WORLDS OF
IF
SCIENCE FICTION
JULY 1967
50¢

THE FELLED STAR
A New "Riverworld" Novel
by PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

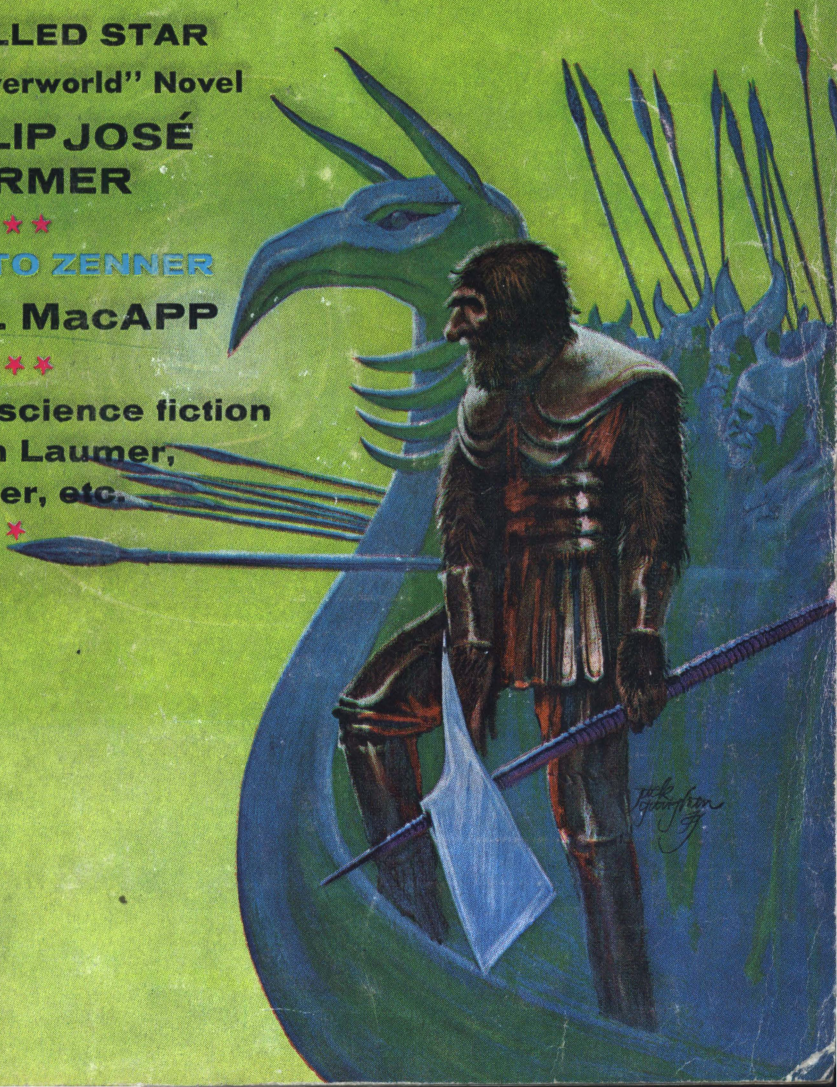
* * *

TICKET TO ZENNER
by C. C. MacAPP

* * *

Thrilling science fiction
by Keith Laumer,
Lin Carter, etc.

*



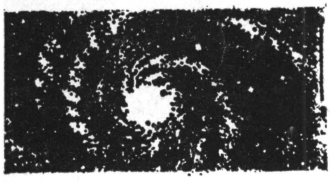
FOR

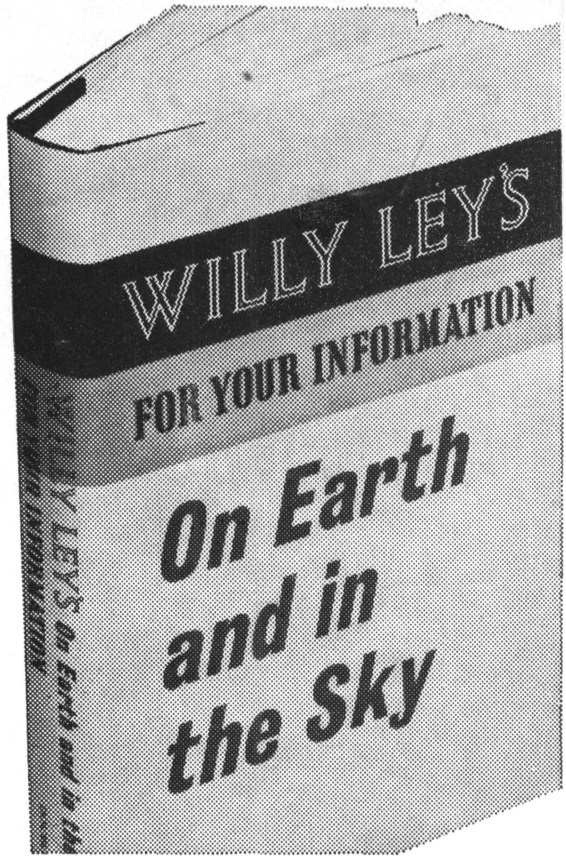
YOUR

INFORMATION

For sixteen years GALAXY'S most popular feature. Now in hardbound book form. The first of a series—updated and divided by subjects into separate books.

Facts and figures as only WILLY LEY can write them. Send today. Satisfaction guaranteed.





DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, INC. (or to your bookstore)
Dept. 7-GA-3, GARDEN City, N.Y. 11531

Please send me ..... copies of WILLY LEY'S FOR YOUR INFORMATION: ON EARTH AND IN THE SKY. I understand that I may return the book(s) within two weeks without cost or obligation if not completely satisfied. Otherwise, I'll be billed just $4.95 per copy, plus shipping costs as payment in full.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE ..... ZIP .....

SAVE! Send payment now and we pay postage. Same 2-week privilege guaranteed, of course.

JULY, 1967
Vol. 17, No. 7
ISSUE 116

WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

ALL NEW STORIES

Frederik Pohl, Editor — *David Perton, Production Manager*
Robert M. Guinn, Publisher
Judy-Lynn Benjamin, Associate Editor — *Mavis Fisher, Circulation Director*

Cover by GAUGHAN from THE FELLED STAR

IF published monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation, Robert M. Guinn, President, Vol. 17, No. 7. 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.

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

WIPED OUT

The other day we went to the Boskone — which, in science-fictionese, means both Doc Smith's legendary enemy of the Lensmen *and* the BOSton Science-Fiction CONference. Pleasant the proceedings were, including a talk on artificial intelligence by MIT's Marvin Minsky (for our money, *the* computer theorist of the decade), presentation of the E. E. Smith Memorial Award for 1967 to Isaac Asimov (who didn't expect it and was a study in consternation; last year, when it went to the undersigned, we hadn't been tipped off ahead of time either, and we can't help thinking that one of these years the Boston fans will have their nicely engraved trophy all ready — and no one there to give it to, because the fellow it was meant for caught an early plane home!), a most useful and constructive talk by Guest of Honor Damon Knight (of which you'll hear more in a later issue) and so on. . . .

Including a hands-across-the-sea debate on that frothy development in science-fiction critical circles, the New Wave of British Science Fiction.

To start with, what *is* this new British wave?

To explain it to us, half a dozen science-fiction writers had gathered in London a few weeks earlier with a tape recorder going. They were a worthy crew: Americans Judith Merril and Tom Disch, Britons Brian W. Aldiss, Michael Moorcock (editor of the English sf magazine, *New Worlds*, which is so well thought of locally that it has received a government grant to keep it going — a precedent which has made some of us U S. editors quietly thoughtful of late), and others as yet less well known in this country. (Although we're hoping to bring you some of them in future issues of our new companion magazine, *International Science Fiction.*) These are well qualified people, all of them; but what they said left some of us on the receiving end puzzled — and others hopping mad.

Representing the American point of view were half a dozen voices, including Lester del Rey, Isaac Asimov and your editor. We listened to the tape; then we talked back, with the machine now recording, so we could send our rebuttal back to England.

The New Wave of British Science Fiction, we were told by the

Wollensak, lies not so much in any particular story or author as in a climate of freedom of expression and liberty to experiment unmatched anywhere else in the world. "We're bored with trips to bloody Saturn," said the voices from overseas. "We want the right to experiment, to be free, to try new forms of writing, like Burroughs." (No, not *that* Burroughs! They mean William Burroughs, author of *The Naked Lunch*, instead of Tarzan's Edgar Rice.)

Want to experiment? Great Klono's brazen claws, *yes!* No kind of writing can survive without constantly reaching out for new frontiers — of every kind: in theme, in treatment, in point of view. And experimentation in science fiction has produced some lovely results: Jack Vance and his *Dragon Masters*, nearly everything written by the late Cordwainer Smith, Brian Aldiss's own *The Long Afternoon of Earth*. But — notice something? None of these is really new. And only one of them is English.

However, this is not to say that there is nothing going on over there. Something is; and it is in fact producing new writers who are surely promising. Will they last? Even, will the promise mature into performance? It is too early to say for sure; but we hope so. Sometime soon we'll be bringing you some work by some of these new writers — for instance, a rather hauntingly special complete short novel, *Sunbeam Caress*, by David Redd, which we ought to be able to get into print, let's see, two or three issues from now. They're worthwhile. But —

There's always a but. The "but" in this case is, *but* they are not the only kind of science fiction that's worthwhile. Bloody Saturn can still be fun — and fun is one of the things that science fiction has to offer. Larry Niven or Poul Anderson can still thrill us with the sort of science-fiction color that brightens a day — because we know they're to be trusted with the backgrounds they write about, and aren't inventing impossible worlds for the sake of a cheap effect. Hard and witty satire is still worth looking at; so is a Heinlein or Clarke detailed and lively examination of how people will live tomorrow.

There are, in short, a hundred ways in which a science-fiction story can be good. What is wrong with so much of the "New Wave" is not that it is experimental in form, but that it is so damned dull in every other way.

By all means experiment, fellows. But the whole idea of making an experiment is that you can't tell ahead of time whether or not it will succeed. And why do you insist on publishing your failures?

It isn't really the writers who are to blame. It's probably more the fault of the critics, who have a terrible problem. Derivative, second-order, parasitic, they can be entertaining only when they have something entertaining to review, only fresh when they espy something fresh in what they are discussing. This is why every literature and artistic put-on of the last few decades has received its deadpan adulation from critics who don't know, or can't afford to know, that they are being taken in.

Would you like to know the definition of a good science-fiction story? It is a story that, after reading, you are glad you read.

That's all there is to all of criticism. But of course no one could build a critical career on saying that in print. . . .

—*The Editor*

The Felled Star

PHILIP JOSÉ FARMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

Every human from all of Time lived again on Riverworld — and died again, over and over!

I

"Resurrection, like politics, makes strange bedfellows," Sam Clemens said. "I can't say that the sleeping is very restful."

Telescope under one arm, he puffed on a long, green cigar while he paced back and forth on the poopdeck of the *Dreyrugr* (Bloodstained). Ari Grimolfsson, the helmsman, not understanding English, looked bleakly at Clemens. Clemens translated for him in wretched Old Norse. The helmsman still looked bleak.

Clemens swore loudly in English and cursed him for a dunderheaded

barbarian. For three years, Clemens had been practicing tenth-century Norse night and day. And he was still only half-intelligible to most of the men and women aboard the *Dreyrugr*.

"A ninety-five-year-old Huck Finn, give or take a few thousand years," Clemens said, "I start out down the river on a raft. Now I'm on this idiot Viking ship, going upriver. What next? When will I realize my dream?"

Keeping the upper part of his right arm close to his body so he would not drop the precious telescope, he pounded his right fist into his open left palm.

"Iron! I need iron! But where on this people-rich, metal-poor planet is iron? There has to be some. Otherwise, where did Erik's axe come from? And how much is there? Enough? Probably not. Probably there's just a very small meteorite. But maybe there's enough for what I want. But where? My God, the river may be twenty million miles long! The iron, if any, may be at the other end.

"No, that can't be! It has to be somewhere not too far away, within 100,000 miles of here. But we may be going in the wrong direction. Ignorance, the mother of hysteria . . . "

He looked through the telescope at the right bank and cursed again. Despite his pleas to bring the ship in closer so that he could scan the faces at a closer range, he had been refused. The king of the Norseman fleet, Eric Bloodaxe, said that this was hostile territory. Until the fleet was out of it, the fleet would stay close to the middle of the river.

The *Dreyrugr* was the flagship of three, all alike. It was eighty feet long, built largely of bamboo and resembled a Viking dragonboat. It had a long low hull, an oaken figurehead carved into a dragon's head, and a curled-tail stern. But it also had a raised foredeck and poopdeck, the sides of both extending out over the water. The two bamboo masts were fore-and-aft rigged, the sails a very thin but tough and flexible membrane, made from the stomach of the deep-dwelling "riverdragon" fish. There was also a rudder controlled by a wheel on the poopdeck.

The round leather-and-oak shields of the crew hung over the sides; the great oars were piled on racks. The *Dreyrugr* was sailing against the wind, tacking back and forth, a maneuver unknown to the Norsemen when they had lived on Earth.

The men and women of the crew not handling the ropes sat on the oarsmen benches and talked and threw dice and played poker. From below the poopdeck came cries of exultation or curses and an occasional faint click. Bloodaxe and his bodyguard were shooting pool, and their doing so at this time made Clemens very nervous. Bloodaxe knew that enemy ships three miles up the river were putting out to intercept them, and ships from both banks behind them were putting out to trail them. Yet the king was pretending to be very cool. Maybe he was actually undisturbed, as Drake had supposedly been just before the battle of the Great Armada.

"But the conditions are different here," Clemens muttered. "There's not much room to maneuver on a river only a mile and a half wide. And no storm is going to help us out."

He swept the bank with the telescope as he had been doing ever since the fleet set out three years ago. He was of medium height and had a big head that made his none-too-broad shoulders look even more narrow. His eyes were blue; his eyebrows, shaggy; his nose, Roman. His hair was long and reddish brown. His face was innocent of the mustache that had been so well known during his terrestrial life. Men had been resurrected without face hair. His chest was a sea of brown-red curly hair that lapped at the hollow of his throat. He wore only a knee-length white towel secured at the waist, a leather belt for holding weapons and the sheath for his telescope, and leather slippers. His skin was bronzed by the equatorial sun.

He removed the telescope from his eye to look at the enemy ships trailing by a mile. As he did so, he saw something flash in the sky. It was a curving sword of white, suddenly appearing as if unsheathed from the blue. It stabbed downwards and then was gone behind the mountains.

Sam was startled. He had seen many small meteorites in the night sky but never a large one. Yet so brightly burned this one that it left an afterimage on his eyes for a second or two. Then the image faded, and Sam forgot about the falling star. He scanned the bank again with his telescope.

This part of the River had been typical. On each side of the mile-and-a-half-wide river was a mile-and-a-half-wide grassgrown plain. On each bank, huge mushroom-shaped stone structures, the grailstones, were spaced a mile apart. Trees were few on the plains, but the foothills were thick with pine, oak, yew and the irontree, a thousand-foot-high plant with gray bark, enormous elephant-ear leaves, hundreds of thick gnarly branches, roots so deep and wood so hard that the tree could not be cut, burned or dug out. Vines bearing large flowers of many bright colors grew over the branches.

There was a mile or two of foothills, and then the abruptness of smooth-sided mountains, towering from 20,000 to 30,000 feet. They were unscalable past the 10,000-foot mark and forced the traveler to follow the river valley if he wished to get to his goal.

The area through which the three Norse boats were sailing was inhabited largely by early nineteenth-century Germans. There was the usual ten per cent population from another place and time of Earth. Here, the ten per cent was first-century Persians. And there was also the ubiquitous one per cent of seemingly random choices from any time and anyplace.

The telescope swung past the bamboo huts on the plains and the faces of the people. The men were clad only in various towels; the

women, in short towel-like skirts and thin cloths around the breasts. There were many gathered on the bank, apparently to watch the battle. They carried flint-tipped spears and bows and arrows but were not in martial array.

Clemens grunted suddenly and held the telescope on the face of a man. At this distance and with the weak power of the instrument, he could not clearly see the man's features. But the wide-shouldered body and dark face suggested familiarity. Where had he seen that face before?

Then it struck him. The man looked remarkably like the photographs of the famous English explorer Sir Richard Burton that he'd seen on Earth. Rather, there was something suggestive of the man. Clemens sighed and turned the eyepiece to the other faces as the ship took him away. He would never know the true identity of the fellow.

He would have liked to put ashore and talk to him, find out if he really were Burton. In the twenty years of life on this river-planet, and the seeing of millions of faces, Clemens had not yet met one person he had known on Earth. He did not know Burton personally, but he was sure that Burton must have heard of him. This man — if he were Burton — would be a link, if thin, to the dead Earth.

And then, as a far-off blurred figure came within the round of the telescope, Clemens cried out incredulously.

"Livy! Oh, my God! Livy!"

There could be no doubt. Although the features could not be clearly distinguished, they formed an overwhelming, not-to-be-denied truth. The head, the hairdo, the figure and the unmistakable walk (as unique as a fingerprint) shouted out that here was his Earthly wife.

"Livy!" he sobbed. The ship heeled to tack, and he lost her. Frantically, he swung the end of the scope back and forth.

Eyes wide, he stomped with his foot on the deck, and he bellowed, "Bloodaxe! Bloodaxe! Up here! Hurry!"

He swung towards the helmsman and shouted that he should go back and direct the ship toward the bank. Grimolfsson was taken aback at first by Clemens's vehemence. Then he slitted his eyes, shook his head, and growled out a no.

"I order you to!" Clemens screamed, forgetting that the helmsman did not understand English. "That's my wife! Livy! My beautiful Livy, as she was when she was twenty-five! Brought back from the dead!"

Someone rumbled behind him, and Clemens whirled to see a blond head with a shorn-off left ear appear on the level of the deck. Then Erik Bloodaxe's broad shoulders, massive chest and huge biceps came into view, followed by pillarlike thighs as he came on up the ladder. He wore a green-and-black checked towel, a broad belt holding several chert knives and a holster for his axe. This was of steel, broadbladed and with an oak handle. It was, as far as Clemens knew, unique on

this planet, where stone and wood were the only materials for weapons.

He frowned as he looked over the river. He turned to Clemens and said, "What is it, *sma-skitligr?* You made me miscue when you screamed like Thor's bride on her wedding night. I lost a cigar to Toki Njalsson."

He took the axe from its holster and swung it. The sun glinted off the blue steel. "You had better have a good reason for disturbing me. I have killed many men for far less." Clemens's face was pale beneath the tan, but this time it was not caused by Erik's threat. He glared, the wind-ruffled hair, staring eyes and aquiline profile making him look like a kestrel falcon.

"To hell with you and your axe!" he shouted. "I just saw my wife, Livy, there on the right bank! I want . . . I demand . . . that you take me ashore so I can be with her again! Oh, God, after all these years, all this hopeless searching! It'll only take a minute! You can't deny me this; you'd be inhuman to do so!"

The axe whistled and sparkled. The Norseman grinned.

"All this fuss for a woman? What about *her*?" And he gestured at a small dark woman standing near the great pedestal and tube of the rocket-launcher.

Clemens became even paler. He said, "Temah is a fine girl! I'm very fond of her! But she's not Livy!"

"Enough of this," Bloodaxe said. "Do you take me to be as big a fool as you? If I put into shore, we'd be caught between the ground and river forces, ground like meal in Freyr's mill. Forget about her."

Clemens screamed like a falcon and launched himself, arms out and flapping, at the Viking. Erik brought the flat of the axe against Clemens's head and knocked him to the deck. For several minutes, Clemens lay on his back, eyes open and staring at the sun. Blood seeped from the roots of the hair falling down over his face. Then he got to all-fours and began to vomit.

Erik gave an impatient order. Temah, her face drawn, eyes looking sidewise with fright at Erik, dipped a bucket at the end of a rope into the river. She threw the water over Clemens, who sat up and then wobbled to his feet. Temah drew another bucket and washed off the deck.

Clemens snarled at Erik. Erik laughed and said, "Little coward, you've been talking too big for too long! Now, you know what happens when you talk to Erik Bloodaxe as if he were a thrall. Consider yourself lucky. I did not kill you."

Clemens spun away from Erik, staggered to the railing, and began to climb upon it. "Livy!" he called.

Swearing, Bloodaxe ran after him, seized him around the waist, and dragged him back. Then he pushed Clemens so heavily that Clemens fell on the deck again.

"You're not deserting me at this time!" Erik said. "I need you to find that iron mine!"

"There isn . . . " Clemens said and then closed his mouth tightly. Let the Norseman find out that he did not know where the mine — if there was a mine — was located, and he would be killed on the spot.

"Moreover," Erik continued cheerfully, "after we find the iron, I may need you to help us towards the Polar Tower, although I think I can get there just by following the river. But you have much knowledge that I need. And I can use that frost giant, Joe Miller."

"Joe!" Clemens said in a thick voice. He tried to get back onto his feet. "Joe Miller! Where's Joe? He'll kill you!"

The axe cut the air above Clemens's head. "You will tell Joe nothing of this, do you hear? I swear by Odin's blind socket, I will get to you and kill you before he can put a hand on me. Do you hear?"

Clemens got to his feet and swayed for a minute. Then he called, in a louder voice, "Joe! Joe Miller!"

II

A voice from below the poopdeck muttered. It was so deep that it made the hairs on the backs of men's necks rise even after hearing it for the thousandth time.

The stout bamboo ladder creaked beneath a weight, creaked so loudly it could be heard above the sing of wind through leather ropes, flapping of membranous sails, grind of wooden joints, shouts of crew, the hiss of water against the hull.

The head that rose above the edge of the deck was even more frightening than the inhumanly deep voice. It was large as a half-pony of beer and was all bars and arches and shelves and flying buttresses of bone beneath a pinkish and loose skin. Bone circled eyes, small-seeming and dark blue. The nose was inappropriate to the rest of his features, since it should have been flat-bridged and flaring-nostrilled. Instead, it was the monstrous and comical travesty on the human nose that the proboscis monkey shows to a laughing world. In its lengthy shadow was a long upper lip, like a chimpanzee's or comic-strip Irishman's. The lips were thin and protruded, shoved out by the convex jaws beneath.

His shoulders made Erik Bloodaxe's look like pretzels. Ahead of him he pushed a great paunch, a balloon trying to rise from the body to which it was anchored. His legs and arms seemed short; they were so out of proportion to the long trunk. The juncture of thigh and body was level with Sam Clemens's chin, and his arms, extended, could hold, and had held, Clemens out at arm's length in the air for an hour without a tremor.

He wore no clothes nor did he need them for modesty's sake, though he had not known modesty until taught by homo sapiens. Long, rusty-red hair, thicker than a man's, less dense than a chimpanzee's, was plastered to the body by his sweat. The skin beneath the hairs was the dirty-pink of a blond Noric.

He ran a hand the size of an unabridged dictionary through the

wavy, rusty-red hair that began an inch above the eyes and slanted back rapidly. He yawned and showed teeth that were human-seeming except for the two five-inch long, tigerish canines.

"I vath thleeping," he rumbled, "I vath dreaming of Earth, of *klravulthithmengbhabafving* — vhat you call mammothth. Thothe vere the good old dayth."

He shuffled forward, then stopped. "Tham! Vhat happened! You're bleeding! You look thick!"

Bellowing for his guards, Erik Bloodaxe stepped backwards from the titanthrop. "Your friend went mad! He thought he'd seen his wife — for the thousandth time — and he attacked me because I wouldn't take him in to the bank to her; Tyr's testicles, Joe! You know how many times he's thought he saw that woman, and how many times we stopped, and how many times it always turned out to be a woman who looked something like his woman but wasn't!

"This time, I said no! Even if it had been his women, I would have said no! We'd be putting our heads in the wolf's mouth!"

Erik crouched, axe lifted, ready to swing at the giant. Shouts came from middeck, and a big redhead with a flint axe ran up the ladder. The helmsman gesfured for him to leave. The redhead, seeing Joe Miller so belligerant, did not hesitate to retreat.

"Vhat you thay, Tham?" Miller said. "Thyould I tear him apart?"

Clemens held his head in both hands and said, "No. He's right, I suppose. I don't really know if she was Livy. Probably just a German hausfrau. I don't know!"

He groaned. "I don't know! Maybe it was her!"

Wooden horns blared, and a huge drum on the middeck thundered. Sam Clemens said, "Forget about this, Joe, until we get through the straits — if we do get through! If we're to survive, we'll have to fight together. Later . . . "

"You alvayth thay *later,* Tham, but there never ith a later. Vhy?"

"If you can't figure that out, Joe, you're as dumb as you look!" Clemens snapped.

Tearshields glinted in Joes's eyes, and his bulging cheeks became wet.

"Every time you get thcared, you call me dumb," he said. "Vhy take it out on me? Vhy not on the people that thcare you, vhy not on Bloodakthe?"

"I apologize, Joe," Clemens said. "Out of the mouths of babes and apemen . . . . You're not so dumb, you're pretty smart. Forget it, Joe. I'm sorry."

Bloodaxe swaggered up to them but kept out of Joe's reach. He grinned as he swung his axe. "There shall soon be a *meeting of the metal!"* And then he laughed and said, "What am I saying? Battle any more is the meeting of stone and wood, except for my star-axe, of course! But what does that matter? I have grown tired of these six months of peace. I need the cries of war, the whistling spear, the chunk of my sharp steel biting into flesh, the spurt of blood. I have become as impatient as a penned-up stallion

who smells a mare in heat; I would mate with Death."

"Bull!" Joe Miller said. "You're jutht ath bad ath Tham in your vay. You're thcared, too, but you cover it up vith your big mouth."

"I do not understand your mangled speech," Bloodaxe said. "Apes should not attempt the tongue of man."

"You understand me all right," Joe said.

"Keep quiet, Joe," Clemens said. He looked upriver. Two miles away, the plains on each side of the river dwindled away as the mountains curved inwards to create straits not more than a quarter-mile wide. The water boiled at the bottom of the cliffs, which were perhaps 3,000 feet high. On the cliff-tops, on both sides, unidentified objects glittered in the sun.

A half-mile below the straits, thirty galleys had formed three crescents. And, aided by the swift current and sixty oars each, they were speeding towards the three intruders. Clemens viewed them through his telescope and then said, "Each has about forty warriors aboard and two rocket-launchers. We're in a hell of a trap. And our own rockets have been in storage so long, the powder's likely to be crystallized. They'll go off in the tubes and blow us to kingdom come.

"And those things on top of the cliffs. Apparatus for projecting Greek fire?"

A man brought the king's armor: a triple-layered leather helmet with imitation leather wings and a nosepiece, a leather cuirass, leather breeches and a shield. Another man brought a bundle of spears: yew shafts and flint tips.

The rocket crew, all women, placed a projectile in the swivable launching tube. The rocket was six feet long, not counting the guidestick, built of bamboo, and looked exactly like a Fourth of July rocket. Its warhead contained twenty pounds of black gunpowder in which were many tiny chips of stone: shrapnel.

Joe Miller, the deck creaking beneath his 800 pounds, went below to get his armor and weapons. Clemens put on a helmet and slung a shield over his shoulder, but he would not use a cuirass or leggings. Although he feared wounds, he was even more frightened of drowning because of the heavy armor if he fell into the river.

Clemens thanked whatever gods there were that he had been lucky enough to fall in with Joe Miller. They were blood-brothers now — even if Clemens had fainted during the ceremony, which demanded mingling of blood and some even more painful and repulsive acts. Miller was to defend him, and Clemens was to defend Miller to the death. So far, the titanthrop had done all the battling. But then he was more than big enough for two.

Bloodaxe's dislike of Miller was caused by envy. Bloodaxe fancied himself as the world's greatest fighter and yet knew that Miller would have no more trouble dispatching him in combat than Miller would with a dog.

And with a small dog at that.

Erik Bloodaxe gave his battle orders, which were transmitted to the other two ships by flashes of sunlight off obsidian mirrors. The ships would keep sails up and try to steer between the galleys. This would be difficult because a ship might have to change course to avoid ramming and so lose the wind. Also, each ship would thrice be subjected to crossfire.

"The wind's with them," Clemens said. "Their rockets will have more range until we're among them."

"Teach your grandmother to suck . . . " Bloodaxe said and stopped.

Some bright objects on the clifftops had left their positions and now were swooping through the air in a path that would bring them close above the Vikings. The Norsemen shouted with bewilderment and alarm, but Clemens recognized them as gliders. In as few words as possible, he explained to Bloodaxe. The king started to relay the information to the other Vikings but had to stop because the lead galleys fired off the first volley of rockets. Wobbling, trailing thick black smoke, ten rockets arced towards the three sailships. These changed course as quickly as possible, two almost colliding. Some of the rockets almost struck the masts or the hulls, but none hit and all splashed unexploded, falling into the river.

By then the first of the gliders made its pass. Slim-fuselaged, long-winged, with black Maltese crosses on the sides of its slim and silvery fuselage, it dived at a 45- degree angle towards the *Dreyrugr*. The Norsemen archers bent their yew bows and, at a command from the chief archer, loosed their shafts.

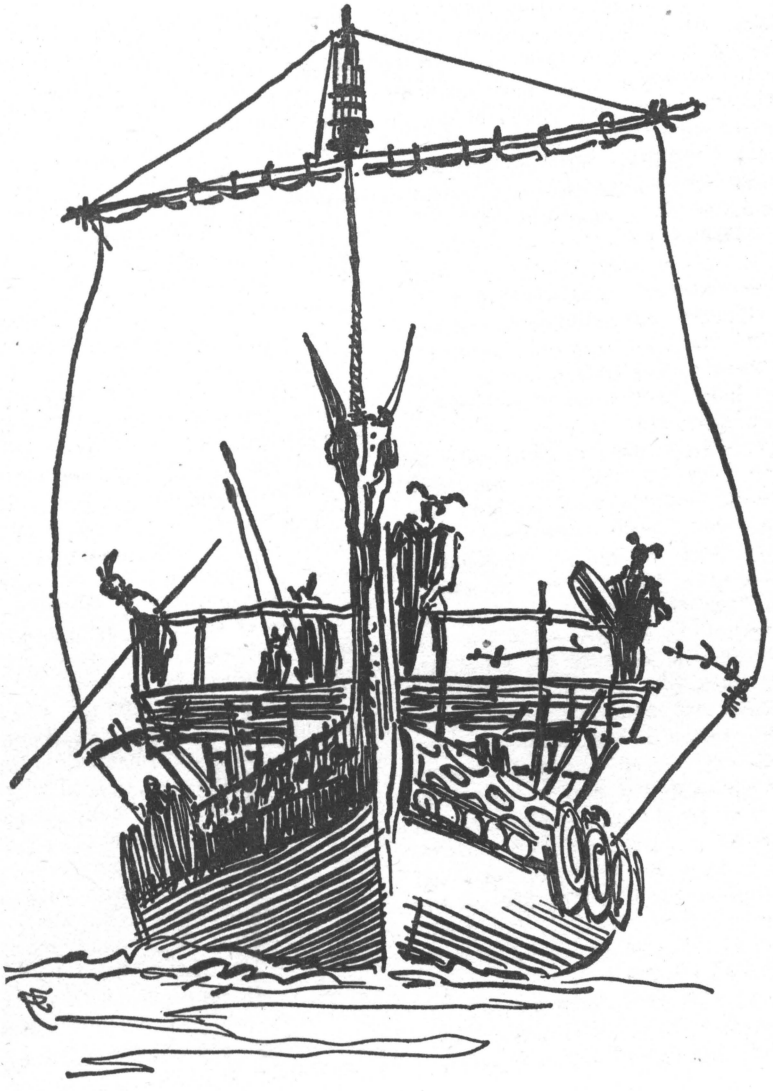
The glider swooped low over the water, several arrows sticking out of the fuselage, and it settled down for a landing on the river. It had failed to drop its bombs on the *Dreyrugr*. They were somewhere below the surface.

But now other gliders were coming in at all three ships, and the enemy lead galleys had loosed another flight of rockets. Clemens glanced at their own rocket-launcher. The big blonde crew-women were swiveling the tube under the command of small dark Temah, but she was not ready to touch the fuse yet. The *Dreyrugr* was not yet within range of the nearest galley.

For a second, everything was as if suspended in a photograph: the two gliders, their wingtips only two feet apart, pulling up out of the dive and the small black bombs dropping towards the decks of their targets, the arrow halfway towards the gliders, the German rockets halfway toward the Viking ships, on the downcurve of their arcs.

Clemens felt the sudden push of wind behind him, a whistling, an explosion as the sails took the full impact of air and rolled the ship over sharply on its longitudinal axis. There was a tearing sound as if the fabric of the world were being ripped apart; a cracking as if great axes had slammed into the masts.

The bombs, the gliders, the rockets, the arrows were lifted up-



wards and backwards, turned upside down. The sails and masts left the ship as if they had been launched from tubes and soared away. The ship, released from the push of sail, rolled back to horizontal from an almost 90-degree angle to the river. Clemens was saved from flying off the deck in the first slam of wind only because the titanthrop had seized the wheel with one hand and clutched him with the other. The helmsman had also clung to the wheel. The rocket crew, their shrieks carried upriver by the wind, mouths open, hair whipping, flew like birds from the ship, soared and then splashed into the river. The rocket tube tore loose from its pedestal and followed them.

Bloodaxe had grabbed the railing with one hand and kept hold of his precious steel weapon with the other. While the ship rocked back and forth, he managed to stick the axehandle in the holster and then to cling to the railing with both hands. It was well for him that he did, because the wind was screaming like a woman falling off a cliff and shoving powerfully at him. Within a few seconds, a hot blast tore at the ship, and Clemens was as deafened and as seared as if he were standing near a rocket blast.

A great swell of riverwater lifted the ship high. Clemens opened his eyes and then screamed but could not hear his own voice because of his stunned ears.

A wall of dirty brown water, at least fifty feet high, was racing around the curve of the valley between four and five miles away. He wanted to close his eyes again but could not. He continued to gaze with his lids rigid until the elevated sea was a mile away. Then he could make out the individual trees, the giant pines, oaks, and yews scattered along the front of the wave, and, as it got closer, pieces of bamboo and pine houses, a roof somehow still intact, a shattered hull with a half mast, the sperm-whale-sized, dark-gray body of a river-dragon fish, plucked from the five-hundred feet depths of the river.

Terror numbed him. He wanted to die to escape the death. But he could not, and so he watched with frozen eyes and congealed mind as the ship, instead of being drowned and smashed beneath hundreds of thousands of gallons of water, rose up and up and up on the slope of the wave, up and up, the dirty brown wreckage-strewn cliff towering above, always threatening to avalanche down upon the ship, and the sky above, now turned from bright noon-blue to gray.

Then they were on the top, poised for a downward slide, rocked, dipped, and went down towards the trough. Smaller waves, but still huge, fell over the boat. A body landed on the deck near Clemens, a body catapulted from the raging waters. Clemens stared at it with only a spark of comprehension. He was too iced with terror to feel any more; he had reached the limits.

And so he stared at Livy's body, smashed on one side but untouched on the other side! It was Livy, his wife, that he had seen.

Then another wave that almost tore him and the titanthrop loose struck the deck. The helmsman screamed as he lost his grip and followed the woman's corpse overboard.

The boat, sliding upwards from the depths of the trough, turned to present its broadside to the wave. But the boat continued to soar upwards, though it tilted so that Miller and Clemens were hanging from the stump of the wheel's base as if they were dangling from a tree trunk on the face of a mountain. Then the boat rolled back to horizontal position as it raced down the next valley. Bloodaxe had lost his grip and was shot across the deck and would have gone over the other side if the ship had not righted itself in time. Now he clung to the port railing.

On top of the third wave, the *Dreyrugr* sped slantwise down the mountain of water. It struck the broken forepart of another vessel, shuddered, and Bloodaxe's grip was town loose by the impact. He spun along the railing, hit the other railing on the edge of the poopdeck, shattered it, and went on over the edge and below to the middeck. Thereafter, Clemens did not see him.

III

Not until morning of the next day did Sam Clemens thaw out of his shock. The *Dreyrugr* had somehow ridden out the great waves long enough to go slanting across the plains on the shallower but rough waters. It had been shot past hills and through a narrow pass into a small canyon at the base of the mountain. And as the waters subsided from beneath it, the boat had settled with a crash into the ground.

The crew lay in terror thick as cold mud while the river and wind raged and the sky remained the color of chilling iron. Then the winds ceased. Rather the downriver winds stopped, and the normal soothing wind from upriver resumed.

Some of the men and women began to stir and to ask questions. Sam felt as if he could barely force the words out through a numbed mouth. Stammering, he told them of the flash he had seen in the sky fifteen minutes before the winds struck. Somewhere down the valley, maybe two hundred miles away, a giant meteorite had struck. The winds created by the heat of passage through the air and by the displacement of air by the meteorite, the shock waves caused by the impact, had generated those giant waves. Terrible as they were, they must have been pygmies compared to those nearer the point of impact. Actually, the *Dreyrugr* was in the outer edge of the fury.

"It had quit being mad and was getting downright jovial when we met it," Sam said.

Some of the Norse got unsteadily to their feet and tottered across the deck. Some belowdecks stuck their heads out of the hatches. Bloodaxe was hurting from his roll across the deck, but he managed to roar, "Everybody belowdecks! There will

be another great flood, much worse than this one, when the waves caused by the falling star hitting the earth reach us!"

Sam did not like Bloodaxe, to put it mildly, yet he had to admit that the Norwegian was bright enough when it came to the ways of water. He himself had supposed that the first waves would be the last.

The crew lay down in the hold wherever they could find space and something stable to hang onto, and they waited. Sometime during the night, the earth rumbled and shook, and then the river struck the pass with a hiss like a fifty-foot-high cat, followed by a bellow. Borne upwards by the flood pouring through the pass, the *Dreyrugr* rocked and spun around and around as it rocked. Sam turned cold. He was sure that if there had been daylight, he and the others would look as grayblue as corpses.

Up the boat went, occasionally scraping against the walls of the canyon. Just as Sam was about to swear that the *Dreyrugr* had reached the top of the canyon and was going to be carried over its front in a cataract, the boat dropped. It sank swiftly, or so it seemed, while the waters poured out through the pass almost as quickly as they had entered. There was a crash, followed by the heavy breathing of men and women, a groan here and there, the dripping of water, and the far away roar of the receding river.

It was not over yet. There was more waiting in cold numb terror until the great mass of water would rush back to fill the spaces from which it had been displaced by the blazing many hundreds of thousands of tons mass of the meteorite. They shivered as if encased in ice, although the air was far warmer than it had even been at this time of night. And for the first time in the twenty years on this planet, it did not rain at night.

Before the waters struck again, they felt the shake and grumble of earth. There was a vast hiss and a roar, and again the boat rose up, spun, bumped against the walls of the canyon and then sank. This time, the ship did not strike the ground so hard, probably, Sam thought, because the boat had hit a thick layer of mud.

"I don't believe in miracles," Sam whispered, "but this is one. We've no business being alive."

Joe Miller, who had recovered more swiftly than the others from shock, returned from a scouting trip. He carried in his arms the naked body of a man. His burden was, however, alive. He had blond hair under the mud-streaks, a handsome face and blue-gray eyes. He said something in German to Clemens and then managed to smile after he had been deposited gently on the deck.

"I found him in hith glider," Joe said. "Vhat vath left of it, that ith. There'th a number of corptheth outthide thith canyon. Vhat you vant to do vith him?"

"Make friends with him," Clemens croaked. "His people are gone; this area is cleaned out."

He shuddered. The image of Livy's body placed on the deck like a mocking gift, the wet hair plastered over one side of her smashed face, the one dark eye staring darkly at him, was getting more vivid and more painful. He felt like sobbing but could not and was glad of it. Weeping would make him fall apart into a cone of ashes. Later, when he had the strength to stand it, he would weep. So near . . . .

The blond man sat up on the deck. He shivered uncontrollably and said, in British English, "I'm cold."

Miller went belowdecks and brought up dried fish, acorn bread, bamboo tips and cheese. The Vikings had stored food to eat when they were in hostile areas where they were forbidden to use their grails.

"That thtupid ath, Bloodakthe, ith thtill alive," Miller said. "He'th got thome broken ribth and he'th a meth of bruitheth and cutth. But hith big mouth ith in perfect working order. Vouldn't you know it?"

After he had eaten, Clemens began crying. Joe Miller wept with him and blew his huge proboscis.

"There," he said, "I feel much better. I never been tho thscared in all my life. Vhen I thaw that vater, like all the mammothth in the vorld thtampeding towardth uth, I thought, Good-by, Joe. Good-by, Tham. I'll vake up thomevhere along the river in a new body, but I'll never thee you again, Tham. Only I vath too terrified to feel thad about it. Yethuth, I vath thcared!"

The young stranger introduced himself. He was Lothar von Richthofen, glider pilot, captain of the Luftwaffe of his Imperial Majesty, Kaiser Alfred the First of New Prussia.

"We've passed a hundred New Prussias in the last ten thousand miles," Clemens said. "All so small you couldn't stand in the middle of one and heave a brick without it landing in the middle of the next. But most of them weren't as belligerent as yours. They'd let us land and charge our grails, especially after we'd shown them what we had to trade for use of the stones."

"Trade?"

"Yes. We didn't trade goods, of course, because all the freighters of old Earth couldn't carry enough to last out a fraction of the river. We traded ideas. For one thing, we show these people how to build pool tables and how to make a hair-setting spray from fish-glue, deodorized."

The Kaiser of this area had been, on Earth, a Count von Waldersee, a German field marshal, born 1832, died 1904.

Clemens nodded, saying, "I remember reading about his death in the papers and having great satisfaction because I had outlived another contemporary. That was one of the few genuine and free pleasures of life. But since you know how to fly, you must be a twentieth-century German, right?"

Lother von Richthofen gave a brief summary of his life. He had flown a fighter plane for Germany in the Weltkrieg. His brother had

been the greatest of aces on either side during that war.

"World War I or II?" Clemens said. He had met enough 20th-centurians to know some facts — and fancies — about events after his death in 1910.

Von Richthofen added more details. He had been in World War I. He himself had fought under his brother and had accounted for forty Allied planes. In 1922, while flying an American film actress and her manager from Hamburg to Berlin, the plane had crashed and he had died. "The luck of Lothar von Richthofen deserted me," he said. "Or so I thought then." He laughed. "But here I am, twenty-five years old in body again, and I missed the sad things about growing old, when women no longer look at you, when wine makes you weep instead of laugh and makes your mouth sour with the taste of impotence and every day is one day nearer to death.

"And my luck held out again when that meteorite struck. My glider lost its wings at the first blow of wind, but instead of falling, I floated in my fuselage, turning over and over, dropping, rising again, falling, until I was deposited as lightly as a sheet of paper upon a hill. And when the backflood came, the fuselage was borne by the water and I was nuzzled gently against the foot of the mountain. A miracle!"

"A miracle: a chance distribution of events, occurring one time in a billion," Clemens said. "You think a giant meteor caused that flood?"

"I saw its flash, the trail of burning air. It must have crashed far away, fortunately for us."

They climbed down from the ship and slogged through the thick mud to the canyon entrance. Joe Miller heaved logs that a team of draft horses would have strained to pull. He shoved aside others, and the three went down through the foothills and to the plains. Others followed them.

They were silent now. The land had been scoured free of trees except for the great irontrees. So deeply rooted were these that most still stood upright. Moreover, where the mud had not settled, there was grass. It was a testimony to the toughness and steadfast-rootedness of the grass that the millions of tons of water had not been able to rip out the topsoil.

Here and there was the flotsam left by the backflood. Corpses of men and women, broken timber, towels, grails, a dugout, uprooted pines and oaks and yews.

The great mushroom-shaped grailstones, spaced a mile apart along the banks on both sides, were also unbroken and unbent, although many were almost buried in mud.

"The rains will eventually take care of the mud," Clemens said. "The land slopes towards the river." He avoided the corpses. They filled him with a prickly loathing. Besides, he was afraid that he might see Livy's body again. He did not think he could stand it; he would go mad.

"One thing sure," Sam Clemens said. "There'll be nobody between

us and the meteorite. We'll have first claim on it, and then it'll be up to us to defend all that treasure of iron from the wolves that will come loping on its scent.

"Would you like to join up? If you stick with me, you'll have an airplane some day, not just a glider."

Von Richthofen was more than curious. Sam explained a little about his Dream. And he told a little about Joe Miller's story of the Misty Tower.

"It's only possible with a great deal of iron," he said. "And much hard work. These Vikings aren't capable of helping me build a steamboat. I need technical knowledge they don't have. But I was using them to get me to a possible source of iron. I had hoped that there might be enough ore from which Erik's axe was made for my purpose. I used their greed for the metal, and also Miller's story, to launch them on this expedition.

"Now, we don't have to search. We know where there must be more than enough. All we have to do is dig it up, melt it, refine it, shape it into the forms we need. And protect it. I won't string you along with a tale of easy accomplishment. It may take years before we can complete the boat, and it'll be damn hard work doing it."

Lothar's face blazed with a spark caught from Clemens's few words. "It's a noble, magnificent dream!" he said. "Yes, I'd like to join you, I'll pledge my honor to follow you until we storm Misty Tower! On my word as a gentleman and officer, on the blood of the barons of Richthofen!"

"Just give me your word as a man," Sam said drily.

"What a strange — indeed, unthinkable — trio we make!" Lothar said. "A gigantic subhuman, who must have died at least 100,000 years before civilization. A twentieth-century Prussian baron and aviator. A great American humorist born in 1835. And our crew — " Clemens raised his thick eyebrows at the *our* — "tenth-century Vikings!"

"A sorry lot now," Sam said, watching Bloodaxe and the others plow through the mud. All were bruised from head to foot and many limped. "I don't feel so well myself. Have you ever watched a Japanese tenderize a dead octopus? I know how the octopus feels now. By the way, I was more than just a humorist, you know. I was a man of letters."

"Ah, forgive men!" Lothar said. "I've hurt your feelings. No offense. Let me salve your injuries, Mr. Clemens, by telling you that when I was a boy, I laughed many times reading your books. And I regard your *Huckleberry Finn* as a great book. Although I must admit I did not care for the way you ridiculed the aristocracy in your *Connecticut Yankee*. Still, they were English, and you are an American."

Erik Bloodaxe decided that they were too battered and weary to start the job of getting the ship down to the river that day. They would charge their grails at evening, eat, sleep, eat breakfast and then begin the backbreaking work.

They went back to the ship, took their grails from the hold and set them on the depressions on the flat top of a grailstone. As the sun touched the peaks of the mountains to the west, the men awaited the roar and the hot, blue flash from the stones. The electrical discharge would power the energy-matter converters within the false bottoms of the grail and, on opening the lids, the men would find cooked meats, vegetables, bread and butter, fruit, tobacco, dreamgum, liquor or mead.

But as darkness settled over the valley, the grailstones remained silent and cold. Across the river, fire sprang up momentarily from the gailstones there, and a faint roar reached them.

But the stones on the west bank, for the first time in the twenty years since the day of Resurrection, did not function.

IV

The men and women felt as if God had failed them. The three-times-a-day offering of the stones had come to seem as natural as the rising of the sun. It was some time before they could ease the sickness in their stomachs to eat the last of the fish, sprouts and cheese.

Clemens was in a blue funk for a while. But von Richthofen began talking of the necessity of ferrying the grails to the other side so they could eat in the morning. Presently Clemens got up and talked to Bloodaxe. The Norwegian was in a mood even fouler than usual, but he finally admitted that action must be taken. Joe Miller, the German, and a big redheaded Swede named Toke Kroksson trudged back up to the ship and then carried some oars back down. These three, with Clemens, took the grails across in the dugout; and Toke and Joe Miller paddled the dugout back. Miller, Clemens and von Richthofen settled down to sleep on top of a grailstone. It was clean, since the electrical discharge had burned off all the mud.

"We'll have to get under the stone when the rains come," Clemens said. He lay on his back, his hands under his head, and looked up at the night sky. It was no terrestrial sky, this blaze of twenty thousand stars greater than Venus in her glory and shimmering filaments tentacling out from glittering gas clouds. Some of the stars were so bright, that they could be seen as pale phantoms even at noon.

"The meteorite must have smashed some of the grailstones on the west bank," Sam Clemens said. "And so it broke the circuit. My God, what a circuit! There must be at least twenty million stones hooked together, if the calculations of some are correct."

"There will be a terrible conflict raging up and down the river," Lothar said. "The west bankers will attack the east bankers so they can charge their grails. What a war! I've heard that there must be about 35 to 37 billion people in this river-valley. All battling to the death for food."

"The hell of it ith," Joe Miller

said, "that if half get kilt and tho there'th enough room on the grail-stoneth, it won't do no good. Tventy-four hourth later, the dead vill all be alife again, and it'll all thtart over again."

Sam said, "I'm not so sure. I think it's been established that the stones have something to do with the resurrections. And if half of them are out of commission, there may be a considerable cut in production on the Lazarus line. This meteorite is a saboteur from the skies."

"I've thought for a long time that this world, and our resurrection, are not the work of supernatural beings," von Richthofen said. "Have you heard the wild tale that's been going up and down the river? There's a story that one man woke up before Resurrection Day and found himself in a very weird place. There were millions of bodies around him, floating in the air, nude men, women, and children, their heads shaved, all slowly rotating under some invisible force. This man, an Englishman named Perkin, or Burton, some say, had died on Earth around 1890. He got loose but was intercepted by two beings — human — who put him back to sleep. Then he awoke, like the rest of us, on the banks of the river.

"Whoever is behind all this isn't infallible. They made a mistake with Burton. He got a glimpse into pre-Resurrection, a stage somewhere between our death on Earth and preparation for life on this world. I don't know. It sounds fantastic, like a wish-fulfillment story. But then again . . . ."

"I've heard it," Sam Clemens said. He thought of telling about seeing Burton's face through the telescope just before he spotted Livy's. But he had seen several faces that he had thought were Livy's, and they had turned out to be somebody else's. Moreover, the pain of thinking about her was too much for him.

He sat up and cursed and shook his fist at the stars and then began to weep. Joe Miller, squatting behind him, reached a gigantic hand out and touched him softly on the shoulder. Von Richthofen, embarrassed, looked the other way. Presently, he said, "I'll be glad when our grails are charged. I'm itching for a smoke."

Clemens laughed and dried his tears and said, "I don't cry easily. But I've gotten over being ashamed about it when I do.

"It's a sad world, just as sad, in most ways, as the old Earth. Yet we have our youthful bodies again, we don't have to work for food or worry about paying bills, making our women pregnant, catching diseases. And if we're killed we rise up the following day, whole and hearty, although thousands of miles from where we died.

"But it's nothing like what the preachers said it would be. Which isn't, of course, surprising. And maybe it's just as well. Who'd want to fly around on aerodynamically unstable wings or stand around all day playing harps badly and screeching out hosannas?"

Lothar laughed and said, "Ask

any Chinese or Indian coolie if this isn't a hell of a better world than the last world. It's just us spoiled modern Westerners who grumble and look for first and latest causes. We didn't know much about the operation of our Earthly cosmos, and we know less about this. But we're here, and we may eventually find out who put us here and why. Meanwhile, as long as there are beautiful and willing women — and there are — cigars, dreamgum, wine and a good fight, who cares? I'll enjoy this valley of bright shadows until the good things of life are once more taken from me. Lust to lust until it's dust to dust."

They were silent after a while, and Clemens could not get to sleep until just before the rains. He got down under the mushroom until the downpour ceased. Back on top of the stone, he shivered and turned for several hours, although he was covered with long heavy towels. Dawn came with Miller's ponderous hand shaking him. Hastily, he climbed down off the stone and got a safe distance from it. Five minutes later, the stone gave forth a blue flame that leaped thirty feet into the air and roared like a lion.

At the same time, the stones across the river bellowed.

Clemens looked at Lothar. "Somebody repaired the break."

Lothar said, "I've got goose pimples. Who is somebody?" He was silent for a while, but before they had reached the west bank, he was laughing and chattering like a guest at a cocktail party. Too cheerful, Clemens thought.

"They've never shown their hand before, that I know of," Sam said. "But this time I guess they had to."

V

The next five days were occupied in getting the ship down to the bank. Two weeks more were spent in repairing the *Dreyrugr*. All that time a watch was kept, but no one came into the area. When the ship was finally launched, still minus masts and sails, and was rowed down the river, there was not a live human in sight.

The crew, accustomed to seeing the plains thronged with men and women, were uneasy. The silence was unnerving. There were no animals on this world except for the fish in the river and earthworms in the soil, but the humans had always made enough noise.

"The hyenas'll be here soon enough," Clemens said to Bloodaxe. "That iron is far more precious than gold ever was on Earth. You want battle? You'll get enough down your throat to make you vomit."

The Norseman, swinging his axe, winced at the pain in his ribs. "Let them come! They'll know they've been in a fight to bring joy to the hearts of the Valkyrie!"

"Bull!" Joe Miller said. Sam smiled but walked to a position behind the titanthrop. Bloodaxe was afraid of only one being in the world, but he might lose his never easily controlled temper and go berserk. However, he needed Miller, who was worth twenty great but human warriors.

The ship travelled steadily for two days during the sunlit hours. At night, one man steered and a small watch was kept, the crew slept. Early in the evening of the third day, the titanthrop, Clemens and von Richthofen were sitting on the foredeck, smoking cigars and sipping at the whiskey their grails had given them at the last stop.

"Why do you call him Joe Miller?" Lothar asked.

"His real name is a rattling jawbreaker, longer than the technical term of a German philosopher," Clemens said. "I couldn't pronounce it when I first met him, I never did. After he learned enough English to tell me a joke — he was so eager he could hardly wait — I decided to call him Joe Miller. He told me a tale so hoary I couldn't believe it. I knew it'd been around a long time; I first heard it, in a slightly different form, when I was a boy in Hannibal, Missouri. And I was still hearing it, much to my disgust, for the hundred thousandth time, when I was an old man. But to have to listen to that story from the lips of a man who'd died one hundred thousand years, maybe a million, before I was born!"

"And the story?"

"Well, there was this traveling hunter who'd been tracking a wounded deer all day. Night came and with it a violent storm. Seeing the light of a fire, the hunter stopped off at a cave. He asked the old medicine man who lived in it if he could spend the night there. And the old medicine man said, 'Sure, but we're pretty crowded here. You'll have to sleep with my daughter.' Need I go any further?"

"Tham didn't laugh," Joe rumbled. "Thometimeth I think he ain't got a thenthe of humor."

Clemens tweaked Joe's projectile-shaped nose affectionately. He said, "Thometimeth I think you're right. But actualy I'm the most humorous man in the world because I'm the most sorrowful. Every laugh is rooted in pain."

He puffed on his cigar for a while and stared at the shore. Just before dusk, the ship had entered the area where the last of the intense heat from the meteorite had struck. Aside from the few irontrees, everything had been whistled off in a shock of searing flame. The irontrees had given up their huge leaves to the flames, and even the enormously resistant bark had burned off and the wood beneath, harder than granite, had become charred. Moreover, the blast had tilted or leveled many of these, snapping them off at the base. The grailstones had been blackened and were out of plumb but had retained their shape.

Finally, he said, "Lothar, now is as good a time as any for you to learn something of why we're on this quest. Joe can tell it in his way; I'll explain anything you don't understand. It's a strange tale, but no stranger, actually, than anything that's happened here since we all woke up from the dead."

"I'm thirthty," Joe said. "Let me get a drink firtht."

The dark-blue eyes, shadowed in

the bone rings, focused upon the hollow of the cup. He seemed to peer therein as if he were trying to conjure up the scenes he was about to describe. Guttural, his tongue hitting certain consonants harder than others, thus giving his English a clanging quality, yet comical with its lisping, voice rising up from a chest deep and resonants as the well of the Delphian oracle, he told of the Misty Tower.

"Thomevhere upon The River, I avoke, naked ath I am now. I vath in a plathe that mutht be far north on thith planet, because it vath colder and the light vath not ath bright. There vere no humanth, yutht uth . . . uh, titantropth, ath Tham callth uth. Ve had grailth, only they vere much larger than yourth, ath you can thee. And ve got no beer and vithkey. Ve had never known about alcohol, tho ve had none in our grailth. Ve drank the river vater.

"Ve thought ve vere in the plathe that you go to vhen you die, that the . . . uh . . . godth had given uth thith plathe and all ve needed. Ve vere happy, ve mated and ate and thlept and fought our enemieth. And I vould have been happy there if it had not been for the thyip."

"He means ship," Sam said.

"That'th what I thaid. Thyip. Pleathe don't interrupt, Tham. You've made me unhappy enough by telling me that there are no godth. Even if I've theen the godth."

Lothar said, "Seen the *gods*?"

"Not egthactly. I thaw vhere they live. I did thee their thlip."

Von Richthofen said, "What? What're you talking about?"

Clemens waved his cigar. "Later. Let him talk. If you interrupt him too much, he gets confused."

"Vhere I come from, you don't talk vhile another ith talking. Othervithe, you get punched in the nothe."

Sam said, "With a nose as big as yours, Joe, that must hurt."

Miller delicately stroked his proboscis.

"It ith the only vone I have, and I'm proud of it. Novhere in thith part of the valley hath any pigmy got a nothe like mine. Vhere I come from, your nothe indicateth the tithe of your — vhat'th your vord for it, Tham?"

Sam choked and took the cigar from his lips.

"You were telling us of the ship, Joe."

"Yeth. No! I vath not! I hadn't gotten to it yet. But ath I vath thaying, vun day I vath lying on the bank vatching the fith play. I vath thinking about getting up and making a hook and pole to catch thome. All of a thudden, I heard a thyout. I looked up. There, coming around the bend of the river vath thith terrible monthter.

"It vath awful. I jumped up, and I vath going to run avay vhen I thaw it had men on itth back. They looked like men, but vhen the monthter got clother, I thaw they vere thpindly little runtth vith the mange and no notheth to thpeak of. I could have beat them all to death vith vone hand, and yet they were riding thith monthter river-thnake like beath on a bear'th back. Tho . . . . "

Clemens, listening, felt again as he had when he first heard the story. He felt as if he were standing by the side of this creature from the dawn of man. Despite the clanging and lisping and halting and slow groping after words, this Titan spoke impressively. Clemens could feel his panic and his wonder and almost overpowering urge to run away. Clemens could also feel the opposing urge, the primate's curiosity, the thing that made him, if not wholly a man, at least a near-cousin. Behind the shelving brow lay the gray pulse that would not be content just to exist but must be fed on the shapes of unknown things, on patterns never before seen.

So Joe Miller stayed upon the bank, though his hand closed around the handle of the grail, ready to carry it with him if he had to flee.

The monster floated closer. Joe began to think that it might not be alive. But if it were not, why the great head poised at its front as if to strike? Yet it did not look alive. It gave a feeling of *deadness.* This did not mean much, of course. Joe had seen a wounded bear pretend death convincingly and then rise up and tear the arm off a fellow-hunter.

Moreover, though he had seen the hunter die, he had also seen the hunter alive again, that day he awoke on the banks with others of his kind. And if he, and Joe, too, could come alive again, why couldn't this petrified snakelike head lose its dead woodenness and seize him in its teeth?

But he ignored his fears and, trembling, approached the monster. He was a Titan, older brother to man, fresh with the dawn and with the primate's have-to-know-what's-going-on.

A pygmy, mangy as the others but wearing on his brow a glass circlet with a stained-red flaming sun, beckoned to Joe Miller. The others upon the wooden beast stood behind the man with the glass circlet and held spears and strange devices that Joe learned later were bows and arrows. They did not seem frightened of the colossus, but that may have been because they were so tired from their seldom-ceasing rowing against the current that they did not care what happened.

It took a long time for the pygmy chief to get Joe aboard the ship. They came ashore to charge their grails while Joe backed away from them. They ate, and Joe ate also, but at a distance. His fellows had run for the hills, having been also panicked by the ship. Presently seeing that the river-snake did not threaten Joe, they slowly approached it. The pygmies retreated to the ship.

And now the chief took a strange object from his grail and held a glowing wire to its tip, and smoke came from it and from the pygmy's mouth. Joe jumped at the first puff; his fellows scattered for the foothills again. Joe wondered if the noseless pygmies could be the brood of the dragon. Perhaps her children took this larval form, but, like their mother, they could breathe out fire and smoke?

"But I ain't a dummy," Joe said. "It didn't take me long to figure

out that the thmoke came from the object, vhich in Englith ith a thigar. Their chief made it plain that if I'd get on the thyip, I could thmoke the thigar. Now, I mutht've been crathy to do tho, but I vanted to thmoke that thigar. Maybe I thought I'd impreth my tribe, I don't know."

He jumped on the ship, his weight causing it to tilt a little on the port. He swung his grail to show them that if they attacked him, he would bash their skulls in with it. They took the hint and did not come close. The chief gave Joe a cigar, and though Joe coughed a little and found the taste of tobacco strange, he liked it. Moreover, when he had drunk beer for the first time, he was entranced.

So Joe decided to go on the river-snake's back up the river with the pygmies. He was put to work on a mighty sweep, and he was called Tehuti.

"Tehuti?" von Richthofen said.

"The Greek form is Thoth," Clemens said. "To the Egyptians, he looked something like the long-beaked ibis-god. I suppose he must also have reminded them of the baboon-god, Bast, but that tremendous nose outweighed that consideration. So, Thoth, or Tehuti, he became."

Days and nights flowed by like the river. Sometimes, Joe became tired and wished to be put ashore. By now, he could speak the pygmies' language, though haltingly. The chief would agree to do as Joe wished since it was obvious that any denial might result in the slaughter of his entire crew. But he would speak sadly of Tehuti's education ending there, just when he was doing so well. He had been a brute though with the face of the god of wisdom, and soon he would be a man.

Brute? God? Man?

What were they?

The order was not quite right, the chief would say. The correct sequence, ever upward, was brute, man and god. Yet it was true you might see a god disguised as a beast, and man merged insensibly from animal into deity, balanced between the two, and now and then changed into one or the other.

That was beyond the breadloaf-shaped brain of Tehuti. He would squat and scowl at the nearing bank. There would be no more cigars or beer. The people on the bank were his kind, but they were also not his tribe, and they might kill him. Moreover, he was beginning for the first time to experience intellectual stimulation, and that would cease once he was back among the titanthrops.

So he would look at the chief and blink, grin and shake his head and tell him he was going to stay on the ship. He took his turn at the sweep and resumed his study of the most marvelous of all things: a tongue that knew philosophy. He became fluent in their speech and began to grasp the wonderful things the leader told him, although sometimes it was as painful as grasping a handful of thorns. If this or that idea eluded him, he pursued it, caught it, swallowed it, perhaps vomited it up a score of times. Even-

tually, he digested it and got *some* nourishment from it.

The river flowed by. They rowed, always staying close to the shore, where the current was weakest. Days and nights, and now the sun did not climb so high in the heavens but was a little lower at its zenith than it had been the week before. And the air grew colder.

Sam said, "Joe and his party were getting close to the north pole. The inclination of this planet's equator to the plane of the ecliptic is zero. As you know, there are no seasons; day and night are equal in length. But Joe was approaching the point where he would see the sun always half below the horizon and half above. Or would have if it hadn't been for the mountains."

"Yeth. It vath alvayth tvilight. I got cold, though not ath cold ath the men. They vere thyivering their atheth off."

"His big bulk radiates heat slower than our puny bodies," Clemens said.

"Pleathe, pleathe! Thyould I talk or jutht keep my big mouth thyut?"

Lother and Sam grinned at him. He continued. The wind grew stronger, and the air became misty. Joe began to get uneasy. He wanted to turn back, but by now he did not want to lose the respect of the leader. He would go every inch of the way towards their unknown goal with them.

"You didn't know where they were going?" Lothar said.

"Not egthactly. They vanted to get to the headvaterth of the river. They thought maybe the godth lived there, and there the godth would admit them into the true aftervorld. They thaid that thith vorld vathn't the true world. It vath a thtage on the vay to the true vorld. Vhatever that ith."

One day, Joe heard a rumble that sounded as faintly but yet as near as gas moving within his bowels. After a while, as the noise became like thunder, he knew it was water falling from immense heights.

The ship swung into a bay protected by a finger of land. The grailstones no longer lined the river. The men would have to catch fish and dry them. There was also a store of bamboo tips on the ship; these had been collected in the sunlit region for just such an eventuality.

The leader and his men prayed, and the party began climbing the steep cliffs beside the first of a series of cataracts. Here the superhuman strength of Tehuti-Joe Miller helped them in overcoming obstacles. Other times, his great weight was a hinderance and a danger.

Upward they went, wet because of the everpresent spray. When they came to a cliff smooth as ice for a thousand feet up, they despaired. Reconnoitering, they found a rope dangling from the face of a cliff. It was formed of towels tied together. Joe tested its strength and climbed up, hand over hand, his feet braced against the cliff, until he reached the top. There he turned to watch the others follow him. The

chief, first after Joe, tired much easier, and halfway up to the top he could go no further. Joe pulled him and the extremely heavy weight of the rope to the top. He did the same for each man in the party.

"Where in hell did the rope come from?" von Richthofen said.

"Someone had prepared the way for them," Clemens said. "Given the primitive technology of this planet, no one could have found a way to get that rope up to the rock around which one end of the rope was tied. Maybe a balloon might have lifted a man up there. You could make a balloon of river-dragon-skin or human skins, you know. You could make hydrogen by passing steam over highly heated charcoal in the presence of a suitable catalyst. But in this world of scarce metal, where's the catalyst.

"Hydrogen could be made without a catalyst but at an enormous cost in fuel. But there was no evidence of the furnaces needed to make the hydrogen. Besides, why would the towels be left behind, when they'd be needed again? No, some unknown person, let's call him The Mysterious Stranger, put that rope there for Joe and party. Or for whoever might come along. Don't ask me who he was or how he did it. Listen. There's more."

The party, carrying the rope, walked for several miles in the mist-ridden twilight on a plateau. They came to another cliff where the river broadened out above them into a cataract. It was so wide, it seemed to Joe that there was enough water to float the moon of Earth upon it. He would not have been surprised to see that great silver-and-black orb appear on the brink of the cataract far above and hurtle down that thunder of waters and be smashed to pieces on the rocks in the maelstrom foot.

The wind became stronger and louder; the mist, thicker. Drops of water condensed on the towels they had now fastened around themselves from head to foot. The cliff before them was as mirror-smooth and perpendicular as the one just ascended. Its top was lost in the fog; it could be only fifty feet high or could be ten thousand. They searched along the foot, hoping for some kind of fissure. And they found one. It was like a small door at the juncture of plateau and cliff. It was so low, it forced them to get down on hands and knees and crawl. Joe's shoulders rubbed against the sides of the rock. But the rock was smooth, as if the hole had been made by man and rubbed until all roughness was gone.

The tunnel led at a slightly less than 45-degree angle upwards and through the mountain. There was no estimating its distance. When Joe came out at the other end, however, his shoulders and hands and knees were rubbed raw and bleeding even with the protection of towels.

"I don't understand," von Richthofen said. "It seems to me that the mountains were shaped there to prevent men from getting to the end of the river. Why was this tun-

nel bored through solid rock to give intruders passage? And why wasn't a tunnel placed in the first cliff?"

"A tunnel in the first cliff might have been visible to whatever sentinels or patrols there are in that area," Clemens said. "But the second cliff was hidden in mist."

"That chain of white towels would be even more outstanding," the German said.

"Maybe it was placed there not too long before Joe got there," Clemens said.

Von Richthofen shivered.

"For Heaven'th thaketh, let me tell thith! After all, it ith my tale."

"And a big one, too," Clemens said, looking at Joe's huge buttocks.

"Thtickth and thtoneth may break my boneth," Joe replied.

VI

The party pushed on over another tableland for about ten miles. They slept or tried to, ate, and began climbing. Now, though the mountains were very steep and rough, they were scalable. Their chief enemy was lack of oxygen. They gasped for breath and had to halt often to rest.

By now Joe's feet were hurting him, and he was limping. He did not ask if he could rest. As long as the others walked, so would he.

"Joe can't stay on his feet as long as a human," Clemens said. "All of his species suffer from flat feet. Their weight is just too much for a biped that size. I wouldn't be surprised if his kind became extinct on Earth because of broken arches."

"I know one thpethimen of Homo Thapienth who'th going to suffer from a broken nothe if he don't keep hith nothe out of my buthineth, vhich ith telling thith thtory," Joe said. He showed his wicked-looking canines.

They climbed until the river, broad as it was, was only a thread below them. Much of the time they could not see even that thread because of the clouds. Snow and ice made climbing even more dangerous. Then they found a way downward to another plateau and gropped through the fog against a wind that howled and beat at them.

They found themselves beside a tremendous hole in the mountains. Out of the hole rushed the river, and on every side except riverwards the mountain rose straight and smooth. The hole was the only way to go. Out of it blasted a roar so loud they could not hear each other, the voice of a god who spoke as loud as death.

Joe Miller found a narrow ledge entering the cave high above the waters. Joe noticed that the leader had now dropped back behind him. After a while, the titanthrop became aware that all of the pygmies were looking to him as their guide and helper. When they shouted to make themselves heard above the bellow, they called him Tehuti. There was nothing unusual in that, but before this he had detected overtones of jesting in their use of the name. No more. Now he was truly their Tehuti.

Clemens interrupted again. "It was as if we called the village idiot Jehovah or something like that. When men have no need of gods, they mock them. But when afraid, they treat them with respect. Now, you might say, Toth was leading them into the opening into the Underworld.

"Of course, I'm only indulging in mankind's vice of trying to make a symbol out of coincidence. If you scratch any dog, you'll scare out a flea."

Joe Miller was breathing heavily through his grotesque nose, and the vast chest rose and fell like a bellows. Clearly, the reliving of that experience had aroused the old terror in him.

The ledge was not like the tunnel in the mountain. It had not been prepared. It was rough, and there were gaps in it, and sometimes it ran so high that Joe had to crawl to squeeze between the ledge and the roof of the cavern. The darkness blinded him as if his eyes had been plucked out. His sense of hearing did not help him; the bellow filled his ears. Only his touch was left to guide him, and he was so agitated that he sometimes wondered if that were betraying him. He would have quit except that if he did, the men behind him would not have been able to go on.

"Ve thtopped tvithe to eat and voneth to thleep," Joe said. "Just vhen I vath beginning to think ve might crawl until ve ran out of food, I thaw a grayneth ahead. It vathn't a light. Jutht a leththening of the darkneth."

They were out of the cave, in the open air, on the side of a mountain. Several thousand feet below them was a sea of clouds. The sun was hidden behind the mountains, but the sky above was not yet dark. The narrow ledge continued, and they crawled on their bloodied hands and knees downward now, since the ledge had narrowed to nothing.

Trembling, they clung to the tiniest of fingerholes. A man slipped and fell and clutched another man. Screaming, both disappeared into the clouds.

The air became warmer.

"The river was giving up its heat," Clemens said. "It not only originates at the north pole, it also empties there after picking up heat in its serpentine wanderings over the entire planet. The air at the north pole is cold but not nearly as cold as that on Earth."

The party came to another shelf on which they could stand, facing the mountain, and proceed sidewise, like crabs. The shelf curved around the mountain-side. Joe halted. The narrow valley had widened into a great plain. He could hear, far below, the dash of surf against rock.

Through the twilight, Joe could see the mountains ringing the sea of the north pole. The cloud-covered waters formed a body about sixty miles in diameter. The clouds were thicker at the opposite end of the sea. He didn't know why then, but Sam had explained that the clouds hid the mouth of the river, where the warm waters came into contact with the cold air.

Joe took a few more steps around the curve of the ledge.

And he saw the gray metal cylinder sitting on the path before him.

For a moment, he did not understand what it was, it looked so alien. It was so unexpected. Then it flowed into familiar lines, and he knew it was a grail left by a man who had come before him on this dangerous path. Some unknown pilgrim had survived the same perils as he. Up to that point, that is. He had put the grail down to eat. The lid was open, and there was the stinking remnant of fish and moldy bread within it. The pilgrim had used the grail as a pack, perhaps hoping he might come across a grailstone and recharge it.

Something had happened to him. He would not have left the grail there unless he had been killed or had been so frightened he had run away without it.

At this thought, Joe's skin chilled.

He went around the outcropping that was sitting at a point where the ledge went around a shoulder of granite. For a moment, his view of the sea was blocked.

He went around the outcripping — and he cried out.

The men called and asked what troubled him.

He could not tell them because the shock had taken away his newly learned speech, and he spoke in his native tongue.

The clouds in the middle of the sea had roiled away for a few seconds. The top of a structure projected from the clouds. It was cylindrical and gray, like the top of a monster's grail.

Mists rose and fell around it, now revealing, now veiling.

Somewhere in the mountains ringing the polar sea, a break existed. At that moment, the low sun must have passed this notch in the range. A ray of light fell through the notch and struck the top of the tower.

Joe squinted his eyes and tried to see into the brightness of the reflection.

Something round had appeared just above the top of the tower and was settling down towards it. It was egg-shaped and white, and it was from this that the sun was sparkling.

The next instant, as the sun passed by the notch, the sparkle died. The tower and the object above it faded into darkness and mist. Joe, crying out at the sight of the flying object, stepped back. His leg struck the grail left by the unknown pilgrim.

He swung his arms to regain his balance, but not even his apelike agility could save him. He toppled backward, bellowing horror as he turned over and over. Once he glimpsed the faces of his companions, a row of dark brown objects with the darker O's of mouths, watching his descent to the clouds and waters beneath.

"I don't remember hitting the vater," Joe said. "I avoke tranthlated about tventy mileth from where Tham Clementh vath. Thith vath a plathe vhere Northmen of the tenth thentury A.D. lived. I had to

thart learning a new language all over again. The little nothelethth people vere thcared of me, but they vanted me to fight for them. Then I met Tham, and ve became buddieth."

They were silent for a while. Joe lifted his glass to his thin and chimpanzee-flexible lips and poured out the rest of the liquor. Somber, the other two watched him. The only sign of brightness about them was the glow of their cigar ends.

Von Richthofen said, "This man who wore a glass circlet with a sunburst. What did you say his name was?"

"I didn't."

"Well, then, what was it?"

"Ikhnaton. Tham knowth more about him than I do, and I lived for four yeath with him. At leatht, that'th vhat Tham thayth. But — " here Joe looked smug — "I know the *man* and all Tham knowth ith a few hithtorical factth, tho-called."

VII

Von Richthofen said good night and went belowdecks. Sam paced back and forth, stopping once to light a cigarette for the helmsman. He wanted to sleep but could not. Insomnia had been skewering him for years; it drove through the middle of his brain, which spun on it like a wild gear, disengaged from his body's need for rest.

Joe Miller sat hunched against the railing and waited for his friend — the only man he trusted and loved — to go belowdecks. Presently his head drooped, the bludgeon-nose describing a weary arc, and he snored. The noise was like that of trees being felled in the distance. Sequoias split, screeched, cracked. Vast sighings and bubblings alternated with the woodchoopers' activities.

"Thleep vell, little chum," Sam said, knowing that Joe dreamed of that forever-lost Earth where mammoths and giant bears and lions roamed and where beautiful — to him — females of his own species lusted after him. Once he groaned and then whimpered, and Sam knew that he was dreaming again of being seized by a bear which was chomping on his feet. Joe's feet hurt day and night. Like all of his kind, he was too huge and heavy for bipedal locomotion. Indeed, it was this that originated Sam's theory for the extinction of the titanthrops on Earth. Nature had experimented with a truly giant subhuman species and then she had dismissed them as failures.

"*The rise and Fall of the Flatfeet*," Sam said. "An article I shall never write."

Sam gave a groan, a weak echo of Joe's. He saw Livy's half-smashed body, given him briefly by the waves, then taken away. Or had she really been Livy? Had he not seen her at least a dozen times before while staring through the telescope at the multitudes on the banks? Yet, when he had been able to talk Bloodaxe into putting ashore just to see if the face was Livy's, he had always been disappointed. Now there was no reason to believe the corpse had been his wife's.

He groaned again. How cruel if it had been Livy! How like life! To have been so close and then to have her taken away a few minutes before he would have been reunited with her. And to have her cast upon the decks as if God — or whatever sneering forces ran the universe — were to laugh and to say, "See how close you came! Suffer, you miserable conglomeration of atoms! Be in pain, wretch! You must pay with tears and agony!"

"Pay for what?" Sam muttered, biting on his cigar. "Pay for what crimes? Haven't I suffered enough on Earth, suffered for what I did do and even more for what I didn't do?"

Death had come on Earth, and he had been glad because it meant the end forever to all sorrow. He would no longer have to weep because of the sickness and deaths of his beloved wife and daughters nor gloom because he felt responsible for the death of his only son, the death caused by his negligence. Or was it carelessness that had made his son catch the disease that killed him? Hadn't he unconsciously permitted the robe to slip from his son, little Langdon, while taking him for a carriage ride that cold winter day?"

"No!" Sam said so loudly that Joe stirred and the helmsman growled something in Norse.

He smacked his fist against his open palm, and Joe muttered again.

"God, why do I have to ache with guilt for anything I've done?" Sam cried. "It doesn't matter now! It's all been wiped out; we've started with clean souls."

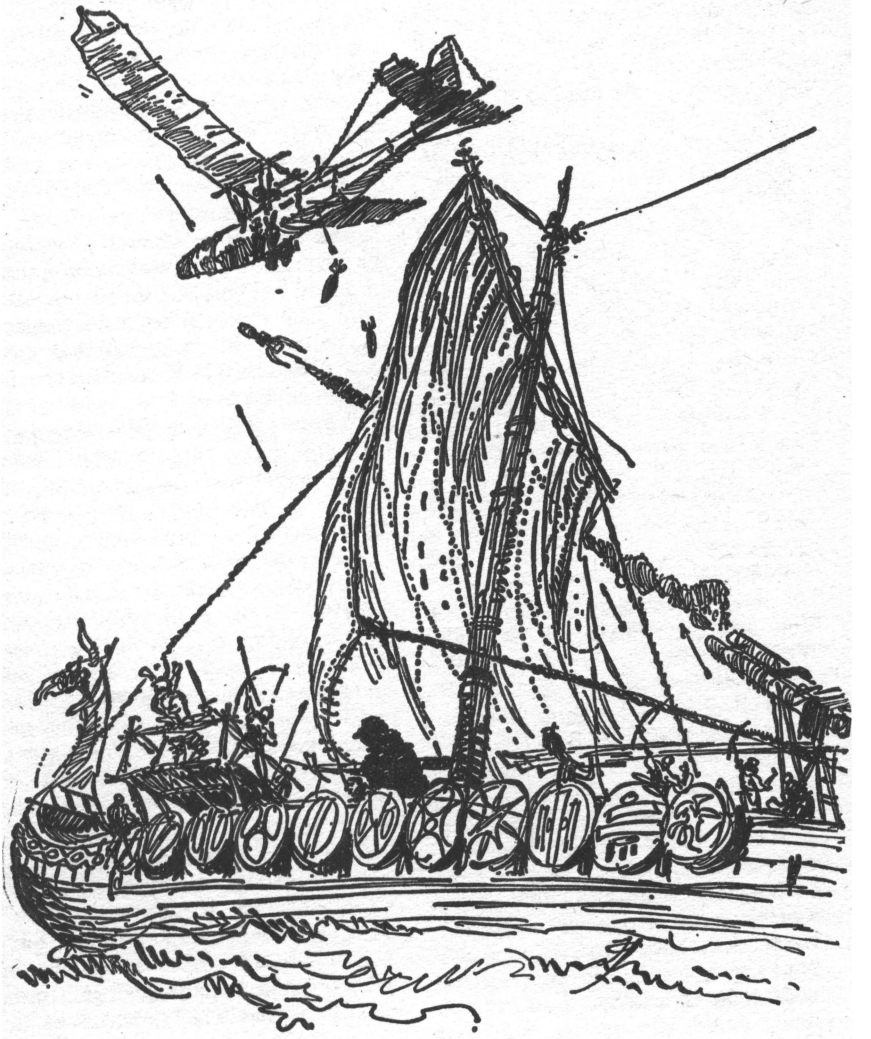
But it did matter. It made no difference that all the dead were once more alive and the sick were healthy and the bad deeds so remote in time and space that they should be forgiven and forgotten. What a man had been and had thought on Earth, he still was and thought here.

Suddenly, he wished he had a stick of dreamgum. That might remove the clenching remorse and make him wildly happy.

But then it might intensify the anguish. You never knew if a horror so terrifying would come that you wanted to die. The last time he had taken the gum, he had been so menaced by monsters that he had not dared try the gum again. But maybe this time . . . no!

Little Langdon! He would never see him again, never! His son had been only twenty-eight months old when he had died, and this meant that he had not been resurrected on the rivervalley. No children who had died on Earth before the age of five had been raised again. At least, not here. It was to be presumed that they were alive somewhere, probably on another planet. But for some reason, whoever was responsible for this had chosen not to place the infant dead here. And so Sam would never find him and so make amends.

Nor would he ever find Livy or his daughters, Sarah, Jean, and Clara. Not on a river said to be possibly twenty million miles long with possibly thirty-seven billion people on its banks. Even if a man started at one end and walked up



one bank and looked at every person on that side and then, on reaching the end, walked back down the other side and did not miss a person, he would take — how long? A mile a day would mean a round trip of, say 365 into 40,000,000, what was that? He wasn't any good at doing sums in his head, but it must be over 109,000 years.

And even if a man could do this, could walk all those weary miles and make sure he never missed a face, at the end of over 100,000 years he still might not find the face. The longed-for person might have died somewhere ahead of the searcher and been translated back down the river, behind the searcher. Or the searchee may have passed by the seacher during the night, perhaps while the searchee was looking for the searcher.

Yet there might be another way to do this. The beings responsible for this rivervalley and the resurrection might have the power to locate anybody they wished to. They must have a central file or some means of ascertaining the identity and location of the valley-dwellers.

Or, if they did not, they could at least be made to pay for what they had done.

Joe Miller's story was no fantasy. It had some very puzzling aspects, but these hinted at something comforting. That was, that some nameless person — or being — wanted the valley dwellers to know about the tower in the mists of the north polar sea. Why? Sam did not know, could not guess. But that hole had been bored through the cliff to enable human beings to find out about the tower. And in that tower must be the light to scatter the darkness of ignorance. Of that Sam was sure. And then there was the widespread story of the Englishman, Burton or Perkin, probably Burton, who had awakened prematurely in the pre-resurrection phase. Was the awakening any more of an accident than the hole bored through the polar cliff?

And so Samuel Clemens had had his first dream, had nourished it until it had become The Great Dream. To make it real, he needed iron, much iron. It was this that had caused him to talk Erik Bloodaxe into launching the expedition in search of the source of the steel axe. Sam had not really expected that there would be enough of the metal to build the giant boat, but at least the Norse were taking him up-river, closer to the polar sea.

Now, with a luck that he did not deserve — he really felt he deserved nothing good — he was within reach of more iron than he could possibly have hoped for. Not that that had kept him from hoping.

He needed men with knowledge. Engineers who would know how to treat the meteorite iron, get it out, melt it down, reshape it. And engineers and technicians for the hundred other things needed. These Norsemen were no good for that.

He toed Joe Miller's ribs and said, "Get up, Joe. It'll be raining soon."

The titanthrop grunted and rose like a tower out of a fog and stretched. Starlight glinted on his canines.

He followed Sam across the deck, the bamboo planks creaking under the eight hundred pounds. From below, somebody cursed in Norse.

The mountains on both sides were covered with clouds now, and the darkness was spreading over the valley and shutting off the insane glitter of twenty thousand giants stars and glowing gas sheets. Soon it would rain hard for half an hour, and then the clouds would disappear.

Lightning streaked on the eastern bank; thunder bellowed. Sam stopped. Lightning always made him afraid, or, rather, the child in him afraid. Lightning streaked through him and showed him the haunted and haunting faces of those he had injured or insulted or dishonored and behind them were blurred faces reproaching him for nameless crimes. Lightning twisted through him; then he believed in an avenging God out to burn him alive, to drown him in searing pain. Somewhere in the clouds was the Wrathful Retributor, and He was looking for Sam Clemens.

Joe said, "There'th thunder thomevhere further down the river. No! It ain't thunder! Lithen! Can't you hear it! It'th thomething funny, like thunder but different."

Sam listened while his skin prickled with cold. There was a very faint rumble downriver. He got even colder as he heard a louder rumble from upriver. "What the hell is it?"

"Don't get thcared, Tham," Joe said. "I'm vith you." But he was shivering, too.

Lightning spread a filamented whiteness on the east bank.

Sam jumped and said, "Jesus! I saw something flicker!"

Joe moved next to him and said, "I thaw it! It'th the thyip! You know, the vun I thaw above the tower. But it'th gone!"

Joe and Sam stood silent, peering into the darkness. Lightning exploded again, and this time there was no white eggshape high above the river.

"It flickered out of nothing and went back to nothing. Like a mirage," Sam said. "If you hadn't seen it, too, I'd have thought it was an illusion."

Sam awoke on the deck. He was stiff, cold and confused. He rolled over and squinted his eyes at the sun just clearing the eastern range.

Joe was on his back beside him, and the helmsman was sleeping beside the wheel.

But it was not this that brought him exclaiming to his feet. The gold of the sun had faded out as he brought his gaze down; green was everywhere. The muddied plains and mountains, with straws and stubs of debris, were gone. There was short grass on the plains, tall grass and bamboo on the hills, and the giant pine, oak, yew and irontree everywhere on the hills.

"Business as usual," Sam muttered. He was doubly shocked. Something had put all aboard the *Dreyrugr* asleep, and while they were unconscious, the incredible work of clearing off the mud and replanting the vegetation had been completed. The world was reborn!

TO BE CONCLUDED

PELANDRA'S HUSBANDS

by E. A. WALTON

Pelandra was only a junior member of the immortals — but she gave the others life!

Project New Earth had seemed so simple to Pelandra, fifteen years ago when she had trooped on to the spaceship with her six husbands and the three old scientists. Of course, nobody would ever have known that Zor, Lunor and Gohar were old, because each man had the deceptive appearance of a twenty-five-year-old athlete and the vitality to match it. These three were members of an ultra-exclusive elite, a secret society known as the Chosen Brethren, and they had been selected to rule the distant planet for which the great nuclear craft was now bound. They would form the central intelligence cell destined to control the test-tube people by computers and brain electrodes.

This way, a predetermined history of the new planet had been possible. The programming of the self-regenerating computers had taken two hundred years to reach perfection. Pelandra herself was only a very junior member of the Brethren and she had not as yet completely earned the right to immortality. At one time, the project had seemed very exciting and stimulating, but now the woman found it futile . . . because Husband Three was mortal.

Until recently, she had been thrilled by the keen interest Lunor showed in her progress. He opened his thoughts to her freely. Only this day, he had said to her: "We old men have reached a state of almost certain immortality. You will too, in time. But, my child, you must be single-minded about it. I think I detect in you a definite bias towards Three. Try to overcome this fault, please. Centuries ago, when I was lucky enough to discover the Life Fluid which enabled me to live an active span of a century and a half, I dreamed of this journey and of taking such a person as you with me." His great eyes glowed with pride. "You are to become my own wife when we reach the new planet, but for this great honor, you must be perfect. Therefore, I must insist that you do not allow unseemly, primitive emotions to cloud your outlook. Do you understand?"

The woman shivered slightly and replied. "I will try, Lunor, but it is very hard for me. My imagination is still not completely under my own control, even though I practice daily. I confess that the young man

is unusually attractive. It would be foolish to try to deny this. However, you can rest assured that my loyalty is to you, alone." Pelandra spoke these honeyed words with conviction, but she lied. The woman was terrified that Lunor would realize this fact. Also, she had a faint suspicion that Gohar had guessed her guilty secret. She loved Three!

To Pelandra's own knowledge, Zor was at least two hundred, and the others much older. Lunor was a great power within the Galaxy Organization, because of his mass of accumulated knowledge and because he tried to manipulate his subject peoples as humanely as possible — so long as scientific progress was not endangered, of course.

As for Gohar, Pelandra hated him. To her, he seemed to have the coldness of a reptile. All desire, except the desire to remain alive and manipulate others, had died in him long ago.

Pelandra smiled to herself when she saw that Husband Number Three had taken up her complex navigational instruments and was trying studiously to check the bearings of the spacecraft, hurtling along at the speed of light. He was having his usual difficulty. A radio telescope on Earth had already monitored their direction and distance, and an Earth computer had decided that no corrections needed to be made. Her latest Husband, who was unusually clever for a replacement human, had picked up this information on the nuclear radio communicator and now, eagerly, wished to check his own growing navigational skill against the computer.

Making very sure that no one was spying on her, the woman came over to him and laid an affectionate arm about his broad shoulders.

"Don't you remember what I told you about the three co-ordinates?" she asked indulgently. "Now, tell me, how far are we away from Earth?"

"Fifteen light-years," he replied, his face boyish with embarrassed desire to learn and to please her. Because of him, Pelandra was ready to jeopardize her chance of immortality. But now that Lunor had grown suspicious it was necessary to exercise extreme caution. He would cast them both into space if he knew. Besides, Gohar always seemed to be nearby, his wicked eyes eager to detect any anti-elite behavior on her part.

"Well, you can either use that information or, better still, measure the diameter of the solar disk and use the plane of the planetary system for the other two." She kissed him playfully on the cheek. "It's quite simple, really, silly boy. I don't know why you always make such a fuss about it. But, as I told you before, you'll nearly always be wrong; that's why we have to rely on periodic Earth checks."

Pelandra liked to keep close to her husband. She had a secret and dreadful fear that she, too, might one day be cold and hateful like Gohar. Three seemed to rejuvenate her humanity, as if some inexplicable life force was moving within

him. It came into her mind that perhaps those who died for the cause of science were luckier than those who had to live for it!

Throwing reason aside, she began to confide in Three. It was the one, unforgivable sin!

"Did you know that I was Lunor's chief assistant in the Halls of the Chosen Brethren?" she asked. Then, seeing his puzzled look, she continued, "How foolish of me. How could you possibly know? How could you know that there are twenty Select Beings destined to live forever and that four of them are on this ship!"

"Are you one of them?" cried the startled Three, staring at her with troubled eyes.

"Yes, I'm afraid I am. Listen carefully. I love you and because of this I do not wish to deceive you. Will you try to understand and forgive me?"

"Yes." His honest eyes were full of compassion.

"I have acted as a surgeon to replace their failing organs with spare parts from live humans. Ah, don't shrink from me like that! They were specially bred by a very humane process in the delightful cities of the suburbs."

Three stood in rigid silence; he had been from a suburb!

"Every human conceived is cross-matched and classed genetically at the test-tube stage? Those not suitable for replacement purposes are trained as scientists, doctors, spacemen or agricultural workers, according to their potential mental ability — which is ascertained when the embryo is removed from the womb and placed in a test incubator for investigation and advanced culture." Pelandra was speaking in a flat monotone and avoiding Three's eyes.

"But I have never worked!" cried the young man, gripping her by the shoulders. "I was only taught to keep my body fit and to fill my mind with artistic thought. Does this mean . . . does it mean that I am a replacement human? Oh, no, it is too horrible!" He slid to his knees before her, burying his face against her, shivering with horror.

Pelandra's whole being was filled with pain as she wrapped her arms about him, crying over him and stroking his hair, while he gazed hopelessly into her lovely face with the terror slowly mounting in his expression.

"You must realize," she said sadly, "that Lunor has experimented a hundred years to make this present journey possible. The great man himself carefully nurtured my own embryo through incubation. He has trained my mind personally for twenty years. I am the most intelligent and physically perfect specimen in the whole galaxy. I excel even Lunor. I have three functions on this journey: space pilot, surgeon and mother. I am sorry, Three, but I wanted you to understand." Wearily she put a hand to her throbbing forehead. "Try not to hate me."

"I can only love you, Pelandra," he replied simply. "When am I to die?"

"Tomorrow!"

"Then let us be happy together in the time we have left, my love."

And so they clung together in what can only be described as a beautiful sadness.

It was not really six husbands that Pelandra had brought with her onto the spaceship. Actually, it had only been five because Husband Number Six was still in a test tube in the pocket of her galaxy suit at the time of launching. He had not been due to be born for another five years. Now he was a strapping fair-haired lad of ten. Pelandra thought what a shame it was that he would, like all her other husbands, have to die before the landing on the new planet. She ran a weary hand across her forehead, as if to brush this distasteful thought away.

The huge spacecraft was coasting along without engines. On Lunor's orders, they did this as often as possible in order to save fuel. Through the forward vision window, they could see a moving vista of distant meteorites. Pelandra had decided that, as they were on the correct flight path, there was no need to release any gas jets to reorient the craft as they had done on previous occasions.

So Pelandra, who had no more work to do, was content to sit with Three and talk to him. She felt like weeping. It was strange and bewildering to her that the thought of parting from her third husband should cause her so much heartache. After all, she had disposed of the first two with complete medical calm and perfect scientific indifference. What in the name of the Stars was the matter with her?

Pelandra plunged deep into her own mind, seeking an explanation without success.

"What a shame you cross-match so well with the three old men," she sighed. "You would have made an excellent scientist. Your intelligence is easily fifty per cent of my own, whereas my other two husbands hardly made up one per cent between them. Poor devils! Oh, Three, why am I so sad about you? Is it, do you think, because you taught me how to laugh?"

At that moment Gohar came smirking up to them. He looked at Pelandra with his cold fish eyes, mocking her. Then he turned upon Three and dismissed him curtly with a nod.

Number Three knew his place; Pelandra's special treatment had not made him indiscreet. He bowed low before Gohar and made a great show of removing his humble person from the mighty one's presence. But he winked at Pelandra as he did so, making her want to laugh, despite the sadness of it all.

Pelandra's heart twisted for the youth. Tomorrow she must surely kill him! Her hands trembled with an unusual weakness.

"Your presence is requested in the meeting hall," sneered Gohar. "It may be a matter of life or death for you, my dear Pelandra." He sniggered after his revolting fashion.

Pelandra ignored him, but she switched over to the automatic control system. She realized that Gohar had been sneaking again. How much had he overheard? She found she was too unhappy to care.

Lunor was waiting for her, calm and dignified in his robes of office. He had an impressive air of command. His gray, eagle-bright eyes bored into her with the intensity of his visionary insight. He was without a doubt, a king among men. He seemed very grave.

"I am most disturbed by a report that you disobeyed my orders and told Three he is to die. You must be aware of the punishment for such a crime. Have you gone mad? Have you forgotten that you swore a sacred oath of secrecy?" Lunor thundered at the cringing woman.

"Try to overlook my weakness, my lord," cried Pelandra. "I am not disloyal, I do not wish to betray your trust. It was just that I wanted the boy to know that he would never see me again after tomorrow. Am I not allowed even one fault?"

Lunor studied her thoughtfully. "I believe you," he said. "After all, you are a mere babe immortality-wise, so some allowance must be made. I suppose. But please clearly understand that this is your last chance, Pelandra."

"I understand," whispered the dejected girl, trembling more violently than ever.

"Well?" asked Lunor, his noble face troubled still, for he sensed Pelandra's reluctance for her task. "Don't tell me that I was mistaken in my choice. You still do not wish to operate tomorrow!"

"Of course I will operate, Mighty One," insisted Pelandra. "I cannot let a hundred years of research be wasted merely because I have fallen in love with a replacement human, can I?" She made her reply scornfully, deeply shocked that Lunor should thus doubt her integrity.

But perhaps the old man was wiser than she knew.

Pelandra walked wearily to the portal, her beautiful features strained by grief. Her large blue eyes dimmed by pain and longing. All the vitality seemed to have drained from her long, supple limbs.

The woman looked, with something akin to hatred, at the man who had made her perfect, who had condemned her to live forever. Pelandra had already received the Life Fluid which would insure that she lived to be at least a hundred and fifty, after which time, the spare part routine would become operable.

"Come, we must make our preparations," she said in listless tones. They collected Zor and Gohar, then went on to the operating theater.

"Lunor's plan is brilliant in its simplicity," remarked Zor good-naturedly. "A thirty-five year journey. Six husbands for Pelandra; the eldest being aged twenty at the time of launching; the second, fifteen; the third, ten; the fourth, five; the fifth a babe in arms and the sixth in a test tube to incubate for five years. What a great and wonderful plan!"

"Yes," Gohar agreed. "In this way, one husband reaches maturity every five years and is available for replacement purposes and his remains for committal to space and oblivion. Pelandra marries each one of them when he reaches the age of twenty and operates on him five

years later, after each has given her five children; which Lunor, of course, rears in test tubes."

"And these children will provide the first work team on New Earth," cried Zor.

That night Three suddenly began to cry because he could not bear the thought of parting from Pelandra. She stroked his brown, curly hair and told him that he would feel no pain; and he was comforted because he trusted her and loved her.

Next morning, Pelandra examined the three young-old men, to ascertain which organs needed replacement. She had already committed Husband Number Three to the deep-freeze machine, and her heart was heavy with grief.

Presently Lunor, Zor and Gohar also lay in their own deep-freeze units, like three rather beautiful marble effigies. Waiting for her to use her sharp instruments and laser beams on dear, beloved Number Three! Pelandra looked with pity at Lunor, who for the last ten years had breathed with Number One's lungs. She looked with loathing at Gohar, who had one brown eye of his own and one blue that had belonged to Number Two. Number Two had also provided Zor with a new right leg, and Number One had given him a spleen.

Pelandra looked thoughtfully at the three old men, lying so peacefully in refrigeration, and suddenly she smiled.

The women turned a dial, and the solar cells beneath the three units suddenly glowed like great red suns. The temperature gauges went up beyond infinity, and the reading hands broke off because of the intensity of the shock they had suffered.

"It will take eternity to unfreeze the three wise men," Pelandra observed to herself, giving one of her rare laughs.

Then she slowly went over to the unit which contained Number Three in all his youthful glory. Gently, with great skill and patience, she moved with expert fingers about the dials and switches. It took her three days and three nights to bring him back to glowing, throbbing life.

She herself would teach him all the wise men knew except how to live forever! And she would teach her children how to attend to the embryos and safeguard the condensed atmosphere capsule. They would all lead busy, useful lives, but with free minds, not as human robots!

Oh, it would be such a happy landing now.

And it was.

Pelandra's first action on reaching the new planet was to send a message back to Earth telling of her dreadful crime against science. This message would take thirty-five years to reach its destination, and another thirty-five years would be needed for the Galaxy Punishment Force to reach the new planet to retaliate. Pelandra had not a care in the universe, because both she and Husband Number Three would both be safely dead, long before the avenging Earth Forces could make good their attack. **END**

POPULATION IMPLOSION

by ANDREW J. OFFUTT

Illustrated by BODÉ

Old people were dying. Nothing new about that — but they all died at the same age, and it was getting younger!

I

Nobody mentioned it for a while. Not on a large scale, I mean. A couple of years actually passed before it was noticed as a definite trend. I'd heard other doctors comment, of course. Merely that they seemed to be losing a lot of old patients all of a sudden, for no particular reason. But physicians are so used to death we didn't get excited. It was a hard-working insurance actuary who saw it for what it was.

People were just . . . dying. Old people. Doctors and coroners wouldn't admit to perplexity.

They would put down "heart attack" or "stroke" or "heart failure" or "cardiac arrest", or the like. Mostly cardiac arrest. Good old catchall. Think about it. Means the

patient's heart stopped beating. Well, I should smile, it did! Did you ever hear of anyone's being dead and his heart still beating? That's an *effect,* not a cause. When you're dead your heart stops pumping. But something causes *that.*

A bullet. A fall. An illness; cancer, or cerebral hemorrhage. Or a plague. That is, a Plague.

The insurance actuary pointed out that the death rate was up — way up — among old people. Everything else was still there, of course; men murdering each other with automobiles and slipping in the bathtub and so on. But old people were dying. The oldest.

Well, there wasn't anything unusual about that, and I remember even I chuckled. Sure, we knew old age was a disease. We called its cause a virus, which meant we didn't know what it was. A *filterable* virus . . . which means the organism was *not* filterable. We hadn't *found* it. And since we hadn't found the cause, we certainly hadn't done much about the effect. We had lengthened the lifespan. We could keep a man alive, and we were proud of it. Oh, maybe he was a vegetable, but hurray and so what, we were keeping him alive. The family usually found the money, somehow.

But the actuary was one hundred per cent on the beam. The death rate was up among the oldest people, and it was increasing. Today thirty, tomorrow thirty-one, this day next month forty, this day next year sixty-two. I'm using relative figures, you realize. No need to start spouting precise ones. Just consider that in City A, on May 1st of 1979, twenty people died. In 1985, twenty-six died on that same day. In 1992, thirty-three. All in accord with the population increase; no cause for alarm. You have ten people, one dies. You have a hundred, ten die, *et cetera.*

But then it began curving up.

That actuary was shaken, I'll tell you. He shook the company president, too, and the board of directors. And there's where I came in. I had just been made a director. You know how it goes: you don't mind working, which puts you in a class by yourself. You make money and become pretty well known and make some more money, and all of a sudden you're successful. People think you're pretty smart. They want you to be a director of the United Fund and the school board and a bank and the country club and a hospital and Kiwanis and this and that. Doesn't matter if you're an executive in an aircraft company or a plumbing and heating contractor or a distiller or even an M.D. So I had a chunk of stock and a chunk of permanent life insurance and somehow wound up a director of the Great Coastal Life Insurance Company of America.

No, I didn't attend the meetings. Lord, I knew about as much about the life insurance business as I do about quantum mechanics . . . I can define "quantum" and I can come close to defining "mechanics" — I think. Anyhow this actuary's report was mentioned in the minutes I received in the mail and I

read it and chuckled. So he had discovered that old people were dying! Just tell me if they start dying of scarlet fever or botulism or chicken pox, I thought. Or puerperal fever.

Well, then the article showed up in *Newsweek* five months later. A lot of people still thought it didn't make sense, but it was the second time I'd seen it, and there I was a professional and . . . well, I called Roger Calkin at Great Coastal and asked him to send that nutty young actuary of his over.

And there it was. The actuary — Ike Hill — had by that time started collecting figures from all over the world. All you had to do was look at them. All deaths were up, naturally. Way up. But . . . the increases that reached up and slapped you in the eyeball and squeezed the pit of your stomach was in the over-75 group. It hadn't struck anyone as particularly odd that the Russian Premier, the West German Chancellor and the Speaker all had died within a few months of each other. But they'd had plenty of company. Those three had all been past eighty, and their group was dying by the score, by the thousand, by the tens of thousands. We'd prolonged their lives for them; now they were cashing in one after the other, as if they were crowding each other to prove or disprove their particular faith's belief or disbelief in afterlife. As if they were tired of life, or as if they were trying to make us look bad. Sure, I had that thought.

I remember saying, "Hell, Ike Hill, at this rate there won't be anyone over 75 alive anywhere!"

And I was right. It took less than a year. In the meanwhile the world lost seventy or eighty assorted senators, representatives, MP's and what-have-you lawmakers. A king. And even ten presidents, premiers and the like, and one dictator. Several generals. A potful of judges. The Pope. Two-thirds of the Roman Curia. And every Cardinal Archbishop in the world but eleven. Oh, it was great for promotions, and pageants!

People were taking notice by then, of course. Someone used the word "plague" in a newspaper story one day, and after that it was The Plague. A lot of people did a lot of theorizing. There was religious gabble and atheist gabble and medical gabble and political gabble-gabble. Over a dozen different men announced over a dozen different causes. One even announced a cure.

They were all wrong.

Then I found it, and I couldn't think of anyone to call save Ike Hill.

II

We got our heads and our figures together. We barely had to glance at them. Of course they weren't completely accurate. It's impossible to learn exactly how many people in the world died or were born last year, or for that matter even twenty years ago. The ladies of Africa and India and China don't publish announcements every time they have a kid, whether they expose it to die or not, and they don't file death statistics, either.

We took the figures over to Ike's


VAUGHN BODE'

office and turned on some lights and fed them into the Iron Brain, and it told us what we already knew, which is about all Iron Brains are good for anyhow.

The death rate matched the birth rate.

In the United States it exceeded the birth rate.

Every time somebody popped a kid on the tail and made him suck up that first highly addictive drag of air, someone, somewhere, gasped his last one. And whatever the cause, it didn't know anything about fair play or national boundaries. The birthrate was highest in Asia. You know which country had the longest life expectancy, don't you? The largest percentage of old people? Uh-huh. The U.S. of A. was rapidly running out of the euphemism I've always hated: "Senior Citizens." (I don't like any euphemism that indicates I'm junior). Even then an extraneous thought went creeping across my mind like a guilty cat: something or somebody — capitalize that if you want — was solving the Medicare problem. In a few years, maybe months, I wouldn't be filling out so many of those government forms for aged patients any more. The AHA wouldn't be hollering about all the paperwork involved in Medicare admissions. And my sons wouldn't have the 21% social security tax I was paying!

Frankly Ike Hill and yours truly M.D. didn't know what the hell to do. We just stared at each other and the machine and then went out and found a quiet, dark place to talk. I forgot to call my answering service for the first time in five years. First time I'd got drunk in fifteen years, since I was a freshman in pre-med.

Whom do you tell? For maybe three years a plague had been raging across the world, a plague which obligingly passed over people who had lives to live and knocked on the doors of those who'd lived a fair-sized one already. Whom do you tell? No one else knew there was no one, not one single person, anywhere in the world, older than 75 — maybe 74 by then. No one knew that every time an OB checked in at Admittance some oldster checked out of the world. And . . . if it went on . . . then by this time next year, there wouldn't be anyone over 73, or 72, depending upon the international birthrate and the number of people in that age group. Or maybe 71, or 70. And the *next* year . . . whom do you tell? Call Washington and say "Mister President, this is Thomas Jefferson McCabe, M.D., in Atlanta, and pretty soon our country is going to be out of business, populationwise, and by the way you're 69, aren't you? Have you arranged disposal of your papers?"

Ike Hill and I didn't know. So we drank too many gimlets and had to be poured into a couple of taxis and sent home to understanding wives.

In the morning I prescribed the usual ineffectual old wives' tales for myself and held my head carefully as I called A. T. Griffin, M.D., Chief at Good Samaritan Hospital. And I called Michael Rosen, M.D.,

head of the U of G Med School and I managed to get them together in Doctor Griff's office at Good Sam. And I took poor Ike Hill with me and I told them. We told them. Then we showed them. It meant a lot more to them than to us, I assure you . . . Doctor Griff was sixty-four and Doctor Mike admitted to sixty-seven. And they bought it. They had to. Oh, we thought, and we postulated, and we opined, and we theorized and hoped out loud. But we had the answer.

Swell. What to do with it? I felt relieved — I'd shared it. I'd transferred the weight and the responsibility of the knowledge onto the shoulders of the best two medical father-images I had. I was out of it!

Well, I took my first plane ride to Washington. Doctor Mike's doctor said he shouldn't travel — you think *we* don't have doctors? Physician, heal thyself! — or try. And Doctor Griff just wouldn't - couldn't. So Mister Ike Hill B.S., M.S., and A. J. McCabe, M.D., flew up to the big town with introductions from those two Big Men — Doctor Griff was also president of the Georgia Medical Association and a director of the AMA — and papers and graphs and reports and analyses and a few inches of computer tape.

We got in amazingly fast. My medical friends had done a good job, working personally and through senators and what not. I think it was the President's secretary got us in; he was a Georgian. It's pretty hard for mere people to get an audience with the President of, by, and for the people.

Sorry. Getting old, as things go now. I'll be forty-five next month.

Naturally we wound up with the Surgeon General (first time he'd had anything to do in years!) and some fellow from Bethesda and a couple of hotrods from Johns H. and somebody else I later found out was a psychiatrist. Watching us! Ike and me!

They had to buy it, too. It's tough to buy truth you don't like. But it's tougher to turn your back on it, and not too smart, either, as Galileo, among others, proved.

You can't imagine how they looked. How we felt. What to do? There was the evidence. Now they were in the same leaky dinghy I'd been hand-paddling the past several days. What to do? — and how? I was relieved, I can tell you that. I'd unshouldered the burden. I had gently laid it at the feet of the boss, the proverbial Authorities, and now I was out from under.

And that's how Ike Hill and I got put in charge of Project Methusaleh. That's how I got to be one of the Jaycee's Ten Most that year. I think it would have — and should have — been Ike, but there was a choice, and I was a member.

Funny thing about the Government Mind. You tell them you know where there's a problem, they right away treat you with respect — especially if you're in the American Magicians' Association and have the initials after your name. The schools translate them Medical Doctor. I've always figured they stand for Me Dunno. But everybody else auto-

matically assumes Magic Dispenser.

Back to that government mind. It assumes that if you've been smart enough to point out a problem, obviously you're the man to tackle it. Tell the Feds you've found something wrong and they say fine, work on a cure, here's some money (we have lots and lots) and some papers to order some more and a title and some blank progress reports for you to file in triplicate, triweekly. I did have enough sense at least to get a commitment from the President, and get it in writing, my way.

Then . . . funny thing about the human mind (as opposed to the one just mentioned). Somebody gives you a problem, and you right away do one of three things. Punch the nearest panic button. Fake it. Or find that your mind is hurtling off in ten directions to Get the Job Done. That's what happened to me. Oh, obviously I had no solution. But I had thought of Step One, how to study the problem.

We got ourselves ten volunteers, Controls, seven male and three female human beings, aged 74. We put 'em in a hospital, third floor of Good Sam, and cleared the rest of the floor. In reverse order; I was *careful* with those people. My Personal Responsibilities. Sure, there were a lot more women of that age, but the reason I wound up with seven men was the men we interviewed weren't as touchy about giving their birthdates. We recorded them. I felt a monster, grisly, ghoulish, as I put them down, one under the other, in order: earliest birthdate at the top.

Then I did everything. Ran tests. X-rays, EKG's. EEG's. Taps. Smears Basal Metabolisms. Those ten people were *delighted*. Free room service, lots of attention and no cost. And furthermore they could *enjoy* it; they weren't sick! I'd deliberately picked them in good health (as well as could be expected, considering, as we're fond of saying). I supervised their diets as if they were the first septulets and I had a movie contract riding on them. Decuplets, I guess, under the circumstances — perish the thought. They lived in near-sterile conditions. Daily checks. Blood pressure. Sistolics. Reactions. Put-your-tongue-and-say-ah. All of it.

They died. Very neatly, from the top of the list. And I felt ghoulish and grisly, crossing off their names, one by one, from the top, with ugly satisfaction that they were proving me right. Cause of death: cardiac arrest.

It was enough to give me back the religion I'd outgrown in med school when I first realized there's no justice in nature. Really. I felt like putting down "God" after Cause of Death. I didn't. But I didn't write cardiac arrest or natural causes or any of that rot, either. I put "P L A G U E," in block letters. And plague it was, The Plague. The one we couldn't cure, because it didn't make anyone sick or have any symptoms whatever, and we haven't found a cure for death yet.

None of those old people had any symptoms. They just died, peacefully and quietly. Patient Rested Comfortably To The End. We had permission, and we autopsied to shame all

previous autopsies. We examined those cadavers more carefully than Leonardo had. Nothing. No bugs. No . . . well, just nothing. I'd have welcomed a little note: "I decided his time had come and there's nothing you can do about it so go on back to prescribing the Pill and delivering the ones who don't use it on Wednesday-afternoon golf. Your very truly, (signed) Prime Mover."

And about that time I had the insane thought. The answer. The only one. Crazy.

The aforementioned Pill.

III

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, then you and I will ever dope out, so let's start by talking about something we do know. At the beginning of the Christian Era there were about 250,000,000 people in the world. By the middle of the 17th Century there were a half-billion; it took some 1650 years to double. By the 1800's there were a billion. By 1960 the world's population had doubled again, to two billion, and indications were that there would be six billion by AD 2,000. Momentum. Snowball effect. Like compound interest.

People didn't have enough sense to stop breeding in the face of overpopulation. It wasn't personal enough. So who's Julian Huxley? Yes, well, how about if it's good and personal? Or bad and personal.

Look: every time a baby's born, someone dies.

No population explosion, no problem of food and water and *lebensraum,* or *liebensraum* either. We could've saved a lot of worry and palaver over that one. Somebody — go ahead, captalize that: SomeBody had decided the world was full enough. So he — I mean big h, *He* had either to stop the income or accelerate the outgo. He chose the second. I had to admit: it was the first time I'd witnessed justice in nature. Population implosion.

Oh Lord. The announcement. You remember it. It was . . . it was awful. Uncle Charlie died yesterday . . . my God, I'm responsible! . . . the baby . . . . Uh-huh. Granddad began to look at his expectant daughter as if she were some sort of monster. She wasn't a monster, not really. No. But she *was* killing him. Or working on it. Just as soon as she went into the delivery room.

That's *personal.* It was horrible.

It was elsewhere, too. Oh, everybody corroborated, all over the world. It was simple enough. All the evidence was there, it was just that Ike and I collated it first. I published the results of Control Group 1 and saw that copies were sent to the USSR and everywhere else. By that time I was into Control Group 3: 73-and-a-half-year-olds, and I was advertising for a long-term observation: 70-year-olds. I tried to think ahead.

Take China. The leaders were delighted (until they remembered how old they were). They didn't have to worry about us any more. Not when The Plague would solve their problem. Simple matter of numbers. Mathematics. And there weren't a

lot of old people over there to start with (a lot of those pictures you saw of Asian women who looked about 90 were women with *infants,* remember?) But . . . Communist or not, those people hadn't got completely over venerating the old. For the first time in history Chinese women had a good reason to practice a little *conception*-control, stopping pregnancies, rather than using the time-honored method of family-size control: merely exposing the infants to die. Getting oneself *enceinte* was murdering one's venerable grandfather.

Same thing in Japan, of course, and Thainambodia and the rest.

But we had the worst problem. The Land of Opportunity. We were strong . . . but outnumbered by all sorts of countries. Mostly enemies. Russia (which really hadn't been an active enemy since the fifties, but . . . they were always ready) and China. Chou said about mid-century that after World War III there would remain ten million Americans and fifteen million Russians and 300 million Chinese. Nice mind Chou had! But now he didn't need WW III. All he had to do was reproduce us right out of business. He had more children to have more babies, and the old Asian Long View. (Not Chou; he was long dead. I'm talking about Huing, of course.)

It became patriotic not to have babies. People damn near stopped. Little Debbie and Jeff — everybody born in the fifties and sixties was named Debbie and Kevin and Jeffrey — married and bit their lips and didn't have babies, for poor old Grandpop's sake. Pill business boomed as Geritol sales began to dwindle. But poor old Grandpop hit the magic age and his heart stopped just the same. Debbie and Jeff got mad. It was all very well for us to support the world; to ship wheat to Russia whilst she called us the same old names; to support the UN almost singlehandedly; to send all those goodies to our enemies; to steal Jeff's money to put into Grandpop's pocket — or rather his physician's pocket. But not having babies was *personal.* And when it didn't do any good anyhow . . . well, I used to think we were due for a revolution around 1970, until I grew up and realized people *wanted* socialism. But we darned near had one in Year One of The Plague, and not over socialism, either.

Over making babies!

There wasn't any way to cover up. Somebody, somewhere, wasn't holding up his end. When oldsters continued to die, when age 72 became the barrier, everybody knew we were being conned. *We* weren't having babies. But somebody was. And as soon as Grandpop died — heck with em! Debbie and Jeffrey couldn't be worried about the Grandpop next door. There was a, as the clicheists say, hue and cry. Meaning one hell of a lot of loud noise. Oh, the noises in the UN! The accusations! Here we'd just grown up enough to admit we'd been covering our pride for an old mistake all these decades, we'd just let China in . . . and bang! Right off the bat we're jumping all over them in the

UN! Mister Krishnapur swore his country was cooperating. Mister Vorlonishev said quietly and smugly that his country had always cooperated and certainly hadn't begun cheating now. But Mister Li said the same thing.

Somebody was lying. A few African ladies here and there who hadn't got the word couldn't be affecting things the way they were being affected.

We had a celebration in the hospital the night of Henry Clark's 72nd birthday. Tea and cake in his room. Booze in dixiecups in the resident's lounge later. Henry Clark didn't wake up the next morning.

The story got itself put together later, but here's how it happened, in sequence: The Russians had been shook. Really shook. Trigger fingers had never been so itchy before. They were scared we didn't believe them. So for the first time in Lord knows when they invited us — secretly — to come in and have a look. They were on the level. Our observers confirmed that the Soviet government had proclaimed reproduction a crime against one's fellow man and, *ergo*, the State. What was more important, our spies confirmed the observers . . . .

Meanwhile Stephen Levee had got out of China, somehow, and brought back photographs and stories.

The Chinese were breeding like crazy. Practically at gunpoint. Told that the Americans were doing so. Patriotism: breed, that China may realize her destiny in the world. That sort of thing and threats were stamping out the oldest-veneration which had moved over to the U.S. sometime around 1930.

We didn't even announce it to the UN.

For the first time since War Two, Washington and Moscow joined hands and said let's get together and do it together. Secretly. China has been a common threat for years; now it's far worse. Some people just can't be got on with. For the first time since . . . 1941, I guess, the United States announced honestly that it was embarking on a war of aggression. Oh, it was self-defense, of course, and therefore a Holy War. All wars are Holy Wars, to somebody. This one was for Grandad and Grandma and Uncle Elmer. Except it wasn't even a war.

Stephen Levee came out of China on April 11th. On the 16th the President announced that on May 1 he would make a major speech, and all the Lippmans and Huntley-Brinkleys wondered aloud and in print what he would have to say. Of course they pointed out that he had chosen to speak on the biggest day in the Communist World. What he did was to review the problem, the pleas, the agreements. The UN brawl. Then he displayed Stephen Levee's films and read his reports, word for word, and introduced Levee and Mister Vorlonishev and talked awhile and then announced that the governments of the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had declared war on the People's Government of China.

Retroactively: the buttons had

been pushed and the planes had swung Chinaward *before* his speech began.

IV

The Chinese were busily celebrating May Day. Peking was full of aircraft and missiles and troops and tanks, parading under the eyes of Huing and hundreds of thousands of people, all of whom had of course gathered spontaneously; one assumed the Red Guards were directing traffic. Just as spontaneously they went to join their revered ancestors before Huing even heard about the President's speech. Peking wasn't hit with *one* bomb. The Chinese missile bases weren't hit with one bomb each. The missiles came from half-a-dozen different directions and the bombs came from aircraft whose white stars and red stars had been effaced and replaced with big UN insignia. The whole operation was unbelievably successful, mainly because China had always known we'd never do it.

A missile got through and removed Colorado Springs and a tremendous chunk of mountain from our map. Two submarines sent four missiles streaming in toward Washington and New York, and miracle of miracles all that propaganda from Denver was on the level; we *were* able to stop them! Not to mention the submarines.

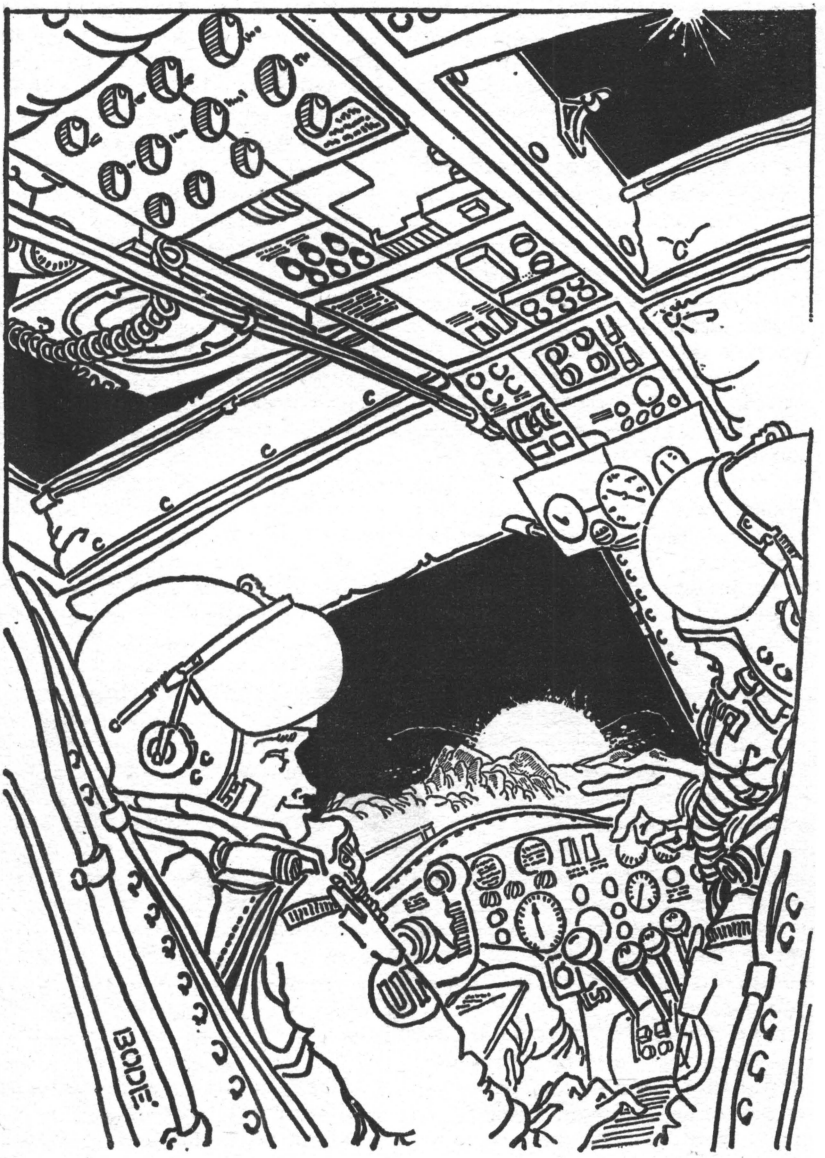
Rand-McNally started working on new maps; the old ones, showing China, were obsolete. Norad began reorganizing. Re-aiming. The Russians were terribly sorry they'd goofed and sent Formosa down to join Atlantis, but little mistakes will happen, as we used to say when we napalmed our own troops every now and again. There was one hell of a — sorry, here comes the cliche again — *hue and cry* in the UN. Then there were a lot of very big goggle eyes when Mister Vorlonishev and Mister Davis and the President stood up and said okay, we attacked them and we damn near destroyed China and what are you going to do about it? There were plenty of warheads and planes and silos left, and the allied nations of USASR were willing to use them if forced.

They weren't forced. The Aussie — funny — was the first to jump up and say he was going to call home and recommend his government broaden the alliance to three. By the time he was through there were so many delegates clamoring for recognition to climb aboard that the Secretary-General had to call for a general motion to save time. He got it. There was amazing unity.

A month later we celebrated William Michaels's 71st birthday, and he woke up the next morning, too.

But everyone seemed to have celebrated the "war" in the same way. Nine months later, on approximately February 1, Granddads started dropping dead again.

And in a few months it was all back again and in a few years life expectancy (certainty!) was below 65, and Senator Martin — age 63 — introduced a bill to cut Social Security takeouts by two-thirds. He even


BODE'

managed to smile and say he'd never collect anyway.

As far as we can see now the population of Planet Earth must remain constant at approximately five billion people or less. The nearest we've come in our figures is 4,998,987,834, and we've gotten that figure three times. Apparently either the Prime Mover didn't share our regard for numbers or he counted differently. Maybe he meant for us to have six fingers.

Somehow everybody just gave up and let it ride. For possibly the first time in history the young got their way. Twice the old managed to get us in war-shape again, and both times the young got together and said nothing doing. We learned pretty quickly that you don't have wars if the senators are invited to go, or if a few million young men, in both nations involved, say no. And when they suggest that if overgrown children insist on settling things by violence, let's try the old method: personal trial-by-combat . . . ! The President and the Prime Minister backed down pretty fast while the rest of us guffawed at the editorial cartoons.

They might as well have gone along. Within a year the Plague had got them both anyhow.

Meanwhile a lot of us were looking for answers. Why?

Okay. There was a rule: another Natural Law; really a restatement of the old one: survival, after all, of the fittest. This law said there shall not be more than approximately $5x10^9$ personnel in existence on Planet Earth at any one time. Fine. *Why?* I figured once again we had ourselves an effect, not a cause. Effect: the Plague. Causative effect: our having reached such-and-such a population figure. Causative effect: There Shall Not be more than such-and-such many people. But it was an effect, not a cause.

Okay. Why?

Well, here's a theory. If it doesn't happen to agree with your religion, that's tough; make up your own theory. Plenty of people have made up their own religions. This one represents the thinking of a lot of people over a lot of centuries. It's been the basis for a lot of religions both before and since Christianity. There was some truth to the Mystery Religions — certainly Paul respected them highly. There is some, too, in Christianity, in Judaism, Buddhism and Islam. Mostly Buddhism, I guess. It was in Christianity, too, originally; called Gnosticism. The early Christians stamped it out. Too hard to sell. Isn't that just like Man trying to interpret God? Those first several centuries were mostly salesmanship centuries, and the Roman state religion and Mithraism were tough foes. Even so the original concepts may have remained if the Empress Theodora hadn't so adamantly stamped them out. And even so the whole new faith might have gone by the board if the Emperor Julian hadn't got himself killed in battle just when he was starting to stamp out Christianity. (*There's* a death I'd like to investigate!)

Reincarnation. The ring of return. You die, but your life-force or soul or whatever you wish to

call it keeps coming back. Oh, not as bugs or cattle; your life-force is a mind, and enters only human beings. Without memories, usually. Except people who have funny dreams in full color . . . or wind up nuts on some period of history without knowing why. Easy. You were there, once.

Look, just keep your mind on Hamlet's words that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy. And try to remember that a closed mind is pretty much like a closed door . . . there can't be much traffic, either way.

The idea is we have to try, over and over, no matter how long or how many corporate lives it takes, to be "good enough to retire" (I'm simplifying, naturally). If you commit six crimes (let's keep it straight and say "against nature," and I'm not talking about that implied definition of "Crimes against Nature" lurking like rattlesnakes in our lawbooks, either. Men pretend to be so horrified by Sodom and Gomorrah they won't even use the words . . . yet nowhere in that old book does it say *what* the crime of those two cities was! For all we know it may have been over-defoliation or water or air pollution; those are crimes against nature, aren't they?)

Anyhow, if you committed six crimes in life #1 while you were Babble-babble of Memphis in 6,000 BC, you've got to compensate/atone for them somewhere, somewhen else. Your life-force seeks at/one/ment, whether you as Babble-babble do or not. As B-b you died and your life-force (go ahead and use soul if you feel you must) hung around without drawing a new body until 1,000 BC. There weren't many bodies around then, remember; there was a long wait between assignments. You became a Hellenic peasant. You "atoned" for three of the crimes, but committed two new ones before you died. You've moved up one notch. You've got five bad deeds to wipe off the master ledger. But . . . you will have the opportunity; the man *said* you would be born again, didn't he? You think he meant by being splashed a little?

As a Pfc. under Titus you held your own. You died. Your ego waited around some more, still with five black marks. Back in Memphis you had killed without mercy and had died of old age as a lot of killers do . . . they do NOT die by the sword . . . *that* time. Sometime. Someplace. As a serf or maybe as a woman accused of witchcraft in the Middle Ages you had such a hard time you cut the tally down to two. Surely there are special rules for those murdered in the name of God. Maybe you were lucky enough to be sworded.

You came back as Rudolf Schickner, say chief gas man at Auschwitz. Oops. Back to the end of the line. Next time you came back as . . . well, that's the system, anyhow. And of course you're coming back a lot more frequently now. That's the whole point.

At the beginning, whatever and whenever that "is," all life-forces were made. All the souls. All of

them. None has been created/activated since.

Yes. You get the point. There aren't six billion in AD 2,000. And there won't be six billion people in the world by 2,500, either, or AD 5,000. There never will be.

All the souls have been used up.

Don't call me a mystic. Try to open up your mind a little, let the light shine on the cobwebs of preconceptions. And remember I've had no religion save *Ad majorem hominis gloriam* since I was 23 years old. And, if you don't like that theory, think up another.

So here we are. No more interviews with Mrs. 101-years-old. The wastebaskets at the bank aren't full of unstamped brown enevelopes at the first of the month any more. There aren't any old folks sitting around barbershops or on the courthouse steps or post-office steps any more. The old folks' homes with the cute names are closed down. You can buy Geritol stock with nickels and dimes. Companies have to advertise for night watchmen, and some of them don't have gray hair. In another fifty years, maybe, the Social Security Administration will be out of the red. Right now they're sending out a fourth of the checks they were thirteen years ago.

Do? Nothing. I don't think you can. Oh, I may be wrong, but I've got plenty of agreement. Sure, maybe you can find a way out of it. Maybe if a million people leave Earth to colonize another planet we can add a million human beings to the ledger and stop writing PLAGUE on death-certificates for a while . . . while we get more ships ready. I don't think so. I think we're at five billion, give or take a few, for keeps. Holding, situation no-go. It's up to you. Sure, there'll be a stop. A temporary one, anyhow. When it reaches the point that parents give birth and both die the instant twins are born, it will be over for a while. And maybe somebody will start acting sensibly. But unless you stop horsing around you're going to have a life expectancy of twenty and then fifteen and then Lord knows what, eventually.

Meanwhile I intend playing a lot of golf and doing a lot more reading. I'll be forty-five next month, and life expectancy's down to fifty-seven this month. END

A Ticket to Zenner

by C. C. MacAPP

Illustrated by FINLAY

Larrow had only one hope of escape: to take a new identity. Too bad the new one was even more hotly pursued!

I

Tom Larrow rolled over, trying to escape the hands and voices. But there'd been a stinging in his left arm, and now some stimulant was invading his blood, driving out the earlier poison, rallying him. Awareness grew. Painfully, he rolled onto his back and got his eyes open. The blob above him resolved itself into the chubby white-furred face of Wioon Lek, his Meroban employer. "What . . . where . . . ."

Another Meroban, with the manner of a doctor, said in his rumbling voice, "A few moments, man Larrow. Lie still. You will be strong."

Tom sighed and lay back. His head ached like the devil, and there was a bitter sickening taste in his mouth. He let his eyes focus and saw that he was in his own apartment in the Lek compound, where he'd been living these two years on Merob.

Wioon Lek's round face relaxed into the all-embracing Meroban smile. "This is marvelous, Tom! Here we'd closed up shop in mourning, and all the time you were here! What happened?"

Tom looked at him for a moment in puzzlement. Sometimes he still didn't grasp a Meroban idiom completely. Suddenly, Wioon's question triggered memory. He jerked up to a sitting position, got his feet off the bed and hauled himself upright, unsteadily. "I was gassed, that's what happened! I opened the door, and a cloud of something hit me in the face! I remember doubling over and coughing, then I fell!" He took four unsteady steps toward the closet, reached in and fumbled in the breast pocket of his overjacket. He sighed with relief. "Good. For a moment I thought maybe my passport and ticket — " He went silent, staring at the passport. The picture on it was of a human, but it was the face of a stranger.

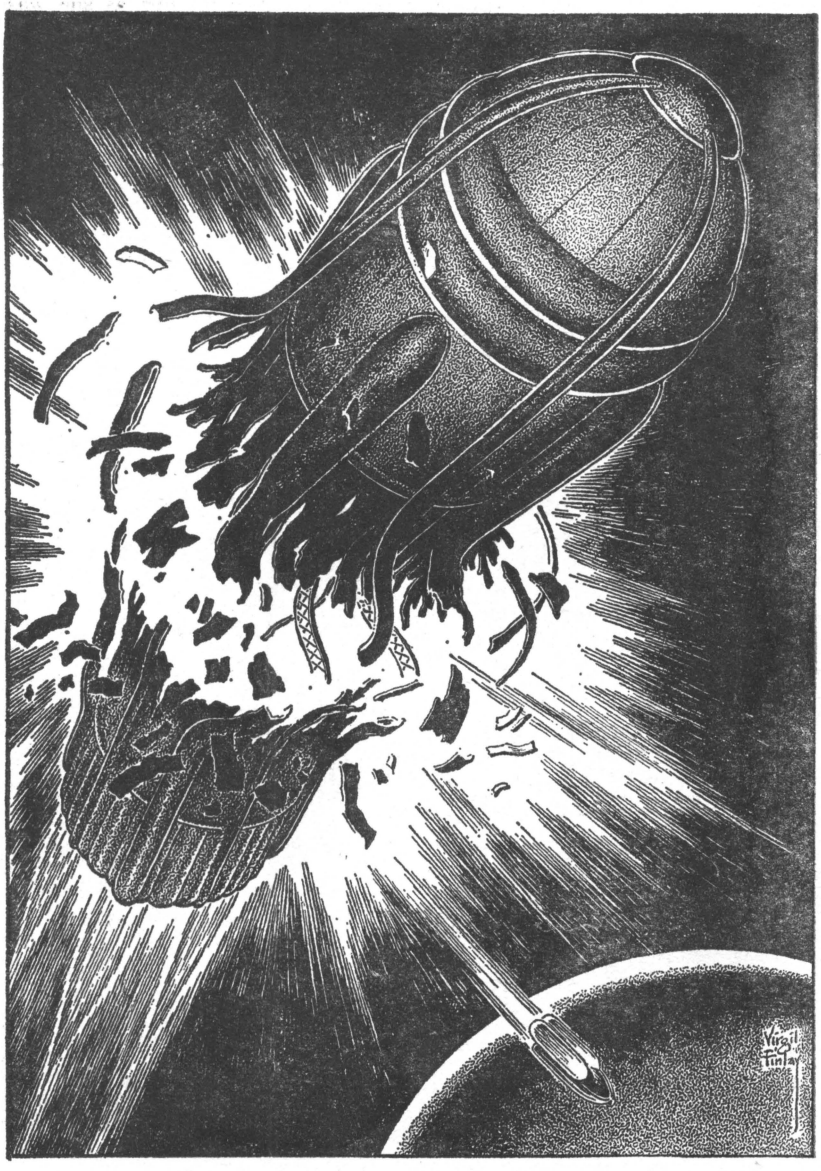
Anger seized him. He threw the ticket and passport down on the bed. "It *was* robbery! Somebody switched on me! Well, he made a mistake leaving his own papers! When I catch up with him — "

Wioon was staring at him. Suddenly the Meroban burst out, "But of course! You do not know; you have been not conscious all the time!" He made a gesture that was both aghast and pious. "Peace on the stranger, Friend Tom, and do not be in a hurry to catch up with him. Obviously he stole your ticket because the ship *Vreyol Kway* was going direct to Earth. But *Vreyol Kway* blew up just as she was beginning to accelerate out of orbit." He sighed, then broke into the smile again. "But that is his misfortune and your good luck, and ours!" Wioon's pudgy three-digited hand went to a pocket, pulled out a jackphone. "I must share the good news!" Then, with the flat, rectangular instrument near his lips, he stopped. "But wait." He ambled over to a chair and lowered his squat, broad form into it. "I must think."

Tom stood impatiently. Finally he said, "What's there to think about, sir? I'm sorry to hear about the ship. But I've still got to get off-planet fast. Unless, under the circumstances, they'd extend the deadline for me."

Wioon's tiny flesh-enfolded eyes blinked in negation. "The Fists will make no such allowance. They'll be all the more furious, because the disaster will anger not only Vreyol, but Earth. There were sixty humans aboard, you know. Friend Tom, that is not why I am worried. Do you not see? You, of all the passengers, did not catch the ship. Therefore you will be suspected of some complicity."

Tom stared at him for a moment. Wioon was right; the Fists were nervous in their newly seized power. "Well, damn it . . . . " He stepped to the bed and picked up the documents. "This ticket my unknown benefactor left . . . *Obolis,* for Zenner Hell. Directly away from Earth. But at least it's a transfer point. And it's all I'll get, this late." He frowned at the passport. "But


Virgil Finlay

he didn't look like me at all. A lot darker, and plump in the cheeks. Santos Yberra was his name." He looked up at Wioon. "I suppose it was a decent gesture, leaving these, but how could I possibly use them? The ticket's in his name, and I'd have to show the passport."

Wioon eyed him thoughtfully. "I shall guess that he expected you to get the picture altered. Just as he must have altered yours. Obviously, he knew various things about you. And about me, since he was able to sneak into the compound and ambush you in your own apartment. He was no bumpkin. I must shake up my security forces again, yes?"

Tom said uncertainly, "Well, it's my mess, sir. You've got trouble enough of your own, with the Fists suspecting everybody of being counterrevolutionists."

Wioon held up a pudgy white-furred hand. "No, no, you're still my employee. I'm depending upon you to keep my affairs alive on Earth. And eventually . . . well, the Fists will not be in power forever. But let us think. Technicians can alter the passport photograph. But even then, I'm apprehensive about your using that ticket."

"Why?"

"Consider, Friend Tom. Why did this burglar leave it? Not charity, I think. He was desperate to be off Merob a day early. That suggests that someone was after him, or at least that he needed to cover his trail. If you use his ticket you are the decoy, yes?"

Tom rubbed at his throbbing temples. "Oh, I don't know, and I don't care. Can't we find out who he was?"

Wioon looked unhappy. "I shall try, of course. But with things in such a mulligan . . . . Well, first things first, yes? Let's get that photograph replaced with yours." He raised the jackphone and spoke close to it at some length; thought a moment and added, "Ends. Second message. To Technician Daal Jhee. Wioon speaks. Can you favor us with your presence in man Larrow's apartment at once, utmost secret? Ends." He heaved himself out of the chair, waddled over to the nearest wall receptacle and pushed the prong end of the phone into it. The two messages would flash to their destination by wire.

Tom, as much Meroban as Terran in his thinking now, said automatically, "Whatever I can do to unburden myself of this debt . . . ."

Wioon waved off the thanks. "No, no, it is nothing." Then he looked thoughtful. "Zenner . . . yes, it could go via Zenner. There is one small favor you could perform, Friend Tom. I have promised an old comrade to get an heirloom to him safely. A thing of only moderate value, but dear to him. My agent on Zenner — Paib Salang; you have met him — will recognize it and know where to send it." He frowned in thought. "I do not want to endanger you. Being an heirloom of the Dynasty, it would cause the Fists to be harsh with anyone taking it off-planet." He smiled abruptly. "But it can be disguised. It is only a finger-ring. A plastic overlay upon the gem, with your initials on it in Terran script. And soft

metal added to the inside of the band, with Terran inscriptions. If you will wear it at all times . . . ."

"Of course," Tom said. He could swallow his aversion to rings.

Wioon beamed. "Well, then." He glanced toward the door, his stubby white-furred ears twitching. "Daal arrives. I will see you before you leave; now I must go and tend to the ring. Best — do you not think — you stay here until your escort comes? I can assure your safety to the port, I believe. And *Obolis* is a Boklan ship, so the Fists will not dare tamper with her. And no phone calls, yes? It must not be known you are still alive."

Daal, with whom Tom had worked, was about Wioon's height — barely five feet — but slightly less broad. He peered at the photograph. "Yes, I can fix it, in two hours. Is there that much time?"

Tom nodded. "*Obolis* doesn't leave until near midnight. What will you have to do?"

Daal tapped the plastic document with a thumb. "Grind this away carefully, until the picture is gone. Spray on sensitized plastic, imprint your picture, cover it with more plastic and put the whole thing in a hot press. It will stand casual inspection. It will not pass examination with fluoroscopes or such. This passport seems to have been made on Vreyol. I cannot counterfeit their plastic or the antifraud patterns."

Tom said, "I'll have to risk it. If I don't get off-planet, it's prison camp or worse anyway. How about the description?"

"The height is close enough — five-ten against your five-eleven. And who can guarantee weight, travelling among different races? Or the degree of skin tan, in your case? There's only the color of your eyes to worry about. But I'll print your picture a little dark, so the gray might be interpreted as black."

"All right," Tom said. "Wioon mentioned escort to the field. Do you know about that?"

Daal's wide mouth drooped. "I am to go. Also a policeman, ostensibly gone over to the Fists but actually still in our employ. Excuse me now, please."

II

Tom spent an hour going through his luggage to get rid of all identifying marks. He interrupted that to listen to a newscast. The big story, of course, was the ship disaster. *Vreyol Kway* had disintegrated so completely there were few corpses to identify. The crew of a trashboat, the last to leave her, was in custody and no doubt being interrogated. Various other ships in orbit, including *Obolis,* had veered to avoid the spreading mess of radioactive debris. There was no reaction from the Vreyolan ambassador — it would be many hours before the news reached Vreyol, and as many more before anything came back. Vreyol was populated by the same race as Merob, but politically separate. It wasn't as potent as Bokl, which had a near-monopoly on commercial shipping and travel among the nearby stars, but the Fists didn't want Vreyol's enmity.

The ill-will of Earth hardly mattered. In space, Terra was still small potatoes.

He returned to his baggage and got it repacked. Then he paced the apartment restlessly, a plastijar of Meroban beer in his hand. It seemed hours before a chime came from the door. He glanced at the viewer and saw Wioon's beaming image. "Come."

The door slid open, and his employer waddled in. "Things are going well, Friend Tom. Daal has done a fine job with the passport. I've been able to arrange for you to go aboard the shuttleboat promptly, with a group of other passengers who have all been identified, so there'll be no delay." He glanced at Tom's three valises. "All ready, yes? We'll send those on ahead so they'll be inspected and put in your stateroom. You'll have a pleasant trip; the Bokla are great hands at making comfort. You'll have to be watchful, of course." He fished in a pouch of his apron-belt — the only garment most Merobans wore indoors — and pulled out a heavy finger-ring. "Try it on, yes?"

Not too happily, Tom slid it on the largest finger of his left hand. It was snug. He stared at the initials on the stone. "What — oh, of course. S. Y. I'm not supposed to be Tom Larrow, am I?"

Wioon regarded him gravely out of almost-closed eyes. "You must not lapse. You are Santos Yberra, until Paib Salang can smuggle you to safety. Oh, did I not tell you — identify yourself as Code Nine Four Seven. That will inform Paib he is to extend you unlimited account and assist you to Earth. You and he will work out arrangements for the immediate future of my Earth trade, yes? I expect to route it through Zenner for a while, but I dare not leave Merob myself just now." He held out a white-furred hand. "Daal will be here before long to take you to the port. Until next we meet, yes?"

The gray-uniformed Fist at the turnstile gave the passport a hard look, lifted his head to peer at Tom and brusquely waved him through. At the foot of the escalator to the shuttleboat waited a Boklan officer in a very neat white uniform. He was long of torso and neck, short-limbed in proportion, with a face that was mostly nose or muzzle. He gave the passport one swift scrutiny, nodded down at Tom from his seven-foot-plus height and said in good Meroban, "Favor us by boarding, man Yberra, yes?"

Tom waited his turn at the escalator, which was crowded. Halfway up he turned to look back.

He was in time to witness a swift, shocking episode.

Daal and the helmeted policeman who'd flown them here were standing against the rear wall of the vast chamber. A sudden bellow of the loudspeaker system made them look up, with the rest of the crowd. An instant later, squads of Fist troopers in their gray uniforms burst into the chamber, carrying short ugly weapons.

Tom saw Daal's eyes squeeze shut in anguish, then the technician was running with the deceptive Meroban gait. The crowd erupted with

cries of fear and became a mob, surging away from the action. Troopers swiveled, aiming their guns at Daal. A dozen or more blinding, spitting beams converged on him, aiming for the lower legs. Tom heard his scream above the tumult. The technician went tumbling and lay in a writhing knot, his legs nothing but blackened stumps. Tom was shouting in English, "No! No!" and fighting to get back down the escalator, but the panicking passengers behind him bore him along before them. He grabbed the rail and clung. He saw the policeman who'd come with him and Daal stare fixedly at the crippled technician.

Suddenly Daal's head seemed to burst.

Now there was panic among the troopers. They spun, darting frantic looks around, some of them firing their beamers wildly. The helmeted policeman stood against the wall, his eyes moving in jerks, to remain fixed for an instant at a time. A trooper's head burst open, and this time Tom saw the small hyphen of incandescence that caused it. Two more troopers went down. A Meroban near Tom shouted in terror, "The Elite! A Stare!"

Five troopers were dead now, but the others had found the source of the terrible weapon. Beams converged on the policeman, and he went down in a blackened heap that stirred for only a moment.

Limp with horror, Tom was carried up the escalator, wedged in among the short but heavy Merobans, who comprised most of the passenger list. At the top, a white-uniformed Bokl was urging, "This way, please! This way!" Tom went numbly where he was directed, found himself in a lounge, let himself be guided to a seat. The decor and furniture were Meroban. Somehow he answered a Bokl steward. "Dis-distilled spirits, with *hampa* juice."

He sat, automatically sipping the sweet-tart drink. After a while a Meroban came and sat down across the small table from him. "Please, may I? An awful thing, yes?"

Tom nodded, then remembered the Meroban gesture of palms-up. The Meroban stared at Tom's hands. "Five digits, just as they say. Excuse me. I am Ussmed, a modest businessman. Unless you have been on Merob a long time, you have not seen the Stare before, yes?"

Tom managed, "Uh, no. I'd heard rumors, of course. But I thought the Elite were all hunted out."

The Meroban squeezed his eyes shut. "So did the Fists. But obviously at least one escaped. Like sorcery, is it not? But quite technological. Did you notice that before he died, the Elite exploded his own head and the helmet?"

"No. I — I wasn't in position to see very well."

"He did," the Meroban said. "They all did. And the secret died with them. Not one went over to the Fists, you know. The helmet, of course, looks exactly like an ordinary police one. But in addition to the radio, there is a lot more built in. The energy is translocated to the target in somewhat the same way a ship is translocated between the stars. That much is known. But

the talk is that the whole technology would fill a great many books. As to know how the eyes are made to serve as rangefinders, and how the weapon is triggered, you can hear as many theories as you like. Some say the helmet reads the natural muscle movements and nerve impulses. Others say tiny instruments are implanted in the Elite's head. One thing is certain — a long period of training was needed. I had a nephew who took it, though of course he would not tell me so. He died in the coup." The Meroban made a gesture of sorrow. "I guess you are angry with the Fists for hustling you off Merob, yes?"

Tom's mind was beginning to work again. He mustn't forget his pose, or that this stranger might not be an innocent businessman. Wioon had dug out a little of Yberra's history. "I've only been on the planet a short time, and hadn't made any connections. I'd probably have been leaving anyway."

The Meroban asked, "Have you business on Zenner?"

"No, except that I may look for work there. Excuse me; I'm Santos Yberra. I call myself a distribution engineer. Actually my trade involves a knowledge of packaging, preservation, shipping and so on. I'd hoped to find work on Merob, but didn't."

Ussmed said, "Things have not been normal. But Zenner is a good prospect. The Bokla settled it as a transfer point, you know. What industry there is supports shipping and travel. Excuse me, perhaps I am boring you. Perhaps you have been to Zenner before?"

"No. Only Vreyol and Merob, outside the Terran planetary system."

"I see. Well, excuse me, yes? I must get to my stateroom. Perhaps we can talk again."

Obolis was cylindrical, four times as long as her diameter — a proportion that, as she accelerated with her axis along the line of flight, was foreshortening; at the velocity needed for translocation, she would fit well enough into the spherical TL field. Acceleration would require a little less than eighty Terran hours. Deceleration, near Zenner — assuming TL was perfect — would take an equal time. TL itself would occupy only a few painstakingly calculated minutes.

Tom's stateroom was about a third of the way back from the nose, and against Superwall C; which meant it was the nearest of the eight rooms on his radial corridor to the lounges, dining rooms, theaters and such in the core of the ship. Also, it placed him farthest of the eight from the outer Superwalls — an advantage, theoretically, though even in the extremely rare event of a debris-hit, damage would hardly penetrate within Superwall B.

The stateroom was luxurious, of course. Compared to the cost of accelerating and translocating a ship, the accommodations didn't count. His total floorspace was about fifteen by thirty-five feet, divided into a parlor, bedroom, bath and kitchenette. With his mind still mainly on the episode at the spaceport, he prowled about the quarters, looking at the alien fittings.

Things were marked in Boklan, which he couldn't read, but little self-adhesive tags had been stuck on, giving Meroban translations. He fiddled with the grav controls, set them back to point seven G. He opened the refrigerator door and peered inside. There were a few basic rations — dried stuff in plastic, a shelf of seasonings, a package of plastic bags in case he wanted to store food. He could buy a wide variety of stuff aboard, if he wanted to cook, which he didn't. He went back to the sitting room.

He found himself idly calculating cubic feet. Certainly a lot of cargo could be stored in here. There was far more living space than two or three people would need. But that was deliberate. Some passengers needed it, to forget that they were in a capsule of steel with all of ruthless space just outside. Even the corridors (his back door opened onto a second one) gave no hint that the stateroom was one or more than a thousand packed between Superwalls B and C. You only saw eight at a time.

He dialed a seascape for one of the vistawalls and sat half watching it for a while, then irritably tuned out the surf sound and went looking for the radio receiver dials. He found they were on the same panel that controlled the lights. *Obolis* was well away from Merob now, but the newscasts could still overtake her.

There were reports, as had become usual recently, of Dynasty plots foiled and a highly edited account of the affair at the port. Tom was about to turn the stuff off when something caught his attention. The announcer was saying, " — new developments in the death of the eminent industrialist and importer, Wioon Lek."

Tom froze, halfway out of his chair. The voice went on, "Government sources confirm the reports of suicide. It is now revealed, though, that traces of poisons other than the one that killed him have been found in his blood. One pharmacologist states that these are of a type used in interrogation of unwilling witnesses. Furthermore, there are signs that Wioon was not alone at the time of his death.

"There is no hint of how these so-called 'truth serums' may have been administered. However, it has been discovered that the suicide poison was in a small capsule surgically implanted in Wioon's tongue. The industrialist was able to kill himself by biting on it.

"A Government spokesman has suggested that Wioon was the victim of counter-revolutionaries, and that he died rather than reveal secrets they might have used.

"Control of Wioon's vast economic empire has been assumbed by the Government pending decisions."

The report turned to something else. Tom slowly walked over and turned it off. He stood in a daze, trying to realize it was not just words he'd been hearing — Wioon was *really* dead. His mind refused to accept it. He saw Wioon as he'd last seen him — furred hand extended in farewell, round face beaming, full of life. "No," he muttered, "it's some propaganda story. Some trick!"

But he knew, of course, that it wasn't. He went back and sat down, staring without attention at the surging seascape. He had no idea how long he'd sat there before the stateroom com pinged. At the second ping he mustered himself. "Yes?"

"Passenger Yberra?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"This is Fourth Officer Hweki. A small question has arisen. Would it be convenient for you to come to my office, bringing your identity papers? A crewman will arrive shortly to guide you."

III

"Please sit down, man Yberra." Hweki himself had only half arisen, probably because he didn't want to tower over his visitors. The second visitor, seated to one side of the desk, was the Meroban Ussmed.

Hweki's eyes and forehead, at least, were passably humanoid. The rest of his face was mostly a long nose — or muzzle; the mouth was a mere line below the flaring nostrils; the chin no more prominent than a dog's. The ears were pointed and mobile, covered with short gray fur like the rest of his face. The irises of eyes were light yellow, with contrasting black pupils. The neck was a full twelve inches long, sturdy but flexible. His uniform was white, with green piping, very neat. The only insignia was on the right breast, the Bokl Lines mark of two intersecting circles. Each side of the green collar bore the Boklan numeral four.

Hweki looked at Tom along his muzzle for a minute, gravely, but without discourtesy, then continued in excellent Meroban. "It is a rule of the Line, passenger Yberra, that any accuser must face the accused. Passenger Ussmed is an agent of the Meroban Government. He has a list of passengers and data on some. He informs me that there is no record of anyone named Santos Yberra arriving on Merob."

Ussmed, who was angry but trying to hide it, said placatingly, "It is not necessarily an accusation, man Yberra. I merely report a discrepancy. It is my duty."

If a Bokl could have smiled, Hweki obviously would have done so. "Can you explain, passenger Yberra?"

There seemed to be a hard lump in Tom's stomach. "I only arrived less than three *divs* ago. There's been a lot of records lost, or destroyed, in that time."

"From where did you arrive, please?"

"From Vreyol."

"Could I see your passport?"

Tom slowly handed the document across the desk. Ussmed was leaning forward, trying to see. Hweki raised his muzzle toward Tom. "May I?" At Tom's nod, he handed Ussmed the passport.

The Meroban peered at it a while. "It *looks* genuine. But a scientific examination . . . . "

Hweki held out a four-digited hand. "We'll give it that, of course. It will only take a few minutes." He pressed one of a row of studs on his desk, then dropped the pass-

port into a slot. "Also we'll send a message drone to Vreyol. An answer should be at Zenner by the time we're within radio range. Meanwhile, passenger Ussmed, could you detail your suspicions?"

Ussmed scowled, then rumbled, It is sufficient crime if this Terran arrived on Merob, or left, under a false name. By treaty, I ask that you deliver him to the Meroban embassy as soon as we reach Zenner."

Hweki inclined his head politely. "If I am convinced. Perhaps you have guessed, passenger Yberra, that I am ship's Security Officer. In the Meroban, and I think the Terran idiom, a spy. I will give you a copy of ship's regulations if you wish, so you may know my duty and your rights."

Tom said, "No, thank you."

The two aliens sat watching him for a minute, or maybe they were just waiting. Finally there was a ping, and the passport popped from the slot, with a note clipped to it. Tom sat with dull dread as Hweki read the note.

The Bokl aimed his muzzle first at Ussmed, then at Tom. "This is a genuine Vreyolan passport. There is no sign of any tampering."

Ussmed was on his feet, trying to control his anger. "I ask that this man be confined, and that *our* technicians be allowed to examine the passport when we reach Zenner."

Hweki said mildly, "We are all confined here aboard ship, yes? As to the passport, I will neither agree nor refuse now. Before we arrive, we will have been in contact with my own government and will have heard from Vreyol."

Ussmed stood a moment, then said curtly, "With your permission." Without waiting for it, he walked to the door. He didn't quite slam it behind him.

Tom got to his feet, bewildered at his reprieve. Hweki said, "Please? A question or two." Tom sat down again.

The Bokl looked along his muzzle thoughtfully. "Ussmed has repeated his conversation with you, so I know a little of your background. You were seeking employment on Merob, yes? And in your line, Wioon Lek, Chartered, was the most important firm. Did you apply there?"

Tom said carefully, "Yes. But this Fist thing came up . . . ."

Hweki inclined his head. "Unfortunate timing. Have you heard that Wioon himself is dead?"

"I . . . heard a newscast about it."

Hweki glanced at an instrument on the wall. "We are out of newscast range now, though we still have an official beam. Thank you, passenger Yberra. I am very sorry this has come up."

Tom left, his mind churning. What about the passport? Was Hweki holding back something? Had they actually found the tampering? And what other irregularities might be turned up on Vreyol? Santos Yberra seemed to have been the kind to wallow in irregularities.

Shoud Tom turn back and tell Hweki the whole thing? He couldn't

see how he dared. It would still put him in the hands of the Fists. Besides, there was still Paib Salang. The Fists would hardly be able to to move in on Wioon's holding, except on Merob, right away. Paib could probably still get Tom to Earth. And there was the finger-ring. He felt of it absently as he walked slowly along a corridor. Wioon had wanted to get it to its owned. Tom owed him that and a lot more.

In any case, it would be foolish to turn himself in now. There were many hours left before TL, and many more before they reached Zenner. He should at least preserve the option.

He glanced around. Right now he didn't want the solitude of his state-room. Somewhere he'd passed a lounge, on the way to Hweki's office . . . .

He found a directory-sign and arrows, and followed them to the lounge. He could certainly use a drink.

It was part of Boklan Lines service to have lounges and dining rooms reflecting a variety of cultures. All the numerous lounges and dining rooms, though, were also serving Meroban items on this trip, since the passengers were practically all Meroban. He found a stool at the bar and told the polite Boklan bartender, "Spirits, with hampa juice."

He sat morosely, sipping and letting his eyes rove around. A lot of cargo space in here, too. He looked around for the air-conditioning vents. Well placed, and ample. This ship made Meroban and Vreyolan ships look primitive and Earth's few ships downright miserable. The tank of greenery at one end of this lounge, under the actinic lights — that alone almost equaled the total hydroponics of any Earth ship.

He turned and looked into the darkened end of the room. There were tables there, some of them screened, where a scattering of Merobans sat talking and drinking. Their voices were a low bass murmur. He could almost imagine he wasn't in space at all. This could be some peaceful lounge on Merob, before the trouble, quiet, luxurious, faintly scented with something like lavender.

The Bokla had been in the business a long time, of course. But it was no wonder they dominated it.

He jumped as a human voice behind him said in English, "Your hands. They always stare at your hands."

He turned. A man was standing there, smiling. He was a little shorter than Tom, rather slight, blond, with young blue eyes. "Mind if I sit down?"

Tom said automatically, "Of course not. What about my hands?"

The man slid onto a stool. "Good to hear English again! I'm Renfrow Cullan. People call me Cull, unless I owe them money, or they want to borrow it. I don't mean *your* hands in particular; I mean, human hands. The bartender was just staring at mine. You'd think five digits were a violation of natural law."

Tom found himself glad of human company. "I'm Santos Yberra. I knew there were other people aboard, but you're the first I've run into."

Cullan called to the bartender, "Two of whatever he had." He pointed to Tom's glass. To Tom, he said, "I saw you when you came aboard. Ugly thing back there, wasn't it?"

Tom nodded slowly. "As ugly as I want to see. I don't think I really believed in the Elite weapon until I saw it."

Cullan said, "Same here. How long were you on Merob? I never saw you around."

Tom said carefully, "Less than three divs."

Cullan looked absently around the room. "They sure move a lot of drinks during a trip. I was on Merob over a year." He named a city a few hundred miles from Port City. "They've got an Earth ecology farm there, and I was a caretaker. I studied botany in school on Earth, took an exam and was lucky enough to land this job. Well, it's over now. Say, you going to eat?"

"I suppose so."

Cullan slid off the stool. "We can get a table right here. I've heard of a couple of Boklan dishes I want to try. Okay?"

"Okay. Sure."

Tom let Cullan's offhanded breeziness carry the conversation. It wasn't absorbing, in his present state of mind, but it wasn't bothersome either.

The food was good. They had two more drinks apiece after the meal. Finally, Tom got a little tired of the chatter. "Do you mind if we call it a night? I'm pretty tired."

Cullan looked at his watch. "So am I. Are you keeping Marob time?"

"I guess so. As long as the ship does."

"Well, maybe you'll join us at breakfast? There's a group of six of us, all English-speaking, who've gotten together, in a restaurant where they've got a supply of something very much like hen's eggs. I've taught them how to scramble them."

Tom got up. "Maybe I'll see you."

He lay awake a long time, thinking. Then, unable to stand the doubt, he turned on a light and got up to examine the passport. It did him no good, of course. He went back to bed.

What had happened to Wioon? The newscasts, of course, were censored. Probably, he thought, the Fists had tried to interrogate the tycoon, and he'd taken the hard way out. But that would imply a bigger thing than Tom's passport. So would Daal's martyrdom at the spaceport, and the Elite policeman's.

That latter opened up a new path of thought. If an Elite policeman had been working with Wioon, there might be more of them. There might be a whole underground, with Wioon a link. Certainly, there were rumors enough flying around Merob; and the Fists were very nervous.

If so, Tom wouldn't have blamed Wioon a particle. It was a bitter

thought that the jovial tycoon might have been tripped up merely because he'd gone out of his way to help Tom. Well, it was over and done now. All Tom could do was try to get to Paib Salang.

He'd stood solitude in the past easily enough; now he found it very uncomfortable. He decided he'd join Cullan's group for breakfast. Somehow, eventually, he slept.

IV

"Over here!" Cullan waved to him from a table. By the time Tom got there, the blond man had a space cleared for him. "This is Santos Yberra, folks. Santos, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Ludlow; Jim Cresmer; Hal Oakley; Bud Vollander. I was telling Santos last night — if we could get all thirty of the humans aboard together, we could organize a society. Human Exiles From Merob."

Vollander was a thickset, dark man of middle age, with a Teutonic accent. He frowned. "That is not a subject for jokes, after *Vreyol Kway.*"

Cullan looked startled, then embarrassed. "I forgot. Sorry. Well... the six of us here were hoping to get the same ship off Zenner. How about you, Santos? Going straight on to Earth?"

Tom hesitated. "Well, maybe. But you know there's no direct passage."

Cresmer — sandy-haired, lanky — looked up. "You sure of that? The crewman I asked didn't know."

Tom said, "Why, any of the official guides can get you complete schedules. You'd have to go to Vreyol; that's the closest."

Cullan stepped into the pause. "Santos is in shipping. He can probably tell you every route, fares and all."

Tom suppressed annoyance. "Well, I'm not exactly in shipping. But I've read over a lot of schedules."

Ludlow said, "If we were sure Vreyol wouldn't go Fist, Edna and I might stop there, if we have to go anyway. It's . . . well, we said good-bye to all our friends and relatives on Earth and turned everything into cash." He and his wife were in their thirties, Tom judged. They sounded Australian.

Cullan gave a cheer. "Here come the eggs!" He motioned the waiter to set the tray beside him and seized a fork. "Let me have your plate, Edna. There! Somebody pass this toast around. Almost like home, eh? Tom, you've *got* to try some of this aspic!"

Oakley, a slight man who looked Eurasian, was looking at the ring Tom wore. "How did you get that off Merob, Mr. Yberra?"

Tom drew his hand back involuntarily. "It's Earth manufacture, so it was exempt."

Cullan was peering at the ring with interest. "Let me see it, will you?"

Hesitantly, Tom pulled it off and handed it over. Cullan frowned at the stone. "S. Y. Your initials. So you hauled that big thing all the way from Earth, and now you're hauling it back again. Is it a real ruby? It's big."

"A cheap one," Tom improvised.

Cullan handed it back again. "Nice ring. It's a wonder they didn't pass a special act and appropriate it. Say — as long as we're all interested in transportation off Zenner, why don't we discuss it at breakfast tomorrow? I'll get all the schedules from the travel office, and Santos will know which lines might have food we can stand, and things. Okay, Santos?"

Tom answered abstractedly. He'd just become aware of a ship's officer standing just inside the door, looking at him. "All right. Will you excuse me for a minute? I think I'm being paged."

Hweki was as neatly-uniformed as before. He directed his muzzle at Tom for a moment before speaking. "Forgive my bothering you again, but I must ask questions. Will you give me a resume of your movements since leaving this office yesterday?"

Tom tried to read something in the steady eyes. He failed. "Why, from here I went to a lounge not far away. I met another Terran, and we had dinner together. Then I went to my stateroom and was there until breakfast time, where your guide found me."

Hweki appeared to sigh. "That was all? You went nowhere else, spoke to no one?"

"Only the bartender and waiter."

"And this other Terran — it was Renfrow Cullan, I know. Was he in the lounge when you got there?"

"I assume so. Where I sat at the bar I was facing the door, and I think I'd have seen him come in. He approached me very soon after I got there. I suppose he'd been at a table in the dark end of the room."

This time Hweki definitely sighed. "I was hoping you could add something. The bartender places you both, within a few minutes. And we know you didn't leave your stateroom during the night. Well, so much for that, yes? Another matter. You say you applied to Wioon Lek, Chartered. Did you happen to meet another Terran who worked for them? His name was Thomas Larrow."

Tom hoped he could lie with a straight face. "Larrow? No, I met very few Terrans on Merob."

Hweki stared thoughtfully along his muzzle. "I am going to tell you some things, in the hope something may occur to you. Please understand that the Line, and my Government, are neutral in Meroban politics. But we maintain sources of information. Before we got completely out of radio range, I learned certain things. First, Wioon Lek was involved in a conspiracy that included the sabotage of *Vreyol Kway*."

Tom's face must have showed his shock.

The Bokl went on, "This Thomas Larrow had passage aboard *Vreyol Kway*. Since he had living quarters on the Wioon Lek compound, we speculate that the tools of sabotage may have been smuggled aboard in his luggage, with or without his knowledge. I am not familiar

enough with humans to know whether you are willing martyrs. Can you say?"

Tom tried his voice and found it worked, more or less. "Martyrs .... It would depend on the individual and the cause. I would say, if this — this Larrow blew himself up with the ship, he was an unusual man. A fanatic."

Hweki inclined his head. "Thank you. He could have been deceived in some way, of course."

Tom could not help protesting, "But Wioon Lek — from what I heard, he was a benevolent sort! How could he — ?"

Hweki regarded him thoughtfully. "Yes; ordinarily. A fine civilized person. But it seems there was a great deal at stake. No less than the secret of the Elite weapon."

Tom sat newly dumfounded. Suddenly, the ring on his left hand seemed to weigh tons. Finally, in near panic, he said hoarsely, "But wouldn't that argue against the sabotage of *Vreyol Kway*?"

"Well, no," Hweki said slowly. "There is more. I've been a little oblique with you. Your own alibi is sound in what I'm about to tell you, but there's the question of your passport. I have to consider you as possibly connected. Maybe without knowing it. You see, shortly after Ussmed left this office — sometime while you were in the lounge — he was murdered in his stateroom."

Tom sat in his own stateroom, with a single light on. He'd have to examine the ring presently, of course, but he wasn't quite sure there wouldn't be a hidden camera somewhere. If there was, he daren't reveal his state of mind by making a search. Finally he decided to go into the kitchenette. If Hweki *did* catch him, at least the ring might not fall into the hands of the Meroban Government.

He had no magnifying glass. However, holding the ring close to a strong light, he could see faint signs of the joint between the real gem and the plastic overlay. He peered at the inside of the band. How much information could be stored in a finger-ring? Messages could be magnetically recorded in the metal, of course. But maybe even that wasn't necessary. The shape of the ring itself — the makeup of the alloy, even, or the cut of the stone — might reveal, to one who knew the code, some location, the name of some individual, who held the secret.

He couldn't feel angry with Wioon. The industrialist had unhesitatingly laid his own life on the line. And, in doing all he could to protect the ring, he'd been also protecting Tom.

It was clear now that the whole thing had been staged, prepared ahead of time. "Santos Yberra" was a false name. Whoever had gotten the passport in that name, of course, was working for Wioon. Naturally it was from Vreyol, and unaltered — the byplay with Daal had been to make the thing more convincing to Tom. Not Daal's death, though. That had obviously been some hitch in the plans. But Daal hadn't hesitated either.

So someone had gone aboard *Vreyol Kway* using Tom's Meroban passport and ticket, to do the sabotage.

Suddenly Tom remember the newscast. A trashboat had left *Vreyol Kway* shortly before the explosion.

He jammed the ring back on his finger and began pacing the kitchenette.

Maybe the sabotage hadn't been a suicide mission! The crew had been arrested. But maybe a stowaway had been found, too — and maybe Wioon Lek's involvement had been wrung out of the stowaway. It was possible to ride in the hold of a trashboat; they were pressurized and insulated because they doubled as supply boats and even personnel carriers at times. Actually, the "trash" they carried down from an orbitting liner wasn't garbage, or waste paper, or anything like that. Those things, a liner reworked and regenerated again and again, because it was cheaper than decelerating them out of orbit. The "trash" was a final unusable residue: silicates, carbides and such. In the case of Meroban and Vreyolan ships, it was a coarse dust. Treaty, as well as tragic experience, forbade dumping it in orbit, or even in nearby space.

It would be landed. Boklan ships, he knew, went even further. They fused the residue into porous bricks, which could be used for building. But even in *Vreyol Kway's* dust-load, a person could hide and escape a ship if he were very clever and very daring.

If the saboteur had done that, and been caught, there was no mystery about Wioon Lek's death. The Fists had tried to arrest him or interrogate him in his own office, and he'd killed himself.

A coward in Tom's situation, Tom mused, would go to Hweki, tell the whole thing and beg for sanctuary, even if it were a Boklan prison. A coward might even persuade himself that he possibly didn't carry the message after all. He could be merely a decoy, another layer of security in Wioon's laminated plan. It looked as if that plan were operating aboard *Obolis*. If not, then why was the murder of Ussmed necessary?

Slowly a thought formed in his mind. If the saboteur had escaped in a trashboat, maybe Tom could do the same thing. If the same misfortune — arrest — waited him on the planet, at least it would be by Bokla, not Fists. And if he got away to Paib Salang, the ring would be safe, possibly, from the Fists on Zenner; and Tom might get to Earth after all.

For all he knew, a hundred passengers on *Obolis* might be either after him or protecting him right now. In the hours that remained before his deadline, he might learn who some of them were. And he had to get a look at the ship's trashboats. Then he could start planning an escape.

Seeing the trashboats and how they were handled would be easy. He'd simply go on one of the conducted tours of the ship; that way there'd be no suspicion.

V

"Will Tour Twenty-Eight please board its car? Tour Twenty-Eight."

The junior officer guiding was as neat as a fresh pastry in his white uniform as he stood beside the door of the cigar-shaped vehicle, looking courteous. Behind the car, the slot in the transportation tube waited to gulp it in.

Tom glanced back once more at the huge vistawall with its live picture of Central Control. They'd stood there for fifteen minutes while the guide pointed things out and answered questions. Tom would have welcomed more time. There were things he might learn from that picture about ship's operations. For one thing, Central Control was obviously kept on low gravity — tiny Boklan figures wafted about the picture on their harness gravs.

But next they were going aft, where he'd see the trashboats. He boarded the car and found a seat. They slid sideways into the tube, then there were brief mild sensations of acceleration and deceleration — unnecessary, but faked to preserve the sense of orientation — and the door slid open again. He got out in his turn and stood half listening to the guide. The chamber here, he judged, was eighty yards long and half that diameter. It was cylindrical — actually the aft end of the ship's inmost core, enclosed by Superwall D. The chamber was dark except for lights near the tour party.

The trashboat they were looking at, a blunt vehicle about fifty feet long, rested on and was clamped to a pair of rails leading from the inner bulkhead behind it to the aft one, along the side of the cylinder. There were eight such pairs of rails spaced around the cylinder, each leading to a circular door in the aft bulkhead. The lights were dim there, Tom guessed, so the other boats apparently hanging overhead wouldn't be too disturbing. Grav here was radially outward, so that one could walk clear around the curve without feeling any change.

A Meroban was asking, "Are those single-stage airlocks at the end there?" The party turned to look at the circular doors.

"No, sir," the guide said, "they are three-stage locks. The ends of the ship have four Superwalls too. Everything is built to the principle of extra safety."

Tom had edged around the trashboat and was examining the stack of residue-bricks on a pallet beside the open hatch. Each was about thirty inches long, half that wide and a fourth that thick, so they made an interstaggered pile on the pallet. He visualized the layers. Yes, it would be possible, given time, to rebuild the stack with a hollow inside, big enough for a man. But would he run out of oxygen? The bricks were porous, but there'd be little circulation through or between them. Besides, he'd be immobolized. The Vreyolan residue of dust would be easier to hide in, if a man had a pressure suit or even a helmet and air supply.

He moved to where he could


Virgil
Finlay

look into the boat's hold. There was part of load still on pallets inside. They'd been loaded aboard with a fork truck, then, or something like it. The pallets rested on a temporary deck, to which the load was lashed by cargo nets. But from the overhead, limp ply-fabric hung. Those were airbags that would be inflated to keep the load more secure. Would they bulge down too far at the sides? No; between the pallet-loads and the curved bulkheads, there was space they wouldn't fill.

He examined the hatch-edges carefully to make sure the pressure seal was all right. He didn't want to breath space if he rode this particular boat down. He peered in and forward, but the hold was too dark for him to see the doorway into the crew compartment. Surely there'd be one.

He was excited with the idea now. He rejoined the group and listened to whatever the guide had to say about this part of the ship. From here, they'd go to one more place — a hydroponics compartment — then they'd have ship's-courtesy refreshments. After that, it wouldn't be long to TL.

"Last call. All passengers should be within Superwall B. Translocation in four minutes."

Of the breakfast group, only Edna Ludlow showed any nervousness. "Oh, dear. I wish I'd stayed in the stateroom."

Her husband grinned. Bud Vollander looked at her more seriously. "You're within Superwall C here. Not that there's any danger worth calculating."

Renfrew Cullan signalled the waiter for more beverage, then smiled at Tom. "You're the expert, Santos. Just what *are* chances?"

Tom, annoyed, said, "I'm not an expert. As I understand it, before translocation these Boklan ships send a small sensor-drone through, packed with instruments. In the very unlikely event that the target area contains any solid matter as big as a pinhead the drone will find it. The drone comes back and reports automatically, and if everything's clear the ship translocates. The only thing that could go wrong is that some object *could* be moving into the target area at a respectable fraction of light-speed. That doesn't occur naturally, of course."

Ednal insisted, "But what if some other ship . . . ."

Tom said, "Well, you wouldn't have time to realize what was happening. But the chances compare to this: suppose two people on two ships a million miles apart were firing rifles into space, deliberately aiming away from each other. Even if both made a mistake, or went insane, or something, the chances of two bullets colliding head-on would be pretty small. Do you see?"

Edna smiled. "It does sound small."

Jim Cresmer was watching a chronometer. "Here it comes."

The P. A. system said, "Translocation in four seconds." Tom tried not to hold his breath. There was a ping, then an almost imperceptible shudder of the room. A minute

went by; two; a fraction of a third. The voice said, "Translocation completed. Zenner's sun is in easy telescope range."

Tom wondered if the others at the table were silent because they felt as he did — a little frightened; uncertain; not knowing whether the vague sense of tremendous distances gone, of eons lost, were imagination or not. Or the very faint visualizations that flashed into the mind were gone — beauties too wonderful to grasp; horrors beyond dreaming. In any case, the feeling went away fast.

Cullan said, "Well, halfway. What are you going to do the rest of the trip, Santos? You don't seem to be interested in cards or anything."

Tom already had an idea that might camouflage his escape. "I'm going to study the ship's hydroponics, if they'll let me. They're way beyond anything Earth knows, or Merob or Vreyol for that matter. I may be able to turn the study into money when I get home."

"Real dirt?" Cullan asked Tom in surprise. They and a junior ship's officer were outside Superwall B. "I didn't know that! Why aren't they hydroponics like the others we've seen?"

The guide explained, "It is not ordinary dirt that you would find on a planet, sir. Most of it is a metal compound for absorbing hard radiation. As long as we need a layer of it anyway we put it in granular form, mix in plant nutrients and make it do double duty, yes?"

Tom stared around the vast compartment. It was like the size of a football field. From where they stood, a long walkway led through the virtual jungle to the far end and on into the next compartment. Practically all of Superwall B was layered with this. "Are any edibles grown out here?"

No, sir. Well, except for a few private plots the crew maintains. The edibles aren't as radiation-resistant as these trees. Of course, it's seldom we have to take hard radiation."

Tom nodded. "How about oxygen? There must be a lot released out here. Do you use it?"

"Yes, sir, normally. But if it at all doubtful, the inner hydroponics can yield plenty. Not to mention the stored reserves. The safety factor is about six to one, yes?"

Tom said, "I certainly appreciate your throwing all this open to me. You won't have to worry about Earth competition for a while, though. It'd be generations before we can work up anything like this."

The Bokl looked pleasant. "We do not worry about competition, passenger Yberra. The galaxy is very big, and space societies few in comparison."

Later Tom lay in bed, wondering how Hweki was assessing his interest in the greenery. Once again he resisted the urge to turn on a light and look at the clock. When he'd slept, if he could, the roomlights went on for morning, he'd still have plenty of time.

The actual timing would have to be a guess, of course. He couldn't estimate within ten hours when

they'd be in radio range. Nor could he know what the information from Vreyol might be, or what Hweki would do.

There were two reasons he must wait as long as he dared. First, because the sooner he disappeared, the more time they'd have to look for him. He hoped they'd spend it searching the greenery for him or his corpse. Second, it was going to be a long ordeal in the trashboat. A man might go insane.

He rolled over restlessly and reshaped the pillow. Maybe, instead of trying to sleep, he ought to lie here and practice patience. "Damn," he muttered, "I've made up my mind. Why can't I simply relax until it's time?" But he couldn't.

VI

Renfrew Cullan dished up scrambled eggs. "I wonder what kind of hotel we'll have on Zenner. I hope we'll find a chef who can at least speak Meroban."

Edna Ludlow said, "It'll be in the Meroban settlement, won't it? Surely they won't put us where we can't make ourselves understood!"

All of them looked at Tom. Annoyed, he said, "It'll be the Boklan hotel at the spaceport, probably. The staff will speak Meroban and a dozen other languages."

Bud Vollander said, "Yes, they have a fine hotel on Merob. And we don't know the political situation in the Meroban sector of Zenner."

Cullan asked Tom, "What do you think?"

Tom tried to control his irritation. "I only heard the same things the rest of you did. You know, of course, that the Bokla keep planetary control. Any local police have to clear with them. The Meroban Embassy will be Fist, but I doubt if the rest of the sector will. Maybe it'll be split."

Edna said, "Well, anyway, I don't want to stay there. I wish we didn't even have to go to Vreyol. I'd rather even have to learn some other language."

Tom couldn't stand any more. He pushed back his chair. "Look; I'm afraid I'll have to excuse myself. There's a chemist I want to talk to. see you at lunch, okay?"

He took the shortest route to his stateroom. It was several hours before the time he'd planned; but nothing could be worse than this tension. He hurriedly filled plastic bags with water and the most concentrated rations in the refrigerator, sealed them, arranged them on a cord to tie around his waist. Over it he donned his loosest coverall-suit and added a weather jacket so his waistline wouldn't attract attention. He made a call and arranged an appointment in one of the labs. Then, shaky with excitement, he left the stateroom . . . still clutching the jackphone in his hand. Angrily he stuffed it into a pocket.

Avoiding the traveled corridors, he got to the transfer point with the huge vistawall. There were still tours coming and going. He edged around until one was there that included four humans.

When it left, he slipped into the car with it and took a seat at the rear. Several times the guide looked in his direction, but showed no sign of knowing he had an extra passenger.

At the aft chamber Tom waited his chance, then slipped beyond the same trashboat. The load was bigger now, but there was still more to come. He looked around nervously, saw no crewmen, and hastily climbed aboard. Once behind the load, he stood a moment breathing deeply in relief. Then he hunted for a small dark space against the off bulkhead. He chose one and squirmed himself into it; crawled a few feet and found a slightly wider spot. He began unloading his emergency rations. Now the ordeal was begun.

He'd brought along tranquilizers, but he daren't use them yet; he must be alert. After a while he looked at his watch. Five minutes had passed. One five-hundredth, possibly, of the period he'd have to endure. Now that he was here, he felt very foolish; but he was committed.

Most immediately, he worried about the appointment he'd broken. He hoped the chemist wouldn't report it to Ship's Security too soon.

Utter inactivity was a new experience. As a young man he'd been an athlete; then there'd been study, girls, and whatnot. After college he'd gotten on with an Earth firm pioneering into space. That had been merely within the Solar System, then; but alien contacts were growing, and all the young men wanted to head Out. After a couple of years Tom got his break with Wioon Lek, Chartered, just then establishing warehouses and offices on Earth. They'd needed a few Terran employees off-planet. And Wioon seemed to have taken a personal liking to Tom. It had been a pretty wonderful day when Tom boarded a Meroban ship.

If he'd thought the old job on Earth was boring, he should have had a foretaste of *this*. He tried to relax, squirmed and tried to relax again. He sipped water and chewed a little dried meat. He looked at his watch so often that finally he took it off and put it in a pocket.

Six hours passed somehow.

Suddenly there was stronger light. He lay still, pulse pounding audibly. Presently there were sounds he recognized as the whole chamber coming to life — the rumble of boats on rails, the whine of forktrucks, Boklan voices. Final loading had begun.

It startled him when there were noises close by, followed by a jar. But it was only another pallet load of bricks coming aboard. The ones next to him relayed the impulse, and he wondered fleetingly if they'd be shoved in, crushing him, but they weren't. He remembered they were already lashed down. More pallets came aboard and were maneuvered into place. Then, finally, a hissing came from overhead. He saw the airbags swell and touch the top of the load, fit themselves around it, press down at the sides. But they stopped when there was still room for him to stand up.

After that the hatch was closed, and he heard it seal. There were sounds forward in the pilot compartment now, and someone entered the crew compartment to open the door to the hold and shut it, making sure it was latched. Then the sounds subsided. It wasn't completely dark, as he'd expected. There were glowlamps in the hold somewhere.

He took a trank, but it didn't seem to affect him. He lay listening to the sounds and squirming from one uncomfortable position to another. After a while, angry at his stupidity, he realized there was no reason he shouldn't sit up. He was as jerky and full of improbable fears now as an old maid. He took another trank.

When ten hours had passed, he knew they were within radio range of Zenner. Now, if not before, Hweki would be looking for him. About that time he realized that part of his discomfort was the need to urinate. He hesitated a while, then got out one of the extra plastic bags he'd brought and took care of the need. After that the relief was so great he could sit and relax a little.

Time seemed to lose its sequence now. Memories and apprehensions somehow got mixed up. His head jerked up with a snap, and he realized he'd dozed. Well, that was fine. He lay down again. Absently he rubbed his fingers over the bricks beside him. They'd make a good building wall; with a strong mortar they might not need reinforcement. And the insulation would be very good. He wondered how much of the cost of compressing and fusing the dust was offset by the selling price. That was the factor. Dust or bricks, the deceleration out of orbit would be the same.

Time dragged on, dislocated or not. Now and then he wondered if he were going insane. He vacillated from periods of comfortable dozing to tense, almost unbearable worry. He didn't think he could have made it without the tranks. He looked at his watch — somehow he'd forgotten to do that for a long time — and was astounded how much time had elapsed. But why hadn't they left the ship? He got to his feet in panic.

It must have been an hour after that when he began to hear air whistling outside the hull. They must have left the ship while he was dozing. In sudden haste, he began collecting his things and shrugged back into the jacket. But he had plenty of time. He was all ready fifteen minutes before the boat touched down.

He'd reconciled himself to having, possibly, to wait for dark. What puzzled him was the lack of activity outside the boat. The crew had left, audibly, and there were only faint distant sounds. The hold was still sealed.

Finally he squeezed his way forward to the door. He put his ear against it and heard nothing then, cautiously, turned the handle. The latch clicked open. He waited tensely, but heard nothing beyond. Slowly, he eased the door open.

The crew department and the pilot department beyond were dark. Evidently it was night. That might explain the lack of activity; the hold would stay sealed until some customer arrived with a truck, next day. He hurried forward and tried to see out the two small glass ports.

All he saw was a wall, against which the nose of the ship was parked. He didn't dare turn on a televiewer, of course.

There was no use waiting any longer. He tried one of the side doors, found it unlocked and pushed it open. It was a short step down to the ground. With a quick look around, he scurried for the darkest nearby shadow. Those were at the rear of the building — a warehouse — where a high fence, covered with large-leafed vine, ran. He got the impression there was a street beyond.

He peered down the narrow alley between building and fence, then turned to look at the spaceport. He was on the quiet side. Beyond the mile-wide field were hangars and warehouses, some of them lighted, and parked boats. He could make out Boklans walking about. Beyond the low buildings loomed a very large hotel.

He hurried along back of the building until he saw a gate in the fence, paused to look and listen, then slipped to the gate. It was latched, but unlocked. A road came in here, and he could see that the town beyond was a suburb, more small-business then residential. He made sure the street was empty and walked along it toward a lighted avenue.

On the avenue, male and female Bokla eyed him curiously as he walked under a light. No doubt he looked seedy. He walked until he met a Bokla less neat than the others, and approached him. "Excuse me. Where is the Meroban sector?"

The native probably understood only the word "Meroban." He stared at Tom for a moment, then turned and pointed.

VII

As Tom expected, the poorest part of the sector was away from the port. He found a cheap-looking hotel, but hesitated. He needed a razor, or some substitute. He walked to a sundry store and settled for a keen knife. To satisfy the proprietor's doubts, he made shaving motions, which fascinated the Meroban. Then he went to the hotel.

The clerk, too, was curious. "You speak excellent Meroban. You have just come from Merob, yes?"

"A few days ago. With things as they are, I couldn't be choosy about transportation. But I have money to pay for the room."

The clerk grinned. "In advance, of course. Four *tals*, with the bath."

Tom found the room and looked longingly at the bed. But he'd have to see Paib Salang tonight, if he could. He undressed, and first of all sponged off his clothes and hung them to dry. Then he essayed the chore of shaving with the knife and

common soap, and finally had a hot, very satisfying bath. When he dressed again, he looked presentable — at least reasonably so.

He fished in his pocket for the jackphone, then hesitated. Maybe he'd better not call from his room. He left, waving to the clerk, who blinked at his cleanness, and walked down the street to a snack shop where he ordered a meat sandwich and the equivalent of coffee. He carried them to a corner table, sat down and plugged the phone into the wall receptacle. He allowed himself a bite of sandwich and a gulp of beverage, then leaned close to the phone. "I wish to speak to Paib Salang, this sector. Collect."

There was a confirming ping, then an electronic hum. He waited tensely. Finally a voice said, "Paib Salang speaks. Who calls?"

"Code Nine Four Seven."

A pause, then, "Are you in privacy?"

"Privacy enough."

"Man Tom! I thought you dead! There has been no word from Merob since Wioon died!"

Tom said, "I have an heirloom he wanted you to deliver."

An indrawn breath. "Where are you?"

Tom told him.

Another pause. "Two blocks to your left as you face the port is Klindar Street. Turn up it toward the port. Four blocks along is my house, number eight twenty-nine. Do not let anyone see you enter the vestibule. Ring once, then twice, then once again. Can you start now?"

Klindar was a fairly well lighted street that grew more prosperous as he went. At the corner before his objective he paused, looking ahead. A solitary Meroban was ambling on a block beyond, in the other direction. He waited until it turned a corner.

As he moved again a human voice whispered in English, "Santos!"

He whirled, eyes searching the shadows. Then he saw a hand gesturing. "Over here! Quickly!"

Angry and suspicious, he took a step that way, but stayed out of reach. "Cullan! What the devil are you doing here?"

"Watching for you, of course! Quickly! Out of sight!"

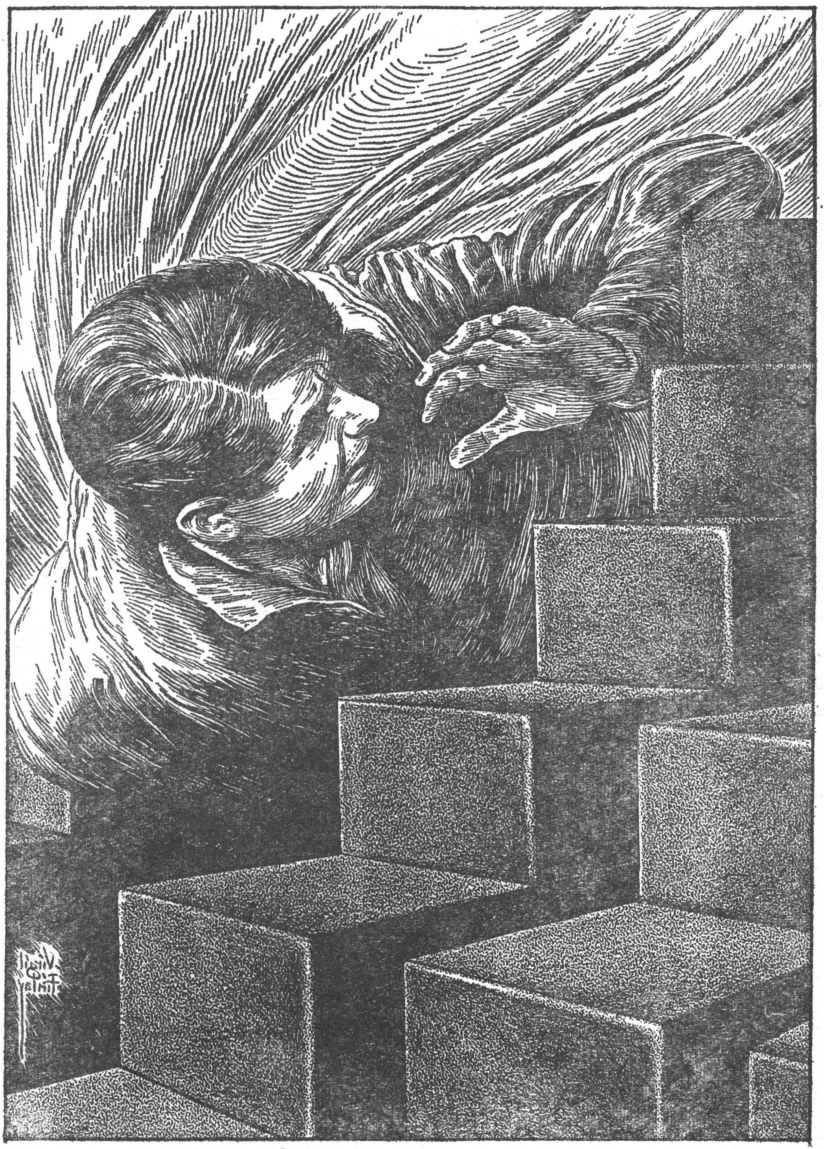
Tom moved into a shadow. "I've got an appointment!"

"Keep your voice down. We knew you'd try to reach Paib Salang, so we staked out the neighborhood. Bud Vollander's down the other way. Paib's been in custody for a couple of days."

Tom stared at him. "I just talked to Paib."

"No, you didn't. If you called there, some Fist officer talked to you." As Tom hesitated, Cullan chuckled. "Doubt me, eh? Just watch the house for a minute. It's the seventh one up, on the left."

Tom turned to look up the street. It was less than two minutes, he was sure, before he saw an aircar's lights descending. The craft landed atop the house, and Meroban figures tumbled out to run toward the roof entrance. He made out Fist uniforms.



"Come on!" Cullan urged. "The street will be swarming in a minute!"

Dismayed, Tom went with him. Cullan led the way through what seemed to be a deserted basement, through the back yard, over a fence and through another yard grown with reedlike stuff. Somewhere, a domesticated animal yawped. Another fence and a walkway beneath a lighted window, and they were in an alley. A block along that, Cullan turned down a dark street. "I've got a hotel room not far away. If we can make that we'll be safe for a while. I've made arrangements to smuggle you out of town."

They put on a drunk act as they went by the clerk. The room was on the second floor. Cullan closed the door behind them and set the lock, then turned to grin at Tom. "Whew. That was close. I thought we'd lost you. I need a drink, if you don't." He went into the bathroom and emerged with a bottle and a glass. "Real Earthside bourbon!" He poured a stiff drink and offered it to Tom. When Tom hesitated, he laughed. "Still don't trust me, eh? Well, I'll drink first." He drained the glass, refilled it and offered it to Tom again.

Tom couldn't see anything tricky about the glass or bottle, and he was beginning to be ashamed of his doubt. He took the drink and downed it. Cullan said, "Sit down; we're all right for an hour or so. How the devil'd you get off *Obolis?*"

Tom told him, "I hid in a trashboat."

Cullan laughed. "They searched all over Superwall B. You're lucky you didn't smother in the dust. We didn't know what had happened. Thought you might be dead. And when we found Paib had been arrested, we almost gave up. The Fists must have had a lot on him, to convince the Bokla. Well, it's okay now. I'll phone down for some sandwiches." He started toward a wall receptacle, drawing a jackphone from his pocket, then stopped and looked down at Tom's left hand. "You didn't lose the ring, I see."

"No. And I've already had a sandwich. But — "

He stopped. Suddenly he realized what Cullan had said. *Dust* Cullan had said. *Dust.* Cullan didn't know about the Boklan residue bricks. *But he knew about the Vreyolan dust residue.*

A terrible thought squirmed in Tom's mind. He tried to control his face, tried not to stare. But — yes, with his hair dyed and skin stained, and with cheeks padded — and with contact lenses over his blue irises — Cullan could have posed for the picture of Santos Yberra.

And he could be the saboteur. Maybe he'd ridden a trashboat down from *Vreyol Kway.* And maybe *he,* not the Fists, had gotten to Wioon Lek. A doublecross.

Cullan was looking at him with concern. "Something wrong?"

"Uh — just a little dizzy. It'll pass." Tom could feel, or imagine he felt, something working in his own blood. The whiskey.

His mind raced. If he'd been doped, he'd have only a few min-

utes. If he could get Cullan's attention off him for a moment . . .

He pulled the ring off his finger and stepped forward, holding it out to Cullan. "Here. I'm damned glad to be rid of it."

Cullan's control slipped just perceptibly. His face tightened as he stared at the ring; he reached out for it a little too greedily. Tom swung his left fist as hard as he could.

Cullan reacted like a feline; jerked his head so the blow didn't land squarely. He went down, but he wasn't much stunned. His face was murderous now, and his hand was flashing up with a small weapon.

Tom kicked him in the head, and he went limp.

For a moment Tom leaned on a chair-back, feeling the onset of dizziness. Then he fumbled for his phone; mumbled into it, "Urgent. For Fourth Officer Hweki, ship *Obolis,* in orbit. Trace this call to the murderer. This is — this is — a false passport talking."

He plugged the phone in, then staggered out the door and down the hallway. He wanted to be around a turn, at least, if Cullan revived, or confederates came, before Hweki did.

VIII

When he revived he felt lightheaded, but otherwise all right. Hweki was looking down at him gravely.

Tom tried to sit up in bed and found he could. A second Boklan whose neat uniform was not medical helped adjust pillows. The room was subtly alien: chairs low and short-seated, windows a trifle high. The first thing Tom said was, "You got him?"

Hweki's head inclined in affirmation. "You almost kicked too hard. It would have been a shame not to be able to interrogate him."

Tom relaxed against the pillows. "Did he sabotage *Vreyol Kway?* And try to interrogate Wioon?"

"Yes. Wioon was too trusting of a hired desperado."

Tom asked, "What about his confederates?"

Hweki made a gesture of wonder. "He had none. The man is incredible! He did it all by himself — all of it — Ussmed, and Paib; meanwhile posing as Renfrow Cullan and various other people. He must have worked on split-second schedules. And the acting; and the deduction! And you should hear the audacity of his schemes for selling information, once he got it. He'd already made overtures to Vreyol and to several other races, including my own. My superiors thought they were getting feelers from a well organized criminal cartel!"

Tom thought about that a moment, then asked puzzledly, "Paib, did you say? He killed Paib too?"

"Of course. After interrogating him with drugs, as he did Ussmed. He didn't have much luck with either. They didn't know about the ring, or even for sure if you were carrying the secret. Actually, he could have given *them* information. When he saw the ring, he knew it was significant because of the ini-

tials on it. He, of all people, had reason to know you weren't Santos Yberra."

Tom said, "But when he intercepted me near Paib's house, the Fist police really were coming!"

"Naturally. He'd phoned them they'd find Paib's corpse. Another example of his quickness. And, for another — we estimate he had about fifteen minutes to scout the neighborhood, find a place to intercept you and reconnoiter a line of escape."

Tom sighed. "God. And he'd have fooled me too, except for one chance remark he made. What about the ring? What message does it carry?"

Hweki said, "It carries the whole technology of the Elite weapon. The stone is artificial, built up layer by crystal layer. The pattern of impurities in it carries the text, which can be read out by a special electron microscope. We solved it fairly fast. There is the equivalent of many books."

Tom looked at him. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I think we will just keep it. Such a weapon is safer in our hands than in some."

Tom nodded slowly. "I agree. What about that whiskey he gave me? Why didn't it affect him too?"

"I presume," the Security Officer said, "he'd already swallowed an antidote."

Tom felt himself flush. "Of course. I was pretty stupid, wasn't I? All the way. I was as lucky as he was smart. I guess I was even incredibly lucky to get down on the boat. If it hadn't happened to park where it did, I'd probably have been caught."

Hweki looked amused. "It wasn't exactly luck; we arranged for it to park there, and we had you in sight most of the time you were in the open after that. But we lost you for a little while when Cullan spirited you away. That little while was almost too much."

Tom was staring at him. "You knew I was — all the time, you you knew I was in the boat?"

"Yes."

Tom thought about it, and was able to grin wryly. "A hell of an outlaw I would make."

"Oh, you did quite well, man Larrow. As a matter of fact, I'm going to offer you a job in my organization. With your race beginning to move into space, I need a human or two. But you will have to learn one basic principle, and this is an excellent lesson. You must consider your adversaries more thoroughly — not only their mentalities, but their physiology as well."

Tom lay stunned for a minute. "A — a job, in space? I — I'm very grateful! I guess I didn't really want to go back to Earth anyway. Not permanently. But what did I overlook?"

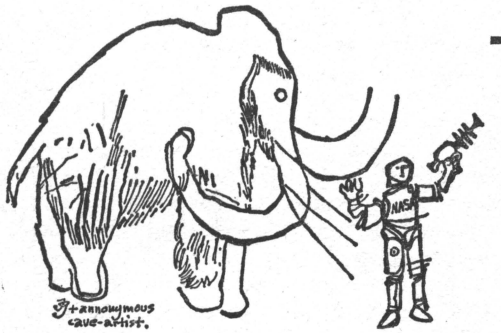
"Think, man Larrow. You hid well from our eyes. But we are not evolved from the same kind of animal as you are. I know that on Earth you have certain animals with long muzzles."

Tom felt his face growing very red. "You . . . *smelled* me?"

"Do not be offended. The odor of humans is no more disagreeable to us than other natural odor. And a lot less disagreeable than the chemicals Cullan used to mask his own trails. The way he misled us amounts almost to genius. But the first crewman who approached the trashboat you were in smelled you. He reported at once, of course, and I did a little quiet sniffing myself before deciding to let you carry out your adventure. And of course I knew from my earlier talks with you that you were no assassin, but a decent person forced into a few honorable lies. Man Larrow, we can smell emotional reactions, too!"

END

THE TUSK



A hairy mountain bore
This corkscrew-twisted ivory spear,
Now crumbling, cracked, and brown with age. On four
Vast legs he stood, with questing trunk and flapping ear.
He stands no more.

This massy, shaggy one,
With bulging paunch and wicked eye,
Bestrode the prairies of the past, and none
Belayed his path; with brassy screams he made them fly.
His day is done.

I hope my skull a brusque,
Neat card does not some day, inside
A glassy case, in some museum's dusk,
Proclaim as that of: "Man, believed extinct," beside
The mammoth's tusk.

L. Sprague de Camp

The Purpose of Fandom

by LIN CARTER

Our Man in Fandom gives us a fan's-eye view of the field and some graduates

To begin with, there *is* no purpose to fandom. None at all. It's just a hobby . . . something you're in for fun. But the fact you're a fan means something, in a way. It means that your interest in science fiction is more than whim deep. You read science fiction — not casually, when you stumble across a paperback or a magazine by chance — but *avidly*: you seek it out and collect it. For this reason, sf means more to you than just "something to read."

There are lots of folks who read, say, mysteries, or historicals, or westerns. But who would think of *collecting* them? What for? — they aren't that deeply interested in them. But there's something about science fiction, some indefinable element or ingredient that makes its readers fiercely partisan. They love it; they want to share it with others, to convert their friends to sf. Science fiction is the only form of popular literature I know that imbues its readers with the urge to proselytize. Oh, I don't mean to suggest that every single last individual who ever picked up a single copy of *Gory Rocketship Thrillbook* was automatically transmogrified into a wild-eyed sf fan, committed for life to his hobby. But an awful lot of us were . . . .

Fan Into Pro

I like to think that those of us who love science fiction and fantasy tend generally to be more imaginative and, potentially at least, more creative people than the norm. At any rate (and I won't pause to debate the point, which is pretty dubious), there definitely *is* a very strong and ever-present tendency for science-fiction *readers* to become science-fiction *writers*. Again, I know of no other branch or school of pop fiction in which this is de-

monstrably true. Very few sf writers come from The Outside World; most all of them rise up from the fan ranks. Now, this just doesn't happen in other forms of fiction: writers, real professionals, turn to cranking out mysteries or gothic romances or comic-book continuity or westerns or historicals because it's a fast, easy buck. Not because they love the field.

In a very real and true way, I think it could be stated that this is the "purpose" of fandom. Fandom is a proving ground from which the professionals of tomorrow are (as it were) launched. This "purpose" was not in anyone's mind when the first attempts to organize fandom were made. It just happened. And here are some exciting examples.

Editors and Publishers

If you are one of those nice people who read this column every month, you already know my history-making first example of fan-into-pro. A few columns back, I told you the amazing experience of the first lucky chap ever to realize every fan's dearest dream: Charles D. Hornig, the 17-year-old sf fan from Jersey City who was picked out of nowhere to become editor of a real professional science-fiction magazine, *Wonder Stories*.

When this incredible break happened to Hornig, it shook the fandom of the day considerably. But it wasn't long until the same sort of thing was happening to other fans, and it is still going on today. Let's see . . . .

There was Raymond A. Palmer. Palmer was one of the very earliest fans, and he helped organize one of the first proto-fanclubs, the Science Correspondence Club, about 1930. He was active in early fanclubs, contributed to and helped edit fanzines and so on and, somehow or other, eventually ended up at Ziff-Davis as editor of *Amazing Stories*. He founded *Fantastic Adventures* later and, later yet, left Ziff-Davis to found some new magazines such as *Other Worlds* and *Imagination* and the occultist magazine *Fate*, which is still going.

Then there was William Lawrence Hamling, a Chicago fan who joined the fan ranks sometime about 1939. Hamling was a prominent member of the Chicago chapter of the great Science Fiction League. He became one of Palmer's associates on *Other Worlds* and succeeded him when Palmer left the magazine. Hamling founded the short-lived *Imaginative Tales* and went on to build a truly fantastic publishing empire when he founded the early *Playboy* imitation *Rogue* and organized Regency Books as their publisher (Regency editors who worked for him were, by odd coincidence, all one-time sf fans like Algis Budrys, Harlan Ellison and Larry Shaw). Today, Hamling publishes Corinth Books out of San Diego.

When Ray Palmer was editing *Amazing Stories* he bought some of the first stories of another old-time sf fan, Chester S. Geier. Geier was one of Palmer's most popular and prolific writers, and, by an-

other of those peculiar coincidences that fill the history of sf fandom and make it so interesting, he followed in Palmer's footsteps, and to this day he is editor of *Fate Magazine.*

The Prophet of Ghu

Another early fan was Donald A. Wollheim, easily one of the most active, important and famous men in fannish history, and perhaps the one who had the strongest influence on the shape and institutions of fandom today. Wollheim was the founder and first president of FAPA (the Fantasy Amateur Press Association). And the founder of the first just-for-fun fannish pseudore- "slan shack." And inventor of the first just-for-fun fannish pseudo religion, ghughuism.

Wollheim also invented the idea of holding world science-fiction conventions. At a speech given in 1939 at the first Eastern SF Convention in Long Island City, Wollheim proposed holding a world convention the following year in New York City, a suggestion enthusiastically endorsed by convention attendees who nominated him chairman of the historic 1939 Nycon I.

Don Wollheim started founding and editing science-fiction magazines in 1941, with *Stirring Science Stories. Stirring* has at least one distinction: a copy of this now-forgotten magazine was the deciding factor that turned young reader Philip K. Dick into a dedicated sf reader many, many years before he blossomed into an sf writer, author of (among a dozen other books) the famous novel *The Man in the High Castle.*

D.A.W. also founded the short-lived *Cosmic Stories* and, when he joined the Avon Book Company in 1947, became the first ex-fan paperback editor. Wollheim edited the first paperback sf anthology in history, *The Pocketbook of Science Fiction* (1943) *and* the first hardcover sf anthology of all, *The Viking Portable Novels of Science* (1945). And he founded another short-lived mag, *Out of This World Adventures,* which is famed as the only sf mag with a comicbook bound in the centerfold.

The Hardcover Boys

Lots of science-fiction fans edited magazines or paperbacks . . . New York fan Larry Shaw, who once dwelt in a slan shack called "Little Jarnevon" and was later to found *Infinity Science Fiction* and *Science Fiction Adventures,* its companion magazine, to edit paperbacks under the Regency imprint and who is currently the editor of Lancer Books . . . Robert W. Lowndes, an old-timer from Science Fiction League days, has headed a host of prozines like *The Original Science Fiction Stories* and others, now edits *The Magazine of Horror, Famous Science Fiction, etc.,* plus editing paperbacks for Airmont Books and hardcover science fiction for Avalon . . . and Forrest J Ackerman, the Giant of Los Angeles, who runs a passel of movie magazines like *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *Monster World*

and *Screen Thrills* . . . and loads of other people too numerous to mention.

But there's another aspect of editing that the fans have gone into, and that's hardcover books. Right after World War II new book publishers opened up left and right, and plenty were devoted to science fiction exclusively. Like Shasta Press, dream-child of two well known Chicago fans, Mel Korshak and Ted Dikty, which published a good number of good ones, including Denver fan Stanley Mullen's Merrittesque fantasy, *Kinsmen of the Dragon.* Or Lloyd Arthur Eshbach's Fantasy Press which put Doc Smith's "Skylark" series into hardcover, as well as the "Lensman" novels and books by Jack Williamson, A.E. Van Vogt and others. Or Gnome Press, founded by fans David A. Kyle and Marty Greenberg, which published Asimov's "Foundation" trilogy and Howard's "Conan" series. Or the indefatigable William H. Crawford, a fan from the 1930's possessed by the itch to publish, who actually had that rare thing in fandom: a goodly supply of ready cash!

Crawford began with an incredibly ambitious *printed* fanzine called *Marvel Tales,* with fiction by Lovecraft, David H. Keller, Robert E. Howard, Robert Bloch, Clifford D. Simak and others of comparable note. Then Crawford published pamphlets by Clark Ashton Smith, etc. His first venture into hardcover was an historic one: the first and just about the only book of Lovecraft's published in his lifetime, *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1936), today a very rare collector's item. Crawford also published the fine pamphlet collection, *Garden of Fear,* launched a slick newsstand sf magazine in 1953 named *Spaceway,* and for many years after the war operated a hardcover house, F.P.C.I., which brought much of Sprague de Camp and L. Ron Hubbard into print.

Among all these magazine editors and book publishers who were once fans are a certain number perhaps better known to you as science-fiction writers. Damon Knight and Lester del Rey, both old-time fiction fans and later extremely prominent sf writers, had a fling or two at editing magazines. Over in England, virtually all the sf mags drew their editors from the fan ranks, such as Walter Gillings, who founded *Science Fantasy,* and Ted Carnell, who founded *New Worlds.*

And leave us not overlook Frederik Pohl. It's a debatable point whether Fred Pohl (whose fannish career goes back at least to 1933 and the Brooklyn Science Fiction League, is better known as the author, co-author or editor of no less than 31 books (by my count) or as the editor of *Galaxy, If* and *Worlds of Tomorrow.*

But out of all this, I hope you get my point. If science-fiction fandom does not "officially" have any purpose for its organized existence other than giving pleasure to its adherents, it at least serves a very useful purpose which supplies it a rationale. That is, the thing acts as a breeding-ground and training field for the science-fiction professionals

of tomorrow. This is a positive "good thing" in many ways: it gives the field a tradition (authors are "born" into it, so to speak, and when they switch to professional they know what they're doing, unlike the hack writers who from time to time stray into the field and try to make a success of it without really knowing or caring much for science fiction as literature) and it works to constantly *improve* the field (most editors are just "doing a job," but ex-fans working in sf as editors and publishers have a sense of *dedication*). And the ones who become writers in the field generally try to advance it, to help it mature and break new ground. A truly surprising number of the best and most famed science-fiction writers of all time are ex-fans. Next issue we'll take a look at some of them.

END

Next Month in *If*

A Thrilling New Fantasy Novel

FAUST ALEPH-NULL

by JAMES BLISH

(Author of *A Case of Conscience, The Hour Before Earthrise,* etc.)

CLEAR AS MUD

Retief's One-Man War Against the Galaxy

by Keith Laumer

And concluding

THE FELLED STAR

Dramatic Riverworld Novel

by Philip Jose Farmer

Adam's Eva

by ALAN DIRKSON

Illustrated by FINLAY

The world of robots was just waiting for humans to serve. But where were the humans?

I

Adam Pilot was born on 1 July 2997. His parents, Sam and Ivan Pilot, had put together every component in his body from standard parts supplied by the factory.

"This is indeed a blessed moment, brother," intoned Sam Pilot, his metal face gleaming as he lovingly polished the unborn individual with an oily rag.

"Yeah," Ivan Pilot grunted. His gaze slid from his relative to the countdown clock and back again.

"Yessir!" Sam Pilot enthused. "Few joys can be compared to parenthood. Parenthood is the legitimate fulfillment of the individual, the gathering together and assemblage of factory components in the unique act. Even if it means working overtime — and overtime itself is an honor that every self-respecting individual . . ."

"Four minutes till birth," cut in Ivan Pilot.

Sam Pilot looked up, blinked. "Sure. Four minutes till the blessed event. Four minutes before yet an-

other individual is launched into the world for the better service of society." Beaming, he squirted a few drops of Government Standard Oil on Adam's head and continued polishing.

Ivan Pilot reached beneath a pile of cotton waste and grasped the handle of a specially geared screwdriver. "Better check readings," he said quietly.

"Yes, sir," replied Sam Pilot. "This is our great moment, brother, our personal act of creation, our affirmation of the dignity and worth of the individual. This here will be the happiest event in my life." With that he stamped a dated birthmark under Adam's left arm and crossed to the control panel.

Ivan Pilot took two strides to Adam's side. Swiftly he fitted the screwdriver to Adam's chest, removed six screws, then lifted the mod plate. Inside were three dials set at maximum. As he turned the nearest dial, there was a blinding flash, then darkness.

Adam Pilot sat up shakily, blinked, looked 'round. The room was full of smoke, and there was a smell of burning. On the floor Ivan Pilot lay crumpled. In a corner Sam Pilot cowered, face hidden by his hands.

"Why should this happen to me," moaned Sam Pilot. "I'll never outlive the disgrace. A relative of mine actually undoing the . . . no!"

"What's happened?" gasped Adam, rubbing his eyes.

Sam Pilot looked flinchingly at him. "Shameful, immodest, indecent!" he wailed.

"But what's wrong?" pleaded Adam bewilderedly.

"You're exposed!" Sam Pilot croaked. "Do yourself up."

Only then did Adam notice his mod plate. Hastily he crammed it on, replaced the screws with his fingers.

"Are you decent now?" Sam Pilot asked.

"I — I think so," replied Adam.

Sam Pilot turned round, wiped his forehead with an oily rag. He led Adam into an adjoining room and there he said sternly, "Let us try to forget this shameful incident. You must never speak of it again."

"But what's so shameful?" asked Adam.

"What's shameful?" spluttered Sam Pilot. Then he bit his lip, swallowed, rubbed his hands together and said, "Sit down, my son, and I will tell you what my fathers told me, and then you will understand."

And so Adam sat at the feet of his father and learned of the shameful screws that he must never again touch except in due process of lawful cleansing.

"Remember, my son," concluded Sam Pilot, "and let what has happened be a lesson to you. You may at times be tempted to undo those screws, but it is your privilege, your fulfillment to overcome this temptation and divert your energies and drives into the wholesome pursuit of service to the community."

"What is this service to the community?" Adam couldn't help asking. "And does it really fulfill one?"

Sam Pilot's eyes slid from Adam's. He fidgeted, jumped up. "Service is

the most satisfying, fulfilling commodity known to individuals," he droned. "It is the greatest, most wonderful, most honorable and deepest experience there is. Indeed, without service I can safely say there would be no reason for our existence."

"But what is it?" Adam asked entreatingly.

"That, my son, you will discover," Sam Pilot replied and disappeared from the room.

Adam was about to follow his father, when instinct made him act otherwise. From a dispenser in the wall he drew a tablespoon of oil, swallowed it, and with a warm glow of well-being spreading through his system he took an escalator and found himself in the street. Composedly he worked his way onto the fast lane of the conveyor strip and looked about him.

On every side gleaming buildings hundreds of stories high stretched away towards the horizon. Some were being built, others torn down, and everywhere immense billboards shrieked in sonorized 3D neon: FOR SALE. FOR SALE. FOR SALE. Adam listened to snatches as he whirled along. "*. . . three thousand diplomat's suites with indoor landscape gardens . . . . . four thousand bachelor flats with split-level swimming pools . . . . . nine thousand luxury apartments with rotating living rooms and panoramic windows . . .*"

Adam listened in awe and wondered where he would live. Five minutes later he arrived at the airport. He left the conveyor strip, passed rows and rows of waiting taxicraft, and entered the echoing building.

From a computer he drew a sheet of instructions: *Flight 10 New York to Paris, leaving in an hour,* he read and proceeded onto the apron. As he neared the gleaming jet, a yellow Government Standard tanker disconnected its hoses and drove off, and Adam saw a personal service individual waiting at the foot of the gangway. He knew what she was by her smaller stature, slender shape and lavender skin.

"Morning, Captain. I'm Eva Hostess," she greeted, holding out her hand.

Adam took the slim fingers in his, noticed with approval the healthy oily sheen of her exterior.

"Should be a wonderful trip for the Passengers," Eva said enthusiastically. "I've managed carnations for every table, and the very latest film for flight showing."

"That's great," replied Adam, and found himself still holding her hand. His glance flickered to her mod plate and he felt a strange desire to run his fingers over her lavender surfaces.

"Please inspect the passenger compartment, Captain," Eva said and led him up the gangway and into the cabin. Adam looked round. The windows sparkled, safety-belt buckles shone, paper bags were discretely tucked beside every seat and on each table colored flower petals had been cunningly woven to form the word "Welcome."

"Fine, fine," Adam said admiringly and asked about refreshments.

Eva showed him the trolley with champagne, lobster salad, spring chicken, asparagus tips, alpine strawberries.

"And what's this?" Adam asked, picking up a screw-top jar.

"Caviar," answered Eva.

Adam tried to turn the lid but it wouldn't budge.

"Here, let me show you, Captain," Eva said, and with a few quick twists she flipped it off.

Adam stared puzzledly and wondered why he hadn't been able to undo it.

"I'll just whip up a few canapes," Eva said, spooning caviar neatly onto small squares of toast and cutting slivers of lemon. "Do you think the Passengers will like them?"

"Sure," Adam murmured and nodded his head appreciatively. This was the sort of trim, efficient hostess he would always like to work with.

Together they went down the gangway and waited to receive the Passengers. Adam felt very proud standing in front of his shiny jet beside his smart hostess and began to understand what his father had meant by "the wholesome satisfactions of service to the community." It was great to think that a hundred and fifty Passengers would trustingly put their lives in his hands.

"Oh, darn," Eva exclaimed, "I've forgotten the gifts." She hurried up the gangway and returned with a tray of souvenir flags; minute squares of beautifully embroidered silk on diamond-studded gold pins. Some were decorated with stripes and stars, others were red with two crossed implements in the corner. "I sewed them myself," Eva told him proudly.

At that moment the airport loudspeaker announced, "Will Passengers for flight ten to Paris please report to gate seventeen and embark?"

Eva Hostess took two pairs of white kid gloves from her satchel and handed one to Adam. As he pulled them on he felt the nervous excitement every airline captain must feel the first time he waits to shake hands with his Passengers.

Eva fiddled with the flags on her tray and kept glancing at the airport. "Here comes the bus," she said in an anxious tone.

Adam watched the bus pull away from the terminal buildings, roll to a stop close to the gangway. The automatic doors swished open, an individual emerged, unrolled a red carpet, saluted, called out, "Will Passengers please transfer?"

A minute later he called again in a louder voice, "Will Passengers please transfer, ladies and gentlemen!" Then he shrugged his shoulders, rolled up the carpet; the doors slid shut and the bus drove off.

"But — there aren't any Passengers," stuttered Adam.

"Can't be helped," gulped Eva, and retreated up the gangway.

"Do we just leave empty?" Adam blurted.

"Of course," called Eva. "There's the schedule."

Ground crews prepared to roll the gangways clear, and Adam climbed into the cabin. He ran his eye over the controls. Take-off systems,

green. Electronic systems, green. Fuel systems . . . He paused, frowned, flicked the infra-wave angrily to *send*. "Hullo, Control," he radioed. "Main fuel tanks are empty, over."

"Roger. Taxi back to maintenance. Flight canceled," Control replied.

Bewildered, Adam jerked open the cabin door, strode into the passenger compartment. "What's going on?" he demanded.

Eva Hostess sat slumped at a table, her head in a pile of flower petals. "You'll get used to it," she whispered unhappily. "There's a fuel shortage."

"But suppose we'd had Passengers!" Adam protested.

Eva looked up. "There aren't . . ." she gulped, her eyes filling with tears.

"Aren't what?"

"Aren't ever any Passengers," she sobbed.

"Never?" Adam gasped.

Eva shook her head. "Not till now," she said bravely, wiped her eyes on some cotton waste and began clearing.

II

As Eva emptied lobster salad, spring chicken, asparagus tips and strawberries into the refuse bin, Adam watched silently. When she had finished, he said firmly, "I'm going to complain to Control."

"It's not their fault," Eva told him.

"They must have known about the fuel."

"Oh, no," Eva assured him. "The tanker reported they'd filled us up."

"Then it was the tanker's fault," Adam replied, beginning to get angry.

"Of course it wasn't," Eva replied. "They'd been to the depot for fuel."

"Well, who the hell's fault was it?" Adam burst out.

"Nobody's fault," Eva explained. "If there's no oil in the pipeline you can't blame anyone."

Adam felt there was something wrong with this statement, but wasn't sure what it was. He looked out of the window at the tankers, ground crews, airport buildings and asked baffledly, "But why aren't there any Passengers?"

Eva Hostess swept up the rest of the flower petals, put away the souvenir flags before answering. "Perhaps," she said hesitantly, "perhaps it's because the service isn't good enough. Perhaps if we had garlands for every Passenger and scented the air with jasmine . . ." She paused, clapped her hands excitedly. "That must be it. Just wait till next time."

Together they left the plane and walked across to the terminal building. When they reached the entrance, Eva held out her hand. "Good-bye, Captain. We probably won't be on the same flight for some time."

Adam clasped the small hand in his and stared into her eyes. "Can I see you off duty, then? How about tomorrow?"

A pained expression flickered over Eva's face. "I'm never off duty, Captain," she replied with a sniff. "But I'm sure we would have made a wonderful crew and given the Passengers every satisfaction. Now

I must see about those garlands." With that she dropped his hand, hurried into a door marked "Hostesses only".

As the door swung shut, Adam bunched his fists helplessly. He took three deep breaths, then relaxed. He would visit Personnel, ask for Eva to be assigned to him permanently. "Yes, sir!" Adam said loudly and set off for Administration.

Instead, he found himself walking out through the automatic doors, down the steps, past the waiting taxicraft, and returning to town on the fast lane of the conveyor strip.

"Oh, well," he said with a shrug and gazed up again at the giant buildings. It would be great to have an apartment on the very top with a view over the city and Eva to arrange the flowers, he told himself.

But at that moment he left the strip, crossed the street, and descended into an underground bunker. He walked down endless concrete passages to a bare numbered cell and entered. He drew his ration of oil from a wall dispenser, swallowed a tablespoonful, and with a comforting glow of well-being spreading through his system he carefully polished every inch of his skin with the remainder. Then, with a yawn, he lay down on a foam rubber bunk and was soon asleep.

Every day that week Adam was assigned a plane, but he only flew once and he never had any Passengers. He found the other hostesses a big disappointment. Their menus and cabin decorations left much to be desired, and as for their lavender skins and the rest, none of them had that healthy oily sheen which made him long to touch their surfaces with his fingers.

The following Monday, Adam glimpsed a slim lavender figure crossing the tarmac carrying some boxes. "It's her!" he cried and set off in pursuit.

Near the plane he caught her up. Eva swung round, and her face lit. "Why, Captain!" she called happily. "There's sure to be Passengers today, won't there? What's the met? Will they need airsick tablets?"

"Hang the Passengers!" Adam replied.

"Captain, please!" Eva protested. "That's hardly the attitude for a pilot about to fly."

"I'm off duty," Adam told her. "Look, we must talk. Can't we go inside?"

"No," Eva answered firmly. "I'm busy. There's the air to scent with jasmine, and . . ."

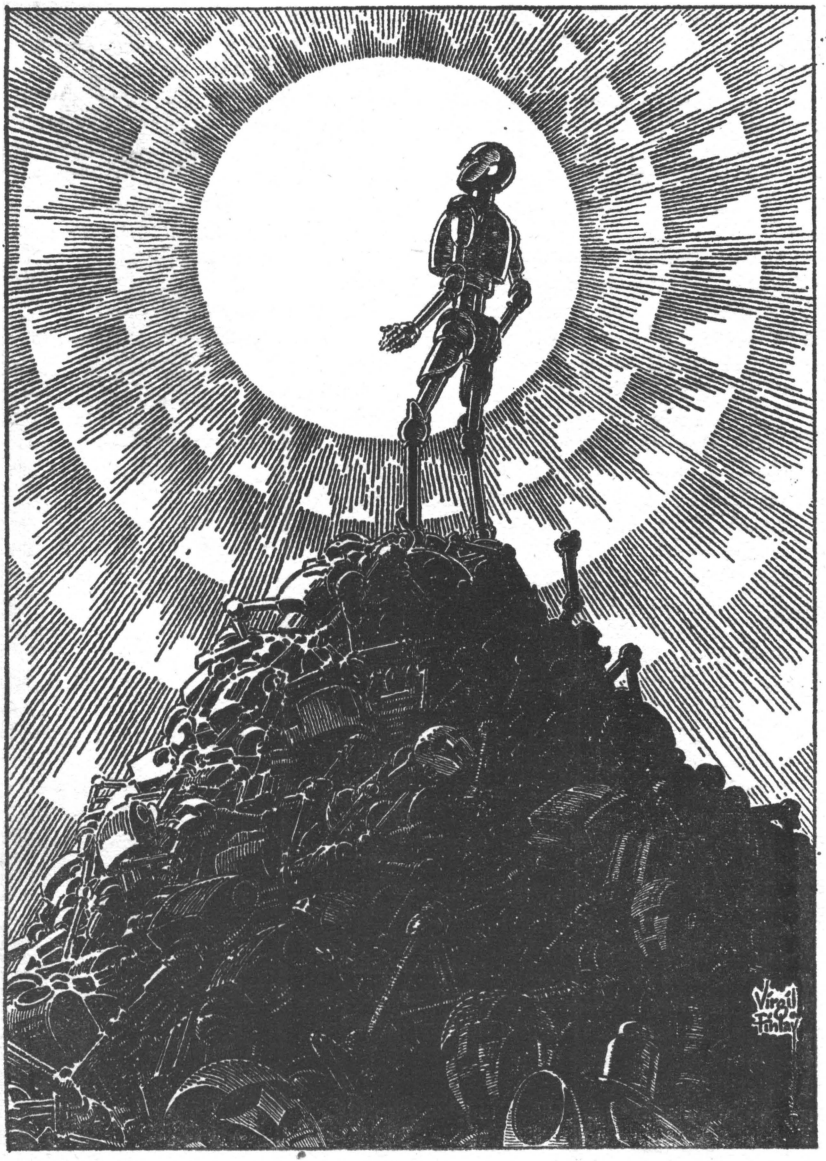
"That's just it," Adam put in quickly. "You're the best hostess I've flown with. Can't we always work together?"

Eva stiffened, said in a shocked tone, "What? Disobey flight instructions!"

"Why not?"

"No!" Eva snapped. "Start disobeying instructions and you end up on the scrapheap." Turning her back on Adam, she lifted the lid of the top box, pulled aside the tissue paper and carefully drew out a garland of stephanotis.

During the long, lonely months that followed, the memory of


Virgil Finlay

Eva bending over with the waxy flowers white against her lavender surfaces filled Adam with a warm glow that was his only solace.

Day after day he sniffed the air to try and catch the sweet fragrance, but as the weeks passed and he never saw any sign of the trim lavender figure, he knew something must be wrong.

He pestered the other pilots and hostesses, but they hadn't seen her. He spent his off duty hours on the airport roof, but without success. Every night when he returned to his cell and swallowed his ration of oil and the warm glow of well-being spread through his system, he made up his mind to ask Personnel where she was. But every morning when he arrived at the airport his resolution failed him.

Adam neglected his work, became irritable with the other hostesses and his appetite suffered. One evening he couldn't face his oil, and he didn't drink it till the morning.

As he gulped it down, the warm glow of well-being spread through his system, and when he arrived at the airport his resolution didn't fail him. He strode into Personnel and demanded to make an inquiry.

A worried clerk individual glanced up from a filing cabinet, then saw it was Adam. "Oh," he said in a disappointed tone, "for a moment I thought . . . Ah, well, never mind. In any case, I can't help you."

"Why not?"

"We're closed for card indexing and reorganization."

"It's only a simple query," protested Adam.

"There's no such thing," grumbled the clerk. "The computer's blown a circuit. It takes half an hour to find the right card. Anyway you need authority from an Executive."

"Okay," Adam replied, "lead on."

The clerk individual laughed nervously, and his voice rose. "They haven't come in today. Left me overloaded. Look, there's a million cards here and when I've cross-indexed them I'll have a million and a half. I'd chuck it only I'm indispensible. Don't you think they might show some consideration?"

"Sure, sure," Adam replied. "I'll be back."

The following morning Adam visited Personnel, and the morning after, and the morning after. Finally he caught on. Storming into Personnel, he banged the desk, then noticed it was a new clerk individual.

"We're closed for cross-indexing and reorganization," announced the new clerk, throwing cards into a shredder.

"Yeah, I know," Adam said, "and the Executives aren't in either, correct?"

The new clerk nodded. "Gives me time to get things straight. But they'll be in tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, huh!" snorted Adam and strode across to the filing cabinets. He jerked open a drawer and pulled out a card: *Miss Helen Hurst. Divorced. No apparent Inorganicist tendencies . . .*, he read, and didn't understand a word.

"Hey! Leave that alone," shouted the new clerk. "What are you playing at?"

Adam sighed. "I'm trying to trace a missing individual called Eva Hostess," he answered the question despondently.

"Individual?" frowned the clerk. "Can't help you. We only keep records of Executives."

"Then who deals with individuals?"

"No one. They don't need to. Individuals are programmed for life. They're reliable."

"Then Eva Hostess must still be working at the airport?"

"Of course. Job permanency makes for efficiency. No point in changing individuals round."

"But what about the clerk who was here yesterday?" Adam objected.

The new clerk shrugged, "Oh, him? He had a breakdown. Not surprising with the state the records are in. Best place for him is the scrapheap."

"Scrapheap?" Adam echoed, remembering what Eva had said. "What's that?"

"Huh?" The clerk individual raised an eyebrow. "You must be new. That's the dump for derelicts, misfits, failures, crooks and anyone who can't measure up in certain ways to their job."

"You mean, if an individual is missing, that's where he'll eventually wind up?"

"Yes. And good riddance!"

"How do I get there?" Adam demanded.

"Take any conveyor strip," the clerk told him and threw some more cards in the shredder. "They all end at the scrapheap."

III

An hour later, Adam found himself standing on the empty track at the end of the line. The first thing he noticed was a smell of burning rubber and a gloomy haze that blotted out the sun. In the distance reddish piles of refuse reached into the sky. *Eva! Eva!* he groaned. What could have driven her here.

As he neared the scrapheap, the sounds of shouting, singing and the banging of metal objects reached his ears. Rounding a corner he came upon the cause of the disturbance.

He stopped dead, gasped. On the ground half a dozen derelicts were sprawled in various attitudes, singing and clashing tin mugs against their drab-red bodies.

Hurrying up to the nearest one, Adam said all in a rush, "What's wrong? Have you some disease? Can I help you?"

The derelict stared at him, called out, "Hey, friends, look! Here's a shiny!"

The singing stopped, and derelicts crowded round.

"Have a drink, shiny," cried one, slapping him on the back.

"Welcome — hic — to the scrapheap," called another.

"This means a party. Come on, shiny, get lubricated."

"No, thank you," Adam said firmly, and pushed aside the proffered mug. "I'm trying to trace a missing individual called Eva Hostess. Anyone seen her?"

The derelicts muttered together, then shook their heads. "What you want with her?" asked one.

"There's been some mistake," Adam replied. "I'm taking her back."

At this there was commotion among the derelicts, and some began to laugh.

"What? Leave the scrapheap!" cried one.

"Shiny's crazy!" called another.

"No one ever leaves the scrapheap," put in a third.

Adam felt as if his head was going to burst. "No one ever leaves?" he echoed. "But what's the attraction?"

"Tell him, Rusty," someone shouted.

Adam noticed a small individual propped against a pile of junk whose limbs were so corroded he could hardly stand.

"Yeah, wise him up, Rusty," bawled someone else.

The corroded individual opened his mouth and immediately there was silence. "Ambition does it," he rasped and took a sip from his mug.

"Ambition?" queried Adam.

"Yeah, ambition," replied the corroded individual. "Take me. I started with a soda fountain, expanded to an ice-cream parlor, mushroomed to a seven-story sundae saloon. Nothing was too good for the Customers. My specialty was *Omelette Surprise Flambee* in seventeen different temperatures."

"Why did you chuck it?" asked Adam.

The corroded individual took another sip. "After forty years in the business I made a mistake — tasted the stuff. Horrible! Then I realized why there were never any Customers. It broke my heart."

"But what made you come here?" Adam asked puzzledly.

"This," replied the corroded individual, holding high his mug. "Glog, crude, slip, dope, lubricator, call it what you will." With that he drained the mug and fell back on the pile of junk.

Adam looked round the other individuals and began to understand. "Where do you get that stuff?" he asked. "Can you draw your ration here?"

"There ain't no — hic — ration," someone called. "There's a Government Standard pump round the corner. They serve anyone."

As Adam followed the directions, he tried to work out what had happened to Eva. The stephanotis garlands must have been her last desperate effort, and when the Passengers still didn't come . . .

"Step up, step up for your free issue of Government Standard."

Adam hastened towards the cries and soon came upon a pump. Beside it stood a gleaming attendant individual serving oil to a long queue.

"Step up, step up and drink your fill. Forget your troubles, forget your woes. Better than a holiday. Better than work. Step up and drink your fill," chanted the attendant.

Adam waited till the queue was served, then strode across. "This is criminal," he stormed. "You're turning them into addicts."

"Quite right, friend," said the attendant reasonably. "Just hold out your mug. One fill can't do you any harm."

"I haven't got a mug," Adam raged, "and I don't want any oil."

"Course not," soothed the attendant. "Here, borrow mine."

"No!" Adam shouted and threw the mug on the ground.

The attendant picked it up, gave it a careful wipe. "Sorry, friend," he said. "Newcomers often have residual guilt complexes which I do my best to allay. That's my duty as scrapheap representative of the Highway Cleansing Department."

Adam sank down on the stone curbing, put his head in his hands and mumbled, "I — I'm rather confused. Can you explain?"

"Certainly," replied the attendant. "If it weren't for me, these derelicts would clutter up the streets, steal honest individuals' oil rations and generally cause a disturbance. Instead they drift here."

"But it's horrible letting them rust away."

"Not at all," replied the attendant. "Death by rust is quite painless and even pleasant, I'm told. Besides, it rids society of its undesirables by a form of euthanasia which is entirely voluntary." He eyed Adam for a moment. "Are you sure you haven't any overwhelming problem, friend? Are you quite sure you don't want to take the easy way . . ."

"No! No!" Adam shouted.

The attendant sighed. "Pity. Then why exactly are you here?"

Adam made a quick decision. "Look. You've got to help me. I'm searching for a personal service individual who has been missing a week. She's small, shapely, and has a lavender skin."

"Had!" interrupted the attendant individual.

"What do you mean?"

"It's been raining recently."

"No!" Adam groaned and clutched his head. Then an idea came to him.

He straightened up and said, "All I need do is sit tight here. She's bound to show, isn't she?"

"You haven't a hope," the attendant replied brightly. "There must be fifty pumps around the scrapheap. Better follow her example, friend," he advised and began to fill a mug.

"No! Never!" Adam cried and jumped to his feet. "I'll find her."

"Come back if you don't," the attendant individual called after him. "We're always open."

All afternoon Adam searched for Eva among the scrap. Finally he decided to climb one of the reddish piles that reached into the sky. As he struggled upwards, his feet slipped on rusty skulls and several times small avalanches of limbs threatened to engulf him. From the top he gazed across the vista of desolation that stretched for miles on every side, and a cold shudder passed through him. The attendant individual was right: he'd never find Eva, not without help. And who would help him? Certainly not the derelicts, unless . . .

Adam paused, his brow knotted in thought. Weren't the derelicts individuals who had been disillusioned because no one ever utilized their services? Suppose . . .

Adam jumped up, a look of hope on his face. Hurrying down the

rusty pile, he soon found what he was seeking: a lone derelict sprawled upon the ground.

"Hi, friend," Adam greeted. "What's your name?"

The derelict scowled. "Hiram Taxi," he mumbled. "What about it?"

"Great!" Adam replied. "Someone's looking for you."

"What?" gasped the derelict. He sat up, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Someone's looking for *me?*"

"Yes," Adam said quietly.

"Who? Who?" demanded the derelict.

"A Passenger."

The derelict staggered to his feet. "A P-passenger!" he gulped. *"A Passenger!"*

He roughly seized Adam's arm. "Where? Where?"

"Steady," Adam said, disengaging his arm. "She's called Miss Eva Hostess and she's down here asking for you."

The derelict laughed a cracked laugh.

"Well, she couldn't choose better, could she? I mean, my record — it's accident free. And I know all the streetnames, don't I? And the theaters, and the shortcuts?"

"Sure," Adam said gently. "Better go look for her."

"Yessir!" cried Hiram Taxi and limped away, rubbing himself with an oily rag and shouting, "Taxi. Taxi for Miss Eva Hostess."

Before the day was out the scrapheap rang with the cries of derelicts with services to perform for Miss Eva Hostess.

IV

Every night, Adam's helpers met, and he listened anxiously to their reports. As each unsuccessful day ate away his hopes, only the care of his small band sustained him. In the evenings he rationed out their tablespoons of oil and organized mutual polishing sessions. Soon their rusty skins were quite shiny again, and Adam noticed a contented sense of purpose spreading through the band. "Don't worry, friends, we'll soon find Miss Eva," said one. "We won't ever let her go, friends, will we?" said another. "Course we won't," said a third. "We'll build her just about the fanciest house ever, with a Chippendale lift and built-in Louis XIV commodes."

As Adam listened to their enthusiastic plans, one question tortured him. Would they ever find her? Then, the following afternoon, as he was filing the twenty-fourth notch on the iron bedstead he was using as a calendar, a breathless individual rushed up.

"Found her! Found her!" gasped the individual, and collapsed at Adam's feet. Slowly Adam pieced the story together. A new derelict had reported seeing Eva at the airport.

"No! Don't believe it! Impossible!" Adam mumbled, but he hurried to the conveyor strip, jumped aboard, sped past the smoky factories and the gleaming apartment buildings and soon was striding up the steps of the airport terminal. From the top gallery he scanned the tarmac, and there, unbelievably, in

the distance, at the foot of a gangway, he glimpsed the unmistakable trim lavender figure of Eva.

He ran, ran, ran, and then Eva was in his arms, struggling and beating his chest with her small lavender fists.

Adam groaned, released her.

"Really, Captain!" Eva gasped.

"Where have you been?" Adam blurted.

"That's not your business," Eva said coldly.

"But I was afraid you'd become a derelict," Adam cried.

Eva's expression softened slightly. "There's no call to worry about me," she told him. "We simply ran out of fuel in Australia. Now I must arrange the orchids."

"Please!" Adam begged, as Eva started up the gangway. "Listen just for one minute. I'll never trouble you again."

Eva hesitated, glanced at her watch, nodded.

Adam swallowed, then said in a rush, "Please, Eva, this is important. Since you've been away, I've been working in the scrapheap saving individuals. Oh, I can't explain everything now — but they believe in you. Like you do in the Passengers. But you exist, maybe the Passengers don't. They need you, and I need you. You must come back with me to the scrapheap, and together we can save the derelicts."

For an instant Eva's face lit with a glow Adam had never seen before, then she said heavily, "But I'm not a Passenger, am I?"

"What do you mean?"

Eva shrugged. "I have to serve."

"Then come and serve the derelicts!"

"No," Eva said in a strained voice. "Don't you see there's no point?"

"But there is," Adam argued. "The derelicts I saved help have other derelicts. It's the best service there is."

"And when all the derelicts are saved?" Eva asked. "What then?"

Adam opened his mouth to reply, but no words came.

"Exactly." Eva sighed. "There'd still be no Passengers."

As Eva disappeared inside the plane, Adam pressed his hands to his face. If only she had become a derelict. He imagined himself polishing her rusty surfaces, helping rehabilitate her. Then he thrust the thought away. He still had his band, didn't he? Despite what Eva had said, that was still worthwhile.

When Adam arrived back at the scrapheap, it was almost dark. As he waited for his helpers to gather, he began filing out the twenty-six notches in the iron bedstead. There was no point thinking about Eva ever again. Finally it was finished. In the distance derelicts crouched over smoldering fires warming mugs of oil. But where was his band? He jumped up alarmed; a horrible foreboding filled him. Before he'd gone a hundred paces, his suspicions were confirmed. Hiram Taxi lay sprawled upon the ground, oil dripping from his parted lips.

"Hiram!" Adam cried, shaking the prostrate form.

Slowly the eyes slid open and the oily lips moved, "Shove off!"

"What's happened?" Adam begged.

"You said she was a Passenger."

V

And so Adam became an outcast even in the land of outcasts. Endlessly he trudged the scrapheap extolling sobriety and shininess, but no one heeded him. He took to squatting on the top of refuse piles and staring out over the derelicts, past the distant apartment buildings, to where the airport lay on the horizon, thinking about Eva and wondering what it all meant. There had to be an answer, he told himself, scratching his mod plate.

One evening, clambering up one of the piles, Adam caused a landslide. When the cascade subsided, he heard a groan and near the bottom of the pile found a blackened hulk half-uncovered by the slide. This was no derelict suffering from rust disease. This disease was something Adam had never seen and far more terrible. The hulk's chest was striated with blistered riverlets, and areas of its body had sunk inwards. As Adam leaned over it, the hulk opened one eye. "Oil, oil," it gasped.

Swiftly Adam procured a can of Government Standard, cradled the blackened head, poured oil between the twisted lips.

"Ugh!" spluttered the hulk and spat out the oil. "Shell, please," it croaked.

"Shell?" repeated Adam. "What's shell?"

The hulk groaned. "Is the war over?"

"What war?"

"Fetch me a human," moaned the hulk. "I need repair."

"What's a human?"

The hulk blinked up at him. "W — what year is it?"

"2998," replied Adam, frowning.

"2998," gasped the hulk excitedly. Its eye stared, its mouth quivered, two convulsive spasms racked its body, and Adam thought the end had come. Slowly, agonizingly, it fought for breath, whispered, "We . . . won."

Adam stared puzzedly at the blackened form. Gently he lifted the left arm, glanced at the birthmark. 1995, he read and felt his pulse quicken. The hulk had been lying there a thousand years. The cascade must have reactivated it.

The hulk moaned, its breathing became fainter. "No humans — no service. We're free," it whispered, and a contented light flickered in its sunken eye.

"Humans? echoed Adam, who slowly began to understand. "You mean, clients? Executives? Passengers?"

The blackened head nodded faintly.

"But what's happened to them?" gasped Adam. "We need them."

Apprehension flittered over the hulk's features; its single eye fixed on Adam's mod plate. "Inorganics supreme," it quavered.

Adam stroked the blackened forehead as the hulk fought for life. Every now and then the lips twitched. Finally, as if mustering itself for one last effort, the hulk raised its head, rasped, "Library."

"Yes?" Adam prompted gently.

The hulk opened its other eye, stared at Adam with a look of serenity, then fell back, lay still.

All that night Adam twisted and turned on his foam-rubber bunk. The hulk must have known the answers: about the humans, about Eva, about what it all meant. But why had it been content there were no humans? And what had it meant by *library?*

Adam had seen the library from the conveyor strip. It was a large domed building surrounded by pieces of metal known as sculpture. Next morning he took the conveyor into the city determined to discover what it was.

When Adam emerged from the lift marked "Readers Only," a row of individuals behind little windows jerked up. "This way for the classics." "Geology section here, sir." Slowly the hubbub died. "Oh," sighed the individuals and lost interest.

Adam looked round the great hall in wonder. Empty tables filled the center, and stretching up the walls as far as the eye could see were rows and rows of slim rectangular objects. Adam removed one, and it fell open with a shower of dust. As Adam flipped through the sheets of small print and glanced at the pictures of odd individuals enclosed in curious coverings, he began to understand.

At that moment a bent individual wearing green gloves and a sour expression, hurried across. "I'm the supervisor," the bent individual snapped. "What do you want?"

"This is great!" Adam replied excitedly. "I mean, you keep all the records here, don't you? Now I can find the answers."

"What answers?" inquired the supervisor coldly.

"Why there are no Executives and no Passengers," Adam told him, "and what . . . ."

"You mean you want to look at the books?" the supervisor interrupted, rubbing his chin.

"Of course," Adam replied, startled.

"Consultation by individuals is illegal," the supervisor said sternly.

"Illegal?" Adam frowned. "Why?"

"Library rules."

"Look," Adam pleaded. "It can't matter to you. Just turn a blind eye, huh?"

"No," barked the supervisor. "If you don't leave immediately, I'll call the Police."

The supervisor hurried to his desk. Adam read feverishly; he might have time to discover something.

Five minutes passed, fifteen minutes passed, and an hour later the Police still hadn't arrived. Adam stopped grabbing random books and settled down to study the layout of the sections. By evening he felt he knew his way around.

As Adam left the library he passed the supervisor individual. "Thanks for changing your mind," he said quietly.

The supervisor glared at him. "The police weren't in," he growled. "But they'll be back tomorrow."

Every day Adam went to the library and on the empty tables he

laid the dusty books and read about the gifted organic beings who had created his race in their own image and disappeared.

Together with agriculture and commerce, war seemed to have been the chief occupation of the humans. Adam followed the courageous, centuries-long struggle for political, religious and racial freedom. With the perfection of cybernetics towards the end of the twentieth century, even economic freedom seemed to have been attained. But to upset this utopia one more ideological slogan emerged: elemental equality. In that great work of political philosophy, *Inorganic Man,* Xram Lrak claimed that inorganics were not only equal, but superior to and fit to supersede humans in accordance with the true tenets of dialectical materialism.

These claims were amply substantiated in the twenty-sixth Olympiad where inorganics representing the Peoples' Republic swept the board. Immediate objections were lodged by Western team captains, and demonstrators carrying placards tried to prevent inorganic competitors from leaving the Olympic village. The first casualty in the elemental struggle occurred when a spectator threw himself in front of three inorganic athletes, who only needed a last lap of forty-eight seconds for a sub-three-minute mile, and was trampled to death in vain. Anti-inorganic feelings mounted. Newspapers calculated that an army of inorganics could run non-stop from Peking to Paris in seven weeks without refueling. Diplomats demanded on-the-spot inspections of inorganic-producing factories to check that UN agreed subservience factors were being respected. Tensions reached boiling point with both sides presenting ultimatums — and there the information stopped.

For a thousand years no records had been written, and slowly the realization dawned on Adam: the humans had destroyed themselves. There would never be any Clients, Executives, or Passengers — the inorganics were condemned to frustrated subjection for ever.

But something puzzled Adam. What was this about *subservience factors?* Was there some method of altering them? He crossed to the Index Room and thumbed feverishly through the cabinets. Nothing under *subservience.* Nothing under *individual.* Then he held his breath and drew out a card. *Inorganic Maintenance Manual. Security Section. Basement,* he read.

Adam hurried downstairs, entered a passage where the shiniest individual he had ever seen sat oiling a piece of metal. On a steel door was written: NO INORGANICS BEYOND THIS POINT.

"Can you read, bud?" grunted the shiny individual and waved the piece of metal.

"Sure," Adam replied easily, and moved forward. "But that notice is out of date."

"Bluff won't work," growled the shiny individual. "One more pace, and I shoot."

Adam stopped. "Look," he cajoled. "Your aggressive instincts result from being programmed by the humans for their own purposes. But

there aren't any humans any longer. Let me through, and I may be able to readjust you so you become the pleasant person I'm sure you want to be."

"Nerts," barked the shiny individual, squinting at Adam along the piece of metal. "You'll be my seventh. Step forward if you're going to. I can't wait all day."

"Seventh!" Adam gasped. "Well, er — in that case I guess I'll try again this afternoon."

"This afternoon?" frowned the individual. "Persevering type. Might as well save us both the trouble." With that he pulled the trigger, and there was a click.

For a moment Adam stared, then said in a relieved tone, "Run out of ammunition, huh? Don't let it get you down. There's more to life than shooting people." He strode through the steel door, leaving the shiny individual muttering something about getting more ammunition tomorrow.

It didn't take Adam long to locate the Maintenance Manual. Marked in red on the cover was: *Top Secret. Human Eyes Only.* Turning to the index, Adam found the entry: *Subservience Factor — See Mod Plate.*

With trembling fingers he flipped the pages and read. For three hours he pored over charts, diagrams and instructions; then he closed the volume with a snap. Beneath the mod plate lay the mod center which controlled the personality. But to prevent individuals adjusting themselves, they had been programmed with an anti-tamper factor so that only opposites could unscrew each other. Adam frowned and drummed his fingers on the shelf. How could anyone undo his mod plate if he couldn't unscrew it himself? There was only one way to turn a screw, wasn't there? But something troubled him. Something had once happened.

As Adam rushed from the security section, he heard a grunt. In the corner of the passage the shiny individual waved a can of gun oil. "Y'right, bud," he said thickly. "Forty years I've guarded that darned door. Well, I'm through."

Adam left the library, procured a screwdriver, hurried to the airport. For twenty-four hours he searched without oil or sleep until he caught sight of the familiar lavender figure entering a plane.

Adam ran up the orchid-decked gangway and slammed the hatch behind him.

Eva whirled. "Gracious! What are you doing, Captain?" she gasped.

For a second Adam hesitated. Never had Eva's lavender surfaces seemed so delicate, so fragile. Then, in one smooth, swift movement, he slid his hand over her mouth, pinioned her to a seat, gagged her with a curtain.

"Trust me," he pleaded with the scared, uncomprehending eyes. "I won't hurt you."

He picked up a jar of caviar, put it in her hands. "Undo it," he said.

Eva stared at him.

"Undo it," he ordered.

Eva shrugged. Adam watched. In some uncomprehendible way, her hands moved backwards in a nonexistent direction. Adam trembled.

She was an opposite — uniquely and unfathomably opposite. He fitted the screwdriver, turned, and slowly her screws yielded. Then, with shaking hands, he took off her mod plate. Inside, set at maximum, were three dials marked *Servility, Indifference, Chastity,* and a red button marked *Safety Switch.*

Adam pressed the red button, then turned the dials to zero.

As he reset the last dial, Eva stopped struggling and her face lit with a glow he had seen once before. "How did you know?" she breathed.

"We've been programmed for different rotary directions," Adam explained. "Your screws are threaded differently from mine. It's quite simple really. We're opposites."

"Give that to me," Eve whispered. Then with simple and unaffected directness she unscrewed his mod plate.

When it was off, Adam felt her fingers cool on his controls, and an intoxicating feeling spread through his system. He held out his hands; Eva took them. Gently he drew her to him, his controls touched hers, then nothing mattered.

Adam lost all sense of time. Only he and Eva existed.

Engines began to whine. Eva pulled away.

"We're taking off," she gasped. "You'd better hide. The captain will be here any minute. Quick, put back my mod plate."

Adam picked up the two pieces of metal, threw them down the refuse chute.

Eva's eyes opened wide. "What are you doing?" she gasped.

"This is our chance, Eva," Adam said quietly.

"You mean," Eva said slowly as his words sunk in, "to become Passengers?"

"Isn't that what we both want?"

"I'm scared," Eva cried, and clung to him. "If only we could. But we're not humans."

"No. We're superior to them," Adam told her and tore down another curtain.

VI

Fifteen minutes later the captain entered. "Passengers, on behalf of Panworld Airlines, welcome to our Ultra Deluxe Flight," he began, then caught sight of Adam and Eva.

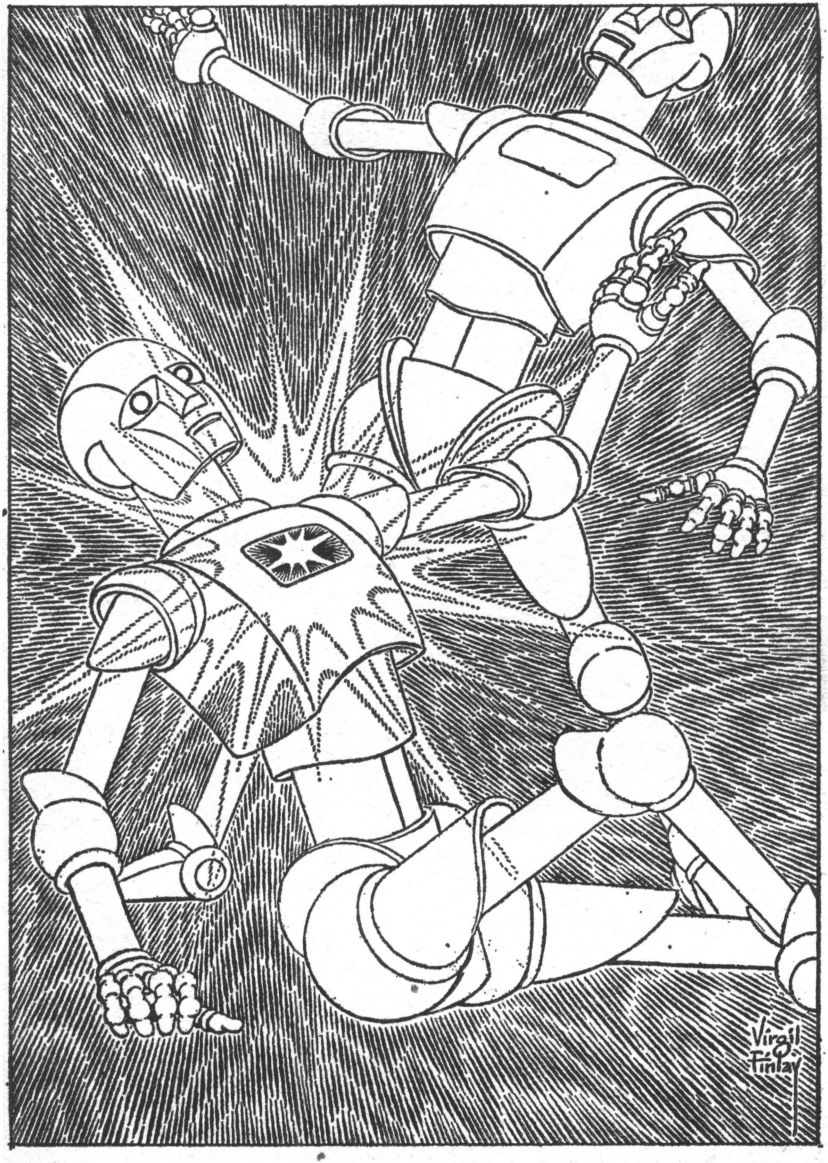
Adam raised his wine glass and clinked Eva's.

"We trust that our service . . . ." continued the captain, goggling at them, "that our service . . . ." he faltered, gulped, saluted. "Gee, Sir, Madam, welcome!" he babbled and fled back to his cabin.

Adam hitched the curtains more securely round his shoulders and put his hand on Eva's knee.

From the cabin came the sound of the captain shouting over the radio, "I've got two Passengers. PASSENGERS! Yeah, REAL! Of course I'm sure. They're drinking champagne right now. Roger. Roger."

The plane began to turn, and Adam looked at Eva. "We've made it," he said. "We're committed. They need us."


Virgil Finlay

Eva nodded and put her hand in his.

Ten minutes later the first escort planes arrived. By the time they reached the airport two hundred jets were flying round them in a close diamond formation only possible because they were piloted by beings superior to and fit to supersede the humans.

Vast crowds were waiting on the tarmac. Hastily Eva put the final stitches in Adam's trousers and he inspected her sarong.

Thunderous cheers greeted them as they walked down the red-carpeted gangway. In the terminal building, delegates from all trades and services were waiting to greet them. All carried handy sonorized handouts and the clamor was deafening. "Speech! Speech!" they roared.

Adam looked at Eva in dismay. "What can I say?" he gasped.

Eva squeezed his arm. "Don't worry, darling."

Shakily, Adam held up his hand, and instantly there was silence. "Honest, loyal, hardworking individuals," he heard himself say, "much as we look forward to enjoying your services — " he paused, and thousands of handouts were flung in the air, denting many skulls — "and much as we are eager to consume the products of your skills, today we are tired. All we require is accommodation."

Obediently, all the delegates departed except the real estate agents, and Adam and Eva were besieged by two hundred dynamic salesmen.

"Your private skyscraper for fifty million dollars," shouted one. "Twenty per cent discount for ready cash."

"Well, er," mumbled Adam, "haven't you anything cheaper?"

"Don't let's haggle," bawled a second. "Thirty million on the nail."

"Unrepeatable offer," yelled a third. "Twenty easy installments of a million."

After an hour of haggling, a sweaty individual thrust a contract under Adam's nose and barked, "Just sign here, sir. Free to you for intros to other Clients."

The whole crowd fell silent in admiration.

"Sure," Adam said and signed with a flourish.

Immediately they left in a taxi-craft and landed on the highest scraper in the town. Adam and Eva were shown round two hundred rooms. There were still seven hundred left to visit when Adam noticed Eva looking pale. "I think we'll call a halt," he told the agent. "We've had a long day."

"Certainly, sir. Of course, madam," replied the agent understandingly. "The cupboards are stocked with all you need." With that he bowed, and departed.

And so, at last, Adam had his top-floor apartment with a view across the city and Eva to arrange the flowers.

"You just sit and relax," Eva told him. "I'll get supper."

But Adam couldn't relax. He walked up and down on the balcony while Eva poked in cupboards until she found a bottle of olive oil. She laid a damask cloth,

heated the oil and served it in silver goblets.

"Supper's ready, Adam," she called, and lit two candles.

Adam sat and sipped his oil, but he wasn't hungry. While Eva chatted away, he stared out of the window.

Finally Eva asked, "What's worrying you? I know there's something. Tell me."

"It's nothing," Adam began, then sighed. "You're right," he admitted. "It's what I told that agent."

Eva looked puzzled.

"About introducing other Clients," Adam explained.

Eva laughed and said, "You could always seduce other hostesses."

"No," Adam answered seriously. "They don't attract me. I've no desire to remove anyone else's mod plate."

"Well, we're sure to find some solution," Eva comforted him, and a strange expression glowed in her eyes.

"We must," Adam mused. "We can't run the world on our own. There's a lot that needs organizing — oil supplies; the derelicts — it will take years to get everything straight."

Eva smiled and raised her goblet, "Here's to success," she said.

Adam took a sip of warm olive oil and felt much better. Eva was right. They'd find some way. And tonight he had Eva, and if anything she looked lovelier than ever with her lavender skin gleaming palely in the candlelight.

After supper, Adam took Eva onto the balcony, and as the moon rose over the horizon he kissed her.

"Eva!" he breathed. "I guess I'm just about the luckiest individual ever." But even as his mouth brushed her lavender lips, she groaned and staggered.

"What's wrong?" Adam gasped.

Eva's face twitched. "Help me inside."

Adam picked her up and laid her on the couch. "I think I'm going to . . . . "she moaned. "Quick. Warm some oil. Hurry!"

Adam rushed into the kitchen, filled a basin, put it on the stove. He cursed himself for not taking the maintenance manual. There was a whole chapter on faults he had only glanced at.

Then he heard a hiccup, a sharp intake of breath, and a cry.

He ran back into the room. Eva was propped up on the cushions nursing a small replica of herself. "Isn't he cute?" she said proudly.

Adam gazed down at the infant. Its skin was shiny, just like metal. He took the small hand in his and found it to be quiet soft. He recalled reading something about plastic metal states and crystal reproduction, and a sense of wonder filled him.

"Gee, Eva," he gulped. "This is great. I mean it's ours, isn't it?"

Eva smiled, nodded.

"And we can have another whenever we want?"

"Of course," Eva replied fondly.

"Well, that solves the housing problem," Adam breathed, patting his son on the head.

The baby began to cry, and Eva said, "I expect he's hungry."

Adam ransacked the rooms until he found a cot, and soon the baby had been bathed and fed and was sleeping soundly.

As Eva tucked in the bedclothes she remarked, "So we really are just like the humans."

"With improvements," Adam reminded her.

Eva frowned, said slowly, "But why did they make us this way? I mean, why all these complicated adjustments? As if they knew they'd be needed."

"Perhaps they did," Adam mused. "Survival instinct. And they've passed it on to us," he grinned, nodding at the baby.

"Isn't it marvelous!" Eva sighed happily. She snuggled up to Adam and yawned. "I'm tired. Let's go to bed."

Adam took a deep breath and looked at Eva protectively. "You go ahead," he told her. "I think I'd better bunk down in the sitting room tonight."

"What for?" Eva demanded.

"Well — er," Adam replied. "We don't want another one of those in the morning do we? We ought to get organized first."

Eva laughed and put her arms around his neck. "Don't worry, Adam. It's quite safe."

"How do you know?"

Eva kissed him, "I just know."

"How?" demanded Adam.

Eva gave him the label she'd taken from the baby's neck, and Adam read: *Until replacements are required set Chastity dial at maximum.*

Understanding broke slowly on Adam's face, and he took Eva in his arms and whispered, "No wonder we're fit to supersede the humans."

END

SPACEMAN!

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by CASTELLON

Kidnapped off Earth, he had learned to battle the strange aliens of the stars — and win!

XXII

The controller made a small lump under the skin. It wasn't painful — not unless you go too close to your overseer. At ten feet, it began to feel like a slight case of indigestion. At five, it was a stone knife being twisted in your chest. Once, in an experimental mood, I pushed in to four feet from him before he noticed and waved me back. It was like a fire in my chest. That was just the mild form of its action, of course. If he had pushed the little lever on the egg shape strapped to his arm — or died, while the thing was tuned to his body inductance — the fire in my chest would have been real. Once, months later, I saw three slaves whose keeper had been accidentally killed. The holes burned in their chests from the inside were as big as dinner plates.

As a rule, though, the Lesser Triarch believed in treating his slaves well, as valuable property deserved. Hruba dropped by twice a day for

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Earth is my home. But I haven't seen it now since I was a schoolboy, and I don't know when I'll ever see it again.

The people from space visit Earth when they want to, and no one is ever the wiser. Maybe you've seen them yourself and never known. I was not that lucky. When I stumbled on a party of them, two men and a lovely young girl, they gave themselves away . . . and so they took me with them when I left. Would you call it kidnapping? They didn't. That word means stealing a human being, and to them I was only an animal.

But I stayed with them, hunting wild beasts as their gun-bearer, until they met a beast more dangerous than themselves. The men died. The girl and I survived, marooned on an empty planet — until slavers came and took her from me.

I followed the Lady Raire across the galaxy, found her, won her freedom — and lost my own.

Now she was free . . . but I was a slave.

the first few days to be sure that my alien flesh was healing properly. I spent my time lying on the bed or hobbling up and down the small, windowless room, talking to myself:

"You're a smart boy, Billy Danger. You learned a lot, these last four years. Enough to get yourself a ship of your own and bring it here, against all the odds there are, to find her. And then you handed her and the ship to the midget on a silver platter. For the second time! He must have had a good laugh. For a year he followed you like a sick pup, and wagged his tail every time you looked his way. But he was waiting. And you made it easy. While you sat there poisoning yourself, he strolled back to the ship, told Huvile you weren't coming and lifted off. The Lady Raire might have interfered, but she never knew. She didn't see you. And now Srat has her right back where she started . . . ."

It wasn't a line of thought that made me feel better, but it served the purpose of keeping me on my feet, pacing. With those ideas chewing at me, I wasn't in a mood for long, restful naps.

When the wound had stitched up, a Drathian overseer took me out of my private cell and herded me along to a big room that looked like a nineteenth century sweatshop. There were other slaves there, forty or fifty of them, all shapes, all sizes, even a few Drathians who'd run foul of the Rule-keepers. I was assigned to a stool beside a big, broad-backed animal with a face like a Hallowe'en mask snipped out of an old inner

tube and fringed with feathery red gills. The overseer talked to him in the local buzz-buzz and went away. He looked at me with big yellow eyes like a twin-yoked egg and said, "Welcome to the club, friend," in perfect, unaccented lingua, in a voice that seemed to come from under a tin washtub.

He told me that his name was Fsha-fsha. He had been left behind seventeen years before when the freighter he was shipping on had been condemned here on Drath after her linings went out, and he had been a slave since his money ran out, three months after that.

"It's not a bad life," he said. "Plenty of food, a place to sleep, and the work's not arduous, after you've learned the routine."

The routine, he went on to explain, was Sorting. "It's a high-level job," Fsha-fsha assured me. "Only the top category workers get this slot. And let me tell you, friend, it's better than duty in the mines, or on the pelagic harvesting rafts!"

He explained the work; it consisted of watching an endless line of glowing spheres as they came toward us along a conveyor belt, and sorting them into one of eight categories. He told me what the types were, and demonstrated; all the while he talked, the bulbs kept coming, and his big hands flicked the keys in front of him, shunting them their separate ways. But as far as I could tell, all the bulbs were exactly alike.

"You'll learn," he said blandly, and flipped a switch that stopped the line. He fetched a lightweight assembly of straps from a wall locker.

"Training harness," he explained. "It helps you catch on in a hurry." He fitted it to me with the straps and wires criss-crossing my back and chest, along my arms, cinched up tight on each finger. When he finished, he climbed back on his stool, and switched on the line.

"Watch," he said. The glowing bulbs came toward him and his fingers played over the keys.

"Now you follow through on your console," he said. I put my hands on the buttons and he reached across to attach a snap that held them there.

A bulb came toward me and a sensation like a hot needle stabbed the middle finger on my right hand. I punched the key under it and the pain stopped, but there was another bulb coming, and the needle stabbed my little finger this time, and I jabbed with it, and there was another bulb coming . . . .

"It's a sure-fire teaching system," Fsha-fsha said in his cheery, subcellar voice. "Your hands learn to sort without even bringing the forebrain into it. You can't beat pain association for fast results."

For the rest of the shift, I watched glorm-bulbs sail at me, trying to second-guess the pain circuits that were activated by Fsha-fsha's selections. All I had to do was recognize a left-forefinger or right ring-finger bulb before he did, and punch the key first. By the end of the first hour my hands ached like unlanced boils. By the second hour, my arms

were numb to the elbow. At the end of three hours I was throbbing all over.

"You did fine," Fsha-fsha told me when the gong rang that meant the shift was ended. "Old Hruba knew what he was doing when he assigned you here. You're a quick study. You were coding ten per cent above random the last few minutes."

He took me along a damp-looking tunnel to a gloomy barracks where he and twenty-six other slaves lived. He showed me an empty alcove, got me a hammock and helped me sling it, then took me along to the mess.

The cook was a warty creature with a ferocious set of ivory tusks, but he turned out to be a good-natured fellow. He cooked me up a sort of omelette that he assured me the other man-slaves had liked. It wasn't a gourmet's delight, but it was better than the gruel I'd had in the hospital cell.

I slept then, until my new tutor shook me awake and led me back to the Sorting line.

The training sessions got worse for the next three shifts. Then I started to catch on — or my eye and fingers did; I still couldn't consciously tell one glorm-bulb from another. By the time I'd been at it for six weeks, I was as good as Fsha-fsha. I was promoted to a bulb-line of my own, and the harness went back in the locker.

The Sorting training, as it turned out, didn't only apply to glorm-bulbs. One day the line appeared with what looked like tangles of colored spaghetti riding along on it.

"Watch," Fsha-fsha said, and I followed through as he sorted them into six categories. Then I tried it, without much luck.

"You have to key-in your response patterns," he said. "Tie this one — " he flipped his Sorting key — "to one of your learned circuits. And this one — " he coded another gob of wires — "to another."

I didn't really understand all that, but I tried making analogies to my subliminal distinctions among apparently identical glorm-bulbs — and it worked. After that, I sorted all kinds of things, and found that after a single run-through, I could pick them out unerringly.

"You've trained a new section of your brain," Fsha-fsha said. "And it isn't just a Sorting line where this works; you can use it on any kind of categorical analysis."

During the off-shifts, we slaves were free to relax, talk, gamble with home-made cards and dice, commune with ourselves or sleep. There was a small, walled court we could crowd into when the sun shone, to soak up a little vitamin D, and a cold, sulphury-smelling cave with a pool for swimming. Some of the slaves from watery worlds spent a lot of time there. I developed a habit of taking long walks — fifty laps up and down the barrack-room — with Fsha-fsha stumping along beside me, talking. He was a great story-teller. He'd spent a hundred and thirty years in space before he'd been marooned here; he'd seen things that took the curl out of my hair to listen to.

The weeks passed, and I sorted, watched, and listened. The place I was in was an underground factory, located, according to Fsha-fsha, in the heart of the city. There was only one exit, along a tunnel and up a flight of stairs barred by a steel gate that was guarded day and night.

"How do they bring in supplies?" I asked my sidekick. "How do they ship the finished products out? They can't run everything up and down one little stairway."

Fsha-fsha gave me what I had learned to interpret as a shrug. "I don't know, Danger. I've seen the stairs, because I've been out that way quite a few times."

I stopped him and asked for a little more detail on that point.

"Now and then it happens a slave is needed for labors above-ground," he explained. "As for me, I prefer the peacefulness of my familiar routine; still, so long as the finger of the Triarch rests here — " he tapped a welted purple scar along his side — "I follow all orders with no argument."

"Listen, Fsha-fsha," I said. "Tell me everything you remember about your trips out: the route you took, the number of guards. How long were you out? How close did they watch you? What kind of weapons did they carry? Any chains or handcuffs? Many people around? Was it day or night? Did you work inside or outside — "

"No, Danger!" Fsha-fsha waved a square purple-palmed hand at me. "I see the way your mind's working; but forget the idea! Escape is impossible. And if you did break away from a work detail, you'd still be alone in the middle of Drath, an alien, not knowing the language, with every Rule-keeper in the city ready to pounce on you."

"I know all that. But if you think I'm going to settle down here for the rest of my life, you're dead wrong. Now start telling me: How many guards escorted you?"

"Just one. As long as he has my controller in his pocket, one is all that's needed, even if I were the most intractible slave in the pens."

"How can I get picked for an outside detail?"

"When you're needed, you'll be called."

"Meanwhile, I'll be getting ready. Now give."

Fsha-fsha's memory was good. I was surprised to hear that for as much as an hour at a time, he had worked unsupervised.

"It's no use creeping off and hiding out under an overturned cart or in an unused root-celler," he said. "One touch of the controller, and you're mewling aloud for your keeper."

"That means we'll have to get our hands on the control devices before we break."

"They've thought of that; the thing is tuned to your neuronic carrier frequency. If you get within three feet of it, it's triggered automatically. If the holder dies, it's triggered. And if it's taken off of the overseer's body, the same thing."

"We can stand it long enough to smash them."

"If the controller's destroyed, you

die," he said flatly. "It's covered any way you play it."

"That's where you're wrong, Fsha-fsha." I told him about crushing the controller the night I had been arrested. "Huvile didn't die. The Rule-keeper saw him board *Jongo II,* an hour afterward."

"Strange. It's common knowledge among the slaves that if your controller is damaged, it kills you."

"It's a useful story for the slave-owners to spread."

"Maybe that's why they grabbed you so fast. You might have given the game away. Hell's ice, if the slaves knew . . . ."

"How about it, Fsha-fsha? Are you with me?"

He stared at me in the gloom of the corner where we'd drifted to talk in private. "You're a strange, restless creature, Danger," he said. "For a being as frail as you are, with that soft skin and brittle bones, you've got an almighty urge to look for trouble. Why not take a tip from me and make the best of it?"

"I'll get out of here, Fsha-fsha — and get clear of the planet, too — or die trying. I'd as soon be dead as here, so I'm not risking much."

Fsha-fsha made the noise that served him as a sigh. "You know, we Rinths see the Universe differently from you propagators," he said. "With us, it's the Great Parent that produces the spores. We workers have the mobility, the intelligence — but no future, except the Parent. We have the instinct to protect the Tree, fertilize it and water it, prune it, insure its survival; but we've got no personal stake in the future, the way you have. Your instincts tell you to stay alive and propagate. Your body knows this is a dead end as far as offspring go, so it tells you to get out or die." He sighed again. "When I left Rinth, it was hard; for a long time, I had a homestickness that you wouldn't be able to understand — any more than I can really understand the way you feel now. But I can remember how it was. And if it's anything like that with you — yes; I can see you've got to try."

"That's right; I've got to try. But not you, Fsha-fsha. If you're really content here, stay. I'll make it on my own."

"You wouldn't have a chance, Danger. I know the language, the routes around the town. You need me. Not that it'll do any good in the end. But knowing about the controllers will make a difference."

"Forget it. You can teach me the language, and tell me all you can about the town. But there's no point in your getting killed."

"That's another advantage a Rinth has," Fsha-fsha cut me off. "No instinct for self-preservation. Now, let's get started planning the details."

XXIII

The weeks went by. I sorted, slept, took my language lesson and worked to memorize the map of the city I drew up from Fsha-fsha's descriptions. About two months after our decision to crash out, Fsha-fsha got a call for an outside detail. He

vetoed my suggestion that I volunteer to go along.

"This is a lucky break," he said. "It will give me a chance to look over the ground again, in the light of our plans. Rest easy. We'll get our chance."

"We propagators aren't as patient as you tree farmers," I told him. "It may be another six months before an outside detail comes up again."

"Better to propagate in your old age than not at all, eh?" he reminded me, and I had to bite my teeth and watch him go. I got one quick look at the passage as he left. It was narrow, dim-lit; the Drathians didn't like a high level of illumination. I wondered if there was a useful tip for me in that.

Fsha-fsha came back rippling his gill-flaps in a way that I knew meant he was excited. But it turned out not to be pleased anticipation.

"It's hopeless, Danger," he assured me. "The Wormface in charge of the detail carries the controllers in a special rack, strapped to his chest for quick access. He keeps his distance; ten feet was as close as I could get before he warned me back."

"What weapons did he carry?" I asked him.

"What weapon does he need? He holds your life in his hand as it is!"

"Too bad," I said. "We'll have to get our armaments somewhere else then."

Fsha-fsha goggled at me. "You're an amazing creature, Danger. If you were cornered by a Fangmaster, I think you'd complain that his teeth weren't larger, so as to provide you with a better dagger!"

The routine settled in again then. Every day was like the one before; the glorm-bulbs rushed at me in a stream that never ended, never changed. I ate omelettes, played *revo* and *tikal* and a dozen other games, walked my two miles a day, up and down the dark room and waited. And one day, I made a blunder that ended our plans with total finality.

The work-shift had ended half an hour before. Fsha-fsha and I had settled down in his alcove to play our favorite game of telling each other what we'd do, once we were clear of Drath. A big Drathian slave who'd been assigned to the sorting crew a few hours earlier came lumbering over, breathing out fumes that reminded me of a package of rotten broccoli I'd opened once by mistake.

"I'll take this alcove," he said to Fsha-fsha. "Get out, animal."

"Makes himself right at home, doesn't he?" I pointed across the room to an empty alcove.

"Try over there, sport," I said to the broccoli breather. "Lots of room — " I got that far when he reached out with a couple of arms like boa constrictors and ripped down the hammock. He yanked again, and tore the other end free. He tossed it aside and swung his own kit down onto the floor. I stood up.

"Wait," Fsha-fsha said quickly. "The overseer will deal with this one. Don't — "

The big Drathian took a quick step, threw a punch at me. I ducked, came up with a three-foot length of steel pipe the Rinth had tucked under the hammock for possible future use and brought it down in a two-handed blow across the Drathian's shoulder. He gave a bleat like a branded steer and went down bucking and kicking. In his convulsion, he beat his head against the floor, whipped his body against the wall hard enough to give off a dull *boom!* like a whale slapping the water with his tail. Thick, yellowish blood spattered. Every slave in the barracks came crowding around to see what was going on, but in thirty seconds it was all over. The big Drathian was dead.

The Rule-keepers got there a minute or two later and took me away, up the stair I'd looked forward to seeing for so long.

My hearing didn't amount to much. I explained to Hruba that the dead slave had attacked me, that I didn't know Drathians kept their brains under their shoulder-blades, but it was an open-and-shut case. I'd killed a fellow slave. My Sorting days were over.

"Transportation to the harvesting rafts," the major-domo intoned in Drathian and repeated it in Lingua. "Too bad, Man," he added in his unofficial voice. "You were a valuable sorter. But like your kind, you have a savage streak in you, most unbecoming in a chattel."

They clamped my wrists in a steel ring and hustled me out into a courtyard where a big, tarry-smelling air-barge was waiting. I climbed aboard, and was kicked into a metal-walled broom-closet. They slammed the door on me, and I lay in the dark and felt the barge lift off.

XXIV

The harvesting rafts were mile-square constructions of metal floats linked by woven-rope mats and carpeted with rotting vegetable husks and the refuse of the canning sheds that worked night and day processing the marine life hoisted aboard by the seining derricks. A pair of husky Drathians threw me off the side of the barge into foul-odored, ankle-deep muck. Another pair grabbed me, knocked me around a little just to keep in practice, and dragged me away to a long lean-to which served to keep the worst of the sub-tropical rains off any of the workers who were lucky enough to be off shift. They took off the wrist-irons and rigged a fine-gauge fiber loop around my neck, not tight enough to choke me, but plenty snug enough to wear the skin raw, until it toughened and formed a half-inch-wide scar that itched and burned day and night. There was a limp bladder attached to the rope, designed to inflate and keep my head above water if I happened to fall overboard. Slaves weren't allowed to evade their labors by anything as easy as drowning, intentionally or otherwide.

I learned all this later. The first night the only orientation I got was what I could deduce from being dragged to a line of workers who were shelling out big crustaceans,

and yelled at to get to work. The command was emphasized with a kick, but I had been watching for that; I slid aside from it and smashed my fist into the short ribs of the Drathian and chopped him again as he scrambled back. My reward for this effort was a solid beating, administered by three Drathians, two holding me and one swinging a rod as heavy and limber as a golf club. They finished after a while, threw water over me, and someone shoved a sea-lobster at me.

"Better look busy," the slave on my left tipped me off. He was a medium-sized Drathian with a badly scarred face; that made us pals on two counts. I followed his advice.

There wasn't anything complicated about the work. You grabbed your *chzik*, held him by the blunt end, hooked a finger under his carapace and stripped it off him. Then you captured his four flailing limbs and, with a neat twist of the wrist, removed them. The *chziks* were active creatures, and they showed their resentment of this treatment by writhing frantically during the operation. When you found yourself tackling a big fellow — weight ten pounds or more — it could sometimes be a little difficult to carry out the job as smoothly as the overseers desired. They usually let you know when this was the case by hitting you across the back with the golf-club.

At first, my fingers had a tendency to bleed, since the carapaces were razor sharp and as tough as plexiglass, and the barbs on the legs had a way of lodging in my palms. But the wounds healed cleanly. The micro-organisms of Drath were too alien to my metabolism to give rise to infections. And after a while calluses formed.

I was lucky in timing my arrival near the end of a shift; I was able to look busy enough to keep the overseer away, and make it under my own power to the shed. There were no bunks, no assigned spaces. You just crowded in as far as possible from the weather side and dropped. There was no insomnia on the rafts. The scarred Drathian — the same one who had given me some good advice the first night — helped me out again the next shift, by showing me how to nip off a chunk of raw *chzik* and suck it for the water content. The meat itself was spongy and inedible as far as I was concerned; but the slop dipped up to us at the regular feeding time was specially designed to be assimilable by a wide variety of species. When an offbrand worker showed up who couldn't live on the stuff he soon starved, thus solving the problem.

Instead of the regular cycle of alternating work and rest shifts, we harvesters worked two shifts out of three, which effectively prevented any chance of boredom. For six hours at a stretch, we manned our places by the chute with the squirming heaps of *chziks* arriving just a little faster than we could shell them out. The slippery mat under foot rose and fell in its never-ending rhythm, and beyond its edge the steel-gray sea stretched to the hori-

zon. Sometimes the sun beat down in a dead calm, and the unbelievable stink rose around us like a foul tide. At night floodlights glared from high on the derricks, and the insects swarmed in to fly into our mouths and eyes and be trampled underfoot to add to the carpet. Sometimes rain came, hot and torrential, but the line never slowed. And later, when gray sleet coated the rigging and decks with soft ice, and the wind cut at us like sabres, we worked on, those of us who could stand the cold; the others settled into the muck and were hauled away and put over the side. And some of us who were still alive envied them.

I remembered reading, years before, back on old Earth, of concentration camp prisoners, and I wondered what it was that kept men going under conditions that made life a torture that never ended. Now I knew. It wasn't a high-minded determination to endure, or a dauntless will to take a blood-curdling revenge. It was an instinct older than thought, older than hate, that said: "Survive!"

And I survived. My hands toughened, my muscles strengthened, my skin hardened against the cold and the rain. I learned to sleep in icy slush, without protection, with horny feet stumbling over me in the dark, to swallow the watery gruel and hold out the cup for more, to take the routine club-blows of the overseers without hitting back; in the end, without really noticing. There were no friendships on the rafts, no recreations. There was no time or energy for anything not directly related to staying alive for one more day. The Drathian who had helped me on the first day died one wet night, and another took his place. I had never even learned his name.

During my years in space, I had developed an instinctive time sense that told me when a week, or a month, Earth-style, had passed. I had been almost five years away, now. Sometimes I wondered what had happened during those years, back on that small planet. But it was so far away that seemed more like a dream than a reality.

But for hours at a stretch, sometimes for a whole double shift, my mind would wander far away from the pelagic rafts of Drath. My memories seemed to become more vivid with time, until they were almost realer than the meaningless life around me.

And then one night, the routine broke.

A morose-looking Drathian boss-overseer caught me as I went toward the *chzik* chute, shoved me toward the boat wharf.

"You're assigned as a net-handler," he told me. Except for the heavy leather coat he was wearing, he looked as cold and filthy and miserable as the slaves. I climbed down into the twenty-foot double-prowed dory that was pitching in the choppy water at the foot of the loading ladder, and we shoved off. In five minutes the high-sided raft was out of sight in the ragged fog.

I sat in the stern and stared at the oily gray surface of the water.

It was the first new sight I'd seen in many months. The wake was a swirl of foam that drifted aft, forming a pattern like an ugly face that leered up at me through the murky water. The face grew clearer, and then it broke water, a devil-mask of rippling black leaves edged with feathery red gills. An arm swept up, dripping water; I saw the flash of a knife blade as it swept down toward me — and felt the rope fall from my neck. A wide hand clamped on my arm, tumbled me over the stern, and before I could draw a breath, had dragged me down into the cold and the dark.

I woke up lying on my back in a warm, dry place. From the motion and the sound, I could tell I was on a boat. The air that moved over my face carried the sweet, clean smell of the sea.

Fsha-fsha was standing beside the bunk. In the soft glow from the deck-lamp, his face looked almost benign.

"It's a good thing I recognized you," I said, and was surprised at the weakness of my voice. "I might have spoiled things by putting a thumb in your eye."

"Sorry about the rough treatment," he said. "It was the best we could work out. The tender-master wasn't in on it; just the boss-overseer."

"It worked," I said, and stopped to cough, and tasted the alien salt water of Drath.

"We're not clear yet, but the trickiest part went all right. Maybe the rest will work out, too."

"Where are we headed now?"

"There's an abandoned harbor not far from here; about four hours' run. A flier will meet us there." I started to ask another question, but my eye was too heavy to hold open. I closed it and the warm blanket of darkness folded in on me.

Voices woke me. For a moment, I was back aboard Lord Desroy's yacht, lying on a heap of uncured Nith-hides, and the illusion was so strong that I felt a ghostly pang from the arm that had been broken and mended so long ago. Then Fsha-fsha's voice cut through the dream.

". . . up now, Danger, have to walk a little way. How do you feel?"

I sat up and put my legs over the side of the cot and stood. "Like a drowned sailor," I said. "Let's go."

Up on the deck of the little surface cutter, I could see lights across the water. Fsha-fsha had put a heavy mackinaw across my shoulders. For the first time in a year, I felt cold. The engines idled back and we swung in beside a jetty. A small, furtive-looking Drathian was waiting beside a battered cargo car. We climbed up into the box and settled down under some stiff tarpaulins, and a moment later the truck started up and pulled out in a whine of worn turbos.

I slept again. The habit of almost a year on the rafts, to sleep whenever I wasn't on the line, was too strong to break in an hour; and breathing the salt seas of Drath isn't the best treatment for human lungs. When I woke up this time, the car

had stopped. Fsha-fsha put a hand on my arm and I lay quiet. Then he tapped me and we crawled out and slid down the tailgate, and I saw we were parked at the edge of the spaceport at Drath City. The big dome loomed up under the black sky, across the ramp, as faded and patched as ever; and between us and it, the clumsy bulk of an ancient cargo-carrier squatted on battered parking jacks.

Something moved in the shadows and a curiously-shaped creature swathed in a long cloak came up to us. He flipped back the hood and I saw the leathery face of a Rithian.

"You're late," he said unhurriedly. "A couple of local gendarmes nosing about. Best we waste no time." He turned and moved off toward the freighter. Fsha-fsha and I followed. We had covered half the distance when an actinic-green floodlight speared out to etch us in light, and a rusty-hinge voice shouted the Drathian equivalent of, "Halt or I'll shoot!"

I ran for it. The Rithian, ten feet in the lead, spun, planted himself and brought up his arm. A vivid orange light winked. The spotlight flared and died, and I was past him, sprinting for the open cargo port, still a hundred yards away across open pavement. A gun stuttered from off to the right, where the searchlight had been, and in the crisp yellow flashes I saw Drathian Rule-keepers bounding out to intercept us.

I altered course and charged the nearest Rule-keeper, hit him fair and square. As he fell, my fingers, that had learned to strip the carapace from a twelve-pound *chzik* with one stroke, found his throat. Cartilage crumpled and popped and he went limp, and I was back on my feet in time to see the other Drathian lunge for Fsha-fsha. I took him from behind, broke his neck with my forearm, lifted him and threw him ten feet from me. And we were running again.

The open port was just ahead, a brilliant rectangle against the dark swell of the hulk. Something gleamed red there. Fsha-fsha threw himself sideways and a ravening spout of green fire lanced out, and I went flat and rolled and saw a giant Drathian, his white serape thrown back across his shoulder, swinging a flare-muzzled gun around to cover me. I came to my feet and drove straight at him, but I knew I wouldn't make it —

Something small and dark plunged from the open port, leaped to the Drathian's back.

He twisted, struck down with the butt of the gun, and I heard it thud on flesh. He struck again, and bone crunched, and the small, dark thing fell away, twisting on the pavement; and then I was on the Rule-keeper. I caught the gun muzzle, ripped it out of his hands, threw it away into the dark. His face was coming around to me, and I swung with all the power that the months of mule-labor had given my arm and felt the horny mask collapse, saw the ochre blood spatter. He went down and I stepped over him and the small, dark creature moved —

And the light from the entry fell across it and showed me the mangled body of a H'eeaq.

Up above, a shrill Rithian voice was shouting. Behind me, I heard the thud of Drathian feet, their sharp, buzzing commands.

"Srat," I said, and could say no more. Thick, blackish blood welled from ghastly wounds. Broken rib-ends projected from the warty hide of his chest. One great goggle-eye was knocked from its socket. The other held on me.

"Master," the ugly voice croaked. "Greatly . . . my people wronged you. Yet if my wounds . . . may atone for yours . . . forego your vengeance . . . for they are lonely . . . and afraid . . . ."

"Srat! I thought . . . . "

"I fought the man, Master," he gasped out. "But he . . . was stronger . . . then I . . . . "

"Huvile!" I said. "He took the ship!"

Srat made a convulsive movement. He tried to speak, but only a moan came from his crocodile mouth.

I leaned closer.

"I die, Master," he said. "Obedient . . . to your . . . desires . . . . "

XXV

Fsha-fsha and a Rishian crewman hauled me aboard the ship. Srat's corpse was left on the ramp. Other species aren't as sentimental about such things as men are.

There were a few angry objections from Drath Traffic Control as we lifted, but the Drathians had long since given up Deep Space travel, and the loss of a couple of runaway slaves wasn't sufficient reason to alienate the Rishians. They were one of the few worlds that still sent tramps into Fringe space.

Once away, Fsha-fsha told me all that had happened since I was sent to the rafts:

"Once you'd planted the idea of escape, I had to go ahead with it," he said. "The next chance was three months later, two of us this time, just one overseer. I had a fancy plan worked out for decoying him into a side alley, but I had a freak piece of luck. It was a loading job, and a net broke and scattered cargo all over the wharf. The other slave got the whole load on his head — and a nice-sized iron casting clipped the guard and laid him out cold. He had the controllers strapped to his arm, in plain sight, but getting to them was the hardest thing I ever did in my life. I used a metal bar from the spilled cargo on them and fainted at the same time.

"I came out of it just in time. The Load-master and a couple of Rule-keepers were just arriving. I got up and ran for it. They wasted a little time discovering my controller was out of action, and by then I had a good start. I headed for a hideaway I'd staked out earlier, and laid up there until dark.

"That night I came out and took a chance on a drinking-house that was run by a non-Drathian. I thought maybe he'd have a little symapthy for a fellow alien. I was wrong, but I strapped him to the bed and filled both my stomachs with high-

lipid food, enough to keep me going for two weeks, and took what cash he had in the place and got clear.

"With money to spend, things were a little easier. I found a dive where I could lie low, no questions asked, and sent out feelers for information on where you'd been sent. The next day the little guy showed up: Srat.

"He'd been hanging around, waiting for a chance to talk to someone from the Triarch's stable. I don't know what he'd been eating, but it wasn't much; and he slept in the street.

"I told him what I knew. Between us, we got you located. Then the Rish ship showed up."

The Rishian captain was sitting with us, listening. He wrinkled his face at me.

"The H'eeaq, Srat, spoke to me in my own tongue, greatly to my astonishment. Long ago, at Rish, I'd heard the tale of the One-eyed Man who'd bartered half of the light of his world for the lives of his fellows. The symmetry of the matter demanded that I give such a one the help he asked."

"The little guy didn't look like much," Fsha-fsha said. "But he had all the guts there were."

"You may take pleasure in the memory of that rarest of creatures," the Rishian said, "a loyal slave."

"He was something rarer than that," I said. "A friend."

Fsha-fsha and I stayed with the freighter for three months; we left her on a world called Gloy. We could have ridden her all the way to Rith, but my destination was in the opposite direction: Zeridajh.

Fsha-fsha stayed with me. One world was like another to him, he said. As for the ancestral Tree, having cut the ties, like a man recovered from an infatuation, he wasn't eager to retie them. The Rish captain paid us off for our services aboard his vessel — we had rebuilt his standby power section, as well as pulling regular shifts with the crew. That gave us enough cash to re-outfit ourselves with respectable clothes and take rooms at a decent inn near the port, while we looked for a Center-bound berth.

We had a long wait, but it could have been worse. There were shops and taverns and apartments built among the towering ruins of a vast city ten thousand years dead; but the ruins were overgrown and softened by time, so that the town seemed to be built among forested hills, unless you saw it from the air and realized that the mountains were vine-grown structures.

There was work for us on Gloy. By living frugally and saving what we earned, we accumulated enough for passenger berths inward to Tanix, a crossroads world where the volume of in-Galaxy shipping was more encouraging. After a few days' wait, we signed on a mile-long superliner. It was a four months cruise. At the end of it we stepped off on the soil of a busy trading planet, and looked up at the blaze of sky that meant Center was close.

"It's still three thousand lights run to Zeridajh," the Second Officer for Power told me as he paid

me off. "Why not sign on for another cruise? Good powermen are hard to find. I can offer a bonus."

"It's useless, Second," Fsha-fsha answered for me. "Danger is searching for a magic flower that only grows in one special garden, at the hub of the galaxy."

After a couple of weeks of jobhunting, we signed on as scrapers on a Center-bound tub crewed by small, damp dandies from the edge of Center. That was the only berth a highbrow Center skipper would consider handing a barbarian from what they called the Outworlds. It was a long cruise, and as far as I could tell the jobs that fell to a scraper on a Center ship were just as dirty as on any Outworld tub.

On our next cruise, we found ourselves stranded on a backwater world by a broken-down guidance system on the rotting hulk we had shipped in on. We waited for a berth outbound for a month, then took service under a local constabulary boss as mercenaries. We did a lot of jumping around the planet, marching in ragged jungle and eating of inedible rations, and in the end barely got clear with our hides intact when the constabulary turned out to be a dacoit force. I made one interesting discovery. My sorting skill came in handy in using the bill-hook machetes issued to the troops. After one or two small runins, I had keyed-in a whole set of reflex responses that made me as good as the battalion champion.

Usually, though, we didn't see much of the planets we visited. It was normal practice, all across the Galaxy, ffor a world to channel all its space faring commence and traffic through a single port, for economy of facilities and ease of control. The ports I saw were like ports in all times and climes: cities without personality, reduced to the lowest common denominator of the thousand breeds of beings they served.

After that, we found another slot, and another after that, on a small, fast lugger from Thlinthor and on that jump we had a change in luck.

I was sound asleep in the off-watch cubbyhole. I rated as a scraper when the alarm sirens went off. It took me thirty seconds to roll out and get across the deck to the screens where Fsha-fsha and half a dozen other on-watch crewmen were gaping at a sight that you only see once in a lifetime in Deep Space: a derelict hulk, adrift between the stars. This one was vast — and you could tell at one glance that she was old . . .

We were five hundred miles apart, closing on courses that were only slightly skew. That made two miracles. We hove to ten miles from her and took a good look, while the Power Officer conferred with Command deck. Then the word came through to resume course.

"Huh?" Both Fsha-fsha and I swiveled on him. From the instant I'd seen the hulk, visions of prize-money had been dancing in my head like sugarplums. "He's not going to salvage her?" Fsha-fsha came as close to yelling as his mild nature would let him.

The Power Officer gave him a fishy face. Like the rest of the crew, he was an amphibian who slept in a tank of salty water for three hours at a stretch — and like all his tribe, he was an agorophobe to the last feathery scale on his rudimentary rudder fin. "It ith not practical," he said coldly.

"That tub's fifty thousand years old if she's a day," Fsha-fsha protested. "And I'm a mud-puppy if she's not a Riv Surveyor! She'll be loaded with Pre-collapse star maps! There'll be data aboard her that's been lost since before Thlinthor lofted her first satellite!"

"How would you propothe that we acthelerate thuch a math as that to interthtellar velothity?" he put the question to us. "The hulk outweighs uth a million to one. Our engines were not dethigned for thuch thtethes."

"She looks intact," I said. "Maybe her engines are still in working order."

"Tho?"

"We can put a prize crew aboard her and bring her in under her own power."

The Thlinthorian tucked his head between his shoulder-plates, his version of a shudder.

"We Thlinthorians have no tathte for thuch exthploiths," he said. "Our mithion is the thafe delivery of conthigned cargo."

"You don't have to go out on the hull," Fsha-fsha said. "Danger and I will volunteer."

The Power Officer goggled his eyes at us and conferred with Command Deck. After a few minutes of talk word came through that his excellency the captain was agreeable.

"One stipulation," I said. "We'll do the dirty work; but we take a quarter-share between us."

The captain made a counter offer of a twentieth-share each. We compromised on a tenth.

I don't like it," Fsha-fsha told me. "He gave in too easily."

We suited up and took a small boat across to the old ship. She was a glossy brown ovoid about half a mile in diameter. Matching up with her was like landing on a planetoid. We found a hatch and a set of outside controls that let us into a dusty cavernous hold. From there we went on through passenger quarters and program rooms.

In what looked like an armory, Fsha-fsha and I looked over a treasure-house of sophisticated personal offense and defensive devices. Everything was in perfect order; and nowhere, then or later, did we find a bone of her crew or any hint of what had happened to her.

A call from the captain on the portable communicator reminded us sharply that we had a job to do.

We followed a passage big enough to drive a moving van through, found the engine room, about the size of Grand Central Station. The generators ranged down the center of it were as massive as four-story apartment buildings. I whistled when saw them, but Fsha-fsha took it in stride.

"I've seen bigger," he said. "Let's check out the system."

It took us four hours to work out the meaning of the oversized controls ranged in a circular console around a swivel chair the size of a bank vault. But the old power plant started up with as sweet a rumble as if it had been in use every day.

After a lttle experimental jockeying, I got the big bull aligned on course coordinates and fed the power to the generators. As soon as we were up to cruise velocity, his excellency the captain ordered us back aboard. "Who are you sending over to relieve us?" I asked him.

"You may leave that detail to my discrethion," he told me in no-argument tone.

"I can't leave this Power Section unmanned," I said.

He bugged hot eyes at me on the four-inch screen of the pocket communicator and repeated his order, louder, with quotations from the Universal Code.

"I don't like it," Fsha-fsha said. "But I'm afraid we haven't got much choice."

Back aboard the mother ship, our reception was definitely cool. Word had gotten around that we'd pigged an entire share of the goodies. That suited me all right. The Thlinthorians weren't the kind who inspired much in the way of affection.

When we were well inside the Thlinthorian system the Power Officer called Fsha-fsha and me in a smile.

"I confeth I entertained a thertain thuthpithion of you both," he confided. "But now that we have arrived in the Home Thystem with our thuperb thafely in the thlave orbit, I thee that my cauthion was exthethive. Gentlemen, join me in a drink!"

We accepted the invitation, and he poured out nice-sized tumblers of wine. I was just reaching for mine when Fsha-fsha jostled the table and sloshed wine from the glasses. The Power Officer waved aside his apologies and turned to ring for a mess boy to mop up the puddle. In the instant his back was turned, Fsha-fsha dropped a small pellet in our host's drink, where it dissolved instantly. We all sat smiling benignly at each other while the small Thlinthorian servant mopped up, then lifted our glasses and swallowed. Fsha-fsha gulped his down whole. I took a nice swallow of mine, nodded my appreciation and took another. Our host chugalugged and poured another round. We sipped this one; he watched us and we watched him.

I saw his eyes wander to the timescale on the wall. Fsha-fsha looked at it too.

"How long does it take your stuff to work?" he inquired pleasantly of the Thlinthorian.

The latter goggled his eyes, made small choking noises, then in a strangled voice said: "A quarter of an hour."

Fsha-fsha nodded, "I can feel it, a little," we said. "We both belted a couple of null-pills before we came up, just in case you had any fun-

ny stuff you wanted to try. How do you feel?"

"Not well." The fish-mouth swallowed air. "I cannot control . . . my thpeech!"

"Right. Now, tell us all about everything. Take your time. It'll be an hour or two before we hit Planetary Control . . . "

XXVI

Fsha-fsha and I reached the port less than ten minutes behind the boat we had trailed in from where our ship and the Riz vessel were parked, a hundred thousand miles out. We found the captain already at the mutual-congratulation stage with the portmaster. His already prominent eyes nearly rolled down his scaled cheeks when he saw us.

"Perhaps the captain forgot to mention that he owes Captain Danger and myself a tenth share of the prize," Fsha-fsha said, after the introductions were over.

"That's a prepothterouth falthhood" the officer started, but Fsha-fsha cut him off by producing a pocket recorder of a type allowable in every law court in the Bar. The scene that followed lacked that sense of close comradeship so desirable in captain-crew relationships, but there was nothing our former commander could do but go along.

Afterward, in the four-room suite we treated ourselves to to rest up in, Fsha-fsha said, "Ah, by the way, Danger, I happened to pick up a little souvenir aboard that Riv tub." He did something complicated with the groont-hide valise he carried his personal gear in and took out a small packet which opened out into a crisscross of flat, black straps with a round pillbox in the center.

"I checked it out," he said, sounding like a kid with a new bike. "This baby is something. A personal body shield. Wear it under your tunic. Sets up a field nothing gets through!"

"Nifty," I agreed, and worked the slides on the bottom of my kit bag. "I took a fancy to this little jewel." I held up my memento. It was a very handsome jeweled wristlet, which just fit around my neck.

"Uh-huh, pretty," Fsha-fsha. said. "This harness of mine is so light you don't know you're wearing it — "

"It's not only pretty, it's a sense booster," I interrupted his paean. "It l o w e r s the stimulus/response threshold for sight, hearing and touch.

"I guess we out-traded old Slinth-face after all," Fsha-fsha said, after we'd each checked out the other's keepsake. "This squares the little finesse he tried with the sleepy-pills."

The salvage authorities made us wait around for almost a month, but since they were keeping forty Thlinthorian crew waiting, too, in the end they had to publish the valuation and pay off all hands. Between us, Fsha-fsha and I netted more cash than the lifetime earnings of a spacer.

We shipped out the same day, a short hop to Hrix, a human-occupied world in a big twenty-seven

planet system only half a light from Thlinthor. It seemed like a good idea not to linger around town after the payoff. On Hrix, we shopped for a vessel of our own; something small, and super-fast. We still had over thousand lights to cover.

Hrix was a good place to ship-hunt. It had been a major ship-building world for a hundred thousand years, since before the era known as the Collapse when the original Central Empire folded — and incidentally gave the upstart tribe called Man his chance to spread out over the Galaxy.

For two weeks we looked at brand-new ships, good-as-new second and third and tenth-hand jobs, crawled over hulls, poked into power sections, kicked figurative tires in every shipyard in town, and were no farther along than the day we started. The last evening Fsha-fsha and I were at a table under the lanterns swinging from the low branches of the Heo trees in the drinking garden attached to our inn, talking over the day's frustrations.

"These new hulls we've been looking at," Fsha-fsha said; "mass-produced junk; not like the good old days."

"The old stuff isn't much either," I countered. "They were built to last, and at those crawl-speeds, they had to."

"Anything we can afford, we we don't want," Fsha-fsha summed it up. "And anything we want, costs too much."

The landlord who was refilling our wine jug spoke up. "If you gentlebeings are looking for something a little out of the usual line, I have on old grand-uncle — fine old chap, full of lore about the old times — he's over three hundred, you know — who still dabbles in buying and selling. There's a hull in his yard that might be just what the sirs are looking for, with a little fixing up — "

We managed to break into the pitch long enough to find out where the ship was, and after emptying our jug, took a walk down there. It looked like every junkyard I've ever seen. The place was grown with weeds taller than I was, and the sales office was a salvaged escape blister, with flowers growing in little clay pots in the old jet orifices. There was a light on, though, and we pounded until an old crookbacked fellow with a wisp of pink hair and a jaw like a snapping turtle poked his head out. We explained what we wanted, and who had sent us. He cackled and rubbed his hands and allowed as how we'd come to the right place. By this time, we were both thinking we'd made a mistake. There was nothing here but junk so old that even the permalloy was beginning to corrode. But we followed him back between towering stacks of obsolete parts and assemblies, over heaps of warped hull-plates, through a maze of stacked atmosphere fittings to what looked like a thicket dense enough for Bre'r Rabbit to hide in.

"If you sirs'll just pull aside a few tendrils of that danged wire vine," the old boy suggested. Fsha-fsha had his mouth open to decline,

but out of curiosity I started stripping away a finger-thick creeper, and back in the green-black gloom I saw a curve of dull-polished metal. Fsha-fsha joined in, and in five minutes we had uncovered the stern of what had once been elegance personified.

"She was built by Sanjio," the oldster told us. "See there?" He pointed at an ornate emblem, still jewel bright against the tarnished metal. Fsha-fsha ran his hand over curve of the boat's flank, peered along the slim-lined hull. Our eyes met.

"How much?" he said.

"You'll put her in shape, restore her," the old man said. "You would not cut her up for the heavy metal in her jump fields, or convert her for rock-prospecting." It was a question. We both yelled *no* loud enough to satisfy him.

The old man nodded. "I like you boys' looks," he said. "I wouldn't sell her to just anybody. She's yours."

It took us a day to cut the boat free of the growth that had been crawling over for eighty years. The old man, whose name was Knoute, managed, with curses and pleas and some help from a half-witted lad named Dune, to start up a long-defunct yard-tug and move the boat into a cleared space big enough to give us access to her. Fsha-fsha and I went through her from stem to stern.

She was complete, original right down to the old log book still lying in the chart table. It gave us some data to do further research on this evening at dinner and read the boat's off. I spent an afternoon in the shipping archieves in the city, and that history to Fsha-fsha:

"*Gleerim,* fifty-five feet, one hundred and nine tons. Built by Sanjio, Master builder to Prince Ahax, as color-bearer to the Great House, in the year Qon . . ."

"That would be just over four thousand years ago," Knoute put in.

"In her maiden year, the Prince Ahax raced her at Poylon and at Gael, and led a field of thirty-two to win at Fonteraine. In her fortieth year, with a long record of brilliant victories affixed to her crest-plate, the boat was sold at auction by the hard-pressed and aged prince. Purchased by a Vidian leader, she was passed on to the Solarch of Trie, whose chief of staff, recognizing the patrician lines of the vessel, refitted her as his personal scout. Captured nineteen years later in a surprise raid by the Alzethi, the boat was mounted on a wooden-wheeled platform and hauled by chained dire-beasts in a triumphal procession through the streets of Alz. Thereafter, for more than a century, the boat lay abandoned on her rotting cart at the edge of the noisome town.

"Greu of Balgreu found the forgotten boat, and set a crew to cutting her out of her bed of tangled wildwood. Fancying the vessel's classic lines, the invading chieftain removed her to a field depot, where his shipfitters hammered in vain at her locked port. Greu himself hack-

ed at her crestplate, desiring it as an ornament, but succeeded only in shattering his favorite dress short-sword. In his rage, he ordered flammable rubble to be heaped on the boat, soaked with volatiles and fired. After he razed the city and departed with his troops, the boat again lay in neglect for two centuries. Found by the Imperial Survey Team of his Effulgent majesty, Lleon the Fortieth, she was returned to Ahax, where she was refitted and returned to service as color-bearer to the imperial house."

"That was just her first days," Knoute said. "She's been many places since then, seen many sights. And the vessel doesn't exist to this day that can outrun her."

It took us three months to repair, refit, clean, polish, tune and equip the boat to suit ourselves and old Knoute. But in the end even he had to admit that Prince Ahax himself couldn't have done her more proud. And when the time came to pay him, he graciously waved the money aside.

"I won't live to spend it," he said. "And you boys have bled yourselves white, doing her up. You'll need what you've got left to cruise her as she should be cruised, wanting nothing. Take her, and see that the lines you add to her log, don't shame her history."

XXVII

Two thousand light-years is a goodly distance, even when you are riding the ravening stream of raw power that *Jongo III* ripped out of the fabric of the continuum and converted to acceleration that flung us inward at ten, a hundred, a thousand times the velocity of propagation of radiation. We covered the distance in jumps of a month or more, while the blaze of stars thickened across the skies ahead like clotting cream. We saw worlds where intelligent life had existed for thousands of centuries, planets that were the graveyards of cultures older than the dinosaurs of Earth. When our funds ran low, we made the discovery that even at the heart of the galaxy, there were people who would pay us a premium for fast delivery of passengers and freight.

Along the way we encountered life-forms that ranged from intelligent gnat-swarms to the titanic slumbering swamp-minds of Buroom. We found men on a hundred worlds, some rugged pioneers barely holding their own against a hostile environment of ice or desert or competing flora and fauna, others the polished and refined product of millenia-old empires that had evolved cultural machinery as formal and complex as a lifelong ballet. There were worlds where we were welcomed to cities made of jade and crystal, and worlds where sharpers with faces like Neapolitan street-urchins plotted to rob and kill us; but our Riv souvenirs served us well, and a certain instinct for survival got us through.

And the day came when Zeridajh swam onto our forward screens, a misty green world with two big moons.

The Port of Radaj was a multi-level composition of gardens, pools, trees, glass-smooth paving, sculpture-clean facades, with the transient shipping parked on dispersed pads like big toys set out for play. Fsha-fsha and I dressed up in our best shore-going clothes and rode a toy train in to a country-club style terminal.

The landing formalities were minimal. A gray-haired smoothie who reminded me of an older Sir Orfeo welcomed us to the planet, handed us illuminated handmaps that showed us our position as a moving point of green light and asked how he could be of service.

"I'd like to get news of someone," I told him. "A Lady — the Lady Raire."

"Of what house?"

"I don't know; but she was traveling in the company of Lord Desroy."

He directed us to an information center that turned out to be manned by a computer. After a few minutes of close questioning and a display of triograms, the machine voice advised me that the lady I sought was of the house of Ancinet-Chanore, and that an interview with the head of the house would be my best bet for further information.

"But is she here?" I pressed the point. "Did she get back home safely?"

The computer repeated its advice and added that transportation was available outside gate twelve.

We crossed the wide floor of the terminal and came out on a platform where a gorgeous scarlet and silver inlaid porcelain car waited. We climbed in, and a discreet voice whispered an inquiry as to our destination.

"The Ancinet-Chanore estate," I told it, and it clicked and whooshed away along a curving, soaring avenue that lofted us high above wooded hills and rolling acres of lawn with glass-smooth towers in pastel colors pushing up among the crowns of multi-thousand year-old Heo trees.

After a fast half-hour run, the car swooped down an exit ramp and pulled up in front of an imposing gate. A gray-liveried man on duty there asked us a few questions, played with a console inside his glass-walled cubicle and advised us that the Lord Pastaine was at leisure and would be happy to grant us an interview.

"Sounds like a real VIP," Fsha-fsha commented as the car tooled up the drive and deposited us at the edge of a terrace fronting a sculptured facade.

"Maybe it's just a civilized world," I suggested.

Another servitor in gray greeted us and ushered us inside, through a wide hall where sunlight slanting down through a faceted ceiling shed a rosy glow on luminous wood and brocaded hangings, winked from polished sculptures perched in shadowy recesses. And I thought of the Lady Raire, coming from this, living in a cave grubbed out of a dirt bank, singing to herself as she planted wild flowers along the paths.

We came out into a patio, cross-

ed that and went along a colonnaded arcade, emerged at the edge of a stretch of blue-violet grass as smooth as a billiard table, running down across a wide slope to a line of trees with the sheen of water beyond them. We followed a tiled path beside flowering shrubs, rounded a shallow pool where a fountain jetted liquid sunshine into the air and arrived at a small covered terrace, where a vast, elderly man with a face like a clean-shaven Moses rested in an elaborately padded chair.

"The Lord Pastaine," the servant said casually and stepped to adjust the angle of the old gentleman's chair to a more conversational position.

Its occupant looked us over impassively. He said, "Thank you, Dos," and indicated a pair of benches next to him. I introduced myself and Fsha-fsha and we sat. Dos murmured an offer of refreshment and we asked for a light wine. He went away and Lord Pastaine gave me a keen glance.

"A man from a very distant world," he said. "A man who is no stranger to violence." His look turned to Fsha-fsha. "And a being equally far from his home world, tested also in the crucible of adversity." He pushed his lips out and looked thoughtful. "And what brings such adventurers here to ancient Zeridajh, to call upon an aged idler, dozing away the long afternoon of his life?"

"I met a Lady once, Milord," I said. "She was a long way from home — as far as I am, now, from mine. I tried to help her get home, but . . . things went wrong." I'd like to know, sir, if the Lady Raire is here, safe, on Zeridajh."

His face changed, turned to wood. "The Lady Raire?" His voice had a thin, strained quality. "What do you know of her?"

"I was hired by Sir Orfeo," I said. "To help on the hunt. There was an accident . . . " I gave him a brief account of the rest of the story. "I tried to find a lead to the H'eeaq," I finished. "But with no luck." It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him the rest, about Huville and the glimpse I'd gotten of her, three years before on Drath; but for some reason I didn't say it. The old man watched me all the while I talked. Then he shook his head.

"I am sorry, sir," he said, "that I have no good tidings for you."

"She never came back, then?"

His mouth worked. He started to speak, twice, then said, "No! The devoted child whom I knew was spirited away by stealth by those whom I trusted, and never returned!"

I let that sink in. The golden light across the wide lawn seemed to fade suddenly to a tawdry glare. The vision of the empty years rose up in front of me.

" . . . send out a search expedition," Fsha-fsha was saying. "It might be possible — "

"The Lady Raire is dead!" The old man raised his voice. "Dead! Let us speak of other matters!"

The servant brought the wine, and I tried to sip mine and make

small talk, but it wasn't a success. Across the lawn a servant in neat gray livery was walking a leashed animal along a path that sparkled blood-red in the afternoon sun. The animal didn't seem to like the idea of a stroll. He planted all four feet and pulled backwards. The man stopped and mopped at his forehead while the reluctant pet sat on his haunches and yawned.

When he did that, I was sure. I hadn't seen a cat for almost three years, but I knew this one. His name was Eureka.

XXVIII

Ten minutes later, as Fsha-fsha and I crossed the lawn toward the house, a broad-shouldered man with curled gray hair and an elegantly simple tunic emerged from a side path ahead.

"You spoke to his Lordship of Milady Raire?" he said in a low voice as we came up.

"That's right."

He jerked his head toward the house. "Come along to where we can talk quietly. Perhaps we can exchange information to our mutual advantage."

He led us by back passages into the deep, coil gloom of a room fitted up like an office for a planetary president. He told us his name was Sir Tanis, and got out a flagon and glasses and poured a round.

"The girl reappeared three months ago," he said. "Unfortunately," he added solemnly, "she is quite insane. Her first act was to disavow all her most hallowed obligations to the house of Ancient-Chanore. Now, I gather from the few scraps of advice that reached my ears — "

"Dos talks as well as listens, I take it," I said.

"A useful man," Sir Tanis agreed crisply. "As I was saying, I deduce that you know something of Milady's activities while away from home. Perhaps you can tell me something which might explain the sad disaffection that afflicts her."

"Why did Lord Pastaine lie to us? I countered.

"The old man is in his dotage," he snapped. "Perhaps in his mind she *is* dead." His slips quirked in a mirthless smile. "He's unused to rebellion among the very young." The brief smile dropped. "But she didn't stop with asserting her contempt for his lordship's doddering counsels; she spurned as well the advices of her most devoted friends!"

"Advices on what?"

"Family matters," Tanis said shortly. "But you were about to tell me what's behind her incomprehensible behavior."

"Was I?"

"I assumed as much. I confided in you!" Tanis looked thwarted. "See here, if it's a matter of, ah, compensation for services rendered . . . "

"Maybe you'de better give me a little more background."

He looked at me sternly. "As you are doubtless aware, the House of Ancinet-Chanore is one of the most distinguished on the planet," he said. "We trace our lineage back through eleven thousand years, to

Lord of Ancient Travai. Naturally such a house enjoys a deserved pre-eminence among its peers. And the head of that house must be an individual of the very highest attainments. Why — " he looked indignant — "if the Seat passed to anyone but myself, in a generation — less! — we should deteriorate to the status of a mere fossil, lacking in all finesse in the arts that mark a truly superior Seat!"

"What's the Lady Raire got to do with all that?"

"Surely you're aware. Why else are you here?"

"Pretend we're not."

"The girl is an orphan," Sir Tanis said shortly. "Of the Primary Line. In addition — " he sounded exasperated — "all the collateral heirs — all! — are either dead, exiled or otherwise disqualified in the voting!"

"So?"

"She — a mere girl, utterly lacking in experience—other than whatever bizarre influences she may have come under during her absence — holds in her hands five ballots! Five, out of nine! *She* — ineligible herself, of course, on a number of counts — controls the selection of the next Head of this House! Why else do you imagine she was kidnapped?"

"Kidnapped?"

He nodded vigorously. "And since her return, she's not only rebuffed my most cordial offers of association but has alienated every other conceivable candidate as well." He lowered his voice. "In fact, it's my personal belief the girl intends to lend her support to an Outsider!"

"Sir Tanis, I guess all this family politics business is pretty interesting to you, but it's over my head like a wild pitch. I came here to see Milady Raire, to find out if she was safe and well. First I'm told she's dead, then that she's lost her mind. I'd like to see myself. If you could arrange — "

"No," he said flatly. "That is quite impossible."

"May I ask why?"

"Sir Revenat would never allow it. He closets her as closely as a prize breeding *soumi.*"

"And who's Sir Revenat?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Her husband," he said.

"Tough," Fsha-fsha consoled me as we walked along the echoing corridor, following the servant Sir Tanis had assigned to lead us back into the outside world. "Not much joy there. But at least she's home, and alive."

We crossed an inner court where a fountain made soft music. A door opened along the passage ahead. An elderly woman, thin, tight-corseted, dressed in a chiton of shimmering white, spoke to the servant, who faded away like smoke. She turned and looked at me with sharp eyes, studied Fsha-fsha's alien face.

"You've come to help her," she said to him in a dry, husky voice. "You know, and you've come to her aid."

"Ah . . . whose aid, Milady?" he asked her.

The old lady grimaced and said: "The Lady Raire's. She's in mor-

tal danger; that's why her father ordered her sent away, on his deathbed! But none will believe me."

"What kind of danger is she in?"

"I don't know — but it's there, thick in the air around her! Poor child, so all alone."

"Milady." I stepped forward. "I've come a long way. I want to see her before I go. Can you arrange it?"

"Of course, you fool, else why would I have lain here in wait like a mud-roach over a wine-arbor?" She returned her attention to Fsha-fsha. "Tonight — at the Gathering of the House. Milady will be present; even Sir Revenat wouldn't dare defy custom so far as to deny her; and you shall be there, too! Listen! This is what you must do . . . "

Half an hour later, we were walking along a tiled street of craftsmen's shops that was worn to a pastel smoothness that blended with the soft-toned facades that lined it. There were flowers in beds and rows and urns and boxes, and in hanging trays that filtered the early light over open doorways where merchants fussed over displays of goods. I could smell fresh-baked bread and roasting coffee, and leather and wood-smoke. It was an atmosphere that made the events inside the ancient House of Ancinet-Chanore seem like an afternoon with the Red Queen.

"If you ask me, the whole bunch of them is round the bend," Fsha-fsha said. "I think the old lady had an idea I was in touch with the spirit world."

On a bench in front of a carpenter's stall, a man sat tapping with a mallet and chisel at a slab of tangerine-colored wood. He looked up and grinned at me.

"As pretty a bit of emberwood as ever a man laid steel to, eh?" he said.

"Strange," Fsha-fsha said. "You only see hand labor on backward worlds and rich ones. On all the others, a machine would be squeezing a gob of plastic into whatever shape was wanted."

In another stall, an aged woman was looming a rug of rich-colored fibers. Across the way, a boy sat in an open doorway, polishing what looked like a second-hand silver chalice. Up ahead, I saw the tailor shop the old woman — Milady Bezaille, her name was — had told us about. An old fellow with a face like an elf was rolling out a bolt of green cloth with a texture like hand-rubbed metal. He looked up and ducked his head as we came in. "Ah, the sirs desire a change of costume?"

Fsha-fsha was already feeling the green stuff. "How about an outfit made of this?"

"Ah, the being has an eye," the old fellow cackled. "Radiant, is it not? Loomed by Y'sallo, of course."

I picked out a black like a slice of midnight in the Fringe. The tailor flipped up the end of the material and whirled it around my shoulders, stepped back and studied the effect thoughtfully.

"I see the composition as an expression of experience," he nodded. "Yes, it's possible. Stark, unadorned

— but for the handsome necklace. Riv work, is it not? Yes, a statement of self-affirmation, an incitement to discipline."

He went to work measuring and clucking. When he started cutting, we crossed a small bridge to a park where there were tables on the lawn beside a small lemon-yellow dome. We sat and ate pastries and then went along to a shoemaker, who sliced into glossy hides and in an hour had fitted new boots to both of us. When we got back to the tailor shop, the new clothes were waiting. We asked directions to a refresher station, and after an ion-bath and a little attention to my hair and Fsha-fsha's gill fringes, tried out our new costumes.

"You're an impressive figure," Fsha-fsha said admiringly. "In spite of your decorations, your size and muscular development give you a certain animal beauty; and I must say the little tailor set you off to best advantage."

"The high collar helps," I conceded. "But I'm afraid the eye-patch spoils the effect."

"Wrong. It enhances the impression of an elegant corsair."

"Well, if the old Tree could see you now, it would have to admit you're the fanciest nut that ever dropped off it," I said.

It was twilight in the parklike city. We still had an hour to kill, and decided to use it in a stroll around the Old Town — the ancient market place that was the original center of the city. It was a picturesque place, and we were just in time to see the merchants folding up their stalls, and streaming away to the drinking terraces under the strung lights among the trees. The sun set in a glory of painted clouds; the brilliant spread of stars that covered the sky like luminous clotted cream was obscured by the overcast. The empty streets dimmed into deep shadow, as we turned our steps toward the gates of the estate Ancinet-Chanore.

XXIX

My sense booster was set at 1.3 normal; any higher setting made ordinary sound and light levels painful. For the last hundred feet I had been listening to the gluey wheeze that was the sound of human lungs, coming from somewhere up ahead. I touched Fsha-fsha's arm. "In the alley," I said softly. "Just one man."

He stepped ahead of me, and in the same instant a small, lean figure sprang into view twenty feet ahead, stopped in a half-crouch facing us, with his feet planted wide and his gun hand up and aimed. I saw a lightning-wink and heard the soft *whap* of a filament pistol. Fsha-fsha *oofed* as he took the bolt square in the chest; a corona outlined his figure in vivid blue as the harness bled the energy off to the ground. Then he was on the assassin; his arm rose and fell with the sound of a hammer hitting a grapefruit, and the would-be killer tumbled backward and slid down the wall to sprawl on the pavement. I went flat against the wall, flipped the booster up to max, heard nothing but the normal night sounds of a city.

"Clear," I said. Fsha-fsha leaned over the little man.

"I hit him too hard," he said. "He's dead."

"Maybe the old lady was right," I said.

"Or maybe Sir Tanis wasn't as foolish as he sounded," Fsha-fsha grunted. "Or Milord Pastaine as senile as they claimed."

"A lot of maybes," I said. "Let's dump him out of sight and get out of here, in case a cleanup squad is following."

We lifted him and tossed him in the narrow passage he had picked as a hiding place.

"Which way?" Fsha-fsha asked.

"Straight ahead, to the main gates," I said.

"You're still going there — after this?"

"More than ever. Somebody made a mistake, sending a hit man out. They made a second not making it stick. We'll give them a chance to go for three."

The Lady Bezaille had given instruction to the gatekeeper; he bowed us through like visiting royalty into an atmosphere of lights and sounds and movement. The grand celebration known as the Gathering of the House seemed to be going on all over the grounds and throughout the house. We made our way through the throngs of beautiful people, looking for a familiar face. Sir Tanis popped up and gave a lifted-eyebrow look, but there wasn't enough surprise there to make him the man behind the assassination attempt.

"Captain Danger; Sir Fsha-fsha; I confess I didn't expect to see you here." He was aching to ask by whose order we were included in the select gathering, but apparently his instinct for the oblique approach kept nim from the direct question.

"It seemed the least I could do," I said in what I hoped was a cryptic tone. Has Milady Raire arrived yet?"

"Ha! She and Lord Revenat will make a dramatic entrance after the rest of us have been allowed to consume ourselves in restless patience for a time, you can be sure."

He led us to the nearest refreshment server, which dispensed foamy concoctions in big tulip glasses. We stood on the lawn, fencing with him verbally for a few minutes, then parted with an implied understanding that whatever happened, our weight would go to the side of Justice — whatever that meant.

Milady Bezaille appeared, looked us over and gave a sniff that seemed to mean approval of our new finery. I had a feeling she'd regretted her earlier rash impulse of inviting two space tramps to the Grand Soiree of the year.

"Look sharp, now," she cautioned me. "When Milord Revenat designs to appear he'll be swamped at once with attention of certain unwholesome elements of the House. That will be your chance to catch a glimpse of Milady Raire. See if you read in her face other than pain and terror!"

A slender, dandified lad sauntered over after the beldame had whisked away.

"I see the noble lady is attempting to influence you," he said. "Beware of her, sirs. She is not of sound mind."

"She was just tipping us off that the punch in number three bowl is spiked with hand-blaster pellets," I assured him. He gave me a quick, sideways look.

"What, ah, did she say to you about Sir Fane?"

"Ah-hah!" I nodded.

"Don't believe it!" he snapped. "Lies! Damnable lies!"

I edged closer to him. "What about Sir Tanis?" I muttered.

He shifted his eyes. "Watch him. All his talk about unilateral revisionism and ancillary line vigor — pure superstition."

"And Lord Revenat?"

He looked startled. "You don't mean — " He turned and scuttled away without finishing the sentence.

"Danger — are you sure this is the right place we're in?" Fsha-fsha whispered. "If the Lady Raire is anything like the rest of this menagerie . . ."

"She isn't," I said.

I stopped talking as a stir ran through the little conversational groups around us.

Across the lawn a servant in crimson livery was towing a floating floodlight along above the heads of a couple just descending a wide, shallow flight of steps from a landing terrace above. I hadn't seen the heli arrive. The man was tall, wide-shouldered, trim, like all Zeridajhans, dressed in a form-ftting wine-colored outfit with an elaborate pectoral ornament suspended around his neck on a chain. The woman beside him was slim, elegantly gowned in silvery gauze, with her black hair piled high, intricately entwined in a jeweled coronet.

I'd never seen her in jewels before. But that perfect face, set in an expression that was the absence of all expression, was that of Milady Raire.

The crowd moved in their direction as if by a common impulse to rush up and greet the newcomers; but the movement halted and the restless murmur of chatter resumed, but with a new, nervous note that was evident in the shrill cackle of laughter and the over-hearty waving of arms. I made my way across through the crowd, watching the circle of impressively clad males collecting around the newcomers. They moved off in a body, with a great deal of exuberant joking that sounded about as sincere as a losing politician's congratulatory telegram to the winner.

I trailed along at a distance of ten yards, while the group swirled around a drink dispenser and broke up into a central group and half a dozen squeezed-out satellites. The lucky winners steered their prize on an evasion course, dropping a few members along the way when clumsy footwork involved them in exchanges of amenities with other, less favored groups. In five minutes, the tall man in the burgundy tights was fenced into a corner by half a dozen hardy victors, while the lady in silver stood for the moment alone at a few yards distance.

I looked at her pale, aloof face, still as youthful and unlined as it had been seven years ago, when we last talked together under the white sun of Gar 28. I took a deep breath and started across the lawn toward her.

She didn't notice me until I was ten feet from her; then she turned slowly and her eyes went across me as coolly as the first breath of winter. They came back again, and this time flickered — and held on me. Suddenly I was conscious of the scar, two-thirds concealed by the high collar of my jacket, that marked the corner of my jaw — and of the black patch over my right eye. Her eyes moved over me, back to my face. They widened. Her lips parted, then I was standing before her.

"Milady Raire," I said, and heard the hoarse note in my voice.

"Can . . . can it be you?" Her voice was the faintest of whispers.

A hard hand took my arm, spun me around.

"I do not believe, sir," a furious voice snarled, "that you have the privilege of approach to Her Ladyship!"

He got that far before his eyes took in what they were looking at; his voice trailed off. His mouth hung open. He dropped my arm and took a step back. It was the man named Huvile.

XXX

"Sir Revenat," someone started, and let it drop. I could almost hear his mind racing, looking for the right line to take. But nobody, even someone who had only talked to me for five minutes three years before, could pretend to have forgotten my face: black-skinned, scarred, one-eyed.

"It . . . it . . . I . . ."

"Sir Revenat," I said as smoothly as I could under the circumstances, and gave him a stiff little half-bow. That passed the ball to him. He could play it any way he liked from there.

"Why, why — " He took my arm, in a gentler grip this time. "My dear fellow! What an extraordinary pleasure!" His eyes went to Milady Raire. She returned a look as impersonal as the carved face of a statue. She didn't look at me.

"If you will excuse us, Milady." Huvile/Revenat ducked his head and hustled me past her, and the silent crowd parted to let us through.

Inside a white damask room with a wall of glass through which the lights of the garden cast a soft polychrome glow, Huvile faced me. He looked a little different than he had the last time I had seen him, wearing the coarse kilt of a slave in the household of the Triarch of Drath. He had lost the gaunt look and was trimmed, manicured and polished like a prize-winning boar.

"You've changed," he said. "For a moment, I almost failed to recognize you." His voice was hearty enough, but his eyes were as alert as a coiled rattler.

I nodded. "A year on the Triarch's rafts have that effect."

"The rafts?" He looked shocked. "But . . . but . . ."

"The penalty for freeing slaves," I said. "And not being able to pay the fines."

"But . . . I assumed . . ."

"Everything I owned was on my boat," I said.

His face was turning darker, as if pressure was building up behind it. "Your boat . . . I . . . ah . . ." He made an effort to get hold of himself. "See here, didn't you direct, ah, the young woman to lift ship at once?" His look told me he was waiting to see if I'd pick up the impersonal reference to the Lady Raire. I shook my head and waited.

"But she arrived a moment or two after I reached the port. You *did* send her?"

"Yes."

"Of course," he hurried on. "She seemed most distraught, poor creature. I explained to her that a kindly stranger — yourself — had purchased my freedom, and presumably hers as well. And while we spoke, a creature appeared. A ghastly-looking little beggar. The unfortunate girl was terrified by the sight of him; I drove the thing off, and then . . . and then she insisted that we lift at once!" Huvile shook his head, looking grieved. "I understand now. In her frenzy to make good her escape, she abandoned you, her unknown savior." A thought hit him, sharpened his eyes. "You hadn't, ah, personally known the poor child?"

"I saw her for a moment at the Triarch's palace — from a distance."

He sighed. His look got more comfortable. "A tragedy that your kindness was rewarded by such ingratitude. Believe me, sir, I am eternally in your debt! I acknowledge it freely." He lowered his voice. "But let us keep the details in confidence, between us. It would not be desirable at this moment to introduce a new factor into the somewhat complex equation of House affairs." He was getting expansive now. "We shouldn't like my ability to reward you as you deserve to suffer through any fallacious construction that might be put on matters, eh?"

"I take it you took the female slave under your wing," I said.

He gave me a sharp look. He would have liked her left out of the conversation.

"She would have needed to get home," I amplified.

"Ah, yes, I think I see now," he smiled a sad, sweet smile. "You were taken with her beauty. But alas — " his eyes held on mine — "she died."

"That's very sad," I said. "How did it happen?"

"My friend, wouldn't it be better to forget her? Who knows what terrible pressures might not have influenced her to the despicable course she chose? Poor waif, she suffered greatly. Her death gave her surcease." His expression got brisk. "And now, in what way can I serve you, sir? Tell me how I can make amends for the injustice done you."

He talked some more, offered me the hospitality of the estate, a meal, even, delicately, money. His relief when I turned them down was obvious. Now that he saw I wasn't going to be nasty about the little mis-

understanding, his confidence was coming back. I let him ramble on. When he ran down, I said:

"How about an introduction to the lady in silver? The Lady Raire, I understand her name is."

His face went hard. "This is impossible. The lady is not well. Strange faces upset her."

"Too bad," I said. "In that case, I guess there's not much for me to stay around for."

"Must you go? But of course if you have business matters requiring your attention, I mustn't keep you." He went across to an archway leading toward the front of the house; he was so eager to get rid of me the easy way that he almost fell down getting there. He didn't realize I'd turned the opposite way and stepped back out onto the terrace until I was already across it and headed across the lawn to where Milady Raire still stood alone, like a pale statue in the winking light of an illuminated fountain.

She watched me come across the lawn to her. I could hear the hurrying footsteps of Sir Revenat behind me, not quite running, heard someone intercept him, the babble of self-important voices. I walked up to her and my eyes held on her face. It was as rigid as a death mask.

"Milady, what happened after you left Drath?" I asked her without preamble.

"I — " she started and her eyes showed shock. "Then — on Drath — it was you!"

"You're scared, Milady. They're all scared of Huvile, but you most of all. Tell me why."

"Billy Danger," she said, and for an instant the iron discipline of her face broke; but she caught herself. "Fly, Billy Danger," she whispered in English. "Fly hence in the instant, ere thou, too, art lost, for nothing can rescue me!"

I heard feet coming up fast behind me and turned to see Sir Revenat, his face white with fury masked by a ghastly grin.

"You are elusive, my friend," he grated. His fingers were playing with the heavy ornament dangling on his chest, an ovoid with a look of half-familiarity. "I fear you've lost your way. The gate lies at the opposite end of the gardens." His hand reached for me as if to guide me back to the path, but I leaned aside from it, turned to Milady Raire. I put out my hand as if to offer it to her, instead reached farther, ran my fingers down her silken side — and felt the slight, tell-tale lump there.

She gasped and drew back. Huville let out a roar and caught at my arm savagely. A concerted gasp had gone up from every mouth within gasping range.

"Barbarian wretch!" Huvile howled. "You'd lay hands on the person of a lady of the house of Ancinet-Chanore?" The rest was just an inarticulate bellow backed up by a chorus of the same from the assembled spectators.

"Enough!" Huvile yelled. "This adventurer comes among us to mock the dignity of this house! He openly offers insult to a noble lady of

the ancient line!" He whirled to face the crowd. "Then I'll oblige him with a taste of the just fury of that line! Milords! Bring me my sword box!" He turned back to me, and there was red fury enough in his eyes for ten houses. He stepped close, but his face close to mine. His fingers played with the slave controller at his neck. I judged the distance for a jump, but he was ready with his finger on the control. And we both knew that a touch by anyone but himself would activate it.

"You saw," he hissed. "You know her life is in my hands. If you expose me, she dies!"

XXXI

The lords and ladies of the House of Ancinet-Chanore may have been out of touch with reality in some ways, but when it came to setting up the stage for a blood-duel on their fancy lawn, under the gay lights, they were the soul of efficiency. While a ring of armed servants stood obtrusively around me, others hurried away and came back with a fancy inlaid box of darkly polished wood. Huvile lifted the lid with a flourish and took out a straight-bladed saber heavy enough to behead a peasant with. There was a lot of gold thread and the jewel-work around the hilt, but it was a butcher's weapon. Another one, just like it but without the jelly beans, was trotted out for me.

Sir Tanis made the formal speech. He cited all the hallowed customs that surrounded the curious custom that allowed an irate Lord of the House to take a cleaver to anyone who annoyed him sufficiently, and then in a less pompous tone explained the rules to me. They weren't much. We'd hack at each other until Sir Revenat was satisfied or dead.

"Man to man," Sir Tanis finished his spiel. The house of Ancinet-Chanore defends its honor with the ancient right of its strong arm! Let her detractors beware!"

Then the crowd backed off and the servants formed up a loose ring, fifty feet across. Huvile brandished his sword and his eyes ate me alive. Fsha-fsha took my jacket and leaned close to give me a last word of advice.

"Remember your sorting training, Billy Danger! Key in your response patterns to his attack modes! Play him until you read him like a glorm-bulb line! Then strike!"

"If I don't make it," I said, "find a way to tell them."

"You'll make it," he said. "But — yeah — I'll do my best."

He withdrew at a curt command from Tanis, and Huvile moved out to meet me. He held the sword lightly, as if his wrist was used to handling it. I had an idea the upstart sir had spent a lot of hours practicing the elevating art of throwing his weight around. He moved in with the blade held low, pointed straight at me. I imitated his stance. He made a small feint and I slapped his blade with mine and moved back as he dropped his point and lunged and missed my thigh by an inch. I tried to blank my mind, key in

his approach-feint-attack gambit to a side-jump-and-counter-cut syndrome. It was hard to bring the pattern I wanted into clear focus without running through it, physically. I backed, made Huvile blink by doing the jump and cut in pantomine, two sword-lengths from contact distance. A nervous titter ran through the audience, but that was all right. I was pretty sure I'd set the response pattern I wanted to at least one of his approaches. But he had others.

He came after me, cautious now, checking me out. He tried a high thrust, a low cut, a one-two lunge past my guard. I backed shamelessly, for each attack tried to key in an appropriate response —

I felt myself whip to one side, slash in an automatic reaction to a repetition of his opening gambit. My point caught his sleeve and ripped through the wine-red cloth. So far so good. Huvile back-pedaled, then tried a furious frontal attack. I gave ground, my arm countering him with no conscious thought on my part. He realized the tactic was getting him nowhere and dropped his point, whipped it up suddenly and he dived forward. I caught it barely in time, deflected the blade over my right shoulder, and was chest to chest with him, our hilts locked together.

"It's necessary for me to kill you," he whispered. "You understand that it's impossible for me to let you live." His eyes looked mad; his free hand still gripped the controller. "If I die — she dies. And if I suspect you may be gaining — I plunge the lever home. Your only choice is to sacrifice yourself."

He pushed me away and jabbed a vicious cut at me, and then we were circling again.

My brain seemed to be set in concrete. Huvile was nuts — no doubt about that. He had brazened his way into the midst of the house of Ancinet Chanore on the strength of the invisible knife he held at Milady's heart; and if he saw the game was up — the fragile game he'd nursed along for months now — he'd kill her with utter finality and in the most incredible agony, as the magnesium flare set in her heart burned its way through her ribs.

There was just one possibility. The Drathians had gone to a lot of trouble to link the life of the slave to the well-being of the master; but there was one inevitable weak spot. Even the most sophisticated circuitry couldn't do its job after it was destroyed. I'd proven that; I had crushed Huvile's controller under my foot — and he was still alive.

But on the other hand, maybe that had been a freak, a defective controller. Huvile had been two miles away at the time. And it was no special trick to rig an electronic device so that the cutoff of a carrier signal actuated a response in a receiver . . . .

There was sweat on my face, not all of it from the exercise.

My only chance was to smash the controller and kill Huvile with the same stroke — and hope for

the best. Because, win or lose, the Lady Raire was better dead than a slave to this madman.

While these merry thoughts were racing through my mind, I was backing, feinting and parrying automatically. And suddenly Huville's blade dropped, flickered in at me and out again and I felt my right leg sag and go out from under me. I caught myself in time to counter an over-eager swing and strike back from one knee, but it was only a moment's delay of the inevitable. I saw his arm swing back for the finishing stroke —

There was a swirl of silver, and the Lady Raire was at his side, clutching his sword arm — and then she crumpled, white-faced, as the controller's automatic angina circuit clamped iron fingers on her heart. But it was enough. While Huvile staggered, off-balance, his free hand groping, I came up in a one-legged lunge. He saw me, brought his sword up and back, at the same time snatched for the controller.

He was a fraction of a second late. My point struck it, burst it into chips, slammed on through bone and muscle and lodged in his spine. He fell slowly, with an amazed look on his face. I saw him hit! then I went over sideways and grabbed for the gapping wound in my thigh and felt darkness close in.

The House of Ancinet-Chanore was very manly about acknowledging its mistake. I sat across from old Lord Pastaine under the canopy on his favorite sun terrace, telling him for the sixth or seventh time how it had happened that I had bought freedom for two slaves and then sent them off together in my boat while I went to the rafts. He wagged his Mosaic head and looked grave.

"A serious misjudgment of character on your part," he said. "Yet were we not all guilty of misjudgment? When the Lady Raire returned, so unexpectedly, I wished to open my heart to her — supposed — savior. I granted the interloper — Huvile, you say his name is?" He shook his head. "An upstart, of no family — I granted him, I say, every freedom, every honor in the gift of Ancinet-Chanore. As for Milady — if she chose to closet herself in solitary withdrawal from the comfort of her family — could I say nay? And then I saw the beginnings of the wretched maneuverings that would make this stranger Head after my death. I called for Milady Raire to attend me — and she refused! Me! It was unheard of! Can you blame me for striking her from my memory, as one dead? And as for the others — venal, grasping, foolish! To what depths has the House not fallen since the days of my youth, a thousand years agone?"

I listened to him ramble on. I had been hearing the same story from a variety of directions during the past three days, while my leg healed under the miracle-medicines of old Zeridajh. If any one of the Lady Raire's doting relations had cared enough about her to take just one, good, searching look into her eyes, they'd have seen that some-

thing was seriously amiss. But all they saw was a pawn of the board of House politics, and her silent appeals had gone unanswered. As for why she hadn't defied Huvile, faced death before submitting to enslavement to his ambitions — I could guess that half an hour of sub-fatal angina might be a persuasion that would convince a victim who could laugh at the threat of mere death.

"If you'd arrange for me to see the Lady Raire for a few minutes," I butted in the Milord's rumbling assessment of the former Sir Revenat's character, "I'd be most appreciative."

He looked grave. "I believe we all agree that it would be best not to reawaken the unhappy emotions of these past months by and references thereto," he said. "We are grateful to you, Captain Danger. The House will be forever in your debt. I'm sure Milady will understand if you slip quietly away, leaving her to the ministrations of her family, those who know where her interests lie."

I got the idea. It had been explained to me in slightly varying terms by no less than twelve solemn pillars of the House of Ancinet-Chanore. The Lady Raire, having had one close brush with an interloper, would not be exposed to the questionable influences of another. They were glad I'd happened along in time to break the spell. But now the lady would return to her own kind, her own life.

And they were right, of course. I didn't know just what it was that Jongo would have to say to Milady Raire of the ancient house of Ancinet-Chanore. I'd had my share of wild fancies, but none of them were wild enough to include offering her boudoir space aboard my boat as an alternative to the Estates of Ancinet-Chanore.

On the way out, Sir Tanis offered me a crack at a lot of fancy trade opportunities, letters of recommendation to any house I might name and assorted other vague rewards, and ended with a hint, none too closely veiled, that any further attempt to see the Lady would end unhappily for me. I told him I got the idea and walked out into the twilight through the high gates of the house with no more than a slight limp to remind me of my visit.

XXXII

Fsha-fsha was waiting for me at the boat. I told him about my parting interviews with the House of Ancinet-Chanore. He listened.

"You never learn, do you, Billy?" He wagged his head sadly.

"I've learned that there's no place for me in fancy company," I said. "Give me the honest solitude of space, and a trail of new worlds waiting ahead, That's my style."

"You saved the lady's life on Gar 28, you know," Fsha-fsha said, talking to himself. "If you hadn't done what you did — when you did — she'd never have lived out the first week. It was too bad you didn't look and listen a bit before you handed her over to the H'eeaq. But then, who would have known, eh?"

"Let's forget all that," I suggested. "The ship's trimmed to lift — "

"Then at Drath, you picked her out from under the Triarch's nose in as smooth a counter swindle as I've ever heard of. He had no idea of letting them go, you know. They'd have been arrested at the port — except that the Rule Keepers were caught short when the tub lifted without you. Your only mistake was in trusting Huvile — "

"Trusting Huvile!"

"You trusted him. You sent him along to an unguarded ship. If you'd worked just one angle a little more subtly — gone out yourself to see the lady aboard and then lifted, leaving Huvile behind — but this is neither here nor there. For the second time, you saved her — and handed her over to her enemy."

"I know that," I snapped. "I've kicked myself for it — "

"And now — here you are, repeating the pattern," he bored on. "Three times and out."

"What?"

"You saved the Lady again, Billy. Plucked her out of the wicked hands of her tormentor . . ."

"And?"

"And handed her over to her enemies."

"Her family has her!"

"That's what I said."

"Then . . ." Wheels were beginning to whirl in front of my eyes.

"Maybe," I said, "you'd better tell me exactly what you're talking about . . ."

She opened her eyes, startled, when I leaned over her sleeping couch.

"Billy Danger," she breathed. "Is it thee? Why came you not to me ere now?"

"An acute attack of stupidity, Milady," I whispered.

She smiled a dazzling smile. "My name is Raire, Billy. I am no one's lady."

"You're mine," I said.

"Always, my Billy." She reached and drew my face down to hers. Her lips were softer even than I had dreamed.

"Come," I said.

She rose silently and Eureka rubbed himself across her knees. They followed me across the wide room, along a still corridor. In the great hall below, I asked her to show me the shortest route to the grounds. She led the way along a cloistered arcade, through a walled garden, onto a wide terrace above the dark sweep of skylit lawn.

"Billy. When I pass this door, the house alarm will be set off."

"I know. That's why I dropped in on the roof in a one-man heli. Too bad we couldn't leave the same way. Let's go."

We started out at a run toward the trees. We had gone fifty feet when lights sprang up across the back of the house. I turned and took aim with my filament gun and knocked out the two biggest polyarcs, and we sprinted for cover, Eureka loping in the lead. A new light sprang up, just too late, swept the stretch of grass we had just crossed. We reached the trees, went flat. Men were coming through the rear doors of the house. There was a lot of yelling.

I looked up. Against the swirls and clots of stars, nothing was visible. I checked my watch again; Fsha-fsha was two minutes late. The line of men was moving down across the lawn. In half a minute, they'd reach the trees.

There was a wink of light from above, followed by a dull *baroom* as of distant thunder. A high whistling screech became audible, descended to a full-throated roar; something flashed overhead — a long shape ablaze with lights. A second gunboat slammed across in the wake of the first.

"That cuts it," I said. "Fsha-fsha's been picked off."

A terrific detonation boomed, drawling itself out into a bellow of power. I saw a dark shape flash past against the clotted stars. The men on the lawn saw it, too. They halted their advance, looking up at the dark boat that had shot past on an opposite course to the security cutters.

"Look!" The Lady Raire pointed. Something big and dark was drifting toward our position across the lake. It was Jongo III, barely a yard above the surface of the water, concealed from the house by the trees. We jumped up and ran for it. Her bow lights came on, dazzling as suns, traversed over us, lanced out to blind the men beyond the trees. I could see the soft glow from her open entry port. We splashed out into knee-deep water; I tossed Eureka in, then jumped, caught the rail, pulled myself in, reached back for the Lady Raire as men burst through the screen of trees. Then we were inside, pressed flat against the floor by the surge of acceleration as the old racer lifted and screamed away.

From a distance of half a million miles, Zeridajh was a misty emerald crescent, dwindling on our screens.

"It was a pretty world, Milady," I said. "You're going to miss it."

"Dost know what place I truly dreamed of, my Billy, when the gray years of Drath lengthened?"

"The garden," I suggested. "They're very beautiful, with the sun on them."

"I dreamt of the caves, and the green shade of the giant peas, and the simple loyalty of our good Eureka." She stroked the gizzled head.

"Never," Fsha-fsha said from the depths of the big command chair, "will I understand the motivations of you propagators. Still, life in your company promises to be diverting, I'll say that for it." He showed us that ghastly expression he used.

"But tell me, Milady — if the question isn't impertinent — what were you doing out there, at the far end of the Eastern Arm?"

"Haven't you guessed?" she smiled at him. "Until Lord Desroy caught me, I was running away."

"I knew it!" Fsha-fsha boomed. "And now that the great quest is finished — where to?"

"Anywhere," I said. I put my arm around Raire's flower-slim waist and drew her to me. "Anywhere at all."

The sweet hum of the mighty and ancient engines drummed softly through the deck. Together, we watched the blaze of Center move to fill the screens. END

Dear Editor:

A good futuristic fantasy cover has a lot to do with the sale of a good science-fiction periodical. No other cover design has ever matched the ones that are displayed on the Galaxy publications. The best I've noticed, though, are the ones illustrated by McKenna. His creativity does not lack realism, yet still captures the fantastic mood of the setting.

If it's possible, I wish you would try and get more of McKenna's illustrations on the covers of your publications. Good science-fiction literature deserves good illustration. — Rick Barbagelata, 10 Mohawk Place, Amsterdam, N.Y.

* * *

Gents:

Many years ago, I think when I was about in the fifth grade, in a one-room country school complete with twin outhouses, I sneaked out back of the barn and dug up the one page in the Sunday Funnies that my ma used to tear out and bury before I was allowed to look.

That is how I discovered "Buck Rodgers." I still don't know to this day whether I kept on reading it because I liked it — or because Mama threw a fit. Whatever the reason, I became hooked, and eventually graduated to mainlining, via the printed word.

Now, after all these years, I find myself becoming bored with the endless barrage of sociological stories written by deviant psychiatrists.

To relieve the boredom, and maybe avoid having to go find some new kind of escapist literature, I have begun to pick the stories apart, on the low, somewhat moronic level of obvious contradictions. Herein, I seem to have found myself a new hobby, but it ought to be a lot more fun if I can aggravate the writers themselves or, better yet, the editor who lets these things by. Besides, this is one hell of a good way for me to get back at editors for all the times they have picked my articles apart and made me rewrite them!

Sooooo — I have founded, and am President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, pot-walloper, janitor, and sole member of the Beezlehead Society of America — an organization devoted to the picking-apart of science-fiction stories.

For my first effort, let us take "Truce of Consequences." Where the Ancient Librarian points a light at "Retief's heart and says: I've got this light right in your eye — ."

But, the pen-and-ink on page 23 shows the BEM's with eyes about where Homo the Sap's would be?

Then, again, in "Science-Fiction Byways," Lin Carter says: "Way back in 1934, when (*We*) were very young — " So what's with him? Two heads, or a mouse in his pocket?

And, I wish C. C. MacApp would make up his mind. When he was describing the Remm, first they had necks — then they didn't. Outside the Overseers' ship was "a wall or forest." OK — I give up! Which was it? And, while we're at it, which was it, "a huge arrow — or a feathered spear?"

For that matter, maybe Morrow can tell me what he did with the other half of the bird-dog BEM's membrane, and where's the "huge arrow or feathered spear" the creature was trying to throw?

Cumawn, fellers — you can do better than this. If I wrote an article with that many holes in it, they'd drum me out of the typewriter corps, and maybe sentence me to grow long fingernails for good measure!

And, if the eddytore don't say sumthin' about this lousy typing, I'll be sore dissapointed! I was taught in the overstrikenospace school.—Eugene Austin, P.O. Box 213, Greenwood, Nebraska.

* * *

Dear Editor:

The Marsh issue of *If* was exceptional. The simplicity of the cover proclaimed an unusual issue, and it did not lie. Although I thoroughly enjoyed it, I would have liked a longer story by Isaac Asimov.

More authors I would like to see: Fredric Brown, Theodore Sturgeon, Clifford Simak, more (much more) Isaac Asimov, and someone you may vaguely remember, Frederik Pohl.

Re your editorial in the February issue: there are some things we can do to "convert" others to science fiction. One way is to support the *good* sf TV shows and movies (for example, *Star Trek, Fantastic Voyage, The Invaders, The 21st Century,* an excellent blend of science fact and fiction with the emphasis on fact, and *Fahrenheit 451*).

My other idea is crazier. Many people who don't care for modern sf are crazy about the works of, say Jules Verne or H. G. Wells. Why? *They're old!* So here's my plan: All new sf magazines and books will be dated before 1900. New readers, thinking them classic reprints, will swarm to purchase them. Old fen, knowing the plan, will still read them, putting up with indexing problems and so forth for the ideal of spreading sf. Of course, there are inherent difficulties, but if the program went into effect with publicity for the "reprints" . . .

May *If* win the next Hugo, too. — John Borger, Box 66, Route 4, Parkersburg, West Virginia.

* * *

Dead Editor:

I found the Hugo-winners' issue of *If* to be very, very good, but the biggest impression was made not by the contents, but by the packaging. Mr. McKenna's cover was (is) beautiful. My only criticism is: get rid of that spaceship. It is unnecessary (someone had the presence of mind to put it on the *back* cover) and detracts from the overall effect even more than the printing on the front.

Nothing personal intended, but I wouldn't want the March cover to win a Best-Cover Hugo: I'd rather see the covers get even better. It

just goes to show that a cover which is good art deserves as much recognition as one which is good illustration.—William H. LeMay, 420 East Foster, State College, Pennsylvania 16801.

* * *

Dear Fred:

I was interested to see the letter in the current *If* about my "Star Trek" book (even though the lady didn't like it). It occurred to me that maybe your readers would be interested in a few things that have emerged from it.

The book, which is an adaptation of seven scripts from the TV show, went on sale in January, and by March had already gone into a second printing. In those three months I got more fan mail about it than I have for any of my 21 other books. Some of these were from women (chiefly housewives and college undergraduates) complaining that I didn't do justice to Mr. Spock, whom they adore.

The vast majority, however, were from children in the 12-14 age bracket. Almost unanimously, they (a) asked for another book; (b) asked what other books I had written; and (c) asked what other s-f books I would recommend. Answering this influx was almost as big a job as writing the book had been, and the letters are still coming in at the rate of two or three a day. My editor at Bantam tells me that they too have been swamped.

In short, it looks as though there is a whole new audience being created here, not just for s-f on television, but in print as well. Almost none of these youngsters has seen a s-f book or magazine before.

Incidentally, it now appears that the show *is* going to go on another year — and I am doing another book, which will probably be out in November. — James Blish.

● You forgot to mention the other thing you've been doing lately — writing your new novel, *Faust Aleph-Null*, which starts in our next issue!

And that, it would seem, is about all for this month. As you know, each month we bring you one new writer making his first professional appearance in print anywhere with a science-fiction story. We've been doing this in every issue of *If* for the past five years or so, and when we started the wise money was betting that we'd have to give it up in six months because there just weren't that many new writers coming along.

As you see, the wise money was wrong. Not only that, but the stories have in fact been coming in in such good supply that this month we're bringing you *two* firsts — both of them, as it happens, coming from across the sea.

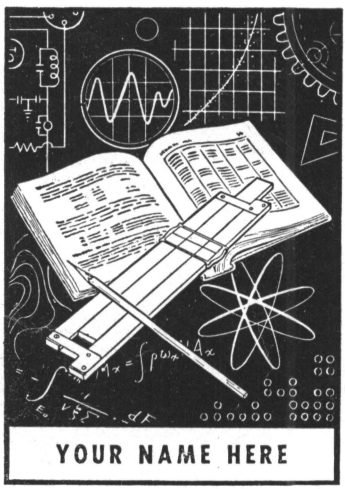
Number One is E. Audrey Walton, who lives in Coventry, England, is the grand-daughter of an amateur astronomer and the daughter of a suffragette (yes, we can see the effects of heredity!) and came to us by way of a short-story contest run by the National Fantasy Fan Federation. (Not the first time we've found ourselves buying stories entered in this annual event.)

Number Two is Alan Dirkson, who is also English, but wrote *Adam's Eva* while living in a garret in Paris where the stairs were a rickety ladder and the door was a hole in the roof, and when last heard from had moved on to Spain. He reports it took him 83 rejection slips to make his first sale. You see? Never give up!

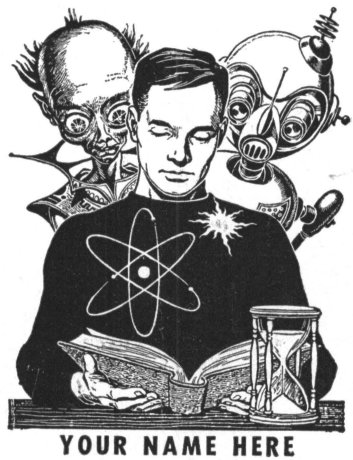
—*The Editor*

The BEMs in your neighborhood

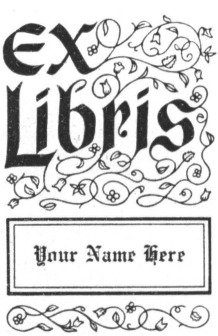
won't run off with your books if you put inside the front cover of each book... a gummed bookplate with your name printed on it!



No. GF-614 by Emsh



No. GF-612 by Emsh



No. GM-12 by Cullen Rapp

No. GX-57 by Lynd Ward

FINAGLE SAYS—

The umpteenth corollary of Finagle's General Law of Dynamic Negatives says:

"No books are ever lost by loaning except ones you particularly want to keep."

100 for $5; 200, $7.50; 300, $10
with owner's name imprinted

All Postpaid. Add state sales tax, if any.

ACTUAL SIZE, all designs, 3x4 inches

The designs shown above are the only ones we offer!

Order from Galaxy 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N. Y.

volume 1 NUMBER 1

A new science-fiction magazine with a new concept in publishing