FANTASTIC UNIVERSE SCIENCE FICTION

OCT.
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FEATURING 3 EXCITING NOVELETS

REVOLT ON MERCURY by STANLEY MULLEN

DEATH FOR A HUNTER by MICHAEL SHAARA

SOLDIER FROM TOMORROW by HARLAN ELLISON

THE CANALS OF MARS

This is the page where the cover artist usually tells the story behind the cover, as he sees it. We feel you will agree with us that Felix Boyd, author of *Welcoming Party*, which appears in this issue, captures with extraordinary skill much of the brooding horror and the menace lurking behind the flowers and the smiles of the young girls sent to welcome these Earthmen who have arrived on Mars.

The canals of Mars have interested writers and scientists for several generations, many acknowledging the possibility that Intelligences had been responsible for the coming into existence of the canals, but differing on the appearance of whatever life-forms, whether humanoid or otherwise, that might have survived. Allan Howard, in last month's issue of this magazine, describes the *canali* of Schiaparelli (first seen in 1877) as "indeed broad waterways, stretching from pole to pole, too regular to be anything but the work of intelligence," while other writers have seen life as still struggling for survival on Mars—sometimes in turreted cities and sometimes in cities reflecting something of the glory that had been Mars—civilization clinging to the edges of the canals or channels that unite and keep alive the planet.

Obivously the canals of Schiaparelli, if correctly identified, do represent a fantastic engineering achievement. If one of these canals should be moved to earth it would stretch from Texas to New York and be, a hundred miles wide.

But who built these canals that begin in one dark region and end in another, crossing each other from time to time at spots identified as oases? Lowell's explanation resembles that of Schiaparelli, except that he sees the canals as a fantastic system of planet-wide waterways, built in the final centuries when there was still life on Mars, the Martians making use of the melting mountain snows in a last desperate effort at survival, vegetation and what remained of civilization clinging to the canals until "the end".

And now comes Felix Boyd's explanation of the *real* meaning of those spots where the canals cross....

NEW MONTHLY FEATURE

From time to time we have published reports by the *Research Section of Civilian Saucer Intelligence of New York.* CSI is distinguished from most of the other organizations working in the field, in that here is no blind acceptance of published or unpublished rumors, but instead critical evaluation of reports, dispassionate analysis of supplementary evidence, field investigations whenever possible and, above all, standards of evaluation which make CSI's reputation for objectivity completely understandable.

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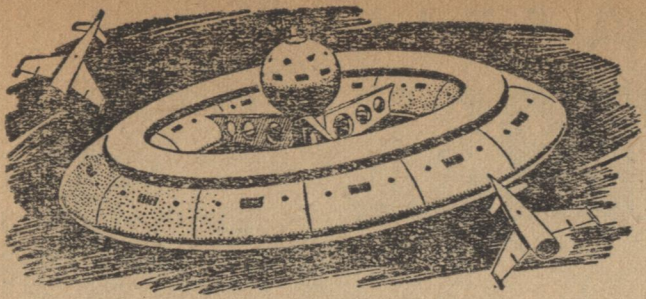

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soldier from tomorrow

by HARLAN ELLISON

They heard the telepathic cry in each head, recited their daily prayers, and began the crawl over the slushy ground.

QARLO hunkered down-further into the firmhole, gathering his cloak about him. Even the triple-lining of the cape could not prevent the seeping cold of the battlefield from reaching him; and even through one of those linings—lead impregnated—he could feel the faint tickle of drop-out, all about him, eating at his tissues. He began to shiver again. The Push was going on to the South, and he had to wait, had to listen for the telepathic command of his superior officer.

He fingered an edge of the firmhole, noting he had not steadied it up too well with the firmer. He drew the small molecule-hardening instrument from his pouch, and examined it. The calibrater had slipped a notch, which explained why the dirt of the firmhole had not become as hard as he had desired.

Off to the left the hiss of an eighty-thread beam split the night air, and he shoved the firmer back quickly. The spiderweb tracery of the beam lanced across the sky, poked tentatively at an armor center, throwing blood-red shadows

Harlan Ellison, who by now needs no introduction to any reader of Science Fiction, returns with this challenging novelet which raises the question of what war will be like "the Day after Tomorrow". And what will the men be like who fight in this frighteningly different tomorrow?

across Qarlo's crag-like features.

The armor center backtracked the thread beam, retaliated with a blinding flash of its own batteries. One burst. Two. Three. The eighty-thread reared once more, feebly, then subsided. A moment later the concussion of its power chambers exploding shook the earth around Qarlo, causing bits of unfirmed dirt and small pebbles to tumble in on him. Another moment, and the shrapnel came through.

Qarlo lay flat to the ground, soundlessly hoping for a bit more life amidst all this death. He knew his chances of coming back were infinitesimal. What was it? Three out of every thousand came back? He had no illusions. He was a common footman, and he knew he would die out here, in the midst of the Great War VII.

As though the detonation of the eighty-thread had been a signal, the weapons of Qarlo's company opened up, full-on. The webbings criss-crossed the blackness overhead with delicate patterns—appearing, disappearing, changing with every second, ranging through the spectrum, washing the bands of colors outside the spectrum Qarlo could catalog. Qarlo slid into a tiny ball in the slush-filled bottom of the firmhole, waiting.

He was a good soldier. He knew his place. When those metal and energy beasts out there were snarling at each other, there was nothing a lone foot-soldier could do—but die. He waited, knowing his time would come much too soon. No matter how violent, how involved, how pushbutton-ridden Wars became, it always simmered down to the man on foot. It had to, for men fought men still.

His mind dwelled limply in a state between reflection and alertness. A state all men of war came to know when there was nothing but the thunder of the big guns abroad in the night.

The stars had gone into hiding.

Abruptly, the thread beams cut out, the traceries winked off, silence once again descended. Qarlo snapped to instant attentiveness. This was the moment. His mind was now keyed to one sound, one only. Inside his head the command would form, and he would act; not entirely of his own volition. The strategists and psychmen had worked together on this thing: the tone of command was keyed into each soldier's brain. Printed in, probed in, sunken in. It was there, and when the Regimenter sent his telepathic orders, Qarlo would leap like a puppet, and advance on direction.

Thus, when it came, it was as though he had anticipated it; as though he knew a second before the mental rasping and the *Advance!* erupted within his skull, that the moment had arrived.

A second sooner than he should have been, he was up, out of the firmhole, hugging his Brandelmeier to his chest, the weight of the plastic bandoliers and his pouch reassuring across his stomach, back, and hips. Even before the mental word actually came.

Because of this extra moment's jump on the command, it happened, and it happened just that way. No other chance coincidences could have done it, but done just that way.

When the first blasts of the enemy's zeroed-in batteries met the combined rays of Qarlo's own guns, also pinpointed, they met at a point that should by all rights have been empty. But Qarlo had jumped too soon, and when they met, the soldier was at the focal point.

Three hundred d i s t i n c t beams latticed down, joined in a coruscating rainbow, threw negatively-charged particles five hundred feet in the air, shorted out...and warped the soldier off the battlefield.

Nathan Schwachter had his heart attack right there on the subway platform.

The soldier materialized in front of him, from nowhere, filthy and ferocious-looking, a strange weapon cradled to his body...just as the old man was about to put a penny in the candy machine.

Qarlo's long cape was still, the de-materialization and subsequent reappearance having left him untouched. He stared in confusion at the sallow face before him, and started violently at the face's piercing shriek.

Qarlo watched with growing bewilderment and terror as the sallow face contorted and sank to the littered floor of the platform. The old man clutched his chest, twitched and gasped several times. His legs jerked spasmodically, and his mouth opened wildly again and again. He died with mouth open, eyes staring at the ceiling.

Qarlo looked at the body disinterestedly for a moment; death...what did one death matter...every day during the War, ten thousand died... more horribly than this... this was as nothing to him.

The sudden universe-filling scream of an incoming express train broke his attention. The black tunnel that his War-filled world had become, was filled with the rusty wail of an unseen monster, bearing down on him out of the darkness.

The fighting-man in him made his body arch, sent it into a crouch. He poised on the balls of his feet, his rifle levering horizontal instantly, pointed at the sound.

From the crowds packed on the platform, a voice rose over the thunder of the incoming train:

"*Him!* It was *him!* He shot that old man...he's crazy!" Heads turned; eyes stared; a

little man with a dirty vest, his bald head reflecting the glow of the overhead lights, was pointing a shaking finger at Qarlo.

It was as if two currents had been set up simultaneously. The crowd both drew away and advanced on him. Then the train barreled around the curve, drove past, blasting sound into the very fibers of the soldier's body. Qarlo's mouth opened wide in a soundless scream, and more from reflex than intent, the Brandelmeier erupted in his hands.

A triple-thread of cold blue beams sizzled from the small bell-mouth of the weapon, streaked across the tunnel, and blasted full into the front of the train.

The front of the train melted down quickly, and the vehicle ground to a stop. The metal had been melted like a coarse grade of plastic on a burner. Where it had fused into a soggy lump, the metal was bright and smeary—more like the gleam of oxidized silver than anything else.

Qarlo regretted having fired the moment he felt the Brandelmeier buck. He was not where he should be—*where* he was still another, more pressing problem—and he knew he was in danger. Every movement had to be watched as carefully as possible...and perhaps he had gotten off to a bad start already. But that noise...

He had suffered the screams of the battlefield, but the reverberations of the train, thundering back and forth in that enclosed space, was a nightmare of indescribable horror.

As he stared dumbly at his handiwork, from behind him, the crowd made a concerted rush.

Three burly, charcoal-suited executives—each carrying an attache case which he dropped as he made the lunge, looking like unhealthy carbon-copies of each other—grabbed Qarlo above the elbows, around the waist, about the neck.

The soldier roared something unintelligible and flung them from him. One slid across the platform on the seat of his pants, bringing up short, his stomach and face smashing into a tiled wall. The second spun away, arms flailing, into the crowd. The third tried to hang onto Qarlo's neck. The soldier lifted him bodily, arched him over his head—breaking the man's insecure grip—and pitched him against a stanchion. The executive hit the girder, slid down, and lay quite still, his back oddly twisted.

The crowd emitted scream after scream, drew away once more. Terror rippled back through its ranks. Several women, near the front, suddenly became aware of the blood pouring from the face of one of the executives, and

keeled onto the dirty platform unnoticed. The screams continued, seeming echoes of the now-dead express train's squealing.

But as an entity, the crowd backed the soldier down the platform. For a moment Qarlo forgot he still held the Brandelmeier. He lifted the gun to a threatening position, and the entity that was the crowd pulsed back.

Nightmare! It was all some sort of vague, formless nightmare to Qarlo. This was not the War, where anyone he saw, he blasted. This was something else, some other situation, in which he was lost, disoriented. What was happening?

Qarlo moved toward the wall, his back prickly with fear-sweat. He had expected to die in the War, but something as simple and direct and expected as that had not happened. He was *here*, not *there*—wherever *here* was, not wherever *there* had gone—and these people were unarmed, obviously civilians. Which would not have kept him from murdering them...but what was happening? Where was the battlefield?

His progress toward the wall was halted momentarily as he backed cautiously around a stanchion. He knew there were people behind him, as well as the white-faced knots before him, and he was beginning to suspect there was no way out. Such confusion boiled up in his thoughts, so close to hysteria was he—plain soldier of the fields—that his mind forcibly rejected the impossibility of being somehow transported from the War into this new—and in many ways more terrifying—situation. He concentrated on one thing only, as a good soldier should: OUT!

He slid along the wall, the crowd flowing before him, opening at his approach, closing in behind. He whirled once, driving them back further with the black hole of the Brandelmeier's bell-mouth. Again he hesitated (not knowing why) to fire upon them.

He sensed they were enemies. But still they were unarmed. And yet, that had never stopped him before. The village in Tetra Omsk Territory, beyond the Volga somewhere. They had been unarmed there, too, but the square had been filled with civilians he had not hesitated to burn. Why was he hesitating now?

The Brandelmeier continued in its silence.

Qarlo detected a commotion behind the crowd, above the crowd's inherent commotion. And a movement. Something was happening there. He backed tightly against the wall as a blue-suited, brass-buttoned man broke through the crowd.

The man took one look, caught the unwinking black eye of the Brandelmeier, and

threw his arms back, indicating to the crowd to clear away. He began screaming at the top of his lungs, veins standing out in his temples. "Geddoudahere! The guy's a cuckaboo! Somebody'll get kilt! Beat it, run!"

The crowd needed no further impetus. It broke in the center and streamed toward the stairs.

Qarlo swung around, looking for another way out, but both accessible stairways were clogged by fighting commuters shoving each other mercilessly to get out. He was effectively trapped.

The cop fumbled at his holster. Qarla caught a glimpse of the movement from the corner of his eye. Instinctively he knew the movement for what it was; a weapon was about to be brought into use. He swung about, leveling the B r a n d e l m e i e r. The cop jumped behind a stanchion just as the soldier pressed the firing stud.

A triple-thread of bright blue energy leaped from the w e a p o n ' s bell-mouth. The beam went over the heads of the crowd, neatly melting away a five foot segment of wall supporting one of the stairways. The stairs creaked, and the sound of tortured metal adjusting to poor support and an overcrowding of people, rang through the tunnel. The cop looked fearfully above himself, saw the beams curving, then settle under the weight, and turned a wide-eyed stare back at the soldier.

The cop fired twice, from behind the stanchion, the booming of the explosions catapaulting back and forth in the enclosed space.

The second bullet took the soldier above the wrist in his left arm. The Brandelmeier slipped uselessly from his good hand, as blood stained the garment he wore. He stared at his shattered lower arm in amazement. Doubled amazement.

What manner of weapon was this the blue-coated man had used? No beam, that. Nothing like anything he had ever seen before. No beam to fry him in his tracks. It was some sort of power that hurled a projectile. . . that had ripped his body. He stared stupidly as blood continued to flow out of his arm.

The cop, less anxious now to attack this man with the weird costume and unbelievable rifle, edged cautiously from behind his cover, skirting the edge of the platform, trying to get near enough to Qarlo to put another bullet into him, should he offer further resistance. But the soldier continued to stand, spraddle-legged, s t a r i n g at his wound, confused at where he was, what had happened to him, the screams of the trains as they bulleted past, and the barbarian tactics of his blue-coated adversary.

The cop moved slowly,

steadily, expecting the soldier to break and run at any moment. The wounded man stood rooted, however. The cop bunched his muscles and leaped the few feet intervening.

Savagely, he brought the barrel of his pistol down on the side of Qarlo's neck, near the ear. The soldier turned slowly, anchored in his tracks, and stared unbelievingly at the policeman for an instant.

Then his eyes glazed, and he collapsed to the platform.

As a grey swelling mist bobbed up around his mind, one final thought impinged incongruously: *he struck me ... physical contact? I don't believe it!*

What have I gotten into?

Light filtered through vaguely. Shadows slithered and wavered, sullenly formed into solids.

"Hey, Mac. Got a light?"

Shadows blocked Qarlo's vision, but he knew he was lying on his back, staring up. He turned his head, and a wall oozed into focus, almost at his nose-tip. He turned his head the other way. Another wall, about three feet away, blending in his sight, into a shapeless grey blotch. He abruptly realized the back of his head hurt. He moved slowly, swiveling his head, but the soreness remained. Then he realized he was lying on some hard metal surface, and he tried to sit up. The pains throbbed higher, making him feel nauseous, and for an instant his vision receded again.

Then it steadied, and he sat up slowly. He swung his legs over the sharp edge of what appeared to be a shallow, sloping metal trough. It was a mattressless bunk, curved in its bottom from hundreds of men who had laid there before him.

He was in a cell.

"Hey! I said you got a match there?"

Qarlo turned from the empty rear wall of the cell and looked through the bars. A bulb-nosed face was thrust up close to the metal barrier. The man was short, in filthy rags; his eyes were bloodshot, and his nose was criss-crossed with blue and red veins.

Qarlo knew he was in detention, and from the very look, the very smell of this other, he knew he was not in a military prison. The man was staring in at him, oddly.

"Match, Charlie? You got a match?" he puffed his fat, wet lips at Qarlo, forcing the bit of cigarette stub forward with his mouth. Qarlo stared back; he could not understand the man's words. They were so slowly spoken, so sharp and yet unintelligible. But he knew what to answer.

"Marnames Qarlo Clobregnny pryt, sizfifwunohtootoonyn," the soldier muttered by rote surly tones running together.

"Whaddaya mad at *me* for, buddy? I didn't putcha in

here," argued the match-seeker. "All I wanted was a light for this here butt." He held up two inches of smoked stub. "How come they gotcha inna cell, and not runnin' around loose inna bull pen like us?" he cocked a thumb over his shoulder, and for the first time Qarlo realized others were in this jail.

"Ah, ta hell wit ya," the drunk muttered. He cursed again, softly under his breath, turning away. He walked across the bull pen and sat down with the four other men —all vaguely similar in facial content—who lounged around a rough-hewn table-bench combination. The table and benches, all one piece, like a picnic table, were bolted to the floor.

"A screwloose," the drunk said to the others, nodding his balding head at the soldier in his long cape and metallic skintight suit. He picked up the crumpled remnants of an ancient magazine and leafed through it as though he knew every line of type, every girlie illustration, by heart.

Qarlo looked over the cell. It was about ten feet high by eight across, a sink with one thumb-push spigot running cold water, a commode without seat or paper, and metal trough, roughly the dimensions of an average-sized man, fastened to one wall. One enclosed bulb burned feebly in the ceiling. Three walls of solid steel. Ceiling and floor of the same, riveted together at the seams. The fourth wall was the barred door.

The firmer might be able to wilt that steel, he realized, and instinctively reached for his pouch. It was the first moment he had had a chance to think of it, and even as he reached, knew the satisfying weight of it was gone. His bandoliers also. His Brandelmeier, of course. His boots, too, and there seemed to have been some attempt to get his cape off, but it was all part of the skintight suit of metallic-mesh cloth.

The loss of the pouch was too much. Everything that had happened, had happened so quickly, so blurrily, meshed, and the soldier was abruptly overcome by confusion and a deep feeling of hopelessness. He sat down on the bunk, the ledge of metal biting into his thighs. His head still ached from a combination of the blow dealt him by the cop, and the metal bunk where he had laid. He ran a shaking hand over his head, feeling the fractional inch of his brown hair, cut battle-style. Then he noticed that his left hand had been bandaged quite expertly. There was hardly any throbbing from his wound.

That brought back to sharp awareness all that had transpired, and the War leaped into his thoughts. The telepathic command, the rising from the firmhole, the rifle at the ready...the silence

...then a sizzling *shusssssss*, and the universe had exploded around him in a billion tiny flickering novas of color and color and color. Then suddenly, just as suddenly as he had been standing on the battlefield of Great War VII, advacing on the enemy forces of Ruskie-Chink, he was *not* there.

He was here.

He was in some dark, hard tunnel, with a great beast roaring out of the blackness onto him, and a man in a blue coat had shot him. Actually *touched* him! Without radiation gloves! How had the con known Qarlo was not boogy-trapped with radiates? He could have died in an instant.

Where was he? What war was this he was engaged in? Were these Ruski-Chink or his own Tri-Continenters? He did not know, and there was no sign of an explanation.

Then he thought of something more important. If he had been captured, then they must want to question him. There was a way to combat *that*, too. He felt around in the hollow tooth toward the back of his mouth. His tongue touched each tooth till it hit the right lower bicuspid. It was empty. The poison glob was gone, he realized in dismay. *It must have dropped out when the blue-coat clubbed me*, he thought.

He realized he was at *their* mercy; who *they* might be was another thing to worry about. And with the glob gone, he had no way to stop their extracting information. It was bad. Very bad, according to the warning conditioning he had received. They could use Probers, or dyoxl-scopalite, or hypno-scourge, or any one of a hundred different methods, any one of which would reveal to them the strength of numbers in his company, the battery placements, the gun ranges, the identity and thought-wave band of every officer...in fact, a good deal. More than he had thought he knew.

He had become a very important prisoner of War. He *had* to hold out, he realized!

Why?

The thought popped up, and was gone. All it left in its wake was the intense feeling: I despise War, all war and *the* War! Then, even that was gone, and he was alone with the situation once more, to try and decide what had happened to him...what secret weapon had been used to capture him...and if these unintelligible barbarians with the projectile weapons *could*, indeed, extract his knowledge from him.

I swear they won't get anything out of me but my name, rank, and serial number, he thought desperately.

He mumbled those particulars aloud, as reassurance: "Marnames Qarlo Clobregnny, pryt, sizfifwunohtootoonyn."

The drunks looked up from

their table and their shakes, at the sound of his voice. The man with the rosedrop nose rubbed a dirty hand across fleshy chin folds, repeated his impression of the strange man in the locked cell.

"Screwloose!"

He might have remained in jail indefinitely, considered a madman or a mad rifleman. But the desk sergeant who had booked him, after the soldier had received medical attention, grew curious about the strangely-shaped weapon.

As he put the things into security, he tested the Brandelmeier—h a r d l y realizing what knob or stud controlled its power, never realizing what it could do—and melted away one wall of the safe room. Three inch plate steel, and it melted bluely, fused solidly.

He called the Captain, and the Captain called the F.B.I. and the F. B. I. called Internal Security, and Internal Security said, "Preposterous!" and checked back. When the Brandelmeier had been thoroughly tested—as much as *could* be tested, since the rifle had no seams, no apparent power source, and fantastic range—they were willing to believe. They had the soldier removed from his cell, transported along with the pouch, and a p h i l o l o g i s t named Soames, to the I. S. general headquarters in Washington, D. C. The Brandelmeier came by jet courier, and the soldier was flown in by helicopter, under sedation. The philologist named Soames, whose hair was long and rusty, whose face was that of a starving artist and whose temperament was that of a saint, came in by specially-chartered plane from Columbia University. The pouch was sent by sealed Brinks truck to the airport, where it was delivered under guard to a mail plane. They all arrived in Washington within ten minutes of one another, and without seeing anything of the surrounding countryside, were whisked away to the sub-surface levels of the I.S. Building.

When Qarlo came back to consciousness, he found himself again in a cell, this time quite unlike the first. No bars, but just as solid to hold him in, with padded walls. Qarlo paced around the cell a few times, seeking breaks in the walls, and found what was obviously a door, in one corner. But he could not work his fingers between the pads, to try and open it.

He sat down on the padded floor, and rubbed the bristled top of his head in wonder. Was he *never* to find out what had happened to himself? And *when* was he going to shake this strange feeling that he was being watched?

Overhead, through a pane of one-way glass that looked like a ventilator grille, the soldier was being watched.

Lyle Sims and his secretary kneeled before the window in the floor, along with the philologist named Soames. Where Soames was shaggy, ill-kept, hungry-looking and placid...Lyle Sims was lean, collegiate-seeming, brusque, and brisk. He had been special advisor to an unnamed branch-office of Internal Security for five years, dealing with every strange or offbeat problem too outre for regulation inquiry. Those years had hardened him in an odd way; he was quick to recognize authenticity, even quicker to recognize fakery.

As he watched, his trained instincts took over completely, and he knew in a moment of spying, that the man in the cell below was out of the ordinary. Not so in any fashion that could be labeled—"drunkard", "foreigner", "psychotic" —but so markedly different, so *other*, he was taken aback.

"Six feet three inches," he recited to the girl kneeling beside him. She made the notation on her pad, and he went on calling out characteristics of the soldier below. "Brown hair, clipped so short you can see the scalp. Brown ...no, black eyes. Scars. Above the left eye, running down to center of left cheek; bridge of nose; three parallel scars on the right side of chin; tiny one over right eyebrow; last one I can see, runs from back of left ear, into hairline.

"He seems to be wearing an all-over, skintight suit something like, oh, I suppose it's like a pair of what do you call those pajamas kids wear ...the kind with the back door, the kind that enclose the feet?"

The girl inserted softly, "You mean snuggies?"

The man nodded, slightly embarrassed for no good reason, continued, "Mmm. Yes, that's right. Like those. The suit encloses his feet, seems to be joined to the cape, and comes up to his neck. Seems to be some sort of metallic cloth.

"Something else...may mean nothing at all or on the other hand..." he pursed his lips for a moment, then described his observation carefully. "His head seems to be oddly shaped. The forehead is larger than most, seems to be pressing forward in front, as though he had been smacked hard and it was swelling. That seems to be everything."

Sims settled back on his haunches, fished in his side pocket, and came up with a small pipe, which he cold-puffed in thought for a second. He rose slowly, still staring down through the floor window. He murmured something to himself, and when Soames asked what he had said, the special advisor repeated, "I think we've got something almost too hot to handle."

Soames clucked knowingly, and gestured toward the window. "Have they been able to make out anything he's said yet?"

Sims shook his head. "No. That's why you're here. It seems he's saying the same thing, over and over, but it's completely unintelligible. Doesn't seem to be any recognizable language, or any dialect we've been able to pin down."

"I'd like to take a try at him," Soames said, smiling gently. It was the man's nature that challenge brought satisfaction; solutions brought unrest, eagerness for a new, more rugged problem.

Sims nodded agreement, but there was a tense, strained film over his eyes, in the set of his mouth. "Take it easy with him, Soames. I have a strong hunch this is something completely new, something we haven't even begun to understand."

Soames smiled again, this time indulgently. "Come, come, Mr. Sims. After all... he *is* only an alien of some sort...all we have to do is find out what country he's from."

"Have you heard him talk yet?"

Soames shook his head.

"Then don't be too quick to think he's just a foreigner. The word *alien* may be more correct than you think—only not in the *way* you think."

A confused look spread across Soames' face. He gave a slight shrug, as though he could not fathom what Lyle Sims meant...and was not particularly interested. He patted Sims reassuringly, which brought an expression of annoyance to the advisor's face, and he clamped down on the pipestem harder.

They walked downstairs together; the secretary left them, to type her notes, and Sims let the philologist into the padded room, cautioning him to deal gently with the man. "Don't forget," Sims warned, "we're not sure *where* he comes from, and sudden movements may make him jumpy. There's a guard overhead, and there'll be a man with me behind this door, but you never know."

Soames looked startled. "You sound as though he's an aborigine or something. With a suit like that, he *must* be very intelligent. You suspect something, don't you?"

Sims made a neutral motion with his hands. "What I suspect is too nebulous to worry about now. Just take it easy ...and above all, figure out what he's saying, where he's from."

Sims had decided long before, that it would be wisest to keep the power of the Brandelmeier to himself. But he was fairly certain it was not the work of a foreign power. The trial run on the test range had left him gasping, confused.

He opened the door, and Soames passed through, uneasily.

Sims caught a glimpse of the expression on the stranger's face as the philologist entered. It was even more uneasy than Soames' had been.

It looked to be a long wait.

Soames was white as paste. His face was drawn, and the complacent attitude he had shown since his arrival in Washington was shattered. He sat across from Sims, and asked him in a quavering voice for a cigarette. Sims fished around in his desk, came up with a crumpled pack and idly slid them across to Soames. The philologist took one, put it in his mouth, and then, as though it had been totally forgotten in the space of a second, he removed it, held it while he spoke.

His tones were amazed. "Do you know what you've got up there in that cell?"

Sims said nothing, knowing what was to come would not startle him too much; he had expected something fantastic.

"That man...do you know where he...that soldier—and by God, Sims, that's what he *is*—comes from, from—now you're going to think I'm insane to believe it, but somehow I'm convinced—he comes from the future!"

Sims tightened his lips. Despite himself, he *was* shocked. He knew it was true. It *had* to be true. "What can you tell me?" he asked the philologist.

"Well, at first I tried solving the communications problem by asking him simple questions...pointing to myself and saying 'Soames', pointing to him and looking quizzical, but all he'd keep saying was a string of gibberish. I tried for hours to equate his tones and phrases with all the dialects and sub-dialects of every language I'd ever known, but it was no use. He slurred too much. And then I finally figured it out. He had to write it out—which I couldn't understand, of course, but it gave me a clue—and then I kept having him repeat it. Do you know what he's speaking?"

Sims shook his head.

The linguist spoke softly. "He's speaking English. It's simply just English.

"But an English that has been corrupted and run together, and so slurred, it's incomprehensible. It must be the future trend of the language. Sort of an extrapolation of gutter English, just contracted to a fantastic extreme. At any rate, I got it out of him."

Sims leaned forward, held his dead pipe tightly. "What?"

Soames read it off a sheet of paper:

"My name is Qarlo Clobregnny. Private. Six-five-one-oh-two-two-nine."

Sims murmured in astonishment. "My God...name, rank and—"

Soames finished for him, "—and serial number. Yes, that's all he'd give me for over three hours. Then I asked him a few innocuous questions, like where did he come from, and what was his impression of where he was now."

The philologist waved a hand vaguely. "By that time, I had an idea what I was dealing with, though not where he had come from. But when he began telling me about the War, the War he was fighting when he showed up here, I knew immediately he was either from some other world —which is fantastic—or, or ...well, I just didn't know!"

Sims nodded his head in understanding. "From *when* do you think he comes?"

Soames shrugged. "Can't tell. He says the year he is in —doesn't seem to realize he's in the past—is K79. He doesn't know when the other style of dating went out. As far as he knows, it's been 'K' for a long time, though he's heard stories about things that happened during a time they dated 'GV'. Meaningless, but I'd wager it's more thousands of years than we can imagine."

Sims ran a hand nervously through his hair. This problem was larger than he'd thought.

"Look, Professor Soames, I want you to stay with him, and teach him current English. See if you can work some more information out of him and let him know we mean him no hard times.

"Though Lord knows," the special advisor added with a tremor, "*he* can give us a harder time than we can give him. What knowledge he must have!"

Soames nodded in agreement, "Is it all right if I catch a few hours sleep? I was with him almost ten hours straight, and I'm sure *he* needs it as badly as I do."

Sims nodded, also, in agreement, and the philologist went off to a sleeping room. But when Sims looked down through the window, twenty minutes later, the soldier was still awake, still looking about nervously. It seemed he did *not* need sleep.

Sims was terribly worried, and the coded telegram he had received from the President, in answer to his own, was not at all reassuring. The problem was in his hands, and it was an increasingly worrisome problem.

Perhaps a deadly problem.

He went to another sleeping room, to follow Soames' example. It looked like sleep was going to be scarce.

Problem:

A man from the future. An ordinary man, without any special talents, with any great intelligence. The equivalent of "the man in the street". A man who owns a

fantastic little machine that turns sand into solid matter, harder than steel—but who hasn't the vaguest notion of how it works, or how to analyze it. A man whose knowledge of past history is as vague and formless as any modern man's. A s o l d i e r. With no other talent than fighting. What is to be done with such a man?

Solution:

Unknown.

Lyle Sims pushed the coffee cup away. If he ever had to look at another cup of the disgusting stuff, he was sure he would vomit. Three sleepless days and nights, running on nothing but dexedrine and hot black coffee, had put his nerves more on edge than usual. He snapped at the clerks and secretaries, he paced endlessly, and he had ruined the stems of five pipes. He felt muggy and his stomach was queasy. Yet there was no solution.

It was impossible to say, "All right, we've got a man from the future. So what? Turn him loose and let him make a life for himself in our time, since he can't return to his own."

It was impossible to do that for several reasons: (1) what if he *couldn't* adjust? He was then a potential menace, of *incalculable* potential. (2) What if an enemy power—and God knows there were enough powers around anxious to get a secret weapon as valuable as Qarlo—grabbed him, and *did* somehow manage to work out the concepts behind the rifle, the firmer, the monoatomic anti-gravity device in the pouch? What then? (3) A man used to war, knowing only war, would eventually *seek* or foment war.

There were dozens of others, they were only beginning to realize. No, something had to be done with him.

Imprison him?

For what? The man had done no real harm. He had not intentionally caused the death of the man on the subway platform. He had been frightened by the train. He had been attacked by the executives—one of whom had a broken neck, but was alive. No, he was just "a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made," as Housman had put it so terrifyingly clearly.

Kill him?

For the same reasons, unjust and brutal...not to mention wasteful.

Find a place for him in society?

Doing what?

Sims raged in his mind, mulled it over and tried every angle. It was an insoluble problem. A simple dogface, with no other life than that of a professional soldier, what good was he?

All Qarlo knew was war.

The question abruptly answered itself: If he knows no other life than that of a sol-

dier...why, make him a soldier. (But...who was to say that with his knowledge of futuristic tactics and weapons, he might not turn into another Genghis Khan?) No, making him a soldier would only heighten the problem. There could be no peace of mind were he in a position where he might organize.

As a tactician then?

Sims slumped behind his desk, pressed down the key of his intercom, spoke to the secretary, "Get me General Mainwaring, General Polk and the Secretary of Defense."

He clicked the key back. It just might work at that. If Qarlo could be persuaded to detail fighting plans, now that he realized where he was, and that the men who held him were not his enemies, and allies of Ruskie-Chink (and what a field of speculation *that* pair of words opened!).

It just might work...but Sims doubted it.

Mainwaring stayed on to report when Polk, and the Secretary of Defense went back to their regular duties. He was a big man, with softness written across his face and body, and a pompous white moustache. He shook his head sadly, as though the Rosetta Stone had been stolen from him just before an all-important experiment.

"Sorry, Sims, but the man is useless to us. Brilliant grasp of military tactics, so long as it involves what he calls 'eighty thread beams' and telepathic contacts.

"Do you know those wars up there are fought as much mentally as they are physically? Never heard of a tank or a mortar, but the stories he tells of brain-burning and spore-death would make you sick. It isn't pretty the way they fight.

"I thank God I'm not going to be around to see it; I *thought* our wars were filthy and unpleasant. They've got us licked all down the line for brutality and mass death. And the strange thing is, this Qarlo fellow *despises* it! For a while there—felt foolish as hell—but for a while there, when he was explaining it, I almost wanted to chuck my career, go out and start beating the drum of disarmament."

The General summed up, and it was apparent Qarlo was useless as a tactician. He had been brought up with one way of waging war, and it would take a lifetime for him to adjust enough to be of any tactical use.

But it didn't really matter, for Sims was certain the General had given him the answer to the problem, inadvertently.

He would have to clear it with Security, and the President, of course. And it would take a great deal of publicity to make the people realize this man actually was the real thing, an inhabitant of the fu-

ture. But if it worked out, Qarlo Clobregnny, the soldier and nothing *but* the soldier, could be the most valuable man Time had ever spawned.

He set to work on it, wondering foolishly if he wasn't too much the idealist.

Ten soldiers crouched in the frozen mud. Their firmers had been jammed, had turned the sand and dirt of their holes only to ice-like conditions. The cold was seeping up through their suits, and the jammed firmers were emitting hard radiation. One of the men screamed as the radiation took hold and he felt the organs watering away. He leaped up, vomiting blood and phlegm—and was caught across the face by a robot-tracked triple-beam. The front of his face disappeared, and the nearly-decapitated corpse flopped back into the firmhole, atop a comrade.

That soldier shoved the body aside carelessly, thinking of his four children, lost to him forever in a Ruskie-Chink raid on Garmatopolis, sent to the bogs to work. His mind conjured up the sight of the three girls and the little boy with such long, long eyelashes—each dragging through the stinking bog, a mineral bag tied to their neck, collecting fuel rocks for the enemy. He began to cry softly. The sound and mental image of crying was picked up by a Ruskie-Chink telepath somewhere across the lines, and even before the man could catch himself, blank his mind, the telepath was on him.

The soldier raised up from the firmhole bottom, clutching with crooked hands at his head. He began to tear at his features wildly, screaming high and piercing, as the enemy telepath burned away his brain. In a moment his eyes were empty, staring shells, and the man flopped down beside his comrade.

A thirty-eight thread whined its beam overhead, and the eight remaining men saw a munitions wheel go up with a deafening roar. Hot shrapnel zoomed across the field, and a thin, brittle, knife-edged bit of plasteel arced over the edge of the firmhole, and buried itself in one of the soldier's head. The piece went in crookedly, through his left earlobe, and came out skewering his tongue, half-extended from his open mouth. From the side it looked as though he were wearing some sort of earring. He died in spasms.

Then the attack call came! In each of their heads, the telepathic cry came to advance, and they were up out of the firmhole, all seven of them, reciting their daily prayer, and knowing it would do no good. They advanced across the slushy ground, and overhead they could hear the buzz of leech-bombs, coming down on the enemy's thread emplacements.

All around them in the deep-set night the varicolored explosions popped and sugged, expanding in all directions like fireworks, then dimming the scene again the blackness.

One of the soldiers caught a beam across the belly, and he was thrown sidewise for ten feet, to land in a soggy heap. A head popped out of a firmhole before them, and three of the remaining six fired simultaneously. The enemy was a booby—rigged to backtrack their kill-urge, rigged to a telepathic hook-up—and even as the body exploded under their combined firepower, each of the men caught fire. Flames leaped from their mouths, from their pores; a pyrotic-telepath had been at work.

The remaining three split and cut away, realizing they might be thinking, might be giving themselves away. That was the horror of being just a dogface, not a special telepath behind the lines. Out here there was nothing but death.

A doggie-mine slithered across the ground, entwined itself in the legs of one soldier, and blew the legs out from under him. He lay there clutching the shredded stumps, feeling the blood soaking into the mud, and then unconsciousness seeped into his brain. He died shortly thereafter.

[illegible] a barbwall, and blasted out thirty-eight thread emplacement of twelve men, at the cost of the top of his head. He was left alive, and curiously, as though the war had stopped, he felt the top of himself, and his fingers pressed lightly against convoluted slick matter for a second before he dropped to the ground.

The last soldier dove under a beam that zzzzzzzed through the night, and landed on his elbows. He rolled with the tumble, felt the edge of a leech-bomb crater, and dove in headfirst. The beam split up his passage and he escaped charring by an inch. He lay in the hole, feeling the cold of the battlefield seeping around him, and drew his cloak closer.

The soldier was Qarlo...

He finished talking, and sat down on the platform...

The audience was silent...

Sims shrugged into his coat, fished around in the pocket for the cold pipe. The dottle had fallen out of the bowl, and he felt the dark grains at the bottom of the pocket. The audience was filing out slowly, hardly anyone speaking, but each staring at others around him. As though they were suddenly realizing what had happened to them, as though they were looking for a solution.

Sims passed such a solution. The petitions were there,

tacked up alongside the big sign—duplicate of the ones up all over the city. He caught the heavy black type on them as he passed through the auditorium's vestibule:

SIGN THIS PETITION! PREVENT WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD TONIGHT!

People were flocking around the petitions, but Sims knew it was only a token gesture at this point: the legislation had gone through that morning. No more war...under any conditions. And intelligence reported the long playing records, the piped broadcasts, the p.a. trucks, had all done their jobs. Similar legislation was going through all over the world.

It looked as though Qarlo had done it, single-handed.

Sims stopped to refill his pipe, and stared up at the big black-lined poster near the door.

HEAR QARLO, THE SOLDIER FROM THE FUTURE! SEE THE MAN FROM TOMORROW, AND HEAR HIS STORIES OF THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF THE FUTURE! FREE! NO OBLIGATIONS! HURRY!

The advertising had been effective, and it was a fine campaign.

Qarlo had been more valuable just telling about his Wars, about how men died in that day in the future, then he could ever have been as a strategist.

It took a real soldier, who hated war, to talk of it, to show people that it was ugly. And there was a certain sense of defeat, of hopelessness, in knowing the future was the way Qarlo described it. It made you want to stop the flow of Time, say, "No. The future will *not* be like this! We will abolish war!"

Certainly enough steps in the right direction had been taken. The legislation was there, and those who had held back, who had tried to keep animosity alive, were being disposed of every day.

There was just one thing bothering special advisor Lyle Sims. The soldier had come back in time, so he was here. That much they knew for certain.

But a nagging worry ate at Sims' mind, made him say prayers he had thought himself incapable of inventing. Made him fight to get Qarlo heard by everyone...

Could the future be changed?

Or was it inevitable?

Would the world Qarlo left inevitably appear?

Would all their work be for nothing?

It couldn't be! It dare not be!

He walked back inside, got in line to sign the petitions again.

revolt on mercury

by STANLEY MULLEN

THE LAST thing they did on Mercury was to dismiss the guards and unlock all the prisons.

Silence clamped down hard. Men sat around or stood up and shuffled uneasily in the cramped space alloted them. They waited for the doors to unlock and open. They waited for bells to ring, to summon them to breakfast, to the workday.

But silence continued. None of the electric doorlocks clicked. No guards appeared to herd them anywhere. No bells rang. Nothing happened. They grew restless and nervous and oddly afraid. Whispers and rumors went from cell to cell, and it was guessed, mostly, that someone had slipped-up in the control room. But whispers and rumors solve nothing.

The mob stormed into the wealthier section, looting where there was anything to loot, burning, killing.

In the prison, as on most of Mercury, there was neither night nor morning. Light came on or went off automatically. Time was a matter of atomic clocks, or to astronomers, sidereal clocks. Time for the convict laborers was a schedule of work-period, sleep-period, eat-period, and so-called recreation time when

Suddenly they were free. These convicts, these murderers, these thieves, these men and women rejected by Earth, found themselves given one final chance to make something of their lives. Stanley Mullen writes about their struggle to create a new world out of blazing chaos.

there was nothing to do but sit around and growl with other convict laborers and decide that life was not worth it.

Then suddenly, without warning, there was this morning that was different from the others. Night sounds merged into waking sounds, and those to restless sounds while you waited for the bells and for the slop-breakfast and the start of the day's work. You woke as usual, stirred around, and nothing happened. Your fellow convicts grumbled as usual, and some sat down to grumble. A few returned to their bunks and stretched out to enjoy the luxury of their first non-scheduled rest-period. At first, nobody noticed the silence. And nobody thought to try the doors.

Not until empty bellies were growling, and relaxing became boredom, and boredom became hunger and thirst, and these two became anger. Then the chant started, low and fierce, and the rhythmic stamp of feet, like a ceremonial war-dance. Then the building of excitement which precedes a riot. But how far can a prison riot get when you are locked in the cellblocks, unarmed, no guards in sight for hostages, and no one to force to unlock the doors?

From there, the logical next step was to try the doors.

In unison, like something in a mechanical ballet, every door in the prison slid open. It was as simple as that. But the simple things are the most frightening. An open door on Mercury is not as inviting as it might be other places. Doors opened and mouths opened. And with their road to freedom clear, the convicts fell back, too dazed and habit-bound or frightened to take advantage of their liberty.

All but three of them—

Alby and his two cellmates acted on pure reflex and jumped out into the corridor without thinking. Then each stood and stared at the other two and they stared back, frozen. But there was a quick thaw. None of the three was a man to miss an obvious opportunity. They had nothing but their lives to lose and all three were lifers in a place where life was not worth much at best. They went, heading out quickly and with ceremony, before someone, somewhere changed his mind, and schedule caught up with them again.

"Outside the prison quick!" shouted Alby.

They bolted down the corridor between the cellblocks with their banks of yawning doors. Their example inspired others, and men boiled out of the cellbanks onto the metal decking and the stairs like ants from a shattered anthill.

Carfax and Groaner got through the main door of the prison first as might be expected of an agile pair of cat-burglars doing time as habit-

ual criminals. But Alby joined them almost at once, coming through the door like a cork shot from a champagne bottle. There was mounting pressure behind.

"No guards, anywhere!" howled Groaner. "No guards at all!"

"What's going on?" demanded Carfax. "Didn't you birds pay your rent, or something?"

"Anyhow, who cares?" shrieked Groaner.

"Who cares?" Carfax yelled, grinning.

He and Groaner set a stiff pace down the main City Tunnel. Behind them, the heavy doors of the prison crashed outward with the violence of explosion. A tidal wave of men swept toward them along the resounding tunnel. Men wildly and tearfully excited, men hysterical, men pale and sober and mutely dangerous. Men caught up in the unrestraint fury and joy of a taste of sudden, unexpected freedom. Men whose business was making trouble, all ready to go back in business.

A few laggards and worriers had tried to hold back, but the sheer mass of the rest caught them up and whirled them along in a hurricane of emotion and physical force.

Alby caught one of his partners with each craggy fist and dragged them by naked strength into an eddy. Even there, the three had to fight for breathing space.

"Did you notice," he screamed above the hubbub. "Only the automatic machinery is running. Nothing that has to be tended. And there was no traffic when we hit the main tunnel." He stopped and let them digest this important fact, then went on—

"Just slow down a minute, and let's think this over."

Carfax stared at Groaner's coarse, heavy-featured face, and from that to Alby's thin, sharply ascetic face, and saw both of them reflect his own dawning comprehension and horror.

"I'm not sure I'm going to like this," Carfax muttered.

Not much later, that was to be remembered by all three as the understatement of the year for Mercury....

Through main tunnels and side tunnels and connecting tunnels, even through sewers surprisingly empty of matter on its way to the waste converters, up ramps and the elevators which were still working, the floods of men rose to the high levels which housed most of the living quarters of the underground city. In their mass-mind was thought only of riot and revolt, of looting and murder, of rape and pillage. and they headed first to Administration and the wealthier sections of the city which lay beyond. They had to find someone to take out their hatred upon, and the bosses and

their families were target number one.

Here, they found life and movement, such as it was. They found others before them, already looting what little was left to loot. Others as downtrodden and bedraggled and vengeful as themselves. Others as hate-happy and hopeless and desperate.

The chief difference between the various parties bent on loot and violence were that some wore drab prison uniforms and others wore only the rags and shabby uniforms of volunteer indentured workers and immigrants, all lured by the false advertising and the fool's gold of wealth on Mercury.

The Bosses and their families had departed. Officials and their families were gone, bag and baggage. Higher paid workers, technicians, designers, administrators, and their like, all of them had vanished, and their portable belongings with them. Even the guards and the police had gone, and when the latter went, so went law and order.

The scum and sweepings of the city, the beggared tenant farmers in hydroponics, the rough element which had drifted in from heaven knew where, the second generation pioneers whose inheritance had been snatched from under their noses, the rank and file of low income workers, dog-robbers and beachcombers, drunks and harlots, the criminal elements, the marginal men of all kinds, like mixed-blood Martians and Venusians, and grubby Diggers from Callisto—all the f r o t h i n g yeast of society had felt the lifting of police restraints. Like hordes of wild animals, they stormed into the wealthier sections of the city looting where they found anything to loot, burning where they found nothing, killing those few underpaid servants left behind by departing plutocrats, killing each other when other targets for hatred failed.

Before the convict laborers reached the area, savagery reigned. Tunnels were filled with flickering red glare. Atmosphere was foul with heat, smoke, and the deadly gases released by c o m b u s t i o n. Weaker members already were suffocating in the press, being trampled underfoot, dying of sheer frustration. Hardly anyone was in a state of mind for clear thinking, and the few that were, had no time for it.

When the convicts drove in among the previous looters, hell was really afoot. Confufusion broke into knots of struggling men. No nobody lacked an adversary. Contagion of v i o l e n c e spread through the city. Business blocks were ransacked, stores broken into. E v e r y t h i n g breakable was smashed. Anything portable was loot, and whoever had it was your

enemy. Everybody was everybody's enemy. And worst savages of all were the narcotics-crazed addicts. Since the Company had encouraged dope-pushing because conditions were so terrible on Mercury, and also as an additional means of keeping working classes in line, there were so many addicts now—all tortured with the craving, all searching in vain for the dope, and all growing more frantic and vicious as they searched in vain.

Probably half of the poorer people in the city were on the dope. There were so many of them, it was no miracle that Alby, Carfax and Groaner encountered one. It would have been a miracle if they had not—

The three had not joined in the looting. For a while, the crowds had carried them along. But three stout hearts and willing elbows, and three pairs of fists, had won a way out of the pack for them. They holed up after a fashion, scurrying from rathole to rathole, avoiding the clash of mobs, the insane violence, fighting when necessary, running if outumbered, but on the whole staying clear of the uproar.

Obviously, there was nothing worth fighting and being butchered over. The ruling forces of Mercury had taken everything portable along on their exodus.

She came upon them suddenly, springing out from some cranny in the tunnel wall. She came at them, screaming, clawing, eyes as colorless and formless as swirling smoke. From her rags of costume, she had already had rough handling. Most women alone in the city were being killed by men fighting over them, but this one had escaped personal violence, though her clothes obviously had not.

Crouched, ready for defense, Alby whirled and struck out at her wildly. In previous encounters, there had been no time to sort out adversaries. Weaponless, you got in the first blows, or you were not there for the second round.

His fist cracked explosively in her face, and she went out cold.

"It's a woman!" Carfax said.

"So what?" demanded Alby irritably. "You've seen one before, haven't you?"

"Not too recently."

Alby nodded glumly. He knelt beside her and picked up the identag with its luminous "LP."

"I guess I haven't been in long enough to get interested in one like this," Alby observed grimly.

"Sure, and a hophead at that. Not bad looking, though, if you like Venusians. I don't. What are you going to do with her?"

Groaner whistled. "Do we

have to do anything with her?"

"We don't have to," Alby spat. "However, we can't leave even one like this lying here unconscious. You know what would happen to her when the first mob comes by."

Groaner shrugged. "I remember what a guy once said about a hunk of expensive stinking cheese."

"Alby's right," agreed Carfax. "And so are you. She's not worth the trouble, but we can't leave her helpless. They'd tear her to pieces, partly because of her association with the Bosses. Even civilized communities shave their heads, I hear, and Mercury is not too civilized just now."

"She's coming round," said Alby, relieved. This was no time to be saddled with a woman, certainly not this one.

The girl's eyes opened. A measure of sanity had returned to them. There was emotion in them, not smoke-filled horror. She blinked up at Alby and smiled.

"You look like a man, not a beast," she said, her voice the dull, simpering whine of a begging addict. "You look like a man who will pay for what he wants. I need a shot. I need it...bad, mister. Just one shot. Even a cut one. I'll do anything for a shot. Anything, mister...."

Alby stared at her without pity.

"If I had one, I wouldn't give it to you. And, sister, you haven't anything I want. You're just lucky you haven't. And I have some bad news for you. There aren't going to be any more shots. Not for you, or anybody. Not here on Mercury."

She stared wildly around, and saw no hope on any of the three faces.

"But I've got to have it. There must be some. I know the Bosses have gone. But they wouldn't take it all with them. They couldn't do that to us. Not after getting us on the habit. They couldn't...."

"They could. They have. What makes you think they care about any of us? You're on your own, sister. Better find a place to hide and wait for this uproar to settle down. Some place where nobody can find you. Dig a hole and pull the hole in after you. We have things to do. We can't waste any more time on you."

"I can't," she murmured. "I can't take the cure this way. Not 'cold turkey,' no medicines, no reduced doses of drug. I can't stand it. Don't leave me alone. Take me with you. I won't be any trouble. I swear it. When the craving gets too bad, just beat me unconscious. I'll be grateful to you... Kill me if you have to. It would be a favor."

Carfax laughed, not unfeelingly. "Just stick with us and you'll probably get killed quickly enough!"

"You're not like the others. Take me with you," she pleaded.

"Sorry, sister. No dice. We'd only get ourselves killed trying to defend you. Tag along if you want. We can't stop you. But don't expect any favors."

"Come on, Carfax," ordered Alby roughly. "We're wasting time." His eyes fixed grimly on the girl. "I'm afraid we can't take you with us. Don't try to follow us. I'll use force if I have to, and I'd rather not. You'd only bring trouble on us, and we have trouble enough, right now. We'll have more if we don't get going. Everyone will have more."

"Trouble!" she moaned, trying weakly to get to her knees, to stand. "You don't know what trouble is. Wait till the fools start wrecking the power stations and the air converters. We'll all suffocate."

Alby glared at her, his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "How did you know about that?"

"I...heard them talking."

"Where? Who? How many?"

She did not answer. Hands covering her face, she shook as if with a chill.

"There's no time to waste," Alby told his friends. "We'll have to head straight for the power stations and the air-conversion pumps. If we can find weapons, we can make a stand there...."

"Weapons," said Groaner, licking his dry lips.

The girl uncovered her face. She was smiling thinly, a calculating expression in her eyes.

"I'll bargain with you," she said harshly. "I said I'd do anything for a shot. I know where you can find some weapons. I know...."

Her voice trailed off, her eyes blanked again. Alby grabbed and shook her ruthlessly. He hammered questions at her. She shook her head numbly.

"There aren't any shots. Not anywhere. There aren't going to be any. Understand?"

"Why should I tell you anything?" she burst out in cold fury. "Let them smash the machines. They're crazy and drunk and riding the whirlwind. But they'll be gasping for air soon enough. Who do they think they'll be hurting? It won't matter much anyhow. Only a matter of time for all of us. We've been left behind to die, to kill each other and die. There won't be any more foodships, no dope for people like me, no fuel for anything. Even the machinery will quit sooner or later, automatic or not. Who's left here to die but the scum like us. Who cares?"

"You care," Alby told her sternly. "You care, or you wouldn't be so full of hate and hurt."

"I don't care," she replied dully. "What have I got to live for? Look at me, you know who I am. What I am. Why should I want to go on living. Why should any of us?"

"You have as much and as little as any of us," Alby said. "We're scum, as you say. Maybe we are and maybe we're not. That's just a point of view. But I want to live. I'm going to go on living if only because I don't want to give those so-and-sos the satisfaction of dying. They can desert me on a planet that's not fit to live on, but I won't give them the satisfaction of dying. We figured this might happen someday. We talked about it, and decided what we would do. We think there's a chance we can take over and make a world right here on Mercury, a world where people can live. And we can build spaceships and go away. We think it's worth a try. But we can't do anything to defend the vital machinery against wreckers. Not without guns and ammunition. Won't you help us?"

"You wouldn't help me," she charged, her mood changing. "Will you, now. Will you do what I said—take me with you, and beat me unconscious when the going gets too rough?"

Alby glanced at his partners. Carfax and Groaner nodded.

"It's a deal, Cyanide Mary. Where are those weapons?"

She staggered, but set off down the corridor in stumbling, nervous walk. The three followed her through a mean section of warehouses and rat-nest hovels. They followed her zombie-pacing to a maze of office structures carved from the living rock of subsurface Mercury. She led them through concealed panels, down spiraling ramps, into subcellars below subcellars. And at last she led them to a room where racked guns and cases of explosive ammunition lined the rock walls.

Thence, loaded like walking arsenals, they made their way to the airlocks guarding the entrance to the power stations and the air pumps. Alby and the girl stayed there on guard, while Carfax and Groaner made two more trips for supplies.

Then the tidal wave struck. Guns hammered and grew hot, and were abandoned. Men died in rows, screaming, crying out, falling upon one another. They fell back, reformed, came on again. Again the death-chatter of machine-guns blasted away the front ranks, the second ranks. The corridor floors grew slippery with blood and blocked with riddled bodies. But the three determined men held the fort and drove back the onslaught of maddened men. They held firm and worked the guns until the violence of the rioting and the drink and dope madness that followed wore itself out.

At intervals, as agreed, one or another of them left his post long enough to quiet the screams of the girl they had locked in a small room,

stripped of furniture so she could not hurt herself during her ordeal.

At intervals, one or another went in and beat her unconscious to kill the pain and craving and the madness.

It was a curiously symbolic birth in blood and tears and screaming madness for the first republic on Mercury. But then Alby always had been an idealist, after his fashion. A two-fisted, tough-minded idealist. And this was the reason Alby had got himself sent to Mercury....

Some whimsical demon must have designed Mercury as a study in extremes. Sunside is hotter than anything in the system but the Sun itself. Darkside is colder even than Pluto, where buried transuranic elements radiate enough heat to raise temperatures a few degrees warmer than the Eskimo idea of Hell.

Landscape is fantastic, in a manner uniquely Mercurian. One is always conscious of the Sun, visible or not. No one can look directly at such blindingly close magnificence. In size, if one dared look, it would seem to vary between twice and three times as large as the apparent size as seen from Earth. Imagine it as a half-bushel basket of pure dazzle held at arm's length. Or try not to imagine it at all. Try not to think of it.

Light and heat pour upon a naked planet, practically unclothed by atmosphere. Unshielded sunlight seems to have mass and density, and sensible pressure. It hammers upon a surface as broken, splintery and unstable as a field of ice-floes. It is stupendous setting for nightmare. Sunside, everything is unrelieved brightness or solid, opaque blackness. Darkside, all is gray with perpetual starlight. Here, savage mountains shine with frost-rime and sparkle with glaciered atmosphere.

Between these prodigies is the narrow, shifting belt of twilights, where a horizon-bound Sun rises and falls slowly, over long periods, creating a conditional world in which men can live, but under grotesque terms. Domed cities offer access to the troubled surface; otherwise life is lived troglodyte-fashion in caverns underground. Mining goes on, for Mercury is rich in minerals and solar power is freer than water. Some foods are grown in hydroponic farms and gigantic yeast vats. Air is recycled, food is recycled; life itself seems to follow the cyclic patterns.

When the first penal colony was established on Mercury, there was some idea held that all criminals were insane to a greater or less degree. Many sent to Mercury were unfit also on physical or moral grounds. Besides the criminally insane, other unsound

types were herded into ships, or induced by false promises to emigrate to Mercury. Such a planet seemed an ideal dumping ground for habitual criminals, for the mentally disturbed, the physical and moral wreckage, for hopeless drug-addicts, and even for economic failures of various kinds.

Unfortunately for the dreams of psychiatrists of making Mercury a refuge, where care and isolation could mend the mind maimed, and restore the others through hope and hard work, the planets resources proved rich. So government backed promoters took over, using convict labor, and gutted the surface wealth for quick gain. And when profit margins dropped, they simply abandoned their slaves and hirelings with the rest of their worn-out tools, too poor in value to warrant the spacefreight cost.

When the riots damped-out from sheer exhaustion, not more than a third of the abandonees still lived. The weak had died and the more vicious had killed each other, for the most part.

Alby gathered about himself a force of more-intelligent hardheads, chiefly convicts, and established order. Government would have to be on primitive terms for a while, at least until essential living services were re-established and functioning.

Food and water and fuel were needed desperately. Fuel was almost gone. Water could be obtained from Darkside, though reconstructing the badly neglected piping system would be both difficult and dangerous. Food must be grown in the hydroponics and yeast vats, which would take time. For the moment, remaining stocks must be doled out on savage ration, and belts would have to tighten. Fuel was the most desperate scarcity; without atomic stockpills, most of the machinery was useless, which created a vicious circle, for without atomics it refine atomics.

Power, there was. Solar power, drenching the Sunside surface. But to use it, silicon batteries or mercury-vapor turbines must be set up, and wherever possible, all machinery converted to electrical power. It was a gigantic project, required vast resources of men and technical knowledge. Not to mention the necessity for venturing forth on Sunside in protective armor which had been neglected until little better than junk.

Fortunately, Alby's people were tough, used to hard work, and a few of them chiefly convicts, had technical training.

"And," as Carfax observed, "we are not starting completely from scratch. We have the abandoned machinery, such as it is. We have technical libraries on microfilm. We have the know-how, and the have-

to, both of which are important."

"And we haven't too much time," warned Alby. "Do you think for a moment that they'll leave us alone, if we seem to be making out? The various government of Mars, Earth and Venus will be keeping wary eyes on us. They don't want us to make the thing go. An independent republic born of madness and crime and despair, would be a direct challenge to them,. They can't afford to let us exist. And if they think there's a chance of making another quick profit, they won't be able to wait to get their greedy hands back into the gravy boat."

Carfax agreed soberly. "What happens when they come back? We can't fight them. One hydrogen bomb on the dome will destroy this city or any others like it that have managed to survive. We can't fight back, not without spaceships, and I for one won't surrender. I won't go back to prison life."

"We're still in prison," said Alby. "Just a larger prison. It's up to us to make our prison a home. We have that to do first, and we're working on it. When they come back, to destroy us or take over the world we've made here, we'll fight. We have to fight. And if we can't lick 'em, we'll join them."

"They'll love that. How do you propose to manage that?"

"The same way I'm managing this cageful of wild beasts. Force them, if I can, persuade them when I can't force them; and as a last resort, appeal to their intelligence and self-interest. I want them to need us. In the meantime, we'll have to raise ourselves by our shoestrings."

Carfax grinned wearily. "Even that can be done, with a block and tackle. We have to do it without the block and tackle. Rough work."

"Then let's get on with it...."

Sunside was slightly cooler than Hell. Slightly. The light seemed worse than the heat. Even filtered and stepped-down in intensity by helmet faceplates, it was still blind, searing pain. Terrain was split and tortured into deep rift valleys, sometimes thermal-eroded into larger-scale versions of the Grand Canyon. Towering serrated mountains crisscrossed the surface in all directions. So close to the Libration Zone, with the Sun's rays more or less horizontal, there was shade. Zinc and lead melted in the sunlight and stiffened into treacherous sludge in the shade.

Alby and his partners led out construction and repair crews, repairing water lines, building huge conveyor tubes which would lead superheated mercury from Sunside to Darkside, using the fantastic temparature differences to produce electrical power. In

the obsolete and cranky protective armor, such work was hardly an adventure, it was suicidal. But it had to be done. And, slowly and painfully, it was done.

After nightmares of continuous effort, which seemed to go on and on and on, the city became a functioning unit again. In time, food was being produced in sufficient quantities to increase the rations, the air supply clarified in pace with growing greenery, there was electrical power for the most vital services and some factories began to operate, after a fashion. There were setbacks, such as the constant quake dangers, tectonic stresses which rippled through the underground world, doing damage not immediately found. There were blind alleys, such as mining, which could scarcely be carried on at deep levels without atomics. Which in turn blocked hope of obtaining atomics from that source.

Carfax was more disturbed by the failures than encouraged by the successes.

"With even a small amount of usable atomics, we could start a pile working, creating and refining. But without any, we can't even trigger a reaction in an atomtractor. We can't work the mines without atomic tools and trucks. And we need oil, real oil, not synthetics. Magnetic bearings don't last long enough on heavy machinery."

"That's true," Alby said. "That's one of the reasons we must be ready to make terms with the other planets. We must have trade, establish a balance. We can be almost self-sufficient on Mercury, but not quite. There's not a drop of oil on the planet, for one thing. None except the small stores which were brought in and left behind. And to establish trade, we'll need other things to offer besides old hatreds, and weapons to repel invasion.

"If we had a spaceship, we could turn pirate and raid for supplies," suggested Groaner amiably.

"For a while, yes," agreed Carfax. "But they'd only arm stronger and develop defenses we couldn't break through."

"We do need a spaceship," said Alby. "We'll have to have one."

"Fine. Just wave a wand. How can we build spaceships when we can't build atomic tractors? And how can you power ships with electricity?"

Alby smiled. "There might be a way, but I don't know it. Since we can't build a spaceship, we'll have to steal one. I've been thinking about it."

"Daydreaming?"

"A good daydream is always the beginning of an idea. I think we can implement mine. It won't be easy but—"

Alby broke off.

"Show me a spaceship, and I'll steal it," promised Groaner eagerly.

"I may do just that. There's one place on Mercury we can be sure is not abandoned. The polar observatory, for Solar observations. They keep a small space-cruiser there, just for emergencies. And a supply ship touches down about once every month (Earth-reckoning). With luck, we might even steal two spaceships, and some needed supplies. If we can make it to the South Pole—"

"That's a long walk, following the twilight zone."

"It's shorter directly across Sunside."

"Shorter, and hotter. Nobody ever made it alive. And the few fools who tried it had to be brought back by spacers —well-done on both sides."

"I didn't say it would be easy. I don't like the idea of being broiled in my jacket either. But I'm not asking anyone to take a risk I won't take myself. I'll go."

Groaner groaned. "Somebody always maneuvers me into a false position. I don't want to go, but I can't let you call my bluff. If you can get me there, even soft boiled, I'll steal you your spaceship."

Carfax stood by loyally. "If you can use a second cat burglar for the job, count me in. I don't like it, but since I'll probably spend Eternity in extreme heat, I may as well get used to the climate gradually. But maybe, instead of volunteers, you might want to pick the men best suited to the work."

Alby snorted. "Can you see me picking men for this and giving the orders? I can't."

There had been trouble controlling the citizenry of the city. Nothing overt or violent, for the most part. In general, everyone went along with Alby's assumed leadership because he was headed in the only direction they could go. No party of open opposition could exist. But freedom, such as it was, had come too closely upon brutal and tyrannical subjection. Resentments stayed and fixed themselves upon even the shadow of authority. There had been outbreaks, though usually confined, there still was muttering, malingering and general unrest. Alby evaded every possible test of power, since he had nothing to gain by force, and everything to lose if his foot slipped.

"Ticklish business trying to run tigers in harness," commented Carfax. "How can we bargain with planets when we can't even work up a good basketball team?"

"Spread the word around," urged Alby. "I think you'll be surprised by the percentage who will offer to help within the limits of sticking their necks out on a creaky limb."

Word went around. Like yeast, it worked through the mass, fermenting. Strangely enough, several malcontents who had given a great deal of

trouble to the brittle administration had a reversal of feeling. They realized that, whatever they thought of Alby, his planning, his knowledge and his determination to make a workable world of their city, would be missed. A petition circulated requesting that Alby withdraw from the expedition.

The first offer of positive assistance came from an ex-engineer and inventor named Gresham.

"I'm shot physically and may not last the course," he said. "But if you can't get volunteers enough, I'll make a try at it."

"In your shape, you shouldn't venture outside the dome," Alby told him. "You need care and medicines. I know there are no medicines, but you'll last longer here than outside. We need good brains more than we need expendable bodies."

"I'll still go if you need me. Let me know."

"Thanks. But I have a job for you right here. Even if we snatch those ships, we're still in trouble. There's a patrol cruiser orbiting Mercury, keeping an eye on us. And stealing the ships may bring trouble right down on our heads, literally. One bomb in the dome that holds in our atmosphere, and we're through."

"If you expect me to rig a defense against that, you're whistling in the wind. As an engineer—"

"I know. There's no defense in the physical sense. We need a psychological defense. A trick. We need a secret weapon."

"I don't think I can manage that, with the means at hand."

"Neither do I. So we'll try the next best thing. We'll try to convince them that we have a secret weapon. While we're off on this madman's try at stealing spaceships, I want you to daydream until you come up with something. It doesn't have to work. But it has to do something that will bother them, wondering if it might work. We'll need a faked demonstration. Probably something using the ships. Destroy one, if you have to. But make it spectacular. I want fireworks, heat rays, everything in the comic-tape arsenal. Can you do it?"

"As I said before, I can try."

"Good man. Work on it."

As preparations for the expedition went ahead, Carfax and Alby noticed that Groaner was showing signs of strain and depression. They approached him with it.

"Something on your mind, Groaner?" asyed Alby.

Groaner shook his head. "Nothing at all. Well, yes, there is. I was thinking about my will. When you haven't got anything, it's harder to spread it around."

Alby laughed, but Carfax probed shrewdly to the heart of the matter.

"How's your sick cat coming along, Groaner?"

With a tenderness surprising in him, Groaner had undertaken the care and responsibility for the girl who provided weapons for their barricade at the only price they could pay.

"Nahli?" The girl was Venusian, and Groaner could not have pronounced her real name if he had known it. "She's all right. Getting along. What's going to happen to her if I leave her here alone?"

"Nothing that hasn't already, I'm sure," Carfax said roughly. Life and virtue were still precarious possessions on Mercury. They were the only things left worth taking, or holding, if they meant enough.

"Don't talk like that about her," warned Groaner. "She has good stuff in her. She had a rotten deal."

"Who hasn't had?" demanded Carfax, grinning. In love, Groaner was quite a spectacle. "Let's leave Groaner behind, chief. A lovesick cat burglar along will be no good to either of us. Have you ever heard a lovesick cat on a fence?"

Violence threatened, but Alby intervened, laughing.

"I think I can arrange for Nahli's safety while we're gone. Know Gresham? He'll look after her."

Groaner frowned. "That's not the problem. She's well now. Pretty strong. But she says she wants a job. Wants to be needed. She wants to go along with us. Wants a chance to take risks and do something important. Like paying a debt."

"That does it!" bleated Carfax. "Two lovesick kitty burglars. No thanks."

"You're all wrong," said Groaner, glaring. "I haven't a chance with a girl like that, and I know it. She has a crush on Alby. Thinks he's an angel with brass wings."

"Somewhat tarnished, I'm afraid. I had no idea Nahli felt like that. And maybe you're mistaken anyhow."

"Imagine!" said Carfax, still asking for trouble. "I'd think once a girl had lost her amateur standing, she'd give up the sport, as such. You're all three nuts, if you ask me."

"Carfax is probably right," commented Alby sadly. "But I can't turn down volunteers. The girl can be useful. Tell her she can come along. We can use her as bait to lure the staff men outside the observatory. They wouldn't come out for us. For a girl, they might. You don't like the idea, do you, Groaner?"

"It stinks, like everything else around here."

"It does. But we have to be practical. And I'm being practical when I promise you something else. If the girl has a crush on me, I'll find a way to cure her of it."

"That's no favor," stormed Groaner. "It won't help me anyhow. And you simply don't

want her. You'd spit on her, wouldn't you?"

Alby's eyes flashed with anger. "I didn't say that. I said I wouldn't compete with you...."

It was a small caravan which crawled painfully across the broken surface of Sunside. Eight men and one woman. At the last moment, five other reluctant adventurers had been shamed into joining the expedition. Now, barely protected by obsolete and inadequate protective suiting, the nine dared the perilous passage.

Tectonic stresses of various kinds made volcanic outbursts commonplace. Quakes and landslides threatened death by violence every mile. Moving afoot anywhere was a scramble over terrain which jiggled, or roared down at you, without warning. In direct sunlight, some metals of low-liquification point were pools of molten brilliance. Each footstep, even in the shade where lead slush and crusted zinc gave footing as treacherous as quicksand, was a challenge to painful death.

Merciless glare angled across the great expanse of wastelands. Solid sunlight and opaque shadow-patterns seemed to be strewn at random. No depth of atmosphere tempered the killing force of sunlight. Only a shallow layer of heavier gases clung to deep chasms and hollows. Naked veins of heated copper webbed the surface, conducting heat through even insulated soling. The landscape was nightmare, and the pilgrims moved across it like a column of insects upon a hot stove.

At first, they had dragged sledloads of equipment and supplies by battery-powered tractors. But makeshift machinery broke down repeatedly, and real repairs were impossible. For a while, they dragged some of the lighter sleds by hand until the skids bogged in pools of bubbling mercury, mired in lead or zinc slush, or heated enough to stick fast to copper veins like skin freezing upon cold metal. Such progress was tragically slow, so eventually all sleds had to be abandoned, along with most of the equipment and supplies.

They went on afoot, carrying only weapons and food, and only the most scanty and optimistic ratios of the latter. Never had Sunside, or any considerable part of it, been crossed by a party on foot. But now it had to be done.

Second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, week after week, they pushed on. Determination became despair, then combined into desperate determination. Long past the point of no return, they had no choice but to push on. Out there ahead, somewhere, lay the Polar Observatory Station. Horror had ceased to be comparative.

More dead than alive, they plodded on, and on, and on....

Polar Mercury is not much different from the rest of Mercury. Surroundings seemed less jumbled, possibly because of some variation in tectonic strains, offering less cover. High mountains were still visible, but they ringed the curiously-near horizon. Above their rugged silhouette appeared a segment of the savage Sun, rising and falling slowly according to season, and making a complete circle once each Mercurian year.

Dead-center in a high plateau was the Polar Station, most of its structure deep underground, but the observatory set high upon a natural mound, to make Solar sightings possible. Each building was a citadel planned for defense against the fearful environment, but equally effective against human attack.

Within sight of their first objective, but carefully out of sight of possible watchers, the expedition paused. Alby called a conference, after casing the layout, to discuss possible strategy and plan the attack. Reaching the station was only part of the project; there was still the staff-garrison to be dealt with, and (he hoped) spaceships to be stolen.

Groaner was groaning, as usual. "The inside of this armor of mine smells like a poorly managed zoo," he complained.

Carfax laughed. "Well, Loverboy, steal us that spaceship you promised, and you can take it off."

Groaner turned to Alby. "Show me the spaceship and I'll steal it."

"They wouldn't be left above ground," said Alby sourly. "Below the airlocks are elevators. The ships will be cradled at the foot of the shafts. Somehow we'll have to get inside and hit the lower levels. As a burglar, you should have ideas about that."

Groaner said nothing, glancing significantly at Nahli. The girl was dead on her feet, as they all were. But inside her face plate, the thin, delicately molded face seemed more drawn and gray and ugly than even drugs had made her before. Only her native courage and high determination had brought her as far as this. And her Venusian heritage had given her deep-strength and heat-endurance, though even the second planet could not compete thermally with Sunside Mercury.

"I can tell you one thing," Carfax broke in. "We can't get through those airlocks unless someone opens them. And we're too small a force to take over the station, so it will have to be a quick job, in and out again, before they get over the first shock of surprise."

Alby studied Nahli sharply. "I guess you're elected," he

told her. "If you think you can do it, walk straight out and let them see you. Stumble a few times, pretend to fall, get up, stagger on, then pretend to faint."

"It may not be pretense," she said weakly.

"I know. Step up your communicators and keep calling for help. They'll know about what happened in the prison-cities, and may be ready for trouble, like us. But it won't occur to them that a woman could cross Sunside, and live. They'll be c u r i o u s. And, whether they're in a Samaritan mood or not, they will have to investigate. It's a prison offense in interplanetary law not to answer a call for help. So they'll come out. You know what to do then."

The girl nodded. "I know. But I won't kill them. I brought a paralysis gun, so I wouldn't have to kill them. It's short range, and the effects won't last long. So you'll have to rush the airlock fast, before they come out of their daze." She touched the gun concealed in a fold of her bulky s u i t-a r m o r. "I am ready."

"No time like now," said Alby roughly. "And whether it works or not, thanks. That goes for all of you."

Nahli left concealment, tottering, but moving rapidly toward the airlock. They could hear her voice calling out, weak but startling amplified. Nearing the flattened airlock domes, she faltered, fell, got up and staggered on. She fell again and her amplified voice pinched off completely. She lay still. The eight men waited and wondered. Had she finally collapsed from strain and hardship? Or was she playing the grim game?

They waited. Slowly, the airlock doors slid back. A dark opening appeared at the head of the shaft. Three figures emerged, heavily-suited, armed and weapons ready. They approached the prostrate girl. They bent over her limp figure, talking.

After that, the scene dissolved into action and sheer violence. There was no time to wait and see if the ruse was effective. Alby gave a crisp c o m m a n d. His tiny force raced toward the a i r l o c k. There was staccato firing. Confusion. Savagery.

At the top of the shaft was huddled conflict. Screams amplified through helmet communicators. Hand to hand fighting, since the press was suddenly too great for firearms. Carfax broke free from the melee and busied himself setting c h a r g e s to blast through from the airlock valve into the inner workings. He stood away, shouting a code word to his friends to retreat.

Machinery erupted in a gigantic geyser, spewing wreckage. In the stunned silence following explosion, Alby's men charged back in to make good their gains.

Pressured atmosphere was

escaping from below in high, whistling scream. The scream echoed and re-echoed as workmen fled through mazed tunnels, trying to escape suffocation as the atmosphere leaked swiftly away. Down the shaft swarmed Carfax and Groaner, their cat-burglar agility and skills serving them in good stead. At the bottom of the shaft, cradled, ready for flight, were the two spaceships. One small, fast cruiser, the other a clumsy but commodious supply craft.

Groaner and Carfax took the cruiser, herding the surprised, spacesuited crew outside with leveled guns.

"I don't know what the Burglars Union will say about my blowing up that airlock valve," observed Carfax. "I was never a soup-man or safecracker."

"We'll worry about jurisdiction later" snapped Groaner. "Alby said for us to pick up Nahli, if she's still all right. He and the others are making a try for the supply ship. It's still loaded and the city could use those supplies. Let's get this spacecan out of here. Now."

Carfax pressed a remote-control stud. Riding a cushion of compressed air, the cruiser rose swiftly and smoothly up the shaft. At the top, Carfax switched over to ship's power and the ship shot from the air lock like a slug from an air-gun. The craft lifted, hovered, made a wide swing and set down again. In space, such a ship is graceful, smooth-working; but for surface working on planets, a spaceship is as awkward and floundering and abrupt in movement as a grounded goose.

The landing jarred both men's teeth. But almost before the ship touched ground, Groaner was through the tiny airlock and slipping money-like to the surface. He landed running, wondering where this last reserve of strength came from, and headed toward the spot where Nahli struggled hopelessly in the grip of aroused and frightened technicians from the station. He went among them, scattering men like tenpins, snatching half-conscious Nahli from their hands. But before he could make a run back to the ship, his enemies had closed in again, surrounding both him and the girl.

Carfax stood clear, firing slowly, carefully, with deadly accuracy. Groaner broke clear, half-carrying Nahli. He made for the ship. Carfax kept up a rear guard action until a hail of missile cut him to shreds. He fell dead, his body partly buried in a bank of lead sludge.

With no time for tears, no time for regrets or revenge, Groaner thrust Nahli through the airlock, and followed her. He slammed the ship upward into a black, reeling, skyfull of stars. At full power, the acceleration shock nearly blacked him out. He set the

controls on automatic-pilot, heading home.

Groaner bent over Nahli, ministering. "Are you all right?"

"I'm alive," she whispered hoarsely. "How about you? You're hurt. Is it bad?" Groaner glowed at the first interest she had shown whether he lived or died.

"I'll make out," he muttered. "Carfax is dead."

"I know. I know," the girl murmured, eyes stinging.

Partway back to the city, Groaner slowed the cruiser, waiting to see if the supply ship would catch up. He had no way of knowing how Alby and the others had come through the conflict. Then a speck of light appeared astern, growing swiftly in the fat, serviceable supply ship. Groaner let it close the gap and worked the signal blinker beams for word from his friends.

Alby answered. They had their ships. There was a price in lives, and it had been paid. Alby and two others had come out alive, and were working the ship, short-handed, Alby received the news about Carfax calmly. But he felt no elation over his victory. They had taken a desperate gamble and won, but good men had died on both sides. It was a waste. But what had to be done had been done. He swallowed hard on his losses.

Nearing the dome of their home city, the two ships almost ran head-on into a blockading force of Space Patrol ships.

Evading the warships, by swift maneuvering before the officers commanding the fleet could marshal for action, Alby got his prizes through the blockade down the airlock tunnel, and into the city. Not, however, without getting his outer hull-plates singed by a lucky sweep of the flagship's beam-gun battery.

Home safe, thought Alby. But how safe?...

Gresham was waiting for Alby when he stepped down the ramp from the cradled supply ship. Exhausted, Alby nearly fell into the engineer's arms.

"What are they doing out there now?" asked Alby, his voice dull from weariness.

"Same thing," answered Gresham. "They're just circling, like cats around a mousehole. They've been doing it since shortly after you left on the raid. Congratulations, by the way! You've really pulled their whiskers by stealing those ships. I don't know how much good they'll do us, but they may have bargaining value."

"Maybe, and maybe not. I wonder what they're waiting for out there."

Gresham shrugged. "Want to take us alive, I suppose. We still have value, as convict labor. Also, if they dropped a bomb, it would do a lot of damage. They still

think the city is their property, not ours. I think they're waiting for someone back on Earth or Mars to untangle the red tape and decide what to do about us. Waiting for definite orders."

"They may get impatient now. Stealing the ships might make up their minds for them. Let me know if they show any signs of changing their maneuver. I'm dead for sleep. I could sleep a week, straight through. Let me have an hour, then call me. Did you rig up some kind of fake weapon that will put on a show?"

"Yes, but—"

"Not now. My brain's too fuzzy for details. See that it's installed in the supply ship. Use paper clips, if you have to, but get it installed. Our time's running out fast."

Gresham n o d d e d grimly. Alby was sound asleep before the nod was completed. He tilted forward, and Gresham had to hold him upright until men could carry him away, still sleeping.

When Alby wakened, fully dressed, he was surprised to finda Nahli sitting beside his bed, watching him.

"You're going to try something dangerous, aren't you?" the girl demanded.

"Dangerous!" Alby laughed. "A f t e r all we've b e e n through?"

"Don't h e d g e with me. You're going out, alone, trying to talk them into something. You don't have to answer. I know you're going. And it's dangerous. Before you go, I want to say something. It won't take a minute."

"Talk fast," said A l b y, "while I'm throwing cold water on my face."

"Groaner thinks I'm in love with you. You promised not to compete with him. You don't have to, Alby. If you want me, that's the way it is. But I don't think you want me. I don't think you'll ever want me."

"Wanting you has nothing to do with it, Nahli. And you don't really love me, or want me. You just think you should, for some fantastic woman's reason. You sense that I'm different."

Her lips twisted bitterly. "I should know all about love. I don't. I'm as scared and confused of it as any green kid. I do feel something about you, more like pain and pity and awe than like love as a girl thinks of it. You are different from any man I've ever known. Not better or worse, just different."

"I'm a humanoid robot. Not clanking machinery, but a hash of synthetic flesh, reclaimed organic matter and salvaged parts. A scientific zombie, an experiment in lab-created humanity, which went haywire and turned on its creators. I escaped, and was nearly enough human to escape detection. As a human being, I was sent here."

"Not human. Then some-

body sent you here. No robot ever does anything but follow orders. Someone, maybe a subversive organization, sent you here to take over the convicts for their purpose. Who sent you, Alby? What do they want?"

Alby laughed, his face harsh. "If you mean God may have wanted to try a new experiment with the dregs and refuse of humanity and sent me to organize it, you may be right. I don't know about that. But if you mean I'm working for some human agency, like politicians, freethinking philosophers or curious scientists —no. It was my own idea."

Nahli looked dubious. "I told you I was different—different from men and from other robots. Back on Earth, after I escaped, I became a sociologist. I was full of ideas, spoke out against corruption and inhumanity. The only way they could shut me up was to frame me, and send me here. They wanted to bury me in the prisons of Mercury and suddenly I wanted to turn corruption into a higher idea of man, of men freethinking and adventurous, but practical, loyal, capable of governing themselves. We can do that, Nahli, if I can buy a little time. And the men can do it without me, if I have to buy their chance with my life. My synthetic life."

"No," she protested.

"Don't worry," said Alby. "I'm not dying unless there is no other way. I like life, and respect it. Even my own."

Nahli followed Alby into the elevator which was taking him to the ship docks.

"What about you and Groaner?" Alby aked.

"I don't know. I like him. Sometimes it seems more than that. I owe him a lot, and I'm grateful."

"Don't let that blind you to more important emotions. Groaner's a proud man. He'll never settle for less than love. If you can't give him that, give him honesty."

"I will. I've told him how I feel. I hope he understands. Later on, I might find that I've loved him all the time. But if he hurries me, I could hate him. He's afraid, even though you agreed not to compete. It makes him impatient."

"When they made me, Nahli, they left out one factor, sex, and the capacity for having children."

"There are other kinds of love. We could skip that."

"Now, perhaps," said Alby sadly. "But people have to have something to live for. Children give them that. The people of Mercury are my family."

"I know," murmured the girl. "Can I tell Groaner about you, so he'll stop worrying?"

"If I come back, I'll tell him, Nahli."

"Take care of yourself, Alby. We need you. All of us need you. Without you, we're lost and frightened...."

The ships rested in cradles, just inside the airlock.

Men clustered around them, busy at numerous tasks, all working quietly, skillfully. Watching them, Alby felt strangely proud. His people. Good men. Good technicians, especially the ex-prisoners. Criminals are usually good technicians, since they can't afford not to be. Safecrackers are experts with explosives; pickpockets skilled with their hands, delicate and precise of touch. No psychologists anywhere could compete with confidence men. The same, all through the various professions.

Even an amateur murderer like Gresham might have hidden talents beyond the ordinary. Might be a first class engineer, an inventor in various lines. His murder had been ingenious enough, and only unpredictable accident had betrayed him.

"Is the supply ship unloaded?" Alby asked Gresham.

"Unloaded, yes," replied the engineer. "We're still installing the weapon. Paper clips wouldn't do."

"You'll have time. And pick a crew to operate it for me. We're running a bluff, but it has to look convincing."

"It will. I'll operate it myself. I'm going along."

"Can your bad heart stand the excitement?"

"It'll have to. I wouldn't miss the expression on your face when my fireworks start popping."

Alby grinned in sympathy. "It had better work."

"It will, as far as it goes..."

"Signal a parley," instructed Alby. "I'm going out first, alone, in the cruiser. And I don't want them shooting at me. Not yet, anyhow. Tell them I'll speak only to their commander."

Gresham licked his lips. "Just like that? High-handed. You can't talk them out of this, Alby."

"Talk first. Then our bluff. If neither work, we'll fight them through the elevators, through the streets and tunnels and even the ratholes, inch by inch. This is our home."

"We may have to earn it," prophesied Gresham.

The Space Patrol commander was a civilized man. He remembered Alby and grimaced unhappily.

"I might have known you'd have a finger in this pie," he said. "So you're spokesman for that rabble of thieves and cut-throats?"

"No longer a rabble," Alby warned softly. "And I've known worse men. When the Bosses abandoned Mercury, they left behind one valuable commodity—people."

The commander winced. "I know about that. And a great many people back home were incensed when word leaked out. They thought it was a stinking trick."

"People here thought so, too," commented Alby drily.

"We did something about it. We've severed relations."

"Personally, I don't blame you. Officially, you are still considered subject to the various governments of the Allied Planets. Nobody will recognize your claim to autonomy, and you can't make it stick. I've orders to look in, make sure you're all right, and place you back in custody peaceably. Your people seemed ready to dispute the point. I have no direct orders to start bloodshed, but I'm expecting such orders any time."

"Before you start anything," said Alby, "I have some counter terms to offer. Just go away and leave us alone. We're making out. We can do better if Allied Planets will establish trade relations with us. We need oil, some starter atomic fuels, some trickier machinery, medicines—"

"I don't think you're in a position to bargain. No civilized planet will recognize you as a free and independent citizenry with a valid government of your own."

"What's civilized about abandoning us to kill each other or die? We think your governments forfeited jurisdiction by neglect, by endangering our lives, and by the whole planet."

"Only the get-rich-quick promoters. Putting them in charge of the colonies here was a mistake, and there's talk that they will be punished. None of the governments—"

"I'm not here to argue politics. We now have our own way of life. We like it, and we intend to keep it, whether anyone recognizes us or not."

The commander smiled indulgently. "You never were an armchair sociologist, Alby. But as a sociologist, you know that all governments are born in war, not ideas or dreams. There were eight prison-cities on Mercury. Two wiped themselves out during the riots, possibly through failure of the machinery. None of the others is showing any signs of developing into responsible city-states. We could take them over with feather dusters, not guns. Can you speak for them? Can you implement a war?"

"We can if we have to," grated Alby. "We'd rather trade with you. Mercury has mineral richness to offer. And we can exchange valuable ideas. Even inventions."

The commander waved a contemptuous hand. "I doubt that."

"We already have one which might interest you. A secret weapon. I don't expect you to believe me, but I'm prepared to give a demonstration."

The commander laughed. "Go ahead."

"There's a hitch. I insist on a bloodless demonstration. We need a ship for a target.

Do you want to abandon one of yours, or shall I use the cruiser we took on the Polar Station raid?"

Alby took a deep breath while the commander debated the problem with himself.

"Better use the cruiser. I can't risk a Space Patrol ship on what might be a smooth piece of trickery."

Alby nodded. "Retire your ships out of range. We'll send out the cruiser first on robot-pilot. A zigzag course. The supply ship will follow. You'd better set up space-cameras. I'm sure you'll want to show them back home, as well as tell them."

The commander shrugged...

Two hours later, the unmanned cruiser shot from the airlock sally-port of Dome City V. It took off erratically in a series of eerie zigzags and twisting spirals.

The supply ship, weaponed with a fantastic hodgepodge of gadgetry, followed in slow, clumsy pursuit. As a special favor to an old friend, Alby had permitted the Space Patrol commander aboard, giving hostages to the fleet as security for the person and comfort of the commander.

At a safe distance above the city, Alby called the commander close to the weapon.

"No tricks, commander. To prove it, Gresham offered to let you shoot down the cruiser."

The commander stared at the complicated monstrosity with amusement. He let Gresham instruct him in its operation.

A pencil-thin beam licked out through darkness. Like magic, it fixed itself upon the difficult target.

Coruscating violence of soundless light filled the sky, lighting up a large portion of Mercury's surface brighter than sunlight had ever lighted it. The cruiser had ceased to exist, but the deadly accuracy of the beam, and the utter violence of dissolution, stunned the mind.

Pale, the commander turned from the holocaust.

"I don't know, I just don't know," he muttered. "I have no authority to make deals, or any decisions as important as this."

"A commander in space always has authority to avoid a needless waste of ships and men," Alby reminded soberly.

"I'm impressed," admitted the commander stiffly. "But the best I can offer is armistice. I'll have to report, and the governments of Allied Planets will send out qualified observers. There's always the possibility that you had time-bombs planted in that cruiser—"

"I offered to use one of yours for the demonstration."

"So you did. But I remember playing poker with you—just once, a long time ago."

Alby grinned. "If you ca... spare one of your ships...."

"No, thanks. Signal my lighter to bring in your hostages and take me back to the fleet. I'll make my report, and ask to be transferred to the Mars-sector. Your poker games are too rough, and I play a low limit game...."

Back in City V, Alby and Gresham watched the fleet turn and depart, heading back for Venus report.

"We've bought a little time, that's all," Alby commented. "We ran our bluff and bought a little time. The show was brilliantly conceived and brilliantly executed, Gresham. Spectacular enough to scare even me. I won't ask how you did it, because I probably wouldn't understand."

"I don't myself. Not for surse." Gresham was grinning, pale with excitement, but strangely excited.

"I don't know what we'll do when they come back for a real demonstration. Your gadget won't work, and then what—"

"Who says it won't work? I nearly blew up the city with it, just on a dry run. Four hundred years ago, a cartoonist named Rube Goldberg specialized in doodling the most complicated and unlikely devices for accomplishing simple tasks. It's been a standing joke among scientists ever since. I started doodling the same way, in three dimensions. That's all I had in mind. But the gadget took over. Don't worry about that second demonstration. It will work."

"It really works? That thing!"

Gresham grunted. "It's no more unlikely than making Mercury a decent place for decent people to live. If we can do one, we can do the other. And Allied Planets will have to meet our terms. It's a stand-off."

Gresham and Alby stared at each other in silence. The engineer broke it. "Take off that mask, robot. I know you. And you're a better man than I am...."

"How long have you known?"

"From the first. And Carfax knew. We'll miss him. And we'll miss a lot of good men before we're through. We have the other cities to help. And a lot of nasty technical jobs to lick. And maybe some fighting we can't bluff out. But we'll do it, and what then?"

"What do you mean?"

Gresham looked upward through the transparent dome of plastic, at the dark sky and the wide scattering of stars and planets.

"What are you going to do when you've civilized Mercury?"

"I hadn't thought about it," admitted Alby. "But there's always Venus and Mars...and Earth."

"If you need help with them," said Gresham seriously, "call on me...."

witch's saturday

by WALT SHELDON

She was faintly shocked for a moment until she realized there was something reassuringly familiar about Byrne.

SUSANNA consulted her full-length mirror first. She was all there, every gorgeous line of her, unclad, bathed and powdered. She smiled, raised her arms and stretched.

Having confirmed her beauty visually, she slipped into a negligee with a white, furry collar and turned to Tweetums. Tweetums was on the bed. His registered name was Ch. Ting Kua Kua of Ruddydale, but that was too long for every day use. Tweetums was a Pekingese and his honey-colored hair was not unlike Susanna's. "Well, Tweetums," she said, "am I not just about the most gorgeous tomato you ever saw?"

Tweetums barked asthmatically.

"Sweet," she said. She lowered her voice and pursed her lips to say it. Then she went to the dressing table and began to architect a face.

She was making the final strokes with the lipstick brush when Gerald barged in. Tweetums set up a wheezy racket. Gerald's entrances always did this to him.

"Susanna!" said Gerald. "Look at this!" He held a sheaf of mangled papers.

Walt Sheldon explores that borderline world—in this story about a beautiful woman—where the records kept do not always agree with records kept in more prosaic village or county clerk's offices. It is an appealing idea, this possibility of interlocking worlds with identical interests.

There were tooth marks and even paw prints. Tweetums began to burrow into the nylon bedspread. Gerald Hoskins was a tall young man with cropped blond hair, a stub nose and an earnest chin. He was in fact generally earnest—not entirely humorless, just earnest.

Susanna looked up coldly. "Gerald, I've told you time and again not to burst in here when I'm making up. It makes my hand wiggle."

"Well, you don't worry about other parts of you wiggling," said Gerald, just for something nasty to say, "especially if guys like Reynaldo Lamarr happen to be around—"

"*Will* you stop harping on that theme!" Susanna got up, her turquoise eyes on fire. Something odd happened to her eyes when she got angry like that. They narrowed without actually getting smaller or something. Gerald had never quite been able to figure it out.

"All right, all right," said Gerald, "forget Lamarr. For the moment." Lamarr was a photographer's model they'd met one day when an advertising agency had borrowed Gerald from the institute as a kind of technical advisor on the hypnotism series they were running. Nice hunk of cash, it had been, just for letting them say: *this photograph was prepared under the direction of Dr. Gerald Hoskins, noted parapsychologist.* Gerald had no traditional or sentimental qualms about picking up a nice hunk of cash here and there, now and then. Made his research—his real work—easier. "Forget Lamarr," he said. "Let's talk about that flat-faced, overweight, runny-eyed, moronic little beast you call a dog. This is my report on *The Telepathic Aspects of Evil Influence*—a distillation of six months work. I leave it on a desk in my own living room, turn my back to it for five minutes, and and—*ka-CHEE-EEEW!* Damn that dog!"

That, of course, was why Gerald Hoskins and Ch. Ting Kua Kua of Ruddydale were fated to be mortal enemies. Gerald was allergic to dog hair. As he kept telling Susanna. Who didn't believe in allergies. She, herself, had never been sick in her life—not even chicken-pox when she was a little girl. Sickness, she firmly believed, was a self-induced thing, something like people who always get into accidents.

Tweetums was cowering miserably now. Susanna went over to him, cuddled him in her arms and said, "There, there, don't be frightened. Don't let the big mean old football player frighten little you."

"I'm not a football player, never was!" roared Gerald.

"Well, you look like one," said Susanna.

Gerald tightened his lips and looked in the direction of God for a moment. No help. Then he looked down again. He muscled calm into himself. "Now, listen, Susanna. It's not exactly the dog, and it's not exactly Reynaldo Lamarr, and it's not exactly any one particular thing. It's your whole—well, campaign. I'm sure your aggressiveness is subconscious, and very possibly the result of, well unfathomable arcane influence of some kind. You spend money like water—this apartment, the convertible, your fur coats, your jewelry—you've raised more eyebrows down at the institute than the city dust. You've—"

"Oh, can it, Gerald," said Susanna wearily. "Let's just have one evening tonight without any of this coming up. This is Saturday night—party night. And I'm going to have a good time at the Barrington's masquerade, if—if—"

"If what?"

"If it kills me," said Susanna, and got up from the bed.

Gerald took a deep breath. "All right," he said. "Truce tonight. On one condition. Tomorrow we go over the whole thing carefully and see what we can't work out. *Something's* got to be done. With all this fuss I can't keep my mind on my work, and I must warn you frankly, Susanna, my work's the most important thing I have. If it came to a choice—"

She looked at him sharply. "Are you asking for a divorce, Gerald?"

"No, of course not," he said angrily. He half-turned, then looked back and said, "A divorce would just about ruin me down at the institute at this time anyway."

"Uh huh," said Susanna wearily. She went back to the dressing table. "You'd better start getting into *your* costume. We'll be late."

"Oh," he said, "I meant to tell you. I have to get down to the shop tonight. Just a few hours. You drive on up to the Barrington's in the convertible, and I'll be along later."

"Well, aren't *you* the perfect husband, though!" said Susanna. "I look forward to this masquerade for three weeks and then when it comes, you, without warning, without—"

She made a bit of a speech of it. She had to. Wouldn't do to let Gerald suspect she was happy he wasn't going to the party with her. Couldn't tell him, after all, that she and Reynaldo Lamarr had actually racked their brains trying to figure out a way to keep him out of the picture this Saturday night....

Reynaldo was already sitting in the convertible when she got downstairs. She'd phoned him after Gerald had left, he'd hurried over and met the convertible when the ga-

rage man brought it to the curb. It had happened like this before; the garage man knew Reynaldo.

Reynaldo looked at Susanna, lifted his thick, dark, glossy eyebrows and said, "Wow!"

She was pleased. She held up the skirts of her costume and said, "Like it?"

"Terrif," said Reynaldo, and opened the door for her.

It was a witch costume, this thing she wore. Not just any old witch costume out of the bins at Brooks', but something especially and lovingly designed by a talented, if gentle young man on the staff of one of the swankiest dress-making joints in town. At first glance it looked as if Susanna floated along in a swirling cloud of tulle, and as she swirled stars and pinpoints glittered. The tulle was draped over an underslip of gunmetal brocade, and the cape, thrown back, was lined with t' is. The golden witch's stars spotted the thing at random. A tulle veil hung from the hat, curled over one shoulder, and then crossed and masked the lower part of her face.

She posed for just another instant, then got in beside Reynaldo and closed the door behind her.

Once out of the city they headed up the old road, along the river. The Barrington's place was still a good ten miles away. A fat moon, pinkish, as if bloodstained but not quite thoroughly washed, rose in the East and Susanna thought at first it would be a bright and cheerful night. But shreds of clouds came scuttling out of nowhere and began to play over the face of the moon, teasing it. The moon shrank as it rose. The clouds thickened, formed clusters, and presently, a thin gray overcast. The moon was weak and fuzzy behind it.

Now a light wind—cold and curiously intangible—sprang up. It came from the side, and Susanna knew it wasn't the slipstream of the car. Once they passed through a tiny patch of wood, and she was certain she heard a musical, mournful sighing among the trees.

Reynaldo drove somberly, his handsome profile scarcely moving. After a while he said, "When are you gonna get rid of that jerk?"

She stared at him. Reynaldo was a beautiful, exciting thing—all man—tender, yet cruel—and it was delicious to be with him. But sometimes when he put things bluntly like this it jolted her. When was she going to get rid of Gerald? She'd have to some time, of course; she'd planned it that way a long time ago. A few years of marriage wasn't a bad price for a subsequent lifetime of alimony. Security, with a minimum of obligation, meant a lot to Susanna. Her widowed mother, clinging des-

perately to the family name and the hollow-ware that was supposed to have been made by Paul Revere himself had raised her in an old and big house in Massachusetts. Because it was old and big the house was hard to keep up. Ever since she could remember Mother had long since stopped clipping coupons and was digging into capital. And always, those lectures on Family Glory. "Your great-great-great-great grandfather hung the first witch in this town, and don't you ever forget it," her mother would always say.

Somehow, poverty or no, Mother had managed to send her to a progressive school in the Southern mountains where you studied what you pleased and more or less did what you pleased when you weren't studying. Gerald had lectured there on parapsychology. At first, except to note he was fairly good-looking in an airedale sort of a way, she hadn't paid much attention to him. Then a fellow student had asked what did she think that guy made a year with that parapsychology racket of his? When she had heard the figure she'd widened her eyes and begun to stalk Gerald. Through the old-fashioned virtues—i n d u s t r y, persistence, skill—she got him.

So she thought of all this and didn't answer Reynaldo (whom she'd ditch but fast the minute he showed signs of wanting to share her security) and snuggled down into the leather cushions and let the wind play with her blonde hair and the black tulle pennons of her costume.

When it happened she had little warning. Not enough time to react, and not even enough time to sit up straight and become tense. Maybe that was partly her salvation. She knew only that glaring headlights swung toward them, brakes s c r e e c h e d, metal ground and crashed, everything went into kaleidoscope and then was suddenly black —blacker than a cave in Hell—

She heard a scream just before she went under. Possibly it was her own.

She knew, after a while; that she was beginning to come to. She sensed, even before she opened her eyes, that that she was in a medical place of some sort. That smell.

She heard a deep, pleasant voice calling her name. "Susanna. Susanna. Come on now, that's a good girl—wake up Susanna."

She opened her eyes. She had a fuzzy impression of a round, jolly face bending over her, and about her a small room, white-walled, enameled and glassed-in cabinets sitting here and there, a basin, a gleaming sterilizer, diplomas on the walls. And some kind of a huge m a c h i n e. She thought it might be an x-ray machine.

She tried her voice out. "How long?" she asked him.

A chuckle came from the round face and then it moved a little more into focus. It was sort of an Irish face, she thought; that homely, pleasant, reassuring Irish face you often see. He was a doctor; she assumed that from his white lab coat. Fifty; maybe a little more. Rounded off everywhere, cheeks and chin and brows, and with delightfully soft, curly gray and ginger hair. Blue, twinkling eyes—and was that just a suggestion of slant at the corners? The doctor said, "Oh, you've been out an hour or two, now. But I wouldn't be worrying about it. Slight concussion. I'll have you patched up in the time it takes to utter an easy curse on some one. Ha! Even more than that—I'll have you patched up and your normal powers restored. That I will."

It didn't make much sense to her. Probably it wasn't supposed to; it was just cheerful talk for the patient. Meanwhile there was this and that to be learned.

"Where am I?"

"In my office. You're perfectly safe. I went out and picked you off the field as soon as they whispered the word in my old ear. That I did."

"You're a doctor, of course."

"You might say that." He chuckled again. He made a little bow and said, "Michael Lucifer Byrne, at your pleasure, Madame. My friends and patients—and practically one and the same they are—are all in the habit of calling me Dr. Mike."

"Oh," she said. She tried to get up and Dr. Mike said, "No, no, not yet," and touched her gently to push her back again. She could have sworn that a faint electric shock went through her as he touched her. But she didn't worry about it. Gerald had often told her about tactile hallucination induced by stress or sock. She had a sudden thought. "Reynaldo—the man in the car with me—what—?"

"Passed away," said Dr. Mike, chuckling hugely this time. It struck Susanna as faintly macabre that he should chuckle, but she let that pass, too. Dr. Mike nodded and said, "You did a good job, Susanna—but you slipped up, you did, on the basic principle of keeping yourself out of it. Well—inexperience, I suppose. Excusable it is, and quite common."

"How do you know my name?"

Dr. Mike seemed to find that funny too. He slapped his leg as he chuckled and said, "On your driver's license, naturally. It's a doctor's privilege now, isn't it, to look in the handbag of a beautiful young—er—girl he finds lying out in the field?"

"Oh," she said. "Of course. Now—another thing. Just how

badly am I hurt? When can I get up? I—I don't feel any pain or anything at all—"

"You've nothing but a few scratches, my dear. The body, the vehicle, as we might say, is undamaged." His eyes went back and forth, over her. "A beautiful vehicle it is," he added wistfully.

For the first time she realized that she wore no clothes. She was faintly shocked, and ready to demand something to put over her when she saw that there was a sheet over her. It was light, gossamer. Literally, she couldn't feel it's weight. She made herself limp and closed her eyes again, just for a moment. Then she opened them and said, "Have you notified my husband? He's Dr—"

"Yes, I know of him well," said Dr. Mike quickly. It seemed to Susanna he frowned. "I haven't called him yet, partly because he's on his way from the institute now and I'd have to wait until he got to the Barrington's anyway before I could reach him —and partly because I don't want him to be coming around here in the next hour or two and interfering."

Susanna's head was just about thoroughly cleared out now. Enough for her to stare in mild amazement at Dr. Mike. "Wait a minute. How did you know he went to the institute tonight? How did you know about the Barrington's? How—"

He touched her on the shoulder again, and this time she was *sure* there was a light electric shock. "My dear," he said, "you wouldn't be prying into my trade secrets now, would you? After all, even among our sort, there's such a thing as ethics. You should be thankful the accident happened where it did—that whole field is deeded to one with the powers. Oh, not in the county records, of course, but in the other books, where *everything* is kept." He took his hand away, and the electric shock disappeared, and then he moved from the operating table to the curious bulky machine that looked something like an X-ray outfit. He began to turn knobs. "It'll take a while to give you the treatment. But I promise you —not only will your original powers be restored, but the powers that have been dormant will be brought out. Your husband would understand this. He's even done some research on the relation between ganglion enzynes and the function of subconscious circuits."

Susanna's eyes became wide. "Look. What—what are you going to do with that machine?"

"Use it," said Dr. Mike pleasantly. "Oh, there'll be the usual fee, of course. The one all those silly Faust legends are based on."

"What?" Susanna shook her head bewilderedly.

"After the treatment your powers are at my disposal. You understand that, don't you? However, you've nothing to worry about, because, if anything, it'll be an improvement. It will for fair. Oh, you'll have your little powers and you'll have to learn to be careful of them, but the fact is, under me, you'll be getting along better with people—your husband for one. And doing more good in general." He sighed. "I wish normal people could get it into their heads that we're just like any other b e i n g s—some of us good, some of us bad—"

Susanna stared at Dr. Mike and in a breathy voice said, "What kind of a doctor *are* you, anyway?"

He raised his eyebrows. He started to pull the machine over to the operating table, where Susanna lay. "Why, my dear," he said, "I thought you understood. Naturally—I'm a *witch* doctor...."

It was early morning when Susanna got to the apartment, and she was dizzy, tired and dazed—she didn't even want to fumble in her handbag to find her key. She rang the doorbell instead. She couldn't remember much of what had happened: there'd been an accident, some country doctor had taken her in, but she couldn't even remember the doctor's name or what he looked like. Nothing was really very clear up to the moment she stepped from the taxi downstairs and the doorman's eyebrows exploded in surprise at seeing her and he helped her to the elvator and left her only when she assured him that absolutely, p o s i t i v e l y, naturally, of course she was all right. Quite all right.

Oh, yes, there was one more thing she seemed to remember. The kind of morning it was outside. The kind of a quiet, Sunday morning it was with the light pale gold and unreal and the movement of birds from tree to tree in the park, but no sound from them, no real sound. The streets empty—looking freshly scrubbed. It made her think of one of those pieces of serious music they always had to listen to in that progressive school. What was it, now? Wagner—the guy in one of his rare tender moods—yes, *Forest Murmurs*, that was it.

The door opened and Gerald's eyes grew like ripples from a splash and he cried, *"Susanna!"*

"Hello, dear," she said. "Good morning. I—"

He bustled her inside and asked every question in the world simultaneously. It was quite a feat. He kept it up all the way to the couch in the living room. He made her lie down. She felt like lying down; she felt at once ineffably tired and weightless. She put her forearm on her forehead. She sighed deeply.

"My poor baby, my baby

doll, my darling," said Gerald, and words to that effect. He polka-dotted her face and neck and arm with kisses. "Why didn't you call? Where have you been? Do you—I mean—do you feel all right? I mean—"

She brushed away some black tulle that had crept up around her neck. "I'll explain everything later, Gerald. Everything I know, that is—it's all sort of vague. But I'm all right. I know I'm all right. I can feel that, and I can feel something else—"

"What? What, dear?"

She frowned for words. "I don't know how to say it exactly. I'm changed. I mean I'm not—I'm not the kind of a witch I used to be. I'm going to help you in your work, Gerald. We're going to get along much better—"

"Sweetheart," said Gerald, frowning, "you'd better rest."

"Yes." She closed her eyes; she let herself float. "Yes, I'll have to rest for a while—there's a power, a funny power in me—I don't know what it is—"

At that moment Tweetums, or Ch. Ting Kua Kua of Ruddydale, waddled into the room, saw Gerald getting Susanna's undivided attention, perked up his silken ears and began to bark furiously.

"Oh, drop dead," said Susanna in a weary voice.

Tweetums looked surprised. His eyes glazed over. He tried to take a deep, wheezing breath and it got caught halfway. He took two steps forward and fell—and after that there was not a trace of movement in him.

Gerald didn't notice right away. He was too busy stroking Susanna's brow and kissing her closed eyelids and that sort of thing.

15th WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION, LONDON, 1957

Hundreds of science fiction fans and professionals are already heading for London, as this is being written, to attend the 15th *World Science Fiction Convention* at the King's Court Hotel, Leinster Gardens, in Bayswater. The entire hotel has been taken over for the four Convention days, September 6th to 9th, by the committee headed by John Wyndham and John Carnell.

Membership in the Convention Society is 7/6 or $1. For further information and/or membership, write either to the Secretary of the Convention Committee, 204 Wellmeadow Road, Catford, London, S.E.6, or to Franklin M. Dietz, 1721 Grand Avenue, Bronx 53, N.Y.C.

lancelot returned

by IRVING E. COX

I'VE BEEN Crystal Douvain's press agent ever since she hit the top ten a dozen years ago. I know her—too well, maybe; in fact I nearly married her once, only we couldn't figure any clever angle to the publicity. Take it from me, Crys is a sharp character; she doesn't scare easily. That's why I knew something was up when she called me at the Studio Saturday morning.

"Sam," she said. "Sam," you got to come out here."

"Today, Crys? I have all the publicity stills to—"

"It's about Madge, Sam."

"I thought you were going to send her to Switzerland this year."

"I was afraid to, Sam, and—" Crystal's voice was suddenly hysterical. "Oh, Sam, you've got to come! I heard them talking again last night and I saw his helmet, only—only it wasn't there, really, and Madge says—"

"Whoa," I broke in. "Give it to me without the dramatics, please."

"A man in the playroom with Madge," she answered, trying to be calm. "She says his name is Lancelot and—

She obviously believed the fiction. The truth could plunge her fragile mind into complete and fatal chaos.

Irving Cox, California school teacher and former Philadelphian, increasingly well known in Science Fiction in recent years, returns with this story of a lonely young girl who feels unwanted, and who is visited, nightly, by a shining knight in armor, riding out of the mist...

and when I tried to catch him, he simply disappeared, Sam."

"O.K., Crys, I'll run out this morning."

It sounded as if she were having the D.T.'s—something new for Crystal Douvain. If so, that meant a lot of work for me—arranging for a quiet cure somewhere; botching together a plausible story for the papers. But it wasn't something I could put off. Crystal Douvain is the top money-maker for our studio, one solid blue-chip TV hadn't hurt. Douvain in technicolor—with or without 3-D—can still drag Pop out to the neighborhood theatre, away from the half-hour horse operas and the beer ads in the living room.

I drove my Merc convertible out to the Douvain house in Bel-Air. Five years ago I'd have driven a Caddy, but TV and big taxes have pulled our belt straps in a couple of notches. For most of us, anyway. Crys still lived on the old scale. Her house was—well, monstrosity about covers it. She designed it herself—a disjointed combination of a French chateau, a Spanish monastery, and an English castle. In releases to the screen magazines we always speak of Crystal's "delightfully effervescent retreat in the Bel-Air hills." But, take my word for it, we've had to strain our camera angles to get photos to illustrate that point of view.

I parked my Merc in the breezeway, behind the swimming pool. Shivering in a filmy, black negligee, Crystal was waiting for me on the terrace, as if she were afraid to go inside. She had a tall drink in her hand, and for the first time in all the years I've known her she had applied her make-up so clumsily she looked her real age. A hard forty-three, not the conventional "early thirties" of the press releases.

I put my hand under her elbow and walked with her toward the door into the house. Her fingers were ice cold; her whole body was trembling. "Better lay off the stuff, Crys," I advised.

She looked at her drink and laughed brittlely. "First one I've had in two days, Sam. I thought it was that when I first heard the voices, and I went on the wagon, but fast."

I shrugged. Her eyes were clear; maybe she was telling the truth.

"It's something else, Sam. Something—awful—that I can't understand. I went up to Madge's room early this morning, when I heard them again, and I saw him—his helmet, anyway. Just for a second. Then it was gone, all of it." Her voice sank to a whisper.

We went inside. It was colder in that enormous, stone-walled room than it had been on the terrace. Crystal's living room had always re-

minded me of the Union Terminal, decked out in tapestries and dusty coats of arms. Arched columns gave it a kind of cloistered effect, but the yawning cavern of the Gothic fireplace looked like the mouth of a tomb. Suits of armor decorated the bases of the columns, and gargoyles grinned down from the murky darkness close to the Romanesque arch of the ceiling. The furnishings were tremendous, ornately carved, and very black—pieces Crystal had picked from an impoverished Grandee in Spain.

I sat down on something high and uncomfortable. Crys paced the floor, sipping her drink occasionally.

"All right," I said, "Let's have it."

"There's nothing to tell, Sam—nothing you can put your finger on. I heard voices and I saw a man, maybe; that's all there is to it."

"He was in Madge's room?"

"Yes, Madge and—and this somebody else. She says his name is Lancelot and I saw that helmet—" Crystal shook her head in a characteristic gesture of disbelief; then, in one hungry gulp, she emptied her glass. "Of course I can't get a sane explanation from Madge. I think he's someone from the studio, Sam, trying to take a crack at me through Madge."

"Anything to go on, Crystal?"

Her lips made a hard, grim line. "Don't tell me we have a real Lancelot parading around the hills of Bel Air. Even for Hollywood, that's going a little too far." She lit a cigarette nervously. "The thing that really gets me, Sam, is the way he disappeared when I went into Madge's room. A trick, but a damn' clever one; that means he's getting in and out of the house without tripping the burglar alarms."

"How is Madge taking it?"

"The poor idiot: this is exactly the sort of thing that would seem entirely normal to her. I want you to talk to the kid, Sam. You've always had more patience with her than I have. Maybe you'll be able to get something out of her this time."

"I'll try, Crys."

I walked slowly up the broad flight of marble-faced steps four floors to the big playroom at the top of the house. I knew I wouldn't get much help from Madge and I was trying to piece together from Crystal's disjointed account a general idea of what had actually happened. Presumably a man had broken into Madge's playroom somehow and Crystal had heard him talking to the child. I didn't put much stock in the rest of the story.

Child. It's strange how we think in established patterns. Madge was actually nineteen, but Crys still kept her daughter confined to a playroom and surrounded with dolls and games. For Crys it was psych-

chologically necessary to keep Madge a child, for that helped maintain the illusion that Crystal's own youth and beauty were imperishable commodities.

The studio had always kept Madge something of a state secret. Today it wouldn't matter too much—Crys is too firmly established—but ten years ago it would have made a big difference in the Douvain build-up. We might never have shoved Crys into the top ten if the public had known she was a divorced, ex-burlesque comic and the mother of a baby girl.

There was another side to the picture, too. Crystal wasn't entirely to blame for her attitude toward her daughter. Crys was speaking the literal truth when she called Madge an idiot. The psychologists Crys has consulted—in droves—have never been quite so blunt. They say Madge is just a moron, and they always add, in that sanctimonious tone they use with hopeless cases, "But many children of inferior mental ability make adequate life adjustments."

However, brains weren't the only features nature left out when she put Madge together. Madge was so awkward, so gawky, so very plain that no make-up artist in Hollywood could have made her even passably attractive. To top it off, Madge had a cleft palate, and she spoke with a lisp that made everything she said almost totally unintelligible. As Crys said, I'm one of the few people with enough patience to find a way to help her, to liked her—no, I suppose it was just pity. I always wanted to find a way to help her, to make her a little happier.

For Madge was an idiot, but not idiot enough to be unaware of her loneliness and neglect. She knew she was locked in the playroom because her mother was ashamed of her, but she didn't understand why. She knew she was clumsy; she knew she was ugly; and she tried desperately to make herself over. Sometimes, after I'd spent an afternoon with Madge, I'd make a bee line for the nearest bar and drink myself blind; it was the only way I could keep from thinking thoughts that were heresy in the mind of a functioning press agent.

Madge was curled on a window seat reading when I entered the playroom. A child's book, with big print and plenty of pictures. The title caught my eye as she put the book aside, *King Arthur and His Knights.*

"I sought you'd tome to thee me, Tham," she said slowly, as distinctly as she was able. "Mommy wath worried. Thee alwayth hath you tome, t'en."

"Crystal says a man was in your room this morning, Madge."

"All night, Tham! Ev'ry night for almoth a week," her

face was radiant, in a vague way, like something seen unclearly through a thick mist, Madge seemed beautiful.

"Who is he, Madge?"

"Lanthelot. I twaved a boom—oh, Tham, I twaved an' twaved—an' tho he tame."

"Yes I know, Madge. But who is he, really, when he's not play acting? You must have seen his face. Is he somebody from your mother's studio?" That question I realized as soon as I had asked it, was foolish; Madge wouldn't know, since she had never seen her mother's studio.

"He'th Lanthelot, an' nobody elth!" Madge stamped her foot angrily, and I saw tears in her eyes. I began to understand then, why Crystal was so frightened. Madge believed the fiction. The truth might plunge her fragile mind into complete chaos. If this was revenge aimed at Crystal, it was the filthiest deal I had ever tangled with—to attack the reason and the faith of a half-witted child.

I said very gently, "Don't you think it's a little strange, Madge? Lancelot has been dead for hundreds of years. You know ordinary people can't—"

"He ithn't od'nary, Tham. He 'thplained that to me. He'th always alive when people believe it—really believe it, like I do; an' he alwayth helpth a damthel who twaves a boom."

"How does he get in, Madge?"

"He tometh when I twave."

"Would he come now?"

"Not while you're here, Tham—unleth you believe an' twave ath hard ath I did."

I clenched my fists. Whoever he was, he had sewed Madge up tight. There was no way to shake the thing out of her mind. I talked for another half hour to Madge—conversation with her was always a slow and painstaking process—but she gave me no new information. I tried, with half a dozen different approaches, to get her to tell me how her Lancelot got into the playroom. But her answer was always the same, "I twaved a boom an' he tame." Through the window or the door from the hall? Madge didn't think so. "He'th juth' here, Tham—all at onth, in my room." And he disappeared, with similar efficiency, whenever an outsider appeared.

I went downstairs and saw Crystal again. She was less frightened than she had been when she telephoned to me. Which was Crystal's normal way of reacting to a problem. Whenever something came up that she couldn't handle—from a hassel over her Bullock's charge account to a question of the seating protocol when she gave a dinner party—Crystal called the studio and dumped the problem in our laps. The studio never had temperament trouble with

Crystal Douvain. She did as she was told, good pictures or stinkers—anything, so long as the green stuff kept flowing into her bank account.

Sometimes I wondered. if Crystal had been less hard-headed a business woman, she might have given Madge more real motherly love. But where Madge was concerned there was always a nasty nightmare lurking at the back of Crystal's mind. How would the public react if it were general knowledge that Crystal was not only the mother of a nineteen year old daughter—making Crys a matron, not an ingenue—but that the daughter was a moronic ugly duckling?

"Did you get anything out of Madge?" Crystal asked.

"Not much more than you did. She believes the man is really Lancelot."

"What's back of it, Sam?"

"It's hard to say. There's a pay-off gimmick somewhere."

"A kind of mental kidnapping." Crystal's jaw worked grimly. "I'll pay, of course, but one thing I insist on—Madge must be let down easily. I won't have the child hurt." Crystal had never been selfish with Madge. She had spent a fortune on doctors and psychiatrists to help the child. She had deluged Madge with a flood of things, everything a girl could want. It was as if Crystal hoped to substitute material objects for the real affection she could not express or feel.

"One thing worries me," I said. "How do we contact him? How do we let him know we're ready to make the pay-off?"

"That's up to you, Sam, you're paid to take care of details." As I said before, when Crystal has a problem she drops it in our laps. This time it looked as if she expected something in the nature of a miracle. How do you go about making a deal with a kidnapper of a child's mind, when he has the singular habit of disappearing unless you know how to twave a boom?

"If it's all right with you, Crys," I said, "I'll spend the night here. Maybe this Lancelot character will put in an appearance again."

"Madge says he's been here every night for a week."

"In the meantime, I'm going back to the studio. I've an idea we may be able to get our man through Central Casting. We can assume, I think, that he's an actor, and—"

"What good will that do? They come in job-lot batches in Hollywood."

"But we know one or two other things, too. He appears in costume. He's either rented that or borrowed it from a studio wardrobe. I don't believe he's renting the outfit; that would be too easy to trace. If I check with the studios and we find a costume missing—"

"Maybe, Sam," Crys agreed. "You've an outside chance of finding him. I don't care how you do it. I'm only interested in the results."

It was noon when I backed my Merc out of the breezeway and headed toward town. Crystal's castle sprawled across the top of one of the highest hills in Bel-Air. The drive twisted sharply down the hillside in a series of S-curves and through the dense foliage of an olive grove. Where the drive joined the public road, there was a high, wrought-iron gate set in stone pillars. I stopped the car and got out to unlock the gate. When I turned back, I saw Lancelot behind me—a magnificent figure in glistening armor seated on an enormous, white horse.

I've been working around the studios for fifteen years. I know the sort of research that goes into making a period costume, but I had never seen such detailed accuracy as this. The metal was thoroughly real, not foil-on-cardboard to make the burden of armor lighter. Our Lancelot must have been a giant with the strength of an ox. The visor of his helmet was down, so that I could not see his face. The purple plume fluttered gently in the wind. Fixed to the helmet, just below the plume, was a scarlet scarf which I recognized as belonging to Madge. In a dim part of my mind I remembered that the knights of the medieval romances always wore tokens from the ladies for whom they went adventuring. He had obviously spared no detail to make the illusion of the masquerade convincing.

He lowered his lance and advanced toward me slowly, until the point of the weapon touched my throat. I backed against the wrought iron fence; he held me pinioned there, with the lance prodding angrily into my skin.

"Varlet, dost come from yon castle?" he demanded in a deep-pitched, nasal voice.

"I've been up to see Crystal Douvain, if that's what you mean."

"Ha!" The point of the lance ground deeper into my throat. "Then thou art a minion of the evil enchantress."

"Listen, chum," I ventured, "you can drop the corny dialect. You may be able to fool Madge with it, but—"

"By the Rood, thou shewest courage to speak the name of the fair Lady Margaret to her champion. Wert thou a gentleman, rightly armed, I would give thee challenge now to do battle to the death."

Disdainfully he drew up his lance; I relaxed a little and sidled toward the convertible. In the last half minute my opinion of the situation had changed materially. This was no bizarre form of mental kidnapping or revenge. Crystal would not be able to settle the issue with a quiet pay-off;

the man who called himself Lancelot was mad.

The important thing, as I saw it, was to prevent any publicity. If I called in the cops, the whole story would be smeared over the front pages of every newspaper in the country. Before I could make a move to lock this character up in the booby hatch where he belonged, I had to get him away from the Douvain estate.

"You're from King Arthur's Court?" I asked, feeling very foolish.

"I am Lancelot, Knight of the Round Table."

"It's good we met, friend. The Court has assembled in the city, and if you'll just come with me—"

"I do not return, knave, until my quest is done. As all Christendom knowest the fair Lady Margaret craved a boon, and the adventure was given me by the King at Camelot."

"Madge asked you to come?"

"Feigned innocence sits not well on thy tongue. Did the evil sorceress, who holds the Lady Margaret captive by her spells, send thee forth to do discourse with me?"

"You could put it that way."

"Then the enchantment is weakening." His deep-throated chuckle was muffled by the mask of the helmet. "Thou canst carry back my challenge to the enchantress. Let her appoint a fitting champion to do single combat in her name. A gentleman fair armed and mounted, not a varlet coming naked in magicked chariot such as this." He tapped the hood of the Merc resoundingly with his lance. "We will meet ere dusk in this same forest; should I be the victor, the spell shall be done and the Lady Margaret is free to return with me to Camelot."

"My friend, we don't settle our problems with combat these days. Now, if you'd just come along to the city—"

"Thou hast heard the challenge, fair spoken, of Lancelot. If the enchantress find no champion to meet me this day, the spell is forfeit and the Lady Margaret is free."

He turned proudly and rode off among the trees—so quickly, so silently, it seemed as if he disappeared into nothingness. I slid behind the wheel of the Merc; my face was beaded with sweat and my hands were shaking. I was, frankly, scared; the problem was far more delicate than it had seemed before I knew we were dealing with a madman.

I saw no point in going back to the house and telling Crystal I had talked to Lancelot. She would have considered his new development just another detail that I was expected to know how to handle.

I drove back to the studio, turning over a variety of half-baked schemes in my mind. The deduction I had made earlier, that we might learn

the name of Lancelot by checking the files of studio extras, was no longer entirely valid. Madness doesn't operate with our kind of logic. He might have forged the costume himself; he might have had it for a number of years.

Nonetheless I went through the motions of trying to turn up some useful facts; I couldn't think of anything else to do. I wasted most of the afternoon, and drew an amazingly consistent negative on every count. At four o'clock I faced the ugly truth: I had made absolutely no progress, and at dusk an armored madman expected to do battle on the estate.

I didn't have time to think the thing through from all the possible angles, but I put together the best plan I could under the circumstances. I had to have a force of men I could trust; if we could capture the masquerading Lancelot and turn him over to the authorities somewhere else, Crystal's name would be out of it. In Hollywood we have one gilt edged currency that will purchase very nearly anything: a motion picture contract. Every studio is always besieged by dozens of pretty muscle men who think they're the answer to the American woman's dream. There was my manpower, and the contract would buy their silence.

I explained the deal to the Big Boss. He thinks with a cash register, so I didn't have to draw diagrams to make him see we had to risk something to protect Crystal; after all, she's still our biggest money-maker. I rounded up a score of muscle men and the front office gave them contracts.

I borrowed a studio bus and drove my army to Bel-Air. I told them as little as I could. There seemed no reason to mention Madge. I said there was a lunatic loose on the estate and we wanted to bring him in without causing any unnecessary publicity.

The sun was setting as I parked the bus in the breezeway. I stationed four or five of the men outside, hidden beside the pool. The others I kept as a mobile force in the living room. Crystal brought us cocktails and sandwiches. Automatically she turned on the Douvain charm; it was an instinctive reaction whenever a man was around.

We didn't have long to wait. Precisely as the sun dipped behind the western hills, we heard a yelp from the terrace and the living room doors burst open. Lancelot strode toward us, his sword flashing. Crystal gave a little scream and shrank against the manly chest of one of my hired muscle boys.

Lancelot stood in front of her, his legs wide. "Sorceress," he thundered, "hast thou named thy champion?"

"This is it, boys," I said. "Surround him. If we use rope—"

Lancelot whirled his sword in front of him. "I fight not with unarmed fools. Yet twice I ask, as 'tis required: woman, where is thy champion?"

The muscle men moved toward him gingerly. When he moved again, they jumped away. One of them backed against a suit of armor. He cried out, in a high, shrill voice. The armor clattered to the floor. Lancelot touched it scornfully with his toe.

"Be there man among you who hath the courage to don a warrior's raiment?" No one spoke. Lancelot laughed joyfully. "Thrice I have asked, and the charm is done!" He strode toward the hall. One of my pretty, muscle men couldn't get out of his way fast enough, and Lancelot's shoulder plate cut a superficial scratch in the hero's cheek.

The muscle man screamed in terrible agony.

"My face! You've ruined it. I'll never be able to face a camera!" He swung toward me, his lips quivering. "It's your fault. I'm going to sue you and your whole damn' studio for every b l e s s e d cent—"

"Sam!" Crystal cried. "He's going upstairs!"

"Stop him, boys!" I ordered. "We have to keep him away from Madge."

For a moment the muscle men moved reluctantly after the knight. At the foot of the stairway Lancelot turned and swung his sword. "Be gone, knaves!"

I lurched after him, but my army was in full retreat. As the strong men barreled toward the terrace, they carried Crystal and me back with them. Before we could work ourselves free, Lancelot was at the top of the first flight of steps. Crystal and I raced after him.

Three endless flights of steps: I was gasping for breath when I reached the fourth floor. Lancelot was forty feet ahead of us. Crystal snatched wordlessly at my hand and dragged me after him. But the playroom door banged in our faces. The lock shot home. Crystal began to weep hysterically; I tried to break open the lock. Muffled by the wooden panels, voices were audible in the playroom.

"You've come to take me away—at last!" Madge sighed. Her whisper sang with joy, and for some reason her lisp seemed to be gone.

"The enchantment is broken, dear lady. Camelot lies just beyond yon open window."

"The window, Lancelot? But it is so far to the ground, and the terrace below—"

"It is nothing, Lady Margaret. Thou hast believed. Thy boon is granted. Come; take my hand; we must be gone."

"No, Madge, no!" Crystal screamed.

At last the door yielded. As

it banged open, we saw Madge standing on the window seat. She began to step into the yawning emptiness beyond. No, it was not quite empty, and from the heart of the light but rather a glow of pale light we saw - hand reaching out to help her. The radiance was reflected on Madge's face, and the child was beautiful, the ugly duckling transformed into a princess and clothed in the mist of hope.

Screaming again, Crystal sprang toward her daughter. But she was too late. Madge walked through the window. We heard her body strike the flagstone of the terrace, four stories below. Crystal fainted.

Twenty frightened muscle men saw it happen, and even the contracts haven't bought their silence. Considering the scandal that might have developed, the studio has done a remarkable job on the publicity. Apparently, a majority of the fans sympathize with Crystal for her loss.

Sure, sometimes you can pick up nasty rumors in some of the night spots in Hollywood; most of it is absurd. But you won't hear any mention of Lancelot. He doesn't fit according to our logic. We feel much more at home with the sordid tale of a neglected, idiot girl so lonely she killed herself: that sort of bathos H o l l y w o o d understands.

But we all saw Lancelot once more that night. We went to carry Madge's pitifully distorted body into the house, and we saw, for a moment, a glow of r a d i a n c e among the trees beyond the pool. Lancelot was riding proudly into the night and Madge sat on the saddle behind him.

"THE EARTHLINGS'LL GIT YOU IF YOU DON'T WATCH OUT!"

I've never seen a Martian BEM—

But on the Martian barrens

I'll bet they make their kids behave

With threats of Bug-Eyed Terrans.

—Lee Chaytor

eternal lovers

by JACK WEBB

She was left, finally, even without love, condemned by the old gods to wander forever in the nether regions.

A LOT of big time art is a racket. I know. I've packaged it for the one-generation-rich. the wives who suddenly need something in the living-room their husbands can't understand and seldom care for much. Something somewhat like themselves. I know what they want and I have a whole string of poor man's Picassos to keep them happy. It's easy to make a painter a 'must' in the mind of a contractor's wife or to create a 'rage' in Dallas. But if pandering is my trade, that doesn't mean I'm not always on the lookout for the real thing. I am.

I found it once. One of those blades of truth I'll take along with me when I stand before the Lord.

I discovered Fermin del Rio.

He paints what he sees, my Fermin, and he paints it well. Sometimes, too well. Take *La Llorona*. Take it and put it up against the best of Rivera, of Siquieros, of Orosco. You take it!

Last month, I sold *La Llorona* to the Museum of Modern Art. The check had four figures to the left of the decimal point. There could have

Mystery readers will remember Jack Webb's warmly human novels about the little Padre and the Police Sergeant (THE NAKE ANGEL, Rinehart; etc.) Here is a different story, a haunting page out of Mexico's memories where centuries seem to at times blend into the present.

been more if I hadn't been in a hurry to sell. The current issue of ART IN REVIEW quotes me as saying I was willing to sacrifice the painting because it was too great a thing to hoard in a private collection.

That is a half-truth.

Do you know Mazatlan? Then you know the cafe of Papa Moreno on the *escarpa* opposite the sea wall. When the sundown breeze comes in from over the islands of the Three Marys and passes over the rocks where the vendors of fresh oysters have thrown the empty shells, the Cafe Moreno is filled with the tide's edge smell half tasting of salt, half tasting of death.

We were done with dominos late that night and had settled to the pleasure of serious drinking. Pepe Valdez, Nacho Solorzano and Don Antonio de Anza were arguing a point of politics.

Fermin del Rio and I were discussing elephants. Early Mexican elephants carved in stone before the time of Cortes. I said they proved the roots of Mexican culture to be Asiatic. Fermin said not. He spoke of racial memory, contended that the sculptures were a subconscious remembering of all the tales ever told from that time when Tepexpan man battled with mammoths on the shores of Texcoco some fifteen thousand years ago.

We had reached an impasse when Fermin changed the subject abruptly. His fat shoulder against mine, he spoke softly. "Observe Don Antonio."

I glanced across the marble table top. Aware of my scrutiny, de Anza raised his head and smiled. A polite smile, a sad smile made only with the mouth.

Pepe said something about Toledano then and Don Antonio replied instantly militant. I glanced back at Fermin.

He asked, "How old is our friend?"

I thought about it, surprised that I was puzzled. "It is either," I said finally, "that Don Antonio is a young man old beyond his years, or an old man with access to some partial fountain of youth."

"For a novice," Fermin admitted, "you make good use of your eyes." (All who do not paint are novices in the art of seeing according to Fermin.) He reached forward with a chunky hand to retrieve the square bottle of *habanero.*

After he had filled our glasses and we had made the salute and taken each of us a taste of the sugar cane rum, Fermin rubbed his index finger along the ridge of an enormous, veined nose and asked, "You still have *La Llorona,* eh, Johnny?"

"*Pues,*" I shrugged, "and who parts with a miracle?"

"*Gracias.*" His large moist eyes met mine level. We were sharing that fondness men can have only when they drink well together and it makes little difference what the hour. It is a thing the men of my country have lost. Their wives have seen to that. I was glad I could still have it with Fermin.

"And what do you know of my lady in white?" he continued.

I drank my *habanero* and watched a trio of street singers enter the cafe and take a table near the door. They laid aside their guitars and ordred *pulque*. I thought about Fermin's question, about the strangely beautiful woman in the painting.

"*La Llorona*," I said softly, "The Crying Woman, a ghost who wanders down the deepest watches of the night. They have forgotten her, your people. Only the grandmothers remember sometimes and use her to frighten naughty children."

Over at their table in the corner by the door, the *mariachis* had exchanged their *pulque* for their guitars and had begun a very old song about four corn fields.

"Of all the stories about her," I said, "there are two I prefer."

"And those?" Fermin's sleepy eyes watched me from under veined lids.

"The one which has it she is the Aztec goddess, Cihuacoatl, who called in the nights before Cortes came." I pressed my temples with my thumbs and remembered, "*Oh, my sons! Where can I take you that we may not be lost?*"

Fermin nodded. "You are a student, Juanito."

"Of ghostology," I said. It made a poor joke. It did not translate well.

"And the other story?"

"She's the spirit of *La Malinche* who was named Dona Marina by Cortes when he loved her and would make her a Christian. He deserted her later, though. Gave her to one of his captains. So she was left finally even without love and condemned by the old gods to wander forever in the nether land on the other side of sleep. Because she had betrayed her country and her people. Because even forsaken, she loved their conqueror."

"A terrible punishment for love," Fermin remarked. And then, "This I can tell you; she's *La Malinche*, my crying woman.

"Doubtless," I said, "this is a truth you learned from your grandmother."

"My grandmother," Fermin said soberly, "was a good woman. A good woman walks under the wing of an angel. Is such a one likely to encounter *La Llorona*?"

I had a feeling we were in something deeper than our cups.

A Maltese cat came softly

through the door of the cafe and out of the velvet night. *The cat came on little fog feet.* That was what I thought. That was how much I'd been drinking. I remembered a proverb. *"God made the cat so man might stroke a tiger."*

Ignoring the *mariachis* improvising plaintive couplets to their guitars, the Maltese marched between the marble topped tables and the spindle-legged soda fountain chairs towards its couch beneath the long mahogany bar. I knew the cat. We all did. It was Papa Moreno's rat catcher.

One of the troubadors spotted the cat. His fingers changed the tune on the strings even as his voice sang softly. The air was melancholy with a devilish rhythm underneath, a rhythm peculiar to these people where its drum beat is carried by the heel of the hand thumping on the flat wooden face of the guitar:

Once there was an old cat
who did his work for the
devil...

His head was thrown back and his eyes were closed.

"And the devil said to the
cat,
Said to his love,
the cat, the cat...

I felt Fermin stiffen in the chair beside me.

As the Maltese came even with our table, it suddenly altered its course and I watched its battle shortened tail pass out of sight among our legs under the marble top that once had been ballast out on a caravel on a wind from Genoa. Then, so unexpectedly it frightened me, I heard a purr of pleasure rise from beside the chair of Don Antonio. Absently he reached down to stroke the animal. The cat leaped into his lap, rubbing its whiskers against the palm of his hand. Its eyes were closed in ecstacy; its stub of a tail stood stiff and straight.

Fermin's nails bit into my arm. "Have you ever seen that cat make up to anyone but Papa?"

"I tried to pet it once," I whispered. "It backed me away from the bar."

The Maltese opened its eyes and focused the immense amber orbs on de Anza's scholarly face. This was love in the desert, Witches Sabbath, a strange and unwordly love and I knew I was drunk. Though Don Antonio did not seem to notice, I was embarrassed. Embarrassed that he could casually bring such unholy rapture and talk of politics. Now, he was arguing with Nacho about agrarian reforms.

"Maria Santisima," Fermin swore. "The cat knows."

"What passes?" I demanded. Too many things were being left unsaid. Too many little incidents, innocent enough on the surface were becoming enormous in my over-sensitized brain. I knew that I had been drinking too

much, that my head was full of needles. Uncomfortable with somethings that were nothings, with *nada, nada, nada.* "What passes?" I repeated.

Instead of answering, Fermin shrugged, and once more he made our conversation veer like a sail before a capricious breeze. "Is it not unusual, Johnny, that our distinguished Don Antonio has never married?"

"It is possible," I suggested profoundly, "that he has never loved."

"Fool," Fermin whispered, "do you believe that the de Anza family ever marries for love?"

"Then there's a reason it's not been arranged?"

Fermin shook his head. "Three times it has been decided that Don Antonio should play the bear. Three times he has courted a suitable young lady."

"So?"

"So?"

"So we shall have another drink." Fermin reached for the bottle.

There was a lull in the conversation among our companions and we alone at our end of the table had persisted in talking. Don Antonio absently stroked the cat as Richelieu had run pieces of fine silk between his fingers, as Goethe had tapped out complicated German meters on the bare back of his mistress. Fermin filled the glasses. We saluted and drank.

"It is as I have said," Pepe Valdez announced, *"El Presidente* is making a crusade for morality in public office. He is not forgetting the people. He is keeping the faith."

"Words." Don Antonio made a negative gesture with the wrist of the hand that was not stroking the cat. "How many words can come from a mouth. You know us, Pepe. Diogenes lost his lamp to a public official in Mexico." He smiled across the table at me, a foreigner. They were off again.

I got back to the three women he had wooed and never wed. "About the three *senoritas?"* I said to Fermin.

His eyes were like a sleepy bear's. "Accidents," he said. "Each in her own fashion. Maria Sepulveda," he laid a fat finger on the table top, "Don Antonio's auto hit another. Barbara del Rosario," a second finger joined the first, "a fall from a horse when they were riding together. Dolores Cortina," a third finger followed, "drowned when Don Antonio's boat overturned on a calm day."

"Ah," I said, "and that would explain the sadness behind his eyes, the grey hair above a young man's face."

"You *gringos,"* Fermin sighed, "you practical North Americans. *Por favor,* do you have a scrap of paper?"

I found an envelope.

On the back of it with a stub of pencil he made a hasty

sketch and slid it across the table top for my inspection.

It was Don Antonio. "With a few lines," I exclaimed, "you have captured the very man. May I keep it?"

"In a moment if you wish. But first..."

He pulled the drawing back before him and worked rapidly. To the head they added a wedge of beard, a fine mustache and a fuller hairline. Over the suggestion of a doublebreasted coat, he imposed a steel breastplate and sleeves of armor. Then, he pushed it back.

I gasped.

If you ever have seen the most famous painting in the Hospital de Jesus Nazerno in Mexico City, you'll know the figure that lay on the table before me. It was a rough but unmistakable portrait of Hernan Cortes.

Silently, with the desperation of a quiet drunk, I tried to fit the fragments of the evening together: *La Llorona*, Fermin's painting of a ghost, the enigma of the gentleman across the table who could talk of politics now and not quite hide the sad something which lurked behind his eyes, a man who stroked a cat. Fermin still watched me like a sleepy bear.

"With your permission, *Senores*, it is getting late." He put the cat gently onto the floor and had it winding about his ankles purring even as he stood.

Don Antonio, a handsome man with no wife to keep him home, saying goodnight to his drinking companions; it was nothing more than that. I stood. He shook hands with me first because I was the guest, the one from another country. *And another time,* I thought.

He shook hands with the others. A wonderful thing this sincere touching of the hands, a thing we have almost lost up home. I tried not to think of other things, the kind of things we should not think who walk alone down the night. Hernan Cortes; Don Antonio de Anza. 1519; 1955.

Fermin grasped my elbow as we walked to the door.

We came out of the cafe and onto the walk beside the curve of cobalt sea. Blue smoke curled in foggy wraiths from the door behind us, carrying the sad, lost song of the *mariachis*.

"Noche de ronda.
Que triste pasa..."

Night of revelry, what sadness passes. I tried to shake free of the artist. His hand tightened about my arm.

Don Antonio's stride lengthened. The four of us remained on the sidewalk before the cafe. Only the cat went with him, a grey shadow chasing a greater shadow before it.

He went around the corner of the cafe. A finger of cloud slid across the face of the

moon. Shadows closed around his retreating footsteps. From a long way down the empty street came a plaintive wail not unlike that of some secretive nightbird.

"*Una chotacabra*," I whispered, "a whippoorwill."

Fermin let go of my arm. His voice was as sorrowful as it was fond. "Go with God," he said, "go with God on your bird hunt, Johnny."

So I went down the long street alone.

What can I tell you of my trip? Of shadows that caught my hollow footsteps and flung them to echo against pink adobe walls. Of shadows that had color, had s u b s t a n c e. Shadows that moved like a seascape, scintillant and unholy with a light of their own.

Where I crossed the grey plaza, a man lay huddled upon a hard park bench wrapped in his somber *serape* against the cold of predawn. As I passed him, he moaned in his sleep like a child caught in the web of a nightmare.

Then, rounding the corner of the great blue church which faces upon the other side of the plaza, I saw Don Antonio...Don Antonio and the woman who leaned upon his arm.

A veiled woman in shimmering white, a woman with cold jewels like stars in her gown.

Seeing them together, I had to know.

Before God, no One else, I will answer to it.

Fermin had hinted of a terrible love, of a woman who had lingered through four centuries to love again a man like Cortes.

I had to know.

I began to run, and when I was upon them, I heard the savage hiss of a cat and saw the grey Maltese go skittering into the black shadows formed by the apse of the ancient church. Away from me. Not from him and not from *her!*

Don Antonio bowed gravely as a gentleman did when gentlemen there were.

"Your servant," he said.

"With permission," I said.

My fingers reached for the woman's veil.

I am certain my first impression was of great beauty. That my feelings were a flood and a mixture, half relief and half shame. The kind of shame a drunk has when the dreadful thing is done.

But before I could drop the veil, before the first stumbling words of apology found their way to my lips, the change took place. And there was before me in the moonlight a face without flesh, a smile without lips, a stare without eyes, and over the fishbelly brow, two coils of black hair like horns.

Then, the sound came again, the last, loneliest cry on the face of our earth. No night bird, this.

A whippoorwill has no soul to lose!

Have you ever been in an Mexican jail?

Do you know the odor of human spoilage after a hundred years?

Have you ever faced a sergeant of police with the face of an Aztec god?

Drunk and disorderly, passed out in a gutter before the church of our Lord.

Have you paid your fine? And called a cab? And had a bath? And changed your clothes? And taken the next plane north from hell?

Not that that was the end of it.

I had to go home. Home to my apartment where her picture hung.

The current issue of ART IN REVIEW quotes me as saying I was willing to sacrifice the painting of *La Llorona* because it was too great a thing to hoard in a private collection.

This is not quite true.

For Fermin is a painter who paints what he sees. And sometimes, he paints it too well.

DO YOU KNOW YOUR ATOMIC TERMS

Can you match the following atomic terms with the brief explanations or descriptions of each? Six correct answers is passing; 7 to 8 is good; 9 to 10 excellent.

1. *CUTIE PIE*	(a)	mechanical hands used to handle highly radioactive material
2. *MODERATOR*	(b)	any substance which emits radiation
3. *PIG*	(c)	heavy hydrogen
4. *RABBIT*	(d)	a portable radiation detector
5. *CORE*	(e)	a container (usually lead) used to store or ship radioactive material
6. *MASTER SLAVE MANIPULATORS*	(f)	the energy liberated or absorbed in a nuclear reaction
7. *PLUTONIUM*	(g)	a material used to slow neutrons in a reaction
8. *SOURCE*	(h)	a capsule which carries samples (for testing) in and out of an atomic reactor via a pneumatic tube
9. *Q-VALUE*	(i)	a heavy element which undergoes fission under the impact of neutrons
10. *DEUTERIUM*	(j)	the heart of a nuclear reactor where the nuclei of the full split and release energy

Please turn to page 109 for the answers

the old woman

by MIRIAM deFORD

THE FACADE of the All-Day branch of the largest bank in the world has wide sloping stone sills below its first-floor windows on the Willy Street side. Tired shoppers with heavy bundles find them convenient while they wait for a bus. Drunks use them to gather enough energy to stagger on to the nearest bar. And there are the regulars. There is a white-bearded man in a ragged overcoat who suns himself there on good days, having doubtless no other place to go except a dark hole of a room somewhere. There is a retired bus dispatcher who smokes a meditative pipe while he watches the traffic that no longer concerns him; once in a while a driver comes by who knew him in the old days and with whom he can exchange a greeting and feel for a minute that he isn't entirely outside of life, looking in.

And there was the Old Woman.

Meanwhile, in that somewhere else, crops were failing, volcanoes erupting, glaciers encroaching, to their horror.

"It oughtn't to be allowed," said the young policeman indignantly. "She ought to be shut away."

"Why?" asked the experienced policeman who was

Miriam Allen deFord returns after much too long an absence with this story of the strange old woman who was so obviously mad, but not too dangerous, as she sat there, day after day, week after week, brushing away unseen harassers and waiting for an extremely dangerous human.

showing him the beat on his first day. "She don't do no harm. She never bothers nobody. She don't even talk."

The Old Woman never spoke, even when spoken to. She was gaunt and dark-skinned with almost colorless hollow eyes. She was decently dressed and fairly clean, with a hat and a handbag and even gloves. She came every morning, rain or shine, except on Saturdays and Sundays when the bank was closed, and she sat there on the last sill at the west end of the building from eight in the morning to ten at night; the bank itself doesn't open till ten, but the safe-deposit vaults are open at eight.

All day long she sat there, beating her gloved hands about her, brushing something invisible from her face and body, waving her arms around in the air, quiet only in occasional moments of exhaustion.

Sometimes passers-by, usually housewife-looking women, would glance at her, become distressed and sympathetic, and go up to her. "Are you sick?" they would ask. "Can I help you?" She never answered. She never even looked at them. Somebody accustomed to the neighborhood would motion the inquirer away, tapping his forehead meaningly; or the good Samaritan would give up, perplexed and upset, and walk off, shaking her head. The Old Woman paid no attention.

Somewhere else, though, somebody noticed. Somebody sent a message. Someone renewed the attack.

This thing had been going on now for sixteen years, ever since the Old Woman had refused orders to return home. It had been a losing battle, so far, against her indomitable will, but they never gave up. They never could. Things were going to pot because of the Old Woman's absence—only there she wasn't the Old Woman. But she had refused to listen to reason, cajolery and persuasion left her cold, she ignored commands. They hadn't the force to abduct her bodily. So they were doing the only thing left—harassing her almost beyond endurance, but not quite beyond it. That seemed to be failing too, but they had nothing else in their arsenal, so they kept at it.

And meanwhile, in that somewhere else, crops were failing, glaciers were encroaching on arable land, all because one obstinate creature insisted on staying where she was.

Why? She wouldn't even tell them that.

In baffled fury, they sent new swarms of invisible annoyers to torment her. She sat on the sill of the bank building and fought them off in silence, her face grim.

Of course she had a room where she spent her evenings and nights and week-ends, where she ate and slept. She

even had a name there, but only for the benefit of the landlord, and then only when she rented the place; after that, she sent him the exact rent every month in a plain envelope. She bought her food in supermarkets where no one knew her. She could talk well if she wanted to, but she never did; she needed to hoard her strength for the daily struggle. At home, at night, she was safe, for they could not get at her while her part of the earth was dark. Sometimes, sitting alone in her room, she permitted herself a pitying smile. They thought they could wear her down, did they? They seemed to have forgotten who and what she was.

And if they knew *why* she stayed all day just in that particular spot, how terrified they would be!

It came finally to a top-level, top-secret conference of all the most important and powerful of those concerned—all except, naturally, the Old Woman herself. While it went on, elsewhere and elsewhen, she was busy sitting on the stone sill and fighting off the invisible annoyers who made her days one long grisly battle.

"Has it something to do with that structure she haunts?" asked one. (Their names are unpronounceable, their offices and functions indescribable.) "And could we compel her, then, by destroying the entire structure?"

"We tried that once," replied a colleague gloomily, "and it failed. Without her own power we have not sufficient strength.

(The police were sure the abortive fire at the bank was set, but they could never discover the method and never found a trace of the arsonist.)

"But if we are able to get messages across, and even to send the *anwahs* regularly to attack her, why aren't we strong enough to take away whatever it is that keeps her there?"

"We might be, if we could find out what it is. But we don't even know that this is her reason. We don't know anything, because she won't tell us."

Impasse again. Then the youngest member had a bright idea.

"Could we kill her? There can be no successor as *mikuna* until she is dead."

They looked at him contemptuously. Several of them wondered if it hadn't been a mistake to raise him to leadership.

"She took with her the tokens by which the new *mikuna* could be recognized," one of them explained at last. "Either she comes back, or we shall never have a *mikuna* again. And I suppose even you"—he couldn't resist that slur—"realize what that would mean."

"The end," moaned the as-

sembled leaders. And even the youngest echoed, "The end."

"And we can't wait much longer," sighed the most venerable of them all. "My whole estate in the south is buried deep in mud from a flash flood." "And mine become a dust bowl," agreed his nearest colleague.

If the Old Woman had wanted to bother, she had the means to listen in, and she might have derived some sardonic amusement from overhearing the discussion. But she was too busy fighting off anwahs, while she sat on the sill of the bank building.

There was no object whatever in the bank vaults that interested her. She stayed where she did, and haunted the building, and refused to go home, because of something that *wasn't* there.

She was waiting for it. She would know.

She was the ninth *mikuna* of her line. She had been recognized and installed when she was only eight years old. That was 211 years ago. She was ripe with experience and wisdom and power.

She had not deserted her home, or refused to return to it, out of any dissatisfaction or anger. She had gone, and she remained, because only so could she save it from utter disaster.

There was no guarantee that she could save it. If she must stay much longer, it might be destroyed in another manner, because of her absence alone. But that risk was the only chance. And she could not have waited to explain, or the chance might have been lost.

Sixteen years ago, laying her plots for the annual prophecy, she had learned the shocking future. There was only one way to avert it, and that way she had taken, at once. It was her responsibility. She alone was their guardian and preserver.

There was a star so far away and insignificant that it had no name, only a number, in their astronomy. Around it eight planets revolved. On one of them—on a particular spot on one of them—within a particular artifact of its inhabitants, a creature of the planet's dominant breed so like and so unlike her own would one day place an object which, if it were not wrested from him, would spell the doom of her own world. (Of others too, but she did not care about that.) He must be anticipated and worsted. Until he came to place it there, she could not reach him to destroy the thing.

She left her home without warning. The next day the Old Woman had appeared, sitting all day on the stone sill. The *anwahs* followed as soon as the horrified leaders had discovered where their *mikuna* was, and that she would not return.

There were more confer-

ences, each less fertile and less hopeful than the last. The climate, the weather, the material state of the planet grew every day more chaotic, more frightening. And still the Old Woman sat, and fought off the *anwahs,* and waited.

On a bright sunny morning in spring something suddenly pierced through her. She sprang to her feet, waving her invisible tormentors away.

A car had driven down Willy Street to the bank entrance and stopped. A man got out.

He had not moved two steps when an old woman confronted him. She did not touch him, she did not speak. She only looked at him and used her power.

He gasped, he clutched his throat, he fell to the sidewalk, and he lay there. He did not move again.

In the instant before the crowd gathered, the woman thrust her hand within his coat as if to feel his heart. Her handbag opened and shut. Then she was not there.

"Did anybody else see it?" asked the policeman after the doctor had pronounced him dead and the ambulance had taken him away.

"There was an old woman," said a voice. "She was leaning over him when I got there. But I don't see her now."

"Aw, don't bother about her—she's crazy," volunteered the retired bus dispatcher. "She's always here, but she can't even talk. Anyway she'll be back—all this commotion just scared her away."

"She don't matter," the white-bearded man in the ragged overcoat agreed. "She just sits here all day long, waving her arms around. Ought to've been put away long ago. I'm surprised she'd even walk up and look at him."

"We've done everything," said the Secretary of Defense wearily. "The whole FBI has been on the job day and night. There's no trace of it."

"But it *must* be found." The President's face was white. "His wife is absolutely certain he had it with him. You talked to him on the phone yourself."

"I know. We've gone all over that. I said to him, 'Do you mean there's only one copy of the formula in existence?' and he said, 'Except in my head,' and laughed. He was the greatest physicist alive, but you couldn't control him. You remember what a tussle we had to make him agree to give it to us alone instead of to the whole UN.

"'You come right back to Washington with it then,' I told him, 'and let us put it where it will be safe. Suppose something happened to you?' I asked him. And he laughed again, and said, 'Nothing will. I'll bring it in when you're

ready to start implementing it. Till then I want to be the only one who can lay hands on it.

"'But I'll tell you what I'll do,' he said, 'if it will make you feel better. I'll put that copy in my safe-deposit box next time I'm in the city, and keep it there until you give me the word to come and get things started.'"

"But it isn't there," said the President. "My guess is that's what he was preparing to do when he dropped dead. It was a week later, but it would take him that long to get around to it. He must have had it on him somewhere. What was that story about an old woman who disappeared?"

"You know as much about it as I do. There was a crazy old woman used to be seen around there all the time. Somebody said she was leaning over him right after he fell. She hasn't been back and nobody knows where to find her. We had a house-to-house search of the whole city."

The President got up from his desk and began pacing the floor.

"And that's just it," he said in a strangled voice. "It's bad enough to think we've lost it. Didn't that damned fool of a genius know his heart was diseased? Nobody else is near the solution; he worked on it for sixteen years, and it may be centuries, or forever, before someone works it out again. But if that old woman was a foreign agent—"

"I keep hoping against hope that there was no connection," said the Secretary of Defense faintly. "I keep hoping that she *was* just some old lunatic who was frightened away by seeing him die. Then if we do find her we can get it back, and even if we don't, she'd never know what she had and, as you say, all we lose is the greatest scientific discovery in history.

"But there's always the other possibility, and we might as well face it. We've tightened the security program, but we can never be absolutely sure. If *they* have that formula, we might as well throw away all our atomic weapons and just wait to be annihilated."

"That's what it looks like. Even if we could put the whole population literally underground, it would be worse than useless."

"It would help *them*. From now on, we'll be living on the edge of a live crater."

"We've been doing that for years; there's no language to express the situation now," said the President.

"We'll keep on hunting, of course, but there's only one way out that I can see. We'll have to take a few key people in the UN, and in Congress too, into our confidence, and we'll have to do the biggest diplomatic job that ever was done on the earth.

"The way things stand now, it's peace—lasting—lasting peace—or the end of us all—eventually of them as well as us. *He* thought of it only in terms of the exploration of space—remember how he talked about those millions of suns and their planets to be conquered and colonized?

"But if another nation—and a nation that's our enemy—has the secret of countergravity—"

"Oh, God!" said the Minister of Defense: and his tone was reverent.

There was another of the endless conferences going on—each time they called it the last. But this one was more despairing than ever before—she had gone out of range. The *anwahs* had reverberated back. The range-finders were searching desperately, and all they could report was failure.

"Then this is really the end," groaned the leader of leaders; and all they could do was nod in unhappy agreement. "She has escaped us. We are doomed."

And then the ceiling door, where the sentries guarded their meeting, opened suddenly. And the Old Woman—who was no longer the Old Woman—stepped demurely to her vacant place.

She held up an imperative hand against their exclamations.

"Later, later," their *mikuna* said. "I've found something, and destroyed it, and at least postponed the very worst thing that could ever happen to us.

"And now," she added briskly, "What's all this about the weather?"

NEXT MONTH—
in addition to—
IVAN T. SANDERSON'S third article on "Flying Saucers"
— WHAT PILOTS A UFO?
ISABEL DAVIS' startling article on "Contact Cases"
— MEET THE EXTRATERRESTIAL!
CIVILIAN SAUCER INTELLIGENCE's fifth column on
— SHAPES IN THE SKY
important fantasy and science fiction such as—
FRANK B. BRYNING's unusual DAUGHTER OF TOMORROW
ROBERT F. YOUNG's gentle THE BLUEBIRD PLANET
BERTRAM CHANDLER's provocative THE BEHOLDERS
LLOYD BIGGLE's amusing LESSON IN BIOLOGY
JAMES W. TURNER'S exciting WILL POWER
VINCENT STARRETT's new fantasy, THE SINLESS VILLAGE
— *in* FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

the home stretch

by MILDRED McCUNE

She must never get curious! He'd chosen her because this complete disinterest was such a refreshing characteristic!

"ONE THING sure, she didn't marry him for his looks!" said the fat Mrs. Bates. "Now I'm plump, but that man is a regular tub!"

"Put him in a striped suit and he'd be a beach ball", said the witty Mrs. Harris, "or one of those funny balloons with a round head and flat feet."

The librarian shot in her remark. "He's got a real circumference." She flicked a glance around the table, laughed comfortingly to herself then quickly gulped some tea.

"Why do you suppose she did it?" inquired the new lady. "Tall girl, isn't she? Long, honey colored hair? Why she's beautiful—could have had her pick."

"What's beauty!" said the homely Mrs. Forbes. "Dime a dozen. Model in a department store. Practically on the street. She knew what she was doing."

"But how do you suppose", insinuated the witty Mrs. Harris—what I mean is how, unless he's a contortionist—" She trailed off on a pleased laugh.

Young Mrs. Leighton burst in. "There's nothing like that!

Sheila Caixt found marriage to the professor a little boring at times, but there was no denying that it had its compensations. Mildred McCune returns with this pleasant vignette of the lovely but not too bright professor's wife who hoped that life would, at long last, be beautiful!

That is well, I guess I might as well explain. After all I'm her best friend, or I was before she went high society. It's like a contract. She runs the house and appears at dinner when there's out of town guests such as doctors and physicists. She's to keep unwanted visitors from bothering him when he's busy in his laboratory. There! Now let up on her. She's just like a private secretary."

"And for this she ties herself down to a meat ball?" said Mrs. Harris. "Give, June! What's in it for her?"

"I wouldn't know", said Mrs. Leighton. She relented. "Well, it's only a temporary arrangement and when he leaves she'll never have to work again."

"Hmmmm", said Mrs. Bates slowly.

"The plot thickens", said the librarian with arch haste.

"I don't like the smell of this", cried Mrs. Harris, sniffing ecstatically.

The ladies subsided for thirty seconds of thoughtful private contemplation. "Perhaps I shouldn't trust you girls with a secret", said Mrs. Forbes.

"Trust us", they breathed.

Mrs. Forbes settled more comfortably in her straight backed chair and enjoyed a leisurely sip of tea. "You know my Harry helps out at the university now and then—odd jobs—and he's pretty friendly with some of the maintenance staff. In a very round about way he got this information, and I'm not going to swear it's true. Here it is. The university was presented with a selection of the most perfect and priceless stones—jewels, mind you—by our friend, the dumpling (a triumphant glance at Mrs. Harris) to use in whatever manner they wished for the good of the school. One stipulation. No publicity. And in return? Free use of the school library. What do you think?"

"Whew", said Mrs. Harris.

"Yeah!" said the librarian.

Sheila Caixt dug her fingernails into the smooth flesh of her thighs and muttered a few damns. She was putting on pounds. She could swear it. Her molded skirt was protesting fore and aft. Scarce a trace remained of the enchanting hollows of her cheeks. She snatched a caramel from the rifled box on her dressing table, glared at it, and flung it into the waste basket. Three months of enforced boredom, highlighted by an occasional dinner with the intellectuals. Big deal! She mimicked her society manners. 'Yes, Professor Hackley. The doctor has told me of your fascinating research. Fruit flies, isn't it? Yes, we're very comfortable here. Just the cook and the maid. I drive Lexor when it's necessary. He's too—well, he has difficulty. All the way

around.' Then perhaps a nervous laugh halfway between a cough and a burp. Damn playing lady! Damn their frankly curious stares. For all their courtly manners and owlish pomposity she could just bet they were busy mentally undressing the professor from his scrunched in face to his waddled feet and placing him in bed beside her.

Yet there was nothing ridiculous in the professor's low-pitched, pleasant voice or his deep-set, glowing eyes. And the silent respect he commanded when he chose to enter the conversation made even her pause.

Several times he had allowed her to watch his experiments in the laboratory, but so much of this and so much of that and water bubbled, or maybe it didn't; and sometimes a frog or a rose grew an extra appendage or changed color. So what! And she had said so.

'Your most refreshing characteristic, my dear. Your complete disinterest. That's one reason I chose you. Don't ever get curious.'

So of course she had gotten curious and just yesterday, prepared with a trumped up excuse to enter the forbidden basement laboratory, she had surprised a great shimmering screen of light that ebbed and flowed and shifted hue from palest pink to deepest orchid. She stood on the landing almost hypnotized by the steady accompanying hum that blended pitch like three dimensional music played in color.

Dim shapes appeared and receded and floated past within the shimmer until one loomed clearer and a man's s t o o p e d over body broke through and deposited a heavy box on the floor fronting the screen. The figure straightened, and across the length of the basement Sheila looked into the inscrutable eyes of the professor.

'This is unfortunate, my dear", he said.

She half turned to run. 'No —no. Since you are here, let me explain what I can.' He took her hand at the foot of the stairs and drew her toward the desk. 'Sit down and allow me a moment to disconnect the screen. It musn't get overheated.' The humming radiance m e l t e d reluctantly away and revealed the solid grey of the brick wall. Drawing a chair opposite her, he began.

'I have no idea what fantastic thoughts are somersaulting about in your silly little head, and perhaps the truth will be equally confusing, but let's have a try. Can you imagine a world similar to your own, complete with c o n t i n e n t s, oceans, great buildings, and a race of people existing in the same space as your own world? No? I thought not. Nevertheless, another such world does ex-

ist, and what you have seen here might be called a doorway between your world and mine.

'Now, do not be alarmed. Our people have known of your world for hundreds of years but only recently have we been able to awkwardly penetrate the barrier. There is much that we can give to you. Already a hint here and there has opened whole new concepts to the minds of your scientific men.'

'My purpose here is to conduct a study along lines for which we at home have very little background of research. With the help of your university library my work is being completed in a fraction of the time it would otherwise require. Do I make myself clear?'

Sheila nodded silently.

'Then, since it would serve neither your purpose nor mine to make the information public, shall we consider this incident as not having occured?'

'Yes, I suppose so', Sheila agreed thoughtfully.

She was thoughtful now as she removed the gold chain from her neck and used the attached key to open her dressing table drawer. Unconsciously she glanced backward toward the locked door before reaching way to the back of the drawer. Her breath caught as always when the light hit the stones,—the clear sparkle of the emerald, the rich glow of the ruby, and the brilliant gleam of the diamond. Hers! Her payment. One each month Was it worth it? Should she get out right now? Simply disappear?

She fondled the jewels and smiled. What other treasure might lie behind that mysterious screen. It was worth it for a bit longer.

Dinner was a monotonous affair at best, but alone with the professor it outdid monotony. Sheila longed for a gay night club and a really hep guy sitting across. Someone who spoke her language and didn't pull the p u n c h e s. Someone who could make her feel alive and smouldering.

She toyed with the dessert and beat a tatoo with her foot, her face unconsciously taking on heavy-lidded, s e n s u o u s lines.

"My dear Sheila."

Resentfully she s n a p p e d back to the present and eyed him questioningly, continued. the monstrosity opposite her.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to presume on your good nature in yet another matter." He paused, but as Sheila eyed him questioningly, continued. "I have a young nephew who's always been a bit of a misfit back home. I've invited him here for a short visit. If he seems somewhat strange at first you must make allowances and do what you can to help him adjust. I'll see that you're well repaid."

Sheila nearly growled in her teeth, but managed an icy, "Does he resemble you, then?"

The professor smiled in good humor. "No. His divergence from the norm is of a different type. You might find him quite good company. Shall we consider it settled then?"

"Now wait a minute", Sheila exclaimed. "Some things I draw the line at. I'm no nurse maid to a freak show. Has he got two heads or what?"

"Suppose we call him in and see", said the professor. "Will you excuse me for just a few minutes? He's in his room resting."

Sheila spent the few minutes in ill-controlled rage. She lifted venomous eyes at the sound of footsteps and left her mouth hanging agape. Standing shyly in the doorway was a six foot creature of unbelievable perfection. Crisp dark hair. Deep tan. Electric blue eyes. Cleft chin. Wide, muscular shoulders and slender waist, all shown to advantage beneath his belted, pale blue, ankle length tunic. She snapped her mouth shut and stared some more. "This is your nephew?" she managed.

Lexor propelled him to the table and grinned amicably. "Sheila, I would like to present my nephew, Maxon. Maxon, say hello to Aunt Sheila."

"Just call me Sheila", she replied huskily. "I hope you'll be happy with us."

"Uh—yes", the young god replied warily. "I hope so."

"And now perhaps you two would like to become better acquainted. I have work to do as always."

Still eyeing Sheila, Maxon backed away. "I'll go with you, Uncle Lexor."

Sheila lay a hand on his forearm and felt a pure animal thrill running from her finger tips to her shoulder, then gently diffusing itself throughout her body. "Don't go", she said faintly. "I get so lonesome. Stay and talk to me a bit."

"Yes, stay", Lexor. "I'll be in the laboratory if you need me."

"Shall we go into the living room and relax?" Sheila said, pulling him gently along. "Perhaps you'd care for a drink?"

"Oh I don't know", he murmured diffidently, but he accepted the tall cool glass.

Sheila lit a speculative cigarette. There was an angle here somewhere that could be played for both pleasure and profit. "Now tell me all about your world and how long you can stay here."

He was edging away on the couch and his voice was unsteady. "I come from Arexica, and Uncle says maybe I can stay here permanently if it works out all right."

"Wonderful", said Sheila, moving closer as if impelled. "What's it like in your world?

Do you have the stars and the moonlight?"

"Oh yes", he replied uncomfortably. "We have all that."

"And are the men all as handsome as you?"

He drew back in alarm. "You make fun of me. I know I'm a freak. I think I'll go see Uncle Lexor now."

"No, stay a minute", cried Sheila. "Oh, this is good! You're different from your uncle and everyone else so they call you a freak. This is crazy! You poor boy! In our world they're the freaks and you—she shook her head slowly—you're just out of t'is world. Look at me! Am I a freak?"

He darted a quick look in her direction. "Oh no! You're beautiful!"

"Well, take it from there. You're as handsome for a man as I am beautiful for a woman. Come on. Look in the mirror. Take a good look."

Slow, amazed acceptance showed in his face as he turned it this way and that. He touched his jaw line tentatively and a smile crept over his face. "But I never realized. It's true. I am handsome." He inspected his forehead, his chin, turned his head to better catch the light; stood back to admire the set of his shoulders.

"That's enough", said Sheila. "Don't fall in love. Have another drink and we'll talk this thing over." She led him back to the couch. "This screwy world you come from. Is it an awfully rich place. Lots of precious stones and such?"

"Oh no. Nothing very valuable in minerals except the iron mines. Of course the government owns them."

"Iron", Sheila sputtered. "I'm talking about jewels, like this." She drew the emerald from her pocket and let it sparkle against her palm.

"Oh that", he nodded. "The children enjoy hunting them. They're pretty as decoration, but worthless. No commercial value."

"I'm going to have another drink, said Sheila. "How about you?"

After that drink Maxon discovered that even the dimensions are no barrier when true love seeks its mate. Another drink and he was made to realize love cannot continue beautifully without the proper settings for love: e. g. cars and furs and liveried chauffeurs.

Another drink and he passed out.

Sheila alternated between pacing the floor and applying ice packs the following day. When she had him groggily propped in place toward late evening she was ready to consolidate her gains. "There's only one solution for us, Maxon", she confided gravely. "You must go back and bring all the jewels you can conceal."

"Go back? Oh no!" he cried. "I never want to go back. Don't ask that of me."

"Just for a little while", she begged. "You can explain to your uncle. Make some excuse. Say you're homesick."

"He'd never believe me," he groaned. "In my world I'm a monster. I couldn't bear that again."

"Then you don't love me", she said throatily. "It was just words."

"But I do. I swear I do. I'd do anything. Honestly. Except go back."

A small, hard note crept into her voice. "Then that's that. We're through. Tomorrow I'll be leaving."

"Oh—please. Not when I've just found you!" He slumped despondently. "You win, but what if something should happen to the screen and I'm stuck? It's only experimental, you know, and even Uncle doesn't understand why it sometimes quits altogether. That's why he's so glad to be finishing up."

"You'll make it", she assured him. "Now don't waste any time and Sheila will be waiting for you."

Sheila waited through an interminable day and a sleepless night. She had finished breakfast in her room when the low knock sounded. "Did you get them?" she hissed.

Maxon glanced furtively behind him and stepped inside. He drew a small bag from beneath his tunic and Sheila up-ended it onto the bed. "Ten—t w e l v e—fourteen", she counted. I expected hundreds. The way you talked t h e y ' r e just lying around!"

He mopped his forehead with the back of his hand. "They are, and I had a pile, but Uncle Lexor said, 'Throw them back, you fool!' so what could I do?" Sheila paced the floor.

"And now they're just lying there? The other side of the screen?"

"Guess so", he replied.

"Oh what a nit-wit. Didn't I tell you HIDE the things!" She came to a halt. "You've got to go back and get them."

"Maxon sank to the bed. "Oh—no. Not again!"

"Yes. Again. And this time we'll make sure there's no slip up. We'll drug the professor's coffee."

Everything went smoothly. The unsuspecting professor ate his usual dinner and excused himself to return to the laboratory. Sheila noted with satisfaction that his short legs barely supported him and he took pains to suppress a yawn.

"We'll give him half an hour", Sheila told Maxon. I'm going to pack."

The professor slept soundly in his big swivel chair when Sheila and Maxon crept down the basement stairs. The far wall lay bare and dark. "Turn

on the screen", Sheila commanded. Dutifully Maxon pressed the switch and there followed a low hum and a pin-point of pinkish light. There was a sputter and a break, another sputter and the light reached and stretched until the entire wall was bathed in a rosy diffusion. "Now", said Sheila, thrusting the bag at him.

He hesitated. "It's dark over there too. I'll need a flashlight." They searched the room. No flashlight.

"For heaven sakes—they sparkle in the dark. You shouldn't have any trouble. Here! Take my cigarette lighter." He stepped gingerly through the maze of light and became a distorted, shadowy form, wandering in and out of view.

The minutes crept slowly by and the hum of the screen, along with the professor's gentle snores, edged into Sheila's taut nerves. "Hurry, can't you?" she hissed, her head close to the radiance.

Maxon's face broke through, wreathed in apology. "I can't see very well. It's a old creek bottom. Looks like it's been used as a sort of dump. I keep picking up these gold nuggets by mistake."

"Gold nuggets!" Sheila screeched. She looked wildly about, grabbed the metal waste basket and crashed through. There was an immediate horrific tearing sound, and a lightning blaze of color.

"Oh", Maxon groaned. "You shouldn't have done that. Iron in the waste basket. It's—" His explanation was lost in the resounding clap of thunderous sound and the complete blackness of night. Sheila's shaking hand fumbled for a cigarette. Finally she located her pocket and held one to her lips.

"Now what", she breathed, as he held the lighter.

"Another ten years and Uncle will have it whipped", he answered on a high, bitter note.

"Meanwhile", she shuddered, and she couldn't seem to control the thin squeak in her voice, "life among the monsters." She steadied the lighter with her hand and took a long draw. Then she held the lighter close to Maxon's face for a full minute before she screamed.

His long ovoid head came to a distinct point at the peak. His neck funnelled interminable below and got lost somewhere in his cardboard thin shoulders. On down she forced her eyes to the tubed arms and the stilt legs.

"A matter of atmospheric pressure", he piped. "See what I mean? In my world I'm a freak."

Sheila stumbled backwards. "Don't come near me! Don't touch me!"

"Who'd want to", he squeaked, just before she fell into a faint—all nine feet of her.

welcoming committee

by FELIX BOYD

There were four of them. Four lovely girls with pale green skins, friendly, laughing, chattering away in clear voices.

IT was a lousy landing. The tall spaceship tilted, wobbled, and finally jarred into the sand with a fin-rending crunch. Captain Moran looked at the back of Pilot Sinkley's sweating neck and resisted the impulse to close his hands around it.

"That was the worst landing I have seen since I have been in the service," he said. "*This* is a rescue mission—so who is going to rescue us?"

"I'm sorry...captain..." Sinkley's voice shook as badly as his hands. "It was the glare ...first from the sand...then the canal..." His voice died away like a run down record.

There was a grinding crunch from somewhere below and emergency lights began to dance across the board. Captain Moran cursed and thumbed the tell-tales. Trouble. Engine room. Aft quadrant. The intercom suddenly belched out the gravel voice of Chief Engineer Beckett.

"Some gear carried away when we landed, nothing serious. Two ratings injured. Out."

The pilot sat with his back hunched, either prayer or fear. He had goofed and

There have been a number of interesting suggestions as to what Mars may be like, but we feel you will agree that few have equalled the quiet brooding horror of the Mars of Felix Boyd, our cover story for this month. Felix Boyd is the pseudonym of a very well known sf writer.

goofed badly and he knew it. Captain Moran shot one tension loaded glare at the back of the lowered head, then stamped out towards the lock. Too much was going wrong and the responsibility was all his.

Dr. Kranolsky, the medical officer, was already at the lock, taking samples through the bleeder tube. Captain Moran chewed his lip and waited while the fat little doctor fussed with his instruments. The vision plate next to the port was on and he looked at it, at the dusty red landscape that stretched away outside. Like a questioning metal finger, the tall bulk of the other ship stood silhouetted against the sky.

That was the reason they had come. One year since the first ship had left, one year without a report or a signal. The first ship, *Argus*, had carried at least a ton of signalling equipment. None of it had been used. A puzzled world had built a second inter-planet ship—the *Argus II*. Moran had brought her this far—now he had to finish the job. Find out what had happened to the crew of the *Argus*. And get a report back to earth.

"More air pressure than I had expected, captain," Dr. Kranolsky's voice knifed through his thoughts. "And oxygen as well. About equal to the top of a high mountain on earth. Also the culture plates remain clear. Most interesting, because—"

"Doctor. Make it short and make it clear. Can I take my men out there?"

Kranolsky stopped in midphrase, deflated. He had no defenses against a man like the captain.

"Yes...yes. You could go outside. Just be sure that certain precautions are followed—"

"Tell me what they are. I want to get over to the *Argus* while it's still light."

Back on the bridge the captain started to growl through the door of the radio room but the operator beat him to the punch.

"I've tried to contact the *Argus* on all frequencies, captain, right down to the infared. Nothing. Either that ship is empty or the crew is—" He left the sentence unfinished, but the captain's thundercloud scowl finished it for him.

"What about search radar?" Captain Moran asked, "they might still be in the vicinity."

Sparks shook his head in a slow negative. "I've been looking at the slow sweep detail screen until I have pips on my eyeballs. There ain't *nothing* out there—earthman or martian. And at the distance I was using it that screen would show anything bigger than a baseball."

Captain Moran had a decision to make and it was a rough one. Almost every man aboard was essential to the operation of the ship. If he

sent a small party to examine the other ship they might run into trouble they couldn't handle. If they didn't come back none of them would get back to earth. But the only alternative to a small party was taking the entire ship's compliment. That would leave the ship empty—looking just like the *Argus*.

Moran chewed the problem for a minute and a half, then banged the intercom board with decision.

"Attention, ship's crew, all ratings attention. We are going out of here in fifteen minutes—*all* of us. Draw marsuits and the weapons you can carry. Now *jump*."

When they were all out on the red sand, Moran shut the massive lock door behind them and spinned the combination lock. Then, dispersed like an infantry squad, they slowly circled towards the *Argus*.

In alternate rushes they approached the lock of the other ship. It was wide open and there was no resistance or sign of life. In a matter of minutes the captain was standing under the gaping mouth of the lock. There was complete silence except for the rustling of wind churbed sand granules. Red faced and panting hard, Pilot Sinkley raced up and slammed down next to the captain.

"Concussion grenade," Moran whispered.

Sinkley fumbled one out of his chest pack and handed it to the captain. He pulled the pin, counted slowly, then flipped it through the open port. There was a blasting roar and Moran was through the port before the echoes had died away.

Nothing. No one in sight and no one in the carefully searched ship. The captain went to the empty bridge and tried to understand what had happened.

Moran was reading the log when he heard a hoarse shout from the guard he had left at the lock. He made it on a dead run, almost slamming into the men crowded there. Pushing them roughly aside he looked out.

There were four of them. Four girls. Lovely as any he had ever seen if you didn't take offense at their pale green skin.

"A welcoming committee. Boyoboy!", one of the crewmen said before Moran growled him into silence.

Yet that was all they seemed to be. They weren't armed and seemed incapable of any offense. The captain insisted on their being searched to everyone's enjoyment. Including the girls. They answered questions in clear and incomprehensible voices. The only information they conveyed was that they wanted the spacemen to go with them. In unmistakable gestures they waved towards the canal and beckoned the men to follow them. Captain Moran was the only one who

showed any hesitation about accepting. He finally posted a guard over the girls and called his officers aside for a conference.

There was only one course and they finally took it. They had to find out about the men of the other ship and the green girls were the only sign of a possible solution. There was no sign of any other kind of life on the red planet.

Well armed, they went in force. The girls were bubbling with happiness at the move and the whole thing had more of the air of a picnic than an expedition. Particularly when they found the boats moored at the canal's edge with two or three more girls in each boat. After a careful search that disclosed nothing, Moran allowed his men to embark, one man to a boat.

A barely perceptable current moved them along and the whole expedition took on the air of a punting trip in paradise. Captain Moran ordered and roared but it did little good. The sudden change after the long trip was dismembering what few shards of military morale the men had left.

Only one incident marred the even placidity of the trip. Dr. Kranolsky—whose scientific interest seemed to rise above his libido—was making a detailed examination of the boats. He called to the captain who guided his craft over until they touched.

"Something here captain, I have no idea what it might mean."

Following the doctor's pointing finger, Captain Moran saw faintly discernable scratches on one of the seats. Twisting and turning until the light hit them right he realized suddenly they were letters.

"SPII..that's what it looks like. Could one of the men from the *Argus* have written it?"

"They had to," the doctor said excitedly. "It is beyond reason that these martians could have an alphabet so similar to ours. But what can it mean?"

"It means," Captain Moran said grimly, "That they came this way and we had better keep our eyes open. I don't feel safe in these damn boats. At least we have the girls. Whoever or whatever is behind this won't start anything while we have them as hostages."

As the hours went by the current increased, they were soon moving at a deceptively rapid speed between the wide banks. Moran was worried and had his gun out instantly when he heard the doctor's shout.

"Captain, I have been thinking about those letters. They could mean only one word. If the man who scratched them here hadn't finished the last letter, only made the vertical

mark, the word could be SPIDER."

The captain put his gun back and scowled at the doctor. "And do *you* see any spiders doctor? There are none in these boats and these women are the only life we have found so far. Perhaps he meant water spiders. And if so—so what?"

Following this possibility Dr. Kranolsky took closet notice of the water. Captain Moran shouted orders to his men, but the boats were drifting further apart and some of them didn't hear him, or pretended they d i d n ' t. He couldn't be sure but he thought that things were going on in some of the furthest boats that were definitely against orders. Also the current was much faster. Only the presence of the green girls gave him any feeling of security.

There seemed to be a dark spot on the horizon, dead ahead. He tried vainly to make it out. Dr. Kranolsky's voice knifed irritatingly across his concentration.

"Being logical, c a p i t a n, whoever scratched this word here thought it was important. Perhaps he never had time to finish it."

"Don't be fantastic, doctor. There are more important things to concern ourselves with."

For the first time since he had served under the capitan, Dr. Kranolsky disagreed.

"No, I think this is the most important thing we have to concern ourselves with. If the man meant *spider*—where is the beast? Certainly these girls are harmless enough. Or the spider web—where is that." He mused for a second, his brow tight, then laughed. "It makes me think of a fantasy I had when we approached Mars. The canals looked like a giant spider web scratched on the surface of the planet."

Moran snorted with disgust. "And I suppose if this canal is a strand of the web, these girls are the 'bait'. And this building we are coming to is the spider's lair. Really doctor!"

The canal swept towards the giant black structure and seemingly vanished through an opening in its side. They couldn't control their small craft and within minutes were passing under a giant archway. Moran was frightened and to conceal his fear he poked fun at the doctor.

"And now we are in the lair doctor, what do you think a planet-wide s p i d e r should look like? How would you describe a beast that lives on a world as an earth spider lives on an apple?"

A scream was his only answer, a good enough answer.

Words are inadequate to describe the *thing* that completely filled the building.

Waiting.

Reaching for them....

the faith of father gillespie

by MICHAEL HOLLMAN

The purpose of the trip was not personal glory. They were searching for a habitable planet for Earth's millions.

FATHER GILLESPIE was glad of the eternal night. Faith always seemed to come easiest to men at night. In daylight other thoughts filled their minds, but they hadn't seen a day in several years. Father Gillespie's faith was now all that kept their minds, within the hull of the starship "Vega" and not reeling out into space.

Sam Rothmore sat at the control panel. He slouched in his boredom for he and the rest of the crew had little to do with the operation of the ship except in emergency. The "Vega's" robot entrails determined her course, guided her around obstacles, changed speed, and even, as the crew had jokingly said in the early days of the voyage, "Saw to the comfort of the passengers."

Rothmore muttered partly to the other men and partly to the space before the front panel, "Wouldn't you think that at this speed we'd come to something. An inhabited planet, a purple star, maybe God's underwear hanging out on a line—", he turned around smiling weakly. "I'm sorry Father. It's just that—well

Michael Hollman explores a question that must interest many of us—what Religion's role will be in the not too distant future when Man will have begun his long, slow, conquest of the Stars. A student at the University of Indiana, he has had several stories published locally.

when I started on this voyage I expected something. Maybe it was childish, but I kind of pictured myself landing on some lush tropical planet, claiming it for Earth, and then coming home and announcing to the world that there was a dream world just waiting to be colonized."

Father Gillespie smiled. "You put that very well, Sam. If you want to know the truth you pretty well summed up my feelings. I thought I'd bring some heathen aliens into the fold. All I see instead is some heathen stars blazing like hell fires. They certainly want no part of me."

The men laughed. Dr. Gillespie continued. "You see what I mean. It's rough on all of us but the purpose of our trip is not personal glory but to find a habitable planet. The peoples of the Earth must have a place to flee. Keep in mind that we are perhaps better off than they are. The world was like one vast tenement when we left, and it is worse now. There are over fourteen billion persons crowded on that hunk of rock! Remember that this voyage is dedicated to them. Well, now that I've preached my daily sermon let's pass out our dinner tablets. I hope that my little talk sharpened your appetite."

Rothmore took the tiny tablets in his hand. "I'm sorry I opened up, Father. I'll remember what you said."

Phillips, first mate of the "Vega" kept watch at the controls while the others slept. Seeing distant stars grow huge, then fade away into pin points of light, seeing vast areas of space swept by in seconds by the fantastic speed of the ship, had always filled him with pleasure and wonder. He, and perhaps Captain Peters were the only ones to whom the experience still held interest and uniqueness. Suddenly his lethargy was broken. The pattern of stars growing large then small was gone. There were no more stars ahead!

He cried aloud in his surprise. Captain Peters, drowsing, beside him woke with a start. "What is it son?"

Phillips turned his eyes to the panel. "Look ahead. There are no more stars. There's nothing, nothing!"

Captain Peters stared at the panel. "God, it's true!"

Father Gillespie, awake now, walked over to gaze at this scene. "How can this be, Captain? Maybe we've hit a sort of clear spot in space. In an hour or so the stars will probably be back."

The captain turned to him. "Certain scientists thought that the universe was of finite length, not endless as popular conception has it. Frankly I went along with those who thought it went on forever; but there doesn't seem to be any more—"

Father Gillespie put his

hand on the Captain's shoulder.

"Let's just wait, shall we? It just doesn't seem possible that we've come to the end of the universe. If that were so where are we now?"

The three men stood by the front panel together for several hours. Each hoped that the stars would reappear and that they might laugh together. It was ridiculous to think that they could come to the end of the universe. The stars did not reappear and they did not laugh. As the hours passed, their heads lowered as they realized that they were nowhere.

The crew was awake now and seeing the three defected-looking men ran over to the panel. They stood for long minutes straining their eyes for one tiny speck of light.

Rothmore broke the silence, "We're in nothing! Absolutely nothing!"

The men's voices began to rise and a throbbing panic wove itself into them. Someone began to sob, "We're nowhere. No matter how fast we go we're not going to get anywhere—"

Captain Peters slapped the hysterical man. "Stop it! If we all go to pieces we certainly will be nowhere. What does this word "nowhere" mean? Nothing. We're always somewhere—"

He couldn't stop them. Their voices rose over his. He rushed into their midst but was knocked down by the men whose only link to the world was the word "Nowhere" they kept repeating. A word that they had used in that world without ever really knowing until now what it meant.

Father Gillespie was standing in front of them forcing his voice to be heard above theirs. "Please, let's stop this! We're still men and not mindless animals!"

The men stopped like a fire that had burned itself out; but their eyes still held some of the wildness.

"Don't ever do this again! Behavior like that is a sacrilege to—"

Someone half shouted and half sobbed, "But, Father, we left God behind when we left the universe. He made the universe but this—"

Father Gillespie stood staring into the "nothing" before the panel. Perhaps the man was right? The panic began to rise again as the Father stood gazing through the panel, the only thing between him and "nothingness." His mind went back to the teeming Earth, so overcrowded that it choked. At least it had a God. He remembered his church and all the others, all the others—

The sound of the men's voices was not so loud now for they had lost the courage to make much noise with nothingness so close. Now they stood quietly while Father Gillespie spoke.

"How many of you remember a church where you lived. The only ones I know are my own and another several hundred miles away. Don't you see? Mankind has forgotten God. The only thing it has thought of during the last several hundred years is getting men like you out into space with enough power to reach any point in the universe." He hoped that they could accept his next words.

"God can only exist where he is recognized. We have found that man is the only thinking creature in the universe." His voice began to rise but it never lost control. "If God can't exist in Man's universe anymore, he *must* be around us in this nothingness!"

Father Gillespie and the rest of the crew stood looking through the panel knowing that what was just spoken was true. They could feel God around them as they never had on Earth, and their panic gave way to an intoxicating calmness. They were almost sorry when the ship was turned around and headed back into a Godless universe.

WHAT ABOUT PLUTONIUM?

A reader of Isaac Asimov's article on THE UNRARE EARTHS in our last issue has called our attention to an article on Plutonium in the March 30, 1957 issue of the London *Economist*. We quote:

"Plutonium, for a long time, has been one of the back-room mysteries of the atomic energy programme. A vaguely sinister metal, which scientists describe as 'poisonous', it is roughly interchangeable with the fissile portion of natural uranium. But it only appears in the conditions set up inside an atomic reactor and is never found 'wild' in nature. Putting two and two together, the layman may deduce that here is a valuable asset to any atomic power programme, an atomic fuel 'grown' in the power stations of the atomic grid, a miniature uranium mine inside each reactor. He is indeed told this on every side, by people who are in a better position than he is to calculate the probable output of this strange metal, but who have so far kept this information to themselves."

The British Atomic Energy has, however, now estimated that "when all 6 million kilowatts of atomic capacity are installed, the country's atomic power stations will have an annual output of 4 tons of plutonium", ie., "the fuel equivalent of about 600 tons of natural uranium", and perhaps enough to keep a 300,000 kW atomic power station operating for about four years.

publicity stunt

by JAN MELTON

By the end of the second week he'd spent or agreed to spend a cool one billion dollars—and he'd just started!

MR. THEODORE PENNINGTON was a large man, to say the least, with a set of chins which would have been the envy of any circus fat lady. At the moment, the chins were quivering frantically, turning bright pink one after another to match the rest of his florid face.

"It's preposterous," Mr. Pennington stormed. "Completely, thoroughly, utterly, fantastically,..." he paused for breath.

Gerald H. Lawton, Attorney at Law, reached for one of Mr. Pennington's imported cigars. "Ridiculously," he suggested.

"...Ridiculously preposterous!" Mr. Pennington finished. "And stay out of my cigars!"

The attorney struck a match. "The fact remains, T. J., that your advertisement was a bona-fide offer, it left no doubt as to the means of securing the proferred trip, and it contains no loopholes. Therefore, Abigail Winthrop, having presented you with one thousand empty tubes of Cleenall Toothpaste, is entitled to one trip to Mars cour-

Pennington never anticipated that anyone would have the patience to get together one thousand empty tubes of Cleenall Toothpaste (ugh!) but someone did. Jan Melton, an investigator who holds a bachelor's degree in criminology from Fresno State College, tells what happened.

tesy of Cleenall Toothpaste, Incorporated. For Free."

Mr. Pennington started all over again. "This is the 20th century, not Buck Rogers' 25th. The nearest thing to space flight in this country is a little basketball floating around 1700 miles up taking pictures. How in the devil am I supposed to furnish a trip to Mars?"

Lawton blew a smoke ring toward the ceiling. "That's your problem. You ran the ad."

Mr. Pennington snorted, "That ad was a gag! How was I supposed to know some little old lady would have nothing better to do than sit around and collect toothpaste tubes!" He slammed a ham-like fist on the desk. "You go talk to this Mrs. Winthrop and get her to forget this whole deal."

"It's Miss Winthrop, and she is a very stubborn woman. She had already told me that if she doesn't get the trip, she'll sue for false advertising."

"She'll never make it stick!"

"Yes, she will. Your ad was very specific. I can see it now..."

"Never mind! I'm sick enough of that thing without listening to you quote it from memory." He placed a pudgy finger on the intercom and pushed. "Miss Norwood. Call a meeting of the Board. Immediately." He glowered at the lawyer. "You'd better find us a way out of this thing, and fast!"

Lawton unwound from his chair and stood up. "Okay, I'll try, but I'd bet my last dime you'll have to furnish the trip to Mars or its cash equivalent."

Mr. Pennington brightened like a three hundred watt bulb. "That's it! Cash equivalent."

Lawton stopped at the door. "It would be cheaper to build a space ship."

"Huh?"

"Sure. If a person wanted to go to Europe, it would cost two or three thousand dollars to book passage, eat, and so forth. So that's your cash equivalent. But if he wanted to go to Mars, he'd have to build a ship, test it, and everything. That would cost three or four billion dollars, and that's your cash equivalent. Whatever it costs to get there."

Mr. Pennington's chins began to quiver again. Lawton opened the door but was stopped by the industrialist's voice. "Just a minute. I changed my mind. I want you to sit in on this meeting."

The lawyer shrugged and went back to his chair.

The Board of Directors arrived in 45 minutes. In 55 minutes they were all talking at once, until Mr. Pennington banged the gavel. "That's the situation, gentlemen," he

concluded. "And according to Mr. Lawton, we're legally bound to furnish this Miss Winthrop with a trip to Mars."

The executive vice-president rose to his feet. "Assuming we are stuck for the trip, and I'm willing to take Mr. Lawton's word for that, what's to prevent us from persuading her to take a substitute trip? Around the world, or something."

Lawton answered the question. "She's been around the world a couple times already. The problem is simple. Miss Winthrop is a lonely old maid who had outlived all her friends and hates all her relatives. She's been bored to tears for the last twenty years, so now she's jumping at the chance to do something different. Like going to Mars."

"So she picks on us," Mr. Pennington grumbled.

A junior executive had no idea. "Wouldn't it be cheaper to go ahead and let her sue? And then appeal the decision if we lost? She would have to spend a lot of money to keep the suit alive."

"Miss Winthrop is worth a couple hundred thousand," Lawton replied, "and she has a nephew who is a very able attorney and who would be just as happy to get rid of her as we would."

The metting dragged on. Question after question, idea after idea, came up, to be dispelled either by Lawton and the law or by Mr. Pennington and impracticality. Finally the third vice-president in charge of marketing stood up.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I think it is fairly clear that Miss Abigail Winthrop is entitled to a trip to Mars. I have, therefore, a proposition, and I hereby move its adoption. I move we build a space ship and take her to Mars. Give her the trip."

The uproar was tremendous, but Mr. Pennington rose above it.

"Mister Colstead!" the industrialist fumed. "Just how do you propose to finance this project or are you secretly the Count of Monte Cristo or someone that money means nothing to you?"

Mr. Colstead waited until the noise had subsided somewhat, then explained. "There are three possible courses of action in this matter, as I see it. One, let Miss Winthrop sue. For reasons already explained, that is out of the question. Two, give her the cash equivalent of the trip. That is also out of the question since it involves at least two billion dollars in cash, which we don't have."

"Which is precisely why we can't build a space ship," Mr. Pennington interrupted. "We don't have the money!"

"I was coming to that," Mr. Colstead explained patiently. "True, we don't have the

money to build a ship. But to build it will take time, and with time there is a way to get the money." He paused for dramatic effect. "Sales. And you get sales by advertising. And the fact that you are giving a little old lady her heart's desire is human interest, therefore news, therefore good, and especially free, advertising. We merely have to take it from there." Mr. Colstead smiled benignly around the table and sat down.

"Maybe that's it," somebody else put in. "We could come out with all kinds of gimmicks to boost sales, like space-ship-shaped toothpaste tubes for the kiddies."

"Right," another voice chimed. "And think of the saving in income tax with the profit and loss statement."

Nonetheless, the idea caught, and suggestions flew for twenty minutes before Mr. Pennington banged down the gavel. "All right," he decided, "we'll do it. We'll give Miss Abigail Winthrop her free trip to Mars. And by heaven we'll make it the biggest publicity stunt in the history of the toothpaste industry!"

When Mr. Pennington made up his mind to do something, he did things in a big way. First he called in the representatives of the wire services and broke the story. When the trade and women's magazines contacted him, he gave them fill ins on the story and at the same time purchased two and three page ads in the next issues extolling the virtues of that greatest of all toothpastes, Cleenall. Then he contacted experts in every conceivable field connected with space flight, signed them to two year contracts, and put them to work. He purchased a huge expanse of Nevada desert and set up all the myriad details needed by a space ship testing and launching center.

By the end of the second week, Mr. Pennington had spent or committed himself to spend a cool one billion dollars. And, he complained to Lawton, he had just barely started.

Lawton nodded and filched an imported cigar, to Mr. Pennington's vociferous annoyment. "How long will it take to get this thing rolling," the lawyer asked.

"About three months, why?"

"Well," Lawton blew out the match and sat down, "Miss Winthrop is somewhat peeved about the delay. She seems to feel that you should have been ready to ship her off."

Mr. Pennington grew a shade darker. "My aching back!" he exploded. "It'll take a good two years to build this ship!"

Lawton shrugged. "She's talking suit again."

Mr. Pennington's chins began to quiver. "Stall her off. I can't afford to sink money into a lawsuit now. Stall her."

"Well, there's one answer. I've heard the Peoria Science Fiction Society would like to have her give a talk. Something about her reactions on being the first woman to go into space. Now if you were to start her off on a speaking tour of the country, footing the bills, of course, then..."

"And why the devil should I foot the bills?"

"To show your good faith, mainly. Besides, maybe she'll throw in a plug for Cleenall once in a while."

Mr. Pennington turned red, but he finally agreed, and Miss Winthrop was off for Peoria. The project, and the money, rolled on, and out.

At first there was some objection from the government, but since the project wasn't a government undertaking, and there were no government funds involved, and Cleenall, Inc. was not a company with government contracts, it was decided that there were no legal grounds for stepping in with security regulations and the usual red tape.

The project chief, a nuclear physicist late of the University of California, decided the best procedure would be to build a ship which was capable of traveling to the moon on her maiden voyage, as a test flight, then being refitted and adapted for the Mars run. At first he had wanted to build a full-sized space station on the grounds that it would be easier to construct the ship itself in space, but after several discussions with Mr. Pennington he was convinced that it would be cheaper to go ahead and build the ship on Earth.

The sales force, spurred partly by the promise of higher commissions but more so by the threat of lost jobs, began opening territories hitherto untouched, branching out into Canada and South America and touching on the overseas market. In the first four months, sales rose 183% and net profits rose 57%, thanks to salary cuts imposed on the corporation officers and the abolition of stock dividends scheduled to be paid to the Board of Directors. And in that four months, the corporation sustained a net loss of seventeen million dollars cash outlay.

"Do you realize," Mr. Pennington informed the Board at the next meeting, "that this means a net loss of fifty-one million dollars over a twelve month period? And the corporation is already committed to pay out almost eight hundred fifty million dollars by the end of this fiscal year. That means a total net loss of nine hundred million dollars in eight months. Needless to say, gentlemen, we don't have

that much money. And we need twice as much." He glanced around the table. "Any suggestion?"

Mr. Colstead stood up. "Why not cash in on some of this free newspaper publicity a little more directly," he began. "How about selling guided tours of the project. So much a ticket?"

A junior executive interrupted. "I've got a better idea. How about giving the tours away for, say, fifteen empty Cleenall tubes. He did some scribbling on his note pad. "Fifteen tubes at 59c retail, means a net profit of two dollars and nine cents per person. That's more than you could sell tours for outright."

"That's right," someone else agreed. "The old idea of something for nothing."

Mr. Colstead nodded "Let's see, at a return of one percent, that's a hundred..." his voice trailed off as he stared at the ceiling. "Should increase our net profit by a million dollars in two months, not counting the tourist trade and the overseas market."

Mr. Pennington thought it over. "Okay, set it up. And Colstead, think up some more cheap giveaway gimmicks. Make empty Cleenall tubes worth their weight in Uranium."

Back in the office, Mr. Pennington sat down with a grunt. "How is dear Miss Abigail these days?" he wanted to know.

"Let's see..." Lawton consulted a calendar. "She's in Atlantic City a honorary judge of the Miss America contest."

"Huh! I can imagine who she'd pick as a winner."

"And Thursday she's due in Pasadena to give a talk on the conveniences of knitting in free flight."

"What does she know about free flight?"

"Oh, she's had several scintillating talks with the staff about the trip, and she has a very vivid imagination."

"Plus a gift for gab." Mr. Pennington leaned forward and planted his elbows on the desk. "On your way downtown," he said pointedly, "check with my broker and see how he's doing on the stock market. And stay out of my cigars!"

Lawton obligingly returned the cigar to the humidor, artfully palming another, and left.

Time and money marched on together. Working twenty-four hours a day, the *Cleenall I* was made ready for the moon run in seven more months. According to the project chief, the trip, being a final test, would save half a billion dollars *if* nothing serious went wrong. This being an event of historical importance, the press was naturally invited, and two thousand grandstand seats were sold

for twenty dollars or twenty-five toothpaste tubes. The tubes were cheaper.

Miss Winthrop was on hand, too. Originally she had wanted to go along, but Mr. Pennington finally convinced her that it would be too dangerous, being a test flight, and besides, she was only entitled to the Mars trip. So she was more or less content to sit in the box of honor and watch the ship take off to the cheers of the spectators. The next day she left for San Francisco to speak to the Bay Counties Culinary Society on the problems of baking upsidedown cake in space; the problem being, according to Lawton, how do you tell, in weightless, directionless space, which side is up and which is down.

The trip around the moon was uneventful, and therefore highly successful. Data was gathered by the crew and radioed back to Earth, where it was disseminated "in the public interest" to boost sales. Photographs of the other side of the moon were published, to the disappointment of a great many romanticists, who found that the other side looked very much like the side everyone was used to.

Meanwhile the sales division made marketing history by opening up Darkest Africa as a selling area, receiving instead of cash goods worth five times as much as the present retail value of the toothpaste. The fact that the people were more interested in Cleenal as a tasty delicacy than as a tooth cleaning agent was carefully not publicized.

Still, at the end of eighteen months, Cleenall, Inc., showed a net loss of one billion dollars, and Mr. Pennington himself was down to his last half million. And there was still, according to the project chief, a hundred million dollars worth of work to be done in refitting the *Cleenall I* for her trip to Mars.

"Where," Mr. Pennington complained, "am I supposed to get that kind of money? My credit's strained to the limit, I've pushed Cleenall prices as high as I can, and I'm broke myself."

Lawton filched a cigar. "Sell your stock in the corporation."

"What?"

"Sure. It ought to be worth something."

Mr. Pennington snorted.

"Besides, you've already picked up fifteen million in mineral rights for the Uganda territory, and sales are up forty-seven percent. That's another ten million. There's a fourth of your cost there."

"Sure, but sales are already at the saturation point." He snorted. "Where's Miss Winthrop?"

"Seattle, raising funds for a home for orphaned cats."

"What!"

"She would appreciate it if

you would make a contribution."

Mr. Pennington rose slowly to his feet, but before he could voice his opinion, Lawton had taken warning from his barometric chins and left.

"Stay out of my cigars!" Mr. Pennington shouted helplessly at the closed door.

Finally the great day arrived. Mr. Pennington had raised the necessary finances without resorting to sale of the corporation stock and the *Cleenall I* stood proud and sleek outside his Nevada field office, ready for the first trip in history to the mystery planet Mars. Inside the field office flashbulbs popped continuously in the direction of Mr. Pennington's smiling chins. Reporters milled about taking statements from everyone; Mr Pennington, the project chief, assorted technicians and executives, and the janitor who had absent-mindedly wandered in to empty the waste basket.

The governor of Nevada was there along with several state legislators. The Senator from Wyoming was there as personal representative of the President. Various military officials had arrived, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, outwardly congratulatory but inwardly fuming because the Army hadn't been the first.

"Yes, sir," Mr. Pennington was saying. "I've spent every dime I had or could borrow on this project, but it will be worth it when I can see the happiness on Miss Winthrop's face. She has been extremely patient in the face of this unavoidable delay. Where is she? Mr. Lawton, my attorney, has gone to Reno to pick her up. They should be back shortly. You know, she..."

At this point attention shifted to the office door. Flashbulbs began popping all over again as Lawton opened the door, walked in, smiled, ...and closed the door behind him. Mr. Pennington's rosy mood began to fade.

"Where's Miss Winthrop?" he demanded.

Lawton ambled over to the window and gazed out at the great silvery shape in the desert.

"Lawton!" Mr. Pennington growled.

"Well," the attorney turned around smiling for a photographer, "I went to her hotel room and knocked on the door. When she saw who it was, she invited me in for a cup of tea, which I couldn't very well refuse since she offered to lace it with a little peach brandy, and a chat."

"So?" By this time Mr. Pennington's chins were most agitated.

"So, she told me about all the wonderful people she's met on her tours around the country and all. In fact, it seems she's even received a few proposals of marriage."

"You're stalling, Lawton!"

The lawyer held up a restraining hand. "Now, now. She told me to be sure and thank you for all the trouble you've gone to, but she's decided Mars is a pretty long way off, after all."

"What?"

Lawton shrugged. "She doesn't want to go." He glanced at the crowd of people, then turned back, concerned. "Are you ill?"

Mr. Pennington didn't say a word. He just kept looking from Lawton to the window and back, over and over, the chins quivering like the proverbial bowls full of jelly. When it became obvious the big man had nothing to say, Lawton laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Cheer up. It's not that bad. Why, in fifty years or so you can go into the space transport business, and maybe find a whole new market for Cleenall. Here," he fumbled in his coat pocket, "have a cigar."

ANSWERS TO ATOMIC TERMS QUIZ (on page 76)
1-d; 2-g; 3-e; 4-h; 5-j; 6-a; 7-i; 8-b; 9-f; 10-c.

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death for a hunter

by MICHAEL SHAARA

All night long the two of them dragged on into the north, Nielson following, calmly, steadily, relentless.

NIELSON sat within a bush out of sight, his head bent low and his eyes closed. A few feet behind his back the forest opened onto a wide stream, and on the other side of the stream was a steep bare rise which flattened out at the top into a small plateau. There were several men on the plateau. If Neilson had looked he would have seen them, sitting among the rocks at the top. He did not look but he knew they were there. On the other side of the forest there were more men coming toward him. They were firing into the woods as they came and occasionally he could hear the vicious snaps and hisses of their guns. It was late afternoon. Nielson raised half-closed eyes to squint at the sky. No sign of rain. All day long he had hoped for rain. Still, it was already late afternoon and if the men coming toward him were cautious enough they might not get to him before the sun went down. He rested his head on his chest, breathing slowly and heavily. For three days he had not eat-

Were the Morgans intelligent? Michael Shaara, author of CONQUEST OVER TIME (Fantastic Universe, *Nov.* 1956), *returns with this novelet of the problem faced by Nielson as he began to wonder about these beings that he had killed because man needed the planet's living space.*

en, because he had not had time to stop and get something. He was also very thirsty. He thought of the stream a few feet away, the dust in his throat, the streaked caked dirt on his face. Briefly he thought of what it would be like to go swimming. But the thought did not last. He was very tired. He wondered if he went to sleep in the bush here they might just possibly pass him by. And then he would awake in the middle of the night, the dark lovely night with stars shining down through the trees, and all alone he would be, and then he would go swimming in the river...

The old man sat on a rock at the top of the plateau, staring down into the forest. He was sitting cross-legged with a rifle in his lap and a small radio by his side. From time to time he spoke into the radio, or heard men speak from it, but mostly he spent the time looking from his watch to the sun to the forest below. Near him on the ground sat a much younger man, a psychiatrist dressed in street clothes. This man was very nervous.

"How much light is there?" he asked.

"About an hour and a half."

"It'll be close. What if you don't get him before night?"

"Then we light up the woods as well as we can and sit it out until morning."

"No chance at all of him giving up?"

The old man shrugged.

"Take it easy. I told everybody to take him alive if they could. But don't expect anything."

"Three years," the psychiatrist grumbled. "Three years of hunting to get one man."

"It's a big continent," the old man said calmly. "And he is after all a professional."

"You said it."

"Nobody but a professional could have gone on this long. Even so, after a while you get superstitious. He kills too damn quietly. There is an art to killing quietly."

"But he is only one man."

"True." The old man looked up at him intently. "But a man can be a remarkable thing."

They sat for a moment quietly in the sun.

"You were going to tell me something about what happened," the psychiatrist said.

"I was considering it," the old man said.

The psychiatrist took out a small black notebook.

"You are the only one who knew him. I can't understand why you won't..."

"Well," the old man said softly, his head bent low, wearily, as if he was looking down into himself, "I guess I might just as well." He clicked the bolt on his rifle once viciously, although his

face was expressionless.

"I guess I really might just as well," he said.

Well now it is a very odd story (the old man said), very odd and very bloody. In the course of it twenty eight men have been destroyed and pretty soon now there will be a twenty ninth. Nielson. This afternoon. And if it ends here with him dead we will never know truly where it began. But I can give you a certain few facts and then you can make up your own mind.

Nielson was a professional hunter, a guide. Roughly you know the type of man, a planet-hopper. He came here for a very odd reason one day, came off a rocket one very hot day three years ago, and was introduced to me by Director Maas. Maas said to issue him a permit to hunt. He said Mr. Nielson was interested in Morgan's wildlife and was willing to do some Game Control work for us for free. He was willing to kill Morgans for free.

Now right away you see that is odd, because if you know professional hunters at all you know they do not kill game for free. They look upon Game Control as a dirty business a man must take from time to time to make a little money. But they will not ever kill out of curiosity. So that is the first oddness.

And second, if you knew Maas you would know also that it was very unlike him to give Nielson a permit to stay on Morgan. Because the permit was illegal, and Maas was a very legal man. Visitors are not allowed on a planet until it is open for colonization. Especially visitors whose sole reason is curiosity. Yet Albert Maas, a serious virtuous man who never did things without a reason, handed Nielson a permit the moment he asked for it. A small thing, you say. True. And at the time I never questioned it, for Maas was genial and friendly, and this Joe Nielson was an ominous man.

You have never seen him? Well he was a Swede, you know, built thick all the way down like the bole of a tree. A huge man. Round stomach as a wind reserve and heavy tubular thighs built up by walking many hundred miles. Strange shape for a woodsman, not slinky at all, more like a great blunt bomb. Blond hair, bullet head close-cropped, and in the Swede blood somewhere something dark, with the eyes coal black. Muscular out of proportion, the kind of man that when he moved suddenly made you jump in spite of yourself. And yet, for all the steely mean look of him a cheerful man and after all only a boy. Rosy faced and clean. Not yet thirty. A very strange mixture, part young, part old, part giant, part boy. Part savage.

And he came to Morgan at

a savage time. The planet had just been discovered and we were busy building the first city so the colonists could move in, and but for the city the whole world was raw and wide. The only humans on the planet were the construction crew and one or two scientific teams and another hunter named Wolke. It was a fine free time, a youthful time, because the world was new and had plenty of fresh living space and we needed that space badly...

But about Nielson. Maas asked me to fly him out to where the other hunter, Wolke, was, somewhere out across half a continent, hunting down the Morgans. I did. When we got to the camp he armed himself and went immediately into the woods. He went in blind, not knowing the land, not knowing where Wolke was, not knowing anything at all about the Morgans except that they were lean and ape-like and could tear your head off with a rock at fifty feet. Foolish? Who knows. He was a professional and a man of pride. He had no fear of anything sneaking up on him, not on *him*, and watching him move that afternoon. I had no fear of it either. He went into the tall grass and was gone, totally gone, that huge bulk of man and rifle all gone, and not a grass quivered or a twig snapped, and in the trees around him even the birds continued to sing.

The old man broke off and sat for a moment quietly. The psychiatrist did not know where this was heading but he had a hunch that if he was careful he might hear more than he had come for. Much more. He waited. After a while the old man said:

"What do you know about the Morgans?"

"Nothing."

"All right. Neither does anyone else. Then for a moment forget Nielson. Consider the Morgans, whom Nielson came to kill. They also have a certain oddness about them.

"They were very clever and swift and very deadly. Altogether I guess there were no more than a few thousand of them on this one continent, but they were Morgan's largest and most dangerous game. Therefore they had to be cleaned out, according to the law, so that the planet would be safe for parks and such, and in the early days we killed them by the hundreds. At the same time they also began to kill us. And the strange thing was that they did not do it like animals, killing us only when we blundered unarmed across their paths, but they began laying in wait for us, hanging around outside our enclosures, and flinging rocks, and for a while we did not go out at all.

"Game Control sent one man down to clean them out and take specimens. This man did very well, captured several and seriously depleted the rest, and then one day they ganged him and we found him headless. His successor was Wolke, but Wolke did not do well at all. For by this time the Morgans had learned to avoid our traps and hide from our guns, and Wolke not only failed to clean them out, but came very close several times to being cleaned out himself. The truth is that Wolke was an amiable man, but no hunter. He was almost a joke. And now we get to the point. For he was also Nielson's friend.

"So there you see why Nielson came, not to kill for fun but to help a friend. Wolke was failing, and if he failed he would get no money and his reputation would suffer and he would get no more guide jobs and would have to leave the woods. And because he was merely an uncomplicated man who hated cities and who also had a wife and two chilren, he sent out a distress call to the only good hunter he knew who would help him. The only man he knew who loved the open sky as much as he did, the only man who would come. And Nielson came.

"But then why did Maas admit him? Officially, because he was anxious to clean out the Morgans and get the job completed. And yet the truth, at last the truth, is this: he was more than anxious, he was sincerely worried. He used Nielson's visit to get rid of the Morgans as quickly as possible. For that, you see, is the point on which it all revolves. He thought the Morgans were intelligent."

The psychiatrist stiffened.

"Yes," the old man said, smiling slightly, "that is the real point of it, the question no one ever answered. Not really, not scientifically. The thing was, you see, that the Morgans *couldn't* be intelligent. Morgan was such a beautiful planet, and we needed it so badly, and if the Morgans were intelligent we couldn't have it. And besides, they showed no signs of culture, no tools, no gods, and they did not respond to tests. When we caged them they wouldn't even move, just sat and stared at us and ignored the tests. But they *couldn't* be intelligent. The law says we cannot dispossess an intelligent race, no matter their status, and all that land, all that wild green living room, all that would be lost if one of them, just one of them, passed a single test. So Maas was relieved, we were all relieved, when the psychologist's report proved conclusively that the Morgans were only animals after all."

The psychiatrist was staring, mouth open, pencil poised.

"But what do you..."

"I don't know," the old man

said softly. "Nobody knows. Or will know. But was there, do you think, a little *fixing?* Did someone in authority realize the simple, practical truth quite early, and send down word that the Morgans could not be intelligent? And was there after all really any blame? Here was a home for ten billion people, enough water and iron for centuries, a great stepping stone to the farther stars! Along side this what were the claims of a few thousand naked beasts? Be truthful. Who cares? I do not even care myself."

"But who was the psychologist? You'll have to verify.."

"I make no charges," the old man turned away. "I verify nothing. You wanted the story. I tell it as it was. If there was any point to charges I would have made them by now. But think about it. If the Morgans really were intelligent, who knew? Maas did, and certainly Wolke did, but Nielson didn't. And therefore what happened in the woods that night must have been interesting. Because you see Wolke never said anything. Here was Nielson come across light years to help him, and Wolke never said anything. The job, the money, was too important. And so it goes..."

And the old man stopped his musing and went on with the story, telling it now with his eyes closed as he began to lose himself in it, telling it in great detail and realizing now that he would have to tell it all, and no longer caring.

That night they decided to move out as soon as possible before too many of the Morgans knew that there was another hunter in the woods. Little Wolke was overjoyed to have Nielson with him and eager now to get a crack at the Morgans on equal terms. When Nielson had found him it was midnight and he was perched in a great tree, petrified, and although Nielson grinned at that, it was unusual and he was naturally curious.

So then Wolke chatted on about how goddam clever the things were, but he left that subject quickly and took up the joking for which he was so well known and liked. They sat for a while talking about the wife and the kids (Wolke's, for Nielson had none), about Nielson's latest clients and which ones he had slept with and how often, and Wolke brought out his latest theory, which was that all the dinosaurs had disappeared so abruptly from Earth long ago because someone, once, had hunted them out. And then they moved out.

Now understand, they were very well equipped, for hunting is now almost a science. They had tight soft clothing which would not scratch on twigs as they moved, and a cream which coated their

bodies and removed their scent so they could not be smelled. They had lenses for night vision and pills for endurance and chemicals which made their nostrils supersensitive. Each carried two guns, a missile firing rifle and an electron handgun. And all this was fine, but what mattered most was that they carried Nielson's skill, that magnificent inborn skill to move very swiftly and be unseen. It comes to few men. He had it as few have had it.

Wolke had located a group of Morgans in a valley to the north. He briefed Nielson carefully on the terrain and then the two of them moved out together.

The way Wolke had chosen to go down into the valley was through a narrow ravine. When they reached the mouth of the ravine they split up, each taking one side, timing themselves to arrive at the end together. It was a fairly cold night in autumn, and very dark, for Morgan has no moon. The stars were clear but unfamiliar, so Nielson had to be very careful about his direction. And so they went down the ravine.

Now here, you see, we have a clue. Why is it Wolke chose such an obvious, incautious way to go down into the valley. That is more than odd. For he had been hunting the Morgans for months now with very little success, yet he apparently had so little respect for them, for their cunning, that he chose the worst possible way to go in after them. Creeping over the sides of the ravine, over rocks, rifle in hand, separated as they were, what position were they in to fight? Cramped and awkward they must have been, should have known they would be, yet that is the way they went in, and that is where the Morgans ambushed them. Maybe Wolke was so emboldened by Nielson's presence that he became overconfident. Or maybe, and this is likely, he did not want Nielson to see that he had so great a respect for the Morgans, and therefore took the simplest, easiest way down. At any rate there is something about it which looks almost *arranged,* and yet I know Wolke was not a man to commit suicide.

Well, they had been moving down the gorge for half an hour, and they had just crossed a ridge and were on their way down when Nielson became aware of something ahead of him in the woods, something quiet and still, but alive, waiting. He did not see it or hear it or smell it, but he knew it was there. Take that as you will, that is the way he told it. That night he *knew* the thing was in front of him, did not doubt at all, and so he melted down into an alcove between a rock and a bush and waited without moving.

He was sure the thing was

large and dangerous, because in the past these were the things his sense had warned him about. He was also sure that it knew he was there. Then just faintly he heard the thing moving in the leaves, shifting its position. He could not hear any breathing but he began to be certain the thing was a Morgan. For a while he thought it was sleeping and was about to move toward it when he heard something else moving above, another one, and then all at once he realized that there were a great many of them all around him in among the bushes and the trees, spread out and waiting. It was possible that they already knew where he was so he began to move. There was nowhere to go but down, and in the bottom of the gorge there was no cover. He stopped at the edge of the bushes, trying to think his way out, beginning now to understand that the position was very bad.

He could not be sure whether or not to warn Wolke, to make a noise, because more of them were probably on the other side of the gorge, or maybe Wolke already knew, and maybe the ones above had not yet spotted him. But then in the next moment it made no difference. Out of the night across the gorge came a loud cracking squishing sound. Then there was suddenly a great thrashing in the leaves, and a terrible victorious inhuman scream from above, and Nielson knew that Wolke had been hit by a rock, and then he heard the ones above him beginning to move down toward him, moving without caution or cries, tearing through the bush and leaping to the place where Wolke lay. Instantly Nielson lay down his rifle and drew his pistol and knife and crouched with both hands ready for close action, tensed and huge and vicious, overwhelmingly ready to kill—but then he heard them running down the gorge and past him, up the other side, seven or eight of them, and they had not known where he was after all.

But now they were going to Wolke, who might still be alive, to make sure that he died where he lay. And then all this in an instant: knowing he could escape now easily back up the ravine, knowing that there were at least a dozen of them ahead, knowing that Wolke was probably already dead or at the very least would die before he could fight them off and get him back across half a continent to the settlement, still Nielson leapt out of the spot where he crouched and screamed his own human scream that made the one Morgan who crouched over Wolke leap up in surprise; and then he flew straight up the side of the gorge, roared like a great black engine

through bushes and over rocks to the spot where Wolke lay, knife in one hand and pistol in the other, lips drawn back like an ape, enormous body of flying steel running into and over one lone stunned Morgan, bursting through a thicket and snapping off dead tree limbs with his head and shoulders, moving all in one frantic moment to the leafy hollow where Wolke was hit, arriving before the one Morgan there knew what had happened, killing that one on the spot, to whirl then and crouch and wait for the others.

Then they should have rushed him, of course, or at the very least turned their rocks on him, but here again now the likely did not happen. In the dark they were none of them sure just who or how many had come. But they had seen the flash of his gun and one or two had seen the huge hurtling form of him, and so they were cautious now and sank into the bush and waited.

Therefore Nielson had time to pull Wolke into close cover, and also to cool his rage enough to think and let his senses tell him where the Morgans were. As it turned out, he was very lucky. What worried the Morgans most was that they knew their sense of smell was no good in hunting humans, and now they were not sure how many had come, or how many more might be coming. So now they were worried about being trapped themselves in the gorge. And then Nielson saw one and killed him with a silent crimson flash from the pistol, and that made up the minds of the others. Most of them slipped quietly away, thinking by now no doubt simply of self preservation, because there not many of them left, at this point only fifteen or twenty on the whole continent. But still two remained, one on the rise above Nielson and the other on a level with him across the ravine. These two remained, while the others left. Were they more bitter, these two, for private reasons, or simply more stubborn and courageous? No matter, but it was unusual, and when Nielson had time he would think about it. Would two wolves remain, if the rest left?

Now it was silent again and Nielson moved quickly to do what could be done for Wolke, and the same time watched and listened for the two Morgans. Wolke was not yet dead and his eyes were open, but the back of his head was crushed and he could not see. He was trying to say something and Nielson bent over to listen, because Wolke was going to live no more than a few minutes. But the little man's voice was inaudible. Then the Morgans began throwing rocks. From minute to minute, with terrible unseen violence, a sharp stone would rip the air around them, to tear with mortal rage through the

leaves, to shatter on a boulder and plough deep into a tree. Then the Morgan above, seeing that Nielson was well-hidden, began craftily to lob bigger rocks down, heavy jagged rocks, heaving them into the air on a high trajectory like a mortar shell, so that they came down on Neilson and Wolke directly from above. Immediately that was very bad, and so Nielson turned and concentrated his attention uphill, periously ignoring the one across the way, and when the Morgan above heaved up another rock his long arm was briefly visible, flung out above the cliff like a snake, and Nielson shot it off.

Then there was only the other one across the way, the last helpless, mad, indomitable savage who still would not move, who waited until the dawn flinging rocks with a desperate, increasing frenzy. But now Nielson was safe and knew it, and turned his attention to Wolke.

By that time, however, Wolke was dead. He bled to death at approximately the same time as the Morgan in the rocks above, like the Morgan, a creature hunted in the dark.

And so Nielson passed the night with Wolke soft and silent on the ground beside him. You wonder, don't you, what he thought of the Morgans then. And shortly before dawn the last Morgan left, for unlike Nielson he could not slip the night lenses from his eyes and see just as well, or better, in the daylight, and therefore even this last stubborn one saw that he was exposed and had to leave. When he was gone Nielson knew it, but remained where he was until the sun was fully up. Then he picked up little Wolke and set him gently across his shoulders, went down into the gorge and retrieved his rifle from where he had left it, and walked back to the camp.

The sun had lowered and the old man had gone into shadow, so he shifted himself into the light. The psychologist continued to stare at him without moving.

"If you had known Wolke—" the old man stopped and shrugged, then looked at his watch. There was now about an hour until sundown.

"We had better get on," he said, now somewhat wearily. "Now I will have to tell you about Maas."

"But—"

"All right, I am no storyteller. But you see Maas is the next important thing, no Nielson. Eventually you will learn about Nielson. Don't get the idea—I see you already have it—that Maas is the villain of the piece. No, not any more than that this is the story of a noble wild man betrayed by a city slicker. Maas was a genuinely worthwhile man. For what he

did no doubt he suffered, but still, he believed he was right. That's what makes it so difficult to judge, to understand.

"Maas, you see, was a man of substantial family and education, of all the best schools, the best breeding, the best of everything. And he turned out the way men like that rarely do, a really sincere idealist. He believed in Man, in the dignity and future of Man, with something like a small boy's faith. Perhaps he substituted Man for God. At any rate he made his faith evident in his speeches and his behavior, and men found him an exceptionally good man to work for, even though he was very handsome and suave and clean cut. For cynical men he had a charm. They followed him in his great desire to conquer all the planets for Man, to reach the farther stars, not because they also believed, but because they would have liked to believe, and at any rate it was inspiring to be believed *in*. So Maas was a very effective man, a comer. He gained his directorship while quite young, and so came to Morgan, and so set in motion, because of his great faith, the dark damned flow which was to destroy Nielson.

"Yet blame? Where is there blame? Here was a man, Maas, who believed that Man was the purpose of the universe, that he would was born to reach out ever further and eventually, perhaps, to transmit himself into a finer, nobler thing. And then, of course, keeping this philosophy in mind, you can see how he must have looked upon the Morgans. How easy it would have been for Maas, how right for him in the long run, to overlook a report on the Morgans. Not really falsify, perhaps just not press it, just approve it when it had been thorough—for let us remember that the Morgans paid no attention to tests. And then, did it bother him, Maas, that he had done it? Did it weigh with him at all? Where really was the wrong in it? I mean ultimately, from the viewpoint of a thousand years?"

"And Nielson," the psychologist said. "I begin to see. Nielson was at the other extreme. 'I think I could go live with the animals, they are so clean and pure', that sort of thing?"

"No. Not at all. I told you this was not the story of a noble savage. Exactly what Nielson was I am not sure, but he was not simply a nature lover, nor a man-hater either. Even when you know the whole thing you may not be able to classify. Always behind it there is some dark point that eludes you...but we had better get on."

When Nielson came back with dead Wolke over his shoulder no doubt it was with

certain questions in his mind. be sure. And anyway he could do nothing immediately, for there remained the question of Wolke's wife and her two children. Wolke had no insurance, being a professional hunter, and nothing in the bank. What money Jen Wolke had, was barely enough to get her back to Earth. The end was automatically that Nielson had to go back into the woods. Killing the last of of the Morgans would complete Wolk's contract and earn a few thousand, and also, perhaps, there was for Nielson some primitive debt of honor besides. Yet the end was that he who had come here to help through killing was forced, almost, impelled, you see, to go on helping, and at the same time, killing and so forged on to the last inevitable moment.

Well then, shortly after Wolke was in the ground Nielson came to ask me for a look at the captured Morgans. I was happy to allow it and went along with him, and oddly enough, we were not at the tank very long before Director Maas came in behind us and stood in the doorway watching.

Now here is the scene. In the Bio tank were eleven Morgans, seven male, four female. The Bio tank was a huge steel affair with plastic windows, standardized model built to hold any game yet known, with pressure, atmosphere, temperature all carefully controlled from the outside. The windows were one-way, you could see in without the things inside seeing out, and that was Nielson's first real sight of the Morgans.

Eleven of them sitting in the tank together, close together, not moving, not scratching or picking at themselves, not even sleeping or resting. Just sitting. Sitting and waiting, all of them, arms folded in various positions and eyes partly closed, statuesque, alien even in the setting of their natural bushes and trees. Occasionally one would stretch slightly and a weird ripple would flip down its body, but otherwise there was no movement at all. And even at rest like that, perhaps because of it, they were distinctly ominous. The least of them was seven feet tall. They weighed an average of two hundred pounds, lean and whiplike with grey fur all over them. Short fur, silvery in the light. Their arms were long and out of proportion and three-jointed, which was the only fundamental difference between their body structure and ours. Their faces were flat nosed and round, the fur on their heads was no longer or different than the rest of their hair, and of course they had no eyebrows or hairline. But what you noticed most, after the long flowing arms, was

the eyes. Set deep in the silvery fur like black rubber balls, no pupil, just wide solid balls. A long time after you left you could see those eyes.

When Nielson turned from looking at them I saw he was smiling. Then he saw Maas and he broke into a broad grin. Maas curious and perhaps now even a little worried, and Neilson beginning to understand and also beginning to wonder now whether or not this was intentional. And so going directly to the point.

"Where do they rate on the intelligence scale?" he said, gesturing at the Morgans and still grinning.

"Higher than most animals," Maas said cheerfully, although he should have known Nielson had some professional knowledge of animal intelligence, and then he was somewhat surprised when Nielson wanted the exact figure, but said still smiling that it wasn't very high, approximately level with that of a dog.

And then, as I recall, Nielson did not say anything, but just looked at him for a moment, and then back at the unseeing, unmoving Morgans. I think he began to wonder then for the first time seriously if someone here was trying to put something over on him, and wondered also at the same time if he should say anything about it, and was possibly perhaps unable to keep himself from letting this character know that they might be kidding each other, but they weren't kidding him, because then he said:

"Somebody's been kidding you."

And he turned away, but Maas was not smiling then and stopped him.

"Why what do you mean?" Good old shocked puzzled Maas, and then Nielson also was not smiling, and said:

"They're a hell of a lot smarter than dogs." And Maas said:

"You think there's been some mistake?" And Neilson said:

"Can't you tell just by looking at them? And Maas, recovering himself a bit, said now more suavely:

"No, I confess I cannot. But then, I don't have your natural sensitivity to animals."

So Nielson shrugged and was mute, annoyed with himself for having brought up the obvious and become involved in it, and glanced at me, wishing for me to say something. But I, until that moment, hadn't ever thought about it and was useless. So Maas again smiled.

"The man who examined them was quite reputable, Mr. Nielson," to which Nielson said stiffly, "Don't worry about it. Forget I said anything." And Nielson turned to go, but Maas said: "But this is a very serious busi-

ness—" to which Nielson replied: "Not to me it isn't. Just so long as it's legal, that's all."

At which point, with a slight nod to me, he went out the door and away, leaving Maas standing there somewhat stunned with one hand outstretched and groping like a man playing a piano in the dark.

"Well," he said eventually, "now what do you make of that?" wondering, no doubt, just how much I really did make of it.

But I, fumbling, turned to look at the Morgans, not doubting Maas yet you see, but doubting Nielson certainly, until I looked in and saw the black rubber eyes, looked into the eyes, and so began the doubt which has lasted until this day.

Maas said then, feeling his way—because actually you know he had not been very bright about this—that he knew there were rumors going around, but he had paid them no attention because everyone knew how reports of animals were exaggerated, how just normal cleverness in an animal often seems remarkable. And besides, there was the psychologist's report, and the psychologist was a reputable man.

He was testing me, you see, and then he looked at me and was intelligent enough to see the vague doubt forming on my face, and so brought himself to say that it was, after all, a question of our right to an entire planet—"Man's right"— and therefore we must, of course, have the Morgans reexamined. He said that when the first rocketload of immigrants landed next week perhaps there would be a qualified man aboard, and if not we would send for one.

And I agreed, was wholly in favor, still in no way suspecting Maas, my mind occupied now with the last curious unsettling question, which was, namely, that Nielson thought the Morgans were intelligent and yet could apparently easily go on killing them.

And so we entered upon the last few days. Nielson did not go immediately into the woods but waited until Wolke was buried and Jen Wolke was gone, and then I found him one day in a bar all by himself and I sat down and talked to him really for the first time.

He was quite willing to talk, perhaps even grateful, for he was not the kind of man people talk to easily. He told me a great deal about animals, about hunting, about the different planets he had hunted, and also by the way a great deal about himself. But he was very difficult to understand. I think he was just approaching that stage where a man finds he can no longer

believe something he has been brought up believing. Something very serious.

Well I was curious, you see, about why he was willing to kill the Morgans if he thought they were intelligent, for though I am no moralist things like that interest me. And Nielson told me without ceremony.

Hell, he said, everything is eaten. Everything alive is sooner or later killed and eaten. The big animals are allowed to grow old first, but the end is the same. The first difference between man and animal, Nielson said, was that a man was eaten after he went into the ground, but an animal rarely got that far.

So there we sat in the beery afternoon, talking Philosophy. You begin to see him. now, perhaps, him so huge and so young. Not foolish, simply young. He had given the matter a great deal of thought, that I could see, and remember that he had lived a very violent and lonesome life.

Well then I asked him if he really believed what he said, and he smiled and shook his head beerily, sheepishly, and he said, well, partly anyway. A man is...well sometimes, he said, a man can be a remarkble thing. But so also sometimes can an animal. Not all animals, not all men. But then a great many things can be magnificent, or a waterfall or a wave or a big wind. And if it all has no meaning, if Nobody Above really gives a damn, still, a man can make his own rules and with luck he can get by. What bothers me most though, Nielson said, slightly drunk now and not looking at me, is the goddam blindness of it. A big wind, you see, is not aware of the ships it wrecks, nor is the germ aware of the body it eats, but you die all the same, are eaten all the same, and what bothers me most is that you are eventually destroyed by something that doesn't give a damn. What I would like is to know that when I die I get it from something that has a good reason for it, and knows it's me he's killing.

And thus Nielson the philosopher. And if that is all disagreeable to you, well, he said it three years ago and I remember it now word for word, and I put it in here because you cannot understand him without it.

For see, in the end, what a strange twist we take. Nielson, the woodsman, becomes the cynic, and Maas, the city man, is the idealist, too simple, too simple. For deep down in Nielson, under the fragile outward layer which reasoned and saw too much hate and waste and injustice, much deeper down in the region which knew the beauty of a leaf and a stormy sky, down so deep that Nielson himself was not aware of it, was something...

"But I philosophize," George said wearily. "Let me get on with it. Listen carefully now. The sun is going down and we'll kill him soon. I would like you to know before we kill him. Watch how the rest of it happens and tell me then why.

"The rocket came and Nielson went back into the woods. There was no qualified man on the rocket to examine the Morgans so Maas sent for one, and yet strangely enough did not stop Nielson from going after the few left in the woods, a fact which investigators have not yet paused to consider.

And then when Nielson was gone a week a strange thing happened, oh an odd, unfortunate, annoying thing. Such a time for it to happen too, because Nielson had just sent in several bodies by air and informed Maas that there were only two left, and that he had them pinned down and would get them certainly by the end of the week. On that same day, in the evening, new atmosphere was given to the eleven Morgans in the tank. Curiously, it turned out that by a rare error someone mistook a tank of chlorine for a tank of oxygen—it was lying in the same rack with all the other oxygen tanks—and this man did not notice and so fed chlorine to the Morgans, who all strangled in a very short time. All eleven. It was not noticed until the next morning, because the Morgans did not move much anyway, but by that time it was much too late and none of them ever moved again. And Maas was greatly shaken when he heard of it, naturally, because racial murder is a very serious thing, and immediately he sent out word to find Nielson before he killed the last two.

But Nielson was half a continent away.

That same evening Nielson shot one of them as it came down to the river to drink. He shot it from a perch in a thick thorn bush across the way, in which he had been sitting for almost three days. During all that time he had not moved out of the bush, but sat waiting with diabolical patience while the last two Morgans, undoubtedly in a state of panic now, tried to sense him or get some sign of him. At last they thought he was gone, or at least not in the area, and they came out of hiding to drink at the stream. That was when Nielson got one of them. But the shot was from a long way off, and the Morgan had been careful to drink from a sheltered place, so it was not immediately fatal. The Morgan moved away as quickly as it could, plainly hit. The other seemed to be helping it. Nielson left the thorn bush and began to track them.

It kept coming into his mind then, as it had kept coming to him during the three days in the thorn bush, that if you thought about this in the right light it was a dirty business. The two Morgans were sticking together. For some reason that bothered him. The unwounded one could easily have gotten away while Nielson trailed the other, could even circle behind and try to get him from the rear. Yet the two stuck together, making it easy for him. He found himself almost wishing they would break up.

They were moving to the north. He wondered where they were heading. He was between them and the only real cover, a marsh to the west. He supposed that they would try to double back. It was already quite murky in the woods so he slipped his night lenses on, pressing forward, silently and cautiously but very quickly, keeping his mind clear of everything but the hunt. He wondered how badly the one was hit, then began finding blood and knew. Pretty bad. And moving like that the Morgan would keep bleeding. Well, by morning he should end it. And then get off this planet for good. Go somewhere else and hunt things with tentacles.

All night long the two Morgans dragged on into the north, with Nielson closing in steadily behind. Early in the morning they began to climb, reaching the first line of low mountains, and then Nielson knew they would try to find a high rocky place where he would have to come at them from below. He quickened his pace, slowly passed them in the night, knowing where they were by little far-off movements. When daylight came he was well ahead of them, up in the high cold country, beginning to feel unnaturally tired now and wondering how in hell the wounded Morgan could keep it up, looking for a good place from which to get them as they passed.

By eight o'clock he had figured the path they would take. He found a dark narrow place on a ledge between two boulders and wedged himself in. It was very cold and he was not dressed for it. He sat for a long while with his hand tucked in his armpit to keep the trigger finger warm and supple. At last he heard them coming.

The wounded Morgan was breathing heavily. He heard it a long way off. Then he heard a clatter in the rocks and thought they'd seen him and were trying to run away, so he peered out.

But the two of them were in the open, perhaps fifty yards away, and they had not seen him. The wounded one had fallen, which was what made the clatter, and lay now

on its back while the other bent over talking to it. Talking to it.

Quickly, not thinking, making a special effort not to think but to bring the rifle up slowly, icily, Nielson sighted in and pressed the trigger. But the trigger wouldn't pull. He was suddenly dizzy, swore at himself. He bore down on his hand, the gun went off. The kneeling Morgan jerked and looked up toward him with the big black eyes, then fell across the other one. Although Nielson's hands had been trembling the shot was clean. When he reached them both Morgans were dead.

He stood for a long while looking down, feeling very odd, very quiet and dazed. The one underneath, which he had wounded the night before, was a female. She had been with child.

He sat down on a rock, rested his head in his hands. He sat there for a long while. When it began to snow he put out his hand and watched the snowflakes melt on his palm. Soon he was white and the ground was white and a thin cold blanket covered the Morgans. Eventually they were completely covered and he was able to leave. He did not take them with him. He wanted to go somewhere quickly and take a bath.

"Oh my lord," the psychologist muttered.

"Yes," George said, "and then he came back and they were all dead. Racial murder. But that was only a part of it, because even before he knew about that he was already dirty. On the plane coming in he sat white-faced with his hands in his lap unnaturally still, and he kept shaking his head and saying he knew that really he ought not to worry about it. He said it was a dirty shame the way when you were a kid they filled you with all that sweet delicate morality, because even when you grew up and saw it was all nonsense still there was always some of it left, dammit, deep inside you where logic couldn't get at it, and that was what he was feeling now but would easily get over. And then of course I had to tell him about the Morgans, the last Morgans all dead, and when he heard how it happened he knew Maas did it, *he knew*, and so sat with his hands unnaturally still until we came to the city, and then went to Maas and destroyed him."

The psychologist bowed his head.

"So all right," George said, "but what really was the truth of it? Where was the guilt? When he destroyed Maas, strangled him in punishment for what they had both done, did he know somewhere deep inside him that he was also, with the same act, making it necessary and in-

evitable that we should eventually also destroy and punish him? For didn't he pull the trigger himself? And didn't he know when he pulled the trigger, even in that horrible second before, didn't he know then that there really was a difference after all and he had no right to do this, and wasn't it even more horrible because the Morgans had never done him any harm and he was only killing them for money, which was no reason at all? And when he went into the woods did he go then with some half-mad idea that he could for a while at least take the Morgans place? Or was he then cold and practical after the event, to go out and do all that he did simply because there was nothing else he could do? And why then to resist with fantastic cunning for three years, to slink and sneak and ambush and murder for three years, knowing surely that the men he had killed were not at fault in this, and knowing also that the end of it was certain, a bullet or a burn, a bullet or a burn..."

The psychologist started to say something but George pressed on.

"And what did he prove, if anything at all? Nothing if not that they were both partly right, both he and Maas, because certainly after three years what it comes down to is this, that a man could be such a noble thing, if only, if only..."

They were both silent, gazing down at the river. The sun was gone and the water was dark. A few moments later they were still gazing, saying nothing, when they both saw Nielson come out of the woods.

In the darkness the hunter was shaggy and blurred. He stood among the rushes on the bank, not looking up, as if he did not know a hundred men were there. He walked out into the shallow water and started to take off his shirt. He had it up over his chest when someone else saw him from above and shot him, and he fell to his knees as the man shot again, then fell face down in the river.

George went down and knelt by him in the water. It seemed such an easy end after three years that he had difficulty believing. The psychologist came up behind him, rippling the water.

"Dead?"

George nodded.

Gradually other men arrived. One was the man who had done the shooting. There was no elation in his eyes. His face was gray as he looked down at the blond bloody floating hair. George reached out suddenly without thinking and patted the man on the arm.

"And so it goes," George said gently, "so it goes."

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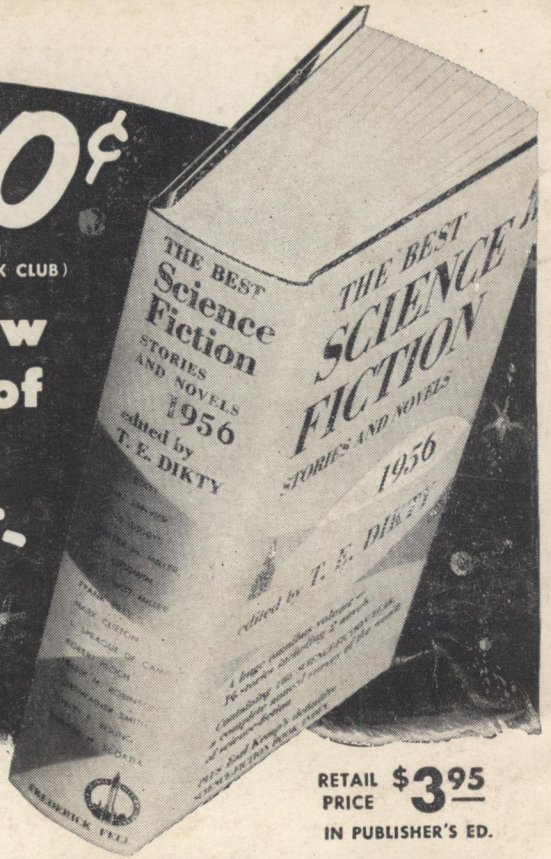

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