WORLDS OF if SCIENCE FICTION

JULY 1969

60¢

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by KEITH LAUMER

The Towns Must Roll
by MACK REYNOLDS

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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

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ALL NEW STORIES

Cover courtesy of Three Lions, Inc., for THE HALF MAN

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LOOKING AHEAD

In the first eight years of *If*'s existence, from that first issue in March, 1952, until the end of 1960, the magazine had half a dozen editors — Paul Fairman, Larry Shaw, Eve Wulff, James Quinn, Damon Knight and H. L. Gold. From 1961 till now, the undersigned has been lucky enough to be running things . . . and lucky enough, too, to have won three Hugos with it as the best science-fiction magazine in the world.

Enough is enough. A good time to quit is when you're ahead. And so, with considerable nostalgia and some flashes of regret, we're moving out of the way to make room for a new crew.

Starting with the next issue, the Presiding Genius of *If* (and of the other Galaxy-group magazines as well) will be Ejler Jakobsson. Sf veterans will remember Jake as whilom editor of *Super Science Stories* some years ago (History does repeat! Curiously, we edited that one before him too). What Jake will do as editor you will be discovering as the issues roll along. We'll be as interested as you are in seeing what new slants on the science-fiction subject Jake will bring to bear . . . and we expect to be pleased with the result.

And, in a way, we expect to be a little envious.

For, while there is much that is in doubt about the next few years for science fiction and for the human race, there is one thing that's for certain, and that is that it is going to be a time of excitement and a time of change.

Just in the last decade we've seen such science-fiction dreams come true as men going into space, the first test flights of supersonic airliners, the wide development of communications miracles like computer facilities on an ever-increasing scale and the growth of color TV. By the time you read this, men may be walking on the surface of the Moon.

For old-timers like most of *us*, who have discounted all these astonishing events because we lived with them for years in the pages of sf magazines long before they happened in the real world, these things already have a sort of quaint, old-fashioned sound; we've come to look far beyond them, to stranger worlds and more remote times. And yet they are now a part of our lives. And with them, they bring a freight of consequences whose ends are far from being in sight. Riots . . . violence . . . campus confrontations and civil unrest. Organ transplants and medical marvels to ease our lives on one hand; ever-increasing pollution of the

environment and stresses on our nervous systems on the other. What is happening in our society is only the reflection of what has happened to our capability of changing the world to suit ourselves.

When we buy scientific progress, the commodity we really want to get is betterment of the world for everyone — betterment in tangible ways, through technology that gives us improved food and medicine, or betterment in such intangibles as a clearer understanding of the basic laws of the universe. But the price we pay is not only money. We pay for energy in the coin of air pollution. We pay for better health in the coin of overpopulation. We pay for increased capabilities in the field of defense in the heavy price of increased danger of war.

That's not a bad thing in itself. "There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch," as Bob Heinlein said in *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* some issues back; whatever we get, we pay for one way or another. But our bookkeeping isn't up to striking a balance in these cloudy areas. Is it worth while to have two cars in every garage, at the cost of two lungfuls of carbon monoxide in every driver? We can't tell. We just don't have any good way of measuring the Good Things against the Bad Things in this way, to find out if we are getting our money's worth.

Not yet.

But there's hope. There are ways now being developed of foreseeing the consequences of change in a quantitative way, so that one can be stacked up against the others. They may give us refined and useable answers before very long.

And until they arrive, we have that cost-accounting system of evaluating possible futures all of us have been using for some time now, the science-fiction story. For it's still true that the best lens available with which to peer into tomorrow's world is in science fiction. Sometimes the oracle is a bit hazy in detail, cryptic, hard to understand. But that has been an oracle's privilege since the days of Delphi and Nostradamus.

And looking into the tomorrows of these fascinating and eventful todays should keep science-fiction writers pretty busy for some time to come.

We hope to be with you in that capacity from time to time; our real reason for cutting down on editing time is to make a little more space in the day for writing.

But we won't be entirely absent in the editorial capacity either. We are going to stick around for a while as Editor Emeritus, which is the rough Latin equivalent for second-guesser, the fellow who looks over the shoulder of the people actually doing the work and criticizes.

So thanks — readers, writers, artists, associates in one capacity or another — for the best part of a very interesting decade. We've enjoyed it. We hope you have. And we will be looking forward to the decades to come.

—FREDERIK POHL

THE TOWNS MUST ROLL

by MACK REYNOLDS

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

Hardin was the town cop and a good one. But the town was on tour in a foreign land and some of the natives were restless . . .

I

New Woodstock crossed the Rio Grande at McAllen and passed through the Mexican city of Reynosa.

There had been two fairly major sites on the American side of the border with excellent facilities for as many as ten thousand homes apiece but Bat Hardin and the executive committee had checked to find that the next nearest site was at Linares, a full 254 kilometers to the southwest. They wanted to push on through and avoid the ne-

cessity of setting up for the night at some second-class or emergency site where there would be inadequate supply facilities and other short comings. There would be enough of that when they got down into Central America and beyond.

New Woodstock was a small town as mobile towns went, and they hadn't the problems of some of the larger communities. The committee had handled all the required border formalities the day before so that there was nothing to hold them up. Bat Hardin leading, as usual, they strung out along the highway, some five hundred homes strong with the auxiliary vehicles spaced periodically between them.

Bat rode alone in his converted police vehicle, drawing his moderately sized mobile home behind. He was far from a misogynist but at this junction in his life he had no permanent feminine affiliations and for some reason not quite clear to even himself he desired none. He was a moderately tall man with a military carriage and a habitually worried expression. His hair was crisp, his complexion dark and his features so heavy that he would hardly have been thought of as handsome by average American standards. He had a nervous habit of gnawing on his under lip at the slightest of problems.

He wore a khaki semi-uniform. Local police often had a chip on their shoulders in their attitude toward the pseudo-police of the mobile towns, who, after all, had no authority in the areas through which they passed. Law in the mobile towns was largely a voluntary matter; minor infractions could be taken care of in the community but any major matter made it necessary to call in the proper authorities of whatever area the town was in at the time.

This part of Mexico was not particularly attractive as Bat had known from earlier trips but the site at which they were to stay that evening was at the edge of the mountains and on the banks of a stream. And the following day they should be getting into the Mexico famed in story and song.

At the thought of that, Bat Hardin grunted deprecation. The world was becoming one in more than one sense. The larger cities, in particular, such as still existed at least, were becoming unbelievably alike. Somehow or other they all seemed to look like Cincinnati. He was hoping that it would be different in South America.

A mobile town, like a convoy of ships in wartime, moves at the speed of its slowest member. Alone, Bat Hardin's electro-steamer could easily maintain a steady five hundred kilometers an hour, at least on an automated underground expressway in the States. Even under manual control such as at present, three

hundred kilometers an hour was quite possible. However, the average home behind him seldom got much above a hundred kilometers an hour especially when traveling in a group.

He shrugged that off. He was used to this reduced speed and they were in no hurry. If they wished, they could take a year — or ten years — to reach their destination. He grunted at that, too. In actuality, they were rather vague on just what the destination was.

What was really on his mind was the sullen quality that he had seemed to detect in some of the border officials. It was nothing he could quite put his finger upon and didn't apply to all of the immigrations and customs people but it was there. And he didn't quite know why.

He said into his car phone, "New Woodstock, Al Castro."

Al's face faded in. "The rear guard here," he said, yawning. "I'll sure as hell be glad when we get up into the mountains a ways."

Bat ignored the complaint of his second. Al Castro was a chronic complainer when things were going fine and never uttered a word of beef when matters were anxious. He was a good man and Bat sometimes wondered at his presence in this community. Al was no more of an artist than Bat was.

Bat said, "We'll be turning off in about a half hour."

"Going to stop then for lunch?"

"We'll put it to the vote but I'm going to recommend no. I'd like to get into Linares before dark. Some of the boys haven't ever driven on these roads before."

"Yeah," Al grumbled. "I'll call back to the old lady to whomp me up some sandwiches. Probably wind up with acid stomach."

The vote carried and in the early afternoon Bat unwrapped the two sandwiches he'd made himself earlier and the plastic of beer. When he had finished the beer, he threw the container out the window without compunction. The plastic containers which dissolved in the sun or rain within a week spelled progress with a capital P in Bat Hardin's book. Gone with the snows of yesteryear were the multi-millions of beer and other cans which used to line the roads and clutter up the parks, beaches and resorts of half the world.

They were only to spend the one night at the Linares site so they made no particular efforts to arrange themselves in predetermined order, other, of course, than that the administration and other auxiliary vehicles parked in the center of their group. They occupied only about a third of the site's most favored area and there were only half a dozen other mobile homes.

Bat himself parked near the ad-

ministration building, noting that the driver, Milt Waterman, wasn't bothering to set it up but was making his way over to his father's home to rejoin his family. Bat detached his electro-steamer from his home, to have it ready in case of emergency. He parked it, to wander about on foot on the off chance that he could be of some assistance to someone setting up one of the larger and consequently more awkward homes. Jim Blake, for instance, could usually use an extra hand. Jim might be one of the most prominent artists in New Woodstock but he wasn't mechanically enough minded to wind a clock.

Blake, however, had secured the services of one of his neighbors. Ferd Zogbaum, a bachelor, lived in what was usually called a camper, a very compact bus-like vehicle that combined the electro-steamer and living quarters very neatly. Ferd was usually on hand to help out when help was called for. A damn good member of the community, Bat had long since decided.

Everything seemed to be settled down and Bat Hardin fell in beside Dag Stryn, the guru of the New Temple, and elderly Doc Barnes and headed toward the site's ultra-market.

He said to the town's doctor, "How's Mrs. Terwilliger?"

Doc Barnes said, "She'll be all right, Bat. I haven't the facilities in the clinic to handle her operation but I'll stop off with her at the first city with an adequate hospital. I have her in stasis for the time being."

"She and Phil will have to drop behind?" Bat said, nibbling on his lower lip.

"Not necessarily. She can convalesce in the clinic while we're underway."

Dag Stryn, a blond Viking of a man but almost unbelievably gentle in all things, said, "I'm worried about the Terwilligers. They're our oldest, and I'm just wondering if this protracted a trip is the sort of thing they should be doing."

"Basically they're both as strong as a couple of horses," Barnes said. "They'll be all right. You can't just sit and die because you've reached your seventies."

The doctor must know, Bat thought. He was certainly pushing that age himself.

They reached the ultra-market and stood at the end of a short line that had formed.

When his turn came, Bat took up a number key and walked on past the display shelves, periodically stopping before an item he wished and touching his key to the impulse device. Aside from tortillas and an inordinate selection of chili peppers, he could have been in an ultra-market in Maine or Oregon.

He wasn't, he realized, particularly happy about the fact. It must have been interesting, in the old

days, to be able to witness different cultures, eat exotic foods, sample different drinks, ogle girls attired in saris or sarongs, rather than the now practically universal fashions.

His selections all made, he returned to the delivery counter, put his number key in place and then slipped his pocket phone cum credit card in the appropriate slot. Within moments, his package erupted from the delivery chute and he picked it up and headed for the door.

In turning abruptly, he caroomed against a newcomer, one of the community members named Jeff Smith.

"Hey, watch yourself, boy," the other snapped.

"Sorry," Bat said mildly.

Smith grumbled something inarticulately and made off.

Bat looked after him for a moment. Jeff Smith was a fiery little man of about thirty-five, fairly recent to New Woodstock. He was supposedly a composer and had a small piano in his unusually large mobile home. Bat occasionally heard rambling music from the Smith quarters but to this point the other had never offered to play any of his compositions or anything else at any of the community entertainments.

Bat shrugged and continued on his way. He hoped that Jeff Smith worked out. In a mobile town there was small room for soreheads. You were either a tight community of cooperating fellows or you soon came apart as a town and dispersed to seek better companionship elsewhere. Bat Hardin liked New Woodstock and would hate to see anything happen to it. It was unique as mobile towns went; in fact, to his knowledge, there simply weren't any other mobile art colonies in North America.

He left his purchases in his home, decided to postpone his evening meal and walked around the site a bit more, pondering the desirability of teaming together with some of the other singles such as Diana Sward or Ferd Zogbaum and taking turns cooking; not that he knew whether or not the others were any better in a mini-kitchen than he was.

Thinking of Diana Sward, he came upon the girl sitting in a folding chair before her mobile home, an easel before her, a palette in hand and a scowl on her face. She was obviously trying to get the colorful mountain peaks to the west on her canvas.

She looked up and grimaced. "The damn light is off. This Mexican light is different. You'd think it would be the same as similar countryside up in California, or wherever, but it isn't."

Bat said mildly, "How can light be different? Light is light."

"That shows how much you know about it," she snorted. "Sit down, Bat."

She was potentially a very pretty young woman but made small effort to realize her potentialities. On the few occasions when she bothered to do herself up for some community affair or whatever, she wowed them all, looking surprisingly like a brunette version of the ancient movie star Marilyn Monroe.

Now she was attired simply in paint-bespattered shorts and there was a streak of blue down her right cheek where she had obviously touched her brush in an absent-minded moment of irritation.

She said, "The hell with it," and tossed the brush to the shelf of the easel.

"Are you any good, Di?" Bat asked idly.

She grunted her disgust. "Not very, but I make a modest living. I have a show or two a year and that usually puts me over the hump. Three or four idiots collect my stuff."

He was moderately surprised. "You mean you don't have to call on NIT?"

"NIT is for nitwits," she retorted. "Besides, I'm not eligible for it."

"How do you mean? I thought three quarters of this whole town depended on NIT. Surely I do."

"But I'm an alien, you know."

"We're all aliens in Mexico."

"I mean, I'm an alien in the United States. I'm not eligible for the Negative Income Tax. I came over from Common Europe as a youngster. When the Germanies reunited, my mother had to hustle out. Some of the new authorities weren't too happy with the stand she had taken in the old days. My name's actually Diana Von Sward und Hanse —very impressive, eh? She was a Grafin."

"A what?"

"Something like a countess from way back in the Kaiser's day. She was also on the chauvanistic side and didn't want to become an American. Since she seemingly had all the money she, and I, would need she didn't become a citizen. By the time she lost her capital — mother was an ass with money — it wasn't as easy as all that to become an American. With the advent of NIT practically everybody in the world would have become citizens if the government would have allowed it."

She changed the subject. "Bat, what in hell are you doing in New Woodstock?"

He shrugged. "In any mobile town, even an art colony, you need other than artists, writers, musicians, sculptors and the rest. You need, for instance, a cop or two."

"Sure, but I mean, what do you get out of it. There is no pay

with your position. Like you said, you live on NIT."

He said slowly, "I'm not by nature a loafer. Besides, I feel a need to identify, I suppose you'd call it. Be part of the community. I want to do my share . . . "

"Well, a mobile art colony is a sort of a strange place to have that drive."

"No it isn't." He looked at her from the side of his eyes. "I'm a cop, for free. Some of the others who don't spend full time at their art act in helping on repairs, as car mechanics, teachers or whatever. For instance, why do you teach art classes to the kids three times a week?"

"Touche," she snorted. "But what I meant was, if you're ambitious to work and don't want to be a loafer, why do you stay in a community like this? Why not get yourself a job up in the States?"

"Di, old girl, we have a new socioeconomic system in our America. Today such labels as democracy, capitalism, free enterprise and such, are passé. We have Meritocracy."

"All right," she said. "Drop the other shoe. So what's Meritocracy got to do with you?"

"Just this. The majority of our population is unneeded in our socioeconomic system. What John Kenneth Galbraith, the old economist, once called the Technostructure — in short, management — has become for all practical purposes the entire working population. Practically everybody who works is part of management: from scientists, through engineers to technicians. The blue-collar worker is an anachronism. Happily — I guess — by this time production is at such a scale that the unneeded are not forced into starvation. Simultaneously with the advent of Meritocracy came the movement toward Guaranteed Annual Income, the Negative Income Tax and other floors beneath the income of every family in the country, employed usefully or not. In short, the dole."

Diana Sward said, "Damn it, stop lecturing me largely about things I already know. What's this got to do with you not being a loafer, not going up and getting yourself a job?"

He nodded, bitterly. "There's not enough work to go around, Di. And that which is available requires both I.Q. and education. You need both. I.Q. without education is, of course, worthless, but you need the I.Q. to get the education — in the schools that count at least. I've never seen figures but I suspect that the average person who works today in American industry has an I.Q. of something like 130. The number that have an I.Q. of a hundred or less must be infinitesimal.

"Di, when you apply to enter a university, or, even if you get over

that hump and graduate, when you apply for a position with any corporation in the nation, the first thing they do is check your dossier in the National Data Banks. And shortly after your name and identity number is your good old Intelligence Quotient which they've been testing periodically ever since you entered kindergarden. When a fraction of the population can hold down all the jobs needed, why should any corporation in its right mind hire somebody with an I.Q. of less than 100?"

"What in the name of God has that got to do with you?"

"I've got an I.Q. of 93, Di."

II

She stared at him. "Don't be ridiculous. Why, you've been lecturing me like a professor of economics since I first met you."

He made a face of deprecation. "Don't confuse learning with intelligence, Di. I didn't have much formal schooling. In fact, practically none at all. When I was a kid we still had the ghettos and slums and my family was as lower class as you could get. But during the Asian War I copped one and was in the hospital for quite a spell. I learned to read there. No, I mean literally. Before that I couldn't do much more than read comic books and sign my own name. I became a compulsive reader, an inveterate reader I suppose you call it. I spend all my free time reading."

"Well, that shows you're really intelligent."

"No it doesn't," he said doggedly. "All it shows is that I'm a compulsive reader. You can be slowish as far as intelligence is concerned and still do a lot of reading. You even learn the twenty dollar words, but you mustn't kid yourself, it doesn't make you any smarter. If your I.Q. is 90, it's still 90. And in the Meritocracy it's exposed. There is no room for the stupid."

She tightened her mouth in rejection. "How do you know your I.Q. is 93?"

He chuckled wryly. "When I first entered the army I worked for awhile in records. I sneaked a look at my induction examinations. By the way, what's yours?"

She made a gesture of shivering. "I've never tried to find out."

"I don't blame you," he laughed. "Sometimes, I'm sorry that curiosity ever hit me in the army. I'd be happier if I didn't know."

She leaned forward. "But look, Bat, there are fields in which I.Q. doesn't particularly enter. The arts, for instance. Some of the great artists of the world were lamebrains. Sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

He spread his hands in a gesture of submission. "Yeah, but I haven't any particular aptitude for any of the arts. Believe me, I've messed around in them."

"But there are other fields . . ."

"Sure, and I've held down jobs in some. I used to curry horses for one of the big mucky-mucks in Kentucky, down where one of my ancestors was a slave. But I don't like being a servant."

"In a way, you're a servant now, a public servant."

"All right. But, here in New Woodstock I'm an honored member of the community. With a few exceptions, possibly, I'm welcome in everybody's home. I get invited to the parties, I'm often brought in for lunch or dinner. Hell, the Robertsons named their new baby after me."

She stared at him in frustration.

He said doggedly, "Here I belong. Here I'm wanted. Here I can be of use. The Meritocracy doesn't need me and I refuse to sit around in the new America collecting my NIT and not being able to return anything of value to society. I don't like charity."

"But you take your NIT."

He shrugged, once again in self-deprecation. "In the world as it is there is no other way to survive. Theoretically, perhaps, I could go off somewhere and be a hermit. But that's theory. Man's a social animal and can't divorce himself completely from society."

Jeff Smith, who seemed to be listing slightly to starboard, passed by them, heading back to his home from the direction of the site's *cantina*.

He stared at them, his eyes particularly going over Diana Sward's semi-nudity. There was an element of sneer in his voice when he slurred, "Yawl having a good time?"

He had passed before either of them could think of anything to say.

Bat chuckled. "I think Jeff sports the last of the southern accents. He's trying single-handedly to maintain the old provincialism. And what's that chip on his shoulder, anyway?"

"He invited me to have a drink a little earlier," Di said distastefully. "I turned him down."

Ferd Zogbaum came up, a scowl on his face. A scowl wasn't normal on Ferd. He was an easy-going, generous type, about thirty, pushing six feet and a hundred and sixty pounds. He was as nearly universally liked by everybody in New Woodstock as is possible to be liked without being completely wishy-washy.

They exchanged amenities, and Di suggested he get himself a chair. She stood. "I think I'd better put on some more clothes, it's cooling off."

Ferd said to Bat, "Could I talk to you a minute?" His tone indicated that he meant alone.

"Sure. Why not?" Bat said, coming to his feet. "Let's go over to my place. See you later, Di."

Bat and Ferd sauntered along easily. It was the time day Bat liked best in the mobile art colony. Two of the younger set, known to be considering marriage, went by slowly, hand in hand. Off in the distance, a guitar, poorly played, was starting up a folk song. The kids were beginning to emerge from their homes; a ball game was shaping up. There weren't many children in New Woodstock, slightly over a hundred, but their presence added a needed something, even to an art colony.

Bat said to Ferd, in the way of make-conversation, "Getting any work done?"

Ferd said, "Some people might work from sun to sun, but a writer's work is never done."

Bat looked at him from the side of his eyes. "Oh? You don't seem to be wearing yourself to a frazzle."

"I'm working right this very minute," Ferd said, in put-on protest. "One of these days I'll do an article about you. How's this for a title, *Last of the Neighborhood Cops?*"

"It'll never sell. Do you place much of your stuff, Ferd?"

"Some. Not enough to negate my NIT, but some. That's one advantage of NIT, I suppose. Gives somebody who's trying to break into the arts the opportunity to survive while he's learning the tools of his trade.

"No more starving in garrets."

Bat's mobile home consisted of a fairly large living room, a mini-kitchen, a bath and a bedroom. In the tradition of house trailers, since their inception, everything was compactly efficient: refrigerator, automatic bar, electronic stove, TV screen, tucked away here and there with a minimum expenditure of space.

Ferd slumped into an easy chair and Bat went over to the bar. "What'll you have?" he said.

"It's been a hot day, how about a Cuba Libra?"

"Sounds good to me," Bat said, dialing the rum and coke and a dash of lime juice. He paused a brief moment, then opened the compartment and brought forth two long, chill plastic glasses. He handed one to Ferd and took a chair himself.

Bat said, "What was it you wanted to see me about, Ferd?"

Ferd's face worked unhappily for a moment before he answered. "I don't know exactly how to put it, Bat, but something's wrong."

Bat looked at him.

Ferd said, "I can't put my finger on it. It's kind of intuitive. But, for one thing, where are the local people?"

"How do you mean?" Bat said, scowling. He had run into this intuitive feeling of Ferd Zogbaum's before. The other hadn't been with

New Woodstock very long but on two occasions he had come up with this intuitive feeling, or whatever it was, and had been astonishingly accurate.

Now Ferd said stubbornly, "The last time I was in Mexico, about five years ago, the locals used to hang around a site when a group of American homes came through. Some were there just to gawk, but some had souvenirs and such to sell. Where are they this time?"

Bat scowled again. "Damn if I know. Possibly so many Americans have been coming through that we're no longer a novelty."

"That wouldn't apply to peddlers, or beggars. It wouldn't even apply to kids. Kids never get tired of gaping at strangers and different ways of doing things."

Bat thought about it, biting his lower lip. He said slowly, "Did you notice at the border this morning a, well, kind of a sullen quality about some of the authorities?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. We had all of our papers, permission to enter and all but I got a distinct feeling that most of them hated to see us pass."

Bat said suddenly, "Look, what do you say we go into town this evening after we eat? Take a look around."

Ferd came to his feet, pulled out his pocket phone and dialed the time. "Okay," he said. "I've got to get back over to Di's now."

After Ferd Zogbaum had gone, Bat went into his mini-kitchen, opened the refrigerator-freezer and scowled in at the purchases he had made earlier. He wasn't particularly hungry after the heat of the day.

In honor of their first stop in Mexico, he brought forth a container-dish of chili con carne and placed it in the electronic heater and gloomily watched as the container top melted, becoming part of the prepared contents.

The chili con carne heated but the dish remained at room temperature and Bat took the food over to the small table in the living room. From a cabinet he brought forth a box of utensils, some crackers and another plastic of beer and sat down to eat. He wasn't going to need the knife with this meal so he ate it along with the chili.

When he had finished, he ate the plate and the spoon and fork and went back to his favorite chair to wait for Ferd Zogbaum. He considered dialing himself an after-dinner drink but decided not to. He had no idea of what they might run into in Linares and didn't want to be even slightly befuddled. He reached up for a book from his shelves and sat again.

Bat Hardin was getting fully emersed in the work when Ferd Zogbaum's knock came at the door. He gave a grunt of displeasure, marked his page and got up.

Ferd's camper was on the slow and awkward side, comparatively, so Bat suggested they take his electro-steamer. Linares proper was about a kilometer down the road and it took them only minutes to arrive.

The town of Linares boasted a small population of approximately 14,000 and had little call to fame. The area was not particularly suited to farming, mining nor, certainly, industry and since its scenic attractions were only moderate tourism was also a matter of little gain. Thus it was that the community had participated hardly at all in the growth of Mexico proper such as was to be seen in the progressive cities of Monterrey, Guadalajara, Vera Cruz and above all Mexico City itself. In fact, Linares remained a town of yesteryear, a sleepy, dull and at this time of the year, at least, dusty backwash to the days of Pancho Villa.

The main highway, leading west and further on, south, compounded insult to injury by avoiding Linares proper. Bat and Ferd had to take a side street to the village zocco or plaza, the center about which every Mexican hamlet, village or city revolves.

It differed not at all, except possibly being amongst the least picturesque in all the Republic, from the norm. There was a park, a bandstand in its center, iron benches about the perimeter, patches of sad flowers spotted here and there. A score of trees provided perching for multitudes of Boat-tailed Grackles which evidently had no respect for weary townsmen slumped below on the benches.

There were few cars parked about the square, and those that were there were more often old-fashioned internal combustion engines, rather than steamers or the more recent electro-steamers. Evidently pollution laws had never been enforced in Mexico. In fact, of wheeled vehicles there were more beaten up trucks and buses than private cars.

Bat Hardin parked the electro-steamer in front of a bar and got out, Ferd doing the same on the other side.

Three or four indolent villagers, leaning up against wall or lamppost, seemed to take displeasure when Bat locked the car doors. He wondered idly if it was because they were thwarted in going through the vehicle, or if they were objecting to his suggesting that it might be done if he failed to lock up. Come to think of it, Bat recalled that in these small towns the crime rate in Mexico was said to be infinitesimal, though it could be different in the larger, more sophisticated cities.

Ferd led the way. If the town as a whole had reminded them of a movie set based on the Mexican

revolution of 1910, there was little in the interior that would indicate the bar wasn't a continuation of the set. The room was long, the walls decorated with bullfight posters and illustrations of bountifully bosomed women. There was a brass-rail along the bottom of the bar and a tile trough with running water for those who must needs expectorate. At the far end of the bar, along the whole wall which faced the door was a tile urinal which could easily have accommodated half a dozen beer discomfited customers at a time. There was a stench of stale urine in the air, along with that of unwashed bodies.

There were perhaps twenty imbibers present, leaning on the prehistoric bar. Behind were three bartenders; one, a fifty-year-old pushing three hundred pounds in weight, was obviously the proprietor; the other two were youngsters in their teens. The liquor selection was limited; tequila, mescal, rum and gin. A battered refrigerator indicated that at least the beer and coke would be cold.

Ferd muttered from the side of his mouth, even as they found a place, "Montezuma drank here."

"Or at least, Cortez," Bat muttered back.

A silence had falled upon their entry. The two Americans ignored it.

The proprietor, who puffed slightly upon movement, hesitated for a long moment but finally came down to them, ignoring some of the cold stares of his habitués.

He stood before them, both obscenely fat hands on the bar, and said expressionlessly, "Senors?"

"Tequila, por favor," Bat said.

He nodded, turned and secured a bottle of the white liquid nuclear bomb, a saucer of limes cut into quarters and a shaker of salt.

Both Bat and Ferd had been in the country before and knew the routine. They poured themselves drinks that would have been called triples in the States, took the salt and sprinkled a touch of it on the back of their left hands. They touched their tongues to the salt, took up and tossed the tequila back over their tonsils in one fell swoop, then grabbed up a quarter of the lime and bit into it.

"Wow!" Ferd said, half in appreciation, half in objection to the strength of the fiery product of the maguey plant.

The Mexican standing nearest to them and at Bat's left, sneered and said in passable English, "Ah, not enough *macho* for tequila, eh, Gringo?"

III

Ferd hesitated for a moment. Finally, he said to Bat, "Well, we came here to learn. What does macho mean?"

Bat said quietly, "Manliness, more or less. The quality of being a real man." He was nibbling unhappily at his lower lip.

"And Gringo?"

"It's a derogatory word for an American. When the American troops invaded from Texas and Vera Cruz one of the popular songs of the day was Robert Burns' *Green Grow the Rushes, Oh,* and the Americans sang it as a marching tune. The Mexicans of the time took the first two words and called the unwelcome invaders Green Grows or Gringos."

"Thanks for the lecture," Ferd said politely. He turned to the Mexican. "And you're just a greaser."

"Holy *Smokes*..." Bat began in protest... much too late.

The Mexican, although a small man by the standards of either of the two foreigners, pushed Bat Hardin to the side with a sweep of his right arm. He moved in fast, so fast that he should have been upon Ferd before that worthy could erect defenses. However, the American was prepared. Ferd went backward in the one, two, three shuffle of the trained pugilist, his hands coming up in fists.

The Mexican was ardent but fighting out of his class as well as weight, height and reach. He swung once, twice, wildly. And then Ferd Zogbaum stepped in with a classic feint of the left and a crushing blow into the other's stomach with his right.

Bat Hardin, meanwhile, had turned to meet the rush of the other occupants of the bar. Unlike his companion, he adopted a crouching stance, his hands slightly forward and held as choppers, rather than fists. He had not spent his long years in the Asian War without compiling background in hand to hand combat.

The very number of the others, in the confined space of the cantina, was their handicap. That and the fact that the locals had been knocking back the Mexican equivalent of the product of the vine considerably before the arrival of the strangers. They had fully the spirit of the thing but precious little science. While his companion was finishing off his attacker, Bat was able to hold them, although he was being pushed back slowly by sheer weight.

Ferd yelled, "Let's get out of here, Bat!"

But Bat was nearly eliminated from the fray at this point by an attack on his flank. The bartender, something that looked like a child's baseball bat in one of his fat paws, leaned over the bar and took a massive swing at the embattled American. Bat caught the motion from the side of his eyes and tried to swing out of the blow but only partially succeeded. For a moment the fog seemed to roll in when the

bludgeon struck him glancingly on the side of his head.

Ferd caught him, supported him just long enough for the other to shake his head in an attempt to clear it.

Swinging almost as wildly as the charging locals now, the two shuffled backward toward the swinging doors.

"I'll try to hold them," Ferd yelled. "Get the car door open!"

It was the obvious strategy. Bat turned quickly and made a dash for it. In the street, he straight-armed one of the loungers who had been outside and who was now coming up on the run, obviously attracted by the sounds of the battle. Another was coming from the opposite direction, a smallish youngster probably not out of his teens. However, Bat Hardin had neither time nor patience for compassion. He slugged the younger man in the face, putting him down, and tore his car keys from his pocket. He fumbled at the door's lock and felt a body hit him from the rear. Somebody threw arms about him.

He reached back, snagged an arm and threw the other brutally over his shoulder in the old wrestler's favorite hold, the Flying Mare.

Ferd Zogbaum erupted from the cantina and slammed the doors back into the faces of the enraged enemy.

The car door was open. Bat Hardin darted in and snaked across the seat to the driver's position. Ferd was still holding the rapidly emerging local citizens, his arms swinging like windmills. Bat Hardin reached out and grabbed him by the belt and pulled him bodily inside in a sprawl.

The car began to move forward. Bat deliberately held down his speed so as not to seriously harm the two or three of the enemy who were immediately ahead, trying to stop him. They scurried to either side as he slowly sped up.

Ferd had finally managed to sit erect and now slammed shut the still open door on his side. "Fun and games!" he yelped. "Get us the hell out of here, Bat. If any of those jokers are heeled, we've had it."

Bat growled, "This is a police car. They'd have to have anti-tank guns."

They were back on the main road leading out of town and to the site where New Woodstock was parked.

"Armored, eh?" Ferd said and then, "Hey, you've got a nasty cut on your head." He pulled forth a handkerchief and handed it over, then put a hand to his own head and groaned.

Bat Hardin was driving with one hand and holding the handkerchief to the cut. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Splitting headache," Ferd mut-

tered. "I always get them, if I get into a fight."

"Damn it," Bat said bitterly. "I always thought of you as an easy going character. What the hell was the idea of calling that guy a greaser?"

Ferd groaned, still holding his head. "Listen, we had no more chance of getting out of that joint without a scrap than we have of flying without wings. Couldn't you feel that in the air when we walked in? I just precipitated it before they got organized — thank God."

"More of your feminine intuition?" Bat said in disgust. He dabbed at his head and looked at the handkerchief. He was bleeding profusely. "I'll have to take this to Doc," he growled.

They were approaching the site.

Ferd looked over his shoulder. "None of them coming — yet."

"They won't come," Bat said, still in disgust. "There weren't more than twenty or so of them, most tight. If we stuck around here for any length of time at all, they might stir up enough of the other townspeople to help them give us a hard time, but as of right now they'd be outnumbered. I suspect that the local cops, at this moment, are cooling them."

He pulled up before the colony's clinic.

Doc Barnes was sitting in a folding chair out front talking to his nurse who was also relaxed in the cool of the evening.

Ferd muttered, "This head is killing me. I'll go over to my own place. See you later, Bat." He stumbled from the vehicle, head still in hands, and staggered away.

Bat didn't bother to answer. He got out of the electro-steamer on his side and started over to the colony physician.

Doc Barnes looked startled and came to his feet. "What in the world's happened? Miss Stevens!"

Barbara Stevens hustled to her own feet and held open the door to the colony hospital.

Bat headed into the interior saying, "Ferd Zogbaum and I went into town and got into trouble at a bar."

Doc Barnes, following him, said grumpily, "I wouldn't think either of you were the types to get into barroom brawls. Here, let me look at that."

Bat said, "They were laying for us, Doc. Haven't you noticed the atmosphere?"

"I can't say that I have. Hold still."

"Well, we're evidently not as popular around here as we might be."

The veteran doctor moved briskly, staunched the blood flow, treated the cut, closed it and placed a layer of pseudo-flesh over the wound. "There you are," he said. "It'll be healed in a few days."

"No stitches necessary?" Bat said.

"We don't use them for that sort of thing any more," the older man said. "You going to see Dean about this?"

Bat turned to leave. "I suppose so. I'll have to. Thanks, Doc." His eyes swept the mobile clinic. When on the road, it moved in two sections drawn by two heavy electro-steamers. When parked, and set up, it consisted of two floors, sporting twelve compartments in all including Doc Barnes' living quarters.

Bat said, "You know, this is the first time I've seen your set-up from the inside. It's impressive."

Doc Barnes said, "You can thank Dean Armanruder and Jim Blake for that. They split the cost fifty-fifty and donated it to the colony."

Bat Hardin said, "Why did they donate this outfit? It must have cost a fortune."

"Contrary to some opinion, these mobile towns are not necessarily solely populated by bums on NIT," Barnes said. "Some people, even well to do people, prefer to live this way. An art colony such as this will attract men like Armanruder and Blake because of the companionship."

"That still doesn't answer my question."

Doc Barnes said impatiently, "They donated it shortly before you joined New Woodstock because I told them I wouldn't take the position unless we had better facilities than were provided at that time."

Bat scowled. "What position? I thought you volunteered your services."

"I did. I'm retired and have all the income I need. Sort of an old workhorse that hates to be out of harness. I saw an advertisement in one of the magazines devoted to mobile town life for a doctor and answered it. New Woodstock's doctor had passed away. Armanruder and Blake liked my qualifications and for the sake of their own selves and family members ponied up the necessary loot if I'd stay."

"Damn nice of them."

Doc shifted his thin shoulders. "You need a competent M.D. in a mobile town. It wasn't completely altruistic on their parts."

Bat said, "Well, if you wanted to remain in practice, why didn't you stay on up north?"

The doctor said testily, "Because I'm outdated. In medicine today you become outdated about every five years. Normally, a competent physician will return to school every five years and spend one or two years catching up on the latest advances. I've got to the age where it's too difficult to keep up. Besides, I like this life. I'm not so confoundedly senile that I don't appreciate a change of scene, open air life, the beach or lakeside in the

summer, a southern climate in the winter."

Bat was beginning to feel better but he was in no hurry to go. He liked old Doc Barnes and suspected that the other had been a top man of his field in his day.

He said, "Were all the other auxiliary buildings acquired the same way?"

Doc looked at him. "You should know, you've lived in mobile towns before, haven't you?"

"They sometimes differ in how they're composed," Bat said. "The only other one I've lived in was even smaller than this and specialized in archeology. There were precious few auxiliaries, and those largely inadequate, except for the mobile museum."

The doctor shrugged. "As far as the auxiliaries are concerned, some, such as the ad building and the school, were bought by popular subscription when the town first organized some years ago. Others are privately owned. Sam Prager's TV and electronic repairshop, for instance. Evidently, Sam had always loved to tinker. When his job was automated out from under him, he and his wife Edith took what resources they had and made a down payment on a mobile home and equipped one room as a repair shop."

"I wondered why Sam joined New Woodstock," Bat said. "You'd think he'd look up some town that had a lot of members with similar interests in fiddling around with electronics."

"Edith writes. Poetry, I believe. She's on the striving intellectual side. Answer the question yourself, Bat. Why has a healthy, comparatively young fellow like you retired to a life in New Woodstock?"

Bat told him.

The doctor was irritated. "The word intelligence has its elastic qualities," he said. "Anyhow, one test isn't enough, though the tests we use now are considerably more efficient than they used to be. However the I.Q. tests largely measure the speed of your thinking, not necessarily its quality."

"How do you mean?"

The testy old man said, "See here, suppose you were shipwrecked on a deserted island. Who would you rather have as a companion, a computer programmer with an I.Q. of 140 — gifted, in short — or a chappie with an I.Q. of 110, slightly above average, who was a professional fisherman and spent his vacations in hunting, hiking and skin diving?"

Bat said dryly, "These days, you're not apt to be shipwrecked. And under the Meritocracy high I.Q. is the criteria that counts."

"All right," Barnes said. "Possibly you know more about it than I do. But you're building up one grand inferiority complex."

Bat Hardin turned to leave. He said, "It's not an inferiority *complex,* Doc. I am inferior."

Before going to the mobile mansion which was the home of Dean Armanruder, Bat Hardin headed for the considerably less ostentatious home of his deputy Al Castro.

On the way he passed the camper of Ferd Zogbaum and considered, momentarily, sticking his head inside and inquiring about the other's headache. It was a strange thing, that headache. What had Ferd said? That every time he got into a fight the headache hit him.

He approached the camper but then drew himself up. Through one of the windows he could see Ferd sitting at his tiny desk talking earnestly into a TV phone. There was an anxious look on his face, one of strain, although he was seemingly trying to control that element of his expression.

Bat shrugged and moved on. Since it seemed unlikely that the freelance writer had any contacts here in Mexico, he must have been communicating with someone back in the States and the conversation was evidently of more than passing interest.

Bat shrugged again. For all he knew, Ferd was querying some editor about an article. Possibly the strained element was there because he needed the money. But why should Ferd Zogbaum particularly need money? He was a single fellow and eligible for his NIT. He could go all year without selling any of his pieces, and never be really up against it, particularly since mobile town life was comparatively cheap and Mexico, in particular, considerably less expensive than the States. NIT, these days, was enough that anyone on it could live-it-up in Mexico or some of the other Latin American countries to the south. And more and more people were discovering the fact every day as witness the exodus of mobile towns and cities southward.

Al Castro's home was approximately the size of Bat's own but since he lived with his well larded wife, Pamela, the space was really less than he could have wished for. The place was lighted up but the curtains drawn. Bat rang the bell.

Al came, yawning as ever, and opened up.

"Hi Bat, what's on? Come on in, have a drink."

Pamela Castro was sitting at the small dining room table, a tall frosted glass there and a wilted look about her. She was an objectionably fat woman, and Bat had never particularly got along with her. She couldn't see any reason for her husband donating his time as Bat's deputy when he received no compensation. Theoretically she was a water colorist but in actuality

she spent precious little time working at it.

Bat said, "No thanks. I just had a drink and got knocked for a loop."

"They got strong liquor down here, all right," Al nodded. "But it tastes like turpentine. Take the tobacco stain right off your teeth. I'll stick to State-side grog."

"It wasn't the liquor," Bat said wryly. "It was the bartender. He slugged me with a baseball bat."

Al Castro stared at him. "What're you talking about?"

Bat told him what had happened. "I'm heading over to see Armanruder. But whatever he says, I think we'd better post a guard tonight. Why don't you round up a couple of the emergency deputies, say Jake Benton's boy, Tom, and Luke Robertson? We'll share watches, four hours on, four hours off."

"Heavens to Betsy," Pamela complained in a half whine. "Is this getting to be an all day, all night thing? What do you get out of it, up and down all night? You'll be too tired to drive tomorrow."

Al didn't answer her. He turned back to Bat. "Okay, I'll run over and get Tom and Luke."

Bat made his way across the center area to where Dean Armanruder was set up not far from the mobile administration building. The senior member of the executive committee this week had by far the most luxurious mobile home in New Woodstock. His three-section establishment was a far cry from the little original trailer homes. Six vehicles in all were involved, three mobile homes which folded quite compactly while underway and three heavy electro-steamers which drew them. Two of the homes were joined on setting up to make the quarters which Dean Armanruder and his secretary occupied; the third home, considerably the smallest, was parked nearby for Manuel Chauvez and his wife, the only two servants in New Woodstock.

Bat Hardin was on friendly enough terms with the retired corporation manager but found no real warmth in the man. In theory, Dean Armanruder dabbled in painting but in actuality such real professionals as Diana Sward had to repress their shudders if they were unlucky enough to see his latest product.

Armanruder was a phenomenon that has been known to the art colony down through the ages, the outsider who loves to associate with Bohemians — whatever a Bohemian is, Bat thought sourly.

The Armanruder home was one of the few in New Woodstock that boasted an identity screen in the door. Bat activated it and stood there waiting for the door to open.

It did, and Armanruder's voice

came through the screen at the same moment. "Come in, Hardin. Good evening. We're here in the salon."

"Good evening," Bat said and made his way down the short corridor to where Dean Armanruder and his secretary, Nadine Paskov, were relaxing before the TV screen which was built into the end wall of the room, taking up most of it.

When set up, the mobile mansion had a second floor which telescoped down into the bottom one when underway. The top floor was devoted to sleeping quarters, dressing rooms, closets and baths and Bat had never seen it. The ground floor was living quarters, library, dining room, a surprisingly extensive kitchen for a mobile home, storage space, a large office and a smaller one for Miss Paskov. Nadine Paskov was really a secretary though some snide elements in the colony prefered to doubt that. She also obviously doubled as Dean Armanruder's mistress and was undoubtedly the most beautifully groomed woman in town unless Diana Sward held that honor.

Dean Armanruder touched a control of the arm of his overgrown chair and the lights went up sufficiently for them to see each other more easily.

"Sit down, Hardin," he said. "Could I have Manuel bring you a drink?" He touched another control.

That was the Armanruder style. Not for him an automatic bar nor even an old-fashioned one which he would have to operate himself.

Cool it, cool it, Bat told himself. What business of his was it? Armanruder had earned his comforts. You didn't become manager of a corporation these days because your father owned most of the stock. The wealthy might inherit a concern nowadays but few were foolish enough to attempt to operate it themselves.

He took the chair proffered but said, "No thanks. I'm going to be up half the night, and a drink would probably make me that much more groggy." He nodded to Nadine Paskov, ever the beauty queen, who looked as though she was bored by his arrival. "Good evening, Miss Paskov."

"Hi Bat," she said, finishing the drink in her cocktail glass.

Manuel entered but for the moment Dean Armanruder ignored him. The small, dark-complexioned servant wore a white jacket now. During the day, while driving one of the Armanruder units, he wore a dark suit and a chauffeur's cap.

Armanruder said to Bat, "How do you mean, you'll be up tonight?"

Bat told him the day's developments and the older man was obviously disturbed. "Why in the world did you two go into town?"

"I told you that. We sensed a sullen quality and wanted to check up on it. We certainly weren't looking for trouble and would have avoided it if we could."

"I suppose so," the other said, then looked at his butler cum chauffeur. "Two more of the same for Miss Paskov and me, Manuel. Mr. Hardin isn't drinking."

"Yes sir." The Spanish American turned to go. If Bat had it correctly, Manuel and his wife, Concha, had come from New Mexico or Arizona. Their Spanish would be invaluable on this town move to South America.

Bat looked after the slightly built servant and must have had an element of questioning in his face.

Dean Armanruder misunderstood it. He said, "You're wondering why Manuel would take a job like this in these days of NIT? It's a fact that servants are few indeed in the States any more. Only the truly wealthy can afford them. But it's not that with Manuel and Concha; I pay them little more than they would get in the way of NIT. Poor Manuel is over a barrel. He's not eligible for NIT."

"Oh? I was under the impression he was an American citizen."

Armanruder chuckled again. "Yes. But not all citizens are eligible for NIT. You see, friend Manuel was caught at falsifying his income tax. He and his wife were collecting their NIT but working on the side to augment their fortunes. Very, very bad. When the computers check you out and catch you, you're no longer eligible for Negative Income Tax and in this day and age of unemployment you have your work cut out finding a position."

Bat said, "Actually, that wasn't what I was thinking, though. The thought went through my mind, there but for luck go you or I."

Nadine Paskov said in bored impatience, "Oh, good heavens."

Armanruder shook his head. "Speak for yourself, perhaps, Hardin, but not for me. Luck is not involved. Manuel Chauvez and I come from different strata in society. It was fated that he occupy his position and I, mine. At his birth he was slated to be a servant or the equivalent, I to be among the top one percent of our system."

He settled back into his chair, made a dome of his fingers and his tone became slightly pompous. "Under the Meritocracy you seek and reach your level. It's a system that fits the human race because it's one that is stratified, because people are. It's highly disciplined, because the universe is. It's a society in which individuals can freely move from one level to another but only by their own abilities. Nothing counts except your own individual achievements."

Nadine Paskov finished her drink and tapped the back of her hand to her mouth.

Bat had a few arguments in mind but he stood and said, "I should be getting on my rounds." He added wryly, "I suppose the manner in which we do the little governing that is needed in these mobile towns is the last of the old time democracy."

Armanruder chuckled. "Yes. And do you see who our fellow townsmen elect to the executive committee? We who, before retirement, were most successful in our positions in society. You don't find men like your impetuous friend Zogbaum on the executive committee."

As Bat Hardin walked back to his own home, with the intention of getting a few hours sleep before relieving Al Castro, he muttered, "No. And you don't see me on the executive committee, either."

It came to him that high intelligence wasn't the only requirement to get to the top in his each-man-for - himself - and - the - devil - take - the - hindmost world. You had to have the push and aggression of a Dean Armanruder. You had to have the desire for power. When Armanruder had first come to the mobile art colony, he had begun operating, volunteering his services, taking over responsibilities. Most of the town's members did a minimum of participating in its required community work. Oh, there were few complete shirkers too taken up with his art work, his family, the maintenance of his mobile home to find time for lengthy committee meetings, the handling of accounts, the making of decisions involving the community.

Within a month, Dean Armanruder had been elected to the executive committee and within two months was dominating it.

Bat relieved Al Castro at ten o'clock and patrolled the town with Luke Robertson, a tall, lanky, slow moving fellow who did sculpturing in iron and who seemed to have an inordinate affection for Bat Hardin, as did his wife, for that matter. Bat wasn't quite sure why. But when somebody likes you, for whatever reason, you have a tendency to like him in return. In actuality, Bat had to admit that he didn't appreciate Luke's work; in fact, it was exactly the sort of abstract, meaningless — to Bat Hardin — sort of thing that he actively disliked. Bat's tastes went to the representational art forms; even free verse left him with a taste in his mouth. Of course, he had never mentioned that to Luke Robertson.

Al Castro and young Tom Benton had reported their four-hour watch uneventful. They had immediately taken off for their re-

spective homes upon the approach of Bat and Luke.

And the hours between ten and two were equally free of any signs of disgruntled locals. In fact, Bat was beginning to wonder if the whole idea of posting a guard hadn't been somewhat ridiculous. He was undoubtedly exaggerating the event in Linares. A bunch of drunks had lit into him and Ferd Zogbaum. So what? It didn't mean that a mob was going to descend on New Woodstock.

At two, Al and Tom came back, Al looking as though in the midst of the self-same yawn he'd had four hours earlier. Bat returned to his mobile home, slept four hours more and came back for the final shift at six.

It was unnecessary. At this time of the year, it was dawn and early risers in New Woodstock were already up and around.

On the way back to his place, more sleep in mind, he passed Diana Sward, once again seated at her easel and once again scowling at the mountains beyond.

Bat looked over her shoulder for a moment at her efforts. "You'll never make it," he said, shaking his head.

"Shut up. Good morning, Bat. When do we roll?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm in favor of getting out of here but I imagine it will be ten o'clock or so, as usual."

Something was there that he didn't like. He couldn't put his finger on it. Maybe he was associating with Ferd Zogbaum too much. Ferd and his intuitions. Maybe they were rubbing off on him. But he had the something-is-bad feeling.

He went back into his home, opened a drawer and stared down at the Gyro-jet pistol there in its shoulder harness. He took a deep breath, took it out, took off his jacket, shrugged into the harness, put his jacket back on and left the home again.

He got into the electro-steamer and dialed a map of the local road system on his TV phone screen. He traced their route for the day, with a finger. The next stretch was 105 kilometers and led largely through the mountains. At the end of the stretch they would join the Pan American Highway about 130 kilometers south of the city of Saltillo. The Pan American Highway was well patrolled, had ample sites strung along it and endless power-pack outlets and stations for fuel cells for those who used them. He would feel happier when they were upon it. As it was, this stretch between Linares and the little town of San Roberto was going to be the most remote that they would travel over in Mexico.

He made a sudden decision, checked his power packs which he

had charged during the night, activated the car and started up. He picked up his phone and said, "New Woodstock, Dean Armanruder."

But it was Nadine Paskov's face which faded into the screen. She was obviously in bed and for once the glamorous secretary was less than her best.

She looked at him sleepily and indignantly and said, "What in the damn world do you want at this time of the night?"

Bat said mildly, "Sorry. I wanted to let Mr. Armanruder know I was going to take a quick scout along the route we're taking today. I assume that I'll be back before the town takes off. If not, I'll rejoin along the route."

She muttered something and flicked off.

It wasn't necessary to enter Linares proper to continue on along the highway, for which Bat Hardin was thankful, although he rather doubted the town would be awake this early. Mexicans are seldom early risers as he had found out from his previous visits. Perhaps it went back to the old days when they were without means of heating their homes and remained in bed until the sun had warmed up the world.

He drove along Route E-60, the road rather rapidly ascending. It was considerably more beautiful a drive than had been the day before with its flatness of countryside; however, Bat Hardin wasn't particularly observant of scenic values. He still had his premonition and chewed away at his heavy lower lip as he rode. There didn't truly seem to be anything untoward.

They nailed him about five kilometers before he reached the tiny hamlet of Iturbide and about fifty kilometers out of Linares. There was a road block of three cars, only one of which was a steamer and it is an old-fashioned kerosene burner, by the looks of it.

Four men, two of them in uniform which Bat didn't place and all of them armed, stood before the road block.

Bat came to a halt and activated the window.

One of the civilian-dressed of the four came over and said, "Senor Hardin? Come out, please." His English was at least as good as Bat's own.

Bat opened the door and came forth, scowling. He said, "How did you know my name?" His eyes went over them. The alleged uniforms were obviously make-shift. He snapped, "You're not police!" His hand shot for his shoulder holster.

Bat Hardin was not slow at the draw but the Mexican was a blur. His own pistol was out and trained on the American's stomach.

He said softly, "Move much

more slowly, Senor Hardin, and give me that for which you were reaching. So. You carry a gun here in Mexico. To shoot Mexicans with, undoubtedly."

Bat brought forth the gun and handed it over. He said, "I have a permit issued by your border authorities. Our town is going all the way down. At least to Peru. Undoubtedly, we'll go through some fairly wild country in places like Columbia and Ecuador. So we have various guns. They weren't meant to be used against the citizens of this country."

He submitted to a frisk by the other, who relieved him of his pocket phone.

The Mexican stuck Bat's Gyrojet pistol in his belt and said, "You'll never reach Peru or Ecuador, Senor Hardin. This way, please." He indicated with his gun the more modern of the three cars.

"Where do you think you're taking me?"

"It is not a matter of mere thinking, Senor Hardin. Just to make matters clear, I would not particularly mind shooting you."

Bat climbed into the seat next to that of the driver. Into the back climbed one of the uniformed men, a short carbine at the ready and trained at the back of the American's head.

The English-speaking one took the driver's seat and started up. They had to wait a half minute for the engine to heat; the steamer was that old a model.

"What am I supposed to have done?" Bat demanded.

The other ignored him and said something in Spanish to the Mexican in the rear. That one threw what seemed to be a towel over Bat's eyes and tied it roughly. Bat winced when his cut on the side of the head had pressure applied to it.

They drove only a few minutes before taking off on what was obviously a side road. They went on for perhaps two kilometers, apparently climbing rather steeply.

Finally they came to a halt and car doors opened. There were other voices now, in the background, all speaking Spanish. Bat was taken by each arm, not especially roughly, and led forward. They entered a house, led him down what was evidently a hall and sat him in a chair.

A new voice, an older voice and a highly cultured one, said, "Ah, Mr. Hardin. You do not look like a villain, Mr. Hardin. But I suppose you do not know that you are a villain. Villains seldom think of themselves as villains, I understand. They usually think they are terribly put upon and only doing what is correct."

Bat snapped, "What is the meaning of all this? I don't have the vaguest idea of why you've grab-

bed me, or what's going on. How do you know my name?"

"That's not important, Mr. Hardin, and we are not particularly interested in you. Any of your town authorities, or even an ordinary member of your community would have done. It is just that circumstance made it you, rather than someone else. We wished to issue an ultimatum."

"An ultimatum!" Bat snapped. "I'm beginning to suspect you're all around the bend. What was the idea of stopping me, dressed in those phony uniforms? You're not Mexican officials, certainly you're not police."

"But we *are* Mexicans, Mr. Hardin, and in a way even police. Vigilante police. And here is our ultimatum. Your mobile town of New Woodstock must turn about and return to your own country."

"We applied for and received all permissions required by the Mexican authorities to pass through the country and exit through Guatemala."

"We do not agree with some of our authorities. They are overly conscious of the American dollars spent by you tourists, you vacationers and you who permanently establish yourselves in our country and devastate it and corrupt our young people with your money, your lack of common decency in your moral code, your bad taste."

Bat began to say something but the older man interrupted him. "When I was a boy, you used to cross the border in ones and twos, some as ordinary tourists, some in their house trailers. We welcomed you, welcomed the dollars you spent in our country. It must have been at the time of the 1968 Olympics that the dam first broke. That year, not scores or even hundreds of your trailers and mobile homes crossed but literally thousands. And that was just the beginning. When you established your fantastic Negative Income Tax and millions of your people were suddenly free to leave America's overcrowded cities with their slums and ghettos, then they swarmed out over not only your own land but Canada and above all Mexico, as well."

A new voice, a younger voice but still in English, added, "And now my own country, Guatemala and the other nations to the south. Everywhere, everywhere, your damnable mobile cities destroy the countries in which they park."

"Look," Bat said. "We pay our way. We spend plenty in every country we go through or remain in. Your people benefit by the dollars we spend."

The older man's voice came again. "A few benefit. Most of us, not at all. Our way of life, our culture, is destroyed. The sites in

which you stay, government-built, are government operated. The government collects for the power you buy, it collects for the expenditures you make in the ultra-markets, restaurants and cantinas located on each site. Admittedly, the money realized is used by our authorities in their grandiose attempts to speed up the industrialization of Mexico. But some of us are not even sure that we wish to be industrialized to the fantastic extent to which you of the north have accomplished."

Bat began to retort, but the other overrode him. "Mr. Hardin, Mexico's relationship with the colossus to the north has not been a happy one, by and large. The flag that flew over the Alamo and was captured by Santa Anna's army was that of a volunteer troop from New Orleans. And did you know, Mr. Hardin, the big reason the Texan revolt took place? Most of the American immigrants were from your southern states and couldn't bear the fact that Mexico had abolished slavery. But Texas was not enough. Border trouble was provoked and what are now your states of Arizona, New Mexico, California and parts of others were also seized. The fact that the seizure was pre-meditated is to be seen in the fact that your General Fremont and his army had treked all the way to California before the war was declared and were ready at hand to capture that area.

"But all that is past history. It is the present to which we object. Your New Woodstock is but a small town, comparatively. Your mobile cities come and completely dominate our country. The best beaches from Tijuana to the Guatemala border and from Matamoros to Yucatan are crowded with them. Manzanilla, for instance, once a small fishing town and resort, now has no room for Mexicans on vacation. Thousands upon thousands of your luxurious mobile homes cover every desirable spot. Every restaurant is full of your people, every bar, every nightclub overruns with them. Your hordes eat up the best products of our seas and our fields and orchards. With your fantastic incomes, you shame a Mexican, make him appear a beggar in comparison. In such resorts you run up the prices astronomically so that we can no longer buy any luxury items."

The older sounding man snorted in contempt. "What is your current Per Capita Annual Income? Something like $40,000?"

Bat said sourly, "Precious few of us who live in mobile towns have incomes approaching that."

"But nevertheless, even a comparatively well-to-do Mexican seldom sees the amount one of your people gets in what you call NIT."

Bat said angrily, "If you people would cool your population explosion a little your Per Capita in-

come would go up too. Your population increases almost as fast as your industrialization."

The first voice he had heard, that of the leader of the group that had captured him spoke then and bitterly. "We do not need lessons in the manner in which to control the size of our families, Senor Hardin. One of our greatest objections to your presence is the manner in which you spread your corrupt moral code"

The old voice came again. "How can our people get underway when the intellectual drain bleeds us white of our best minds and most highly trained technicians? My own son is a surgeon. Does he operate on his people who need him so badly? No, he has been attracted by the high pay in the United States."

A new voice broke in, as bitter as were the others. "But your towns, your hundreds of thousands of mobile homes, streaming south. It is they that blanket our country and make them envious of your affluence and susceptible to your corruption. Why even this New Temple that sweeps your country. It is a religion of no religion. What do you think our simpler people are to believe when they see that such a religion is that of people who live like gods by their standards?"

Bat said, "Look. None of this is deliberate on our part. It began a long time ago and accelerated and there is no way to call a halt. We Americans have a tradition of being on the move."

"But why to Mexico? Gringos go home! You're destroying our country. We don't want you!"

Bat said stubbornly, "Your officials gave us permission to enter."

"Yes, our officials! Your dollars corrupt everything. Our officials cannot see beyond the immediate millions that accrue to them through the money you spend."

"We're only passing through," Bat said. "We'll only be in Mexico for a short time. We're heading all the way down the Pan American Highway to South America."

The voice of the one from Guatemala broke in heatedly. "Yes, and in our small country your presence is even more objectionable. We of the more progressive classes are up in arms. I have come all this way to join the forces of Don Caesar . . ."

"Shuush," somebody muttered.

". . . and to prevent you from getting any further. Some of your towns are already swarming over nations as far south as Chile and the Argentine. Why you have not already been met with arms, I cannot say."

Bat said impatiently, "Why, pick on New Woodstock? I've never heard of anything like

this before. You haven't attempted to turn back other towns."

The older man's voice said, "Quite deliberately, Mr. Hardin. Obviously, what we do is illegal by Mexican law. However, we are dedicated and determined men. You will be an example. The fact that you are a mobile art colony, with all the connotations that brings to the average person's mind, will make the example stronger. Were we to attempt to stop a city or town composed almost entirely of elderly retirees, it would be more difficult for us to gain sympathy both in your country and ours. But an art colony has a connotation of Bohemian life, immoral artists, high flown parties, much drinking of alcohol and smoking of marijuana."

Bat said bitterly, "You'd be surprised how hard working and staid most real artists are."

"That is beside the point. It will be what people think, not the reality. Those that support us will draw a vivid picture of the depravity of New Woodstock, Mr. Hardin, and how God-fearing, country-loving Mexicans turned you back in indignation."

"And if we don't turn back?"

"We are dedicated and determined men, Mr. Hardin."

"It isn't up to me," Bat said flatly. "New Woodstock is operated democratically to the extent we have government at all. It'll have to be brought before the executive committee."

"Very well," the old man said. "Jose, return him to his car."

Jose, evidently the original captor, spoke rapidly in Spanish for a moment, then took Bat by the arm "Let's go, Gringo," he said.

Bat came to his feet and suffered the other to lead him back the way they had come earlier. They retraced the route in the same elderly steamer, and the blindfold was not removed until they reached the spot where Bat's car had been left. They kept him carefully covered.

Jose looked into the interior of the car thoughtfully. He reached out with the barrel of the revolver he carried — it was an old style, possibly World War Two vintage, six-shooter — and smashed the screen of the vehicle's phone.

"Hey, that was a dirty trick," Bat protested.

Jose said apologetically, "Sorry. We'd rather you not be able to communicate with the police immediately."

"I'll do just that when I get back to Linares."

"That will give us time enough."

"How about my gun?"

"I'll keep your gun, Senor Hardin. I'd hate to have you using it on me, later."

Bat climbed into the car, started it up and made a wide turn, heading back for the site where New

Woodstock had settled for the night previous.

He swore under his breath. It was going to be a hassle to get another pocket phone here in Mexico. He'd probably have to wait until he got to Mexico City and the American Consulate. These days, the unique device combined not only a portable TV phone, but your identity number which embraced your credit account, your voter's registration, your military number, what amounted to your post office box, your income tax registration, and all else in the way of identity, including passport.

Well, it couldn't be helped.

New Woodstock was beginning to get itself together preparatory to leaving, when Bat arrived. However, it would undoubtedly take a couple of hours or so more before it was really ready to roll. Instead of going to see Dean Armanruder immediately, he returned to his home with a cup of coffee in mind. He wanted to think about it a little before confronting the executive committee's questions. Obviously, they would depend largely on his opinions and Bat Hardin wasn't quite sure what they were.

He entered his mobile home and stared at the table. There on it was his pocket phone cum credit card.

He took it up, still staring disbelief. So far as he could see, there was nothing wrong with it.

Bat left his home and looked up and down. Sam Prager's mobile home and electronic repair shop was parked next to him on one side but nobody seemed to be about his place. Probably still in bed. The Pragers were inclined to read late into the night and arise at a late hour.

Ferd Zogbaum's camper was on the other side but there was no sign of Ferd. Bat strode over in that direction, and ran into his comrade in arms of the night before on the far side of the camper. He was evidently deep in a heated discussion with Jeff Smith, a discussion that was already just short of physical combat it seemed.

"All right," Smith snapped. "You asked for it!" He began to fall into a fighter's stance.

Bat began, "Okay, okay, you two. Break it up, you're not a couple of kids."

Jeff Smith turned on him, glowering. "Shut up, *nigger!*"

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Bat stared at Jeff Smith for a moment, then threw back his head and laughed.

"It's been a long time since I've heard that word," he said. "You must be the last of the old time southerners. As a matter of fact, my maternal grandmother *was* a Negress, but I doubt if even she was full-blooded."

"Any nigger blood at all makes you one!"

Bat grinned at him. "So I understand was the law in some of the southern states in the old days. I wonder just what percentage of you southerners have African blood in you. For two centuries and more you had your black slaves. For all that time your men forced themselves on the more attractive girls. There was a custom in such towns as New Orleans of young aristocrats setting up an apartment there in the French Quarter and keeping a quadroon or octaroon mistress. You know what the children of an octaroon look like, Smith? They look white and they move to another town and pass as white. Did you labor under the illusion that the famed Creole beauties of Louisiana were solely of French descent?"

Smith began some obscenity, but Bat was suddenly fed up with the argument and with himself for bothering to get into it. He turned to Ferd and said, "Could I talk to you a minute? It's important."

"Sure, why not," Ferd Zogbaum said, ignoring Jeff Smith. He took Bat's arm and headed around the camper, leaving behind the smaller man to glare after them.

Bat said, when they were out of earshot, "What was all that?"

Ferd shrugged it off. "Evidently, Jeff has delusions of being a great lover, or something. He's got a thing for Diana, you well know."

"Well, I don't blame him. She's a darn nice girl."

"Sure. But unfortunately for Jeff, she doesn't have a thing for him. What'd you want to see me about?"

"Did you see anybody go into my home this morning while I was gone?"

"I didn't even know you were gone, but no. Something stolen, or something? We don't have much in the way of petty thievery around New Woodstock. I'd hate to see it happening."

"No. Not that. As a matter of fact, the other way. Somebody put something back."

Ferd looked at him and Bat made a quick rundown of the morning's happenings, including the return of the pocket phone.

Ferd hissed a whistle.

Bat said, "As a matter of fact, it was damned decent of them to return it. They didn't have to and there must have been some risk involved. These vigilanties aren't really bad people and in a way I can see their point."

"Sure. Great," Ferd said. "But that's not going to do you much good when they start sniping away at us from the top of some hill as we go driving by."

Bat said, "Well, keep it under your hat for the time being. I'll see what Dean Armanruder has to say."

Bat Hardin stood before the identity screen of the Armanruder home and activated it.

Nadine Paskov's voice said impatiently, "You again? I thought you were driving up the road to check it."

Bat said patiently, "I'm back. I'd like to see Mr. Armanruder."

"He's having his breakfast."

"It's of the greatest importance, Miss Paskov."

"Just a minute."

Within that time the door opened and Bat stepped through and started down the corridor to the dining room.

"Good morning, Hardin," the retired magnate said, looking up from toast and coffee. "Coffee? Sit down."

Nadine Paskov wasn't present but a dirty cup and plate indicated where she had taken her own breakfast. The Armanruder establishment was one of the few in New Woodstock that didn't utilize disposable plates and utensils; but then, it was also the only home that had servants to clean up.

Bat accepted the coffee and launched into his story. By the time he had finished, Dean Armanruder was swearing.

He banged down his cup, came to his feet and said, "Come with me." He led the way to his office.

He sat down at his desk and activated the TV phone screen. "The police station in Linares," he said.

A Mexican face faded into view.

Armanruder snapped, "Do you speak English?"

The other said evenly, "For all practical purposes, all educated Mexicans speak English. May I ask who you are and what you wish?"

"I am Dean Armanruder, senior member of the executive committee of the mobile town of New Woodstock."

"And I am Miguel Avila DeLeon, captain of police of the city of Linares," the other nodded. "What can I do for you, Senor?"

The captain of Mexican police listened to the account with a frown of disbelief but said courteously, "Who were these men?"

Bat came over and stood next to Armanruder. "I wouldn't know. I was blindfolded. However, one who was obviously an older man was called Don Caesar and the one who kidnapped me was called Jose."

"Both rather common names in Latin countries," the captain said. "They turned you loose?"

"Yes, of course, here I am."

The captain had a few other questions. Bat answered everything to the best of his ability but there seemed to be a strange something in the police chief's manner.

Finally, it came out. He said, "Senor Hardin, if I am not mistaken you are the gentleman who, in company with another Norteamericano provoked a drunken brawl . . ."

"We weren't at all drunk!"

Captain DeLeon went on, "Er, in one of the cantinas here in Linares, severely battering several of the citizens. My men took measures to see that none of our victims carried the matter further, but it would seem that some of them, working behind our backs, took their revenge by playing a bit of a prank on you."

Bat said flatly, "The men who kidnapped me had no relationship to those in the bar. My kidnappers were educated men who spoke excellent English. Those in the bar were town bums."

"I am sure you are mistaken, Senor Hardin. However, I will look into the matter."

Armanruder said harshly, "What are you going to do about it?"

The captain shrugged a most Latin shrug and pursed his lips in regret. "I doubt if there is anything I can do about it, but, as I say, I shall investigate. Have you decided to turn back?"

"No we haven't!" Armanruder snapped, flicking off the set.

He sat and glared in Bat's direction but not at him.

Bat said, "The captain's voice. I've heard it before, or, at least, I think I have. It was one of the voices when I was blindfolded."

"Are you sure!"

"No, not sure, but I think it was."

Dean Armanruder steamed for a moment, then flicked on the set again. "John Fielding, President of United Mobile Cities Association of America, Greater Denver, Colorado."

When the face faded in, it was an impatient face. "Fielding here. I must say, this is an untoward hour. I won't be in my office until nine."

Armanruder said, just as snappishly, "And this is an untoward situation." He gave Bat's story to the association head in detail.

The other thought about it, unhappily. He took a deep breath finally and said, "This is the worst yet."

"You mean there have been other examples?"

"Mr. Armanruder, do you know how many mobile cities, towns and villages crossed the border yesterday? Twenty-two, including New Woodstock. The largest was a city of more than fifty thousand occupants. Of course, this is the high season. Most of the mobile towns will remain in Mexico for only a few weeks, or months but some plan to remain indefinitely. The number increases each year. Wouldn't you expect a certain amount of friction?"

"Friction isn't quite the way to put it. These men were heavily armed. They threatened Mr. Hardin's life."

John Fielding nodded. "I sus-

pect that before we're through it will continue to get worse."

Dean Armanruder said, "What are you going to do?"

"About Mr. Hardin's adventure? What can we do? We'll protest to the Mexican tourism authorities but, actually, you have very little in the way of evidence to present and evidently aren't getting much in the way of support from the local police in acquiring more. Frankly, I'm inclined to think it a bluff. A small number of malcontents who wished to throw a scare into you. The moment one of them actually fired a shot, the Mexican police would be on them like a flash."

"I hope you're right," Bat muttered.

Dean Armanruder made the standard goodbyes and flicked the set off. Then he flicked it on again and said, "New Woodstock, Mr. Blake, Mr. Stryn, Doctor Barnes, Mr. Terwilliger, Mr. Prager."

When the executive committee had all assembled, Dean Armanruder had them seated in the salon. Jim Blake, the town's most successful artist, financially speaking; Dag Stryn, also an artist and the guru of the town's New Temple movement; Doctor Barnes; Phil Terwilliger, who represented the retired element in New Woodstock; and Sam Prager, who more or less represented the mechanics and other workers in town.

Dean Armanruder told the story himself, rather than Bat, but when it was over the questions were fired at the town's patrolman.

Sam Prager finally asked, "How many were there, Bat"

"I'm not sure. I saw only four. I heard the voices of at least three others. There might have been twenty of them, for all I know. Or more."

Old man Terwilliger said, his voice on the fearful side, "I think we ought to go back."

"Certainly not," Jim Blake said heatedly. "What are we, a bunch of sissies? We'll call on the police."

"We already did," Bat said. "They didn't answer."

Blake said, "We'll call in the American authorities, then. We're all American citizens."

"I'm not," Sam Prager said. "I'm a Canadian, but the thing is we're in Mexico and under the jurisdiction of the Mexicans even if this is a predominantly American mobile town."

"We can issue a complaint to the American Consulate in Mexico City."

"If we get to Mexico City," Bat said lowly.

The elderly Phil Terwilliger said, "I vote to turn back, before it's too late. I'm retired and have only a few years of life left to me. I have no intention of having the period shortened by desperate men shooting at me."

"I'll vote to go back too," Dag Stryn said. "I'll go on if the rest of you so decide but these people don't want us."

"A very small number, perhaps, don't want us; but for that matter some Americans don't like the mobile towns and cities. We can't please everyone," Dean Armanruder said. "I vote to go on."

"I vote to go on," Jim Blake said loudly.

"So do I," Sam Prager said.

Doctor Barnes said, "Until we have evidence that they are really as determined as they say, I also vote to go on."

"The vote is four to two," Dean Armanruder said. "We will proceed. I suggest that the whole matter be kept to us here; there is no use alarming the possibly more timid elements in New Woodstock."

"Wait a minute," Bat said. "This isn't a matter for the executive committee to decide alone. You can't expose everyone to this possible danger without their even knowing about it. This is a matter of convening the assembly. If we vote on such matters as whether or not to stop for lunch, we certainly should vote on something as important as this."

Dean Armanruder looked at him. "Your opinion is not needed, Hardin. As town police officer you have a voice but not a vote in this executive committee.

"Bat's right," Sam Prager said. "It isn't up to us to decide. We'll have to call the assembly."

Doc Barnes nodded. "Obviously. I'm afraid it's going to mean a splitting up of the town. But we can't take innocent people into possible gunfire or other danger without giving them the opportunity of debating and voting on it."

While Nadine Paskov and Dean Armanruder were going through the routine of summoning the assembly of all residents of New Woodstock over the age of eighteen, Bat Hardin went over to Sam Prager's home cum repair shop and knocked at the door. Edith Prager opened it. She was an intense woman who impressed Bat Hardin as having a culture complex beyond that usually associated with even inhabitants of an art colony. He liked Sam Prager but invariably felt uncomfortable in the presence of his wife. She wrote poetry, Doc Barnes had said.

"Hello, Mr. Hardin," she said, standing in the door without inviting him in.

"Good morning," he said. "Is Sam back from the meeting yet?"

"No, he isn't. What's this about an assembly?"

"That's right. It's being organized right now. When Sam comes, will you let him know that the screen on my car phone is broken? I think it's just the screen."

She said, sharply, "It'll take a whole unit, possibly. Who's to pay?"

Bat said, "It's my own car, Mrs. Prager, but it was damaged while on duty for the town. I assume the cost of parts will come out of town finances, but I'll take the bill immediately and charge it to the town later on. Tell Sam I'd appreciate having him put a high priority on this. A police car simply can't operate without a TV phone."

"I'll tell him," she said and closed the door.

She seemed a bit abrupt. Bat remembered Jeff Smith and wondered if there were others in New Woodstock who, inwardly at least, objected to him because of his racial heritage.

It had been quite a time since he had even thought about the subject. Particularly in a town such as New Woodstock, you didn't expect to run into characters who bothered with such nonsense as race, color or religious beliefs. He wondered vaguely if there were any Jews in New Woodstock; he had never thought of that before, either. Was Prager a Jewish name, or Zogbaum?

The hell with it. He was impatient of the subject in this day and age.

He re-entered his mobile house and took up a folding chair and, carrying it, went back to the center of the site.

Others were already setting up their own chairs in a large horseshoe-like semi-circle.

It came to him that this was a present day equivalent of the old Town Meeting of New England or, possibly, something like the governing of the Swiss Confederation of cantons. Working democracy in which every adult had his say because the governing unit was small enough so that power and responsibility didn't have to be delegated.

When all except a few straggling latecomers had found places, Dean Armanruder opened the meeting.

He came immediately to the point. "Mr. Hardin has requested a convening of the assembly on the grounds that the community has been threatened with physical danger and must decide whether or not to continue this move to South America. Mr. Hardin."

When Bat had finished, stunned silence met his words for the nonce.

Dean Armanruder cleared his throat. "The question before us is whether to proceed, or whether to return to the United States."

For a long moment, no one requested permission to speak.

Finally: "The chair recognizes Mr. Jeff Smith."

Smith stood next to his folding seat and looked about him deliberately. "I think the first thing to consider is whether this whole story isn't a complete lie?"

TO BE CONCLUDED

On the Dead Star

by JACK L. ALSTON

You might say existence was a trial on the merry sphere.

Jason leaned both hands on the thin euramite handrail. He could feel the intense straining of the gravity shell vibrate up his arms and into his head. It was a familiar feeling and it was a familiar position, standing in front of the large, thick, crystal viewing window, with the hazy lime-green glowing of the gravity shell tinting the view. He liked being captain of a Heavy Probe, and he liked standing there, staring out at the perfectly symmetrical surface of Black Dwarf 2146. There was no doubt about it; Jason liked his work.

"These damned dead stars give me a pain," he said, as he pounded the rail with the palms of his hands.

From across the small raft-like cabin there came a faintly mechanical reply. "Indicate the nature and location of your pain. I will prescribe treatment."

Jason turned slowly and faced the dozen or so blinking lights of the computer. His face looked pained. He started to scream, "It's in my . . . ." Then he stopped himself. "Computer, disregard statement."

"Disregarded."

For the last six months he'd put up with all of the smart-alec cracks

from the new computer, and he was finally beginning to get used to them. He turned away, shaking his head, and stared out at the symmetrically perfect carbon ash-heap that reached out into the dim distance. It always made him feel strange inside to think he was on the surface of a star — a dead star. It also made him feel strange when he thought about a millisecond failure of the gravity shell. The result would be to spread him as a film one atom thick over the entire surface of the star. But really there wasn't anything to worry about. The shells just didn't fail; and besides, that was all part of the thrill of the work. Then, as he looked out the viewing window, he saw another part of his job.

Stars. The black surface of the Dwarf set off their faint radiance and made them look as if he could reach up and grab a handful. God, he thought, there must be a billion of them within a dozen parsecs. And then, with a sigh, he turned to the matters at hand. "Computer, activate sensors and begin recording data." As an afterthought, he added, "Audio readout this time."

"Activating," the machine said, and then silently went to work.

Jason rather liked this new model computer, despite the fact that it sounded off at times with impudent cracks. He also rather liked not having to sweat over a control panel and figure out the trajectory and the landing procedures and all the other stuff that went with manual control. But probably best of all, he liked not having to put up with all the damned clattering racket the old one had made.

The computer was ready. "Data coming in. Surface temperature: 384 degrees Kelvin. Mass: 2.833 octillion tons. Diameter: 9133.4 kilometers. Radial velocity: one galactic year. Additional: galactic coordinates zero-zero degrees."

Well, no wonder all the stars! Right smack in the center of the galaxy. At first he felt like laughing out loud, but then he felt a curious sort of pride and just smiled. The feeling made it all worthwhile.

The computer interrupted his thoughts as it continued. "Extremely high percentage of zirconium. Otherwise, standard class C-3 . . .

an IF first

Each month *If* brings you a new writer, never before published. This month's is Jack L. Alston, a 20-year-old California student who plans to study screenwriting and directing at UCLA. He describes his hobbies as "you name it" — but his chief interest is writing science fiction. At fifteen, he was already writing 15,000 words a week regularly, and now he's working hard on TV scripts. All that effort paid off, as you'll see in his story this time — and many more to come, we're sure.

hold!" There was a brief silence filled with blinking lights, and followed by a now puzzled mechanical voice. "Sixty-eight degrees, four minutes west — forty-five degrees, three minutes south: protrusion on surface."

Jason muttered something about the fail-proof new computers and went over to the machine and pushed several red buttons. Lights flickered in the silence, then nothing. "What the hell?" he said aloud, "There's nothing wrong with it!" It had all checked out. He was suddenly worried. "Computer, recalibrate."

While the machine worked on in silence, Jason ran over to the viewing window, wondering if it was the Gelcons. Brother, that was just what he needed — a diplomatic incident on his record. Well, it wasn't his fault. How the hell was he supposed to know the Dwarf belonged to somebody else? You don't just hang a flag out on a Black Dwarf.

"Fact is affirmative," boomed the computer.

It just had to be something else. Hoping some freak in the laws of physics could save him, he turned and asked, "What's surface gravity?"

"11,349 gravities."

That was it. There wasn't anything natural which could stand all that force. It had to be the Gelcons. He wondered if he'd blundered onto a whole military outpost on some sort of anti-grav pads. "Can you specify size and type of protrusion?"

"Two objects. One: metallic — two point eight-nine kilometers vertical, three-four millimeters at base tapering to a point. Two: ceramic crystal structure — spherical — two hundred meter diameter."

Next came the big question. "Is there any . . . Stop. Can you detect any life forms in the area?"

Silence. Then the machine answered, "Negative. Suggest a close examination of area."

Jason was so relieved to learn there was nobody there that the Probe was already speeding across the Dwarf toward the strange pair of objects, before he realized he'd given the command. He suddenly wondered if he'd better not let somebody else handle this whole thing, and just get out of there. But then he began thinking about the needle-like spire pointing two miles straight into space, and about the big sphere. It puzzled him. Should he go? Here he had a chance to discover something, something possibly valuable. And after all, wasn't that why he was there? That was it, and he was going. Just then he felt a twinge in his stomach and he tried to figure out if it was from fear or excitement.

Minutes wore on, miles fled be-

hind the speeding Probe, and Jason grew nervous. "Computer, any additional information?"

"Negative," it said simply.

"How long till we reach the objective?"

"Five minutes, forty-three seconds."

That was going to be one long five minutes. He sat down and tapped an erratic beat near the sharp edge of the desk top with his fingers. The unidentified twinge in his stomach wrenched. He stood up and walked over to the handrail. Stars, ash-heap and galaxy were all tinted with the lime-green glowing of the gravity shell. Somewhere out there ahead was something that just couldn't exist; and yet it was there — withstanding eleven thousand plus gravities. He took a deep breath. The uneasy rasp from it seemed to reverberate through the silent cabin, and he half wished the computer would come up with some stupid wisecrack. Suddenly the computer voice resounded in his ears. "Object visable on horizon," it said, "Contact in three minutes."

Jason strained his eyes and frantically searched, but he couldn't see anything. The Probe began its slow braking process, as he searched back and forth across the horizon. Nothing, nothing but . . . Wait! Yes, there it was. Ever so faint, a tiny glint of metal. He watched as it grew in size and brightness. It was an incredible thing. With normal gravity, a two-mile spire was a difficult engineering feat, but here on a Black Dwarf it was just impossible. Then, the top of that ceramic sphere began to rise slowly above the horizon. It was white, and from the distance it looked smooth. "Computer," he asked, "what are they?"

"Unknown," was the answer.

"Well, how long to contact?"

"Contact in . . . " But the computer never finished. As Jason watched, it seemed as if a thousand electrical storms had been unleashed from the sphere. Hundreds of spider-tentacles of lightening energy ripped across the surface of the star, toward the Probe. They danced madly on the hull, and inside they sparked through everything, sucking out the energy. Then instantly they were gone, retreated back to the Sphere.

The cabin was dark and silent. Jason lay by the handrail on the floor in a heap, unconscious.

When he awoke, his throat felt like a shovel full of dried desert mud. It cracked as he breathed. His eyes were burning fiercely and beads of sweat poured from his body. The first blurry thing he saw was the viewing window. Its lime-green glowing was gone. The gravity shell was gone! He must be dead! Slowly he raised up on one side, blinked and rubbed his

eyes, unbelieving. As he stood up, he was hit by a blast of seething hot air. He gasped for breath. The cabin was hot, unbearably hot. His head swam. "Computer," he choked, "temperature control." There was no response. He swung around to find the computer's blinking lights were out. The computer was dead! Dazed, he staggered across the deck to the machine and stabbed blindly at several swaying red buttons. His arms ached. His head began to throb, and then the whole cabin spun around and went black.

Jason was shivering when he regained consciousness. The metal deck felt cold against his face. He suddenly tasted blood in his mouth and it scared him. A shock of adrenalin flushed through his body and he doubled up in a convulsion. His fingers were numb and his eyes ached from the cold. Everything was blurry. He sat up and touched his aching forehead. There was a deep gash there and it was bleeding. He could feel the warmth of the blood as it ran down his cheek. Then he remembered — the viewing window! He looked. It was black. As he looked around, he couldn't believe it. Everything was still there, and he was alive! Even the computer was operating again, and yet the gravity shell was gone! His teeth began to chatter as he asked, "Computer. Why aren't we dead?"

"There is a gravity neutralization field within a five kilometer radius of the sphere. Present gravity: sub-normal."

Jason felt helpless. His head was blurry, he couldn't think straight and he was freezing. "Computer, activate temperature control."

"Impossible."

"But why? What's going on?"

"We triggered a reaction field. Variety: unknown. It has extracted all the Nu-mesons from the reactor elements. No main power Auxiliary batteries only."

"Then tap some of the battery power!"

Almost immediately the cabin began to warm. Jason's teeth soon quit clacking together and he could think once again. Without the reactors, there was no high-pulse communications, and the nearest star-base was over 26 parsecs away. That also put the engines out of work, and along with them the gravity shell. It was all fantastic! There was something here on a Black Dwarf canceling the star's crushing gravity. He was caught up in something he couldn't understand and coldn't help. The deck passed awkwardly beneath his feet as he went toward the viewing window. Then suddenly, the Probe shot forward with a tremendous lurch. Jason was thrown to the deck. "Yee-ouch!" he yelled, as he crashed to the hard floor.

"Vehicle is in motion," affirmed

the computer from across the room.

He felt like cursing the machine, but thought better of it and rubbed his bruised knee instead.

After crawling the rest of the way over to the viewing window, he pulled himself up to the handrail. God, it was a weird feeling to see the viewing window without the green glow of the shell. Outside, roughly four miles away, he could see the sphere and the spire.

The computer announced, "Vehicle approaching sphere at eight meters per second."

Suddenly in the distance, there was a brilliant flash of white light. It came from the spire. Great cloud-like pulses of energy were sweeping up from the base to the tip and then diffusing out into space. It looked like some gigantic Jacob's Ladder.

There was more data. "Vehicle is increasing speed. Fourteen meters per second."

Well, if this kept up, he was certainly going to get a closer look. It suddenly hit him. He was being pulled right into that mass of seething energy! "Computer, are we heading for the spire?"

"Negative," came the reply.

That was a relief. At least he wasn't going to be fried alive. As he looked out, he could see that the ship was heading safely between the pair of objects. Now that he was safe, he grew curious again. "Computer, can you analyze the energy from the spire?"

"Spire pulses are masses of neutron-proton groups, whose meson-meson interaction has been violently upset, causing the emanation of approximately ten megawatts of giga-frequency electromagnetic energy, in an omnidirectional pattern."

What it all meant was more than he could see. Obviously a radio transmitter of some sort, but why here on a Black Dwarf? Then the computer had more information. "Vehicle trajectory is curved. Will impact with sphere in two minutes, five seconds. Velocity increasing. Seventeen meters per second."

It couldn't be! Jason spun around and glared out the viewing window. It was right! Already he could see they were turning, right toward the sphere. He was confused. He didn't know just what to make of the last few minutes. Everything had happened so fast. All the power had been sucked out of his engines — he couldn't alter his course, he couldn't send for help, and in another two minutes he'd be dead — smashed like a tomato against the sphere. He stared numbly out the window. The Probe was plunging faster and faster toward it. Death was crashing in on Jason with all its vulgar fury, and yet he was immersed in silence. It was too much; he couldn't stand it.

He whirled around. "Computer! Can't we do anything?"

"Negative," was the cool reply.

"How long?" he yelled.

"Forty seconds."

He was totally helpless. Closer and closer, larger and larger grew the sphere. Twenty seconds away. He gripped the handrail harder. The sphere now filled the viewing window completely. In another ten seconds he'd be smashed to a pulp. Silence, weird and out of place. His knuckles were white. He braced himself. With a tremendous crunch, the Probe met the sphere. Instantly the small cabin was filled with great streaks of lightning and Jason was thrown against the opposite wall. Uninjured, he shook his head and looked up. Half of the Probe was gone. The sphere was *absorbing* it, like a bit of food! Slowly the ceramic surface of the sphere was moving across the deck toward him. It was closing in on him. He pushed frantically against the deck with his feet to get away. No good! He was trapped against the wall. It was coming closer and closer, crackling as it came. He could see himself being crushed against the wall.

What was that? There was a strange feeling in his foot. He looked down. The foot was gone — it was in the sphere. He tried to move it. Impossible! He pushed against the sphere with his other foot, but it too was immediately absorbed into the sphere, as into wet cement. Both of his legs were in up to his thighs. He couldn't feel them at all! It was up to his waist, like so much sand pouring through a sieve.

His stomach and lower ribs were disappearing. He was frantic. He reached with his hands to push himself away. No good! They too stuck tight. Slowly it moved up his chest. All he could move was his head. He was being suffocated! He tried to scream, but he couldn't — he no longer had any lungs.

Jason didn't know how long he'd been unconscious, but he felt rested. He was inside the Probe, lying on the deck and there was a brilliant flow of light diffusing into the cabin through the viewing window. He slowly crawled over to it; shading his eyes from the glare, he peered out. The light seemed to be coming from everywhere. He couldn't see anything, except a fuzzy wall that flickered red and orange and looked like fire. Damn these Probes, he thought to himself; there was only one window. He leaned close to the crystal window and pressed his cheek against it to increase his viewing angle. No good, still nothing. He wondered where in hell he was. Well, there was only one way to find out. "Computer, give me the life support specs."

"Atmosphere: oxygen - nitrogen plus trace elements. Tempera-

ture: normal. Radiation: slightly above normal."

Jason now knew it was safe to go outside, but he was hesitant. He decided he'd better clean himself up before he went out. That way he'd have a little time to organize his thinking. He went over to the medical locker and got out a medi-pad. And then, from the storage cabinets, he got a large steri-towel and cleaned his face and hands and the wound. That felt better. He tore open the package and gently put the medi-pad on his forehead.

"Yee-ouch!" he yelled. "Five thousand years of medicine and the damned things still burn." Instantly he added in the same tone, "Shut-up, computer!"

There was nothing else to wait for. He took a deep breath and then released the lever. The thick hatch popped open without any hiss of pressure equalizing. Jason carefully went to the opening and stuck his head out. He was inside a huge hemisphere about 200 meters across. The curved walls of the thing changed colors randomly in patches, now a deep red, now a bright orange. He realized he was inside the sphere. The reason he couldn't see anything from inside the Probe was because the viewing window had been backed up next to the wall. But now he was facing right out into everything. The Probe was resting on a plane that split the sphere in half. Whatever was beneath it, he couldn't tell, and what was above it, he couldn't believe. Three short steps below him was an open space covered with a dark green growth of some sort that looked like grass. A little way off, there was a narrow, orange pathway that led through what appeared to be a forest, but not like any forest he'd ever seen before. There were literally hundreds of weirdly twisted geometric shapes and cylindrical forms scattered randomly about, as far as he could see. The objects were made of some clear crystalline substance, but their insides were shot through with tiny particles of color that flashed and then faded back to normal brilliance, like the glistening of a displaced rainbow. All these objects in the weird light made an utterly fascinating sight.

Jason stepped down and bent over to examine the grass. It felt cool like grass, but it was artificial. He knew it wasn't real because, as he walked over to the pathway, it crunched beneath his shoes like the breaking of glass. As he stepped out onto the pathway, he found it very smooth, but not at all slippery. He began to walk toward the forest of objects. About ten feet in front of him was one object nearly twice his height that looked something like a pretzel, but was twisted and misshapen. As he approached, the insides of the thing began to flow with washes of color that

blended with each other but didn't disturb the bursting particles of color. He was next to it now; he reached out and touched it. It was very smooth and a gentle warmth seemed to radiate from it. As Jason looked down toward the bottom of it, a voice — a smooth, masculine voice — flooded the hemisphere. "Do you like it?" the voice asked. "It's my favorite."

Jason turned around, but there was no one there — nothing. And then he recalled that the voice had seemed to come from everywhere. "Where are you?" asked Jason.

"Beneath your feet, inside of you, all around you. I'm everywhere."

Jason tried to focus on the walls, but couldn't. A quick scan of the forest of geometric objects revealed nothing. All was motionless, except for the smooth changing of colors in the walls. "Who are you?" he asked.

A short laugh rang out. "Don't be frightened now, but let's say I'm one of the Damned, returned from Hell to taunt and haunt." It laughed again. "Does that frighten you?"

A strange crawling thing seemed to march up and down Jason's back. "Yes," he choked. "Yes it does."

The tone became different now, concerned. "Oh, I'm sorry," it said, "That's no way to start a long friendship, is it?"

A long friendship? What did it mean by that? What was going on? "Why did you bring me here?" he asked.

"I did not bring you. You came of your own will, to stay with me."

Those words rang in his ears. "Stay with you?"

"Yes, of course. I am a curious soul, a human soul. I want companionship. It's really very simple. You will remain here with me."

That was all there was to it. "I'm your prisoner, then?"

"Well, not exactly," it said, not unkindly. "You may leave anytime you wish. Provided, of course, that you find a way of combating the gravity and the vacuum, once you leave. Not to mention getting out of this sealed sphere. But one never knows, does one?"

"No, I guess not." Jason couldn't believe it. Here he was, standing and talking with something he couldn't see, something totally unknown to him, that was holding him prisoner. It was all ridiculous. "Why are you doing this?" he asked. "Just what are you curious about?

"That's a good point to start on." The voice suddenly had a direction. "Look, why don't you follow the pathway over here? Then we'll talk about it. Yes, yes indeed, we'll talk."

The voice was gone. Jason could

feel its absence. He could also feel his own anger at ever leaving the floor of that bar on Beta-Tau-Four to join the service, mixing with anger at this thing, whatever it was, that was holding him here for some stupid reason. It had said there was no certainty about escapes. Well, that had sounded damned overconfident, as far as he could see. So this would be his point to start from. First, he needed information about this thing — what it looked like, why it was here, how much power it had? From there, he could plan on how to fight it and escape.

The twisted objects held a weird sort of fascination for Jason as he hurried down the pathway, surrounded by them. The insides of them would wash with color as he approached; and when he had passed, the colors would fade and just the exploding pin points of color would remain. Then, all around, was that vexing wall of the sphere. When he looked up into it, there was no depth. It was like trying to see the distance of the stars. It all had a sort of bizzare unreality to it. Just then he rounded a bend, and there before him in a clearing was the thing.

It sat head-high atop a pyramid of ebon cubes. It was a small sphere that glowed internally with a blue light. This was his captor.

"Hell-o!" it said, gaily. "I see you've come."

"You gave me a big choice," he replied angrily.

Its voice was suddenly loud with anger. "How would you like to be peeled and salted? Or I can roast you where you stand, if you like!" It paused and then went on, "Humph! Is it better to be well or medium rare . . . uh . . . Say, what is your name? I could seek it in your mind, but I find that peeping-tom practice very distasteful."

Jason was so scared he had difficulty answering. "I . . . I'm . . . Jason," he finally managed to blurt out.

"Jason," it said, savoring the name. "I like that. And it's a start! Yes, it surely is." The thing was no longer mad.

Jason couldn't fathom the change, but there was something else. What was it a start of? Carefully, he asked, "Now that I'm here, what are we going to do?"

"We talk, what else?"

"Talk? Talk about what?"

"About you, of course. I already know all about myself. I want to learn about you."

"About me? But why?"

"Oh, dear. I can see that this is going to be more difficult than I had thought."

Jason was sure this was the end. He closed his eyes and there was a sudden crackling noise behind him that made him wince. He turned slowly to find a bench, a table, a pitcher full of liquid and a glass.

"Tell you what," said the thing, "you sit down and refresh yourself, while I start the conversation. Is that all right with you?"

"Yeah, yeah that's all right," he said. He sat down quickly on the hard bench.

"Good! Well, let's see — where to begin? Ah, yes. I'm a beacon, or rather I used to be one. I was called the Voice." It seemed to think for a second, then continued. "Now, how I got here. The little blue sphere you see before you contains a soul, my soul. A bodyless soul, but one that volunteered for hazardous duty when in flesh." It began to laugh, heartily. "Oh, my! It's so good to tell someone about all this. You see, I didn't volunteer — I was volunteered." The thing continued its laughter.

Jason wanted to keep it talking and happy. "What kind of hazardous duty?"

It sobered. "Takes an explanation. My people were going to leave the galaxy to explore the universe. And so, to make a long story short, they needed a beacon to find their way back."

A couple of pieces fell into place. "The spire outside."

"Well, yes. There is the spire now, but that is really insufficient, since all its power will dwindle in 50 million years."

There was something that didn't fit. "Sorta strange place for a beacon — here on Black a Dwarf."

"Ah, but you see, a little over a billion years ago this was a raging G-4 star. It was then that I was really a beacon."

Now this might lead to something. "You say you made a beacon out of a star?"

"Yes, and that was the — or rather my — hazardous duty."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see our scientists discovered how to turn the photosphere of a star into a tremendous radio transmitter. But there was one catch."

"Yeah, what?"

"It had to be done from the inside."

Jason, who had been sipping cautiously at the cool drink, choked and began to cough. "From the *inside!* You mean the inside of the star?"

"Uh-huh. An inside job."

Jason choked again and forced a laugh. He then pressed on. "But the temperature is twenty-eight million degrees in the center of a G-4 star. Nothing but free subatomic particles."

"And hot as hell, too," it said, describing the living conditions.

"Yeah, but how?"

"Through hazardous duty. Flesh can't exist with all that radiation and the tremendous heat. Even with our most sophisticated protection and cooling systems it wasn't feasible."

"Why not? Do you know?"

"Well, the beacon had to last for billions of years, and flesh just doesn't. So my soul was transposed onto a bank of neural, superfluid poly-helium circuits. These would control our displacement device, which knocked all the Delta-mesons from the opposite field nuclei, which in turn set up... Well, you get the idea."

Jason was puzzled. "I think so," he said, "But why use a human soul? Why not let a computer do it?"

"You see, at the time we didn't have any practical knowledge about the internal evolution of stars. Oh, we had theories, but there was too much at stake to take the chance. With a human soul inside, research could be undertaken to adjust for any unforseen changes, if any took place. And the star could continue functioning as a beacon."

There was a pause. Jason searched madly for conversation. "So, uh, you've been here for billions of years, eh?"

"Six to be exact," it said, happily, "I transmitted for about five billion, and when the nuclear reactions fell below 15 million degrees, I lost my transmission and controlling power and drifted to the surface. During the billion or so years the star took to cool, I developed a way effectively to cut off the gravity. But my energy stores had all but dwindled to nothing when you came to help me."

That explained another difficulty Jason had met, and it made him angry. "You stole the Nu-mesons from my reactor, didn't you?" He caught himself and waited for punishment. None came.

Instead, the thing sounded hurt at the harsh accusation. "I didn't steal them, I just wanted to borrow them." It sounded as if it was crying.

Jason didn't know what to expect. He tried to sooth the creature. "Well, can you put them back? I mean, make my reactors function again?"

"Oh, yes. Yes of course, I can." It sounded happy again. "But I have no intention of sending you away like that, now that you've come to me."

Another lull in the conversation. Come on boy, keep it going or you'll end up fried alive! "Well, why don't you go on with your story?"

It was enthusiastic again. "All right. Oh, by the way, I'm sorry about the temperature extremes after I borrowed the mesons from your reactors. I didn't know what your normal temperature was, so I had to guess at it."

"Don't mention it. It was only two of the seven rings," he said, with a far-away smile.

The voice laughed loudly, and an invisible hand slapped him on the back and knocked him off the

bench. "Yes, I can see we'll get along very well together. You have a marvelous sense of humor."

Jason frowned, brushed himself off and got back on the bench. "What, uh, did you do all this time?"

"Billions of years with nothing to do. That was a problem at first, but slowly as my intelligence began to increase along with my knowledge, I began to research and invent and discover things — everything. You know, in six billion years you can unravel just about all the tangles of science and creation. As you might have guessed, my latest fancy is art. This garden, or forest or whatever you wish to call it, is merely an extension of my own mind. Sort of like painting or sculpture, but without any physical effort on my part. Just for fun, I think things into place. It's intensly interesting to me." It sighed. "But it's gotten so dull. What I mean is, there's nothing new. I've learned all there is to learn, I've done everything and I'm bored. The only thing left is people. That's why you're going to stay with me."

Jason sounded concerned. "But what do you want me to do?"

"I want to share your experiences, your memories — I want you to tell me of them." The thing sounded like a child with a new toy. "So as long as you're here, you might as well start."

Jason had no choice. All his life he'd never been much of a conversationalist, but now he was going to learn — and quickly.

Many hours must have gone by before Jason finally asked, "Are you interested in continuing this now?"

"Oh, yes, indeed I am," I said brightly. Then it added, "Ah, but you're tired, I can see that. You may return to your Probe and spend the night. Tomorrow we'll make plans for a permanent place for you to sleep."

Jason got up. His legs ached and his seat hurt from sitting on that damned hard bench. He limped the first steps down the pathway, and then turned to look back at the sphere as it said, "Good-night, Jason. Sweet dreams."

"Yeah, right. Happy nightmares to you, too," he choked back, hoarsely.

The thing laughed again. "You're just hilarious, Jason. I've made an excellent choice in you."

As he hobbled down the pathway, he didn't think too much about the choice the thing had made, and he didn't think it was one damned bit funny.

The hatch was still open when Jason reached the Probe. He slowly entered, crossed the deck and plopped down in his bunk. He tried to think, but he ached too much. All he could think about was spending the rest of his life en-

tertaining that stupid blue ball.

"Damnit!" he yelled, as he slammed his fist into the pillow. "Why me? Of all the jerks in the galaxy, why do I have to be the one!"

From across the cabin, lights blinked and the familiar computer voice said, "One jerk is just as good as another."

That was the last straw! "Shutup! You damned clanking piece of junk!" Brother! That was just what he needed. It was then, in his anger, that suddenly the solution came to him.

Hours later, the new makeshift control panel was set in front of the viewing window. Through it, he watched the darkness and distance at last swallow Dwarf 2146. Inside the cabin it was dark too, except for the new control panel.

As Jason stared from the viewing window, he wondered if he would start to miss that smartaleck computer.

Then he smiled. Nope, he wasn't going to miss it one bit. And he was sure that both it and the voice would be very happy back on the star, spending endless hours entertaining each other. And best of all, he was free again. There was no doubt about it. If he had to name one man in the service who really liked his work, the name was Jason.

END

AUTOHUMAN 14

by BRUCE McALLISTER

Everyone agreed that autohumans all were very well adjusted . . .

The dashboard lights were red, yellow and white teeth, bared suddenly in a smile when the radio crackled and headquarters announced: "Autohuman 14, S-80-811 Armed robbery seventh sector. Biturb, thought to be Fordam model *Light Year,* metallic green, license FJF-7981. Two male youths carrying hand-rasers, proceeding west on Freeline 28, dangerous."

Lt. Grabe Massel smiled back at the dashboard. As headquarters continued with a repeat of its information and implicit orders, he deactivated two rockets, decelerated rapidly, slipped his police vehicle down an off-ramp and crossed the underpassing street with his multipitch siren screaming and his analogous-colored warning lights syncopated. Stopping finally on the adjacent on-ramp, Massel's car hovered on puffing air-foils, hidden under the edge of Freeline 28, as he waited for the passing blur of the fleeing suspects in their metallic green Fordamerican Motors *Light Year.*

All freeways except the distant Urban Crux 1 were empty this time of night; the first car that passed was the right one, and instantly Massel activated the prime motor and its five rockets.

First the main engine went *tarun, tarun, tarun* as Massel gunned it. Then opal rear-rocket fires seared the pavement, and Masel was thrown back against the seat as his

auto lanced up the on-ramp, wobbled in the air as he overshot the norm hover-level, and finally fell back to a stable airfoil level on the freeway, about a mile behind the *Light Year* but gaining rapidly.

The *Light Year* was fast, with its twin turbines, but Massel's auto had too many finely developed speed and suspension extras for the race to be fair. In addition, Massel was one of the twenty best coordinated drivers in the force. And, of course, there were the high-range stunners that could fan the entire interior of a fleeing auto, if speed failed to give Massel enough advantage. Massel's car was a good one, one to be proud of, as he knew each time he heard its confident starting voice.

Still, Massel wondered why auto companies built civilian vehicles for that speed. Perhaps in some juvenile hope — or unconscious wish — that there would be freeway auto competitions with police or other members of the young public? Massel did not know. He didn't care at this moment; he was moving wonderfully fast now, the *Light Year* growing larger in his eyes.

Excited but confident, with nothing on his mind except an easy chase, Massel happened to look down at the floor. All the webs of colored wires there caught his eye, and for a second his mind allowed him to see the truth of his condition. Then his mind blurred, as his mental block worked for the millionth-odd time, translating Massel's reality into acceptable terms for him — terms of youth and of legs, in the poetry of another man who had lived an idyllic youth of legs. Massel saw himself, in a time and place he had never lived in, but with legs he had once known, and the vision had its parallels —

As always, Massel was running after someone, along a wonderful path, a path free of dust but still not at all rough to his bare feet. The feeling of Mercurial wings on his feet and head made the eternal chase pleasant. Massel was a fleet-footed boy.

To run, sang his mind. To run, to run, to run.

In front of him ran a slower, weaker boy, clad in an airy shirt and shorts just slightly different from Massel's own. The path twisted and curved, and Massel flew past the moist moss on tree trunks and the yellow lichens of granite boulders. His precious feet padded against the earth rhythmically, and the earth made thumping sounds in answer to his running. His heart and legs pumped in harmony. The nectar of his blood coursed affectionately through every vein.

The boy ahead of him jumped a creek stumbled on the bank, scrambled to his feet and ran on. Massel

cleared the water easily, soaring into the feathery grass high on the creek bank, reciting as he ran lines of ambrosial verse: "By brooks too broad for leaping, the light-foot boys are laid..."

Sailing over a gnarled root, Massel went on remembering: "The rose-lipped girls are sleeping, in fields where roses fade."

"Ah..." Massel thought as he ran, "When I was one and twenty, I heard a wise man say..." The breeze cuffed him gently, and he ran, the muscles in his legs flowing golden. He could hear the bells of distant towers, the nearer warbling of wild finches, and the brooks and streams competing with the birds in song. "But there is no rue within my heart now," Massel improvised. The other boy was now only a few strides ahead of him. To run, his mind whispered — to run, to run. Massel spoke to his legs; they complied and he reached out with a sinewy but boyish arm —

The "Light Year" decelerated to a halt and the two young passengers sat rigidly in their seats, stunned and thinking murky indecisive thoughts. Ten meters behind them, Massel deactivated the stunners mounted on the front of his auto, then leaned back to watch the two boys quietly.

The boys would remain pacific for an hour, Massel thought, and long before an hour has passed, the ped-cops would have arrived to take custody. All Massel had to do was wait, staying inside his vehicle. But it wasn't frustrating, really.

In fact, Massel no longer thought about the matter at all. His mind would not let him.

Long ago the frustration had waned — the past ulcerous frustration of having to wait for the arrival of fellow officers who were physically able to leave their vehicles and walk around. Now Massel had even forgotten that he'd once been prey to that humili — that frustra—those confused feelings...

Massel sat quietly in his auto, thinking of blue skies, pebbled streams and the wispy insects of flower fields — read about so often that their past existence was present reality — instead of the web of neural-wires that joined the nerves in the stumps of his amputated legs to the controls of his police vehicle.

Staring ahead, Massel dreamed of legs.

In the University-Suburb Riot 8 three years before — the same riot that had left his wife and son burnt alive by "serious" demonstrators brandishing flame-throwers — Massel's legs had been burned, too, into uselessness.

Subsequent to the accident, he had requested — as was most honorable for a dedicated federal police officer — to be fused with an

auto, made into one of the two dozen or so elite autohumans who served the law with their perfect coordination of human mind and steel body. Nerves joined to wires, to rocket controls, airfoil activators, lights and weapons; Massel could issue ten major commands to his vehicular body with the nerves that had once led to his legs. He liked to think of those commands as his ten lost toes.

The operation had been delicate, but successful — typically successful. "No mental or physical problems in recuperation or psychological adjustment." Typically successful, they'd all said.

Massel was contented now, even when his mental defenses dropped for the duration of a thought or two and he had to admit he was an autohuman. All autohumans, as reports emphasized, were very well adjusted to their condition. Sometimes the catheter leading to Massel's bladder was annoying, when it leaked or scraped him. And sometimes the cramps in his body, the result of too many hours on the freeways, left him few hours of sleep at night, as he dozed fitfully in the dim garages of various police stations. But all in all, Massel knew he was well-adjusted...

Or rather well-adjusted *enough*. His daydreams — his "defensive fantasies," as he rarely admitted — were *his* concern alone, as long as they didn't cause accidents or general incompetency. And his didn't. When he needed — as he often badly needed — to bathe and drink of the old poetry in his copy of *A Shropshire Lad,* that very old book of verse was right there in the glove compartment ready for his reach and reading.

The book had been a gift from a neighbor of the past, a University professor who had wanted the past badly, just as Massel — No, Massel never thought about all of that. He had once and for all told himself he would forget the professor's name and everything about those years — the years before the cities began to cover everything, before the universities were "adopted" by the federal government, before his legs were — He would forget because he had his poetry, much more real than reality, than those days before his legs — He should have been a Shropshire lad, from a century or two ago. He should have been, so he would forget...

As he continued to tell himself, daydreams were his own affair, as long as they caused no accidents, as long as he continued to function efficiently. Chances were that his defense-fantasies would have no negative effects on his performance. There had been only one autohuman who had failed in the history of the fed-police; because of distracting self-pity, that autohuman had let a psychopath

suspected of two murders evade him on the freeway, and as a result his autohuman status had been reduced to perma-monitor with a life of immobility, HQ radio communications work, and only spectator status in the police world . . .

Massel's thoughts in this vein trailed off when he looked up at the *Light Year* beyond his car hood and saw one of the two young men — dressed in a green plastic jacket struggle slowly from the car. The stunner's effect had worn off, Massel realized, and both youths were peanut-brained enough to try a run from the freeway. And the ped-cops? Even later than usual . . .

Massel started to activate the stunners again, but his synaptical command snapped off when a police vehicle with two ped-officers hissed and screamed to a stop behind him. One of the officers leaped from the car, waved what seemed to be a hand-stunner, and in a moment had run past Massel, stopped in front of him, and was taking aim at the farther of the two youths fleeing on foot down the shoulder of the freeway.

Instead of the bluish waver of a stunner's beam, the ped-officer's weapon issued a boiling line of energy.

Massel jerked in surprise. A hand-raser? Since when was HQ ordering rasers for a situation like this?

Then Massel remembered that headquarters had attached the adjective "dangerous" to the report on the two young men out there on the freeway. Because they were carrying hand-rasers themselves, that made them dangerous? Massel didn't think so, and the presence of a ped-officer with a flared-beam raser for a weapon seemed melodramatic.

The raser's beam struck the youth, and the aura of melodrams dissolved. The beam had struck the suspect in the legs.

Legs! Massel's mind froze, and his throat held back a scream. Legs! In his trance he saw the young man fall on the asphalt, clutching at his legs, which looked wet, smoking and gnarled all at once in the night's dimness.

In the continuing trance Massel stared at the ped-officer, an unfamiliar growl escaping his lips. Almost unconsciously, he activated his stunners and focused them — on the ped-officer, who threw up his arms, flung his weapon away in a spasm, stiffened and fell to the pavement.

Full focus was fatal nine out of ten times, Massel remembered faintly. Everything in his senses seemed faint now.

Massel stared at the wounded youth, at the crippled legs, then activated all power in his own body. The engine spoke to him, telling him to flee, reminding him about the autohuman who had erred and was now an immobile radio opera-

tor. But he was trapped, vulnerable within his own steel, unless he —

Unless he ran. Massel had won one chase, an easy race, and now he would be the one chased. But he was fast. His legs were strong. For another moment Massel allowed himself to lounge on the grass toying with a buttercup and listening to the sighs of circling bees. Words like *Light Year* and *Freeline* and *autohuman* drifted against the back of his mind, but dissolved when he thought of insects instead of buzzing words. To run, to run, his mind suggested. "By brooks too broad for leaping," his mind remembered sagely, reciting. Not far from him on the grass lay a young man, the man he had been chasing, and now this young man's legs were hurting — the same people who had hurt the young man's legs now wanted to hurt Massel's. The young man could no longer run on the grass, and unless Massel rose and began running, he too would not be allowed ever again to touch that velvet grass with his own two feet any time he wanted to run, to run, torun, tarun, tarun . . .

END

Spork Conquers Civilization

by PERRY A. CHAPDELAINE

Illustrated by REESE

When Spork of the Ayor discovered human civilization, he was in for a shock — but so was civilization!

I

As the oldest untwinned member of the Ayorian race, I naturally led the expedition into the Quations system.

Since the dawn of Enithra's creation, and the Ayorian type of evolution which followed, the figure-eight-shaped Ayor has been bound by two immutable laws of survival — twinning and grouping.

Each Ayor must create and accept a personal commitment toward solving philosophical, scientific or other types of problems to promote

his own maturity and descendents. Upon successful completion of the accepted problem, the Ayor twins in a very natural way, producing two children similar in their figure-eight structure to the former adult, but each with greatly improved capacity for problem solving in the direction of the accepted twinning problem. Twinning, therefore, provides a kind of radially-divergent evolutionary path for the Ayor.

Though my biology was human, I had been adopted as an infant by one of the Ayor and trained in Ayorian ways. After my beloved Eme had completed my neuronic growth enabling me to use Ayorian faculties of telekmass — mass sensing and teleporting — I fully expected to twin once. I had resolved my twinning problem which was: "Who am I and what is my purpose?"

Since the Ayorian species maintains its singleness of racial integrity by grouping, where each Ayor places the magnetic structure of his being, cup to hemisphere, against another in a very long chain, thus enabling each individual Ayor to exchange personal experiences and the race as a whole to arrive at group decisions, I had had great difficulty in convincing the Ayor that their proper racial thrust was outward, toward the stars.

Eventually, however, we overcame the Tepen, a degenerate evolutionary offshoot of the Ayor who had once preyed on us, and opened the door to more progressive grouping decisions.

When Toby Randolph, slave scientist from the Quations system, crashed on Enithra, we Ayorians quickly learned to build spaceships by means of both direct action — use of tools and their products — as well as indirect action — telekmass faculties.

But once we had left our own little planet to visit others of our system, we encountered the beast of planet two, a mindless entity that had used its irresistible telekmass faculties to strip planets one and two down to their radioactive ingredients and had constructed itself to be virtually three times the size of our own planet, Enithra.

Using both Tepen and human science, we were able to capture, but not kill, the beast, placing it under telekmass shield from the positions of the debris of planets one and two. Now we were free to return Toby Randolph to his own system; I was free to continue my personal twinning problem; and my Ayor brothers, ten thousand strong, were free to plant another culture like ours among the stars.

Unlike my Ayor brothers, I am tall, muscular, dark-skinned and have light receptors which are violet hued. My wide-set eyes and athletic build would probably have made many a ship captain from

human worlds envious, though, to the Ayor, I was still Spork the moron, because of my limited telekmass faculties.

Still I was the most experienced Ayorian for the purpose and was therefore chosen as the expedition's leader.

We entered the Quations system uneventfully and were approaching halfway to Toby Randolph's planet of Feren when the missile struck. Our very naiveté destroyed the ship; for, had we known of the extent to which humans prey upon one another, we could easily have prevented the disaster which followed.

Our concept of struggle did not include the idea of direct-action devices, though I had killed the evil Tepen by means of rocks, clubs and fists. Since we did not consider ourselves to be Tepen, to be openly attacked by members of Randolph's civilization without prior warning or provocation, we did not look for their immediate survival threat.

Apparently the explosive mass struck our ship and released large quantities of chemical energy which expanded rapidly, vaporizing part of the ship's hull and killing Toby. I was knocked unconscious; and in the resulting confusion, all the other Ayor teleported themselves to the nearest planet.

The explosion split the ship; one half carried the now dead Toby Randolph, and my half accelerated well beyond the sensing range of the Ayor.

When I regained consciousness, my legs and arms were shackled by heavy metal bands while my back lay against a hard metallic wall. All around my immediate vicinity I perceived heavily riveted metal sheets. "How odd!" was my first thought. "Is this civilization?"

Now free of Enithra's eternally searching plant and animal life, my own telekmass sensors extended their full eighty-mile limit. As in empty space away from Enithra's surface, the telekinetic silence was pronounced; nowhere could I feel the least of telekinetic fingers plucking for self-nourishment.

As my senses moved outward from me, I noted humans with metal pellet-accelerating tubes, then other humans in different poses — some eating with the mouth as did Toby Randolph, some sleeping; others were laying small cards on a table in unpredictable patterns; and many other humans were behaving in strange and unusual ways. All of them were dressed with clothing of similar design and pattern.

I reached through several layers of metal cubicles, each of similar construction to mine, before encountering the planet's surface. Here I could sense fresh air mixed with fuel exhaust from hundreds of ships — some posed for flight,

some landing, some just resting.

Other buildings scattered here and there surrounded the space field. Some contained machinery of a complex nature while others were filled with containers holding unstable chemical or radioactive mixtures.

Approaching me I could sense a huge human with coarse, heavy eyebrows and puckered nose. Like everything and everyone else, he was walking with his own muscles.

The human at my door opened it, and the newcomer stepped into my cubicle, exploding words at me. "Pig! Where are the rest of the rotting Ventery family?"

I didn't know what a pig was, but experience with Toby Randolph's emotional outbursts taught me that this human was angry.

Greatly curious now, I listened and watched with my ears and light receptors as well as my telekmass sensors.

Without warning, he struck me forcibly across the face. "Pig! Answer me!"

Now I had never been struck before. The closest experience to physical struggle was my personal vendetta and destruction of the Tepen. Ayorian children never have need for discipline or punishment, and no life on Enithra would have used direct-action physical force to accomplish an end.

I was so astonished I failed to react when he struck me again.

My mind reached out toward his arms and froze them in the act of reaching toward me again.

"Guard! Guard!" he shouted loudly with trembling in his voice.

On the appearance of the human from outside my doorway he called, "Kill this dog!"

Again, I didn't know what a dog was, but I could see and sense the long metal stick containing chemically driven pellets as it was raised toward me and I knew what "kill" meant.

I used my telekinetic faculties, preventing the bullets from exploding. The first man swiveled around and shouted even louder. "Kill the pig before I have you hung!"

Now the frightened guard swung his rifle around with intent to crash its butt against my face. I froze his two arms, then stepped out of my shackles to appear behind the two men. "I don't understand what civilization is really about, but I think it is time for you two humans to teach me," I said.

II

About seventy miles away I could sense a strange tree with a moss-like growth covering the ground around its base; here I teleported the two men, their arms and legs still frozen to their sides.

All around me was the green color, just as Toby Randolph had stated. The strange tree had green leaves and the covering underfoot was green. Unlike Enithra's lovely violet and ultraviolet, green foliage was predominant!

I let my mind flow through their chemical processes, finding that they too eternally sought nourishment of water, minerals and gases, just as did Enithra's plant life; but there the similarity ended.

Energy supplied by radiation from the sun beating directly on the wide leaves caused slow chemical reactions which resulted in sugars, proteins and other life structures. No wonder Toby had felt that all Enithra life moved too fast! "Why, at their present rate of growth, months might pass before they bear seed!" I thought.

Insects and bacterial growths, just as on Enithra, could be sensed all around and they, too, followed the slow-direct action processes. Were it not for my two rude hosts, I would have studied these strange forms endlessly.

Turning back to the first, I unfroze his speaking apparatus and asked, "Why did you strike me?"

"Pig!" he exclaimed. "You are of the house of Venetry. All are dogs subject to immediate interrogation and death by our ruler's order! Let us go and I will see that you die quickly instead of slowly as you most certainly should for this insolent action!"

Not yet understanding the motives behind this emotional out-

bursts, I squeezed a little of his body in sensitive spots until I had worked some rationality into him.

It seems that the ship which we had copied was designed by the Venetry family — the family to which Toby Randolph had belonged. Not only had we copied its silhouette, but also its crest of arms, in our passion for detail.

The new ruling dictator of this system had given standing orders to arrest, interrogate and destroy all Venetry family members. I gathered this was because of some fear on his part that the family might legitimately lay some claim to the planet's rule.

When we naively entered into this planetary system, one of their powerful spaceship had spotted our silhouette and crest, ordered us to change direction by means of electro-magnetic radiation signals and then struck us with their chemical torpedo when we failed to answer their challenge.

No words of mine were acceptable to this strangely emotional human. He didn't comment on the matter of my use of indirect faculties; but I'm sure from the way he looked all around from time to time that he was searching for others of my family who might be using direct action devices to cause the new control phenomenon from a distance.

From the second man I learned that soldiers were humans who must obey the orders or be killed themselves; otherwise he held no personal animosity against me.

"Why would otherwise rational beings wish to leave Enithra for the doubtful security of civilization, as did Toby Randolph?" I wondered.

Life, all life, was valuable to Ayorians. Some life killed other life but only for the sake of survival. In the cases of the Tepen and the beast of planet two, we were justified in our actions. But here, in my first contact with Toby's civilization, I had my ship torn apart, was knocked unconscious and was jailed and struck and cursed with the promise of torture and death to come.

Civilization was becoming a great twinning problem for me!

Teleporting the two men back to my jail cell, I extended my mass sensor to the maximum and began moving from point to point across the planet in search of my Ayorian brethren.

Time and again as I halted at teleportation points, I was able to sense billions of humans moving with the phenomenon of continuous motion. Not only was this true of their plants and animals, but also of the vehicles in the air, on the land and in and on the seas. Though anxious to find the other Ayorians — who could certainly handle anything encountered here better than I — I took time to

study the strange phenomenon.

There were monstrously huge cities roughly similar to Tepen villages, containing literally millions of humans! The depth and complexity of their machines in application of direct-action principles was beyond our wildest predictions. Tenth, twelfth or even a hundredth generation of tool development was required to fabricate some items which we Ayorians could build only by indirect-action means.

"How," I wondered time and again, "could life so limited, moving so slowly in basic accomplishment — accretion, growth and twinning — have evolved such tremendously complex equipment?"

My greatest shock came when I learned how humans reproduce. Ayorians twin. Much Enithra animal life transports seed to egg by means of teleportation. Here all animal life, including humans, transport seed by means of direct action!

No wonder Eme, when she first sensed my presence, wondered if I were an animal to be used by Tepens in capturing Ayors; for humans were certainly closer to Enithra animals than to the Ayor.

Still thinking of myself as an Ayor, however, I failed to apply the lessons of my emotional shocks to my own twinning problem.

I chose food from many locations which seemed to specialize in their accumulation and storage. Night came, then daylight again — somewhat faster than on Enithra. My muscles, too, responded quicker here than on Enithra, perhaps because of the planet's smaller mass.

Eventually I located what I thought to be a decent hiding place where I slept, turning and tossing with strange dreams involving the fantastic phenomenon of direct action. Terrible nightmares occurred of indescribable and equally unbelievable nature. I dreamed, for example, of the predatory Ettel *creeping* silently up to the voracious Cien and tearing it apart with jaws and paws! The nightmare quality was caused by the fact that the Ettel has neither jaws nor paws and certainly would not *creep* up to the stupid Cien — it would teleport the Cien directly into its stomach sack!

My choice of a safe hiding place for sleep was an empty building with doors tightly locked. As always my custom, I slept several inches above the floor or platform, which lay immediately before rows of seats; and once asleep, I slept soundly with those puzzling dreams tumbling through my mind.

I was awakened suddenly both by my awareness of other humans now surrounding me and by the sound of human giggling and laughter. I opened my light receptors to find the building well lighted and my floating form complete-

ly surrounded by laughing men and hysterically giggling ladies.

"This is the best performance ever!" one man cried.

"Oh, he doesn't have any clothes!" several ladies screamed.

I should have known about body coverings from Toby Randolph. Entertainment houses were a new concept to me, however. Needless to say, I teleported myself away quickly and, from the top of their entertainment building, I reached out in search of proper clothing. Greatly surprised, I found specialized buildings devoted to their storage and display. By careful scrutiny I soon learned which pieces to wear and on what parts of my body and in which order.

III

Enithra was about six thousand miles in diameter; this planet was somewhat lighter, hence probably somewhat smaller — perhaps only five thousand miles in diameter. At jumps of nearly eighty miles each — closer to seventy-five when I figured in my altitude — it would take me roughly 2.5×10^7 divided by 6.4×10^3 jumps just to cover the planet's surface area. It would take around 3,000 jumps to make a systematic search for the Ayor.

But what if they were five miles under the crust in some hidden cave?

Of course, if only one Ayor were within a half million miles of me, I should already have been found by them.

But then, what if unknown Tepen-like telekinetic fields were being used in their capture? Though highly unlikely from what I had already learned of this planet and its occupants, I did not dare chance the risk.

I compromised by searching the surface area thoroughly — though I must confess part of my reasoning was based upon pure curiosity about the humans and their environment.

Figuring on perhaps 100 jumps per day, it would take me 30 days; and as I finished these mental estimates, I began jumping from point to point, stopping long enough at each point to search thoroughly throughout my sphere of sensitivity.

Within a matter of several jumps, I detected tiny masses containing chemical explosives streaking toward me. Noting their crude similarity to the one which had struck our ship, I removed their explosive materials and fuel, letting them scatter in tiny pieces over the ground.

As my jumps continued, the company of missiles increased in number. Something or someone was learning to predict my probable path of appearance!

I changed my tactics then by

teleporting from point to point along the ground surface of Feren, as the planet was named.

Thirty days of thoroughly searching the planet's surface left me with knowledge more complete than I had held of my beloved Enithra.

Feren had several large bodies of water; and near each pole, snow covered the surface to great depths. Much land was cultivated and, from overhead, appeared multi-colored, checkered and sometimes puckered.

Great sweeps of the planet's continents were devoted to the activities of soldiers and their implements. They were to be found in the cities, in the country, on and in the sea, in specially built thick-metalled ships, in the farm areas and in specially built reservations consisting often of rocket ports and other facilities.

Missiles ringed the planet in such a manner that they could easily cover every square foot of surface area in a very few minutes.

One military base was unusual because of its strength when compared to the others. Surrounded by thousands of missiles and other unknown protective machinery, its cavern-like building was rooted to the planet's bed-rock by means of flotation apparatus capable of holding the peculiarly dense metal surrounding it all.

I didn't find the Ayor. They might have died from the chemical explosive; or with their reaction time, most likely they had teleported themselves from the damaged ship to the other planet.

There was only one way to discover the truth. Since I couldn't very well manufacture my own ship, I chose a large, swift looking craft which appeared to be well cared for and of about the same size as ours had been.

Though differences in some instruments caused a little delay, I soon determined their function. I moved the ship's guards away from the blast area and accelerated upward rapidly. My mind flickered from missile to missile, telekmassing at least three hundred before their attempts ended.

Time had changed the relative positions of the planets with respect to the position of our ship's destruction; but like any Ayorian, I knew exactly where their spatial referents were and where each must now be, relative to one another. In my mind's imagination I could sense the seventh planet in one direction, while fragments of my old ship sped in the opposite direction.

Soon faster and more sophisticated missiles tore through space to find me. These were also deactivated as soon as they reached within my eighty-mile telekmass limits.

Though I could easily deacti-

vate even those designed for one hundred per cent mass conversion, sooner or later one would be fused to explode near or beyond my eighty-mile limits. If so, not even my Ayorian faculties would save me from the energy release of the explosion.

I now directed my ship toward the incoming missiles and within ten thousand miles I discovered an orbiting military satellite. It was gigantic, filled with soldiers and weapons of offense, and could easily have stopped me had the humans known my nature and my limitations.

I flung their missile ingredients toward the sun and only then felt free to return to my quest for the Ayor.

As the ship approached the planet most likely to hold my Ayorian brethren, I came within the half-million-mile sensing range. One of the Ayor immediately teleported to my ship, where we greeted one another with great affection and happiness.

He guided me to a large cavern hollowed out of barren rock below the planet's raw atmosphere. Fortunately, by their capability of reaching below the molecular level, the Ayor were able to create new molecular forms to provide themselves with food, water and oxygen.

My ship was easily transported into their cavern where all the Ayorians grouped to show their welcome and their joy over Spork the moron's return.

I naturally felt a strong sense of belonging as I perceived the display hovering above me. Cup to hemisphere, they tied themselves one to another and spoke in unison as was their custom. "Welcome back, Spork!" Their great booming voice bounced from wall to wall within the cavern.

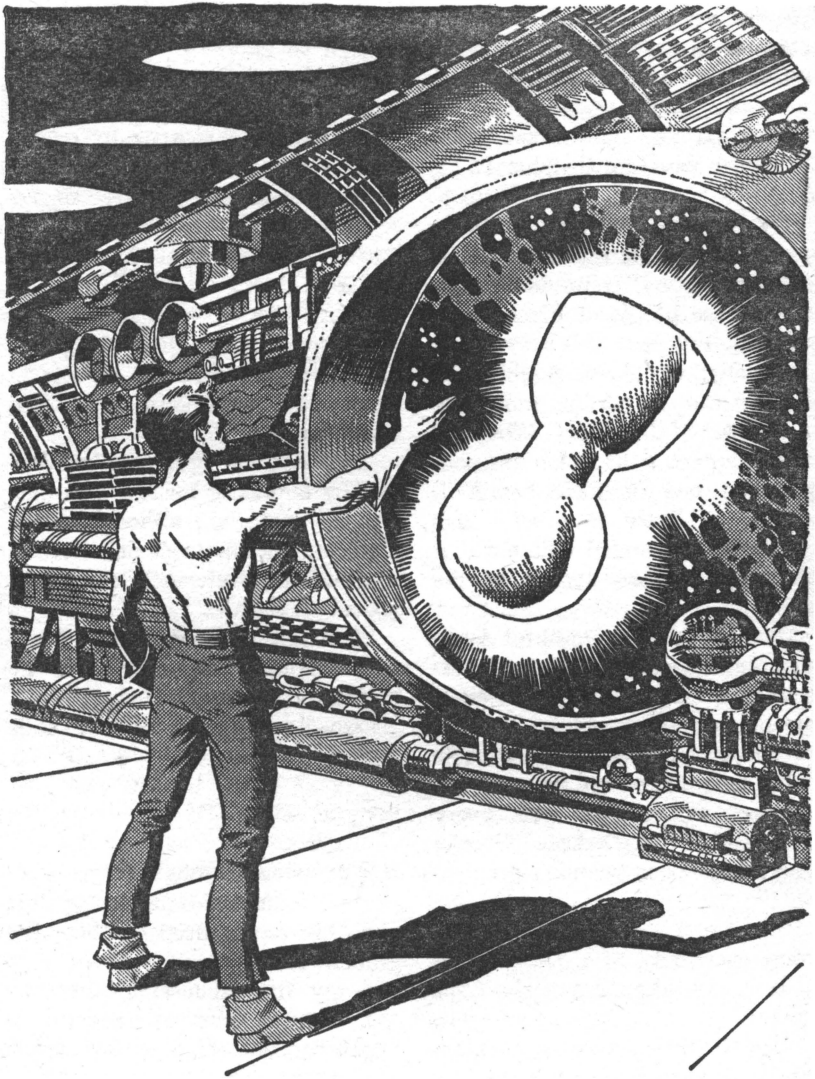
My light receptors watered strangely at this magnificent display of brotherhood and warmth.

The planet was cold, lifeless and inhospitable; its surface was crystalled over with frozen radicals involving complex and simple hydrogens, methanes, ammonia and water.

I could well appreciate the stupendous task which these Ayor had undertaken.

Blown compulsively from our ship by explosive, they had teleported to this planet, carved out a habitable cavern and stocked it with life nutrients within a matter of hours. Then, dividing up their talents, some had begun to restructure the total atmosphere of the planet, changing it from a reducing to an oxidizing atmosphere. Others had been busy reconstructing a new spaceship from unrefined materials easily found throughout the planet.

To my knowledge, no race before had attempted the use of indirect



faculties on such a grand scale. Twinning was frequent — made inevitable by the difficult twinning problems in need of solution when transforming a whole planet.

Time passed while some gains were made on the planet's atmosphere.

My personal twinning problem, again, became the dominant theme within my mind. It would be easy to force the people of Feren under our will, but was this way best? Eventually we Ayor would need allies in our search for individual and racial fulfillment. Would a race under our domination and control, like one of their beasts-of-burden, be likely to provide this need? No! It seemed unlikely that raw force was an answer to the problem.

Meanwhile, other youthful Ayorians, uninterested in planet transformation, clamored for a different sort of twinning problem.

A time of proper grouping came where each shared his personal experiences and desires with every other and I was asked, "Spork! Where does your twinning problem lead?"

"To Feren," I shouted to the group overhead.

"Will you take more of the Ayor along?"

"Yes, if their twinning problem also lies in that direction."

"Very well," they thundered together. "Fifty thousand will accompany you in further contacts elsewhere and the other half have elected to stay."

"We have concluded," they continued, "that survival considerations require the Ayor to remain hidden as yet. We are too small in number to risk further dangers at this time."

"How will we meet the Ferenian humans, then?" I asked.

"Your body is biologically human and you know their language. Learn to pass yourself as one of them. Mix with them and learn what you can."

The Ayorian grouping wisdom usually impressed me and this time was no exception, although, for a moment, my body felt deep resentment at their reference to my biological similarities.

"I accept the suggestion," I answered boldly, "and may all of my brethren have good twinning!"

"Good twinning to Spork!" they replied together.

IV

We swept through the ineffective human detection system and burrowed deep within the ground of Feren, hiding the ship and my fifty thousand brothers.

I chose a city at random, to appear on one of its empty streets and begin deliberate attempts to mingle with the population, hoping

to gain knowledge of their culture and the motives behind their strange and complex behavior patterns.

The day was bright and cool in my chosen location. And all that first day, I briskly walked up and down various concrete paths formed within their cities.

No one could believe how many details could be telekmass-sensed in an eighty-mile sphere within a city unless, like us, he had telekmass senses. Only the microscopic detail of natural biology could exceed it for complexity!

Humans walked into specially prepared buildings to eat. When in need of nourishment, I followed one group and entered where food was automatically served on plastic trays. Carefully watching the man ahead with my light receptors in order to imitate his every move, I picked up a tray.

The man selectively dialed food combinations, and I did the same. Just as I was congratulating myself on my successful mimicry, he reached into his pocket and brought out metal coins and pieces of fibrous paper; he handed these to a machine which accepted them and returned similar objects.

I had no small metal objects of fibrous paper!

The machine blinked and said, "That will be 1.56 Odell, please!"

Thinking rapidly, I reached into the human's pocket behind me and placed some of his fibrous paper in my right-hand pocket. Toby had told me of their monetary system but I was quite ignorant of its implications.

Did I or did I not have 1.56 Odell in my pockets now?

I withdrew the recently acquired paper, handing all of it to the machine.

"Oh my goodness," it said. "I said *one* point five six Odell, not one hundred and fifty six."

It took only one paper-piece; then, as I turned to lift my tray manually as I had seen others do, it called me back to take my change.

The rest of my meal was without incident.

Since the metal pieces and the fibrous paper seemed to represent important symbols of exchange to these people, I felt I should learn where they came from and what they meant.

The next day I studied every place where money moved or was kept, becoming quite perplexed. Most everyone had it. Some humans seemed to work for it while others seemed to store huge quantities of it in protected places; still others handed it out to some for their immediate use, though they appeared to not work for it; one place actually manufactured it, then stored it in other places.

I had worked with the Ayor in

the most complicated areas. We had overcome the evil Tepen and the beast of planet two, learned of modern mathematics and science and built spaceships and many other things; yet this culture, supposedly similar to the one of my biological origin, was most confusing and complex.

Before I learned about schools, I was in trouble again!

To move from one city to another, the humans boarded public vehicles which might be any of several kinds of transportation. At each terminal, guards demanded to see a little card from each person before he could board the vehicle.

Assuming the card was part of their confusing monetary system, I teleported one from the purse of a female human behind me. I naively handed the card to the guard, not noticing the picture on its surface and its writing which stated her sex, size, weight and so on.

The guard took the card, looked at the picture and then asked the lady behind me for her card. Of course the lady didn't have one, so I teleported one to her purse from the man behind her. She handed this card to the guard.

The guard glanced at this card, then asked for one from the next man. The activity continued for six more cards while the guard held on to my original stolen card.

"All right," he said, "how many of you are together?"

Not one of them answered.

Politely handing the proper cards back to the right individuals, he grabbed my arm and placed me under arrest. I went along with him since I was most curious about this custom.

I was jailed again!

It seemed that each citizen had need for identification papers which vouched for the fact that he was who he was and showed where he was permitted to do business which was fully approved by the state.

The jail regime was boringly different from my experience with the military, and teleporting outward was delayed only long enough for me to learn this fact.

Schools were next!

I enthusiastically enrolled in one which specialized in adult education. How disappointed I became when I learned that their rate of learning was slow — as slow as their green colored plant growths. At their rate, I would need to attend for dozens of years simply to learn two or three subjects well; I could not afford the time.

But I did meet books of every description — psychology, sociology, political science, military science, economics, literature, art, music, history and various strange languages.

I had full recall of a six-month-old child's memory of my father speaking to my mother while

our ship spun toward Enithra. "Though we headed the house of the galactic council, Patricia, the sabotage was inevitable. We may be genetically superior, but to the common people we are still only human. Place the baby in the life container now." Eme, also, had passed down to me the words, "HEART OF THE HOUSE OF THE GALACTIC COUNCIL," inscribed on our ship. None of the language books held knowledge corresponding to the written or spoken language of my origin.

Economics made much of their monetary system understandable, but I still failed to understand how money came into being. What started the process? Energy, commodities, goods and services could be added to a community; but how could money be arbitrarily created and then arbitrarily placed into isomorphic correspondence with these things? Was the law of conservation of matter-energy somehow repealed?

I learned the descriptive language of sociology and psychology, understanding the behavior described therein; but the phenomenon itself remained unreal.

The history books, however, were at first my greatest puzzlement. Each book seemed to be written by the same person. I failed, always to reconcile the meaning of the words to actuality. This planet was a military police state but the history books referred to it as the "beneficial democracy surrounding us everywhere."

The paradox, as paradoxes usually do, eventually pointed the way toward an understanding of the culture of this planet.

Thinking to move faster in my learning efforts, I directly approached a human teacher and asked for an explanation of Feren's political paradox. He called the security police and again I was jailed as some kind of enemy of the state!

Though teleporting out of jailhouses seemed to be my chief new occupation, I *was* beginning to learn!

The next three instructors approached by me refused to discuss the subject. But I persisted in my search until, one day, a very elderly human raised his fingers to his lips in their symbol for verbal caution; then, writing an address and a time on a slip of paper, he handed it to me as he quickly left the room.

His house was built low, hunkered down between taller buildings on either side. Colored ceramic fibers impregnated in a matrix of concrete provided its decor; it was old compared to buildings on either side and it held space in reserve for his private use, as did all human structures.

I activated the door announcer, wondering if I were to be jailed

again. He answered, standing tall with his long white hair curling delicately upward at the tips. Behind him, I could see and sense four other people in the house.

He smiled in cheerful recognition, his bushy-haired eyebrows raised slightly at the corners during the process. I was invited in and given a soft chair and a cool drink; he introduced me to two human females and two human males. "These are my students," he said. "These are the only ones who have had the courage to question."

"I realize that questioning the state can lead to jail," I commented, "but how do you know that I do not represent the police?"

"Oh!" he laughed, "I have had much dealing with police states in my life. You were entirely too awkward to represent them. You could not have passed their training programs and remained as innocent as you appear!"

V

Trod Gerard taught me and I learned that the Quations planetary system had once been a newly settled, outlying territory of a distant confederation known as the Galactic Council. As the galactic civilization spread, communication and control problems developed for governing bodies. I could understand communication and control problems, since we Ayorians had made our decision to develop independent colonies because of our forecast of similar difficulties. Indeed, our problems were just beginning in that respect.

When humans were first faced with the communication and control problem, their science was vigorously applied to breed a special class of human who was just a little more intelligent, a little faster in reflex, a little superior in most human respects. These genetically bred humans were trained to be controlling leaders of far-reaching, sprawling, complex galactic confederations.

But even improved biology did not save the union; the solution was applied too late, the genetically bred controllers were not quite capable of the feat, and the confederation was fragmented by selfish, authoritative humans whose only goal was self-aggrandizement and plunder.

The great galactic unions fell apart, with each part fought over and split into smaller and smaller pieces until, like this planet Feren, each piece was ruled by power-hungry dictators.

Feren's dictator — D'Cela — who was certainly as bad as the predecessor who had ruled Toby Randolph's slave-state, now controlled the police and soldiers who enforced his will on unwilling humans.

The many pleasant days studying under this brave old man also taught me that the paranoic aggressive treatment which we Ayorians had experienced to date was an act of one group and not typical behavior for the whole human race as, for example, the Tepen was not representative of the Ayor.

Trod Gerard had once been on the ruling board of Feren; now he was hiding his real activities, though his extreme age gave him immunity of a sort. Probably D'Cela's followers would only kill him outright rather than torture him, in deference to his age.

With my Ayorian faculties searching for detail, I roamed the planet at will, checking on his every lesson.

D'Cela's fortress and permanent living quarters were the gigantic military installation which my telekmass sensors had identified to be unique among all of Feren's military bases during my first planetary survey. "If I am to determine the final truth of what I have learned, I must visit D'Cela," I concluded.

The nature of his protections was complex, subtle and fantastic to an extreme, indicating that D'Cela was a badly frightened human. I teleported into the nearest empty room — past the heavy metal shell of the fortress and the radioactive fires raging between layers of this shell, through double-thick layers of diamond-hard carbon embedded in matrices of iridium, platinum and nickel and through layers of other exotic materials, into an empty room.

The room's doors slammed shut, alarms rang and gas screamed into the space. Had I been just a trifle slower of reflex, death would have found me then. I teleported the gas away as fast as it spewed inward. My mind raced, thinking over the fanaticism of this man who prepared even empty rooms within his citadel as death traps for the unwary. What if the next room had a death ray instead of gas?

The only safe place was beside D'Cela himself, I concluded.

I quickly teleported to his side. Upon observing me, he dropped his food, reached for the row of buttons on his desk and then froze like a human wooden mannikin as I telekmassed both his arms and legs.

He was fat, corpulent and sloppy — greasy food still dribbled down his stubbled chin. His hair, uncombed, was brown and short. He dressed in some sort of toga-like robe within which I could sense several kinds of weapons which he must have thought to be hidden.

Along the sides of his desk were rows of buttons and behind his back were various communication

racks. The emblem of his state, a flag containing his clean-shaven likeness in purple and gold, was the only object higher than himself.

Otherwise the room appeared barren, probably deliberately made uncomfortable for others. I sensed the supposedly secret escape-way beneath his desk leading downward below the level of the planet's bedrock. And along the walls and ceilings were mechanical killing machines of various types which, I was sure, must be connected to some of the buttons at his desk.

I released his speaking apparatus. "We will talk together. I am Spork of the Ayor. You are D'Cela. Why do you wish to control the planet Feren and its humans?"

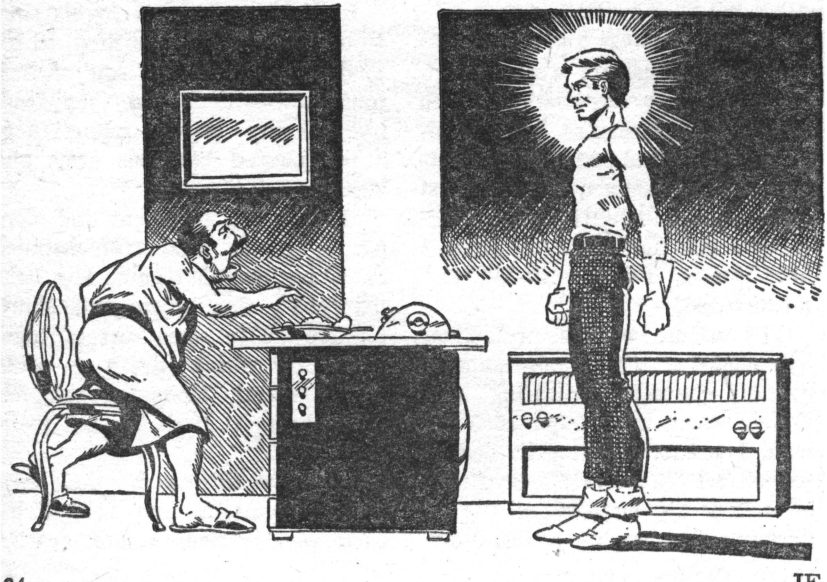
"Insolent pig!" was his only comment.

By now I knew that a pig was a kind of animal found with humans everywhere which was relished for food but abhorred for its supposedly filthy eating habits. Still I wondered why so many members of his tribe greeted strangers with the word.

I tightened the muscles about his heart and watched him struggle as he tried to grasp his aching chest with arms frozen tightly to his side.

"Now you will answer?" I asked.

"What are you? Some kind of devil? I must be dreaming this.



Too much liquor. Yes, yes, too much liquor."

He took decent recognition of me when I squeezed his heart again. Almost with pity, I listened to his odd tale. As a child he had had a difficult time, always scrabbling and fighting for crusts of bread. Fighting and winning, he pushed his way upward in search of security until he controlled all those who could possibly hurt him. Emphatically he intended to maintain his position, too.

"To gain personal security," I said, "you would sacrifice the security of this planet's billions?"

"They want to be controlled. People come in two types. Either they are stronger than you or weaker. If weaker, they need the leadership of the stronger. Without this arrangement, great inefficiencies develop and there is waste in resources and energies." He felt strongly about his position as his planet's savior, while his voice worked ever-upward in emotional dialectics.

How odd were his rationalizations! Especially so when I contrasted the simple social structure of the Ayor with his. What would D'Cela have thought to know that children as well as adult Ayorians might spend years in random play or experiment solely for personal fulfillment. What kind of waste would he call that? How would he attempt to control it?

I could feel his arm and leg muscles struggle again to reach his protective devices when I said, "I understand the Feren people were once free to select their own leaders."

"Bah! Rigged elections. Crooked politics."

"Still, there was more personal fulfillment and happiness then, was there not?"

"The state is the only creation which has a right to fulfillment."

Soon I was convinced that D'Cela, though human, was of the evil Tepen personality. Were he a Tepen biologically, I would have crushed him then. But as an Ayorian, what right did I have to determine the fate of a whole planet? Yet, there was a way common to both Ayorian and human by which truth could be known. Determined to put that means into effect, I teleported to the cavern of the Ayor at the same time I released D'Cela from his telekinetic chains.

I tossed with sleeplessness as I reviewed the merits and demerits of my plan. In the morning I approached Trod Gerard for his mature human advice. He laughed hugely, as though I were yet an infant — one with futile, naive imaginings and fantasies and who must be humored out of his delusion.

I had forgotten that to him I was still an ordinary Ferenian citi-

zen in search of political and historical truth rather than an Ayorian from another planetary system.

Through special lenses I let him view the Ayor, fifty thousand strong, in our hidden cavern below ground. Once he appreciated the subtlety and power of our telekmass faculties he was wildly, enthusiastically cooperative over my scheme.

With their long-range sensors, the other Ayor studied the planet's defenses in detail. Fifty thousand Ayorians fanned their telekmass sensors outward in search of explosives, both nuclear and chemical, as well as bullets, death rays, bombs, projectiles and other potential means for killing or controlling humans. Their senses swept through the planet with accustomed agility as the assignment itself reflected sober uses for their early childhood days of hide-and-seek on Enithra.

All control objects were tossed toward the sun from a half million miles outward.

Armed now with only muscle and club, D'Cela's police state ended suddenly. Incapable of stemming the people's vengeful tide, the dictator and his crew barely escaped from the planet Feren and only by chance.

I was confident this would be the people's choice; yet, as I had taught the Ayor, conjectures must be adequately tested when using direct-action faculties and this problem seemed analogous.

Representative democracy returned to Feren; Trod Gerard was well known, popular with most of the population and a personal friend of most of the elected officials. He insured that Spork and the still hidden Ayor were given all credit though an aura of impenetrable mystery surrounded the means. Nothing we could ask was denied us though our wants were few in number.

When I was made Honorary Planetary President I felt a strange sense of emotional tie with these strange humans. "Am I becoming human, too?" I wondered.

But an invitation to stay on Feren brought me direct confrontation with my true instincts and we Ayorians returned quickly to planet seven where we were received by the now better than sixty-thousand who were diligently transforming their new planet to suit our tastes.

VI

Already we could roam its surface and breathe oxygen. The planet had warmed while dangerous gases and chemicals had been transformed to something more useful or stored in mammoth underground caverns scooped out by telekmass faculties.

To be truly Enithra-like, it lacked only the ecology of Enithra —

and the beautiful violets and ultra-violets of our extensive jungle-covered valleys. We covered the planet with human bioforms, including the clashing greens and browns; for it would have been immoral of us to introduce a potentially dangerous planet in the human's back-yard.

"Perhaps we could adjust to the greens!" we all sighed.

We have since learned that understanding human motives requires more than simple naiveté. We fully expected the people of Feren to regain their political voice, and they did.

But D'Cela, who had not crossed my mind since my forcible entry into his headquarters, was far more clever and subtle than I had imagined. He was corpulent, selfish, evil, frightened and decidedly clever; and I, Spork, completely overlooked the paths he could take, given his single-minded motivation.

Arl, twin of Dingon, had twinned in turn long ago. I stayed with Arl's twins on New Enithra — our new name for planet seven of the Quations galaxy — to watch the process of transformation which changed it from a harsh, frozen environment to one of warmth and comfort. Most humans would yet find the air too thin and cold but with our ability to sort and surround ourselves with denser, energy-packed air molecules we enjoyed the planet's surface at an early period.

A certain sign that Ayorian evolutionary progress continued was shown by the increasing rate of twinning, signifying individual fulfillment by specific Ayorian individuals. And each twinned child became more skilled at addressing the peculiar problems of planet tranformation.

We were now 120,000 in number; I was twenty Enithra years old, nearly twenty-one. Though I almost always stayed on New Enithra, I did travel from time to time to Feren to sit through ceremonial dinners where dull speeches filled the smokey eating halls.

And whenever I attended one of these special human events in my capacity as Honorary Planetary President, the luncheons always brought to mind the Imply mammal on my home planet of Enithra. Many of our insects and smaller mammals can predict the path of teleported seed or smaller insect and can therefore arrange to be within its own striking distance at the time of the seed's or insect's arrival. But the Imply had evolved a peculiar oddity. It teleported from spot to spot in fairly random jumps. Whenever it stopped, it unfolded its stomach sack by means of fleshy hinges to about seven times its original size. If the Imply had chosen a sufficiently dense population of bugs, chances were reasonably good that some insects would blindly teleport to the inside

of this rather cavernous stomach.

As I listened to human speakers and watched their mouths open and close mostly in random, meaningless patterns, I often caught myself wondering just when a bug would teleport to the inside of the big opening!

I did enjoy my visits with Trod Gerard; he was old but lively in thought. His knowledge was vast, including both human politics and galactic history. He had already given me the clue which was to lead to resolution of my personal twinning problem but I was not aware of this fact as yet.

Though Ayorian divergence by radial adaptation was an excellent means by which a race could pass on knowledge from one generation to the next — through increased capability — it had some defects. First, learned knowledge was a hidden, intrinsic part of the magnetic configuration of an individual Ayorian. Only during the time of grouping could all share equally in this knowledge. Second, an Ayorian like myself, in human form, could not share in the grouping; I had constant need for a personal search in answer to simple technological questions.

This defect bothered me constantly and my mind always came back to the recorded and written records of humans. We Ayorians needed objective written records too. Then, after we had planted many colonies throughout the galaxy, these records could serve as quick, accurate means for transmitting knowledge from colony to colony without the necessity for an otherwise impossible physical grouping of billions of Ayorians.

When I took this problem to the children who were most often receptive to new ideas and consequently more inventive, they naturally made a new game of it. Each child had to invent some recording device which, when used by another, had to hold the most information in a form most accurately recoverable in the least amount of time. Under some rather tough measurement criteria, the one who could do the most would win the game.

I watched the beginnings of this new game. One child teleported fragments from a rock, engraving his newly invented alphabet on it. Another used ideograms. A third used binary, then tertiary digits. And so all tried something no matter how cumbersome or awkward it might be. The ideograms won the first round.

The one who had invented the alphabet used his same symbols, still convinced they were superior; but this time he engraved messages in microscopic script. He won the second round.

The fourth winner reached below the molecular level. His was

an excellent solution except that one Ayorian, namely me, could not reach this level; therefore he had violated the initial premise that *all* Ayorians must be capable of utilizing the communication device.

Knowing the game would preceed until an eventual satisfactory solution to the problem came. I left.

Life was pastoral for us; all thought of D'Cela and his followers had left our minds. But had I given him further thought, I would have acted no differently, such was the naiveté of my thinking.

When Eme was killed by the Tepen, I was enraged beyond belief, though no other Ayorians felt emotionally disturbed. Now, when half our thriving colony on New Enithra was wiped out by one missile, my rage grew proportionately; and this time, though still lacking emotion of my kind, the surviving Ayorians recognized this to be a true group twinning problem and they acted accordingly.

VII

With great dismay we asked ourselves how such a dangerous missile coming from outer space to the surface of our planet, sweeping through territory well covered by every adult's telekmass sensors, could have entered unsensed. Had the human race developed. Tepen-like telekinetic fields capable of blanketing Ayorian faculties?

Our questions were analyzed swiftly in detail, using both facts and logic to give us the answer, or probable answer, which also proved discomfiting.

The only direct action instrument known to humans which also involved indirect action phenomenon was the human developed hyper-drive.

D'Cela, the ousted Feren dictator, had probably used one of his many escape routes to leave Feren, once the true revolution had started. I had met one military satellite on my way to New Enithra from Feren and it seemed highly probable that other satellites of the same kind, as well as war ships and perhaps other Quation system planets, would contain men and the materials of war which could be drawn upon by D'Cela.

Though very few Ferenians were aware of our Ayorian faculties and how they had been used in ousting D'Cela; D'Cela himself was well aware of the effects of indirect phenomenon. It was not a weak conjecture, then, which forced us to decide that at least one of D'Cela's missiles had been modified with human type hyper-drives. Furthermore if our conjecture was correct, we could expect others soon.

The really big question was how much warning time might we expect between the first appearance of the missile from out of hyper-drive until it struck our planet.

Though hesitant to group during a time of emergency — for the next missile could easily have killed all the remaining Ayor — reaction time knowledge was so important we accepted the risk.

My reaction time when employing telekmass faculties is about one-tenth of a second. My brother's reaction time is about one one-hundreth of a second. The missile's reaction time approximated two hundredths of a second. Should other missiles have similar reaction time prior to exploding after reentry to Euclidean space, one would imagine that the Ayor could easily handle the problem, since each adult would have nearly twice the required reaction time.

Not so!

Full alertness sustained over long time periods is probably difficult for any biological organism and Ayorians were no exception.

We *could* place more Ayorians on maximal watch, and we did. But how many watchers were sufficient? What were the resources of the enemy — ten missiles per minute? Ten missiles per second? Ten missiles per nano-second in mass saturation drives?

We *could* disperse Ayorians throughout the planet, and we did.

Several more missiles struck at random intervals. It became a nerve-wracking period of spotting a suddenly appearing missile, then teleporting either it or sensitive parts of it away.

Then our unsensed enemy became serious; volley after volley came in hundreds, sometimes thousands. Adult Ayorians on watch now were fed by Ayorian children as the constant need for attention and the heavy drains of energy through constant use of telekmass faculties called upon biological conversion of energy in ever-larger quantities.

Since I was the only Ayorian whose reaction time was too slow for the watch, I gave my time to thought on our danger and our new fight. And I raged inwardly over the death of sixty-thousand of our brethren who had died needlessly.

Wherever our enemy was located, it would be beyond the half-million-mile sphere of sensitivity given to the adult Ayorian. This meant D'Cela must be in satellites, spaceships or on other planets or combinations of any of the three.

Feren could be ruled out. So could New Enithra. This left planets one, three, four, five, six, eight and nine. Planets eight and nine were inhospitable even to the Ayor, so I ruled out those. Planet one could be dropped for the same reason; and planet five was entirely too massive — unless they had gravity-controlling equipment unknown to us. Hesitant to decide on a negative, I kept planet five on my list.

From mental visualization of our nine-planet system, since planets seven, eight and nine were too hostile, the defense of the whole planetary cluster — if that was the original purpose — would be pulled back just outside of the orbit of planet six.

It seemed reasonable that Ferenian defense planners would have wanted as short a supply radius as possible, yet would want to include all of the more valuable planets. They would have been unaware of Ayorian capability to transform the seventh planet.

Accordingly there should be stations surrounding the orbits of all the planets stationed at least as far as beyond the orbit of planet six. But how many? In what density per unit of time?

So far as ships were concerned, they might be located anywhere beyond a half-million miles. Without data to the contrary, I might just as well assume the existence of billions of ships merely an inch beyond the sensitivity limits of my brethren, though I knew the thought to be foolish.

So, probably planets three, four, five and six were involved; probably several thousand satellites swung around orbit six and some unknown number of ships were surrounding us at half a million miles or more.

The large salvos stopped momentarily, then began again, and the war of nerves continued.

Once, when we fought the beast of planet two in our own system, Dingon had carried himself and me across millions of miles of space. With sufficient nutrients, there should be no reason why the fact couldn't be accomplished again for the purpose of finding D'Cela's military units and destroying them. I estimated that, without my dead weight, the adult Ayorian could probably carry himself and his nutrients about 67,000,000 miles in discrete jumps of half a million miles each jump before exhausting his nutrients.

The closest satellite had to be orbiting somewhere between fifty and sixty million miles outward, if not a little closer. Several of the adults volunteered, once I explained my conjectures and plan. They fastened supplies of food to their bodies, then attempted their first jump, fully realizing that should they be unable to find a military unit they would starve in space for lack of energy-giving nutrients.

They couldn't make their first jump!

The whole planet was ringed by telekinetic energy fields similar to that of the Tepen fields. The Ayorian, having evolved strictly from indirect action beings, had no other means of propulsion or motion than that of teleportation. They could not move a half a millimeter

without the use of indirect-action faculties.

Now our plight began to look very serious. Indeed, I had *greatly* underestimated this D'Cela human!

While all adults remained on guard and the children continued their feeding duties, I continued my thinking efforts.

D'Cela's scientists had somehow converted hyper-drive phenomenon to some kind of telekinetic fence around our new planet. But to what end? Would it satisfy any military establishment of his type merely to fence us so that we could not get to him or he to us? Eventually the cost in labor and manpower required to build and shoot his missiles at us would far exceed their effect.

It also occurred to me that he might have developed a net which, like the Tepen's, could squeeze tighter and tighter until all those with only telekinetic capabilities lay prostrate. If so, we were in very, very serious trouble!

The children checked out my conjecture, and it was clearly evident that the net was getting smaller!

I could move through the telekinetic net as I had once done against the Tepen, but how was I to gain solid foothold, high overhead, enabling my muscles to move me through the field?

Should I teleport to somewhere near the field and bring the ship there too with the assistance of the Ayor? Blasting through the telekinetic field should be simple, but would D'Clela be likely to permit such an obvious counter-move?

Settling on one idea which seemed promising, we reached through the planet's crust to bedrock, carving out a two-mile chunk of irregularly shaped rock consisting mostly of iron and nickel and silicon. Within, we hollowed out room for myself and one adult Ayorian as well as food and water.

At the risk of allowing one missile salvo through, all Ayorians grasped the rock containing us, teleporting it nearly five hundred thousand miles away from New Enithra's surface, hopefully in the direction of the orbiting satellites which must ring this system.

Teleportation does not obey what the human community calls Newton's first law of motion. The moment we arrived at our predetermined point in space, our vehicle remained motionless with respect to a point which could only be determined from higher telekmass mathematical calculations. The planet of our origin as well as the other Quations planetary bodies and its central nucleus, the sun, crept slowly away from us in a predetermined configuration of relative motion.

D'Cela's telekinetic net was sev-

eral thousand miles ahead of our point of entry into normal space. The relative velocity between ourselves and New Enithra was so low it soon became apparent that unless we could build up additional velocity, our efforts would be too late.

From our deeply buried hiding place, I telekinetically shredded mass from the front of our vehicle, handing them to Eries, my companion. He slammed them against the rear of our rock, causingg its velocity to slowly increase. Faster and faster we traveled until, by drifting with ever-increasing velocity, we passed easily through D'Cela's telekinetic net.

Once beyond the barrier, Eries' long-ranging sensitivity was activated and we began our first serious search for D'Cela's ships or satellites.

VIII

Eries jumped thirty-one times before he found the first military satellite. He returned to our false meteorite to collect food and water and to assist me to the satellite's location.

I swept my mass sensor through the five-mile station, finding it much like the military fort I had encountered and pacified many months before. Soldiers were eating, sleeping, preparing activated missiles, repairing other apparatus, drawing charts, preparing reports and doing all the other activities which accompany military communities.

Not wishing to underestimate our foe again, we surveyed every compartment with microscopic precision. One room was devoted to maps and charts of the Quations system, and it was there I could sense several soldiers speaking through radio communicators.

With only my light receptors, I could see several small access doors open along the side of the giant satellite from which several dozens of missiles streamed forth, each rapidly jumping into hyper-drive and disappearing from both sight and my mass sensor.

I disabled the radio first as I had once done against the Tepen. Also we disarmed all of the missiles and destroyed any materials which could lend themselves to explosive use.

When we teleported into the commander's quarters, where Eries' transparent body was invisible to all but me, I fully expected to interrogate the commander. But D'Cela's thinking was ahead of me again. The commander clamped his jaws together, swallowing a fatal dose of poison the moment I appeared! The chemical acted too swiftly for me to intervene.

In the map room I was again too late. Standing orders had been given which prevented us from

gaining any usable knowledge. D'Cela had proved himself to be a clever, forward thinking and dangerous human beast!

But he had left one weak link in the form of his radio operator, a frightened soldier obliged by order to send a particular coded message every thirty minutes. Though he did not know its purpose, Eries and I were sure that failure to receive his message would signal other satellites immediately to send missile salvos against this one; probably all satellites would be so organized.

His signals were allowed to continue while the invisible Eries monitored the actions of all the men and I probed for the most likely location of the other satellites.

Were I to build an economical network of military satellites around a whole planetary system, how far apart would each station be placed to insure adequate coverage with a minimum of overlap?

The answer would seem to depend primarily upon the nature of the weapon which would be used, its range and power and the time for travel from any station to the object to be destroyed; also the percent of desired overlap for the sphere of destruction would be important, reflecting military overkill features balanced against economy.

Distance between each satellite was probably computed from the characteristics of unmodified missile drive. Estimating our station to be at approximately 1.8×10^6 miles from the sun, and assuming a sphere of protective covering 3.8×10^{13} square miles, and allowing for 25% overlap on every side of each station, this still meant a protective network of 1,000,000 stations!

Accordingly we should expect to find our next station somewhere on the surface of the protective sphere's boundary in about four adult Ayorian jumps of half a million miles each.

Once these crude estimates had been made I was convinced that D'Cela, though having made correct, shrewd guesses regarding some of the characteristics of our telekmass faculties, still had no idea of the great jumping range of the adult Ayor.

We easily found the next orbiting station, where I immediately froze its commander's jaw muscles to prevent his suicide; his eyes bulged as he tried again and again to obey D'Cela's post-hypnotic command.

In his false tooth I also sensed the micron-sized radio transmitter which, when the tooth's cap was crushed, also signalled to the map room for immediate destruction of all the maps. When his poison and transmitter were removed, Eries kept watch on all other humans

again while I moved into the map room.

To capture the gigantic beast of planet two in our own system we had placed telekinetic generators on each side of the planet, thus insuring that planet two would always be embedded in the field. Had D'Cela and his human scientists done the same to us at New Enithra? If so, where might the field generators be located?

Obviously every satellite engaged in directing missiles to New Enithra would need to know the location and orbiting characteristics of every other, including those which might control our new telekinetic barriers; I found such maps clearly delineating not only the generator's location but also their plan of action which called for closing-up the net around New Enithra within a seven-day period; after that, D'Cela hoped to collect nothing but dead Ayorian bodies from the planet's surface.

With some little encouragement on my part, one of the humans removed the explosive head from one missile and re-directed it to land at the surface of the satellite containing the telekinetic field generator. What he did not know was that Eries, invisible to human eyes, teleported within the opening and rode the missile directly to the station, where he easily deactivated the generator.

Space was open again to the Ayors and we began the long, dirty task of disarming 1,000,000 stations. By now, D'Cela and his military advisors certainly knew something had gone wrong; but they couldn't know the nature of the trouble.

While deactivating these monuments to evil, I had the additional thought that perhaps the satellites were only an outer line of defense. "Maybe, these humans were careful enough to build a second line somewhat further in," I thought.

Additional speculation showed the absurdity of the thought. Even for the first line, enormous amounts of time, sweat and energy had been needed to build 1,000,000 satellite stations, each nearly five miles in diameter by means of direct faculties only. Either these humans were fantastically paranoiac or there was even greater danger from outside the Ferenian system than I had been taught.

Principles of the modified hyper-drive apparatus showed it to be new and novel; left to our own, we might not have adapted similar principles for many generations.

We were considerably more independent of gravitational effects than humans. We could use our indirect faculties to move through the gravity-well easily. For this reason, I suppose we hadn't really given the phenomenon of gravity the attention it really deserved.

D'Cela's humans, on the other hand, fought gravity from the moment of their birth. I imagine their most brilliant men contemplated it and its effects for hundreds of generations before they began to learn its control.

Whatever the case, Eries had found D'Cela's telekinetic field generator to be relatively small, not much bigger than ten by twelve feet. It tapped the gravity-well of the sun.

D'Cela did not appear with his ships during our entire clean-up period. No longer underestimating him and his scientists, we methodically completed our deactivation of his military satellites while forming plans of our own.

Alert patrols placed around New Enithra would prevent recurrence of our disaster. The children returned to their games while some of the interested adults began study of the D'Cela modified hyper-drive. The remainder of us filled our ship with supplies for a determined search for D'Cela and his men.

Once I had felt planet five an untenable base for human habitation because of its steep gravity-well. Now I wasn't so sure. If humans could tap the sun's gravity well, could they not also tap planet five's, making it habitable?

Even so, I chose the most rational course of search. First, at Feren, I spoke to all citizens, explaining what D'Cela had attempted. Trod Gerard introduced us to several scientists who agreed to move to New Enithra for joint human-Ayorian study.

Turning then to the problem of D'Cela, we found the third planet covered with noxious gases. I dropped the ship into a reddish atmosphere charged with striking lightning bolts while several of the Ayor extended their mass sensors throughout the planet's structure.

The ground level was smooth. Gases surrounding the planet were so reactive that its hot flouride radicals had long ago combined with and leveled its surface. Yet, strange as it may seem, deep within the crevices of the planet's crust could be sensed a primitive life which, almost as rapidly as our energetic Enithra life, was building up complex plastic-like molecules. They captured energy from the furious chemical reactions, replicated themselves, then grew again. Even here was the beginning of life!

The fourth planet was pitted and scarred from billions of years of past meteorites. As soon as we were within a half million miles of each station we knew exactly where its military fortresses were located.

But before any stations could respond to our presence, we reached out to identify and nullify all missiles. Then we drove in closer as though we had no suspicion of the station's presence or the nature of

their armanent. When we were nearly two hundred miles from the planet's surface, from two separated stations came hundreds of missiles, making our ship the third apex of a triangle.

We stopped the missiles in mid-flight, turned them around and let them drop back by gravity pull only. Each missile struck with only the impact of its kinetic energy, some breaking through lighter roof structures while others simply crushed themselves flat, the pieces sliding off harder sloping domes to the ground.

Every other military station was treated in similar manner until, finally convinced of their futility, they flew the white flag of peace.

D'Cela was not here; he would have driven his men to death rather than permit surrender even in a hopeless cause.

IX

The fifth planet was indeed a fortress. Its rotation period was ten hours and fifty-seven minutes, but its diameter was 12,000 miles. Surface velocity was fast and its gravity well was steep. Fortunately, like other planets in this system, it had no moons to complicate our search.

Two military citadels had been placed on opposing sides of the planet; and overlaying each fortress was a tightly bound telekinetic field which prevented Ayorian sensors from reaching through.

Aided by optical instruments, I was able to make use of my normally useless light receptors to find that their construction was similar to D'Cela's headquarters back on dense metal surrounding raging atomic fires, all bolted to planet's bed-rock.

I could move myself through the telekinetic barrier, but obviously wouldn't be allowed to come so close. I further doubted my ability to react as fast as his missiles.

Easily fending off droves of missiles, we moved closer to his main station, probing it with our own explosive forces. Not since my capture of the Tepen had I witnessed the effects of a physical object barrier. Our missiles could easily have passed through protective telekinetic barriers but they splashed themselves to death against the physical object barrier, exploding prematurely as they hit the newer force field surrounding the station in near hemispherical perfection.

D'Cela's station was protected by the ultimate defense — telekinetis and direct-action barriers. We couldn't touch him and he couldn't get at us.

How did he move his missile through his doubly protected network?

My light receptors could not respond quickly enough to view pos-

sible switching of double fields and our telekmass sensors could view nothing at all.

Did D'Cela turn off the physical energy barrier long enough to permit hundreds of missiles through during each salvo? If so, we should be able to take advantage of the time aperture no matter how small it might be.

There was a way to test our conjecture!

Several of our own missiles were moved to the planet's surface at its junction with the physical object barrier. They lay about five miles from the edge of the fortress, on a slightly inclined plane, each pointing toward the fortress.

A small telekinetic force against the missile's rear-most edge kept their noses pressed against the physical object barrier; should this barrier open, even momentarily, the missile would be inside and we would have our knowledge.

To divert attention, we cast more missiles directly at the fortress. Their answering missiles appeared at once. Our missiles at the barrier's base tore inward to explode in gigantic bursts against the hypothesized second barrier at about three miles from the citadel.

D'Cela had two physical object barriers placed around his fort, synchronized so that at no time would we gain access to him. When his missiles flew to the first, he released that barrier, replacing it before the missile reached the second

D'Cela was a formidable opponent!

News from New Enithra arrived. Ten new twinnings had occurred while solving the puzzles presented by the gravity-generator. Otherwise all was tranquil at home.

Oh how I longed for the peaceful Enithra days where life moved simply from puzzle to puzzle, rather than from death to death! My mind just naturally called up the beautiful violets and ultraviolets of Enithra and its many interesting, friendly-seeming life forms, like the delicate puff-ball which floated easily through the atmosphere, reaching its tiny mass-sensor outward to identify and to teleport dust motes and light energy packets to its top nodule.

I remembered that some of these would glow like little lanterns or stars in the sky while others would float in darkness, resting. When the sky filled with sweet smelling rain — and if the rain were thick enough — the puff-ball often was pushed to the ground, where unluckily it drowned in larger pools of water. Unhappily I thought, "What we need is a heavy rain to pour on D'Cela's forts!"

Such speculative withdrawals from life's real problems seemed remote from the issues, but I had always found them useful and this

(Continued on page 159)

AUTHORGRAPHS:

An Interview with Robert Bloch

Bob Bloch is best known to That Big World Outside as the author of the crawly Hitchcock movie, Psycho; *but science fiction knows him as the author of science-fiction and fantasy stories beyond counting, and perhaps most affectionately as the man who writes most of the SF Convention reports for* If. *Turn about, they say, is fair play. At the Rio de Janeiro Film Festival and Science-fiction Symposium in March, we lured Bob up to the balcony of our hotel room, turned on the tape recorder and started him talking. This is what came out.*

I first got involved as a science-fiction reader in 1928, with David H. Keller's story, *The Revolt of the Pedestrians.* That hooked me on reading the stuff. I went through the usual stages — Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and the current sf magazines, of course. I became socially involved in 1935.

I'd just sold my first few stories to *Weird Tales,* and I was invited to become a member of the Milwaukee Fictioneers. This was a professional writers' group which met every two weeks for purely professional purposes; that is to say, there were only working writers for members. We spent our time plotting stories and assisting various members with hangups. The reason I say it was a professional group was that we had no lady poetesses, no one was allowed to read from manuscripts and no alcohol was consumed during meetings. I don't know how many hundreds of stories came out of the Milwaukee Fictioneers during those pulp years, but I do know that this was where I first met real live sf writers.

At that time our group included several men who sold occasional science-fiction stories, plus such pros as Roger Sherman Hoare (also known as Ralph Milne Farley),

Raymond A. Palmer and Stanley G. Weinbaum. Stanley in particular impressed me. He was a very soft-spoken former resident of Louisville, Kentucky, with a very fine literary background. Oddly enough, although he was then doing spectacularly well in science fiction, his great ambition was to write for *Weird Tales*. We spent a great deal of time together, aside from the contacts at meetings, discussing the elements of fantasy and just how these could be translated into science-fiction terms, that is to say in reference to the science fiction of 1935. Both of us were hooked on James Branch Cabell and carried a 40-pound Silver Stallion on our backs. So while I tried to indoctrinate Weinbaum regarding fantasy, he in turn gave me an orientation to science fiction.

This may be a little presumptuous. I was 18, and he was an old man of 35. But I made a very pleasant corollary discovery, *viz*, that in the science-fiction world time is indeed relative, and a teenager can explore the same dimension as a mature adult, and meet on the same level.

Again it was the Milwaukee Fictioneers that indirectly brought me to the actual writing of science fiction when RAP took over *Amazing* and *Fantastic Adventures*. He called upon the Fictioneers for contributions, and I wrote my first story for him. It was called *The Secret in the Observatory*. The real secret, of course, was how it ever managed to get published.

During World War II my interests in sf fandom grew, and with it my desire to write farther in the field. I'd say that the majority of the sf I wrote then, and of what I write now, consists of borderline fantasy. My interest in hard science is somewhat limited by my complete inability to understand the workings of any mechanical gadget more complicated than an electric toothbrush. However, my interest in the field of imaginative speculation is extremely intense.

As a writer, I've always considered myself to be primarily a performer. I look upon my work as an effort at entertainment, and my readers, if any, as an audience. This attitude had its roots in my early childhood. My mother had been a social worker in order to support her family, but in so doing had given up a career as a singer; she'd once been offered an opportunity to enter what was then called light opera and operetta work by Florenz Ziegfield's father. He was the head of the Chicago Academy of Music, and a very influential figure in the 1890's; that's where Flo got his start. My mother gave up her musical career, but she never abandoned her interest in the theater. As a child in Chicago, we attended regularly. I was more impressed, however, by the vaudeville shows which my father introduced

me to. By the time I entered high school I was stagestruck.

During those depression years I appeared regularly in dramatic productions. I wrote and performed in my own skits and sketches, and rather fancied myself as a comedian. As I look back on it now, my pretensions were funnier than I was. But I did succeed, around 1936, in selling a few gags to radio comedians Stoopnagle and Budd, and to Roy Atwell who at that time was working with Fred Allen. I also made a few appearances as a master of ceremonies at the kind of night spot later celebrated by John O'Hara in *Pal Joey*. For three shows a night the performer received ten dollars, a sandwich and a cup of coffee. The agent took $5, but he got no sandwich. I had a particular advantage in that my agent could not drink coffee. But, somehow, it wasn't enough to compensate for the long hours and the long layoffs during those depression years.

Abandoning my dreams of glory of becoming a top banana in the burlesque wheel, I resigned myself to a fullfledged career as a writer.

Unfortunately, for many years the best I could attain was a halffledged career. There were not enough markets for fantasy, and very few outlets for my dubious brand of science fiction.

It must be difficult for today's readers to realize that at the time of which I speak there were only three hard-cover anthologies of fantasy fiction in existence, with the exception of an English reprint series which had borrowed heavily from *Weird Tales*. There were no science-fiction anthologies whatever. There were no paperback reprints, nor, of course, any paperback originals. The situation was far different from that which exists today.

Even by the depression standards of income, it was virtually impossible for a fulltime writer to earn even a meager living, unless he also turned out detective stories, Westerns, love stories and true confessions. Many of my colleagues augmented their income by writing for the comic books. So my little entertaining was performed on a very small stage.

The economics of science fiction have improved: the status of science fiction has grown; the audience for science fiction has become greatly enlarged. The techniques of writers have advanced. But, to me, science fiction ideally remains entertainment.

THE HALF MAN

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by BARR

Gon was a creature without a world, sent to bring destiny to those who refused it. But sometimes destiny takes over . . .

I

"Why don't you give it up?" Cruthers said. The chief of the Planetary Resource Survey team was a lean, gray-faced, gray-haired man with the fussy, precise manner of a bookkeeper. He addressed his question to a tall, red-faced, middle-aged man in field khakis, and to the boy who sat on the bench beside him adjusting the

straps that held the flat compressed-air tanks to his back. The lad was sturdily built, though oddly proportioned; his arms were thick and long, his torso short. Tough membranes linked his powerful fingers. His body, clad only in diving trunks, was hairless, the skin a blotchy greenish color, coarse and leathery. His eyes were large and round, his nose almost nonexistent, his mouth small, pursed. He looked too alien to be fully human, too human to be other than a man.

"We've come too far to be beaten now, Mr. Cruthers," the blond man said heartily, resting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Gon and I will carry on so long as the Infinite gives us the strength."

"Mostly the boy's strength," Cruthers said shortly, eyeing Gon sourly. "This can't go on indefinitely, Brother Glad." He looked the big, florid man in the eye. "I have the authority to order an end to these swimming expeditions on medical grounds. He's exhausting himself for nothing. It's obvious there's no viable culture among the natives — assuming any are left alive."

"We know they're alive. And as for culture, it's not their fault Terra withdrew support, let them revert to savagery," Brother Glad said in his large voice. "These people are a human creation, no less human for their appearance. It was Terran science that mutated their ancestors, disinherited them and denied them the open air. We can't slough off responsibility for them!"

"That was three hundred years ago. My job isn't to emotionalize over what's past, but to look for ways to build the future. Recommending uneconomic ventures on lifeless worlds isn't one of those ways."

"We must stay long enough to establish contact and learn their needs!" the missionary said indignantly. "We owe it to the Merieds to do what we can to lighten their lot."

"The Meried experiment was carried out in order to open a new world to colonization, to afford an outlet for the human need for a frontier. The test failed. I shall so report."

"But we could try again — "

"I can't base my recommendations on sentiment, Brother Glad, however noble. Tomorrow we lift. You may plan accordingly." The Survey chief turned and strode from the room.

"Don't despair, Gon," Glad said to the boy after the door had closed. "I'm sure we'll have luck today. Think what it will mean, Gon — to meet your own people — "

"They're not my people," the boy interrupted. He looked at the stone floor, not at the man. "They

look like . . . like freaks," he added in a mutter.

"We don't use that word, Gon!" the man said in a whiplash tone. "You, least of all!"

A beige flush mounted the boy's narrow face.

"I'm worse than they are," he blurted. "They're at home here, but I'm not at home anywhere! I can't stand sunlight, but I can't breathe water! I swim better than any Terran, but not as well as a baby Meried!"

"There'll always be a home for you in the Tabernacle," the missionary said in a gentler voice. "Now come along. It's time."

Gon didn't move.

"Gon, Gon, have you forgotten everything we've taught you?" the blond man said in a tone of patience long abused. "Don't you remember our purpose here, your own privileged role as a unique instrument of the Infinite?"

"I'm not a unique instrument, Brother Glad. I'm a halfbreed monster that never should have been born!"

"Stop it!" The missionary's voice cracked like a physical blow. "You're forbidden, ever, to voice thoughts like those! There is a purpose in life for every soul born under a sun! Your purpose is here! Now get on your feet and come with me! I won't let you fail — us or yourself!"

Reluctantly, the boy rose and followed the blond man as he strode down across the pebbled beach. At the edge of the sea, the older man halted and turned his face up to the sky.

"O, thou who art eternal and without limit," he intoned, "grant this humble creature of thy making the privilege of leading those who were lost and are found again back to the true path of thy will!"

He turned to the boy.

"Perhaps today is the day, Gon," he said solemnly. "Good luck."

The boy shivered, looking out across the wind-riffled water. He went forward hesitantly until an edge of surf washed about his feet, then paused to adjust the breathing mask across his mouth. As he looked back, he saw Brother Glad's pale eyes fixed on him. He waded on; the chill water surged about his waist, his chest.

I'm afraid! he wanted to scream. *I don't want to go down into this alien ocean. I want to go home.* But instead he drew a deep breath and dived forward into the breaking wave.

II

On their barge, anchored ten miles off the lifeless North Continent of the world known as Meries, Cap O'Royle and Pard Kuchel, traders, sat at the cabin table, drinking coffee. For the last

five hours they had been busy, loading the displays of Terran manufactured goods into the home-made display racks designed to be lowered over the side for the examination of their prospective customers. Small tools, wrist compasses, patent fish-baits, sea-lights, buckles and straps, small hardware, a few foodstuffs; all the items that twenty years of tramp commerce had taught them would be welcomed by the elusive Merieds.

There was a sudden splash in the diving well at the center of the barge; a goggle-eyed gray-blue face appeared there, water sluicing down across the coarse, almost reptilian skin. The creature's sphincter-like mouth gaped comically, like a goldfish on a carpet. Water ran from the nostrils, mere slits in the wet-clay sheen of the face. The sea-man made a hoarse, croaking sound, waved a webbed hand and dropped from sight as O'Royle, a stocky, white-haired man, called a greeting.

"They're here," he said, rising. "I'll take the first load down."

"Damn! Wish old Dreen would give a man more warning! Many times as I've seen that ugly face, it still gives me the leaping creeps when it pops up at me that way!"

"They're adapted to their environment, Pard, like a bird or a fish. Think of 'em that way and they have a kind of beauty."

"Hard to believe they're only ten generations away from normal folk," Pard said. "I heard somewhere a man could still breed with 'em. Picture getting that close to one of their females."

O'Royle grunted. He checked his gauges, closed his helmet and lowered himself into the well. As the blue-green water closed over him, the sea-man swam up, his oversized eyes gleaming in the watery light.

"Hello, Dreen," O'Royle said, his voice echoing oddly through his underwater microphone. "Good trip up?"

The Meried's finny headcrest rippled as he nodded, uttering the gasping, clucking sound that was an all-purpose affirmative. He held out a small pouch of soft, slick-wet fishskin.

"I have a few sea-stones for you, O'Royle," he said in his thin, going - down - for - the - last - time voice. "Not so nice as last time, but big, eh?"

The trader squeezed the pearls out on his palm. They were as big as walnuts, but lumpy, an iridescent milky-blue yellow in color.

"They're beauties," O'Royle said. He waved a hand at his stock of goods — mostly small hardware, water-proof power tools. "Take what you like."

The Meried took his time looking over the display. Other sea-men gathered around. They had

brought their barter-goods with them: nets of rare shells, glassy, polychrome corals, sea fruits mutated from Earthly plants. There were swollen ears of sea-corn with yard-long cobs set with fist-sized kernels, purple oceanberries descended from Pinot Noir grapes, clusters of tomatoids, like great green raspberries; hundred-foot salt-melons which would be flensed like whales and the sweet red flesh lifted aboard in hundred-pound slabs, to be ferried ashore and stored in the spaceship's freezer. The stones O'Royle sold on distant planets, but the foodstuffs he rationed out to himself and Pard over the long years between visits.

"Did you know, O'Royle, there is another party of drymen camped on the shore there, half a swim to the north?" the sea-man said. He pointed off through the murky water.

"Traders?" O'Royle frowned.

"These are no traders. They built a house on the high beach, but they offer no goods."

"Maybe they're scientists, a mapping party, something like that." O'Royle rubbed his chin, looking troubled.

"They say," Dreen went on, "that there's a man among them who's of the sea, but not of the sea."

O'Royle looked at him questioningly. "You mean a frogman, with scuba gear?"

"No . . . he swims naked in the surf. Yet he sleeps on land. Curious, eh, Royle?"

"Half a swim to the north, you said?"

Back on deck, O'Royle told Pard the news. The smaller man swore.

"Might of known it wouldn't last, having the place to ourselves."

"There's plenty here for everyone, Pard," his partner pointed out. "It might be the best thing for the Merieds to build up trade here, remind the government they're out here."

"I don't mean that. I just don't want strangers poking in, spoiling things. I like it like it is — peaceful."

"We don't own Meried, Pard. But I'm curious. I'm going to take the flitter over and pay a courtesy call. You mind the store."

III

As Gon's eyes adapted to the light level, he was able to see the undulating slope that stretched away before him, its surface thickly grown with weed of the strange color that he only saw here, under the sea. A cloud of silt rose like a puff of smoke ahead, as some small sea-dweller took alarm at his approach; at once, with a sharp pain, the nictitating membranes that protected his eyes flicked closed — a reflex never triggered on land.

He swam on, out past the second

bar, angling more sharply downward now. Outcroppings of rock broke the bottom here; the luminous lichens crusting them shed an eerie glow through the water. Small shrimp-like piscoids moved in awkward spurts among the stalks of sea-cane. Something large and lazy oozed away across the bottom. Gon drew air from his breather, giving the big fellow a wide berth.

The first chill had passed; as his body warmed, he swam more strongly, questing through the dim water for the elusive mermen.

O'Royle flew north for half an hour, following the barren coastline of the lifeless continent. Behind the froth-laced beach, gray and tan hills rose toward distant peaks of stone, untouched by the faintest hint of green. Only patches of dead trees and sere grasses along the strand attested the three-centuries-gone attempt to transplant earthly soil and flora to the young world. Those, and the remnant of the viaformed humans who had been seeded here. The Lost War had wrecked the grand scheme of which they had been a part, cut off the support and aid that would have made the scheme work. Now with a resurgent Terra again feeling her way into the Arm, the Merieds might benefit from some belated assistance, O'Royle reflected. But, more likely, the sea-men would suffer from the rediscovery of their world. The oceans were rich in dissolved minerals; floating refineries could extract them, discharge the contaminating wastes into the sea. It was standard practice on pre-life worlds, but tough on the Merieds. That was the reason O'Royle had never reported his find, twenty-five years ago. Now, it seemed, the secret was out.

He saw the camp ahead, a cluster of pre-fab sheds perched on a knoll of rock above high-tide line. He settled in near a shed; a stocky man in khakis came forward.

"I'm Brother Glad," the stranger said, holding out a square hand. "Surprised to see your flier. The others are away, out in the launch."

O'Royle listened silently to the other's explanation of the purpose of the Survey Group.

"I understand you have a half-breed in your party," he said when the missionary paused. "I'd like to see him."

Brother Glad looked surprised. "There is a lad of mixed blood with me, yes. How did you — "

"Where is he?"

"What's your reason for asking?"

"This boy — he's from Terra? About nineteen years old?"

Glad frowned. "And if he is?"

"His name's Gon O'Royle. He's my son."

Glad's face went rubbery; his mouth shaped itself around words as if trying them for size but finding none that fit.

"I left the boy in school, back on Terra," O'Royle said. "Why did you bring him here?"

Brother Glad made an effort to reassemble his expression of stern good will. "He belongs here," he stated. "His destiny — "

"He belongs back on Terra, getting an education," O'Royle cut off the other's speech.

Brother Glad's expression jelled over. "Gon is here doing what the Infinite shaped him for, what he was born for."

O'Royle narrowed his eyes. "He was born," he said grimly, "because a young spacer met a woman in a lonely place, and they fell in love. As for his shape — Gon's an intelligent boy, a fine scholar. He can lead a useful life — "

"A life of seclusion — a scientist-monk, a misfit in a dead-end! He deserves a chance to live! Here, he can make a unique contribution. He'll play a role in the Great Plan — "

"Hogwash!" O'Royle cut in. "You're not going to use Gon as a pawn in your game, whatever it is! Now, do you tell me where he is, or do I have to start looking?"

Brother Glad met O'Royle's eye. "You may be Gon's father, but he's of age. You've no claim on him now."

"And you do?"

"He's helping me willingly."

"To do what?"

"His people were disinherited — denied the open land, the free air — by the meddling of our ancestors! I intend to undo that wrong — to bring these unfortunate stepchildren of the human race back to their own world! Gon can help!"

O'Royle stared at the zealot. "Back to their own world? *This* is their world, damn you! They can't live out of water for more than a few hours!"

"Perhaps — but we needn't abandon them to such a fate! They've regressed since their ancestors were left here; they no longer farm; their domestic animals have returned to the wild. They've multiplied, but no start has been made on bringing life to the shore. The experiment, in other words, is a failure. Very well — these people are doomed — but their children deserve the right to rejoin their race, to live normal lives! They're innocent victims of unnatural tampering with the Infinite's plan! We owe it to them to give them back what they lost!"

"Where does Gon come into all this?"

"He's my ambassador to the Merieds. He'll go among them, bring the good news of their deliverance to them, lay the foundation for the program — "

"You sent him out *there* — into the ocean?"

"Of course. It's his natural ele-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ment. He can go among the Merieds as no norm — ordinary man could do."

"You fool!" O'Royle's voice was ragged. "Why do you think I took him to Terra in the first place?"

"To be rid of him, I suppose!"

O'Royle's fists were clenched, but he held his voice steady. "Gon looks like his mother — externally. To normal Terries that makes him a freak, a side-show exhibit. But internally, it's different. He's only half Meried. His heart's not designed to pump under the pressure of more than fifty or a hundred feet of water. And the trace minerals in the water here are wrong; iodine and arsenic and lead can reach toxic levels in his cells in a matter of hours — if he hasn't drowned by then, or been killed by the local sea-life!"

"Wh — why, Gon's been swimming every day since we arrived; he's suffered no ill effects — "

"He's been lucky."

"The locals seem safe enough!" Brother Glad snapped.

"They're used to it," O'Royle came back. "Gon isn't. He's led a sheltered life until now. How long has he been gone?"

"Perhaps an hour, a little more. But, look here — "

"Did he have a set course, any communication link?"

"No set course... he was to swim out a few miles, then cast about. I'm not in direct communication with him at all — "

"I'm going after him with scuba gear," O'Royle snapped. "Do you have a flitter you can take out to search the surface with?"

"No — nothing.... "

"Then stand by on shore, in case he makes it back here." O'Royle turned to the door, giving the missionary a hard look. "If Gon dies," he said, "I'll be back to see you."

IV

Gon saw the Meried at a depth of forty feet, two miles offshore. It was a slim female who appeared before him out of the darkness, her body glowing faintly to Gon's sea-eyes, slightly magnified by the lens effect of the watery medium. Gon halted, staring into the grotesque mask that peered wide-eyed at him. Then the sea-girl's small mouth opened, emitted rasping speech resembling the squeaks and chirps of dolphin-talk. For a moment the young halfbreed was baffled; then he caught the rhythm of the Meried speech, which he had heretofore heard only on tapes in a sunny classroom on Terra.

"You're the half-man; I've seen you playing in the surf."

"I... I'm Gon O'Royle," the boy said. His voice, coming through the specially designed speaking mask that covered his mouth and

nostrils, echoed and grated in his ears. The rehearsed speech he had memorized against this moment froze on his lips as the Meried swam closer, moving herself effortlessly with small flutterings of her fingers and toes, turning to look at Gon from all sides as she circled him, carrying a light spear gun in her hand.

"You are like a sea-man and yet ... not like," the stranger said. "What is that you hold in your teeth?"

"I have to have it — to breathe," Gon said.

"Indeed? Still, you swim well — for a dryman."

"I'm no dryman!" Gon blurted, and paused, experiencing for the first time in his life a sense of shame at his land-dweller traits.

"You're far afield," the Meried said. "We seldom swim these waters. The grampus lairs here. I came searching for a strayed swoat, never thinking to find a half-man instead!" The sea-girl's mouth puckered into an expression Gon recognized as a smile.

"I want to talk to you," Gon said hurriedly. "I have news for you — wonderful news. You haven't been forgotten — "

"I must go. Will you come with me?" the stranger cut in. "Many will want to see you, to welcome you. We hoped you'd venture out to us in time."

"You've been ... watching me?"

"We're curious folk. We welcome any diversion."

Gon hesitated, remembering Brother Glad's instructions: to deliver his speech, arrange a second meeting, then return. But it had been so long with no results. What if this creature swam off and never came back? He owed it to Brother Glad to cement relations now, while he had the chance ....

"Yes, I'd ... I'd like to come."

The Meried flashed her strange smile again, turned with the flexible grace of an eel and was gone into the murk. Gon paddled hurriedly after her. Half a minute later the Meried reappeared.

"You must learn to use your strength in the water," she said. "Not to waste it in floundering."

Swimming slightly ahead, she led the newcomer out across the edge of the continental shelf and down toward the lightless Deeps of the Continental Sea.

Using the wet-jet strapped to his back, and following the beam of his sea-light, O'Royle covered three miles in a quarter of an hour, alert for a signal from the locator on his wrist, set to resonate to a moving body of the mass of a man.

Twice he picked up traces that led him into detours; the first time a great mollusk scuttled away at his approach; the second, a wild sea-dog approached, fangs bared in

its seal-like snout. He drove it off with a beam of sound from his 'caster. He could have killed it as easily, but the scent of mammalian blood would have attracted a pack of its fellows. The Terran transplants had thrived on native fare, multiplied hugely in their adopted home; but their taste for red meat clung in instinct, even after three hundred years of sea-life.

Now the offspring of strays and runaways had claimed huge volumes of the sea as their own, in competition with their former masters.

O'Royle pictured Gon, alone and helpless, surrounded by sea-carnivores with the smell of Terran blood in their nostrils. Grimly, he swam on.

It had been a long time since he had cruised here, in the purple-black waters of Meries. Not since Gon's birth, in fact, and the death of Onide, his mother.

And now — so close to the day when Gon would have been graduated, able to take a post with the University Foundation — a meddling fanatic had come along to destroy the whole careful structure built up over two decades of hard labor.

O'Royle switched trains of thought again, concentrated on his compass readings, heading outward toward the sea-city where he had met and wooed a sea-woman once, long ago.

Close behind his guide, Gon threaded his way down, down, toward a faint, water-diffused glow spreading out below. Dark spires of rock swept past to left and right; the Meried woman turned and twisted, rounding craggy, weed-grown buttes, sailing under fragilely balanced arches, plunging downward at last into a near-vertical cavern mouth to emerge in an amphitheatre of terraced stone asparkle with pastel glows. Only then did Gon realize that he was in the ruins of one of the undersea cities built three centuries before for the sea colony.

Suddenly, Meried faces were all about. A cacophony of alien voices called greeting, asked questions. made observations.

"Back so soon, Seryl? And who's this with you?"

"Mama — why is he a funny color?"

"Hello, young one. What's that across your mouth?"

"Does he really sleep on the rocks?"

A large, scar-faced sea-man with a tattered crest was before Gon, looking at him with eyes that seemed covered with a grayish film. "Who are you?" he demanded plaintively. "*What* are you?"

"I'm Gon O'Royle," he said, and again his prepared speech deserted him. "I want to be your friend," he stammered.

"I remember," the old man said.

"Onide. She bore a son to the dryman. He took the infant away."

"Yes — you must be the son of Onide!" a woman said. "How like her he is — and yet how strange he is."

"So, so. Strange things happen as the world grows old." The aged Meried drifted away. Gon looked around bewildered at the slim, swift shapes gliding in and out of the rounded doorways — or were they windows? — that reminded him of the toy castles in fishbowls — and of sunken ships, drowned sailors. Abruptly, the sea seemed to close in on him. He sucked air frantically through the mouthpiece, feeling terror rise in him. He struck out in what he thought was the direction of the passage through which he had entered, but found only a slimy barrier of volcanic stone. Seryl called, but he pushed frantically on, hearing a shrilling in his head, the thud of his heart, banging his head, bruising his hands as he scraped and fumbled, forcing his way through narrow passages that opened only into other pockets, ending in a dark cul de sac. He tried to orient himself, but the infallible sense that had always before told him in which direction to move seemed numbed, amputated. Even the phosphorescence was gone from the water. For an instant he thought that he was blind; then he caught the infinitely faint glow of his own skin.

"Seryl!" he shouted, and almost lost the breather, choking as a jet of water sprayed past the mouthpiece. He doubled up in a paroxysm of coughing. He recovered — weak trembling, with a pounding pain in his head — to find himself in total darkness and total silence — alone and utterly lost.

V

Inside O'Royle's scuba suit the pressure and the cold were as oppressive as a filled grave. He wasn't as young as he had been when he had first swum here — not by a lifetime. He realized quite suddenly that he might fail, might not find Gon might not even find the sea-city of the Merieds.

But he had to find it. He knew its location; his compass would lead him there. And there he'd find his old friends and tell them what had happened, enlist their help....

He swam on, tiring, but driven by the mental image of Gon, alone and in danger, needing him. He was taken by surprise by the trio of sea-men that were suddenly around him.

"Benoroyle!" a familiar voice came scratchily through his helmet. "Is it you indeed?"

"Dreen — thank God you're here! It's my son — the half-man you told me about. I've got to find him!"

The sea-men conferred. "The lad

visited City," another Meried said. "But we sensed he was discomfited. So we left him alone, until he should feel more at ease. He soon departed, perhaps to meditate in solitude."

"Departed? Where did he go?"

"Who knows, Benoroyle? No one was so discourteous as to follow him."

"You damned fool! Gon's no Meried! He'll drown! Why the devil didn't you help him?" O'Royle cut off his outburst with an effort. "I'm sorry, Dreen. Will you help me find the boy?"

"As you wish, Benoroyle — but the sea is wide, and filled with perils — "

"Don't treat me to any of your Meried philosophy now! Just find Gon before it's too late!"

Alone in the labyrinth, Gon felt a sudden swirl of deeper coldness around him. Something was moving nearby. He backed water, retreating into a niche in the rock. Then a familiar twittering voice spoke:

"Gon — where are you?"

"Seryl!" The stab of relief that went through the boy was as sharp as physical pain. "Seryl! Get me out of here, back to the surface!"

"Gon, you've hurt yourself! I sense blood in the water!"

He felt her touch on his arm; seeing her face hovering before him, her immense eyes wide, he wondered how he had ever thought her ugly.

"Please — help me . . . !" He fought down the rising panic. The air in his throat seemed hot, stale. He was choking, drowning. He had to get out. He caught at Seryl's arm, but it slipped away.

"Come — this way!" she called.

"I can't see you!" He choked on the words, struck out blindly, smashing face-first into sharp-edged stone. Then her hand gripped his, tugging gently.

"Poor half-man. You're blind; I didn't know. Come now, I'll lead you."

It seemed to Gon that for an endless time they wormed their way through a serpentine route, up, down, twisting, turning, at times forcing their way along passages barely wide enough to pass, then swimming a few strokes until the way narrowed again. Attempting to squeeze through a vertical crevice, he stuck fast. The girl tugged at his hands, uselessly.

"No good. I'll have to go back." He tried to retreat, found that he was wedged equally tightly against withdrawal. He attempted to turn his body, succeeded only in cutting his hide on the sharp edges of volcanic rock.

"Gon — careful!" Now there was anxiety in the girl's voice. "The sea-hunters roam here! If they scent blood . . . . "

He fought silently then, in blind

panic. He was only dimly aware of the girl's voice calling to him, of her hands trying to hold his flailing arms.

"Gon — they're here!" Her cry cut through his panic. He went slack then, hung, half in, half out of the fissure, watching a thing like an eight-foot otter or beaver, black and sinuous, armed with a tiger's jaws. It cruised past at a distance of ten feet, stroking with broad, seal-like flukes, studying him with wide, dark-glistening eyes. Gon recognized it as a mutated dog, a remote descendant of a retriever or herder brought from Terra centuries before, now grown large, wild and fierce, the ancient subservience of its kind to man forgotten. With sudden decision, it started in, jaws gaping.

Seryl set the butt of her spear gun against her shoulder, followed the patrolling carnivore as it shot forward and fired. A plastic-feathered quarrel sprang out and sank to half its length in the side of the predator. Instantly, the creature whirled to bite at the shaft, fighting like a hooked tarpon; but as the smoky blood wafted from the wound in a widening veil, a second sea-dog closed; in a lightning snap it opened the dying animal's throat. Through water abruptly opaque with an ink-black stain, Gon caught glimpses of swift-darting bodies that struck, and struck and struck....

Time had passed. How long, Gon didn't know. But his air was running out. Where was Seryl? How long had he been trapped here? How long since Brother Glad had bade him farewell on the shore?

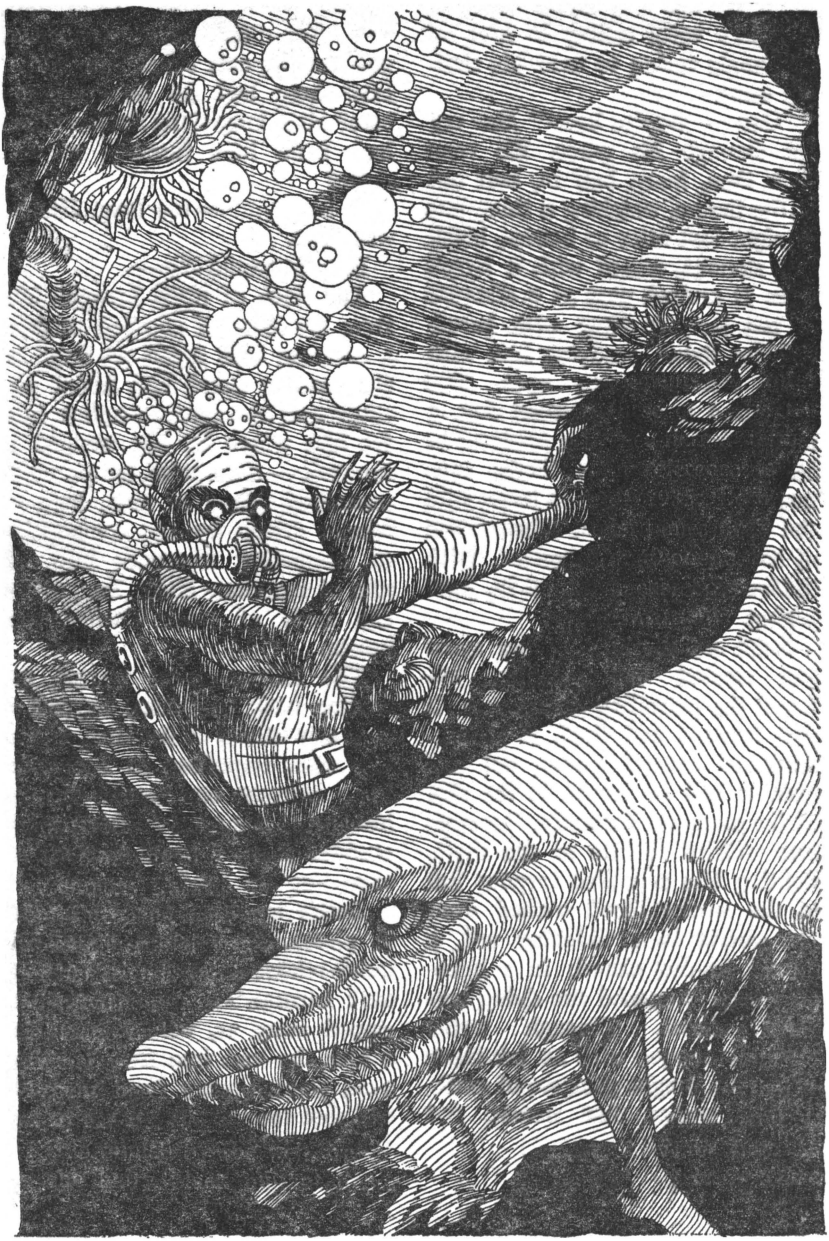
A long time — too long. His air was gone.

Here he would die —

The flash of teeth brought him from his state of shocked reverie; a creature half again as large as the sea-dog Seryl had killed had swept past him close enough to buffet him where he lay, wedged in the rock — a porpoise, once a mild-mannered friend of man, here on Meries driven by the competition of competing mammals into the role of voracious killer, hungry for the flesh of warm-blooded sea-beasts.

The killer-porpoise turned, patrolling back past him. Beyond it Gon saw others of its kind, gliding like grim torpedoes in formation. In a moment one would turn on him; with one snap of those spike-studded jaws, it could take off his arm — or his head.

Better to drown than to be torn to pieces. He reached, found the quick-release latch, and slipped the tank harness. The mouthpiece was ripped away as, with a twist and a kick, he tore free from the harness, pushed away from the rock, and shot toward the surface a hundred and fifty feet above.



The pain struck O'Royle without warning, like a blow in the chest with a spiked club. He gave a single gasping grunt and doubled over, tumbling as the powerful water jets drove him erratically on. He managed to switch off power and hung, afloat now in a sea of agony wider than the Continental Ocean.

Time passed — how long, he had no idea. Slowly, he became aware that he was drifting, head-down, in black water. Fire still burned in his chest, but it was a bed of embers now, not a roaring blaze. He moved, and pain lanced through his rib-cage. Slowly, awkwardly, like a crippled insect, he straightened his body, began to move slowly toward the mile-distant shore. Gon was still out there; but Dreen and the others would find him. He had done that much, anyway. Now the trick was to reach shore alive, to be there waiting when they brought the poor lad back.

Gon's lungs were bursting. How far above was the surface? He stroked, stroked, eyes bulging, jaws locked, chest straining. It had to be close now; only a little farther. His vision was blurring, shot through with red; his lungs ached, his tissues screamed their torture. Hold on, hold on —

Without his conscious volition, against every conscious instinct for self-preservation, his mouth opened, his lungs heaved convulsively. He felt the icy pressure in his throat, the burning pain as the sea water flooded his straining lungs — and blackness flooded his mind.

O'Royle did not suspect his error until the rush of inch-long crustaceans swirled around him like a flock of startled birds. Then they were gone — and a vast gray-black body hurtled after them.

"Sea-bull," O'Royle grunted. "Deep-sea critter. What's it doing this close to shore?"

He glanced at his compass — and then he saw. He had been holding steadily on course — directly *away* from shore. By now he was five miles at sea, in the dreaded Deep, where the big hunters roamed, looking for red meat.

VI

Gon floated in a pink mist of pleasure, wafted from cloud to sunset cloud on a perfumed breeze. At his whim, he sailed effortlessly across the pillow-soft sky, drifted with the gentle tides of air, plunged downward in a dizzying swoop, soared upward again, faster than thought....

"It's the dream again," he thought. "The dream of flying. But this time it's real. I *can* fly. I always knew I could, if I could just remember the trick..."

He flew on, savoring the total freedom of the spirit and body that expressed itself in soaring high above all mundane cares. Brother Glad, Cruthers, the others, seemed remote, unreal. There had been a thing he had worried about; what was it? It seemed so far away now, so unimportant. Something about a role he had to play in the Plan of the Infinite. Gon almost laughed aloud at the innocence of the conception: that the power that had evoked galaxies from nothingness should require the intervention of a boy to bring about its purposes....

Brother Glad had wanted him to go to Meries, the water-world where he had been born, where his mother had died in the birthing; to go down again to the sea, seek out his kin, begin a movement to bring them back to Terra.

Back to Terra! This time Gon laughed, surrendering himself to the inexpressible grotesquerie of the idea. Back to Terra — to live in goldfish bowls, and flatten their noses against the glass, begging the aquarium visitors for crumbs of fishfood? Or to waddle about the dry, dusty streets of the cities, wearing water-filled helmets? Or perhaps to swim glumly about the polluted Earthly seas, on the alert for the mile-wide pelagic harvesting craft. Once caught in their water-sweeps, they'd windup as organic fertilizer for hydroponic farms!

Gon blinked the tears of hilarity from his eyes — and as he did, he became aware suddenly of a coldness and a pressure against his ribs. He moved to relieve the discomfort and felt a sense of vertigo that made him flail out with both hands to bring himself upright. Smoky, gray-brown opacity swirled before him. He waved it away, was looking out across a rolling expanse of dun-colored hills, densely grown with tall, willowy plants that waved in the light but irrestible wind-like images reflected in the surface of a pool. The light that shone from the green-black sky seemed to waver, rippling through minutely discernible changes of intensity. It was a weirdly alien landscape — and yet, in some indefinable way, a comfortable one. But — where was he?

He now remembered Brother Glad's invitation to accompany him, the preparations for the trip, the long, eventless weeks in space....

And the landing on the deserted shore... and the building of the camp....

The rolling, phosphorescent sea. Himself wading into the cold, alien surf, Brother Glad urging him on; his first swim, the let-down as no Meried came swarming to meet him, the discouragement, the suicidal thoughts. The one, last try that he had privately promised himself to make, after which —

After? What had happened? Had he been successful or . . . ?

He remembered a face, narrow-bluish-green, wide-eyed, purse-mouthed, sleek.

Seryl. He had met her, and —

With a convulsive movement, Gon fought to tear free of the remembered trap — and drifted effortlessly forward across the waving grass-plain beneath him.

I'm flying, the thought crashed into his mind. *But that was a dream.*

But I'm not dreaming now; I'm awake — and still I'm flying. He moved his hands and at once his body responded, angling up and to the left, drifting as lightly as a gas-filled balloon.

Drifting. But not like a balloon; like a fish in water.

Not flying, swimming.

Not breathing air . . . but water.

Gon drew a deep breath, felt the healing coolness flow in, flow out again. He was breathing under the sea. He had lost his mask and mouthpiece, and he was still alive. Lost in the wonder of the miracle, he drifted with the swift current toward the deep sea.

Consciousness was a light powered by a failing battery. As his awareness flickered dimly alight again, O'Royle knew that it was hopeless, that he would never reach the distant shore. He throttled back the wet-jet with a motion that sent new pangs stabbing through his chest, and hung motionless, his body a broken vessel filled with pain.

Pressure waves beat against him; a thing vast as a whale loomed out of dimness, tossing him like a chip in its wake. O'Royle saw the great scarred flank slide past him at a distance of less than three yards, saw the strokes of the mighty flippers that could crush a man with a careless flick, unaware of his presence.

But this monster was aware, he realized as it turned and made a second pass at even closer range. This time he saw the coiled proboscis, the narwhale-like tusks, the spined ears, the great swell of the crested shoulders as the grampus — a mutated Indian elephant — swam straight at him. O'Royle half expected to see the jaws gape to snap him up, but at the last moment, the behemoth rolled, showing a flash of the shark-like teeth studding the wide mouth, modified for flesh eating, not by man, but by natural mutation, here in the adopted environment of Meries. The giant meat-eater was confused by the sterile scent of the protective suit, O'Royle knew; but in another moment, satisfied of his harmlessness, its appetite would assert itself. The next pass would be the last.

He watched it move away, turn with a lazy flick of its modified

limbs, hover, measuring him for the kill. He saw the trunk go up, the jaws open. As helpless as a newborn infant, he waited for the final charge.

VII

When Seryl returned with a party of sea-men to the place where she had left Gon trapped, the sea-wolves were still patrolling there; but of the half-man there was no sign.

"They've taken him," Dreen said. "We're too late."

"No — I smell no blood in the water — only a trace from his earlier wounds," Seryl retorted. "He must have freed himself."

"Look — his breathing apparatus," another Meried called, retrieving the tank and attached mouthpiece from the sea floor a few yards below. "Without this, can he live?"

Seryl uttered a choked cry. "Poor half-man! He wished so much to live . . . "

"We must find his body," Dreen said.

"There's a vicious current here; by now the corpse will be far away — if the carrion beasts have spared it," a man said.

"Why venture into dangerous waters on a futile quest?" another questioned.

"You needn't come; but I must try, for the sake of my friend, whom I failed." Dreen swam away, Seryl beside him. The others hesitated, then followed.

The sea-man hailed Gon from a distance, calling in the strange, penetrating under-sea voice of his kind:

"Sheer off! A hunting grampus near!"

Gon hesitated, confused by the warning and filled with an urgent desire to talk.

"No time to waste," the stranger called. "It's occupied for the moment with easier prey; a dryman, poor fool, weighted in his trappings like a mud-castler!"

"A dryman?" Gon queried; but the other was gone in the murk. A land-dweller, about to be killed by a sea-hunter? Could it be Brother Glad looking for him? But the missionary owned no scuba gear — and no one else in the party would have reason to come here.

Cautiously, Gon advanced. A pair of sea-men flashed past him at the edge of visibility. He went on and saw a group of Merieds hovering in the water ahead. As he swam up to them, one, a small, slender female, turned —

"Gon!" Seryl called sharply, coming toward him. Beyond her, Gon saw through an obscuring haze of roiled silt a shape as big as a twenty-man copter, gray-black, horny-hided, massive; flippers bigger than a man's body stroked

restlessly, holding its position.

"You're alive — and — " Seryl broke off as Gon swept past her, his eyes on the man-shape drifting in the water ahead. A dryman, as the Meried had said, bulky in a vermilion-dyed dry-suit with a bubble helmet, through which the features of a square, lined face, white-haired, blue-eyed, were visible. The face of Captain Ben O'Royle.

"Father!" Gon shouted. At his cry, the Merieds whirled; the giant sea-thing gave an ill-tempered thrust of its flukes, turning ponderously to face the new disturbance. A big sea-man came toward Gon as if to intercept him, but he veered aside from the out-stretched hand, shot to O'Royle's side.

"Father! Run! Quick!" Gon grabbed at the older man's arm, only then saw that his face was slack, his eyes half-shut.

Gon whirled to the sea-men, ignoring the hovering mass of the sea-elephant, which had swung again to face him.

"Help me! He's sick!"

"Gon! Beware! He'll charge!" Seryl called. She darted forward, raised her tiny spear-thrower, fired from the hip, once, twice, three times full into the monster's face. Gon felt the tiny shocks, saw the darts leap to imbed themselves in the expanse of horny hide above the back-curled trunk as the sea-elephant, head lowered and tusks foremost, rushed at him.

For a frozen instant, time seemed to stand still. Gon hung motionless, peripherally aware of the staring eyes of the helpless seamen in the background, of the unconscious, suited man beside him, of the curious translucence of the water, of the thumping of his heart, watching the bulk of the leviathan grow as it hurtled straight at him. Then, at the last possible instant, he moved aside — not a wild leap for safety, but a calculated sidestep, just sufficient to avoid the forward-lunging tusk of the monster. Instantly, Gon was in behind the spined ear, and with a powerful thrust of his legs, astride the horny back, grasping the umbrella-ribbed dorsal fin, flattening himself to the curve of the great beast's shoulders.

The grampus fought. It plunged, rolled, flailed backward with its trunk. The blows, impeded by the density of the medium, thudded across Gon's shoulders like strokes with a canvas hose. He pressed himself closer, digging his fingers into the tender membranes at the base of the back-flattened ears, his knees locked along the main rib of the fin. Over and over the grampus rolled; once it slammed the mucky bottom, and for a moment Gon was immersed in murky ooze; but he held his breath, and a moment later his mighty mount was streaking forward at a speed that sent water sluicing back around the clinging

rider like the backwash of a torpedo.

As the animal's course veered left, Gon twisted at the tender tissues of the left ear; the grampus angled back to the right. Gon hung on grimly, saw the color of the water changing, lightening. Abruptly, the sea-elephant broke water with a Niagara-like smash of surf; it crashed back then, splashing and hissing, to surge ahead another hundred yards. Then it was humping itself through the shallows like a monster walrus, spewing water from its trunk and mouth. Air was like fire in Gon's lungs as he ejected the water from them. Coughing, he clung, waiting for the blow that would smash him flat; but panicked, the sea-elephant had forgotten the weapons of its trunk and its bulk. It could have plucked him free, trampled him, rolled on him. Instead, it floundered up the beach, bellowing and snorting. Gon blinked away the film of water from his eyes and saw the survey camp a few hundred yards off to the left. He saw men running out and heard their shouts. Brother Glad appeared, rifle in hand. As Gon raised himself to shout a warning, the creature changed course abruptly, hurling itself toward the sounds. Gon's knees slipped from their grip; the grampus skidded to a halt, lowered its head, and tossed. Gon felt himself going up and over, then falling, to slam against the gravelly sand with a stunning impact. Above him the big bull lowered its head, lunged. The needle-tipped ivories gouged into the sand on either side of Gon; the horny hide of the immense head rasped him, bumping him as the beast strove to gore him, but was fended off by its own tusks.

There was a sharp *car-rong* as a heavy rifle fired nearby. The monster grunted and keeled forward; its weight came crushingly on Gon. The sky went dark, and far away voices shouted through the failing light.

VIII

Brother Glad sat smiling at him. Beside him, his father, pale but recovered, smiled too.

"They told me what you did, Gon," he said. "You saved my life; but more than that, you taught them something."

"It was a stroke of genius to think of driving the beast on shore," Brother Glad said. "The Merieds never dreamed of such a thing."

"Too bad . . . you killed it," Gon gasped. There was pain in his chest, in his arms, in every bone of his body. "They . . . could be tamed . . . used . . . "

"It's not dead, just drugged," the missionary said. "Our fellows helped the sea-men to winch it back into the water. When it wakes it will be in harness." His smile wid-

ened. "They have great plans for capturing more in the same way."

"Gon, the doctor examined you," O'Royle said. "You have a few broken ribs, but you'll be all right. But the curious thing is — water respiration seems to have had the effect of metamorphosizing your metabolism. Your reflex times, muscular tone — everything — has become almost double the Terran norm — or the Meried norm, for that matter."

"It seems to be just what Captain O'Royle called it — a metamorphosis," Brother Glad said.

"It seems that a Terran-Meried hybrid has to spend his infancy on dry land," Gon's father said. "But as an adult, he becomes a true amphibian, breathing water or air equally well."

"Mr. Cruthers wants to offer you a job," Brother Glad said. "As a liaison man with the Merieds. Your father and I, between us, have convinced him that the Meried trade is worth developing."

"You'll be more than a liaison man," O'Royle put in. "You're a hero to the sea-men — and to a sea-girl named Seryl. They want you as their official ambassador. They've offered to build you a palace, half on land, half under water, and to stock it with the rarest delicacies of the ocean — including a girl named Seryl."

There was more; Gon listened, his thoughts afloat on a sea of pleasing fancy to rival the green ocean he had at last discovered.

I came here as a man without a world," he said when the others fell silent at last. "Now I have two." END

A DAY FOR DYING

by CHARLES NUETZEL

Only one could survive the Games!

Realizing that it was probably the last time I would ever see them, I watched the tall, endless buildings rush past the police ground-car. They were glassy structures, colored in rainbow brightness, slipping by one after another. The people walked the night-streets and moved into neoned clubs happily, as on every night of their lives, unaware of the hard fact that they could be snapped away to the Tele-Games, without even a moment to say good-by to their loved ones.

I, Charles David Travers, a peace-loving Citizen of the 22nd Century, had been arrested for some unnamed crime, to appear in the Tele-Games of March 8th, 2134. And yet the world around me continued as usual.

Finally we arrived at the Tele-Games Court, a large white building that reached upward to disappear into the night sky. The officer who had presented me with the official papers now ushered me out of the car, up the steps into the building.

The walk through the Courthouse was a flashing series of dark impressions that disappeared almost immediately. I was pushed into a small courtroom, invisible death hanging from its clean white walls.

The gray-faced judge stared down at me as if made of cold steel.

"Charles David Travers, for

Judgment sir," my escort announced like a robot. "Case 2-99 63567489, of Los Angeles Major, California."

The judge looked at me. He said, "You are brought before the High Court for treason against the State. How do you plead?"

Every muscle knotted in disbelief. "I've done nothing. This is a farce. You have the wrong man."

The judge asked, "You *are* Charles David Travers, son of David Jay Travers and Joan Marianne Travers? You have a mistress by the name of Julie Thorson? You work at the International Message Service as a file clerk, Code-5B? You are a collector of old books, adventure novels, and are in the habit of spending hours in libraries and in your one-room bachelor apartment reading? You are the Charles David Travers, who wrote an article in college defending the concept of the Tele-Games as a logical means of controlling the world population and relieving our civilization of criminals, of giving the Citizens the kind of violent entertainment they so highly desire? An article which had its tongue-in-cheek subtle double-meaning — obvious, now in light of what we have learned about your true activities."

"Yes, but — "

"Then there is no mistake," the judge announced with finality. "You have been the companion of Julie Thorson for the last six months, working with her in an attempt to overthrow the government. You are guilty of first-degree treason. Miss Thorson has confessed."

"It's a lie!" I shouted.

"Silence! You will appear before the National Tele-Games of March 8th as a Man-at-Arms to do battle to the death. In the event you should be the sole survivor, you will be freed, never again to be sentenced to the Tele-Games. So is the fair judgment of the State's Justice."

Dazed, I followed the guard out of the courtroom and down a series of corridors. He stopped before two large iron doors and presented an identification card to the guard there, who allowed him to lead me into the inner chambers of the Central Los Angeles prison.

I was led to a narrow door marked 71134. The guard ordered me into the cell with a wave of his arm. The door closed behind me like the clanging of some morbid trap.

It was a voice that cut into my agony. It was filled with a mixture of surprise and pained horror. "Charlie!"

All the emotions rushed up in a flood, choking all senses like invisible fingers blotting out sanity. Whipping around, I saw the tall woman who had been my mistress these last months. But I couldn't equate this beautiful creature with the one with whom I'd shared silent walks through building-top

parks or companionable evenings in my apartment or simply dancing gracefully in the dim night-clubs, chatting happily over a dinner and cocktails. This couldn't be that same woman!

Madness clutched at my brain.

There stood the creature that had placed me here. Through the emotion of wild fury I looked at her voluptuous body, draped in a green glowing cloth that wound around her slim waist and angular hips above firm thighs, dropping like silken waves about every beautiful and loving curve of her body. She didn't seem real, standing there in the drab coldness of the cell, her arms stretched out in offering.

Sanity snapped like a thread.

"You lying tramp!" I yelled, leaping. My hands gripped her silken white throat; my fingers squeezed the air back into her lungs, trapping it there.

Maybe it was the look of surprised horror in her large brown eyes that jolted sanity back into my shocked brain. My hands lowered as I slowly stepped back.

"Those lies... I've never done anything against the State."

She clutched at her throat, gasping for air, and finally said, "Charles... believe me — I didn't tell them *anything!* So help me God!"

"Then why?" I managed, confusion defeating all hatred.

"Why do they have the Games? Why is a person sent to his death for voicing objection against the State? Or getting drunk in public, or being late paying his bills? There doesn't have to be any logical reason!" she blurted.

"But they had to have some reason!"

"You were my companion. Oh, Charlie, believe me, I'd do anything to get you out of this!" Her eyes pleaded with me to forgive her. They blurred with moisture and then closed, tears running down her creamy cheeks.

How could I hate her? She had been created for love. And I knew she returned my love. Looking at her I felt a flood of overwhelming emotion.

Helplessly I folded an arm about her waist, gently raised her chin until our eyes met. And as I looked at her, reality slipped away to become a fantasy of love.

"Oh, Charlie, thank God!" she breathed. "I was afraid you wouldn't understand! Or forgive."

After that the insanity of need overwhelmed all other considerations. There was only my sensations and Julie's form.

Some time later I was aware of Julie moving from me. I sat up and asked, "How'd they pick you up? Why?"

She shook her head. "They brought me to the Games Judge and announced that I was guilty of treasons against the State, sen-

tenced me to the Arena and brought me here. The next thing I knew you were in the cell. That's the whole truth, Charlie." She shrugged. "We're living in the most terrible Police State mankind ever devised. In our grandparents' day it was different."

I merely nodded, aware she spoke the truth. Yesterday I would have refused to believe.

My own grandfather had told me that in his youth there were television shows of violence, but they were plays written by fiction writers, performed by professional actors. Violence was the keynote. Then sporting events became more popular than drama, because of the real violence. It was a logical step to take hardened criminals, already condemned to die, and let them fight to the death for the home audience. Freeing the winner always promised a more exciting battle. With universal peace, an overcrowded world, unemployment and depression, the development of the Tele-Games became a natural evolution. Now it was an international institution that fed the greedy public with the blood-violence it so craved. People were killed. But they were other people! That made the difference.

It might have been only a couple of hours or a day before two uniformed guards stepped into the cell and ordered me out. I was taken into a small room where several rows of chairs were facing a blank wall. As I sat, the guards flanking me, the door opened and five grim-looking officers stepped in; four seated themselves directly behind us and the fifth, a Major, stood in front of me.

"You, Charles Travers, have one way to lower the sentence against you. Placing you with Miss Thorson was a waste of time; therefore, we will show you part of the recording of her interview." He then sat.

The room darkened and the wall glowed into shimmering blue life. To all appearances, it disappeared to reveal another room beyond; in reality, it was one of those huge Tri-D screens.

The major was standing in front of Julie on the screen. "You've been seeing Travers for months. What is his connection with the underground movement?"

"I can't tell you."

"Miss Thorson, you don't seem to realize your position."

"I'm fully aware," she spat out. "We don't give information about our activities."

The major nodded to one of his companions who held a small steel box. "This will give the information we want."

Julie's eyes flashed toward the box and then jerked back to the officer. Her shoulders sagged as she announced in a cold voice: "Charles Travers is my contact.

He got me into this. I don't know anything else."

The screen went dead and the lights snapped on. The real major stepped in front of me. "The rest of the information's classified. We used the Brain-box to check it out. There's no reason for you to deny connection with the Underground Nationalist Movement."

Sweat broke out over my body. No matter what I claimed, they wouldn't believe me.

The major said, "Just tell us who your contacts are."

I shook my head. "I don't know what you're talking about. She was lying."

The major nodded an done of his assistants stepped forward with a Brain-box.

I looked at the mental probe and then shrugged, remaining silent.

One of the men clamped a small band on my forehead. The man holding the box pressed a button and reality blacked out... Then the room snapped back into place.

I blinked and looked at the major. It seemed as if a great, terrible pressure had been lifted.

The major frowned, grimacing in puzzlement. "It would seem Miss Thorson lied — or one of you has been conditioned."

A gnawing cut at my stomach. "How could I afford conditioning? Only the Government has the machinery for that!" I stood, rage tensing every muscle.

"There are ways. If you are a member of the underground, there would be ways." The major laughed. "But it makes no difference. You have been sentenced — even if wrongly — and it will be carried out."

Violence snapped sanity as he turned. I leaped, grabbing his flabby throat. A great feeling of power came over me as I gazed into his reddening features; his eyes were popping out and his tongue was convulsively struggling for air. Then I felt the other men clawing at my arms and body. Something hit the back of my head, but I didn't release the major's neck until another hard object slammed once more at the base of my skull.

I had awakened in the blackness of a cell hours before, unable to see anything. It was a small place with little room for my six feet to stretch out. There wasn't any bed or covers, just hard steel to sleep on. Time passed slowly; then guards came to take me to a huge chamber packed with over a thousand people, locked behind large barred doors.

I was standing there for some time before a gentle hand touched my shoulder. I turned to see Julie. Her face was white and drawn, her lips thin, pale trembling lines.

"I... had to lie," she stammered. "The cell was tapped."

I tried to feel the hate that should be inside me, but it wouldn't

come. No emotion at all affected me. "There's nothing we can do about it."

"I have to make you understand what you're dying for." She hesitated, then pulled me aside, away from the guards. "I was arrested trying to make contact with a man. I had to lie to save him. He's very important."

"What's his name?"

She shook her head sadly. "I can't tell you. You might use the name to save yourself."

I started to argue the point, then shrugged. No matter what, I'd be sent into the Arena — to my death. The chances of survival were reduced to zero. Yet there was still hope as long as I lived.

I found myself reviewing all the major combats I'd witnessed in the National Events. They were bloody battles between inexperienced citizens armed with clubs, rapiers, broadswords and spears. No modern-day weapons were allowed for fear they might be used against the guards or the cameramen who were lodged just above the fighting area. The Arena was surrounded by an army of Games Police with weapons that could cut down every occupant of the Arena at a moment's notice. I'd seen, in viewing countless Games, that many people stood frozen in fear, letting themselves be killed. Others, more realistic, would keep outside the range of the battle until it narrowed down to a few combatants. This I hoped to do. After that, if I survived, I'd try to join the underground movement. But it was useless to tell Julie that; she wouldn't believe me.

The two of us stood together, holding hands. Finally we were ordered out through a corridor in single file, to another larger room lined with armed Games Police. There we were handed primitive weapons for the Event.

I was given a small short sword, like the ones the Romans had used in battle. It was light and made of strong steel — unlike Roman weapons.

It was the thought of personal survival on which I focused as we were herded like a mass of dumb animals into the confines of the Arena.

At that point something unexpected happened to me, like a cutting off of all sensation. It was a sharp mental shifting, a release from fear, as if a switch had been pulled, disconnecting emotion.

I looked at Julie, letting my eyes run along her flesh, but felt nothing. It was as if I had suddenly become a zombie, without any desire other than the want to kill.

I automatically swung the short sword in the air in front of me. My huge arms flexed as I stood there in the middle of the Arena, surrounded by fellow citizens, awaiting the command to kill.

Then it came. A loud blast of horns.

My sword swung into the skull of a man standing next to me. I didn't wait to let others defend themselves. The short sword moved, cutting into arms, chests, heads and necks, creating a bloody passage of death until a mass of bodies were cluttering my passage. Then I was facing a tall man carrying a huge broadsword.

He swung the weapon right at my head. Ducking to one side, I whipped the point of my blade toward his chest; it cut lightly into the flesh, drawing a thin line of red. He swung again, a slicing blow at my stomach. With speed and skill I shouldn't have possessed, I leaped in close and rammed the short sword deep into his gut, twisting with sadistic delight. Withdrawing my sword, I turned and dropped the edge of the bloody blade into a woman's skull. The weapon wrenched from my hand locked in the bony tissue of her head.

Turning, I picked up the broadsword from my fallen male antagonist of a moment before and swung it in a circle through the neck of one man and across the chest of a woman whose body sliced open, the insides bursting out like a bloody fountain.

I made a path of dead bodies before me, like cutting wheat in the fields; then I spotted Julie holding a Scottish broadsword and making a path of death much like my own, without any emotion on her face. There wasn't time to marvel at Julie's unnatural skill; she should have died in the first moments.

It's amazing how fast a couple of thousand people will die when all are enemies of each other. It seemed but minutes before less than a dozen people still lived and I found myself without an opponent. My eyes searched the Arena. I spotted Julie still alive, cutting down a tall muscular man with one swing of her blade. She looked savagely magnificent standing there, the broadsword clutched in her hands, long hair hanging loose and flying as she turned to make another kill. But now there was none other than myself.

It seemed strangely ironic, even fantastic, that it should have ended this way.

She rushed at me calmly, a primitive, mindless killer. Her blade swung at my right arm, but merely cut the outer layer of flesh. It was enough to make me accept real danger. Her light sword, built for fast movement, might easily prove superior to my heavy weapon.

Instinct snapped my broadsword toward her head. It would be over quickly. At least she would die without much pain, I told myself.

But her sword met my blade with superhuman strength. Then

the point jerked out and flicked at my chest, just missing. Our eyes met at that moment, but there was only a black expression on her face.

In the next minutes we exchanged blows which must have given the Tele-Games' viewers the greatest excitement in their lives.

We weren't two amateurs battling to the death; we were expert fighters. Where either of us had learned our skill was impossible even to guess. How could I have known the truth?

I moved with all the sweeping speed in my muscles, attempting to put a quick end to the duel. It was as if some Fate had made us almost perfectly matched. Each was skilled to perfection; each was seeking the death of a former lover.

Then she suddenly leaped forward, the point of her sword reaching for my chest. I side-stepped, using every muscle in my body. At the same time my sword moved in an arc toward Julie's middle.

She had been caught off balance, unable to check the forward movement. My blade sliced cleanly across her mid-section.

Oddly I felt nothing but relief. It was over. I'd survived.

Then I noticed something so alarming that I couldn't believe it at first. Where Julie's body was cut open appeared an odd, twisted mass of wires, circuits and plastic flesh.

Without thinking, without wanting to guess what this implied, I collapsed over he rform as if exhausted. My hands turned her body so that the gaping hole was hidden from view. How much this explained!

I stood and walked to the Freedom Door, the cameras following my every action. As I stepped from the Arena, I was surrounded by international reporters, eager with questions that I answered until a small dark man stepped up. He said, "Come, follow me."

His attitude was so much that of an Official of the Games that I followed automatically. He carried a pass that let us through the guarded corridors and out into the streets of Los Angeles. He indicated a car parked in front of the building and we got in.

As we pulled away from the curb and sped hurriedly down the street, I demanded in alarm, "Where are you taking me?"

"I'm Julie Thorson's contact," was his answer. "All will be explained shortly."

"But Julie was — "

"An android?" He smiled in a strange, almost sad manner. "Everything will be explained."

We drove in silence through the streets for half an hour before stopping at a small building in the outskirts of the city. He escorted me into the house and I found myself in a living room filled with people.

All stood and turned, looking at me.

What I saw then scared me far more than anything I'd experienced in the last days. There, standing before me, was Julie Thorson, quite alive and beautiful! I started to take a step forward when a man beside her turned and began to speak. I stood there, stunned.

"You see, Charlie," he said, "we secretly developed perfect androids; we gave them truthful memory backgrounds up to a point and then added a fictional background to hide information that we couldn't let the authorities know about. We had to find out how perfectly they had been made, to see if it were possible to fool the Government Officials. Of course nobody, outside of those in this room, knows about our discovery. And nobody would even imagine such a thing if the evidence were put before his eyes."

He paused, smiling sadly, then continued, "You see how valuable this will be in our efforts to overthrow the now existing governments and end the Tele-Games. Agents who have inhuman strength and ability, programmed to know nothing other than the 'instinctive' missions given them. The Brain-boxes will reveal nothing. We even had to give our androids sexual drives and a sense of synthetic excitement; the absence of such small things might prove a give-away. That explains why you were able to enjoy a seemingly normal sensual relation with... your Julie Thorson. The experiment worked out perfectly. We couldn't have wished for more."

I stood there dazed, shocked into believing what I saw and heard. It all fit perfectly together.

"What about me, now?" was my only question.

"After you have taped a full report you will be re-programmed," said the real Charles David Travers.

END

IF...and WHEN

by LESTER del REY

Some of my best friends are BEMs

Sometimes it seems that there's nothing new under any sun. The first great hyperspace ship from Earth breaks into normal space around Tau Ceti and begins running on normal drive toward the nearest planet. Then the navigator gasps and shouts to the pilot:

"Alien ships coming up fast, sir!"

And sure enough, there they are on the screen, operating on the same normal space drive as our explorer. But don't worry; they haven't yet found the hyperdrive, discovered three years before on Terra, and our brave Solarians can easily outmaneuvered them.

Or maybe everything looks fine, and there aren't any ships. In fact, our explorers set down near a convenient village of thatched huts and wait for the local chief to emerge, complete with witch doctor and a suitable primitive language.

Whatever other ideas are to be found in a great many science-fiction stories, we can begin with convenient intelligent aliens whose culture ranges from that we had a scant ten thousand years ago to what we might turn up in the next century or so.

More conservative writers may skip the intelligent aliens, but most planets still have native life, much of it vaguely mammalian and often hostile.

The business of filling the galaxy with life of every sort is an ancient tradition of our literature, dating back to its very beginning in the magazines. It probably derived from the early popular acceptance of the idea that Mars must have intelligent life to account for the so-called canals.

When writers got tired of the limits of the Solar System, they naturally carried their plots filled with alien contacts to the stars.

At the time, this all seemed hopelessly unscientific, and several scientists wrote some rather snide comments on science-fictional beliefs in the miraculous existence of life all over the universe. Men had once believed that life could arise spontaneously, but science had learned better. Long before, the Abbé Spallanzani proved that many-celled life could only grow from a seed or an egg; and later, Louis Pasteur showed that even one-celled life could not arise from non-living substances. Hence, life was an inexplicable miracle. We had to accept the fact that it had happened once, since we were here; but logic denied any wholesale sowing of miracles and made us unique in being alive.

Of course, Svante Arrhenius had suggested that life might be spread from world to world by spores that could stand even the conditions of space.

But that didn't help much, though a number of writers used the theory of justification for their aliens. An examination of the rate at which such spores could be spread from star to star by light pressure made the wide dissemination of such life almost as much of a miracle as spontaneous generation on every world would be.

The first crack in the uniqueness of our existence came in 1936 when a Russian biochemist A. I. Oparin published a theory on the origin of life on Earth. So far as I can remember, few stories mentioned this; and even in scientific circles it caused less comment than it deserved. But it should have served as a perfect justification for our desire to have an inexhaustible supply of aliens, bug-eyed or not.

Oparin's theory not only explained how life could come about here, but made such life almost inevitable in the development of any Earth-like planet. It was based upon the best scientific picture of what our early atmosphere must have been like before life arose.

Such an atmosphere could not contain free oxygen. That gas is far too corrosive to stay uncombined. Without plants to break down carbon dioxide gas and free the oxygen, all of the oxygen in the air would unite with other elements in about 2000 years, leaving none for animals to breathe.

Earth's early atmosphere must have resembled the gases in the deep ocean of air around Jupiter. There would be methane, a simple compound of carbon and hydrogen, and ammonia gas — a compound of nitrogen and hydrogen. There might have been some free hydrogen, as well as water vapor, a little carbon dioxide and traces of some

sulfur compounds. It was a noxious mixture, in other words.

Oparin reasoned that the action of lightning bolts striking through such a mixture of gases would cause more complicated compounds to form, among which would be the amino acids that are the basis of all living protoplasm.

By 1949, this became more than a mere theory. Dr. Hermann J. Muller — under the direction of Dr. Harold C. Urey — demonstrated it at the University of Chicago. A mixture of such gases was put in a flask and treated with electric current from a carbon arc. The resulting compounds were collected in water and analyzed.

To the amazement of those conducting the experiment, there was a very high yield of amino acids In fact, there was even some discussion of using the process for commercial preparation of the acids. The water turned into a pink "soup." And not only were the amino acids present, but it turned out they were present in about the same percentages relative to each other as they were in living tissues.

Then it was found that the action of ultraviolet light could cause the process to occur without the need of the electric spark.

Given the conditions that scientists are sure must have existed on Earth perhaps three-and-a-half billion years ago, there *had* to be an enormous production of the basic materials from which life is made. Such substances are quickly destroyed in an oxygen atmosphere; but since there was then almost no free oxygen, they were stable and would continue to accumulate. The shallow seas of that ancient Earth must have been very literally a rich broth. There was no ozone layer (since ozone is a form of free oxygen, having three atoms per molecule instead of the normal two), and hence no screen to hold back the full ultraviolet radiation of the sun. Earth was one enormous chemical factory turning out amino acids.

Oparin had no idea of how rich the production must have been. He had theorized that even a few such compounds might combine into a sort of primitive protein if given enough time. But the results of the experiments indicate that there was such a huge amount of amino acids that the combining into more complicated forms must have occurred over and over again. There may very well not have been a single initial life-form, but many similar ones.

The shakiest part of the whole thing lay in the need to get those separate amino acids to combine into sufficiently large and complex a molecule. But later experiments indicated that even this problem was not a real one. When collected into a broth under conditions that

prevailed in those ancient times, the 22 different amino acids that form life showed a natural tendency to attach themselves together in long chains. The giant molecules that are necessary to life arise automatically. The only problem would be to prevent them from doing so.

By now we know that it is almost impossible to draw a sharp line between life and non-life. The tobacco mosaic virus can exist as a pure crystal, seemingly no different from many other non-living crystals; yet on the tobacco plant it becomes an active virus that shows every characteristic of life. In between it and a one-celled plant or an amoeba there is an almost continuous spectrum.

Life apparently didn't suddenly appear; it evolved. Some combinations of amino acids had a greater tendency than others to add more building blocks onto themselves; some of these grew too big and unwieldy and split; and some of these split (reproduced) into two equal parts that carried on this greater efficiency. Accidental changes — mutations — are frequent in simple organisms, and such changes produced even more efficient forms.

For eons, perhaps, the sea broth offered all the nutriment necessary, together with the new "food" that must have been dropping from the atmosphere as creation went on. Then some cell added a trace of magnesium from the sea water by some accident to produce chlorophyl. This first plant began to change the atmosphere by releasing free oxygen. This, of course, put an end to the spontaneous generation of life by upsetting the conditions that had made it possible — and also destroyed most of the evidence.

So far, science has not created life from the raw elements directly. But every essential step has been tried and proved. We know that the only miracle involved in the start of life is to be found in the normal laws of chemistry.

We also know now that life must be as common in the universe as science fiction has always assumed. Our current theories and such evidence as we have indicate that most stars somewhat similar to our sun have planetary systems and that each such system should have at least one planet suitable for the creation of life. There is a very good chance that we will find living creatures — and even oxygen atmospheres suitable for our habitation — around most of the stars we will explore in interstellar ships.

Intelligence is another matter. The technically advanced enemies or the friendly savages so useful to our story plots are only slightly less improbable today than they were forty years ago.

Time is the enemy of our desires in this case. Life began on

Earth during the first billion years of the planet's existence and has gone on for almost four billion more years by now; there's a good chance that it will be another five billion years before the sun grows too hot and unstable for such life to continue. That means that life will have been on Earth during 90% of its existence as a planet.

The first vertebrate creature — some early form of fish — appeared only about half a billion years ago. The first warm-blooded animal may go back only a hundred million years. And the earliest form of man that we could consider even remotely human dates from perhaps a million years in the past. We wouldn't consider him much, probably, even beside the most primitive human being our history shows.

Stars come in all ages. Some are just forming now and building their planets with them. Others are almost at the end of their hydrogen-fusion cycle, after which no habitable planets will exist. And the factors producing intelligence are so complex that we can't possibly guess the time needed for another race. Intelligence occupies such a tiny and uncertain period in history that the chance of finding it elsewhere is almost nonexistent.

Of course, we can hope that intelligence, once reached, will continue forever. The evidence isn't favorable; the bigness of the dinosaur and the striking power of the sabertooth vanished before advances none could have foreseen. But maybe intelligence is the ultimate goal of life.

Certainly, however, it will not be static. Evolution seems to go faster as we rise higher, rather than halting. *Australopithecus* of a million years ago would have less in common with us than with *Proconsul* of ten million years before. We may be still further from "man" of ten thousand years in the future. A primate learned to use his hands and built a brain around them to create us. What will man build around DNA when he learns to use it, for instance?

When we write about our aliens, we cover no more than our earliest history of a few millennia ago to perhaps not even a century ahead. It is too small a second to consider in the day of a planet. Or so science and logic tell us. We are not unique among stars in having planets, nor among planets in having life. But we're still unique in our particular concept of intelligence. Science fiction is just wish-dreaming, as usual, in having us meet alien intelligences so like ourselves.

As usual?

We were right and logic was wrong about there being planets around the stars and about life on those planets. I can only hope we *are* wish-dreaming as usual! We'll meet the nicest aliens. END

WHERE THE BEAST RUNS

by DEAN R. KOONTZ

Illustrated by ADKINS

Bounty hunting is never for the squeamish. But this Beast was one no sane man could ever kill.

I

Long ago, shortly after my mother's blood was sluiced from the streets of Changeover and her body burned upon a pyre outside of town, I suffered what the seems a very inadequate word to psychologists call a trauma. That me.

To understand this trauma, you should know some of the events that preceded it. The townfolk came in the middle of the night

and took her, decapitated her, stuffed a cross cut from stale bread into her dead mouth, and charred her in fire fed by the bows of a dogwood tree. I was five years old at the time.

Those were the days when men still killed, before Hope sprang up as the capital of our galaxy and pushed forth a society where no man killed another man, where sanity ruled. That was a thousand years ago, a century after Galactic War I, before Eternity Combine gave us immortality. And worst of all, that was Earth. The rest of the galaxy was staggering to its feet; Hope was an idea born in brighter minds; and Earthmen were still hunting witches.

To hide me from those who would destroy me because my mother was a mutant who could lift pencils — only pencils and scraps of paper — with her mind, my grandparents locked me in a closet of their house. There were smells of mothballs, old rubber, rainshoes and yellowed magazine paper. I could see dark ghosts of wools and cottons hanging all about.

And I wept. There was little else to do.

On the third day, the witch hunters were certain that I had perished in the fire of the house, for they could not find me and trusted my grandparents, chiefly because they were normal. So it was that on the third day I was brought forth from the closet and into the parlor where my grandmother kissed me and dried her eyes on her gray, coarse apron. On that same day, my grandfather came to me where I sat with my grandmother, his huge calloused hands folded over each other, concealing something. "I've a surprise for you, Andy."

I smiled.

He took one hand from the other, revealing a lump of coal with eyes a shade darker than the rest of it. "Caesar!" I cried. Caesar was my myna bird, rescued in some miraculous fashion from the holocaust of the exorcism.

I ran to my grandfather; and as I ran, the bird screeched in imitation: "Andyboy, Andyboy." I stopped and stared at it. It fluttered a wing. "Andyboy, Andyboy, An — "

And I started to scream. It was an involuntary scream, torn from my lungs, bursting through my lips, roaring into the room. The myna's words were mockings of my mother's. The inflection, though not tone, was perfect.

I turned and ran from the parlor. Wings beat against me. Caesar was a stuck recording.

Grandfather was running too, but he was not grandfather any longer. Instead, he seemed one of the witch hunters shooting out the windows of our house, screaming

wildly for my mother's death.

Running through the half open cellar door, I stumbled down the steps, flailing at the hideous wings, the sharp orange beak that tried to be her lips. I locked myself in the coal room while Caesar battered himself to tatters against the thick door. When grandfather finally broke it down, I was on my knees with my head against the floor, unable to scream in anything but a hoarse whisper. My knuckles were raw from pounding them against the concrete, my blood a polka-dot pattern on the grayness.

I was taken to bed, nursed to recovery and sent off-planet to an aunt's home in another solar system where men were coming of age faster. I grew up, took Eternity Combine's treatments in the first public group and outlived Caesar, grandfather and all.

Years later, at one of Congressman Horner's parties, a psychologist told me it had all been a trauma concerning Death and my new perception of it. I told him trauma was a terribly inadequate word and went off to dance with a particularly beautiful young woman.

Now I was experiencing fear much the same as the fear that day so long ago when I was five and my mother was three days dead. It was the fear of death — stinking, oppressive, omnipresent. I am always afraid at the beginning of a hunt. It made no difference this day that I had gone on 215 others; it was this one that was immediate — and frightening. If I was killed in these jungles, Eternity Combine could never reach me in time to restore me to life. Dying here, one stayed dead.

And what for? Money? Certainly, that was part of it. Lotus, Crazy and I would pick up seventy thoucredits apiece when we split the bounty on this Beast. But it was more than money. Lotus was all stirred up by the photos of children who had fallen prey to the Beast. She's soft-hearted for kids and dogs. Crazy? Well, he had a brother who was a bounty hunter too. His brother had tried to bring back this particular Beast, and his brother had never been seen again. It was revenge for Crazy. Then there was blood lust. We didn't kid ourselves about that. In a world where killing was horrifying to nearly everyone, we killed. True, only animals. But the point is we had a violence-tendency that was missing in most. We wouldn't kill people, but Beasts were another story... I guess blood lust was my major driving force, all stemming back to that trauma.

I loaded the last of the cameras into the floater and looked around for the others. "Lotus! Crazy! Let's get a move on!"

"All right, all right," Crazy said, stomping down the steps of the out-

side entrance to the guest house. We were staying on Congressman Horner's Earth Ranch until the completion of the hunt. Crazy Horse, since he weighed three hundred pounds plus fifty and was blessed with hooves, did not use the highly polished, slippery indoor steps of plasti-glass. Oh, his full, real name was Jackson Lincoln Puicca, after the famous General, famous humanitarian and famous scientist. But we called him Crazy Horse — mostly because he was crazy — and because he sure did look like a horse.

Crazy was a natural mutant, not a product of the Artificial Wombs. One day there had been a nuclear war spreading through the civilized galaxy. Several generations later, there was Crazy — muscular, bright, shaggy-headed, and horse-behinded. He was a valuable man on a bounty hunt. Just as his brother must have been . . .

"Where's Lotus?" I asked.

"Out picking berries somewhere. You know her."

"You know *what* about her?" Lotus asked as she lifted over a corral fence, her blue-fog wings fluffing gently as she glided on the breeze. "What would you say of me behind my back, Crazy?"

Crazy Horse stomped his hooves, folded his hands in supplication. "What *could* I say behind your back, pretty one, when you're possessed of such ears?"

Lotus settled on the ground next to me. She fingered the delicate, elongated shells that were her elfin ears and looked at Crazy. "Yours are bigger. I don't think I should make nasty remarks about another's ears if mine were distended bladders like yours."

Crazy snorted and shook his huge head so that his wild mane covered his baggy ears.

"I'm on time, I trust," Lotus said.

"Trouble is," I said, putting an arm about her twenty-inch waist and looking at her small four-feet-eleven form, "you know damned well we'd wait all day and not be angry at you."

"That's because I'm the prettiest girl around," she snapped, her green-blue eyes adance.

"Not much competition on an all-male ranch," Crazy muttered.

"And you, Crazy, are the handsomest horse I have seen here." She said it so that he didn't know whether to be mad or laugh — so he laughed.

That was Lotus. She was cute as Christmas multiplied by Halloween and Easter — and she knew it, which wasn't always so bad because she pulled her own weight. Aside from being one of the best botanists specializing in post-A-war plants, she was our aerial reconnaissance expert since she could fly ahead, land where a floater

would never fit, and let us know what was dangerous or interesting that stood in our way. Why a botanist on a bounty hunt? Well, it was true we usually stalked killer animals that disturbed the small towns on the post-war rural planets. But now and again there were plants which were just as deadly. There were those walking plants on Fanner II that latched onto the nearest warm-blooded animal — often human-type — lashed roots around it, grew through it all night long, absorbed it and walked away with the sunrise — a few inches taller and satisfied until darkness came again, which was every nine hours on Fanner II. Thus, Lotus.

"Let's get moving," I said. "I want these cameras set before dark."

"After you, Butterfly," Crazy said, bowing as far as he could, considering his less-than-human posterior.

Lotus breezed into the floater like a smoke puff. Crazy followed, and I went last, dogging the door behind. We had three seats across the front of that tub — Lotus between us two men. I was pilot.

A floater is a round ball with an inner and outer hull, each independent of the other. Thus if you ever meet an eighteen-foot bat, you can have an outer hull beaten to Hell and never feel it inside or let it deflect your course, since the inner one carries the drive engines.

I pulled back on the stick, lifted us and set out for the forest jungle that had spread outward from the Harrisburg Crater. The screens gave us a full view of the ugly woods. At the edge were gray-green ferns. Later, these gave way to giant trees that choked the ferns but were equally gray and lifeless-looking.

"You haven't said what you've found out about our quarry this trip," Lotus said.

"It killed Ralph," Crazy said. "That's all I need to know."

"Tell us more," Lotus said, pulling the thin membrane of her wings about her like a cloak. "Tell us all Horner told you."

"Mainly, we're the fifth team to be sent after it. Crazy's brother was on the fourth."

"The other teams?" Crazy asked.

"All together, there were twenty-two in the other four teams. Twenty were never seen again."

"The other two?" Lotus asked.

"Rescue parties brought them out — in pieces."

Below, the world was gray-green.

Five miles into the forest, I set the floater down in a small clearing. Lotus went ahead to check for other clearings and crossings where it might be wisest to rig the cameras and their tiny electric-eye triggers. Chances were we'd get a wide variety of freaks on film, but we should have no trouble picking our killer. From the four hazy de-

scriptions we had, we knew that he was approximately eight feet tall, man-like and damnably ugly. There were a number of mutants that fit the first and last parts of that — but few of them were manlike. None of the descriptions gave any indication of why twenty-two experienced bounty hunters had not killed it but had been killed instead.

Crazy was setting up electric eyes, stringing wires back toward me and concealing them with fine layers of dust. I was rigging the cameras in the rocks and bushes. Both of us had our backs to the same part of the forest.

And that was a mistake.

II

Crazy would have heard it first, except that he still had his hair down over his ears, hindering his usually keen hearing. When I heard the snapping and low keening, it was almost on top of us. Whirling, I brought my gun up...

And up, and up, and up... Damn, was it big! Big and quiet, which is a combination we hit more often than you might think. It stared down through the trees at us, thirty feet high, its bulbous belly opening over us like a wet, wicked mouth — which it was. No long, slow throat-to-stomach affair here. Just open up and — *slurp!* Spiders make me sick. This one made me sicker than usual. There were ugly, cancerous scabs all over it, pus-coated hairs hanging heavily from each disease pocket.

"Don't shoot yet," I told Crazy. But he didn't have to be told. More than once he had seen these things react reflexively to a shot, leap in and chomp up whatever was holding the gun. A big spider is not so large as he looks; he is mostly spindly legs which can squeeze together fast into a little ball, to drop him fifteen feet in height and let him scuttle in under the trees after you.

"The rocks," I said quietly, watching the multi-prismed eye watch me. Very slowly and with grace, we edged our way along the rocks where I had been setting that particular camera.

The spider watched, swiveling its strangely tiny head to follow us, a row of fine hairs a-twiddle below its eyes.

The rocks were actually the ruins of centuries, tossed here by the A-blast that had leveled Harrisburg, a provincial capital at that time. It was a vast tumble of caves, valleys and mountains of bricks and stone and powdered mortar.

Moving a tentative step, the spider settled long legs through the brush with a minimum of noise. It keened a bit louder.

We reached a place where the rock broke open to form a small valley, closing again four hundred

feet away and forming a dark tunnel that led further into the ruins — a tunnel too small for a beast like this. "Now," I whispered. "Run!"

We turned and loped into the valley, cutting ourselves off from view of the spider. Crazy reached the tunnel first. His legs were often an asset when speed was needed.

I was halfway down the valley when the spider mounted the one valley wall and looked down on us. The colossal red eyes glittered accusingly. Then the belly appeared, mandibles open and clacking.

Crazy opened fire with his vibra pistol, catching one of its legs. The beast drew up the wounded member, twiddling it madly. Crazy fired again and blew off another leg.

I ran.

The spider started down into the valley

Crazy shot again, tearing open the beast's side. But spiders are tough — and a fist-sized wound wasn't stopping this baby.

Also, we had too-hastily overlooked a very important thing: tunnels make nice homes — for things. Crazy was raising his pistol for a shot at the giant head when a pinkish grub-like creature came wriggling out of the tunnel in defense of its abode, casting off three-inch, hard thorns. One of these struck Crazy's arm and sent him tumbling, his gun lost in the stones.

The spider keened insanely.

The grub, suddenly a more immediate danger, hissed, arched its back and flung itself forward in spasmodic lurches that were immediately followed by the jerking release of the sharp quills. I ran to Crazy and tried dragging him to the walls where the beasts could attack from only one direction. But dragging three hundred and fifty pounds was just about impossible.

I crouched behind Crazy Horse and pulled the spine fro mhis arm. There was a lot of blood pumping out of that arm. I had nothing to stop it with, either. I turned to the grub, looking for a vulnerable spot. Most of his belly was calloused, but he always managed to keep the first two segments aloft. I aimed my vibra pistol there, pulled the trigger and held it down. The worm went kicking into the air, turning over and over, tossing off spines that shot over our heads. He crashed back to the ground when I stopped firing and was very still.

But the spider . . .

It was at the opposite end of the valley now, having used the grub's diversions as a chance to find an easy entry. Behind it, anchored to the rubble, was a thin web structure. It was getting ready to snare us.

Crazy moaned, kicked a foot and lapsed into unconsciousness again.

The spider leaped.

All those legs just tensed, and it

was moving through the air, hitting the ground and running silently.

I fired.

The shot caught it in the legs, folding the spindly members up under it, and sent it tumbling backwards. It lay still so long that I thought it dead, but finally it stirred, stood, and clung to the rubble wall, watching me. I was mentally charting all possible pathways of advancement for it, trying to anticipate its next move. But I didn't expect the silk to come spitting out like liquid smoke from so great a distance. Lazily, it twirled toward us. The spider could evidently direct two of these lines at the same time, for two of them approached. One struck the wall to the left, curling over a rocky projection halfway up; the second hit at an equal height on the opposite wall, lacing through loosely stacked rubble and welding its hold into a solid position. Then the beast began swinging the lines, wrapping them back and forth from wall to wall, closing us in.

I sat on the ground, braced my back against Crazy and thumbed the controls of the vibra pistol to full power. The web dropped over us, fouling my hand. I had to spend several valuable seconds trying to untangle the sticky mess from the gun and my fingers. When I raised the gun again, the spider had advanced fifty feet. I fired. But the web was so dense now that it absorbed the blast and diffused it, before dissolving under it. I could not dissolve it as fast as the spider could make it.

Another filament dropped across my back. Crazy was almost covered.

I shot.

The web absorbed it. The web dissolved. The web was replaced. The spider was keening more frantically than ever, no longer quiet in its advance. A sticky strand lashed around me, pinning my arms to my chest. Another. A third. I was being cocooned. The gun dropped out of my hands as circulation was cut down in my arms and my hands grew numb.

A strand crossed my face, fouling an eye.

Crazy was invisible beneath snowy thread.

The spider tensed to leap.

III

Lotus was no helpless, frightened rabbit of a girl when there was danger. Lotus was a girl who came fluttering over the tree tops just as the spider was about to devour her friends and leaped onto the spider without a gun.

But she had her knife. She kept it in her waistband, where only the red gem handle showed until she had to use it.

I was pinned by the web, watching the hairy black mutant dance

across the foggy highway it had built when she came into view in the sky and spotted the action. She dipped, swayed with half a second's hesitation, then landed on the twisted semi-shoulders behind the beast's head. She tossed her legs around that neck, riding it as if it were a bronc. It swiveled its eyes, trying to catch sight of her, but the eyes didn't revolve far enough. Just when they were at the apex of their revolution, she drove the silver blade into the left orb, up to the crimson hilt, and slashed downward.

The spider reared.

The stream of web fluid ceased abruptly, and the beast danced backward down the inclined silken plane, keening like a thousand flutes gone sour. It staggered sideways like a drunk. I wanted to shout that it might try to roll over on her, but my mouth was blocked with fast-drying web, and I could not move my arms to clear it away.

She pulled the knife out and found the second eye with it. The spider flailed and ran at the cliffs, but found it too much trouble to climb out and still bear the pain that was wracking it. Then it rolled...

"Lotus!" I screamed. But it came out a choked whisper, strained through the web matting my lips.

But she was flying again, her wings beating furiously until they had taken her high enough to catch the low breezes. They fluffed out then and carried her back and forth across the chasm, letting her watch the spider.

It died slowly and with lots of kicking. Once, I was sure it was going to blunder onto the web and fall in upon Crazy and me, but it never did. When it was down for good, Lotus drifted into the web, to settle at its edge. "Andy! Crazy!"

I tried to call out. The result was a low-key vibration.

"I hear you! I'll get you out!"

I blessed her elongated ears. A moment later, she began hacking into the web with her knife. In time, she reached me and cut away the fuzz that bound my arms and closed my mouth. Together, we removed Crazy, ready for the worst.

But it wasn't that bad at all. He was still unconscious, but the webbing had matted over the spine wound, stopping the bleeding.

"We'll have to take him back," I said.

"The cameras?"

"We were only setting up the second one."

"You finish," she said. "I checked ahead. Follow the main trail for half a mile and you'll cross six major intersections. That should give us enough coverage to see if the beast uses these trails regularly. If

you bring the floater here first, I can take care of Crazy."

"He may be — "

"He'll be okay. There's enough medical supplies in the floater to fix him up."

She was a good nurse. "Okay," I said. "I'll be back in a minute." Actually, it was four minutes, but when I settled the floater down next to the pieces of the web, she already had Crazy uncovered and clean of the sticky stuff. I took the cameras, slung them over my shoulders and set out — lugging what two were meant to carry. I kept my gun drawn and an eye out for hairy trees . . .

Three hours later, I stumbled back, worn out and showing it. Lotus and Crazy were laughing about something. "Nice way to get out of doing work," I said.

Crazy looked up, whinnying that silly laugh of his. "You can have this arm if you want. I'd rather have gone setting the cameras than nursing this."

"Likely story."

"We'd better be getting back," Lotus said. "Looks like a storm, and I don't want to see what might come tromping around in the rain."

It was a heavy rain that gave Fanner II's vampire plants such voracious appetites.

"Okay. Can you walk at all, Crazy.

"I can manage."

"Let's go."

One day, the men start looking like animals to you. And you realize you are allowed to shoot animals .. And you realize you are just imagining them as animals so that you can shoot them and revenge your mother — and maybe wipe out that entire chapter of your life . . . Deep down, you think maybe you want to spill the blood of men, spill it and drink it . . .

I must have been moaning in my sleep. It was an old and often-felt dream. I say that I must have been muttering, for when I slipped from the dream to the dark reality of the bedroom, there was a light body against mine, lips on my two, and soft, velvet wings enclosing us in the closet of our souls . . .

The next morning, we went out to collect the cameras. Crazy's arm was almost healed, thanks to the speedheal salve and bandages. We hoped he would be well enough to begin the hunt shortly after noon in the event the cameras had recorded anything.

And the camera had.

"I don't like it," Crazy grunted as the film loop came across the viewer for the sixth time.

"It isn't the ugliest we've met," I said. It stood seven and a half feet tall and was heavier than Crazy. Two arms trailed the ground, with six-inch claws on them, and there was a set of smaller arms in the middle of a barrel chest. The little hands fiddled with each other,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lacing fingers. The mouth was a treasure trove — if you value sharp, yellow teeth. It had one sunken eye in the left side of its face and an undeveloped socket where the other one should be. "It doesn't even look as dangerous as the spider."

"That's what I mean. I don't like it."

"Huh?"

"I think," Lotus interrupted, "that Crazy means it looks *too* easy. Anything that easy would have been knocked out by the first team that went after it. It must have something else besides claws, teeth and an extra pair of hands."

"What do you think?" I asked her.

"Can't say," Lotus chirped. "That would be like stating the cause of death before the murder."

"What's the concensus? Should we back out of this one?"

They both voted to go on.

I smiled and shut off the film loop. "Okay. Let's get started. Crazy, your arm all right?"

He peeled off the bandage and flexed it. It was swollen but unscarred. "Never felt better. Let's go."

IV

We made camp near the crossway where the camera had caught him. Lotus took the first watch, and I was halfway into the second when I heard something of more than medium size coming along from the right. Unholstering my pistol, I stretched out behind a heavy row of bushes and waited. My infrared goggles filtered out the night, giving me a perfect view.

In a way, I wished it had been dark. This fellow looked a lot more formidable in person than when seen from a camera. The short view on the film hadn't shown the easy loping motion of the mutant. I decided upon his ancestry pretty quickly — ape. There had probably been a zoo around when the big bang wiped out the city and its suburbs, a zoo just far enough out to be saved. Radiation did the rest. He loped by and was gone in the darkness.

I found I was sweating — yet the wind was cool.

I pushed myself up from the ground and stepped back to my previous waiting post. I was in the process of sitting down when I saw, from the corner of my eye, that the Beast had returned and was standing half a dozen yards away, squinting at me. I cursed myself for forgetting the curiosity and cunning of the apes. I hadn't wanted to try killing him until I had studied him a few more times. Now I had no choice.

Suddenly, he started toward me.

I brought up my pistol and fired two blue-white bolts at him.

But he wasn't there any longer.

He had ducked and taken off beneath the line of the brush. He could have been a hundred yards gone or only four feet away. I panicked. That's a bad thing to do in a strange jungle in the dark with a killer Beast prowling around. I started backing up, moving toward a small, cleared knoll where I imagined I would have the advantage of a better view.

There was a rustling to my left. I fired, but there was no scream. I backed faster. My heart was throbbing, and the loudness of it seemed to reverberate through the trees. All other sounds had ceased. The fauna knew something was up. I kept backing.

Then I found that the knoll wasn't a knoll at all. The infrared goggles were not at fault, for it did look like a knoll, even from a dozen feet away. But it was a lush, clover-like growth that rose to a height of five feet in the center, tapering to three at the edges of the clearing. I turned to move forward, realizing the Beast was ahead, waiting. If I backed long enough, I would cross the small hill and come into the safety of our camp. I cursed myself for missing that first shot.

I was in the middle of the stuff, clover up to my middle chest, when there was one other sound besides my heart thumping — a thick, guttural snarling. Somewhere, in the dense growth, crouched beneath its surface, the Beast moved.

I almost yelled for help. But that would have given the Beast a fix. Now, he was only prowling, but he would come running at the sound of my voice. Or at the sound of my feet. I couldn't move and I couldn't yell, and I damn sure couldn't just wait to be discovered.

Aiming where I thought the noise was coming from, I pulled the trigger. A patch of burned-out clover turned steaming and black. Nothing more. It was impossible to tell where in the dense stuff the growling was.

Then he leaped!

I whirled sideways, spun even further and faster as his wicked claws tore through my shoulder. He crashed into the clover again and did not make a sound. I clutched my shoulder with my gun hand, then realized I would have to keep that hand free and let the damn wound bleed if it wanted to.

It wanted to.

Ape. Damn, clever, agile ape! I cursed him, gritting my teeth against the pain in my shoulder, blinking out tears of fury that blotted my vision. Suddenly, he was leaping again. This time I moved fast enough. He missed altogether.

I kept my eyes on the spot his hand disappeared into. Slowly, the clover began to waver as he moved around to the right to spring from a different direction. I followed the movement of the clover until he had positioned himself. I waited.

He was foxy but not too patient. He leaped, and I burned him. He fell halfway to me, rolling around through the clover. Now, I had the upper hand. I moved after him, burning off the clover to keep him moving. He stood up to run, and I shot his left arm. He screamed like a kitten at its first bath.

Then, abruptly, there was blackness . . . More like a blur. In that blur, he was charging me, swiping at me, tearing at my side, ripping me up and down . . .

Much later, when the sun was up and the birds were singing, Lotus poured something warm into my mouth and I was waking up to the beautiful scene of her face. Then Crazy spoiled it by sticking his horsey mug into the picture. "What happened?"

I struggled to sit up, managed with their help. My head swam, settled slowly and was still. "I shot it. Wounded it, anyway. It tried to kill me."

"Why didn't you kill it?" Lotus asked.

"I guess it knocked my gun away."

"No," Crazy said. "You had the gun clutched in your hand when we found you. You must have been holding it when he chewed you up. Then why didn't you shoot it again?"

I tried to remember. I could picture the blue-white vibra beam tearing open the night. There was some sort of exclamation — evidently from me — and I could no longer shoot. It was limping at me, bleeding badly, but I could not pull the trigger. I didn't *want* to pull the trigger! I explained the memories as I recalled them.

"Hypnosis?" Crazy asked.

"I don't think so. I wasn't spellbound. Something . . . something else."

"I think we should back out now," Lotus said. "I think we should pack our gear and move out fast."

"No," I said, trying to look more chipper than I felt. "We'll get it. I know we'll get it."

"But there are other jobs — easier jobs," she protested.

"We've shed our blood for this one," Crazy said. "When you spill your blood for a hunt, you're bound to get the beast no matter what."

She fluttered her soft blue wings, looking right through me as only she can do. "It's more than that to you, isn't it, Andy?"

"Yes," I croaked. "Yes, I suppose it is. Though I don't know what." Then I passed out.

Two days later all my wounds were healed. We had not seen the Beast since, though we were not inexperienced enough to think it had crawled away to die. We decided, instead, that it had returned to its lair, somewhere in the forest,

to heal itself. We had ceased to speculate about why I had been unable to kill it when I had the chance, for that was not a happy thing to speculate about. There were too many bad dreams in something like that.

Leaving everything that could not be carried easily, we struck out with inflatable mattresses, food, water and guns. Most of all, guns. After establishing what our quarry's footprints were like — humanish, four-toed, with long and wicked nails tipping each toe — from a set that led away from the fight scene in a limp pattern, we set off deeper into the woods. On the second day of the march, we found where it had fallen and had lain for some time until it found the strength to go on. On the third day, we tracked it to the lip of the Harrisburg Crater — where the footprints ceased.

We stood there on the rim of the vast depression, staring across the table of nuclear glass that the triple-headed super-nuclear rocket had made. The crater, I knew from the maps, was two and a quarter miles in diameter. That was a lot of space. Dotting it were thousands of bubbles of glass. A number of them were broken and led to the maze of caves that lay under the floor of the crater. Apparently, in one of those caves, the beast was licking its wounds — and waiting.

"How can we cover all that?" Crazy asked.

"We'll do it," I said. I didn't want to do it. I didn't know why I didn't order everyone to back track, to get the hell out of there. Lotus was right, of course; the reason was more than revenge against a dumb animal. For a moment, I felt like Hamlet on the castle ramparts, talking to a ghost. But that feeling passed. My determination had something to do with that night when I could have killed it and didn't, when I almost let it kill me. And why? Why had it killed twenty-two others?

"I guess here is as good a place as any," Lotus said. "Let's make camp here." She swung a hand around, indicating the thirty feet of hard-packed earth that separated the forest from the crater edge. Here and there, a few sparse pieces of vegetation were trying to grow on the no-plant's-land between woods and glass. They weren't doing too well, but they made the bleakness a little less bleak.

"Here it is," I said, dropping my own gear. "We'll start to search the caves tomorrow."

Nightfall drifted in — a black fog.

There were stars in the sky, but the greatest light show of all lay at our feet. For two and one quarter miles ahead, the nuclear glass shimmered with vibrant colors, giving off the heat of day. Blue chased reds across its surface while ambers danced with oranges.

I was sitting on the edge of the crater, dangling my legs, a hundred yards or so from the campsite. Crazy was back there, still eating supper. His suppers lasted two hours. Lotus drifted down next to me, folded her tiny legs under her and put her head on my shoulder. Her hair was cool and sweet-smelling. It was as black as the night and blew around my ears and chin and made me feel good.

"Beautiful, isn't it," I said. There was a burst of orange rimmed with silver to the right.

"Very," she said as she tried to crawl closer. She was our consolation. She held the team together. Crazy and I could not have lasted a month without her. Briefly, I wondered at her and Crazy; he was so big and clumsy, while she was so tiny, so fragile. But she never came back cracked or chipped, so maybe the lummox was gentler than he seemed.

"You scared?" I asked. She was trembling, and it was not cold.

"You know me."

"We'll win. We're the good guys."

I felt something wet on my neck, and I knew it was a tear. I shifted a little and cuddled her and muttered soothing platitudes. But mainly, I just sat there being uncomfortable and damned happy all at once. Lotus almost never cried. When she did, she was worried about one of us — I mean *really* worried — and then she couldn't stop until she was dried out. I could only sit and hold her.

So she was crying.

And I was cuddling.

And, suddenly, Crazy was screaming!

V

A very long time ago, as I had sat at an upstairs window before my mother made me leave our house, there had come two giant red eyes out of the night mists. They had been as large as saucers, casting scarlet light ahead of them, focusing on the house. It was a jeep covered with sheets and red cellophane and painted to look like a dragon by the Knights of the Dragon to Preserve Humanity. I thought it very funny that grown people should play at such games.

Now, below me in the pit that had suddenly opened and swallowed Crazy, a spider, spindly legs bracing it a hundred feet down, was looking up with crimson headlamp eyes. Only, there was something worse than a jeep behind these orbs.

"Crazy!" I shouted.

"Here. Toward the left!"

I took the lantern Lotus brought from the camp and lowered it into the steeply sloping tunnel. The spider backed off another fifty feet. Branching off from the main fall were several side tunnels, all filled

with eggs and sticky webbing.

"It must have burrowed close to the surface," Crazy shouted. "I just stepped on the ground and it gave away under me."

He had rolled into one of the side tunnels and was caught up in the stickiness and the eggs. The mother spider fidgeted below, wanting to come charging up, frightened only for the moment. "Lotus, climbing cleats — and your knife. Hurry!"

She lifted away and was back almost instantly. I slipped the cleat attachments onto my boots and took her knife to cut steps into the tunnel wall. "I'm coming down, Crazy."

"What about the spider?"

"She looks scared."

"She'll get over that. Stay out."

"Crazy, you're nuts." I crawled down into the sloping cave, hating to turn my back on the spider but unable to negotiate the steep passage head first.

The red eyes watched. They never blinked. They had no lids.

I reached the side cave where Crazy was trapped, with dirt packed so tightly under my fingernails that they ached. I hacked away the web, balled it up and stuffed it behind him. I didn't want to drop it down the main shaft for fear the jolt would bring her flailing upward, stomach open. When I had his head and arms free, he was able to help himself.

"You first," I said. "Can you make it up?"

"These hooves give perfect balance." He kicked out of the egg pocket and started up the incline. I waited until he was almost out, then launched myself on the climb. But all this action had shaken the mother spider to action. I could hear the scuttling of her feet coming up fast.

"I can't shoot, Andy!" Lotus shouted. "You're in the way!"

I started to say something when the furry legs touched me around the waist and pulled me loose. But the spider wasn't prepared for all my weight. She wobbled and collapsed. We both plunged down the slope, twisted around a bend — all her legs kicking furiously — and dropped twenty feet onto a cavern floor.

I was on top of the spider.

She was screaming. Then, despite the pounding of my heart, I could hear that most of the screams were echoes, cast back by the walls of the great stone chamber.

I felt something wet, scrambled for a hand hold on the flailing beast and looked down. My foot was dangling inside her stomach! She had rolled onto her back, and I was mounted on her deadly under-side. The mandibles quivered. I jerked the foot back and discovered the knife still clutched in my hand.

The head reared up as she tried to throw me off. I struck for the eye, pulled back the blade and was rewarded with gushing blood. She screamed louder, rolling about. I was tossed free, to crouch behind a large boulder.

The spider did her death dance, and then stilled, her flashing legs awkwardly akimbo.

I remained behind the rocks, clutching an arm that ached, too afraid to look at it until I saw that the beast was dead and she would not be rushing me. It took her some time to expire, but she did so with a great amount of frothing. When I looked at my arm, I could see the reason for pain; a small piece of white bone was sticking through the flesh, white and spotted with blood. My head was swimming, and I suddenly felt more than a thousand years old.

Above, from the tunnel that the spider and I had fallen through, I could hear a noisy scuffling. My head spun even faster, and visions of the beast's mate swam through my head, magnifying my fears. I got to my feet. I felt as if I were walking on a cushion of air. My eyes were burning coals someone had dropped into my sockets, while my head was a block of melting ice. I staggered out of the large cavern, moving to a tunnel that glittered with light at its end, hoping that this — in some way — would lead me out.

The stones seemed to melt and reform around me. My teeth chattered in my ice head. I perspired.

The end of the tunnel was a branching-off place where the walls turned to glass and wound erratically off under the floor of the vast crater. Turquoise and crimson ceilings flashed over me. The walls were tinted mirrors. Reality was pushed even further from my mind, and delusion and fever grew stronger. I moved to the right.

My arm had become a flaming tree, its roots grown deep into my chest, constricting my lungs. Panting, I moved on through the winding glass corridors, sane enough to know who I was and that I must get out, but just delirious enough to not think of turning back and working along the route I had covered. In this manner, I came across the Beast in its lair.

The tunnel ended in a room where grasses had been dragged in, and there was rotting flesh from past meals strewn on the floor. There was a natural stairway, uneven but usable, breaking one wall. It led to the ceiling where a half-moon aperture offered escape to the crater floor overhead. But lying between that escape route and me was the Beast. And, though dying, he was not dead.

I stopped, swaying crazily. The Beast was watching me from where he lay, his massive head raised

from the floor, his single red eye a hideous lantern, bright even in this glittering room of fantasy walls. He grunted and tried to move. His leg was a mess. That was the work of my first shot. He shoved his other leg under himself and pulled into a sitting position, all weight on one arm and his good leg. He snarled. I saw that he was going to leap.

I looked about for a chunk of loose glass and found one the size of my fist. I bent, picked it up and weighed it. I brought my healthy arm back, to heave it at the Beast's head. It struck his chest instead, knocking him on his behind. He struggled to a sitting position while I searched for another rock.

The walls glittered, seeming to recede and quickly approach me when I moved too much . . .

I found a sharp-edged piece and brought it back to throw.

And he spoke. "Make Caesar shut up!" he said. "Make him shut up!"

I almost dropped the rock. The walls wiggled crazily. The Beast repeated the thing, over and over. Then he leaped.

The force of his impact was not as great as it might have been had he been able to use both feet to propel himself. Still, he bowled me over. He raked claws down the side of my face as we rolled. I kicked free and rolled across the floor to the far wall. Above was the exit.

"Andy!" Lotus and Crazy appeared at the entrance to the room. It had been they, not the spider's mate, who had been scrambling down that tunnel!

"Make Caesar shut up!" the beast recited. "Make him shut up!"

The two of them froze. Crazy had a gun drawn and was about to fire. Now he left the gun dangling loosely in his fingers.

"Kill it!" I shouted.

"It's intelligent," Lotus said, rubbing her tiny hands together.

"It is like hell!" Panting as I was, I must have sounded more like an animal than the Beast. "It killed Ralph, Crazy!"

Crazy flinched, looking very distressed. "It's more man than animal," he said, his gun hanging uselessly in his hand.

"It got that phrase from me!" I shouted. "I said that when I shot it in the woods. It must have been speaking then — something it picked up from a previous bounty hunter — and I thought it was intelligent. That's why I couldn't shoot it. Man cannot kill man. But this is a Beast! Nothing more. A myna bird."

"It got that phrase from me!" the Beast shouted, struggling across the floor toward me, throwing a few cautious looks behind at Lotus and Crazy.

"See!"

"See!" it mocked me.

Lotus grabbed the gun from

Crazy and aimed. But she could not fire. "Here, Andy!" She tossed the gun to me, over the Beast. It clattered against the wall five feet away. Wearily, I inched after it.

And the Beast was on me. He tore at me with his reserve of strength, the strength he had been saving to meet death with. I felt blood pumping out of my back as his claws raked it. His foul breath swept over me.

I kicked out with a last ounce of strength. My boot caught him on the chin and stunned him. My fingers slipped over the gun. Bringing it around, with the barrel centered on the brutish face, I choked as my finger pressed the trigger.

"See!" he shouted, reaching a long, hairy arm out for me.

Strange scenes of a house on fire, of a woman burning, of people turning into animals, flashed through my mind. Then I pulled the trigger. I saw his face go up in a red fountain and collapsed backward into darkness.

When I came to, it was to see a blue sky overhead, trees flashing by on both banks, and blue water underneath. Crazy had broken the top from one of the glass bubbles and had used it as a boat, placing it in the small river that drifted through Congressman Horner's ranch. This would be a much swifter route than that by which we had come.

"How are you feeling?" Lotus asked.

"Relieved," I croaked.

"I know," she said, running a cool hand over my forehead.

"No, you don't," I said, turning my head to the glass bottom where the water revealed its depth. My own depths were purged. END

(Continued from page 98)

time was no exception. "Perhaps," I reflected with growing enthusiasm, "we *can* drown D'Cela's forts."

Leaving the larger of our two ships to guard D'Cela, I raced back to New Enithra with some hope of end to the D'Cela problem. Both human and Ayorian scientists, now working in teams, were asked, "Can the gravity field be made directional over an area equal to that of D'Cela's forts?"

The humans, looking like gigantic bugs because of the goggles enabling them to see the Ayor, answered in the affirmative.

"Will the energy of gravity pass through both the physical and telekinetic barriers?"

Again the answer was yes.

What I had in mind was simple enough. D'Cela's fortress had a thin double skin made with exceedingly dense metal. Such dense structures, especially when constructed in strong gravity-wells, needed special flotation platforms to keep them from sinking through the planet's less dense bed-rock. With the gravity generator, we should be able to upset the delicate balance of those floatation platforms, causing the fortress to sink naturally and completely through the planet's composition.

I returned to D'Cela's final retreat with the modified equipment, and we increased the apparent mass of the fort in steep exponential progression. It sank toward the planet's center as though falling through a hard-vacuum column we were fortunate to escape the explosion which resulted, causing the planet's crust to be torn away in cascades of fire.

On approaching the fortress on the planet's opposite side, we soon sensed both the absence of humans and the quick popping of small hyper-driven ships as they snapped into hyper-space.

Would we never catch this evil man?

Rational logic dictated that we quit the chase since there was no known way of either tracing or catching D'Cela in hyper-space. Billions of stars might serve as his coming-out point.

But my emotions were not rational and I drove myself and all others to find the means by which D'Cela could be destroyed. My need for revenge drove me as no Ayorian had ever been driven.

The nearest galaxy was 1.5×10^6 light-years distant from Feren's sun. Under hyper-drive, flight time would fill six weeks, were he to choose that direction. This would be my maximum time for solution to two major problems — first, to exceed D'Cela's hyper-driven velocity and second, to develop a means for locating his ships while still on hyper-drive.

Driven mostly by emotions, I felt instinctively convinced that we could solve these two problems. There was first the clue that hyper-drive phenomenon was crudely related to our natural indirect action faculties. Next was the fact that no time accrued during our organically induced teleportation, while time did accrue under the mechanical variety.

Those children who were deeply engrossed in their personal twinning problems could not be dissuaded from their tasks, but all others were pushed and prodded as never before into study of the problems. And within a matter of days, we had our first breakthrough and within hours we had our first potential solution.

When the adults reached into the hyper-drive field under their highest power of sensitivity, they were able to observe or sense a kind of "wake," sub-nucleonic in character. As the field moved, the wake left a fine trail of asymmetrically arranged sub-particles. In time, they dissipated; but they lasted long enough to provide the trace of D'Cela's ships.

When a smaller hyper-drive generator was placed inside the field of another generator, relative velocity was increased by a power factor of two for the total assemblage. In theory, an endless number of generators placed one within another would provide mechanically induced "instant" travel, like that which we already enjoyed by means of our natural faculties. Practical considerations enabled only one power boost, and even then the linkage worked for only small objects.

But we had our solution! Tied to the dissipating wake of D'Cela's ships were small nuclear explosives which moved ever-closer to each of his ships in the ratio of one number to its square power. Wherever and whenever the wake terminated, indicating the normal space position of his ship, our explosive would perform satisfactorily and the resulting blast would loose enough free energy to destroy any ship.

X

By now I was well aware of the fundamental differences between even two beings of the same biological stock. The Tepen, though derived from Ayorian stock, were all evil; D'Cela and his men were derived from human stock and they, too, were mostly evil.

Probably on any planet there were both evil and good stock, so I could not truly condemn the whole human race for the actions of a small number, anymore then I could blame all Ayorians for the action of the Tepen.

But what of cultural and control institutions? The Ayorian had never allowed themselves to be

controlled by evil, choosing to die rather then to succumb to that which was against their natural nature. How did the humans of Feren allow themselves to be so controlled?

If we Ayorians were successfully to colonize the empty planets of the Ferenian planetary system, we would have great need for peace. Could we ever have peace if the humans were to continually allow might to rule right?

With an almost paranoiac, passionate feeling for detail, we checked planet six to insure no further dangers and I gave thought far ahead to our future. My emotions, once boiling against D'Cela and his murder of thousands of my brethren, now transferred to a determination that security would be established for my people.

We landed on Feren to be met by a large government delegation; when the empty speeches were through and the banquet ended, I explained to all the kind of government I had in mind. "From this day forward," I said, "this planetary system shall be considered under the dominion of the Ayor.

"Should the humans of Feren wish to continue self-rule of their planet, they will be free to do so — so long as no evil men or evil systems are allowed to take root, restricting the principles of individual self-responsibility and development.

"All alliance with other human groups will be approved only through the Ayor, as well as growth or preparation of military efforts."

How these humans felt about my ultimatum was unimportant, since I was fully determined to protect my race. Never again would more than sixty thousand of my brethren be destroyed by the idle whim of some mad human. Therefore I, Spork the Ayorian moron, Spork the Tepen avenger, Spork the beast enslaver, now became Spork, ruler of the Quations planetary system!

END

June 6-8, 1969. PgHLANGE (Pittsburgh regional convention). At Allegheny Motor Inn, 1424 Beers School Road, Coraopolis, Pennsylvania. Guest of Honor: Robert Silverberg. Features a banquet. Membership: $1.50, in advance, $2.00, at the door. For information: Peter Hays, 1421 Wightman, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15217.

June 7-8, 1969. THE DETROIT TRIPLE FAN FAIR. Features a banquet where the NOVA will be presented. Guests of Honor: Ed Hamilton and Leigh Brackett and Al Williamson. At Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge, Detroit, Michigan. Membership: $3.00, advance; $4.00, at the door. For information: Detroit Triple Fan Fair, 4644 Toledo Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48209.

June 23-August 1, 1969. THE SECOND ANNUAL CLARION WRITERS' WORKSHOP IN SPECULATIVE FICTION. Participants may register for two, four or six weeks, and college credit may be granted. Faculty: Robin Scott, Frederik Pohl, Fritz Leiber, Harlan Ellison, Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm. The cost is $88.00 for each two-week segment and includes full room and board. For information: Robin Scott Wilson, English Department, Clarion State College, Clarion Pennsylvania 16214.

June 20-22, 1969. THE SOUTHWESTERCON. At the Ramada Inn, 2525 Allen Parkway, Houston, Texas. Membership $2.50. For information: Tony Smith, 1414 Lynnview, Houston, Texas 77055.

June 28-30, 1969, MIDWESTCON. At The North Plaza Motel, 7911 Reading Road, Cincinnati, Ohio. For reservation blanks and information: Lou Tabakow, 3953 St. Johns Terrace, Cincinnati, Ohio 45236.

July 3-6, 1969 WESTERCON XXII/ FUNCON II. At Miramar Hotel, Santa Monica, California. Guest of Honor: Randall Garrett. Fan Guest of Honor: Roy Tackett, Toastmaster: Harlan Ellison. Membership: $3.00 in advance, $5.00 at the door. A supporting membership of $1.00 entitles you to all publications. For information: FUNCON II, Box 1, Santa Monica, California 90406. Make checks payable to Ken Rudolph.

August 22-24, 1969. DEEP SOUTH STF CONFERENCE (DSC). At Ramada Inn, just off I-40 and I-75, Knoxville, Tennessee. Guest of Honor: Rachel Maddux, author of "The Green Kingdom." Membership: $2.00. For information: Janie Lamb, Rt. #1, Box 364, Heiskell, Tennessee 37754.

August 29- *September* 1, 1969. ST. LOUISCON: 27th World Science Fiction Convention. At Chase-Park Plaza Hotel, 212 N. Kingshighway, St. Louis, Missouri 63108. Guest of Honor: Jack Gaughan. Fan Guest of Honor: Ted White. Features: Project Art Show; Masquerade Ball; All-night movies — every night; Rock Band; Panels and speeches featuring all your favorite writers, editors, and artists; Auctions; Awards Banquet and the Presentation of the Hugos. Memberships: $4.00, attending; $3.00, supporting. Join now and receive all the progress reports as they are published. For information: St. Louiscon, P.O. Box 3008, St. Louis, Missouri 63130. Make checks payable to St. Louiscon.

October 30-*November* 1, 1969. SECONDARY UNIVERSE II and SECOND ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY OF AMERICA. At the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay. The Secondary Universe is open to the first 300 registrants ($5.00 fee); the Tolkien Conference is open to all ($1.00 fee if not a member of the Tolkien Society of America). For information: Ivor A. Rogers, University of Wisconsin-GB, Green Bay, Wisconsin 54302.

November 8-9, 1969. PHILCON. At Warwick Hotel, 17th and Locust, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Membership: $2.00. For information: Tom Purdom, 4734 Cedar Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvia 19143.

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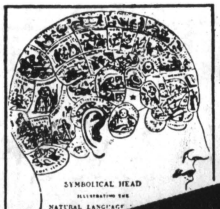

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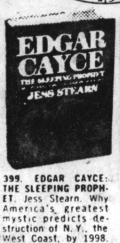

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