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by **ANDRE NORTON**

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WORLDS OF



SCIENCE FICTION

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**ALL NEW
STORIES**

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Judy-Lynn Benjamin, Associate Editor

Mavis Fisher, Circulation Director

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WHY THE EARTH ISN'T ROUND

Time was when everyone knew that the Earth was flat — after all, you could look at it and see its flatness for yourself. Then along came Eratosthenes to say it was round, and prove it by measuring the height of the sun at mid-day in two locations. (The see-for-yourself people didn't really believe him, wherefore the world went right back to assuming it was flat for another thousand years or more; but that's only a detail; he was right, and sooner or later Galileo, Giordano Bruno and others came along to confirm what he said.) Then, quite recently as historical time goes, the great geodetic surveys of the last hundred years revealed that it was not a sphere but what we learned in school to call an oblate spheroid.

All of this was reasonably satisfactory and comfortable for most people — once they'd got over the first instinctive horror at concluding our enormous Earth was only a little pebble rolling around a

vast and empty universe, anyway. It all made sense. The Earth spins, right? We know that spinning objects bulge out at their equators if they can — that is, if the centrifugal force generated exceeds the rigidity of the object. So naturally our Earth bulges too —

Only it shouldn't bulge as much as it does.

Unless we're very wrong in some basic assumptions, we know quite accurately how much it should bulge. The radius of the Earth at the equator ought to be about 13.4 miles more than at the poles.

But it isn't exactly. We now have a chance to measure this radius with great precision by tracking the orbits of the hundreds of manmade satellites we've put up . . . and the confounded thing bulges 230 feet more than it ought to.

How much of a difference does that make?

Up at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory a fellow named E. M. Gaposchkin puts it this way:



Do Unseen Powers Direct Our Lives?

ARE the tales of strange human powers false? Can the mysterious feats performed by the mystics of the Orient be explained away as only illusions? Is there an intangible bond with the universe beyond which draws mankind on? Does a mighty Cosmic intelligence from the reaches of space ebb and flow through the deep recesses of the mind, forming a river of wisdom which can carry men and women to the heights of personal achievement?

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... that unmistakable feeling that you have taken the wrong course of action, that you have violated some inner, unexpressed, better judgement? The sudden realization that the silent whisperings of self are cautioning you to keep your own counsel—not to speak words on the tip of your tongue in the presence of another. That something which pushes you forward when you hesitate, or restrains you when you are apt to make a wrong move.

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"The Earth has in fact the shape that it would have in theory if it rotated so fast that a day was $23\frac{1}{2}$ instead of 24 hours long."

Further, Gaposchkin points out, there is some pretty good evidence to believe that at a point in the geological past, perhaps fifty million years ago, Earth's day *was* $23\frac{1}{2}$ hours. Could there be some sort of 50-million-year time lag involved? We don't know; but Gaposchkin adds, "We do know though, that the force which produced that extra oblateness, and is therefore in a sense trapped in it, is about 2×10^{34} ergs . . . enough . . . to raise the temperature of all of the oceans by 720° Fahrenheit, right now."

Interesting? We thought so; and it led us to wonder about something else.

The resistance produced when one object is rubbed against another is called friction; to us it looks mostly like a uniform force, which we measure in terms of the drag of an aircraft wing, the braking distance of a car under varying conditions of speed, road surface, tires, and so on, *etc.*

Careful study has shown us, though, that on the microscopic scale the friction between two solids isn't all that uniform. It appears to operate in a sort of stick-slip progression, with the two surfaces alternately microwelding to each other and breaking free, welding and breaking free again. So what appears to the eye as a uniform deceleration is, to a micro-observer, perhaps better described as a series of jolting shocks, dizzying slides, crunching halts and brief periods of stability.

You might even say that the micro-observer would think himself

involved in tectonic activity . . . a sort of great San Francisco earthquake that goes on and on.

And now we wonder this: Suppose on our macroscopic scale the same sort of stick-slip resistance is happening, at intervals of eons instead of microseconds. Suppose the Earth's crust at some point in time gives up the struggle for rigidity, sighs, relaxes its grip and allows that accumulated 230-foot equatorial hump to assume its proper shape . . . releasing all those 2×10^{34} ergs in the form of heat.

And suppose, right about then or shortly afterward in the macro-time scale, some curious extraterrestrials send a space probe past the Earth to see what it's like. They might even call it Mariner II. . . .

What a devil of time they would have, trying to account for the temperatures and pressures they would find!

Personal note: The other day we made an informal study of stick-slip effects as they apply to automobile brakes on slippery roads. The results were inconclusive, but not altogether unpleasant: we survived.

However we are now, and will be for some months in the future, wearing a handsome plaster cast on the left arm, on which we have inscribed the Eleventh Commandment. ("Keep thy seat belt fastened, chowderhead, if thou wouldst have thy days long on this Earth.")

To those who have sent us expressions of sympathy and so on, our appreciation . . . and apologies. We'd like to answer each letter individually, but — well, have you ever (for instance) tried to change a typewriter ribbon with one hand?

—The Editor

WIZARD'S WORLD

by ANDRE NORTON

Illustrated by MORROW

*The woman was a witch—no surprise
on this mad planet, where wizardry
ruled and death lurked everywhere!*

I

Craike's swollen feet were agony, every breath he drew fought a hot band imprisoning his laboring lungs. He clung weakly to a rough spur of rock in the canyon wall, swayed against it, raking his flesh raw on the stone. That weathered red and yellow rock was no

more unyielding than the murderous wills behind him. And the stab of pain in his calves no less than the pain of their purpose in his dazed mind.

He had been on the run so long, ever since he had left the E-Camp. But until last night — no, two nights ago — when he had given himself away at the gas station, he

had not known what it was to be actually hunted. The will-to-kill which fanned from those on his trail was so intense it shocked his Esper senses, panicking him completely.

Now he was trapped in wild country, and he was city born. Water — Craike flinched at the thought of water. Espers should control their bodies, that was what he had been taught. But there come times when cravings of the flesh triumph over will.

He winced, and the spur grated against his half-naked breast. They had a "hound" on him right enough. And that brain-twisted Esper slave who fawned and served the mob masters would have no difficulty in trailing him straight to any pocket into which he might crawl. A last remnant of rebellion sent Craike reeling on over the gravel of the long-dried stream bed.

Espers had once been respected for their "wild talents," then tolerated warily. Now they were used under guard for slave labor. And the day was coming soon when the fears of the normals would demand their extermination. They had been trying to prepare against that.

First they had worked openly, petitioning to be included in spaceship crews, to be chosen for colonists on the Moon and Mars; then secretly when they realized the norms had no intention of allowing that. Their last hope was flight to the waste spots of the world, those refuse places resulting from the same atomic wars which had

brought about the birth of their kind.

Craike had been smuggled out of an eastern E-Camp provided with a cover, sent to explore the ravaged area about the one-time city of Reno. Only he had broken his cover for the protection of a girl, only to learn, too late, she was bait for an Esper trap. He had driven a stolen speeder until the last drop of fuel was gone, and after that he had kept blindly on, running, until now.

The contact with the Esper "hound" was clear; they must almost be in sight behind. Craike paused. They were not going to take him alive, wring from him knowledge of his people, recondition him into another "hound." There was only one way, he should have known that from the first.

His decision had shaken the "hound." Craike bared teeth in a death's-head grin. Now the mob would speed up. But their quarry had already chosen a part of the canyon wall where he might pull his tired and aching body up from one hold to another. He moved deliberately now, knowing that when he had lost hope, he could throw aside the need for haste. He would be able to accomplish his purpose before they brought a gas rifle to bear on him.

At last he stood on a ledge, the sand and gravel some fifty feet below. For a long moment he rested, steadying himself with both hands braced on the stone. The weird beauty of the desert country

was a pattern of violent color under the afternoon sun. Craike breathed slowly; he had regained a measure of control. There came shouts as they sighted him.

He leaned forward and, as if he were diving into the river which had once run there, he hurled himself outward to the clean death he sought.

Water, water in his mouth! Dazed, he flailed water until his head broke surface. Instinct took over, and he swam, fought for air. The current of the stream pulled him against a boulder collared with froth, and he arched an arm over it, lifting himself, to stare about in stupefied bewilderment.

He was close to one bank of a river. Where the colorful cliff of the canyon had been there now rolled downs thickly covered with green growth. The baking heat of the desert had vanished; there was even a slight chill in the air.

Dumbly Craike left his rock anchorage and paddled ashore, to lie shivering on sand while the sun warmed his battered body. What HAD happened? When he tried to make sense of it, the effort hurt his mind almost as much as had the "hound's" probe.

The Esper Hound! Craike jerked up, old panic stirring. First delicately and then urgently, he cast a thought-peek about him. There was life in plenty. He touched, classified and disregarded the flickers of awareness which mingled in confusion—animals, birds, river dwellers. But nowhere did he meet intelligence approaching his own. A WIZARD'S WORLD

wilderness world without man as far as Esper ability could reach.

Craike relaxed. Something had happened. He was too tired, too drained to speculate as to what. It was enough that he was saved from the death he had sought, that he was HERE instead of THERE.

He got stiffly to his feet. Time was the same, he thought — late afternoon. Shelter, food — he set off along the stream. He found and ate berries spilling from bushes where birds raided before him. Then squatting above a side eddy of the stream, he scooped out a fish, eating the flesh raw.

The land along the river was rising, he could see the beginning of a gorge ahead. Later, when he had climbed those heights, he caught sight through the twilight of the fires. Four of them burning some miles to the southwest, set out in the form of a square!

Craike sent out a thought probe. Yes — men! But an alien touch. This was no hunting mob. And he was drawn to the security of the fires, the camp of men in the dangers of the night. Only, as Esper, he was not one with them but an outlaw. And he dare not risk joining them.

He retraced his path to the river and holed up in a hollow not large enough to be termed a cave. Automatically he probed again for danger. Found nothing, but animal life. He slept at last, drugged by exhaustion of mind and body.

The sky was gray when he roused, swung cramped arms,

stretched. Craike had awakened with the need to know more of that camp. He climbed once again to the vantage point, shut his eyes to the early morning and sent out a seeking.

A camp of men far from home. But they were not hunters. Merchants — traders! Craike located one mind among the rest, read in it the details of a bargain to come. Merchants from another country, a caravan. But a sense of separation grew stronger as the fugitive Esper sorted out thought streams, absorbed scraps of knowledge thirstily. A herd of burden-bearing animals, nowhere any indication of machines. He sucked in a deep breath — he was — he was in another world!

Merchants traversing a wilderness — a wilderness? Though he had been driven into desert the day before, the land through which he had earlier fled could not be termed a wilderness. It was overpopulated because there were too many war-poisoned areas where mankind could not live.

But from these strangers he gained a concept of vast, barren territory broken only by small, sparse, strips of cultivation. Craike hurried. They were breaking camp. And the impression of an unpeopled land they had given him made him want to trail the caravan.

There was trouble! An attack — the caravan animals stampeded. Craike received a startlingly vivid mind picture of a hissing, lizard thing he could not identify. But it was danger on four scaled feet. He

wincing at the fear in those minds ahead. There was a vigor of mental broadcast in these men which amazed him. Now, the lizard thing had been killed. But the pack animals were scattered. It would take hours to find them. The exasperation of the master trader was as strong to Craike as if he stood before the man and heard his outburst of complaint.

The Esper smiled slowly. Here — handed to him by Fate — was his chance to gain the good will of the travelers. Breaking contact with the men, Craike cast around probe webs, as a fisher might cast a net. One panic crazed animal and then another — he touched minds, soothed, brought to bear his training. Within moments he heard the dull thud of hooves on the mossy ground, no longer pounding in a wild gallop. A shaggy mount, neither pony nor horse of his knowledge, but like in ways of each, its dull hide marked with a black stripe running from the root of shaggy mane to the base of its tail, came toward him, nickered questionly. And then fell behind Craike, to be joined by another and another, as the Esper walked on — until he led the full train of runaways.

He met the first of the caravan men within a quarter of a mile and savored the fellow's astonishment at the sight. Yet, after the first surprise the man did not appear too amazed. He was short, dark of skin, a black beard of wiry, tightly curled hair clipped to a



point thrusting out from his chin. Leggings covered his limbs, and he wore a sleeveless jerkin laced with thongs. This was belted by a broad strap gaudy with painted designs, from which hung a cross-hilted sword and a knife almost as long. A peaked cap of silky white fur was drawn far down so that a front flap shaded his eyes, and another, longer strip brushed his shoulders.

"Many thanks, Man of Power —" the words he spoke were in a clicking tongue, but Craike read their meaning mind to mind.

Then, as if puzzled on his closer examination of the Esper, the stranger frowned, his indecision slowly turning hostile.

"Outlaw! Begone, horned one!" The trader made a queer gesture with two fingers. "We pass free from your spells —"

"Be not so quick to pass judgment, Alfric —"

The newcomer was the Master Trader. As his man, he wore leather, but there was a gemmed clasp on his belt. His sword and knife hilt were of precious metal, as was a badge fastened to the fore of his yellow and black fur head gear.

"This one is no local outlaw." The Master stood, feet apart, studying the fugitive Esper as if he were a burden pony offered as a bargain. "Would such use his power for our aid? If he is a horned one — he is unlike any I have seen."

"I am not what you think —" Craike said slowly, fitting his tongue to the others' alien speech.

The Master Trader nodded. "That is true. And you intend us no harm; does not the sun-stone so testify?" His hand went to the badge on his cap. "In this one is no evil, Alfric, rather does he come to us in aid. Have I not spoken the truth to you, stranger from the wastes?"

Craike broadcast good will as strongly as he could. And they must have been somewhat influenced by that.

"I feel — he DOES have the power!" Alfric burst forth.

"He has power," the Master corrected him. "But has he striven to possess our minds as he could do? We are still our own men. No — this is no renegade Black Hood. Come!"

He beckoned to Craike, and the Esper, the animals still behind him, followed on into the camp where the rest of the men seized upon the ponies to adjust their packs.

The Master filled a bowl from the contents of a three-legged pot set in the coals of a dying fire. Craike gulped an excellent and filling stew. When he had done, the Master indicated himself.

"I am Kaluf of the Children of Noe, a far trader and trail master. Is it your will, Man of Power, to travel this road with us?"

Craike nodded. This might all be a wild dream. But he was willing to see it to its end. A day with the caravan, the chance to gather more information from the men here, should give him some inkling as to what had happened to him and where he now was.

Craike's day with the traders became two and then three. Esper talents were accepted by this company matter-of-factly, even asked in aid. And from the travelers he gained a picture of this world which he could not reconcile with his own.

His first impression of a large continent broken by widely separated holdings of a frontier type remained. In addition there was knowledge of a feudal government, petty lordlings holding title to lands over men of lesser birth.

Kaluf and his men had a mild contempt for their customers. Their own homeland lay to the southeast, where, in some coastal cities, they had built up an overseas trade, retaining its cream for their own consumption, peddling the rest in the barbarous hinterland. Craike, his facility in their click speech growing, asked questions which the Master answered freely enough.

"These inland men know no difference between Saludian silk and the weaving of the looms in our own Kormonian quarter." He shrugged in scorn at such ignorance. "Why should we offer Salud when we can get Salud prices for Kormon lengths and the buyer is satisfied? Maybe — if these lords ever finish their private quarrels and live at peace so that there is more travel and they themselves come to visit in Larud or the other cities of the Children of Noe, then shall we not make a profit on lesser goods."

"Do these Lords never try to raid your caravans?"

Kaluf laughed. "They tried that once or twice. Certainly they saw there was the profit in seizing a train and paying nothing. But we purchased trail rights from the Black Hoods, and there was no more trouble. How is it with you, Ka-rak? Have you lords in your land who dare to stand against the power of the Hooded Ones?"

Craike, taking a chance, nodded. And knew he had been right when some reserve in Kaluf vanished.

"That explains much, perhaps even why such a man of power as you should be adrift in the wilderness. But you need not fear in this country, your brothers hold complete rule — "

A colony of Espers! Craike tensed. Had he, through some weird chance, found here the long-hoped-for refuge of his kind. But where was here? His old bewilderment was lost in a shout from the fore of the train.

"The outpost has sighted us and raised the trade banner." Kaluf quickened pace. "Within the hour we'll be at the walls of Sampur. Illif!"

Craike made for the head of the line. Sampur, by the reckoning of the train, was a city of respectable size, the domain of a Lord Ludicar with whom Kaluf had had mutually satisfactory dealings for some time. And the Master anticipated a profitable stay. But the man who had ridden out to greet them was full of news.

Racially he was unlike the traders, taller, longer of arm. His bare chest was a thatch of blond-red hair as thick as a bear's pelt, long braids swung across his shoulders. A leather cap, reinforced with sewn rings of metal was crammed down over his wealth of hair, and he carried a shield slung from his saddle pad. In addition to sword and knife, he nursed a spear in the crook of his arm, from the point of which trailed a banner strip of blue stuff.

"You come in good time, Master. The Hooded Ones have proclaimed a horning, and all the outlanders have gathered as witnesses. This is a good day for your trading, the Cloudy Ones have indeed favored you. But hurry, the Lord Ludicar is now riding in and soon there will be no good place from which to watch — "

Craike fell back. Punishment? An execution? No, not quite that. He wished he dared ask questions. Certainly the picture which had leaped into Kaluf's mind at the mention of "horning" could not be true!

Caution kept the Esper aloof. Sooner or later his alien origin must be noted, though Kaluf had supplied him with a fur cap, leather jerkin, and boots from the caravan surplus.

The ceremony was to take place just outside the main gate of the stockade, which formed the outer rampart of the town. A group of braided, ring-helmed warriors hemmed in a more imposing figure with a feather plume and a blue

cloak, doubtless Lord Ludicar. Thronging at a respectful distance were the townfolk. But they were merely audience; the actors stood apart.

Craike's hands went to his head. The emotion which beat at him from that party brought the metallic taste of fear to his mouth, aroused his own memories. Then he steadied, probed. There was terror there, broadcast from two figures under guard. Just as an impact of Esper power came from the three black-hooded men who walked behind the captives.

He used his own talent carefully, dreading to attract the attention of the men in black. The townsfolk opened an aisle in their ranks, giving free passage to the open moorland and the green stretch of forest not too far away.

Fear — in one of those bound, stumbling prisoners it was abject, the same panic which had hounded Craike into the desert. But, though the other captive had no hope, there was a thick core of defiance, a desperate desire to strike back. And something in Craike arose to answer that.

Other men, wearing black jerkins and no hoods, crowded about the prisoners. When they stepped back Craike saw that the drab clothing of the two had been torn away. Shame, blotting out fear, came from the smaller captive. And there was no mistaking the sex of the curves that white body displayed. A girl, and very young. A violent shake of her head loosened her hair to flow, black and long, clothing her naked-

ness. Craike drew a deep breath as he had before that plunge into the canyon. Moving quickly he crouched behind a bush.

The Black Hoods went about their business with dispatch, each drawing in turn certain designs and lines in the dust of the road until they had created an intricate pattern about the feet of the prisoners.

A chant began in which the townspeople joined. The fear of the male captive was an almost visible cloud. But the outrage and anger of his feminine companion grew in relation to the chant, and Craike could sense her will battling against that of the assembly.

The watching Esper gasped. He could not be seeing what his eyes reported to his brain! The man was down on all fours, his legs and arms stretched, a mist clung to them, changed to red-brown hide. His head lengthened oddly, horns sprouted. No man, but an antlered stag stood there.

And the girl — ?

Her transformation came more slowly. It began and then faded. The power of the Black Hoods held her, fastening on her the form they visualized. She fought. But in the end a white doe sprang down the path to the forest, the stag leaping before her. They whipped past the bush where Craike had gone to earth, and he was able to see through the illusion. Not a red stag and a white doe, but a man and woman running for their lives, yet already knowing in their hearts there was no hope in their flight.

Craike, hardly knowing why he did it or who he could aid, followed, sure that mind touch would provide him with a guide.

He had reached the murky shadow of the trees when a sound rang from the town. At its summoning he missed a step before he realized it was directed against those he trailed and not himself. A hunting horn! So this world also had its hunted and its hunters. More than ever he determined to aid those who fled.

But it was not enough to just run blindly on the track of stag and doe. He lacked weapons. And his wits had not sufficed to save him in his own world. But there he had been conditioned against turning on his hunters, hampered, cruelly designed from birth to accept the quarry role. That was not true here.

Esper power — Craike licked dry lips. Illusions so well done they had almost enthralled him. Could illusion undo what illusion had done? Again the call of the horn, ominous in its clear tone, rang in his ears, set his pulses to pounding. The fear of those who fled was a cord, drawing him on.

But as he trotted among the trees Craike concentrated on his own illusion. It was not a white doe he pursued but the slim, young figure he had seen when they stripped away the clumsy stuff which had cloaked her, before she had shaken loose her hair veil. No doe, but a woman. She was not racing on four hooved feet, but running free on two, her hair blowing be-

hind her. No doe, but a maid!

And in that moment, as he constructed that picture clearly, he contacted her in thought. It was like being dashed by sea-spray, cool, remote, very clean. And, as spray, the contact vanished in an instant, only to return:

"Who are you?"

"One who follows," he answered, holding to his picture of the running girl.

"Follow no more, you have done what was needful?" There was a burst of joy, so overwhelming a release from terror that it halted him. Then the cord between them broke.

Frantically Craike cast about seeking contact. There was only a dead wall. Lost, he put out a hand to the rough bark of the nearest tree. Wood things lurked here, then only did his mind touch. What did he do now?

His decision was made for him. He picked up a wave of panic again — spreading terror. But this was the fear of feathered and furred things. It came to him as ripples might run on a pool.

Fire! He caught the thought distorted by bird and beast mind. Fire which leaped from tree crown to tree crown, cutting a gash across the forest. Craike started on, taking the way west, away from the menace.

Once he called out as a deer flashed by him, only to know in the same moment that this was no illusion but an animal. Small creatures tunnelled through the grass. A dog fox trotted, spared him a measuring gaze from slit eyes.

Birds whirled, and behind them was the scent of smoke.

A mountain of flesh, muscle and fur snarled, reared to face him. But Craike had nothing to fear from any animal. He confronted the great red bear until it whined, shuffled its feet and plodded on. More and more creatures crossed his path or ran beside him for a space.

It was their instinct which brought them, and Craike, to a river. Wolves, red deer, bears, great cats, foxes and all the rest came down to the saving water. A cat spat at the flood, but leaped in to swim. Craike lingered on the bank. The smoke was thicker, more animals broke from the wood to take to the water. But the doe — where was she?

He probed, only to meet that blank. Then a spurt of flame ran up a dead sapling, advance scout of the furnace. He yelped as a floating cinder stung his skin and took to the water. But he did not cross, rather did he swim upstream, hopping to pass the flank of the fire and pick up the missing trail again.

III

Smoke cleared as Craike trod water. He was beyond the path of the fire, but not out of danger. For the current against which he had fought his way beat here through an archway of masonry. Flanking that arch were two squat towers. As an erection it was far more ambitious than anything he had seen during his brief glimpse of Sampur. Yet, as he eyed it more closely, he

could see it was a ruin. There were gaps in the narrow span across the river, a green bush sprouted from the summit of the far tower.

Craike came ashore, winning his way up the steep bank by hand-holds of vine and bush no alert castellan would have allowed to grow. As he reached a terrace of cobbles stippled with bunches of coarse grass, a sweetish scent of decay drew him around the base of the tower to look down at a broad ledge extending into the river. Piled on it were small baskets and bowls, some so rotted that only outlines were visible. Others new and all filled with mouldering food stuffs. But those who left such offerings must have known that the tower was deserted.

Puzzled Craike went back to the building. The stone was undressed, yet the huge blocks which formed its base were fitted together with such precision that he suspected he could not force the thin blade of a pocket knife into any crack. There had been no effort at ornamentation, at any lighting of the impression of sullen, brute force.

Wood, split and insect bored, formed a door. As he put his hand to it Craike discovered the guardian the long-ago owners of the fortress had left in possession. His hands went to his head, the blow he felt might have been physical. Out of the stronghold before him came such a wave of utter terror and dark promise as to force him back. But no farther than the edge of the paved square about the building's foundation.

Grimly he faced that challenge, knowing it for stored emotion and not the weapon of an active will. He had his own defense against such a formless enemy. Breaking a dead branch from a bush, he twisted about it whisks of the sun-bleached grass until he had a torch of sorts. A piece of smoldering tinder blown from the fire gave him a light.

Craike put his shoulder to the powdery remnants of the door, bursting it wide. Light against dark. What lurked there was nourished by dark, fed upon the night fears of his species.

A round room, bare except for some crumbling sticks of wood, a series of steps jutting out from the wall to curl about and vanish above. Craike made no move toward further exploration, holding up the torch, seeking to see the real, not the threat of this place.

Those who had built it possessed Esper talents. And they had used that power for twisted purposes. He read terror and despair trapped here by the castellans' art, horror, an abiding fog of what his race considered evil.

Tentatively Craike began to fight. With the torch he brought light and heat into the dark and cold. Now he struggled to offer peace. Just as he had pictured a girl in flight in place of the doe, so did he now force upon those invisible clouds of stored suffering calm and hope. The gray window slits in the stone were uncurtained to the streaming sunlight.

Those who had set that guardian

had not intended it to hold against an Esper. Once he began the task, Craike found the opposition melting. The terror seeped as if it sank into the floor wave by wave. He stood in a room which smelt of damp and, more faintly, of the rotting food piled below its window slits; but now it was only an empty shell.

Craike was tired, drained by his effort. And he was puzzled. Why had he fought for this? Of what importance to him was the cleansing of a ruined tower?

Though to stay here had certain advantages. It had been erected to control river traffic. Though that did not matter for the present, just now he needed food more —

He went back to the rock of offerings, treading a wary path through the disintegrating stuff. Close to the edge he came upon a clay bowl containing coarsely ground grain and, beside it, a basket of wilted leaves filled with over-ripe berries. He ate in gulps.

Grass made him a matted bed in the tower, and he kindled a fire. As he squatted before its flames, he sent out a questing thought. A big cat drank from the river. Craike shuddered away from that contract with blood lust. A night-hunting bird provided a trace of awareness. There were small rovers and hunters. But nothing human.

Tired as he was Craike could not sleep. There was the restless sensation of some demand about to be made, some task waiting. From time to time he fed the fire. To-

wards morning he dozed, to snap awake. A night creature drinking, a screech overhead. He heard the flutter of wings echo hollowly through the tower.

Beyond — darkness — blank, that curious blank which had fallen between him and the girl. Craike got to his feet eagerly. That blank could be traced.

Outside it was raining, and fog hung in murky bands among the river hollows. The blank spot veered. Craike started after it. The tower pavement became a trace of old road he followed, weaving through the fog.

There was the sour smell of old smoke. Charred wood, black muck clung to his feet. But his guide point was now stationary as the ground rose, studded with outcrops of rock. So Craike came to a mesa jutting up into a steel gray sky.

He hitched his way up by way of a long-ago slide. The rain had stopped, but there was no hint of sun. And he was unprepared for the greeting he met as he topped the lip of a small plateau.

A violent blow on the shoulder whirled him half-way around, and only by a finger's width did he escape a fall. A cry echoed his, and the blank broke. She was there.

Moving slowly, using the same technique he knew to sooth frightened animals, Craike raised himself again. The pain in his shoulder was sharp when he tried to put much weight upon his left arm. But now he saw her clearly.

She sat cross-legged, a boulder at her back, her hair a rippling

cloud of black through which her hands and arms shown starkly white. She had the thin, three-cornered face of a child who has known much harshness; there was no beauty there — the flesh had been too much worn by spirit. Only her eyes, watchful-wary as those of a feline, considered him bleakly. In spite of his beam of good will, she gave him no welcome. And she tossed another stone from hand to hand with the ease of one who had already scored with such a weapon.

"Who are you?" she spoke aloud.

"He who followed you," Craike fingered the bruise wound on his shoulder, not taking his eyes from hers.

"You are no Black Hood." It was a statement not a question. "But you, also, have been horned." Another statement.

Craike nodded. In his own time and place he had indeed been "horned."

Just as her thrown stone had struck without warning, so came her second attack. There was a hiss. Within striking distance a snake flickered a forked tongue.

Craike did not give ground. The snake head expanded, fur ran over it; there were legs, a plume of tail fluffed. A dog fox yapped once at the girl and vanished. Craike read her recoil, the first faint uncertainty.

"You have the power!"

"I have power," he corrected her.

But her attention was no longer his. She was listening to something he could hear with neither ear nor

mind. Then she ran to the edge of the mesa. He followed.

On this side the country was more rolling, and across it now came mounted men moving in and out of mist pools. They rode in silence, and over them was the same blanketing of thought as the girl had used.

Craike glanced about. There were loose stones, and the girl had already proven her marksmanship with such. But they would be no answer to the weapons the others had. Only flight was no solution either.

The girl sobbed once, a broken cry so unlike the iron will she had shown that Craike started. She leaned perilously over the drop, staring down at the horsemen.

Then her hands moved with desperate speed. She tore hairs from her head, twisted and snarled them between her fingers, breathed on them, looped them with a stone for weight, casting the tangled mass out to land before the riders.

The mist curled, took on substance. Where there had been only rock there was now a thicket of thorn, so knotted that no fleshed creature could push through it. The hunters paused, then they rode on again, but now they drove a reeling, naked man, a man kept going by a lashing whip whenever he faltered.

Again the girl sobbed, burying her face in her hands. The wretched captive reached the thorn barrier. Under his touch it melted. He stood there, weaving drunkenly.

A whip sang. He went to his knees under its cut, a trapped animal's wail on the wind. Slowly, with a blind seeking, his hands went out to small stones about him. He gathered them, spread them anew in patterns. The girl had raised her head, watched dry-eyed, but seething with hate and the need to strike back. But she did not move.

Craike dared lay a hand on her narrow shoulder, feeling through her hair the chill of her skin, while the hair itself clung to his fingers as if it had the will to smother and imprison. He tried to pull her away, but he could not move her.

The naked man crouched in the midst of his pattern, and now he chanted, a compelling call the girl could not understand. She wrenched free of Craike's hold. But as she went she spared a thought for the man who had tried to save her. She struck out, her fist landing on the stone bruise. Pain sent him reeling back as she went over the rim of the mesa, her face a mask which no friend nor enemy might read. But there was no resignation in her eyes as she was forced to the meeting below.

IV

By the time Craike reached a vantage point the girl stood in the center of the stone ring. Outside crouched the man, his head on his knees. She looked down at him, no emotion showing on her wan face. Then she dropped her hand on his thatch of wild hair. He jerk-

ed under that touch as he had under the whip which had printed the scarlet weals across his back and loins. But he raised his head, and from his throat came a beast's mournful howl. At her gesture he was quiet, edging closer to her as if seeking some easement of his suffering.

The Black Hood drew in. Craike's probe could make nothing of them. But they could not hide their emotions as well as they concealed their thoughts. And the Esper recoiled from the avid blood lust which lapped at the two by the cliff.

A semicircle of the black jerkined retainers moved too. And the man who had led them lay on the earth now, moaning softly. But the girl faced them, head unbowed. Craike wanted to aid her. Had he time to climb down the cliff? Clenching his teeth against the pain movement brought to his shoulder, the Esper went back, holding a mind shield as a frail protection.

Directly before him now was one of the guards. His mount caught Craike's scent, stirred uneasily, until the quieting thought of the Esper held it steady. Craike had never been forced into such action as he had these past few days; he had no real plan now, it must depend upon chance and fortune.

As if the force of her enemies' wills had slammed her back against the rock, the girl was braced by the cliff wall, a black and white figure.

Mist swirled, took on half substance of a monstrous form, was swept away in an instant. A clump

of dried grass broke into flame, sending the ponies stamping and snorting. It was gone, leaving a black smudge on the earth. Illusions, realities — Craike watched. This was so far beyond his own experience that he could hardly comprehend the lightning moves of mind against mind. But he sensed these others could beat down the girl's resistance at any moment they desired, that her last futile struggles were being relished by those who decreed this as part of her punishment.

And Craike, who had believed that he could never hate more than he had when he had been touched by the fawning "hound" of the mob, was filled with a rage tempered into a chill of steel determination.

The girl went to her knees, still clutching her hair about her, facing her tormenters with her still-held defiance. Now the man who had wrought the magic which had drawn her there crawled, all humanity gone out of him, wriggling on his belly back to his captors.

Two of the guards jerked him up. He hung limp in their hands, his mouth open in an idiot's grin. Callously, as he might tread upon a worm, the nearest Black Hood waved a hand. A metal axe flashed, and there came the dull sound of cracking bone. The guards pitched the body from them so that the bloodied head almost touched the girl.

She writhed, a last frenzied attempt to break the force which pin-

ned her. Without haste the guards advanced. One caught at her hair, pulling it tautly from her head.

Craike shivered. The thrill of her agony reached him. This was what she feared most, fought so long to prevent. If ever he must move now. And that part of his brain which had been feverishly seeking a plan went into action.

Ponies pawed, reared, went wild with panic. One of the Black Hoods swung around to face the terrorized animals. But his own mount struck out with teeth and hooves. Guardsmen shouted, and above their cries arose the shrill squeals of the animals.

Craike stood his ground, keeping the ponies in terror-stricken revolt. The guard who held the handful of hair slashed at the tress with his knife, severing it at a palm's distance away from her head. But in that same moment she moved. The knife leaped free from the man's grasp, while the severed hair twined itself about his hands, binding them until the blade buried itself in his throat; and he went down.

One of the Black Hoods was also finished, tramped into a feebly squirming thing by the ponies. Then from the ground burst a sheet of flame which split into balls, drifting through the air or rolling along the earth.

The Esper wet his lips — that was not his doing! He did not have to feed the panic of the animals now; they were truly mad. The girl was on her feet. Before his thought could reach her she was gone, swallowed up in a mist which arose

to blanket the fire balls. Once more she cut their contact; there was a blank void where she had been.

Now the fog thickened. Through it came one of the ponies, foam dripping from its blunt muzzle. It bore down on Craike, eyes gleaming red through a tangled forelock. With a scream it reared.

Craike's hand grabbed a handful of mane as he leaped, avoiding teeth and hooves. Then, somehow, he gained the pad saddle, locking his fingers in the coarse hair, striving to hold his seat against the bucking enraged beast. It broke into a run, and the Esper plastered himself to the heaving body. For the moment he made no attempt at mind control.

Behind, the Black Hoods came out of their stunned bewilderment. They were questing feverishly, and he had to concentrate on holding his shield against them. A pony fleeing in terror would not excite them; a pony under control would provide them with a target.

Later he could circle about and try to pick up the trail of the witch girl. Flushed with success, Craike was sure he could provide her with a rear guard no Black Hood could pass.

The fog was thick, and the pace of the pony began to slacken. Once or twice it bucked half-heartedly, giving up when it could not dislodge its rider. Craike drew his fingers in slow, soothing sweeps down the sweating curve of its neck.

There were no more trees about, and the unshod hooves pounded on sand. They were in a dried water

course, and Craike did not try to turn from that path. Then his luck ran out.

What he had ignorantly supposed to be a rock ahead, heaved up seven feet or more. A red mouth opened in a great roar. He had believed the bear he had seen fleeing the fire to be a giant, but this one was a nightmare monster.

The pony screamed with an almost human note of despair and whirled. Craike gripped the mane again and tried to mind control the bear. But his surprise had lasted seconds too long. A vast clawed paw struck, ripping across pony hide and human thigh. Then Craike could only cling to the running mount.

How long he was able to keep his seat he never knew. Then he slipped; there was a throb of pain as he struck the ground, to be followed by blackness.

It was dusk when he opened his eyes, fighting agony in his head, his leg. But later there was moonlight. And that silver-white spotlighted a waiting shape. Green slits of eyes regarded him remotely. Dizzily he made contact.

A wolf — hungry — yet with a wariness which recognized in the prone man an enemy. Craike fought for control. The wolf whined, then it arose, its prick ears sharp cut in the moonlight, it's nose questing for the scent of other, less disturbing prey, and it was gone.

Craike edged up against a boulder and sorted out sounds. The rush of water. He moved a paper dry

tongue over cracked lips. Water to drink — to wash his wounds — water!

With a groan Craike worked his way to his feet, holding fast to the top of the rock when his torn leg threatened to buckle under him. The same inner drive which had kept him going through the desert brought him down to the river.

By sunrise he was seeking a shelter, wanting to lie up, as might the wolf, in some secret cave until his wounds healed. All chance of finding the witch girl was lost. But as he crawled along the shingle, leaning on a staff he had found in drift wood, he kept alert for any trace of the Black Hoods.

It was midmorning on the second day that his snail's progress brought him to the river towers. And it took another hour for him to reach the terrace. Gaunt and worn, his empty stomach complaining, he wanted nothing more than to sink down in the nest of grass he had gathered and cease to struggle.

Perhaps he might have done so had not a click-clack of sound from the river put him on the defensive, his staff now a club. But these were not Black Hoods. Farmers, local men bound for the market of Sampur with products of their fields. They had paused, were making a choice among the least appetizing of their wares for a tribute to be offered to the tower demon.

Craike hitched stiffly to a point where he could witness that sacrifice. But when he assessed the contents of their dugout, the heaping basket piled between the pad-

dlers, his hunger took command.

Fob off a demon with a handful of meal and a too-ripe melon would they? With three haunches of cured meat and all that other stuff on board!

Craike voiced a roar which could have done credit to the red bear, a roar which altered into a demand for meat. The paddlers nearly lost control of their crude craft. But one reached for a haunch and threw it blindly on the refuse covered rock, while his companion added a basket of small cakes into the bargain.

"Enough, little men—" Craike's voice boomed hollowly. "You may pass free."

They needed no urging, they did not look at those threatening towers as their paddles bit into the water, adding impetus to the pull of the current.

Craike watched them well out of sight before he made a slow descent to the rock. The effort he was forced to expend warned him that a second such trip might be impossible, and he inched back to the terrace dragging both meat and cakes.

The cured haunch he worried into strips, using his pocket knife. It was tough, not too pleasant to the taste and unsalted. But he found it more appetizing than the cakes of baked meal. With this supply he could afford to lie up and favor his leg.

About the claw rents the flesh was red and puffed. Craike had no dressing but river water and the leaves he had tied over the tears.

Sampur was beyond his power to reach, and to contact men traveling on the river would only bring the Black Hoods.

He lay in his grass nest and tried to sort out the events of the past few days. This was a land in which Esper powers were allowed free range. He had no idea of how he had come here, but it seemed to his feverish mind that he had been granted another chance — one in which the scales of justice were more balanced in his favor. If he could only find the girl, learn from her —

Tentatively, without real hope, he sent out a questing thought. Nothing. He moved impatiently, wrenching his leg, so that his head swam with pain. Throat and mouth were dry. The lap of water sounded in his ears. Water — he was thirsty again. But he could not crawl down slope and up once more. Craike closed his eyes wearily.

V

Craike's memory of the hours which followed thereafter was dim. HAD he seen a demon in the doorway? A slaving wolf? A red bear?

Then the girl sat there, cross-legged as he had seen her on the mesa, her cloak of hair about her. A hand emerged from the cloak to lay wood on the fire. Illusions?

But would an illusion turn to him, put firm, cool fingers upon his wound, somehow driving out by touch the pain and fire which burned there? Would an illusion raise

his head, cradling it against her so that the soft silk of her hair lay against his cheek and throat, urging on him liquid out of a crude bowl? Would an illusion sing softly to herself while she drew a fish-bone comb back and forth through her hair, until the song and the sweep of the comb lulled him into a sleep so deep that no dream walked there?

He awoke, clear headed. Yet that last illusion lingered. For she came from the sun-drenched world without, a bowl of fruit in her hand. For a long moment she stood gazing at him searchingly. But when he tried mind contact, he met that wall. Not unheeding — but a refusal to answer.

Her hair was now braided. But about her face the lock which the guardsman had shorn made an untidy fringe. While around her thin body was a strip of hide, purposefully arranged to mask all femininity.

"So," Craike spoke rustily, "you are real —"

She did not smile. "I am real. You no longer dream with fever."

"Who are you?" He asked the first of his long hoarded questions.

"I am Takya." She added nothing to that.

"You are Takya, and you are a witch —"

"I am Takya, and I have the power." It was an assertion of fact rather than agreement.

She settled in her favorite cross-legged position, selected a fruit from her bowl and examined it with the interest of a housewife

who has shopped for supplies on a limited budget. Then she placed it in his hand before she chose another for herself. He bit into the plumlike globe. If she would only drop her barrier, let him communicate in the way which was fuller and deeper than speech.

"You also have the power — "

Craike decided to be no more communicative than she. He replied to that with a curt nod.

"Yet you have not been horned — "

"Not as you have been. But in my own world, yes."

"Your world?" Her eyes held some of the feral glow of a hunting cat's. "What world, and why were you horned there, man of sand and ash, power?"

Without knowing why Craike related the events of the days past. Takya listened, he was certain, with more than ears alone. She picked up a stick from the pile of firewood and drew patterns in the sand and ash, patterns which had something to do with her listening.

"Your power was great enough to break a world wall." She snapped the stick between two fingers, threw it into the flames.

"A world wall?"

"We of the power have long known that different worlds lie together in such a fashion." She held up her hand with the fingers tight lying one to another. "Sometimes there comes a moment when two touch so closely that the power can carry one through. If at that moment there is a desperate need for escape. But those places of meeting

can not be readily found, and the moment of their touch can lay only for an instant. Have you in your world no reports of men and women who have vanished almost in sight of their fellows?"

Remembering old tales he nodded.

"I have seen a summoning from another world," she continued with a shiver, running both hands down the length of her braids as if so she evoked a shield for both mind and body. "To summon so is a great evil, for no man can hold in check the power of something alien. You broke the will of the Black Hoods when I was a beast running from their hunt. When I made the serpent to warn you off, you changed it into a fox. And when the Black Hoods would have shorn my power — " she looped the braids about her wrists, caressing, treasuring them against her small breasts, "again you broke their hold and set me free for a second time. But this you could not have done had you been born into this world, for our power must follow set laws. Yours lies outside out patterns and can cut across those laws — even as the knife cut this — " She touched the rough patch of hair at her temple.

"Follow patterns? Then it was those patterns in stone which drew you down from the mesa?"

"Yes. Takyi, my womb-brother, whom they slew there, was blood of my blood, bone of my bone. When they crushed him, then they could use him to draw me, and I

could not resist. But in the slaying of his husk they freed me — to their great torment, as Tousuth shall discover in time."

"Tell me of this country. Who are the Black Hoods and why did they horn you? Are you not of their breed since you have the power?"

But Tayka did not answer at once in words. Nor did she, as he had hoped, lower her mind barrier.

Her fingers now held one long hair she had pulled from her head, and this she began to weave in and out, swiftly intricately, in a complicated series of loops and crossed strands. After a moment Craike did not see the white fingers, nor the black hair they passed in loops from one to another. Rather did he see the pictures she wrought in her weaving.

A wide land, largely wilderness. The impressions he had gathered from Kaluf and the traders crystallized into vivid life. Small holdings here and there, ruled by petty lords, new settlements carved out by a scattered people moving up from the south in great wheeled wains, bringing flocks and herds, their carefully treasured seed. Stopping here and there for a season to sow and reap, until they decided upon a site for their final rooting. Tiny city-states, protected by the Black Hoods — the Esper born who purposefully interbred their own gifted stock, keeping their children apart.

Takya and her brother coming, as was sometimes — if rarely — true, from the common people.

Carefully watched by the Black Hoods. Then discovered to be a new mutation, condemned as such to be used for experimentation. But for a while protected by the local lord who wanted Takya.

But he might not take her unwilling. For the power that was hers as a virgin was wholly rift from her should she be forced. And he had wanted that power, obedient to him, as a check upon the monopoly of the Black Hoods. So with some patience he had set himself to a peaceful wooing. But the Black Hoods had moved first.

Had they accomplished her taking, the end they had intended for her was not as easy as death. And she wove a picture of it, with all its degradation and shame stark and open, for Craike's seeing.

"Then the Hooded ones are evil?"

"Not wholly." She untwisted the hair and put it with care into the fire. "They do much good, and without them people would suffer. But I, Takya, am different. And after me, when I mate, there will be others also different. How different we are not yet sure. The Hooded Ones want no change, by their thinking that means disaster. So they would use me to their own purposes. Only I, Tayka, shall not be so used!"

"No, you shall not." The vehemence of his own outburst startled him. Craike wanted nothing so much at that moment than to come to grips with the Black Hoods, who had planned this systematic hunt.

"What will you do now?" He

asked more calmly, wishing she would share her thoughts with him.

"This is a strong place. Did you cleanse it?"

He nodded impatiently.

"So I thought. That was also a task one born to this world might not have performed. But those who pass are not yet aware of the Cleansing. They will not trouble us, but pay tribute."

Craike found her complacency irritating. To lie up here and live on the offerings of river travelers did not appeal to him.

"This stone piling is older work than Sampur and much better," she continued. "It must have been a fortress for some of those forgotten ones who held lands and then vanished long before we came from the south. If it is repaired no lord of this district would have so good a roof."

"Two of us to rebuild it?" he laughed.

"Two of us — working thus."

A block of stone, the size of a brick, which had fallen from the sill of one of the needle-narrow windows, arose slowly in the air, settled into the space from which it had tumbled. Illusion or reality? Craike got to his feet and lurched to the window. His hand fell upon the stone which moved easily in his grasp. He took it out, weighed it, and then gently returned it to its place. Not illusion.

"But illusion too — if need be." There was, for the first time, a warm note of amusement in her tone. "Look on your tower, river lord!"

WIZARD'S WORLD

He limped to the door. Outside it was warm, sunny, but it was a site of ruins. Then the picture changed. Brown drifts of grass vanished from the terrace, the fallen stone was all in place. A hard-faced sentry stood wary-eyed on a repaired river arch. Another guardsman led out ponies saddle-padded and ready, other men were about garrison tasks.

Craike grinned. The sentry on the arch lost his helm, his jerkin. He now wore the tight tunic of the Security. Police, his spear was a gas rifle. The ponies misted, and in their place a speedster sat on the stone. He heard her laugh.

"Your guard, your traveling machine. But how grim, ugly. This is better!"

Guards, machine, all were swept away. Craike caught his breath at the sight of delicate winged creatures dancing in the air, displaying a joy of life he had never known. Fawns, little people of the wild, came to mingle with such shapes of beauty and desire that at last he turned his head away.

"Illusion," her voice was hard, mocking.

But Craike could not believe that what he had seen had been born from hardness and mockery.

"All illusions. We shall be better now with warriors. As for plans, can you suggest any better than to remain here and take what fortune sends — for a space?"

"Those winged dancers—where?"

"Illusions!" She returned harshly. "But such games tire one. I do not think we shall conjure up any

garrison before they are needed. Come, do not tear open those wounds of yours anew, for healing is no illusion and drains one even more of the power."

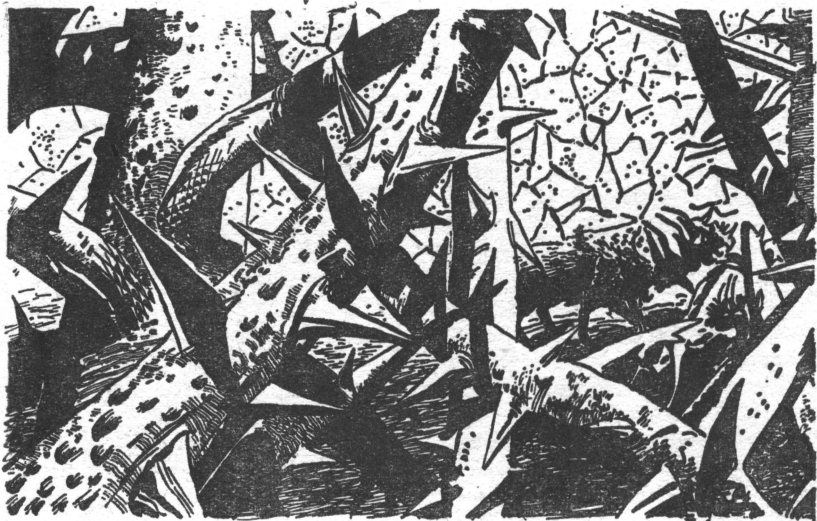
The clawed furrows were healing cleanly, though he would bear their scars for life. He hobbled back to the grass bed and dropped upon it, but regretted the erasure of the sprites she had shown him.

Once he was safely in place, Takya left with the curt explanation she had things to do. But Craike was restless, too much so to remain long inside the tower. He waited until she had gone and then, with the aid of his staff, climbed to the end of the span above the river. From here the twin tower on the other bank looked the same as the

one from which he had come. Whether it was also haunted Craike did not know. But, as he looked about, he could see the sense of Tayka's suggestion. A few illusion sentries would discourage any ordinary intrusion.

Takya's housekeeping had changed the rock of offerings. All the rotting debris was gone and none of the odor of decay now offended the nostrils at a change of wind. But at best it was a most uncertain source of supply. There could not be too many farms up river, nor too many travelers taking the water way.

As if to refute that, his Esper sense brought him sudden warning of strangers beyond the upper bend. But, Craike tensed, there were no peasants bound for the market at



Sampur. Fear, pain, anger, such emotions heralded their coming. There were three, and one was hurt. But they were not Esper, nor did they serve the Black Hoods. Though they were, or had been, fighting men.

A brutal journey over the mountains where they had lost comrades, the finding of this river, the theft of the dugout they now used so expertly — it was all there for him to read. And beneath that something else, which, when he found it, gave Craike a quick decision in their favor — a deep hatred of the Black Hoods! Outlaws, very close to despair, keeping on a hopeless trail because it was not in them to surrender.

Craike contacted them subtly. They must not think they were

heading into an Esper trap! Plant a little hope, a faint suggestion that there was a safe camping place ahead, that was all he could do at present. But so he drew them on.

"No!" A ruthless order cut across his line of contact, striking at the delicate thread with which he was playing the strangers in. But Craike stood firm. "Yes, yes, and yes!"

He was on guard instantly. Taky, mistress of illusion as she had proved herself to be, might act. But surprisingly she did not. The dugout came into view, carried more by the current than the efforts of its crew. One lay full length in the bottom, while the bow paddler had slumped forward. But the man in the stern was bringing them in. And Craike strengthened his invisi-



ble, unheard invitation to urge him on.

VI

But Takya had not yet begun to fight. As the dugout swung in toward the offering ledge one of the Black Hoods' guardsmen appeared there, his drawn sword taking fire from the sun. The fugitive steersman faltered until the current drew his craft on. Craike caught the full force of the stranger's despair, all the keener for the hope of moments before. The Esper irritation against Takya flared into anger.

He made the illusion reel back, hands clutching at his breast from which protruded the shaft of an arrow. Craike had seen no bows here, but it was a weapon to suit this world. And this should prove to Takya he meant what he had said.

The steersman was hidden as the dugout passed under the arch. There was a scrap of beach, the same to which Craike had swum on his first coming. He urged the man to that, beaming good will.

But the paddler was almost done, and neither of his companions could aid him. He drove the crude craft to the bank, and its bow grated on the rough gravel. Then he crawled over the bodies of the other two and fell rather than jumped ashore, turning to pull up the canoe as best he could.

Craike started down. But he might have known that Takya was not so easily defeated. Though they maintained an alliance of sorts she

accepted no order from him.

A brand was teleported from the tower fire, striking spear-wise in the dry brush along the slope. Craike's mouth set. He tried no more arguments. They had already tested power against power, and he was willing to so battle again. But this was not the time. However the fire was no illusion, and he could not fight it, crippled as he was. Or could he?

It was not spreading too fast — though Takya might spur it by the forces at her command. Now — there was just the spot! Craike steadied himself against a mound of fallen masonry and swept out his staff, dislodging a boulder and a shower of gravel. He had guessed right. The stone rolled to crush out the brand, and the gravel he continued to push after it smothered the creeping flames.

Red tongues dashed spitefully high in a sheet of flame, and Craike laughed. THAT was illusion. She was angry. He produced a giant pail in the air, tilted it forward, splashed its contents into the heart of that conflagration. He felt the lash of her rage, standing under it unmoved. So might she bring her own breed to heel, but she would learn he was not of that ilk.

"Holla!" That call was no illusion, it begged help.

Craike picked a careful path down slope until he saw the dugout and the man who had landed it. The Esper waved an invitation and at his summons the fugitive covered the distance between them.

He was a big man of the same

brawny race as those of Sampur, his braids of reddish hair hanging well below his wide shoulders. There was the raw line of a half-healed wound down the angle of his jaw, and his sunken eyes were very tired. For a moment he stood down-slope from Craike, his hands on his hips, his head back, measuring the Esper with the shrewdness of a canny officer who had long known how to judge and handle raw levies.

"I am Jorik of the Eagles' Tower." The statement was made with the same confidence as the announcement of rank might have come from one of the petty lords. "Though," he shrugged, "the Eagles' Tower stands no more with one stone upon the other. You have a stout lair here — " he hesitated before he concluded, "friend."

"I am Craike," the Esper answered as simply, "and I am also one who has run from enemies. This lair is an old one, though still useful."

"Might the enemies from whom you run wear black hoods?" countered Jorik. "It seems to me that things I have just seen here have the stink of that about them."

"You are right. I am no friend to the Black Hoods."

"But you have the power — "

"I have power," Craike tried to make the distinction clear. "You are welcome, Jorik. So all are welcome here who are no friends to Black Hoods."

The big warrior shrugged. "We can no longer run. If the time has come to make a last stand, this is WIZARD'S WORLD

as good a place as any. My men are done." He glanced back at the two in the dugout. "They are good men, but we were pressed when they caught us in the upper pass. Once there were twenty hands of us," he held up his fist and spread the fingers wide for counting. "They drew us out of the tower with their sorcerers' tricks, and then put us to the hunt."

"Why did they wish to make an end to you?"

Jorik laughed shortly. "They dislike those who will not fit into their neat patterns. We are free mountain men, and no Black Hood helped us win the Eagles' Tower; none aided us to hunt. When we took our furs down to the valley they wanted to levy tribute. But what spell of theirs trapped the beasts in our dead-falls, or brought them to our spears? We pay not for what we have not bought. Neither would we have made war on them. Only, when we spoke out and said it so, there were others who were encouraged to do likewise, and the Black Hoods must put an end to us before their rule was broken. So they did."

"But they did not get all of you," Craike pointed out. "Can you bring your men up to the tower? I have been hurt and can not walk without support or I would lend you a hand."

"We will come." Jorik returned to the dugout. Water was splashed vigorously into the face of the man in the bow, arousing him to crawl ashore. Then the leader of the fugitives swung the third man out of

the craft and over his shoulder in a practiced carry.

When Craike had seen the unconscious man established on his own grass bed, he stirred up the fire and set out food. While Jorik returned to the dugout to bring in their gear.

Neither of the other men were of the same size as their leader. The one who lay limp, his breath fluttering between his slack lips, was young hardly out of boyhood, his thin frame showing bones rather than muscled flesh under the rags of clothing. The other was short, dark skinned, akin by race to Kaluf's men, his jaw sprouting a curly beard. He measured Craike with suspicious glances from beneath lowered red lids, turning that study to the walls about him and the unknown reaches at the head of the stair.

Craike did not try mind touch. These men were rightly suspicious of Esper arts. But he did attempt to reach Takya, only to meet that nothingness with which she cloaked her actions. Craike was disturbed. Surely now that she was convinced he was determined to give the harborage to the fugitives, she would oppose him. They had nothing to fear from Jorik and his men, but rather would gain by joining forces.

Until his wounds were entirely healed he could not go far. And without weapons they would have to rely solely upon Ester powers for defense. Having witnessed the efficiency of the Hooded Ones' attack, Craike doubted a victory in

any engagement to which those masters came fully prepared. He had managed to upset their spells merely because they had not known of his existence. But the next time he would have no such advantage.

On the other hand the tower could be defended by force of arms. With bows — Craike savored the idea of archers giving a Hooded force a devastating surprise. The traders had had no such arm, as sophisticated as they were. And he had seen none among the warriors of Sampur. He'd have to ask Jorik if such were known.

In the meantime he sat among his guests, watching Jorik feed the semiconscious boy with soft fruit pulp and the other man wolf down dried meat. When the latter had done, he hitched himself closer to the fire and jerked a thumb at his chest.

"Zackuth," he identified himself.

"From Larud?" Craike named the only city of Kaluf's people he could remember.

The dark man's momentary surprise had no element of suspicion. "What do you know of the Children of Noe, stranger?"

"I journeyed the plains with one called Kaluf, a Master Trader of Larud."

"A fat man who laughs much and wears a falcon plume in his cap?"

"Not so," Craike allowed a measure of chill to ice his reply. "The Kaluf who led this caravan was a lean man who knew the edge of a good blade from its hilt. As for cap ornaments — he had a red

stone to the fore of his. Also he swore by the Eyes of the Lady Lor."

Zackuth gave a great bray of laughter. "You are no stream fish to be easily hooked, are you, tower dweller? I am not of Larud, but I know Kaluf, and those who travel in his company do not wear one badge one day and another the next. But, by the looks of you, you have fared little better than we lately. Has Kaluf also fallen upon evil luck?"

"I traveled safely with his caravan to the gates of Sampur. How it fared with him thereafter I can not tell you."

Jorik grinned and settled his patient back on the bed. "I believe you must have parted company in haste, Lord Ka-rak?"

Craike answered that with the truth. "There were two who were horned. I followed them to give what aid I could."

Jorik scowled, and Zackruth spat into the fire.

"We were not horned; we have no power," the latter remarked. "But they have other tricks to play. So you came here?"

"I was clawed by a bear," Craike supplied a meager portion of his adventures, "and came here to lie up until I can heal me of that hurt."

"This is a snug hole," Jorik was appreciative. "But how got you such eating?" He popped half a fruit into his mouth and licked his juicy fingers. "This is no wilderness feeding."

"The tower is thought to be de-

mon haunted. Those taking passage down stream leave tribute."

Zackuth slapped his knee. "The Gods of the Waves are good to you, Lord Ka-rak, that you should stumble into such fortune. There is more than one kind of demon for the haunting towers. How say you, Lord Jorik?"

"That we have also come into luck at last, since Lord Ka-rak has made us free of this hold. But perhaps you have some other thought in your head?" He spoke to the Esper.

Craike shrugged. "What the clouds decree shall fall as rain or snow," he quoted a saying of the caravan men.

It was close to sunset, and he was worried about Takya. He could not believe that she had gone permanently. And yet, if she returned, what would happen? He had been careful not to use Esper powers. Takya would have no such compunctions.

He could not analyze his feelings about her. She disturbed him, awoke emotions he refused to face. There was a certain way she had of looking sidewise — But her calm assumption of superiority pricked beneath his surface armor. And the antagonism fretted against the feeling which had drawn him after her from the gates of Sampur. Once again he sent out a quest-thought and, to his surprise, was answered.

"They must go!"

"They are outlaws, even as we. One is ill, the others worn with long running. But they stood against

the Black Hoods. As such they have a claim on roof, fire and food from us."

"They are not as we!" again arrogance. "Send them or I shall drive them. I have the power —"

"Perhaps you have the power, but so do I!" He put all the assurance he could muster into that. "I tell you, no better thing could happen then for us to give these men aid. They are proven fighters —"

"Swords can not stand against the power!"

Craike smiled. His plans were beginning to move even as he carried on this voiceless argument. "Not swords, no, Takya. But all fighting is not done with swords nor spears. Nor with the power either. Can a Black Hood think death to his enemy when he himself is dead, killed from a distance, and not by mind power his fellows could trace and be armored against.

He had caught her attention. She was acute enough to know that he was not playing with words, that he knew of what he spoke. Quickly he built upon that spark of interest. "Remember how your illusion guard died upon the offering rock when you would warn off these men?"

"By a small spear." She was contemptuous again.

"Not so." He shaped a picture of an arrow and then of an archer releasing it from the bow cord, of its speeding true across the river to strike deep into the throat of an unsuspecting Black Hood.

"You have the secret of this weapon?"

"I do. And five such arms are better than two, is that not the truth?"

She yielded a fraction. "I will return. But they will not like that."

"If you return, they will welcome you. These are no hunters of witch maidens —" he began, only to be disconcerted by her obvious amusement. Somehow he had lost his short advantage over her. Yet she did not break contact.

"Ka-rak, you are very foolish. No, these will not try to mate with me, not even if I willed it so. As you will see. Does the eagle mate with the hunting cat? But they will be slow to trust me, I think. However, your plan has possibilities, and we shall see."

VII

Takya had been right about her reception by the fugitives. They knew her for what she was, and only Craike's acceptance of her kept them in the tower. That and the fact, which Jorik did not try to disguise, that they could not hope to go much farther on their own. But their fears were partly allayed when she took over the nursing of the sick youngster, using on him the same healing power she had produced for Craike's wound. By the new day she was feeding him broth and demanding service from the others as if they had been her liegemen from birth.

The sun was well up when Jorik came in whistling from a dip in the river.

"This is a stout stronghold,

Lord Ka-rak. And with the power aiding us to hold it, we are not likely to be shaken out in a hurry. Doubly is that true if the Lady aids us."

Takya laughed. She sat in the shaft of light from one of the narrow windows, combing her hair. Now she looked over her shoulder at them with something approaching a pert archness. In that moment she was more akin to the women Craike had known in his own world.

"Let us first see how the Lord Ka-rak proposes to defend us." There was mockery in that, enough to sting, as well as a demand that he make good his promise of the night before.

But Craike was prepared. He discarded his staff for a hold on Jorik's shoulder, while Zackuth slogged behind. They climbed into the forest. Craike had never fashioned a bow, and he did not doubt that his first attempts might be failures. But, as the three made their slow progress, he explained what they must look for and the kind of weapon he wanted to produce. They returned within the hour with an assortment of wood lengths with which to experiment.

After noon Zackuth grew restless and went off, to come back with a deer, visibly proud of his hunting skill. Craike saw bowstrings where the others saw meat and hide for the refashioning of foot wear. For the rest of the day they worked with a will. It was Takya, who had the skill necessary for the feathering of the arrows

after Zackuth netted two black river birds.

Four days later the tower community had taken on the aspect of a real stronghold. Many of the fallen stones were back in the walls. The two upper rooms of the tower had been explored, and a vast collection of ancient nests had been swept out. Takya chose the topmost one for her own abode and, aided by her convalescing charge, the boy Nickus, had carried armloads of sweet scented grass up for both carpeting and bedding. She did not appear to be inconvenienced by the bats that still entered at dawn to chitter out again at dusk. And she crooned a welcome to the snowy owl that refused to be dislodged from a favorite roost in the very darkest corner of the roof.

River travel had ceased. There were no new offerings on the rock. But Jorik and Zackuth hunted. And Craike tended the smoking fires which cured the extra meat against coming need, while he worked on the bows. Shortly they had three finished and practiced along the terrace, using blunt arrows.

Jorik had a true marksman's eye and took to the new weapon quickly, as did Nickus. But Zackuth was more clumsy, and Craike's stiff leg bothered him. Takya was easily the best shot when she would consent to try. But while agreeing it was an excellent weapon, she preferred her own type of warfare and would sit on the wall, braiding and rebraiding her hair with flying fingers, to watch their shooting at

marks and applaud or jeer lightly at the results.

Howéver, their respite was short. Craike had the first warning of trouble. He awoke from a dream in which he had been back in the desert panting ahead of the mob. Awoke, only to discover that some malign influence filled the tower. There was a compulsion on him to get out, to flee into the forest.

He tested the silences about him tentatively. The oppression which had been in the ancient fort at his first coming had not returned, that was not it. But what?

Someone moved restlessly in the dark.

"Lord Ka-rak?" Nickus' voice was low and hoarse, as if he struggled to keep it under contral.

"What is it?"

"There is trouble — "

A bulk which could only belong to Jorik heaved up black against the faint light of the doorway.

"The hunt is up," he observed. "They move to shake us out of here like rats out of a nest."

"They did this before with you?" asked the Esper.

Jorik snorted. "Yes. It is their favorite move to battle. They would give us such a horror of our tower that we will burst forth and scatter. Then they can cut us down as they wish."

But Craike could not isolate any thought beam carrying that night terror. It seeped from the walls about them. He sent probes unsuccessfully. There was the pad of feet on the stairs, and then he heard Takya call:

"Build up the fire, foolish ones. They may discover that they do not deal with those who know nothing of them."

Flame blossomed from the coals to light a circle of sober faces. Zackuth caressed the spear lying across his knees, but Nickus and Jorik had eyes only for the witch maid as she knelt by the fire, laying out some bundles of dried leaf and fern. Her thoughts reached Craike.

"We must move or these undefended ones will be drawn out from here as nut meats are picked free from the shell. Give me of your power — in this matter I must be the leader."

Though he resented anew her calm assumption of authority, Craike also recognized in it truth. But he shrank from the task she demanded of him. To have no control over his own Esper arts, to allow her to use them to feed hers — it was a violation of a kind, the very thing he had so feared in his own world that he had been willing to kill himself to escape it. Yet now she asked it of him as one who had the right!

"Forced surrender is truly evil — but given freely in our defense this is different." Her thoughts swiftly answered his wave of repulsion.

The command to flee the tower was growing stronger. Nickus got to his feet as if dragged up. Suddenly Zackuth made for the door, only to have Jorik reach forth a long arm to trip him.

"You see," Takya urged, "they

are already half under the spell. Soon we shall not be able to hold them, either by mind or body. And then they shall be wholly lost — for ranked against us now is the high power of the Black Hoods."

Craike watched the scuffle on the floor and then, still reluctant and inwardly shrinking, he limped around the fire to her side, lying down at her gesture. She threw on the fire two of her bundles of fern, and a thick, sweet smoke curled out to engulf them. Nickus coughed, put his hands uncertainly to his head and slumped, curling up as a tired child in deep slumber. And the struggle between Jorik and his man subsided as the fumes reached them.

Takya's hand was cool as it slipped beneath Craike's jerkin, resting over his heart. She was crooning some queer chant, and, though he fought to hold mind contact, there was a veil between them as tangible to his inner senses as the fern smoke was to his outer ones. For one wild second or two he seemed to see the tower room through her eyes instead of his own, and then the room was gone. He sped bodiless across the night world, casting forth as a hound on the trail.

All that had been solid in his normal sight was now without meaning. But he was able to see the dark cloud of pressure closing in on the tower and trace that back to its source, racing along the slender thread of its spinners.

There was another fire, and about it four of the Black Hoods. Here, too, was scented smoke to free

minds from bodies. The essence which was Craike prowled about that fire, counting guardsmen who lay in slumber.

With an effort of will which drew heavily upon his strength, he concentrated on the staff which lay before the leader of the company. Setting upon it his own commands.

It flipped up into the air, even as its master roused and clutched at it, falling into the fire. There was a flash of blue light, a sound which Craike felt rather than heard. The Hooded Ones were on their feet as their master stared straight across the flames to Craike's disembodied self. His was not an evil face, rather did it hold elements of nobility. But the eyes were pitiless, and Craike knew that now it was not only war to the death between them, but war beyond death itself. The Esper sensed that this was the first time that other had known of his existence, had been able to consider him as a factor in the tangled game.

There was a flash of lightning knowledge of each other, and then Craike was again in the dark. He heard once more Takya's crooning, was conscious of her touch resting above the slow, pulsating beat of his heart.

"That was well done," her thought welcomed him. "Now they must meet us face to face in battle."

"They will come." He accepted the dire promise that Black Hood had made.

"They will come, but now we are more equal. And there is not the Rod of Power to fear."

Craike tried to sit up and discovered that the weakness born of his wounds was nothing to that which now held him.

Takya laughed with some of her old mockery. Do you think you can make the Long Journey and then romp about as a fawn, Ka-rak? Not three days on the field of battle can equal this. Sleep now and gather again the inner power. The end of this venture is still far from us."

He could no longer see her face, the glimmer of her hair veiled it; and then that shimmer reached his mind and shook him away from consciousness; and he slept.

It might have been early morning when he had made that strange visit to the camp of the Black Hoods. By the measure of the sun across the floor it was late afternoon when he lifted heavy eyelids again. Takya gazed down upon him. Her summons had brought him back, just as her urging had sent him to sleep. He sat up with a smile, but she did not return it.

"All is right?"

"We have time to make ready before we are put to the test. Your mountain captain is not new to this game. Matters of open warfare he understands well, and he and his men have prepared a rude welcome for those who come. And," her faint smile deepened. "I, too, have done my poor best. Come and see."

He limped out on the terrace and for a moment was startled. Illusion, yes, but some of it was real.

Jorik laughed at the expression on Craike's face, inviting the Esper

with a wave of the hand to inspect the force he captained. For there were bowmen in plenty, standing sentinel on the upper walls, arch, and tower, walking beats on the twin buildings across the river. And it took Craike a few seconds to sort out the ones he knew from those who served Takya's purposes. But the real had been as well posted as their illusionary companions. Nickus, for his superior accuracy with the new weapon, held a vantage point on the wall, and Zackuth was on the river arch where his arrows needed only a short range to be effective.

"Look below," Jorik urged, "and see what shall trip them up until we can pin them."

Again Craike blinked. The illusion was one he had seen before, but that had been a hurried erection on the part of a desperate girl, this was better contrived. For all the ways leading to the river towers were cloaked with a tangled mass of thorn trees, the spiked branches interlocking into a wall no sword, no spear could hope to pierce. It might be an illusion, but it would require a weighty counterspell on the part of the Hooded Ones to clear it.

"She takes some twigs Nickus finds, and a hair, and winds them together, then buried all under a stone. After she sings over it — and we have this!" Jorik babbled. "She is worth twenty hands — no, twice twenty hands, or fighting men, is the Lady Takya! Lord Ka-rak, I say that there is a new day coming

for this land when such as you two stand up against the Hooded Ones."

"Aaaay — " the warning was soft but clear, half whistle, half call, issuing from Nickus' lofty post. "They come!"

"So do they!" That was a sharp echo from Zackuth, "and down river as well."

"For which we have an answer," Jorik was undisturbed.

Those in the tower held their fire. To the confident attackers it was as such warfare had always been for them. If half their company was temporarily halted by the spiny maze, the river party had only to land on the offering rock and fight their way in, their efforts reinforced by the arts of their Masters.

But, as their dugout nosed in, bow cords sang. There was a voiceless scream which tore through Craike's head as the hooded man in its bow clutched at the shaft protruding from his throat and fell forward into the river. Two more of the crew followed him, and the rest stopped paddling, dismayed. The current pulled them on under the arch, and Zackuth dropped a rock to good purpose. It carried one of the guardsmen down with it as it hit the craft squarely. The dugout turned over, spilling all the rest into the water.

Zackuth laughed; Jorik roared.

"Now they learn what manner of blood letting lies before them!" he cried so that his words must have reached the ears of the besiegers. "Let us see how eagerly they come to such feasting."

It was plain that the Black Hoods held their rulership by more practical virtues than just courage. Having witnessed the smashing disaster of the river attack, they made no further move. Night was coming, and Craike watched them withdraw downstream with no elation. Nor did Jorik retain his cheerfulness.

"Now they will try something else. And since we did not fall easily into their jaws, it will be harder to face. I do not like it that we must so face it during the hours of dark."

"There will be no dark," Takya countered. One slim finger pointed at a corner of the terrace, and up into the gathering dusk leaped a pencil of clear light. Slowly she turned and brought to life other torches on the roof of the tower over river, on the arch spanning the water, on the parapet — And in that radiance nothing could move unseen.

"So!" Her fingers snapped, and the beacons vanished. "When they are needed, we shall have them."

Jorik blinked. "Well enough, Lady. But honest fire is also good, and it provides warmth for a man's heart as well as light for his eyes."

She smiled as a mother might smile at a child. "Build your fire, Captain of Swords. But we shall have ample warning when the enemy comes." She called. A silent winged thing floated down and alighted on the arm she held out to invite it. The white owl, its eyes seeming to observe them all with



intelligence, snapped its wicked beak as Takya stared back at it. Then with a flap of wings, it went.

"From us they may hide their thoughts and movements. But they can not close the sky to those things whose natural home it is. Be sure we shall know, and speedily, when they move against us."

They did not leave their posts however. And Zackuth readied for action by laying up pieces of rubble which might serve as well as his first lucky shot.

It was a long night, wearing on the tempers of all but Takya. Time and time again Craike tried to probe the dark. But a blank wall was all he met. Whatever moves the Black Hoods considered, they were protected by an able barrier.

Jorik took to pacing back and forth on the terrace, five strides one way, six the other, and he brought down his bow with a little click on the time-worn stones each time he turned.

"They are as busy hatching trouble as a forest owl is in hatching an egg! But what kind of trouble?"

Craike had schooled himself into an outward patience. "For the learning of what we shall have to wait. But why do they delay — ?"

Why did they? The more on edge he and his handful of defenders became, the easier meat they were. And he had no doubt that the Black Hoods were fertile in surprise. Though, judging by what Takya and Jorik reported, they were not accustomed to such determined and resourceful opposition to their wills. Such opposition would only

firm their desire to wipe out the rebels.

"They move," Takya's witch fires leaped from every point she had earlier indicated. In that light she sped across the terrace to stand close to Jorik and Craike, close to the parapet wall. "This is the lowest hour of the night when the blood runs slow and resistance is at its depth. So they choose to move —"

Jorik snapped his bow cord, and the thin twang was a harp's note in the silence. But Takya shook her head.

"Only the Hooded Ones come, and they are well armored. See!" She jumped to the parapet and clapped her hands.

The witch light shown down on four standing within the thorn barrier, staring up from under the shadow of their hoods. An arrow sang, but it never reached its mark. Still feet away from the leader's breast it fell to earth.

But Jorik refused to accept defeat. With all the force of his arm he sent a second shaft after the first. And it, too, landed at the feet of the silent four. Craike grasped at Takya, but she eluded him, moving to call down to the Hooded Ones:

"What would you, men of power — a truce?"

"Daughter of evil, you are not alone. Let us speak with your lord."

She laughed, shaking out her unbound hair, rippling it through her fingers, gloatingly. "Does this show that I have taken a lord, men of power? Takya is herself, without



division, still. Let that hope die from your hearts. I ask you again, what is it you wish — a truce?"

"Set forth your lord, with him we will bargain."

She smoothed back her hair impatiently. "I have no lord, I and my power are intact. Try me and see, Tousuth. Yes, I know you Tousuth, the Master, and Salsbal, Bulan, Yily — " she told them off with a pointed forefinger, a child counting out in some game.

Jorik stirred and drew in a sharp breath, and the men below shifted position. Craike caught thoughts — to use a man's name in the presence of hostile powers, that was magic indeed.

"Takya!" It was a reptile's hiss.

Again she laughed. "Ah, but the first naming was mine, Tousuth. Did you believe me so poor and power lost that I would obey you tamely? I did not at the horning, why should I now when I stand free of you? Before you had to use Takyi to capture me. But Takyi is gone into the far darkness, and over me now you can lay no such net! Also I have summoned one beside me—" Her hand closed on Craike's arm, drawing him forward.

He faced the impact of those eyes meeting them squarely. Raising his hand he told them off as the girl had done:

"Tousuth, Master of women baiters, Salsbal, Bulan, Yily, the wolves who slink behind him. I am here, what would you have of me?"

But they were silent, and he could feel them searching him out, making thrusts against his mind

shield, learning in their turn that he was of their kind; he was Esper born.

"What would you have?" he repeated more loudly. "If you do not wish to treat — then leave the night undisturbed for honest men's sleep."

"Changling!" It was Tousuth who spat that. It was his turn to point a finger and chant a sentence or two, his men watching him with confidence.

But Craike, remembering that other scene before Sampur, was trying a wild experiment of his own. He concentrated upon the man Takya had named Yily. Black cloak, black hood making a vulture's shadow against the rock. Vulture — vulture!

He did not know that he had pointed to his chosen victim, nor that he was repeating that word aloud in the same intonation as Tousuth's chant. "Vulture!"

Cool hand closed about his other wrist, and from that contact power flowed to join his. It was pointed, launched —

“Vulture!”

A black bird flapped and screamed, arose on beating wings to fly at him, raw red head outstretched, beak agap. There was the twang of a bow cord. A scream of agony and despair and a black cloaked man writhed out his life on the slope by the thorn thicket.

"Good!" Takya cried. "That was well done, Ka-rak, very well done! But you can not use that weapon a second time."

Craike was filled with a wild elation, and he did not listen to her. His finger already indicated Bulan and he was chanting: "Dog—"

But to no purpose. The Black Hood did not drop to all fours, he remained human; and Craike's voice faded. Takya spoke in swift whisper:

"They are warned, you can never march against them twice by the same path. Only because they were unprepared did you succeed. Ho, Tousuth," she called, "do you now believe that we are well armed? Speak with a true tongue and say what you want of us."

"Yes," Jorik boomed, "you can not take us, Master of power. Go your way, and we shall go ours—"

"There can not be two powers in any land, as you should know, Jorik of the Eagles' towers, who tried once before to prove that and suffered thereby. There must be a victor here—and to the vanquished—naught!"

Craike could see the logic in that. But the Master was continuing: As to what we want here—it is a decision. Match your power against ours, changling. And since you have not taken the witch, use her also if you wish. In the end it will come to the same thing, for both of you must be rendered helpless."

"Here and now?" asked Craike.

"Dawn comes, it will soon be another day. By sun or shadow, we care not in such a battle."

The elation of his quick success in that first try was gone. Craike

fingered the bow he had not yet used. He shrank inwardly from the contest the other proposed, he was too uncertain of his powers. One victory had come from too little knowledge. Takya's hand curled about his stiff fingers once again. The impish mockery was back in her voice, ruffling his temper, irritating him into defiance.

"Show them what you can do, Lord Ka-rak, you who can master illusions."

He glanced down at her, and the sight of that cropped lock of hair at her temple gave him an odd confidence. Neither was Takya as all-powerful as she would have him believe.

"I accept your challenge," he called. "Let it be here and now."

"WE accept your challenge!" Takya's flash of annoyance, her quick correction, pleased him. Before the echo of her words died away she hurled her first attack.

Witch fire leaped down slope to ring in the three men, playing briefly along the body of the dead Yily. It flickered up and down about their feet and legs so they stood washed in palid flame. While about their heads darted winged shapes which might have been owls or other night hunters.

There was a malignant hissing, and the slope sprouted reptiles, moving in a wave. Illusions? All—or some. But designed, Craike understood, to divert the enemy's minds. He added a few of his own—a wolfish shape crouching in the shadow—leaping—to vanish as its paws cut the witch fire.

Swift as had been Takya's attack, so did those below parry. An oppressive weight, so tangible that Craike looked up to see if some mountain threatened them from overhead, began to close down upon the parapet. He heard a cry of alarm. There WAS a black cloud to be seen now, a giant press closing upon them.

Balls of witch fire flashed out of the light pillars, darted at those on the parapet. One flew straight at Craike's face, its burning breath singeing his skin.

"Fool!" Takya's thought was a whip lash, "Illusions are only real for the believer."

He steadied, and the witch ball vanished. But he was badly shaken. This was outside any Esper training he had had, it was the very thing he had been conditioned against. He felt slow, clumsy, and he was ashamed that upon Takya must the burden of their defense now rest.

Upon her — Craike's eyes narrowed. He loosened her hold on him did not try to contact her. There was too much chance of self-betrayal in that. His plan was utterly wild, but it had been well demonstrated that the Black Hoods could only be caught by the unexpected.

Another witch ball hurtled at him, and he leaped to the terrace, landing with a force which sent a lance of pain up his healing leg. But on the parapet a Craike still stood, shoulder to shoulder with Takya. To maintain that illusion

was a task which made him sweat as he crept silently away from the tower.

He had made a security guard to astonish Takya, the wolf, all the other illusions. But they had been only wisps, things alive for the moment with no need for elaboration. To hold this semblance of himself was in some ways easier, some ways harder. It was easier to make, for the image was produced of self-knowledge, and it was harder, for it was meant to deceive masters of illusion.

Craike reached the steps to the rock of the offerings. The glow of the witch lights here was pale, and the ledge below dark. He crept down, one arrow held firmly in his hand.

Here the sense of oppression was a hundredfold worse, and he moved as one wading through a flood which entrapped limbs and brain. Blind, he went to all fours, feeling his way to the river.

He set the arrow between his teeth in a bite which indented its shaft. A knife would have been far better, but he had no time to beg Jorik's. He slipped over, shivering as the chill water took him. Then he swam under the arch.

It was comparatively easy to reach the shingle where the dugout of the Black Hoods had turned over. As he made his way to the shore he brushed against water-soaked cloth and realized he shared this scrap of gravel with the dead. Then, arrow still between his teeth, Craike climbed up behind the Black Hoods' position.

The thorn hedge cloaked the rise above him. But he concentrated on the breaking of that illusion, wading on through a mass of thorns, intact to his eyes, thin air at his passing. Then he was behind the Black Hoods. Takya stood, a black and white figure on the wall above, beside the illusion Craike.

Now!

The illusion Craike swelled a little more than life size, while his creator gathered his feet under him, preparatory to attack. The Craike on the wall altered — anything to hold the attention of Tousuth for a crucial second or two. Monster grew from man, wings, horns, curved tusks, all embellishments Craike's imagination could add. He heard shouts from the tower.

But with the arrow as a dagger in his hand, he sprang, allowing himself in that moment to see only, to think only of a point on Tousuth's back.

The head drove in and in, and Tousuth went down on his knees, clutching at his chest, coughing. While Craike, with a savagery he had not known he possessed, leaned on the shaft to drive it deeper.

Fingers hooked about Craike's throat, cutting off air, dragging him back. He was pulled from Tousuth, loosing his hold on the arrow shaft to tear at the hands denying him breath. There was a red fog which even the witch lights could not pierce and the roaring in his head was far louder than the shouts from the tower.

Then he was flat on the ground, still moving feebly. But the hands were gone from his throat, and he gasped in air. Around him circled balls of fire, dripping, twirling, he closed his eyes against their glare.

"Lord — Lord!"

The hail reached him only faintly. Hands pulled at him, and he tried to resist. But when he opened his eyes it was to see Jorik's brown face. Jorik was at the tower — how had Craike returned there? Surely he HAD attacked Tousuth? Or was it all illusion?

"He is not dead."

Whether or not that was said to him, Craike did not know. But his fingers were at his throat and he winced from his own touch. Then an arm came under his shoulders, lifting him, and he had a dizzy moment until earth and gray sky settled into their proper places.

Takya was there, with Nickus and Zackuth hovering in the background of black jerkined guardsmen who stared back at her sullenly over the bodies of the dead. For they were all dead — the Hooded Ones. There was Tousuth, his head in the sand. And his fellows crumpled beside him.

The witch girl chanted, and in her hands was a cat's cradle of black strands. The men who followed Tousuth cringed, and their fear was a cloud Craike could see. He grabbed at Jorik, won to his feet, and tried to hail Takya. But not even a croak came from his tortured throat. So he flung himself at her, one hand out like a sword blade to slash. It fell across that wicked net

of hair, breaking it, and went to close upon Takya's wrist in a crushing grip.

"Enough!" He could get out that command mind to mind.

She drew in upon herself as a cat crouches for a spring, and spat, her eyes green with feral lusting fire. But he had an answer to that, read it in her own spark of fear at his touch. His hands twined in her hair.

"They are men," he pulled those black strands to emphasize his words," they only obeyed orders. We have a quarrel with their masters, but not with them!"

"They hunted, and now they shall be hunted!"

"I have been hunted, as have you, witch woman. And while I live there shall be no more such hunts—whether I am hound or quarry."

"While you live—" her menace was ready.

Suddenly Craike forced out a hoarse croak meant for laughter. "You, yourself, Takya, have put the arrow to this bow cord!"

He kept one hand tangled in her hair. But with the other he snatched from her belt the knife she had borrowed from Nickus and not returned. She screamed, beat against him with her fists, tried to bite. He mastered her roughly, not loosing his grip on that black silk. And then in sweeps of that well whetted blade he did what the Black Hoods had failed in doing, he sawed through those lengths.

"I am leaving you no weapons,

Takya. You shall not rule here as you have thought to do—" The exultation he had known when he had won his first victory against the Black Hoods was returning a hundredfold. "For a while I shall pull those pretty claws of yours!" He wondered briefly how long it would take her hair to regrow. At least they would have a breathing spell before her powers returned.

Then, his arm still prisoning her shoulders, the mass of her hair streaming free from his left hand, he turned to face the guardsmen.

"Tell them to go," he thought, "taking their dead with them."

"You will go, taking these with you," she repeated aloud, stony calm.

One of the men dropped to his knees by Tousuth's body, then abased himself before Craike.

"We are your hounds, Master."

Craike found his voice at last. "You are no man's hounds—for you are a man. Get you gone to Sampur and tell them that the power is no longer to make hind nor hound. If there are those who wish to share the fate of Tousuth, perhaps when they look upon him as dead they will think more of it."

"Lord, do you come also to Sampur to rule?" the other asked timidly.

Craike laughed. "Not until I have established my lordship elsewhere. Get you back to Sampur and trouble us no more."

He turned his back on the guardsmen and, drawing the silent Takya, still within the circle of his arm, with him, started back to the tow-

er. The bowmen remained behind, and Craike and the girl were alone as they reached the upper level. He paused then and looked down into her set, expressionless face.

"What shall I do with you?"

You have shamed me and taken my power from me. What does a warrior do with a female slave?" She formed a stark mind picture, hurling it at him as she had hurled the stone on the mesa.

With his left hand he whipped her hair across her face, smarting under that taunt.

"I have taken no slave, nor any woman in that fashion, nor shall I. Go your way, Takya, and fight me again if you wish when your hair has grown."

She studied him, and her astonishment was plain. Then she laughed and clutched at the hair, tearing it free from his grasp, bundling it into the front of her single garment.

"So be it, Ka-rak. It is war between us. But I am not departing hence yet a while." She broke away, and he could hear the scuff of her feet on the steps as she climbed to her own chamber in the tower.

"They are on their way, Lord, and they will keep to it." Jorik came up. He stretched. "It was a battle not altogether to my liking. For the honest giving of blows from one's hand is better than all this magic, potent as it is."

Craike sat down beside the fire. He could not have agreed more heartily with any suggestion. Now that it was over he felt drained of energy.

"I do not believe they will return," he wheezed hoarsely, very conscious of his bruised throat.

Nickus chuckled, and Zackuth barked his own laughter.

"Seeing how you handled the Lady, Lord, they want nothing more than to be out of your grasp and that as speedily as possible. Nor, when those of Sampur see what they bring with them, do I think we shall be sought out by others bearing drawn swords. Now," Jorik slapped his fat middle, "I could do with meat in my belly. And you, Lord, have taken such handling as needs good food to counter."

There was no mention of Takya, nor did any go to summon her when the meat was roasted. And Craike was content to have it so. He was too tired for any more heroics.

Nickus hummed a soft tune as he rubbed down his unstrung bow before wrapping it away from the river damp. And Craike was aware that the younger man glanced at him slyly when he thought the Esper's attention elsewhere. Jorik, too, appeared highly amused at some private thoughts, and he had fallen to beating time with one finger to Nickus' tune. Craike shifted uncomfortably. He was an actor who had forgotten his lines, a novice required to make a ritual move he did not understand. What they wanted of him he could not guess, for he was too tired to mind touch. He only wanted sleep, and that he sought as soon as he painfully swallowed his last bite. But he heard

through semistupor a surprised exclamation from Nickus.

"He goes not to seek her—to take her!"

Jorik's answer held something of approval in it. "To master such as the Lady Takya he will need full strength of power and limb. His is the wisest way, not to gulp the fruits of battle before the dust of the last charge is laid. She is his by shearing, but she is no meek ewe to come readily under any man's hand."

Takya did not appear the next day, nor the next. And Craike made no move to climb to her. His companions elaborately did not notice her absence as they worked together, setting in place fallen stones, bringing the tower into a better state of repair, or killing deer to smoke the meat. For as Jorik pointed out:

"Soon comes the season of cold. We must build us a snug place and have food under our hands before then." He broke off and gazed thoughtfully down stream. "This is also the fair time when countrymen bring their wares to market. There are traders in Sampur. We could offer our hides, even though they be newly fleshed, for salt and grain. And a bow—this Kaluf of whom you have spoken, would he not give a good price for a bow?"

Craike raised an eyebrow. "Sampur? But they have little cause to welcome us in Sampur."

"You and the Lady Takya, Lord, they might take arms against in fear. But if Zackuth and I went in

the guise of wandering hunters—and Zackuth is of the Children of Noe, he could trade privately with his kin. We must have supplies, Lord, before the coming of the cold, and this is too fine a fortress to abandon."

So it was decided that Jorik and Zackuth were to try their luck with the traders. Nickus went to hunt, wrecking havoc among the flocks of migrating fowl, and Craike held the tower alone.

As he turned from seeing them away, he sighted the owl wheel out from the window slit of the upper chamber, its mournful cry sounding loud. On sudden impulse he went inside to climb the stair. There had been enough of her sulking. He sent that thought before him as an order. She did not reply. Craike's heart beat faster. Was—had she gone? The rough outer wall, was it possible to climb down that?

He flung himself up the last few steps and burst into the room. She was standing there, her shorn head high as if she and not he had been the victor. When he saw her Craike stopped. Then he moved again, faster than he had climbed those stairs. For in that moment the customs of this world were clear, he knew what he must do, what he wanted to do. If this revelation was some spell of Takya's he did not care.

Later he was aroused by the caress of silk on his body, felt her cool fingers as he had felt them drawing the poison from his wounds. It was a black belt, and she

was making fast about him, murmuring words softly as she interwove strand with strand about his waist until there was no beginning nor end to be detected.

"My chain on you, man of power." Her eyes slanted down at him.

He buried both his hands in the ragged crop of hair from which those threads had been severed and so held her quiet for his kiss.

"My seal upon you, witch."

"What Tousuth would have done, you have accomplished for him," she observed pensively when he had given her a measure of freedom once again. "Only through you may I now use my power."

"Which is perhaps well for this land and those who dwell in it," he laughed. "We are now tied to a common destiny, my lady of river towers."

She sat up running her hands through her hair with some of her old caress.

"It will grow again," he consoled.

"To no purpose, except to pleasure my vanity. Yes, we are tied together. But you do not regret it, Ka-rak —"

"Neither do you, witch." There was no longer any barrier between their minds, as there was none between their bodies. "What destiny will you now spin for the two of us?"

"A great one. Tousuth knew my power-to-come. I would now realize it." Her chin went up. "And you with me, Ka-rak. By this," her hand rested lightly on the belt.

"Doubtless you will set us up as rulers over Sampur?" he said lazily.

"Sampur!" she sniffed. "This world is wide —" Her arms went out as if to encircle all which lay beyond the tower walls.

Craike drew her back to him jealously. "For that there is more than time enough. This is an hour for something else, even in a warlock's world."

END

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BERSERKER'S PREY

by FRED SABERHAGEN

The berserker owned them and would destroy them when it chose—unless they could somehow destroy it first!

The ship had been a human transport once, and it still transported humans, but now they rode like well cared for cattle on the road to market. Control of their passage and destiny had been vested in the electronic brain and auxiliary devices built into the *New England* after its capture in space by a berserker machine.

Gilberto Klee, latest captive to be thrust aboard, was more frightened than he had ever been before in his young life, and trying not to show it. Why the berserker had kept him alive at all he did not know. He was afraid to think about it. Like everyone else he had heard the horror stories — of human brains, still half-alive, built into berserker computers as auxiliary circuits; of human bodies used in the berserkers' experiments intended to produce convincing artificial men; of

humans kept as test-targets for new berserker death-rays, toxins, ways to drive men mad.

After the raid Gil and the handful of others who had been taken with him — for all they knew, the only survivors of their planet — had been separated and kept in solitary compartments aboard the great machine in space. And now the same berserker devices that had captured him, or other devices like them, had taken him from his cell and led him to an interior dock aboard the planetoid-sized berserker; and before they put him aboard this ship that had been a human transport once, he had time to see the name *New England* on her hull.

Once aboard, he was put into a chamber about twenty paces wide and perhaps fifty long, twelve or fifteen feet high. Evidently all interior decks and paneling, every-

thing non-essential, had been ripped out. There was left the inner hull, some plumbing, some light, artificial gravity and air at a good level.

There were eight other people in the chamber, standing together and talking among themselves; they fell silent as the machines opened the door and thrust Gil in with them.

“How do,” said one man to Gil, as the door closed behind the machines again. The speaker was a thin guy who wore some kind of spaceman’s uniform that now bagged loosely on his frame. As he spoke he took a cautious step forward and nodded. Everyone was watching Gil alertly — just in case he should turn out to be violently crazy, Gil supposed. Well, it wasn’t the first time in his life he’d been thrown in with a group of prisoners who looked at him like that.

“My name is Rom,” the thin guy was saying. “Ensign Rom, United Planets Space Force.”

“Gilberto Klee.”

Everyone relaxed just slightly, seeing that he was fairly normal.

“This is Mr. Hudak,” said Ensign Rom, indicating another young, once-authoritative man. Then he went on to name the others, but Gil couldn’t remember all their names at once. Three of them were women, one of them young enough to make Gil look at her with some interest. Then he saw how she kept half-crouching behind the other people, staring smiling at nothing, fingers playing unceasingly with her long and unkempt hair.

BERSERKER’S PREY

Mr. Hudak had started to ask Gil questions, his voice gradually taking on the tone used by people-in-charge conducting an examination. In school, Youth Bureau, police station, Resettlement, always there was that certain tone of voice used by processors when speaking to the processed — though Gil had never put the thought in just those words.

Hudak was asking him: “Were you on another ship, or what?” On a ship. You were not a spaceman, of course, said the tone of authority now. You were just a boy being processed somewhere, we see that by looking at you. Not that the tone of authority was intentionally nasty. It usually wasn’t.

“I was on a planet,” said Gil. “Bella Coola.”

“My God, they hit that too?”

“They sure hit the part where I was, anyway.” Gil hadn’t seen anything to make him hopeful about the rest of the planet. At the Resettlement Station where he was they had had just a few minutes’ warning from the military, and then the radios had gone silent. There wasn’t much the people at the Station could do with the little warning they had been given. Already they could see the berserker heat-rays and dust-machines playing over the woods, which was the only concealment they might have to run to.

Still, some of the kids had been trying to run when the silvery, poisonous-looking dart that was the berserker’s launch had appeared descending overhead. The Old Man had come tearing out of the com-

pound into the fields on his scooter — maybe to tell his young people to run, maybe to tell them to stand still. It didn't seem to make much difference. The ones who ran were rayed down by the enemy, and the ones who didn't were rounded up. What Gil recalled most clearly about the other kids dying was the look of agony on the Old Man's face — that one face of authority that had never seemed to be looking at Gil from the other side of a glass wall.

When all the survivors of the Station had been herded together in a bunch, standing in a little crowd under the bright sky in the middle of a vine-grown field, the machines singled out the Old Man.

Some of the machines that had landed were in the shape of metal men, some looked more like giant steel ants. "Thus to all life, save that which serves the cause of Death," said a twanging metal voice. And a steel hand picked a squash from a vine and held the fruit up and squeezed through it so it fell away in broken pulpy halves. And then the same hand, with squash-pulp still clinging to the bright fingers, reached to take the Old Man by the wrist.

The twanging voice said: "You are to some degree in control of these other life-units. You will now order them to co-operate willingly with us."

The Old Man only shook his head, no. Muttered something.

The bright hand squeezed, slowly.

The Old Man squeezed, but did

not fall. Neither did he give any order for co-operation. Gil was standing rigid, and silent, but screaming in his own mind for the Old Man to give in, to fall down and pass out, anything to make it stop . . .

But the Old Man would not fall, or pass out, or give the order that was wanted. Not even when the berserker's big hand came up to clamp around his skull, and the pressure was once more applied, slowly as before.

"What was on Bella Coola?" Ensign Rom was asking him. "I mean, military?"

"Not much, I guess," said Gil. "I don't know much about military stuff. I was just sort of studying to be a farmer."

"Oh." Rom and Hudak, the two sharp, capable-looking ones among the prisoners, exchanged glances. Maybe they knew the farms on Bella Coola had been just a sort of reform-school setup for tough kids from Earth and other crowded places. Gil told himself he didn't give a damn what anyone thought.

And then he realized that he had always been telling himself that and that maybe now, for the first time in his life, it was the truth.

In a little while the prisoners were fed. A machine brought in a big cake of mottled pink and green stuff, the same tasteless substance Gil had lived on since his capture eight or ten days ago. While he ate he sat off to one side by himself, looking at nothing and listening to the two sharp guys talking to each other in low voices.

Rom was saying: "Look we're in what was the crew quarters, right?"

"If you say so."

"Right. Now they brought me in through the forward compartment, the control room, and I had a chance to take a quick look around there. And I've paced off the length of this chamber we're in. I tell you I served aboard one of these ships for a year, I know 'em inside out."

"So?"

"Just this." There was a faint scrape and shudder through the hull. When Rom spoke again his low voice was charged with excitement. "Feel that? We're going spaceborne again, the big machine's sending this ship somewhere, for some reason. That means we would have a chance, if only . . . Listen, the circuitry that makes up the brain that's controlling this ship and keeping us prisoner — it has to be spread out along that plastic bulkhead at the forward end of this compartment we're in. On the control room side there's another plastic slab been installed, and the circuitry must be sandwiched in between the two."

"How can you know?" Hudak sounded skeptical.

Rom's voice dropped even lower, giving arguments most of which Gil could not hear. ". . . as well protected there against outside attack as anywhere in the ship . . . paced off the distance . . . overhead here, look at the modifications in the power conduits going forward..."

Hudak: "You're right, I guess. Or at least it seems probable. That

plastic barrier is all that keeps us from getting at it, then. I wonder how thick."

Gil could see from the corner of his eye that the two sharp guys were trying not to look at what they were talking about; but he was free to stare. The forward end of the big chamber they were in was a blank greenish plastic wall, pierced along the top for some pipes, and at one side by the door through which Gil had been brought in.

"Thick enough, of course. We don't have so much as a screwdriver, and we'd probably need a cutting torch or a hydraulic jack — "

Hudak nudged Rom and they fell silent. The door forward had opened, and one of the man-sized machines came in.

"Gilberto Klee," it twanged. "Come."

Rom had been right; they were spaceborne again, away from the big berserker. In the forward compartment Gil had a moment to look out before the man-sized machine turned him away from a view of stars and faced him toward a squat console, a thing of eyelike lights and a radiolike speaker, which seemed to crouch before the front of the plastic wall.

"Gilberto Klee," said the console's speaker. "It is my purpose to keep a number of human life-units alive and in good health."

For a while, Gil thought.

The speaker said: "The standard nutrient on which prisoners are fed is evidently lacking in one or more necessary trace ingredi-

ents. In several places where prisoners are being held, symptoms of nutritional deficiency have developed, including general debility, loss of sight, loss of teeth." Pause. "Are you aware of my meaning?"

"Yeah. I just don't talk much."

"You Gilberto Klee, are experienced at growing lifeforms to be consumed by human life-units as food. You will begin here in this ship to grow food for yourself and other human life-units."

There was a pause that stretched on. Gil could see the Old Man very plainly and hear him scream.

"Squash would be good," Gil said at last. "I know how to raise it, and there's lots of vitamins and stuff in the kind of squash we had at the Station. But I'd need seeds, and soil . . ."

"A quantity of soil has been provided," said the console. And the man-sized machine picked up and held open a plastic case that was divided into many compartments. "And seeds," the console added. "Which are the ones for squash?"

When Gil was returned to the prison chamber other machines were already busy there with the modifications he had said would be needed. They were adding more overhead lights and covering most of the deck space with wide, deep trays. These trays were set on the transverse girders of the inner hull, revealed by the removal of decking. Under the trays drainage pipes were being connected, while sprinklers went high overhead. Into the trays the machines were dumping soil they carted in from somewhere.

Gil gave his fellow prisoners an explanation of what was going on.

"So that's why it took you and some of the other farmers alive," said Hudak. "There must be a lot of different places where human prisoners are being held and maybe bred for experiments. Lots of healthy animals needed."

"So," said Rom, looking sideways at Gil. "You're going to do what it wants?"

"A guy has to keep himself alive," Gil said, "before he can do anything else."

Rom began in a heated whisper: "Is it better that a berserker's prisoners should be kept — " But he broke off when one of the man-sized machines paused nearby, as if it was watching and listening.

They came to call that machine the Overseer, because from then on it never left the humans, though the other machines departed when the construction job was done. Through the Overseer, the berserker-brain controlling the ship informed Gil that the other prisoners were mainly a labor pool, should he need human help in food-growing. Gil thought it over briefly. "I don't need no help — yet. Just leave the people stay here for now, but I'll do the planting."

Spacing the hills and dropping the seeds was easy enough, though the machines had left no aisles between the trays of soil except a small passage leading to the door. The trays farthest forward almost touched the plastic bulkhead, and others were laid edge to edge back

to within a few paces of the rear. The machines gave Gil a platform the size of a short surfboard, on which he could sit or lie while hovering at a steady two feet above the soil. Hudak said the thing must work by a kind of hole in the artificial gravity field. On the platform was a simple control lever by means of which Gil could cause it to move left or right, forward or back. Almost as soon as the planting was done, he had to start tending his fast-growing vines. The vines had to be twisted to make them grow along the soil in the proper direction, and then there were extra blossoms to be pinched off. A couple of the other prisoners offered to help, despite Rom's scowling at them, but Gil refused the offer. You have to have a knack, he said, and some training. And he did it all himself.

The two sharp guys had little to say to Gil about anything any more. But they were plainly interested in his surfboard, and one day while the Overseer's back was turned Rom took Gil hurriedly aside. Rom whispered quickly and feverishly, like a man taking what he knows is a crazy chance, fed up enough to take it anyway. "The Overseer doesn't pay much attention to you any more when you're working, Gil. You could take that platform of yours —," Rom's right hand, extended horizontally, rammed the tips of its fingers into the palm of his vertical left hand — "into the wall. If you could only make a little crack in the plastic, a hole big enough to stick a hand through, we'd have

some kind of chance. I'd do it but the Overseer won't let anyone but you near the platform."

Gil's lip curled. "I ain't gonna try nothin' like that."

The thin sickly man was not used to snotty kids talking back to him, and he flared feebly into anger. "You think the berserker's going to take good care of you?"

"The machine built the platform, didn't it?" Gil demanded. Wouldn't give us nothing we could bust through there with. Not if there's anything so important as you think back there."

For a moment Gil thought Rom was going to swing at him, but other people held Rom back. And suddenly the Overseer was no longer standing on the other side of the chamber with its back turned, but right in front of Rom, staring at him with its lenses. A few long, long seconds passed before it was plain that the machine was not going to do anything this time. But maybe its hearing was better than the sharp guys had thought.

"They ain't ripe yet, but we can eat some of 'em anyway," said Gil a couple of weeks later, as he slid off his platform to join the other people in the few square yards of living space left along the chamber's rear bulkhead. Cradled in Gil's arm were half a dozen dull yellowish ovoids. He turned casually to the Overseer and asked: "Got a knife?"

There was a pause. Then the Overseer extended a hand, from which a wicked blade extended it-

self like an extra finger. "I will divide the fruit," it said, and proceeded to do so with great precision.

The little group of prisoners had come crowding around, some interest stirring in their dull eyes. They ate greedily the little morsels that the Overseer doled out; anything tasted good after weeks or months of nothing but the changeless pink-and-green cake. Rom, after a scarcely perceptible hesitation, joined the others in eating some raw squash. He showed no enjoyment as the others did. It was just that a man had to be healthy, he seemed to be thinking, before he could persuade others to get themselves killed, or let themselves sicken and die.

Under the optimum conditions provided by the berserker at Gil's direction, only weeks rather than months were needed for the trays to become filled with broad roundish leaves, spreading above a profusion of thickening, ground-hugging vines. Half of the fast-growing fruit was hidden under leaves, while others burgeoned in the full light, and a few hung over the edges of the trays, resting their new weight on the girders under the trays or sagging all the way to the deck.

Gil maintained that the time for a proper harvest was still an indefinite number of days away. But each day he now came back to the living area with a single squash to be divided by the Overseer's knife; and each day the fruit he brought was larger.

He was out in the middle of his "fields," lying prone on his platform and staring moodily at a

swelling squash, when the sound of a sudden commotion back in the living area made him raise himself and turn his head.

The center of the commotion was the Overseer. The machine was hopping into the air again and again, as if the brain that controlled it had gone berserker indeed. The prisoners cried out, scrambling to get away from the Overseer. Then the machine stopped its mad jumping, and stood turning in a slow circle, shivering, the knife-finger on its hand flicking in and out.

"Attention, we are entering battle," the Overseer proclaimed suddenly, dead monotone turned up to deafening volume. "Under attack. All prisoners are to be — they will all — "

It said more, but at a speed no human ear could follow, gibbering up the frequency scale to end in something like a human scream. The mad girl who never spoke let out a blending yell of terror.

The Overseer tottered and swayed, brandishing its knife. It babbled and twitched — like an old man with steel fingers vising his head. Then it leaned forward, leaned further, and fell on its face, disappearing from Gil's sight below the level of trays and vines, striking the deck with a loud clang.

That clang was echoed, forward, by a cannon-crack of sound. Gil had been keeping himself from looking in that direction, but now he turned. The plastic wall had been split across the center third of its extent by a horizontal fissure a few feet above the trays.

Gil lay still on his platform, watching cautiously. Ensign Rom came charging across the trays and past him, trampling the crop unheedingly, to hurl himself at the wall. Even cracked, it resisted his onslaught easily, but he kept pounding at it with his fists, trying to force his fingers into the tiny crevice. Gil looked back the other way. The Overseer was still down. Hudak was trying the forward door and finding it locked. Then first he, and then the other people, were scrambling over trays to join Rom and help him.

Gil tested his platform's control and found that it no longer worked, though the platform was still aloft. He got up from it, setting foot in soil for the first time in a couple of months; it was a good feeling. Then he lifted the thin metal platform sideways out of its null and carried it over to where everyone else was already struggling with the wall. "Here," Gil said, "try sticking the corner of this in the crack and pryin'."

It took them several hours of steady effort to make a hole in the wall big enough for Rom to squeeze through. In a minute he was back, crying and shouting, announcing freedom and victory. They were in control of the ship!

When he came back the second time, he was in control of himself as well, and puzzled. "What cracked the wall, though? There's no fighting, no other ships around —"

He fell silent as he joined Hudak in staring down the narrow space

between the farthest forward tray and the slightly bulged-in section of wall where the strain had come to force the first crack above. Gil had already looked down there into the niches between wall and transverse girder. Those niches were opened up now, displaying their contents—the dull yellowish fruit Gil had guided into place with a pinch and a twist of vine. The fruit had been very small then, but now they were huge, and cracked gently open with the sudden release of their own internal pressure.

Funny pulpy things that a man could break with a kick, or a steel hand squeeze through like nothing. . . . "But growth is stobborn, boys," the Old Man always said, squinting to read a dial, then piling more weights onto the machine with the growing squash inside it, a machine he'd set up to catch kids' eyes and minds. "Can't take a sudden shock. Slow. But now, look. Five thousand pounds pressure per square inch. All from millions of tiny cells, just growing, all together. Ever see a tree root swell under a concrete walk?"

It was on Rom's and Hudak's faces now that they understood. Gil nodded at them once and smiled just faintly to make sure they knew it had been no accident. Then the smile faded from his face as he looked up at the edges of broken plastic, the shattered tracery of what had been a million sandwiched printed circuits.

"I hope it was slow," Gil said. "I hope it felt the whole thing."

END

ALL TRUE BELIEVERS

by HOWARD L. MORRIS

Illustrated by FINLAY

*The baron's job was to prevent
a revolt — by passing on the
message that would trigger it!*

I

The Chief Porter of Ness House tiptoed into the study of the man who to him represented omnipotence. Omnipotence was in a good mood. Sir Hubert Wulf-Leigh, K.K. S., Baron Minor, was usually in a good mood when he was totaling up the monthly reports on the wine duty which fell to the Lord Deputy Warden of the Ness by delegation of royal prerogative.

Looking up smiling from his accounts, he asked casually, "Who is it this time?"

"The Senior Captain of the merchanters, m'Lord. 'E says 'ee sent for him."

"Hugh Cruffin, eh? That's right, I did send for him. Show him in." There was a few moments' pause and then the dean of merchant captains entered. He was a tall, though now somewhat stooped, figure of a man, whose cap clutched in gnarled

arthritic fingers revealed an unruly and rather sparse head of white hair as he followed the porter in.

Seeing the captain obviously ill at ease, the baron began with amenities of the more commonplace variety. "Some rum, captain? No? Then you'll try some of this wine, best Madura, out of a Spiniel prize. I'll keep you company on this cigar. The damn doctors have warned me to avoid the delights of the grape lest my old liver trouble kick up anew, and my darling Arabella keeps careful tabs on the wine flasks."

This confession of human frailty did much to put Captain Hugh at his ease. "You sent for me, 'Lord. I hope we can do the business quickly. I sail on *Milady o' Plymness* at four bells of the afternoon watch. That's two o'clock, sir."

For a moment Sir Hubert frowned slightly. "I know that, Master Cruffin. You know I was Confidential Clerk to the Board of Lord High Admirals and was sort of a seaman by proxy. Now to the point: I remember that when the Freunchies and their sky boats threatened the Ness, you told me about false lighters and wreckers, didn't you?"

"Aye, I told 'yee all right. And 'ee used it to give 'en a royal rousting." The old man chuckled appreciatively at the recalled memory.

"Now tell me this after a moment of careful thought: Are there any more wreckers on this coast?"

"No, my Lord." The aged captain did not hesitate more than a few seconds. "There be none. The Navy and the Coast Patrol cleaned

'em out fifteen or twenty years ago, and I'll fight any man that says different."

"I'm afraid the men who made the charges aren't much on fighting," was the placatory response of the official ruler of the Ness. "You've heard of the Compassionate Confraternity of St. Angus of the Open Hands."

A puzzled look came over Cruffin's face. "The compassionate Confraternity, who be'en? Oh, 'ee means the black 'uns." A look of feral hatred now came over the merchantman's face. "Ee'd know it would be'en with sneaking ways and 'eir oaths to the Bishop of New Byzantium; besides which 'en are Pantlerists."

The Warden mildly chided him for this display of bigotry. "Captain Hugh, you shouldn't talk that way. You sound as if the Act of Forbearance was never passed."

The old man waved a triumphant finger in Sir Hubert's face. "And 'oo sat in Lindesnes Palace when mun was passed? Rupert Pantler, the last Pantler, that's who mun was!"

"Well, a lot of water has flown under Lindesnes Bridge since then. At any rate, you know that the Angus brothers have the responsibility for the burial of all Cullenlanders who die on our shores or in our country and, as many of them do, die destitute. You also know about the wreck on Exmouth Head the other day?"

The dean of captains nodded gravely. "Aye, I do. But mun was

not wreckers. Mun was foolishments. 'En showed too much canvas, 'en did. Fore and main sails, fore and main topsails and main t'gallants, 'en was making. And to come about Exmouth Head with twenty knots o' wind blowing man was not foolishments, mun was suicide."

"Well, foolishness or suicide, they were thrown onto Exmouth Head four days past and all hands perished. The next day the sea gave up one of her victims — a red-headed man, and by that red head, a medal round his neck and th' cut o' his clothes identified as a Cullenlander. We gave him over to the Angus Brothers and the next day the Superior of the order called on me, said there were indications he was carrying papers of importance to his family in Cullenland and that those papers were no longer on him. I convinced him of the innocence of the Ness or the Navy and he suggested wreckers. I thought of you and had you sent for."

"As I said, m'Lord, 'ere be no more wreckers, but — " the old man's face brightened — "'ere still be strand-gleaners. A strand-gleaner be not outlawed. He can take any goods found on the shore, not on the person of a corpse and broken clear of the hull of a ship."

Sir Hubert made a tent of his fingers and looked through them at the captain smiling ironically. "And what act of Parliament made this strand-gleaning lawful?"

"'Ere be no act of Parliament made mun lawful. Mun be the law of the sea-folk joined with the

strand-dwellers and handed down father to son for six hundred years. Mun is older than Parliament."

Sir Hubert shrugged. "I guess that is potent law. But in this case, I think we can tap stronger sources like the King's prerogative in flotsam and jetsam. I shall look further into this strand-gleaning. Tell me, are there many strand-gleaners at Exmouth Head?"

"Oh no, m'Lord. 'En be agreed be the strand-gleaners that one on 'en shall have a stretch of coast to munsself. The strand-gleaner at Exmouth Head be the taverner Will Devers and mun came down from his father Jack Devers and his gaffer Tom Devers an' back all the way in 'eir line. 'En be main proud of the honor, m'Lord."

"I don't doubt it," snapped the Lord Deputy. "Picking the bones of Briden's merchant ships! I shall call on Mr. Devers. And I pray you, Captain, do not send word to Master Devers that I am coming. I plan to fall on Mr. Devers by accident. I'll arrange that accident soon."

The captain chuckled appreciatively. "'E be a smooth 'un, 'ee be. 'Ee plans an accident. Mun be some accident."

"Yes," frowned Wilfly, "we plan accidents around here. Here are two royals for your trouble, Captain, and there'll be two royals more for your silence too if the innkeeper is taken by surprise."

"Tie me up and throw me in the chain locker, should mun get out by my fault. Why, bewig me, I'll have the sailmaker sew up my lips with linen thread."

"That won't be necessary, Captain. Just go on board the *Milady o' Plymness* and leave the rest to me."

After the mariner went out the Baron Minor sat a few moments lost in thought, then snapped his fingers and walked from his study to the front hall. He called up the stairs, "Arabella, my love!"

"Coming, Wilfly," came the prompt and melodious answer of Dame Arabella Pepinart Wulf-Leigh, the beautiful daughter of Lord High Admiral Alexander Pepinart, a slender, sparkling-eyed, curly-haired brunette. She had wed the Lord Deputy Warden of the Ness eighteen months previous, two months after the defeat of the Freunch descent on the Plymness. "What did you call me for, my dear?"

"Partly to look at you and see how lovely you are," cooed the Knight of the King's Strand, "and that's most important. Of somewhat lesser importance is an invitation. How would you like to leave Wilfly Junior here with his governess, pack a hamper of cold lunch and go out for a day on the green and possibly spend the night at a country inn?"

"Corking!" she enthused, then frowned. "And what about work? Do you have some scheme of inspection or some other job in mind while you're down there enjoying life on the green?"

Sir Hubert grinned, an abashed sheepish grin. "My darling, you should have been a thief catcher for the Royal Assizes. I did intend to go down to Exmouth to inspect the

lighthouse there. I have a responsibility, you know, and whenever a ship is cast up I must go down and quiz the lighthouse keeper. I haven't done it yet in the wreck of the *Leveret* a few nights back. So if that would spoil it for you — " He trailed off into an embarrassed silence.

"You darling old work-donkey of a man! Of course you wouldn't spoil it. We'll still be together on the coach and lunching on the green, and at the country inn. You ought to be kissed for thinking of this, in fact." She fitted action to the suggestion and threw her arms about his neck. She planted a light but tender smack on his lips, then darted away, laughing, before he could catch her up. "Not now, my love. Later on the green and still better later at the inn; now I must go and order the steward to pack a good lunch and get myself into some country clothing. I'll be down in half an hour." Noting Wulf Leigh's eyebrows raised in amused and quizzical challenge, she amended hastily: "Well, in an hour at any rate."

II

It was a glowingly radiant couple that Will Devers, the Taverner of Exmouth, welcomed to his courtyard under his grimly ominous sigh of the "Foundered Ship" that evening. Milady's eyes sparkled. Her every gesture was filled with the innocent enjoyment of the afternoon and the promise of earthier pleasures in the night to come. The Deputy

Warden was tanned and relaxed. There was a slight knitting of his brows as if some unhappy thought lay in ambush at the back of his brain.

Will Devers was in seventh heaven. He hustled around and bumbled as he hustled. "No, m'Lord, Milady, mun be'n't often that quality folk like 'ee honor my humble way station. Avast, ye lubber!" he bel-lowed at a porter. "Don't handle her Ladyship's portateau so roughly."

"You were Navy?" Sir Hubert inquired, stirred by the turn of the host's speech.

"Aye, sir. Mun's right, I was four years cook's mate on the *Lyonesse*, six years cook on the old *Indomitable* and two years captain's steward on the *Thunderer*. Then I came back here a trained man and took over the inn from my old dad. Mun's been the way we Dever's have readied oursens for three or four generations."

The Baron Minor chuckled. "I'm glad you mentioned that service as steward; else I was set to walk out. Navy ration cooking isn't my idea of good backround for a taverner."

"No, my Lord, mun ben't," agreed the landlord. He ushered them to seats at a large oak table, and began to lavish attentions on them. "Some wine, m'Lord, Milady? I have some good Chambergnon, some passable Madura —"

"Don't bother with your list, Master Devers, just bring a bottle of Rossa."

"Darling." The soft word was made all full of sharp and thorny

edges, and Lady Arabella's glance would have frozen the wine in its flagons. Sir Hubert got the message.

"I'm afraid I forgot, Master Taverner," he explained, "that my doctor in Lindesnes forbade me the pleasures of the vine. I indulged a little too much in those pleasures in recent years and my liver survives only on sufferance."

The landlord stood in silent sympathy for this sudden revelation of human frailty in one of so great a station, then shook his head sadly. "Ten bells!" the unusual sailor's oath burst from his lips. "To be so rich and yet so poor." Then his face brightened. "'Er doctor didn't warn 'ee beyond the vine, did he? He didn't warn 'ee to beware the fruits of the tree, did he?"

The Baron Minor fixed him with an intense stare. "No, he didn't, Master Devers. What do you have in mind?"

"Well, sir, mun's perry, made of pears, from a tree. So wholesome mun be, the doctors here-parts give mun to colicky children. Shall I bring 'ee some?"

The Lord Deputy Warden looked at his wife who shrugged a grudging assent. "Very well, host, you may bring us some."

The perry, when it came, was not exactly an attractive drink, a murky gray color with some slight overtones of green and gold. Wulf Leigh raised his glass to Lady Arabella in a brave toast. "Here's to you, my lady, may this drink exceed its looks in the quality of its

taste as you, my lady, exceed all other ladies in beauty." With a comical grimace, he murmured: "It had better! For in its looks, it puts me in mind of some of those half poisonous potions they fed me when I was taking the cure at Inverhock-ing."

They were very pleasantly surprised. The perry went down smoothly and sweetly, with just enough fermentation in the drink to add a faintly acrid tang. They enjoyed a second glass before the roast was on the table and at the end of the meal, Sir Hubert ordered the landlord to put six bottles with their baggage and contracted for the weekly delivery of six bottles to the steward of Ness House. "And if the good King comes to Ness House, I shall introduce him to your perry. And a pox take me," enthused the Warden of the Ness, "if you don't get a warrant or patent or whatever they call it as the royal purveyor of perry to His Majesty William the Fifth."

"'Is blood!" gasped the innkeeper. Then, suddenly abashed, "Regretting the profanity to 'er Ladyship, but mun gave such a start; me a warranted royal purveyor with the right to stamp the royal coat of arms on every bottle. Why, I'd have to double-size my orchard!"

"I don't doubt it," gruffed the eminent semi-naval person. Then his face, which had been relaxed a few moments before, now suddenly straightened into the grim visage of a sentencing judge. "If my Lordship can, I can also take away. I'd have a word with you, Master De-

vers, in your cabinet or study or counting room or wherever you keep your accounts. Arabella, go up to your chambers and indulge yourself in the totally unnecessary fripperies that you needlessly undergo to make yourself beautiful."

The former Miss Pepinart gasped in pleasure. "Why, Wilfly, that's one of the nicest things you've ever said to me. Get done with your business quickly. I'll be waiting up." With an arch-conspiratorial smile on her face, she flitted nimbly upstairs.

The taverner led the way into his counting room and watched uneasily as his lordship shut the door as soon as he had lit the candle.

"If mun's the Chambergnon that ires 'ee 'ere are lawful ways of getting mun. I can explain . . ."

"Don't worry about that, host. I'm not after smuggled merchandise tonight, even though it might go better with you if you turned up at the prize auction at Plymness more often than you do now if you're going to sell Freunch wines. I aim to make inquiry into another and more delicate matter. I refer of course to one of the ways in which you acquire property."

"'Ee means, sir?" The innkeeper assumed a baffled look.

Sir Hubert's words were sharp and incisive. "I mean, sir, an infringement upon one of the King's rights, the right of the King to possession of all valuables cast up or thrown overboard from wrecks or ships in danger of foundering, the prerogative of flotsam and jetsam. I charge you, Master Devers, with infringe-

ment of that right. I charge you with being the strand-gleaner for Exmouth-Head."

Blustered the hosteler, "'oo told 'ee that? Mun be a lie!"

"The man I got the information from is quite reliable," Wulf-Leigh responded coldly. "I would not advise you to deny it or I shall have to take strong measures."

Poor Will shivered. "And 'ee'd be the man to do mun." Then, a little defiantly. "Very well, my Lord. I own to mun. I be the strand-gleaner for Exmouth and my father and his father before him as far back as our family Bible shows."

The Deputy Warden spoke through tautened lips with a grim smile on his face. "You are not setting up a prescriptive right adverse to the King, are you, Taverner? That is called constructive treason and the penalty is death — in the case of a commoner by hanging, or of a noble by the axe — forfeiture of all goods and chattels, attainder of real property and burial in Pauper's Ground."

"My Lord," sobbed the new terrified Devers, "'ee'd do mun to a poor man for picking a few gauds and baubles off the beach?"

"Don't be alarmed, Will, I'm not going to do that to you yet. But you must work with me. You know the wreck of the *Leveret* three or four nights ago? There was a Cullenlander washed up on the beach. He is reported by some powerful persons of my acquaintance to be carrying papers when he drowned. Do you have those papers?"

The strand-gleaner hesitated a moment, weighing the advantages of truth against lie. Truth won. "Aye, m'Lord, I do; as I have most everything else I have ever gleaned from the strand. Mun be strand-gleaner's law that he must hold and not sell the gifts of the sea lest he be in dire straits." With which words he pulled out a two by four foot trunk and opened it to reveal the fruits of two hundred years of Devers's gleanings. Bracelets, brooches, gold and silver candlesticks, piles of coins glittered dully along with leather objects, books, piles of banknotes still stained by the sea.

The Baron Minor whistled in admiration. "There must be a million royals worth of goods in that chest. You're a rich man, Landlord."

"'Ere mus' be. But I've never counted mun. Mun be bad luck for a strand-gleaner to count his goods. Gaffer did mun, and the next day he got caught in a patch of sink-sand and was nought left o' him but his hat. 'Ere be the papers ye're wanting. I broke the seal on the package and found nought but six o' those five Naflon pieces and a silly letter." He handed over a thin packet of oilskin.

The government representative huffed imperiously, "You shouldn't break seals, even Naflon seals. It's a bad habit to get into. Silly letter, eh? What's silly about it?"

"See for yourself, m'Lord. Mun be nought to understand save the name at the end, Ian Macconnail. Mun be the name o' one of the Cullenlanders rebels who fled to Naflon's court."



Sir Hubert looked at the now unfolded paper with growing interest and intensity. Aside from the bold signature of Ian Macconail there were eight lines divided into two groups, one of six lines and one of two. The first group read in large capital script:

TXEAXEBTXECBXED
TXEEXPXEFEXEGPXEHLXEI
IXEJCXKTXELTXEMFXEN
AXEOTXEPBXEQWXERRXES
DXETTXEUTXEVFXEWLXEX
LXEYCXEZ

Then having a third of the page blank were the small case script letters:

o.l.r.e.h.r.d.a.a.n.e.h.w.i.l.
r.e.l.a.h.w.i.o.i.u.

"Mun be queer, ben't mun?" probed the innkeeper, breaking in on Wulf-Leigh's intense scrutiny.

"Mun be queer indeed," ironically answered the safekeeper of the Ness. "It's the kind of queer thing that deserves a further looking into by my office. Taverner Devers, I shall look into the possibility of getting you hereditary letters patent as strand-gleaner of Exmouth Head for the good service you rendered the commonweal in preserving this letter."

"'ee means," squeaked the innkeeper, "that mun'd be legal to glean the strand? I don't know, sir. Would take all the joy out of mun, knowing mun were within the law. But thank 'ee kindly, sir."

"Ha!" the Warden teased tri-

umphantly. "So you admit you've been acting outside the law! I could confiscate all your ill-gotten gains. But I shan't. You shall have your letters patent at any rate. You may even keep five of the six Naflon sinkers that you have from the dead Cullenlander. I'll need the sixth for evidence if the message reads as I think it will."

Will Devers was agog, trying to keep up with the fast-acting mind of the Ness chief. "'ee means 'ee's solved mun?"

"Not yet," acknowledged Sir Hubert. "But I shall and soon. I would advise you strongly to say nothing of this to anyone. Let no one know that you gave me this paper; not even your wife."

The ex-Particular Clerk to the Board of Lord High Admirals opened the door of the counting room and walked out, the letter clutched in his fist, muttering: "So the Compassionate brethren of St. Angus have friends whose family receives letters from Ian Maconnail. This will require looking into."

He came up into the chambers prepared for him, kissed his wife lightly as she waited his coming clad in a night-rail and with the pillows propped up behind her and then, lighting a spill from the low burning coals on the hearth, lit two tapers, took a sheet of paper from his dispatch case and set out to break the message.

Lady Arabella watched for a few moments with impatience and annoyance writ large on her face and finally spoke. "Darling — " the endearment had an icy edge —

"aren't you going to come to bed? I thought we were going to do nothing but enjoy ourselves at the inn. That can surely wait till morning."

"No, my dear." Sir Hubert's lips were taut. "I'm afraid it can't. I must arrive at Plymness at a reasonable hour of the morning so that none will suspect I've acquired and been working on important papers. Besides which I'm doing it in part for you."

Her tone was less annoyed, more interesting. "How's that?"

"It pleases you to be Lady Deputy Warden of the Ness?" He waited her answering nod. "How would you like to be Milady Lieutenant of Cullenland?"

"Pooh! No Baroness Minor could have that title. I'd have to be a Viscountess for that. You mean that paper — " the daughter of Lord High Admiral Pepinard was born and bred to pride of place and position as the reward of service — "can spell a viscount's rank and the Lord Lieutenancy?"

"I can't be sure, but it jolly well might. We will have to solve it first, and then see what message the rebel Ian Maconnail is sending from his exile. Have I your leave to work on, lady love?"

She made a half-comic moue of disdain, then murmured in a voice overlaid with tenderness: "Go on, my kind old work-donkey. You'd probably work with my leave or without, so go with your little game and make me a viscountess."

"Thank you, wife." He used a gruff tone to hide his own growing

passion, and turned again to the hidden message before him.

He murmured aloud as his thinking began to warm up: "Let's see now; this can't be too hard a cipher to break. It's one designed to be read by men of limited education as most of these rebels are. This naturally limits the ingenuity of the code. Those letters X and E appear repeated too often to be without meaning. Probably it marks something about the letters before and behind it. Now before is the most logical choice, so to think like a Cullenlander, we'll chose letters after. Let's see now, XE A XE B C. Why, that's nothing more or less than an alphabetic progression! That's a trap for the unwary cipher clerk and I walked into it a little. Let's see what we get with the letters before it.

"T A T B T P E P L I C T S S A T B W R A D T T F L L C. That doesn't make sense. How I wish Groberd, the cipher clerk of the Lord High Admirals, were here now! How about those two bottom lines: they don't have XE's. in front of them. Maybe that's meant as an interposition cipher. Let's see now: T O A L T R B E T H P R E D P A L A I N C E T W F I A L T R E W I R I D A T T W S I L O C U. That's not much better than the first essay. Let's see what else might signify a meaning. How about those periods after each of the letters in the last two lines? Are they decorations or do they delimit the words? Let's try again: T O A L T R B E"

Suddenly the Warden of the Ness sprang from the table, dashed over to his wife, planted a hearty smack

on her unprepared lips and exclaimed: 'I've got it! It's a cipher of interposition and abbreviation. Listen to this: 'To all true believers the Prince Edward Pantler lands in Celtland the twenty-fifth all true believers will rise at dawn the twenty-fifth long live Cullenland!'

"So there's the message to a needy family that the Father Superior of the Angusards was so concerned about! I think Captain Cruffin was right. They are a pack of Pantlerists."

"So what are you going to do about it, my relentless husband?" Though the words were harsh, their tone was melting.

His words were crisp and incisive as he pulled open his stock loosened and shed shirt and riding coat. "Tonight, my dear, I will do absolutely nothing. We can't go dashing into town alarming everyone and especially the good brethren of St. Angus. Tomorrow morning we will ride sedately into town, and I shall call on the Father Superior and we shall indulge in a little mutual wool pulling — he over my eyes and I over his. After that I shall have a talk with my signal yeoman and see how our dry land mast and hoist communications system works with a message to Lindesnes. As for tonight, I have other fish to fry — beginning with a delicious little trout who is too fond — " The warmth and tenderness in his voice belying even the mock anger in his words — "of calling her loving husband an old work-donkey."

"Wilfy." Her voice melted into complete surrender. "Be gentle with

me when you devour me, won't you?"

III

The Deputy Warden's coach drew up in front of the grim-facaded, weather-streaked, gray-stone building that housed the Priory of the Order of St. Angus. The Lord Deputy kissed his wife lightly, dismounted from the coach and entered the ante-hall of the Priory.

A novice of the order met him there and said he would announce him to the Father Superior. The ante-hall was dimly lit, as befitted the former ownership of the building, a powerful noble family that had taken part in all the turmoils, intrigues and civil wars that had plagued Briden throughout the dark and middle ages and the beginning of the modern era. To a family of that sort, narrow slits of windows that arrows could be fired through or hot lead and oil dripped out of made sense.

Two dim lamps called special attention to one of the walls, where a smoke-begrimed mural showed St. Angus bargaining with one of the pagan petty kings of ancient Cullenland for the freedom of a small enslaved boy. Sir Hubert was engrossed in studying this mural when Father Superior entered noiselessly and coughed softly to attract Wulf-Leigh's attention.

"Ah, Father Superior, I'm glad to see you. You're in good health?"

"Better in health of the spirit, my Lord Deputy, than of the body; but we accept whatever bounties in that

matter the Lord bestows upon us. You, too, seem well. Your old liver complaint has not bothered you?"

"Yes," he huffed, "I enjoy good health and expect to fill the Lord's commandment to be fruitful and multiply. You may wonder why I have come?"

"I do," the Angusard replied laconically. "I had hoped it might be concerned with the papers of the unfortunate Tachacullen — pardon me, you eastern folk would call him a Cullenlander, but we of the breed call them sons of Cullen or Tachacullen in the old tongue. His family may suffer great distress if they do not get their hands on the papers."

Sir Hubert could be a consummately smooth liar when his country's interests were at stake. He lied now: "I have some strong leads, Father, but they are still not ready for the oven. They are a close-mouthed lot, these men of the Ness shires, and they have some strange customs and odd beliefs. One of the customs is called strand-gleaning, the gathering of chattels spread along the beach by the dark angel of storms. I am fully convinced that the strand-gleaners have your unfortunate friend's possessions. But I must move slowly and cautiously. These strand folk have some odd beliefs too."

"For instance?" The father's voice was cold, his face an expressionless mask.

"They all have a deep and abiding belief that you of the Confraternity are Pantlerists."

The eyes in the expressionless mask flickered for an instant — with hate, defiance, fear? — then the

emotional visor dropped down again. "And you, what do you think? Are we Pantlerists?"

Sir Hubert closed up his figurative helmet and gave back just as curtly as his adversary: "I believe nothing I cannot prove before a judge and jury to their satisfaction and that of the public hangman."

Now a faint smile cracked the mask. "Then you believe in our innocence of these absurd charges?"

"I did not say that," the Knight of the King's Strand pointed up the fine distinction. "I said only that I was not convinced of your guilt. There's a sharp difference between one and the other. There are two things I should like to know to that I can move more effectively against those holding the papers. First off, how did you know of his status as a messenger, and second, why this unseemly haste about the delivery of the papers?"

The priest answered cautiously: "It's more or less a legal matter." Seeing the raised eyebrows of the Deputy Warden, he explained hurriedly, "You know the law of the deadman's hand. It's not in your British law, but in Cullenland and some parts of Celtland, it is still held by. It is decreed that any property belonging to one who has passed must be delivered to either the inheritors, a chief or a priest of the Holy Church within ten days or else must be destroyed or buried with the deceased."

Sir Hubert grumped. "That's a strange kind of law. What court handed it down?"

Father Superior raised his eyes to heaven momentarily as if calling upon the supernatural powers to free him from his tormentor. "That's very old; the ancient code of Patran-na-Tachan, the fathers of the clan or Chiefs' Law. It is very practical in dealing with property matters in courts where it is still observed."

"Oh, of course you mean the hedge courts. I've heard that they cause a great deal of trouble for British justice. But even granting the jurisdiction and rightness of this law you still haven't explained how you knew him to be a courier, and where from he was carrying messages."

The priest made the heaven-seeking grimace once again. "You know, sir, that he had certain empty wallets and an empty money belt. There were certain marks on those wallets which proclaimed him a courier. As to the origin of his messages, that's a trifle embarrassing. You know in the last Pantlerist risings several hundred Tachacullen were forced to flee their land and settle in Fraunce. These men had family left in the old land, helpless wives and children, aged mothers and disabled fathers. These men have grown old and died in the fifty years since that futile revolt but their sons and grandsons carry on the task. They serve in French bodyguard troops. Since Naflon has seen fit to honor, to some extent, the Pantler claimant, they serve in the Pantler court and they send money home. They support, kinfolk, orphanages, schools."

Sir Hubert had caught the priest in a lie, but he chose not to press his advantage. He knew that no wallets or money belts had been on the Cullenlander's body when it was found. "Very well," he lied blandly in retort, "these are good things. We shall for once forget about possible legal results of having intercourse with His Majesty's enemies and shall endeavor to so press the folk of Exmouth so that you shall have the document in the ten days prescribed by the high and puissant court of the hedgerow. Good day, Father Superior."

Ness House was regarded as part of the Navy establishment. As a result the Deputy Warden of the Ness had at his disposal a signal yeoman and a towering backyard mast that tied into a chain of masts that stretched across the country to provide for speedy communications with Navy House, the headquarters of the Board of Lord High Admirals. Now the youthful signaler came into the study of the master of Ness House, eager to end his long days of relative idleness. "You sent for me, sir. Have a message?"

"No," sarcastically drawled Sir Hubert. "I invited you here for a game of chess." Changing to a more kindly tone, he went on: "Yes, I do have a message. You haven't had too many during the last year so I hope your skills are up to it."

"Aye, sir. They are. Me and the other signal chaps keep our hands in with messages under a signal that warns practice message, disregard."

"A good idea. But this message is not for practice. Make: Ness House to Navy House for transmittal to King's First Minister. Have uncovered treasonous plot. Urgent you meet me. Cannot afford to move more than one day's ride from Plymness, Wulf-Leigh Deputy Warden. Make that message with as few hoists as is possible. How long do you think that will take?"

"That will take some doing, sir. Let's see Ness House number, Navy House number, signal forward instead of transmit (with your leave, sir) King's First Minister (one hoist for that) Use an event past hoist instead of have and the respondent signal for guns uncovered leaving off the guns pennant; treasonable, we'll have to spell out; the Navy don't have a signal for treason. Plot we can get easily enough — put up plot a course and leave off the signal for course. Urgent, thank the Lord is an easy one, almost all our Lord High Admirals' messages have that hoist; meeting we'll use another single hoist; numerical and a day sign; ride we'll have to spell out, make the number for Plymness. That's twenty-five pennants at five seconds a hoist. That's two minutes and five seconds. Allow ten seconds a pennant for make-ready. That's four minutes and ten seconds or six minutes and fifteen seconds for the whole message. There are twelve masts to Navy House. Allow ten seconds a mast for alerting the yeomen and you get seventy-seven minutes to Lindesnes, allowing a half an hour

to deliver the message to King's first and seventy-five minutes for return (everybody will be alerted by then). And you will have your answer in a little over three hours."

Actually it was three hours and thirty-five minutes before the message came back: "Meeting agreeable. Expect you at Vaughanby house two hours after sunrise tomorrow. Vaughan King's First Minister."

Vaughanby was a great, red-brick mansion in the Williamic style, built some men said by the graft and bribe-taking that were almost a prerequisite of a First Minister's early years in the office. Now, with his material needs satisfied, Vaughan thirsted for glory and regard as a pre-eminent statesman. He seemed likely to get that meed of honor for his conduct of the Naflonic war.

His greeting to Sir Hubert was traditionally laconic. "Well, Wilfly, you've gotten me to ride sixty leagues in a day. You've done the same. That message of yours had better be of earth-shaking importance."

"It is, sir," the Baron Minor assured him. "There is to be a rising in Cullenland, and to some extent the Confraternity of St. Angus of the Open Hand are subject to the charge of suborning the revolt."

"There is always a revolt coming in Cullenland," the First Minister denigrated, as he led the way to the dining hall where a buffet table awaited them. "The skill in government is to find out when and who and how."

"I can give you that information. The rising is set for dawn of the twenty-fifth to coincide with a Pantlerist landing in Celtland. Here are the proofs." He spread out the coded letter and his copy of it, and demonstrated the way he had broken it down. The chief of the government was impressed and studied it carefully while Wulf-Leigh attacked a kipper and pewter mug of steaming tea.

Now the First Minister showed some enthusiasm for the find. "This is good show, S'r'ubert. You've given us an exact date on the Pantler Landing which he expected but didn't know quite when. But — " here Vaughn frowned — "you've also thrown in a Cullenlander revolt which will divide our forces and may afford the Pantlerists some success."

"Suppose, sir, that the Cullenlander revolt and the Pantler landing failed to occur on the same day. Would that help?"

"Would that help? By the bones of Henry Pantler, would that help! With four days leeway between them we could crush the Cullenlanders, recross the sea and still be in time to crush Edward Pantler when he lands in Celtland or vice versa. But how are you going to do it? How do you outwit a rather shrewd pack of rebels and the equally astute nest of Angusards whom you've unmasked or are going to unmask?"

"My good Lord Vaughan," the watcher of the western gate assured him, "I have some reputation for this sort of deception. In fact I've gotten the sword tap for King's

Strand for false-lighting the Freunch to their defeat above Plymnness. If I can't do the same to a bunch of Cullenlanders just as easily, I ought to turn back my sashes. Are you sure that given a four-days' switch in the rebel plans you can outfight them?"

"If you update the revolt by four days, I'm sure enough to promise you that I'll turn in my seals of office if I fail. You see, Macconnail has his strength concentrated in three areas, the back streets of Elmore city, the glens around Dunican Bay and in what were once, before the rising that broke clan, the Macconnail lands north of Moiree. If we strike those three areas in overwhelming force, the rising will die a — boring. Do you need any help from Lindesnes?"

Wulf-Leigh thought for a moment then nodded, "There is one thing where you could help me. You have a certain influence with the court of Royal Assize and Jail Delivery sitting in Lindesnes?"

Vaughan harumphed: "I have that influence. How do you choose to use it? You know it would help the war against Naflon no end to get the Cullenlander rebels off our backs and the Pantlerists over the hip."

The Baron Minor outlined the help he sought and got the promise full cooperation, including the use of a communicating mast at Vaughanby for a message to Lindesnes to get the judges of Royal Assizes off to a running start on the necessary papers for the matter of his request.

"Now — " suddenly growing

saturnine — "there comes the bargaining. If you succeed in this design, what quid do you want for your quo? You surely didn't go to all this trouble for amusement alone."

Sir Hubert assumed a mask of injured innocence. "My Lord, my only concern is to better serve my country. But if rewards and punishments are to be handed out, my wife would dearly love the title of Viscountess."

"You sly dog," chuckled the King's First Minister, "that's the shrewdest way to ask for a viscounty that I ever heard. Make my wife a Viscountess, my Lord! Why, for that jape alone I'm half inclined to make you a Viscount whether you succeed or fail. And as for serving your country, what would you say to the Lord Lieutenancy of Cullenland when Lord Moreham steps down in about six months? You'll keep of course the revenues from your present office. They're an irrevocable life grant."

All the Warden could say was a simple, "Thank you, M'lord."

IV

Three days later, one night remaining of the ten days allotted by the chiefs' law of the dead hand, a little gamecock of a man was ushered into the Deputy Warden's study and allowed to introduce himself. "Me nyme's Jemmy Fyker, your worship, a calligrapher from Lindesnes down by the post coach from Lindesnes, hat your service." He made a sweeping bow.

His worship was not amused. "Hold it, fellow. I have your file before me, and it says that you're Jessamy Cowles, lagged for forgery and sentenced to three years at hard labor to be followed by the amputation of your right thumb. If you'll work honestly for me, I can promise your thumb at least will be spared and your other punishment lessened. So no more of his Jemmy Fyker story."

"Hit ayn't no loie, sir," bristled the little man. "Me name's been Jemmy for nigh six years and a calligrapher's happrentice for six years before that. I'm a Grykie, hi ham, a real Grykie born not honly in the shadow o' Gry Kirk o' Fields but in the blooming rectory. Me pa was sexton. Hi was 'is second son. 'Is heldest was to follow 'im as sexton so 'e happrenticed me to a calligrapher. Six years did Jessamy Cowles lybor at the work and learned hall that man could teach 'im. Then h'i asked for moi freedom and me journeyman's pypers but the bond said seven years and 'e swore 'ed 'old me to hit. There was a bit of a wench hin it too, yer honor. So Hi swore hi'd py 'im hout and Hi did. Hi forged 'is nyme and seal to a note of 'and for a 'undred royals and sold hit hon the thieves' market. 'E didn't 'ave the 'undred royals when hit cyme due and 'e tried to deny the signature. 'E knew 'oo 'ad done hit but 'e couldn't prove hit hand they took 'im awy to debtor's jyle. My bond was forfeited too but no calligrapher would tyke me on. They knew oi was too smart for them.

So Jemmy Fyker Hi became, huterer hof forged notes, false deeds and hanything helse you moit need."

The Baron Minor's comment was only a laconic: "How many times were you caught?"

"Honly this once, yer 'onor," came the proud reply, "hand wouldn't 'ave been now if there 'adn't been a bit of a wench hin hit too. You see."

The Deputy Warden cut him off abruptly. "Enough romance. You've been brought by the post coach from Lindesnes to do a particular piece of work, and the question remains to be proven, how good are you at your craft?"

"Hi'll show you, Hi will. Wroite yer signature, sir. As a precaution, sir, lest Hi betempted, write hit with yer left 'and. Hi never loikes to see a man's true signature when H'm workin' for 'im".

Arabella's husband scrawled a shaky and uncertain "Wulf-Leigh" on the sheet in front of him. Jemmy Fyker took a quick though intense look at it and then, quickly (or anyway relatively quickly) produced a copy indistinguishable from the original in every shake and squiggle.

"You'll do," gasped the Knight of the King's Strand. "Now here's what you must do." So saying, he brought out the cipher note.

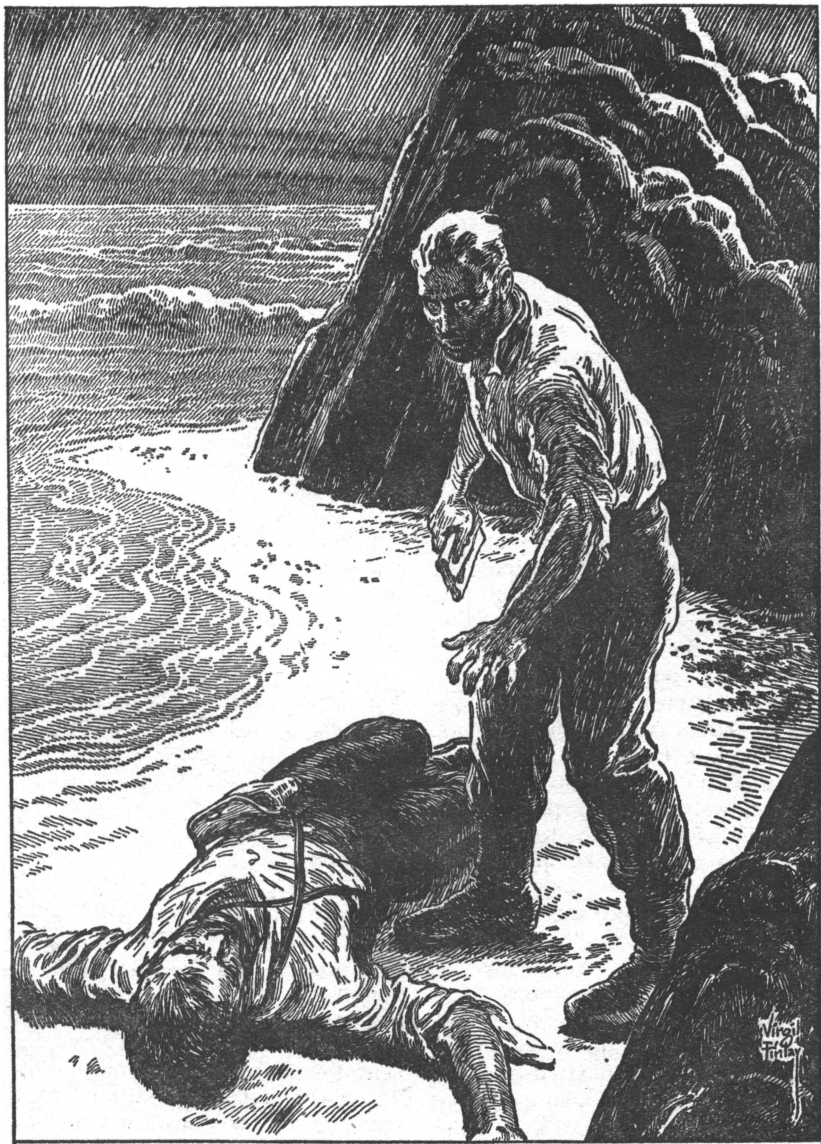
Jemmy took one look at it and said: "Hi can't do hit. That's Freunchie pyper and Hi don't suppose you've hany of that."

Sir Hubert smiled. "The Navy can work miracles too." He reach-

ed into his draw and took out a dozen sheets of identical weave linen paper. To the astonished forger, he explained laconically, "From a prize auction, you know. For your share in this, I'll give you two hundred pounds, and Lord Vaughan will get you a King's Covenanted Pardon if our plan works."

For once Jemmy Fyker was almost silenced. He bumbled a feeble "Crikey!" and set to work. The message from Macconnail was in the hands of the Augusard brothers on the fourth of the month, within the limits of the Chiefs' Law of the dead hand. By the seventh of the month certain messages were going through the back-roads and byways of Cullenland. Men uprooted hearthstone flags and unwound the wrappings from long secreted muskets; axes were sharpened, broadswords taken from ornamental displays and whetted for grimmer use.

In Briden too, preparations were made. On the seventeenth an upland loyalist regiment and two squadrons of Celtland dragoons sailed across the broad strait that was miscalled the Cullenlander Sea and marched across the northern part of Cullenland, timing their march to arrive in Moires late in the evening of the twentieth. On the same evening two regiments usually stationed in the Middle Counties and four squadrons of King William's household Cavalry arrived in the near shore glens of Dunnican Bay. Three companies of marines and a regiment of the Ness-shire militia, blooded and battle-proven against



the Freunch assault, also made a dark of night landing in Elmore.

On the twenty-first at dawn the revolution exploded but there were too many troops in just the right places to wet it down. By noon of the twenty-third the back of the revolt was broken and most of the troops could be withdrawn, put back on the ships that had brought them and sailed back across the Cullenlander Sea to be ready for the Pantler Pretender when that worthy landed near Overwick.

By the twenty-seventh Edward Pantler was being marched southward, not at the head of his troops but as a state prisoner bound for trial and execution at Lindesnes Castle.

On the thirtieth, the Father Superior of the Confraternity of St. Angus was announced as the Lord Deputy was breakfasting. Hospitably Sir Hubert invited him to enter. "A very good morning to you, your worship. You'll have some eggs and a rasher of bacon." Noting the pained expression on the Byzantine churchman's face he shrugged. "Ah, yes, it's one of your meager days. Then how about a kipper? Make free of the sideboard. There's tea and a half-jug of an excellent beverage called perry by way of beverages. Can I help you in any way, Father?"

The priest gulped hard as if about to swallow a nasty dose and spoke in a low voice. "I am afraid I must confess some liability for the recent rising in Cullenland. You see, Lord Deputy, I was not quite frank in our last interview. I knew that the un-

fortunate man who was cast ashore from the wreck of the *Leveret* was a Macconnail courier. I knew that which he carried was a cipher calling the people of Cullenland to a revolt. I saw the message was forwarded to the proper people. So much innocent blood lies on my poor head."

"To which, Reverend Father," answered a grim-faced Wulf-Leigh, "may be added your own. You realize that your last statement repeated in front of witnesses can bring your conviction on a charge of High Treason; and we do not allow the benefit of clergy in this country any more. My own testimony alone is not sufficient to convict, you, but I can and should have you bound over to the examining magistrates of His Majesty's Court of High Justice."

The Father Superior shrugged, raised his eyes toward heaven as though welcoming a martyr's crown. "Bind me over; bring your witnesses; none of your courts can punish me worse than I am punished already." He threw up his arms in a gesture of despair and desolation. "Behold a shepherd who has lost his flock."

The baron Minor relaxed slightly his grim-set jaw. "Ah, perhaps my Lord Vaughan already has heard this and decreed banishment. If my poor influence can insure the softening of your exile — "

The Angusards' leader smiled weakly. "No, your lordship, the King's first minister knows naught of this. I am banished by a far sterner tribunal, the hearts and wills

of my people. You know that I am charged with the aid of unfortunate and desolate Cullenlanders. So when a shipload of poor prisoners arrived in Plymness yesterday from Elmore city, already tried and sentenced to be shipped to the penal colonies in the Antipodes, I and a dozen of my brothers in the Lord went down to aid them and ease their suffering. They would have none of our comforts. They said we had betrayed them, that too many Bridish troops had arrived too soon. They had learned from the over-boastful gaolers that even the comfort of aiding the success of the Pantlerist landing by their demonstration had been dendied them. So they turned a deaf ear to our prayers and answered our supplications by pelting us with hard bread. The captin then ordered us from the ship and chided us for disturbing his prisoners. Come noose, come axe; you can hurt me no worse."

The Deputy Warden looked long and hard at the man of the cloth before replying. "I think you're right. No punishment that our justice can mete out will hurt you more than that which you have already received at the hands of your own people. Now if you would write a statement of your involvement..."

He paused as the prelate drew out a scroll and handed it to him across the desk, then examined the missive and stuffed it into a cubbyhole. "That's just right. It will serve as — shall we say — insurance against your further involvement in Pantlerist plots. With Edward Pantler waiting the axe, and the old

King clamant enfeebled by age, there won't be any plotting now for a generation. All true believers will be more cautious next time."

At this last phrase the priest's eyebrows rose suddenly. Bereft for a moment of speech he could do no more than point an accusatory finger at the baron minor. The baron minor in matched silent byplay nodded, smiled and fixed the prelate with a stare, as if to say: "That's right, I knew of your letter and gave you an altered copy which caused the rising to be premature. Now you know it but you can't prove it."

But all he said aloud was, "Good day, Father." END



WITZEND

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THE N3F AND OTHERS

by LIN CARTER

*Our Man in Fandom shows us
the wonderful world of fan
clubs that span the planet!*

The Coast-to-Coasters

Last month in this space we were talking about the science-fiction superclubs that were a natural out growth of the "itch to organize" that has always been rife in sf fandom. First the local clubs, then the state organizations, then as a logical progression, somebody comes up with the idea that there should be a coast-to-coast organization covering the whole country and incorporating all of the science-fiction fans in one whopping big fanclub.

I told you about some of the early ones, like THE SCIENCEERS organized by Negro fan James Fitzgerald, the TERRESTRIAL FANTASCIENCE GUILD, and the half-dozen or so other Leagues, Associations, Fraternities, Legions and whatever, culminating in the

one superclub that really worked and really did something, the SCIENCE FICTION LEAGUE, founded by Hugo Gernsback and Charles D. Hornig and sponsored by *Wonder Stories*. The SFL lasted some years before *Wonder* was sold to another publisher and the local chapters began to split off, dissatisfied with the autocratic, centralized structure of this, the world's largest sf fan club. In its time, though, the League actually had several thousand members, and chapters from one end of the country to the other, including branches overseas.

Even though the mighty League collapsed at last, it did serve as an example of just how big and influential a national club could be, and it was an example worth striving to emulate in the years that followed. Here are some of the emulators . . .

The Big Associations

Even before Gernsback's SFL had gasped its last gasp, there were people trying to revivify the not-quite-extinct cadaver. A small group which split off from the East New York chapter of the SFL attempted to get the ball rolling with a thing called **THE INDEPENDENT LEAGUE FOR SCIENCE FICTION**, but the ball refused to roll and the whole thing went under in 1936. The following year **THE AMERICAN FANTASY ASSOCIATION** got going. It planned an "official organ" (I'm sorry, but that's what club magazines are called, *echh*, what an awkward term!) to be named *The American Fantasy Magazine*, but the organ died in embryo as did its parent organization.

Across the pond in Britain, meanwhile, another association was founded. Called simply **THE SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION**, it was open to U.S. members and did indeed have some Amerifans in it. The SFA's main business was putting on conventions, and through it the British fen organized three annual cons — each bigger and better than the last, according to reports. The Association looked forward to a bright and happy future, but then along came something called World War II, and in the fuss and flurry it became dormant.

The Science Fictioneers

I suppose it was inevitable, given the success of *Wonder's Science Fiction League* (which must have

helped boost circulation and multiply reader-interest in the magazine), that another prozine eventually try the experiment. The one that did was a now-defunct magazine called *Super Science Stories*, not at all a bad magazine in its day, home of many good Kuttner and Asimov yarns.

Super Science announced a club called **THE SCIENCE FICTIONEERS**, which was to be modeled pretty closely on Gernsback's League. The magazine printed names and addresses of members as they wrote in and organized local branches here and there, but never as many as the League had. The Science Fictioneers, while a pale shadow of the great League of yore, did at least get some clubs going in vicinities where no club had previously been organized. The thing might just possibly have succeeded in being another giant-size League, but (again!) World War II came thundering in, and a nasty corollary, the paper shortage, killed the magazine, and the club died instantaneously.

But then, around 1943 or thereabouts, something new came on the scene. It was so ambitious, sounded so active and so very promising, that it took a little time for people to realize just how vague and screwy it was. I am talking about:

The Crazy Days of The Cosmic Circle

There was once a fan named Claude Degler. He wandered about the country hitch-hiking and bus-riding, trying single-handedly to

organize the nation's fans into an sf superclub to end all superclubs... rather like Peter the Hermit, who went about rabble-rousing for the First Crusade. Degler's crusade was for THE COSMIC CIRCLE; nobody ever quite knew what it was, but from all the noise and excitement, it was going to be BIG, with a capital B, I, and G.

Degler the Hermit contacted fans all over the country, chiefly through names and addresses printed on letters in the prozines; he announced in grandiose terms his Circle, urged them to lurk about newsstands in their town and sign up anybody who bought sf magazines, offered them all sorts of charters and things and generally cut loose in fifteen different directions with a flurry of activity that made most fans look sluggish.

He announced local sectors of the Cosmic Circle like one in Tennessee called "The Circle of Atzor" and the "Alabama All-Fans" and the "Valdosta Philosophers" in Georgia. Other local or regional branches of the Cosmic Circle existed (on paper at least, or in Degler's feverish imagination anyway) in Florida, Louisiana, Indiana and so on.

The Cosmic Circle was supposed to be a union of anybody anywhere who had a "cosmic outlook." Almost at once, the CC claimed 200 members, but it was hard to tell exactly who really *did* belong to it, because Degler filled his various "official" publications with pseudonymous writings. In fact, Claude used so many pen names and men-

tioned so many fictitious members, that it was never easy at any given time to say whether this or that Cosmic Circle member was a real person or just another facet of the fabulous Degler personality.

These magazines poured out in fantastic numbers — *The Cosmic Circle Commentator* and *Fanews Analyzer* and even one called *Spicy Spaceship Stories*(!). Claude planned to stir up so much excitement with all these magazines as to create the illusion of a giant, multi-state organization throbbing and rumbling in back of him. But not too many people were fooled, and it quickly became apparent that most of the "contributors" to this deluge of fanzines were Degler himself, writing under phoney names.

Degler certainly thought *big*. He announced the formation of regional Circle organizations in Oklahoma and New Mexico and Nevada. He launched a flurry of special fan-service bureaus: a National Fan Directory, a fan vacation camp in Arkansas, a Circle Amateur Publishers Alliance with a circulation of 500 (which was mighty interesting, since at this time Circle membership was only supposed to be 200). He announced still more regional organizations, a Dixie Fantasy Federation, a Southern Circle, a Gulf Circle, a Northwest Federation, a United Califans, Utah Cosmic Fans, and so on. He bombarded *real* fandom with a snowstorm of weekly fanzines, news bulletins and such and even — perhaps from sheer hysteria — even announced a summer school for the

cosmically-minded kids of fans!

It was all a bit too much. Working on the theory that the CC could be *laughed* out of its pseudo existence, some irate fans in Boston produced a magazine called the *Trivial Triangle Troubadour*, which was a lampoon of things Deglerian. Francis T. Laney, prominent fan of the period followed with the *Comic Circle Commentator* ("comic" — not "cosmic"). Another lampoon was called the *Caustic Square Commentator*. Fan-wit Bob Tucker dealt the death-blow, by pretending to found an organization yclept *The Cosworms*.

The whole thing collapsed like a house of cards. And it came out somewhere later that Degler had reputedly been committed some years before to a hospital for the insane (around 1936-37) and had been allegedly released against the advice of his doctors. *That* did it. No wonder!

The National Fantasy Fan Federation

Then there's the one coast to-coaster that did work and actually out-performed even the League. The World Science Fiction Convention of 1941 was held in Denver, Colorado and was called "The Denvention," the name coined by Donald A. Wollheim. Damon Knight gave a speech calling for the creation of a central fan organization. In those days, Damon Knight was a leading fan; today, of course, he is a leading science-fiction writer. After taking a poll of fans for their ideas and after enlisting their sup-

port. Knight and Arthur Widner launched The National Fantasy Fan Federation, called the "N3F" or the "NFFF" and pronounced "Neff." A general election was held, and a constitution was drawn up and finally agreed upon.

The first president of the N3F was Louis Chauvenet (the guy who coined the word "fanzine"). America's entry into World War II, that old bugaboo of fandom, hampered the beginning of the N3F, but, after a slow, steady start, it picked up speed. The original idea was to include *all* U.S. fans and divide the country into regional groups of affiliated local clubs, with a central administrative core of elected officers, an advisory board and several committees, including some sort of legal or judiciary body. These visionary goals never got to working.

The National Fantasy Fan Federation is the only nation-wide central fan organization that ever really worked or lasted, not counting the amateur press associations. It is still with us, believe it or don't and has recently celebrated its first *quarter century* of existence.

What Hath Damon Knight Wrought?

If you are eager to get into the fan world, there is no better way to do it than to join the N3F (unless there is a local fan club in your vicinity). To do so, send \$2.00 to Janie Lamb, Route 1, Box 3664, Heiskell, Tenn. 37754.

You will be on the receiving end of a swarm of friendly letters from

members of the Welcom, or “welcoming committee” — the recruiting adjunct of the Federation. You will also get two official bi-monthly magazines, *Tightbeam* and *The National Fantasy Fan*, and a host of little brochures called “fan-books” which will initiate you into various aspects of fanning, such as the world of fan publishing, the amateur press associations, and so on, including a booklet-dictionary of fan jargon.

Also, as a Neffer, you will be able to check the membership list which may give names and addresses of fans in your hometown you never knew were there. You may want to get in touch with veteran Neffer, Seth Johnson, 339 Stiles St., Vaux Hall, N.J. 07088. Seth is a tireless correspondent, who likes to talk and give encouragement to newcomers in fandom. Through his Fanzine Clearing House you can for

\$1.00 get an assortment of recent fanzines which will show you the sort of thing that's going on these days.

I suggest you stay in the NFFF for no longer than a year, for the valuable “introduction to fandom” material I've described above is about all you'll really get for your membership. Unhappily, Damon Knight's dream of a central fan organization never got off the ground. The NFFF never actually *did anything* in fandom. It just sort of sits there, big and old and full of members, but never does much. If all you want from fandom is a few long-distance friends to trade letters with, it will be just what you are looking for. But if you happen to be interested in getting into the middle of the *real* fan world, the Neffers have nothing for you.

Still, why not give 'em a try, if you're interested? **END**

Watch for
INTERNATIONAL
SCIENCE FICTION!

THE CASTAWAYS

by Jack B. Lawson

*Smith's World was rough but
not fatal — except to people
who were half dead already!*

Ship's log would tell Sherril Kierzek only two things. First, the voyage to Smith's World had lasted 14.533337 years so far, leaving — as she remembered the schedule, anyway — something more than four years to go. And second, she'd been defrosted on instructions from Lewis Cathcart, who was at present drinking in the observatory.

And that was where she found him. He was a small, bony man with the orangish complexion common to people who had switched to Richard's blood, and he was floating in the exact center of the room and sneering at the nipple on the brandy bottle.

"Here," he said and pushed the

bottle at her. "We're lost, you're going to need a drink."

She deflected the bottle, brought it to rest against the wall.

"What does that mean? Are we going to die?"

"It means we're as likely to end up in the Land of the Boojums as Smith's World. Or more precisely, we might not end up at all. Left to itself this thing we're on isn't ever going to decide to slow down."

"It won't tell me anything. Just, you had me waked up. You're a logician, aren't you?"

Cathcart had drifted to the far wall and lay stretched out against it, arms and legs spread wide.

"We used to call this making an

angel," he said, twisting his head up to look at himself. "When you jumped into a snowbank in this position."

"Is that supposed to tell me something? An oblique way of saying we're going to die, or what? If you — You do know what's wrong, don't you? The ship *did* tell you?"

"It's a human-solution problem," he said. "Of course I had to be exposed to a full report; but you weren't, so your interpretation wouldn't get contaminated — supposing I wanted an interpretation from you, which I don't. Ship's log was just being discreet."

"It's not the only one being coy either, is it? Please, Lewis. What's wrong?"

"Do you understand anything at all about the guidance system on one of these things? Spacecraft?"

"No. Well, I suppose I can see roughly You couldn't very well aim it ahead of time, could you? Not over eighteen and a half light-years."

"God. Of course not. You couldn't possibly figure out where to end up close, the universe isn't all that tidy."

"And you wouldn't just lock on to the light from your destination. You'd want to lead it, and that would mean maps and some way of comparing them with observational data, and deciding what to do on that basis. It shouldn't be very difficult."

"Right. Only it's a little more complicated. Of course. Comparing the maps, and what's out there —"

he pointed at the silver-gray lens of the scope — "takes two pieces of equipment. A collating machine and a selector. Our trouble's in the selector. A thing like that can be practically feeble-minded, you know. It's given a few rules — basically an axiom set — and in conjunction with the collation results, these tell it to go on pulling maps at such and such intervals and in such and such order. Or else the view doesn't match up quite and the collator measures the inconsistency. Then the selector informs control, determines which map the view's going to look like when the ship gets back on course and starts a new sequence from there. Feeble-minded, essentially. Not a job that ordinarily calls for very stiff reasoning, of course."

Cathcart pushed away from the wall and drifted past the scope, managed to drag a foot against the floor, swing around and come back to it. "Here," he said, waving his finger over the row of buttons. He poked one and almost floated out of reach of the machine before he caught a handgrip and stopped.

The lens blackened and a swan-shaped blur formed over three-quarters of its surface, and then the blur resolved into a cloud of stars and in the corners around the swan other stars pricked through the darkness. Just where the neck curved into the head was an intense jab of white, and below, in an isosceles triangle within the swan's breast, flared three more noticeably bright stars, the apex one with a distinctly green tinge.

"Smith's World," Cathcart said,

tapping the lower righthand side of the lens. "Which we'll never get to. Because there aren't any maps with this thing on them." He touched the bright star in the swan's neck. "The rock of our shipwreck. As far as our selector's concerned, a sky with that in it is imaginary. Certainly no place to go."

"Nova," Sherril said. "If it's not on the maps — that's what it has to be, isn't it?"

Cathcart punched another button and the lens went back to silver-gray.

"So now you know. Very funny, I think. What you have to do is suck the bottle and sort of stroke the nipple toward the tip with your tongue. You can work up a whole swallow with patience."

She finally got some of the brandy down.

"But we'll die, Lewis! The ship will never know when to slow down. We'll just go on past and —"

"Exactly what I was telling you."

"But can't we — the ship defrosted *you*, can't you think of a way out? Can't you get this selector to ignore the nova? I mean, if —"

"Oh, if the machine had any brains to speak of, there are lots of things I could do. But the thing is, it doesn't. It's set up to do what I told you. Find a certain map at a certain time. Pass it on to the collator. And if anything's wrong, translate the inconsistency into course-correction instructions and pass these on to control. Of course, there are inconsistencies *and* inconsistencies."

"Don't people *know* when a star's

going to nova? This ought to have been anticipated."

"No doubt. But that isn't going to help us now."

"Anyway, my field's microbiology," she said. "Cross-strand modification. What do you think I *can* do?"

Cathcart made a queer shrugging motion, as if putting his head down between his shoulders.

"I got you up because it was cold and silent and I felt lonely, if you really have to know."

She floated across and took his hand between hers, skin on skin.

"Like that?" she said.

"Yes. Thanks." He looked off, at the bottle rotating slowly over by the door. "I think what I really want is my mother."

"But there's nothing you can do?"

"Oh, I can do *something*. Two kinds of thing, to be precise. I can change the rules the selector works from by erasing the whole set and starting over. Not very helpful, since I haven't any idea what to start over *with*. Or I can add something to the present rules."

"What would that mean? You wouldn't have much chance of putting in anything but an imaginary new destination, would you?"

"Well, there's an enormous map file — several hundred million, the log claims. Suppose I eliminated one of the rules of selection, added its contradictory to the axiom set, say. Only one of those determines the point at which the ship must begin to slow down, so I'd have a fair chance of missing that one. In fact, I think I know which one to avoid."

"Then we'll go somewhere?" Sherril said, stroking the back of his hand. "Only not to Smith's World, I suppose."

"Hardly. Actually, that's one place you can be sure we won't go. But we'll probably go somewhere like it — Earthlike planets are characteristic of a certain class of sun, as I remember."

"Yes. Only I don't think it works out perfectly. Sometimes there's just nothing. It depends on . . . She was silent for a minute, staring at the upper lefthand corner on the far side of the room. "I don't remember. It's been a long time since I had basic astronomy."

"Me too. Well, probably we'll head for the right kind of sun. The point of most rules has to be to eliminate certain map sequences, so what I'll be doing is opening up some of the other possibilities. Hopefully, at least one of these won't be ruled out by the nova. But we'll have to see what turns up. If anything."

Something did.

It was almost thirty light-years away, according to ship's log — a fat, green planet spongy with lakes and capped at one pole by an enormous splay of ice. There was even the right sort of atmosphere — or so Sherril interpreted the spectrograph. But there were no plowed fields, no roads, no citydomes, no ring of satellites. Where ever they were, it was outside the human universe.

Cathcart got himself into the exact center of the room again and floated there, spinning slightly, with

his hands clasped together across his shins and his eyes closed, while Sherril explained things to Jane Shaw and Todd Braithwate, who were teachers and who watched her lips with wide, intent eyes in still faces, and to Richard Ronaldson, who came in last, broad-shouldered and vague, and then kept drifting away to make faces at the planet in the scope. He was a poet.

"So what do we do now?" he said finally. "There aren't any *people* down there."

"We go down, obviously," Cathcart said, without opening his eyes. "And then there will be."

"That's crazy. There's no point."

"Let's think of it as an adventure," Jane Shaw said in a gray voice.

Todd wagged an open hand at the scope. The blue of his eyes almost matched the lake color.

"Yes. Dick's right. I say we should try again. I agree, Lewis, you did the only possible thing. Acted very cleverly. But this place won't do, surely you see that. And next time —"

"No doubt. But we've got no choice, you have to consider that. No next time. There probably isn't enough fuel left to get us out of this system. At least I'd hate to try it." Cathcart opened his eyes and grinned at Todd. "So whatever we *should* do —" and he finished it with a high shrug.

"But there aren't any *people* down there," Ronaldson said again, showing his teeth around that word "people."

"Really, I think we can live," said Sherril. "Lewis and I went over the

whole thing carefully. The big risk was that we'd end up somewhere without food. But we're in luck. All that green is live stuff, you know."

"So you trust," said Cathcart.

"And the ship has a doctor of sorts. Well, what else is there? We'll have to do without all the pills civilized people take, I suppose. And so on. Oh, we'll have some problems, but *think* about it. There's nothing but brute physical nature down there. We're the end products of six thousand years of civilization, intelligent human beings, and what —"

"Especially me," said Cathcart. "Speaking of end products. I happen to have Richard's blood. Excellent stuff, keeps you young longer and cuts in half the time you need to put in sleeping. But it doesn't renew itself. I'll be dead inside three weeks."

"I didn't think about that," Sherril said after a while.

"I couldn't get up nerve to ask you," he said. "But of course there's nothing you could do, is there?"

"It would take — a high speed oscillator and an EEH microscope equipped with waldoes, and who knows what else? That's not really my field, you know — actually *doing* things. I'm more on the math side. Sorry. *Very* sorry, Lewis."

"Already down to four little Indians," Ronaldson said, perhaps to the scope or the image of the planet on it. "Oh, we will have some problems, no doubt."

"I gather the idea is," Todd said, pointing his finger first at Cathcart, then Sherril, "we're going to be

colonists. Pioneers, first settlers, people like that?"

"Well, what do *you* think?" she said. "Maybe I'm the one who's being stupid just because he doesn't like the situation. Maybe we've got some other choice, a whole higgledy of choices maybe."

"There *are* people like that," Jane Shaw said. "Certainly used to be. People who got out away from the human race. We'll have to figure out their psychological set. See how *doing* that sort of thing can make sense."

"Ha," said Ronaldson.

Todd swung both hands wide, the motion skewing him to his left and floating him free of the wall.

"I bet nobody has even considered whether it is possible to get down there — to raise one more stupid objection before we go on with this foolishness."

"The ship has an emergency landing unit," Cathcart said. "Why, God knows. Vestigial, maybe — something regulations demanded a long time ago, and the shipbuilders never got around to asking if they could take it out."

All of them except Cathcart looked again at the image of the planet, green and blue and white, with beige flecks around the equator and a crooked mountain range winding up shortly and then disappearing under the icecap. The shadowline began on the other side of the mountains.

"So we are *actually* going down there to live," Todd said in a slow voice.

"*You* are," Cathcart said. "Not me. I'm going there to die."

Sheril then gave him her hand.

"The rest of us *aren't*?" Ronaldson said, shrill, turning away from the scope. "You know better! All of you! There isn't a *thing* we can do down there except squat around a natural fire and wait to die. So what if it takes thirty years instead of three weeks That's some kind of *advantage*?"

"Well, isn't even that better than going around the universe in a cake of ice?" Sherril said.

Ronaldson showed teeth and made a noise something like a voiced hiss.

"I wouldn't be sure," Todd added.

"Besides, it's not as if we were so *dependent* on civilization. We're *it*. We carry a lot of it around in our heads, you know. Why can't we make things civilized down there?"

"I'm a *poet*," Ronaldson told her. "Just what Godforsaken use do you think I am, to myself or anybody else, without a computer?"

"People used to make up poems by themselves," Jane Shaw offered. "Without computers."

"No question about it. I've seen poetry like that. Somebody made it up for himself, all right. You can tell."

"There are other things," Sherril said. "I mean, later."

"Not for me there aren't."

"What I started to say, later on there'll be babies, you know. That'll be one of the consequences of doing without pills."

"What are the pills all for, I wonder?" Todd flapped his hands loosely. "It can't very well be to keep *me* from having babies."

"You mean — have them our-

selves?" said Jane Shaw and looked at her groin. "Inside us? That doesn't sound like a very good idea."

"It's a perfectly feasible way," Sherril said. "That's sort of my field. I can assure you it works. Why not?"

"And your children will have children," Cathcart said. "Also by themselves. And your children's children, and so on, and eventually when human beings get out to wherever we are, they'll find they're already here."

"Perhaps we'll be rescued some day," Jane Shaw said.

"Some of those children will be yours, too, you know," Sherril told Cathcart in a softer voice, tightening her grip on his hand.

"No. I don't know that. There's nothing different about the shape of your stomach."

"That takes time."

Todd got a toe against the wall and pushed himself toward the scope.

"We'll have to build things," he said, making square chops in the air with stiff straight hands. "Using *natural* materials. It will make for some interesting problems."

"Impossible's the word," Ronaldson said.

"Let's just agree to do what we can," Jane Shaw said. "We all know it's a horrible situation, but if we don't take a positive attitude about it, it *will* be impossible."

"No," Cathcart told her. "I've done my share already, and my situation is impossible right now. I don't intend to do anything. Or to be agreeable either, for that matter."

"You've already done a miracle, haven't you?" Sherril said. "You got us a world to live on."

"Yes," Todd said. "And there ought to be some use for his body. To scare away animals, something. No, I feel we might as well be honest about it. You don't mind, do you, Lewis?"

"As long as you wait," said Cathcart. "In about three weeks I expect not to mind. Just don't do anything with me or talk about it until then, okay?"

But he died much sooner than that — less than a day after the ship brought them down on to a long open slope, between dark green tangles of growth and a freeform lake with mountains on its far side. The others were fidgeting around in front of the ship — or what was left of it, the core which had been constructed to pass through a planet's atmosphere — wondering what to do, and Cathcart lay with his head and shoulders propped against a rock, perhaps fifteen meters away, over by a bend in the river that wound down to the lake, when something big came sprawling around the end of the ship. Then his shout got mixed with a scabrous body and flapping and a nasty smell, and the thing was going from them awkwardly, hopping and lurching and fluttering its bony wings.

Ronaldson had taken two steps toward it, but now he came back and stood with them, combing back his hair with rigid fingers, close to the ship. The thing crouched on the lakeshore and ate Cathcart, twisting about a lot. It had a narrow buck-toothed head with lidless round eyes set at the sides and a long scaly

ridged neck. Its wings were obviously too small to fly with and now, folded, they stuck out crisscross in pointed folds over its back. There was a thick moving tail, and as the beast crouched the hind legs hunched up fatly against its belly. Its forelegs were long and slender and ended in enormous three-fingered claws and these pushed Cathcart about frantically under the writhing of its head and neck.

"A real monster, that," Ronaldson said.

"What do you suppose it's doing to him?" Sherril said eventually.

"Spitting him out and washing him, I think," said Todd. "I gather it doesn't much like the taste."

"Perhaps it'll leave the rest of us alone, then?"

Still, they spent the rest of that day very close to the ship and went inside when the lake turned black.

Next morning they found the monster dead, wings projecting straight up, almost at their door. Its eyes had turned an ugly yellow. Todd walked all the way around it and then said: "So he did do something else for us after all."

"I should have thought of this," said Sherril. "Of course it hadn't a chance of digesting Lewis — an alien lifeform. Too many differences in molecular structure."

• "But we've got to eat too," Jane Shaw said. "If this thing —"

"Yes, but you've got a Nagel stomach, you know," Sherril told her. "Digests practically anything. At least any carbon-based life. Which all this is." And she waved her hand about.

"When did that happen?" Ronaldson said. "A stomach? I don't remember anybody doing that to me."

"Had to. They wouldn't have let you off Earth otherwise. The differences in what you'd eat on Smith's World are probably as great as here. Greater maybe."

"Let's not talk about Smith's World," Ronaldson said. "I'm trying to forget."

Todd worked most of the morning at separating one of the wing bones from the corpse and failed. He had nothing to cut with except splinters of rock. Nothing in the ship was even like a tool, much less a weapon. There were no points and no sharp edges, and most things were molded into the walls.

His idea had been to make a spear or a bow out of the bone — a bow was a primitive machine, without brains, that could be used to project sharp sticks — but rocks only scratched the small hard scales of the wing, and by midday he was breathing openmouthed and his fingers no longer held on to things, and he could do no more.

"We'll have to do something else for protection," he said, staggering back into the ship. "Dig pits."

"With your hands, I suppose," Sherril said, and he looked at what had happened to his palms and fingers. But that afternoon birds — as Ronaldson, who was naming things, decided to call them in spite of their lack of feathers — began to light on the body, longlegged metallic-green creatures with rounded heads that screwed into the folds of skin and

jerked away. A standard week later the bones of the dragon were bare.

By then they were constructing a house. The ship had become unlivable the third day — tiny crawling things had got inside and eaten holes in the refrigerator plates, and the ship's brains, including the doctor, died. The kitchen stopped preparing meals. Closed doors no longer opened. The air turned foul, and fluid of some sort began to collect in the room where Ronaldson and Jane Shaw were sleeping. So they had to move outside, and well away from the ship because of the stench of the dragon.

They had almost a kilometer of flexible tubing, seventeen transparent bags, an empty brandy bottle, three spools of chartreuse tape with a black stripe along the top edge, the lens off a microfilm reader, thirty-two boxes that wouldn't open and four legless chairs — these things were what they could salvage from the ship. But they had nothing that could be used to cut down trees or dig holes in the ground. And in any case the ground was rocky. To make a reasonably deep hole in it they would have needed some sort of explosive; and the trees were made of layer after layer of rough fiber that would have spread and bent under the weight of a roof.

So while Todd kept watch beside his pile of throwing-stones, the others gathered branches and underbrush for a geodesic. The most complicated problems with that sort of house were mathematical, and all of them still knew how to do elemen-

tary trig. It took just four days to lash together and cover a dome that measured roughly seven meters across — big enough, everybody hoped, to keep out a second dragon. But the earleaf and mud did little to keep out the rain which began to fall that evening, and kept on late into the night.

“**I**n the morning we must dig all the way around and make a channel so some of the water will run off.” Jane Shaw said suddenly in the dark.

“Must we?” said Sherril. “I’m lying in a puddle too, at least most of me is. But it’s a *comfortable* puddle. Warm and soothing. Why can’t we just live with it?”

“Don’t count on its always being warm.”

“We’ve got tools now,” Todd said. “I think maybe I can rig up some kind of spade from the vertebrae.”

“What’s a spade?” asked Ronaldson.

“It’s a thing for digging with,” Todd told him. “So we can do this all-day job of Jane’s in maybe a couple of hours.”

“Maybe.”

“My hands won’t close now,” Sherril said. “They’re getting thick on the inside and they always hurt. Couldn’t we just rest for a while?”

“Symptoms of the primitive life,” Ronaldson said. “The hands, I mean. Hardly the resting.” He gave a long noisy sigh.

“I’ve had an idea,” Todd said. “If we filled in the river — that would just mean throwing in lots of rocks, it wouldn’t be hard — then I think

the way the ground slopes, the water would have to go around on the other side of the ship. We would be here in the middle, on a sort of triangle of ground with water around and that might be good protection against dragons.”

“Hop right over,” said Ronaldson.

“Maybe there aren’t any more dragons,” Sherril said.

Ronaldson splashed about, came back.

“It might be stopping. Who knows?”

“Watch out, you’re trying to sit on me,” Jane Shaw said.

“What happens to where the river used to be?” Sherril asked. “When you fill it in? There won’t be any water there, will there, Todd?”

“I didn’t think about that,” he said finally. “Well, if we dig a channel and divert only part of the river, that ought to work.”

“I suppose that just means I’ve made an even bigger job out of it.”

“I’ll bet there’s a way to get food out of the river too, when we get to work on it. Sooner or later we’re going to run out of animals that’ll stand still while we throw rocks at them.”

“You know,” she said, sitting up — the water trickled off her louder, briefly, then the sound of rain outside — “that’s worth thinking about. There are bound to be things in the river. Environments fill up, and the more different stuff we eat the better.”

“We need to store a few things away too,” Jane Shaw said. “Out in natural environments there are winters. The air gets cold, and it’s sup-

posed to be harder to find food."

The rain paused, then scattered a long last gust and was gone, and they were left with the ticking of drops inside the dome.

"We're getting an edge on things now," Ronaldson said. "If you don't think about how meaningless it all is. But we're alive. We've got shelter, sort of, and the dragon's going to make a fair supply of things to cut and dig with, spades, tools."

"The things we've absolutely got to have," Todd said.

"And we can even start thinking about the future. We're actually making it."

"You know what made all the difference, don't you?" Sherril said. "It was the dragon's eating Lewis. We've got a lot to thank Lewis for." She lay back down, crooked her head over out of a puddle.

"We ought to think about light and heat," said Jane Shaw.

And then Jane Shaw was dead. She didn't get up in the morning, and Sherril called her twice and went over to shake her awake before noticing her eyes were open and their surfaces dry, faintly puckered. They stripped off the tattered freezer coverall, but there were no unexpected marks on her body. She was simply dead. Todd rolled her back over, and she lay with her eyes, if that was the thing to call them now, fixed on the center of the dome.

"It's like suddenly finding a hole in the world," Ronaldson said. "As if it, wasn't real the way you'd always thought it was."

Todd moved her jaw up and down slowly.

"What are you doing, trying to make a poem out of it?"

"But what *happened* to her?" Sherril said. "Surely people don't just *die*."

"Well, in a way I've been expecting something like this," said Todd. "I've thought about it a lot. Of course without a doctor we'll never know why Jane died, but it was almost predictable. How much stuff were you taking back on Earth, Dick? How many pills a week, for example?"

"Seventeen, eighteen. I never knew what they were for."

"Sherril?"

"Three. You mean she had some organic defect, don't you? Her body couldn't assimilate something it needed or get rid of its own poisons without help? I suppose I ought to have thought of that."

"I can't know, of course. But isn't it likely? Aren't there a lot of people like that? Obviously all the stuff I and everybody I ever knew took was supposed to do something."

"It's because there are so many laws about modifying human embryos," Sherril said. "I've got — I had friends who used to gripe about it. You couldn't always change something even if you knew it was wrong. Not that you can always detect things in the embryo, for that matter. I suppose most human beings have something seriously wrong with them — but you can't discriminate against their genes, you know. That's illegal too. Of course it doesn't matter ordinarily."

"So there's something wrong with us," Ronaldson said. "Only we don't know what. Surprise! Maybe my head falls off."

"I know one thing that's likely to be wrong," said Todd. "At least part of the stuff all of us took was an I.E. An intelligence enhancer. Human beings aren't naturally intelligent enough to deal with the kind of civilization they've got."

"Naturally they're what you'd even call stupid, I suppose," Sherril said. "When did the I.E.'s come in? 1970? 1980?"

"I don't remember exactly," Todd said. "But I do know before that the race was degenerating fast. I've taught history. In the countries that did any testing, England, America, there was a loss of as much as three I.Q. points a decade. Of course, I expect those weren't accurate tests."

"And the stupid ones would be the ones who had children," Sherril said. "Maybe it isn't a very clever thing to do, either."

"So really I may be feeble-minded," Ronaldson said, looking at Jane's eyes again.

"I just hope it's nothing worse," Todd said, and pointed, waved his finger at the corpse. "She's dead."

"Different chemicals stay in your body different lengths of time," Sherril said. "And we may have been taking pills for things that don't matter out here."

But Todd and Ronaldson never did. That afternoon the second dragon came out of the forest and had them trapped down by the lake where they were taking Jane's head,

wrapped in a net of plastic tubing, to see if it could be used to catch something worth eating. Sherril had just time to scream, and when they turned it was a hundred meters away, between them and the dome.

Todd went into the lake. Then Sherril found she was still screaming and stopped. The dragon shrieked. Looking back then, she saw that Todd had got the net over its head.

She crawled to the door but still couldn't see him. He was not turning toward her across the open, 'or crouched behind a rock.

By late afternoon the dragon had writhed into deep enough water to drown.

The next morning, when she could no longer stand to wait, she went down to the lake and found Todd where the dragon had rolled on him, smashed almost flat.

Sherril lasted a long while. She moved back into the ship — the smell had weakened, and in any case she wasn't bothered as much by smells now — and started a garden of the more edible plants. She had always been good at killing things with rocks, and by the first snow she had managed to fill the interior of the ship with rotting food. But by then she was very stupid, too, and one day she got caught at the end of a corridor and could not think to turn around, and so starved to death facing the closed door to the observatory. She was at that time about six standard months pregnant, and the male child inside her more or less well formed.

If it had been born it might have survived as long as a week. END

SPACEMAN!

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by CASTELLON

*The galaxy was immense. Trying to find
one human in it was almost impossible—
but the human was the woman he loved!*

XI

It wasn't a luxury cruise. The man Ancu-Uriru had assigned to captain the tub — In-Ruhic, by name — believed in every man's working his way, in spite of the generous fare I'd paid. Even aboard as sophisticated a machine as a spaceship, there was plenty of coolie labor, as I well remembered from

my apprenticeship under Sir Orfeo. The standards he'd taught me carried over here. After my assigned chores were done I spent long hours chipping and scraping and cleaning and polishing, trying single-handed to clear away grime that had been accumulating since the days of the Vikings — or longer. According to In-Ruhic the old ship had been built on a world

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 they left.

So I stayed with them, pleasure-cruising across the galaxy hunting wild beast as their gun-bearer, until they met a beast more dangerous than themselves. The men died. The girl and I survived, until slavers came and took her from me.

The next ship I saw took me — pursuing those who had stolen the only thing in the universe I loved.

called Urhaz, an unknown number of millenia ago.

At first my wounds caused me a lot of pain, until In-Ruhic stopped me one day and told me my groans were interfering with his inward peace. He had me stretch out on a table while he rubbed some vile-smelling grease into the scars.

"How you survived, untended, is a matter of wonder," he said. "I think you lost a pound of flesh and bone here, where the pellet tore through your shoulder. And you've broken ribs, healed crookedly. And your throat! Man, under the web of scar-tissue, I can see the pulse in the great vein each time you lift your chin!"

But his hands were truly as gentle as any girl's could have been. He gave me a treatment every day

for a few weeks. The glop he used must have had some healing effect because the skin toughened up over the scars and the pain gradually faded.

I told In-Ruhic and the others about the wasp-waisted ship and the armored midgets that had taken the Lady Raire; but they'd never seen or heard of their kind. They wagged their heads and grunted in vicarious admiration when I described her to them.

"But these are matters best forgotten, Biridanju." That was as close as In-Ruhic seemed to be able to get to my name. "I've heard of the world called Zeridajh. Distant it is, and inhabited by men as rich as emperors. Doubtless these evil-doers you tell of have long since sold her there for ransom.

By the time the world where Ancu-Uriru planned to drop me was visible in the view-screen on the bridge where I was pulling watches as a sort of assistant instrument reader, I was almost a full-fledged member of the crew. Just before we started our landing maneuvers, which were more complicated for an old tub like In-Ruhic's command than they had been for Lord Desory's ultramodern yacht, In-Ruhic took me aside and asked me what my plans were.

"If there's a Zeridajhi embassy, I'll go there and tell them about the Lady Raire. Or maybe I can send some kind of message through. If not . . . well, I'll figure out something."

He shook his head and looked sad and wise. "You nurture a hopeless passion for this high-born lady," he stated.

"Nothing like that," I cut him off short. "She was in my care. I'm responsible."

He put a hand on my shoulder. "Biridanju, you've shown yourself a willing worker, and quick to learn. Stay on with me. I offer you a regular berth aboard this vessel."

"Thanks, In-Ruhic. But I have another job to do."

"Think well, Biridanju. For a foreigner work is not easy to find. And to shore folk, who know not the cruel ways of space, your little decorations may prove unsightly, an added incubus."

I put a hand up and felt the lumps and ridges along the side of my throat and jaw. "I know. It looks like hell. But I'm not asking

for any beauty prizes. I'll pay my way."

"I suppose you must make your try. But after, Biridanju, remember. We're based nearby and call here at Inciro ever and anon. I'll welcome you as shipmate whenever you're ready."

We landed a few hours later on a wind-swept ramp between a gray sea and a town growing on a hillside. Captain Ancu-Uriru was there ahead of us. He talked earnestly with In-Ruhic for a while, then invited me to his quarters aboard the yacht. There he sat me down and offered me a drink and a double-barreled cigar, rolled from two different weeds which, when combined, produced a smoke worse than any three nickel stogies.

"Biridanju, I tell you freely, you've made me a rich man," he said. "I thought at first you were a shill who'd bring pirates down on me. Almost, I had you shot before you boarded." He made a face that might have been a smile. "Your cat saved you. It passed reason that a man with your wounds, *and* an animal lover, could be but a decoy for corsair. I ordered In-Ruhic to watch you closely, and for long I slept but little, watching these beautiful screens for signs of mischief. Now I know I did you an injury."

"You saved my life," I said. "No apologies needed."

He lifted a flat box from a drawer of the gorgeous inlaid desk. "I am a just man, Biridanju; or so I hope. I sold the special store aboard

this cutter for a sum greater than any year's profit I've known since I first captained a trader. The proceeds are here, your fair share."

I lifted the lid and looked at an array of little colored sticks an eighth of an inch square and an inch long.

"There is enough there to keep you in comfort for many years," he said, "if you squander it not on follies, such as star-messages or passenger fares. Not that there's enough to take you far." He gave me a sharp look that meant In-Ruhic had told him my plans.

I thanked him and assured him I'd make it go as far as I could.

It took me ten minutes to collect my personal belongings from the ship and buckle Eureka into the harness I'd made for him. Then Ancu-Uriru took me through the port formalities, which weren't much for anyone with a bankroll, and found me an inn in the town. In-Ruhic joined us for a final drink in my room, and then they left, and I sat on the side of the plain little bunk in the plain little room in the yellow twilight and scratched Eureka behind the ears and felt the loneliness close in.

XII

The town was named Inciro, like the planet. It was one of half a dozen ports that had been built ages past to handle the long vanished trade in minerals and hides and timber from the interior of the one big continent.

The population added up to about
SPACEMANI

ten thousand people, many of whom had six fingers on each hand for some reason. They were tall, dark-eyed, pale-skinned, gloomy-looking, with a sort of Black Irish family resemblance, like Eskimos or Hot-tentots. I spent a few days wandering around the town, sampling the food in different chophouses and seafood dives — they were all good — and drinking a tasty red beer called *izm*. The mixed dialect I'd learned from In-Ruhic and his men was good enough to carry on a basic conversation. I soon learned there was no Zeridajhi embassy anywhere on the planet. The nearest thing to it was a consular agent representing the commercial interest of the half dozen worlds within five light-years of Inciro.

I called on him. He was a fattish, hairy man in a stale-smelling office over a warehouse. He steepled his pudgy fingers and listened to what I had to say, then solemnly suggested I forget the whole thing. It seemed it was a big galaxy, and the things that had maimed me and stolen Milady Raire could be anywhere in it — probably at the far side of it by now. No belligerent non-human had been seen in these parts for more centuries than I had years. He would have liked to have told me I'd imagined it all, but his eyes kept straying back to my scars.

Eureka went with me on my walks, attracting quite a bit of attention at first. The Incirinos had seen cats before, but none his size. He did more than keep me company. One evening a trio of rough-necks with too many bowls of *izm*



inside them came over to get a closer look at my scars, and he came to his feet from where he'd been curled up under the table and made a sound like tearing canvas and showed a mouthful of teeth, and they backed away fast.

I found a little old man who hung around one of the bars who knew half a dozen useful dialects. For the price of enough drinks each evening to keep him in a talking mood, he gave me language lessons, plus the beginning of an education on the state of this end of the galaxy. He told me how the human race had developed a long time ago on a world near Galactic Center, had spread outwards in all directions for what must have been a couple of hundred thousand years, settled every habitable planet they found and built a giant empire that collapsed peacefully after a while of its own weight. That had been over twenty thousand years earlier; and since then the many separate tribes of man had gone their own ways.

"Now, take you." He poked a skinny finger at me. "From a planet you call Eart'. Thought you were the only people in the Universe. But all you were was a passed-over colony, or maybe what was left of a party marooned by an accident; or a downed battleship. Or maybe you were a penal colony. Or perhaps a few people wandered out there, two thirds of the way to the rim, just wanting to be alone. A few thousand years pass, and — there you are!" He looked triumphant, as if he'd just delivered a rigorous proof

of the trisection of the angle.

"But we've dug up bones," I told him. "Ape-men, and missing links. They show practically the whole chain of evolution, from animals to men. And we've got gorillas and chimps and monkeys that look too much like us to just be coincidence."

"Who said anything about coincidence?" he came back. "Life adapts to conditions. Similar conditions, similar life. You ever look at the legs and feet on a pink-lizard? Swear they were human, except they're only so long. Look at flying creatures: birds, mammals, reptiles, goranos or mikls. They all have wings, all flap 'em, all have hollow bones, use two legs for walking —"

"Even Eureka is related to humanity," I pressed on. "We have more similarities than we have differences. As embryos of a few weeks, you can't tell us apart."

He nodded and grinned. "Uh-huh. And where'd you say you got him. Not on Eart'."

It was like arguing religion. Talking about it just confirmed everyone in his original opinion. But the talking was good experience. By the time I'd been on Inciro for three months Earth time I was fluent in the lingua franca that the spacers used and had a pretty good working vocabulary in a couple of other dialects. And kept my Zeridajh sharpened up with long imaginary conversations with the Lady Raire, in which I explained over and over again how we *should* have greeted the midgets.

I looked up a local surgeon who examined my wounds and clucked and, after a lot of lab studies and allergy tests, put me under an anesthetic and rebuilt my shoulder with metal and plastic to replace what was missing. When the synthetic skin had stitched itself in with the surrounding hide, he operated again, to straighten out my ribs. He wanted to reupholster the side of my neck and jaw next, but the synthetic hide was the same pale color as the locals; it wouldn't have improved my looks much. And by then, I was tired of the pain and boredom of plastic surgery. My arm worked all right now, and I could stand up straight again instead of cradling my smashed side. And it was time to move on.

In-Ruhic's ship called about then, and I asked his advice.

"I don't want to sign on for just a local run," I told him. "I want to work my way toward Zeridajh and ask questions along the way. Sooner or later I'll find a lead to the Midgets."

"This is a long quest you set yourself, Biridanju," he said. "And a vain one." But he took me along to a local ship-owner and got me a place as an apprentice power-section tender on a freighter bound inward toward a world called Topaz.

XIII

Eureka and I saw Topaz, and after that Greu and Poylon and Trie and Pandache's World and the Three Moons. Along the way, I learned the ins and outs of an ion-

pulse drive and a stressed-field generator; and I served my time in vac suits, working outside under the big black sky that wrapped all the way around and seemed to pull at me like a magnet that would suck me away into its deepest blackest depths, every hour I spent out on a hull.

And I had my head pounded by a few forecastle strong-arm types, until an oak-tough old tubeman who'd almost been fleet champion once in his homeworld's navy showed me a few simple tricks to keep from winding up on the short end of every bout. His method was effective. He pounded me harder than the bully-boys until I got fast enough to bloody his nose one night, and graduated.

I learned to pull duty three on, three off, to drink the concoctions that space-faring men seemed to always be able to produce no matter how far they were from the last port, and to play seventy-one different games with hundred-and-four card decks whose history was lost in antiquity. And at every world I asked and got the same answer. No such animals as the Midgets had been seen in five thousand years and probably not then.

On a world called Unriss, in a library that was a museum relic itself, I found a picture of a Midget — or a reasonable facsimile. I couldn't read the text, but the librarian could make out a little of the old language. It said the thing was called a Heeaq, that it was a denizen of a world of the same name, and that it was extinct.

Where Heeaq was located, it neglected to say.

My small bankroll, which would have kept me in modest circumstances on Enciro, didn't last long. I spent it carefully, item by item outfitted my ship chest, including a few luxuries like a dreamer and a supply of tapes, a good power gun and shore clothes. I studied astrogation and power section maintenance whenever I was able to get hold of a tape I hadn't seen before. By the time two years had passed, I had been promoted to power chief, second class, meaning I was qualified to act as standby chief on vessels big enough to have a standby complement. That was a big step forward — like jumping from Chinese junks to tramp steamers. It meant I could ship on bigger, faster vessels, with longer range.

I reached a world called Lhiza, after a six-month cruise on a converted battle cruiser, and spent three months on the beach there, spending my back pay on new training tapes and looking for a berth that would take me into the edge of the sector of the galaxy known as the Bar.

It wasn't easy. Few of the older, slower hulls that worked the Eastern Arm had business there. But the Bar was where Zeridajh was, still thousands of light-years away, but getting closer.

The vessel I finally shipped on was a passenger liner, operating under a contract with the government of a world called Ahax, hauling immigrant labor. I didn't much

like the idea; it was my first time nurse-maiding a ship-load of Flatlanders. But I was offered a slot as first powerman, and the tub was going on a long way, and in the right direction. So I signed on.

She was an old ship, like most of the hulls operating in the Arm, but she had been a luxury job in her day. I had a suite to myself, with room for Eureka, so for the first time aboard ship the old cat got to sleep across my feet, the way he did ashore. The power section was a massive, old-fashioned stressed-field installation; but after the first few weeks of shakedown and impressing my ideas on my crew I had the engines running smoothly. Everything settled down then to the quiet, slightly dull, sometimes pleasant, always monotonous routine that all long cruises are.

My first shift chief, Ommu, was a big-muscled, square-faced fellow with the faint greenish cast to his skin that said he was from a high C1 world. He listened to my story of the Midgets and told me that once, many years before, he'd seen a similar ship, copper-colored. It had drifted into a commentary orbit around a world in the Guree system, in the Bar. She was a navigational hazard, and he'd been one of the crew assigned to rendezvous with her and set vaporizing charges. Against standing orders, he and another sapper had crawled in through a hole in her side to take a look around. The ship had been long dead, and there wasn't much left of the crew; but he had picked up a souvenir. He

got it from his ship-chest and laid it on the mess table in front of me: It looked like a stack of demitasse cups, dull silver, with a loop at the base and a short rod projecting from the open end.

"Yeah," I said, and felt my scalp prickle, just looking at it. It wasn't identical with the guns that had shot me up, back on Gar 28, but it was a close enough relative.

I had him tell me all about the ship, everything he could remember. There wasn't much. We went up to the ship's psychologist and after a lot of persuasion and a bottle of crude stuff from the power section still, he agreed to run a recall on Ommu under hypnosis. I checked with the purser and located a xenologist among the passengers and got him to sit in on the session.

In a light trance, Ommu relived the approach to the ship, described it in detail as he came up on it from sun-side. We followed him inside, through the maze of compartments, we were with him as he stirred the remains of what must have been a Heeq and turned up the gun.

The therapist ran him back through it three times, and he and the xenologist took turns firing questions at him. At the end of two hours, Ommu was soaking wet, and I had the spooky feeling I'd been aboard that derelict with him.

The xenologist wanted to go back to his quarters and pore over his findings, but I talked him into giving us a spot analysis of what he'd gotten.

"The vessel itself appears a typi-

cal artifact of what we call the H'eeq Group," he said. "They are an echinodermoid form, originating far out in fringe space, or, as some have theorized, representing an incursion from a neighboring stellar assemblage, presumably the Lesser Cloud. Their few fully documented contacts with Man, and with other advanced races of the galaxy, reveal a cultural pattern of marked schizoid-accretional character — "

"Maybe you could make that a little plainer," Ommu suggested.

"These are traits reflecting a basic disintegration of the societal mechanism," he told us and elaborated on that for a while. The simplified explanation was as bad as the regular one, as far as my vocabulary was concerned. I told him so.

"Look here," he snapped. He was a peppery little man. "You're asking me to extrapolate from very scanty data, to place my professional reputation in jeopardy— "

"Nothing like that, sir," I soothed him. "I'd just like to have a little edge the next time I meet those types."

"Ummm. There's their basic insecurity, of course. I'd judge their home world has been cataclysmically destroyed, probably the bulk of their race along with it. What this might do to a species with a strong racial-survival drive is anyone's guess. If I were you, I'd look for a complex phobia system. Fear of heights or enclosed spaces, assorted fetish symbologies. And of course, the bully syndrome. Convince them you're stronger, and

they're your slaves. Weaker, and they destroy you."

That was all I got from him. Ommu gave me the teacup gun. I disassembled it and examined its workings, but it didn't tell me much. The routine closed in again then. I fine-tuned the generators and put the crew on polishing until the section gleamed from one end to the other. I won some money playing *tikal*, lost is again at *revo*.

And then one off-shift I was shocked up out of a deep sleep to find myself lying on the floor, with Eureka yowling over me and every alarm bell on the ship screaming disaster.

By the time I reached the power section, the buffeting was so bad that I had to grab a rail to stay on my feet.

"I've tried to get through to command for orders," Ommu yelled over the racket, "but no contact!"

I tried the inter-deck screen, raised a young plotman with blood on his face who told me the whole forward end of the ship had been carried away by a collision, with what he didn't know. That was all he told me before the screen blanked in the middle of a word.

A new shock knocked both of us down. The deck heaved up under us and kept going, right on up and over.

"She's tumbling," I yelled to Ommu. "She'll break up fast under this! Order the men to lifeboat stations!" A tubeman named Rusi showed up then, pale as chalk, hugging internal injuries. I gave

him a hand, and we crawled on floors, walls and ceilings, made it to our boat station. The bay door was blown wide, and the boat was hanging in its davits with the stern torn out and there were pieces of a dead man scattered around. I ordered the men up to the next station and started to help my walking wounded, but he was already dead.

The upper bay was chaos. I grabbed a gun from a lanky grandpa who was waving it and yelling and fired over the crowd. Nobody noticed. Ommu joined me, and with a few crewmen we formed up a flying wedge. Ommu got the hatch open while the rest of us beat back the mob. All this time, Eureka had stayed close to me, with his ears flattened and his tail twitching.

"Take 'em in order," I told Ommu. "Anybody tries to walk over somebody else, I'll shoot him!" Two seconds later I had to make that good when a beefy two hundred pounder charged me. I blew a hole through him, and the rest of them scattered back.

The boat had been designed for fifty passengers; we had eighty-seven aboard when a wall of fire came rolling down the corridor and Ommu grabbed me just in time and hauled me in across the laps of a fat woman and a middle-aged man who was crying, and Eureka bounded in past me. I got forward and threw in the big red lever and a big boot kicked us and then there was the sick, null-G feel that meant we'd cleared the launch tube and were on our own.

In the 2-by-4 command compartment, I watched the small screen where five miles away the ship was rotating slowly, end-over-end, with debris trailing off from her in a lazy spiral. Flashes of light sparkled at points along the hull where smashed piping was spewing explosive mixtures. Her back was broken and the aft third of the ship separated and a cloud of tiny objects, some of them human, scattered out into the void, exploding as they hit vacuum. The center section blew then. When the smoke cleared there was nothing left but a major fragment of the stern, glowing red-hot, and an expanding dust-cloud.

"Any other boats get away?" I asked.

"I didn't see any, Billy."

"There were five thousand people aboard that scow! We can't be the only survivors!" I yelled at him, as if convincing him would make it true.

A powerman named Lath stuck his head in. "We've got some casualties back here," he said. "Where in the Nine Hells are we, anyway?"

I checked the chart screen. The nearest world was a planet named Cyoc, blue-coded, which meant uninhabited and uninhabitable.

"Nothing there but a beacon," Ommu said. "An ice world."

We checked; found nothing within a year's range that was any better — or as good.

"Cyoc it is," I said. "Now let's take a look at what we've got to work with."

I led the way down the no-G central tube past the passenger cells that were arranged radially around it, like the kernels on a corn cob. They were badly overcrowded. There seemed to be a lot of women and children. Maybe the mob had demonstrated some of the chivalric instincts, after all; or maybe Ommu had done some selecting I didn't notice. I wasn't sure he'd done the right thing.

A big man, wearing what had been expensive clothes before the mob got them, pushed out in the aisle up ahead of me, waited for me to come to him.

"I'm Till Ognath, member of the Ahacian Assembly," he stated. "As highest ranking individual aboard, I'm assuming command. I see you're Crew. I want you men to run a scan of the nearby volume of space and give me a choice of five possible destinations within our cruise capability. Then —"

"This is Chief Danger, Power Section." Ommu butted into his spiel. "He's ranking Crew."

Assemblyman Ognath looked me over. "Better give me the gun. He held out a broad, well-tended hand.

"I'll keep it," I said. "I'll be glad to have your help, Assemblyman."

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear," Ognath showed me a well-bred frown. "As a member of the World Assembly of Ahax, I —"

"Ranking crew member assumes command, Assemblyman," Ommu cut him off. "Better crawl back in your hole, Mister, before you qualify yourself for proceedings under space law."

"You'd quote law to me, you — " Ognath's vocabulary failed him.

"I'll let you know how you can best be of service, Assemblyman," I told him, and we moved on and left him still looking for a suitable word.

The boat was in good shape, fully equipped and supplied — for fifty people, all of whom were presumed to have had plenty of time to pack and file aboard like ladies and gentlemen. Assemblyman Ognath made a formal complaint about the presence of an animal aboard, but he was howled down. Everybody seemed to think a mascot was lucky. Anyway, Eureka ate very little and took up no useful space. Two of the injured died the first day, three more in the next week. We put them out the lock and closed ranks.

There wasn't much room for modesty aboard, for those with strong feelings about such matters. One man objected to another's watching his wife taking a sponge bath — (ten other people were watching, too; they had no choice in the matter, unless they screwed their eyes shut) and knocked his front teeth out with a belt buckle. Two days later, the jealous one turned up drifting in the no-G tube with his windpipe crushed. Nobody seemed to miss him much, not even the wife.

Two hundred and sixty-nine hours after we'd kicked free of the foundering ship, we were maneuvering for an approach to Cyoc. From five hundred miles up, it

looked like one huge snowball.

It was my first try at landing an atmosphere boat. I'd run through plenty of drills, but the real thing was a little different. Even with fully automated controls that only needed a decision made for them here and there along the way, there were still plenty of things to do wrong. I did them all. After four hours of the roughest ride this side of a flatwheeled freight car, we slammed hard in a mountain-rimmed icefield something over four hundred miles from the beacon station.

The rough landing had bloodied a few noses, one of them mine, broken an arm or two, and opened a ten-foot seam in the hull that let in a blast of refrigerated air. But that was incidental. The real damage was to the equipment compartment forward. The power plant had been knocked right through the side of the boat.

That meant no heat, no light and no communications. Assemblyman Ognath told me what he thought of my piloting ability. I felt pretty bad until Ommu got him to admit he knew even less about atmosphere flying than I did.

The outside temperature was ten below freezing; that made it a warm day, for Cyoc. The sun was small and a long way off, glaring in a dark, metallic sky. It shed a sort of gray, before-the-storm light over a hummocky spread of glacier that ended at blue peaks, miles away. Assemblyman Ognath told me that now that we were on terra firma he

was taking charge, and that he would waste no time taking steps for rescue. He didn't say what steps. I told him I'd retain command as long as the emergency lasted. He fumed and used some strong language, but I was still wearing the gun.

There were a lot of complaints from the passengers about the cold, the short rations, the recycled water, bruises and other things. They'd been all right in space, glad to be alive. Now that they were ashore they seemed to expect instant relief. I called some of the men aside for a conference.

"I'm taking a party to make the march to the beacon," I told them.

"Party?" Ognath bellied up to me. "We'll all go! Only by pulling together can we hope to survive!"

"I'm taking ten men," I said. "The rest stay here."

"You expect us to huddle here in this wreck and slowly freeze to death?" Ognath wanted to know.

"Not you, Assemblyman," I said. "You're coming with me."

He didn't like that, either. He said his place was with the people.

"I want the strongest, best-fed men," I said. "We'll be traveling with heavy packs at first. I can't have stragglers."

"Why not just yourself, and this fellow?" Ognath jerked a thumb at Ommu.

"We're taking half the food with us. Somebody has to carry it."

"Half the food — for ten men? And you'd leave seventy-odd women and children to share what's left?"

"That's right. We'll leave now. There's still a few hours of daylight."

Half an hour later we were ready to go, the cat included. The cold didn't seem to bother him. The packs were too big by half, but they'd get lighter.

"Where's your pack, Danger?" Ognath wanted to know.

"I'm not carrying one," I told him. I left the boat in charge of a crewman with a sprained wrist. When I looked back at the end of an hour all I could see was ice.

We made fifteen miles before sunset. When we camped, several of the men complained about the short rations, and a couple mentioned the food I gave Eureka. Ognath made another try to gather support for himself as trail boss, but without much luck. We turned in and slept for five hours. It wasn't daylight yet when I rolled them out. One man complained that his suit pack was down; he was shivering, and blue around the lips. I sent him back and distributed his pack among the others.

We went on, into rougher country, sprinkled with rock slabs that pushed up through the ice. The ground was rising, and footing was treacherous. When I called the noon halt, we had made another ten miles.

"At this rate, we'll cover the distance in ten days," Ognath informed me. "The rations could be doubled easily. We're carrying enough for forty days!"

He had some support on that point. I said no. After a silent meal and a ten-minute rest, we went on. I watched the men. Ognath was a complainer, but he held his position up front. Two men had a tendency to straggle. One of them seemed to be having trouble with his pack. I checked on him, found he had a bad bruise on his shoulder from a fall during the landing. I chewed him out and sent him back to the boat.

"If anybody else is endangering this party by being noble, speak up now," I told them. Nobody did. We went on, down to eight men already, and only twenty-four hours out.

The climbing was stiff for the rest of the day. Night caught us halfway to a high pass. Everybody was dog-tired. Ommu came over and told me the packs were too heavy.

"They'll get lighter," I told him.

"Maybe if you carried one you'd see it my way," he came back.

"Maybe that's why I'm not carrying one."

We spent a bad night in the ice of an ice-ridge. I ordered all suits set for minimum heat to conserve power. At dawn we had to dig ourselves out of drifted snow.

We made the pass by mid-afternoon, and were into a second line of hills by dark. Up until then, everyone had been getting by on his initial charge; now the strain was starting to show. When morning came, two men had trouble getting started. After the first hour, one of them passed out cold. I left him

and the other fellow with a pack between them, to make it back to the boat. By dark, we'd put seventy-five miles behind us.

I began to lose track of days then. One man slipped on a tricky climb around a crevasse, and we lost him, pack and all. That left five of us: myself, Ommu, Ognath, a passenger named Choom and Lath, one of my Power Section Crew. Their faces were hollow, and when they pulled their masks off their eyes looked like wild animals; but we'd weeded out the weak ones now.

At a noonday break, Ognath watched me passing out the ration cans.

"I thought so!" His fruity baritone was just a croak now. "Do you see what he's doing?" He turned to the others, who had sprawled on their backs as usual as soon as I called the halt. "No wonder Danger's got more energy than the rest of us! He's giving himself double rations — for himself and the animal!"

They all sat up and stared my way.

"How about it?" Ommu asked. "Is he right?"

"Never mind me," I told them. "Just eat and get what rest you can. We've still got nearly three hundred miles to go."

Ommu got to his feet. "Time you doubled up on rations for all of us," he said. The other two men were sitting and watching.

"I'll decide when it's time," I told him.

"Ognath, open a pack and hand out an extra ration all around," Ommu said.

"Touch a pack and I'll kill you," I said. "Lie down and get your rest, Ommu."

They stood there and looked at me.

"Better be careful how you sleep from now on, Danger," Ommu said. Nobody said anything while we finished eating and shouldered packs and started on. I marched at the rear now, watching them. I couldn't afford to let them fail. The Lady Raire was counting on me.

XV

At halfway point, I was still feeling fairly strong. Ognath and Choom had teamed up to help each other over the rough spots, and Ommu and Lath stuck together. None of them said anything to me unless they had to. Eureka had taken to ranging far offside, looking for game, maybe.

Each day's march was like the one before. We got on our feet at daylight, wolfed down the ration and hit the trail. Our best speed was about two miles per hour now. The scenery never changed. When I estimated we'd done two hundred and fifty miles — about the fifteenth day — I increased the ration. We made better time that day, and the next. Then the pace began to drag again. The next day there were a lot of falls. It wasn't just rougher ground; the men were reaching the end of their strength. We halted in mid-afternoon, and I told them to

turn their suit heaters up to medium range. I saw Ognath and Choom swap looks. I went over to the Assemblyman and checked his suit; it was on full high. So was Choom's.

"Don't blame them, Danger," Ommu said. "On short rations they were freezing to death."

The next day Choom's heat-pack went out. He kept up for an hour; then he fell and couldn't get up. I checked his feet; they were frozen waxy-white, ice-hard, halfway to the knee.

We set up a tent for him, left fourteen-days' rations, and went on. Assemblyman Ognath told me this would be one of the items I'd answer for at my trial.

"Not unless we reach the beacon," I reminded him.

Two days later, Ognath jumped me when he thought I was asleep. He didn't know I had scattered ice chips off my boots around me as a precaution. I woke up just in time to roll out of his way. He rounded and came for me again, and Eureka knocked him down and stood over him, snarling in a way to chill your blood. Lath and Ommu heard him yell and I had to hold the gun on them to get them calmed down.

"Rations," Ognath said. "Divide them up now; four even shares!"

I turned him down. Ommu told me what he'd do to me as soon as he caught me without the gun. Lath asked me if I was willing to kill the cat, now that it had gone mad and was attacking people. I let them talk. When they had it out of

their systems, we went on. That afternoon Ommu fell and couldn't get up. I took his pack and told Lath to help him. An hour later Lath was down. I called a halt, issued a triple ration all around and made up what was left of the supplies into two packs. Ognath complained, but he took one and I took the other.

The next day was a hard one. We were into broken ground again, and Ognath was having trouble with his load, even though it was a lot lighter than the one he'd started with. Ommu and Lath took turns helping each other up. Sometimes it was hard to tell which one was helping which. We made eight miles and pitched camp. The next day we did six miles; the next five; the day after that, Ognath fell and sprained an ankle an hour after we'd started. By then we had covered three hundred and sixty miles.

"We'll make camp here," I said. "Ommu and Lath, lend a hand."

I used the filament gun on a narrow beam to cut half a dozen foot-cube blocks of snow. When I told Ommu to start stacking them in a circle, he just looked at me.

"He's gone crazy," he said. "Listen, Lath; you too, Ognath. We've got to rush him. He can't kill all three of us —"

"We're going to build a shelter," I told him. "You'll stay warm there until I get back."

"What are you talking about?" Lath was hobbling around offside, trying to get behind me. I waved him back.

"This is the end of the line for

you. Ognath can't go anywhere; you two might make another few miles, but the three of you together will have a better chance."

"Where do you think you're going?" Ognath got himself up on one elbow to call out. "Are you abandoning us now?"

"He planned it this way all along," Lath whispered. His voice had gone a couple of days before. "Made us pack his food for him, used us as draft animals; and now that we're used up, he'll leave us here to die."

Ommu was the only one who didn't spend the next ten minutes swearing at me. He flopped down on the snow and watched me range the snow blocks in a ten-foot circle. I cut and carried up more and built the second course. When I had the third row in place, he got up and silently started chinking the gaps with snow.

It took two hours to finish the igloo, including a six-foot entrance tunnel and a sanitary trench a few feet away.

"We'll freeze inside that," Ognath was almost blubbering now. "When our suit-packs go, we'll freeze!"

I opened the packs and stacked part of the food, made up one light pack.

"Look," Ognath was staring at the small heap of ration cans. "He's leaving us with nothing! We'll starve, while he stuffs his stomach!"

"If you starve you won't freeze," I said. "Better get him inside," I told Ommu and Lath.

"He won't be stuffing his stomach much," Ommu said. "He's leaving us twice what he's taking for himself."

"But — where's all the food he's been hoarding?"

"We've been eating it for the past week," Ommu said. "Shut up, Ognath. You talk too much."

I put Ognath in the igloo. It was already warmer inside, from the yellowish light flickering through the snow walls. I left them then and, Eureka pacing beside me, started off toward what I hoped was the beacon.

My pack weighed about ten pounds; I had food enough for three-days' half rations. I was still in reasonable shape, reasonably well fed. With luck, I expected to make the beacon in a two-day march.

I didn't have luck. I made ten miles before dark, slept cold and hungry, put in a full second day. By sundown I had covered the forty miles, but all I could see was flat plain and glare ice, all the way to the horizon. According to the chart, the beacon was built on a hundred-foot knoll that would be visible for at least twenty miles. That meant one more day, minimum.

I did the day, and another day. I rechecked my log, and edited all the figures downward; and I still should have been in sight of home base by now. That night Eureka disappeared.

The next day my legs started to go. I finished the last of my food and threw away the pack. I had a suspicion my suit heaters were about

finished; and now I shivered all the time.

Late that day I saw Eureka, far away, crossing a slight ripple in the flat ice. Maybe he was on the trail of something to eat. I wished him luck. I had a bad fall near sunset and had a hard time crawling into the lee of a rock to sleep.

The next day things got rough. I knew I was within a few miles of the beacon, but my suit instruments weren't good enough to pinpoint it. Any direction was as good as another. I walked east, toward the dull glare of the sun behind low clouds. When I couldn't walk any more I crawled. After a while I couldn't crawl any more. I heard a buzzing from my suit pack that meant the charge was almost exhausted. It didn't seem important. I didn't hurt any more, wasn't hungry or even a bit tired.

It felt good, just floating where I was, in a warm, golden sea. Golden, the color of the Lady Raire's skin when she lay under the hot sun of Gar 28, slim and tawny . . . Lady Raire, a prisoner, waiting for me to come for her.

I was on my feet, weaving, but upright. I picked out a rock ahead, and concentrated on reaching it. I made it and fell down and saw my own footprints there. That seemed funny. When I finished laughing, it was dark. I was cold now. I heard voices . . .

The voices were louder, and then there was light and a man was standing over me and Eureka was sitting on his haunches beside me, washing his face.

Ommu and Ognath were all right; Lath had left the igloo and never came back; Choom was dead of gangrene. Of the four men I had sent back to the boat during the first few days, three reached it. All of the party at the boat survived. We later learned that our boat was the only one that got away from the ship. We never learned what it was we had collided with.

I was back on my feet in a day or two. The men at the beacon station were glad to have an interruption in their routine; they gave us the best of everything the station had to offer. A couple of days later a ship arrived to take us off.

At Ahax, I went before a board of inquiry and answered a lot of questions, most of which seemed to be designed to get me to confess that it had all been my fault. But in the end they gave me a clean bill and a trip bonus for my trouble.

Assemblyman Ognath was waiting when I left the hearing room.

"I understand the board dismissed you with a modest bonus and a hint that the less you said of the disaster the better," he said.

"That's about it."

"Danger, I've always considered myself to be a man of character," he told me. "At Cyoc, I was in error. I owe you something. What are your plans?"

He gave me a sharp look when I told him. "I assume there's a story behind that — but I won't pry."

"No secret, Mr. Assemblyman."

I told him the story over dinner at an eating place that almost made up for thirty days on the ice. When I finished he shook his head.

"Danger, do you have any idea how long it will take you to work your passage to as distant a world as Zeridajh?"

"A long time."

"Longer than you're likely to live, at the wages you're earning."

"Maybe."

"Danger, as a politician I'm a practical man. I have no patience with romantic quests. However, you saved my life; I have a debt to discharge. I'm in a position to offer you the captaincy of your own vessel, to undertake a mission of considerable difficulty—but one which, if you're successful, will pay you more than you could earn in twenty years below decks!"

The details were explained to me that night at a meeting in a plush suite on the top floor of a building that must have been two hundred stories high. From the terrace where I was invited to take a chair with four well tailored and manicured gentlemen, the city lights spread out for fifty miles. Assemblyman Ognath wasn't there. One of the men did most of the talking while the other three listened.

"The task we wish you to undertake," he said in a husky whisper, "requires a man of sound judgment and intrepid character; a man without family ties or previous conflicting loyalties. I am assured you possess those qualities. The assignment also demands great determina-

ation, quick wits and high integrity. If you succeed, the rewards will be great. If you fail, you can expect a painful death, and we can do nothing to help you."

A silent-footed girl appeared with a tray of glasses. I took one and listened.

"Ahacian commercial interests have suffered badly during recent decades from the peculiarly insidious competition of a non-human race known as the Rish. The pattern of their activities has been such as to give rise to the conviction that more than mere mercantile ambitions are at work. We have, however, been singularly unsuccessful in our efforts to place observers among them."

"In other words, your spies haven't had any luck."

"None."

"What makes this time different?"

"You will enter Rish-controlled space openly, attended by adequate public notice. Your movements as a lone Ahacian vessel in alien-controlled space will be followed with interest by the popular screen. The Rish can hardly maintain their pretense of cordiality if they offer you open interference. Your visit to the capital, Hi-Iliat, will appear no more than a casual commercial visit."

"I don't know anything about espionage," I said. "What would I do when I got there — if I got there?"

"Nothing. Your crew of four will consist of trained specialists."

"Why do you need me?"

"Precisely because you are not a specialist. Your training has been

other than academic. You have faced disaster in space, and survived. Perhaps you will survive among the Rish.

It sounded simple enough. I'd be gone a year; when I got back, a small fortune would be waiting for me. The amount they mentioned made my head swim. Ognath had been wrong. It wasn't twenty-years' earnings; it was forty.

"I'll take it," I said. "But I think you're wasting your money."

"We pay you nothing unless you return," the spokesman said. "In which case the outlay will not have been wasted."

The vessel they showed me in a maintenance dock at the port was a space-scarred, five-thousand tonner, built twelve hundred years ago and used hard ever since. If the Rish had any agents snooping around her for hidden armor, multi-light communications gear or super-drive auxiliaries, they didn't find them. There weren't any. Just the ancient stressed-field generators, standard navigation gear, a hold full of pre-coded computer tapes for light manufacturing operations. My crew of four were an unlikely-looking set of secret agents. Two were chinless lads with expressions of goggle-eyed innocence; one was a middle-aged man who gave the impression of having run away from a fat wife; and the last was a tall, big-handed, silent fellow with moist blue eyes.

I spent two weeks absorbing cephalotapes designed to fill in the gaps in my education. We lifted off be-

fore dawn one chilly morning, with no more fanfare than any other tramp steamer leaving harbor. I left Eureka behind with one of the tech girls from the Training Center. Maybe that was a clue to the confidence I was beginning to have in the mission.

For the first few weeks, I enjoyed captaining my own ship, even as ancient a scow as *Jongo*. My crew stared solemnly when I suited up and painted the letters on her prow myself. To them, the idea of anthropomorphizing an artifact with a pet name was really pretty weird.

We made our first planetfall without incident. I contacted the importers ashore, quoted prices, bought replacement cargo in accordance with instructions, while my four happy-go-lucky men saw the town. I didn't ask them what they'd found out; as far as I was concerned, the less I knew about their activities the better.

We went on, calling at small, unpopulous worlds, working our way deeper into the bar, then angling toward galactic south, swinging out into less densely populated space, where Center was a blazing arch in the screens. We'd seen, by afternoon, Ostrok and twenty other worlds, as alike as small towns in mid-western United States. And then one day we arrived at a planet which looked no different than the rest of space, but was the target we'd been feeling our way toward for five months; The Rish capital, and the place where, if I made one tiny mistake, I'd leave my bones.

SPACEMANI

The port of Hi-Iliat was a booming, bustling center where great shining hulls from all the great worlds of the Bar, and even a few from Center itself, stood ranged on the miles-wide ramps system, as proud and aloof as carved Assyrian kings. We rode a rampcar in from the remote boondocks where we'd been parked by traffic control to a mile-wide rotunda constructed of high arched ribs of white concrete with translucent filigree-work between them. I was so busy staring up at it that I didn't see the Rish official until one of my men prodded me. I turned and was looking at a leathery five-foot oyster all ready for a walk on the beach, spindly legs and all. He was making thin buzzes and clicks that seemed to come from a locket hanging on the front side of him. It dawned on me then that it was speaking a dialect I could understand:

"All right, chaps, just in from out-system, eh? Mind stepping this way? A few formalities, won't take a *skwrth*."

I didn't know how long a *skwrth* was, but I followed him, and my four beauties followed me. He led us into a room that was like a high, narrow corridor, too brightly lit for comfort, already crowded with men and Rish and three or four other varieties of life, none of which I had ever seen before. We sat on small stools as directed and put our hands into slots and had lights flashed in our eyes and sharp tones beeped at our ears. Whatever the test was, we must have passed, because our guide led us out into a

ceilingless circular passage like a cattle run and addressed us:

"Now, chaps, as guests of the Rish Hierarchy, you're welcome to our great city and to our fair world. You'll find hostelries catering to your metabolic requirements, and if at any time you are in need of assistance, you need merely repair to the nearest sanctuary station, marked by the white pole, and you will be helped. And I must also solemnly caution you: Any act unfriendly to the Rish Hierarchy will be dealt with instantly and with the full rigor of the law. I trust you'll have a pleasant stay. Mind the step, now." He pushed a hidden control and a panel slid back and he waved us through into the concourse.

An hour later, after an ion-bath and a drink at the hotel bar, I set out to take a look at Hi-Iliat. It was a beautiful town, full of blinding white pavement, sheer towers, tiled plazas with hundred-foot fountains and schools and shoals of Rish, zooming along on tiny one-wheeled motorbikes. There were a few men in sight, and an equal number of aliens. The locals paid no attention to them, except to ping their bikebells at them when they stepped out in front of them.

I found a park where orange grass as soft as velvet grew under trees with polished silver trunks and golden yellow leaves. There were odd little butterfly-like birds there, and small leathery animals the size of squirrels. Beyond it was a lake, with pretty little buildings standing up on stilts above the water; I could hear twittery music coming from

somewhere. I sat on a bench and watched the big, pale sun setting across the lake. It seemed that maybe the life of a spy wasn't so bad after all.

It was twilight when I started back to the hotel. I was halfway there when four Rish on green-painted scooters surrounded me. One of them was wearing a voice box.

"Captain Billy Danger," he said in a squeak like a bat. "You are under arrest for crimes against the peace and order of the Hierarchy of Rish."

XVIII

The prison they took me to was a brilliantly lit rabbit warren of partitions, blind alleys, cubicles, passages, tiny rooms where inscrutable oyster-faces stared at me while carrying on inaudible conversations that made my ear drums itch. I asked questions, but got no answers. For all I know it was the same oyster I talked to each time; it might even have been the same office. I got very hungry and thirsty and sleepy, but nobody got out any rubber hoses. I could have done worse in any small town in Mississippi.

After about an hour of these silent examinations, I wound up in a room the size of a phone booth with a Rishian wearing a talk-box. He told me his name was Humekey and that he was Chief of Physical Interrogation and Punishment. I got the impression the two duties were hard to tell apart.



SPACEMANI

"You are in a most serious position," he told me in his mechanically translated squeak. "The Rish Hierarchy has no mercy for strangers seeking to do evil. However, I am aware that you yourself have merely been used — possibly even without your knowledge — as an agency for transporting criminals. By cooperating with me fully, you may save yourself from the more unpleasant consequences of your actions. Accordingly, you will now give me full particulars of the activities of your associates."

"I want to see the Ahacian consul," I said.

"Don't waste my time," he shrilled. "What were the specific missions of the four agents who accompanied you here?"

"If my crew are under arrest, I want to see them."

"You have an imperfect grasp of the situation, Captain Danger! It is *I* who make the demands!"

"I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Nonsense, I know you Men too well. Each of you would sell his own kind to save his person."

"Then why are you afraid to let me see the consul?"

"Afraid?" he made a sound which was probably a laugh, but it lost something in translation. "Very well, then. I grant your plea."

They took me to a bigger room with softer light and left me, and a minute later an egg-bald man in dandified clothes came in, looking worried and mad.

"I understand you demanded to see me," he said and hand-

ed me a gadget and looped a similar one around his neck, with attachment to the left ear and the Adam's apple. I followed suit.

"Look here, Danger," his voice peeped in my ear. "There's nothing I can do for you! You knew that when you came here. Insistence on seeing me serves merely to implicate Ahax."

"Who are you kidding?" I subvocalized. "They know all about the mission. Something leaked. That wasn't part of the deal."

"That's neither here nor there. Your duty now is to avoid any appearance that yours is an official mission."

"You think they're dumb enough to believe I'm in the spy business for myself?"

"See here, Danger, don't meddle in affairs that are beyond your grasp! You were selected for this mission because of your total illiteracy in matters of policy."

"Let's quit kidding," I said.

"Why do you think they let you see me?"

"Let me? They practically kidnapped me."

"Sure; this is a test. They want to see what you'll do. Species loyalty is a big thing with them — I learned that much studying tapes, back on Ahax. Every time they capture and execute a Man with no reaction from his home world, they get a little bolder."

"This is nonsense, a desperate bid for rescue —"

"You made a mistake seeing me, Mr. Consul. You can't pretend you don't know me, now. Better get me

out of this. If you don't I'll spill the beans."

"What's that?" He looked shocked. "What can you tell them? You know nothing of the actual — " He cut himself off.

"I can tell them all about you, for a starter," I told him.

"Tell them what about me?"

"That you're the mastermind of the Ahacian espionage ring here on the Rish World," I said. "And anything else I can think of. Some of it might even be true."

He got his back stiffened up and gave me the old ice-blue glare. "You'd play the traitor of the Ahacian Assembly, which trusted you?"

"You bureaucrats have a curious confidence in the power of one-way loyalty. You'd sell me down the river just to maintain a polite diplomatic lie; and you expect me to go, singing glad hosannahs."

He struggled some more, but I had him hooked in the eye. In the end he said he'd see what he could do and went away mopping his forehead. The oysters hustled me into an elevator and took me down into what must have been a sub-sub-basement and made me crawl through a four-foot tunnel into a dim-lit room with a strange, unpleasant smell. I was still sniffing and trying to remember what it was about the odor that made my scalp crawl when something moved in the deep gloom of the far corner and an armored, four-foot midget rose up on a set of thick legs and two oversized eyes stared at me from the middle of its chest.

For the first five seconds I stood where I was, feeling the shock reaction slamming through my brain. Then, without any conscious decision on my part, I was diving for it. It tried to scuttle aside, but I landed on it, grabbed for what passed for its throat. Its body arched under me, and the stubby legs beat against the floor, and it broke free and went for the exit tunnel, making a sound like water gurgling down a drain. I kicked it away from the opening, and it curled up and rolled to a neutral corner and I stood over it breathing hard and looking for a soft spot to attack.

"Peace!" The words sounded grotesque coming from what looked like an oversized armadillo. "I yield, master! Have mercy on poor Srat!" Then it made sounds that were exactly like an Australian bush-baby — or a crying child.

"That's right," I said, and my voice had a high, quavering note. I could feel the gooseflesh on my arms, just from being close to the thing. "I'm not ready to kill you yet. First you're going to tell me things!"

"Yes, Master! Poor Srat will tell Master everything he knows! All, all!"

"There was a ship — wasp-waisted, copper-colored, big. It answered our distress call. Bugs like you came out of it. They shot me up, but I guess they didn't know much human anatomy. And they took the Lady Raire. Where did they take her? Where is she? What did they do to her?"

"Master, let poor Srat think!"

it gurgled, and I realized I'd been kicking it with every question mark.

"Don't think — just give me the answers." I drew a deep breath and felt the rage draining away, and my hands started to shake from the reaction.

"Master, poor Srat doesn't understand about the lady — " It oofed in anticipation when I took a step toward it.

"The ship, yes," it babbled. "Long ago poor Srat remembers such a ship, all in the beauty of its mighty form, like a great Mother. But that was long, long ago!"

"Three years," I said. "On a world out in the Arm."

"No, Master! Forty years have passed away since last poor Srat glimpsed the great mother-shapel! And that was deep in Fringe Space — It stopped suddenly, as if it had said too much, and I kicked it again.

"Poor Srat is in exile," it whined. "So far, so far from the heaving oil-black bosom of the deeps of H'eeaq."

"Is that where they took her. To H'eeaq?"

It groaned. "Weep for great H'eeaq, Master. Weep for poor Srat's memories of that which was once, and can never be again . . . "

I listened to the blubbering and groaning and piece by piece, got the story from it: H'eeaq, a lone world, a hundred lights out toward Galactic Zenith, where Center spread over the sky like a blazing roof; the discovery that the sun was on the verge of a nova explosion; the flight

into space, the years — centuries of gypsy-wandering. And a landing on a Rish-controlled world, a small brush with the Rish law — and forty years of slavery. By the time it was finished, I was sitting on the bench by the wall, feeling cold, washed out of all emotion, for the first time in three years. Kicking this poor waif wouldn't bring the Lady Raire back home. That left me with nothing at all.

"And Master?" poor Srat whimpered. "Has Master, too, aroused the cruel ire of these Others?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. They're using me for a test case." I cut myself off. I wasn't ready to start gossiping with the thing.

"Master — poor Srat can tell Master many things about these Rishes. Things that will help him."

"It's a little late for that," I said. "I've already had my say. Hume-koy wasn't impressed."

The H'eeaq crept closer to me. "No, Master, listen to poor Srat. Of mercy, the Rish-things know nothing. But in matters of business ethic . . . "

I was asleep when they came for me. Four guards with symbols painted on their backs herded me along to a circular room where a lone Rish who might have been Hume-koy sat behind a desk under a spotlight. Other Rish came in, took seats along the walls behind me. My buddy the Ahacian consul was nowhere in sight.

"What will you offer for your freedom?" the presiding Rish asked.

I stood there remembering what Poor Srat had told me about the Rish and wondering whether to believe him.

"Nothing," I said.

"You offer nothing for your life?"

"It's already mine. If you kill me you'll be stealing."

"And if we imprison you?"

"Stealing is stealing. My life is mine, not yours."

I felt the silent buzzing that meant they were talking it over. Then Humekey picked up two rods, a white one and a red one, from the desk. He held the white one out to me.

"You will depart the Rish world at once," he said. "Take this symbol of Rish magnanimity and go."

I shook my head, and felt the sweat start up. "I'll take my life and freedom because it's mine, not as a gift. I don't want any gifts from you; no gifts at all."

"You refuse the mercy of the Hierarch?" Humekey's canned voice went up off the scale.

"All I want is what's mine."

More silent conversation. Humekey put the rods back on the desk.

"Then go, Captain Danger. You have your freedom."

"What about my crew?"

"They are guilty. They will pay their debt."

"They're no good to you. I suppose you've already pumped them dry. Why not let them go?"

"Ah, you crave a gift after all?"

"No. I'll pay for them."

"So? What payment do you offer?"

Poor Srat had briefed me on this, too. I knew what I had to do, but my mouth felt dry and my stomach was quivering. We bargained for ten minutes before we agreed on a price.

My right eye.

XVII

They were skillful surgeons. They took the eye out without anesthetic, other than a stiff drink of what tasted like refrigerant fluid. Humekey stood by and watched with every indication of deep interest. As for me, I had already learned about pain: the body is capable of registering only a certain amount of it; about what you'd get from laying your palm on a hot-plate. After that, it's all the same. I yelled and screamed a little, and kicked around a bit, but it was over very quickly. They packed the empty socket with something cold and wet that numbed it in a few seconds. In half an hour I was back on my feet, feeling dizzy and with a sort of gauzy veil between my remaining eye and the world.

They took me to the port, and my crew was there ahead of me, handcuffed and looking pale green around the ears. And the consul was there too, with his hands clamped up as tight as the rest.

"It has been a fair exchange, Captain Danger," Humekey told me after the others were aboard. "These paid cheats have garnered their petty harvest of data on industrial and port facilities, volume of shipping and sophistication of equipment, on

which to base estimates of Rish assault capability. And in return the Hierarch has gained valuable information for proper assessment of you humans. Had we acted on the basis of impressions gained by study of the persons so cleverly trained to delude us heretofore, we might have made a serious blunder."

We parted on that note, not as pals, exactly, but with what might be described as a mutual wary respect. At the last minute a ramp car pulled up and a pair of Rish guards dumped Poor Srat out.

"The creature aided, indirectly, in our rapprochement," Humekoy said. "His payment is his freedom. Perhaps you, too, may have an account to settle."

"Put him aboard," I said. "He and I will have a lot of things to talk over before I get back to Ahax."

By the time the fifty-seven day voyage was over, I knew as much about H'eeaq as Poor Srat could tell me.

"Why these mistaken kin of mine may have stolen a lady of Master's kind, I can't say," he insisted. But as to where — he had a few ideas on that.

"There are worlds, Master, where long ago H'eeaq established markets for the complex molecules so abundantly available to her in those days. Our vessels call there still, and out of regard for past ties perhaps, the in-dwellers supply our needs for stores. And in return, we give them what we can."

He gave me the details of a few

of these old market places—worlds far out in Fringe Space, where few questions were asked and a human was a rare freak.

"We'll go take a look," I said. "As soon as I collect my pay."

At Ahax, Traffic Control allotted me a slot at the remotest corner of the port. We docked, and my four cheery crewmen were gone in a rampcar before I finished securing the command deck. I told Srat to follow me and started to walk the two miles to the nearest power way. A rampcar went past in a hurry in the next lane over, headed out toward where my tub was parked. I thought about hailing it, but even with the chill wind blowing, walking felt good, after the weeks in space.

Inside the long terminal building, a P.A. voice was droning something. Srat made a gobbling noise and, said, "Master, they speak of you!" I looked where he pointed with one flipper and saw my face looking down from a public screen.

"... distinguishing scar on the right side of the neck and jaw," the voice was saying. "It is the duty of any person seeing this man to detain him and notify Central Authority at once!"

Nobody seemed to be looking my way. I was wearing a plain gray shipsuit and a light windbreaker with the collar turned up far enough to cover the scar; I didn't look much different than a lot of other space-burned crew types. Poor Srat was crouching and quivering. They hadn't put him on the air,

but he would attract attention with his whimpering. We had to get to cover, fast. I turned and headed for the nearest ramp exit and as I reached the vestibule a woman's voice called my name. I spun and saw a familiar face: Nancy, the little tech operator I'd left Eureka with.

"I was in Ops Three when your clearance request came, four hours ago," she said in a fast whisper. She saw the patch over my eye and her voice faltered and went on: I thought . . . after all, no one expected you to come back . . . it would be nice to come down and meet you. Then . . . I heard the announcement . . . "

"What's it all about, Nancy?"

She shook her head. She was a pert little girl with a turned-up nose and very white, even teeth. "I don't know, Billy. Someone said you'd gone against your orders, turned back early."

"Yeah. There's something in that. But you don't want to be seen talking to me."

"Billy — maybe if you went to them voluntarily . . . "

"I have a funny feeling near the back of my neck that says that would be a wrong play."

Her face looked tight; she nodded. "I think I understand." She took a bite of her lip. "Come with me." She turned and started across the lobby. Srat plucked at my sleeve.

"You'll do better on your own," I said, and followed her.

She led me through a door marked for private use, along a plain

corridor with lots of doors, out through a small personnel entry on to a parking lot full of ramp vehicles.

"Good thing, girl," I said. "You'd better fade out fast now—"

"Just a minute." She ducked back inside. I went to a small mail-carrier, found the controls unlocked. I started it up and back around by the door as it swung open and a sleek pepper-and-salt-and-tan animal stalked through, looking relaxed, as always.

"Eureka!" I called, and the old boy stopped and looked my way, then reached the car in one bound and was in beside me. I looked up and Nancy was watching from the door.

"Thanks for everything," I said. "I don't know why you took the chance, but thanks."

"Maybe it's because you're what's known as a romantic figure," she said and whirled and was gone before I could ask her what that meant.

I pulled the car out and into a lane, across the ramp, keeping it at an easy speed. There was a small click from over my head, and a voice said, "7890, where do you think you're going?"

"Fuel check," I mumbled.

"Little late, aren't you? You heard the clear-ramp order."

"Yeah, what's it all about?"

"Pickup order out on some smuggler that gave Control the slip a few minutes ago. Now get off the ramp!"

He clicked off. I angled right as if I were headed for the mainten-

ance bay at the end of the line, but at the last second I veered left and headed out toward where I'd parked *Jongo*. I could see rampcars buzzing back and forth, off to my left; I passed two uniformed men, on foot. One of them stared at me, and I kept my chin down in my collar and waved to him. A hundred yards from the tub, I saw the cordon of cars around it. So much for my chances of a slick takeoff under their noses. I pulled the car offside between a massive freighter that looked as if it hadn't been moved for a couple of hundred years, and a racy yacht that reminded me of Lord Desroy's, and tried to make my brain think. It didn't seem to want to. My eyes kept wandering back to the fancy enamel-inlaid trim around the entry lock of the yacht. The port was open, and I could see the gleam of hand-rubbed finishes inside . . .

I was out of the car and across to the yacht before I realized I'd made a decision. Eureka went in ahead of me, as if he owned the boat. Just as I got a foot on the carpeted four-step ladder, one of the pedestrian cops came into sight around the side of the old freighter. He saw me and broke into a run, fumbling with a holster at his side in a way that said he had orders to shoot. I unfroze and started up, knowing I wouldn't make it, and heard a scuffling sound and a heavy thud and a crash of fire that cracked and scorched the inlay by the door. I looked back, and he was spread out on the pavement, out cold, and Poor Srat was un-

tangling himself from his legs. He scrambled in behind me, and I tripped the port-secure lever and ran for the flight deck. I slammed the main drive lever to full emergency liftoff position and felt my back teeth shake as the yacht screamed off the ramp, splitting the atmosphere of Ahax like a meterite.

The ship handled like a yachtsman's dream. For the first few hours I ducked and bobbed in an evasion pattern that took us out through the planetary patrols. I kept the com channels open and listened to a lot of excited talk that told me I'd picked the personal transportation of an Ahacian official whose title translated roughly as Assistant Dictator. After a while Assemblyman Ognath came on, looking very red around the ears, and showed me a big, phony smile.

"Captain Danger, there's been a misunderstanding," he warbled. "The police officers you may have seen at the port were merely a guard of honor."

"Somebody forgot to tell the gunhandlers about that," I said in a breezy tone that I thought would have the maximum irritant value. "I had an idea maybe you fellows decided forty years pay was too much to spend, after all. But that's okay. I'll accept this bucket as payment in full."

"Look here, Danger." Ognath let the paper smile drop. "Bring the vessel back, and I'll employ my influence to see that you're dealt with leniently."

"Thanks; I've had a sample of your influence. I don't think I'd live through another."

"You're a fool! Every civilized world within ten parsecs will be alerted; you'll be hunted down and blasted without mercy — unless you turn back now!"

"I guess the previous owner is after somebody's scalp, eh, Ognath? Too bad."

I gave him, and a couple of naval types who followed him, some more funny answers and in the process managed to get a fair idea of the interference I could expect to run into. I had to dodge three patrols in the first twenty hours; by the thirtieth hour I was running directly toward Galactic Zenith with nothing ahead but the Big Black.

"Give me the coordinates of the nearest of the worlds where you H'eeaq used to trade," I ordered Srat.

"It is distant, Master. So far away, so lonely. The world called Drope."

"We'll try it anyway," I said. "Maybe somewhere out there we'll run into a little luck."

The yacht was fueled and supplied in a way that suggested that someone had been prepared for any sudden changes in the political climate back home. It carried food, wines, a library that was all the most self-indulgent dictator could want to while away those long, dull days in space.

I showed Srat how to handle the controls so that he could relieve me whenever I felt like taking a long nap or sampling the library. I asked

him why he had stuck with me, but he just looked at me with those goggle-eyes, and for the first time in many weeks it struck me what a strange-looking thing he was. You can get used to anything, even a H'eeaq.

Eureka was better company than the alien, in spite of not being able to talk. He settled in, in a cabin full of frills that conjured up pictures of a dance-hall floozie with the brain of a Pekinese and a voice to match. Fortunately, the dictator's taste in music and books was closer to mine than his choice of mistresses. There were tapes aboard on everything from ancient human history to the latest techniques in cell-surgery, thoroughly indexed. I sampled them all.

The Fringe Worlds, I learned, were the museum of the galaxy. These lonely planets had once, long eons ago, been members of the tightly packed community of Center; their races had been the first in the young galaxy to explore out through the Bar and Eastern Arm, where their remote descendants still thrived. Now the ancient Mother-worlds lingered on, living out the twilight of their long careers, circling dying suns, far out in the cool galaxies. One of those old races, emptiness of the space between Srat assured me, was the ancestral form of Man — not that I'd recognize the relationship if I encountered a representative of the tribe.

One day I ran through a gazeteer of the Western Arm, found a listing of an obscure sun I was pretty sure

was Sol and coded its reference into the index. The documentary that came onto the view-screen showed me a dull-steel ball bearing with a brilliant highlight that the voice track said was the system's tenth planet. Number nine looked about the same only bigger. Eight and seven were big fuzz-balls flattened at the poles. I had just about decided I had the wrong star when Saturn swam into view. The sight of that old familiar ring made me feel homesick, as if I'd spent the long happy hours of childhood there. I recognized Big Jupe, too. The camera came in close on this one, and then there were surface scenes on the moons. They looked just like Luna.

Mars was a little different than the pictures I remembered seeing; the ice caps were bigger, and in the close scan the camera moved in on what looked like the ruins of a camp; not a city, just a lash-up collection of metal huts and fallen antennas, like a South Pole expedition might have left behind. And then I was looking at Earth, swimming there on the screen, cool and misty green and upside down, with Europe at the bottom and Africa at the top. I stared at it for half a minute before I noticed that the ice caps were wrong. The northern one covered most of Germany and the British Isles, and as the camera swung past, I could see that it spread down across North America as far as Kansas. And there wasn't any south polar cap. Antarctica was a crescent-shaped island, all by itself in the ocean, ice-free; and Aus-

tralia was connected to Indochina. I knew then the pictures had been made a long time ago.

The camera moved in close, and I saw oceans and jungles, deserts and ice-fields, but nowhere any sign of man. The apparent altitude at the closest approach was at least ten thousand feet, but even from that height I could make out herds of game. But whether they were mammoths and megatheria or something even older, I couldn't tell.

Then the scene shifted to Venus, which looked like Neptune, only smaller and brighter, and I switched the viewer off and made myself a long, strong drink and settled down for the long run ahead.

XIX

Drope was a lone world, circling a tired old star the color of sunset in Nevada. No hostile interceptors rose to meet me, but there was no welcoming committee either. We grounded at what Srat said was a port, but all I saw was a wind-blown wasteland with a few hill-ocks around it, under a purplish black sky without a star in sight. Center being below the horizon. The air was cold, and the wind seemed to be whispering sad stories in the dusk. I went back aboard; I dined well and drank a bottle of old Aha-cian wine and listened to music, but it seemed to be telling sad stories, too. Just before dawn Srat came back with a report that a H'eeaq ship had called — about a century ago, Earth time.

"That doesn't help us much," I pointed out.

"At least—" Poor Srat got down and wriggled in the dust, but I sensed a certain insolence in his voice "—at least Master knows now I speak truly of the voyages of the H'eeaq."

"Either that or you're a consistent liar," I said, and stopped. My tone of voice when I talked to the Midget reminded me of something, but I couldn't say what it was. Srat's informant had mentioned the name of H'eeaq vessel's next port of call. A world known as E'el, ten lights farther out into intragalactic space, which meant a two-weeks' run. I set ship-time up on a cycle as close to Earth time as I could estimate, and for a while I tried to sleep eight hours at a stretch, eat three meals a day, and maintain some pretense of night and day; but the habit of nearly six years in space was too strong. I soon reverted to three on, three off, with meals every other off period.

We picked up E'el on our screens at last, a small, dim star not even shown on the standard charts. I set the yacht down on a grassy plain near a town made of little mud-colored domes and went into the village with Srat. There was nothing there but dust and heat and a few shy natives who scuttled inside their huts as we passed. An hour of that was enough.

After that we called at a world that Srat called Zlinn, where a swarm of little atmosphere fliers about as sturdy as Spade came up and buzzed us like irate hornets.

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They refused us permission to disembark. If any H'eeaq vessel had been there in the last few decades, it was their secret.

We visited Lii, a swamp-world where vast batteries of floodlights burned all day under a dying sun, and Shoramnath, where everyone had died since Srat's last visit. We walked around among the bones and the rusted machines and the fallen-in buildings and wondered what had hit them. And we saw Far, and Z'reeth, and on Kish they let us land and then attacked us, just a few seconds prematurely, so that we made it back to the lock and lifted off in the middle of a barrage of HE fire that burned some of the shine off the hull. Suicide fliers threw themselves at us as we streaked for space; they must have been tough organisms, because some of them survived the collisions and clung to the hull, and I heard them yammering and rat-tat-tating there for minutes after we had left the last of the atmosphere behind.

On Tith, there were fallen towers that had once been two miles high, lying in rows pointing north, like a forest felled by a meteor strike. We talked to the descendants of the tower builders, and they told me that a H'eeaq ship had called; a year ago, a century ago, a thousand years — it was all the same to them.

We pushed on, hearing rumors, legends, hints that a vessel like the one I described had been seen once, long ago, or had visit-

ed the next world out-system, or that creatures like Srat had been found, dead, on an abandoned moon. Then even the rumors ran out; and Srat was fresh out of worlds.

"The trail's cold," I told him. "There's nothing out here but death and decay and legends. I'm turning back for Center."

"Only a little farther, Master," Poor Srat pleaded. "Master will find what he seeks, if only he presses on." He didn't have quite the whimpering tone now that he used to use. I wondered about Poor Srat; what he had up his sleeve.

"One more try," I said. "Then I turn back and try for Center, even if every post office this side of Earth has my picture in it."

But the next sun that swam into range was one of a small cluster; eight small, long-lived suns, well past Sol on the evolutionary scale, but still in their prime. Srat almost tied himself into a knot.

"Well do I remember the Eight Suns, Master! These are rich worlds, and generous. After we filled our holds here with succulent lichens —"

"I don't want any succulent lichens." I cut off his rhapsody. "All I want is a hot line on a H'eeaq ship."

I picked the nearest of the suns, swung in on a navigation beam from Drath, the ninth planet, with Srat doing the talking to Control, and sat the ship down on a ramp that looked as though it had survived some heavy bombardments in its day. A driverless flatcar riding

on an airstream came out to pick us up. We rode it in toward a big pinkish-gray structure across the field. Beyond it, a walled city sprawled up across a range of rounded hills. The sky was a pre-storm black, but the sun's heat baked down through the haze like a smelter.

There were rank, tropical trees and fleshy-looking flowers growing along the drive that ran the final hundred yards. Up close, I could see cracks in the building.

There were no immigration formalities to clear through, just a swarm of heavy-bodied, robed humanoids with skin like hard olive-green plastic and oversized faces — if you can call something that looks like a tangle of fish guts a face. Eureka stayed close to my side, rubbing against my leg as we pushed through the crowd inside the big arrival shed. Srat followed, making the oofling sounds that meant he didn't like it here. I told him to find someone he could talk to and try for some information; he picked a non-Drathian, a frail little knob-kneed creature creeping along by a wall with the fringe of its dark blue cloak dragging in the mud. It directed him along to a stall at the far side of the lobby which turned out to be a sort of combination labor exchange and lost and found. A three hundred pound Drathian in a dirty saffron toga listened to Srat, then rumbled an answer.

"No vessel of H'eeaq has called here, says he, Master," Srat

reported. "Drath trades with no world. The produce of Drath is the most magnificent in the Universe; he demands why anyone would seek items made elsewhere. He says also that he can offer an attractive price on a thousand tons of glath."

"What's glath?"

"Mud, Master," he translated.

"Tell him thanks, but I've sworn off." We left him and pushed on through to take a look at the town.

The buildings were high, blank-fronted, stuccoed in drab shades of ochre and pink and mauve. There was an eerie feeling hanging over the place, as if everyone was away, attending a funeral. The click and clatter and pat-pat of our assorted styles of feet was jarringly loud. A hot rain started up, to add to the cheer. It struck me again how alike cities were, on worlds all across the galaxy. Where creatures gather together to build dwellings the system of arranging them in rows along open streets was almost universal. This one was like a Mexican village, with water; all poverty and mud. I saw nothing that would pass for a policeman, an information office, a city hall or government house. After an hour of walking I was wet to the skin, cold to the bone and depressed to the soul.

I was ready to give it up and head back to the ship when the street widened out into a plaza crowded with stalls and carts under tattered awnings of various shades of gray. Compared to the empty streets, the place looked almost gay.

The nearest stall displayed an as-

sortment of dull-colored balls, ranging from lemon to grapefruit size. Srat tried to find out what they were, but the answer was untranslatable. Another bin was filled with what seemed to be dead beetles. I gathered they were edible, if you liked that sort of thing. The next displayed baubles and gimcracks made of polished metal and stone, like jewelry in every time and clime. Most of the metal was dull yellow, lead-heavy gold, and I felt a faint stir of an impulse to fill my pockets. Up ahead, an enterprising merchant had draped the front of his stall with scraps of cloth. From the colors, I judged he was color-blind, at least in what I thought of as the visible spectrum. One piece of rag caught my eye; it was a soft, silvery gray. I fingered it, and felt a shock go through me as if I'd grabbed a hot wire. But it wasn't electricity that made my muscles go rigid; it was the unmistakable feel of Zeridajhan cloth.

It was a piece about two feet long and a foot wide, raggedly cut. It might have been the back panel from a ship suit. I started to lift it, and the stall-keeper grabbed for it and cracked something in the local language, a sound like hot fat sizzling. I didn't let go.

"Tell him I want to buy it," I told Srat.

The stall-keeper tugged and made more hot fat sounds.

"Master, he doesn't understand the trade tongue," Srat said.

The merchant was getting excited, now. He made an angry buzzing and yanked hard; I zipped the

cloth out of his balled fists; then Srat was clutching at my arm and saying, "Beware, Master!"

XX

I looked around. A large Drathian who could have been the same one who offered me the load of glath except for the white serapi across his chitinous shoulder was pushing through the gathering crowd toward me. Something about him didn't look friendly. As he came up, he crackled at the merchant. The merchant crackled back. The big Drathian planted himself in front of me and spit words at me.

"Master," Srat gobbled, "the Rule-keeper demands to know why you seek to rob the merchant!"

"Tell him I'll pay well for the cloth." I took out a green trade chip that was worth six-months' pay back on the Bar Worlds and handed it over, but the Rule-keeper still didn't seem satisfied.

"Find out where he got the cloth, Srat," I said. There was more talk then. I couldn't tell whether the big Drathian was a policeman, a guild official, a racket boss or an ambulance-chasing shyster, but he seemed to pull a lot of weight. The stall-keeper was scared to death of him.

"Master, the merchant swears he came by the rag honestly; yet if Master insists, he will make him a gift of it."

"I'm not accusing him of anything. I just want to know where the cloth came from."

This time the bully-boy did the

talking, ended by pointing across the plaza.

"Master, a slave sold the cloth to the merchant."

"What kind of slave?"

"Master . . . a man-slave."

"Like me?"

"He says — yes, Master."

I let my elbow touch the butt of my filament pistol. If the crowd that had gathered around to watch and listen decided to turn nasty, it wouldn't help much; but it was comforting anyway.

"Where did he see this man-slave?"

"Here, Master. The slave is the property of Least Triarch."

"Find out where the Triarch lives."

"There, Master." Srat pointed to a dusty blue facade rising behind the other buildings like a distant cliff-face. "That is the palace of His Least Greatness."

"Let's go." I started past the Rule-keeper, and he jabbered at Srat.

"Master, he says you have forgotten his bribe."

"My mistake." I handed over another clip. "Tell him I'd like his assistance in getting an interview with the Triarch."

A price was agreed on, and he led the way across the plaza and through the network of dark streets, along a complicated route that ended in a tiled courtyard with a yellow glass roof that made it look almost like a sunny day. There were trees and flowering shrubs around a reflecting pool, a shady cloister along the far side. Srat was

nervous; he perched on a chair and mewed to himself. Eureka stretched out and stared across at a tall blue-legged bird wading in the pool.

A small Drathian came over and took orders. He asked Eureka three times what he'd have; he couldn't seem to get the idea that the old cat didn't speak the language. The drinks he brought were a thick, blue syrup with a taste of sulphur and honey. Srat sniffed his cup and said, "Master must not drink this," and proceeded to swallow his share in one gulp. I stared into the shadows under the arcade where my guide had disappeared and pretended to nibble the drink. Rain drummed on the glass overhead. It was steamy hot, like a greenhouse. After half an hour, the Drathian came back with a friend.

The newcomer was six feet tall, five feet wide, draped in dark blue velvet and hung with ribbons and tassels and fringes like a Victorian bonnet. He was introduced as Hrubaba. He was the Triarch's majordomo, and he spoke very bad, but understandable Lingua.

"You may crave one boon of his Greatness," he stated. "In return, he will accept a gift."

"I understand the Triarch owns a human slave," I said. "I'd like to see him, if his Greatness has no objection."

The majordomo agreed and gave orders to a servant; in ten minutes the servant was back, prodding a man along ahead of him.

He was a stocky, strong-looking fellow with close-cropped black hair, well-cut features, dressed in

a plain dark blue kilt. There was an ugly, two-inch scar on his left side, just below the ribs. He saw me and stopped dead and his face worked.

"You're a human being!" he gasped — in Zeradajhi.

His name was Huvile, and he had been a prisoner for ten years. He'd been captured, he said, when his personal boat had developed drive-control troubles and had carried him off course into Fringe Space.

"In the name of humanity, Milord," he begged. "Buy my freedom." He looked as if he wanted to kneel, but the big Drathian servant was holding his arm in a two-handed grip.

"I'll do what I can," I said.

"Save me, Milord — and you'll never regret it! My family is wealthy." That was as far as he got before Hrubaba waved an arm and the servant hustled him away.

I looked at the majordomo.

"How much?"

"He is yours."

I expressed gratification and offered money in return. Hrubaba indicated that Bar money was hard to spend on Drath. I ran through a list of items from Jongo II's well-stocked larders and storage hold; we finally agreed on a mixed consignment of drugs, wines, clothing and sense tapes.

His Greatness will be gratified," Hrubaba said expansively, "at this opportunity to display his graciousness." He aimed a sense-organ at me. "Ah . . . you wouldn't by

chance wish to accept a second slave?"

"Another man?"

"As it happens."

"How many more humans have you got?"

"His Greatness owns many properties; but only the two humans." His voice got almost confidential. "Useful, of course, but a trifle, ah intractable. But you'll have no trouble on that score I'm sure."

We dickered for ten minutes and settled on a deal that would leave Jongo II's larder practically stripped. It was lucky the Triarch didn't own three men; I couldn't have afforded any more.

"I will send porters and a car to fetch these trifles from your vessel," Hrubá said, "which his Greatness accepts out of sentiment. You wish the slaves delivered there?"

"Never mind; I'll take them myself." I started to get up.

Hrubá made a shocked noise. "You would omit the ceremonies of Agreement, of Honorable Dealing, of Mutual Satisfaction?"

I calmed him down, and he sent his staff scurrying for the necessary celebratory paraphernalia.

"Srat, you go to the ship, hand over the goods we agreed on, and see that the men get aboard all right. Take Eureka with you."

"Master, Poor Srat is afraid to go alone — and he fears for Master —"

"Better get going or they'll be there ahead of you."

He made a sad sound and hurried away.

"Your other slave," the major-

domo pointed. Across the court, a Drathian servant came out from a side entry leading a slim figure in a gray kilt like Huvile had worn.

"You said another man," I said stupidly.

"Eh? You doubt it is a man?" he said in a stiff voice. "It is not often that the probity of His Least Greatness is impugned in his own Place of Harmonious Accord!"

"My apologies." I tried to recover. "It was just a matter of terminology. I didn't expect to see a female."

"Very well, a female man — but still a man and a sturdy worker," the majordomo came back. "Not so large as the other, perhaps, but diligent, diligent. Still, his Greatness would not have you feel cheated . . ." His voice faded off. He was watching me as I watched the servant leading the girl past, some twenty feet away. She had a scar on her side, exactly like Huvile's. Beside the horny, gray-green thorax of the Drathian beside her, her human breast looked incredibly vulnerable. Then she turned her head my way, and I saw that it was the Lady Raire.

XXI

For a long, echoing instant, time stood still. Then she was past. She hadn't seen me, sitting in the deep shade of the canopy. I heard myself make some kind of sound and realized I had half risen from my chair.

"This slave is of some particular interest for you?" the majordomo in-



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quired, and I could tell from the edge on his voice that his commercial instinct was telling him he had missed a bet somewhere.

I sat down. "No," I managed to croak. "I was wondering about the scars."

"Have no fear. The cicatrice merely marks the point where the control drive is imbedded. However, perhaps I should withdraw His Greatness's offer of this gift, since it is less than you expected, lest the generosity of the Triarch suffer reflection."

"My mistake," I said. "I'm perfectly satisfied." I could feel my heart slamming inside my chest. I felt as though the universe was balanced on a knife-edge. One wrong word from me and the whole fragile deal would collapse.

The liquor pots arrived then, and conversation was suspended while my host made a big thing of tasting half a dozen varieties of syrupy booze and organizing the arrangement of outsize drinking pots on the table. I sat tight and sweated bullets and wondered how it was going back at the ship.

The Drathian offered the local equivalent of a toast. While my host sucked his cup dry, I pretended to take a sip, but he noticed and writhed his face at me.

"You do not sip! Is your zeal for Honorable Dealing less than complete?"

This time I had to drink. The stuff had a sweet overflavor, but left an aftertaste of iron filings. I forced it down. After that, there was another toast. He watched to

be sure I drank it. I tried not to think about what the stuff was doing to my stomach. I fixed my thoughts on a face I had just seen, looking no older than the day I had seen it last, nearly four years before; and the smooth, sun-tanned skin, and the hideous scar that marred it.

There was a lot of chanting and exchanging of cups, and I chewed another drink. Srat would be showing Milady Raire to a cabin now, and she'd be feeling the softness of a human-style bed, a rug under her bare feet, the tingle of the ion-bath for the first time in four years . . .

"Another toast!" Hruba called. His command of Lingua was slipping; the booze was having a powerful effect on him. It was working on me, too. My head was buzzing and there was a frying-egg feeling in my stomach.

"I've had all I can take," I said, and felt my tongue slur the words. It was hard to push the chair back and stand. Hruba rose, too. He was swaying slightly — or maybe it was just my vision.

"I confess surprise, man," he said. "Your zeal in the pledging of honor exceeded even my own. My brain swims in a sea of consecrated wine!" He turned to a servant standing by and accepted a small box from him.

"The control device governing your new acquisition," he said and handed the box over to me. I took it, and my finger touched a hidden latch and the lid valved open.

There was a small plastic ovoid inside, bedded in floss.

"What's . . . what's this?"

"Ah, you are unfamiliar with our Drathian devices!" He plucked the egg from its niche and waved it under my nose.

"This gnurled wheel. On the first setting, it administers a sharp reminder; at the second position — " He pushed the control until it clicked — "an attack of angina which doubles the object in torment. And at the third . . . but I must not demonstrate the third setting, eh? Or you will find yourself with a dead slave on your hands, his heart burned to charcoal by a magnesium element buried in the organ itself!" He tossed the control back into the box and sat down heavily. "That pertaining to the female is in possession of her tender; he will leave it in the hands of your servant. You'll have no trouble with 'em." He made a sound that resembled a hiccup.

I tilted the box and dumped the ovoid on the ground and stamped on it; it crunched like a blown egg. Hruba came out of his chair in a rush. "Here — what are you doing!" He stared at the smashed controller, then at me. "Have you lost your mind, Man?"

"I'm going now," I said, and went past him toward the passage I had entered by a long time ago, it seemed. Behind me, Hruba was shouting in the local dialect.

Out on the street, night had fallen, and the wet pavement glimmered under the yellow-green glare of lanterns set on the building fronts.

SPACEMANI

I felt deathly ill. The street seemed to be rising up under my feet. I staggered, stayed on my feet by holding onto the wall. A pain like a knifethrust stabbed into my stomach. I headed off in the direction of the port, made half a block before I had to lean against the wall and retch. When I straightened there were half a dozen Drathians standing by.

I passed the plaza where I had found the Zeridajhi cloth, recognized the street along which Srat and Eureka and I had come. It seemed to be a steep hill, now. My legs felt like soft tallow. I fell and got up and fell again. I retched until my stomach was a dry knot of pain. It was harder getting to my feet this time. My lungs were on fire.

Then I saw the port ahead, the translucent, glowing dome rising at the end of the narrow alleyway. Not much farther, now. Srat would be wondering what happened; maybe he would be waiting, just ahead. And at the ship, the Lady Raire . . .

I was lying on my face, and the sky was spinning slowly over me, a pitch-black canopy with the great dim blur of Center sprawled across it, and the faint avenue that was the Bar reaching out to trail off into the dwindling spiral curve of the Eastern Arm. I found the pavement under me, and pushed against it, and got to my knees; then to my feet. I could see the ship across the ramp, tall and rakish, her high polish dimmed by the years of hard use, her station lights glaring amber from high on her slim prow. I

steadied myself and started across toward her, and as I did the rectangle of light that was the open port narrowed and winked out. The amber lights flicked out and the red and green pattern of her running lights sprang up. I stopped dead and felt a drumming start up, vibrating through the pavement under my feet.

I started to run then, and my legs were broken straws that collapsed and my head hit and the blow cleared it for a moment. I got my chin up off the pavement; and *Jongo II* lifted, standing up away from the surface on a tenuous pillar of blue flame that lengthened as she rose. Then she was climbing swiftly into the night.

They were all around me in a tight circle. I stared at their horny shins, their sandaled feet, as alien as an alligator's, and felt the icy sweat clammy on my face. Deathly sickness rose inside me in a wave that knotted my stomach and left me quivering like a beached jellyfish.

The legs around me stirred and gave way to a tall Drathian in the white serape of a Rule-keeper. Hard hands clamped on me, dragged me to my feet. A light glared in my face.

"Man, the Rule-keeper demands you to produce the two slaves given

as a gift to you by his Least Greatness!"

"Gone," I gargled the words. "Trusted Srat. Filthy Midget . . ."

"Man, you are guilty of a crime of the first category! Illegal manumission of slaves! To redress these crimes, the Rule-keeper demands a fine of twice the value of the slaves, plus triple bribes for himself and his attendants!"

"You're out of luck," I said. "No money . . . no ship . . . all gone . . ."

I felt myself blacking out then. I was dimly aware of being carried, of lights glaring on me, later of a pain that seemed to tear me open, like a rotten fruit; but it was all remote, far away, happening to someone else . . .

I came to myself lying on a hard pallet on a stone floor, still sick, but clear-headed now. For a while, I looked at the lone glare-bulb in the ceiling and tried to remember what had happened, but it was all a confused fog. I sat up and a red-hot hook grabbed at my side. I pulled back the short, coarse-weave jacket I was wearing, and saw a livid, six-inch cut under my ribs, neatly stitched with tough thread.

It was the kind of wound that would heal in a few weeks and leave a welted scar; a scar like I'd seen recently, in the sides of Hu-vile and the Lady Raire. A scar that meant I was a slave.

TO BE CONCLUDED



FAMILY LOYALTY

by STAN ELLIOTT

Nice of you to volunteer to emigrate from Earth, Joey. It was getting too crowded—especially for guys like me!

May 21, 2157

Mr. Joseph L. Seaworthy
Apartment 9006
Spaac Tower
Luxemburg Complex
Benilux City, Europe
Dear Joey:

Janie and I were just shocked to hear the news about you and Sylvia. Your sister Ellen called a few days ago and told us, and I swear Janie hasn't stopped crying since. She wanted to call you right away but I told her not to, as I figure you had enough on your mind without us bothering you. Not that I don't feel bad too; after all, we've been like brothers, being raised together and all.

Anyway, we were sitting in our apartment tonight when I asked Janie, "When are Joey and Syl due to Jumpoff?" And she figured it out and it came to just 90 days from

today and I said, "Janie, we really should do something for Joe and Syl to show how much we appreciate the sacrifice they are making by leaving everything behind and going out to settle the Universe."

"What do you have in mind, lover?" Janie asked. One thing about her, she's not like so many of these modern wives but lets me have my way before telling me what she thinks. So I told her all about the great idea of mine to buy that property you own in the Canadian Rockies.

"The way I look at it, sweetie," I explained, "Joey and Sylvia **don't** have any more use for the **property** so the least we can do for **them** is to take it off their **hands** at a fair price. So, suppose we offer them CR3000 for it."

"Gee, honey," Janie came back at me, "we can't afford to spend

that much money; and besides, that sounds like an awful lot for a house with only five bedrooms and a medium-sized pool."

"Sweetheart," I told her, "it's the least we can do for two great people like Joey and Sylvia. After all, now that they've been tapped for Exodus, they've got to give up everything and become part of a team that's going to a far-away world with all its dangers and discomforts. In fact, I think I'll raise that to CR 3500."

Anyway, Joey, there you have it. Like I told Janie, I haven't got any real use for the property but as we don't have a vacation home of our own, I thought it might be fun to run up to the Rockies every once in a while and do some repair work on the house or just supervise the repairmen. Better let me know right away so we can get the title transferred before you blast. Be sure to give my love to Sylvia and tell her how much we're going to miss her.

All my best
Harry

June 10, 2157

Mr. Harry Aimes
86341 Central City
Ohio District
U.S.A.

Dear Harry:

Sylvia and I were both surprised to receive your letter. Ever since you stamped out of our apartment that time I refused to appoint you supervisor at the Omaha-West plant, we've been wondering how you were making out. I heard about

you losing your job with Marcy Watermaking and was shocked at the charges, but I'm sure the hearing will vindicate you.

Actually, Syl and I were not drafted but volunteered to go to Kelso III. Now that the kids are gone, there really isn't much to keep us here, so we decided to try the excitement of colonizing a new planet. I understand that Kelso III has a pleasant climate, which will make it nice for us older people; and there are no reports of dangerous native life, which suits an old coward like me just fine. At our age we have no longing for "adventure" and our idea of romance is to cuddle up and watch a good tri-vee show. So you see that we do not feel badly about leaving old Mother Earth but are looking forward to a whole new and useful life.

I'm sorry that I have to answer you by letter rather than calling direct, but ever since the names have been made public we have been positively hounded by all sorts of people wanting to sell us things or offering to buy our belongings at ridiculous prices. It finally got so bad that we had our phones disconnected and rarely bother answering the doorbell. We have such a short time left on Earth that we cannot bear to waste it on ghouls and con men. I got the impression that a whole industry has grown up around, or perhaps because of, the monthly colonization parties. The government is more than generous in the matter of severance pay or, in the case of a private businessman

like myself, will buy your business at the full market price. They do restrict you to 50 kilos of personal belongings and among 10,000 people this must add up to quite a list of items that *must* be disposed of.

In the event that we don't hear from you again, Sylvia and I wish you and Janie all the happiness in the world.

All my best,
Joe

June 12, 2157

Mr. Joseph L. Seaworthy
Apartment 9006
Spaac Tower
Luxemburg Complex
Benilux City, Europe
Dear Joey:

Boy, were Janie and I glad to hear from you. It's been three weeks since we wrote and for a while we were afraid you were just too busy with final preparations to bother answering us. Of course we would have understood, as it's only eight weeks 'til blastoff, but we would have been very disappointed. As it is, your letter came this morning and I just wish you could have seen how it cheered Janie up. The poor kid works so hard all day that my heart goes out to her. Some day when things break right for me I'm going to make her quit that lousy job and spend the rest of her life just sitting around and taking it easy.

Anyway, I enjoyed your letter very much but I got to admit that at first I was shocked to hear that you *volunteered* to ship out. Then I thought it over and decided that I

admire you and Sylvia very, very much. Imagine *wanting* to go a million light-years to start a life on a brand new planet that might be filled with all kinds of ferocious animals and loathsome diseases. Boy, you sure got more courage than I have, Joey!

I think it's terrible that all those people keep bothering you about your furniture and stuff. I can't understand why the government does not put a stop to that kind of thing. After all, if we don't keep sending people out every month there soon wouldn't be room enough for all the people left on Earth; but I really think that those that stay behind shouldn't be allowed to bother the settlers during their last days at home. Janie agrees with me on this and I'm going to write our Representative about it as soon as I can find time.

You must have overlooked it, but in my last letter I offered to *take* your vacation shack off your hands. I've heard how those damn real estate vultures won't offer a man anything for his property once they know he's shipping out and I can't stand the idea of anyone *pulling* that stuff on one of my relatives, so you just say the word, Joey boy, and I'll stat you a check for CR4500 so fast it'll shock you. Boy, it makes me mad to think that *these* kind of guys would take advantage of great people like you and Syl who are giving up everything to go out and make the Universe safe for mankind.

You'll have to excuse the short letter, but I'm anxious to hear from

you about the shack. Boy, I'm just steamed about all those people trying to cheat you. Remember, Joey boy, just say the word and I'll have a check in your hands in no time.

All our love,
Harry

July 15, 2157

Mr. Harry Aimes
86341 Central City
Ohio District
U.S.A.

Dear Harry:

How very nice to get another letter from you before we leave. We still have five weeks but most of our friends have said good-by already and have since treated us as though we were already gone. I suppose you can't blame them; protracted farewells are a bore, but it makes it rather lonely for Sylvia and myself. I suppose there is a very good reason for this just as there are good reasons for sending 10,000 people each month to colonize another planet. It's just that it can be hard on the people that have to leave.

Now that the farewells have been said, I'm spending all my time disposing of our possessions. It's amazing how much a family accumulates during thirty years of marriage; and I have run across things I didn't even know we had, as well as things I thought were long discarded and forgotten. For example, remember that time I got the maintenance franchise for Spaac Tower and bought all those robo-maints and hired you to run the operation? I found all the bills you ran up be-

fore getting into an argument with Mr. Spaac and losing the contract. I will admit I was very angry with you that time, Harry, but as Sylvia pointed out to me, it only took five years to recoup the losses and the money doesn't mean that much to us where we're going anyway, so why not forgive and forget.

I would have answered your letter sooner, but Syl is in Borneo with Ronnie and Helen. She has been there for the past three weeks and I spent part of the first week with her. Those grandchildren of ours are the most beautiful children I've ever seen. Sylvia swears kids are smarter these days, but I doubt it. I just think *our* grandchildren are smarter. You really should let Janie take a year off and have twins or even triplets. They add so much to an apartment.

Try not to worry much about the upcoming trial. I'm sure the indictment sounds a lot worse than it really is. Of course, that larceny-by-trick conviction five years ago may influence the jurors; but I understand Judge Jason will probably preside and, knowing him as well as I do, I'm sure he will be completely fair.

Thank you again for taking the trouble to write to us, Harry. I have always had a tender spot in my heart for you, perhaps because of my love for your mother. I was so young when Mom died that I tend to think of Aunt Serene as my mother. I remember so well the day you were born and how proud she was and the hopes she — Oh, well, I'm afraid I'm getting mor-

bid. This is probably the last you'll ever hear from me, so **God keep you and I wish you only happiness in the future.**

With all my love,
Joe

July 17, 2157

Mr. Joseph L. Seaworthy
Apartment 9006
Spaac Tower
Luxemburg, Complex
Benilux City, Europe
Dear Joe:

Isn't there any way I can reach you by phone? It's over a month since I wrote. Your letter arrived just this morning and I spent all day trying to reach you. Janie is going to be mad when she sees the bill I ran up. Christ, it must be CR50 easy! You weren't kidding when you said that you couldn't be reached! I must have talked to 50 of your neighbors but nobody could get hold of you.

Joey, buddy, I'll level with you about that Canadian property. It's taking all my money to fight this water-steal thing and if Janie and I could live there we could use the money saved to hire a better lawyer. Damn it all, what if I did drill a well and sell a few thousand gallons of water? There's more than that wasted every day. Don't tell me those politicians don't get all the water they want. In fact, I got it on good authority that our sweet mayor actually has a bathtub in the official penthouse and takes a bath every week and damn the citizens if they don't like it. The sono-baths are good enough for us mortals.

FAMILY LOYALTY

I'd come to see you, Joey, but the cops won't let me leave the Ohio District of the city. So the best I can do is get this letter in the mail right away. Please, Joey, for old times sake, let me buy that prop-erty.

Regards to Sylvia
Harry

August 16, 2157

Mr. Harry Aimes
86341 Central City
Ohio District
U.S.A.

Dear Harry:

Please bear with me as I'm still feeling the after-effects of our prep-shots. It's the funniest feeling. You sit down in this odd-looking chair and the robo-doc asks you a few questions and then you get up and go home. While you're answering the questions the robodoc is giving you all kinds of injections. I don't know how they manage to get through the clothes, but they do; and by the time you get home, you're feeling dizzy and nauseous. I wish the feeling would wear off already, but the robo-doc says it will last right up to the time we enter deepfreeze.

Harry, Sylvia and I have talked it over and decided that we are no longer angry at you. This is probably the last time we shall communicate as we plan to enter deep-freeze day after tomorrow. I don't know if I mentioned it, but the voyage will take three hundred years so we will never meet again in this life. I will admit that Sylvia and I both find it hard to overlook

the past but we are going to make an honest attempt at it.

Harry, I always knew that it was you that sold me out to the Barking trust that time. I wondered how they knew just the moment my Flanger was down for reorientation and they could flood my reclaim tanks; so I hired a detective agency and found my trusted associate and first cousin had sold the information for the princely sum of CR350. As it worked out, I managed to salvage enough of the business to buy the water concession for Omaha-West. This could have put the whole family in private homes with unlimited water privileges but again you could not bear to pass up the chance for an extra credit or two. The main reason I sold out was because I knew about the well you were digging and had no intention of being involved in anything as serious as that. That was also why I wouldn't appoint you supervisor. Anyway, Harry, this is all in the past now and I want you to accept my forgiveness in the humble spirit in which it is proffered

Good-by
Joe

Mr. Joseph Seaworthy
Apartment 9006
Spaac Tower
Luxemburg Complex
Benilux City, Europe
Joe:

All right, you want me to crawl and I'm crawling. I got to have that property to bribe the Water Mar-

shal with. You know what the penalty for Water Misuse is. Please, please don't let it happen to me. I admit all those things you mentioned and I apologize. I'm sorry for everything I ever did to you, Joey, but I must have that property. Dear God, don't let them convict me of Water Misuse. If you have any sense of family loyalty at all, you'll let me have the house. It's no good to you where you're going anyway. I found out that the Water Marshal wants a house — any house — of his own badly enough to swear that I just-finished digging the well and never pumped a drop. All I have to do is sell it to him and I got a chance. Please, Joey, please, Sylvia, don't let them convict me on a Water Misuse charge. Help me!

Harry

Friday

Mr. Harry Aimes
86341 Central City
Ohio District
U.S.A.

Dear Harry:

I would have missed your letter if I hadn't came back to the apartment for my make-up kit. You know how I always manage to forget it. I don't have time to write you a proper letter as Joseph is buzzing me from the roof. So, good-by, dear, and remember that we forgive and love you. We've given the house away to the orphans of some of the people who died of thirst last year.

Sylvia

END

IF

driftglass

by SAMUEL R. DELANY

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

*Sure amphimen are human. What if we
do have gills, breathe water, look
like monsters—and die like flies?*

I

Sometimes I go down to the port, splashing sand with my stiff foot at the end of my stiff leg locked in my stiff hip, with the useless arm a-swinging, to get wet all over again, drink in the dives with old cronies ashore, feeling old, broken, sorry for myself, laughing louder and louder. The third of my face that was burned away in the accident was patched with skinrafts from my chest, so what's left of my mouth distorts all loud sounds; sloppy sartorial reconstruction. Also I have a hairy chest. Chest hair

does not look like beard hair, and it grows all up under my right eye. And: my beard is red, my chest hair brown, while the thatch curling down over neck and ears is sun-streaked to white here, darkened to bronze there, 'midst general blondness.

By reason of my being a walking (I suppose my gait could be called headlong limping) horror show, plus a general inclination to sulk, I spend most of the time up in the wood and glass and aluminum house on the surf-sloughed point that the Aquatic Corp gave me along with my pension. Rugs from

Turkey there, cooper pots, my tenor recorder which I can no longer play, and my books.

But sometimes, when the gold fog blurs the morning, I go down to the beach and tromp barefoot in the wet edging of the sea, searching for driftglass.

It was foggy that morning, and the sun across the water moiled the mists around like a brass ladle. I lurched to the top of the rocks, looked down through the tall grasses into the frothing inlet where she lay and blinked.

She sat up, long gills closing down her neck and the secondary slits along her back just visible at their tips because of much hair, wet and curling copper, falling there. She saw me. "What are you doing here, huh?" She narrowed blue eyes.

"Looking for driftglass."

"What?"

"There's a piece." I pointed near her and came down the rocks like a crab with one stiff leg.

"Where?" She turned over, half in, half out of the water, the webs of her fingers cupping nodules of black stone.

While the water made cold overtures between my toes, I picked up the milky fragment by her elbow where she wasn't looking. She jumped, because she obviously had thought it was somewhere else.

"See?"

"What . . . what is it?" She raised her cool hand to mine. For a moment the light through the milky gem and the pale film of

my own webs pearly the screen of the palms. (Details like that. Yes, they are the important things, the points from which we suspend later pain.) A moment later wet fingers closed to the back of mine.

"Driftglass," I said. "You know all the Coca-Cola bottles and cut crystal punch bowls and industrial silicon slag that goes into the sea?"

"I know the Coca-Cola bottles."

"They break, and the tide pulls the pieces back and forth over the sandy bottom, wearing the edges, changing their shape. Sometimes chemicals in the glass react with chemicals in the ocean to change the color. Sometimes veins work their way through a piece in patterns like snowflakes, regular and geometric; others, irregular and angled like coral. When the pieces dry they're milky. Put them in water and they become transparent again."

"Ohhh!" She breathed as though the beauty of the blunted triangular fragment in my palm assailed her like perfume. Then she looked at my face, blinking the third, aqueous-filled lid that we use as a correction lens for underwater vision.

She watched the ruin calmly.

Then her hand went to my foot where the webs had been torn back in the accident. She began to take in who I was. I looked for horror, but saw only a little sadness.

The insignia on her buckle — her stomach was making little jerks the way you always do during the first few minutes when you go from breathing water to air — told me



she was a Biological Technician. (Back up at the house there was a similar uniform of simulated scales folded in the bottom drawer of the dresser and the belt insignia said Depth Gauger.) I was wearing some very frayed jeans and a red cotton shirt with no buttons.

She reached up to my neck, pushed my collar back from my shoulders and touched the tender slits of my gills, outlining them with cool fingers. "Who are you?" Finally.

"Cal Svenson."

She slid back down in the water. "You're the one who had the terrible . . . but that was years ago. They still talk about it, down . . ." She stopped.

As the sea softens the surface of a piece of glass, so it blurs the souls and sensibilities of the people who toil beneath her. And according to the last report of the Marine Reclamation Division there are to date seven hundred and fifty thousand who have been given gills and webs and sent under the foam where there are no storms, up and down the American coast.

"You live on shore? I mean around here? But so long ago . . ."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"I was two years older than you when the accident happened."

"You were eighteen?"

"And I'm twice that age now. Which means it happened almost twenty years ago. It is a long time."

"They still talk about it."

"I've almost forgotten," I said.

"I really have. Say, do you play the recorder?"

"I used to."

"Good! Come up to my place and look at my tenor recorder. And I'll make some tea. Perhaps you can stay for lunch —"

"I have to report back to Marine Headquarters by three. Tork is going over the briefing to lay the cable for the big dive, with Tonni and the crew." She paused, smiled. "But I can catch the undertow and be there in half an hour if I leave by two-thirty."

On the walk up I learned her name was Ariel. She thought the patio was charming, and the mosaic evoked, "Oh, look!" and, "Did you do this yourself?" a half-dozen times. (I had done it, in the first lonely years.) She picked out the squid and the whale in battle, the wounded shark and the diver. She told me she didn't get time to read much, but she was impressed by all the books. She listened to me reminisce. She talked a lot to me about her work, husbanding the deep-down creatures they were scaring up. Then she sat astraddle the kitchen chair, playing a Lukas Foss serenade on my recorder while I put rock salt in the bottom of the broiler tray for two dozen Oysters Rockefeller and the tea water whistled. I'm a comparatively lonely guy. I like being followed by beautiful young girls.

II

"Hey, Juaol!" I bawled across the jetty.

He nodded to me from the center of his nets, sun glistening on the polished heads of his shoulders, sun lost in the rough mass of his hair. I walked across the nets to where he sat, sewing like a spider. He pulled another section up over his horny toes, then grinned at me with his mosaic smile: gold, white, black gap below, crooked yellow; white, gold, white. Shoving my bad leg in front, I squatted.

"I fished out over the coral where you told me." He filled his cheek with his tongue and nodded. "You come up to the house for a drink, eh?"

"Fine."

"Now a moment more."

There's a certain sort of Brazilian you find along the shore in the fishing villages, old, yet ageless. See one of their men and you think he could be fifty, he could be sixty—will probably look the same when he's eighty-five. Such was Juao. We once figured it out. He's seven hours older than I am.

We became friends sometime before the accident when I got tangled in his nets working high lines in Vorea Current. A lot of guys would have taken their knife and hacked their way out of the situation, ruining fifty-five, sixty dollars worth of nets. That's an average fisherman's income down here. But I surfaced and sat around in his boat while he untied me. Then we came in and got plastered. Since I cost him a day's fishing, I've been giving him hints on where to fish ever since. He buys me drinks when I come up with something.

This has been going on for twenty years. During that time my life has been smashed up and land-bound. In the same time Juao has married off his five sisters, got married himself and had two children. (Oh, those *bolitos* and *teneros asados* that Amalia of the oiled braid and laughing breasts would make for Sunday dinner/supper/Monday breakfast.) I rode with them in the ambulance 'copter all the way into Brasilia and in the hospital hall Juao and I stood together, both still barefoot, he tattered with fish scales in his hair, me just tattered, and I held him while he cried and I tried to explain to him how a world that could take a pre-pubescent child and with a week of operations make an amphibious creature that can exist for a month on either side of the sea's foam-fraught surface, could still be helpless before certain general endocrine cancers coupled with massive renal deterioration. Juao and I returned to the village alone, by bus, three days before our birthday — back when I was twenty-three and Juao was twenty-three and seven hours old.

"This morning," Juao said. (The shuttle danced in the web at the end of the orange line.) "I got a letter for you to read me. It's about the children. Come on, we go up and drink." The shuttle paused, back-tracked twice, and he yanked the knot tight. We walked along the port toward the square. "Do you think the letter says that the children are accepted?"

"It's from the Aquatic Corp.

And they just send postcards when they reject someone. The question is, how do you feel about it?"

"You are a good man. If they grow up like you, then it will be fine."

"But you're still worried." I'd been prodding Juao to get the kids into the International Aquatic Corporation since I became their godfather. The operations had to be performed before puberty. It would mean much time away from the village during their training period — and they might eventually be stationed in any ocean in the world. But two motherless children had not been easy on Juao or his sisters. The Corp would mean education, travel, interesting work, the things that make up one kind of good life. They wouldn't look twice their age when they were thirty-five; and not too many amphimen look like me.

"Worry is part of life. But the work is dangerous. Did you know there is an amphiman going to try and lay cable down in the Slash?"

I frowned. "Again?"

"Yes. And that is what you tried to do when the sea broke you to pieces and burned the parts, eh?"

"Must you be so damned picturesque?" I asked. "Who's going to beard the lion this time?"

"A young amphiman named Tork. They speak of him down at the docks as a brave man."

"Why the hell are they still trying to lay the cable there? They've gotten by this long without a line through the Slash."

"Because of the fish," Juao said.

"You told me why twenty years ago. The fish are still there, and we fishermen who can not go below are still here. If the children go for the operations, then there will be less fishermen. But today . . ." He shrugged. "They must either lay the line across the fish paths or down in the Slash." Juao shook his head.

Funny things, the great power cables the Aquatic Corp has been strewing across the ocean floor to bring power to their undersea mines and farms, to run their oil wells — and how many flaming wells have I capped down there — for their herds of whale, and chemical distillation plants. They carry two hundred sixty cycle current. Over certain sections of the ocean floor, or in sections of the water with certain mineral contents, this sets up inductance in the water itself which sometimes — and you will probably get a Nobel prize if you can detail exactly why it isn't always — drives the fish away over areas up to twenty-five and thirty miles, unless the lines are laid in the bottom of those canyons that delve suddenly into the ocean floor.

"This Tork thinks of the fishermen. He is a good man too."

I raised my eyebrows — the one that's left, anyway — and tried to remember what my little Undine had said about him that morning. And remembered not much.

"I wish him luck," I said.

"What do you feel about this young man going down into the coral rimmed jaws to the Slash?"

I thought for a moment. "I think I hate him."

Juao looked up.

"He is an image in a mirror where I look and am forced to regard what I was," I went on. "I envy him the chance to succeed where I failed, and I can come on just as quaint as you can. I hope he makes it."

Juao twisted his shoulders in a complicated shrug (once I could do that) which is coastal Brazilian for, "I didn't know things had progressed to that point, but seeing that they have, there is little to be done."

"The sea is that sort of mirror," I said.

"Yes." Juao nodded.

Behind us I heard the slapping of saddles on concrete. I turned in time to catch my goddaughter in my good arm. My godson had grabbed hold of the bad one and was swinging on it.

"Tio Cal —"

"Hey, Tio Cal, what did you bring us?"

"You will pull him over," Juao reprimanded them. "Let go."

And, bless them, they ignored their father.

"What did you bring us?"

"What did you bring us, Tio Cal?"

"If you let me, I'll show you."

So they stepped back, green-eyed and quivering. I watched Juao watching. His eyes were brown pupils on ivory balls, and in the left eye a vein had broken in a jagged smear. He was loving his children, who would soon be as alien to him as the fish he netted. He was looking at the terrible thing that was

me and wondering what would come to his own spawn. And he was watching the world turn and grow older, clocked by the waves, reflected in that mirror.

It's impossible for me to see what the population explosion and the budding colonies on Luna and Mars and the flowering beneath the ocean really look like from the disrupted cultural melange of a coastal fishing town. But I come closer than many others, and I know what I don't understand.

I pushed around in my rocket and fetched out the milky fragment I had brought from the beach. "Here. Do you like this one?" And they bent above my webbed and alien fingers.

In the supermarket, which is the biggest building in the village, Juao bought a lot of cake mixes. "That moist, delicate texture," whispered the box when you lifted it from the shelf, "with that deep flavor, deeper than chocolate."

I'd just read an article about the new vocal packaging in a U.S. magazine that had gotten down last week, so I was prepared and stayed in the fresh vegetable section to avoid temptation. Then we went up to Juao's house. The letter proved to be what I'd expected. The kids had to take the bus into Brasilia tomorrow. My godchildren were on their way to becoming fish.

We sat on the front steps and drank and watched the donkeys, and the motorbikes, the men in baggy trousers, the women in yellow scarfs and brighter skirts with

wreaths of garlic and sacks of onions. As well, a few people glittered by in the green scales of amphimen uniforms.

Finally Juao got tired and went in to take a nap. Most of my life has been spent on the coast of countries accustomed to siestas, but those first formative ten were passed on a Danish collective farm and the idea never really took. So I stepped over my goddaughter, who had fallen asleep on her fists on the bottom step, and walked back through the town toward the beach.

III

At midnight Ariel came out of the sea, climbed the rocks and clicked her nails against my glass wall so that droplets ran down, pearled by the gibbous moon.

Earlier I had stretched in front of the fireplace on the sheepskin throw to read, then dozed off. The conscientious timer had asked me if there was anything I wanted, and getting no answer had turned off the Dvorak Cello Concerto that was on its second time around, extinguished the reading lamp, and stopped dropping logs onto the flame so that now, as I woke, the grate was carpeted with coals.

She clicked on the glass again, and I raised my head from the cushion. The green uniform, her amber hair — all color was lost under the silver light outside. I lurched across the rug to the glass wall, touched the button, and the glass slid down into the floor. The breeze came to my face, as the barrier disappeared.

"What do you want?" I asked. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Tork is on the beach, waiting for you."

The night was warm but windy. Below the rocks silver flakes chased each other into shore. The tide lay full.

I rubbed my face. "The new boss man? Why didn't you bring him up to the house? What does he want to see me about?"

She touched my arm. "Come. They are all down on the beach."

"Who all?"

"Tork and the others."

She led me across the patio and to the path that wound to the sand. The sea roared in the moonlight. Down the beach people stood around a driftwood fire that whipped into the night. Ariel walked beside me.

Two of the fishermen from town were crowding each other on the bottom of an overturned washtub, playing guitars. The singing, raucous and rhythmic, jarred across the paled sand. Shark's teeth shook on the necklace of an old woman dancing. Others were sitting on an overturned dinghy, eating.

Over one part of the fire on a skillet two feet across, oil frothed through pink islands of shrimp. One woman ladled them in, another ladled them out.

"Tio Cal!"

"Look, Tio Cal is here!"

"Hey, what are you two doing up?" I asked. "Shouldn't you be home in bed?"

"Poppa Juao said we could come. He'll be here, too, soon."



I turned to Ariel. "Why are they all gathering?"

"Because of the laying of the cable tomorrow at dawn."

Someone was running up the beach, waving a bottle in each hand.

"They didn't want to tell you about the party. They thought that it might hurt your pride."

"My what . . ."

"If you knew they were making so big a thing of the job you had failed at —"

"But —"

"— and that had hurt you so in failure. They did not want you to be sad. But Tork wants to see you. I said you would not be sad. So I went to bring you down from the rocks."

"Thanks, I guess."

"Tio Cal?"

But the voice was bigger and deeper than a child's.

He sat on a log back from the fire, eating a sweet potato. The flame flickered on his dark cheekbones, in his hair, wet and black. He stood, came to me, held up his hand. I held up mine and we slapped palms. "Good." He was smiling. "Ariel told me you would come. I will lay the power line down through the Slash tomorrow." His uniform scales glittered down his arms. He was very strong. But standing still, he still moved. The light on the cloth told me that. "I . . ." He paused. I thought of a nervous, happy dancer. "I wanted to talk to you about the cable." I thought of an eagle, I thought of a

shark. "And about the . . . accident. If you would."

"Sure," I said. "If there's anything I could tell you that would help."

"See, Tork," Ariel said. "I told you he would talk to you about it."

I could hear his breathing change. "It really doesn't bother you to talk about the accident?"

I shook my head and realized something about my voice. It was a boy's voice that could imitate a man's. Tork was not over nineteen or twenty.

"We're going fishing soon," Tork told me. "Will you come?"

"If I'm not in the way."

A bottle went from the woman at the shrimp crate to one of the guitarists, down to Ariel, to me, then to Tork. (The liquor, made in a cave seven miles inland, was almost rum. The too tight skin across the left side of my mouth makes the manful swig a little difficult to bring off. I got 'rum' down my chin.)

He drank, wiped his mouth, passed the bottle on and put his hand on my shoulder "Come down to the water."

We walked away from the fire. Some of the fishermen stared after us. A few of the amphimen glanced and glanced away.

"Do all the young people of the village call you Tio Cal?"

"No. Only my godchildren. Their father and I have been friends since I was your age."

"Oh, I thought perhaps it was a nickname. That's why I called you that."

We reached wet sand where orange light cavorted at our feet. The broken shell of a lifeboat rocked in moonlight. Tork sat down on the shell's rim. I sat beside him. The water splashed to our knees.

"There's no other place to lay the power cable?" I asked. "There is no other way to take it except through the Slash?"

"I was going to ask you what you thought of the whole business. But I guess I don't really have to." He shrugged and clapped his hands together a few times. "All the projects this side of the bay have grown huge and cry for power. The new operations tax the old lines unmercifully. There was a power failure last July in Cayine down the shelf below the twilight level. The whole village was without lights for two days, and twelve amphimen died of overexposure to the cold currents coming up from the depths. If we laid the cables farther up, we chance disrupting our own fishing operations as well as those of the fishermen on shore."

I nodded.

"Cal, what happened to you in the Slash?"

Eager, scared Tork. I was remembering now, not the accident, but the midnight before, pacing the beach, guts clamped with fists of fear and anticipation. Some of the Indians back where they make the liquor still send messages by tying knots in palm fibers. One could have spread my entrails then, or Tork's tonight, to read our respective horoscopes.

Juao's mother knew the knot language, but he and his sisters never bothered to learn because they wanted to be modern, and, as children, still confused with modernity with the new ignorances, lacking modern knowledge.

"When I was a boy," Tork said, "we would dare each other to walk down the boards along the edge of the fiery slip. The sun would be hot and the boards would rock in the water, and if the boats were in and you fell down between the boats and the piling, you could get killed." He shook his head. "The crazy things kids will do. That was back when I was eight or nine, before I became a waterbaby."

"Where was it?"

Tork looked up. "Oh. Manila. I'm Filipino."

The sea licked our knees, and the gunwale sagged under us.

"What happened in the Slash?"

"There's a volcano flaw near the base of the Slash."

"I know."

"And the sea is as sensitive down there as a fifty-year-old woman with a new hairdo. We had an avalanche. The cable broke. And the sparks were so hot and bright they made gouts of foam fifty feet high on the surface, so they tell me."

"What caused the avalanche?"

I shrugged. "It could just been a God-damned coincidence. There are rock falls down there all the time. It could have been the noise from the machines — though we masked them pretty well. It could have been something to do with the induction from the smaller cables for

the machines. Or maybe somebody just kicked out the wrong stone that was holding everything up."

One webbed hand became a fist, sank into the other, and hung.

Calling, "Cal!"

I looked back. Juao, pants rolled to his knees, shirt sailing in the sea wind, stood in the weave of white water. The wind lifted Tork's hair from his neck; and the fire roared up on the beach.

Tork looked back too.

"They're getting ready to catch a big fish!" Juao called.

Men were already pushing their boats out. Tork clapped my shoulder. "Come, Cal. We fish now." We stood up and went back to the shore.

Juao caught me as I reached dry sand. "You ride in my boat, Cal."

Someone came with the acrid flares that hissed. The water slapped around the bottom of the boats as we wobbled into the swell.

Juao vaulted in and took up the oars. Around us green amphipods walked into the sea, struck forward, and were gone.

Juao pulled, leaned, pulled. The moonlight slid down his arms. The fire diminished on the beach.

Then among the boats, there was a splash, an explosion, and the red flare bloomed in the sky: the amphipods had sighted a big fish.

The flare hovered, pulsed once, twice, three times, four times (twenty, forty, sixty, eighty stone they estimated its weight to be), then fell.

Suddenly I shrugged out of my

shirt, pulled at my belt buckle. "I'm going over the side, Juao!"

He leaned, he pulled, he leaned. "Take the rope."

"Yeah. Sure." It was tied to the back of the boat. I made a loop in the other end, slipped it around my shoulder. I swung my bad leg over the side, flung myself on the black water —

— mother of pearl shattered over me. That was the moon, blocked by the shadow of Juao's boat ten feet overhead. I turned below the rippling wounds Juao's oars made stroking the sea.

One hand, and one foot with torn webs, I rolled over and looked down. The rope snaked to its end, and I felt Juao's strokes pulling me through the water.

They fanned below with underwater flares. Light undulated on their backs and heels. They circled, they closed, like those deep sea fish who carry their own illumination. I saw the prey, glistening as it neared a flare.

You chase a fish with one spear among you. And that spear would be Tork's tonight. The rest have ropes to bind him that go up to the fishermen's boats.

There was a sudden confusion of lights below. The spear had been shot!

The fish, long as a tail and a short man together, rose through the ropes. He turned out to sea, trailing his pursuers. But others waited there, tried to loop him. Once I had flung those ropes, treated with tar and lime to dissolve the slime of the fish's body and hold

to the beast. The looped ropes caught, and by the movement of the flares, I saw them jerked from their paths. The fish turned, rose again, this time toward me.

He pulled around when one line ran out (and somewhere on the surface the prow of a boat doffed deep) but turned back and came on.

Of a sudden, amphimen were flicking about me as the fray's center drifted by. Tork, his spear dug deep, forward and left of the marlin's dorsal, had hauled himself astride the beast.

The fish tried to shake him, then dropped his tail and rose straight. Everybody started pulling toward the surface. I broke in foam and grabbed Juao's gunwale.

Tork and the fish exploded up among the boats. They twisted in the air, in moonlight, in foam. The fish danced across the water on its tail, fell.

Juao stood up in the boat and shouted. The other fishermen shouted too, and somebody perched on the prow of a boat flung a rope and someone in the water caught it.

Then fish and Tork and me and a dozen amphimen all went underwater at once.

They dropped in a corona of bubbles. The fish struck the end of another line, and shook himself. Tork was thrown free, but doubled back.

Then the lines began to haul the beast up again, quivering, whipping, quivering again.

Six lines from six boats had him. For one moment he was still in the submarine moonlight. I could see his wound tossing scarfs of blood.

DRIFTGLASS

When he (and we) broke surface, he was thrashing again, near Juao's boat. I was holding onto the side when suddenly Tork, glistening, came out of the water beside me and went over into the boat.

"Here you go," he said, turning to kneel at the bobbing rim, and pulled me up while Juao leaned against the far side to keep balance.

Wet rope slopped on the prow. "Hey, Cal!" Tork laughed and grabbed it up, and began to haul.

The fish moiled in the white water.

The boats came together. The amphimen had all climbed up. Ariel was across from us, holding a flare that drooled smoke down her arm as she peered by the hip of the fisherman who was standing in front of her.

Juao and Tork were hauling the rope. Behind them I was coiling it with one hand as it came back to me.

The fish came up and was flapped into Ariel's boat, tail out, head up, chewing air a few moments more.

I had just finished pulling on my trousers when Tork fell down on the seat behind me and grabbed me around the shoulder with his wet arm. "Look at our fish, Tio Cal! Look!" He gasped air, laughing, his dark face diamonded beside the flares. "Look at our fish there, Cal!"

Juao, grinning white and gold, pulled us back into shore. The fire, the singing hands beating hands — and my godson had put pebbles in

the empty rum bottle and was shaking it in time to the music — the guitars spiraled around us as we carried the fish up the sand and the men brought the spit.

"Watch it!" Tork said, grasping the pointed end of the great stick that was thicker than his wrist.

We turned the fish over.

"Here, Cal?"

He prodded two fingers into the white flesh six inches back from the boney lip.

"Fine."

Tork jammed the spit in.

We worked it through the body. By the time we carried it to the fire, they had brought more rum.

"Hey, Tork. Are you going to get some sleep before you go down in the morning?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Slept all afternoon." He pointed toward the roasting fish with his elbow. "That's my breakfast."

But when the dancing grew violent a few hours later, just before the fish was to come off the fire, and the kids were pushing the last of the sweet potatoes from the ashes with sticks, I walked back to the water to the lifeboat shell we had sat on earlier. It was three quarters flooded.

Curled below still water, Tork slept, fist loose before his mouth, the gills at the back of his neck pulsing rhythmically. Only his shoulder and hip made islands in the floated boat.

"Where's Tork?" Ariel asked me at the fire. They were swinging up the sizzling fish.

"Taking a nap."

"Oh, he wanted to cut the fish!"

"He's got a lot of work coming up. Sure you want to wake him up?"

"No, I'll let him sleep."

But Tork was coming up from the water, brushing his dripping hair back from his forehead.

He grinned at us, then went to carve the meat. I remember him standing on the table by the fire, astraddle the meat, arm going up and down with the big knife ((details, yes, those are the things you remember) stopping to hand down the meat, then hauling his arm back to cut again.

That night, with music and stomping on the sand and shouting back and forth over the fire, we made more noise than the sea.

IV

The eight-thirty bus was more or less on time.

"I don't think they want to go," Juao's sister said. She was accompanying the children to the Aquatic Corp Headquarters in Brasilia.

"They are just tired," Juao said. "They should not have stayed up so late last night. Get on the bus now. Say good-by to Tio Cal."

"Good-by."

"Good-by."

Kids are never their most creative in that sort of situation. And I suspect that my godchildren may just have been suffering their first (or one of their first) hangovers. They had been very quiet all morning.



JACK GAUGHAN
TO CHIP FOR WHAT IS WITH.

I bent down and gave them a clumsy hug. "When you come back on your first weekend off, I'll take you exploring down below at the point. You'll be able to gather your own coral now."

Juao's sister got teary, cuddled the children, cuddled me, Juao, then got on the bus.

Someone was shouting out the window for someone else at the bus stop not to forget something as they trundled around the square and then toward the highway. We walked back across the street where the cafe owners were putting out canvas chairs.

"I will miss them," he said, like a long-considered admission.

"You and me both." At the docks near the hydrofoil wharf where the submarine launches went out to the undersea cities, we saw a crowd. "I wonder if they had any trouble laying the —"

For some reason a woman screamed in the crowd. She pushed from the others, dropping eggs and onions. She must have stopped to see what the crowd was about on her way back from the market. She began to pull her hair and shriek. (Remember the skillet of shrimp? She had been the woman ladling them out.) A few people moved to help her.

A clutch of men broke off and ran into the streets of the town. I grabbed an amphiman who whirled around to face me.

"What in hell is going on?"

For a moment his mouth worked on his words for all the trite world like a beached fish.

"From the explosion . . ." He began. "They just brought them back from the explosion at the Slash!"

I grabbed his other shoulder. "What happened!"

"About two hours ago. They were just a quarter of the way through, when the whole fault gave way. They had a God-damn underwater volcano for half an hour. They're still getting seismic disturbances."

Juao was running toward the launch. I pushed the guy away and limped after him, struck the crowd and jostled through calico, canvas and green scales.

They were carrying the corpses out of the hatch of the submarine and laying them on a green canvas spread across the dock. They still return bodies to the countries of birth for the family to decide the method of burial. When the fault had given, the hot slag that had belched into the steaming sea was mostly molten silicon.

Three of the bodies were only slightly burned here and there. From their bloated faces (one still bled from the ear) I guessed they had died from sonic concussion. Several of the bodies were almost totally encased in dull, black glass.

"Tork —" I kept asking. "Is one of them Tork?"

It took me forty-five minutes, asking first the guys who were carrying the bodies, then going into the launch and asking some guy with a clipboard, and then going back on the dock and into the office to find out that one of the more unrecog-

nizable bodies, yes, was Tork.

Juao brought me a glass of buttermilk in a cafe on the square. He sat still a long time, then finally rubbed away his white mustache, released the chair wrung with his toes, put his hands on his knees.

"What are you thinking about?"

"That it's time to go fix the nets. Tomorrow morning I will fish." He regarded me a moment. "Where should I fish tomorrow, Cal?"

"Are you wondering about . . . well, sending the kids off today?"

He shrugged. "Fishermen from this village have drowned. Still it is a village of fishermen. Where should I fish?"

I finished my buttermilk. "The mineral content over the Slash should be high as the devil. Lots of algae will gather tonight. Lots of small fish down deep. Big fish hovering over."

He nodded. "Good. I will take the boat out there tomorrow."

We got up.

"See you, Juao."

I limped back to the beach.

V

The fog had unsheathed the sand by ten. I walked around, poking in clumps of weeds with a stick, banging the same stick on my numb leg. When I lurched up to the top of the rocks, I stopped in the still grass. "Ariel?"

She was kneeling in the water, head down, her red hair breaking over the sealed gills. Her shoulders shook, stilled, shook again.

"Ariel?" I came down over the blistered stones.

She turned away to look at the ocean.

The attachments of children are so important and so brittle. "How long have you been sitting here?"

She looked at me now, the varied waters of her face stilled on drawn cheeks. And her face was exhausted. She shook her head.

Sixteen? Who was the psychologist a hundred years back, in the seventies who decided that "adolescents" were just physical and mental adults with no useful work? "You want to come up to the house?"

The head shaking got faster, then stopped.

After a while I said, "I guess they'll be sending Tork's body back to Manila."

He didn't have a family," she explained. "He'll be buried here, at sea."

"Oh," I said.

And the rough volcanic glass, pulled across the ocean's sands, changing shape, dulling —

"You were — you liked Tork a lot, didn't you?" I asked. "You kids looked like you were pretty fond of each other."

"Yes. He was an awfully nice — " Then she caught my meaning and blinked. "No," she said. "Oh, no. I was — I was engaged to Jonni . . . the brown-haired boy from California? Did you meet him at the party last night? We're both from Los Angeles, but we only met down here. And now . . . they're sending his body back this evening."

Her eyes got very wide then closed.

"I'm sorry."

That's it, you clumsy crippled, stepping all over everybody's emotions. You look in that mirror and you're too busy looking at what might have been to see what is.

"I'm sorry, Ariel."

She opened her eyes and began to look around her.

"Come on up to the house and have an avocado. I mean, they have avocados in now, not at the supermarket. But at the old town market on the other side. And they're better than any they grow in California.

She kept looking around.

"None of the amphimen get over there. It's a shame, because soon

the market will probably close, and some of their fresh foods are really great. Oil and vinegar is all you need on them." I leaned back on the rocks. "Or a cup of tea?"

"Okay." She remembered to smile. I know the poor kid didn't feel like it. "Thank you. I won't be able to stay long, though."

We walked back up the rocks toward the house, the sea on our left. Just as we reached the patio, she turned and looked back. "Cal?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"Those clouds over there, across the water. Those are the only ones in the sky. Are they from the eruption in the Slash?"

I squinted. "I think so. Come on inside."

END

Coming Next Month

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Dear Editor:

As a sociologist and science fictioneer, I find Mr. Lin Carter's discussions of fandom disturbing. To paraphrase a recent Jewish intellectual, I must take odds with Mr. Carter and expostulate that fan magazines are not only predominately anti-intellectual, but their cataleptic headache powders of frivolous "fannishness" are guaranteed not to activate the social conscience, elevate the blood pressure, or agitate the colon. In short, as one who has closely studied fandom as a subculture as observer and participant (under a deliberate *nom de plume*), I feel that Mr. Carter's exuberance is merely a misconception — he is nurturing an ethnocentrism which is so typical of the non-science-fiction magazine in fandom.

It is important for the sociologist dealing with fan magazines to differentiate between *stated* purposes and purposes which actually manifest themselves. The reason is simple. Purposes and results, in fan magazines, are hardly analogous. For example, this researcher found in 25 fan magazines statements to the effect that the editors were "definitely interested in analytical critics and discussions which, sad to

say, most "fans" (as differentiated from science-fiction readers) have completely ignored; e.g., discussions of the sort as represented by the writings of the fan-sociologist Stephen Pickering, or the editorial by Lester del Rey, or the critiques by Alexei Panshin or Leland Sapiro. However, Mr. Carter need hardly ignore the anti-intellectualism of most fan magazines. Such statements on the editors' part are hardly necessary. The contents of the magazines are sufficient examples of anti-intellectualism. Most fans publish magazines *not* to discuss and explore intellectually stimulating ideas, but to sustain a nurtured "fannish" (i.e., immature individuals) status and role. Hence, I feel Mr. Carter's column is worthless: he is ignoring, completely and irrevocably, manifest and latent functions. That is, Mr. Carter is **ignoring** functions which are **anticipated**, and those which are neither **intended** nor recognized.

The job of differentiating between manifest and latent functions is, of course, a task which most science-fiction writers claim to have done, but which few actually do. Nevertheless, for all of the talk of fan magazines being representative of

an "above the ordinary" individual, it is painfully ostensible, from the reading of any "fannish" magazine, that most fans are very poor, ignorant social critics; most are not intellectuals, and most are highly resistant to actual changes in ideas. The significance of latent and manifest functions lies in the fact that it enables one to systematically analyze fan magazines, fans and their shortcomings. By examining what Merton has called "seemingly irrational social patterns," it is quite probable that the sociologist can assimilate and analyze various ethnocentrismisms of fandom. And the persistence of anti-intellectualism is merely a vindication of the worthless nature of so many fan magazines.

I suggest that Mr. Carter do a little more studying, and a little less excited chatter, in order to present a mature picture to, hopefully, the mature audience of Mr. Pohl's magazines. — Leslie A. Reece, 46 Wainright Drive, Bakersfield, California.

* * *

Dear Editor:

I just want to let you know that, in my opinion, you are the best sf magazine around. With stories like *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, *Neutron Star* and *Skylark DuQuesne*, how can you be beat?

I remember a story, a long short story or a short novelette, that involved an invader from outer space. There was an astronomer, I think, who discovered a body entering the Solar System that would destroy the earth. It had a satellite that would be retained by the sun after Terra's demise. The plan was to go over to the satellite by spaceship and thus save some of the human race. It ended right after

they landed on the satellite and saw a road stretching into the distance. I wonder if someone would tell me the name, author and/or if there was a sequel.

Congratulations on your Hugo.— Cliff Story, 391 Auwinala Road, Kailua, Hawaii 96734.

● Sounds like Balmer & Wylie's *When Worlds Collide*. And there was a sequel: *After Worlds Collide*.— Editor.

* * *

Dear Editor:

My sincerest apologies to Brother Ron Smith in the December ish. Unfortunately, I was not aware that another one of Mr. Plachta's little gems was going to be presented in the same issue with my letter. However, I have a little consolation: at least the two stories are both by the same author.

However, I hope Brother Smith will note my prophetic prediction in my same letter. In it, I said that I felt that it was high time IF received a Hugo. Well, shades of Klonos, what happens at the World SF-Con but that best of all magazines, IF, pops up and wins the Hugo for best pro magazine? If that isn't psi, what is?

The stories that you've been featuring in IF lately have been showing a slow but upgrading as to quality. Of course a few clinkers do slip in occasionally, but that happens in the best of magazines. Then, on the plus side, some of the really good stories, Hugo material, have been appearing regularly. Keep up the good work!

I am still crusading, as always, for better exterior and to a lesser degree, interior art. Those horrible atrocities that have been getting out on your covers are giving the prospective buyers a false impres-

sion of what is inside. Since this is the end of the year, a little bit of review might be in order. The real clunker in cover art appeared on (have to let my computer warm up here) bop, zing popapop here it is: the April and May IFs and the January '66 Worlds of Tomorrow. Your best efforts, as usual come from Galaxy. The April and December covers deserve awards for possibly the best cover art of the year in sf-dom. The December cover especially, for its realistic portrayal of a Door Traveler. I've been debating with myself for a long time: is that figure a photo or not? It seems so lifelike. If you can make the cover art on Galaxy so good, how come the art on IF's and WOT's covers are always so mediocre or just plain bad? How about some more Morrow and Emsh and Finlay doing the interior? These three can really wield a pen.

I read in WOT where Galaxy is planning to put out another magazine. This puzzled me muchly as I was afraid that WOT was going to be taken off the stands. You didn't help it much when WOT was left out of the Christmas package advertisement in Galaxy. It was the first time in three years that there wasn't an ad for WOT. However, with this new news, I suppose I can rest safely. Since you are continuing WOT. I suppose the Moskowitz articles and the Philip J. Farmer Riverworld series will also continue with it. By the way, how many more Riverworld stories are there? And is there any paperback or hardback publication planned soon?

I'm glad to see that IF is getting some of the big names in sf back that haven't been putting out lately. Like Asimov, who has to be one of the greatest ever. And your

March issue sounds like it may win a Hugo itself.

That other magazine that is in the making, will you by any chance edit it yourself? If you do, I feel that you might be spreading yourself a little thin. After all, not even Hugo Gernsback ever managed four magazines at the same time! You might achieve the same effect if you added more pages to the three Galaxy magazines, improve the format and just use the money for the 4th magazine to improve the now-existing three.

Congratulations on what has to be the biggest discovery of a sf writer in the sixties! Who? Larry Niven, of course. Outside of Philip K. Dick, there isn't anyone who is as prolific as Niven. Nearly every magazine on the stands has one of his stories. Happily, most of them have appeared in your magazines. Niven's work is plausible, sensible, and most of all, scientifically correct. Which isn't an oddity today in what might be called "The Science Conscious Age of SF," but is still rare enough that it makes his stories stand out. Keep him with you and without a doubt, he will make it as big, if not bigger than Keith Laumer and the notoriously famous Retief.

One more thing. My friend in Houston, Texas, who is president of the local sf club, would like to invite any interested fan in the Houston area to contact him so they can get in on the sf-ly doings of the Houston Science Fiction Society. Contact Randy Richmond at 10502 Shadow Wood Drive.—Drake Maynard, 123 Plymouth Road, Rocky Mount, N.C. 27801.

* * *

Dear Editor:

Winning that Hugo must have

inspired the staff to even greater efforts at improving *If*. It makes *Galaxy* seem stale and repetitious in comparison. (Jack Vance's *Palace of Love* was a pallid disappointment.) The special March issue was excellent. Even the art work has been a bit better.

Compliments to prolific Larry Niven for all that quality hard SF he's been producing. Algis Budrys's *Iron Thorn* was colorful but ended poorly. Please dissuade Keith Laumer from writing Retief stories for a while.

If you're really going to start an "Idea Mart," may I submit a long-cherished premise? Why doesn't someone base an alternate history series on the absence of Mohammed? This single difference could have drastically changed our world. For instance, picture western civilization today had Europe been spared centuries of barbaric isolation during the Dark Ages. Such speculations comprise the celebrated Pirrenne Thesis. This has been the subject of many scholarly publications which would aid the author in his extrapolations. At the risk of starting an argument, may I suggest that history provides a better background for enjoying SF than science? But then I'm prejudiced, being a medievalist.—Sandra L. Miesel, 4108 Independence Drive, Indianapolis, Indiana.

* * *

Dear Fred:

I have a question which has me on the ropes. It comes from a Washington reader who remembers reading *The First Men in the Moon* as it appeared in the *Strand Magazine* in his early teens, and it has to do with what I thought was an H. G. Wells story called *The Anticipator*. But I have just been through the

20 volume edition of Wells in the local library and can't find it.

The story I remember is about two authors, one of whom finds that another always beats him to the publishers with new ideas. So he plans to kill him, but of course is anticipated even in this. I remember that the last sentence contains the phrase, "The anticipator, horribly afraid" — referring to the murderer as he runs away from the scene of the crime.

I leave for England next week and will tackle some Wells experts there. If you solve the mystery perhaps you would write me.—Arthur C. Clarke.

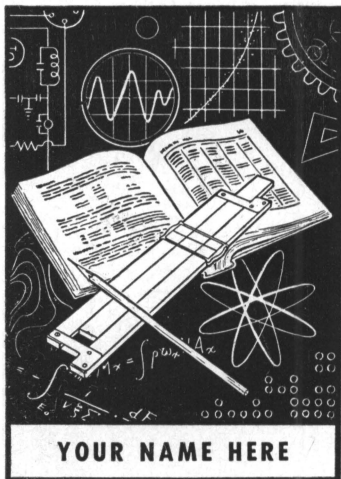
● Anybody got the answer? We'll pass it on to Clarke . . . always providing we can locate him as he jets about the world, tying up the loose ends on his forthcoming spectacular movie called *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

And that ties up most of our own loose ends this month. We're hoping to jet partway around the world in a few weeks to visit the city of Trieste and take in their *V Festival Internazionale del Film di Fantascienza* — fifth annual science-fiction film festival, that is. It runs from July 8th to 15th; looks interesting, and we'll let you know what turns up when we get back. Meanwhile, if you happen to find yourself in the vicinity of the Yugoslav-Italian border around then, why not drop in?

It's been a while since we mentioned it, but we're still running at least one "first" story in every issue — that's to say, a first appearance by someone who has never sold a science-fiction story before. This month's is *Family Loyalty* by Stan Elliott. Next month —

Well, why not come around next month and see? —The Editor

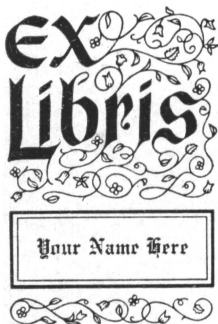
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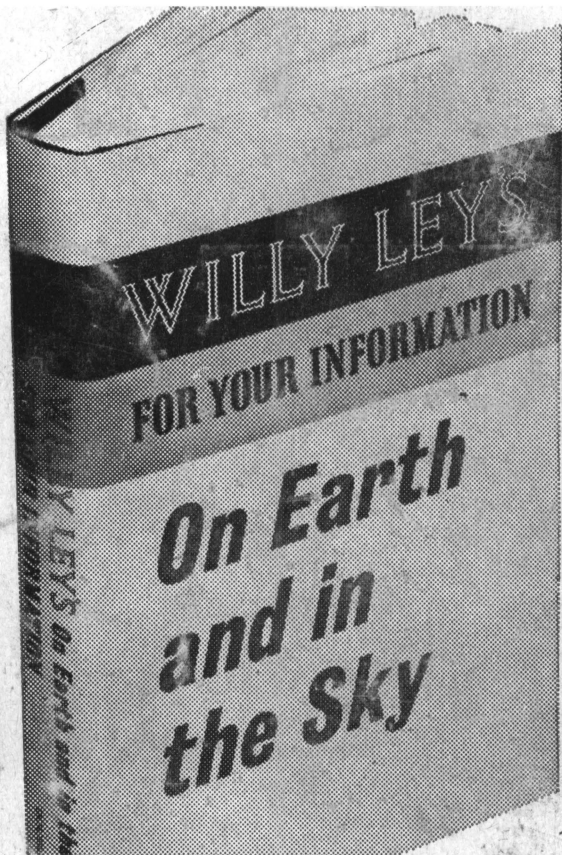
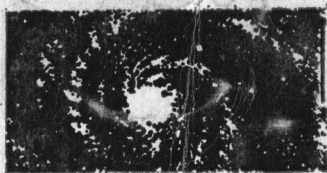
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