GS7722 CORGI SCIENCE FICTION

New Writings in SF-10

SF 10

Edited by
John Carnell

Featuring
The Imagination Trap
By Colin Kapp

John Baxter: Apple
G. L. Lack: Robot's Dozen
Joseph L. Green: Birth of a Butterfly
T. M. Disch: The Affluence of Edwin Lollard
Brian W. Aldiss: A Taste for Dostoevsky
John Rankine: Image of Destruction

When a deep-space-vessel—exploring the infinities of "Tau" travel—returns, reduced to a length of twenty-two inches and carrying a one-and-a-half inch pilot, some detailed investigation is called for. And Colin Kapp, in *The Imagination Trap*, leads the reader into a fantastic "Tau" world before the problem is solved. Size features again in John Baxter's *Apple*, a grisly tale that describes some of the horrible results occurring when nature decides to play about with relative dimensions.

Aliens are usually weird, ugly, or terrifying—but in *Birth of a Butterfly*, Joseph Green gives us an exquisitely beautiful alien. From Brian Aldiss—a fascinating story of time-travel. From John Rankine—another inter-galactic mission featuring Dag Fletcher. *The Affluence of Edwin Lollard* by Thomas M. Disch, reflects on a Welfare State gone wild, and in G. L. Lack's *Robot's Dozen*, we have one of the most hilarious robot stories ever written . . .

The tenth volume of *New Writings in SF*—an exciting and widely divergent collection of original S.F. stories

Also edited by JOHN CARNELL

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EDITED BY

JOHN CARNELL

NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—10

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NEW WRITINGS IN S.F.—10

A CORGI BOOK

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FOREWORD

by

JOHN CARNELL

THIS tenth volume of *New Writings In S-F* sees the series firmly established as one of the most popular yet devised and a major share of the credit given to it by book reviewers round the world must go primarily to the authors who made it possible. Some of them have been new names to the genre, others already well established; all of them have had *stories* to tell and this is part of the basic requirement in each volume.

This present volume, for instance, is a cross-section of varied themes as reasonably well balanced as possible at the time of going to press. It opens with what must be considered Colin Kapp's most ambitious *science*-fiction story to date, outranking his "The Pen And The Dark" in No. 8 —a story which brought forth considerable favourable comment from readers and reviewers alike. Colin, a technical assistant on electro-chemical work in a leading electronics laboratory, has been writing S-F short stories since 1958 and already has one outstanding novel to his name —*The Dark Mind* (titled *The Transfinite Man* in U.S.A.).

In direct contrast, John Baxter's story "Apple" will long be remembered for its macabre background, a penchant he freely admits to liking. This young Australian, who lives in Sydney, recently turned to full-time professional writing and we can expect to see many more fascinating themes from him soon. Notwithstanding the out-of-context setting of his current story, it is no harder to accept than faster-than-light travel.

Joseph L. Green, who likes to analyse the alienness of aliens, has worked in and around American missile bases

for several years and now has one of those dream jobs most S-F writers would give much to have—actually working on the U.S. moon shot programmes at Cape Kennedy. He says that now he is really living science fiction.

Another new American writer to be presented for the first time in this series is Thomas M. Disch, at present footloose in Europe and writing full-time. With two novels and many short stories already to his credit, he is probably one of the most promising of the young Americans who have recently entered the S-F field.

It is nice to welcome back Brian W. Aldiss after such a long absence (since the first volume) with one of the most unusual time-travelling stories we have yet read. Literary editor of the *Oxford Mail*, he is now one of Britain's leading S-F writers. At the World S-F Convention in 1959 he was voted the most promising new writer of 1958—and in 1966 his latest trophy was the Science Fiction Writers of America "Nebula Award" for one of the best short novels of 1965, *The Saliva Tree*.

Finally, John Rankine, headmaster of a junior school in the North of England, whose "Dag Fletcher" character has already appeared in two novels and a collection of short stories. One of his more serious S-F stories, "Six Cubed Plus One", which appeared in *New Writings In S-F 7*, has already been made into a 50-minute B.B.C. television play (retitled "Six Squared Plus One" to reduce the number of extras required in the cast).

Add G. L. Lack's humorous exchange of letters regarding the hiring of a house robot in "Robot's Dozen", and we have another entertaining selection of new stories for your reading pleasure. We are sure that you will enjoy them.

JOHN CARNELL

October 1966

THE IMAGINATION TRAP

by

COLIN KAPP

Tau-space was an inter-atom paradox where conditions existing in normal space were physically and psychologically incongruent—yet it was probably the only route to the stars. If Man could master it!

THE IMAGINATION TRAP

ONE

PROFESSOR CARL DIEPENSTROM, Director of Tau Research Corporation, switched off the intercom.

"Well, at least he's come to see us, Paul."

Paul Porter nodded. "I thought he would. Eric Brevis can't resist the lure of curiosity any more than we can. In fact, if we can score with him, it will be on that very point."

"I see." Diepenstrom raised his large and greying head and studied Porter seriously for a moment or two. "And you still think it vitally necessary that we go through with this project, Paul?"

"You know it is. It's the only chance we have. We can't continue with the present research line. It isn't humanitarian, and it isn't giving us a glimpse of a coherent pattern. Besides which, you know how the Government's attitude is hardening."

"Yes, I know it," said Diepenstrom gravely. "And that's the reason I've backed you as far as I have. I can't see any practical alternative. But I'd be happier if it didn't have to be you who went out there. Tau Research can't afford to lose you, Paul."

"There won't be any Tau Research if this project folds. Anyway, I don't think the risk will be too great—not if we can persuade Eric Brevis to join the team."

"You think a great deal of Dr. Brevis, don't you?"

"I do. He has an intuitive understanding of the irrational, and that can be a prime factor for survival under extreme Tau conditions. With him on the team we have a very real chance of making a breakthrough."

"Very well," said Diepenstrom. "If you want Dr. Brevis, you shall have him. But you'd better leave the interview to me. It may just be that he isn't very willing to offer his life

for somebody else's cause. In which case he will have to be . . . ah! . . . persuaded."

As the psychologist entered the room, Diepenstrom rose in greeting.

"Dr. Brevis, thank you for coming."

Brevis seated himself carefully and took a cigar from the offered box. "Being in receipt of such an intriguing communication, I could scarcely have refused."

Diepenstrom repressed a mischievous smile. "That was, shall we say, contrived. Curiosity is a force far more potent than most people allow."

Brevis studied the Director's face carefully for a moment. "True," he said. "Though I don't think you asked me here just to discuss the psychology of curiosity."

"Indeed not. I wanted to discuss the possibility of death."

"Whose death—yours or mine?"

"Yours."

Brevis exhaled sharply. "I suppose there's some sense in this cryptic nonsense?"

"There is indeed, my dear Doctor, and shortly I'll tell you what it is. But first let me enquire how much you know about Tau?"

"Not very much. I know it's a system in which solid bodies are resonated in such a way that their atoms can pass through the spaces in the atomic structure of other solid bodies. I know you use the method for transport, bringing the big Tau ships to resonance and then driving them through the earth by the shortest mean path to their destination."

"Go on," said Diepenstrom.

"I know also that in its resonant state such a ship passes into an inter-atom domain called Tau-space which is incongruent both physically and psychologically with conditions existing in normal space."

"That will do for the moment," said Diepenstrom. "I recall that you were concerned with Paul Porter on the epic voyage of the old *Lambda I* Tau raft. I also recall that the

impact of some of the things you discovered on that journey caused a radical re-thinking of some major portions of the Tau concept. I put it to you, Dr. Brevis, that this is a remarkable record for one who claims very little knowledge of Tau techniques."

"Suppose we come to the point," said Brevis abruptly.

"I was just going to," said Diepenstrom. "Does the phrase deep-Tau mean anything to you?"

"No."

"Then I'll tell you. Deep-Tau is the Tau-space analogue of conventional deep space. We are actively researching into the possibility of achieving interstellar spaceflight by travelling in the Tau-space analogue."

"I don't see . . ." said Brevis.

"Let me finish first, please. Now, deep-Tau as an alternative to conventional spaceflight promises some remarkable advantages in simplified technique. Indeed, it may be the only technique to make star travel possible. Superficially, deep-Tau travel woul appear to be easier than terrestrial Tau work. Unfortunately there are a number of impossible and irrational reasons why this is not so."

"I fail to see," said Brevis, "what all this has to do with me."

"A great deal. The present pattern of Tau research consists of sending manned telemetry probes into deep-Tau. We've sent some twenty-four to date. Some have returned and some haven't, but each has piled paradox on paradox—and each has cost the life of the probe pilot. Now we're approaching our last chance. If we fail, the Government will probably close down our activities completely. Such an action would be a setback to this research from which it might never recover."

"So?"

"Paul Porter wants to take a four-man vessel fitted out as a laboratory into deep-Tau, and he wants you to go with him. It's my job to persuade you to go, while at the same time leaving you in no doubt that to do so is tantamount to committing suicide."

"So that's it! I refuse, of course. I still have the scars to show from the last time Paul Porter took me into Tau."

"I have a contract here on which you can write your own price for one successful deep-Tau vector."

"No, Professor. If Paul wants to seek an anguished grave in the corner of some dark and twisted hypothetical continuum, that is his own affair. I've no such ambition."

"A fair statement, Dr. Brevis. I appreciate your position. Faced with the same situation, I should probably adopt a similar standpoint. Let me thank you again for coming, and apologize for wasting your time."

Brevis watched him narrowly for a moment. "What are you up to, you old fox? You aren't a man to accept defeat that easily."

Diepenstrom raised his ponderous head. His smile was a mere ghost haunting the corners of his mouth.

"Ah, yes! There was something else. I'm glad you reminded me. While you're here I wonder if you'd care to see some of our deep-Tau exhibits."

"Seeing the whole point of this interview seems to turn on this apparent afterthought, I have no objection. But I warn you that nothing you can show me will make me change my mind."

"Perish the thought, my dear Doctor. I merely wish to show you our little museum of paradoxes. I think you'll find them rather fascinating. Would you care to step this way?"

The vaults beneath Tau Research were olive-drab and vast in extent, and the footsteps of the two men echoed hollowly down the steel and concrete corridors. Brevis had previously had no idea that Government influence extended to the point of including armed servicemen alongside Tau Corporation's own formidable security force. The two men were checked and counter-checked at each level and intersection with a meticulous care which placed a sinister stamp on the ultimate importance of the project.

Brevis smiled wryly. "If I have as much trouble getting

into Heaven as we've had getting into here, I don't think I'll bother."

"Don't worry," said Diepenstrom. "The qualifications for entry are somewhat different—one might almost say mutually exclusive."

"That's a rare piece of cynicism."

"Wait," said the Director, "until you've seen what we have to show you. There are more things in Heaven and on Earth than are dreamed of in your psychology."

They reached the appointed door, and Diepenstrom withdrew the bolts with a heavy clatter and stood aside for the psychologist to enter.

"This is one of the ten or so probe vessels which we have been able to recover. It came back to us on an automatic-recall vector from deep-Tau, and it's not the least of our curiosities."

Brevis entered the room and walked around the exhibit, his face registering a *melange* of fear and fascination.

"What sort of trick is this?"

"No trick, Doctor. Simply one of those things that we at Tau Research have had to learn to live with."

"And the pilot?" Brevis asked at last the question he had been avoiding.

"He came back alive but died in hospital. He was completely to scale with the craft. He was desperately mad and measured exactly one and a quarter inches tall. Do you want to see any more?"

"Not just now. One has to learn to re-adjust."

"You're not feeling ill, are you?"

"No. I was just thinking what a remarkable character your pilot must have been."

"You've got beyond me there," said Diepenstrom, with sudden interest. "What did you have in mind, Doctor?"

"I was reflecting that you sent him into a complex so vast that it doesn't include the limiting concept 'universe'. The wonder to me is not that he came back minute, but that he didn't come back microscopic."

A trace of light flickered across Diepenstrom's brow.

"I think you're on to something, Dr. Brevis. Paul Porter was right. You do have an intuitive understanding of the irrational. Won't you have second thoughts about joining our team?"

"Damn you, Diepenstrom! You've pushed the ball right into my court."

"I merely showed you the ball. You did the pushing."

"But you knew which way it would roll."

"Certainly. With the pitch inclined at an angle of forty-five degrees in the right direction, I could scarcely miss. It's what I call an imagination trap. Give an expert an outstanding problem in his own field, and you have one of the most infallible mousetraps ever devised. Now suppose we go upstairs and sign that contract?"

"I still haven't said I agree," Brevis said.

"No, but you will. You see, if you walk out now you'll always be haunted by the vision of the Tau probe vessel which came back only twenty-two inches long and with a pilot not as big as your thumb. I don't think a man with your imagination could live with himself with that problem unresolved."

"It would appear," said Brevis, "that I am now working for Tau Corporation until death do us part—unless I misread the small print at the bottom of the contract. Although, if I have your intentions divined aright, that mayn't be a very long-term prospect."

Porter turned with a smile from the drafting machine. "I take it that you have just concluded an interview with Diepenstrom. He tends to induce that depressive attitude in interviews. Anyway, glad to have you join the team, Eric. On the type of project we're planning we're going to need all the expertise we can get."

"Even in psychology?"

"Especially in psychology—and your own understanding of the irrational. Eric, we're going into a complex which doesn't begin until a point way beyond where our physics ends—out into a region from which nothing vaguely

rational has ever been recovered. What happens to things out in deep-Tau is completely beyond our experience. That's why I feel a sight happier to know you're going to be alongside."

"I'm with you, Paul . . . although just now I'm damned if I can think of a convincing reason why. What's the big attraction about going into deep-Tau anyway?"

"Because it's there, I guess. Man isn't built to live happily on the edge of the unknown. And if we're ever to get to the stars, then deep-Tau is the only possible route."

"Not spaceflight?"

Porter was slightly amused. "Hardly. Unless there are some very radical changes in our concept of normal physics, we don't have either the engines or the power sources necessary to make such a journey in man's lifetime. And we probably never will have. Mass-energy relationships alone rule that out quite firmly."

"You've just shattered my dream of the space age," said Brevis.

"Except for a ruinously expensive exploration of the Solar system, it never was more than a dream," said Porter.

"But doesn't that apply to deep-Tau travel also?"

"Not completely. In Tau-space there are no gravitational gradients to overcome, and mass-energy relationships and some aspects of Relativity don't hold strictly true. Don't ask me to show you the maths, because we're still trying to understand it ourselves, but Tau-space provides us with a potential medium in which we can circumvent a lot of the physical absolutes which make conventional interstellar spaceflight an impossibility. Even the speed of light is no longer a limiting velocity."

"But aren't the power requirements still prohibitive?"

"They're high, but they don't climb to infinity or anything like. Even today it's theoretically possible to build a ship which could make a thirty-two light year round trip through deep-Tau to Altair and back under its own power."

"Phew! I begin to see the attraction."

"Precisely," said Porter. "If we can't reach the stars via

Tau-space then it's doubtful if we shall ever reach them. But standing in our way is a set of problems so imponderable that we don't know how to begin to start to solve them."

"How much do we know about these problems?"

"Lamentably little. Apart from the monstrosities in the vaults which came back on automatic-recall vectors, all our information is limited to transmitted verbal and telemetered material gathered during the first few hours of a probe vector run—that is to say, before the vessels achieved the speed of light."

"So the speed of light is a limiting velocity?"

"Not in the usual sense. Neither is it a failure of communication due to Döppler effect. This is something truly frightening in its implications."

"Go on!" Brevis said, noting the look in Porter's eyes.

"When the probe vessel reaches the velocity of light our receiver here at Tau Research breaks down. The probe continues to transmit, but we can't receive its signals."

"I don't understand," said Brevis.

"Neither do we." Porter's face was haunted. "Their signal strength increases to such proportions that the current actually fuses the terminal elements of our receiver. Millions of amperes are involved."

"But how can that be?"

"I don't know. But the implications are terrifying. If we can receive such power over such a distance . . . then what must have happened to the ship itself? Such a condition presupposes that the ship's transmitters are happily modulating beamed power equal to the output of a pretty fair-sized star."

Two

"WELL, that's the ship, Eric. We're calling her *Lambda II* after Rorsch's original Tau raft."

Brevis looked down. "And there the similarity ends," he said.

They were on the balcony of Tau Research's main

assembly shop, and below them the huge vessel, running almost the length of the facility, returned the solid glint of flawlessly polished metal. Even now a group of fitters was engaged in burnishing the plating with great attention, against the possibility of its eventual emergence into the rays of some strange and alien sun.

"It looks more like a spaceship than a Tau craft," said Brevis.

"That's effectively what it is—a spaceship built around the largest and most stable Tau-spin generator we could find. We've made it capable of operating in either Tau or real space environments in the hope that we may achieve the easy transposition from one to the other. We've proved such a transposition is possible in vacuum without the necessity for a grid."

"I'd no idea you were planning anything on this scale."

Porter shrugged. "It's our last chance, Paul. Tau Corporation is staking everything on this gamble. We've spent twenty-one and a half million on *Lambda II* so far—and it could have been five times that much except that the Nuclear Energy Authority donated the reactor design and provided the fuel. The Rorsch generator was diverted from a luxury Tau liner already under construction, or we could easily have spent another three million on that."

Bevis looked slightly dazed. "And this type of money is readily available?"

"A hundred times that, if necessary. The project is that important. The proof of the project is whether we can go out into deep-Tau and come back alive. Any facility which might aid us in doing just that is ours for the asking."

Brevis nodded. "If only we knew in advance what to ask for," he said.

Immediately below them now the four snow-white ceramic tubes of the thrust jets gave a shrewd hint of the capacity of the drive reactor, cunningly contrived to conform to the hindshape of the hull itself. Many large industrial cities had less power than this at their disposal. Almost centrally along its length the hull bulged into a

globe wherein was situated the mammoth Rorsch generator, originally designed to induce Tau-spin in a luxury craft of nearly a hundred times the mass displacement of its present charge.

The front of the ship was blind, save for antennae and the scanning and sensing devices feeding the instrumentation which had to serve in lieu of eyes. The only concession to the need to physically observe was the blister atop the ship, which emerged through the heavy shielding protecting the ship's occupants from the unwelcome psychic molestations of the raw Tau environment. Apart from that, the hull was featureless.

"We'll go in later," said Porter. "First I want you to meet the rest of the team. I know they're very curious about you."

"Curious?"

Porter smiled briefly. "I could have been forgiven for picking a cosmologist, a nuclear physicist, or a radio-astronomer—in fact a man specializing in any of the hundred or so branches of physical science with which we get involved in deep-Tau work. But when I announced I was bringing in a far-out psychologist, reactions ranged from the incredulous to the hostile.

"The objections weren't too serious, of course. We needed a qualified medic aboard, and that factor plus your previous record in Tau made you the natural choice anyway. But Tau pilots especially are somewhat sensitive of implied criticism of their mental balance. Not unreasonably, I suppose, when we expect them to come to meaningful decisions in what is essentially an irrational environment."

"I promise you I'll tread lightly," said Brevis.

The others were already in the office when they arrived. Porter kept the introductions brief. Sigmund Grus, fortyish, a Tau Research senior physicist, heavy, Germanic save in all but accent. He was every inch an applied intellectual, with a rational solidity behind his thinking which matched his frame.

The second was Pat Driscoll, senior Tau test pilot. An

altogether different character. In his early thirties, he was nervous and apparently unsure of himself. Though his face registered his thoughts on the trend of the conversation, he only once allowed himself to speak, and then did so with such embarrassing over-emphasis of point that he confused himself in mid-sentence and trailed back into pathetic silence.

After two hours the meeting broke up, they having summarized for Brevis' benefit the duties and responsibilities of each man on the team. Brevis alone had no set duties. While the others concerned themselves with the machines and mechanics of the trip, his concern was solely with the functioning of the men.

Afterwards Brevis and Porter went down to the ship. The psychologist had to familiarize himself with the various equipments controlling the temperature, humidity and composition of the ship's atmosphere, and the devices provided to assist survival against various levels of potential catastrophe. Also it was left to him to equip the tiny hospital room and operating theatre, and to decide what medicaments and drugs should be carried. Porter showed him his quarters and provided him with the necessary charts and layouts.

"By the way, Eric, what do you make of the others?" Porter slipped the question in apparently casually as they turned to leave, but there was no doubt it had been long in his mind.

Brevis shrugged. "I was going to take that up with you. I take it they were picked for their specialities rather than their suitability for an exploratory voyage of this kind."

"Very much so. We don't have any mental and physical supermen with sufficiently advanced Tau knowledge, and it would take too long to train some. Therefore we compromised. We took the most technically able men who also had practical Tau operating experience, and threw in a full-time psychologist to balance the equation. Unorthodox, I know, but it's only one of the compromises we've had to make in getting a project like this off the ground."

"Mm!" said Brevis. "Ordinarily the only man I'd recommend for a venture of this magnitude would be yourself. Sigmund Grus is sound enough, but he'd be better left in his own laboratory with his wife to meet him in the car. But I'm more than a little dubious about Pat Driscoll. He's a man who lives inside himself too much. I'd imagine his I.Q. is something quite fantastic, but he's introverted almost to the point of being unable to communicate. I certainly can't recommend exposing him to stressful situations. He's a weak link, Paul."

"But he's also the best and most experienced Tau pilot available. He has over a thousand vector runs to his credit, many of them on unprogrammed exploratory runs. Take it from me, Eric, there's no pilot on Tau Corporation's payroll better suited than Pat Driscoll to handle this trip."

"I'll take your word for it. But at least you can't say you weren't warned."

"Exactly what are you afraid of, Eric? Every man on this team has already proven his capability of working and surviving under extreme Tau conditions. You can't have a better criterion than that."

"No, except that I suspect both you and I are already quite certain that the extremes of the Tau-state influence aren't going to be our greatest hazards. Else, Paul, why did you include as your medic someone who was also a far-out psychologist?"

In the subsequent months of preparation the tension slowly mounted. Brevis had ample time to observe its effect upon his fellow team members. He found nothing to make him revise his original conclusions as to their psychological suitability, but he rapidly acquired a respect for their technical competence. Sigmund Grus, particularly, impressed him with his detailed understanding of the craft and all its installations.

Two major landmarks measured the progress towards the final departure time. The first was the bringing of the *Lambda II*'s reactor up to criticality, and the second was

the successful proving trial of the giant Rorsch Tau-spin generator. Then the only stage left was the towing of the craft from the assembly shop to the adjoining bay where lay the immense Tau terminal grid which would launch its charge into the unknowns of the deep-Tau continuum.

When this operation too had been completed, the air of expectancy and tension rose like a fever. Whether for success or disaster, the die was already cast. Any inherent faults and shortcomings in the ship were both unknown and scarcely alterable. This was the machine, the physics and mechanics of the project. From this point on the emphasis was very much on the men.

In the eighteen hours of countdown every conceivable item of instrumentation, control and communication was re-checked, and double checked. The huge Rorsch generator, unstable in standby state, responded magnificently on ready-state power, and gave every promise of a fault-free operating condition. The reactor performance was well above specification, and the ship computer had long been soundlessly exchanging its fantastic number sequences with its communication counterpart in the Tau Research information centre.

At two hours to take-off, the team had their final assembly. The atmosphere was so highly charged emotionally that the image of the voyage had assumed epic proportions before it had even begun, and Brevis signalled to Porter to close the hatches early to quieten the tension. Their departure into such a radical unknown as deep-Tau was a psychological vortex which those who experienced it would never quite forget.

With the hatches closed and the occupants insulated from the outer activities except for the electronic chatter of check and counter-check, the tension within the ship swiftly subsided. It was replaced by an immediate sense of identity with the ship and its purpose. Porter took the control room, Driscoll the blister. Grus, having re-run a check-out exercise on the reactor, hastened to his beloved computer where the instrument data was being processed into

an endless electronic digest which could be all the world outside might ever know as to their fate in deep-Tau.

Brevis, his instrumentational chores completed, found himself suddenly at a loss, and retired to his bunk to lay, half resting, mentally reviewing what he knew of the strengths and weaknesses of his companions, and listening to their conversation on the intercom set.

"Zero minus ten minutes." Porter's voice over the loudspeaker was a clear, precise, ritualistic chant. Perfectly controlled. No sign yet that his subconscious had fully absorbed the impact of the situation.

"Tracking stations Pi and Sigma receiving our beam and locked on," said Grus. Sigmund Grus—his strength was that he probably never would perceive the deeper significance of the situation. As the flesh served to cushion his body, so his technology cushioned his mind. But pity him on the day when some inexorable reality leaned down to crush him.

"Seventeen point nine times ten to the minus eleven. Sigmund, I'll need help with the tensor analysis." That was Driscoll. His psyche knew where they were going . . . had known it for a long time . . . had soaked itself in a little acid-pit of dread. But when your psyche has a wound in it as deep and raw as his, you can't bear to be far away from the possibility of death for long. Nevertheless you can still leave sweat, grey upon the pillow.

And himself? How much of the unknown could he take? No use to worry. The unknown and the irrational was his speciality. His drugs had taken him through stranger exercises of the mind than anything deep-Tau might have to offer. Perhaps.

"Three minutes," said Porter's voice. "This will be a two-part take-off. We will adopt the Tau state but remain on the grid until the computer has cleared the course co-ordinates. Eric, if you want to do any preliminary work on the Tau phenomena you'd better join Pat in the blister right away."

Brevis leaned to his microphone. "Check!"

He made his way to the blister directly. Somewhere down the corridors as he walked, the ship made a perfect

transition from real space into Tau, becoming coexistent with the molecules of the air which rushed in to fill the void it had left on the grid. But deep within the ship the transition was indetectable. In the blister, beyond the screens, it would be different. Very different. He halted before the heavy blister door and wiped the sweat from his palms. The reaction of unshielded Tau influence with certain centres of the brain gave rise to hallucinatory images so strong that they equated fairly well with all a man could ever know of reality.

He shouldered the door open, watching the telltales on the wall to give him an indication of the position of the screens set mazeform to shield the emanations of the blister from the ship. The room was dark, but three steps sufficed to place him in the maze and from there he could proceed by fingertip location of the route. But as his head cleared the final screen he again stopped, breathing heavily with part fear and part wonder.

Although their spatial analogue was still the black iron of the grid in the confines of Tau Research, nothing of this was visible. Instead, the blister seemed to be an island floating in alarming isolation in the midst of a pink waste which was the characteristic image of the Tau Gamma mode of resonance. But the knowledge of its origin in no way lessened its scope and awesomeness. Here was space, limitless in a way no real-space panorama could ever be.

Nothing was visible above or below, nor on any side, save for a shifting pink radiance which had no apparent source and which closed around from all sides. Brevis knew this to be subjective illusion, and that even if he closed his eyes the impression would remain. But he could not rid himself of the vertigo or the feeling of profound insignificance which the scene impressed upon his mind.

Driscoll's familiarity, however, had made him more immune. He was already at work under the blister's dome with refractometer, spectrum analyser, polariscope and sighting apparatus, relaying vector and tensor co-ordinates to Grus to form the basis for the calculation of the course.

Brevis was fascinated. Driscoll was setting up line, angle and point relationships by purely visual reference to the Tau-domain image beyond the blister, fixing point co-ordinates to seven decimal places as though they were physical absolutes. But how the information was determined, or how it could be established with such accuracy from the Tau image, he was unable to decide. In this he sensed the reason for Driscoll's inclusion in the team. The ability to interpret the Tau image in terms of mathematically usable quanta was indeed a facility worthy of respect.

Brevis had no idea at all how it was achieved. If any features were visible at all, they were vague features of contrasted intensity in the illuminated field, like some cosmological X-ray diffraction pattern, which Driscoll could read with expert eyes and from which he established his axes and points, as though drawing an elaborate imaginary three-dimensional spider-web across the pink backdrop of unreality.

Finally Sigmund Grus was satisfied.

"That's all we need for now, Pat. Computation time is about seven minutes. Paul, I can give you a deadline in ten minutes."

"Right." Porter's voice cut in on the communicator. "Primary acceleration will exert an apparent force of a half gravity in a direction parallel to the long axis of the ship. This is not a measure of the acceleration rate but a gravitic nuclear reluctance effect which will dissipate rapidly as the ship leaves the Earth's magnetic field. Eric, you won't have experienced this yet, but just brace yourself against a stern bulkhead until it passes. Sigmund, I'm handing control to the computer. As soon as the course is taped you can give her the gun."

Three

BRED in a world used to the statistics of the crushing acceleration gravities of rocket spaceflight, Brevis had earlier envisioned their leap towards light-speed velocities

would be a prolonged spell of suffering in an acceleration couch. But in the modified physics of the Tau domain their actual departure was a physical anticlimax. The half gravity Porter had promised proved no more than a gentle push against the wall, a force against which he could move and lean quite easily. The effect was as if the room had rotated slightly on its axis so that the wall on which he leaned inclined back at an angle and the floor sloped upwards. After a few minutes both wall and floor returned to the normal.

When conditions had stabilized and the Tau image remained unchanged, Brevis left the blister and went to the control room where the activity was now centred. So effortless had been the moment of departure that he was inwardly slightly sceptical that they had already achieved a velocity greater than a conventional rocket could ever hope to match. It was also incredible that they could have developed a rate of acceleratiion beyond the structural endurance of any known material operating in a real-space environment.

Even in the control room the air of unreality grew no less. The T-Döppler radar and similar devices meant things to Porter and the computer but to Brevis' untrained eye gave no more sensible indication of speed now than they had when the ship was at rest. As their speed climbed to measurable fractions of that of light Brevis was completely at a loss to convince himself of any condition other than that of being completely at rest. He finally dismissed the problem and turned his attention to his own charges—the human components of the ship.

And it was here he discovered, at least in Grus and Porter, that the sense of speed and the fear of it was very much in evidence. What Driscoll thought he absorbed into himself, but the tension rising in the other two was a minute by minute tightening of a spring. Real-space physics postulated the speed of light to be a physical absolute, which nothing could transcend. But in less than four hours they and their ship were going to challenge that barrier at a velocity near-

ing three hundred thousand kilometres a second. Then something was going to have to give—ship and men, or physical absolute, and nothing in their experience could guide them as to what might follow. Brevis reflected curiously that while both men had dared to penetrate so far into the field of Tau physics they still had an inbred fear of transgressing the absolute of light speed.

Occasionally he returned to the blister, but the Tau Gamma image held steady and inscrutable save to Driscoll's eyes as he occasionally took reference readings from the pink transience to verify the computed course. The psychologist noted that the image was growing in intensity, and hardening in such a way that on entering the blister the image would snap into view rather than simply become apparent as a visual image would. Also its influence extended farther into the screen maze.

The strength of the hallucination was now beginning to overpower the visual, so that the blister layout and Driscoll's instruments were all assuming an apparent transparency through which diffused the pinkness of the surrounding image. Even Driscoll and himself were becoming translucent and losing definition under the influence of the Tau emanation. And, while the others were inwardly fearing the approach to the light barrier, Driscoll's fear was more apparent in the blister, where the shaping and intensification of the image was a tangible portent of the unknown into which they were headed.

"I don't like this at all, Paul," said Driscoll at last. "Signs are that this image is growing unstable as our velocity increases. I don't know what it will break into, but it won't be a simple mode jump."

"Is that bad?"

"At this intensity the image is tolerable at the moment because it's unchanging. But if it breaks to a living pattern it could become a nightmare in here. And if it breaks fast we might not even make it to the door."

"How so?"

"It can flay the senses out of you in seconds if you catch

a rogue run of images. And since it can enter and confuse the brain even when you're unconscious, it can interfere even with the autonomic nervous system. Then it becomes a killer. I'd say it was a killer Tau storm that's brewing now."

"Then let's get out," Brevis said.

"You go. I've got to take a few more readings while I can still see the instruments."

"Then do me a favour," Brevis said. "Leave the communicator open and report not less than once a minute. Miss a minute and I'll be back here to get you out."

"Thanks, Eric. I'll do that. You've just five minutes if you want to be in the control room when we hit the light barrier. I think this image will split wide about then, and it may be preferable if one of us is elsewhere than in the blister when that happens."

A simple indication. Two blips on the face of an oscilloscope, crawling inexorably together. One blip indicating the speed of light, the other giving ship speed. The space intervening represented the amount by which the ship velocity lagged behind that of light. A narrowing difference. An approaching unknown.

Two blips crawling together. Now two centimetres apart, now one, with the basic tenets of real-space physics stacked high against the odds of their meeting, and the ingenuity of man pushing fearfully in favour of their passing.

The sweat stood broad on Porter's brow. Grus' fingers deftly laid mathematical expressions on the keyboard of a computer input. He too was near to breaking under the strain, but syphoned his nervous energy constantly into symbolic equations representing the event. The separation between the blips closed to a few millimetres, then to a hairsbreadth spacing which seemed to endure for an eternity. Then, just as it seemed that the absolute velocity of light was going to remain inviolate, the blips passed one another. And concurrently the men experienced an indefinable shiver which ran throughout their bodies as if every

cell had undergone some transition yet still emerged whole and undamaged.

Porter rapidly checked his instruments and confirmed that they had indeed passed the light barrier, and that their rate of acceleration was still increasing. The detectors told of a million kilometre light flare they had wakened in the emptiness of space, but this evidence was purely metered information, and inside the ship human senses were still totally unable to appreciate the fantastic velocity of their passage.

But Brevis had anticipated the sudden cessation of Driscoll's voice over the intercom. Without pausing to share with the others the relief and triumph of the moment he rushed back through the corridors to the blister. As he passed through the screens he was aware, even before he could see it, that the image had broken. The kaleidoscope of lights that hit him as he reached the end of the maze shocked his senses, and he would have lost orientation had not his shoulder still been in contact with the lead slab of the screen.

Driscoll was immediately in front of the entrance, invisible now against the strength of the hallucination, but presumably standing fascinated by the living diorama of the now overwhelming Tau image. When Brevis grasped his arm he woke as though from sleep, and allowed himself to be led through the maze like a blind man. Outside, Brevis inspected him closely.

"Are you all right? How do you feel?"

Driscoll bit his lip and smiled wanly. "As well as can be expected. I guess I stayed a little longer than I should." His face was deathly white.

Brevis nodded. "That's a fair summary. I want you to go to your cabin, Pat, and rest for a while. I'll give you a sedative that'll put you to sleep for a few hours. And I don't want you to go back into the blister again until you've checked with me. I knew a rogue Tau image was vicious, but I'd not expected it to have that sort of effect in so short a time."

Driscoll's eyes searched the psychologist's face, and he seemed about to say something when a sudden wave of nausea and dizziness caused him to sway and clutch at his head. Thereafter he leaned heavily on Brevis' arm all the way to the cabin.

Though the light barrier had been passed, the tensions were still very much in evidence. They were now facing the great unknowns, a tiny, impudent, splint of metal and humanity fleeting at super-light speed across the analogue of interstellar space. The probes had previously achieved this condition also—but the few that had ever returned now formed a mind-twisting collection of physical paradoxes in the grim museum vaults of Tau Research. But there were no answers yet as to what had happened to the probes or why.

Men and computer constantly scanned every available bit and digit of instrumental data, searching for some clue to the mystery. But both mechanisms and men failed to identify anything amiss with the project. All known functions were staying well within their designated parameters, and thirty times a second the computer completed its checks and returned a negative comment. Grus let the printout tape slip by him unnoticed. Its detail was irrelevant. Although the computer was satisfied, none of the men could confess to being free from the nagging apprehension that they had already penetrated past the point of no return. But whatever the factor which had been added or taken away, it was neither recordable nor encompassed by their systems of detection.

Drawn by a certain fascination, Brevis returned once to the blister maze and cautiously sampled the now rampant image. It blazed in his head and formed such frightening confusion that he was forced to retire without gleaning anything of value from the experiment. As he was returning to the control room he found Sigmund Grus bending close to the floor in the corridor, examining something. He moved to pass, but the physicist motioned him back.

"Careful, Eric! There is something here I don't understand. See there—a tiny light shining."

Without Sigmund's direction Brevis would not have noticed the phenomenon for himself, so minute and intangible did it appear. But following the line of the indicating finger he found the object, and paused in wonder. In the corridor, unsupported and apparently unaffected by the airstream from the ventilators, drifted a minute splint of light, like a luminous dust mote. It took him several seconds to realize that the object was in fact incredibly small and that it was visible mainly by virtue of its extreme brilliance. It was difficult to imagine how such a degree of radiation could be sustained by anything so lacking in size.

"What is it?" Brevis asked at last.

"It could be a projection of something from real-space into Tau—a sort of breakthrough of atomic condition."

"I thought that was impossible."

"It's barely possible, even in theory. Projection requires an extreme degree of excitation on the part of the basic atom—a very extreme degree, I can assure you."

"How extreme?'

"The excitation state involved in nuclear fusion, at least." Grus appeared thoughtful. "But something tells me this isn't a simple projection. This is something new. Such a thing should never exist, even as a projection. You couldn't have a self-sustaining fusion reaction that small."

He produced a pencil and probed the splint carefully. It did not move, but seemed rather to penetrate the pencil and emerge unchanged. He examined the pencil in silence.

"I don't like this at all," he said finally, holding the pencil up to the light. "Would you fetch Paul?"

Porter came without comment. The top-line frown reflected the fear which was already clawing deep in his guts, and the new phenomenon could add no more or less to the burden of responsibility he was already carrying. Brevis watched him carefully for signs of hysteria, and was relieved to find none.

When they reached the corridor Sigmund had ex-

tinguished the overhead fluorescent panels, and was observing his discovery against the background under the dim illumination of the tritium safety lamps. In this setting the splint burned inconceivably bright for its size, casting a clear glow on the bulkhead.

"Don't touch it," Grus warned. "It could be dangerous. I want to try a test."

He went off to the laboratory and returned with a square of fine tungsten foil. He passed this several times through the point of light. It remained unmoving. Then he ran to the optical room and closed the door. A minute later he was back.

"Holes right through," he said. "I don't think this can be a projection. Its heat is incredible but the holes it makes are so minute that they're hardly capable of being resolved with our microscope. Nothing that small should possess that sort of energy. Paul, I want to do a spectrum analysis on this thing.'

'I'll help you," Porter said. "But we'll have to dismount the spectrograph and fetch it out here since we can't pick that thing up."

"Can I assist?" Brevis asked.

"Not much at the moment, Eric. We've some delicate work ahead of us, and its specialized. We'll let you know our findings when we're through."

Brevis nodded and returned to his cabin. He had the curious impression that both men already suspected and feared what their findings would be. He checked through his stocks of tranquillizers in the store-cupboard and wondered just how long such mental and intellectual strain could be offset by purely chemical means. At some point a psyche was going to refuse to be pacified by drugs, and when that point came somebody was going to snap. Driscoll was already showing signs of breaking up. And who next?

It was about an hour later that Porter knocked on his door.

"May we come in?"

"Do." Brevis pulled down the other bunk to form a seat and beckoned him in. Grus followed, still studying the long strips of photographic paper from his instrument. His hands were trembling.

"We've found what it was, Eric." Even at that point Porter was reluctant to put a name to his fear.

"I think I already know," said Brevis quietly. "It's a star."

"You knew?"

"I guessed about the same time that you did. But I was expecting it. You weren't."

"But a star . . ." said Porter, and his voice was ragged. "It's a spectral G-type sun, similar to Sol. It could measure perhaps a million miles across. And it's out there in the corridor like a point of light so small you can hardly measure the holes it makes. Christ, Eric, if that's a sun out there—what size does that make us?"

Four

Putting his empty glass unsteadily back on the table, Porter pushed the hair from his face.

"I still don't see how you could have anticipated this, Eric."

"Not exactly this, but I was prepared for something of this nature. I saw the Tau probe vessel which came back only twenty-two inches long. This is part of the same pattern. Somehow, Paul, entry into deep-Tau cuts things adrift not only from the universe but from the controlling physical constants of the universe. I've no idea how long the ship is now, but if you want to try the calculation, start by using light-years instead of metres."

"And yet you aren't frightened silly at the prospect?"

Brevis refilled the glasses from the bottle on the table.

"No. So far the survival threats here are purely intellectual ones. It would take a well-trained mind to appreciate that we three, sitting here drinking whisky, regard ourselves as being close to death. And if asked what form of death, we none of us could even define it."

Porter watched his face carefully for a moment. "You're dead right of course. We've come unstuck from the universe, certainly, but so far it's panic not physics which is most likely to kill us. Sigmund, have you enough data to calculate our size from the dimensions of that star, assuming it's a regular G-type dwarf?"

"I'll work on it," said Grus. "But there's a more urgent problem first. That star must have entered through the hull, and therefore left a puncture. I think our first concern must be the preservation of our atmosphere."

"If the holes it made in the hull are no greater than those it made in the foil, the air losses won't be measurable."

"True. But that's only a simple G-dwarf. What happens if we run up against a giant like Betelgeuse? That would make a hole we couldn't afford to ignore. I suggest we try to navigate in a direction away from the island universes until we've some idea of what we're up against."

"Good point," said Porter. "I'm going up to the control room to see if we can get sufficient information from the instruments to give us a bearing on a relatively unpopulated region of space. I could use Pat's help, Eric. Is he still sleeping?"

Brevis glanced at his watch. "I gave him a sedative about four hous ago. He should be out of it by now. I'll go and wake him."

"Get him to join me in Control. We've got instrumentation for detecting stellar objects in real space, but whether it can detect star systems the size of meteorites projecting into Tau is a rather different problem. Is it possible to use the blister?"

Brevis shook his head. "That's completely out of the question. The Tau-psychic interaction in there is so strong it would drive a man senseless in fifteen minutes, and kill him in thirty."

Porter nodded his acceptance of the fact and went out of the door. Brevis' own intention of following was delayed by a sudden gesture from Grus towards the end of the room. Through the wall of the cabin another star had

drifted, and they both paused in fascination as the tiny splint of light cleared the mirror of the table top by a centimetre and neared the whisky bottle standing in its path. Brevis moved to take the bottle out of the way, but Grus stopped him.

"Wait, Eric. There's something we need to know."

The splint touched the bottle and penetrated slightly into the glass. Then with a crash the bottle shattered, scattering liquor and glass on to the table and the floor. The star, apparently unaffected, continued its slow, amazing journey across the room.

"Bad!" said Grus. "We none of us dare sleep with those things drifting through. At best they could be painful, at worst, lethal. Can you imagine waking with one of those entering your temple? Even walking into one could cause a pretty nasty injury." He glanced around him. "And it's only a matter of time before one of them cuts some wiring or hits something vital. And . . . Oh my God!"

Brevis was caught by his sudden spasm of alarm.

"My God!" said Grus again. "I've been worrying about the heat and visible spectra, but those things must be chucking out hard radiation as well. Not only could they be a fair biological hazard, but if one of them gets into the computer it'll flip every solid-state device in the whole assembly. The whole control system will go haywire, to say nothing of the loss of the computer function. You'd best get Pat up to Control fast. I'll try and get a radiation check on this one, but unless I miss my guess we've a death threat far more tangible than panic already with us."

Brevis tried to raise Driscoll on the intercom, but failed. Carefully avoiding the star in the corridor he ran to Driscoll's cabin. It was empty. The sheets on the bed were still warm, but not too recently occupied. Swiftly he checked the few other likely places. They were similarly bare. Then he flipped the emergency communication button.

"Paul! Sigmund! Is Pat with you somewhere?"

"Not here," said Grus.

"Nor in Control." Porter's voice carried a note of alarm. "What's the matter, Eric?"

"I've an idea the damn idiot's gone back into the blister. The image there is so ultra-real it's almost addictive. I've noticed a similar tendency in myself. Once you've experienced it you can't let it alone."

"Damn!" said Porter. "Have you tried him on the intercom?"

"He must be hearing my voice now," said Brevis, "but if he's in the blister he won't respond because the Tau image will represent the dominant reality. Pat, for God's sake, if you can hear me, answer!"

The set returned only silence and little electronic sounds gathered from various parts of the ship.

"Then he'll have to stay there until the course is re-set," said Porter.

"No. He could have been there ten or fifteen minutes already. Leave him exposed for as long again and we won't need to fetch him out. Just paint R.I.P. on the blister door and pack his effects for his relatives. That's a killer image in there. I'm going to try and help him."

Without waiting for Porter to reply, Brevis ran directly to the blister door. It was slightly open, though he knew it to have been closed the last time he had left. The telltales on the wall indicated that the screen maze inside had been altered or damaged. This in itself was sufficient to show that Driscoll had entered and therefore needed help.

Before he could enter, Grus arrived. Porter was close behind. Porter summed up the situation with a quick glance, and turned to Brevis.

"I can't let you go in there, Eric. Pat'll have to take what's coming to him. I daren't risk losing you too."

"And we daren't risk losing Pat—not if we ever want to find our way home again. He may be unconscious, but I doubt if he's dead yet. There's still a chance of getting him out alive. Later there won't be."

Porter came to a sudden decision. "Very well. But you go in with a rope around your waist. You'll have five minutes,

and then we'll haul you out if necessary. And try not to fall down among the screens or you might get hurt on the way out."

"If you insist." Brevis stood submissively while Grus fetched a rope from the store-room and fastened it round his waist. Porter caught him by the shoulder.

"Five minutes, Eric—and good luck!"

Brevis shouldered open the heavy door and entered. It was quite dark inside, and, as the telltales had indicated, the internal screens were disarranged. All he could see initially was a fuzz of diffused polychromatic light which crept around the disordered lines of the lead panels. Seeking orientation, he moved back to the wall and sought the light switch.

As his fingers moved the toggle he was engulfed by a wave of vibrant, dancing, idiotic, multi-coloured patterns, which swarmed in front of him like a living kaleidoscope. The imagery trapped his senses in a mesmeric focus which almost robbed him of his power to react. Mercifully the toggle remained under his fingers and he snapped it off urgently, thankfully relaxing in the return of darkness.

"Are you all right, Eric?" Porter's voice sounded a hundred times farther than it should.

"Just about," said Brevis. "Deep-Tau emanation and A.C. lighting make a formidable combination. I couldn't stand that for long. I'll do the rest blind."

Slowly he found the screens and devised a path between them and across those which had fallen, scowling at the thought of the psychic paroxysm which had driven Driscoll to attack the heavy screening with such irrational violence. The edges of the lead sheets appeared fuzzed and burred with a polychrome haze which grew stronger as he entered through the maze and hinted at the violence and turbulence of the Tau-psychic effects rampant in the blister proper.

He searched each area urgently with his hands, hoping that Driscoll had fallen between the screens and away from the awful aura ahead. But he knew in his heart that this

would not be so, and he felt a wave of fear at the prospect of having to penetrate finally into the unshielded extravagances of the raw Tau influence.

When he turned the last corner into the blister the wave of imagery and sensation tore down at him apparently from all sides, swamping his senses and leaving only the single core of his objective mind to guide him in his purpose.

Dazed by light and form and colour, his eyes attempted to follow and analyse the geometrically untenable planes and images as he trod apparently through a macrocosm of chaos which only his iron resolution reminded him was the blister floor. His mind seized on the shattering images and attempted to rationalize them into meaningful terms and comprehend the semantic substance with which every line of light was seeded. Every now and again his imagination became caught in a snare of some intriguing speculation, and he had to wrench his mind free with almost physical effort, knowing the deadly penalty for indulgence.

He could understand now the fatal attraction of the Tau images for Driscoll. The brain received the images direct, without the filtration and attenuation of the normal human senses. The mind was released from the mundane bonds of limited sensory experience, and could swing, undamped, in domains of previously unfathomable concepts, without the distractions and reflexes of the body.

A savage jerk under the ribs brought his own wandering thoughts back to focus on his mission. He stumbled over Driscoll's body on the floor, but fortunately did not fall. He could see nothing of the form he caught up to his shoulders, only the variegated colours of the quasi infinities which clawed at his mind with snags of intangible steel.

Again the rope caught at his chest, this time insistently. He hesitated, having no means of gaining his bearings in the unchartable fantasies in which he was immersed. The rope had now become the sole link with another sort of reality, an invisible umbilical cord connecting him across the unknown to an isolated, dark womb of fear and apprehension

which was the ship and its situation. He felt an irrational desire to slip the knot and not to return to the worry-shrouded oppression of shades with its precarious chance of re-birth.

The third pull of the rope was decisive. Before he could re-arrange his burden so as to get his fingers to the knot he was dragged forcibly against the screens and through them, until, near the end of the ruined maze, darkness closed down again and the mental turbulence grew quiet. Hands seized him in the darkness and slipped the body from his back, then thrust him outward into a different kind of light —the cold, fluorescent harshness of reality. He fell into the corridor and remained there for many seconds, shaking the images from out of his head, until Porter came and helped him to his feet.

"How do you feel, Eric?"

"Grim. But I think it will pass." He looked up and saw the door of the blister still part open. "But it's not a risk I'd care to take again. Can you fix that hatch permanently closed?"

"I'll weld it shut," promised Porter. He looked at Driscoll, now laid desperately unconscious in the gangway. "Not that it looks as if he'll be interested in it for a while."

"I wasn't thinking of him," said Brevis. "I was thinking of myself."

Outwardly, Porter's evasive manoeuvre seemed to be a success. His instrumental questing finally located a direction in space where the stellar population was obviously less. Breaking the pre-set course co-ordinates, he manually directed the ship in this direction. Miraculously both astral bodies which had entered the hull drifted slowly out through the fabric again without detectable damage to the vessel. Then they waited. No further cosmic intruders penetrated into the ship, and finally they relaxed.

This gave them the respite needed to consider their plight more logically. But internal tensions were creeping dangerously high. Brevis was more than anxious about the con-

tinuing stress and its inhibiting effect on the type of intellectual free-wheeling which the problem demanded.

Grus was tending to concentrate his energies on routine tasks, as though trying to convince himself that he did not have time enough to grapple with the major problem. Driscoll was being maintained in a state of light sedation after his experiences in the blister, and was therefore intellectually inactive. Even Porter was having difficulty in bringing his mind to a position of logical attack.

"The hell of it is," said Porter, "you can't even find a point from which to start solving a problem like this."

"You're not thinking too clearly, Paul," said Brevis. "You're allowing yourself to be fazed by the size of the concepts instead of looking for fundamentals. I'm no physicist, but the problem appears to me to be one of congruency. We've lost physical congruence with our own universe. We're no longer controlled by whatever factors control the size of things. Now, what factors do control the size of things, Paul? Why is anything the size it is, rather than a million times larger or smaller?"

"A good question," said Porter, "and way outside my field. I don't pretend to know the answer. The size of a thing is always relative. I suppose the nearest thing to absolute units are the sizes of the atoms and molecules from which matter is constructed. Aggregates of matter generate and are acted upon by certain forces—molecular binding forces, gravitation, centrifugal forces and the like, which roughly determine the mass-range which that type of object normally achieves.

"It's the interaction of possible states of matter, and the forces generated by them and acting upon them, which appears to control the size of everything in the universe. You can't have a molecule as large as a star or a star as small as a molecule because either would be unstable."

"Then what happened to place us outside this control?"

"I don't know. We were in a state of Tau-spin resonance when we accelerated through the speed of light. It's beginning to look as though the Einsteinian mass-velocity re-

lationship does apply in Tau, but in a peculiar way. Instead of the velocity being limited to that of light, we passed easily through the light barrier, but tore our own atoms free from the controlling influence of the universe instead. Effectively we're a universe in our own right now—still self-integrated, but unconnected with any other universe. And Heaven alone knows what factor is controlling our absolute size relative to the universe from which we started."

"Are we still in Tau-space?"

"The Rorsch generator is still running, but our molecular density is so low relative to the star stuff through which we're passing that it's doubtful if a true Tau state is being maintained."

"Can't we just reverse the process and drop back through the light barrier?"

"We're trying," said Porter, "but there's no indication yet that it's going to work. Since we cleared the star patch we've been winding down our speed—eighteen hours, and we still aren't much above light velocity now. So far our size has done nothing but increase slightly more. I'd guess that once our atoms were torn from the universe they found some arbitrary relationship of their own which is independent of velocity."

"That's a key factor," said Brevis. "This arbitrary relationship—I'm not convinced it's true. I suspect there's still some relationship between our present size and the size we were when we started. I think there must be some connecting link. Can we check this at all?"

"We can fling all our co-ordinates into the computer and see if we can spot a relationship. If there is a controlling principle it should show up as a function of something."

"Will you do that?" said Brevis. "If you can isolate the controlling factor it gives us a possible method of attack on the problem by attempting to reverse the issue."

"I'll get Sigmund on it right away. If we spot anything I'll let you know immediately."

Five

In this, Brevis had at least achieved his object of getting Porter to apply himself to the task. Once a line of investigation had been initiated Porter could be relied upon to follow it to its logical conclusion. Even if the research proved futile, he had at least set up the pattern of attack. He was not therefore surprised when Porter's next communication carried a note of enthusiasm.

"Eric!" Porter was speaking from the computer room. "I think we've isolated the controlling factor. The computer has thrown up an interesting set of constants which give an extrapolation back to the time of our breaking the light barrier. The constants are independent of velocity or distance from point of origin, but they are related to elapsed time."

"How does this affect us?" Brevis asked.

"Frankly it means the longer we stay in this state the larger we shall become. We're like the proverbial exploding universe. Where stars can now float through the ship, soon it will be galaxies. Can you imagine . . ."

"Shut up!" said Brevis sharply. "I'm trying to think. I don't believe this is any accident, Paul. It's rather what I suspected. Now think carefully. Is anything at all still tying us to the old universe? For instance, on what do we base our conception of measured time?"

"All our instrumentation is related back to the master oscillator. That itself is synchronized with . . . Eric, you may just be on to something. Look, I've got some checking to do. I'll call you back in a few minutes."

Brevis acknowledged the hastily broken connection with a raised eyebrow. His eyes automatically wandered to his precious drug cabinet. As an explorer of the human mind he had learnt the humility of the chemical modification of human outlook. Any mind-state could be conditioned for better or for worse by a few micrograms of the right substance in the bloodstream. He had drugs which could make his comrades accept their present situation with joy or

equanimity, but nothing in any phial or bottle which could fire the spark of genius they needed to resolve the problem.

His reverie was interrupted by Porter's insistent buzz on the intercom.

"Eric, I've got a lead. Don't ask me how, but we're still receiving timing pulses from the Tau Research transmitters. A ten kilocycles square wave. Is this the sort of thing you were looking for?"

"It could well be. What do we do with it?"

"Use it to correct our own master oscillator. In effect we're using it as a time reference for damn nigh every time constant on the ship—clocks, transmitter, instruments, computer—the lot. The master oscillator crystal is pulling like hell, but it's still synchronized with the reference signal."

"So all our time referents are still tied to the old universe?"

"Effectively, yes. What do you suggest we do?"

"Turn the receivers off. Kill the signal."

"First let's consider what that's going to achieve. If the time constant has any bearing on the size of this ship, what happens if we cut adrift from it? We will lose our very last point of congruence with the universe. We're already adrift in the three physical dimensions. If we lose congruence with time also, our chances of ever getting back would appear to be remarkably slight."

"Something's controlling our size," said Brevis. "And the computer's proved it's no casual relationship. But that controlling factor has caused us to become about four light years longer than we started out. I would guess that somehow our size is attempting to compensate for an untenable time constant to which we are tied regardless of velocity. As I see it, our only hope is to break every possible link so that our size determinator is a purely arbitrary factor. Then we have a chance to do some research into instituting our own control."

"I think it's a hell of a risk, Eric. Better the devil we know than the one we don't."

"How much do we know about this devil called time, Paul?"

Porter considered this in silence. "Very well! I'm turning the receivers off now. But I wish to hell I knew what you had in mind. I know there's something buzzing in that brain of yours."

"Perhaps. I'm wondering whether to take a gamble, based on something I saw in the vaults of Tau Research. When you can show that our size determinator is arbitrary I'd like to set up an experiment which I think might work. I think it stands a chance because I suspect that it was tried by somebody once before. Somebody who finished up one and a quarter inches tall."

There was silence for a long second. "At this stage, Eric, any idea is better than none. How do we set about it?"

"I need to tidy up a few details first. So I'll give you the proposition in its final form. And Paul . . . !"

"Yes?"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd keep this to yourself for a while. You understand why."

"Sure, Eric. The whole situation's a psychological bomb."

"Check! Get those receivers off and have Sigmund watch the computer to see if the linking factor is broken. When you're sure the time correlation has gone let me know—but quietly. Hullo, Paul, are you still there?"

"Sorry. I was just thinking. I wonder what it's like to be one and a quarter inches tall?"

As he cut the connection Brevis noted that his own hands were shaking. The scheme which had formed in his mind in the course of the conversation was one born of desperation, and would involve the type of risk that only desperation could justify. That the idea had sprung from his own mind was a fascinating insight into the pressure of the fear which lay in his own subconscious. And, despite his words, it was not something he could discuss with either Porter or Grus. In fact, there was only one other person aboard likely

to be able to follow his reasoning and appreciate the nature of the experiment.

Slowly his considerations formed into a practical plan of action. Some of the steps he was loath to take, but again the sense of desperation forced the conclusion that there was no other course. He knew now what drugs he could use and to what purpose.

Then he reached the point of decision, and moved swiftly. From the automatic kitchen he removed the coffee dispenser and doctored the first two charges of coffee concentrate. From the surgery he took a couple of pre-sterilized hypodermic syringes and two ampoules, which he concealed carefully in his pocket. And all the while he was watching the clock, knowing the shipboard habit pattern with such certainty that he could afford to let affairs take their own course up to a point where his active intervention was necessary.

The only new factor to be added was Porter on the intercom, his voice ragged and near hysteria.

"Eric, the time link factor's been broken. But we should never have switched off the receivers."

"Why, what the devil's happened?"

"It's the stars, Eric. My God, what have we done?"

"What's the matter with the stars?"

"I thought the instruments were broken, but it isn't that. I've checked. But the stars have all gone out."

Brevis verbally strove to quell the rising panic, playing for time. To ensure that the coffee reached its intended destination he collected it himself and took it to Grus and Porter, and stood for a moment while they tried to coax the computer to handle mathematical concepts of infinity for which no programmes would ever be available. The unmistakable smell of fear was heavy in the air. Brevis estimated that the knockout drug in the coffee would be effective in about five minutes, and was somewhat apprehensive when Porter decided to consult the micro-reader in his own cabin just before this time. He followed Porter discreetly, to

be on hand in case he should fall on the stairs. But Porter continued safely almost to the cabin before he fell unconscious in the corridor.

Brevis caught the fallen figure under the armpits and dragged it in to the bunk. Baring an arm, he prepared a hypodermic syringe and made an injection. Then he stopped and looked about him. The ship seemed curiously still. Only the whispered rustle of the automatics and the slight sound of the air conditioning system broke the silence. There was no drive operating, not even for routine attitude or spin correction. Even the power hum had fallen to an inaudible level, and the Rorsch generator, working in such tenuity, had long since ceased to voice its characteristic harmonics. In these conditions he imagined he could hear the molecules in the walls around him creaking as they strained to find some controlling principle which would set their absolute as well as their relative size.

He went out into the corridor and then back up to the computer room looking for Sigmund Grus. The physicist was already asleep, his head resting on the console. Brevis moved him to the floor and gave him an injection as he had done with Porter. Then, satisfied, he left Grus at rest, and headed for Driscoll's cabin.

Driscoll woke up at his entry and propped himself sleepily up in the bunk, an unspoken question on his lips. Brevis seized his wrist and checked his pulse impatiently. Then nodded.

"Get up! We've got work to do."

Driscoll scowled at the abruptness of the address, but complied nevertheless, swinging into his working jeans, all the time his deep eyes trying to wrest information from Brevis' impatient face.

"Now what? What's going on?" Even waking from sleep Driscoll took it as axiomatic that something unusual was in progress.

"We're going into the blister. Paul's welded the door shut, so get a cutting torch and join me there."

"But Paul'll never . . ."

"Paul can't stop us. Nor Sigmund. I've got them both under sedation. Now I've got some work to do in the blister and I need your help. What's the matter—don't you dare?"

"You know how much I'd dare to get back in there." Driscoll's intelligence shone through the perspiration on his brow. "But God, Brevis, I hope you know what you're doing! Was it you who got me out?"

"Yes. That's how I know how much of it I can stand and how much you can stand. It should have killed you, but it didn't."

"After a while you learn to come to terms with it. The effect of Tau imagery is essentially akin to a drug experience. When it's as strong as we found it in the blister it can combine mescalin fantasy with opiate addiction. And there's a limit to what you can take and still retain your own volition. But you can prolong your tolerance by repeated exposure."

"This time," said Brevis, "there'll be no question of even trying to retain your own volition. We may have to go well beyond that point. The best we can hope for is that one of us can retain sufficient objectivity to complete the job."

"What job?"

"Getting the ship back into congruence with the universe from which it started."

Driscoll watched him narrowly for a moment or two. "I know you're not mad, Brevis," he said, "so you must have some idea behind what you're saying."

"It's more of a hunch than an idea. In the vaults of Tau Research I saw a probe vessel twenty-two inches long with a pilot to match. What intrigued me was not so much that he finished up at such a size, but why he happened to finish up at that particular size. I wonder now if I'm beginning to see an answer."

"Go on."

"My theory is this. His probe vessel, like ourselves, probably broke dimensional congruity with the universe due to some Tau phenomenon when passing through the light barrier. And like ourselves, by accident or design, he estab-

lished that his size determinator was an arbitrary factor."

"Is ours?"

"It is now. We were apparently maintaining time congruency with the universe due to our dependence on Tau Research timing pulses. This link we've now broken. So we should have access to the same sort of control which I think the probe pilot used to correct the size of his ship."

"Which is what?"

"Imagination. Tau-psychic interaction is something we can prove to exist even though we don't yet understand it. The Tau hallucinations in the blister are part of it. An area of the brain, apparently located near the so-called pineal eye, responds directly to unshielded Tau influence, and there is evidence that certain aspects of Tau are mutually responsive to strong psychic states. I suggest that having realized the size determinator of his probe was arbitrary, the pilot went into the blister and attempted to mentally correct the size of his ship by reference to the Tau image. He literally thought his way back into near congruence. Unfortunately he overshot the mark, but when you consider through how many orders of magnitude he probably descended, it was a feat of genius."

"My God, Brevis!" Driscoll was standing now, his eyes alight with comprehension. "I was in Control when that probe came in. You couldn't have known this, but the pilot *was* in the blister when it arrived. I got him out with a spatula and my thumb. I've had nightmares about it ever since."

"I guessed as much. But are you willing to attempt the same thing?"

"Of course. We don't have anything to lose, after all. And if it worked for him it should work for me. But I'm not too certain about you. After certain minimal exposure to Tau hallucination one tends to become . . . 'wedded', as we pilots say. But the honeymoon period is a pretty harrowing affair. I suggest you stay outside the blister and leave the manipulation to me."

"I would, but for one thing," Brevis said. "When you're

pitting your own psyche against the truly infinite it takes a rare degree of dissociation to establish your own status accurately. The probe pilot underestimated himself with disastrous results. You're an outstanding introvert. Any error in your judgment will necessitate the use of a microscope to extricate us from this ship. Conversely, I have insufficient experience of Tau imagery to drop us through even one order of magnitude. But I do have enough training in psychological balance to correct us to approximately the right endpoint. As a composite we have a chance of bringing the size of the ship to a point where Paul and Sigmund may usefully survive."

Driscoll accepted the point without comment. "When do we start?"

"The sooner the better. The others will be out for about three hours, and the less imaginations we have working at once the more likely we are to succeed."

"Is that why you put them out?"

"I despaired of ever trying to convince them of the scheme which you have accepted almost without hesitation. That's why I approached you alone. I also put them out as a humane precaution which I cannot extend to either of us."

"Which is?"

"At our present size we could include a whole galaxy in the ship and never notice it. But when we start to descend through a few orders of magnitude you can imagine our predicament if we happen to include within the ship's structure even one solitary expanding star."

Six

SEEING his unfamiliarity with the tool, Driscoll took the cutting torch away from him and cut deeply into the metal, causing a shower of burning metal droplets to cascade to the floor. Then he levered the still white-hot metal open with a bar, and forced the door back with his foot. But despite his exertions, the sweat that beaded his brow was of

emotional rather than physical origin. He stood aside for Brevis to enter.

After their last desperate emergence very few of the screens remained standing, and the extremities of the unshielded Tau emanation seemed to burn off every angle and projection with an intensity which was almost audible. Brevis did not need to enter far to know that the savagery of the raw Tau influence was considerably greater than it had been even when he had almost succumbed while getting Driscoll out. Both his hope and his determination drained as the force of the situation hit him. Driscoll, coming up behind him, stopped abruptly, appalled at the intensity of the effect.

"Jesus! That will eat us alive. We could never function in there."

"You don't think we could stand it?"

"We might stay conscious, but it wouldn't be possible to think. It would be almost a complete mental wipeout with that degree of activity."

"Let's get outside again," Brevis said, "and see if we can find another angle on this."

Back in the corridor they closed the damaged door and leaned against it, thankful for the respite.

"We've not much time, Eric. The level's rising all the while. Whatever we decide will have to be done soon. If it gets much stronger it'll strip us senseless before we can get through the screens."

"Can you think of anything at all which might give us a lead?"

"Given some sort of focal point or target on which to concentrate, it might just be possible to remain objective. But you'd never handle abstractions against that level of interference."

"Tell me something," said Brevis. "When I went into the blister to get you out, I put on the light at the door side of the screens. There was some Tau emanation leaking past the screens, and the interaction nearly blacked me out. Is this usual?"

"No." Driscoll's eyes were shrewd with their dark intelligence. "It isn't usual, but it happens sometimes. Occasionally in terrestrial Tau work the ship breaks from real time into the Tau temporal analogue. Under Tau emanation in a blister the light attempts to make the real-to-analogue transition and you get the same impression twice—once visually and once via the Tau hallucination. But the two signals are out of phase and set up a ringing pattern in the brain."

"I see," said Brevis. "That accounts for the patterning of the image."

"Probably. But it has its uses. The ringing sets up something similar to a mental moire-fringe interference pattern from which an experienced man can read the time differential with almost micrometer accuracy. Using a narrow-band light source with controllable illumination, it makes a useful research tool."

"Have we got such a source?"

"We've got a mono-isotope krypton 86 discharge lamp in the blister. That's about the best available. With it you could detect an analogue-to-real time displacement of less than two milliseconds. Does that help?"

"It just might," Brevis said, "if you could use the lamp as your focal point and concentrate on correcting only the time differential."

"How would that help?"

"Since we broke the link with the Tau Research timing pulses, the ship analogue time has adapted itself to fit the same controlling constant as ship size."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Porter told me the stars had all gone out. This suggests there has been a time shift from real to analogue time. Our time scale is now so vast that normal light frequencies just don't register with us. It's too much of a coincidence that the stars disappeared just after the receivers were turned off. I surmise that if we can get one dimension back into congruity, the others will follow. After all, they're all now tied to the same controlling constant. Alter one dimension

and the others must modify themselves to balance the equation."

Driscoll pulled his lip. "The whole theory's based on far too many assumptions."

"We don't have time to re-examine the data. Unless you've anything better to offer I suggest we go back in there and try it."

"You're right, of course. At this stage even a bad theory is better than none. And if we're going to die anyway, I know where I'd prefer to be."

Driscoll opened the door and walked towards the blister. Brevis followed, hiding his face in the shadow of Driscoll's fading silhouette—a shadow made surrealistic by the polychromatic fuzz which made nonsense of the outline. The crackling lure of the bright imagery seized his mind and drained his volition. He followed like an automaton, with his eyes fixed on a narrowing area of darkness which was the small of Driscoll's back. And in his mind there nestled an even smaller and more rapidly reducing area of objectivity.

Driscoll was in the blister now. Forcing his hands to find and operate familiar instruments now entirely invisible because of the strength of the hallucination.

"Lamp on," Driscoll said. "It'll take a few minutes to warm. I'm sitting right in front of it. Make it easy on yourself. Go outside and wait."

"I'm staying," Brevis said. Unable to orientate himself with respect to the now unseeable blister layout, he sat down on the floor. At rest, the impressions overwhelmed him. The Tau images, suffering no attenuation through the limiting filters of the body, assumed an exquisite fidelity and "edge" which he found both intolerable and irresistible at the same instant.

There was no way now to shut out the startling excitations, nor any way to keep his personality contained. The Tau-psychic interaction continued through to fusion point, and its effect was one of mental dispersion, as though his

consciousness was being distributed homogeneously into the surrounding phenomena. His mind and the Tau-space imagery momentarily seemed fused into one.

It was later that something left of himself tired of being alone and infinite, and tripped his attention to Driscoll's disembodied voice rambling in the midst of chaos. Only one phrase was sufficiently articulate to be understood—but that was sufficient to shock his mind back into narrower awareness.

"Brevis . . . stop fighting me. Is that what you want . . . infinity?"

In that instant of revelation Brevis forced his mind to withdraw from the fantastic rapport, and forced his muscles to carry him to his knees. As he did so a new form of image forced itself into his head—great sliding bands of alternate light and darkness, slipping, twisting, moving always downwards. Then he knew that his eyes had come within the range of the krypton lamp. This was the moire fringe effect, though what was visual and what was hallucinatory he was unable to decide.

But he was conscious that Driscoll was somehow forcing the bands downwards across the field of view, seeking a smaller pattern, a smaller differential between their time and the real time of the universe. The flickering bands cascaded to a blur of grey, then slowed as Driscoll paused for a closer examination of phase, angle and magnitude.

Brevis relaxed, and in doing so he lost the image of the moire fringe. The turbulent Tau image crowded over him again, slipping away on all sides in a torrential series of changing modes and characters breathlessly unlike anything he had previously experienced in Tau. Unable to regain his vision of the fringe, he attempted to remain a passive observer as the drunken kaleidoscope of subjective impression veered down an ever-narrowing funnel of restricted effect.

The thought formed hazily in his head at first, and then with a clear and rising panic, that Driscoll had lost control. The descent seemed too far and too fast, and they were

gaining an impetus which it appeared impossible to halt. From the infinitely large, Driscoll's own introspection was threatening to drive them into the infinitely small, and they stood the risk of becoming voyagers in some untenable sub-nuclear domain.

Brevis attempted to extend his mind into correlation with the now fleeting image. But the relative velocity between the phenomenon and the speed of his own thought processes defied the contact and threw him back with a headful of sparks. And his panic grew to a certainty as the velocity of the descent increased still further as judged by the transience of the parade of imagery.

Once again he attempted to enter the battle, and this time his mind caught and held, but with a mental wrench that almost stripped him of consciousness. Then he was back again, fighting to re-form the patterns of Tau image with which he had become acquainted through exposure to more normal states of Tau.

Then suddenly stasis, quietude, rest; a synchronous locking. He caught at the image and held it, and the whole scene stabilized in the rose-pink panorama of the Tau Gamma mode illusion. It seemed they had arrived.

It took him many minutes to collect his senses and to take stock of the situation. The intensity of the Gamma image was low, and the krypton lamp, now itself visible, provided sufficient illumination to draw out other real details against the pink hallucination. Stumbling to his feet Brevis located the switch for the blister's internal lighting. Immediately the normal details of the room became apparent and the pinkness shrank back to a mere ghost of an illusion.

Driscoll had slipped from the chair in front of the lamp and was now prostrate on the floor. Relying now on his eyes, Brevis sought a path through the disordered screens and dragged Driscoll out to the corridor. A swift examination suggested he was not dead but merely in a state of shock. Despite the urgency which the treatment of Driscoll

seemed to merit, Brevis felt impelled to visit both Porter and Grus on his way to collect his emergency case. Both were still sleeping, but stirring and shortly due to wake.

It was only when he reached his cabin that his experience in the blister caught up with him. As he opened the door a brief confrontation of his own face in the mirror filled him with confused amazement. In attempting to correlate the death-white idiotic features which he saw with those of his normal image, the wonder and the horror caught up with him. He had a vague impression of falling as delayed shock drove the resistance from his body and tipped him into a pit of unconsciousness.

When he finally awoke, Porter was standing at his side.

"How do you feel now, Eric?"

"Weak," said Brevis.

Porter nodded. "It certainly took it out of you. But you'll be pleased to know that whatever you did was successful."

"You mean we've made it?" Brevis sat up. "We got back into congruence?"

"As near as we can tell. When Sigmund and I came round we found we were in a simple Gamma mode. We took the chance and dropped the ship out of Tau into real space. There we found everything according to the catalogue. We've been taking spectroscope and radio-telescope fixes on the identifiable primaries and radio-sources, and we've even managed to establish our position."

"How did Pat make out?"

"Fine. He recovered a lot quicker than you. He's back in the blister right now doing triangulation fixes for Sigmund, and feeling rather chipper about the whole thing. He estimates we can make the return trip without losing congruence as long as we don't tie our time constant to a fixed point of reference."

"With that I agree," said Brevis. "Our dimensional dilemma was a simple example of Tau-psychic interaction. The radio-pulses controlled our instruments and our clocks. From these we took our consciousness of time. It wasn't a condition of time appropriate to the separate universe we

had become at that velocity, but we fondly imagined that time, at least, was real.

"It was our acceptance of that measured time which fixed it as a time constant as far as Tau-space was concerned. All the other physical dimensions then had to adapt in order to maintain the right mass–time relationship. I think for that we can steal Diepenstrom's term of an imagination trap—because that's precisely what it was. Next trip just let the time constant, and thus our time consciousness, drift with the ship. By the way, how far did we travel?"

"When you feel up to it, Eric, come down to Control and see the scanners. It's rather an impressive sight. The Milky Way, seen from completely beyond its boundaries, is a rather frightening and a rather nostalgic thing to see."

APPLE

by

JOHN BAXTER

Scientists consider that Man's size is between the macrocosm and the microcosm. John Baxter takes an apple and an insect out of context with their normal size to produce a horribly fascinating story of what might happen if the balance of Nature is disturbed.

APPLE

THE apple was red, smooth, coldly perfect. One patch, almost obscured by the shadow it cast in the soft light, was green, a blemish that served only to show up the flawless purity of the remaining colour. It lay on its side, letting light spill into the recesses of its hollow, from which the stalk jutted inconclusively, terminating in a small leaf, greenly transparent.

Low down, near the ground, a crater had been gouged out, exposing the white flesh. The hollow was an irregular one and already the air had turned most of the higher points to a rusty brown. Much of the rest was creamy with incipient decay.

A town lay just under this crater, half its three hundred houses in morning sunlight, the others obscured by the dark terminator of the apple's vast shadow.

To Billings, standing three miles away, it looked as if the apple itself were getting ready to snap up the rabble of houses over which it hovered, but when he looked up at the mass of the fruit looming solid and red in the strengthening light, its colour accentuated by the climbing sun, the sensation passed. It was as solid and immovable as the others. Faced finally with the thing he had travelled fifty miles to find, he dropped the long case of tools, hitched up his leather apron and reflectively massaged away some of the aches that had plagued him this last half day of hill climbing.

The valley before him, Billings thought, looked like a mouth, the apple lying on a broad and smooth tongue of brown earth surrounded on three sides by a gap-toothed mountain range that grinned obscenely at him. His climb had brought him out of the throat, a narrow gully of dry earth rippled with erosion scars like a tumbled cloth. Standing now at the root of the tongue, he luxuriously scratched

away a recalcitrant colony of itches on his neck, picked up once again the clanking bag of tools and moved reluctantly on.

Going down the slope was work almost as hard as his earlier climb. The ground was metal-hard, bleached by the rain to a sterile and jagged mass from which grains of mica and quartz glinted back the yellow sunlight. All atomic grounds had the same look; riven, like scraps of another world. No man, and especially not one of his trade, had to have one pointed out to him. The dead earth and the weird giant fruits it spawned were indication enough, just two of the jokes war had played on the human race. Like the Moths.

Head down, his eyes on the fissured ground, Billings tramped the long road to the town, thinking only of sitting down, loosening his tight apron and belt, discussing his fee with the town Boss. Mild pleasures, but the only one most Moth Killers knew. Staining the air he could smell the rotting juice of the apple, sweet and diseased, matching the bilious glow of the sun. He ignored the stink and soon it faded from his sensations.

He placed the Boss as soon as he saw him, then forgot his existence. He was young, ugly, tough—his town was the same. A ragged puddle of gimcrack shacks latticed with crooked muddy streets, its weak hold on reality was accentuated by the bulk of the apple looming above it, needing only a touch to roll down on it like a red moon, crushing the miners and their houses into the earth. But nobody cared. Women stood gossiping at their doors while children paddled around in the mudholes. There was an endless traffic of handcarts along the street carrying sawn slabs of apple flesh to the presses or returning empty to pick up a fresh load. As the two men, Boss and Moth Killer, went by, the people bent their heads but said nothing.

Close to the mine, traffic was thicker and more hurried, the miners' movements more antlike than ever. The apple loomed over them, cutting off the light, and in the mire of mud and juice that surrounded the entrance to the mine.

the men moved like naked spectres, shiny with the apple's blood.

A path had been made across the mud with slabs of pressed-out apple flesh, like porous brown wood. The Boss went first, Billings following. As they walked across the narrow track, men looked up at them, then stepped uncomplainingly off until they had passed. Billings watched the men's legs sinking to the knees in the brown bog but felt no sympathy for them. He had been used to such things when he was a miner. Now that he was more, it was his right to have privileges. He had worked for them.

The path's end was well inside the cavity. It yawned like a vast and jagged pit above them. By the light of the oil lamps wedged into the walls, Billings could see the galleried mine rising three hundred feet above him, its face dotted with men. Their echoing voices peopled the dark air with ghostly curses and prayers, underscored and occasionally blotted out altogether by the trickling splash of juice from the cuts they made. An endless drizzle of the sticky sweet liquid fell to the floor of the mine, making their leather clothing glossy and stiff. Drops of the juice trickled off their aprons and fell into the swamp that surrounded them. The air was thick with the smell of decay.

Billings dropped his tool case, unlaced the opening and took out the contents item by item, laying them out in a neat row on the ground. His two blades, something like the billhooks used by the miners, were differently weighted so that the flat, almost square blade at the end of the four-foot handle could bite deeper and stay in longer, its curved talon hanging on to flesh and carapace even when its wielder was unable to strike again. After this there were leather gauntlets and greaves, barbed pitons, a fat coil of rope and spiked boots. It had been some months since Billings had used the boots and greaves, but they had stayed supple inside the bag. He pulled them on, laced them carefully and picked up the rest of the equipment.

"The entrance is up top," the Boss said.

Billings looked up. There was less activity in the dark-

ness, and he knew why. Word had spread that he was a Killer. He could feel them watching him, hoping—as he had hoped when he was a miner—to see some slip, a fault in his skill. He visualized how it must look to the men hanging in their harness up against the top faces in the dark, their bodies tacky with juice, hands welded to their knives by a congealing glaze of the stuff. In their eyes, used to darkness and yellow light, he would seem a dim and distorted figure, hardly more than an upturned face against the brown of the muddy floor.

He moved quickly and without warning the Boss, so that the man jumped visibly when Billings took his knife from his quiver and, with one neat wrist movement, sliced a horizontal gash in the main face. The flesh was brown, rotten, almost dried out, but another cut showed white. He cut again, severing the overhang so that the firm foothold was exposed from above and shelved beneath by the larger mass of rotted flesh. His right leg came up and the foot wedged deep into the notch while his arm swung again higher up, cutting a further foothold. His gauntleted left hand grabbing at the rough and crumbling surface of the main face, steadying his body for the movements of his blade.

The climb was dangerous, depending on a continued ascent for safety. His hand would steady him for only a few seconds before the rotten flesh collapsed under his touch, and the cleated soles of his boots would hold in a cut for only a moment before sliding out. There was no time for him to see where he was going nor concern himself with the face above him. He had estimated where the ledge was that he must arrive at, and also the best route to approach it. Now he had to depend on his inborn skill. Spidering upwards, his hands grasped, his blade swung, his feet bit and pistoned him up the cliff. His mind was blank—until, after a long moment of doubt, his blade cut air, his fingers grabbed a firm new-sliced edge, and he hauled himself up on to the main upper terrace. As he stood panting on

the edge, he heard the miners around and above him muttering, sensed their admiration and was content.

The Boss took another minute to reach the terrace along the roped gallery that zigzagged up the main face. Billings waited without comment, cleaning his blade and scraping the accumulated pulp from between the spikes of his boots. When the Boss arrived he recognized resentment in the man's stiff face but said nothing.

"Further up," the Boss said shortly.

They moved along the terrace until it petered out in a dark hollow so small that they had to stoop. A miner brought down a lamp and the Boss took it, holding the light up. In the glow Billings saw the beginning of a tunnel, the ragged edges of transparent, slightly green material that lined it, and smelled the dry and musty scent he had expected.

"It's an old one," he said. "Three days maybe."

He pulled at the tattered edge of the tunnel lining and shredded a piece of it in his fingers.

"Maybe four. It's dried out a lot."

"How far in will . . . ?"

"I wouldn't know."

The Boss held the lamp further towards the tunnel, letting fingers of light probe the darkness. There was nothing to be seen but the smooth-sided circular hole plunging into the heart.

"How long will it take?"

Billings hefted his knives on to his back and took the lamp.

"As long as it takes," he said shortly and walked down into the darkness.

The Boss looked after him for a moment, then turned to stare at the silent miners hanging in their harness across the face of the crater. Their burning eyes were brighter than the lamps by which they worked. He moved quickly down the gallery without saying anything.

Inside the tunnel it was warm and dark. Billings trimmed

the lamp and moved slowly forward, listening. Air moved softly around him, light glinted on the walls.

He remembered his father who had died in a tunnel very like this.

The town where he was born was an apple town. The fruit was an ancient wrinkled mountain still anchored to the earth by a thin bough tufted with leaves, though the bough was long since empty of sap and the leaves were parasols that rustled like sails in the stirring winds of autumn. But the flesh inside was still firm and men were not afraid to cut long galleries through the desiccated exterior where the flesh was juiceless (cells like dust-filled rooms repeated in endless transparency) to reach the sweet white heart.

They had found his father in one of those galleries, a long excavation that intersected the tunnel of a Moth. The body was wadded up into the gallery's end, a boneless mass of flesh frosted with the drying web-stuff of the insect's cocoon. . . .

Billings blinked back the image and drew a deep breath. The tunnel was empty around him, and for a few dozen yards in each direction he could see it stretching emptily into the shadows. Lifting the lamp he looked at the walls and saw his face reflected back from the depths of the transparent lining, a long gaunt impassive face that might have been his or his father's, or that of a ghost haunting the vast mountain of the apple, the spirit of a man lost in the empty halls of the centre, as Billings was lost—as they were all lost.

The deeper he penetrated the less he was afraid. The worst fear was of failing, but when there were no other men around him this fear disappeared. It belonged to ordinary people. The men who hunted Moths were different. They had an understanding with the universe, a heightened sensitivity to the world off which other men merely scavenged. The thick white messy bulk of the apple was a place with its own rules in which Billings was comfortable, at home. He recognized the risks, but they were risks of

the apple and of nature, not of men. He faced death, but it was nature's death, not man's.

Thick and white the apple bulked around him. Billings could hear it in motion on all sides. Tides surged through its oceanic cells, membranes quivered with a motion as palpable as that of a heart. Above, below, on all sides, he sensed the white flesh sleeping in darkness, perfect, sweet, waiting. He moved in the apple like a god, feeling other gods, his father and his father's father, waiting in the shadows for him, resting just beyond the green tunnel wall. Layers of civilization began to slough from him like shed skins and, half dreaming, he listened for the expected voice.

His foot slipped momentarily before the cleats caught again and he realized the tunnel was shelving slightly. At the same time his nose caught a different scent, an edge in the mustiness of the gallery, a suggestion of putrefaction. He unslung his knife. The tunnel was reaching its end, dipping down to intersect the vulnerable heart. His feet slipped more often and he had to cut steps in the floor to hold him from sliding forward. The lamp showed him no ending to the tunnel but an area ahead of him that he could not penetrate with light. Slicing fresh footholds every few feet he slithered forwards. The tunnel ended—and he looked down into a deep chamber whose walls, glossy and transparent, reflecting his own elongated image, tapered some twenty feet below him to a point in which the globular brown shape of a seed was wedged. He had reached the centre.

From now on the real business of his task began. Sitting on the lip of the tunnel, his legs dangling over the edge, he methodically checked his equipment. Then he looked down. The walls were mirror smooth and he could tell from their sheen that they remained slippery even though the seed chamber had been pierced. Wedging a piton into the tunnel wall he threaded his rope through its eye, tossed the rest of the roll out into space and climbed down.

There was no movement or sound, so he could assume his presence was still undiscovered. And when, behind the seed, he found the unguarded doorway to the inner chamber, he

knew he could have surprise on his side. Pausing only for a glance back to make sure his rope remained fastened to the tunnel entrance, he dropped quickly into the main seed space.

Seeds hung like tightly cocooned beetles above him, their smooth backs turned out, their unseen claws clutching the central axis of the apple that gave Billings his only indication of the direction in which he was moving. It lay ten degrees off the horizontal, making the main seed chamber slope slightly upwards. The floor was slippery and being forced to fight uphill was some disadvantage but he depended a great deal on surprise. If he could catch the Moth sleeping or perhaps somnolent, beginning a cocoon—it was their breeding time now and most of them were sleepy and slow—then his job would be easy. He moved forward, keeping the brown kernels on his right, watching the part of the chamber he could see under the rows of seeds for any movement. Each step made an infinitesimal but noticeable sound, a slight creak, as if he walked on transparent leather.

The chamber was quiet, as silent as if it were the centre of the earth. Billings reached the upper end of the space, unslung his knife, and half turned.

A face looked back at him from the chamber.

In the far wall a spot of opacity had appeared in the transparency. The skin was unbroken but a window had been cleared as a new tunnel reached the central core. It widened quickly. A low-held head butted the membrane, lifted to bite through it—and looked at him. He glimpsed for a terrible moment the waving furred antennae, the brow, eyes and mouth of a fearsome face; wide eyes, sharp cornered; high cheek bones; a wide and scarlet mouth. Female, young . . . a talon split the skin and from the tunnel, newborn, the magnificent insect erupted into the silent space.

Backed against the wall, Billings watched the Moth, waiting for its move. The insect was patient, perhaps tired. She stayed near the new tunnel, licking globules of juice from her fur, watching him, preening.

Her body was that of a young Moth, about the size of a human girl, though slimmer than most. Only in the smoothly swelling breasts was there a specific reference to humankind. The down that covered her body in a honey-coloured mist shadowed but did not hide the smooth play of muscle under the flexible skin of the legs and torso, but around the head and shoulders a quick shading off of the fur and the appearance of tight shell across the skull and neck betrayed her insect nature. On first glance there were few other signs, but then she stretched back her arms in a quick gesture and the magnificent beige wings expanded from between her arms and body, their patterns of brown and black scrawling like hieroglyphs across his vision.

Billings blinked. In that moment clawed feet gripped the chamber wall, wings twitched an instant, and she sprang.

A right-hand cut to stop her advance, then Billings scrambled for the seeds hanging like a garland of gunshot down the chamber's centre. Air buffeted him as her wings gripped, but he was safe, sheltered from the slash of her claws for an instant, allowing him the luxury of a turn and new grip on his blade. Then she was under the seeds and rising to attack him.

Cut. The pointed tip caught a clawed forearm, bit, then slipped. The shrill twittering of her voice filled the air. Then her other arm lashed out and he felt a blaze of agony in his side.

Cut again, hack down on the arm buried in him. Blood—green blood. Another lateral slice and wing membrane parted. Another. But she was still coming, her wings, delicate but not vital, taking the blows while her body remained shielded behind them.

Spinning down the chamber from her blow, Billings sensed the hollowness of the wall behind him. He looked down through the membrane into emptiness, a suggestion of mist but nothing else. A further chamber hollowed out beside the others, probably her living place.

Before he had raised his knife she was on his back but he swung down with one last desperate movement and felt the

rotted chamber wall rip like paper. They fell down into a warm, steamy space that smelled rotten and corrupt. Billings twisted as he fell and sensed the disappearance of her weight from his back. Then he landed with a sickening suddenness on something soft and thick. He grabbed at it, slithered, hung on.

He was on a ledge of crumbling flesh high in her living chamber. Dimly he took in the rest of the place, the walls that descended in rotting terraces to the floor, the trickling juice that welled out of them in a dozen places, the flaccid sac of her discarded cocoon on which he had landed. From his ledge it fell twenty feet to the floor to lie among the stalagmites of brown flesh in valances of dusty green.

The escaping juice dribbled down to the bottom of the space where a pool of it almost covered a seed brought from one of the other chambers. The juice had partly fermented, and the place was hot, steamy, thick with the smell of decaying matter spiced by the tang of alcohol. Billings felt dizzy and sick. His side was beginning to hurt and he felt blood on his hands.

She lay by the pool, twenty feet below him, her wings sprawled across the juice-wet surface of the poolside, their delicate transparency glued to the smooth tacky surface. She was struggling to rise, her hands fluttering across the floor in front of her.

The room was misty and Billings was wounded. He made a mistake. Unslinging his second knife—the first was lost in the main chamber—he grabbed a handful of the soft cocoon and slid over the edge.

The moment he did so he sensed his error. The cocoon was rotten, eaten to shreds by the humid air. Under his weight it ripped like decayed cloth. He fell, tumbled, scrambled down, enveloped in its clinging folds. His grasping hands tore at the stuff, bringing down fresh curtains of it around him. Then he landed with an impact that emptied his lungs. His knife skidded across the floor.

Billings turned his head to look at the Moth, then bowed it like a sacrifice. Her body, no longer glued to the ground,

surged up triumphantly, her magnificent face looked down at him, her talons raised in an embrace. He saw the descending claw, cried out, and was silent forever.

They never found his body as they had found that of his father but it was there for them to find if they had cared to look. Deep in the apple he lay cocooned in her web, his face looking out at her dried carapace. Long dead in the cold currents of autumn that, even deep in the core, she had felt and responded to, she left behind a final sign for him to ponder. Deep in his body the larvae lay that would one day rise to be another Moth, inhabit another apple, just as she had risen from a Moth Killer's body herself, and others would rise after her.

Though dead, Billings sensed the last great possession of his life and was content. Staring into the silent chambers of his tomb, he waited for resurrection.

ROBOT'S DOZEN

by

G. L. LACK

As a pleasant change from the normal straightforward narrative, here are thirteen communications regarding the hiring of a house robot which have more to say than most stories do.

15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath,
Somerset.
30th August, 1979

Rentarobot Ltd.,
London, W.15.

Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for your prompt and efficient service. The robot you supplied to take care of my house and garden while I was away on holiday on the continent proved (if you will excuse the term) a model of perfection. It did all the jobs required, cleaning the house, mowing the lawns and generally keeping up the appearance that the property was occupied, as recommended by the police in their Crime Prevention Manual.

Also I must congratulate you on achieving a perfect likeness to myself after only two sittings.

I have set the homing device in motion and trust that you receive the robot safely, and I shall be pleased if the invoice for the fee outstanding is sent as soon as possible.

Yours faithfully,
Arthur Willis

Rentarobot Ltd.,
London, W.15.
10th September, 1979

Arthur Willis, Esq.,
15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath, Somerset.

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your communication dated 30th August, 1979. We are pleased that you were satisfied with

our service and I have passed your complimentary remarks about the resemblance of Model RR/1307 to yourself on to the technician concerned with its manufacture.

The slight delay in sending the enclosed invoice was caused by the time-lag between the machine's departure from your house and its subsequent arrival at our establishment. A small retardation of the homing mechanism may have been responsible, otherwise it is in perfect working order.

We shall be pleased to receive your remittance in due course and look forward to your custom again in the future.

Yours faithfully,
P. Crane
(Dispatch Officer)

Bright, Bright & Purvis,
5A Town Square Chambers,
Bath.
10th September, 1979

Arthur Willis, Esq.,
15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath.

Dear Sir,

On the instructions of my client Mr. Robert Stagg of 17 Slimbridge Gardens I am writing to you concerning certain incidents alleged to have occurred during the month of August and in the first week of September this year.

I refer to the fact that you appear during this time to have spent much of your time, while presumably your wife was on holiday, in watching the every movement of my client's wife, until she was reduced in the end (after giving you the benefit of every doubt) to such a state of nerves that she was afraid to venture outside the door or indeed to leave the curtains pulled open.

Since the end of your wife's holiday and your return to

work there seems to have been almost an end to the constant surveillance except for three evenings when she saw you watching from the cover of the small shrubbery in your garden.

This has been a great shock for Mr. and Mrs. Stagg who, although not well acquainted with you socially, had a great respect for you. I trust that my client will have no more cause for complaint and I shall be pleased to forward an explanation and apology for your behaviour to him should you not wish to do so personally. He hopes that you take the latter course.

Yours faithfully,
Alexander Bright

15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath,
Somerset.
11th September, 1979

Rentarobot Ltd.,
London, W.15.

Dear Sir,

I hope that the robot I hired from you has returned. However, this letter is about a much more serious matter than its delay.

Enclosed is a copy of a letter I received today. You will note that the complaints referred to coincide with the presence here of your robot and my neighbour has assumed it to be me.

While this may be a compliment to your modellers it has, you will appreciate, put me in an acutely embarrassing position. I shall be pleased if you will send a letter confirming that you supplied me with the robot and explaining the purpose of your organization so that I may take it with me when I go to see Mr. Stagg.

Yours faithfully,
Arthur Willis

Rentarobot Ltd.,
London, W.15.
13th September, 1979

Arthur Willis, Esq.,
15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath.

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your letter received today. May I say how well I realize your difficulty. However, as you are aware, our service is confidential and available (and indeed only made known) to selected clients. Since Mr. Stagg is not yet on the Approved List I am obliged to refuse your request and suggest that a verbal explanation should be satisfactory.

Yours faithfully,
P. Crane
(Dispatch Officer)

15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath,
Somerset.
16th September, 1979

Managing Director,
Rentarobot Ltd.

Dear Sir,

Further to my letter of a few days ago and the solicitor's attached (which I trust you still retain) may I say that the interview between myself and Mr. Stagg was far from successful. In fact Mr. Stagg, normally a quietly-spoken, mild-tempered man, became extremely abusive and dismissed my explanation as a "load of old excreta" and absolutely refused to believe that a service such as yours exists.

Now that the matter has reached boiling point it is certain that even a letter of explanation will no longer suffice and I shall be pleased if you will dispatch the robot back to

me to prove my point. I shall of course pay the necessary expenses and shall ensure the utmost secrecy.

Yours faithfully,
Arthur Willis

RENTAROBOT LTD. Internal Memo. Date: 18/9/79

URGENT

FROM: Managing Director. To: Deep-freeze stores.

Please check that Model RR/1307 is in full working order and dispatch immediately to:

A. Willis, Esq.,
15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath,
Somerset.

15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath,
Somerset.
21st September, 1979

Managing Director,
Rentarobot Ltd.

Dear Sir,

You will be pleased to hear that the operation was carried out successfully. The look on my neighbour's face when confronted by myself and your robot had to be seen to be believed. The difficulty then was convincing him that the model was not my identical twin.

There is one slight snag. I have set the homing device but the robot seems reluctant to leave. However, this is causing no inconvenience at the moment but I welcome your advice.

Thank you for your co-operation and please submit invoice on the return of the robot.

Yours faithfully,
Arthur Willis

Rentarobot Ltd.,
London, W.15.
23rd September, 1979

Arthur Willis, Esq.,
15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath.

Dear Sir,

I am delighted that the "operation" was a success. We always hope to oblige our customers and in this case the charges will be waived.

Do not be unduly concerned about the laggardly manner of your model. Normally we re-tune the homing device after each mission. Due to the urgency in your case this was not done as we dispatched quickly and no doubt the mechanism is slightly run down. It should take effect but if it does not operate within forty-eight hours of the receipt of this letter please contact me again.

Yours faithfully,
Oscar P. Flavenbaum
(Managing Director)

15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath,
Somerset.
23rd September, 1979

Managing Director,
Rentarobot Ltd.

Dear Sir,

Further to my letter of the day before yesterday, will you note that your robot is still here and, since its behaviour is not normal, I shall be pleased if you will have it collected as soon as possible.

To tell the truth, I may be imagining things, but it seems to wear a *superior* look on its face and is almost *dominating*

the household. I think the mechanism needs inspecting thoroughly.

Although your service fulfilled a very necessary need at the time, in view of recent events I shall not engage the service of a robot in the future. Even as I write it is peering over my shoulder, which is quite disconcerting.

Yours faithfully,
Arthur Willis

15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath.
Saturday

Dear Tilly,

Oh, I have so much to tell you that we must get together soon. We had a marvellous holiday on the continent. I hope you got my card from Venice. The weather was glorious *all* the time and the hotel was fabulous. Even Arthur thawed out a bit—and on the days when he had business appointments (he could never have just a *holiday*) I went with a gorgeous Swede for trips in his launch . . . Well I can't tell you *everything* of course, but he was blond and beautifully tanned . . . *all* over. Yes he was a Viking to my liking!

I thought it would seem very dull when we got back but at least *one* interesting thing has happened. You know we were going to have one of those robot things to look after the house (I shouldn't have told you really so don't say anything about it to You-Know-Who) well we had one and Arthur had to ask for it back because it had misbehaved itself and our neighbour had thought that it was Arthur ogling his wife. Arthur! Can you imagine it? The funny thing is that now we've got him (I mean *it*) and everything has been straightened out, he won't go!

He loafs around the house all day and of course he looks just like Arthur. As if one of him wasn't enough! But from the way he looks at me I don't think he's such a cold fish as dear A. himself!

Well Tilly, as I said we *must* meet and you can tell me all your adventures. I'm sure that you didn't go to Nice for *nothing*!

Lots of Love,
Patty

RENTAROBOT LTD. Internal Memo. Date: 24/9/79
URGENT
FROM: Managing Director. To: Robot Mortician
Seymour Dent

Please collect Model RR/1307 from:

Arthur Willis, Esq.,
15 Slimbridge Gardens,
Bath,
Somerset.

Model to be disposed of upon your return.

Flat 12,
Westall House,
S.W.6.
25th September, 1979

Dear Mr. Flavenbaum,

I did not come to work this morning as I was not well. That last job of collecting a model from Bath took a lot out of me as it did not want to come.

I have worked for you for several years now and liked the job very much but now I've had enough. When the robots were just models it was all right but now they are more like us it's different.

The last one really turned me up. I didn't mind him struggling, but that last scream as I pushed him into the incinerator went through me like cold steel. I wish I had

been told that he had been modified as much as that and anyway I can't see any need to build in such life-like things and so I give in my notice.

Yours truly,
Seymour Dent

BIRTH OF A BUTTERFLY

by

JOSEPH L. GREEN

American author Joseph Green has become something of a specialist in depicting human beings faced with utterly alien life forms. In this latest story he describes the adoption of a tiny Sun—who decides on the adopting is all part of the story.

BIRTH OF A BUTTERFLY

PINK-Beam-of-Terror; *The Wild-Flames! Far out over the death-liquid, searching, from lost Hot-Home the Wild-Flames have followed us! Flee! Flee!*

Blue-Beam-of-Courage: *No! Hold, we cannot! Our built-up heat would slow us! We must discharge-by-creation first! Discharge! Create!*

Pink-Beam: *Time? Time? The young-flame to come, the savages behind us disrupting?*

Blue-Beam: *Time enough! The young-flame? The Aliens, the Aliens! Attach it, attach it! Their great powers protect! Must save our own Consciousness-of-Being!*

Pink-Beam: *Cruel, cruel! A young one, a new-flame!*

Blue-Beam: *We must, we must! Give me the White, the White!*

White-Beam-of-Creation: *In sore distress, in agony of mind, I give you White!*

White-Beam-of-Creation: *And I return, in feelings strained, the White! Heat, heat! The smallest alien approaches this place of birthstones! Create, create! our young-flame of trouble born!*

"Momme," said little Dickie solemnly, "I saw two burnin' butterflies eat up a great big diamond and make a baby butterfly."

"Did you, dear?" asked Irma without looking up from the synthesizer. The contrary thing was mixing too many lipids with the amino acids again and at dinner Hammond would stare unhappily at the fat in his steak. "You *didn't* bring more of those diamonds inside?"

"The two big ones' wings got all dim, and the diamond went whoof! and there was another butterfly, just like the first two only not as bright," Dickie rattled on, and when

Irma glanced sternly at him he hung his head guiltily and extended a hand. She inspected the gem, and sighed.

"All right, dear, you may keep it. Now tell Daddy to clean up for dinner."

He trotted off happily, short legs churning, and Irma shook her head in loving exasperation and returned to the synthesizer. Just like his father, a toy a minute . . . though of course Hammond did not consider his gadgets toys. But when marvellous science, with all its wonders, couldn't design a simple little intra-uterine safety that would stay inside . . . she hummed as she took up the meat, secretly glad they hadn't. This barren world of rock and water was the eighty-first planet on which they had landed. She and Ham had been in space over five years now, with another five scheduled. Dickie-bird had become a stronger interest-in-common than all the psycho-computers on Earth could have found when they were matched for this trip.

Both her men attacked the fat steaks, which had entered the scout as very nasty seaweed and slime three systems back, with admirable gusto. When Hammond finished he said, "I'll rig the imprinter for Dickie's next learning-set and we'll lift. Are you going to deep-sleep?"

"Not for a one-week trip. I have mending to do." Their clothes had been designed to last indefinitely, but the planners hadn't anticipated a baby. The garments she had laboriously cut-down for Dickie kept coming apart on him.

She cleared the galley while Hammond went through his pre-lift checks, watching his broad back more than her work. She could usually manage the programmed-imprinted-analytical lug, but the fit he had pitched last night when she suggested they have a second child. . . . Dickie had been an easy birth, but the thought of delivering another baby sent Hammond into a virtual panic. Midwifery was not on his programme of skills and his fear of her becoming pregnant again had lowered their ratio of sexual synthesis for the past four years. But Dickie needed a baby sister. Growing up with an improvised imprinting machine and your parents was no life for a child.

Hammond fastened Dickie in his accel-decel couch and attached the cap. Irma turned away, to avoid seeing the child pass out, and got them an after-dinner cup of stimcaf.

Alpha Crucis Number Two was a virtual copy of One, the same lifeless bare rock and salt-free seas. The air was thin but breathable and Irma happily turned Dickie free outside. Her nerves needed a rest.

It was only a few minutes before the little fellow returned. Hammond had sent the detectors out immediately and was manually scanning with one. He looked up in mild surprise when Dickie said, "Momme, the baby butterfly followed us here. I think it's *'dopted* me."

Irma smiled and hastily bent to press her cheek against his fair head, one wary eye on his father. She saw Hammond put the machine on automatic scan and braced for trouble. Now he would pin the child down on his fantasy and there would be another lecture on reality and illusion, and how you must always distinguish between the physically real and the mentally unreal, Richard.

But a moment later Dickie was saying, "I'll *show* you, Daddy," and leading a reluctant Hammond towards the airlock. Irma dropped her needle and thread and followed. Dickie was going to be needing her very shortly.

It hovered in the air by the outer door, so close the detectors had missed it, a head-sized core of opaque white light surrounded by multi-coloured streamers of fire that curled, dipped and moved like burning wings. It reminded her irresistibly of textbook illustrations of old Sol in a tantrum, with huge clouds of flaming hydrogen thrusting into space. It even gave off a gentle warmth.

Irma looked away from the too-bright ball. "What in the world is it, Hammond?"

He closed his eyes for two seconds, opened them and said, "It resembles nothing in my memory-banks. Logic indicates it might be some local form of coherent illuminated gas. Dickie says he saw others on Alpha Crucis One."

"I saw *this* one, Daddy," insisted Dickie shrilly. "I saw its momme an' daddy, an' it *'dopted* me."

Hammond smiled briefly and reached to pat the small head, but Dickie darted away. He vanished behind a nearby rock outcropping. When Irma turned back towards the gas-cloud it had also disappeared.

Hammond shook his head in resigned patience and walked back to the scout. He was at the scanner again when Irma entered, lost in the useless and foolish task that had engaged Earthmen now for most of a hundred years, the search for another intelligent race. Another? Personally she wasn't satisfied that their *own* should make the claim!

Dickie's ship-finder brought him back unharmed except for a few bruises, which scarcely mattered where there were no bacteria. She sprayed skin on the damaged areas and got dinner. After the meal she put him to bed and relaxed for an hour with the impressor, but the sensory images had just become interesting when the detectors returned and Hammond decided to lift. Planet Number Three was in conjunction, or some-such and it would be a two-day trip at sub-light speed. No deep-sleep again. Dickie wouldn't even have time to digest a new learning set.

They were barely clear of gravity and accelerating for the short hop when the main computer, the bio-brain, jelled its central bank again. Hammond glared at its bland glass face as though ready to give it a good swift illogical kick, then went after the imprint cap without a word. It had been a part of the brain's emergency circuits until he removed it to build an imprinter for Dickie and had to be restored each time the bio-brain was to be bypassed.

When Hammond was ready Irma sat demurely in the co-pilot's chair and let him attach the cap. He checked each minute detail with his usual machine-like thoroughness before throwing the switch. Despite long familiarity she stiffened when the current hit, then slowly grew accustomed to it and relaxed. It was nice to be able to do something with her brain that Hammond, with all his force-fed knowledge, could not do half as well. He had tried to explain once that her brain made a better emergency circuit-box than his simply because it *hadn't* been imprinted with

knowledge. Something about several billion of his available circuits being "tied down" by established synaptic connections, the neural paths used up by the immense amount of information crammed into his head, and so on.

It was true that Hammond's brain had been used virtually to capacity. These small scouts had to be prepared for every possible emergency and only a man with an excellent grasp of dozens of basic sciences could keep the complicated machines going for the thousand years they would stay in space . . . or was it ten? They would return twelve years after departure, since everyone came back on a schedule designed to let new knowledge be absorbed systematically, but they would have aged only ten. Hammond had carefully explained that exceeding the speed of light moved mass backward in time and they would spend so many days travelling at high speed and so many years at sub-light, to balance the book. It was when he said they would move through space for a thousand years but it would seem like only ten because most of the sub-light travel time would be spent in suspended animation that she began to wish she had declined this assignment.

Hammond had been programmed for exploration scout, ten years of dangerous work and all the world had to offer ever afterwards, by a doting mother. He had gone under the cap at the age of two. Irma's father, an imprinted neurologist himself, had decided to raise his daughter the old-fashioned way. He had theories about heavy imprinting destroying certain desirable characteristics in the human personality, and stifling creativity. And perhaps he was right.

It was true that all the world's original artists, writers and musicians were non-imprints. But in the technical world the immense task of mastering just one science, much less a dozen, made imprinting mandatory. They had reached the physical limit with people like Hammond . . . but she had heard dark rumours of idiot babies with oversized heads being born in labs . . . if controlled mutation could increase the size of a baby's brain, make even more

circuits that could be imprinted with even more knowledge . . . if one extra-large brain reached a sane maturity and they imprinted it to its new capacity with neurology and genetics and its owner set out to mutate an even larger brain in some child . . . she shuddered as she began to drift off into the lazy torpor that was her usual state when half her brain was loaned out.

She was a very ignorant woman by today's standards, but the psycho-matchers had selected her as a compatible mate to one of the world's greatest brains . . . and they had been right. She and Hammond were going to convert their temporary marriage to a permanent one if they lived to reach home. But she didn't want to wait that long for a second baby and she always got her way in the end. Einstein equals Motherhood times Children by a square Father, she thought sleepily.

There was life on the third planet, just microscopic stuff and a little jelly in the seas, but Hammond wouldn't let Dickie out without a spacesuit. He was always worrying about bacteria. Dickie had to wear the improvised contraption his father had made out of spare parts.

They were sitting on a barren rock plain not far from a small lake. Irma worked in the galley and watched Dickie on the ship's viewers, while Hammond monitored both detectors. She was the one who saw a butterfly descend out of the clear sky and hover over Dickie's head.

"Hammond," she said softly, and when he looked up, visibly annoyed, she pointed silently to the viewscreen.

Hammond reached for the radio mike immediately. Irma could see nothing particularly dangerous in the situation, but her brain had not been programmed and imprinted to capacity. Hammond frequently made decisions and took actions that seemed senseless to her and proved right in the end.

There was a short but intense argument with Dickie. The little fellow returned to the scout, hot rebellion in his eyes. When Irma glanced at the screen again the butterfly was hovering just outside.

Hammond informed Dickie that in the future he was to return to the scout immediately when a gascloud appeared and was told in turn that this was the same butterfly which had 'dopted Dickie two planets back, that it was his personal friend, and not dangerous at all. In the end big tears were streaming down Dickie's face in a most unprogrammed way. As he crawled into his couch to cry in privacy he lifted a wet face and got in the last word: "An' it'll be on the *next* planet, too!"

And it was.

For the first time in five years Hammond asked Irma what she thought of the situation.

"The shining thing? Why I think it's alive, just as Dickie tried to tell you. I mean, how do we know all life has to be based on protoplasm? Maybe it's made out of living light."

She saw his brief, forgiving smile, and felt her temper stir. "Look, third-unsatisfactory-husband, biology admitted it was lost when the first sampler returned from Mars! You——" She stopped, warned by the look on his face. Just because he'd been so darn busy having all that knowledge piped into the grey goop that this was his first marriage . . . jealousy was such a *primitive* character trait . . . but at least it proved they hadn't programmed and imprinted *all* the natural responses out of Hammond.

The sullen look faded. "Irma, there are certain basic biological principles common to *all* life-chains, such as the synthesis of energy compounds in the presence of sunlight——" He stopped, and she knew he was afraid of losing her again.

"*Why* does synthesis have to take place? It looks just like a tiny sun. Maybe it gets energy directly from the big sun up there."

Hammond could only shake his head. This was totally outside his imprinted experience, a situation unique in history. Since only solid objects could exceed the speed of light there was no possible way to contact Earth for further instructions. Irma watched him sweat helplessly for a while

and then suggested he catch the thing in a specimen box and put it through the analyser.

Hammond looked so grateful for the obvious idea that she wondered what he would do if she came up with something *brilliant* one day.

She watched her husband approach the little sun—son of a sun?—through the viewscreen. It was hovering at head-height. Hammond walked directly to it, opened the box and brought it up underneath the creature, and slammed the magnetically-sealed lid. She saw the bright flames of an angry excrescence as it vanished inside.

Hammond started back to the scout, triumph in his walk. Tomorrow he would be referring to this as his idea.

A corner of the box turned red, rippled like water and melted into sludge. She heard Hammond's surprised yell, saw him hurl the hot box violently away just as the butterfly emerged, its bright wings angrily swirling. She saw Hammond backing away as the beautiful flaming creature moved towards him and suddenly realized that he was very near death. She screamed once and then little Dickie was standing by her and screaming louder than she, but he had turned on the outside mike first. His amplified child's voice rolled from the top of the scout into the shuddering air and it was an angry command not to hurt his daddy.

The miniature sun hesitated, its more violent colours fading. The flaming wings slowed, looked less like bearing pinions. After a moment it rose swiftly and in seconds had merged with the brighter sunlight in the cloudless sky.

"It'll come back," said Dickie placidly; he might never have screamed in his life. "It's *'dopted* me."

Hammond must have finally been convinced it had indeed adopted Dickie. During the three-day hop to the next planet he spent his free time building a gadget for which she could see no immediate use. When she tried to question him about it he gave her an angry look and refused to answer. He even ate the terrible chops she concocted from some old leaf-mould without a single comment.

This time it was no surprise when Dickie went out and

the flaming butterfly shortly appeared and hovered above his young head. They were on another obviously dead world, all rock and diamonds, with very little air. Dickie wore his suit cheerfully, since there was no alternative and he and the butterfly were playing some odd game they had devised when she saw Hammond emerge from the work-room carrying his newest toy. It was a grey box with a large crystal rod mounted on top, similar to some very primitive lasers she had seen.

"What's that?" she asked in some alarm. Hammond's face had a grimly determined look she did not like.

"A light wave-form disruptor. I'm going to see if that *thing* out there can stand up to a little photon jarring."

Irma wanted to cry out that he was being cruel, that the little white sun-child had done him no harm, but the words stuck in her throat. The attempt to capture it had been her idea. In a way she had been responsible for the blow to Hammond's pride. And it *was* a dangerous little fire-pot. If it should get angry with Dickie in one of their games ... She watched him approach it calmly, knowing that his device, whatever it was, would work. She saw him aim the crystal rod in its general direction and press a button. A beam of life leaped from one end and flew by the butterfly, burning its way into the sky. Hammond moved the box slightly and the beam shifted, engulfing the small central body. *And it flared, grew, brightened intolerably in a soundless explosion of light* ... and died to a dim memory of glory on the edge of her retina. As it faded to nothingness she thought she saw a black lump of—was it coal?—fall to the ground at little Dickie's feet.

"That takes care of that," said Hammond's voice on the radio. It sounded more defeated than satisfied. She saw him stoop to pick up the black lump.

It had happened so fast Dickie's young mind was slow in grasping the fact that his friend and pet was dead. He had just started a rising wail of protest when Irma saw two circles of light appear at the top of the viewscreen, falling fast. She felt a sudden dread clutch at her throat.

Hammond saw them also. He lifted the disruptor in alarm, his finger stabbing the button. The killing beam lashed out just before the dropping small suns reached him. It cut the air by one of the flaming balls and before Hammond could shift it a similar beam shot from the body of the second butterfly and melted the box into shapeless slag. The disrupting light vanished.

The two creatures halted just above little Dickie's head and Irma saw strong orange and delicate lavender beams flashing back and forth between them. She did not need Hammond to tell her they were communicating and her own intuition told her what it was about. In a near paralysis of terror she watched the weirdly beautiful judges weigh their decision of life or death and not for a moment did she doubt they were both judge, jury and executioner, and capable of all three tasks.

Dickie was staring at them with wide-eyed interest, apparently completely unafraid. Hammond's face had turned pale. He edged slowly closer to Dickie, with some vain idea of protecting him if the decision went against them.

Orange-Beam-of-Anger: *He disrupted our young-flame! Our young-flame! They are powerful but cruel, cruel! Their bodies are jelly of death-liquid and death lives in their minds, minds! I kill!*

Lavender-Beam-of-Restraint: *No! No! He did not understand, understand! You caused us to attach away our young-flame when we fled here for safety! Ours no longer! Think, Think! The Wild-Flames have not discovered the birth-power locked in stone! They came not this far from Hot-Home! It is safe to make another young-flame, another! We have built our heat again, we can create, create!*

Orange-Beam: *It will weaken us, for purpose, what purpose?*

Lavender-Beam: *For the aliens, dull-flame! Attach it to the largest one, let it be his child!*

Orange-Beam : *To kill again, to kill again?*

Lavender-Beam : *They are not primitives! We must make ties, ties! Sense you not his regret? He thought to protect his young, as we, as we! We must make friends, get aid, fight savages! Their machines move between Hot-Homes and we cannot! Powerful friends, when we return to drive Barbarians from our Hot-Home! See Low-Burner, see Low-Burner?*

Orange-Beam : *We will see who Burns-Low! Give me your White, your White!*

White-Beam-of-Creation : *In joy of being, in love tender-yielding, I give you White!*

White-Beam-of-Creation : *And I return, in strength of love, in happiness conscious, the White, the White!*

The light beam colloquy abruptly stopped. Irma's gaze shifted downward. Dickie was holding up a large diamond, its rough exterior glittering in the brightness of Alpha Crucis.

A new beam of brilliant white flashed between the butterflies, held, and they moved towards each other and the extended diamond. When they were quite close Dickie finally dropped it and withdrew his hand. The small suns followed the crystal to the ground, still connected by the beam of pure white light. Irma saw them almost merge when they reached opposite sides of the diamond. She knew the purpose of that beam of blended white and that Dickie had seen it once before. She felt like a Peeping Tom in the bedroom of Zeus and Hera and could not tear her eyes away.

The white light seemed to grow, to widen and deepen until it covered the central bodies of both butterflies, hiding the other colours and the frozen glitter of the diamond. Both Hammond and Dickie had backed away a few feet and were watching through slightly polarized face-plates. The rock in the immediate vicinity of the strange mating was charring. The whiteness grew more intense, almost unendurable in its brilliance. There was an abrupt flare in the

centre of the merged lights, a tone of vivid orange, and then the parent butterflies moved apart, the beam broken, their sun-heats fading to a more normal temperature. Where the diamond had rested an orange flame burned, slowly brightening.

Some dim fragment of memory came to Irma, something about the intense pressure matrices inside a diamond, the immense forces necessary to heat and compress carbon until it reached that state of final beauty. If those matrices could be made to yield their imprisoned energy . . .

The parent butterflies lifted slowly, moved behind Hammond, gently urged him forward, until he was standing quite close to the burning orange. Their new-born child grew brighter and brighter. Hammond, apparently no longer afraid, waited in front of it and an older meaning of the word "imprint" dawned on Irma, the original psychological one. Some new-born creatures adopted the first living animal they saw as their mother, regardless of its shape or form.

Dickie had got the situation somewhat confused. The first butterfly had not adopted him. He had unknowingly adopted the butterfly!

The thought sent her into a burst of laughter and when she realized how near to hysteria it was she cut it off abruptly and stood there trembling in silent relief. When she looked again her husband and son were slowly approaching the scout. The new butterfly, now flying, hovered close by Hammond's head.

"Of course little Brightstar isn't the protoplasmic type of intelligence we were looking for, but I think Earth will be too thrilled to care," said Hammond cheerfully as he made the last adjustment on his current toy. He had assured Irma that when their second child learned to use it properly he could activate any of its thirty-six cells by a light-beam and produce one of the basic sounds of speech in its attached radio. With the intelligence little Brightstar displayed it should be a short step from there to true speech.

"I'm happy just to get home five years early." Irma really couldn't have cared less about the *type* of intelligence her adopted child had. Dickie-bird needed a brother and now he had one. She glanced at the chronometer. About time for another meal for Brightstar, and for Dickie's nap. It had been very pleasant, watching the two of them tumble about outside the ship during the last feeding, but Brightstar would have to eat alone this time. She called Dickie and asked Hammond to drop to sub-light and pull in close to the next star.

When both children were attended to she asked, "Is the search really over, Hammond? Will this satisfy the people who insist there just *has* to be more intelligence in the universe?"

He turned from the controls in mild surprise. "Why, no, of course not. The search must go on. Baby suns aren't all the answer. But we'll leave the new trips to others. Except . . ." he hesitated, and Irma made her face cloud up and prepare to rain. Not again!

He saw her look, and grinned. "Oh no, not another major trip. Just a little expedition to home base, so to speak. To Sol. It occurs to me that Bright and his kind may not be as rare as we thought. They were obviously born in some star originally. We may have intelligence a darn sight closer to home than we've ever dreamed."

Irma sighed in relief. Why of course! And a good thing too. The way children grew up before your eyes, they had to be thinking about Brightstar's future. No child of *her's* was going to grow up a bachelor!

She smiled reflectively, already seeing her grandchildren burning before her eyes.

THE AFFLUENCE OF EDWIN LOLLARD

by

THOMAS M. DISCH

One of the most important duties of science fiction is to portray many of the ultimate possibilities of human actions. New American author, Thomas M. Disch, reflects (perhaps tongue in cheek) on one end product of the Welfare State.

THE AFFLUENCE OF EDWIN LOLLARD

THE Accused stood at the bar. The jury had been chosen—twelve irredoubtably solvent men. Both the Prosecution and the Defence had waived their openings. Somewhere in the folds of flesh that sheathed the soul of R. N. Neddle, State's Attorney, was a particular crease in the sphincter muscles of his oral cavity : a smile of assurance.

There was also a smile on the lips of the Accused, but it would be difficult to say just what that smile represented. Assurance? Hardly. Bravado, then? Not likely, knowing the character of the Accused. Contempt of court? It was not a court to be contemptuous of. The period furnishings, the silver woven into the brocade hangings, the gilded mouldings, and the matched pearls in the Judge's elaborate pompadour wig—these gleamed richly, affluently in the crystalline light of the Steuben chandeliers. The ermines and velvets of the officers of the court presented a dignified contrast to the ostentatious dress of the packed gallery, where the bookies were still taking bets. To the right of the Judge's bench hung the flag of the United States of America; to the left, the flag of the sovereign State of Quebec.

The Prosecution called its first witness, Police-Sergeant Jay Gardner.

"You were the arresting officer?"

"Yuh."

"Would you tell the court why you arrested the Accused?"

"He looked sorta suspicious to me, you know what I mean?"

"Suspicious—how?"

"Oooh . . . sorta thin——" The jury confirmed Sergeant Gardner's testimony : the Accused looked *very* thin. Moreover, he was wearing a blue serge suit. "—an' dirty, an' he was just sitting on this park bench, not doing anything. Five

minutes he sat there like that, not doing anything, so I figured why not arrest him? I mean, I didn't have anything *personal* against him, like a crime . . ."

"Please allow the court to interpret evidence," the Prosecution interrupted firmly.

"Anyhow, I guess I've got a sixth sense about these things. I brought him into the station and checked him out. He didn't have any money, just some crazy sort of book."

"*This* book, Sergeant Gardner?" The Prosecution handed a leather-bound pocket-sized volume to the witness.

"Yuh."

"This book, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, Your Honour, will be presented in evidence as Exhibit A. Now, Sergeant, to continue—at the time of his arrest, did the Accused have a timepiece on his person: a wristwatch, a pocketwatch of any sort?"

"No, sir, he did not."

"That will be all. You may leave the stand, Sergeant Gardner."

". . . so help you God?"

"I do."

"Be seated."

Mrs. Maude Duluth lowered herself into the witness box. There was a rustle and hissing of silk, a wobble of ostrich feathers, and a sigh of relief.

"Mrs. Duluth, would you recognize the Accused if you saw him in this assembly?"

"I should say *so*, Your Honour."

"It will not be necessary to address me by that title. Would you point to the Accused, Edwin Lollard?" Maude pointed. Her jewel-crusted hand dazzled the eyes of the spectators. "And would you tell the court, please, what was the nature of your relations with the Accused?"

"He was my first husband. We got married fifteen years ago, and it was the dumbest thing I ever did. But I was only a kid then, no more than . . ." Maude did some mental arithmetic painfully and decided not to be too explicit. "No

more than a kid. I met him at General College. I have a Master's Degree in Household Administration Systems."

No one in the jury seemed very impressed by this. After all, a Bachelor's Degree was compulsory in the State of Quebec.

"Could you tell us something about your married life?"

"Well," (blushing) "there isn't much to tell. After the honeymoon—it was a fine honeymoon: Hawaii, Japan, New Zealand, a cruise through the Ross Sea—after the honeymoon, as I was saying, we never did too much. Like we never *went* anywhere, not even to the First Evangelical Bingo Casino on Sunday, although it was right down the block. Or to the races, or dancing—although I'll have to admit that I wasn't the dancer then that I *used* to be. I mean, I was only a kid, but——" Maude was lost for a moment in confusion and came to a limping halt. "Of course, he had his job and that took a lot of time."

"What was his job, Mrs. Duluth?"

"Advertising. At the Realright Agency. It was Edwin's idea to start using sandwichmen again—you know, men out on the sidewalks with signs on their backs. It was a total flop sales-wise. I mean, if a person is a pedestrian he isn't going to be buying very much, is he? And if you're jetting by in a car, then you can't read a little bitty sign. A total flop, but it *did* cost millions of dollars in salaries. A big boost to the economy, everyone said. Yes, Edwin was going places."

"How much time would you say he spent at work?"

"Oh . . . twenty hours a week?"

The Prosecution lifted one sceptical eyebrow out of its wreaths of flesh.

"Well, *ten* hours anyhow," Maude declared firmly.

"And yet he had no time left over to spend with you at, shall we say, *normal* activities?"

"He had the time. I was always telling him different things we could do instead of all the time staying at home and watching teevee. He didn't even do that. He just sat down in his chair and read books." She looked out to the

gallery for sympathy. A flashbulb popped. "Or *wrote* things."

"Advertisements?"

"No, just . . . things."

The Prosecution allowed Mrs. Duluth a moment to recover from her ordeal.

"And then, to top it all, he quit his job. One hundred thousand a year—and he was still a young man. Do you know what he wanted to do instead? He wanted to move to the country and . . . and use the money he'd saved! All that time he'd been putting money away, saving it, while we sat at home and *starved*! So that's why I had to get a divorce."

"Did it seem to you, at that time, Mrs. Duluth, that your husband might be 'poor in spirit' as the saying goes?"

"A party pooper? I should say so! And he came from a good solid middle-class family too: two hundred thousand dollars a year. Civil Service. His poor parents still can't understand where they went wrong. It's such a tragedy I could cry." In witness to this a tear squeezed out of the corner of Maude's face and dropped to the plateau of her bodice.

"That will be all, Mrs. Duluth."

The next witness spoke so incoherently that the clerk was able only to make a summary of her testimony. Miss Nausicaa Hotchkiss was Professor Emeritus in the English Department of Quebec University College, where the Accused had taken his Bachelor's degree fifteen years earlier. Miss Hotchkiss testified that the Accused had been able to read without moving his lips, write in script and recite long poems from memory; further, that he had been argumentative in class and taciturn during the Fellowship Sings afterwards. The Defence objected that, since the Accused was not on trial for literacy, Miss Hotchkiss' testimony was immaterial and served only to prejudice the jury against the Accused. The Prosecution countered that, far from being immaterial, the behaviour of the Accused

showed a consistently anti-social pattern, a pattern that had led him inalterably to the crime for which he was being tried. The objection of the Defence was overruled, but Miss Hotchkiss had been so shaken that the next half-hour of her testimony was utterly incomprehensible. While everyone in the courtroom politely ignored Miss Hotchkiss' pathetic babblings and conversed quietly among themselves, the defendant could be seen to grow more and more agitated. Finally he exclaimed: "This ... this moron, an English teacher! An *English* teacher—hah!" A doctor was called from the gallery to administer a sedative to the delirious defendant.

"Would you spell out your name, please, for the benefit of the clerk?"

"Anderson. A-N-D-E-R-S-O-N. Jack Anderson."

"Your occupation, Mr. Anderson?"

"Loan consultant and junior partner for the Maple Leaf Protective Loan Corporation. Our motto is: Ready Cash—Easy Terms. Twenty-two years in the business, and this is the first time——"

"Thank you," the Prosecution said, raising the appendage that depended from its right shoulder. "Just tell the court briefly how you came to know the Accused."

"I handled his application. That was two years ago."

"What amount was the loan approved for?"

"Well, he applied for an even million, but we finally persuaded him to take three. I guess that was a mistake on our part. We're a small company, although we've been in the business twenty-two years. Did I mention that? We don't have the resources to investigate every applicant as thoroughly as we might like to. The economy, as you may recall, needed a shot in the arm at that time, and the Federal Reserve interest rates favoured us. We would have realized a neat seventeen per cent on that loan. And you know the old saying: 'Haste is the better part of discretion.'"

"Did you know that the Accused had already filed for bankruptcy the year before?"

"No. That would have made us more cautious, but like I said, it was a rush job. Priority A, I call it. A three million dollar loan is nothing to sneeze at. He sure *looked* respectable, and he had good references. I pride myself that I'm a good judge of people. Nobody can pull the wool over my eyes. This is the first time——"

"Mr. Anderson, were you aware of the intended destination of that three million dollars?"

Mr. Anderson looked about nervously, removed a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket, dabbed at a speck of dust on his polished baby-kangaroo street-slippers, replaced the handkerchief in his pocket and (the question not having vanished with the speck of dust) replied: "I understood him to say that he was a publisher. Of books."

The Prosecution waited for the witness to continue.

"There's nothing illegal about publishing books, is there? Personally, I'm against books, but seventeen per cent is seventeen per cent. And they weren't pornography—they were picture books. I saw one of them. It cost twenty-five dollars—*The Wonderful World of St. Francis of Assisi.* Religion! You wouldn't expect a religious man to be dishonest—now would you?"

Mr. Anderson stepped down from the witness box, smoothed out the wrinkles from his gold lamé suit and with a friendly but dignified wink at the Judge, walked out of the courtroom.

"Your name?"

"Brother Francis Simeon."

"That's all there is to it?" the Judge enquired.

"We of the Brotherhood renounce all earthly names. When I received my vocation, I adopted the names of St. Francis and of Simeon the Stylite." Brother Simeon clasped his hands together, prayerfully, and bowed his head.

"You are," the Prosecution continued, "an Assisist?"

"Praise the Lord!"

"How is the court to interpret that?" the Judge asked.

"If I may interpret, your Honour—he means 'yes'," the

Prosecution explained. "I must beg the court's indulgence for calling up such a singular witness—a man who is almost a self-confessed criminal—but his testimony is essential to the Prosecution's case."

The Judge nodded gravely, with indulgence.

"Would you explain to the court, Brother Simeon, the nature and purpose of your organization?"

"We are a religious group. The Fioretti, as we call ourselves, were incorporated over a century ago. In this country alone there are ten thousand of us. We practice austerity and live by the charity of others."

"Do you advocate the overthrow of the United States Government by force or violence?"

"Praise the Lord—no!"

"But you do preach austerity? You are a self-declared enemy of affluence?"

"We realize that austerity is not everybody's cup of tea. We do, however, advocate moderation. Three meals a day, for instance, at two thousand calories each, would not be detrimental to health."

A few ladies in the galleries gasped; some—more blasé—tittered; still others, munching popcorn, didn't hear Brother Simeon's testimony.

"There will be no need to scandalize the court with details of obscene and disgusting practices," the Prosecution warned.

"Praise the Lord!"

"How much do you weigh?"

"Objection!"

"Objection sustained."

But the Prosecution had already made his point. Brother Simeon, who stood five feet eight inches in his hand-sewn sandals, weighed no more than one hundred and eighty pounds. The Prosecution followed up its advantage: "You are a friend of the Accused, Edwin Lollard?"

"Praise the Lord! I *was*."

"He was also a Sissy . . . pardon me . . . an Assisist?"

"Not in the formal sense. He was what you might call a

fellow traveller. Since we cannot own property, he handled certain of our business affairs. He held many properties in his name for the Fioretti—including a publishing house, which he also managed. Strictly speaking, they were not our 'property', but we were allowed the free use of them, and the profits maintained our community. Legally, however, they belonged to Lollard."

"Would you tell us what some of those properties were?"

"The Ritz Hotel, where many of the Fioretti reside; the Racquet Club; the Lo-Cal Gourmet Eateria on Diefenbaker Drive; The Thrift Emporium of Fine Furs—and the Fioretti Press. I might add that some of the wealthiest men in the State of Quebec—and in our southern states as well—are sympathetic to the aims of the Assisists. Largely it is these men who provide our daily bread. I might also add that our daily bread costs them a pretty penny. Austerity isn't cheap. We don't eat any hydroponic foods, and many of our members are vegetarians—although that is not an article of faith. Everything we eat must be grown without chemical fertilizers. We use pewter dishes and hand-crafted furniture. It all adds up. You'd be amazed."

"When did the Accused begin to work for your organization?"

'Ten years ago; perhaps longer than that. He had been recently divorced when he read *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*. That little book has brought in converts by the droves—and, naturally, their money. A brother in the order, of course, gives up his private property. Mr. Lollard went to see the Brother-Superior at the Ritz. That is how I came to meet him : I am the Brother-Superior's assistant, in charge of our financial operations. Mr. Lollard told us that he had fallen in love with Lady Poverty. He said, and I can remember it very clearly—'I want to give all that I have to the poor.' The Brother-Superior can tell it much more humorously than I."

There was an awkward silence. Brother Simeon giggled.

"But don't you see the point? There *are* no more poor.

They are no longer with us, as the saying goes." Brother Simeon cinched up his drooping paunch with a lovely hand-crafted silver rope. "Well, of course, we couldn't take a maniac like that into the order, but the Brother-Superior put him to good use."

"Running the Fioretti Press?"

"Yes. I mean, praise the Lord! He seemed to enjoy it in his own odd way. A bookish sort, you know. Personally, well . . ." Brother Simeon smiled appealingly at the jurors. ". . . books aren't *my* failing. In fact I'm proud to say I never learned to read. But we do sell a lot of them, and every penny counts."

"You sell a lot of *books?*" the Judge asked incredulously.

"Praise the Lord! Libraries are becoming fashionable these days in the better sort of home. And you can imagine what it costs to furnish one full room, wall to wall and floor to ceiling, with books at twenty-five dollars apiece."

"How big is a book?" the Judge asked.

"No more than an inch thick, usually. That's one of our books there on the table." Brother Simeon pointed to Exhibit A, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis.*

"Then how in hell did the defendant go broke?"

"Our next witness will explain that, Your Honour," the Prosecution said, pacifically. "If you please, Brother Simeon?"

Brother Francis Simeon left the witness box, cast a look of considered hatred at the Accused, and, *sotto voce*, intoned a short prayer for vengeance.

"Would you spell that again, please, for the benefit of the clerk?"

"C-O-L-T." She pronounced each letter carefully. "Any idiot should be able to spell Colt."

Jillian Colt didn't give a damn—not for the court, not for public opinion, not for the twelve solvent jurors, not for the flashbulbs popping, not for the deadly glances of the ladies in the gallery nor for the more kindly looks of the ladies' escorts.

"How long have you been acquainted with the Accused?"

"Two years or so. I don't keep a diary. I wouldn't dare."

"You met him . . .?"

"At the Lo-Cal Gourmet Eateria. I usually have lunch there when I'm in town. That's how I keep my figure. I think it's disgusting to be fat—don't you?"

"If you please! *I* shall ask the questions."

Jillian regarded the Prosecution's massive dignity with astonished innocence. "To be sure. I was only joking."

"Are you an Assisist, Miss Colt?"

"Don't be silly. Me? By the way, you can call me Jillian, I won't mind."

"But you diet?"

"I explained that. I said I think it's disgust——"

"Did you know the Accused had been a member of that organization?"

"Eddie—a Sissy? No, he couldn't have been. He thought they were all phonies. Me, I couldn't care less. After all, just about everybody is phony when you come down to it. What the hell, I say."

"Miss Jillian!"

"H'm?"

"Miss Colt, please answer the questions directly and to the point." The Prosecution retired to his bench, where he pretended to consult an empty notebook. "You became good friends with the Accused at that time?"

Jillian smiled enigmatically.

"That is to say—you saw the Accused frequently after that first meeting?"

"Oh yes. He was crazy—kept calling me his Lady Poverty. But he had style, if you know what I mean. Like, some women have to wear dresses that would have made Queen Elizabeth look like a pauper. The first Queen Elizabeth, that is. Me, I think simplicity is more elegant. Once I even joined a nudist camp, but they were mostly old retired couples. Cranks. Well, Eddie was no crank, and he had style. Yes, we saw a lot of each other after that."

"Were you acquainted with his financial affairs?"

"Not really. Money's such a bore, don't you think? I'm an heiress, myself. Talk about money! But it's entailed, which means that I only get it in dribs and drabs. Eddie had this funny deal with the Sissies. He'd gone bankrupt right before he went to them. Actually, he'd quit his job and just been loafing around, living on what he had saved. Then his wife insists on a divorce, which was a good thing really, except that it cleaned him out. He called his first bankruptcy a purification, or, sometimes, an enema." Jillian tittered.

"Miss——"

"As *I* was saying. They would have arrested him then and there, but the Sissies made him take all this property. They just gave it to him outright, although I guess there was some arrangement so that *they* got all the profits. All of a sudden Eddie was a millionaire. I think everybody should be a millionaire. They're nicer. But *he* could only think of giving it all away to someone else. I thought it was a wild idea. I mean, after all, *most* people wouldn't take a printing press if you offered it to them. It has dirty connotations.

"But Eddie wouldn't give it to just anybody. He wanted to give it to poor people. Imagine that! He was always looking around for poor people. In fact, that's how he struck up with me—he thought I looked poor! I was never so flattered in my whole life.

"Of course he never found any. But he was determined to unload all his stuff just to play a trick on the Sissies. He sold the hotel and the other things and borrowed a *pile* of money and started printing books. He was crazy about books. Strangest man I ever met.

"Millions of books. You wouldn't believe it. Tons of books with fancy leather bindings and crinkly paper and gold-leaf illustrations. He was filling warehouses with these books. And they were all the same story—*The Little Flowers of St. Francis*. He was always quoting from that

book, and to tell the truth, this St. Francis was every bit as crazy as Eddie was.

"Then one day he sold the publishing company and bought this fleet of ships. Twenty of them, all freighters. He loaded the books on and we set sail. North.

"You know what he wanted to do? He was going to give those books to the Eskimoes. He said only an Eskimo could understand St. Francis nowadays. He must have thought *they* were poor, I guess. Insane! So, naturally, I went along for the ride. There aren't many Eskimoes left on Baffin Island—not real Eskimoes—but at last he found one. He became awfully upset, because this Eskimo already had a copy of *The Little Flowers* and wouldn't take another. The two of them, Eddie and the Eskimo, talked up a storm all night, and the next morning Eddie takes his fleet with all its books twenty miles out into Hudson Bay and, one by one, he sinks each ship. What a sight! For miles, you couldn't see anything but *The Little Flowers* bobbing in the water, and then they all sank. It was sort of sad.

"We still had a little money left—it was mine—so we rented this shack——"

"Miss Colt, please watch your language."

"Well, that's all it was, a shack. We stayed there the whole summer, until those men my uncle had hired came around and brought me back home. I can't imagine how Eddie made it back, because he didn't have any money. While it lasted it was the *best* summer. During the day, Eddie would go out in his garden or fishing, and I'd stay inside and *cook* and *wash clothes* and even sew up holes in his old clothes. . . ."

"Miss Colt, if you continue to speak in this manner, you will be held in contempt of court."

"Sorry, Your Honour. But really—it *was* fun. And at night, before we went to bed, he taught me to read. I can still do it. He had brought along some books of his, and he'd read them by the hour. It's funny, you know, but I think he actually loved those books."

"You may leave the stand, Miss Colt."

A man in a white coat rose from the gallery and walked to the side of the witness. Carefully he led her from the stand and out of the courtroom to the limousine waiting to take her back to the Golden Rest Mental Hospital, to which her family had had her committed.

The Prosecution rose to deliver its closing speech amid a whirlwind of renewed speculation in the gallery. Miss Colt's appearance on the stand had raised the odds for acquittal, and the Accused's refusal to testify in his own defence had left the bookies in a buzz of uncertainty. They didn't know which way to change the odds.

The Judge called for order.

Like periscopes rising from deep waters the eyes of the Prosecution lifted out of their burrows of pink flesh to stare morosely at the jury.

"Gentlemen of the Jury," the Prosecution began:

"The Accused, Edwin Lollard, is guilty of many crimes. Today you will be asked to judge only one of them. You may think the crime for which he is being tried is not the gravest of those of which he is guilty. But the Law, gentlemen, is strict, and under the Law, Edwin Lollard is guilty of only one crime.

"He is not guilty of literacy, for literacy is not a crime. Some of the noblest figures in the history of this nation have been literate: the signers of the Declaration of Independence, Abraham Lincoln, Dwight D. Eisenhower—to name only a few. Books are not necessarily a corrupting influence, and I would like to say, for the sake of the record, that personally I *approve* of books. I have read many—often with appreciation—and I do not look down on the man who has read more than I.

"Of course, like many good things, the reading of books may be carried to excess, and anything done to excess becomes an evil. It is likely that, in the case of the Accused, literacy had become a vice. But it is not a vice punishable under the Law. I must ask you to bear this in mind, gentlemen, when you are arriving at your verdict.

"The Accused is not guilty of bankruptcy. If he were, there would be a redeeming feature in this sordid case, for it would reveal some scrap of dignity. But dignity is a feature that the Accused has never evidenced. You are all probably familiar with the story of Billie Sol Estes, one of the leading spirits of the twentieth century. At *his* moment of glory, Estes owned nothing, but he *owed* millions. The Accused, however, owes no more than he owns. He is nothing more nor less than a pauper.

"The Accused is not guilty, under the Law, of robbery or malfeasance. The money he squandered so wildly was not in a sense his own—it belonged to the Brotherhood of St. Francis. But by a legal fiction the Brotherhood can own no property. The Accused committed a gross breach of trust when he sold their properties and sank his ships, but he did not commit a crime. How can I ask you, gentlemen, to ignore this most ignoble act when you are deliberating his fate? Yet I must. The Law is strict and sometimes, gentlemen, it is powerless.

"Will Edwin Lollard escape the penalty of the Law—because of the casuistry of the courts, the inelasticity of the Law and the foibles of logic? Can he be saved through loopholes? No, gentlemen—happily he cannot. For Edwin Lollard is guilty of a most despicable crime, and the Law recognizes his guilt. So, gentlemen, will you.

"The Accused is guilty, most culpably guilty, of criminal poverty.

"It is incredible to think that in an age such as ours—an age of enlightenment—that in a society such as ours—a society of affluence and ever-increasing prosperity—that any man, however mean of spirit, could be *poor*! Centuries ago there was such a thing as unemployment. Poverty was so common that no one dared recognize its essentially criminal nature. But no man today need be poor. Modern science and the wonders of automation have eliminated not only the poor but the merely well-off. Today all men are rich—or they are poor by a premeditated and criminal action. An action, gentlemen, such as that of Edwin Lollard.

"Gentlemen of the Jury, consider the evidence before you: a man is raised by wealthy parents, in a home very much like your own. No want is unsatisfied and no request denied him. An average childhood—an *ideal* childhood. He attends college where already his criminal nature begins to reveal itself. He is aggressive, competitive, surly. You have seen for yourselves how he respects the woman who devoted a year of her life to his education. Like all the good things that have been given him he rejects this goodness too.

"He marries and finds a good job. But he cannot long endure goodness. He leaves his job and forces his wife to leave him. He is bankrupt. Except for a strange and fateful coincidence, that would have been the end of his exploits. As we have heard, it was only the beginning. He joins a society which—again we see an evidence of the leniency of the Law—is allowed to spread its corrupting gospel in a democratic society. A religion, it is called! Yet even this notorious fellowship is not corrupt enough for the tastes of this man. He must betray it.

"This society has provided him with greater wealth than he had ever dreamed of possessing. Accompanied by a woman of certified insanity and certain viciousness, the Accused commits his final incredible action. He converts his new-found wealth into shiploads of worthless trash and *then* jettisons the whole mass of his folly into Hudson Bay, where I would suggest it is better off.

"An act of insanity? So absolute an evil must always appear insane to persons of moral discernment. Edwin Lollard was aware, however, of the consequences of his action. He knew that he had made himself a pauper.

"It is probably unnecessary to explain to any of you the enormity of Lollard's crime. It strikes at the heart of social order. It invokes an age of nightmarish Need. St. Francis of Assisi is the apt symbol of such an age: a thin man, dressed in rags, kissing the hand of a leper. Strong language, gentlemen, but nothing less will express the meaning of poverty.

"Its essential evilness has been expressed most aptly by

that prophetic spirit of the twentieth century—who had seen poverty at first hand—George Bernard Shaw. Shaw spoke of, 'the irresistible natural truth which we all abhor and repudiate: to wit, that the greatest of our evils, and the worst of our crimes is poverty, and that our first duty, to which every other consideration should be sacrificed, is not to be poor. Security, the chief pretence of civilization, cannot exist where the worst of dangers, the danger of poverty, hangs over everyone's head.'

"*Society cannot tolerate a pauper!* The Holy Bible says—Thou shalt burn a witch, by which is certainly meant a pauper.

"Society cannot say—'If a man so wills, let him be poor.' Shaw exposed the fallacy of such ill-founded toleration, and, in conclusion, I cannot improve upon his words: 'Now what does this Let Him Be Poor mean? It means let him be weak. Let him be ignorant. Let him become a nucleus of disease. Let him be a standing exhibition and example of ugliness and dirt. Let him have rickety children. Let his habitations turn our cities into poisonous congeries of slums. Let the undeserving become less deserving; and let the deserving lay up for himself, not treasures in heaven, but horrors in hell upon earth.'

"Gentlemen of the Jury, as you value the country in which you have your homes, as you value affluence and as you value truth, you must find Edwin Lollard guilty of criminal poverty."

Edwin Lollard was found guilty of criminal poverty and sentenced to twenty-five years' imprisonment in the Blue Forest Prison Colony on the outskirts of Quebec City. For two years he had striven to this one goal and at last he had obtained it.

It isn't easy to break into prison. Murderers receive the death penalty; thieves and other criminals motivated by avarice are seldom prosecuted; the few felons that do not fit these categories are usually judged insane and lobotomized. Except for paupers. Paupers are transported to the Quebec

City prison. Poverty, however, is hard to achieve in a truly affluent society and still harder to prove. Edwin Lollard had achieved it.

Now, he thought with quiet joy as he rode in the back of the prison van—now at last he would be able to live the life he'd always dreamed of: free from affluence, free from the soul-deadening bondage of the consumer; free to do as he pleased—to read, to relax, to be poor. Blessed are the poor, he thought (somewhat inaccurately), for they shall be comfortable.

He felt a moment's passing tenderness for Jillian. A shame that he would never see her again. He hoped she would be as happy at Golden Rest as he expected to be at Blue Forest.

He didn't expect much, and precisely for that reason he expected to be happy. A spare diet, hard work through the day and, at night, his bare cell. A wooden cot, a lamp, a book and utter solitude. In twenty-five years he could read all the books he had never had time for: Gibbon and Toynbee, Virgil and Dante, Tolstoi, Joyce and Gaddis, Firboth and McCallum.

He felt like a newlywed and he imagined rapturously all the delights awaiting his tender explorations beneath the rags of his Lady Poverty, his bride.

Like most men of that time, he knew virtually nothing about penology. Blue Forest was going to be a great surprise.

A prison has two functions: to detain and to punish. Blue Forest detained admirably: escape was impossible from its system of walls, fences and minefields. But the Warden, an enlightened man, with an enormous annual budget to get rid of, saw no reason to inflict senseless and degrading punishments upon the criminals under his charge. His prisoners ate well—five satisfying meals a day during the week and a special twelve-hour banquet on Sundays; they slept in rooms that could have graced the pages of *Modern Living;* they watched teevee in an enormous stadium and their robo-sports arena was second to none.

The Warden was proud of the Blue Forest Choral Society, in which all the convicts participated. The Choral Society had recorded three successful albums: *Songs of Good Cheer, What Do You Want for Xmas?* and *Music to Go to Sleep By*. A new Physical Therapy and Massage wing was under construction.

All the convicts were happy and uncomplaining. They lived every bit as well as they had on the outside. They were especially happy, however, because the food they ate gave them no choice. It contained Deleriomycin.

There was no library.

A TASTE FOR DOSTOEVSKY

by

BRIAN W. ALDISS

As can be expected from one of Britain's foremost science-fiction writers, Brian W. Aldiss presents one of the most unusual time-travelling stories yet written.

A TASTE FOR DOSTOEVSKY

He was nearly at the spaceship now, had slithered down the crater wall and was staggering across the few feet of broken rock that separated him from safety. He moved with the manic action of someone compensating for light gravity, his gauntleted hands stretched out before him.

He blundered clumsily against the outcropping teeth of rock, and fell on them. The knee joint of his suit snagged first on the rock, bursting wide. Still tumbling, the man grasped at his knee, feebly trying to clamp in the escaping oxygen–nitrogen mixture.

But help was at hand. They had been tracking his progress through the ship's viewer. The hatch was cycling open. Two men in spacesuits lowered themselves to the lunar surface and hurried over to the fallen figure.

Grasping him firmly, they pulled him back into the ship. The hatch closed on them. The audience applauded vigorously; they loved the old corn.

In the spaceship cabin, relaxing, the two rescuers lit mescahales and sat back. Eddie Moore sprawled on the floor, gasping. It had been a close one that time. He thought they were never coming for him. Slowly he sat up and removed his helmet. The others had gone by then; there were just a few technicians backstage, clearing up.

Still breathing heavily, Moore climbed to his feet and headed for the dressing room. The lunar gravity did not worry him at all—he had lived here ever since his mother died, three years ago.

When he had changed, tucking himself into his ordinary everyday one-piece, he made his way towards the players' exit. Half-way there, he changed his mind and climbed down through the airlock of the mocked-up twentieth-century rocketship.

Most of the audience had left the big hall now; there

were just a few of them at the gallery at the far end, admiring the cleverly recreated lunar landscape. Eddie trudged through the mock pumice, head down, hands in pockets.

Funny the way it wasn't until the whole moon surface was built over and the artificial atmosphere working that people had recalled the terrific aesthetic pleasure they had derived from the old primeval landscape of the moon—and had been forced to recreate it here out of artificial materials. That was the way things went. They didn't appreciate his once nightly performance as the dying spaceman; he so fully empathized with his role that he knew one day he would die of oxygen-failure even while breathing it—and then there might be those, the discerning ones, who would hold the name of Eddie Moore dear, and realize that they had once been in the presence of a great artist.

Looking up, he saw that a solitary figure stood on a ridge of rock, staring moodily up at the fake heavens. He identified it as Cat Vindaloo, the Pakistani director of their show, and called a greeting to him.

Cat nodded sourly and altered his position without actually coming any nearer to Moore.

"We went over well tonight," Moore said.

"They still pay to come and watch," Cat said.

"Your trouble is, you're obsessed with being a failure, Cat. Come on, snap out of it. If there's anything wrong with the show, it is that it's too realistic. I'd personally like to see less of a dying fall to end with—maybe a grand finale such as they'd have had at the end of last century, with all the crew parading outside the ship, taking a bow."

As if the words were dragged out of him by compulsion, Cat said, "You're beginning to over-act again, Eddie." Moore realized the director was not standing here purely by accident; he knew that Moore, alone of the troupe, often preferred to trudge home the hard way.

"Let me tell you, I'm the only one of the whole damned batch who still throws himself into the part. You can have no idea of the sort of life I lead, Cat! I'm an obsessive,

that's what, like a character out of Dostoevsky. I live my parts. My life's all parts. Sometimes I hardly know who I really am. . . ." He saw the beginnings of a glazed expression on Cat's face and grabbed his tunic in an effort to retain his attention. "I know I've told you that before, but it's true! Listen, it gets so bad that sometimes—sometimes I'm *you*—I mean, I sort of take your role, because I worry about you so much. I mean, I suppose I am basically afraid —it's silly, I know—afraid you may be going to sack me from the cast. I must tell you this, though of course it's embarrassing for us both. I—don't you sometimes feel I am being you?"

Cat did not seem particularly embarrassed, a fact that disconcerted Moore. "I was aware you were unbalanced, Eddie, of course. We all are in this game, and I suppose I may as well confess—since you are bound to forget every word I tell you—that my particularity is suffering any sort of insult people like to heap on me. So that's why I attract your attentions, I suppose; it's destiny. But I fail entirely to see how you mean you are being me."

"If you don't understand, it's no good explaining. What I mean to say is that sometimes for days at a time I think myself—though I'm pure English—to be an Indian like you, living in India!"

"I am a Pakistani, Eddie, as I have told you many times. You are choosing your own way to insult me again, aren't you, taking advantage of the fact that I fundamentally have this degrading urge to be insulted. How can you live like an Indian here? And why should I care if you do? Your life is your own to make a fool with if you care to!"

"That I would dispute if you were capable of arguing properly. How far are any of our lives our own? Where do we live? Who lives us? Which is us? But to pose such philosophical questions to you—pah, it's laughable! I must be out of my mind!"

"The very truest word I have heard from you for months! You're mad!"

"Don't you call me mad!" The two tiny human figures

confronted each other in the vast grey reconstructed landscape. Suddenly, one of them flung himself on the other. For a moment, they struggled together and then fell, rolling over and grasping at each other's throats, lost on the ill-lit and broken plain. They became quieter. Finally one of them rose. He staggered off in the direction of the exit, gaining control of his movements as he went, and then breaking into a run that took him as fast as possible from the scene of the struggle.

When he got back to his apartment, he went straight into the little washing cubicle behind the surgery and rinsed his face and hands. He stood there bent at the basin for a long while, soaking his cheeks in cool water. Life was such nonsense that the more serious it grew, the harder it became to take it seriously.

The more he thought about it, the more amused he became. By the time he was drying himself on a fluffy white towel, he was laughing aloud. The moon indeed! The twenty-second century! Funny though it was, this nonsense must be put a stop to, once and for all. Clearly, he must go and see Etienne.

He rolled down his sleeves, walked through the surgery, down the passage, and to the front door. Looking through the two panels of frosted glass, he could see that beyond lay a fine summer's evening. Although it was almost past nineteen-fifteen, the sun was still shining brightly, and quite high in the sky. He paused. Just beyond the door he would see the brass plate that announced he was practising as a dentist; and the name on it would be—Vindaloo or Morré? He hesitated. He hoped, Morré.

He opened the door. On the brass panel, polished by the concierge that morning, appeared his name: Morré. He beamed with relief. Beside the panel was a little pasteboard card with his surgery hours and reminders to patients to present their health cards, all neatly written out in French and Flemish.

He strolled down the side street and on to the main road,

where the quiet was instantly lost. The garish seaside street carried a lot of through traffic, often international traffic hurrying from France through to Holland or Germany. Taking the undercut, Morré crossed the road and walked a couple of blocks to Etienne's place. On the way, he stopped at a little flower stall and bought her a posy of blue cornflowers; they would soften the blow of what he had to say.

Etienne lived over a magazine and paperback shop in a flat she shared with two other young Belgian ladies—both happily away on holiday at present. Her pleasant little living room looked over the low dunes and the wide beach to the sea.

"You are very late this evening, Eddie," she said, smiling as she let him in.

"Perhaps so, but why attack me for it? It's my misfortune, isn't it—or so I would have thought it if you had greeted me lovingly!"

"Eddie, don't be that way! I did not reproach you, my darling!" She stood on tiptoe, as he had noticed she often did. She was short and very shapely, in a little blue dress that went well with the cornflowers. She looked very sexy standing like that.

"Please come off your tiptoes," he said. "You are trying to fool me."

"Darling, I was not—and I swear to you, I did not even notice I was on my tiptoes. Does it disturb you to see me on my tiptoes? It's not usually reckoned as an indecent posture, but if it offends you, I promise I won't do it again."

"Now you are trying to humour me! You know nothing maddens me like being humoured! Why can't you speak to me like a reasonable human being?"

She flung herself down rather prettily in the wide armchair. "Oh, believe me, if you were a reasonable human being, I'd make every effort to talk to you like one. You're absolutely nuts, aren't you, Eddie?"

He had a brilliant idea. It would scare the pants off her. "Yes, you have uncovered my secret: I am nuts." Without

undue haste, he lifted up the cornflowers before him and ate them one by one. Then he wiped his hands on his handkerchief. "I am nuts and that is what I wished to talk to you about this evening."

"I have to go out almost at once, Eddie . . ." She looked as if she would have liked to faint. When he sat down close to her on the straight-back chair with the tapestry seat that was an heirloom from her old Flemish grandmother, she became rather fixed in expression, and said nothing more.

"What I was going to tell you, Etienne, darling, what I especially came over for, was to say that I feared our engagement must be broken off. It's not so much that we are not suited, although that is a consideration; it is more that I don't even seem to know what century I am living in—from which it follows, I suppose, that I don't even know what country I am living in—which in turn means that I don't know what language I am speaking, or what my name is. In fact I don't even know what planet I'm on, whether it's the Moon, or Earth, or Mars."

Etienne gestured out of the window towards the beach, where two sand yachts were bowling merrily along.

"Take a look for yourself. Does that look like Mars? You were born on this coast; you know the North Sea when you see it, don't you?"

"Don't interrupt me! Of course I can see it's the flaming North Sea——"

"Well then, don't talk so stupid! Look, Eddie, I've really had about enough of your nonsense! You come up here every Saturday night and break off our engagement——"

"I do not! I've never broken it off before, often though I've been tempted to!"

"You do, too! You don't know what you do do! How do you think I like it? I've got my pride you know! I can take emotional scenes as well as the next girl—in fact sometimes I rather think I enjoy them in a kinky sort of way. Maybe I'm the kinky kind——"

He shook a fist under her nose. "No self-analysis, please,

at least while I'm speaking! Have you any interest in me or haven't you? And who am I? Who indeed? Man's eternal quest for identity—pity I have to carry mine out with such rotten partners."

"If you're going to be insulting, you can go, Eddie Morré! I know perfectly well what's wrong with you, and don't think I'm not sympathetic just because I don't show it. You have built up that fine little dentist's practice just so's you will have enough money to support me comfortably when we get married, and the overwork has resulted in brain fatigue. Poor Eddie! All you need is a little rest—these fantasies about Mars and the Moon are just phantoms of escape filtering across your over-heated cerebellum, reminding you of the need for rest and quiet. You know how damned quiet it is on Mars."

Tears filled his eyes. It seemed she really was sympathetic. And perhaps her explanation was correct. He threw his arms round her in perfect forgiveness and attempted to kiss her.

"Do you mind! Your breath stinks of cornflowers!"

The two vast human figures confronted each other in the tiny artificial town-room. Sparked by sudden anger, he grasped her more closely. They struggled. Nobody was there to see a chair tipped over and they rolled on to the floor, arms round each other's necks. After some while, they were both still. Then one of the figures rose and hurried out of the apartment, slamming the door in haste.

Plainly, he was in need of some form of purification. When it was dark, he changed into clean garments and walked down to the burning ghats. The usual crowds of beggars stood and lay in the temple doorway; he gave to them more generously than usual.

Inside the temple, it was stuffy, although a cool breeze moved near the floor, fluttering the tiny lights of the faithful—who were not many this evening, so that they formed only a small cluster of insects in the great dim hallowed interior of the hall.

E. V. Morilal prostrated himself for a long while, his forehead to the stone, allowing his senses to go out amid the generations who had pressed foreheads and feet to this slab in the solemn contortions of devotion. He felt no devotion, only isolation, the opposite of devotion, but the sense of other human beings was some sort of balm.

At last he rose and walked through the temple on to the ghats. Here the smells that lingered in the building took on definition: wood smoke, burning unguents, the mouldy Ganges slowly trundling by, bearing its immemorial burden of holiness, disease and filth. As ever, there were a few people, men and women, bathing in their clothes off the steps, calling on their gods as they sank into the brown flood. Morilal went tentatively to the edge of the water, scooping up a handful of the stuff and pouring it on his shaven crown, letting it run pleasurably down into his clothes.

It was all very noisy. There were boats plying on the river, and children and youths shouting on the bridge, some of them with transistor radios.

"Hello! Back in the twentieth century now!" Morilal thought sharply.

Restless, he shuffled back and forth among the funeral pyres, some of which were unlit, awaiting midnight, some of which were almost burnt out, the human freight reduced to drifting ash or a bit of recalcitrant femur. Mourners crouched by most of the biers, some silent, some maintaining an arbitrary wailing. He kept looking for his mother. She had been dead three years; she should have been immolated long ago.

His old friend Professor Chundaprassi was walking slowly up and down, helping himself along with a stick. He nodded to Morilal.

"May I have the honour and pleasure of joining you, professor, if I do not interrupt a chain of meditation?"

"You interrupt nothing, my friend. In fact, I was about to ask if you would delight me by joining me, but I feared you might be about to engage in a little mourning."

"No, no, I have only myself to mourn for. You possibly know I have been away for some while?"

"Forgive me, but I was not aware. You recall I greeted you yesterday at the railway station. Have you been away since then?"

Morilal had fallen in with Chundaprassi, walking sedately through the puddles and wet ash; now he stopped in some confusion and gazed into the wrinkled face of his companion.

"Professor—you are a professor, so you understand many things above the powers of ordinary men such as myself—though even as I say 'ordinary men such as myself', I am conscious of my own extraordinariness. I am a unique being——"

"Of course, of course, and the point really cannot be too greatly emphasized. No two men are alike! There are a thousand characteristics, as I have always maintained——"

"Quite so, but I'm hardly talking about a characteristic, if you will forgive my being so disagreeable as to interrupt you when you are plainly just embarking on an interesting if somewhat long lecture on human psychology. And forgive me, also, if I seem to be talking rather like a Dostoevsky character—it's just that lately I've been obsessed——"

"Dostoevsky? Dostoevsky?" The professor scratched his head. "Naturally I am familiar with the major writing of the Russian novelist . . . But I fail momentarily to recall which of his novels is set, even partially, in Benares."

"You mistake my meaning—unintentionally, I'm sure, since a little sarcasm is positively beyond you. I happen to be in a spot, professor, and if you can't help, then to hell with you! My trouble is that my ego, or my consciousness, or something, is not fixed in time or space. Can you believe me if I tell you that no more than a couple of hours ago, I was a *Belgian dentist* at a seaside resort?"

"Allow me to wish you good night, sir!" The professor was about to turn away when Morilal grasped him by one arm.

"Professor Chundaprassi! Please tell me why you are going so suddenly!"

"You believe you are a white man! A Belgian white man! Clearly you are victim of some dreadful hallucination brought about by reading too much in the newspapers about the colour bar. You'll be a Negro, next, no doubt! Good night!"

He pulled himself free from Morilal's grip and tottered hurriedly from the burning ghat.

"I will be a Negro and be damned to you, if I so desire!" Morilal exclaimed aloud.

"Congratulations, sir! You are quite right to exercise your freedom of judgment in such matters!" It was one of the bathers who spoke, a fat man now busily oiling his large and glistening breasts; Morilal had noticed that he was avidly listening to the conversation with the professor and had already taken a dislike to the man.

"What do you know about it?" he enquired.

"More than you may think! There are many people like yourself, sir, who are able to move from character to character, like birds from flower to flower. I myself, but yesterday, was a beautiful young Japanese lady aged only twenty years with a tiny and beautifully-proportioned body, and a lover of twenty-two of amazing ardour."

"You are inventing filth, you fat old Bengali!" So saying, he jumped at the man, who tripped him neatly but failed to stand back in time, so that Morilal took him with him as he fell, and they rolled together, hands at each other's throat, down the slimy steps into the Ganges.

He dragged himself out of the river. For a while, as he lay on the bank with his head throbbing, he thought he had experienced another epileptic fit. Something of the chequered past came back to him, and he dragged himself up.

He was lying half out of a shallow stream, under a stone bridge. As he got to his feet, he saw the stream cut through a small country town. The place seemed to be deserted: so

empty and so still that it looked almost like an artificial place. Slowly, he walked forward, down the curving street, staring at the small stone houses with their gardens neat and unmoving in the thin sun.

By the time he reached the other end of the street, where the buildings stopped and the fields began again, he had seen nobody. The only movement had come from an old cat, stuffily walking down a garden path. As he looked back the way he had come, he saw that he had just passed an unpretentious building bearing the sign POLICE STATION. For several minutes, he stared at it, and then moved briskly towards it, opened the door and marched in.

A portly man with a grey moustache that drooped uncomfortably over his lips sat reading a newspaper behind a counter. He wore a green uniform. When the door opened, he looked up, nodded politely and put down his paper.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"I want to report a murder. In fact, I want to report three murders."

"Three murders! Are you sure?"

"Not really. I don't know whether I killed the persons concerned or not, but it must be worth checking. There was a friend of mine, a producer, and my fiancée, and a poor black man in India. I can give you their names. At least, I think I can remember. Then there's the time and place . . ."

His voice died. He could see it was going to be difficult. His impulse had been to enlist help; perhaps it had not been a wise impulse. And had he ever been anyone else, or had it all been the product of a fever?

The policeman slowly came round the counter, adjusting his face until it was absolutely without expression.

"You seem to have some very interesting ideas, sir, if I may say so. You wouldn't mind if I ask you a question before you go any further? Good. You say you don't know whether you killed these unknown persons or not?"

"I—I get blackouts. I am never myself. I seem to work through a lot of different people. You'd better assume I did kill them."

"As you like, sir. Which brings me to my next question. How do you mean, one of them was a black man from India?"

"It was as I said. He was very black. No offence meant—it's just a fact. Quite an amusing man, now I come to think of it, but black."

"His clothes were black, sir?"

"His clothes were white. He was black. His skin. Good heavens, man, you stare at me—I suppose you know that the people of India are pretty dark?"

The policeman stared at him with blank astonishment. "Their skins are dark, you say?"

"Am I offending you in some way? I didn't invent the idea, don't forget! As sure as the good Lord took it into his head to make you and me this rather unattractive pink–white–grey tone, he made the Indians more or less brown and the Negroes more or less black. You do know that Negroes are black, I suppose?"

The policeman banged his fist on the desk. "You are mad! By golly, you are mad! Negroes are as white as you are."

"You mean the Negroes in Africa?"

"Negroes anywhere! Whoever heard of a black Negro?"

"The very *word* means black. It's from a Latin root or something."

"From a Greek root meaning tall!"

"You liar!"

"You simpleton!" The policeman leant over and grabbed his newspaper, smoothed it out angrily with his fists. "Here, this will show you! I'll make you admit your stupidity, coming in here and playing your pointless jokes on me! An intellectual, I can see!"

He ruffled through the paper. Moore caught a glimpse of its title *The Alabama Star* and stared up incredulously at the policeman. For the first time, he realized the man's features were distinctly negroid, though his skin was white and his hair fair and straight. He emitted a groan of fright.

"You a Negro?"

"Course I am. And you look at this news item—FIRE IN NEGRO UNIVERSITY. See that picture. See any negro there with black skin? What's got into you?"

"You may well ask, and I wish you'd stop grasping my shirt like that—it feels as if you have some chest hair with it, thanks. I'm not trying to play a joke on you. I must be in—well, I must be in some sort of an alternate universe or something. Hey, perhaps you are kidding me! Do you really mean people in Africa and India and so on have skins the same colour as us?"

"How else could they be any other colour? Ask yourself that!"

"They were where I come from."

"Now, how could they be? Just how could they be?"

"I don't know! It's a matter of history. Some races are white, some yellow, some brown, some black."

"Some idea! And you say this arrangement happened in history. When?"

"I didn't say that! It happened way back . . . well, I don't know when."

"I suppose your men originated from different coloured apes, huh?"

"No, I think it all happened later than that . . . Stone Age, maybe. . . . Honestly, now you confront me with it, I must admit I don't exactly know when the arrangement came about or how. It does sound a bit unlikely, doesn't it?"

"Anyone who could dream up the idea of men all different colours—wow! You must be a real nut! I suppose like it's allegorical, with the good people being white and the bad black?"

"No, no, not at all—though I admit a few of the white saw it like that. Or did I invent it all, the whole colour question? Perhaps it's all another facet of my guilt, an awful phantasm I have thrown up from the depths of my mind, where I did the murders. They can't have any subjective reality, either. Wait! I remember! I'm nearly there! Fyodor Dostoevsky, I'm coming!"

Hurriedly, he punched the policeman in the chest and braced himself for the reciprocal blow. . . .

He was tramping through the sand, ankle deep even in the main street of this shabby town. In the side streets, the sand climbed almost to the eaves of the shoddy wooden houses. Among the houses were buildings that he identified after a moment's thought as mosques; they were no more than huts with wooden minarets added. There were Tartars here, moving slowly in their costumes of skin, some leading the two-humped camels of Bactria behind them through the street.

The man with whiskers and a stoop was just ahead of him. Morovitch drew level and looked sideways. He recognized the beetling brow and the haunted eyes, set deep in their sockets.

"Second Class Soldier of the Line Dostoevsky?" he asked.

Dostoevsky stared back at him. "I've not seen you in Semiplatinsk before. Are you with the Seventh Siberian Battalion?"

"The correct answer to that, operatively, is no. I—well, sir, if I could talk to you for a moment . . . the fact is . . ."

"It's not a message from Marya Dmitrievna, is it?" Dostoevsky asked impatiently, his face pale.

"No, no, nothing so banal. In fact, I have come from the future to speak to you. Please, cannot we go to your room?"

Dostoevsky led the way in a sort of daze, shaking his head and muttering. He was still serving out his exile in Siberia, no longer as a convict but as a humble soldier in the army. His present home, to which he led Morovitch, was of the simplest, a poor room in one of the small wooden houses, containing little more than a bed, a table and one chair, and a round iron stove that could scarcely heat the flimsy room when the cruel winter came round again.

Humbly, Dostoevsky offered the intruder the chair, sat down on the bed himself, and produced some tobacco so

that he and the visitor might roll themselves cigarettes and smoke together.

He passed a hand wearily over his face. "Where do you say you come from? You're not—not a Decembrist?"

"I am from what to you is the future, sir. In my age, my race recognizes you as one of the great novelists of the world, by virtue of your profound insight into the guilt always lingering in the human mind. You are one of the supreme artists of suffering."

"Alas, I can write no more! The old ability has gone!"

"But even now you must be gathering together your notes on prison life for the book you will call *The House of the Dead*. Turgenev will say the bath-house scene is pure Danté. It will be read and remembered long after you are dead, and translated far beyond the bounds of your native Russia. And greater masterpieces of guilt and suffering will follow."

Dostoevsky hid his face in his hands. "No more! You will silence me forever if you speak thus, whether I believe it or not. You talk like the voices inside me, when another attack is coming upon me."

"I travelled back to you from the far future through a series of epileptic hosts. Others of my kind travel back through other illnesses—it is a matter of what we specialize in. I plan to travel slowly back through the generations to Julius Caesar, and beyond that . . . but you are a very important landmark on my way, for you are integral to the whole philosophy of my race, honoured sir! Indeed, you might say you were one of the founders of our philosophy."

The writer rubbed the back of his neck in discomfort and shuffled his rough boots on the floor, unable to look straight at Morovitch. "You keep saying 'our race' and 'our kind', but what am I to understand by that? Are you not Morovitch?"

"I have infested Morovitch. We are parasitic—I am merely distorting his life a little, as I have distorted the lives of those I infested on my way back to you. Ah, the emo-

tions I have stirred! How you would relish them, Fyodor Mikhaylovich! I have been in all kinds of persons and in all kinds of worlds, even in those that lie close in the probability spectrum to Earth—to some where man never formed himself into nationalities, to one where he had never divided into races with different coloured skin, to one where he never managed to gain supremacy over his fellow animals! All, all those worlds, absolutely stuffed with suffering! If you could see them you might think you yourself had created them."

"Now you mock me! I can create nothing, unless I have created you. Forgive me if that sounds insulting, but I have a fever on me today, which induces me to doubt somewhat your reality. Perhaps you're part of my fever."

"I'm real enough! My race—you see I use the term again, but I would find it difficult to define it to you. You see, there are more millions of years ahead than you could comprehend, and in those long periods man changes very radically. In my time, man is first dependent on a milk-meat animal he breeds—a sort of super-cow—and then entirely parasitic upon it. Over a millennia, he develops an astounding freedom and can travel parasitically back through the generations, enjoying the suffering of all, like a silverfish boring back through the pages of a large and musty volume: a silverfish who can read, sir, if you follow my image. You see—I let you into the secret!"

Dostoevsky coughed and stubbed out his ragged cigarette. He sat uncomfortably on the narrow bed, crossing and recrossing his legs. "You know I cannot believe what you say . . . Yet, tell me no secrets! I already know enough for one man; I'm burdened with knowledge about which I often ask myself, What good is it? And if it is true, as you say, that I have understanding of some of the dark things in the human heart, that's only because I have been forced—though often I myself was the forcer—to look into the dark things in my own heart. And I have tried to reach truth; you are admitting, aren't you, that you distort the lives you—well, if I say 'infest', it is your own word, isn't it?"

"We get more fun . . . A couple of days ago, I caused a Belgian dentist to jilt his girl friend. Maybe he even murdered her! We live on the dark passions. The human race always had a morbid tendency that way, you know, so don't think of us as too abnormal. Most literature is just gloating over the sorrows and sins of others—of which you are one of the supreme and most honoured exponents."

There were little flies that flipped down from the stained walls and landed persistently on the hands and faces of the two men. Dostoevsky had rolled himself another cigarette and drew heavily on it, looking less as if he enjoyed it than as if he supposed it might defeat the flies. He spoke ramblingly. "You have the case all wrong, sir. Forgive me if I criticize by remarking that your attitude seems very perverted and vile to me. I have never revelled in suffering, I hope . . ." He shook his head. "Or perhaps I have, who knows? But you must leave me, for I feel remarkably ill of a sudden, and in any case, as I say, you are wrong."

Morovitch laughed. "How can millions of years of evolution be 'wrong' in any sense? Man is what he is, becomes what he is from what he was. Strong emotions are a permanent need." He rose. Dostoevsky, out of politeness, rose too, so that for a moment they stood very close together, staring into each other's eyes.

"I shall come back to see you tomorrow," Morovitch said. "And then I shall leave this ignorant tribesman and infest—well, sir, it will be the greatest connoisseur's treat possible from our point of view—I shall infest you, and finally gain new insights into what suffering is like. It was so as to apply, as it were, the gilt to the gingerbread, that I called first, so that I may know you inside and out."

Dostoevsky began to laugh, but it broke at once, changing into a cough. "I see you are, as you claim, an illness."

"Tomorrow, I will be part of *your* illness. Goodbye, sir, and thank you for your courtesy and evident disbelief—until tomorrow!"

He turned towards the door, on which the writer had hung a battered painting of a woman. As he did so, Dos-

toevsky bent quickly down and snatched up the poker from its resting place beside the stove. With a mighty swing, he brought it down across the man's unprotected head, much as Raskolnikov would one day be described as bringing down the hatchet on the old lady's head in *Crime and Punishment*. With scarcely a groan, Morovitch sank to the floor, one arm sprawling out across the crumpled bed.

Dostoevsky put the poker down. Then he began to tremble.

IMAGE OF DESTRUCTION

by

JOHN RANKINE

Dag Fletcher of the Inter-Galactic Organization, who started "life" in the first volume of New Writings In S-F, *runs into one of his toughest assignments as he takes the mixed crew of an* Interstellar *starship on a mysterious rescue mission.*

IMAGE OF DESTRUCTION

One

DAG FLETCHER broke total concentration and switched out the glowing presentation panel which was pushing data at him in a steady stream of stimuli. There was no doubt, the matters which found their way to his desk were those which other people had found difficult to deal with.

He left his padded chair and roamed impatiently round the broad, oval penthouse room, reflecting that it would not be long before he fitted a matching padded wall to beat his head on.

High up in the Northern Hemisphere Space Corporation Headquarter Block, he could see the intricate complex spreading out round him, at once familiar and yet, on occasions, totally strange. The recurring, central pivotal theme of his professional life, and yet only one place among many, one reality among an infinity of possibilities.

This was a dangerous mental tack to sail and he recognized its perils. The new CHAIRMAN label on his penthouse door might come to hang like an albatross round his neck; but no one could cut it free. It was his own choice and he was stuck with it.

Out left, on the distant perimeter, he could see the towering spires of the slender ships he directed on their incredible inter-stellar missions. For a year now, since Spencer's death, he had been top man in the Corporation, and now he knew what pressures had gone to sour his late chief's temper and put the lines on his craggy face. Reluctantly, he was brought round to an admiration of the diplomatic skill which Spencer had deployed. It was in this committee management field where he knew himself to be least successful.

No detail of logistics escaped the fine net of his attention, no problem that might face his commanders on their far-

flung enterprises could find a gap in his practical experience. To the space crews, he was a kind of superman. Every fantastic mile of every mission, they had tangible evidence of his absolute paternal care. It was true to say that they would accept any direction he gave as if it had come down from a mountain, graven on a stone tablet.

The Executive Committee, with its political links and its allegiance outside the service was another matter. Also the many thousands of ground staff were less inclined to bow to the throne. They could only follow the curt, military-style memos which he used as an instrument of government and think of him as the autocratic god in the ivory tower.

Moreover, in the years as chief trouble-shooter for Chairman Spencer, he had weeded out a number of misfits from active service in the fleets. No one likes to be found inadequate, particularly if he knows he is; even when being grounded carried a technical promotion and extra pay. Colleagues knew the score and a certain bitterness remained to rankle and grow.

Dotted about the huge complex, they formed a potential lobby against the new chairman. Not particularly active, he was a dangerous man to cross; but lying like grains of sand in the delicate machinery of control. Fletcher was not unaware of it. But he reckoned it as one of the inescapable by-products of command. One of the things which were attached to that "Chairman" label. And yet he also knew that Spencer had always managed these affairs with the minimum of personal enmity.

Back at his elaborate console desk, he stubbed a piano-key on the local-environment-block. A double wall of glass rolled silently away and he walked out on to his roof-garden into warm mid-morning sunlight.

Now he could hear the ships and the world was alive round him. That would be *Interstellar Three-Four*, dead on schedule, building to that crescendo of effort which would lift her off. He could not control an involuntary tightening of his nerves. Less than a minute now for them before they burst out of this constricting shell and into their independ-

ent world. Their own small planet, held together by their own expertise against every hostile force in the book.

Acting on impulse, he strode back inside and flicked in the over-riding priority line to the blockhouse. His face came up life-size on the master screen and he said, "Controller, put me through to *Three-Four*."

Then he was looking into the control cabin of the vibrating ship, with the sweep hand on her commander's console eating into the red quadrant. He came up as an inset, top left on the main scanner, lean face lined and tanned, short cropped, fair hair with its narrow iron-grey streak, legacy of a searing mission, eyes grey-green, snapping with eagerness.

He said, "Neal, good trip. I'd like to join you."

Commander Neal Banister, one of the senior captains of the service had time to say, "Thank you, Chairman. You're welcome. Any time." Then he exercised the prerogative of principal executive of a moving ship and cut Fletcher out of the picture.

It was what Dag himself would have done and he could not fault it. But it was as if a door had been slammed in his face. Grounded, by God! Out of the mainstream of action which made the service what it was. He could imagine the feeling in that ship. A well-integrated crew, confident of their expertise as the most highly trained technocrats their planet had ever produced.

Fletcher set himself to work with an anesthetizing dedication. Spencer had once said to him, "I work a five point plan, Fletcher. Long ago I found that it works out. Do one thing at a time. Know the problem. Learn to listen. Learn to ask questions. Learn to tell sense from nonsense."

It seemed a long time ago; though it was not so long as that, in the time measured by chronometers. A collection of truisms; but he had come to appreciate that therein lay all the mystique of management.

He worked steadily on a two-hour stint to subdue his impatient flesh and beat the robot to its knees with a repetitive flash coming up ALL PENDING BUSINESS CLEAR.

It was not until a week later, at the same vulnerable morning hour, that he was moved again to regret his desk-bound lot and this time the stimulus-surge tripped a one-way relay in his computer mind which could only take him along a path of action.

Banister came up on the confidential scrambled link which brought his voice directly to the penthouse, breaking through all routine circuits and sending up an alarm bleep on the immense chart which localized the last plot of his ship.

His voice, shorn and parcelled by a hundred relays, but unmistakable in timbre, said, "There's a thing come up, Dag, you should know. Final briefing brought up a detour on this trip. Sabazius. It carried your personal authorization so I let it go. Is that right?"

"Right. It's semi-political. An order couched as a request from I.G.O. control. You were the nearest ship in that area. I.G.O. Commissar there has some security material to clear. No military ship is due for six months. It's all in your brief. Where's the problem?"

"Do you know the nature of that material?"

It was unlike Banister to beat about the bush. He must know as surely as Fletcher himself, that Inter-Galactic Organization affairs carried over-riding priority and that no planetary official could question them.

"What does it matter what it is? Unless it has a critical weight or an energized structure which will disturb instrumentation, shove it in the safe and do what the man says. Who is it, anyway?"

Banister kept his temper with an effort. It was all very well for Fletcher, sitting on his backside in chair-bound splendour; but the situation on Sabazius was as peculiar as any he had ever met.

Interstellar Three-Four had blazed down out of the amethyst sky to a copybook landfall in Jasra's great circular spaceport to an atmosphere of barely concealed hostility, with inter-galactic goodwill going sour in its bottle. There was no business to transact, unless Earth Consul,

notified of their coming, had gathered any special freight for onward movement. It was simply a matter of finding the I.G.O. Commissar, picking up the security material and getting on to his next scheduled stop which was Fingalna.

This, however, had proved to be a hard thing to do. Mention of it at the port reception area had sent enough significant looks round the circle to stock a repertory company for a season and the place had suddenly filled up with assorted soldiery. Eventually he was told that the man had disappeared. Sunk without trace in the seclusion of his own office headquarters. Seen by his own secretarial staff within an hour and then quite gone.

Moreover, further enquiries showed that he was not alone in this Indian rope trick eccentricity. Over the past twelve months on Sabazius it had become an occupational hazard for members of the many governmental committees which regulated the affairs of the planet.

Earth Consul was not over-helpful about it, and was in fact unwilling to sponsor Banister's suggestion that I.G.O. special branch ought to be brought in as a matter of urgency. He took the view that it was an internal police matter and Sabazians could put their own house in order. Sabazius had, anyway, an unsavoury history of police-state methods and it was unwise for a foreigner to meddle. Its people had accepted the I.G.O. Charter of Human Rights because take-over by a governing mission was the only alternative.

Banister, thinking of the efforts he had made, in the reeking heat of the small hot planet, to complete his task, said with commendable restraint, "The Commissar was a Cappodanian called Puzur-Sahan, a very able man and liked well enough. As much as any foreigner is liked by this xenophobic lot."

"*Was?* What's this *was*?"

"That's basically what I'm on about. He's disappeared. Not alone either. Eventually they'll have to bring in the Special Branch on this. But what do I do as of now? Whatever it was that Puzur-Sahan wanted to dispatch isn't here.

The Commissar's staff don't know anything about it. Mind you they're mainly Sabazians and wouldn't want to help. I have no direct link with I.G.O.

"Another complication is that they've more or less grounded *Three-Four*. There's a round-the-clock guard on the pad and I can't get a signed clearance. The authorities know, of course, that I had to collect something from Puzur-Sahan. I reckon I could break out. But do I do that thing? And if not, how long do I stay on this stinking pad?"

Fletcher looked at the huge spread of the planetarium which dissolved the only solid wall of his penthouse in an infinity of blue and gold. He keyed the word Sabazius into the operating board on his desk and a luminous silver line ran from Earth Terminal to the point where Banister was. Direct, without the stops *Three-Four* had made, it was a four-day stint in rationalized time.

Banister said, "Are you there, Dag?"

"Sorry. Weighing up the score. You can afford another four days without getting snagged up on the stellar plot. Don't try anything. I know they have nothing there with a capability of intercepting *Three-Four*, but they do have some conventional cannon and some military master-minds who would be glad of a chance to blast off at a moving target. You need a covering force. I'll come and join you."

When it was out and said, he knew that it had been in his mind from the beginning. Banister's pleased acceptance gave it reality and a seal.

Largely due to his own standing with I.G.O. and pressure on his own Corporation over the years, Northern Hemisphere Space Authority was one of the few civilian organizations in the galaxy with its own defence potential. *Interstellar X*, an obsolescent military corvette, was standing ready on its pad like a breakdown tender to pull out any one of the regular ships which got out on a limb in an inhospitable corner of the cosmos. Each use of it had to be cleared with I.G.O., but it was regarded by them as a useful supplement to their much-extended peace-keeping force.

Fletcher dropped into the rhythm of concentrated effort

which had made him famous. First, a call on his private link to the great artificial, wandering asteroid which housed the administrative machine of the Inter-Galactic Organization. He was accredited to go to Sabazius. Commissioning status would follow by videgraph. The nearest military unit, was, as he had thought, too far away to be of immediate help. Replacement of Puzur-Sahan was proceeding as a routine matter; but it would be some months before it could be done. He was empowered to make preliminary investigations.

Then he spoke to Ned Fairclough, filling his old slot as Senior Controller.

"Ned, what spare crew is there?"

"Spare crew? You have to be joking, Dag. *Three-Nine* goes out on the meridian with a navigator light. You know how it is at this time. Maximum wastage. We're hanging on for the new batch from training wing. For the next month, I'm fighting a rearguard."

"Nevertheless I want *Interstellar X* commissioned and ready to go by sixteen hundred."

"Sixteen hundred *today?*"

"Today. Now just get your finger out, Ned, and leap about. It's a single hop job. Nothing complicated. I'll manage with a skeleton crew. One navigator, two power, two communications. Pull out two extra final-year cadets for general duties, they can sit in on the armament and get acquainted with it."

Ned Fairclough, arguing from the privileged position of twenty years' friendship said, "Look, Dag, it just isn't on, and you know it. There isn't a commander on reserve with the know-how to take up *Interstellar X*. Unless I go myself and that with all due respect I could not justify."

"I'm taking her myself. I'll settle for half the personnel in final-stage cadets. Sixteen hundred is the deadline. I'll be seeing you in three hours' time. Say fourteen hundred for briefing."

Two

INTERSTELLAR X entered the gravisphere of Sabazius when Neal Banister had checked off five more of that planet's short days on his ship's log. He picked up its etiolated call sign on the private fleet link before Jasta control was aware of the corvette's presence and was able to tell Fletcher that the local commander had shown his hand in a definitive way by mounting a round-the-clock watch on *Three-Four* with a battery of sizeable artillery in a half moon on the perimeter of the pad.

Fletcher said, "Thank you, Neal. Over and out," and told his communications executive to get on to the diplomatic channel and raise Jasra.

Susan Brault, working at full stretch in the top communications slot, took all of ten seconds and flipped the Jasra Controller on to her commander's console like a neatly landed fish. Expecting a Fascist-type official, one who bullies or is bullied, Fletcher made no concession to protocol. He said, "Inter-Galactic Organization Corvette, *Interstellar X*. Designate landing area. I am coming in as of now. Acknowledge."

Acknowledgment carried only minimal goodwill. "You may land. Reference coming up. Out."

It was a testing time for the scratch crew. In raven-haired Susan Brault, he had a regular junior communications executive, holding temporary rank as lieutenant for this mission. Power was solid though, with a tough veteran, Ray Mortimer; sacrificing retirement leave to make this trip as a special favour to Fletcher. He was assisted by Freeman, a square-built Scot. One of the best students in the final grade. Second navigator was another highly-placed student, Paula Underwood, and one of the major satisfactions of the arrangement for that busy girl was the fact that Arne Richardsen, the apple of whose eye she was, had got himself in as Communications Two.

She had not been as delighted when she met Susan Brault at the briefing session. But when she saw, in the first hour

aboard, that the brilliant, dark-brown eyes of the communications lieutenant followed only the commander about the set, she relaxed and settled for keying in on the net from time to time to check that the communications team kept conversation at strict business levels. Massey and Railton were tough and dependable, working like natural born space crew in the exacting general-duties role. Massey particularly had the ideal build, short, broad, muscled like a professional weight-lifter.

To this point in space-time, *Interstellar X* had slid like a bobbin on the fine wire of its computer-spun data. Now Fletcher showed them how finely it would answer under a guiding human hand. He took her down on manual, leaving the retro phase until she was nosing into the first atmospheric layers of the amethyst-blue planet with the surface expanding below them as if in a zoom lens.

The ship turned once, checked almost to zero momentum and then plunged down to hit the designated pad dead centre, flexing down on hydraulic rams with the last of gravity's urge; setting them down a hundred metres from the familiar slender column of *Interstellar Three-Four* and next in line to a small silver Fingalnian, flying a request-clearance pennant.

Grey cooling gas billowed out. Fletcher was following procedures he had used with a fully-staffed military unit. But the next logical move was out. Normally a landing party would have fanned out in a bridgehead of overwhelming strength to damp down any thought of resistance on the part of a foolhardy local commander. He banked on the effect of the corvette's presence and its yellow-gold pennant to convince all those present that its potential power was all-systems-go.

Fletcher said, "Ray, I want Massey and Richardsen with me. Take over. Watch that artillery. Swing a main laser that way and if any gunner bends down near a firing pin, let them have it. Patrol car at the port in five minutes. Massey and Richardsen, ceremonial rig, if you please. Send

my compliments to Commander Banister and tell him to be at stand-by readiness as of now."

Jasra control had ponderously cleared an official port tender and it was edging out from its parking bay when its journey was made unnecessary by the arrival of the small silver car. Richardsen, a massive Scandinavian type but surprisingly neat and precise in all his movements, homed into a docking collar at the head of a deep bay with iron-nerved panache.

Like all Sabazian building, the complex was on a concentric circular plan with open vistas through ranks of supporting piers. Fletcher marched into the reception area at the hub of the wheel, looking neither right nor left, flanked by his *aides*, as though he had arrived to accept an unconditional surrender. He halted at the centre of the high-domed hall where a raised dais on a twenty-metre diameter carried the office layout of the port controller.

Grey-skinned with the almost completely round head of the Sabazian ethnic stock, eyes flatly set, multifacetted like chiselled obsidian, taller than the Earthmen, heavily muscled for the high gravity load, he walked to the edge of his platform, towering over them with four uniformed guards behind him carrying short carbines at the ready.

Hearing echoes of the past in the long corridors of his mind, Dag said, "Commander Fletcher, Inter-Galactic Organization Corvette, *Interstellar X*. Provisional I.G.O. Commissar in this place. I want to see the local military commander."

Arne Richardsen had a moment of doubt about this harsh opening gambit. He stood stock still waiting for somebody to say, "No."

But in fact he was surprised to find that although no one could call the reception friendly, they were not actively opposed. One of the guards went off at a smart clip and the port controller invited them on to his platform and offered the local equivalent of a cigar and a spittoon.

Fletcher was not, however, to be charmed into goodwill. He continued to stand, impassive, motionless. Massey,

broad and powerful, close-cropped, dark hair, took his cue from his leader. The three Earthmen stared before them in silence.

In the minutes it took for the local commander to be brought in, Richardsen sensed a change in the atmosphere and paid mental tribute to Fletcher. The Sabazians were becoming uncomfortable. Under the piercing eye of the leading Earthman, the port controller began to shuffle things about on his desk, twice he sat down and stood up again. He walked to the edge of his platform and came back. Then he began to sweat. It was an object lesson in applied psychology. The man looked as guilty as hell.

One of the weaknesses of the method was that this diffused guilt feeling was likely to make a blanket reaction and mask the real issue; but he was definitely softened up and ready for questioning by the time the military master-mind appeared.

This one was tougher material. Olive-drab uniform; rank-tabs of a colonel; conical spiked helmet with side-flaps reminiscent of Genghis-Kahn. Marched heavily to the rim of the central platform with a deferential staff-officer half a pace behind and an escort of six guards three metres to the rear.

Fletcher swivelled slowly to meet them. He said, pitching his voice for all to hear, "Colonel. You will withdraw your troops from the area of this port. It is, for the time being, I.G.O. territory."

"If I refuse?"

"You will not refuse. I shall expect the withdrawal to be completed in one hour, local time. Meanwhile I want transport and an escort to take me to I.G.O. headquarters."

Black glittering eyes held Fletcher's for a long count. Richardsen was sure that his chief had pushed it too far. Then the man spoke. "Colonel Sarpedon, Metropolitan Commandant. Of course, I accept I.G.O. authority. I will withdraw five kilometres from the port. Even so, the I.G.O. charter requires that you work through the governmental

channels of a Sovereign state. I shall expect confirmation of this instruction from the Metropolitan Governor."

"You will get it. Thank you for your co-operation."

Having carried his point, Dag Fletcher felt that he could afford to relax. Even watch, without more than a casual curiosity, the arrival of an imposing Federal Government State tender which decanted a large thick-necked Sabazian in the dark-blue uniform of the diplomatic corps on the step of the central platform itself.

The new arrival was clearly an important official. Sarpedon threw up a stiff salute, left arm bent from the elbow, palm flat and facing the oncoming man. He said, "Your Excellency, the newly-arrived I.G.O. Commissar has directed that our forces should withdraw from the port."

"Thank you, Colonel." The voice was unexpectedly shrill and high-pitched from such a huge figure. "The Commissar is no doubt anxious to save his small civilian crew from any inconvenience. Nevertheless, he will have to put up with it. Leave your troops in their positions. Neither of the Earth ships have clearance to move except on my express authority."

On the dais, he dwarfed the Earthmen and spoke directly to Fletcher. "I will take you to the headquarters of the late Commissar. But I must remind you that your position is very insecure. You will remain for the time being as my guest in the spaceport hotel. Every thought will be given to your comfort, but I am sure you will see that I have to take what precautions I can against a ship with such armament as yours and with only untrained civilian staff to direct it. Please take care that the Inter-Galactic Organization does not lose another representative."

Dag Fletcher had suffered reversals enough in his time to be externally unmoved by this one. He walked easily to the waiting car as though he had ordered it himself and ducked under its low roof without a backward look. But his mind was racing through a number of disquieting possibilities. Only I.G.O. and his own inner staff knew the details of his crew manifest. Someone had taken the trouble to put the

leak through to Sabazius. Otherwise the bluff of strength could not have failed.

I.G.O. was solid and Sabazius did not have the kind of Intelligence Service which could crack the I.G.O. codes. It could only be a Space Corporation break. Easy enough when you thought of it. Message to the Sabazian Consulate in Paris, Earth. Or even, and this was more humiliating, a direct call even now while he was here playing out the charade of power. Someone in the ship itself.

Mortimer? He would stake his life not. Railton or the other cadets? No access to the link. Susan Brault? It could only be Susan and that was ridiculous. Why it was ridiculous he did not stop to analyse, but intuitively, he knew it was so.

The Sabazian official did not press his advantage and made his position stronger by that. Leading through the concentric complex of rooms to the private office of the late Commissar, he revealed himself as His Excellency, the Metropolitan Governor in person, Hablum by name and all there was of power in Jasra and its environs for ten thousand square kilometres.

Fletcher had put in some research on the Sabazian domestic scene in the crammed days of the flight and now remembered that the official bearing that title should also bear a different name.

"You are well informed, Commissar. That excellent administrator was the holder of this office up to a few months ago. Then he disappeared. Just as your commissar did. A most unfortunate thing. You will, no doubt, wish to remain here. My guards will wait for you and conduct you wherever you wish to go. You will find necessary items for your comfort in the apartments set aside for you. All movements of foreign persons come under my jurisdiction, so you will of course apply to me should you wish to leave Jasra itself."

Three

It was clear enough that there would be nothing to find, and clear too that they would not get back to the ship without a showdown of force which was weighted against them.

Alone in the circular room, Fletcher knew that anything they said would be monitored. It hardly mattered. He would be expected anyway to make some comment on the action so far. He said briefly, "There will be security check on anything we say here. Save it if it's important. Check round for any line on what might have happened to Puzur-Sahan."

Massey said, "Pooh-Bah Hablum will have been through it with a fine tooth-comb."

"Perhaps not. The I.G.O. Commissar is not here by invitation and even a Metropolitan Governor would not search for something he already knew about."

Fletcher walked slowly round the circular room. Under heavier gravity and with an atmosphere putting up five per cent more pressure, he felt the enclosed space to be heavy and claustrophobic. This preoccupation with the concentric principle in architecture meant that the inner rooms were like the depths of a burrow. A retreat to the womb.

One suicide's natural, was ruled out. There was no high window for his leap into oblivion. It was said that he had been seen entering the room through its only door and then not again.

Dag talked to the chief secretary, a small squat Venusian who instantly impressed them with his conviction that Puzur-Sahan had disappeared from inside.

"I was here all that night in the outer office, Commander. The Commissar went in. That I know. He did not come out. That I know too. When I knocked, very late, to enquire whether I was to stay any longer, there was no reply. The door was not locked. I entered. He was not there."

"Did you leave the outer office at all during that time?"

"No, Commander."

"Not even for a few minutes?"

"No, Commander."

"But you would see the Commissar moving in and out a dozen times a day. It was a familiar thing. Could it be that it was so familiar that you simply did not notice it?"

"No, Commander. For one thing, I required the Commissar's signature on a report and I was particularly waiting to catch him."

"Very well, thank you. One more thing though. What about the other side of the coin; did any person go into the office?"

"No, Commander . . . at least . . ."

"Well?"

"I have forced myself to think over the events of that evening many times. I am left with a curious impression, which I cannot substantiate, that the Commissar *himself* went in a second time. I cannot sort this out even to myself. It must have been an illusion. A trick of the light. The lights flickered at that time. But this has been a usual occurrence now for many months."

The Venusian went out, impassive; a dour unimaginative man. His race were much in demand by I.G.O., because of high stability rating and almost infinite frustration tolerance. Ideally suited for administration work on inhospitable stations.

Fletcher sat at the desk-console and played himself a selection from the pending file, selecting English from the robot-translator's hundred standard choices. Puzur-Sahan had been a man of method. Only three routine items remained without the addition of his dictated commentary—delivered in a precise, clipped voice, just audible behind the cool patter of the interpreter.

He ran back to the last item which had been cleared and cut out the translation. There was a tenuous link timewise, if the man had been seated here at work, between that last spoken word and what had happened.

The item itself was unimportant; a memo on the replacement of a time-expired junior clerk, due for repatriation.

Nothing there. He ran on to the next. A report on natural resources, confirming that no new mineral discoveries on Sabazius during the last twelve months made it necessary to alter the records held at I.G.O. Annual routine stuff. Requiring only signature consent.

Had he read that? There was no comment at the end. A pause and a click. Dag ran on to the next. No comment. No click either. He ran back to earlier cleared items. Very faintly at the end of each spoken comment there was the click as he switched himself out of circuit.

So on that last item, he had switched himself in. Made no comment and switched himself out. Dag ran back to the crucial point and turned up the volume until the last words of the recording clerk were a shout and Massey and Richardsen stopped looking about and came over to join him.

The last shouted word died away. There was a pause and a whisper, so faint that even on full power it was no more than an etiolated sigh. Two words. Dag mimed for no comment and ran it again until he could take it down in phonetic script. Puzur-Sahan was, naturally enough, working in Cappodanian and the words meant nothing to him. He made a final check. Then he pushed the erase button and the Commissar's last words were forever lost.

It was all they were likely to get from that room. He made his comment loud and clear. "Well that's it, then. Like the man said, it's a blank sheet. I'll make a call on the Cappodanian embassy and pay my respects for the loss of their distinguished countryman. We can do nothing, here."

Outside, waiting guards fell in behind them. Round, grey faces confident and insolent. Sure now that the men in white were no threat. Fletcher kept silent until they were in the car and it was moving off. Then he asked, "Where are we bound for now?"

"The Cappodanian Embassy."

"Yes, of course, that is where I want to go."

It confirmed that there had been a listening watch and it

was comforting proof that the rank and file were on the side of naïvety.

The Cappodanian representative on Sabazius was a worried man. He was glad to see an accredited I.G.O. official. He said, "I fear that there is a large-scale conspiracy going forward. Many good people have disappeared. Many. And all of the moderate party who accepted the I.G.O. charter. There is an extremist military group which is gradually taking over every important post in the administration. I believe Puzur-Sahan was ready to make a report. Indeed I think he had drafted it and was sending it out when he so tragically disappeared. Although I am his countryman, he was very exact in his official life, you understand, I am only putting two and two together; he did not confide in me."

Dag said, "You may be right. I came primarily because of the safety of my ship *Interstellar Three-Four*, but certainly I shall alert I.G.O. to this danger."

"Then you should do it quickly, before you also become a victim of this uncanny thing."

"Can you tell me what this means in your language?" Dag laid the phonetic transcript on the table between them. It was an abrupt change of subject, but the Cappodanian answered at once.

"It is a mathematical term. Literally 'additive inverse'—the reasonable proposition that one and minus one combine to make nothing."

"Can you think of any reason why Puzur-Sahan should be concerned about that?"

"No. But I can tell you that he was a keen mathematician. It was a hobby with him. Any phenomenon would present itself to him in mathematical terms."

Two days later, Dag Fletcher was still puzzling out the implications of the Commissar's enigmatic, signing-off phrase. There was a certain anticlimax in the situation. He had not been allowed to move back to his ship; but he and his companions were being given V.I.P. treatment in a top-floor suite of rooms in a reception unit which lay on the

perimeter of the port area and had a direct radio link with *Interstellar X*.

Ray Mortimer said, "What goes on, Dag? Give the word and we'll do some selective blasting round here. I have a close-grain scan of every installation on a fifty-kilometre diameter. Believe me, there isn't much at that."

"It may come to it, but hold it for now." Fletcher was certain that anything he said would go straight to Hablum. But there was no point in concealing what strength he had. In fact it was stalemate. Hablum knew that if he moved directly against his guests or *Interstellar X* there would be massive reprisals even from its unskilled crew.

Mortimer went on, "Another thing, Dag. Since when have port controls wanted a complete dossier on ship construction and personnel? Banister tells me they've got enough data on *Three-Four* to build it from bedrock. I've provided profile data that nobody ever asked for in my experience. They've got you taped, down to your last birthmark. But ship detail I have not released. This is still on the classified list as an ex-military corvette."

"You did right. What precisely on the other details?"

"Physiometrics, build, photographs, weight—the lot."

"That can do no harm."

"Perhaps not. Paula thinks it's a commercial angle and they're going to run her on a calendar series. She's also as superstitious as they come and says its like stealing hair and nail-clippings to work a spell. She's keeping her fingers crossed. So you should be all right."

The rooms they were in made a penthouse extension over the centre ring of the hotel unit. From an open quadrant of tiled roof, edged by a metre-high filigree rail, they could see a fair slice of Jasra spread out in its exact geometric patterns, between low-lying moors of the characteristic amethyst-blue lichen of Sabazius. Like a child's doodling exercise with a compass, interweaving arcs and circles and adding the sweeping, connecting curves of the first-floor walkways which kept the few pedestrians out of the lichen.

Almost central in the panorama was a building new to Fletcher. Not surprising in itself since it must have been all of twenty years since he had paid a brief visit to the planet. Strange for all that, because there was almost absolute architectural conservatism in Sabazius and the outlines of Jasra had not changed for centuries.

In any other place, he might have identified it as some kind of transmitter. Concentric rings on diminishing diameters went up like a step pyramid to a tall gleaming cylinder of ebony-black.

Neal Banister, in a brief, relayed transmission, said, "That's an amazing place. It's the headquarters of a neo-fascist organization. Sponsors your friend Hablum. Extremists, but not unpopular. In fact their philosophy seems to suit the morons in this place. When, if ever, do we pull out?"

"Any day now. You'll just have to be patient. Just keep looking in those mirrors to make sure you're still there. There's a devious situation developing."

Out on the open roof, with some chance of avoiding a beamed monitor, Dag wrote and mimed an instruction for Massey. "Don, back to the ship for you. Work at it with Mortimer and Railton. Get all the armament you can move and pinpoint that building with the black column. Annihilation drill. Round the clock watch with a finger on the button. Signal to blast it will be my personal call sign on the company net. Sent by this." He offered a cigarette from a flat electrum case and thumbed over a flat plate, which revealed the wafer-thin, fixed-frequency transmitter. "Tonight we'll go take a look at it."

Then he was calling Hablum on video in their day room. "I am sending one of my men back to the ship. Please instruct the guards here to do nothing foolish."

"Why, Commissar," the rank which Dag had not claimed was now used as an insult. "Why should they do anything foolish? Our rights as a sovereign state are guaranteed by *your* organization. Certainly your man can go back. In his place, I suggest you call out the woman, Brault—your

communications executive. You must see that I cannot allow your ship to be fully operational until I am sure of your intentions."

Susan Brault arrived in some splendour. Having seen the male contingent turn out in full regalia, she dressed with particular flamboyance in the green and gold ceremonial tabard of the service. Raven-black hair in shining wings. Startlingly white skin. Eyes elaborately made up with obliquely slanted brows. Slim, graceful, moving like a dancer. Although not beautiful by the standard of the local aesthetic, which went in for bulbous opulence, she made an impact on the guards who followed her and brought a surge of welcome colour to the internment cage itself.

They met her in the outer ring of the complex and walked back through the onion skins of its concentric lay-out to the central hall of elevator outlets and narrow spiral emergency stairways. A guard, making her white travelling-case appear toy-sized, pointed curtly to an elevator grille serving a different apartment and which was currently being swung back by a large, bulging, Sabazian woman in white overalls, with the unmistakable aura of nurse-wardress.

Had Susan Brault been in any kind of deal with the Sabazian power it would have been easy for her to accept the separation and be easily accessible to any negotiator. But the look she gave him ended any possibility that she was a Sabazian agent. It held an amalgam of real terror, appeal for help and a simple emotional demand which he did not want to identify but which was unmistakable.

She said, "Commander, I surely don't have to be alone with them? Please make them let me come with you."

Dag said, "That's all right, Susan. Of course you can come with us." Then to the senior guard who was moving forward to sort out the hold-up, "The lieutenant will use one of our rooms. Put her case in this elevator."

Stony black eyes held his for a long considering stare. Fletcher made no move and his face was set in the mask that expected the answer yes. The man unhooked his car-

bine and brought it deliberately up to the aim on a line with Fletcher's throat. He said, "You do not give orders. I give orders. The Earthwoman goes to a separate place."

Fletcher walked forward without haste until the muzzle of the carbine was touching the white cloth of his tunic. Casually erect. Resplendent against the drab cyclorama with the long bars of his many orders making an oblong blaze of colour. Even now, after all the years of experience and a sure knowledge that he no longer cared about that unjustifiable invasion of privacy which is death, he could not do it without an involuntary shrinking of the nerves and a small chill of fear.

They saw him move both hands to the barrel of the gun, move it sharply down and left, so that when the guard decided to fire the heavy slugs tore into the parquet beside them. At the same time, he twisted it free and brought up the butt to smash home between the eyes of the round moon-face above him.

It was so quickly done, that no other guard had unslung his carbine when the leader dropped clear and Fletcher was left questing round for a target. There was a digestive pause. Sabazian national character was to follow where led. There was no enthusiasm for self-sacrifice.

Dag said evenly, "Put the lieutenant's case in this elevator. I shall report this man for a serious breach of discipline."

When it was done, he lowered the carbine and motioned the others to go inside. Then he followed without haste.

Two men, making it clear that they intended nothing but good went to pick up the sleeper. They carried him over to the nurse's corner on the principle that such obvious talent should not run to waste and she took him off in her elevator looking, as far as could be judged, innocently pleased by the windfall.

Susan Brault, brown eyes emotionally dark and shining bright put a light warm hand on Fletcher's arm as their cage lifted them out of sight of the busy hall. She said, "I'm sorry, I've made it worse for you. I should have gone with

them. But honestly, they make my skin crawl. I can't bear to be near them. What will happen now?"

"Nothing will happen. Don't worry. I'll get on to Hablum straight away. He's a realist with some long-term plan. It wouldn't have suited him at all to have me shot like that. Don't give it a thought. We'll be all right."

She said in a small voice, "Thank you anyway." Very near him in the small cage was Arne Richardsen working the clumsy switchgear which controlled the ride. Impulsively she stood on tiptoe and briefly brushed the side of his cheek with her lips. He felt the quick pneumatic pressure of firm breasts and a flat abdomen against him and was back in time to another elevator, going down, when a mission had ended and the girl's hair had been shining red-gold.

He said, "Whatever happens I am well repaid." But she was not deceived and had known that his mind was off somewhere where she could not follow.

In the apartment, she opened her case for inspection, like a favourite aunt bringing presents for one and all. She said simply, "We thought you might need something other than ceremonial rig if you wanted to move about."

There were two dark blue, one-piece fatigue suits and a trim charcoal-grey pants and jersey set for herself. Some thin, unbreakable line; a vibrator; two service lasers, weapons on the restricted I.G.O. list, with the stopping power of a dozen carbines. Set to stun, rather than carry fatality they would damp out animal activity in a wide V on a ten-metre range.

Arne Richardsen gave her a friendly pat where even the strict lines of the masculine tabard could not conceal a pleasant roundness.

"Well done that lieutenant."

She said, "Your executive lieutenant, Richardsen. I'll trouble you to keep your hamlike hands to yourself." A proud spirit, she was not falling for any more acts of disinterested courtesy.

Hablum, as Dag had expected, was not concerned about his damaged guard. He even dropped the ironical "Com-

missar" tag. "That was unfortunate, Commander. But I must ask you to take care. It could have ended badly for you. It would also embarrass me to have to report the death of a second I.G.O. representative in so short a time."

"Death?"

"What else can we assume? In any event, we shall soon be able to come to some final arrangement."

Dag went out on to the roof and looked once more at the towering ziggurat with its black pinnacle. Hablum's last communique suggested that matters were soon to be brought to a head. Meaning what? That something they were working at had reached the kind of readiness that no outside interference could upset?

No other incident broke the flat monotony of a hot, heavy day with hardly a breath of air stirring in Jasra. Dag had himself driven to the Earth Consulate and found empathy a non-starter.

Purely a clearing house for a small trade exchange between Earth and Sabazius, there was a local staff and the consul himself—a fat, smiling, but ungenial Armenian named Victor Lamech. He was obviously more concerned with the business side of his post and would go to any length to avoid upsetting the Metropolitan Governor.

"You must understand me, Commander. There is no gain in antagonizing Hablum. I.G.O. will send a new official in their own time. Meanwhile we keep our noses clean, yes? Commerce must go on. Business as usual, eh? I know these people. Be guided by me. Do nothing. Do not be put out by their abrupt ways. Bend like the reed and the storm passes. And the reed is still there. Is that not so? They are an industrious people and have no ambitions outside their own planet."

"That may well be, but they are making no effort to get to the bottom of the Commissar's disappearance. Someone will have to answer for it. Eventually the peace enforcement patrol will put in at this port. No local force can argue with that."

"That is nothing to me. I run a trade post. That is all."

"For you everything has a price tag?"

"I am not too proud, Commander, to call myself a trader. But do you imply something else by that?"

"Let it go. But I warn you, Lamech, don't sell me short. Any information you have, I want."

"One thing I know, Commander, that the small business connection we have here is very valuable to *both* planets. I repeat, I cannot help you."

The short Sabazian day slipped rapidly into its amethyst dusk, then into intense black night with jewelled, walnut-sized stars. Susan Brault, all dressed up in her charcoal-grey playsuit, found that she had nowhere to go. Briefed in a series of curtly-worded memos, she made only one small protest by writing, "Don't overstrain the welcome."

Fletcher and Richardsen in their one-piece suits with lasers at their belts went silently on to the roof. Dag, moved by the appeal in her eyes, turned back and met her at the sliding transparent screen. Speech could be dangerous, but he wanted to reassure her. Words could have run in a number of non-loaded, vaguely comforting patterns.

Instead, he put his hands on her shoulders and drew her near enough to kiss her cheek in a shorthand version of those missing assurances. His intention must, however, have been signalled ahead by extra-sensory radar, always a danger when dealing with a communications expert. She moved so that her lips were there, very warm and soft. A tactile fragment to shore against all possible ruins.

Four

LEAVING their own section of roof was easy enough. Since all stairs and elevators led to the same hall, there had been no need to make physical barriers in the insurmountable class. A high party wall ran to the balustrade and projected in a decorative cusp which made a half-metre overhang.

Despising himself for a momentary shrinking of his

nerves, Dag swung out to the narrow ledge on the outside of the rail and reached up for the run-back of the curve.

Arne Richardsen privately reckoned that he should have gone first; but was too tactful to suggest it, and resigned himself to the view that if the mission foundered on the Chairman's vanity, the man had already paid for the privilege by his years of high endeavour. On this first pitch, however, he had to concede that he could not have done better himself.

The patio over the wall was in semi-darkness with subdued light from the centre window. Assuming the Sabazian passion for symmetry to hold, the layout of the apartments would be identical with that they had left. Central lounge; sleeping rooms left with a shared bathroom between them; dining and cooking, far right. Only the lounge had access to the inner landing with its stairhead and elevator shaft, so it had to be through that way.

Fletcher was already flat against the wall beside the window looking in on a peaceful domestic scene. The damaged guard and the out-of-work matron had an intricate set-up of blue and grey discs on a small table between them and were playing a local variant of strip poker.

It was a frivolous side of the Sabazian character which was welcome on psychological, though not on aesthetic grounds, by the watching Earthman. He waved Richardsen over to the bedroom window and joined him there.

There was no need for speech. Richardsen immediately began to cut out a section of glass with the vibrator needle feeling its way through the molecular structure like a hot knife in wax. A metre-square plate leaned back into their hands and was lifted aside. Richardsen went through as silent as a hunting puma.

In the prevailing heat of Sabazius no one made a big thing about closing doors. Most buildings had none, internally; these apartments specially set up for eccentric foreigners had thin beaten-bronze leaves opening inwards. As it came silently back, there was what could pass for a giggle and the broad, grey back presented to the opening

door was now as ruggedly bare as a Henry Moore reclining figure and made much the same statement of form.

Peering out through a bandage-mask, the guard's polygonal black eyes met Fletcher's with incredulity changing to fury and then a glaze of indifference as a diffused beam sprayed out its message of instant calm. He fell across the table on to the scattered counters—a two-time loser. The lady in the case, bludgeoned in the act of leaning back, continued to move under gravity and fell into a lumpy grey composition with knees wide apart which any first-year art student would have labelled "Fecund Earth" without giving it another thought.

Richardsen said, "Even here, it is Eros who makes the world go round. How long have we got?"

"Two hours at the very least. Go down the stairway. I'll take the elevator in one minute thirty seconds. Whoever is in the hall will naturally look to see the grille open. If I don't get to him first you take him from behind."

Each apartment was separately served by circulation space. Richardsen went off taking the stairs in threes. Fletcher checked out the time and moved on the second. In the hall, a single guard was leaning against the solid wall between two elevator shafts. As it clicked into its magnetic lock, he twisted round to pass the time of day with its freight and had only a confused impression of a dark shadow dissolving into brilliant light. He knew nothing of the shadow which moved behind him and dragged him into the empty cage to send him back to the penthouse suite.

Dag said, "We'll get the car. It's faster than anything they have."

A direct corridor led through the complex, with swing-leaf doors at each intersection. There was no great folk migration under way. Only once a massive grey-faced figure, looking neither right nor left, crossed the passage ahead of them, moving from one quadrant to another.

At the entrance, they came out on to a wide curving patio under brilliant light from oval ceiling ports. Facing into the open spread of the terminal they could see the

control tower and reception unit lying like the shining boss of a wheel, half a kilometre distant. Richardsen said, "How do we get there without being seen by somebody?"

"Surprisingly, their eyes are not good at long-range vision. Here, and near the rotunda is the danger. Otherwise we'll meld into the lichen. Nobody moves about on foot. We won't be noticed. Over you go."

Arne Richardsen was across on a count of four and dissolved in the blue background. Fletcher took five, moving seemingly without haste, and found the lichen thicker than he had expected.

On Sabazius there was no use made of ground level. Pedestrians kept to first-floor walkways. Amethyst-blue lichen was calf deep, thick, fibrous; a springy mat. Very dusty so that they stirred up a powdery cloud like figures in a dream sequence.

Ten minutes hard slog; conscious of the residual heat of the day and the gravity drag, brought them just outside the ring of light. They circled the round terminal complex, with the tall ships distant silhouettes behind them.

"Here it is."

Arne Richardsen dropped full length and went slowly forward in choking dust to the open ends of the docking bays. Five in all. Three currently occupied. A long clumsy port tender, a small silver car from the Fingalnian ship and *Interstellar X*'s car in the end slot.

Lichen took him with marginal cover to the floor of the bay itself and he stood up slowly against a smooth wall of basalt block. Five metres above his head was the rounded under-belly of the car and beside it the rim of the pit. Fletcher came up beside him and stood back to the wall miming for the younger man to climb up and over him.

Three minutes later they were inside the car and it was ghosting out under zero thrust.

"Take it from the top."

Richardsen fed in some power and the tiny car began a vertical rise like a free-standing elevator until its console flashed for maximum height at two hundred metres. He

turned slowly to orientate on their objective and then they moved off; a faint streaking shadow.

At that height, the squat buildings of the Sabazian capital were all well below. Even the black column of the target centre was ten metres under their keel. As they approached it, Richardsen said, "Instrumentation, Commander. It's all to hell. I can hold it on manual, but there's a strong jamming field."

"Take it down to that first terrace."

Out of the car, which had a degaussing capability, they were conscious of the strength of the field as a tangible force; as though they were molecules in a dielectric which was straining to the point of fracture. At this level there was neither window nor door and after a circuit of the maypole, Fletcher said, "Down one."

It was five metres to the next level and they found a line of niches and recessed hand grabs to take them down. Once again they made a circuit of blind walls. Richardsen crossed the roof from the point where the built-in ladder came down. He swung himself over an ornate bronze edging and then came back looking surprised, "It doesn't carry on."

"Rope then, you can't expect to be catered for all the way."

"But how would a man reach this section of ladder. It isn't logical to start at this point."

Fletcher reflected that he must be getting slow; at one time he would have thought of that. "Good thinking. Somewhere between here and the edge then."

Finding a trap was one thing, opening it up, another. In the end Richardsen used the vibrator to undercut a deep V and pulled until muscles stood out like ropes. When the slab came away, they looked down a dark narrow well with bars set to cut off an arc and make grips leading down.

The light of a small beam recessed in the vibrator's head threw back a thousand-angled reflection of polished walls which made it difficult to assess distance. Either it came from ground level for this special purpose or it made service stops at each level.

Five metres down, Dag found recessed grabs at his back to move a curved, sliding panel. He eased it back, a centimetre at a time and light spilled in through the gap. Their tube fitted into the interior design by being one in a series of roof supports in a curved colonnade which carried the roof above. Facing in, he was looking across ten metres of clear floor to the centre of the building which appeared to be an immense open well.

As he watched, a massive central column of seemingly newly-forged, glowing metal reached the level they were on, coming by spontaneous creation from a central source way below. He shoved back the cover far enough to climb through and stand in brilliant light on a grey-tiled, solid floor which he had, humanly-speaking, to himself.

Richardsen followed out and Dag said, "Close the door. It might be important to conceal the way we arrived. But for God's sake remember which it is."

"By what?"

The man had a point, symmetry in design could go no further. There was nothing to orientate by. He said, "Nick it low down with the vibrator."

By the time they had made a circuit of the floor, keeping well back from the centre well, they were glad of the mark to chalk up the score. The rod had extruded itself out of sight above. There was a slight vibration as though machinery under load was making a big effort. Then a small definitive click and the vibration cut out. Whatever the column was for it appeared to be all set to do it.

Dag Fletcher crawled to the open edge of the well. Inching along on his side with one eye on the level above in case any observer should be looking down from there. But there was no one. He saw that the rod had locked home on the base of the black column. It looked as solid as though it had been there before the building was assembled round it.

He looked down. Across the way on the floor below were rows of desks each with its busy worker. Women mainly, a kind of clerical assembly-line. They appeared to be check-

ing out data from bulky folders and transferring the gleanings to a coded record.

As he watched, one of them held up a massive grey arm, in a gesture which could have carried any number of possibilities, and in fact attracted a man in unfamiliar semi-military uniform, who came forward from a point of vision and took her offering of work done.

Forward an inch and he could see a narrow arc of the floor further below. More people. Men this time. A puppet factory? On the ends of benches just in sight were scaled down models of Sabazian men, half a metre high. Wonderfully accurate. He risked a look down the well itself and what he saw held him there, with caution momentarily forgotten.

The huge shining piston went down without lateral support for more than a hundred metres into a silo below ground level, a miracle of exact balance. Surrounding it, in the pit, a mass of control gear, too distant and too complex for identification. Rising slowly beside it, was a scale model of *Interstellar Three-Four*.

Richardsen said, "I have a hunch about this. There is something in common with a primitive short-range communications system. This rod transmits very intense field fluctuation on a long wave."

"Transmits what, for God's sake? Sabazius has highly developed cable linkage between its cities and doesn't go in for fraternization on a stellar basis."

"Short range this. Very short with great power. Susan Brault would have the breakdown on it."

"Why the model?"

Arne Richardsen felt all the difficulty of his position. He was the resident expert for the man who had no doubt been served on other missions by the best communications teams in the business. Some comment he had to make. He said, "Commander, I can only make a guess, but I would think the aim was to project an intense image of that model somewhere fairly close."

The nudge of a sixth sense told Dag that his junior com-

munications man had come up with something true. It still made no sense. But that was what it was all about.

Work seemed to have stopped on all intervening floors and heads like so many bladders were leaning out to look down at developments below. The pay-off was clearly due.

Fletcher suddenly drew back and tapped Richardsen's arm. "Get to the car. Raise *Three-Four*. Get everybody out of her. Everybody. Top Priority. Seconds count. Get moving."

Richardsen earned himself an extra point on his confidential profile by asking no questions and being out of sight before Fletcher had returned to his watching brief.

In the short interval, affairs below were building to a pattern reminiscent of a countdown. The shining model of *Three-Four* had moved on its rising piston parallel to the centre shaft and shared its central axis. Now it was stationary. Tension in the human audience was a palpable thing, the climax of the exercise was at hand.

The general immobility struck a freak resonance in Fletcher's mind which threw up the story of the girl in the shop who was asked, "Do you keep stationery?" and had to confess, "Well, I wriggle a bit." This unseasonable gloss brought a small loss of concentration and he drew back a fraction of a second late as a round Sabazian head in the circle immediately below looked up to see if they still had a roof.

There was a shouted warning and every head turned up like a circus audience seen from the apex of the big top. From far below, a staccato patter of orders, and a guard sent a single shot screaming up with its flat percussive crack echoing still as Dag reached the hollow column.

He heaved himself out on to the platform as light filled the tube from below and far down, he saw movement filling it from side to side. As he pushed back the trap, hammer blows jarred it against his hands as the upcoming guard ran through a clip. Then he was taking time off to do a neatly designed piece of undercutting with the vibrator through which he could ram a wedge.

Reaching the ladder in two strides, he went up in a rhythmic swing; glad it was short; feeling the gravity drag as though he had suddenly aged.

At the top, he believed for a moment that he had made a mistake and the car was on the other side. But even as he pushed himself to a jog trot round the rotunda to find out, he knew it was no good.

Certainly, it had gone. As he confirmed that it was so, a number of things happened at once. The force field was very much stronger, it built intolerably into a pounding, destructive rhythm, which isolated every cell in his ten-billion-unit computer brain and broke the conscious bonds which made him man. A last impression was that all the lights in Jasra had dimmed down to pin points of cherry red. He crumpled forward with arms outstretched on to the black basalt tiling.

Arne Richardsen had made a command decision which ensured his future as executive material, but which gave him no immediate pleasure. The car's low power system was swamped in the intense field. He could not raise *Three-Four* and it took him two seconds to know positively that he never would.

He could stay where he was and go on trying until time ran out and be in the clear responsibility-wise. He could even go back to Fletcher and tell him how it was. Or he could take the initiative, leave his commander, take the signal himself in a forked stick like any traditional messenger-man.

At full thrust, the small silver car moved like a flung dart and was docking below *Three-Four*'s entry port in under a minute.

Banister cracked into a concentrated fury of action. Alarm bleeps sounded through the ship. Forty seconds after Richardsen's arrival, with crew sealed up in their clutter of survival gear, he was leaving his front door as the last man out, and joined and strung-out line ploughing heavily through the lichen towards *Interstellar X*.

They were twenty metres from *Three-four* when the

perimeter lights cut out and the big-city glow in the sky above Jasra dimmed down.

Materialized in three-dimensional solidarity beside *Three-Four* and sidling slowly towards her was a shining replica of the ship herself. Seemingly as substantial as the original. Correct in every minute detail with a nimbus of blue luminosity like St. Malo's fire.

They stood in the sea of lichen, feeling the intolerable tension even through the bulk of their protective gear. Heads turned back looking up. Like a procession of statues in a field.

The slowly moving image touched its target. Moved on as circles intersect, overlap and finally coincide. There was only one ship. *Interstellar Three-Four* glowed brilliantly, faded, and was gone, leaving incredibly only its vacant lot. Gone as completely as if it had flamed on to complete its scheduled mission towards another planetfall.

FIVE

SUSAN BRAULT, back in the nest, saw the lights go down from the open roof where she had stood since the departure of the working party. Emotionally involved in the well-being of her commander, she instinctively felt that something was badly wrong and like Richardsen had a dilemma to rebut.

Categorically told to stay where she was, there should have been only one outcome. But a conclusion arrived at on a deeper level than the conscious mind moved her to action. She jammed a chair where it would hold the sliding door, slung the carbine across her shoulders like a partisan, wound a length of line round her narrow waist and swung out on to the other party wall.

She reasoned that going the same way as the others would be asking for double luck and in the event her choice was not unreasonable. The patio was empty and there were no lights, dimmed or otherwise, from the three rooms which opened on to it.

A new vista of the city from this quadrant allowed a limited view of the port itself. She saw the end-game of *Three-Four*'s eclipse. The ship glowed as if flood-lit and then dissolved in darkness. *Interstellar X* remained comfortingly in silhouette against its backdrop of stars and rising ground light.

It puzzled her but did not drown out her concern for Fletcher. This thing she had about him had started when she had first joined a crew from training wing. He had briefed the first mission, going out of his way to make it easy for her. After his incredible career he still had a fresh mind and could see the way ahead as if he stood exactly where she was standing.

As she had learned more of what he had achieved, the dangers he had passed, her interest had grown. Now to be on the same crew was an unexpected bonus. But, except that he treated her with the attention any man would give to an above-averagely attractive girl, there was no move on his side to push the boat along. Obviously he had no special thought for her.

In this analysis, she was way out. Dag Fletcher was not insensitive to the flattering attention he was getting; but in all modesty rated it as a by-product of his position in the corporation and the reputation he had. Hardly a personal issue at all. He deliberately kept his mind from the individual angle, because he knew he could very easily want more than she would be prepared to give.

Giving her attention to the job in hand, Susan found that she had been trying unsuccessfully to get through the transparent screens for longer than she could afford. She ran back to the parapet, sure now that Fletcher needed help.

From this penthouse roof, there was a treble storey drop of twenty metres to the next projecting patio. Doubled, the line would take her half-way. Thinking herself into an optimistic set, she went over the top and down in a lithe, hand-over-hand drop.

Smooth surfaces against her face made every effort to

contradict her mood. When she reached the end of the line, the case for optimism needed a new advocate.

Two metres left, a recess went back to a window. She tried to remember what the windows were like and could only visualize long complete plates without support features. Right, there was nothing. Except that at extreme reach there was a wider slot than usual between the basalt block strata.

Arms aching with strain, she unslung the carbine and explored the gap with its short muzzle. It went back about four centimetres. She wedged it in, clip and butt turning up. Hanging from it, one handed, she cleared the rope, fed it over the barrel in a convenient cooling fin and then carried on.

At the bottom, she stood erect against the wall, taking deep breaths in a darkness which concealed the totally pleasing effect this dynamism gave to a trim and proportionate figure. Stepping back she considered the possibility of pulling the carbine free and catching it as it fell. Then she recognized that there were too many imponderables. Instead, she ran lightly to the next balustrade and saw that this one concealed only a normal one-storey drop.

Susan Brault was in top physical shape in a service which took high ratings as a norm. She went over to full-arm stretch and dropped, turning as she fell to come out of the movement in a relaxed forward roll. She found she was at walkway level, and moved off at an easy jog-trot towards the great central tower which had been Dag's objective.

The walkways were empty, as though the people of Jasra knew better than to be out and about and she had to fight down a rising sense of panic and nightmare dread at her loneliness in this alien place.

Light was fully restored when she neared her objective and she had easy vision of a green-painted ambulance tender sidling in to dock at the level immediately below. Doors slid open in the entrance porch and a low trolley was wheeled out by a uniformed female Sabazian. There was no doubt who was lying on it and he appeared to be dead.

Somewhere, at the back of her mind, had been the thought that once she joined up with Fletcher and Richardsen, whatever complications remained, her personal troubles would be over. Now the full insecurity of her situation dawned starkly on her. In any case, if Dag was dead she was facing a bleak moment of truth at every level.

She checked a *suttee* instinct and held back. No guard followed the trolley out. The attendant ran it up a short ramp into the open back of the tender and pulled down its overswung door to a clip-fastener. Then she went round to join the pilot.

Susan dropped down and had joined the corpse as the tender began to edge out of the bay. She found herself in a low-ceilinged oblong box with two berths, one above the other, with Fletcher in the bottom one. The forward bulkhead was solid to within half a metre of the roof and closed by a transparent screen for the rest of the way. Pilot and nurse appeared, head view, looking to the front. She lay flat on the floor, out of vision for any casual look round and took hold of his trailing hand.

In spite of the warm night it was unseasonably cold. Testing for a pulse, she could not be sure, but believed it might still be faintly a going concern. Watching the window, she moved inch by inch until she was sharing his berth. Then she methodically went into a high-powered revival drill which would have resurrected a candidate from the valley of tombs.

She zipped down his blue overall suit and peeled it off. Flat powerful torso with a white scar from left shoulder to right hip like a tattooed bandolier. Then she wriggled out of her jersey top and held him tightly, warming him with her tautly vital body in a total statement of form from knees to lips which breathed into his cold ones.

It was a method to revive a far-gone exposure case and was as unfair to *rigor mortis* as it could get. Dag Fletcher had opened his eyes to some unexpected scenes but this one went into the file as top choice. He saw wide brown eyes centimetres from his own, dark brows flaring obliquely; a

cowl of dark scented hair brushing his face, warm arms and the softly-firm pneumatic pressure of bare breasts against his chest.

To say, "Where am I?" would have been unforgivable. He said as though her presence there was the most obvious and necessary thing, "Your eyes are nearly all pupil and the iris is like a dark gold ring. A very beautiful effect, Susan," and took her in a grip which was convincing proof that he had rejoined the ranks of erotic man.

She put a hand over his mouth and struggled clear, a feat requiring as much strength as anything yet in her busy evening. By the time she had grabbed her charcoal-grey top, he was back on frequency and similarly ready to postpone personal interest to the public good.

He said, "They thought I was dead. Sabazian biological structure is pretty rugged. They would not detect respiration or pulse. You did a good job, Susan, and no man ever revived a better way. Next time I get hold of you, however, it will not be in the line of duty. So you'd better be on your guard."

She said, "Why, Commander, whatever do you mean?" But her eyes gave away the honest statement that she was all interest in the arrival of that day.

Fletcher had a moment to reflect that he was more fortunate than any human-type being had a right to be and had to modify it as the Sabazian nurse belatedly turned round to see how the cadaver was taking the ride. She was all surprise to see that his eyes were open and he was zipping up his curious overall suit. The driver responded to her thump on his massive shoulder and took a look for himself, then he dropped the car in a lichen-covered space between rows of squat circular houses and slid back the screen which separated the quick from the dead.

His simple task was to deliver the body to the converter on the moor outside Jasra where corpses were collected and re-structured into useful community products like soap, fertilizer and book-binding materials. Not much profit could be expected from the slender Earthman, but it would be a

gesture towards covering expenses for the trouble he had caused. Certainly, there was nothing in the convenant about Resurrection.

The Sabazian leaned through, head and shoulders, having thoughtfully picked a heavy jacking lever from its clip beside his seat.

Rank and file members of the organization were not in the genius class and he brought his flail down with a carry-through which embedded it in a mash of broken springs and torn fabric. Fletcher, timing it to the last split second, rolled clear and grabbed the grey arm in an old-fashioned lock which threatened to break it off.

The bar fell to the deck and was caught by Susan Brault who appeared like a comely genie and, without prompting, took a two-handed swipe through the open slot, which lifted Dag's hair with the wind of its passing and caught the driver on the side of his neck. His grey turnip head lolled sideways in a very terminal way. Soap and fertilizer shares were looking up.

The nurse, primarily a member of a semi-military organization, was bringing a carbine round to bear when Susan's bludgeon on a second sweep drove it soggily against her ballooning chest and Dag had pulled it free before she could regain the initiative.

He handed it to his Brunhilde. "Cover her, I'll pull out the driver."

They left the man, a barely noticeable grey mound in the amethyst-blue lichen and Dag went on another kilometre before they dumped Florence Nightingale knee-deep in the heather. Then with Susan beside him, he turned back in a wide sweep for Jasra, now a bowl of brilliant light.

The hospital tender was clumsy in use, with switch-gear which had been superseded a century ago on Space Corporation craft. Dag made two false moves which took them within a metre of collision before he got the hang of it and beat it up to a fair speed just above walkway level. Susan rode shot-gun with the carbine across her knees.

She said, "Where are you taking me?" in the tone which

pleasingly suggested that anywhere at all was all right by her.

Dag Fletcher took time off to give her a long look. Whatever the outcome, which was very shaky indeed, he felt a surge of personal optimism in the life situation. It was all starting again for him and he realized what he had cut himself off from in the last year or two of concentrated work schedules.

So far, the initiative had been all on her side. So he went down in a flamboyant dive and when the tender ploughed to a stop took a full minute by his time disc in spite of time's special value just then, to show her beyond reasonable doubt that the ball was in his court and she was a marked woman.

Then he was giving total concentration to the moves ahead. He said, "Can you raise *Interstellar X* on this heap's primitive intercom? They might have news of Arne."

She took under thirty seconds to tell him it was no go and he followed the same reasoning path as Richardsen had done and turned for the space port. *Three-Four* had certainly gone.

Six

TEN metres from the reception port of his own ship, grabs snaked out and held the tender in line with a static disintegrator. Banister's voice, on a beamed hailer, penetrated the very fabric, using the clipped *lingua franca* of the Galaxy and in a tone which would have made any language sound nasty. It said, in essence, that he wanted one good reason for allowing the car to stay in recognizable molecular shape and he wanted it damned quick.

Dag said, "Fletcher here and Executive Lieutenant Brault," and the grabs retracted and pulled them up to the front door.

Banister said, "Richardsen swore he'd seen you dead when he went back. He got away with a line of notches in the car. Hablum is in the open. He must believe he has a cast-iron case."

Fletcher said, "*Interstellar Three-Four* will cost Sabazius two hundred million and I'll collect it myself. Where's Richardsen now?"

"Still out with the car. He went back to pick up Lieutenant Brault from your five-star hotel. Thank you, in passing, for the call. You could have been twelve crew down as well."

"Everything has its good side. We can put *Interstellar X* on a war footing. Sort it out, Neal, and take over in command. Bring in your co-pilot on the same basis. That will leave me free to run the I.G.O. political angle. No criticism of Paula Underwood, she's a good navigator, but this is now a different mission. She can double with your number three. All your people in the executive slots except Ray. He must stay number one Power."

"I've worked with him before. I'd agree that."

"Then we have spare people to put on the armament. Susan Brault with me on the diplomatic chore ranked as Staff Lieutenant. Crew briefing as soon as you can make it and in any event in fifteen minutes."

It took all of that, with *Interstellar X* like a disturbed hive. Among Banister's crew, Fletcher found an ex-I.G.O. gunner who had done his compulsory service in a corvette with similar armament. Carter by name, a tow-haired, phlegmatic type, who heaved himself into the corvette's fire-control centre above the hydroponic tanks in the cone without asking a single question. He strapped himself into his gimbal-mounted couch, plugged himself in, ran through the controls and called up on the net. "Guns to Commander. All systems Go. Just tell me where and when."

Dag came in, "Pin-point that central building with its black column. Selective destruction. Be ready to fire on signal."

Neal Banister came in, "Commander to Commissar. Conference set up."

In the small control cabin of *Interstellar X* there was only room to stand. Carter stayed in his distant eyrie and Mor-

timer had his Second on an auxiliary console in the power pack ready to initiate a countdown.

Fletcher said, "Thank you, Commander. I'll say this. There's a very dodgy phase coming up. You saw what happened to *Three-Four*. This time we shall strike first. But the I.G.O. charter is explicit about the use of force. We are not here to make punitive retaliation. I am going ashore to see Hablum. Accept no orders about the ship unless I bring them myself. If the ship is threatened destroy that central power source in Jasra. A second's delay to think about it will be too long. Again, if my personal call sign is repeated without stop from this"—he demonstrated the small cigarette case unit transmitter—"do the same. Any questions?"

"None, Commissar."

Amethyst-blue light was coming up to dim out Jasra's many still-lighted windows when Fletcher made a second ceremonial approach to its space port reception area. This time he went armed in the uniform of a military commander with the over-riding rank insignia of an I.G.O. Commissar on his left epaulette. Massey accompanied him, carrying a heavy-duty laser which could neutralize space in fifty-cubic-metre blocks or punch a needle hole through a metre of hardened steel.

The scout car was back in its docking collar and he told the tender which brought him in to stand off and cruise about waiting for a call.

He went through to the centre dais and a ring of guards closed in behind him. He said, "What has happened to *Interstellar Three-Four?*"

The port controller looked insolently confident. This demonstration of power had confirmed him as Hablum's man and he believed that Sabazius now had a weapon which made them independent of outside interference. He said curtly, "I would have expected your own Commander to have kept you informed. He took off at a time and for a destination which is listed in the control tower log."

"That is not so. The ship was destroyed with your knowledge. You are displaced and this port is taken out of

Sabazian control until I am satisfied that proper operating conditions have been re-established."

Not being physiologically adapted for it, there was not much laughter on Sabazius. But the controller drummed up what would pass for a sneering grin which remained fixed on his round turnip face as Fletcher's laser beam sprayed out and ended his contribution to the exchange of views. Simultaneously, Massey took the rear guard in a wide-angled burst. Then he swivelled slowly and dropped every Sabazian in sight.

One guard, quicker than his fellows, had unslung his carbine and hastily pumped out a shot which took an intricate flight path in a succession of ricochets among the many pillars of the rotunda. Then he fell rigidly forward with the carbine at his shoulder making one leg of a supporting tripod. The set looked like a shop outfitter's basement.

Dag said, "Get the scout car, Lieutenant. I want to know what has happened to Richardsen."

Massey was back on a count of twenty and Fletcher had already checked records purporting to show routine flight exchange signals from *Three-Four* and a clearance which showed she was now out of the gravisphere of Sabazius. No doubt the machine would be set up to do the same service for *Interstellar X*.

In the car, he said, "We'll check at the guest house, they might just be holding him there." They swept on to the terrace of their suite and blasted the closed screens. The rooms were empty. Even the poker players next door had gone, leaving the playing discs in mute witness of a game unfinished.

Jasra was a big city. Arne Richardsen could be anywhere. It seemed unlikely that the experimental block would also be a prison. Dag said, "We'll give Earth Consul a call. There's one other thing to clear up."

Victor Lamech rolled reluctantly out of his wide bed and blinked warily in the strong light. He looked an unhappy man when Fletcher grabbed a handful of his blue silk

pyjama top and backed him against the cold basalt block of his bedroom wall. A convulsive wriggle from the tumbled bed made it clear that he had found ways of making the lonely station less of an all-time chore.

Dag said, "How did the Sabazians know that my ship was undermanned?"

Lamech blustered, "You will pay for this, Fletcher. I am an accredited Consul with diplomatic immunities. You cannot do this to me."

"No?" Fletcher began a systematic and impersonal thump of the large head on to the unyielding wall. He asked again, "How did they know?"

Pressure on the man's neck was making his eyes project.

"I have . . . to supply . . . details . . . incoming Earth . . . nationals."

"How did you know these details? My manifest was on I.G.O. security."

There was silence and a diversion. A small, silvery nude Fingalnian girl wriggled suddenly out of bed and made a run for the door where Massey had the pleasure of catching her.

Fletcher looked again at Lamech, tightened his grip and hammered back his head, as though he had lost interest in anything the man might have to say. He asked one more question.

"Who told you?"

'Gilmore. Sub-Controller Gilmore. He is related to me by marriage, you understand. He always lets me know of interesting developments."

So that was it. Dag remembered Gilmore. A communications executive who had been grounded on his say-so, when the man had been found making off-the-record transactions in Fingalnia. Hence the hot-pillow addition to his brother-in-law's Consulate.

That was one thing sorted out.

"Another thing. Where would they be likely to take Arne Richardsen?"

Broken on the main count, Lamech was anxious to help.

Sitting on the bed, massaging his neck, he said, "There is an internment block below the guard barracks. You would never gain entrance without a permit from the Metropolitan Governor himself."

"Right, Lamech. You have been helpful. You just might live. You can show us the way."

"Like this?"

"Why not, you will be sitting down. Count your blessings."

Massey said, "What about this one?"

"Bring her along. It adds a touch of phantasy."

The small scout car was full. Fletcher and Lamech in front, Massey and the beautiful silvery girl in the rumble. At the last moment, Massey found her a cellular blanket, for his own peace of mind and she was wearing it, like a poncho, to mid-hip length.

Lamech wasted no time and Fletcher took the car in arrow swoops to the gates of the guard barracks.

Underslung the length of the small car, a heavy calibre laser tube raked along the double-leaf bronze door and it sagged away before them. Volleys from embrasures beside the door drummed along their infrangom sides and with hardly a check Fletcher drove through the opening gap.

In the centre was an open courtyard and they roamed round it looking for away into the circular block of building.

Lamech said, "Down there."

There was a ramp and another bronze door and the car went down like an angry wasp. Inside the door a heroic jailer died standing four-square with his carbine at his shoulder blazing at the oncoming car, and then they found Arne Richardsen.

Stripped to the waist, hanging by his wrists turning slowly like any free-hanging mass in a current of air. Broad back raw from a preliminary flogging, anacrusis to the execution arranged for later in the day.

The Fingalnian girl was all for sacrificing her blanket and

then cradled his head on her lap and stroked his hair. She was obviously going to be a big help.

Spinning in its own length, the car was ready to break out when a rumble penetrated its acoustic shell and reminded Dag that such a place would have its inner defences. He stopped, with half a metre of freedom as the whole corridor before him filled from edge to edge with black basalt block, dropping from the roof like a seal in any Pharaoh's tomb.

Turning in a second's fraction, he was in time to see the matching block close off the distant end.

The car's heavy-calibre laser blasted a socket like the hole for a shot-firing charge. It was going to take some little time to get out. He slowly traversed their world. Forty metres of corridor with six cell-cubicles opening off. All blind built into an immensely thick wall. Even then it seemed foolish of Hablum to do this. It was only a question of time before they were out to make the reckoning.

Fletcher left Massey working at it and got out again to look at the ground. Then he imagined for one second of confusion that the end wall had become a mirror of polished glass. His own familiar figure was advancing towards him. Exact in every detail. Tall, erect, meeting his own eyes in a hypnotic stare.

Massey's voice was shouting to him as though through a metre of acoustic padding, "Commander! It is the image of destruction. Your signal! Your signal!"

Dag Fletcher knew how difficult it must have been for any victim to evade the contact. They would move forward, fascinated, wanting to grasp annihilation to them. He fought his will to get a hand to his pocket and bring out the transmitter. Five metres, four metres, coming on slowly with the inevitability of death.

Massey had left the car and was shouting in his ear, "The signal!"

He thumbed down the switch and the tiny short-wave surge went out. It depended on reaction times and what sort of watch was being kept.

Susan Brault heard the faint etiolated bleep and roused Mortimer before a count of two. It was instantly plain to her that Dag might well be in the building itself. But she would follow his instruction if it cut out her own heart. She said, "On three, Commander. On three. Coming up. *Now*."

Dag Fletcher saw his own three-dimensional form coming to close the gap as to an ultimate judgment. This was what the world saw of him then. Detail crystal clear. Pucker over the left eye from that burn from way back. Grey streak of hair. Now the finality of oblivion. He could reach out and touch. Now he knew what it was, a projection of exact detail in an expression of negative mass. One plus minus one is nothing. Cancellation.

The image took the last step and he could feel the immense output of energy which gave it form. His mind went calm and steady to accept the onset of oblivion.

Massey hurled himself forward to break the deadlock which seemed to have numbed Fletcher's mind, and found himself thrown against the basalt corridor wall. The floor was trembling as if in seismic spasm. When he picked himself up Fletcher was still there, alone and shaking his head as though to clear his eyes of double vision.

Dag said, "Thank you for that, Lieutenant, I won't forget it. Now we have to dig our way out of here."

When the scout car homed on its docking collar at the entry port of *Interstellar X*, they were met by Neal Banister. He said, "There's a change of heart over there, Dag. Hablum went up with his H.Q. The moderates are all eager to call you uncle. You're a revolutionary hero."

"It will still cost them two hundred million for *Three-Four*. I want that signed on the line or Jasra will have to be evacuated."

"They've offered that agreement."

One missing delegate in the circle of welcome was Susan Brault and Dag had a moment's self-deprecating doubt. Possibly, with all the new staff, she had re-established an old acquaintance. He took a cigarette from his useful case

and went on to his cabin. At the end of the line, one was always alone. Necessarily so. Deep down, he knew it and accepted it.

When he slid back the door he saw that the small space had been transformed for a very old-fashioned welcome. She was wearing the diaphanous, sari-like dress which was Bromius's contribution to Galactic *haute couture*. Draped over the right shoulder, bare to the waist on the left, to symbolize that the heart had nothing to hide.

She said uncertainly, "I hate official receptions. The only things worth saying can only be said in the strictest privacy."

In her warm, dark eyes, he could see a reflection of himself moving towards her, and the notional line showed no sign of an ending in the forseeable future. Which was all any reasonable man could want to see at any one moment of time.

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