



The
Stainless-Steel
Knight

BY JACK RACKHAM

illustrated by IVIE



*He had everything a knight needed:
gallant steed, fair lady
and the most unconquerable little home-made dragon
in a billion solar systems!*



WHEN the twisted and radioactive wreckage screamed down out of space on to their dark planet, the Shogleet were instantly intrigued. To that incredibly ancient race, evolved to the point where energy, matter and form had no more secrets to hide and only curiosity remained, anything new was an occasion for rejoicing. And this was new.

Metals, plastics, physical and chemical combinations — they were familiar enough. But this strange mass had been formed into a particular shape. They probed at once, and at once found that there was something more.

Something lived, but only just.

Using their combined talents, they caught at the fragile remnant, preserved it, studied it, reconstructed it. From the still viable patterns of intelligence, they deduced the whole. They remade a man. They went further, discovering his history and, from that, something of the history of the whole species. They were unwilling to admit that such a monstrosity could be genuine, yet their probings could not be argued. So they remade his ship, which had obviously been only a small part of the whole tangled wreckage, and they sent it back whence it had come. And they appointed

one of their number to go with it, and him, to investigate.

THE Shogleet crouched by Lancelot's beautiful boots, and purred. The purr was not a sign of pleasure, but the by-product of producing an outline-blurring vibration and a curiosity-damping field. The corridor outside the Agent-Director's office was a busy place, and the Shogleet had no wish to be observed.

Yet it was pleased. These things called Men were even more fantastically odd than it had at first imagined. With its perceptors extended, it was listening to the conversation on the other side of the wall. Voices were discussing Lancelot.

"— not only made us a laughing-stock, but he's getting to be a damned pest! Hanging about outside my office, demanding to be sent on a mission. I wouldn't trust him to empty my waste-basket. What the hell am I going to do with him?"

"Perhaps we might cook up a mission for him, Chief."

"Don't be obscene, Peters. That moron, on a mission? Don't forget, this is the blasted idiot who tried to rescue a disabled star-ship with a one-man raft!"

"Just the same, Chief, we could pick out something."

"But I can't send a Prime G-man on a routine call, damn it. Not that he is a Prime,

except on paper. But you know what I mean."

"Ah, but wait until you hear what I've dug up. It's from a Vivarium planet. We don't usually handle those. What generally happens is that the local man goes in, disguised, and re-sets the alarm, then smoothes out the fuss. Doesn't affect us unless it's a case of external invasion, you know."

"All right, all right. I know all that. But what's it to me? Some inside problem on a Viv planet. So?"

"Yes. But this planet is called Avalon. It's static in the 'pseudo-feudal' stage, with a culture based on Arthurian legend. Get it?"

The Shogleet, recording all this avidly, head a gasp. Putting mental query marks against the new terms, it went on listening.

"Arthurian!" Hugard breathed. "Peasants. Knights in armor. Sword and shield stuff. Go on."

"I thought we could play it up big, and let him have it. Make it sound a desperate emergency. Give him something to do."

"Yes. Quite harmless, of course. But I like the sound of it. Where is this Avalon?"

"That's the best part, Chief. It's in the Omega Centaurus cluster. That's twenty thousand lights away!"

"That settles it for me. It will take him a month, real time, just to get there. I'll be

shut of him for a while. Sure we're not treading on any private toes with this?"

"Absolutely. Strictly a routine call, on a waiting list."

"Fine. Fine! Get me the data so I can blow it up big, and then shoot him in here. Peters, I won't forget this. To think that I'm going to be rid of that moron, for a while at least —"

THE Shogleet crept to Lancelot's shoulder, shivering gently with anticipation. When the summons came, it rode into the office with him and saw him stiffen into a stern salute before the Director's desk.

"Ah, Lake," Hugard nodded portentously. "At last I have a mission for you. Something I cannot pass on to anyone else. It will tax your powers to the utmost. I am not asking you to volunteer; I am *ordering* you to go. That is how serious it is. You understand?"

"I do, sir," Lancelot said, sternly. "Rely on me!"

"Good man! I was counting on that. Now, you'll take full details with you to study en route, of course, but I can give you the gist. The planet is Avalon. The alarm is urgent. Avalon is a closed culture. No one, not even we of Galactopol, can intervene in a closed culture, unless the situation is desperately critical." The Shogleet felt Lancelot stiffen, saw the swell of

his chest and the fire in his eyes, and wondered anew at these strange creatures who thrilled to the prospect of imminent danger.

"Most importantly—" Hugard hushed his voice — "As this is a closed culture, I can only send one man. You will be alone. Single-handed. You will be equipped, of course, as fully as possible, compatible with the culture. But everything else will be up to you. You're on your own."

"I understand, sir," Lancelot said simply. "Rely on me. If it's called for, I'll stake my life, rather than let down the Service." Hugard turned his face away, obviously overcome by some strong emotion. Then, coughing, he handed a form to Lancelot and stood up.

"That's your authorization. You'll pick up the rest of the documents at the front office. How soon can you leave?"

"At once!" Lancelot snapped, saluting crisply. Hugard put out a hand.

"Good luck, my boy. You'll need it."

"Thank you, sir." Lancelot took the hand with an enthusiasm that made the Director wince. "Don't worry about me. I'll come through!" He spun on his heel and marched from the office.

"You know," he confided to the Shogleet, "Hugard isn't such a bad old guy, after all. I thought he was neglecting me. But I can see his point,

now. I've misjudged him."

"Lancelot," the Shogleet whispered, "do something for me. Get a stock of visio-tapes on feudal cultures, vivarium planets and the Arthurian legend."

"All right. Anything to oblige. But you pick the queerest things to be curious about. Arthurian legends, is it? My Dad used to be interested in them."

THIS the Shogleet already knew, as well as much more. It had learned, for one thing, the truer version of how Lancelot Lake came to be cast away in the first place. This it had picked up from various sources, in and about Galactopol headquarters.

Lancelot Lake had been a humble technician in the lowest grades of Galactopol, serving his time in a spaceways emergency - and - observation station, and passing his time in dreams of glamor and glory. He shared the simple faith of his equally simple parents, that it was just a matter of time before he had his big "break." And Fate had been very obliging.

The star-class liner *Orion*, carrying wealthy passengers but very little else, had developed a major defect in her main drive. Her skipper, in angry calm, warped out of hyper-drive, gave the order "Abandon Ship!" and pointed his lifeboat cluster toward the

nearest E-and-O station. It had not been an emergency. There had not been the least danger — only nuisance, and the loss of a valuable ship. The lifeboat signals had plainly said so.

But Lancelot had read his own special brand of understanding into those signals. On the run, fired with holy zeal, he had broken out his one-man raft, designed purely for short-range forays about the surface of his planetoid-station. Linking in to the powerful, all-wave, sub-etheric emergency radio of the station and giving a blow-by-blow account of his effort, he had stormed off to rescue the *Orion* single-handed.

No one could hear the lifeboat signals, after that. The *Orion* company reached the E-and-O station quite safely. There, in company with every other open planet in the Galaxy, they had listened, fascinated, to the classic broadcast that Lancelot was pouring out.

Dedicated, always brave, heedless of personal safety, washed with the radiation from a rapidly disintegrating nuclear drive, he kept on to the inevitable, hopeless, gallant end. Like a gnat grappling a runaway elephant, he went spiralling down into the great gravity sink of Antares, until the thermal radiation from that giant sun overwhelmed his transmission.

The rest was silence.

Now, a stupid, gloriously gallant, *dead* hero, is one thing. Posthumous awards are a matter of little consequence. It was nothing — the least they could do — to make the deceased Lancelot a Prime G-man. But the same hero returned from the dead was something else again, as the Shogleet had learned.

Perhaps, it pondered, they had done too good a job of the reconstruction. They had made him strictly according to the images in his own brain. Consequently, he was big, brawny, blue-eyed, golden-haired, handsome, and well-nigh indestructible . . . translating literally the concept "You can't keep a good man down." Had Lancelot known Hamlet, he would have agreed with his description: "What a piece of work is Man; how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties; in form and moving, how express and admirable; in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god!" But Hamlet was insane, whereas Lancelot was sincere, simple, and assured of the reality of his dream. Hence — as Hugard had said — a damned pest.

II

LANCELOT'S happy glow lasted well into the second week. Then he grew bored. The ship, though small, was

comfortable and almost self-directive. There was nothing to do.

He decided to check his equipment. The Shogleet, engrossed in the tortuous language of Mallory, was interrupted by its ward, who came bearing a long and shining rod tipped with a razor-edged blade.

"This thing," he said. "It's a lance, isn't it? And there's another thing, like a big blade with a cross-bar and a hand-grip. A sword?"

"I would think so. There should be armor, also. I gather you are to masquerade as a knight. From the literature, it seems there actually was a knight named Sir Lancelot."

"That's so. My Dad used to tell about him. Oh, Hugard knew what he was doing when he picked me for this mission! Fate, that's what it is." The Shogleet had other views, but kept discreetly silent about them.

"The concept of a vivarium culture interests me," it said. "Apparently not all men seek change, only a small percentage?"

"That's so," Lancelot nodded, sagely. "The happy man is the adjusted man. Knows what he's good at and where he belongs, and gets on with it. Like me, for instance. Natural born adventurer — and here I am."

"But you were originally a station-keeper. A mistake?"

"Oh, no. Psycho-dynamics is infallible. That station-keeper job was just a starter, so that I could work up."

The Shogleet, knowing full well that Lancelot knew nothing at all about the science of psycho-dynamics, wished it had asked for a tape on that. It was curious to see how the technique would work out on a whole planet seeded with one psycho-type.

Eventually, warning bells gave tongue and their little ship went down, on a guide beacon, over a green and peaceful world, dotted with islands, laced with blue sea, into a small glade ringed with rugged hills. It was just on sunrise, on a glorious spring morning.

Lancelot breathed deep of unfiltered air and the sweet scent of growing things, and found an immediate complaint to make.

"**W**E'RE about a hundred miles away from the chief city, Camlan," he said, as he frowned at a map. "And no transport. I mean, that kit I have to wear, it's a weight. It's not going to be easy just getting it on, much less walking."

"According to the accounts," the Shogleet said. "A knight rode something. A steed, I believe, or horse. What is a horse, Lancelot?"

"Damned if I know. I vaguely recall drawings, when I was

a kid. Sort of big animal, four legs, head at one end, tail at the other. But stop a bit, that explains something —” and he lugged out some massive pieces of metal-work. “These had me baffled, but they must be horse-armor. And this thing is a seat, to go on its back, I guess.”

“I shall have to approximate,” the Shogleet decided. “From your memories, and what I have read, I will transform myself into a horse.”

“All right, but give me a hand with this hardware first. I can’t get it on alone. In fact, I don’t see how it *can* all go on one man!”

But, with patience and struggling, trial and error, they got the pieces that a skilled synthesist had fabricated from the patterns of museum relics buckled, strapped and locked about Lancelot.

His guess had been good. He could hardly hold upright under the load of metal.

“How the hell does anybody hop about,” he complained, making a few labored steps, “and swing a sword in this lot? It’s not possible!”

The Shogleet paid no attention. It was busy on its own account. Swallowing great quantities of air and energy, and speeding its metabolism to a great rate, it was converting its mass to a something that would fit that armor. Lancelot, shambling round, gave advice according

to his blurred memories. Then, struggling mightily, he hoisted up the pieces one at a time, and then the saddle. Sweat was dribbling into his boots by the time he was done.

“Hell! This is a day’s work by itself,” he groaned, bashing his helmet in a vain attempt to wipe away the sweat from his brow. “There must be an easier way.”

“I imagine,” the Shogleet-horse guessed, “that this is why the knight had a squire, as it says in the tapes.” Lancelot grunted his heartfelt agreement at this, hung the blank shield on a saddle-hook, the sword and sheath on the opposite side, stood the long lance by a handy tree, and eased his visor down past his nose, which was already raw from the first, light-hearted try.

Then he eyed the stirrups. “You’ll have to kneel,” he said. “I’ll never make it up there.”

He climbed aboard gingerly, and they left the glade at a sedate walk. “First thing,” he said firmly, “we get a squire. I’ll never make it to Camlan at this rate.”

“Very well,” the Shogleet agreed, trying to work out a method of progress that would not unseat Lancelot. It compromised on a rubber-legged shamble which carried them at a smooth glide through what it assumed was a “woody glen.” Half an hour of this

brought them to a clearing, laid out in a chessboard of little fields, with a huddle of timber shacks in the center. Their arrival was the signal for a bedlam of shouts, screams and frantics barking from a horde of half-wild dogs.

The uproar lasted only a second or two. Then all was silent, apart from furtive rustlings in the nearby bushes.

"Where did everybody go?" Lancelot demanded, grabbing the saddle-horn. "How am I going to round up a squire, if they all run off like that? No, wait — there's one, over by that tree."

HE was an old man, grizzled-haired and cramped with rheumatic stiffness. In his simple brown smock, he clung to the tree and trembled at their gliding approach. Lancelot let go the saddle-horn and tried to sit up, impressively.

"Ho, there!" he called. "Why did everyone run away?"

"Marry, fair sir," the oldster mumbled, cringing. "It would have been at sight of the strange beast thou ridest. No mortal eye ever saw such a mount before."

"What's wrong with me?" the Shogleet demanded curiously. "Isn't a horse like this?"

"Now strike me dead!" the peasant blanched, clutching the tree. "It spoke like a Christian. I heard it!"

"Naturally," Lancelot said

grandly. "'Tis a magic steed, just as I am a holy knight. I have need of a squire. Call the others, that I may choose."

"Nay, noble sir, we are but humble peasants. Wilt find no squire here."

"Oh, blast!" Lancelot relapsed into Galactic in his irritation. Then, with strained patience, "Where then shall a knight find himself a squire?"

"The Baron Deorham has many such," the old man offered. "Steeds, too, though none such as thou ridest. But he is a wonderly wroth man, and a great warrior. He will surely attack thee, an thou come near him."

"Fear not for me, old man. I am Sir Lancelot. I will to Deorham."

"Lancelot! Now am I dead and in hell, forsooth. Lancelot is legend!"

"Never mind that. Just point the way, you old fool." The old man cringed again, and wobbled a shaky arm in the direction of a rough track. The Shogleet went into its gliding run again.

"A pity I couldn't get him to put me right on this shape," it said. "I must study a real horse at the first opportunity."

"This feels all right," Lancelot argued. "Still, I suppose you're right. It won't do to scare the locals out of their wits all the time . . . Say, that looks a likely place."

They had broken clear of trees, and before them the

grass went away in a slow rise to a hill, where there was a massive gray building. "Just let me do the talking. Apparently horses aren't supposed to talk." He clutched the saddle-horn valiantly, and they went on at a fair speed.

Suddenly the Shogleet sensed life and movement nearby, and swung round.

"What did you do that for?" Lancelot demanded, clinging desperately. Then he saw what the Shogleet had detected. About seventy yards away, just rounding an outflung clump of trees, came three riders. On either side the figures were slight, but the man in the center was gross, his steed huge, his armor bright in the sun. His shield bore the device of a mailed fist, and his lance carried a fluttering blue plume at its tip.

"That's what I want," Lancelot muttered. "A picture on my shield and a flag on my stick. Then they'll know who I am."

"So that," the Shogleet murmured, interestedly, "is what a horse is like." And it discreetly began modifying its shape. "We should keep still," it advised. "Let him come to us. I want to see that creature move."

As if in answer to the thought the big man put up a mailed fist. They distinctly heard the click of his visor as it snapped into place. Then he applied his heels to his mount

and began thundering at them over the turf.

"LOOK at him go!" Lancelot said, admiringly. "I must learn to ride like that." The mighty figure thundered nearer, and Lancelot grew uneasy. "He'll never be able to stop in time," he muttered. "Not at that clip. Now what's the fool up to?" — for the stranger had dropped his lance to the horizontal, and the point was aimed straight at Lancelot. The Shogleet, ever curious, stood quite still.

"Hey! You lunatic! Point that thing the other way!" Lancelot yelled. But it was obvious even to him that the other had no intention of doing any such thing. At the last minute, he managed to fumble up his shield. There was a rending crash as point met shield, fair and square. Lancelot shot backwards over the Shogleet's cruppers, to land with a jarring thud on the ground. The Shogleet spun round, to watch as the young man groaned, sat up and then struggled to his feet.

"Art unhorsed!" the stranger roared. "Dost yield?"

"Yield nothing," Lancelot gasped, indignantly. "I wasn't even fighting. You want to give a bit of notice, next time you do something like that. Charging up like that without so much as a word . . ." and that was as far as he got. The strange knight, backing up

and tossing away his shattered lance, had yanked out his sword. Putting heels to his horse again, he tore up to where Lancelot stood. His blade rose and fell mightily, and a clang echoed across the meadow. Lancelot went down on his knees, hung there a moment and then kneeled over, groaning. The Shogleet trotted to where he lay and nuzzled him.

"You must get up and fight," it murmured. "I believe you are liable to be taken captive otherwise."

"Fight!" Lancelot mumbled. "I'm half-killed already. That damned lunatic should be put away." He sat up and banged his mailed fist on his helmet to clear his head. The knight backed off a yard or two, waiting.

"Get up, quickly," the Shogleet encouraged, and knelt. This sent the knight's horse into a rearing frenzy, giving Lancelot time to mount — and time to get annoyed, also.

"All right," he growled. "Wants a fight, does he? We'll see about that." He unsheathed his sword with an effort. The strange knight crouched, setting his horse into another gallop. At the critical moment, he stood up in his saddle to give more power to his sword-arm. Lancelot heaved his shield up, the shock numbing his arm, then swung blindly in riposte.

"Turn round," he ordered,

as the knight charged past. "Let me have another bash at him. I only nicked him that time."

"You may kill him, you know."

"And what d'you fancy he's been trying to do to me? I'm black and blue all over. Let me have another crack at him, I said!"

"Wouldn't it be wiser to ask him to yield? In that way, we might get some information, which we sadly need." Lancelot grumbled under his breath, but when he saw that his casual swipe had sheared the knight's helmet-spike, and split his shield in half, he agreed reluctantly.

"Ho, knight," he called, and waved his sword. "Wilt yield?"

"To a foul fiend from the pit?" the knight roared, tossing away his ruined shield and bent sword. "Never! Pit thy sorcery against this!" And he unhooked from his saddle a short length of heavy chain, ending in an iron ball studded with vicious spikes. Once again, he came thundering forward.

"There!" Lancelot gasped. "I said the man was raving. If he catches me with that thing, I'm a dead duck."

He put up his shield and peered round it warily. The spiked ball flailed through the air and crashed full on the shield, slamming the young man over to an extreme angle. In sudden, blind rage, he

swung back, lashed out with the sword, felt it bite into something. Then, as the Shogleet bridled off, he looked back, and his stomach squirmed.

The super-hard, razor-keen blade had sliced through armor and knight, from shoulder to groin. There was blood everywhere.

III

"THE fool would have it," he muttered. "Now there'll be trouble."

But the body was hardly flopped to rest before the two attendants rode up, slid from their mounts and went down, each on a knee, heads bowed.

"Spare me, Sir Knight," they said, in unison. "I am thy servant."

"They're only kids," Lancelot said, surprised. "What are your names?"

"I am hight Alaric," said the ginger one, on the left.

"And I, Ector," the other added, shaking his long yellow locks. "How shall we call thee, Lord?" The Shogleet felt Lancelot brace up and stiffen.

"I am Sir Lancelot!" he announced. They promptly fell flat on their faces. "Oh, get up!" he said, irritably. "I'm not going to eat you. Now, one's to be my squire, and the other to look after my horse. Which way do you want it?"

"The horse!" they said, together and at once.

"That won't be necessary," the Shogleet said, forgetting. "I can look after myself quite well." Again the two youths fell to the ground, shaking and white.

"Get up!" Lancelot shouted. "How can I get anything done if you keep passing out, all the time? Now, what happens about him?"

"Thy liege-men will attend to it, Lord," said Alaric, in a shaky voice.

"My liege-men?"

"But certainly. Hast slain Deorham. That which was his is now thine."

"Oh!" Lancelot looked round. "Castle and all? Well, that's handy. And that was Deorham, was it? All right, one of you nip off and tell the gang the boss is coming home, hungry . . . and bruised, too!"

"I will, Lord!" Alaric fled for his horse and raced on ahead.

The Shogleet contented itself with a modest canter, finding the new movement intriguing. Lancelot was not impressed.

"You're shaking me to a jelly," he groaned. "Can't we go back to the other way?"

"This is more accurate. You had better learn. You may have to ride a real horse some day." Lancelot forgot to grumble as they reached the courtyard of the castle, and he could appreciate the size of the place. He slid off, and stood agape at high rough-

stone walls and towers, their slit-windows innocent of glass, but with gay cloths trailing from every vantage point. Ector approached, unwillingly, to take the Shogleet's bridle. Lancelot objected at once.

"You can't go off and leave me, not now. What'll I do? I mean, you know more than me about all the customs and things."

"It will be quite all right," the Shogleet consoled him in Galactic, ignoring the flabbergasted stares of the men-at-arms who had drawn near. "Just give orders. Tell them what you want. I will join you as soon as I can."

It went with Ector to a great low stable, where there were many half-wild horses and a great smell. As soon as it could be alone, it cast off the horse-shape. It had given a degree of thought to this, and decided it was best to assume some human-like form. So, on its rapid transit through the stables, courtyard and into the great hall, it settled into a small, dark-hued, manikin shape, thinking to be less impressive and thus less frightening in that guise.

Trotting through the serfs who were busy scattering fresh rushes on the stone-slab floor, it found Lancelot seated at the head of a long, rude table, on which more serfs were arranging platters heaped with hot food. He was deep in conversation with an old,

rugged-looking, gray-bearded man, but looked up as the Shogleet came close and scrambled on to the arm of his chair.

"THIS is Gildas," he said. "Calls himself a seneschal. Sort of head-man. Been telling me all about the property."

Gildas backed off warily.

"Now, sooth," he muttered. "I do believe thou *art* Lancelot, and this thy familiar. What is it, a troll?"

"Lancelot," the Shogleet said, in Galactic. "Have you forgotten? We are on a mission? You should be asking Gildas for news of the emergency."

"Say, that's right. I'd forgotten. It's not every day a man gets a barony." He turned in his chair. "Draw near, Gildas. There is nothing to fear."

"Thou sayest it well, Lord," Gildas growled, "but I like it not. A troll that stands and parleys like a man. Still, it is but part and parcel with the strange things that have come on this land but lately."

"Ah, now, that's what I wanted to know about. What's going on? I have to know, because I'm here to stop it." Gildas stepped back, transformed from a sullen gray-beard into an angry enemy.

"I knew it!" he roared. "I knew thou wert false! I will hail the men-at-arms, that

they may cut thee down. Nay, strike me dead an thou canst, but I will say it."

"Oh, lord!" Lancelot muttered. "What now? For heaven's sake, man, I'm not going to strike anybody dead. Not again. I've had enough of that for one day. Just get a grip on yourself and tell me what it's all about."

"Methinks yon troll doth already know, and the question is but a trap. Natheless, I will tell. Ye wit well there is but one great sin in this land. It is hight 'Change.' The wise ones tell us this is the best of all worlds, and that it is sin to think otherwise. So all say, where it can be heard. But who can say what a man thinketh in his heart? To labor and sweat and garner the fruits of the land is the old way, the honest way. But who will labor and sweat when his fields may be ploughed, sown, aye, and garnered into his barn, without he turn a hand? This be a change that many welcome."

"I haven't the foggiest idea what you're going on about," Lancelot confessed. "Don't tell me the sky is going to fall over a few ploughed fields? I was thinking of gathering some of those lads out there to ride with me to Camlan —"

"Camlan!" Gildas leaped back again, surprisingly spry for one of his age. "Again I say ye are false!" And he had his mouth open to shout as

Lancelot jumped up and seized him.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "I'm getting sick of this double-talk. Why the hell can't you come right out and say what you mean?" He turned to the Shogleet, with Gildas dangling chokingly from his mailed fists. "Can you make any sense out of it? I think they're *all* stark raving mad here."

The Shogleet eyed Gildas.

"Put him down," it said. "Now, what land is this, and who is your king?"

"This is Brython," Gildas said, squeakily, "and our king hight Cadman. Soon to be Cadman of the Fiery Dragon, in sooth. He dwells in Alban, twenty miles south. If ye be the wise troll, advise this your master to ride to Cadman and plead to aid, on our side!"

"I'm beginning to get it," Lancelot sighed "What's Camlan then?"

"Camlan is for Bors, King of the Kellat, and our deadly foe. Even now doth he call an army of knights, to invade our land and seize our dragon. To destroy it, he claims, but many suspect it is but to capture it for his own use."

"Oh, come now. A real dragon?"

"It is sooth, Lord. I myself have seen it, and my eyes were weak for a day after. It is truly a fearsome thing for an enemy. But for us it be great good. It is strange, and we all fear it, but who can argue



LARRY IVIE

JOHN RACKHAM

against a full barn and tilled fields, all without labor?"

"A DRAGON which labors in the field? That would be something really worth seeing, Lancelot. The tapes said nothing of this."

"A dragon!" Lancelot murmured, dreamily. "That would be right up my street. All right, Gildas, we'll leave the question of politics for a bit. Shove some of that grub my way, would you? And pass some tools." Gildas frowned at this.

"There are no eating implements in this culture, Lancelot," the Shogleet advised, drawing on its studies. "Dagger and fingers only."

Before Lancelot could voice his grumble, Gildas said, "Wilt permit thy wives now, Lord?"

"My what? How do I come to have wives?"

"They were Deorham's, are now thine. They wait thy leave to come to table."

"Good grief! Now I have a couple of wives."

"Nay, Lord. Six."

Lancelot shrank into his glittering armor. He cast an appealing eye on the Shogleet. "What do I do now? Six wives! One w'ould be too many."

"Ask Gildas," the Shogleet advised. "He will know. There was nothing in the tapes about such a situation, so I cannot help you."

"Here a minute," Lancelot

gulped. "I have been long in the grave and forget many customs of this land. What shall I do with these — women? What are they all for, anyway? And why six?"

"Marry, Lord, but I understand thee not. A man may take as many wives as he needs and can support, if he be a knight. And what would a wife be for, but to serve? Still, it matters not, now. If thou art truly for our cause, then must eat and depart forthwith. All is to hand. We can fetch Alban by nightfall."

"What, right away?"

"All is to hand," Gildas repeated firmly. "Even this day did Deorham make ready for the journey, to join Cadman and all the other great knights of this land, against the Kel-lat. Else thou wouldst not have found him in the meadow, where he did but try out his armor and steed." Lancelot groaned and looked about feverishly. The Shogleet, watching, saw him shudder.

"I'm up a tree this time. I can't face a twenty-mile drag, not after what I've just had from the Baron. I ache, I tell you. But I don't fancy all these women hanging about either. I'm caught both ways."

"The Lady Phillipa hath the healing touch," Gildas offered. "If thou wilt shed thy mail, Lord, she will attend thee." And he clapped his hands before Lancelot could stop him.

They came in at once. The Shogleet suspected they had been close at hand, listening. At any rate, there was no need to warn the Lady Phillipa that her services were needed. A large and robust woman of some thirty years, she made at once for the hapless knight and, with Gildas assisting, had him out of his mail as readily as a mother undresses a child, and with as little concern.

It was the Shogleet's first contact with women at close quarters and it was intensely interested in this new phenomenon. What it found particularly puzzling was Lancelot's obvious awkwardness, as if he was afraid the females might see the body that had been built for him. This was not the behavior-pattern that it had traced in Lancelot in the beginning. According to that, he was lordly and quietly compelling in the presence of the opposite sex. It began to suspect that this, too, had been part of the young man's fantasies. It was all very strange.

HALF an hour later, on a real horse, into the saddle of which Lancelot had been hoisted by a primitive block-and-tackle arrangement and three sweating serfs, the young man led a great rout from the castle courtyard. On his arm, the Shogleet listened keenly to the chatter of the men around. A few were

mounted, most were afoot, and they all were filled with enthusiasm for the battle ahead. But, of the dragon, there were divided opinions. Some thought it a blessing, a gift from the gods to a deserving country, but they were in a minority. The rest devoutly believed that it was evil. The right and proper thing for a man was to work or to fight, they declared. What man could do either, when a dragon did both so much better than any man? Not so, they said, and this legendary knight was come, for sure, to rid them of it.

Lancelot, jogging along in his armor, was acting and talking in anything but a knightly manner, but the Shogleet paid him little heed. Disguised under the ministrations of Lady Phillipa, it had managed to help him with doses of carefully tuned energy. The young man was as good as new, except in spirit, in which region he was badly bruised.

"I shall never keep this up for twenty miles," he groaned, as his teeth jarred and clicked at every pace. "I'm a nervous wreck, I tell you. If this is knight errantry, then I've had it." They made a good twenty miles an hour, and should have fetched Alban in two hours. But it was nearer five, and the sun lowering in the sky, before the roofs of the city came in sight.

Then the Shogleet recalled, from its studies, the low level of education consistent with this culture. Few of these people could count as far as twenty. For them, forty was well-nigh an infinite number.

Over the bridge and into the narrow streets of Alban, Lancelot was pushed into the lead. The Shogleet sharpened its senses for more information about the dragon. There were whispers on all sides about the "knight with the naked shield" and "how his armor doth glitter, like silver," but not a mention of the mysterious beast. In the center of the city they came to the castle. The crowd of idle sightseers gave way to a great throng of men-at-arms, knights, squires.

They came to the foot of a great flight of steps.

"That's it," Lancelot said, with resigned conviction. "Just let me fall off right here. I'm through."

But Alaric had spurred his mount forward, just as a tall, gray-headed man, with a heavily-lined, strong face, came to the head of the steps.

"Your Majesty," the squire cried in a high but quite audible voice. "I am squire to this knight. This day hath he slain Deorham in a great battle. Whereupon, and without stay for rest, hath he ridden right speedily, with this great company, to offer service with thee against thine enemy.

Your Majesty, this is Sir Lancelot!"

The Shogleet could hear the great gasp which ran through the crowd at this awesome name. Even the King himself seemed to shrink a little.

"It is, indeed, a great honor," he said uneasily, "to have such a great one return from the shades to serve in our cause. Dismount, Sir Lancelot. Approach and be welcomed to our presence." Lancelot crawled wearily from the saddle. He stood on shaky legs, looked up the steps and began to climb.

But the Shogleet, with its razor-keen senses, had caught something highly irregular. Alaric had gone on, to keep one pace to the rear of Lancelot, while Ector stayed to hold the horse.

"Ector!" the Shogleet hissed, becoming part-visible for the purpose. "See you that man in the brown jerkin and the cap over his eyes, there close by the knight in the falcon shield?" Ector peered, and nodded.

"Mark him. Discover what you can. When the moment is ripe, have word with him, and say Lancelot has need of him. Have him come."

"And if he will not come, Lord?"

"Whisper in his ear this word. It is a great magic, so forget it not. The word is 'Galactopol.' Hearing it, he will come."

ECTOR repeated the word fearfully, and went off with the horse. The Shogleet scurried up the steps, its curiosity-damping field going full blast. Lancelot was wearily explaining to King Cadman that he had travelled far and fast, and that all he wanted to do, right then and there, was to rest.

"They must be made of steel and leather," he complained bitterly, in the chamber that had been assigned to him, as Alaric helped him unbuckle his armor. "Believe it or not, but that crowd down there are just getting set for an all-night session. Drinking, carousing and eating. Mountains of food. Entertainers standing by. Women all over the place. Don't they ever get tired?" The squire was sent off for bread and wine and a bowl of hot water, and the Shogleet soon had Lancelot easier in body. But his spirits were well down.

"I'm a flop at this game," he gloomed. "All right, I've turned up a dragon. But suppose I can't fight it? And suppose I do? I still don't know what the emergency is all about, and I've no idea how to start looking. I'm a duff, I tell you. Best thing I can do is go back to Director Hugard and turn in my badge."

"Patience," the Shogleet counseled. "I think Ector may have news for us. Ah, here he is now."

ECTOR had found his man. Lancelot looked, indifferently.

"Who might you be?" he asked.

"That's a good question," the stranger replied crisply. "I was going to ask the same thing. Who the hell are you? And what's the big idea of riding around in that fake chrome-silicon-steel armor, hey?"

"That's it," the Shogleet nodded, shimmering into full visibility. "That's what I heard you say, down there by the steps." The man in brown stepped back carefully, blinked a time or two and swallowed.

"I don't believe it," he said. "I see it. I hear it. A little brown pixy, with red eyes, talking Galactic. But I don't believe it."

"Hey!" Lancelot sat up, painfully. "That's a point, too. You're talking Galactic. Who are you, anyway?"

"He is obviously a Galactopol agent," the Shogleet said patiently. "The real point is, why is he here? Why would they send two agents?"

"Two agents?" The stranger stared, then pushed his cap back. "I'm beginning to get it, I think. Heard of you, haven't I? Lancelot Lake?"

"That's right. And you?"

"Oh, I'm just a third-level sector man. Name's Alfred North. Pass myself off as a

journeyman blacksmith here. It's a living, with all the armor about. That's how I could spot your stuff. Nothing here to even scratch that. You'd be a pay-off bet in a tourney."

"No fear!" Lancelot said, hastily. "I've had all I want of that. But what is this all about? What's the emergency?"

"It's a dilly, all right." North fished out a case, offered it. "Smoke?"

"Thanks!" Lancelot's eyes shone, until he recalled the squires. "How about them, then? Won't they mind?"

"It'll scare them, but they'll write it off as magic. That's a handy way to cover up anything you don't understand. That's why they can take the dragon so easily."

"There really is a dragon, then?"

"But surely. You mean you didn't know? It's had me stopped, I can tell you. I was thinking of screaming for special aid. How come you're here, if you don't know about it?"

"I guess I'm your special aid. I only got here this morning, and I can't seem to keep still long enough to find out anything that makes sense."

North frowned, then shrugged resignedly. "I suppose you special boys have your own methods. Anyway, I'd say you have the right approach in this case. We usually work under cover, but this one isn't like that at all. When the

alarm went off, I wasn't bothered —"

"That alarm," the Shogleet interrupted. "I am curious about that. Is it some form of automatic device?"

North sighed. "I was hoping you'd go away, if I didn't pay any attention. Ah, well." He inhaled thoughtfully. "You see, when these planets are colonized, they implant the compatible beliefs as a dogma. But, just to take care of any sports, there's a ritual, a form of exorcism, that is triggered off by any major change. And that fires the alarm. Doesn't happen very often. It's usually a gene-twist. Some kid gets curious about the stars up there, or begins to fiddle about with experiments in steam-pressure. That kind of thing. But this one is different."

"A real dragon?" Lancelot asked, wide-eyed.

"**T**HAT would be the day," North grinned. Then he sneaked a look at the Shogleet, and his grin slipped a little. "No," he said, stubbing out his smoke-tube. "If you think back a couple of hundred years, when they were terraforming this planet, they used machinery. Big stuff. One gadget was a combined cultivator-harvester. Thorium powered, and just about everlasting. They used hundreds of 'em. And somebody goofed. One got left behind, in a cave they

were using for storage space. Now, after all these years, one of the local boys has found it. He's using it."

"Hold on," Lancelot objected. "He wouldn't know how."

"That's the hell of it. He wouldn't have to; I've checked. The thing is run from a mentrol — a sort of headband, with trimmings. You put it on, and think your orders, like 'stop,' 'go,' 'right,' 'left,' 'fast,' and 'slow.' And what more do you want? The way I figure it, somebody must have found the mentrol and tried it on for size, and that started the whole thing off."

"Yeeow!" Lancelot gasped. "He must have had the hell of a fright when it came rumbling out of its cave. But it all fits. The way they lap up magic here, it wouldn't be any trouble for them to spot that whoever wears the mentrol controls the beast. Which is right, anyway. Who owns it now?"

"That's Sir Brian de Boyce. Next to old Cadman, he's the big boy in these parts. The way I heard it, one of his freemen found the mentrol, so Sir Brian eliminated him, and took charge. And it's ruining the economy. There isn't a peasant in miles who's put his back into his job in months. I'm stymied. I'm only a free-man here. I can't just charge in and tell Sir Brian what to do. But you can. You're a knight."

"That's all right," Lancelot mused, "but how do I get it from him?"

"You'll fight him for it, of course." Lancelot fell back.

"Oh, no! I'm not having any more of that," he groaned. "You didn't see what Deorham did to me. I can show you the bruises —"

"Come off it." Noah was curt. "If you took a stroll down to the main hall right now, you'd find that they're working out the list for the big fight, in the morning. No, not against Bors and his boys. Against each other."

"Eh? What for?"

"It's the culture pattern. Trial by combat. Knights fight for rank, prestige. Cadman wouldn't dream of leading a field of knights unless they had all been graded by prowess. That's how it's done. The winners qualify; the losers flunk out. I'll bet you there's a dozen down there right now, just aching to have a crack at you. You can *call* yourself Sir Lancelot. But they'll want you to prove it. And you can't refuse, either; if you chicken out, your name will smell. Even a serf will spit on you."

"Oh lord!" Lancelot sat up, and put his head in his hands. "I wish I'd never seen this place. What the hell am I going to do?"

"Your best bet is to lash out with a challenge to Sir Brian, right away. If you're lucky, and he's free to take you on,

then all you have to do is chop him down, and you're top man — and the mentrol is yours. You'd better be quick. The competition is fierce."

MASQUERADING as a horse again, the Shogleet carried Lancelot through the busy streets, early the next morning. It was of the opinion that Lancelot had been reasonably fortunate. He had drawn one strange knight from the far west, called Gnut, an unknown about whom fantastic stories were rife.

"Discounting the tales," it argued, "for these people have only the vaguest ideas of accuracy, you are fortunate. You will defeat Gnut, then Sir Brian, and the mentrol will be yours."

Lancelot refused to be cheered. "I'm sick of this knight business," he muttered. "I spend all my time in this blasted metal strait-jacket, jogging my guts out on a horse, people bashing me about. Now I've got to fight a couple of guys I've never seen before. And if I win what happens? Every knight for miles around will be waiting to have a bash at me to show how good he is. And they talk about competition in a dynamic culture! They don't know what they're talking about."

They were turning the corner, by a high-roofed house. The Shogleet was pondering

on the unspoken implication in Lancelot's words. He was actually so low in spirit as to entertain the thought that he might not win! Then there came a gentle hail from the balcony, and a gay-colored scrap of silk fluttered through the sunlight, to catch on the tip of Lancelot's lance.

"Tis a troth, Lord," Alaric said. "Wouldst have me seek out its owner?" Then he explained, as Lancelot was completely fogged. He would enter the house find out who had tossed the silk, ask for her glove, and Lancelot would carry it into battle. "An thou art victorious, Lord, the hand which fits the glove is thine. It is the custom."

"But I've got six wives, now!"

"What of that?" Alaric demanded. "Who knoweth what treasures may hap, today? I know not of Gnut, but Sir Brian is a wonderly rich man — and all can be thine."

"Good grief!" Lancelot shuddered. "Doesn't a man ever settle down with just one wife here?"

"To wed, thou meanest? Marry, that is a different matter. That is the way of a man who is old, and would put an end to glory and adventure."

"Precious few of these lads will live so long," Lancelot mumbled. "The way they go at it. What do you call 'old'?"

Alaric frowned. "I can but guess, sire. A great many

years, certainly. As many as thirty."

The Shogleet was amused by Lancelot's sudden silence. It knew he was thirty-three. But there was food for thought, too. If it was rare for a knight to live longer than thirty years, then this would be a self-control mechanism to keep down the numbers of the non-productive to within the capacity of an agricultural community. Knighthood, it seemed, served the multiple function of entertainment, hazard, prestige and the skimming off of the restless few.

But the wives were an enigma. The Shogleet determined to question North at the first opportunity.

THE tournament field was riot of color. Gay streamers flirted with the breeze from the pavilions at either end. Each pennant was a knight. Tabarded heralds carried rosters. The chattering populace was accommodated on rude plank seats along either length of the field. In the privileged center of one side was the royal stand, thick with drapes.

Alaric was kept busy pointing out the various celebrities, reeling off their reputations, their possessions, their pedigrees, until even the Shogleet marvelled a little at such a memory. Then the boy saw Sir Brian's pennant. He indicated it.

"His lands are the most spa-

cious in Brython, second only to the King. Vast herds, great forests and three castles."

"How many wives?"

"As I heard it last, sire, eleven."

"Oh, great!" Lancelot sagged. "That's a hell of an incentive to win. But if I don't kill him, then he'll kill me!"

Bugles rent the chatter, and set the pennants rising and falling. The contest began. Lancelot watched gloomily.

"Look at that!" he muttered to the Shogleet. "Ton and a half of raving insanity, travelling at about thirty miles an hour. Double it, because the other lunatic is doing the same. No wonder they count you out if you fall. By the time you stop that with your belly and fall about five feet onto hard ground, plus all the hardware, it's no wonder they don't get up to argue."

The pennants rose and fell. Trumpets blared. Brass-lunged heralds told the tally of victor and vanquished. Then up went a barred black pennant, with a gold spot. A herald roared.

"Sir Gnut, of the Westland . . . to meet Sir Lancelot!"

Alaric broke out a pure white pennant, and the challenge was shouted back.

"Sir Lancelot to meet Sir Gnut!"

The great surf-roar of the crowd was stilled as that fabulous name spread from lip to lip. Lancelot settled himself in

the saddle, and put out a hand for the lance which Alaric held ready. But the Shogleet had already spotted Gnut, at the other end. A smallish man, in all-black mail, on a small, wiry stallion, he looked fast.

"Leave the lance," it ordered. "Prepare to use your sword." It cantered on to the field before Lancelot could argue "Now sit firm. Fend off his point with your shield, then cut him down with your sword."

"Who, me?" Lancelot chattered. "How the blazes can I, with you bouncing me about like that?" A great yell went up from the crowd as the gallant knight flung his arms about the neck of his steed to keep from falling off.

The Shogleet halted. The warden's flag fell. Sir Gnut went into his gallop at once, head well down, crouching over his crouched lance. Lancelot fumbled for his sword. The Shogleet braced itself. Lance met shield with a rending crash, and splintered into matchwood. The Shogleet pranced backward and round, to keep Lancelot in the saddle. Gnut was equally nimble, tossing away the ruined lance and whipping out his blade. In and out like a snake, he battered Lancelot, again and again, rocking him in his saddle until he was good and angry.

"All right!" he roared. "You asked for it!" And he stood in his stirrups, waiting for the

black knight to charge in just once more. Then the Shogleet felt him slash down, viciously . . . and there was a shocked *Aaah!* from the crowd.

"Serve him right," Lancelot growled as they trotted from the field, and the serfs ran on to carry off the sliced remains of Sir Gnut. "Let's hope that made Sir Brian stop and think a bit."

V

BACK in his tent there was a surprise waiting for Lancelot.

The Shogleet, poking its horse-head through the tent flap, saw a slim, girlish figure, with her glossy gold hair done in gleaming braids about her head. This was the youngest female it had seen. It studied her with great interest. Her complexion was curiously translucent, so that the flush of blood in her cheek was clearly visible. And her voice was soft and low, as she greeted Lancelot. Alaric, as usual, was on hand with explanations.

"This is the Lady Jessica, sire. She who threw thee the silk which thou accepted."

"I pray," she said, softly, "that thou'rt willing to accept my glove as a gage, Sir Knight." Timidly she held out a slim hand. Lancelot took it as if it was an eggshell. The Shogleet was completely baffled by his beet-red face and

the glazed look in his eye. This was a side to Lancelot that it had not seen before.

The Lady Jessica had to stand on tiptoe to put her face to Lancelot's. Then she went even more red in the face, and whispered, "I pray that thou wilt be triumphant, Sir Knight — for my sake!"

Then she was gone, leaving Lancelot staring into vacancy and rubbing his cheek. North pushed his way into the tent, grinning.

"Nice work, Lake," he said. "Not much style, but you chopped him down quick."

"Here —" Lancelot said, abstractedly. "Something I wanted to ask you. This business about wives. I mean, I won six from Deorham. Lord knows how many Gnut had, but Sir Brian has eleven. What do I do with all them?"

"Ah!" North chuckled. "You're a bit mixed, there. The word should rightly be 'housewives.' They're a kind of high-class servant. When you think about it, there isn't much else a high-born lady can do, except run the domestic side, while the menfolk are busy battling. They have their duties, you see, like keeping track of the hired help, tending to the kitchen, the bedchamber, the linen — that sort of thing. They tend to the man of the house, too, of course, and entertain his guests. But they're strictly property. No need to be both-

ered, if that's what you're worried about."

Lancelot's face went red again. "So there isn't any regular getting married and settling down, then?"

"Oh, sure, but that's a different thing. For the knight who is past his prime and wants to settle down. Retire. You know. He usually selects some old place out in the sticks, turns in the rest of his property to the King, to be a prize for some contender, and settles in to raise a family. More squires and ladies, and the whole thing starts all over again. Not many get that far. It's too dull for them. Why?"

Lancelot was saved his stammering explanation by the sound of a herald from the field. Sir Brian's pennant had gone up.

"Take the lance this time," the Shogleet decided, studying Sir Brian.

"Good grief!" Lancelot had been looking, too. "See the size of him! No wonder he's the top man in these parts. He's going to take a bit of knocking out."

The Shogleet pricked up its ears at the sudden change in Lancelot's tone, but it had more urgent matters to consider. "Couch your lance firmly," it advised. "Aim for his midriff." The flag fell. They began to go forward, from a canter into a gallop, Lancelot manfully sitting forward and forgetting to complain. The

mighty Sir Brian thundered toward them, his lance glittering in the sun. At the very moment of impact, the Shogleet stiffened, rearing on its haunches to keep Lancelot in the saddle. There was a deafening double clang from the shields, a wheeze from Lancelot as the wind was punched out of him, the screech of tortured metal and a gruesome gargle from Sir Brian.

Then, despite all the Shogleet could do, it felt Lancelot lifted and dragged from the saddle.

SKIDDING furiously to a stop, it wheeled to look. There was Lancelot, on foot, dazedly clutching the haft of the lance. The other end, with its razor tip, had stabbed through Sir Brian's shield, his armor and Sir Brian himself, and stuck out a hand's breadth on the far side.

With a grunting effort, Lancelot tore the lance free. He staggered back as the Shogleet cantered up, to kneel so that he could remount. The crowd was stunned into momentary silence. Then it went wild.

Even King Cadman looked shaken, as they cantered past the royal stand for the salute and accolade. Back in the tent, Lancelot eased himself out of his helmet and sat.

"That's me," he said flatly. "I'm through, done, finished." North pushed through the tent-flap just in time to dis-

agree with the last word.

"There's still the dragon," he said. "That shouldn't be too hard, now that you've won the mentrol. Nice bout, that was. Just as well you're not staying in these parts. The rest of the boys don't stand a chance against you."

"It's the superior metal, of course," the Shogleet commented, poking its horsehead into the tent. North jumped a clear foot off the ground, knocking his head on the wooden spar of the tent.

"Talking horses, now," he breathed. "Is this routine equipment for you Prime G-men?"

"Forget that," Lancelot snapped. "What about this dragon? Let's get it over with, and we'll see whether I'm staying here or not."

North eyed him thoughtfully. "I suggest you play it this way. There should be a coffee-break, soon. You get an audience with Cadman. Tell him this dragon is a great evil. You've come to kill it and, once done, you'll return to the shades. That way, everybody'll be shut up. All right?"

"Sounds simple enough. But can I kill the thing?"

"I'll fix that," North said briskly, "once I have the mentrol." He glanced out of the tent and chuckled. "Here they come now."

"Who?"

"Sir Brian's crowd. His lieges, turning themselves in.

You want the lad with the gadget. Never mind the rest."

"Suppose . . ." said Lancelot, in a tone that made the Shogleet prick up its ears at once. "Suppose I was staying here, and I didn't want all these retainers hanging about — what's the routine procedure?"

"Nothing to it." North gave him that thoughtful look again. "You just manumit them. Give 'em their freedom. They'll just go off and sign up with somebody else. It's not wise, though, because you couldn't run an estate without staff, and they work for their keep."

"That's a point," Lancelot admitted. He went to receive his spoils with a pensive air.

Late that afternoon, with the awed populace keeping a safe distance, the Shogleet bore Lancelot, following North who was on foot, to the meadow where the monster "slept." North had the mentrol in his hand.

"This shouldn't be any trouble," he said. "A bit of expert sabotage, and it will be all over. There she is, folks."

IT was easy to see why the peasants had dubbed it a dragon. Its sectioned body, all of fifty feet long, hugged the ground, rising to a twenty-foot high hump in front. There a single head-lamp gave it a one-eyed, evil look.

"That front scoop," North

explained, "can be set to any level you like, and there are controls which can be adjusted so that the stuff is processed, inside. Got a rudimentary 'brain' — enough to identify and reject organic matter that's still alive. It wouldn't touch a man, even if you tried to make it. Not that any of the locals would have the nerve to chance it. Nor do I blame them. Incidentally, it processes wastes and makes its own bags and fertilizer, all in one operation. That's not doing the economy any good, either, believe me. I've been stuck because I couldn't lay my hands on this little gadget. But now I have it, I know that it's immobile. Nothing can happen until I put it on my head. Come on."

But the Shogleet had other ideas.

"Lancelot," it said. "You had better go back. Warn the audience not to come too near. And there is someone you would wish to see, I think?"

"That's right," Lancelot slid down eagerly, and went clanking back.

"You're a smart animal," North said, shrewdly. "What's on your mind?"

"Answer me a question, first. I gather that there is a sort of personal polarity, an attraction and an attachment between humans of opposite sexes, if certain other factors are favorable. It involves such activities as marrying, set-

tling down, raising a family — all of which are concepts which I do not quite understand. But I believe such relationships are not amenable to reason. Yes?"

"If you mean that there's neither sense nor reason in a guy who's in love, that's dead right," North chuckled. "Love makes a fool of a man. There's never been a cure for it yet."

"That is what I thought. Thank you. Now, it is not enough that the dragon be destroyed. It must be *seen* to be destroyed. Impressively."

"It's a good point. What's on your mind?"

The Shogleet proceeded to tell him, in rapid, explicit detail. North's eyes widened.

"I can do it, sure, if that's the way you want it. I hope you know what you're doing, that's all."

He hurried off across the meadow, to disappear into the gaping jaws of the cultivator. Lancelot came clanking back. He had already mounted by the time North returned.

"Let's get it over with," he said impatiently, dropping his visor. "I might as well tell you that, as soon as I've finished with this thing, I'm retiring from Galactopol. I'm through. Now, what do I do?"

"It's all fixed," North said dryly. "I'll get well clear, then I'll put this on and make it look as if you two are battling. When you've had enough, you bash it with your sword."

"Fat lot of good that's going to do!"

"I told you, it's all fixed. Keep an eye out for a yellow danger-plate. It's marked 'DRIVE - UNIT SAFETY COVER.' Just hit that. That's all."

The Shogleet broke into a gentle canter. Lancelot drew his sword. The long, gleaming machine suddenly broke into loud and grumbling life, its great jaws agape. With a growl of gears, it moved and swung its great head round, like a humped serpent seeking prey. Then the headlight lit up, sending out a bright beam.

"You know," Lancelot jerked, as the Shogleet swerved to chase the lumbering machine, "this isn't such a bad place, after all. I mean, once you get away from this armor-plated business. I think I'll retire. I own all Sir Brian's lands now. I could settle down, take life easy —"

"But you are a Prime G-man, Lancelot. It is your duty to return to Headquarter's and report the successful completion of your mission."

"North will take care of that for me."

"But you don't really belong here."

"What's that got to do with it? It's a free country, isn't it?" Lancelot waved his sword valiantly, and the Shogleet swerved suddenly, so that the tip of the blade struck the yellow panel.

THE bang was enough to impress even the Shogleet.

It was very busy, for a few fractionated seconds, warding off blast, radiation and chunks of flying debris. Then there was a ringing silence. In a thick haze of settling dust, it turned, scrambled up out of the hole and crept over the torn and ruptured earth to where North was peering, open-mouthed, from a sheltering bankside. Of the Brythons there was nothing to be seen but the puffs of dust from their flying heels.

"You look all right," North gasped, "but what about him?"

"He is stunned, and in temporary fugue. It will pass. If you would hang the mentrol on my saddle, we will be leaving. You can clear up the odd details?"

"Sure, I can handle those. You're leaving right now?"

"I think it would be wise.

Lancelot seems to have formed one of those attachments, for a certain young lady. He intended to remain here permanently. That would have been unwise, I understand?"

"Dead right," North grinned, but there were grim undertones. "With what he's got, and you along, he would be 'Change' in a big way. That wouldn't do. I'd have to interfere. And that might be nasty."

"Yes, that is what I thought. It is better this way."

"Just what are you, anyway — a sort of guardian angel?"

"You might say that, yes," the Shogleet nodded, and set off to gallop the long trail, back to the ship.

But it was still curious. It wondered just what Director Hugard would say when Lancelot got back.

END

Kangaroo Quiz

This is a quiz with something in its pocket. Try the problem below, then hop to p. 108 for the answer. There you'll find some surprising information about the quiz — and about you.

○ ○ ○
○ ○ ○
○ ○ ○

Problem: Without raising your pencil from the paper, connect all the above points with four straight lines.



The
Stainless-Steel
Knight

BY JACK RACKHAM

illustrated by IVIE



*He had everything a knight needed:
gallant steed, fair lady
and the most unconquerable little home-made dragon
in a billion solar systems!*

