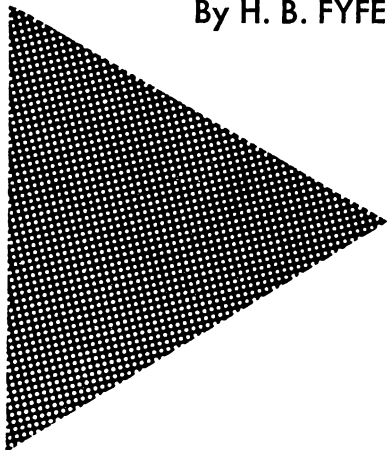


WHEN the concealed gong sounded, the man sitting on the floor sighed. He continued, however, to slump loosely against the curving, pearly plastic of the wall, and took care not to glance toward the translucent ovals he knew to be observation panels.

He was a large man, but thin and bony-faced. His dirty gray coverall bore the name "Barnsley" upon grimy white tape over the heart. Except at the shoulders, it looked too big for him. His hair was dark brown, but the sandy ginger of his two-week beard seemed a better match for his blue eyes.

By H. B. FYFE



Finding his way out of this maze was only half the job.

The Wedge

Finally, he satisfied the softly insistent gong by standing up and gazing in turn at each of the three doors spaced around the cylindrical chamber. He deliberately adopted an expression of simple-minded anticipation as he ambled over to the nearest one.

The door was round, about four feet in diameter, and set in a flattened part of the wall with its lower edge tangent with the floor. Rods about two inches thick projected a hand's breadth at four, eight, and twelve o'clock. The markings around them suggested that each could be rotated

to three different positions. Barnsley squatted on his heels to study these.

Noting that all the rods were set at the position he had learned to think of as "one," he reached out to touch the door. It felt slightly warm, so he allowed his fingertips to slide over the upper handle. A tentative tug produced no movement of the door.

"That's it, though," he mumbled quietly. "Well, now to do our little act with the others!"

He moved to the second door, where all the rods were

set at "two." Here he fell to manipulating the rod handles, pausing now and then to shove hopefully against the door. Some twenty minutes later, he tried the same routine at the third door.

Eventually, he returned to his starting point and rotated the rods there at random for a few minutes. Having, apparently by accident, arranged them in a sequence of one-two-three, he contrived to lean against the door at the crucial instant. As it gave beneath his weight, he grabbed the two lower handles and pushed until the door rose to a horizontal position level with its hinged top. It settled there with a loud click.

BARNSLEY stooped to crawl through into an arched passage of the same pearly plastic. He straightened up and walked along for about twenty feet, flashing a white-toothed grin through his beard while muttering curses behind it. Presently, he arrived at a small, round bay, to be confronted by three more doors.

"Bet there's a dozen of you three-eyed clods peeping at me," he growled. "How'd you like me to poke a boot through the panel in front of you and kick you blubberballs in all directions? Do you have a page in your data books for that?"

He forced himself to *feel*

sufficiently dull-witted to waste ten minutes opening one of the doors. The walls of the succeeding passage were greenish, and the tunnel curved gently downward to the left. Besides being somewhat warmer, the air exuded a faint blend of heated machine oil and something like ripe fish. The next time Barnsley came to a set of doors, he found also a black plastic cube about two feet high. He squatted on his heels to examine it.

I'd better look inside or they'll be disappointed, he told himself.

From the corner of his eye, he watched the movement of shadows behind the translucent panels in the walls. He could picture the observers there: blubbery bipeds with three-jointed arms and legs ending in clusters of stubby but flexible tentacles. Their broad, spine-crested heads would be thrust forward and each would have two of his three protruding eyes directed at Barnsley's slightest move. They had probably been staring at him in relays every second since picking up his scout ship in the neighboring star system.

That is, Barnsley thought, it must have been the next system whose fourth planet he had been photo-mapping for the Terran Colonial Service. He hoped he had not been wrong about that.

Doesn't matter, he consoled himself, as long as the Service can trace me. These slobs certainly aren't friendly.

He reconsidered the scanty evidence of previous contact in this volume of space, light-years from Terra's nearest colony. Two exploratory ships had disappeared. There had been a garbled, fragmentary message picked up by the recorders of the colony's satellite beacon, which some experts interpreted as a hasty warning. As far as he knew, Barnsley was the only Ter-ran to reach this planet alive.

To judge from his peculiar imprisonment, his captors had recovered from their initial dismay at encountering another intelligent race—at least to the extent of desiring a specimen for study. In Barnsley's opinion, that put him more or less ahead of the game.

"They're gonna learn a lot!" he muttered, grinning vindictively.

He finished worrying the cover off the black box. Inside was a plastic sphere of water and several varieties of food his captors probably considered edible. The latter ranged from a leafy stalk bearing a number of small pods to a crumbling mass resembling moldy cheese. Barnsley hesitated.

"I haven't had the guts to try this one yet," he reminded himself, picking out what

looked like a cluster of long, white roots.

The roots squirmed feebly in his grasp. Barnsley returned them to the box instantly.

Having selected, instead, a fruit that could have been a purple cucumber, he put it with the water container into a pocket of his coverall and closed the box.

Maybe they won't remember that I took the same thing once before, he thought. Oh, hell, of course they will! But why be too consistent?

He opened one of the doors and walked along a bluish passage that twisted to the left, chewing on the purple fruit as he went. It was tougher than it looked and nearly tasteless. At the next junction, he unscrewed the cap of the water sphere, drained it slowly, and flipped the empty container at one of the oval panels. A dim shadow blurred out of sight, as if someone had stepped hastily backward.

"Why not?" growled Barnsley. "It's time they were shaken up a little!"

PRETENDING to have seen something where the container had struck the wall, he ran over and began to feel along the edge of the panel. When his fingertips encountered only the slightest of seams, he doubled his fists and pounded. He thought he could detect a faint scurrying

on the other side of the wall.

Barnsley laughed aloud. He raised one foot almost waist-high and drove the heel of his boot through the translucent observation panel. Seizing the splintered edges of the hole, he tugged and heaved until he had torn out enough of the thin wall to step through to the other side. He found himself entering a room not much larger than the passage behind him.

To his left, there was a flicker of blue from a crack in the wall. The crack widened momentarily, emitting a gabble of mushy voices. The blue cloth was twitched away by a cluster of stubby tentacles, whereupon the crack closed to an almost imperceptible line. Barnsley fingered his beard to hide a grin and turned the other way.

He stumbled into a number of low stools surmounted by spongy, spherical cushions. One of these he tore off for a pillow before going on. At the end of the little room, he sought for another crack, kicked the panel a bit to loosen it, and succeeded in sliding back a section of wall. The passage revealed was about the size of those he had been forced to explore during the past two weeks, but it had an unfinished, behind-the-scenes crudeness in appearance. Barnsley potttered along for about fifteen minutes, during which time the walls resound-

ed with distant running and he encountered several obviously improvised barriers.

He kicked his way through one, squeezed through an opening that had not been closed quite in time, restrained a wicked impulse to cross some wiring that must have been electrical, and at last allowed himself to be diverted into a passage leading back to his original cell. He amused himself by trying to picture the disruption he had caused to the honeycomb of passageways.

"There!" he grinned to himself. "That should keep them from bothering me for a few hours. Maybe one or two of them will get in trouble over it—I hope!"

He arranged his stolen cushion where the wall met the floor and lay down.

A thought struck him. He sat up to examine the cushion suspiciously. It appeared to be an equivalent to foam rubber. He prodded and twisted until convinced that no wires or other unexpected objects were concealed inside. Not till then did he resume his relaxed position.

Presently one of his hands located and pinched a tiny switch buried in the lobe of his left ear. Barnsley concentrated upon keeping his features blank as a rushing sound seemed to grow in his ear. He yawned casually, moving one hand from behind

his head to cover his mouth.

Having practiced many times before a mirror, he did not think that any possible watcher would have noticed how his thumb slipped briefly inside his mouth to give one eyetooth a slight twist.

A strong humming inundated his hearing. It continued for perhaps two minutes, paused, and began again. Barnsley waited through two repetitions before he "yawned" again and sleepily rolled over to hide his face in his folded arms.

"Did you get it all?" he murmured.

"Clear as a bell," replied a tiny voice in his left ear. "Was that your whole day's recording?"

"I guess so," said Barnsley. "To tell the truth, I lose track a bit after two weeks without a watch. Who's this? Sanchez?"

"That's right. You seem to come in on my watch pretty nearly every twenty-four hours. Okay, I'll tape a slowed-down version of your blast for the boys in the back room. You're doing fine."

"NOT for much longer," Barnsley told him.

"When do I get out of here?"

"Any day," Sanchez reassured him. "It was some job to learn an alien language with just your recordings and some of your educated guesses to go on. We've had a regular

mob sweating on it night and day."

"How is it coming?"

"It turns out they're nothing to worry about. The fleet is close enough now to pick up their surface broadcasting. Believe me, your stupid act has them thoroughly confused. They hold debates over whether you could possibly be intelligent enough to belong in a spaceship."

"Meanwhile, I'm slowly starving," said Barnsley.

"Just hang on for a couple of days. Now that we know where they are, they're in for a shock. One of these mornings, they're going to hear voices from all over their skies, demanding to know what kind of savages they are to have kidnapped you—and in their own language!"

Barnsley grinned into his improvised pillow as Sanchez signed off. Things would really work out after all. He was set for an immensely lucrative position; whether as ambassador, trade consultant, or colonial governor depended upon how well the experts bluffed the blubber-heads. Well, it seemed only his due for the risks he had taken.

"Omigosh!" he grunted, sitting up as he pictured the horde of Terran Colonial experts descending upon the planet. "I'll be the only one here that hasn't learned to speak the language!"

END