



GAMMA

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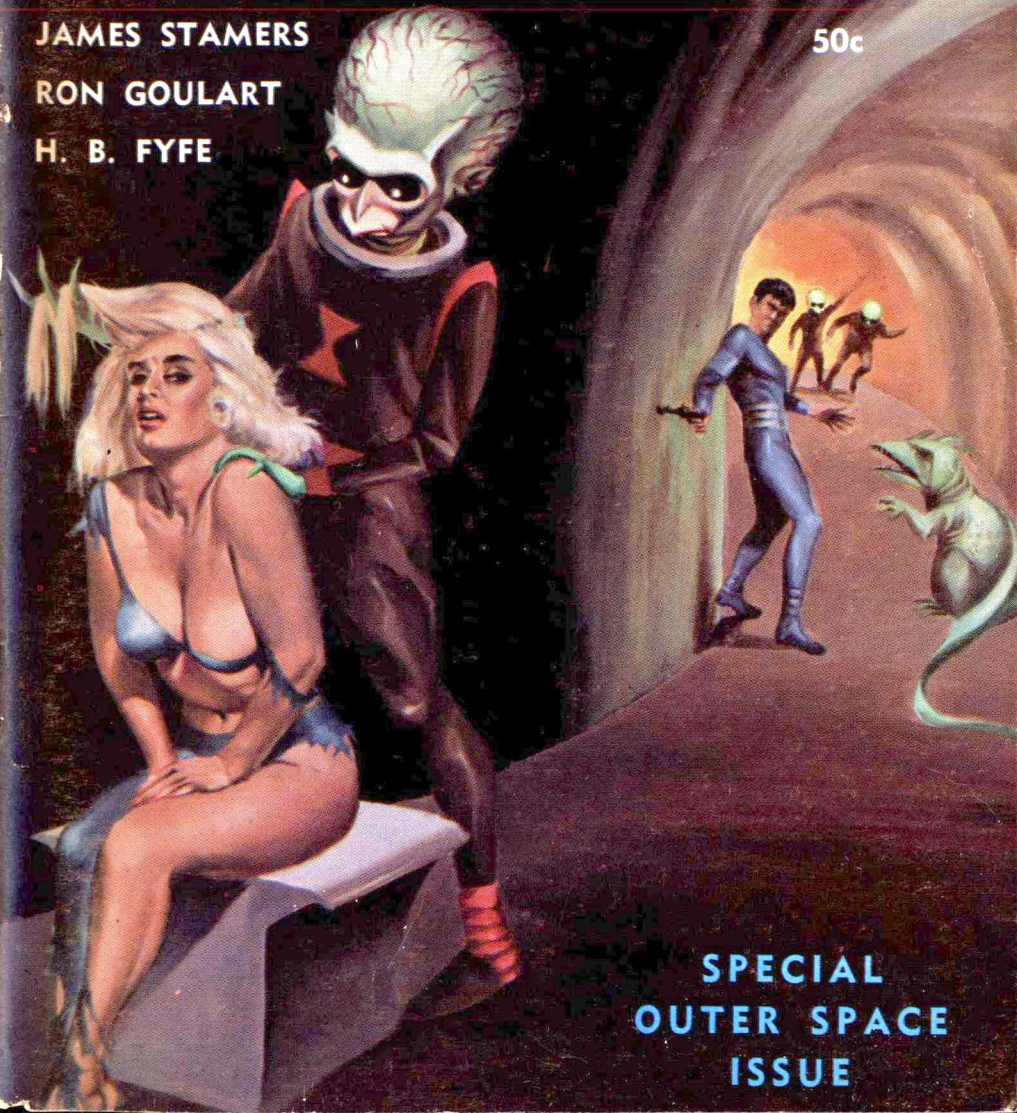
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H. B. FYFE

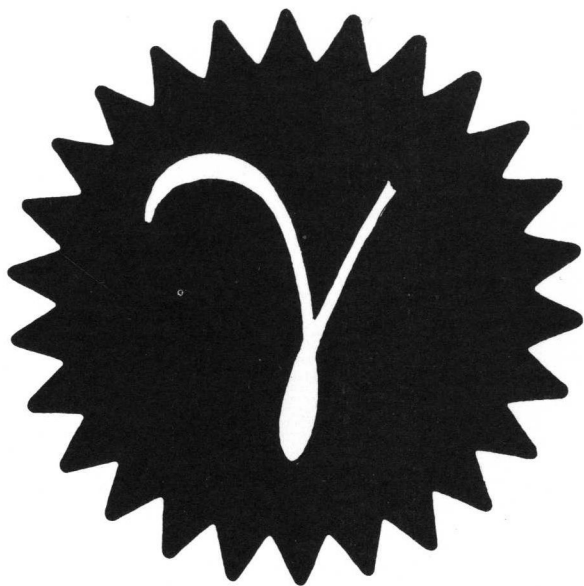
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SPECIAL
OUTER SPACE
ISSUE



GAMMA 4

New Frontiers in Fiction

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REMEMBER

the good old days when science-fiction was fun, and you didn't need a slide-rule and a couple of years of calculus to figure out what was going on; when mad scientists were wrecking worlds and stalwart heroes with blasters were putting them back together again; when every damsel in distress was a Jayne Mansfield who invariably wore a space suit apparently constructed by a bikini manufacturer and every Bug-Eyed Monster attacked her for reasons known (if at all) only to himself (itself)?

Well, return with us to those thrilling days of yesteryear, as GAMMA presents its SPECIAL OUTER SPACE ISSUE.

In the following pages you'll find monsters, courtesy of Forry Ackerman, an evil mad doctor supplied by Ron Goulart, a melodious space opera by H. B. Fyfe, plus some surprises which we won't give away here.



SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

The following people:

ELIZABETH TAYLOR

RICHARD BURTON

RINGO STARR

EFFIE LOU KEESIEWETTER

will probably not appear in future issues of GAMMA. But then, you can never be sure. GAMMA is not a conventional science-fiction/fantasy mag, and we don't want to bog down in that category. We know that today's readers are imaginative people who want a magazine that dares to be different. GAMMA is *their* magazine.

For the past 20 years, the name H. B. Fyfe has been a familiar one to readers of science-fiction.

Born in Jersey City, New Jersey, he attended Columbia University before and after the war, receiving his Bachelor of Science degree in 1950. During the war, he served as a radio operator in the 63rd Division Infantry, where he saw action as a sergeant in France and Germany.

Since 1940, he has had science-fiction short stories and novelettes in nearly all the science-fiction magazines, and a novel, *D-99*, published by Pyramid Books.

His hobbies are history and astronomy, photography and gardening. Current projects; an historical novel "and improving my four-wall handball game."

The following story is a space-opera in the grand tradition, but with philosophical plus-factors that make it especially worthwhile for today's modern reader.

THE CLUTCHES OF RUIN

H. B. Fyfe

Neil Bryson reported reluctantly to the conference cabin. The presence of a huge, furry Sirian sentry at the half-open door was no comfort.

Hesitating, he smoothed his tunic and ran a hand over his closely cropped dark hair. The Sirian looked down at Bryson's less than six feet of height, at the squarish face, and at the worried frown hovering above the blue eyes. The black fur at his elbow parted to reveal a glimpse of azure skin as he slid the door open.

Bryson then had no choice but to walk straight in. Inside, the Chief was waiting with three or

four of his staff and a Terran woman.

The Chief was an elderly Capellan whose natural dignity held a hint of professorial abstraction. His name was Vookhaf, and he preferred it that way, with no "Chief" or "Captain". His theory was that everyone aboard the Galactic ship *knew* his position and the weight of his task.

But for a mere suggestion of chin under a wide mouth bearing a double row of tiny teeth, Vookhaf's face was approximately humanoid. His snaky body stretched seven feet tall. In places, his uniform revealed a downy covering

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like fine, gray fur. His jet eyes peered from wrinkled, baggy lids with bone-deep ennui.

"Bryson arrives," he noted in Galactic. "We shall review instructions."

The Terran stifled a sigh at not being offered a chair. Since it was impractical to provide a seat for every kind of being in the crew, the cabin was furnished only with a table and a row of files recessed in a bulkhead.

Bryson reported that he had observed the planet Ytijio on the screen from their orbit beyond the two moons. He did not mention having been unimpressed by the small globe that was half water — there were enough beings aboard little impressed by Terra, a Galactic Federation member for only a few generations.

Vookhaf played tapes of the conditional admission of Ytijio to the Federation. Then a report later by fifty Terran years mentioned a dangerous increase in population to over the four billion mark. The Federation had warned that this must be checked. Engineers were altering two neighboring planets for emigration, but such massive operations required time. What was the use of giving the natives space travel if there were nowhere

for them to go? No member race offered asylum.

"Naturally," commented Vookhaf. "If people persist in crowding themselves out of their own system, they will crowd you out of yours! Now — to judge if late tales of wars and upheavals are true! The engineer in charge is a Procyonite . . ."

He peered about under his sagging lids. No Procyonite was present.

". . . and I feel that our friends from Procyon VI lean toward hysteria at the least infraction of a minor ordinance. Therefore, we send Bryson down to check."

The Terran groaned under his breath. Upon his report might depend the future of four billion Ytijii. He doubted that the Federation would bomb the planet, but it could ignore its natives to favor some more promising race. He *did* know that he had better report exactly what he found: his chances of fooling Vookhaf about anything in the universe were about as thin as space.

The Chief mentioned some evasions tried during his own days of observing.

They can probably fool me if they try, thought Bryson. *He was smarter eighty years ago than I'll ever be! Now, what's this girl for?*

"You must know Carole Leland," said Vookhaf, following Bryson's glance. "You Terrans are great ones for seeking each other out on a ship like this."

Bryson agreed cautiously. He thought he recalled her as a dietitian, which required skill in a Federation ship.

"Under the policy of sending most races on missions by couples," said Vookhaf, "Leland will act as your secretary. You are equipped, Leland?"

"Yes, my recording gear is aboard the landing rocket," answered the girl.

Bryson hoped that abandonment was not a possibility here. A few real colonies had such histories, but he preferred not to originate the first Terran one.

The very thought made him eye the girl more closely. About five-feet-four, she bore herself like a dancer or athlete. Her hair was dark blonde, worn in a short, curly style popular in space. He wondered what she thought of going down; but no emotion showed on the oval face with its pointed chin or in the gray eyes under long, tilted brows. Even her voice was low and expressionless.

Vookhaf repeated a few of his choicer bits of advice and wished them luck.

Bryson found himself outside again, still feeling unready for his first independent assignment.

"Are you . . . uh . . . ready?" he asked, conscious of her speculative stare.

She nodded, and he set out along the corridor with what he hoped was a determined pace. After that, the operation proceeded with dismaying smoothness. A Sirian couple named Gror and Drunterl met them at the launching tube. These experts made the trip to the surface smooth with the finesse of a hundred landings.

They brought the landing rocket down somewhat south of the equator, at a mid-morning longitude, and told Bryson over the intercom that there was a sizable city nearby. He remembered that he could expect a day of about thirty hours.

The four of them cooperated in swinging a compact jet helicopter down from a hatch amidships, like a spider dropping on its own web. The Sirians said they liked the location, a plain from which they thought it would be convenient to relay messages to the ship. Bryson disconnected the cable, packed Carole Leland and her recorders into the cabin, and got airborne.

Within a few minutes, he spot-

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ted the Ytijian city. He glanced back once.

"They seemed to think this was pretty routine," he said.

"Isn't it?" asked the girl.

"Well . . . is it good to pop in on them so suddenly? What do you think?"

"You're doing the thinking. I'm just detailed to record."

Bryson blinked.

"I mean . . . what if they haven't complied with the directive? Or didn't succeed?"

"Then report that. Don't worry; they all comply with Federation directives. You haven't been in the field service too long, have you?"

Bryson gritted his teeth and pretended to examine the city below. He was disappointed at the size, hardly a mile across, but it looked well built.

By the time they reached the center of the city, Bryson was happy to see that they had been observed. He would not have to drop down and explain himself without warning. In what seemed like a main square, a number of natives had gathered to stare upward. He hoped they had heard of the message Vookhaf had ordered broadcast.

They're all supposed to have learned Galactic as a second language by now, he comforted him-

self. *This really ought to be easy.*

The Ytijii were not awed by the helicopter, although they prudently cleared an area for it to land. Bryson asked Carole if she had noticed any local craft.

"Nothing in sight. The last inspection report says they don't have any."

"Well, if it's in the report, it must be so," growled Bryson, busy landing.

He opened the plastic door on his side and stepped out onto a fairly decent pavement resembling macadam. A delegation marched down the steps of the largest building. A few onlookers arrived ahead, and Bryson met his first Ytijii.

They were about five feet tall, with two arms and two legs. Each limb had three distinct segments where a Terran had two. These members ended in long, three-clawed hands and feet with vestigial heel-spurs. Bryson knew from his briefing that there were also stunted tails about nine inches long; but the group moving toward him wore tunics with colored patterns embroidered upon them. Some wore sandals ingeniously strapped between the claws and around the heel spur.

Their skin, made up of minute scales, was basically pearl gray,

but Bryson noticed that individuals exhibited varying tints ranging from faint green through bluish gray to a muddy purple. Each had three eyes, uniformly beryl-green.

The Terran at last began to feel himself definitely among aliens. Aboard ship, he had learned to read expressions in all sorts of humanoid visages; but now he stared confusedly into the large black pupil of the leader's middle eye. The other two were set so wide that the Ytijian must have been able to see rearward with a slight flick of his head.

"We have been made aware of your coming, Envoy," announced the leader, halting with his staff forming a semicircle behind him. "Welcome to the home of science!"

The Galactic spoken was quite good, considering the shape of the blunt snout that was thrust forward with the speech. Bryson decided that there was nothing really hypnotic about the large eyes; they were merely unhuman.

"I am pleased to have arrived," he answered. "Can you tell me the name of this place? There have been changes since the last Federation visit."

The remark caused a stir among the delegation. Bryson was unable to interpret the leader's expression—the flattish head and the heavy

bone ridges curving symmetrically above each eye lent an air of stolidity. An inch or so of horn jutting up at the end of the snout was distracting in itself. The leader had his gilded, though his companions wore less pretentious colors.

"When we call it the home of science, we mean exactly so. This place, not the world. Translation is difficult. Have you knowledge of our language?"

Bryson admitted that he had not, hoping wistfully that the revelation would not prompt them to exchange secret comments under his nose.

"Then, if I may coin a word in Galactic," said the Ytijian, "the equivalent might be Scientocracy. I am honored to be Chief Scientist for this year."

Bryson looked around at Carole Leland. At his nod, she raised her palmed microphone to her lips and recorded that information.

"Were you informed of the purpose of our visit?" inquired Bryson.

"We were! We have a scientific communications network, and received the whole message from your ship. It was wise of you to land here first."

"Why so?"

"We can supply you with much basic and scientifically accurate

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information — but then, you Galactics know what you are doing! You will help us into space yet, in spite of the mess other governments are making of the world!”

He made the last claim with a toss of his gilded nose horn and much emphasis.

Bryson raised a hand as unobtrusively as possible and wiped a few flecks of moisture from his face as if he were thinking of something else.

He supposed it would be best to let them think this landing spot had been chosen on their account.

“Do I understand,” he asked, “that you have not yet achieved world government?”

The Chief Scientist rolled his eyes in various directions at his subordinates.

“Let us withdraw to a meeting room,” he suggested, “and we shall explain for you the truth of conditions on Ytijiol!”

Avoiding Carole’s eye, Bryson held out an upturned palm as a gesture of assent which he trusted would not commit him too deeply. He began to wonder how many opinions would be presented to him as the One True Explanation.

They were escorted up the steps of the large building and through a number of spacious chambers to a meeting hall. His main impres-

sion was of low ceilings, which suited the Ytiji well enough but made Bryson want to hunch his shoulders. Interior decoration was not unsophisticated, with many glass windows. The room was furnished with a number of low benches, each with a small table.

Carole planted her recorder on one of the latter and managed to look more comfortable on her bench than the taller Bryson. The latter pulled out his notebook, a black metal box six inches by three by one deep which contained a long roll of sensitized paper.

He discovered ruefully that the stylus clipped to the box was discharged again, and spent a few moments rotating the end between thumb and forefinger to build up the power. Settled at last, he announced to the Ytiji who had taken places facing him that he was prepared to listen. The dam promptly burst.

He learned immediately that the Scientocrats possessed all the answers as to what was wrong with their world. They regretfully admitted that parts of the planet under the control of other sects had made no sincere progress in carrying out the Federation directive. They volunteered to aid the Galactics in reforms.

Bryson exchanged glances with Carole.

"Since you are so well informed," he said carefully to the Chief Scientist, "perhaps you will outline for me the steps that are being taken here."

The Ytijian twinkled triumphantly with all three eyes. Bryson found himself becoming accustomed to the appearance of the natives in the flesh. He also began to notice that they had a distinctive, though faint, fishy odor.

Wonder what they think of me? he mused.

"Obviously," declared the Chief Scientist, holding aloft a hand with two claws curled and one elegantly extended, "only one method is practical. To any civilized people, the ancient, so-called 'natural' hazards of war, disease, and famine are beneath consideration."

"You may say that," agreed Bryson, very conscious of Carole's recorder.

"In some parts of the world, we must admit, the ignorant are in control. One large nation refuses to do anything at all to solve its share of the problem. They cannot perceive that the only intelligent course is to neutralize egg-laying!"

Bryson wrinkled his brow and strove to recall details of local reproduction. That last phrase was

one that could lead easily to misinterpretation.

His briefing had included the information that the Ytijii were of rather reptilian evolution and multiplied by laying and hatching eggs. It added nothing to his *savoir-faire* to reflect that the Chief Scientist had once cracked his way out of something Bryson might have ordered for breakfast.

Furthermore, did the Ytijian mean to inhibit the laying of all eggs, or merely fertilized ones, or was it a euphemism for preventing hatching?

He decided to explore by asking, "Do you imply that you destroy eggs?"

The Chief Scientist was staggered. Recovering, he hushed the gabble of his followers and set out to correct Bryson's misapprehension.

"Quite the opposite!" he declared. "Our Scientocracy is the only nation that has developed methods for the successful storage of eggs until there is need or room for the individuals to be hatched. If I may presume to advise a Galactic, there are places where it is remarkably unwise even to hint at the destruction of eggs!"

Bryson checked Carole with a glance, and scribbled a private note. The paper of his notebook

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automatically rolled up an inch or two.

"Thank you," he said. "It has been long since we visited here"

The atmosphere lightened somewhat.

"I fear that you will encounter many stupid, horn-blunting views," admitted the Chief Scientist more calmly. "Actually, there are misguided people who do advocate egg-cracking or the destruction of burdensome, over-age citizens. They have much logic, but neither course is widely popular."

That's nice, thought Bryson. *Limited popularity ought to be enough!*

"Then, there is the plan to emigrate to other worlds," the Ytijian went on. "Meanwhile, we place much emphasis upon improving agriculture so as to increase food supplies until that happy era, with the aid of Galactic engineers, shall dawn."

"You must understand that such projects as altering even a promising planet take a long time, though we hope the need for population control is temporary."

"That is one reason why we *store* eggs," replied the Chief Scientist.

"But what about your comment on neutralizing egg-laying . . .?"

At this, he was introduced to a

medical expert, the leader turning out to be an agricultural specialist.

Bryson soon discovered that his Terran background had led him in one respect. For various physical reasons, the only practical method of producing infertile eggs was based upon chemical means. With proper use of injections or pills, eggs laid by a mated female would not hatch. Egg-laying itself could be halted only by sterilization.

"Actually a quite commendable idea," interjected the Chief Scientist. "At the present level of medical knowledge, however, it is rather inefficient."

"The results are unreliable?"

"Not at all, but the operation has an embarrassingly high mortality rate."

Bryson noticed the medical Ytijian's throat swell slightly with a strong pulse. With some effort, he, himself, maintained a stolid expression.

"I think I see the general idea of the subject," he said.

The Chief Scientist hesitated. None of his henchmen volunteered help. The Terran sensed some concealed stumbling block.

"In the sheer pleasure of research," said the native at last, "you will doubtless be amused at the fantastic array of opinions it is

possible to collect. You will even find those who denounce the . . . well . . . physical aspects of mating."

Bryson chewed his lower lip. "Continnence, you mean?" he hazarded. The word sounded strange to him in Galactic, since he relied entirely upon hypnotic language training when he uttered it.

"The farther the star, the smaller the change," said Carole when he turned for help. "You got it right."

"But this, you see," said the Ytijian, "is also inefficient, because of the deep racial urge to egg. Of course, Scientocrats observe a related custom — a citizen must complete his scientific education before legally mating."

"You are very scientific," Bryson complimented him, wondering whether the Ph.D. degree had been invented on Ytijio. "So much so that I feel confident that you will be able to supply me with census figures."

He was assured that his confidence was completely logical; and it was agreed that the Terrans would be conducted to the hall of records after stopping at their helicopter. Bryson raised the Sirians at the landing rocket and reported.

"What do you think of these

lizards?" he asked as they prepared to return.

"I wouldn't know," retorted Carole with a shake of her short curls. "They sent me along because it was my turn, without much background on the mission."

"Sorry — I forget that everyone isn't crammed with local info."

"Cheer up! Next time, you can watch some other observer sweat."

"Humph! Well, we might as well finish up here. I told Gror to have supplies for a longer trip unloaded for us when we get back."

The Ytijian in charge of the official records produced what he claimed was a printed report on the population of his country. At Bryson's request, he also found a reasonably good colored map of the Scientocracy and a slightly less trustworthy one of the whole planet.

Remembering that the Ytijii based their arithmetic on twelve — fair enough, considering the number of their claws, he supposed — Bryson asked for a translation of the census figures.

Difficulties ensued.

Half an hour later, he came to the end of the roll in his notebook and had to fish in his pocket for a replacement. By then, he and Carole sat alone over a table, the Yti-

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jii having dispersed into several whirlpools of debate.

"Why couldn't I have been born an engineer?" Bryson complained. "I'd at least have a slipstick with me. The best I can do, after worming out of them the identity of every integer and basing things on ten, is a hundred and fifty million."

"That's a lot of lizards!" said Carole.

"I thought so, too; yet they must be trying to minimize the number."

The Chief Scientist offered an inspection tour of the egg-storage facilities of the city, and Bryson asked that they be shown some of the Ytijian homes on the way.

"You count the rooms each time," he muttered to Carole, "and I'll count the people living there. We'll guess at an average and take an air photo later. Vookhaf told me a few tricks like that."

The storage site, when they finally arrived after sundry local stops, turned out to be underground.

"We must protect it as well as possible," explained the Chief Scientist. "Here is stored our future."

Thereafter he conducted the Terrans on a thorough tour of the establishment, during which Bryson saw that Ytijian eggs were the size of a small Terran grapefruit.

They were stored in plastic drawers by the thousand under what the Chief Scientist boasted was constant temperature. He also boasted that the "parents" of any egg, living or dead, could be identified from the code painted on the egg. Bryson marveled at the exactitude, under the circumstances.

"But we store only eggs of good heredity," said the native. "Naturally, there is some pride involved."

"That is a very . . . uh . . . scientific thought," Bryson told him, wondering meanwhile if the common citizens approved wholeheartedly of thus improving the breed.

In the end, he wrote a memo to the effect that a good effort was apparently being made to comply with the Federation directive, although no one had offered to show him how undesirable or excess eggs were disposed of. He made excuses to avoid staying for formal ceremonies, and got himself and Carole into the air with just enough light to take a few photos of the city and nearby area.

He studied these on the way back to the rocket, letting Carole pilot. He thought that the countryside was not being farmed as intensively as it might be, although some machines were obviously in use. Perhaps the agricultural ad-

vances were more planned than accomplished. A good sign; they could hardly be desperate.

Carole made him clench his teeth with a swooping approach and abrupt landing. The length of the Ytijian day was making itself felt, however, and he was grateful when Gror planted a simple meal before him and offered to load the helicopter for the next morning.

Early the next day, in the growing warmth of Ytijio's sun, he checked the rations, inspected the equipment for distilling potable water, and struggled to insert into a compartment under the seats, two electrically heated sleeping bags and changes of clothing for Carole and himself.

Next, he arranged for a directional signal to be broadcast at regular intervals. Using the Ytijian map, he marked his probable course on that of the Sirians, in case of emergency. After that, he got into the air and headed toward a range of mountains. He planned to fly across a narrow sea beyond.

By late afternoon, they saw a very different countryside.

"What do they call this?" asked Carole.

Bryson read off the translation he had lettered under the name printed upon the Ytijian map:

"Land of the Naturalists, as near as I could understand them."

"They must love nature. Look at that cultivation — not a tree left!"

The surface below was an intensively farmed patchwork of small fields with no wasted space. Many natives could be seen working or staring up at the visitors but there appeared to be no farm machinery in use here.

"There's the city we want," announced Bryson as he corrected his course a little later. "I'll hover while you get a few photos."

"Look at how those buildings are jammed together," said Carole. "I hope you find room to land."

When they had the pictures from the camera, they descended to look for landing space. They had by now, attracted considerable attention.

"Every open stretch is filled with lizards!" complained Carole.

Bryson managed, however, to land in the midst of some fairly impressive buildings. Most were constructed of mud-colored brick, but a few were stone. One of the latter was four stories high, with a trio of slim towers as much higher.

As Bryson opened his door and stepped down to the street, he was engulfed by a gabbling crowd. A

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few bolder individuals held out begging claws. With his first breath came the impact of their fishy, unwashed odor. He almost choked.

Being hemmed in at such close quarters by strange, three-eyed beings hindered observation, but the difference in dress from the Scientocrats was striking.

Most of these Ytijii wore nothing but a kilt or loose loincloth. Here or there, a kilt was of red or blue, and many may once have been white, but the majority were coarsely woven gray or dun material. Only a few in the crowd had painted their nose horns. Bryson had the impression that most of these natives were smaller than those he had met the previous day. Certainly, they were thinner — he spotted a few who could be described as emaciated.

"Here comes some kind of big operator," Carole called to him.

The crowd parted reluctantly. Through a lane formed by several shoving attendants, there strode a better-dressed personage who wore yellow paint not only on his horn but also on the bony top of his skull. It matched the hue of his bright yellow kilt. Bryson was grateful that the brow ridges were not similarly adorned, but had to

admit that the newcomer looked authoritative.

"Do you speak Galactic?" he asked, having been unable to detect a syllable of it in the gabble of the mob.

"But of course," replied the yellow-painted Ytijian. "All members of the scholarly class do. It is obvious that you are an alien from space."

Bryson exchanged a darting glance with Carole, who was being a long time about smothering a sneeze with a handkerchief. He took note of the large number of scrawny youngsters in the crowd before he inquired if there had been news of their arrival and planned tour of inspection.

"I have heard none," said the one who had described himself as a scholar. "What is there for the Galactics to inspect? Have they prepared a planet for us?"

"Oh, you know of that engineering program?"

"Certainly. I am of the educated, keeper of traditions for this district."

"Well, I regret to say that emigration is still far in the future. However, progress is being made as rapidly as possible."

One of the scholar's attendants translated for the crowd, which be-

gan to edge away in disappointment.

"Do they not speak Galactic?" demanded Bryson. "It was agreed that in return for Federation help all your people would learn it as a second language."

"They are too many to teach," retorted the Ytijian. "If that is the purpose of your inspection, we must admit that much work is yet to be done. On the other hand, much progress has been made."

Bryson wondered what he had been told. His own vague generality had been promptly reflected at him.

He learned in the next few minutes that the scholar was in charge of the three-towered building, the Temple of Meditation. This position apparently gave him great influence or actual governing authority over a large portion of the city. He knew his people, too; before inviting the Terrans inside, he had a guard posted over their helicopter.

Bryson was astonished at the bareness of the temple interior. There was hardly anything inside but the columns holding up the roof. Cramped stairways wound about these columns below the centers of the three towers. Scattered about the dim expanse sat

individuals or groups engaged in meditation or quiet talk.

"A peaceful refuge for contemplation," remarked the scholar.

He sat down at the base of a column. For the first time, Bryson was glad of having slacks and pitied Carole for her shorts — mud and dust tracked inside by native claws was obviously never swept away. Several Ytijii gathered around.

Bryson, feeling like a lecturer, began to explain his purpose.

It shortly became plain that the announcement did not sit well.

"I must emphatically disagree with you!" objected the scholar. "No believer in Naturalism could be forced to think as you do. A census, indeed!"

"You are not requested to think in any particular way," said, Bryson, taken aback. "We merely want to know the size of your population."

"But that very question implies basic error!" protested the Ytijian. "What purpose could there be in violating the process of Natural life? You Galactics have no right to force your improper beliefs upon us!"

Bryson pretended to take a note. He tapped his stylus against the case of the notebook until he caught Carole staring at him.

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"How did I start so wrong?" he breathed to himself.

The scholar evidently set store by his local standing, for he kept one of his juniors translating his speeches to the audience.

"Let me make one thing clear," Bryson tried again. "The Galactic Federation does not force anyone to believe anything. In the case of Ytijio, it offered with certain conditions to assist you to prepare the two other habitable planets for colonization. Admission to the federation further implies aid in developing space travel and contact with other civilizations."

"Fine promises!" hissed the scholar. "When will they come true?"

"That is what we seek to learn. How near are the Ytijii to fulfilling the conditions to which they agreed?"

"Such agreements are historical, made before any of us were hatched. You say you want to help us, but what is truth? Generations have passed since the Galactics first appeared on Ytijio. Many, many clutches of eggs have been laid. Millions have hatched and lived and egged and died and been forgotten. Yet today we are worse off than of old. There are more people and less to eat!"

"If you are unable to feed your-

selves," Bryson pointed out, "surely that is proof that we must study the facts and learn what can be done."

The scholar wove his three-jointed arms together and glowered.

"We are given none of the help that is necessary to live in peace. The misguided ones calling themselves Scientocrats boast of sending surplus food, but it is always too little. Neighboring lands make war against us. The Galactics promise worlds in space, but you want us to share them with others."

"What is wrong with that?" gasped Bryson.

"The numbers of the other nations of Ytijio are as nothing compared to ours. Is it not just that the greatest need deserves the greatest aid?"

"But this matter of numbers is exactly what I am trying to get at!"

"I know what you are trying to promote! Here again is raised the wicked theory that one can interfere with Nature!"

The Terran sighed. He hauled out a handkerchief and patted his brow.

"Perhaps I am new enough in the Galactic service not to be completely informed," he admitted. "What exactly is it that arouses your anger?"

The scholar was given pause for a brief space, then launched a dissertation.

"We have been the targets of evil unnaturalities from fools of our own race. Each ignorant or malignant nation preaches that we must do this or that to thwart the processes of Nature. They will yet bring ruin upon the world!"

"What is wrong with suggesting solutions to the problem?"

"The fact that they are wrong. *Wrong*. WRONG! We Naturalists have made deep, spiritual studies of true wisdom. We prefer to contemplate the eternal rather than the specious, the convenient, the so-called practical. What are these solutions offered by the evil-minded to solve a problem that does not exist?"

"Well, what are they?" asked Bryson, as reasonably as he could manage.

"They come to us and say we must murder old people who consume more than they produce, upon whom they would blame the common lot of famine. Is murder a solution or a foul sin? They say wars and famines must be halted, but *we* do not make wars or famines. Some boasting of stamping out diseases, but would not such tampering with Nature raise the population in contradiction of their

overt purpose — which proves they are aiming a cruel plot at us alone!"

He paused for breath, glaring at the Terrans. The sibilant voice of the translator caused the general gathering to toss nose horns approvingly.

"Then there are those who advocate use of medicines to cause the laying of dead eggs, and others who would keep mates apart to achieve the same ends. Most perverted of all, the lowest of scum, are those who suggest the harm, the neglect, or actual *destruction* of the sacred egg. That is monstrous . . . racial murder!"

A good deal of claw-clicking and belligerent gesturing ensued.

"Are you planning to get us out alive?" murmured Carole.

"You work on that!" he snapped. "I'm in trouble enough. No, no . . . I spoke to my assistant. Tell me, what do you people want?"

"Justice!" declaimed the scholar, after turning his head from side to side to examine Bryson suspiciously with each side eye. "We are cramped and constrained in an area not proportionate to our numbers. We need more land to feed ourselves."

"Land now held by others?"

"Ah, I perceive the false assumption you are about to make in your

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mind! The others will claim the surplus land is theirs by right of force or other irrelevant reasons. Truthfully, it should be ours by right of need."

"So your point is that your very numbers justify your demands."

"Is that not obvious?"

"It may be obvious when you tell me what your numbers are," Bryson told him.

The scholar rolled all his eyes wildly, sputtering until Bryson considered holding his handkerchief permanently before his face. The audience fell silent, evidently waiting to learn how this foul tactic would be parried.

"You deceiver!" hissed the scholar. "You liar . . . cheat . . . unnatural, dirty *egg cracker!* If you would know the numbers of the worshippers of Nature, *go out and count them!*"

In the end, that was what Bryson had to do.

Despite the disturbed atmosphere, no open threats or violence pursued them. He and Carole were trailed apathetically by stragglers as far as the helicopter. Several loiterers with a word of Galactic begged for food or money before the Terrans could get into the air.

They put their heads together over the map and chose another city of the same nation. Dropping

down there an hour later, they found the story about the same. After a few such experiences, they changed their tactics.

"My advice," Carole finally volunteered, "is to lie your head off."

Bryson agreed. He began to express interest in everyday living conditions and to ask individual views on moving to other land or another planet. This sort of evasion began to fill his records with indirect data to offset the lack of official information. Three days later, as he was on the verge of making a rough estimate, they stumbled over their first sign of cooperation.

It happened in the teeming city that passed for the nation's capital.

"I have heard of your coming," said a white-robed official they met in the largest and cleanest building they had yet seen on the planet. "There are some of us who maintain communications and who believe in overlooking slight conflicts between your mission and Nature. We have a secret population estimate for you."

"Very kind of you," replied Bryson, feeling rather numb. His spare uniform was sweaty and wrinkled, and he felt like a dirty, hungry begger at home with the Naturalists. He gestured to Carole, whose appearance was only a shade bet-

ter, to turn on her recorder. "What would you guess the number to be?"

"About a billion, in your Galactic numbers, of which I have made a study."

They thanked him, pokerfaced, and departed.

In the air, Bryson asked Carole to take the controls and head for the border while he compared the information with their own data. After an hour, he dropped the photos and papers to his lap and leaned back.

"You *look very* clever," said the girl. "I almost wish I'd gone into that branch instead of interstellar nutrition."

She leaned forward to study his sour expression and added, "Well? How near right was our fat, official friend?"

"About halfway, I guess."

"What? Not *two* billion? Why, that's an antheap!"

"Well, aren't they? Swarming all over, half starving on little garden-patch farms, resorting to all sorts of conniving in spite of the sermons they pitched at us! Remember the bunch that tried to palm off their own eggs on the family we were interviewing? And the time we found an egg on the 'copter seat?"

"That I liked!" grumbled Carole.

"Claiming *I* was responsible for raising it!"

Bryson repressed a slightly hysterical impulse to guffaw.

"You scared the hell out of them, threatening to drop it from a hundred feet up. Scared me, too. That might have reduced the population by three."

He looked again at the map procured from the Scientocrats, thinking his estimate might have gone wrong, but the area of the country over which they were flying *was* more extensive than any other. That reminded him of something else.

"In all this land," he said, "there must be a river or lake where we could swim and rinse out a spare shirt. I could do with a nap outside this cabin, too. Imagine cities without even sidewalk and roof space left for sleeping!"

They kept watch for a suitable body of water until they found a small lake. Between it and a dusty village, the grain fields were temporarily empty of farmers.

The water looked clear when they landed and walked over, so they took turns swimming. Bryson also filled their tank, then tried to wash his other uniform.

It was while he labored at this, and Carole dozed atop a sleeping bag at the edge of the grain field,

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that they heard natives approaching from the village. Bryson hastily wrung his wash and tied it to the outside of the helicopter cabin.

A few minutes later, the head of a long column of marching Ytijii reached the area. One glance revealed that the leaders were not lovers of Nature. A ragged but eager squad of six detached itself at the trot to scout the Terrans.

"Strangers!" muttered Bryson.

These Ytijii looked like soldiers. Lean and tough, they wore brief aprons and a webwork of leather harness upon which hung various weapons. Axes with small heads but yard-long helves seemed to be general issue, as did daggers and spears a bit taller than the soldiers themselves. Bony skulls were painted in stripes resembling a unit code, but nose horns were apparently painted according to individual preference with red predominating. Several wore as decorations strings of real or simulated horns.

"Do you speak Galactic?" asked Bryson warily.

One who bore a sickle-shaped blade instead of a spear, and who exuded even more overbearing assurance than his fellows, stepped a pace forward.

"You are under arrest!" he announced in passable Galactic.

"What for?" demanded Bryson.

"We will think of something. If you hope to protect the village, it is useless. We reject all claims of the dirty Naturalist to this land!"

"Who the hell is he?" inquired Carole.

Bryson set to work to find out. A few minutes of bickering led to the admission that a superior officer was within range.

"I'll go talk to *him*," he said to the girl. "You get in the 'copter and go up if I don't get loose. Either call the rocket or trail along overhead!"

The soldiers hesitated, but the leader and two others attached themselves to him grumpily as he strode off toward the column. A glance over his shoulder showed Bryson that the remaining trio had stared after him long enough to permit Carole to climb into the cabin. He doubted they would pry her out.

Reaching the halted column, he discovered only a fraction of the natives to be soldiers. The majority, evidently prisoners, looked more like the work-bowed farmers he had recently interviewed. Some of these had dropped to the ground and were being prodded to their feet by spear butts.

The squad leader sent one of

his minions scampering off to the rear.

"Where are you from?" Bryson asked him.

"We are soldiers of the Military State. Are you a spy?"

"Of course not! I am an officer of the Galactic Federation," replied the Terran, emphasizing his vague rank for what it might be worth.

He was interrupted by a nearby commotion. One of the prisoners, wounded and blood-spattered, staggered toward the lake with a cry in his own language.

Three soldiers pursued him, swinging spear butts at his head. When he fell, they began poking at him with the points.

"Hey! They'll kill him," exclaimed Bryson involuntarily.

The spears were turned toward him, and the squad leader ordered him sharply to stand still. One of the soldiers finished the prisoner with a vicious thrust.

"Who are you?" hissed a new voice behind Bryson as the commotion subsided.

Pivoting, he found himself facing the superior for whom the squad leader had sent. This personage, evidently an officer of considerable rank, wore bright gilt on his nose horn, a helmet of golden scales, and golden greaves on the

two lower sections of his legs. He carried a short whip in lieu of a spear, but a wickedly curved blade hung from his harness. The squad leader reported briskly.

"Oh, the Galactics mentioned in my briefing," remarked the commander.

Bryson, surprised, began to explain his mission, but the other snorted.

"You may report that you discovered us in the act of implementing the Federation directive," he said. "We have just reduced a village of the scum!"

"You . . . uh . . . know about the directive?"

"Certainly. Such information is command. Which reminds me — I apologize for the manner in which these louts of mine received a Galactic officer. They must be taught a little respect for rank!"

He snapped his whip a few times, bringing other soldiers on the double to surround those who had threatened Bryson. The squad leader looked anxious.

"What do you intend?" asked the Terran.

"In all propriety," complained the commander, "they should be hanged by the snout, but the creepy Naturalists have left no trees. I must have them impaled!"

Serve them right, thought Bry-

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son, *but rumor will say a Galactic caused it.*

"One moment, Colonel!" he said, "I'd rather not . . . that is, they thought they were doing their duty. This might put me in the embarrassing position of seeming to criticize a most efficiently commanded—"

He added a bit more, until he felt vaguely sick, and the Colonel relented. He permitted the relieved soldiers to slink away and ordered an extra litter for Bryson. The Terran waved for Carole to take to the air, and climbed into a sort of open sedan chair born by eight prisoners. The Colonel checked him with his left eye, climbed into his own chair, and ordered the march to resume. Bryson made bold to inquire the cause of the raid.

"The Military State is in need of workers," said the Ytijian, clicking the claws of one hand nonchalantly. "Personally, I dislike this operation."

"You mean you were sent here to enslave an entire Naturalist village?"

"If you wish to say that. It is a waste of time. These scum are so underfed that we get but few years' labor out of them. I prefer operations from our other borders.

Of course, there *are* great quantities of eggs to take here."

"You destroy their eggs, too?"

"*Certainly not!* Are you calling us Practicalist barbarians?"

"No, no!" Bryson replied hastily. "But what *is* your policy?"

"Very simply, it is necessary to recruit these dolts for labor; but when we confiscate an egg, whatever hatches is given equal opportunity as a soldier or free citizen-worker. No one speaks of his humble origin."

"But if you save eggs, how are you implementing the Federation directive?"

The Colonel gestured at the column, then back toward the village.

"We have reduced the overblown population of the Naturalists in two ways. First, we have removed one village and all the useless individuals therein. Second, we are taking the useful workers to our own country."

"Thereby increasing *your* population."

"Only temporarily. They will not last us long."

"I fear that you may have misinterpreted the directive," suggested Bryson.

"One must occasionally cross spears with plain facts," said the Colonel condescendingly. "There

are people in the world — and doubtless elsewhere — who are too backward to take action. One must, therefore, take action for them.”

Bryson had no satisfactory retort for that, though he spent the next several hours thinking about one. He was able to leave his swaying conveyance to stretch his legs only when the Colonel was called upon to make a decision somewhere. As nightfall threatened, they passed between low hills and reached a frontier fort.

Bryson signaled Carole to land, and sought an understanding with the Colonel about his mission. The commander was doubtful. A report on the exact numbers of his people sounded to him suspiciously akin to classified information. He felt that he must communicate with superiors before releasing the Terran.

Meanwhile, he would be happy to provide them with quarters for the night.

They were escorted to a low adobe hut resembling a number of others looming in the dusk. It was thatched with straw and swept bare with military thoroughness. Having their own rations, the Terrans declined food.

“Less chance of being served

stewed Naturalist,” growled Bryson.

A trio of soldiers carried in their sleeping bags and built a fire in a shallow pit beneath the smoke hole in the roof. The investigators opened the containers of a modest supper, which they riotously washed down with distilled water.

They were still sitting cross-legged on their sleeping bags, gloomily considering military censorship, when a snout was thrust through the doorway.

“What is it?” demanded Bryson.

The Ytjian scuttled into the hut: the squad leader of that afternoon.

“I am a detail of one,” he announced

“For what?”

“To thank you for saving our lives by the lake.” He employed some complimentary title in his own language, perhaps “Your Excellency” or the equivalent. “The others wish me to report our appreciation.”

He held out a small object that dangled on a loop of thin leather. Bryson, squinting in the firelight, made out a nose horn, painted blue.

“We thought to collect a pair from each whose life was spared,” said the native earnestly, “but we decided that a great officer would perhaps desire to appear modest

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by wearing a single. The commander, with hundreds, does that.”

“Thank you,” said Bryson numbly, accepting the loop on an outstretched finger.

The soldier repeated his gratitude and departed furtively.

“What is it?” asked Carole.

“Souvenir,” said Bryson, creeping around the fire to offer it to her.

“Eeeyaah!” she exclaimed, soaring above her usual contralto range. “Keep that thing to yourself! There’s still blood on the base!”

Bryson examined the horn. A hole had been drilled through the root, the rawness of which suggested recent extraction from an Ytiji-an snout. He thought he could guess the source, and was shocked at how bad the realization made him feel.

“It’s at times like this that I wonder what I’m doing here!” he muttered. “This is all that’s left of a poor, half-starved lizard who was getting along the best he knew how, maybe hoping for a better world without understanding how to make one. Who am I to decide if his eggs should be hatched or if he should just vanish into dust . . . like this?”

He dropped the nose horn into

the fire, where it caused a brief flare.

“Don’t feel like that!” said Carole.

“Not that it’s pathetic . . . but it’s so damned futile!”

“Sit down and relax!” said the girl, coming around the fire to lay a hand on his shoulder. “You’re tired. You’ve been pushing it too hard.”

Bryson sat back, staring into the flames. Carole frowned over him.

“Listen, Neil . . . you *can’t* let yourself think about it that way. Not over any one individual. Get the data and let others worry about the right of it!”

Bryson rubbed the palms of both hands wearily over his eyes.

“Okay,” he said. “I can’t do anything else, I guess.”

“Are you sure you’re all right? You almost had me worried.”

She dropped to her knees beside him.

“I just did it to get a kind word out of you,” said Bryson, grinning weakly.

“Oh, look, now . . . I’m sorry. I didn’t realize — that is, I wanted to keep things scientific and impersonal. At least until we get back to the ship —”

They both looked toward the door at the sound of voices outside. A moment later the Colonel

stepped in to pass the time of night and to mention the guards he had deployed for their "protection". He thought he might have orders from headquarters in a day or so.

"Perhaps," said Bryson, pulling himself together, "you might give us your general point of view without touching on state secrets."

"What do you wish to know?" inquired the Colonel amiably enough.

"Briefly, what is your official policy on the problem of overpopulation?"

"We do not regard it as *our* problem."

"Oh? You must be the one country with no population worries."

"We worry," the Colonel corrected him, "but it is a problem for others, not for us. We provide for our own."

"How? By intensifying agriculture or other production . . .?"

"Not at all! That, again, is the concern of those who *must* supply us or rue the day they refuse. We cannot possibly achieve true overpopulation. The greater our armies, the greater the resources that are ours for the taking!"

"But it must end somewhere!"

"Not as long as there are inferior races to grow food and breed slaves!"

An inverted Naturalist, thought

Bryson. *How to reason with him?*

"So you set no limits on yourselves?" he pursued the subject.

"Would it not be a strategic error for us to do so? We require more and more workers to produce the necessities of life. We have our losses in action, and gain brief productive lives from slaves — why, we need every spearhand we can get!"

"Well, you know the purpose of our mission. I suppose you have heard the various local theories on . . . ah . . . controlling hatchings. Do you approve of employing injections, or sterilization, or gericide?"

"For other nations, if they so desire. For a citizen of the Military State, such would constitute treason. Famine and disease occur mostly among our enemies, and what they call gericide is unknown here because of the patriotic custom of permitting the elderly to volunteer for dangerous battle stations."

"You have an answer to every opinion I have encountered on this planet," sighed Bryson. "Well, perhaps we will someday move the backward ones to other planets."

"Not so fast!" hissed the Colonel. "We could never permit that!"

"Why not?"

"Certain of the inferior peoples

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must remain, or we could never requisition enough workers to support the war effort. That should be obvious."

"Don't know why I didn't think of it," mumbled Bryson sourly.

The Colonel beamed at him with all three eyes, rubbed his gilded horn reflectively, and announced that he really must leave.

"Duty, you know. Having gained rank, one must make up for lost egging time!"

He departed, leaving them silently speculating on either side of the fire.

Bryson took off his boots and wormed his way into his sleeping bag.

"I suppose he considers that it improves the breed," was his last comment.

He dreamed that he fell endlessly through the black of space. Sleek missiles with three eyes and gilded nose cones hurtled at him from all directions. He squirmed frantically aside, knowing that a single hit would dissolve him. The missiles rolled their eyes at him and hissed viciously as they flitted past.

Then, one grazed his shoulder, inflicting intolerable agony and setting his spacesuited body to rocking back and forth in the void . . . back and forth . . . back —

Still encased in his sleeping bag, he sat bolt upright. The native let go of his shoulder and started back in terror, hissing fervently for quiet.

Bryson sat there, breathing heavily and listening to his heart pound. They wanted quiet, so he kept quiet while he struggled to gather his wits.

"Who are you?" he whispered, regaining some memory as Carole sat up.

"The one who will get you away before they kill you as spies!"

"Wait, now! I can't leave. They've promised me information I need." need."

"I can tell you all that," said the Ytijian mentioning a number in his speech that made no sense to Bryson. "That is their so-called secret census. Get me out of here to my own country, and you can have all my data on these warlords!"

"A real spy!" guessed Carole. "Explain that Galactic envoys have immunity!"

"I suddenly have my own doubts. What about those guards outside?"

"They have been dealt with," hissed the native. "There is no turning back!"

Bryson crawled out of his sleeping bag and tip-toed to the door. In the starlight, he saw the hulk-

ing shape of the helicopter, thirty feet away. A dark lump lay stretched on the ground near it, and another at his feet.

"We'd better go," he whispered to Carole.

The native slipped outside while they hastily gathered themselves and their gear. When he hissed that the way was still safe, they walked quietly to the machine.

Until then, Bryson had never noticed that one door squeaked. He tried hard to stow the baggage silently while the others breathed on the back of his shirt.

Then a problem confronted him. Should he have the Ytijian sit on Carole's lap or vice versa? Or should he take him on his own knee? In the end, by cramming the native between them and squeezing hard, Bryson got the door shut.

"Am I really awake and doing this?" he wondered.

"You'd better act like it," warned Carole. "Don't dream our way to a crash!"

Bryson gingerly started the rotors, flinching at the racket. A light flashed at a tower of the fort. Someone ran out the gate with a torch.

"Up we go!" he said between his teeth. "Ready or not —"

He blessed the designers as the helicopter rose into the night. For an instant, he had the distinct impression of a spear whistling past in mid-air. Then he gained altitude and moved forward beyond the torch-light.

"Is a light possible in here?" asked Ytijian uneasily. "I have . . . a map to show you, but I . . . I . . . am not used to . . ."

"Get sick in here," Carole threatened grimly, "and out you go, dammit! Clamp those big teeth together and hold it down!"

With this pleasantry ricocheting about the cabin, they left the Military State.

By daylight, they were over unfamiliar territory, near a range of mountains. Bryson tried to learn more about their guest, but the fellow was cagey.

"What does my name matter? It is probably safer that you do not know."

"Suppose I just call you 'Happy'?" asked Bryson, in view of the pessimistic tone. "Now, if you want me to take you home, give us the information you promised!"

"Or try flying back," said Carole, causing "Happy" to squirm anxiously.

"Population figures!" he grumbled. "That *would* make you look like spies. Well, I have them and

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they must be accurate. One of our agents was disemboweled the other day for passing them on."

There was a moment of quiet before Bryson cleared his throat and had Carole take the controls while he pulled out his notebook. With absent-minded silence, he wound power into the stylus.

"What's the number?" he asked.

The Ytijian gave him a number. After some arithmetical labor, Bryson arrived at a translation of three-quarters of a billion.

"That includes even the slaves," Happy told them. "You say you want it that way, although I was interested in estimating males of military age only."

Bryson grunted and hauled out his map. He asked whether it correctly represented national boundaries. Happy thought so. He pointed out his own land.

"Land of the Fatalists," Bryson repeated after him. "And *your* population?"

"That is a military secret."

"Don't give me that!"

"You are right, of course," admitted Happy. "You will find out anyhow, and it really does not matter . . . considering the miserable general situation."

He named a figure, sending Bryson back to his accounting.

"You could save time. We are

about one fifth as many as the Militarists."

"One hundred and fifty million?" asked Bryson.

"If that is how you say it."

"*Your* people, at least, must have been taking control measures."

"No, nothing special," sighed Happy. "It just works out that way."

Bryson wondered what tale would be palmed off on him now.

"So you rely upon ordinary living, like the Naturalists?" he inquired.

"Not at all," Happy denied. "We might be willing to, but it would never work. During wars or plagues, people become selfish."

"Oh," said Bryson after a moment's thought. "In wanting to live, you mean."

"Exactly. That is why this pipe-dream of the Scientocrats about injections and pills must fail. It might do for those who don't mind race suicide."

"You disapprove of suicide?"

"It does have its supporters," said Happy. "There are even clubs. Most members talk like people with nothing in their skulls but the roots of their own horns."

I should find a use for that crack aboard ship, thought Bryson.

"It is considered mildly subversive," continued the native. "Like

the sterilization clubs and the egg-cracking plots, it tends to put us more at the mercy of the Militarists and others. Of course, both problems are self-solving."

"How is that?"

"The clubs kill themselves off, you see."

Carole looked around and said, "That *would* seem logical, Neil."

"Half of them leave eggs behind, expecting that they will be hatched somehow. Sometimes I think lots of suicide club members sign up just to cover the fact that they have egged before completing their work quotas, and back out later."

"Aha!" exclaimed Bryson. "Then you have a forced labor system, too!"

"Only for national necessities," retorted Happy. "We must have sufficient shelters built by the time of the bombing. That is what *we* rely upon."

"Bombing?"

The Ytjian stared at him curiously, as if at an idiot.

"Do not try to deceive me," he said. "You Galactics issued your directive. Even a dung-digging Naturalist moron can see that it has been completely flouted. What can result but that you should punish the entire planet with your hellish bombs. When it happens,

we Fatalists will simply go underground, and wait."

Bryson looked down at the mountains over which they were flying. He felt as if he might be developing a headache.

"Can you envision no other outcome?" he asked. "If some of the people here were convinced of the need . . . well, for instance . . . for continence?"

"That is a fine joke," Happy told him "On solid ground, I would laugh."

"Egg-control, then! I don't mean destruction, or anything like that."

"Who cares?" demanded Happy. "What hatches, hatches; and if you drop it, someone will clean it up. The mistake you Galactics make is trying to fight Nature."

"That's what a couple of Naturalists told us," admitted Bryson reflectively.

"Oh, *them!* Bombing will be a good thing if it clears *them* out! Natural causes never will. They just keep multiplying and believing in emigration."

"Don't *you* believe the other planets can be used?"

"It does not matter. We shall inherit Ytjio after the bombing anyway."

For some time, Bryson and Carole took turns trying to convince him there would be no bombing

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of the planet. It was like cutting sand with a razor. They blunted the edge of their intellect and left no mark on his.

Finally, Happy claimed to recognize a village below. Since he declared himself confident of finding his way from there to his own border, they agreed to land. Bryson found a level spot just beyond a cluster of stone buildings thatched with straw. They climbed out gratefully.

"Who are these people?" Bryson asked Happy.

"A small sect calling themselves Temperate Ascetics. Completely insane, but the place is a refuge for those fleeing the Militarists or the stupidities of their own lands. There are also bases for smuggling in the hills."

A number of natives had emerged from the village. They were dressed more elaborately than any the Terrans had yet met, with togas of white or gray material draped over pleated kilts. They seemed not to paint their nose horns, but on the fringes of the procession hung several half-clad flunkies who did.

The leader, elderly and emaciated took his good time bringing the parade forward. He was a few inches taller than the average Ytjijan, with a purplish tint to his gray

scales. His three eyes focused on the Terrans with a hard glare.

Happy launched into a rapid parley in Ytjijan. After a siege of suspicious questioning, he obtained some answer satisfactory to him.

"I said I was a refugee and got permission to travel through," he told Bryson. "I said nothing of you; tell whatever lie you like but believe none of theirs!"

Before the Terran could even reply, he dodged around the edge of the crowd and up the narrow street leading into town. Bryson swore under his breath.

"I speak many languages," the old Ytjijan told him. "Galactic, when necessary."

"Since you know us for what we are, I will come right to the point," said Bryson. "Do you remember the directive issued some years ago about population?"

The ascetic drew himself up haughtily.

"Do we remember it? Are you unaware that in the land of Temperate Asceticism is to be found the sole genuine effort to meet the crisis?"

Bryson gestured quickly to Carole to put her recorder into operation. He thought she muttered something like, "Another one of these nuts?"

"Do you by any chance have

census figures we may inspect?" he inquired.

"I have the honor to be Grand Warden," said the ascetic. "I shall tell you whatever you need to know."

Bryson murmured to Carole, "I wonder what he meant by that?" He flushed with annoyance when he realized he had forgotten the recorder.

"To begin with, then," he said, "how many of you are there?"

He was ready with his notebook, and translated the answer rather quickly. He doubted his arithmetic and asked again. He still got a bit over a million.

He expressed admiration, after checking that the place looked larger on his map, and asked if they might not sit down somewhere to learn how it was done.

"Where thought is, who remembers body?" demanded the Grand Warden. "Perhaps your bodies are less inured to discipline than ours. Let us sit, then!"

So saying, he sat down with his toga in the dust of the unpaved street.

"Nice going!" whispered Carole furiously as they perforce followed suit.

The other Ytijians also sat, right where they had been standing. Bryson wondered what happened

around there when the Grand Warden sneezed.

"To resume!" said the latter. "The day is doomed to come when Temperate Asceticism must be accepted as the only solution to the troubles of Ytijio. Only here, in all the world, is there no population crisis!"

"How do you manage that?"

"There is but one way: mating only on the elevated plain of the mind!"

Bryson considered.

"You mean . . . *only*?"

"Only."

"But how do you . . . uh . . . maintain yourselves?"

"All the world beats a path to our temples. Simply though we live, our sole problem is to select the most promising candidates for wardenship."

"Now, explain something for me," Bryson requested suspiciously. "In other lands, they speak of other theories. Sterilization, medical anti-egg treatments, disposal of eggs, disposal — pardon me! — of the aged, emigration to other planets, even open warfare. Some moreover, put faith in agricultural improvement."

"They are wrong," said the Grand Warden.

Bryson waited for the logical

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explanation. The crowd stared at him silently.

When it became unbearable, he cleared his throat and asked, "Why?"

"Artificialities are unnatural," declaimed the Grand Warden. "Emigration is an academic discussion, but more good would be accomplished by placing the world under our direction and diffusing the ideals of Temperate Asceticism."

He paused, then continued methodically to dispose of Bryson's points.

"Warfare is beneath us, we value age, and the handling of eggs is a subject fit only for peasants, and I will thank you not to mention it again!"

"You asked him!" commented Carole.

The Grand Warden examined Bryson's expression with interest for a few moments. He then rose to his feet, with an audible crackling of his many joints.

"The way to truth having been indicated, you are free to remain or go. Tell your fellows in the skies of us, should any desire to follow the way."

Bryson thought later that he had thanked the Grand Warden for the offer as he got to his own feet. He watched the toga-clad figures

stroll back into town with their retainers. After a few minutes, he noticed one of the latter, wearing only sandals and a dingy kilt, loitering at his elbow. This one had a shrewd and well-fed look, and wore his nose horn in an unusual shade of purple.

"Sounded good, did it not?" he asked in excellent Galactic.

"Shouldn't it? Tell me, are you all such good linguists here?"

"Nonsense!" said the Ytijian. "I am a Practicalist, exiled for political reasons. This is a good refuge, but becoming too well known."

"What do you mean?"

"It is true that they have only about a million wardens, as he said; but there are fifty refugee peasants for each. They welcome us as field laborers — work is also beneath them."

"Are they that secluded?" asked Bryson.

"The old droop would not recognize a war if he had his head sliced off in a raid! They forbid war; therefore it cannot exist. They do not believe in famine — we grow them enough grain to feed them and buy off raiders too."

"Thank you," said Bryson, sensing an ear-bending session in the offing.

He returned with Carole to the helicopter, there to decide that

they had discovered no shining answer. It seemed a good idea to fly out over the valley until they found a secluded mountainside where they caught up on their lost sleep.

The next day, they flew over the neat little country. The villages were always small, but they saw enough farming and stock herding to believe the tipster with the purple horn. Bryson consulted his map once more.

"What do you think of trying the Practicalist nation tomorrow?"

"Would that finish the trip?" asked Carole hopefully.

"As well as we can, in the time Vookhaf allowed."

Carole agreed, and they made a good part of the distance to the border that day. The next morning, they reached what the map identified as the Practicalist capital city. Bryson used the helicopter TV to call Gror and inform the Sirian of the imminent completion of the mission.

Approaching from the air, they thought the city matched that of the Scientocrats in size; but at closer range, it seemed less well-kept.

"They've let some of it go to slums," Carole pointed out. "Look! A fire!"

Bryson swung the machine in that direction.

"Fire is only part of it," he said, peering. "There's some kind of brawl."

They watched a small riot surging about a group of burning buildings. The remainder of the city looked orderly enough. Bryson decided to land in an open square before a typically official complex of buildings.

He congratulated himself upon his architectural judgment when, a little later, a clump of officials emerged from the largest edifice to inspect the visitors.

"You are the Galactics, of course," said the leader, a portly native wearing a red toga and an ornate, gilded cap that sat upon his bony head like an inverted spittoon. "We received news of the broadcast from your spaceship."

"I am happy to hear that," said Bryson sincerely.

He began to hope that this was one of the more civilized nations. He saw that the crowd that, as always, was beginning to form wore a variety of clothing. Most had chosen either a kilt or loose tunic. A few wore military aprons and harness, some topped with colorful short capes. Quite a number affected a toga like the official

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costume, though usually in white.

Bryson acknowledged the ensuing introductions, settled for thinking of the portly individual as the "mayor", and ascertained that his mission was understood.

"By the way," he said, "I thought I saw a fire on the other side of town."

Several of what must be "aldermen" fidgeted, but the mayor gestured airily.

"It was, to be frank, a small police matter," he said. "Some misguided persons occasionally feel moved to express themselves."

"On what subject?" Bryson inquired.

"Oh . . . well, there is much international friction, you know. Many have immigrated from other countries, dissatisfied with their programs to meet the —"

He broke off, and the Terran sensed an air of embarrassment.

"To meet the requirements of the Galactic directive?" he probed.

The mayor hesitated, listening to hisses of advice from his councilors.

"That is sometimes an underlying cause," he said finally. "You know how it is."

"Actually," said Bryson, "I would appreciate learning merely how many it is. Have you census figures which I may consult?"

One of the officials was moved to interrupt.

"You must understand, sir, that it is more than a disagreement over bookkeeping. We are encountering serious difficulties in settling the matter of method."

Some of the now quite numerous crowd set up a cheer. The mayor flashed his eyes about angrily and made motions as if to quiet the noise. Bryson realized that certain Ytijians in vermilion tunics were evidently police struggling on the fringes of the gathering to maintain order.

"Tell the Galactics the truth!" someone shouted, raising a chorus of yells.

"Am I to understand," demanded Bryson, "that here, too, you have disputes between proponents of various control systems?"

He anxiously noted the Ytijians surging about his helicopter.

"There is no trouble," the mayor assured him. "There has been an official decision, and we are sure it is the right one. Tell me, as a Galactic, would you not agree that disposal of excess eggs is the *only* sensible population control?"

The Terran sensed the hush caused by the question, and longed to punch the mayor squarely under his vermilion nose horn. Taking sides would surely ruin him.

"Call Gror from the 'copter!" he told Carole. "He may have to come for us."

Shouts were now being freely exchanged among the mob. Some of the educated called names in Galactic, no doubt for Bryson's benefit. "Stinking infanticides" and "filthy egg-crackers" seemed about evenly matched by "idiot hoarders" and "mindless hatch-alls."

A few fists were thrown, and then other things.

"Please!" begged the mayor. "It would be more dignified to retire inside."

The words were hardly out before a stone caught him approximately where Bryson had thought of hitting him, and he collapsed into the arms of his nearest councilor. The square had filled rapidly, and a riot was flaring like tinder.

Bryson swore as a wave of natives swarmed over his helicopter after each other. The craft began to tip, and he charged toward it through a press of Ytijians more concerned with private enemies than with him.

Getting there took too long. The machine was thrown over and two rotors broken before he succeeded in fighting his way to it. Carole was doing her best, with her shirt ripped up the back, to crawl out

of the uppermost door amid a flailing of claws and short clubs.

Bryson seized two necks and clashed the attached skulls like cymbals, unmindful of the fact that one lizard wore a vermilion police tunic. He hauled the girl down from the wreck and started for the steps of the main building.

Bursting out of the melee at a point well up the steps, he saw that none of the officials had waited for him. He grabbed a straggling policeman for a guide and dragged Carole behind him with the other hand until they made their way through the entrance and into a public hall.

There were a great many officials waiting about the place. Bryson realized that Carole still retained little more of her tattered shirt than a collar.

"Good thing those shorts had a snug fit," he told her, while rubbing his knuckles. "Never mind — I'll try to look the other way. Did you reach Gror?"

"I don't mind you so much," she said in a choked voice. "It's *them!*"

"So stand with your arms folded, then! You don't mean anything to an Ytijian."

"That's what I tell myself, but it doesn't *feel* that way. Those three eyes! Yes, I raised Gror and told him he'd better come fast."

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Bryson borrowed a toga with sign language, wound it around her, and tried to locate the mayor. He learned that the portly leader had suffered a chipped horn.

"You'd better clear the square," Bryson warned him. "Our rocket will be landing to pick us up, and those rioters will get themselves fried."

"How can I face the public now? My horn! Half an inch off the point! Can't even be ground to look decent. I'll have to hide until I can have it capped."

The Terran wandered off in search of someone with part of his wits left. Finally, while the hubbub of riot still drifted inside, he bumped into a native who appeared to be a minor clerk. Bryson drew him hopefully aside.

"You would think this an unusual day, would you not?" asked the native.

"I don't care about your personal problems here," Bryson assured him. "Do you at least have a hall of records with census figures?"

"Why bother with that?" asked the clerk, producing a roll of papers from a fold of his toga. "The current population is printed every day in the newspaper. That is what causes half the rioting."

Bryson hitched up his jaw. He tore out a section of the proffered

paper for translation later.

"We are a Practicalist nation," explained the clerk. "We accept whatever works. Then, the next day, we change our minds and try something else."

Bryson thanked him vaguely. He went and sat with Carole against a wall for nearly an hour, until they heard the roar of a descending rocket.

The square seemed to clear rather rapidly at that point.

Much later, in the peaceful orbit beyond the second moon, Bryson attempted to describe his experiences to his colleagues in the Galactic Service.

Vookhaf had about twenty officers and scientists in to hear the preliminary report. Carole stood by, but Bryson delivered it mostly from memory.

"So there it is," he concluded. "The whole planet is a mess, with wars, famines, and internal disorders. I'm afraid that something must be done."

Vookhaf, standing next to him at the end of the table, peered about under his sagging lids, and complimented the Terrans on their work.

"We may even find an excuse to avoid charging the loss of the helicopter against you," he promised. "Now, to review: you said the Sci-

entocrats numbered about a hundred and fifty million, and the Fatalists approximately the same?"

"Yes, sir. The great problem is two *billion* Naturalists."

"Quite. Then three-quarters of a billion Militarists, fifty million Temperate Ascetics, a hundred and fifty million Practicalists . . . hmm . . . three billion plus?"

"Estimated, of course," Bryson qualified. "But the main point is the misery, the instability. You should see the starvation down there! The killing!"

"I prefer not to, at my age," said Vookhaf genially. "However — when the directive was issued, the population was over four billion. Evidently, it has dropped twenty-five percent. What more could we demand? I think we

must get on with our other assignments."

Bryson leaned against the edge of the table, hearing the others file out of the cabin. Carole waited, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"A first mission is difficult," sympathized their chief. "You have been down there hearing it and smelling it. You must remember, however, that you reported on a race, not upon individuals who would die someday anyway."

Bryson stared at him numbly.

"Can we presume to decide details for them?" asked Vookhaf. "If the requirements for survival are being met — no matter how clumsily or painfully — who am I to forbid them the methods they have adopted by their own free choice?"



Like many professional writers, William P. Miller has a background which includes almost everything from teaching a new-born calf to drink from a bucket to jerking sodas and tending bar.

Born on an Iowa farm shortly after World War I, he spent his childhood whetting a taste for adventure with omnivorous reading — including great gobs of science fiction. It was inevitable that he would eventually turn his talent to this field.

College took him to the 40-degrees-below reaches of northern Minnesota, and since then his shadow has fallen on the terrains of such diverse locales as India, Burma, Tasmania, Egypt, Gibraltar, the Azores, and most of the fifty States.

World War II brought him to India with the U. S. Army Transportation Corps, where he rubbed shoulders with the Flying Tigers, Merrill's Marauders, the men who flew the fabled Hump from Assam to China, and the Quartermaster truckers who pushed 6X6's up the Ledo Road. He drove General Stillwell's personal jeep at one time, and knew Lord Louis Mountbatten personally.

He is married, father of five children, is an insurance executive, and has written nearly a dozen novels, innumerable short stories and a play or two. He is a member of the Mystery Writers of America, and is well known and respected among the writing genre.

THE TOWERS OF KAGASI

William P. Miller

The planet Kagasi slogged through space wrapped in a sickly yellow vapor, like some monstrous beetle slowly dying in the vaporous stench of its own decay. The Research and Rescue ship, Vega R. R.3, slipped stealthily into polar orbit around it, a neat one hundred and fifty miles above the fuming yellow atmosphere.

Gil Roberts, first pilot, sighed with relief as he moved out of his cramped position at the controls, and shook off the tension built up during the delicate maneuvering of the craft into orbit, and the several days of deceleration from interstellar drive which preceded it. Now that they were in an orbit satisfactory to Commander Hollo-

way it was time for a break. He glanced at Rolfe Berndt, First Assistant.

Rolfe was staring through the visu-port at the ugly whirling world beneath them. His coarse features were expressionless as usual, and if he shared the sickening sense of foreboding which consumed Gil he gave no evidence of it. Gil could almost read his mind. Rolfe was wondering what form of life — if any — inhabited Kagasi, whether it resembled human life, and if there was a clear-cut distinction between male and female. The distinction was probably the only thing he was really concerned about.

Gil walked out of the control cabin and moved toward Commander Holloway's laboratory, his heels making sharp metallic clicks on the magnetized floor which substituted for gravity. Once he paused and stuck his head into the communication section, and peered anxiously at Jon Yates.

"What about it, Jon? Pick up anything from home yet?"

Jon's face, as he turned, mirrored the nagging worry on Gil's homely freckled west-Texas face.

"Nothing, Gil," he answered dispiritedly. "Absolutely nothing. Its just as if the Earth had disappeared — or died."

The last two words came out slowly, reluctantly, as if he had lost control of a thought he had really meant to keep to himself.

"Not even the inter-stellar mathematical formulæ?"

Yates shook his head.

Earth had been beaming the formulæ into space for centuries in the hope of contacting some other intelligence somewhere in the universe. As a matter of fact that was part of the reason for the frantic hurtle halfway across the galaxy, and now the orbit around the ominous world beneath them. Return signals had been picked up for a few months — long enough to obtain a directional fix and determine that they originated on Kagasi. Then they ceased as abruptly as they had begun, as if the other intelligence had had a second thought about the contact. That had been several years ago.

Then about eight months ago, while the Vega was carrying out a special mission on Pluto, the frantically urgent radio message from Earth had come, and the hazardous inter-stellar dash to investigate Kagasi had resulted.

Earth's finest scientists had not been able to analyze the ray which had speared through space and struck the four cities. They only

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knew that it had been beamed from the vicinity of Kagasi, and that it was deadly. The four cities — Houston, Texas, U.S.A.; Hangchow, China; Cairo, Egypt; and Beni Abbes, Algeria — were now silent tombs where thousands of lifeless bodies sprawled in sudden ghastly death, and the residents of neighboring cities, alive but terrified, dared not enter the areas to bury the dead.

Over eight months ago that had been. Four cities in one swift revolution of the Earth. Accident, chance, or deliberate attack? And how many more could have been stricken in that time? Gil shuddered. The complete and utter radio silence from Earth which began with shocking suddenness scant days after they roared away from Pluto filled him with conviction that it had been deliberate attack. Deliberate and terribly successful.

He clicked on down the corridor to the lab. Rolfe Berndt came out of the control room behind him. Gil heard him but he did not turn or wait. He had no desire to talk to the squat, surly First Assistant just now.

Holloway had a dozen tests going at once, his ancient stooped form racing with amazing energy from one to the other. Evangeline

Chappell followed him obediently. Her soft feminine curves, generous and thirtyish, bulged the space suit. Gil was always slightly amused by the contrast between the coldly scientific environment into which she fitted so unobtrusively, and the other existence he saw so little of, where the curves and the warm friendly lips, the curling brown tendrils of hair and the feminine sway of her gait could be the catalysts of love and passion.

Berndt wasn't amused by it, though. The scientific aura meant nothing to him. He did his job on the Vega, but to him Evangeline was a woman, and his plans for her showed in his little piggish eyes whenever she was in his view.

Gil knew better than to bother Holloway when he was busy, so he waited silently until there was an opportunity to touch Evangeline's arm. She stopped and looked expectantly at him.

"Anything interesting?" he whispered.

She made a little shrug. "Not terribly. The spectroscope tests show that Kagasi is made up mostly of silicon, with small amounts of most of the heavy metals. The only one missing entirely is iridium. Not a trace of it."

"How about the atmosphere? It

looks like the whole planet could be a huge pile of dead leaves on fire."

She smiled at the comparison.

"The heavy atmosphere is chlorine. But there is an outer layer of oxygen and nitrogen — a sort of stratosphere above the chlorine."

"Not much chance of finding life then, I guess," Gil said. "Chlorine is deadly."

"To us. There may be a life form here adapted to it."

"Do the visu-scopes show any sign of life?"

Commander Holloway heard the last question. He loped over.

"There's very little penetration through that murk, Gil," he said hurriedly. "We'll have to put an expedition down for a closer look. We've done about all we can here, without some specific samples from the planet." He changed the subject abruptly. "Did you check with Jon? Any radio contact yet?"

"Nothing." Gil's voice was flat and hopeless.

Holloway's pale old eyes pierced him for an instant, and the sharp features looked almost kindly for a couple of seconds. "Easy," he said. "There may be a reason — other than the one you, all of us, suspect." Then he was all business again.

"Gil, I want some specimens —

minerals, atmosphere, fluids — the usual thing. And I want a closer look, through your eyes. I want to know if there is any life down there, and I want Jon to check for any broadcast activity. Take Evangeline, Jon, Alvey and Wil-mott with you. I'll finish my tests here and Rolfe can keep an eye on the ship. You get the Recon Rocket ready while I give Evangeline some instructions."

Gil nodded, and grinned as he turned away. Holloway had sensed his growing despair. Now he was going to keep him too busy to think about it. It almost worked.

Berndt helped him prepare the recon rocket for the expedition, grumbling angrily because Evangeline was not going to be left aboard, and that he was going to be.

"How long does Holloway think a man ought to go without a woman," he griped. "If there isn't anything female down there I'm going to get at that Chappell — whether the old man likes it or not!"

"He won't," Gil said briefly. "Neither will I."

Rolfe snorted. "You want first dibs, huh?"

"No. This expedition is too important to be fouled up by some emotional passionate entangle-

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ment. You knew what it would be like when you signed into the R and R section. Now live with it. I do."

Their eyes locked, Gil's cold blue and furious, Rolfe's brown flecked and squinting angrily. Gil's long frame towered over the other man, but Rolfe's body was squat and strong. His fist balled suddenly, then opened.

"I'd like to bust the hell out of you, Gil!" he snarled. "When the time comes that we don't need each other to stay alive I'll do it, too!"

The eye duel continued for a moment, then Rolfe looked away. The rocket was almost ready. Gil went to his personal locker and took out the one piece of equipment which was not authorized issue, but to which he clung in a sort of nostalgic desperation. It was a big-bladed old Texas bowie knife in a leather scabbard. He buckled it around his space suit.

Rolfe eyed it and snickered. Gil stared him down again and he flushed. The others came along just then — Evangeline Chappell, Jon the radio operator, and Holloway's two male assistants, Alvey and Wilmott. Rolfe muttered something under his breath and moved away. He turned once and watched the graceful feminine

movements which took Evangeline into the recon rocket, then disappeared toward his own quarters.

The recon rocket dropped out of the belly of the Vega like some monstrous egg, and Gil plunged it into the greenish yellow atmosphere of Kagasi, leveling out only once in the stratosphere so that a sample could be taken of the fringe atmosphere of oxygen and nitrogen.

Once into the chlorine and within a few thousand feet of the surface of the planet visibility became reasonably good, and they cruised for a time, observing.

Kagasi was smaller than Earth. Its diameter was approximately five thousand miles, Evangeline told Gil. The surface seemed to be gently rolling like middle-west prairie lands of the United States. There was vegetation — a scrubby looking brush-like growth of a sickly brown color — and it seemed to be profuse. Narrow strips of it had been cleared away in places and these seemed to extend for miles, suggesting highways. But there was no sign of animal life. Or human life.

Gil dropped the rocket to within a few hundred feet of one of the strips. There was no doubt that it was a road. It had been surfaced with what appeared to be gravel,

and there were installations at intersections which suggested sign posts. There were no bridges or curbs or gutters. Evidently Kagasi was innocent of rain, even some exotic form of moisture which might result from the chlorine atmosphere.

Gil streaked the cruiser along just above the surface of one of the roads for a few minutes.

"Look!" Evangeline Chappell said suddenly.

It was a city.

A dead city. There was no sign of life in the streets, and the dull brown vegetation had begun to spring up in them. The buildings seemed to have been constructed of a green colored stone. They were of a simple block-like design without windows, and in varying sizes. The arrangement indicated that the city had once had a commercial center, with a residential area surrounding it, and yet the complete simplicity of the buildings and the helter-skelter arrangements of the streets suggested a society of limited attainment.

Gil put it into words.

"I can't imagine the people — or whatever they were — who built this, being intelligent enough to communicate with Earth — or to project those rays."

He lifted the rocket to a slight-

ly higher altitude and circled the city. There seemed to be a complete absence of life. He turned to Evangeline.

"What do you think, Evangeline? Shall we land and have a look?"

She nodded. Gill set the rocket on its tail in what seemed to be the center square of the city. They sealed their space suits and opened the valves of the air tanks built into the backs of the suits, then climbed down.

The Kagasi gravity was only slightly weaker than that of Earth and it was not difficult to move around. Alvey and Wilmott moved across the square toward the nearest building, stooping once or twice to pick up objects which excited their curiosity. Gil and Evangeline followed them, and Jon Yates came slowly behind them, working patiently at a radio wave sensing device which he carried.

The two men ahead entered a building, but had passed on through it by the time Gil and the girl entered. Gil scowled.

"We should stick closer together. It's too damned still to be true — gives me a creepy feeling!" He glanced over his shoulder. Jon had stopped and was still working intently with the sensor.

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This particular building had been a clothing store, or whatever the equivalent would be in the Kagasian economy. But it had plainly been looted. Shelves had been looted. Shelves had been over-turned and the place was a mess. Gil stooped and picked up one of the garments. Evangeline moved near him to look at it. It was a toga-like article of a brown colored coarsely woven material. Her fingers reached and explored it, working deftly in the tight gloves of the space suit.

"It's much like cotton," her voice came. "I wonder if it may be a product of the vegetation we've seen so much of."

"They probably eat it and wear it," Gil said, "whoever they are — or were. Let's get out of here, Evangeline. My hackles are up like an old Texas hound dog's!"

She nodded and her face was serious.

"I feel it, too, Gil. I don't think this place is completely deserted. We'd better catch up with Alvey and Wilmott and stay closer together."

They moved on after the two men, walking faster now, the light gravity seeming to add inches to their strides. Gil cursed himself for feeling so spooky, but the sense of impending danger was too strong

to ignore. Several years of interplanetary R&R work had sharpened his instincts. He unclipped the cover of the weapon pouch at his waist and took out the heat ray projector. Evangeline Chappell moved closer and walked at his side, her hand on his arm.

Alvey and Wilmott were nearly a hundred yards ahead of them, standing at the gateway of a large open area hedged around by a thick growth of the brown vegetation. Gil began to hurry. Evangeline's grip on his arm tightened and she kept pace with him.

The two men ahead moved through the gateway. They seemed excited. Gil broke into a run and the girl kept pace with him. With the heat ray thrust in front of them they galloped through the opening in the hedge and stopped in sudden horror.

It was a cemetery — except that that there were no graves. Bodies lay side by side, covering what must have been at least two or three acres. At intervals the brown vegetation had been coaxed up into a spreading tree-like immensity so that the nature of the area could not be seen from the air, and it appeared to be just an open space covered with the brown brush.

Alvey and Wilmott had moved

toward the center of the area, talking excitedly. Gil cursed nervously. Even on Earth, cemeteries gave him an uneasy feeling, and here on Kagasi with the thousands of bodies lying on the surface instead of beneath the ground the effect almost more than he could take.

Evangeline Chappell's grip on his arm relaxed and she went to the nearest body, her scientific curiosity fully aroused. Gil followed her and stood looking down at it, sick with revulsion. He could feel his stomach churn, and he hoped he would not vomit into the helmet of the space suit.

The Kagasians were human-like in many respects. They had arms and legs, and there were fingers and toes, except that there was a curious webbing between them. The bodies were about the same dimension as his own, except that they were generally shorter and finer of bone structure. It was around the head and neck that the resemblance became faint.

The heads were round and bullet-like, perched on high thick necks which were rough and serrated with dozens of gills. The faces were flat and there was a mouth but no nose. The eyes were huge, extending around to the side of the head. Lidless, they stared in death as they had in life. Evang-

eline reached, and with a ginger touch, lifted the thin lips away from the teeth on one of the faces, exposing rows of thin needle-like teeth like those of a shark.

The color of the flesh was yellowish green, unless the color of the chlorine atmosphere was playing tricks with their vision. Most of the corpses were clad in the uniformly brown togas like the one they had examined a few minutes before.

Then a wild, terrified scream brought Gil up to a crouch, trembling with fierce excitement. For an instant he stood paralyzed, his muscles taut as stretched cables.

The scream had come from Alvey. He was hurtling toward them and they could see the terror in his eyes. Five Kagasians — horrifyingly alive Kagasians — were lunging after him, long saw-like knives in their stubby webbed fingers.

Past them Gil caught a glimpse of Wilmott's form lying on the ground motionless. There was a long, jagged tear in his space suit from which blood gouted. Gil knew the tear would have been fatal in itself if the knives had not touched Wilmott's flesh. One lungful of the chlorine would be enough.

He gritted his teeth and fought down the terror he felt. Then he

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lifted the heat ray and pressed the firing button. The shimmering pencil-like ray traced through the gloomy atmosphere to cut one of the green monsters into half as it sliced into his midriff.

A shrill whistling noise keened from the others, and the great wide open eyes seemed to burn with fury as they closed on the panic stricken Alvey. His weapon pouch was still closed. His terror was so utter, so completely unreasoning, he had forgotten he could defend himself, and could only flee.

Gil cursed hysterically and cut down another of the Kagasians with the ray, and then another. They dropped horribly and a sickening vapor lifted from the spot where the ray had scorched through them.

Then one of the remaining lifted his arm and threw the long knife at Alvey, just as Gil's heat ray pencilled into him and folded him to the ground. The knife sliced across the tough fabric of the suit up near the neck, and Gil's horrified eyes saw the strangled, choking look in Alvey's eyes as the chlorine went into his straining lungs. Then his plummeting body toppled and plowed into a neat row of dead Kagasians, disturbing the tidy symmetrical order of their

final rest, and crumpling them against each other.

Gil blasted the last of the five Kagasians with the ray, but the long knife had been thrown and was coming at him with terrific force. He flung his arms up in futile defense, and heard the loud clash of metal as the knife tore the heat ray from his grasp.

"Run, Gil!"

Evangeline's voice was vibrant with terror, and she began to run, her gait awkward and feminine in the tight space suit. Gil saw several more of the green, gilled Kagasians charging toward them, then he turned and followed her. He bent and picked up the heat ray as he ran, but threw it away a moment later. The heavy knife had shattered the electronic mechanism and the gun was useless.

Taller and stronger than the Kagasians, they sped ahead of them down the gravelled street in the direction of the rocket. Gil wondered where Jon Yates was, and in a moment he knew.

Jon was lying face down in front of the looted store. There was a long, red-lined rip in his suit, and his body was motionless. With horror Gil realized that the Kagasian standing over him with the sensor in his webbed hands was between them and the rocket.

The green, fishy looking creature dropped the sensor as he saw them, and picked up his long knife. He moved to intercept Evangeline as she tore toward the rocket, several yards in front of Gil. He raised the knife menacingly. Gil's hand went to his waist again and came up with the heavy bladed bowie knife. Without a pause in his stride he threw it.

It slashed into the complex of gills in the Kagasian's neck. He dropped the saw blade knife in his hand, staggered weakly, groping at the handle of the heavy bowie knife with awkward fingers. The eerie, shrill keening began, then weakened suddenly. The light went out of the big eyes. The strength left his legs and he sprawled forward.

Gil bent over him long enough to retrieve his bowie knife, then sprang after Evangeline Chappell into the recon rocket. One of the saw knives, thrown by one of the charging Kagasians clanged against the door an instant after Gil slammed it shut.

Seconds later, several hundred feet in the air, they looked down and saw several of the green skinned Kagasians milling around in confusion, probably partially blinded by the hot exhaust of the rocket as it had flared up from

their midst. Gil leveled off, and as he did so the figures below them suddenly scattered as if in terror and disappeared into the surrounding buildings.

Gil glanced at Evangeline. "Looks like they are afraid of an attack from the air," he said. "I wonder why they were so belligerent when we were down there with them?"

She shook her head silently and he could see that she was close to tears. Any other woman would have been screaming hysterically by now, he thought. He was still shaken himself, his heart pounding. He was full of anger at himself, too. The expedition had been his responsibility. He should not have let them get separated.

"I guess the Commander will have my backside for lunch," he said ruefully. "And I guess he'll have a right to."

"It's over and done," she answered. "Commander Holloway is a scientist — a realist. He'll feel badly, of course — but we're still in business. We've got a mission."

Gil grinned at her. "You're a cool one!"

He set the rocket on instruments which would home it back into the belly bay of the Vega, and looked at her again. She was still nervous from the encounter with

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the green gilled men even though she was trying to be detached. Gil decided to tease her and get her mind off it.

"If Rolfe knew what a cool customer you are he'd probably quit thinking about making love to you," he smiled at her.

She smiled then and shook her head. "Not Rolfe. He only recognizes the principal distinction between male and female — none of the more subtle, complex differences." She thought for a moment, then commented: "If Rolfe had been father Adam the world would probably still be in the dark ages — maybe even the stone ages. No one would think of anything except eating, sleeping and reproducing."

Gil chuckled. "Well, I guess men are pretty much all alike."

She shook her head. "Everyone has a little of the animal in him, I think — though I have never thought deeply about it. But men are not alike. Rolfe is direct, simple — disgustingly so. You are much more complex. There are compartments in your life. One for work, one for play, one for love, one for philosophy, one for — oh, many, many compartments I'm sure."

The Vega loomed in front of them just then, and the conver-

sation had to cease while he settled the rocket into its bay and coupled the locks so they could re-enter the big ship.

Commander Holloway listened silently while they reported on the disaster their mission had encountered. Gil expected the old man to read him off soundly. He had seen him flare up previously at situations not nearly so serious as the loss of nearly half of his total crew.

The old man had something else on his mind. His pale old eyes pierced into Gil's mind and saw the remorse there. He reached out and touched the younger man in a quick sympathetic gesture, then got back to the business of their mission:

"Our orbital path has taken us over something very unusual — very intriguing," he said. His voice was intense, and he seemed to be trembling with excitement. "It is something we must look into immediately. Look —"

He pushed them to a table upon which a photograph had been spread. Gil recognized it as a reproduction from the photographic mechanism of the visu-scope. He could recognize the murky appearance of Kagasi, and it was evident that the angle of the visu-scope lens had been at about 45 degrees to the surface of the planet. Then

he gasped and bent closer to the photo.

Rearing up out of the chlorine atmosphere was an object which appeared to be the top of a tremendously high tower. A tower that would have to be nearly seventy miles high — and transparent, too, for the photo showed it blossoming out into a vast dome down below the area where the chlorine began, and structures were faintly visible inside it.

Gil stared at it for a long time. Finally he spoke slowly

“One thing seems certain to me — the creatures we ran into were not intelligent enough to be responsible for anything like this.”

“Just so,” Holloway smiled. “I have an idea about all this — but first we must have a closer look. Do you feel up to another descent?”

Gil nodded. “Just you and I?” He glanced at Evangeline Chappell and at Rolfe. Holloway did not miss the significance of the look.

“All of us,” he said. “All of us this time. I do not think there will be danger, but if there is it must be faced. We are now absolutely dependent upon each other. The death of any one of us will make it impossible to return to Earth.”

Gil understood the deeper significance of what the old man said. It was true that all four of them would be necessary to the further movement of the Vega through space, but if radio contact could be re-established with Earth a rescue mission would be possible. He realized that Holloway did not expect to re-establish contact, and that was a part of the theory he had mentioned.

Rolfe left them, with a sideway glance at Evangeline Chappell, and serviced the recon rocket. Then the four of them entered it and dropped from the Vega toward the murky, ominous bulk of the hostile planet.

With Commander Holloway himself navigating, it took only a few minutes to locate the unbelievable tower, and to maneuver the rocket in slow, descending circles around it. As the picture indicated, it swelled to huge proportions near its base, and clearly visible within it now was what appeared to be a complete city. Complete — and deserted.

At the apex of the tower there had been an installation of incredibly complicated looking equipment. Gil knew little about radio — only the basic fundamentals of space communication which were required of every member of the

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R&R Section — but to his eye the equipment looked to be a complicated transitter of some sort. Perhaps that which had beamed the deadly rays which had wiped out the four Earth cities.

As their slow circles took them down within two hundred feet of the base of the dome, Holloway suddenly pointed.

“There it is — the space craft port.”

Gil looked. Indented into the transparent dome, and protected by high walls of the glass-like material was a port which must have covered nearly twenty acres. It was a fantastic complex of equipment — conveyors, slender exotic gantries, piping, and hard circular pads stained with the exhaust of space craft. Ports into the sealed city were clearly visible. Gil set the rocket on its tail near one of the near ports, and they climbed down.

The mechanism of the port was simple and in a few seconds they were inside the dome. Visibility inside was excellent. The atmosphere was clear and transparent — not the thick yellowish green of the deadly chlorine outside. Commander Holloway opened a bulky kit which he carried, and made some tests, smiling to himself. Then, before Gil could restrain

him, he deliberately uncoupled the helmet of his space suit and took it off.

With Gil and the other two staring at him in amazement, Holloway took a deep breath, exhaled, and grinned cheerfully. At his gesture they removed their own helmets. Evangeline exclaimed. The atmosphere inside the city was air — pure, sweet, invigorating, fresh air, just like that of Earth.

Gil said suspiciously: “Don’t tell me this fits your theory, Commander.”

Holloway nodded. “It does. I’ll make another prediction too — in a few minutes, somewhere, we’ll find water.”

Gil said, unbelievably: “On Kagasi?”

Holloway nodded and said cryptically: “This city is *on* Kagasi, but I do not believe it is *of* Kagasi.”

They explored then, walking slowly along the paved streets, peering into the deserted buildings, marvelling at the advanced craft of the things they saw. The buildings were of the same material as the dome. Holloway made a test and pronounced it to be glass — but a glass of such texture and strength as had never been seen on Earth with all of the advance in scientific achievement which had taken place in the three

hundred years since the birth of the twenty-first century.

A few minutes later they entered a spacious building which appeared to have been some sort of an amusement center. There was a stage in the center of it, with cleverly placed entrances and exits into a subterranean area, and rows of seats arranged in circles around the stage. A wide corridor behind the last row of seats circled the inside wall of the building, and along it at intervals there were protruding objects which looked like fountains. Gil pressed a button at the side of one of them and liquid spurted forth — a clear splashing fluid which looked exactly like water.

Holloway tested it, then bent and drank deeply from the fountain.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed. “Very refreshing!”

Gil bent to the fountain. After the repeatedly reconstituted water on the Vega it was delicious. And it tasted sweet and pure, like spring water.

Gil straightened and looked at Holloway. The old man nodded. It fit into his theory.

They walked for two hours toward the center of the city. Some of the buildings had been designed in a manner which seemed to iden-

tify them as apartments where creatures had dwelt. Finally in one of them they found a clue as to what the inhabitants might have looked like.

It was a pathetic little clue, in its way, suggestive of a gentle, human-like emotion which might have existed in this people. It was a doll which had been left behind when the people of the city had deserted it. Made of a faintly rosy colored metal, it had a head which was very large in proportion to its body. Except for this, it looked very human. Gil held it for a moment and looked at its arms and legs, and moved them. Evangeline took it from him and counted the fingers on the little hands and the toes on the little feet, gathering with her own hand to indicate that there were five to each. Then she handed it to Holloway, who peered for a long time at its large head and broad face with the pinched little features concentrated around a prominent nose. Then he said one word:

“Iridium.”

“Iridium!” Gil exclaimed. “I thought the tests showed that Kagasi has no iridium!”

“The doll came from somewhere else,” Holloway said.

At the exact center of the city a glass tube several feet in diame-

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ter speared straight up toward the apex of the dome, disappearing miles over their heads. A complex of piping and wiring connected into it, and spread from it to the buildings immediately adjacent. They explored and found radio equipment in one building so incredibly advanced that Holloway held up his hands in hopeless admiration.

In another building they found a plant which was manufacturing the air which filled the city — pulling the oxygen down from the stratosphere seventy miles above them, and mixing it with nitrogen which was coming from some other source. They explored and found it. The glass tower which soared up into the stratosphere continued on deep into the bowels of Kagasi. Apparently it tapped into gaseous nitrogen at one level and into hydrogen at another. Complex plants, working smoothly and endlessly, and apparently powered by solar energy from Kagasi's sun, a recently discovered star which Earth astronomers had named Ptolymi-Centauri, produced a steady output of water and air so nearly like those elements on Earth that their bodies could use them with no discomfort at all.

"Well, Commander," Gil said finally, "What's the answer?"

"Not pleasant, I'm afraid," Holloway said. He turned and faced them. "I think we may as well resign ourselves to living out our lives here on Kagasi — in this sealed city."

They stared at him. When he spoke again his voice was low and sad, but vibrantly intense:

"We dare not go back to Earth and we dare not make any further attempt to contact it! I doubt that a handful of humanity remains alive by this time — and it will be gone before we could go back."

"What —" Gil began.

Holloway interrupted: "There can be only one answer. The people who lived in this city fled here from another world. The presence of the iridium doll proves that to me. Their world must have been similar to Earth, or it would not have been necessary for them to have built a city like this.

"But it was a temporary expedient, and it served them only until they could find a world which fitted their needs. When they intercepted the spacecast of mathematical formulæ from Earth it did not take them long to find out what they wished to know. Here was a planet which had an atmosphere and a composition which provided the environment they needed.

"They needed only to eliminate the inhabitants of that planet, and go there to live." He paused, then said sadly: "They have done that."

For a long time they were silent, staring at the ground, each assimilating this news according to his own mood and attitudes, each considering what it would mean to him. Three men and a woman, and an inherited city — a city developed by a science so complex that none of them was capable of understanding it fully.

Rolfe's surly, menacing voice broke the silence:

"It came sooner than I thought, Roberts — but I don't need you any more!"

Gil's head snapped up and his eyes narrowed. But it was a little late for caution. Rolfe had already taken the heat ray from his weapons pouch, and its muzzle was pointing steadily at Gil.

Gil felt his muscles tense, and the cold sweat of fear start out upon his spine. It was like the feeling he had experienced when the green, gilled Kagasians had attacked, yet Rolfe was another human and there could be a chance to reason.

"Don't be a fool, Rolfe!"

"You're the fool, Gil. You let me get the drop on you."

"You can kiss off any chance

you'll ever have of getting back to Earth if you kill me."

Rolfe shrugged and grinned nastily.

"I couldn't care less, Gil. All I need is a woman and a place to eat and sleep. With you and the old man out of the way, I'll have that."

Gil's hand moved stealthily toward his weapons pouch, then he remembered that his heat gun lay shattered somewhere out in the poisonous atmosphere of Kagasi.

"There may be a chance to get back — the Commander may be wrong."

Holloway and the girl were staring as if transfixed. If the old man could have slipped this whole matter into a test tube and applied science to it he could have coped with it. Human relations were a little out of his ken.

Evangeline's face was enigmatic. It was difficult to know just what her attitude was. Gil looked back at Rolfe. The First Assistant was enjoying the power he held, and relishing Gil's situation, but he would not wait much longer.

"That ray will go right through me," Gil stalled. "If it hits any of this complex you may find this whole place filled with chlorine."

Rolfe laughed. It was an ugly laugh, and short, and when it was

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finished his lips curled into a menacing snarl, and Gil saw his finger extend toward the firing button.

Gil lunged to the side, but he did not fling himself to the ground. He lit cat-like on his feet again, and during the motion his arm had swept down to the leather sheath at his side. As he lit, crouching, the arm described a swift half-arc and there was a shimmering flash through the air.

Breath went out of Rolfe and he coughed rackingly. His hands moved jerkily and the heat ray clattered to the floor. His hands started to move toward the haft of the big bowie knife buried to its hilt in his chest. Then suddenly a red stain appeared around it. Rolfe coughed again and made a strange rattling sound in his throat.

An instant later he crumpled forward and slumped on the ground.

Gil remained in the crouch for a time, staring at the inert body on the ground in front of him. Then he straightened and looked at Evangeline Chappell. He remembered suddenly the remark she had made about the different kinds of worlds which would result if he or Rolfe were to be an Adam.

She looked back at him silently, but there was a different expression in her eyes now. Gil thought he recognized it. It was the expression her face assumed when she was about to start a totally new experiment.

Holloway glanced at them, grinned quickly, then poked off to explore the rest of a world in which he felt very unnecessary.



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Ray Nelson is a comparative newcomer to the science-fiction ranks, but in a short time his sharply-defined prose has brought him much deserved acclaim. During the past year, for example, he has been anthologized twice — in *The Best From Fantasy and Science-Fiction*, and in Judith Merrill's *Best Science-Fiction of the Year* — and his story *Turn Off The Sky* took fifth place in the Hugo nominations for short fiction.

At present, he is collaborating on a science-fiction novel with Philip K. Dick, which he feels will be a milestone in the field; it will be psychological science-fiction, based on an entirely new style and approach to the story in terms of modern psychology.

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FOOD

Ray Nelson

"They're crawling!" screamed the crewman, writhing in his bunk, trying desperately to escape the straight jacket that held him prisoner. "They're crawling under my skin!"

Ben saw one of them move in the vein in the crewman's neck.

They had grown. They thrived on Earthman's blood. One little sting, like a mosquito bit, and a few weeks later a man's bloodstream was full of the little mon-

sters, thousands of them, drinking blood and growing.

The crewman looked at Ben for a moment, not screaming.

"Kill me," he said. "*For God's sake kill me!*"

Ben went up front to the control room and came back with his laser pistol in his hand. It would only take one clean blast . . . "But then I'll be alone," thought Ben, licking his lips.

The crewman was screaming

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again, no longer words, just howls and screeches and ghastly gargling sounds. His agony had passed the point where it was really human and become, to the onlooker, an almost funny mock agony . . . the silly suffering of a clown who sits on a tack or gets hit in the face with a pie.

"Good bye, old man," whispered Ben, and shot him through the head. The laser beam left a scorched hole that smoked a little; the cooked flesh didn't bleed.

Now that the crewman was dead, the little bastards would start to eat their way out. Ben had seen it happen before, the flesh all covered with moving pimples, the tiny heads breaking through, the creatures drying off their wings and taking flight. Ben closed the door and sealed it.

Now that the screaming had stopped it was awfully quiet in the ship. Ben looked out a porthole. It was dark, except for the blue phosphorescent glow of the cannibal roses.

"Earth-type planet," he said bitterly. "They call this an Earth-type planet." There was no longer any question of repairing the ship. Even if he could make it space-worthy again, Ben knew one man could never fly it alone, let alone

guide it all the long, empty way home.

Idly he tossed the laser pistol from one hand to the other, thinking, "Might as well use it on myself and get it over with," but even now, when there was no hope at all, when death waited calmly a few weeks, a few days, perhaps a few hours away, he could not bring himself to take his own life. "If they want to kill me, they'll have to do the job themselves," he thought. "I won't do it for them."

A firebird swept by, sparkling like a Fourth of July rocket.

The radio went on sending its recorded cry for help. Gravitic waves travelled faster than light, but it would still be over a year before the message would reach Earth. It was a waste of time. Ben knew it was, but he let it go on broadcasting anyway. Tomorrow morning he would send in another report, then see if he couldn't figure out some halfway decent way to spend the last days of his life.

He went to bed and slept soundly, in spite of occasional mild earthquakes. He was used to them.

Daylight woke him. He made his report half-asleep, then fixed breakfast for himself. The decks had tipped a little during the night, probably because of the earth-

quakes, but Ben refused to think about that or anything else until after he finished his breakfast. An apple from the ship's hydroponic gardens and some coffee was all he could get down. His stomach had stopped functioning properly a long time ago.

He took a long time over his coffee, and when he was finally finished he went to the porthole and looked out.

The two suns, one small and brilliant, the other large and dull red, cast strange conflicting shadows on the field of cannibal roses that wrestled there, locked in a slow motion fight to the death, tugging at each other, twisting each other, strangling each other, clawing each other with their thorns, trying with their great fanlike leaves to cut each other off from the sunlight. Now and then one of the weaker flowers was pulled up by the roots, writhing frantically, and torn apart by its neighbors. The blossoms of the roses were dull pinkish white, like albino flesh laced with a delicate pattern of red veins.

In the red-violet sky above floated the living balloons, huge skin bags of gas that drifted in the breeze with octopus-like tentacles dangling down to clutch whatever they could.

"All these months I've been here," thought Ben, "and what do I know about this planet? Nothing. I've seen those balloons every day, yet I know no more about them now than I did the first time I laid eyes on one."

The deck shifted again. The ship was developing a serious list to starboard. "I'd better have a look," thought Ben.

He wore his full space armor when he went out, including the air-tight helmet with a supply of compressed air from the ship. That he had always done this, in spite of the fact that the air of the planet was breathable, was one of the reasons he was still alive. The other reason was luck, because many men had died in spite of all the precautions they could possibly take. There were things on this planet that could secrete fluids that ate through even the theoretically impregnable space armor, and other things that somehow managed to get inside a suit without leaving a mark. Even the hull of the ship itself was being gradually eaten away by an invisible something, probably some kind of micro-organism.

Outside the illusion of silence was shattered. Outside he could hear the flowers singing, a choir of endless air-raid siren wails that

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wandered up and down the scale as aimlessly as the moans of dying men. He could hear the sudden whistling hiss of escaping gas from the living balloons above and the sinister bass drum thumps of an unidentified something under the ground. One of the things that was so unnerving about it all was that the majority of noises that Ben heard were still, after all this time, completely unexplained. That clank sound, like a hammer on an anvil . . . he recognized that. It was made by a little beetle-like creature less than a half inch long. Strange that such a small animal could make such a loud noise.

He had only once smelled this field of deadly singing roses, but he would never forget that smell. It was a funeral smell, like rotting flowers and corpses.

He walked through the knee high cannibal flowers to the rear of the ship, and even as he did so the ship moved again, its rear end sinking. Then he stopped abruptly, reaching for his laser pistol. There was a claw reaching up out of the ground and clutching the tailfins of the ship, and there was a digging going on under the stern, dirt and flowers being tossed up out of a hole that grew larger by the second. Ben fired his laser pistol at the claw and it disappeared abruptly into

the earth, but the digging went on without letup.

The nose of the ship began slowly rising as the tail started sinking. Ben noticed that the earth under his feet was moving toward the hole and that his feet were sinking in it as if it were quicksand. Not a moment too soon he turned and ran, not stopping until he was a good quarter mile away. There he stood, panting feverishly, as the ship slowly sank into the ground and the struggling flowers closed up the hole.

There was a forest or jungle or something several miles to the north and he set out in that direction. It was a rather arbitrary choice, since no matter what direction he went in, there was nowhere really to go. In the forest were animals which might prove edible, though up until now everything on this planet had turned out to be poisonous. When his supply of compressed air ran out he switched to filtered air from the atmosphere. He knew all too well that there were viruses of some sort on this planet that the filter wouldn't stop, but he had no choice. It was odd, but he was not frightened, not even unhappy. The certainty of death was almost reassuring. Before, when there had been some slim chance of escape, he had been

frightened and miserable, but now death was something he could count on, could depend on, a trusted friend who would not be late to an appointment.

He even grinned and whistled to himself as he walked along, then actually burst into song.

"We're off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz . . ."

Days were long on this planet, more than three Earth days long at this time of year. Half-jokingly Ben set up as his goal that he would survive until both suns set. They would unquestionably get him after dark, but with luck and caution he might very well last until then.

Small insect-like creatures attacked him at intervals, but could not penetrate his armor. Harpoon plants with poison stingers struck at him now and then, but the armor stopped them, too. He could hear things moving in the tangled mass of flowers and plants around his feet, but very rarely did he see anything. Once he saw a little furry animal which watched him for a moment, then darted out of sight, and once a flock of birds rose up ahead of him with cries so like those of a human baby that Ben shuddered.

After a while he came to the edge of a small sandpit. He was

about to cross it when he saw the sand move. It rose and fell regularly, as if there were something under it breathing. Ben aimed his laser pistol at the moving mound and fired. The earth screamed and heaved violently, then lay still, and the sand in the mound darkened with a damp green stain. Ben was so intent on the slowly spreading stain that he did not see the balloon creature drifting swiftly and silently toward him until it was too late. A tentacle snapped around him like a bullwhip, jerking him off his feet and up into the air, knocking the laser pistol out of his hand. The balloon expanded and began to rise rapidly, while Ben dangled, kicking and struggling, at the end of the tentacle. Far below, the double shadow of the balloon creature swept over the fields and low hills, growing steadily more distant. Ben managed to get his knife out and hacked at the tentacle a little, but it was as hard as steel cable. "Besides," he thought, glancing down, "It's a long drop."

The cable was barbed, but fortunately the barbs were not strong enough to penetrate Ben's armor. Like a lazy pendulum he swung back and forth, back and forth, as the ground below seemed, with increasing altitude, to pass by slower and slower.

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"Great view up here," he muttered irrelevantly.

He could see the place where the spaceship had been, and also lakes and rivers and forests and distant snow-capped mountains. If it had not been for the odd lighting, it would have looked very much like some stretch of open country on Earth.

The infernal din of the singing flowers and the noises of unidentifiable creatures died away until there was nothing to break the silence but an occasional hiss of escaping gas and the rustle of the tentacles as they danced snake dances in the air.

Ben studied the bulbous monster that held him captive. There wasn't much else he could do. The gas bag was ribbed with muscle, and to go down the creature seemed to contract that muscle, compressing the gas inside, or let some of the gas out through a jet in its downward side. To go up, the creature relaxed its muscles and allowed the gas bag to expand with the lighter-than-air gas that seemed to be manufactured inside it somewhere. At the moment the balloon seemed to be seeking an altitude where the winds were travelling in the direction it wished to go. There were jetstreams in the upper atmosphere, and by making use of them the

balloon creature could probably move quite rapidly from one part of the planet to another.

Off to the west Ben heard a strange banshee cry, and when he looked in that direction he saw some sort of huge bird gliding toward him. It had a wingspan of more than a hundred feet, but its body seemed incongruously small, and it moved its wings very little.

As it grew closer the balloon creature raised its tentacles high, except for the one that held Ben, apparently protecting its gasbag. The bird continued to approach, only quickening its pace a little. It flapped its awkward wings a few times to gain altitude, then dove at the balloon. It had a unicorn horn in the center of its forehead, and it was only too frightfully clear to Ben what that horn was for. The balloon creature was too quick, however, and the bird's guttural shriek of triumph was strangled in its throat by a barbed tentacle. Screaming and thrashing its vast wings, the bird dangled under the balloon, now and then striking Ben and sending him spinning in wild dizzy arcs.

Suddenly the balloon creature raised Ben high above its gasbag and held him there a moment. "The damn thing is going to use me as a weapon," he muttered, as he

plunged down toward the great bird with rapidly increasing velocity. The impact knocked him out and broke the crystal in his faceplate, leaving his face unprotected. He dreamed then, but the nightmares that came in his sleep were mild compared to those that awaited him when he awoke.

In fact, he could not clearly tell where dream and reality were separated. At one moment he was dreaming that something soft and suffocating was covering his face, at the next he opened his eyes and saw that it was true. By the gentle rocking motion he felt, he knew he was still being carried by the balloon creature, but now he was no longer swinging beneath it like a fish on a line. *He was inside it!*

He tried to move, but found that he was bound in a sort of cocoon, so tightly that he couldn't move even his fingers. His nose and mouth were blocked with something soft and sticky, like cotton candy, and in the dim ruddy light that filtered in through the thin walls of the creature's body, he could see the cotton stuff flowing into his armor with a gentle pulsing motion. There were other creatures there too, hanging in cocoons on the stomach wall (Ben called it a stomach for lack of a better word), and when one of them gave a little

whimpering cry, Ben knew that they were still alive. The cotton candy flowed into them at the top of the cocoon white and flowed out again at the bottom red, with little bits of flesh and half digested internal organs mixed in.

"They're being eaten alive," thought Ben, "*and so am I.*"

He then became aware that his heart was no longer beating, his lungs no longer breathing; yet he was alive and conscious! The blood that pulsed through his body was moved by another heart; the oxygen that sustained life in his tissues came from other lungs. The heart and lungs of the balloon-creature!

All through his body he could feel things moving and little thrills and tingles and occasional sharp pains as hair-thin barbed tentacles carefully detached his liver, his bladder, his veins and arteries . . . dragging them slowly up inside his body and out through his mouth. He could even clearly feel the flesh and muscle around his bones being loosened and the bones themselves being gently, ever-so-gently removed.

His sense of smell was drowned in the intolerable smell of hydrogen, but all he could hear was the occasional hiss of escaping gas and the stifled moans and groans of the other creatures.

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Ben would have given anything to have been able to faint, or at least go mad, but the creature controlled the secretions in Ben's blood and would not permit him the luxury of anaesthesia, not even when the tentacles began probing into the grey matter of his brain.

Hallucinations came then, more real than reality . . . sudden flickering visions of endless sky and the ground far below, the feel of warm updrafts and the wetness of rain. It was as if Ben were looking at the universe through the eyes of the balloon-creature, as if he *were* the creature.

He felt himself drifting downward, hungrily reaching out with his tentacles for plants and animals, seizing them, rising with them into the sky. He felt himself drawing his prey into his stomach, exploring the bodies of his prey while keeping them still alive. He felt himself digesting everything . . . everything but the central nervous system. This he saved to devour in another way. This, the mind, the spinal column, the central nerve clusters, he connected by slender nerve fibers to his own brain so that he could read his' victims minds, swallowing their memories and habits and personality traits, making them all part of his own vast, unthinkably ancient mind.

Then Ben seemed to be a part of that mind, to be the heir of the experience of a billion lifetimes in a billion different bodies. Now he was a small insect-like creature, now a bird, now a kind of snake, a fish, a singing cannibal rose, a huge burrowing creature . . . thick and fast came the cloud of memories, the sea of souls, until it almost seemed to Ben that he was all life, past and present, on the planet.

All the myriad lives blended again into one, and Ben Singer drifted through the lower stratosphere, his tendrils limp and hanging, calmly digesting what he had learned.

"Soon it will be time to bud again," thought Ben, dreaming of the tiny balloon creatures that would slowly form in the walls of his huge gasbag stomach, each one an exact duplicate of his father-mother, each one bearing all the parent's memories and mind intact.

He was not going to die after all. Not then, or ever.

Dimly, he was aware that there was another spaceship landing on his planet. A part of his consciousness recognized it as one from Earth.

Hungrily, he moved toward it — and the food it contained.

The following manuscript came to us in a curious way; it was enclosed in a bottle and thrown through our editorial window. This perplexed us no end, since there was no stamped, self-addressed, return bottle in which to send the story back, should it be unsuitable. However, upon reading the manuscript, our beady little editorial eyes glowed, and our black little editorial hearts leaped (as the poets put it) for joy — for here, obviously, was a new writer of great promise.

We traced the bottle back to the liquor store, and careful questioning of the clerk brought forth the information that the bottle (then full) had been purchased by a Mr. Poe; the clerk couldn't recall the first name, but he thought it was something like Teddy, or Eddie, or Freddie.

Consulting the phone book, we discovered a likely listing, copied down the address and went out to see the man, who lived in a modest little tract house with his wife, child, and a parakeet named *Nevermore*. The intimate detail, the almost fanatic scientific accuracy of the story he'd submitted, made us suspect that Mr. Poe was an engineer working on secret government projects. This was not the case, however. Mr. Poe writes greeting card verse for a living.

The following is his first published prose, although he had a poem in one of the literary quarterlies, a piece called *THE RAVEN*. The story presented here explores a method of space travel to the moon not often encountered even in modern scientific journals.

Eddie is now at work on a new story, which he hopes to sell to the movies. We predict that great things will be forthcoming from the pen of this talented newcomer to the science-fiction field, and *GAMMA* is proud to have discovered him.

HANS OFF IN FREE PFALL TO THE MOON

E. A. Poe

One day, feeling more than usually dejected, I chanced to stumble against a bookseller's stall. Seeing a chair close at hand, I threw myself doggedly into it, and opened the pages of the first volume which came within my reach. It proved to be a small pamphlet treatise on *Speculative Astronomy*.

It was late when I reached home, and I lay the whole night buried in meditation. Arising early in the morning, I repaired eagerly to the bookseller's stall, and laid out what little ready money I possessed, in the purchase of some volumes of *Mechanics and Practical Astronomy*. I then devoted every spare

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moment to their perusal, and soon made proficiency in studies as I thought sufficient for the execution of a certain design.

I contrived, by the aid of my wife and with the greatest secrecy and caution, to dispose of what property I had remaining, and to borrow in small sums, no inconsiderable quantity of ready money. With the means thus accruing I proceeded to procure cambric muslin; twine; a lot of varnish; a large and deep basket of wicker-work; and several other articles necessary in the construction and equipment of a balloon of extraordinary dimensions.

I then took opportunities of conveying by night, five iron-bound casks, to contain about fifty gallons each, and one of a larger size; six tin tubes, three inches in diameter, properly shaped, and ten feet in length; a quantity of a *particular metallic substance, or semi-metal*, which I shall not name, and a dozen demijohns of a *very common acid*. The gas to be formed from these latter materials is a gas never yet generated by any other person than myself — or at least never applied to any similar purpose. I can only venture to say here, that it is a *constituent of azote*, so long considered irreducible, and that

its density is about 37.4 times *less than that of hydrogen*.

I conveyed to the depot, and there secreted the apparatus for condensation of the atmospheric air. I found this machine, however, to require considerable alteration before it could be adapted to the purposes to which I intended making it applicable. But, with severe labor and unremitting perseverance, I met with entire success in all my preparations. My balloon was soon completed. It would contain more than forty thousand cubic feet of gas; would take me up easily, I calculated, with all my implements, and, if I managed rightly, with one hundred and seventy-five pounds of ballast into the bargain.

Everything being now ready, I exacted from my wife an oath of secrecy in relation to all my actions from the day of my first visit to the bookseller's stall; and promising, on my part, to return as soon as circumstances would permit, I gave her what little money I had left, and bade her farewell.

In about four hours and a half I found the balloon sufficiently inflated. I attached the car, therefore, and put all my implements in it: a telescope; a barometer, with some important modifications; a thermometer; an electrometer; a compass; a magnetic needle; a seconds

watch; a bell; a speaking-trumpet, etc., etc., etc.; also a globe of glass, exhausted of air, and carefully closed with a stopper, — not forgetting the condensing apparatus, some unslacked lime; a stick of sealing-wax, a copious supply of water, and a large quantity of provisions, such as pemmican in which much nutriment is contained in comparatively little bulk. I also secured in the car a pair of pigeons and a cat.

It was now nearly daybreak, and I thought it high time to take my departure. I took the opportunity of igniting the piece of slow-match, the end of which protruded a little beyond the lower rim of one of the smaller casks. Jumping into the car, I immediately cut the single cord which held me to the earth, and was pleased to find that I shot upward with inconceivable rapidity, carrying with all ease one hundred and seventy-five pounds of leaden ballast.

Scarcely, however, had I attained the height of fifty yards, when, roaring and rumbling up after me in the most tumultuous and terrible manner, came so dense a hurricane of fire, and gravel, and burning wood, and blazing metal, that my heart sunk within me, and I fell down in the bottom of the car, trembling with terror.

The balloon at first collapsed, then furiously expanded, then whirled round and round with sickening velocity, and finally, reeling and staggering like a drunken man, hurled me over the rim of the car, and left me dangling, at a terrific height, with my head downward, and my face outward, by a piece of slender cord about three feet in length, and in which, as I fell, my left foot became most providentially entangled.

How long I remained in this state it is impossible to say. It must, however, have been no inconsiderable time, for when I partially recovered the sense of existence, I found the day breaking, the balloon at a prodigious height over a wilderness of ocean, and not a trace of land to be discovered far and wide within the limits of the vast horizon.

I jerked my way bodily upward, till at length, clutching with a vise-like grip the rim, I writhed my person over it, and fell headlong and shuddering within the car.

It was not until some time afterward that I recovered myself sufficiently to attend to the ordinary cares of the balloon. I then, however, examined it with attention, and found it, to my great relief, uninjured. My implements were all safe, and, fortunately, I had lost

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neither ballast nor provisions. Looking at my watch, I found it six o'clock. I was still rapidly ascending, and the barometer gave a present altitude of three and three-quarter.

It is now time that I should explain the object of my voyage. I resolved to force a passage, if I could, *to the moon!*

The moon's actual distance from the earth was the first thing to be attended to. Now, the mean or average interval between the *centres* of the two planets is 59.9643 of the earth's equatorial *radii*, or only about 237,000 miles. I would have to deduct the *radius* of the earth, say 4,000, and the *radius* of the moon, say 1,080, in all 5,080, leaving an actual interval to be traversed of 231,920 miles.

Now this, I reflected, was no very extraordinary distance. Travelling on the land has been repeated accomplished at the rate of sixty miles per hour; and indeed a much greater speed may be anticipated. But even at this velocity, it would take me no more than 161 days to reach the surface of the moon. There were, however, many particulars inducing me to believe that my average rate of travelling might possibly very much exceed that of sixty miles per hour, and, as

these considerations did not fail to make a deep impression upon my mind, I will mention them more fully hereafter.

The next point to be regarded was one of far greater importance. From indications afforded by the barometer, we find that, in ascensions from the surface of the earth we have, at the height of 1,000 feet, left below us about one thirtieth of the entire mass of atmospheric air; that at 10,600 we have ascended through nearly one third; and that at 18,000, we have surmounted one half the material. It is also calculated that at an altitude not exceeding eighty miles, the rarefaction would be so excessive that animal life could in no manner be sustained.

But I did not fail to perceive that these latter calculations are founded altogether on our experimental knowledge of the properties of air, and the mechanical laws regulating its dilation and compression, in what may be called, comparatively speaking, *the immediate* vicinity of the earth itself; and, at the same time, it is taken for granted that animal life is and must be essentially *incapable of modification* at any given unattainable distance from the surface.

But in point of fact, an ascen-

sion being made to any given altitude, the quantity of air surmounted in any *farther* ascension is by no means in proportion to the additional height ascended, but in a *ratio* constantly decreasing. It is therefore evident that, ascend as high as we may, we cannot literally speaking, arrive at a limit beyond which *no* atmosphere is to be found. It *must exist*, I argued; although it *may* exist in a state of infinite rarefaction.

Having adopted this view of the subject, I had little farther hesitation. Granting that on my passage I should meet with atmosphere *essentially* the same as at the surface of the earth, I conceived that, by means of a very ingenious apparatus, I should readily be enabled to condense it in sufficient quantity for the purposes of respiration. This would remove the chief obstacle in a journey to the moon. In the meantime, the force of gravitation would be constantly diminishing, in proportion to the squares of the distances, and so, with a velocity prodigiously accelerating, I should at length arrive in those distant regions where the force of the earth's attraction would be superseded by that of the moon.

There was another difficulty, however, which occasioned me some little disquietude. It has been

observed, that, in balloon ascensions to any considerable height, besides the pain attending respiration, great uneasiness is experienced about the head and body, often accompanied with bleeding at the nose, and other symptoms of an alarming kind, and growing more and more inconvenient in proportion to the altitude attained. Was it not probable that these symptoms would increase until terminated by death itself? I finally thought not. Their origin was to be looked for in the progressive removal of the *customary* atmospheric pressure upon the surface of the body, and consequent distention of the superficial bloodvessels — not in any positive disorganization of the animal system, as in the case of difficulty in breathing, where the atmospheric density is *chemically insufficient* for the due renovation of blood in a ventricle of the heart. Unless for default of this renovation, I could see no reason, therefore, why life could not be sustained even in a vacuum; for the expansion and compression of chest, commonly called breathing, is action purely muscular, and the *cause*, not the *effect*, of respiration. In a word, I conceived that, as the body should become habituated to the want of atmospheric pressure, the sensa-

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tions of pain would gradually diminish — and to endure them while they continued, I relied with confidence upon the iron hardihood of my constitution.

Having attained the altitude of three miles and three quarters, I threw out from the car a quantity of feathers, and found that I still ascended with sufficient rapidity; there was, therefore, no necessity for discharging any ballast. I was glad of this, for I wished to retain with me as much weight as I could carry, for the obvious reason that I could not be *positive* either about the gravitation or the atmospheric density of the moon. I as yet suffered no bodily inconvenience, breathing with great freedom, and feeling no pain whatever in the head. The cat was lying very demurely upon my coat and eyeing the pigeons with an air of *nonchalance*. These latter being tied by the leg, to prevent their escape, were busily picking up some grains of rice scattered for them in the bottom of the car.

At twenty minutes past six o'clock, the barometer showed an elevation of 26,400 feet, or five miles to a fraction. I now began to experience, at intervals, severe pain in the head, especially about the ears — still, however, breathing with tolerable freedom. The cat

and pigeons seemed to suffer no inconvenience whatsoever.

At twenty minutes before seven, the balloon entered a dense cloud, which put me to great trouble by damaging my condensing apparatus and wetting me to the skin. I thought it best to throw out two five-pound pieces of ballast, reserving still a weight of one hundred and sixty-five pounds. I soon rose above the difficulty, and perceived immediately, that I had obtained a great increase in my rate of ascent. In a few seconds after my leaving the cloud, a flash of vivid lightning shot from one end of it to the other, and caused it to kindle up like a mass of ignited charcoal. I had indeed made a narrow escape.

I was now rising rapidly, and by seven o'clock the barometer indicated an altitude of nine miles and a half. I began to find great difficulty in drawing my breath. My head, too, was excessively painful; and, having felt for some time a moisture about my cheeks, I at length discovered it to be blood, which was oozing from the drums of my ears. My eyes also gave me great uneasiness. Upon passing the hand over them they seemed to have protruded from their sockets; and all objects in the car, and even the balloon itself, appear-

ed distorted to my vision. The pigeons appeared distressed in the extreme; while the cat mewed piteously, and with her tongue hanging out of her mouth, staggered to and fro in the car.

I lay down in the bottom of the car and endeavored to collect my faculties. I lay still for about a quarter of an hour. At the end of this time I arose, and found myself freer from pain than I had been during the last hour and a quarter of my ascension. Looking toward the cat, who was again snugly stowed away upon my coat, I discovered that she had taken the opportunity of my indisposition to bring into light a litter of three little kittens. I was pleased at the occurrence. It would afford me a chance of bringing to a kind of test the truth of a surmise, which, more than anything else, had influenced me in attempting this ascension. I had imagined that the *habitual* endurance of the atmospheric pressure at the surface of the earth was the cause of the pain attending animal existence at a distance above the surface. Should the kittens be found to suffer uneasiness *in an equal degree with their mother*, I must consider my theory in fault, but a failure to do I should look upon as a strong confirmation of my idea.

By eight o'clock I had actually attained an elevation of seventeen miles above the surface of the earth. The pains in my head and ears returned, at intervals, and I still continued to bleed occasionally at the nose. I breathed with more and more difficulty, and each inhalation was attended with a troublesome spasmodic action of the chest. I now unpacked the condensing apparatus, and got it ready for immediate use.

The view of the earth was beautiful indeed. As far as I could see lay a boundless sheet of apparently unruffled ocean, which every moment gained a deeper and deeper tint of blue. At a vast distance to the eastward extended the islands of Great Britain, the entire Atlantic coasts of France and Spain, with a small portion of the northern part of the continent of Africa. Of individual edifices not a trace could be discovered, and the proudest cities of mankind had utterly faded away from the face of the earth.

The pigeons about this time seeming to undergo much suffering, I determined upon giving them their liberty. I first untied one of them and placed him upon the rim of the wickerwork. He appeared extremely uneasy, looking anxiously around him, fluttering his

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wings, and making a loud cooing noise, but could not be persuaded to trust himself from the car. I took him up at last, and threw him to about half a dozen yards from the balloon. He made no attempt to descend as I had expected, but struggled to get back, uttering very shrill and piercing cries. He succeeded in regaining the rim, but had hardly done so when his head dropped upon his breast, and he fell dead within the car. The other one did not prove so unfortunate. To prevent his following the example of his companion, I threw him downward with all my force, and was pleased to find him continue his descent, with great velocity, making use of his wings with ease, and in a perfectly natural manner. In a very short time he was out of sight, and I have no doubt he reached home in safety. Puss, who seemed in a great measure recovered from her illness, now made a hearty meal of the dead bird, and then went to sleep with much apparent satisfaction. Her kittens were quite lively, and so far evinced not the slightest sign of any uneasiness.

At a quarter past eight, being able no longer to draw breath without the most intolerable pain, I proceeded to adjust around the car the apparatus belonging to the con-

denser. I had prepared a very strong, perfectly air-tight, but flexible gum-elastic bag, which was drawn over the whole bottom of the car, up its sides, and along the outside of the ropes, to the upper rim or hoop where the network was attached.

In the sides of the covering thus adjusted around the car, had been inserted three circular panes of thick but clear glass, through which I could see without difficulty around me in every horizontal direction. In that portion of the cloth forming the bottom was likewise a fourth window, of the same kind and corresponding with a small aperture in the floor of the car itself. About a foot below one of the side windows was a circular opening, three inches in diameter, and fitted with a brass rim adapted in its inner edge to the windings of a screw. In this rim was screwed the large tube of the condenser, the body of the machine being, of course, within the chamber of gum-elastic. Through this tube a quantity of the rare atmosphere circumjacent being drawn by means of a *vacuum* created in the body of the machine, was then discharged, in a state of condensation, to mingle with the thin air already in the chamber with atmosphere proper for all the pur-

poses of respiration; but in so confined a space it would, in a short time, necessarily become foul, and unfit for use from frequent contact with the lungs. It was then ejected by a small valve at the bottom of the car; the dense air readily sinking into the thinner atmosphere below.

For the sake of experiment I had put the cat and kittens in a small basket, and suspended it outside the car to a button at the bottom, close by the valve, through which I could feed them at any moment when necessary.

At twenty minutes before nine o'clock, the mercury attained its limit, or ran down, in the barometer. It then indicated an altitude of 132,000 feet.

At five o'clock, P.M. being engaged in regenerating the atmosphere within the chamber, I took that opportunity of observing the cat and kittens through the valve. The cat herself appeared to suffer again very much, and I had no hesitation in attributing her uneasiness chiefly to a difficulty in breathing; but my experiment with the kittens had resulted very strangely. I had expected, of course, to see them betray a sense of pain, although in a less degree than their mother; and this would have been sufficient to confirm my

opinion concerning the habitual endurance of atmospheric pressure. But I was not prepared to find them evidently enjoying a high degree of health, breathing with the greatest ease and perfect regularity, and evincing not the slightest sign of any uneasiness.

It has since been to me a matter of deep regret that an awkward accident, at this time, occasioned me the loss of my little family of cats. In passing my hand through the valve, with a cup of water for the old puss, the sleeve of my shirt became entangled in the loop which sustained the basket, and thus, in a moment, loosened it from the bottom. My good wishes followed it to the earth, but of course, I had no hope that either cat or kittens would ever live to tell the tale of their misfortune.

April 3d. I found the balloon at an immense height indeed, and the earth's convexity had now become strikingly manifest. Below me in the ocean lay a cluster of black specks, which undoubtedly were islands. Overhead, the sky was jetty black, and the stars were brilliantly visible. Far away to the northward I perceived a thin, white, and exceedingly brilliant line, or streak, on the edge of the horizon, and I had no hesitation in supposing it to be the southern

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disc of the ices of the Polar Seas.

April 4th. Arose in good health and spirits, and was astonished at the singular change which had taken place in the appearance of the sea. It had lost, in a great measure, the deep tint of blue it had hitherto worn, being now of a grayish-white, and of a lustre dazzling to the eye. The convexity of the ocean had become so evident, that the entire mass of the distant water seemed to be tumbling headlong over the abyss of the horizon. The rim of ice to the northward was growing more and more apparent.

April 5th. Beheld the singular phenomenon of the sun rising while nearly the whole visible surface of the earth continued to be in darkness. In time, however, the light spread itself over all, and I again saw the line of ice to the northward. It was now very distinct, and appeared much darker than the waters of the ocean. I was evidently approaching it with great rapidity.

April 6th. Was surprised at finding the rim of ice at a very moderate distance, and an immense field of the same material stretching away off to the horizon in the north. It was evident that if the balloon held its present course, it would soon arrive above the Frozen

Ocean, and I had little doubt of ultimately seeing the Pole. During the whole of the day I continued to near the ice.

April 7th. Arose early, and, to my great joy, beheld the Northern Pole itself. To judge from the progression of numbers indicating my various altitudes at different periods, it might be fairly inferred that the balloon had now, at four o'clock in the morning of April the seventh, reached a height of 7254 miles above the surface of the sea. I beheld the whole of the earth's major diameter; the entire northern hemisphere lay beneath me like a chart orthographically projected; and the great circle of the equator itself formed the boundary line of my horizon.

April 8th. Found a sensible diminution in the earth's apparent diameter, besides a material alteration in its general color and appearance. The whole visible area partook in different degrees of a tint of pale yellow, and in some portions had acquired a brilliancy even painful to the eye. My view downward was also considerably impeded by the dense atmosphere in the vicinity of the surface being loaded with clouds, between whose masses I could only now and then obtain a glimpse of the earth itself.

April 9th. Today the earth's di-

ameter was greatly diminished, and the color of the surface assumed hourly a deeper tint of yellow. The balloon kept steadily on her course to the southward and arrived at nine o'clock over the northern edge of the Mexican Gulf.

April 10th. I was suddenly aroused from slumber about five o'clock this morning by a loud, crackling sound, for which I could in no manner account. It was of brief duration, but while it lasted, resembled nothing in the world of which I had any previous experience, I became excessively alarmed, having in the first instance attributed the noise to the bursting of the balloon. I examined all my apparatus, however, with great attention, and could discover nothing out of order. Spent a great part of the day in meditating upon an occurrence so extraordinary, but could find no means whatever of accounting for it.

April 11th. Found a startling diminution in the apparent diameter of the earth, and a considerable increase, now observable for the first time, in that of the moon itself. It now required long and excessive labor to condense within the chamber sufficient atmospheric air for the sustenance of life.

April 12th. A singular alteration took place in regard to the direc-

tion of the balloon, and although fully anticipated, afforded me the most equivocal delight. Having reached about the twentieth parallel of southern latitude, it turned off suddenly, at an acute angle, to the eastward, and thus proceeded through the day, keeping nearly *in the exact plane of the lunar eclipse.*

April 13th. Was again very much alarmed by a repetition of the loud crackling noise which terrified me on the tenth. Thought long upon the subject, but was unable to form any satisfactory conclusion. Great decrease in the earth's apparent diameter, which now subtended from the balloon an angle of very little more than twenty-five degrees. The moon could not be seen at all, being nearly in my zenith. I still continued in the plane of the ellipse, but made little progress to the eastward.

April 14th. Extremely rapid decrease in the diameter of the earth. Today I became strongly impressed with the idea that the balloon was actually running up the line of apsides to the point of perigee — in other words, holding the direct course which would bring it immediately to the moon in that part of its orbit the nearest to the earth. The moon itself was directly overhead, and consequently

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hidden from my view. Great and long-continued labor necessary for the condensation of the atmosphere.

April 15th. Not even the outlines of continents and seas could now be traced upon the earth. About twelve o'clock I became aware, for the third time, of that appalling sound which had so astonished me before. It now, however, continued for some moments, and gathered intensity as it continued. At length, while stupefied and terror-stricken, I stood in expectation of hideous destruction, the car vibrated with excessive violence, and a gigantic and flaming mass of some material which I could not distinguish, came a voice of a thousand thunders, roaring and booming by the balloon. When my fears and astonishment had subsided, I had little difficulty in supposing it to be some mighty volcanic fragment ejected from the world to which I was rapidly approaching, and in all probability, meteoric stones.

April 16. Today, looking upward through each of the side windows, I beheld, to my great delight, a very small portion of the moon's disc protruding on all sides beyond the huge circumference of the balloon. I had now little doubt of soon reaching the end of my perilous voyage. The labor now re-

quired by the condenser had increased to a most oppressive degree, and allowed me scarcely any respite from exertion. Sleep was out of the question. I became quite ill, and my frame trembled with exhaustion. It was impossible that human nature could endure this state of intense suffering much longer. During the brief interval of darkness, a meteoric stone again passed in my vicinity, and the frequency of these phenomena began to occasion me much apprehension.

April 17th. This morning proved an epoch in my voyage. It will be remembered that on the thirteenth the earth subtended an angular breadth of twenty-five degrees. On the fourteenth this had greatly diminished; on the fifteenth a still more remarkable decrease was observed; and on the night of the sixteenth, I had noticed an angle of no more than about seven degrees and fifteen minutes. What, therefore, must have been my amazement, on awaking from a brief and disturbed slumber, at finding the surface beneath me so suddenly and wonderfully *augmented* in volume, as to subtend no less than thirty-nine degrees in apparent angular diameter!

I was thunderstruck. No words can give any adequate idea of the extreme, the absolute horror and

astonishment, with which I was seized, possessed, and altogether overwhelmed. My knees tottered beneath me — my teeth chattered — my hair started up on end.

The balloon, then, had actually burst!

These were the first tumultuous ideas that hurried through my mind: The balloon had positively burst! I was falling — falling with the most impetuous, the most unparallel velocity! To judge by the immense distance already so quickly passed over, it could not be more than ten minutes before I should reach the surface of the earth and be hurled into annihilation!

But at length reflection came to my relief. I paused; I considered; and I began to doubt. In fact, amazement must have fairly deprived me of my senses, when I could not see the vast difference in appearance between the surface below me and the surface of earth. The latter was over my head and completely hidden by the balloon, while the moon — *the moon itself in all its glory* — lay beneath me, and at my feet.

It lay beneath me like a chart — and although I judged it to be still at no inconsiderable distance, the indentures of its surface were defined to my vision with distinctness. The entire absence of ocean

or sea, and indeed of any lake or river or body of water whatsoever, struck me as the most extraordinary feature in its geological condition. Yet, strange to say, I beheld vast level regions decidedly alluvial, although by far the greater portion of the hemisphere in sight was covered with innumerable volcanic mountains, conical in shape, and having more the appearance of artificial than of natural protuberances. The greater part of them were in a state of evident eruption and gave me fearfully to understand their fury and their power by the repeated thunders of the miscalled meteoric stones which now rushed upward by the balloon with a frequency more and more appalling.

April 18. Today I found an enormous increase in the moon's apparent bulk — and the evidently accelerated velocity of my descent began to fill me with alarm. Upon the support of an atmosphere existing in the state of density imagined, I had of course entirely depended for the safety of my ultimate descent. Should I then prove to have been mistaken, I had nothing better to expect, as a finale to my adventure, than being dashed into atoms against the rugged surface of the satellite. And I had now every reason to be terrified. My dis-

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tance from the moon was comparatively trifling, while the labor required by the condenser was diminished not at all, and I could discover no indication whatever of a decreasing rarity in the air.

April 19. This morning to my great joy, about nine o'clock, the surface of the moon being frightfully near and my apprehensions excited to the utmost, the pump of my condenser at length gave evident tokens of an alteration in the atmosphere. By ten, I had reason to believe its density considerably increased. By eleven, very little labor was necessary at the apparatus; and at twelve o'clock, with some hesitation, I ventured to unscrew the tourniquet, when finding no inconvenience from having done so, I finally threw open the gum-elastic chamber and unrigged it from the car.

I lost not a moment in throwing overboard first my ballast, then my water kegs, then my condensing apparatus and gum-elastic chamber, and finally every article within the car. But it was all to no purpose. I still fell with horrible rapidity, and was now not more than half a mile from the surface. As a last resource, having got rid of my coat, hat and boots, I cut loose from the balloon *the car itself*, and clinging with both hands to the

network, I had barely time to observe that the whole country, as far as the eye could reach, was thickly interspersed with diminutive habitations, ere I tumbled headlong into the very heart of a fantastical-looking city, and into the middle of a vast crowd of ugly little people, who none of them uttered a single syllable, or gave themselves the least trouble to render me assistance, but stood like a parcel of idiots grinning in a ludicrous manner and eyeing me and my balloon askant, with their arms set akimbo.

I turned from them in contempt, and gazing upward at the earth so lately left, and left perhaps forever, beheld it like a huge, dull copper shield, about two degrees in diameter, fixed immovably in the heavens overhead, and tipped on one of its edges with a crescent border of the most brilliant gold.

Thus, after a series of great anxieties, unheard-of-dangers, and unparalled escapes, I had at length, on the nineteenth day of my departure from Rotterdam, arrived in safety at the conclusion of a voyage undoubtedly the most extraordinary, and the most momentous ever accomplished, undertaken or conceived by any denizen of earth.

In the unlikely event that you do not know who Forrest J. Ackerman is, just ask the first small child you meet who is wearing a toy space helmet or a Frankenstein mask, or any child-at-heart grown tall and nostalgic for the Good Old Days of Buck Rogers, Big Little Books and Lon Chaney, Sr. (GAMMA contributors Ray Bradbury and Playboy's ex-editor Ray Russell would be good examples), and they will tell you that Ackerman is: editor of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, *Monster World*, and *Spacemen*; Technician #3 in the futuramic American-International colorfilm, *The Time Travelers*; 1964's Guest of Honor from the ranks of fandom at the World Science Fiction Convention; a Hugo winner; contributor of fiction and features (over 200 sales) to imaginative and mundane magazines in the United States and abroad; coiner of the term "sci-fi"; an Esperantist; a record albumist (*Music for Robots*); etcetera; etcetera; etcetera.

However, due to recent national publicity in *Look*, *Life*, *This Week* and other large-circulation publications, and because he has written and edited and filled with his lifetime collection of stills approximately forty movie magazines in the "filmonster" genre during the past seven years, he is, at the present stage of his career, principally famous for his association with horror films. To "an audience approaching a million," says *Look* magazine, he is regarded (with a reverence approaching fanaticism) as Mr. Filmonster, a name to conjure with in the same breath as Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi and Peter Lorre.

Since monsters, bug-eyed and otherwise, are standard ingredients in science-fiction in general and space opera in particular, we felt it might be of interest to readers to learn where the monsters came from, where they've been, and what they might be doing in the future. In the following pages, GAMMA queries "the Ackermmonster" on the subject of cinematic "things" and creatures which have crawled, slithered and shambled across the silver screen from the silent black-and-white flickers of the nickelodeon days to today's scary-ophonic technicolorful cinemascope monsteramas.

THE GAMMA INTERVIEW

Forrest J. Ackerman

GAMMA: Let me start by asking a basic question: what was the first monster movie?

ACKERMAN: Well, if we accept as "monster movie" the first film with some kind of an alien crea-

ture in it, then it all began about 1902 with the six-minute extravaganza by the French cinemagician Georges Melies. He combined elements of H. G. Wells' *First Men in the Moon* with Verne's *A Trip*

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to the Moon into the fantascience tour-de-farce known as *A Trip to the Moon*. The Selenites, or moon men, were acrobats from the Folies-Bergere, who cavorted about the screen so rapidly that I have no clear recollection of *what* they looked like. Certainly, unlike the ferocious outer-space monsters to come, they were the world's most fragile menaces, for one bop from a rolled umbrella and they disintegrated in a puff of smoke. I seem to recall that they were covered from head to toe in something resembling devil-suits, possibly with scales and tails. Of course, the *intent* of the picture was not to be frightening, but physically the moon men were undoubtedly monsters.

GAMMA: What was the first fantastic film, then, with an outright monster intent?

ACKERMAN: Well, just off the top of my head, I'd say it was *Frankenstein*. The 1910 version done by Thomas Edison.

GAMMA: What did the monster look like in that one? Anything like the classic Karloff concept?

ACKERMAN: A far cry from it. The monster more resembled Chaney's hunchback of Notre Dame than any other monster I can think of. He looked like Quas-

imodo after a hard night's work ringing dem bells. A matted hair fright-wig several sizes too large surmounted a pasty white face resembling underbaked bread dough with blackened eyes and a crooked mouth. He seemed to have a hairy chest with tufts of hair springing from his arms, which ended in talon-like claws suggesting dessicated hands left too long buried underground.

GAMMA: That sounds pretty frightening, all right.

ACKERMAN: Wait a minute — let me check something. I have a sinking feeling after giving all the credit to *Frankenstein* that there was a version of *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* a few years earlier. [Ackerman absents himself a few minutes while checking his files, returns.] I was right. The Jeckyll-Hyde monster was seen on the screen in 1908 — and again in 1910, the same year as the first of the many Frankensteins. The Jeckyll-Hyde transformation of good into evil, by the way, is one of the most popular and perennial of monster themes: it's been done at least fifteen times. Matinee idol John Barrymore had a crack at it in silent days and Fredric March won an Oscar for his monstrous portrayal in 1932. Bela Lugosi and Conrad Veidt played together in a Ger-

man version known as *The Janus-Faced*. The Germans also made a version known as *Vogelod Castle*. And the 1919 treatment, with Sheldon Lewis, is sometimes to be seen at Disneyland.

GAMMA: Which would you say were greater, the silent monsters or those since 1930?

ACKERMAN: Good question. Let me think a moment. Let's see — well, right off the bat, in the silents we had the greatest classic of them all: Lon Chaney, Sr. in *The Phantom of the Opera*. I've never improved on the description of him I wrote about ten years ago: *His outraged visage was horror incarnate: bulging, bloodshot eyes fatigued with violet semi-circles beneath them; the grotesquely exaggerated mounds of the cheekbones; the hooked-up, flaring, porcine nostrils; the rotted, jagged teeth, like the rim of an enameled tin can opened with a ragged knife, the scraggly strands of dead gray hair hanging like soggy serpentine from the incredible pyramid of a head.*

In addition to the Phantom there was *The Golem*, two Golems in fact, one of them called *Monster of Fate*; *The Cat and the Canary*; *The Wizard*; *The Thief of Bagdad*; *Seigfried*; *Nosferatu*; *Balao*; *The*

Lost World; *The Monster*; *The Octave of Claudius*; *London After Midnight*; *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*; *Seven Footprints To Satan* . . . monsters in them all. For prehistoric monsters, *The Lost World* couldn't be beat — Marcel Delgado, the living legend, built about forty-nine miniature dinosaurs which the late great Willis O'Brien animated, and lovers of prehistoric beasts never had it so good. *The Octave of Claudius* (also known as *A Blind Bargain*; and *The Monster* were second-grade Chaney (which means first-grade anyone else), with him made up as an ape-man in the former and a mad scientist in the latter.

Features of both *The Thief of Bagdad* and *Siegfried* were dragons which breathed fire. The dragon Doug Fairbanks fought was actually a magnified crocodile or alligator with some extra attachments, apparently sprayed with silver powder and photographed in slow motion. It was frightening for its time, and in fact still exerts a certain effect when seen in revival. The *Siegfried* dragon was a huge many-manned model created and activated with Teutonic acumen.

The Golem — the colossus of clay — was a real slay-boy who stopped many a heart in his day

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(which was 1914 and again in 1920). A huge stone statue which was brought to life by cabalistic magic, the role was superbly played on both occasions by a neglected horror actor, Paul Wegener. Admittedly, his hair did look something like a petrified pumpkin, but the over-all aura exuded by the Golem was overpowering. Incidentally, his built-up shoes were later imitated by the Frankenstein monster.

Nosferatu — the thin monster — there was never anything like him before or since. Max Schreck (the very name meant “terror”) was really the ghastliest Dracula of them all. His head — bald, cadaverous, sunken of eye, pointed of ear — seemed indeed a living Death’s head. His hands were bony claws with Mandarin-long fingernails curving like miniature elephants’ tusks. A monster out of a genuine nightmare.

But Lon Chaney as the vampire of *London After Midnight* gave a whole generation of filmgoers a fright they never forgot with the most incredibly sharpened teeth ever seen on the screen, a grimace as hideous and grotesque as that of THE MAN WHO LAUGHS (Conrad Veidt), bulging eyes to rival Peter Lorre’s and a crippled crouching walk that later may have

inspired Groucho Marx to do a travesty of it.

And *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* . . . Ah yes, there were giants in those days!

GAMMA: What about the talkies?

ACKERMAN: Well, in *King Kong*, O’Brien and Delgado had the opportunity to remake *The Lost World*, changing a brontosaurus knocking down London to a giant ape wrecking New York City and improving the special effects of the earlier film. Of course, the addition of sound was a major contributing factor to the realism of the awesome monsters who battled and roared with anger and rage.

The bloated barrel body of Charles Laughton was a thing of horror in the remake of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Down the side of his puffy face one horrid blind eye hung like a dried fried egg. Not quite as monstrous as Chaney — but great!

And Karloff? He took command when a cruel fate deprived the world in 1930 of the genius of “The Man of a Thousand Faces.” Chaney, Sr. and Boris Karloff were practically the same age when Chaney died and Karloff’s career as a monster really began as the frightening yet sympathetic and pitiable Frankenstein monster . . .

as the revived crumbling corpse of Im-ho-tep, the 3700-year-old *Mummy* . . . as the shaggy-haired, scarred mute menace of *The Old Dark House* . . . as the grave-gray thing called *The Ghoul* . . . the list seems endless.

Close behind Karloff in the contest for number of appearances in horror films and thirsting for blood is, of course, Bela Lugosi with *Dracula*, *Island of Lost Souls*, *Chandu, the Magician*, and many others.

The list lengthens as we remember such outstanding monsters as Lionel Atwill in *The Mystery of the Wax Museum*, Preston Foster in *Dr. X*, Albert Dekker as the bald, near-blind *Dr. Cyclops*, Lon Chaney, Jr. as *The Wolfman* — and the whole horde of prehistoric-type monsters loosed upon a panicking world in *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*, *The Giant Behemoth*, *Gorgo*, *Godzilla*, *The Fire Monsters*, *The Beast of Hollow Mountain*, *Reptilicus*, *Rodan*, etc.

To answer your question directly, I would have to say that, by sheer quantity, the “talking” monsters have the “silent” ones beat. Although no one ever beat Chaney, Sr. at his best. And never forget that he did it the *hard* way — created and applied all his own make-up, didn't have somebody

else do it for him, didn't fudge with masks.

GAMMA: What do you think of “funny” monsters?

ACKERMAN: Not very much. I don't feel strongly enough to get on a soapbox and foam at the mouth because you can now buy a nice friendly “soaky” Frankenstein monster that's so 99.44 per cent pure that he floats in the bathtub with you, but I'll be glad when the rash of horror comedies has run its course and the fiends-can-be-fun farces with their mock-monsters give way once again to shock monsters.

GAMMA: Then you don't believe there's any danger of monsters becoming so civilized, so humanized, that they're no longer — monsters?

ACKERMAN: No.

GAMMA: How do you account for this monster craze?

ACKERMAN: I don't really. Mainly I think it's just a snowball effect. I think I could have edited a successful filmonster magazine in 1950. I think one could have been launched in 1940. Karloff, Lugosi, Chaney, Lorre, Carradine, Rains they were big enough names then; they had a big enough fan following.

GAMMA: Perhaps so. But the movies are creating bigger monsters from outer space, even tying

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them in with teenage pictures; and a half dozen of the new television series have monsters in them. Do you have a theory as to why the upsurge of interest in monsters?

ACKERMAN: Oh, several times the wild idea has crossed my mind that maybe this friendly preoccupation with monsters on the part of young folks is to get their generation prepared for space. I mean, if we encounter strange life forms from other worlds, maybe they won't seem so strange or terrifying to the generation that will meet them, because they've already been exposed to so many alien shapes in films — conditioned to creatures, as it were.

GAMMA: Do you really believe that?

ACKERMAN: No; I just said it was an interesting theory. And I'll tell you another thing I don't believe; all the psychological pontificating about subsurface tensions, hidden fears, catharsis value, etc. in relation to horror films. I find it difficult to believe that anybody comes out of a theater relieved of inner conflict after seeing a monster movie, better equipped to face the world, less afraid to walk home in the dark, and stuff like that. On the other hand, I don't think being a fan of monster movies is going to do anybody any harm, as

some do-gooders have suggested. There is no more reason for banning monster movies than there is for tearing down all church steeples because to some sex maniac they suggest phallic symbols.

GAMMA: Do you actually see *all* the monster movies?

ACKERMAN: Yes, and don't think I *enjoy* them all. I drag my feet on quite a few, particularly when I read a review of how miserable a new one is; but eventually I get around to seeing them all. People expect it of me, you know — they almost *dare* me to say *I Was A Teenage Tarantula* was good. One of the penalties of completism. But then I see *all* kinds of pictures in great quantities. One year, many, many years ago, when I kept track, I recorded and rated 364 films seen in one year. I was disappointed that it didn't average out to one a day but made allowances because I had been sick a week during the year. I've seen as many as seven films in a single day. My ambition is to sit through thirty-six uninterrupted hours of favorite films, or see all the *Twilight Zones* I've ever missed, one after the other.

GAMMA: What do you see as the future of monster movies?

ACKERMAN: Frankly, every year a lot more crud. Inept producers beating those poor little lizards to make them act like dinosaurs . . . men in monkeysuits playing *King Kong Meets Son of Spartacus* . . . filmclips from *One Million B.C.* spliced into *The "New" Lost World* in 2000 A.D. . . . Vincent Price and Christopher Lee becoming the Grand Old Pair of horror films years hence when Karloff and Rains and Carradine are with us only in sainted memory . . . Roger Corman becoming a venerable director . . . monster fans of 1980 moaning for the Good Old Days of the early '60's . . . and some new blood, up from the ranks of talented amateur filmonsterdom, to challenge King Harryhausen in the animation field, to create new and distinctive directorial styles

worthy of a Tod Browning or James Whale, to script screenplays of stature. Maybe someone will pursue my prediction that Fritz Leiber could be built into as big a horror star as the best of them.

GAMMA: What you're saying, then, is that you don't expect the future will be much better than the past?

ACKERMAN: That's about it. Theodore Sturgeon stated it before me: most *everything* in life is mediocre. Why should monster movies be any exception? But many exceptional young individuals are dedicated to this field, and just possibly the future will be a bit of an improvement over the past. I sincerely hope so. Anything less would be monstrous.

γ

OUR NEXT ISSUE

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NESBIT

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As well as imaginative, off-beat fiction by Charles Beaumont, Richard Matheson, Ray Bradbury, and Steve Allen!

John Tanner is a young medical student paying his way through school by tending bar in Greenwich Village. He finds the denizens of this particular bar extremely weird — they wear the usual beards, sandals and over-laundered jeans and some of the females are very pretty. For a year now he has been at work on a novel about them and has already received an advance on the book from a major publisher. But his courses and his job leave him little time to finish it.

About six months ago, John, who is an avid fan of science fiction and reads everything in the field he can lay hands on, was obsessed with an idea for a story. He hated the idea because it would not leave him alone and he knew he had no time to write it.

By the time he got home from the bar at 3 A.M., he was too tired to even look at a typewriter and one evening after work as he glided a pencil across several blank pages, he was almost sidelined by snow-blindness. He tried to give the thing up by like the Ancient Mariner buttonholing the poor wedding guest, it would not let him rest.

Finally, in some desperation, he decided that he would try writing it at the bar in the quieter hours from midnight on, when the beards and sandals were in a corner singing folksongs into the dregs of their beer and customers were few. It wasn't easy. For one thing the bar isn't too well lit — it's a law in this part of the village that if you can see what you're eating or drinking, the landlord's being gypped. But he kept at it, fortifying himself from time to time with sherry flips with raw eggs beaten into them. The result is *Open Season* which we think you'll like.

OPEN SEASON

John Tanner

The first sign of the weird space vessel came as Ditmar's own space ship entered the last phase of the trip from Earth to Venus. The pilot assured them that it was a natural phenomenon in this part of the solar system, and to pay no heed to the strange blue light that grew larger. But Ditmar began to be concerned anyway. It was near

this portion of the trip that his wife Mary, had suddenly, inexplicably broken communication — and then mysteriously vanished.

It had happened in the middle of her usual nightly chatty report on the space flight and what she had learned from the more colorful passengers on board.

"There's a man from South

America," she began, "who wants to colonize an area in the Columbus region of Venus. He's already signed up a thousand people and is going to start building houses right away. There's a lady from Ohio who . . ." Then there was a pause and . . . "That's funny I wonder what that means?"

"What what means, Mary? he had asked.

"It's coming nearer. Oh, darling, I'll call you back. I want to get some photos before we get too far away. Call you back in five minutes."

And that was all. There had been no call back, no letters, no spacegrams. Nothing.

His wife, who had been on her way to Venus to attend a Shakespearean Festival, had simply vanished.

She had never arrived.

Ditmar had tried every source he could: the space police, the authorities on Venus, the people on Earth who had employed her to write up and photograph the festival. All to no avail. No one had any news of her much beyond the point where she had failed to resume communication. He could not locate her spaceship either.

In a mood of near despair Ditmar had decided to see for him-

self. He and Mary had had a good marriage for eight months. They had never quarreled. In fact they had planned to meet on Mars a few weeks later when he finished his work on Earth. Would she decide to leave him under such circumstances? Without warning or explanation of any kind? It did not make much sense. Still he had to take every possibility into account. And that could be an explanation. Quite possibly her spaceship had never been pointed toward Mars, as she had claimed. Quite possibly she had been lying to him about many other things. The festival was not till week after next and she had said she wanted time to travel through Mars to get more material for a book. But had she told the truth, he wondered. He had to find out.

She might have transferred en route to one of the other planets or even one of the resort satellites that had been nicknamed the Hilton Universe. These were beautifully landscaped floating islands that catered to wealthy space travelers who wanted to get away from it all. The climate and the air especially were very healthy and they had everything: first-class entertainment, luxurious hotels, sports facilities — the lot.

But if that was what she had

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done, he had his work cut out for him. There were at least eighty such known places on the well-traveled spaceship lanes between Earth and Venus. Moreover they were several privately owned islands, the personal estates of eccentric, aloof millionaires and recluses who led curious cults. What Southern California had once been for the outsiders and the mystics on Earth — a mecca for those who wanted to listen to the sound of a distant drum — these islands had now become.

Ditmar pored over the map of the floating satellite resorts and wondered what his next move would be. There were daily excursions to the more important ones from Venus. If that source failed, he had no idea where to look next.

He noticed suddenly that the blue light had turned into a garish pink and saw the strange surprised look on the stewardess' face. Had the ship simply disintegrated. It was an idea he could not bear.

"That's odd — I've never seen the lights go pink," she said. She stared out the porthole for a moment. "I think it's some sort of signal. It blinks on and off. I wonder what it means."

Ditmar felt a chill run through him as he heard Mary's words again and he rose from his seat. The

pink light had become a vast teardrop-shaped vehicle bristling with weapons.

The co-pilot spoke re-assuringly over the loudspeaker.

"Please don't be alarmed, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I believe we are being approached by a ship from the space fleet of another planet. It's probably to warn us of certain maneuvers being conducted in this area."

He did not sound very convincing and Ditmar instinctively reached in his pocket for his gun. The hundred-odd passengers in the ship began to flutter up and down the passages and the stewardesses looked very unhappy.

They did not have long to wait. In fifteen minutes the other ship was hovering alongside and giving the signal for permission to board. Through the portholes, Ditmar and the other travelers could see the familiar space flag of Venus. He felt, at once, relieved, but this was changed almost immediately when the newcomers entered.

As soon as the door had opened to admit them, Ditmar saw four extraordinarily brawny creatures enter. They looked like the inhabitants of Venus and they spoke English with the accent that had become familiar to earthlings through repeated telecasts.

The captain of Ditmar's ship greeted them politely and waited for them to speak. They listened to his words disdainfully and then glanced over his head at the passengers. Ditmar saw their cold, steel-gray eyes fix his own. After a moment or two of looking around, the visitors turned to the captain of Ditmar's vessel and one of them spoke very quietly in English.

"You are all free to go except for a few passengers who must come with us."

"Come with you?" the captain asked incredulously. "But why? This entire ship is due in Venus tomorrow night. Is this some kind of joke? Do you realize that I could file a complaint before the Space Court for this kind of thing?"

"What kind of thing?" the leader of the visitors asked quietly.

"Interference with our flight, of course. By what right can you order anyone off this vessel?" the pilot asked.

"Special space patrol," the visitor said coldly. "We are looking for persons involved in interplanetary drug traffic."

"Then you must wait till we land on Venus. These passengers have the right to speak to the Earth ambassador there to protect

their rights. I refer you to Interplanetary Charter rule number 10."

"I am not interested in that," the head man snapped. "Will you submit quietly or shall I simply take the entire vessel."

"But you cannot do this," Ditmar said incredulously. "This is space piracy. The charter expressly forbids arrests in craft between planets. Do you at least have a warrant for the arrest of these people you seek?"

"Another space lawyer," the head man said contemptuously. "Let's conclude this idiotic talking."

"I reserve the right to call my government before proceeding further," the pilot said, "There is no precedence for this sort of thing."

"I told you we must question these people and show them to witnesses."

"Then I must report that to my government. That and the fact that you are taking them in violation of the space charter."

"I'm afraid that is out of the question," the leader of the invading group said. "We do not wish to alert the ring of smugglers that some of their people have been taken into custody."

"I'm sorry," the pilot began and turned to go. He was immediately seized by two of the visitors. The head man nodded to the other in-

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vaders and in an instant they had covered the passengers with dangerous looking space guns.

The leader spoke in a strange dialect to one of the men who immediately went to the communications room. He was back in a moment with the alarmed operator.

"All right," the head man said. "Now listen carefully. My name is Arak. The persons tapped by me or my assistants will step to the front of ship at once."

Quickly Arak and two of his assistants checked the passengers. Ditmar saw them tap each selected individual on the shoulder. He was among them. No names were called. Each person was first studied carefully and picked or rejected. In a few cases the invaders felt the muscles of the passengers' arms and legs. There was a preponderance of males in the group but several females were also picked.

"What are you planning to do with us?" Ditmar asked.

"You'll know when we choose to let you know," Arak said disdainfully. "Now here is what happens next. Your pilot will allow us to get out of sight, then you will proceed toward Venus. Is that clear? If you send out any signal before that, we will destroy you."

"We are not going anywhere

without orders from Earth," the pilot said flatly. "You won't get away with it you know."

Arak sighed. "You Earth people are impossible, but then perhaps it's that very idiocy that makes you such good sport."

The pilot said, "What do you mean by that?"

Arak's eyes narrowed. "Merely a manner of speaking," he said quickly. "You are insistent on your decision to resist us. He turned away to one of his men in some embarrassment. He spoke rapidly for a moment then turned back.

"Your vessel has been immobilized. It must follow ours by a special magnetic device."

The transfer was made quickly. Since they were taking the Earth ship with them there was no reason to remove the selected passengers. Only the technical crew of the Earth vessel were seized and taken off. Arak's assistants spent a few minutes in the computer chamber to change the ship's course and then locked it carefully so no one could enter. One of Arak's group stayed with the Earth voyagers.

Less than half an hour later they were underway. From the space compass in the ceiling of the vessel Ditmar could see immedi-

ately that they were no longer heading toward Venus. He wondered nervously if this was what had happened to Mary. Had she been the victim of space pirates?

"Will you please tell us where we are going?" Ditmar asked Arak's man.

The invader fingered his gun and ignored him.

Ditmar heard someone weeping behind him and turned to see a pretty teen-age girl crying.

"I'm afraid," she said. "I've heard about these space pirates. I've heard all kinds of things. How they torture you and even send your finger to Earth so your people can check your fingerprints and send ransom."

"That is utter nonsense," the invader said. "We do not cut off fingers. You'll be given every chance to live."

"Will you please explain what is going to happen?" Ditmar asked politely. "You have a lot of frightened people here. Surely out of some sense of decency and humanity you can tell us that."

"I am sick of having that word humanity thrown at me," the invader said. "I have said all I mean to. You will know soon enough. We are neither butchers nor common pirates. Now keep your silence, and I suggest that you try to sleep.

You will need all your strength and your faculties when we arrive at Zara."

Zara! Ditmar racked his brain to remember what he knew about it. It was some sort of asteroid, a very small one that had been bought by someone when they had had the big space land rush a few years ago. What had he read about it? He fished into his book bag and came up with a Guide To Smaller Bodies which had been forced on him by someone in his office. He thumbed through the pages to Z and read the small item about Zara.

ZARA —

A small land mass situated near the interplanetary passenger route Earth-Venus close to Venus itself. Mostly agricultural economy. Good forests and lakes and small mountain range suitable for skiing and other winter sports. Believed to have originated in outer galaxy and to have moved slowly to present position. Once used as resort area by Stevens chain but for last four years the exclusive property of Cyrus Blake III, one of the wealthiest men on Earth with immense holdings in metals, mining, electronics, transportation and food. Blake, a hunting and fishing enthusiast uses ZARA as private vacation preserve and has banned

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it to general public. Area is under general suzerainty of Venus. Population: Less than 100 persons.

Ditmar set the book down. Cyrus Blake, III, he said to himself, the grand eccentric of the business world. What on earth did he want with them. He knew little about him except that Blake loved going on big game hunts into Africa and was always being photographed with a pretty actress on one side and a dead lion on the other. Once in the news almost constantly, he had barely been mentioned lately.

He was still mulling over Blake when Zara loomed into sight through the portholes. Looking at the asteroid through his high-powered binoculars he could see a broad forest below and in its center a shimmering body of blue water. In the distance rose a chain of red peaks some of them topped by snow. He could barely see the tops of some buildings as they approached the landing area. On the ground he could discern no activity at all. It seemed, to all purposes, that Zara was deserted.

The landing was quite easy and it gave them a false sense of security. Perhaps the invaders were telling the truth, Ditmar thought. Maybe they are a special investigation patrol checking on drug smugglers. What disturbed him

most was they had no credentials or warrants to prove what they said.

"Okay, everybody out," Arak called to them as the door slid open. "You will be fed in the main dining room and given suitable clothes for our climate. Then you will receive further instructions."

"Is it possible to call my home?" a small, frightened woman asked. "I promised to call them when I reached the hotel in Venus this evening."

Arak smiled glacially. "I am very much afraid, Madame, that in Zara we do not have such amenities as long distance space telephones. You will be permitted to communicate with your people after you have passed your tests."

"What test?" a tall redheaded man asked curiously.

"You'll see," Arak said, glancing amusedly at one of his men. "It is test all our special visitors must undergo. If they survive — er, excuse me — pass this test, we regard it as a sign of their innocence. You might call it our special lie detector test."

He refused to say any more. The newcomers were taken into the main building in a long quadrangle. It was a brisk cool day as they crossed the broad field, shivering in their summer clothes.

Ditmar could feel a strong chilly wind tugging at his legs.

Inside the building they were shown to small rooms and fitted by a dapper young tailor in form fitting dark brown garments.

"I don't understand this," Ditmar said to the tailor. "Why do we have to wear these clothes and why this color?"

The tailor shrugged off the questions. On the way to the dining room with one of the guards, a sinking feeling hit Ditmar in the pit of his stomach. Brown garb! A prisoner's garb. They were going to be jailed. For heaven knew how long. An hour passed without anyone mentioning any questioning. Instead they were told to proceed to the dining room.

The dining room did not alleviate his fears. The hundred odd passengers on the space vessel were sitting at long tables, row upon row of them. It reminded him of the old-time prison films he had seen in the museum. It was just like this, row upon row of tables with prisoners in some dreary uniform. Everyone passed the food and everyone looked glum. And there above them in suspended cages were Arak's men with rapid-fire guns. The guns moved slowly to cover everyone in the room.

But why? he asked himself as he toyed with the food in his plate. Why? He could no longer take any stock in that cock and bull story about the drug smugglers. The only thing he could think of was that they were being impressed into hard labor gangs. For work somewhere in the interior of the asteroid. But this was not credible. Cyrus Blake was immensely wealthy. He could hire mobs of workers from nearby Venus. It would cost him little and he would not be running this kind of risk with the authorities. It was a silly idea, and yet it was the only one that seemed to make sense since those selected had been fairly strong, young and obviously quite healthy persons. Such a selection could fit the hard labor theory. Then he remembered the women. True they were strong, but they were women.

Was it possible that Blake wanted to use them for some forced colonization project on some obscure planet? Was that why he picked healthy young specimens of both sexes?

Glancing about the room he could see at least another fifty persons in the same dark brown garb: men as well as women, all of them about his age and looking very healthy.

OPEN SEASON

They sat at separate tables and ate in a more leisurely way. Ditmar noticed that they had wine. Who were they? he wondered.

He threw the question at one of the waitresses and she smiled. "They've passed the test. Once you pass it's much easier and if you pass two more, they let you go."

"Go where? Back home?" Ditmar asked chagrined.

She shrugged. "I can't talk much. You'll find out. At least it's something to look forward to. You'll be free."

"Free to do what?" he pleaded. But she had already left. Suddenly a wall slid out of view and Ditmar saw high above them a group of men in sports clothes eyeing them with interest.

There were about a score of men in handsome hound's tooth jackets and they were drinking out of tall glasses and laughing as if someone had just told a rather funny story. As Ditmar watched them he saw several peering through binoculars.

As if we were animals in a zoo, he thought angrily. Some strange beasts brought into view while they have their drinks. Other diners looked up expectantly but the new spectators did nothing but look. They seemed to be enormously interested in the diners, in every

aspect of their faces and bodies.

After a few minutes, Ditmar could not endure it any longer. He rose and just like an inmate in an old-fashioned prison movie of the Twentieth Century, he banged on the table with his metal dish.

Instantly the nearest guard leveled his gun at him, but a voice from the drinkers' platform stopped him.

"Let him speak. I'm sure we're all intensely interested in what he has to say," the voice said.

"What are you planning to do with us?" Ditmar shouted. "By what right do you hold us? Who are you? Where is my wife?"

The men on the drinkers' platform laughed good-naturedly.

The speaker smiled at Ditmar. "What are we going to do with you? You'll be taken on a very pleasant tour of the countryside when you're finished. As for your other questions: my name is Cyrus Blake and these gentlemen are my guests. They're all here on holiday. As for your wife, Mr. Ditmar, you'll meet her during your outdoor visit. She's a remarkable woman, by the way. Damned clever."

At that the other men near him laughed appreciatively.

"You haven't told us why you are holding us like this," Ditmar

said irritably. "Or by what right you keep us prisoners. None of us believe this insane story about an investigation of drug traffic."

Blake laughed. "But you're not being held prisoners, my dear fellow. You're free to move about as you like as soon as you leave here." There was another burst of mass laughter behind him at this remark.

"Then why are we wearing this!" Ditmar shouted, pointing to his uniform.

"Why for identification, that's all. We want our people to be able to recognize you. Now if you'll just finish your desserts, ladies and gentlemen, we'll take you outside."

Someone else in Ditmar's group tried to ask a question, but Blake shook his head and the wall slid back into place, hiding them from view.

A few minutes later, Arak and his men ordered them to stand up and come up to the front of the room. There a man sitting at a table gave them each a bell to put around his neck.

"That's to prevent hunting accidents while you're in the forest," Arak explained. "Be sure to wear these all the time. The woods are quite thick and a hunter might shoot at the wrong target unless he hears your little bell. Is that

clear? Good, let's go now."

They were led single file deep into the thickets and as they moved through the mottled sunshine their bells announced them. Ditmar felt as if they were a herd of sheep grazing on a meadow. He felt curiously elated. Mary was alive then. He would see his wife soon, Blake had said. But what had Blake meant by that remark about her? Was she some refugee from justice? Were Blake's police trying to find her after an escape?

When they had walked for nearly half an hour, Arak ordered a halt.

"I must leave you here, my friends. Good luck to you all."

"You mean you're abandoning us in these woods," the pilot of the space ship demanded. "You're going to let us starve?"

Arak shook his head. "You will not starve. All of the fruit you see about you is quite edible and delicious. There are also some excellent nuts if you look about you. You can survive quite easily on those. Those of you who wish can come into the main dining room for a good meal in a little while."

"When?" the pilot persisted.

"Why after you've passed your tests," Arak said. "Goodby now."

Ditmar seized the lapel of his

OPEN SEASON

tunic as he turned to go and screamed at him: "Why are you doing this to us? What have we done? Tell us. What have we done to deserve this? To be treated like slaves, prisoners and cast out into the woods like animals? What have we done?"

Arak regarded him with a bland smile. "Why nothing, Mr. Ditmar. You haven't done anything, any of you, to deserve this except that you came along. It's not what you have done, but what you will do from now on that is important. And now I must really go; Mr. Blake and his friends are going hunting this afternoon and I must guide them. See you later."

They stood there in a clearing in the woods and watched Arak and his companions leave.

After a few moments the voyagers drifted off in small groups. Ditmar went off by himself in search of Mary, calling her name every hundred yards or so. Around him he could hear an army of bells.

"Mary" he called, but there was no answer. For twenty minutes he yelled until he was hoarse and then suddenly he heard the crack of high-powered rifles in the distance. He hid behind a tree, frightened. For a while he lay there on the ground, waiting for

the firing to stop or move away. Instead, it began to come closer and twice he heard screams and the thrashing of bells nearby. Two of the voyagers to Venus had been hit.

He rose quickly and began to sprint away from the sound, rattling his bell as he ran so the hunters could tell where he was.

Suddenly about fifty yards from where he stood, he saw the flash of a dark-garbed figure. But there was no bell. "Wait," he shouted.

The figure stopped and then turned and running up to him, put its hand over his mouth. It was his wife.

"Mary," he said incredulously.

"Don't talk!" she whispered, and then listened for the sound of firing.

"Your bell," he whispered, "where's your bell? They'll mistake you for an animal if you don't wear your bell. They've shot two of your party already."

In answer she tore the bell from around his neck and buried it deep in the soil.

"That bell is your death knell, you fool," she said. "We're the animals they're shooting at. We're the targets."

He looked at her in disbelief.

"This is Cyrus Blake's way of

hunting. Hunting on Earth bored him. At first he stocked the forest with Earth animals, but they acted too sluggishly in these strange surroundings. Finally someone on his staff, as a joke, decided to stock the forest with human game. The human animal has a higher brain and can avoid the hunter more intelligently. I learned all about Blake from one of the former targets who had passed their tests. Once you pass three tests, you can live in the quadrangle as a free man and have to go into the forest only when Arak cannot bring back another shipload."

"What are the tests?"

"You are hunted for three weeks. Each week a new weapon is used. This week they use rifles. Next week, bow and arrows. The third and final week is a ceremonial hunt much like the ones they had on Earth centuries ago."

She was interrupted by the sound of rifle fire coming nearer and pulled him with her. Swiftly she climbed up into a tree and beckoned him to follow. He leaped and scrambled up the trunk after her, his heart beating furiously. They had just hidden themselves in the thick branches when they saw Blake and several of his friends move under, with guns held at the ready.

Ditmar sighed and clasped his wife's hand in relief.

"How long do they hunt?" he asked.

"Till the sun goes down. Then you're safe until eight the next morning. Cover yourself quickly!" Mary shouted suddenly.

They saw another group of hunters move within ten feet of them. Ditmar held his breath until he thought he would burst. As he let out the pent-up air he heard another scream in the woods fifty feet away.

"We've got to get out of here!" he said hoarsely to Mary. "Let's get out of the forest. To some place where they don't hunt."

She smiled grimly. "There is no place. The entire place has been turned into a hunting preserve. You would simply move into another zone where they use different weapons. You'll be moved there soon enough."

"Thank heaven they don't use hounds then or they would have caught our scent by now," he said.

As he finished they heard the sound of dogs barking on the horizon.

Mary listened for a moment and smiled sadly.

"That's the last test zone," she told him. "It's a fox hunt."

Ditmar stared at her with horror.

Bob Katz recently returned to his native New York City from a six month sojourn in Europe, where he was based in Rome and traveled to Paris, London, Moscow, Belgrade and intermediate points. While in Rome, he wrote a soon-to-be-published novel, did ghost writing, and translated one of his own books into Italian and an Italian mystery novel into English.

Prior to his novel-writing career, he "wrote high-paying comedy for low-paying comedians," traveled in Europe doing public relations work, wrote copy for the United Nations and other international organizations, and did freelance photography.

Currently in Manhattan with his beautiful wife and two children, Bob has an historical novel in the works, based on an Italian resistance movement against the Nazis and the Fascists.

The following, a gripping drama of outer space, indicates that there may be dangers *out there* of which man may not yet be aware!

THE WOMAN ASTRONAUT

Robert Katz

NARRATOR

Women now want to go into space. They want to become astronauts — or is it astronettes? This is very natural. As a matter of fact, some people feel there are a lot of women who are out of this world — or should be. I myself have known a few girls I'd like to send on a long trip into space. But I believe women have the right, and the ability, to serve the United States as space pilots — or is it pilettes? Of course, they will have to be trained. So

with that in mind, we take you now to Cape Kennedy, to an orbital training flight. Seated in the space capsule, ready to blast off, is the mother of four children, attractive Mrs. — well, we can't use her real name, so let's name her after some great woman pioneer, who has done much to further her sex — like Jayne Mansfield. . . . On second thought, we'd better just call her Mrs. Smith, the first American woman astronaut — or is it astronette?

CONTROL CENTER

Control Center to woman astronaut, Control Center to woman astronaut — or is it astronette? We're in the final stages of the count-down. Is everything all right?

MRS. SMITH

Everything is A-Okay.

CONTROL CENTER

(PUZZLED)

What? . . . Oh, I get it. Confidentially, Mrs. Smith, we say that only when the newsmen are listening. I'll tell you when. Meantime, just say all right, or something like that. Now —

MRS. SMITH

Peachy?

CONTROL CENTER

That's hunkey dorey with me. Ha, ha, ha. Oh, by the way, the newsmen want to know what name you've chosen for your space capsule. You know, like "Friendship — 7" or "Faith 7."

MRS. SMITH

I was thinking of naming the spaceship after a great woman pioneer who has done much to further her sex. . . .

NARRATOR

(APPREHENSIVELY)

Oh, no!

MRS. SMITH

. . . . but I decided to name it after a woman I personally admire.

(NARRATOR BREATHES A SIGH OF RELIEF)

MRS. SMITH

So I'm calling the space capsule the "Jayne Mansfield — 7."

CONTROL CENTER

We're ready to go now, Mrs. Smith. Any final questions?

MRS. SMITH

Yes. Will I be home by five o'clock?

CONTROL CENTER

Well, if all goes well. But — ha, ha — don't make any appointments.

MRS. SMITH

I already have one. You see I must —

ELECTRONIC VOICE

(BREAKS IN)

Ten. Nine. Eight. . . .

CONTROL CENTER

Steady now. Check rocket boosters

MRS. SMITH

Rocket boosters, check. Orbital guidance systems, check. Retro rockets, check. Hair, face, and mad money, check.

ELECTRONIC VOICE

Three. Two. One. Fire!

(LONG SILENT PAUSE)

CONTROL CENTER

Uh, Mrs. Smith — ha, ha — you, uh, stalled.

MRS. SMITH

I was afraid I would. I always get nervous when somebody watches me.

THE WOMAN ASTRONAUT

CONTROL CENTER

Now, let's try again, shall we. You're sure you're all right?

MRS. SMITH

Everything's A-O — (STOPS HERSELF) Peachy.

CONTROL CENTER

Good. Just pretend that there aren't millions of people watching you.

MRS. SMITH (BRAVELY CHEERFUL)

All rightie!

CONTROL CENTER

(BREAKING IN)

Now, any final questions?

MRS. SMITH

Don't forget. I must be home by five o'clock.

ELECTRONIC VOICE

Ten. Nine. Eight. Sev - -

MRS. SMITH (TAPPING)

Hello, there?

CONTROL CENTER

I know you're in a hurry, Mrs. Smith, but we can't count any faster!

MRS. SMITH (PATIENTLY)

No, darling. I wanted you to count slower. I'm trying to adjust this girdle. It's killing me.

ELECTRONIC VOICE

Three. Two. One. Fire!

(BLAST OFF NOISE)

CONTROL CENTER (CARRIED AWAY BY SPECTACLE)

Perfect launching! The "Jayne Mansfield - 7" is moving beauti-

fully. Her angle of inclination: 38. Latitude: 26. Longitude: 36. Her rear end is glowing, moving off to the southeast. What a hunk of space capsule! (HE REGAINS HIS POISE) Control Center to Mrs. Smith. That was excellent. If there's any slip up, it certainly isn't showing. You have now gone higher and faster than any American woman in history. You are now in orbit, your body is in a state of complete weightlessness, you are traveling to the northeast at 18,000 miles per hour. Do you have any questions?

MRS. SMITH (CONCERNED)

Are you *sure* my slip isn't showing?

CONTROL CENTER (IGNORING HER QUESTION)

Our tracking stations indicate you are now over Europe —

MRS. SMITH (IN AWE)

Think of it, my first trip to Europe!

CONTROL CENTER

Mrs. Smith, we'd like you to make some detailed observations at this point. You see, you're now passing over Communist China.

MRS. SMITH

Well, I can see all of China. And — and I think I've discovered something important.

CONTROL CENTER

(ANXIOUSLY)

Yes, yes, what is it?

MRS. SMITH

Communist China isn't really red

— it has sort of an orange cast to it!

CONTROL CENTER
(EXCITEDLY)

Wait a minute! I'm switching now directly to the White House, Mrs. Smith. The next voice you hear will be the President of the United States.

MRS. SMITH (ALMOST PANICKING)

Oh, dear. And I forgot to go to the hairdresser's this morning, too.

PRESIDENT

Mrs. Smith, the United States salutes you. The whole world is anxiously awaiting the first words of the American woman astronaut — or is it astronette? What is your message to the people of the world?

MRS. SMITH (HALTINGLY, CHOKED WITH EMOTION)

I'm having . . . a . . . wonderful time . . . wish you were here.

PRESIDENT (GRAVELY)

Words to live by, Mrs. Smith. What about your view of the moon?

MRS. SMITH

It looks like a nice place to visit, sir, but I wouldn't want to live there.

PRESIDENT

Do you have a statement to the *women* of the world?

MRS. SMITH

To all who have wondered why I, a wife and the mother of four chil-

dren, would take the great risks involved to become the first American woman astronaut — or is it astronette? — my answer is simply: I'll do *anything* to get out of the house!

PRESIDENT

Thank you. Now, I'll switch you —

MRS. SMITH

Oh, Mr. President, may I ask you something confidentially?

(SHE WHISPERS HER MESSAGE TO THE PRESIDENT)

PRESIDENT

Yes, I'll tell them . . . Control, have this woman home by five o'clock.

CONTROL CENTER

Control Center to Mrs. Smith; Control to Mrs. Smith. You've completed your first orbit. Prepare for second orbit.

MRS. SMITH (PEEVED)

My good man, are you insinuating there was something wrong with the first?

CONTROL CENTER

(HELPLESSLY)

No, I . . . Oh well, bring her down.

MRS. SMITH (ELATED)

How did I do? Think I'll pass my test?

CONTROL CENTER

We'll have to leave that to the inspector.

MRS. SMITH

Do you think . . . ?

THE WOMAN ASTRONAUT

CONTROL CENTER
(HORRIFIED)

Mrs. Smith. Really!

MRS. SMITH

Are you sure it won't help? After all, how much can he make in a civil service job like that. He can certainly use it. It's not as if —

CONTROL CENTER
(INTERRUPTING)

It just isn't done, Mrs. Smith. You can't bribe the inspector! Now,

prepare to re-enter the atmosphere. You'll be landing at any moment. And it's only a little past four o'clock. You'll be home by five, if the traffic isn't too bad. By the way, would you mind telling why it was so important for you to keep this appointment?

MRS. SMITH

Why certainly. My driving lesson, of course!

CURTAIN



IMPORTANT NOTICE

Wartime paper rationing makes it impossible to print enough copies of this magazine to meet the demand. To be sure of getting YOUR copy, place a standing order with your regular newsdealer.

Every effort is made to see that your copy of this magazine reaches you in time — but there may sometimes be an occasional slight delay due to wartime transportation difficulties. Please bear with us during this emergency. Your cooperation is appreciated.

Industrious William F. Nolan, who was our managing editor through the first three issues of GAMMA, has vacated this post to take on a fuller schedule. Right now he's editing an original science-fiction anthology for Avon Books, *Man Against Tomorrow*, and revising a science-fiction comedy for the screen, *Gorf! Gorf! Gorf!* (which, he tells us, is Frog spelled backwards three times). He'll be in *The Fifth Pan Book of Horror Stories*, due out from England in '65, and rates the honor roll in the current Judy Merrill *Ninth Annual Year's Best SF*.

He has a crime-suspense novel all plotted and ready to go, and says this is his next major project. This book will mark Nolan's initial plunge into novelistic fiction. A collection of his showbiz personality profiles, *Sinners and Supermen*, will be coming out soon, and he is working on more non-fiction volumes. All in all, it's a very busy schedule.

However, as the following story proves, he has not completely deserted us here at GAMMA. He wrote this one just for our fourth issue, and it's a tart, tight little job. We think you'll like it.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

William F. Nolan

On the way back to Level 12, in the spacecab, Donald Spencer couldn't resist the impulse to sing. The android pilot looked curiously at him, and Spencer smiled.

"I'm just happy," he told the android. "Bought a rather expensive wedding present today — to celebrate the end of bachelorhood. I've been a married man for exactly —" He checked his wrist. "—six

hours and twenty-seven minutes."

"Congratulations," said the pilot. "I hope that you and your wife will live happily ever after."

Spencer nodded at this ancient response. Feed an android information and the standard cliches emerge. But it *was* something to think about . . . living happily ever after.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

Paula Spencer impatiently watched her husband step out of the humming spacecab. He waved a greeting as the Walk brought him swiftly down to her Level. Then he was in her arms.

"Well . . . where *is* it?" she demanded in mock-anger, stepping back. "You said you were going out to buy us a wedding present."

"And so I did." Spencer pointed skyward. "It's up there."

"What's up where?"

"Our wedding present," he grinned. "I bought us an asteroid."

"Don — you're joking!"

"Twenty thousand credits is no joke," he said. "We are now the legal owners of Asteroid K-157 in the Luani Cluster."

Stunned, Paula blinked at him. "But can we afford it?"

"It's a solid investment, honey," Spencer assured her. "Nobody loses money on asteroids these days. Now, I've arranged everything. We leave tonight for the Cluster. Our living quarters are all set up and waiting . . . so how's about a smile for your rich new husband?"

"Oh, I'll do better than that," Paula said — and brought her lips softly to his.

The trip out to the Cluster was perfect. As their new home swung into sight on the ship's wide view-screen, Donald Spencer knew that he'd made a shrewd purchase. In ten years an asteroid would fetch at least 50,000 credits on the Earth market. The furiously-expanding population guaranteed it. Some of his business friends had been skeptical, warning him against the deal, telling him that no one really knew much about the Luani Cluster, that he might run into trouble there — but Spencer ignored them. They were simply jealous of his business ability. In a few years Luani would be completely settled, and real estate would soar.

"Ready, darling?" he asked.

Paula Spencer nodded excitedly.

The couple shook hands with the Captain, then transferred to their personal landing craft. Spencer raised a hand — and a section of the passenger rocket's outer hull slid back. The small silver craft bulleted toward K-157, leaving the giant ship behind to continue its galactic voyage.

The landing was smooth — and Donald Spencer took his wife's hand after the atomic motor had stilled.

"Happy?"

"You *know* I am, Don."

"Then, c'mon. Meet your asteroid!"

They scrambled out of the ship. The air was heavy, but breathable. In rising waves, the tall blue trees and multi-colored vegetation of Asteroid K-157 pressed around them, all but engulfing their tiny space craft.

"I had a section cleared for us," Spencer told his wife. "The house is just beyond those trees."

"I can hardly *wait* to see it!" Paula said, running ahead of him across the springy green soil.

He joined her at the clearing's edge, smiling at her reaction. Paula clapped her hands together in delight.

"Don, it's wonderful . . . all I'd hoped for!" she said, hugging him.

The new house was low and modern, sculptured to the alien soil, a flat plastibrick structure gleaming under double suns. As they approached it, the front door slid silently open for them.

"All the comforts of Earth," said Spencer. "Even a microfilm library."

"Are we . . . alone here?" Paula asked.

"Absolutely. The last of the building crew was due out yesterday. The entire place is ours."

She darted through the house,

exclaiming at all the latest electronic marvels. In the bedroom, she turned to face him. "We're going to make this the most *tremendous* honeymoon any couple ever had."

"That," he grinned, "will be a pleasure."

Later that night Donald Spencer awoke to find the bed empty beside him. He got up quickly, calling Paula's name. When she failed to answer he pulled on his robe and rushed outside into the bright moonlight.

"Paula — are you out here?"

Then Spencer saw her, standing at the edge of the clearing, facing the massed line of blue trees.

"Darling, I was worried." He put a hand on her shoulder.

She turned calmly, the moonlight filling her eyes. "I needed some fresh air. The room was stifling."

"I just got worried. Sure you're all right?"

Paula didn't reply, turning slowly away from him. Spencer was puzzled; strangely uneasy, yet nothing seemed to be wrong.

"Let's go back to the house."

"No," the girl said firmly. "I want to stay out here."

"But —"

"You go in if you wish."

Spencer shrugged, a little angry.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

He walked back, trying to pinpoint the difference he had noticed in Paula. She had somehow changed . . .

"Exactly *how* have I changed, Donald?"

He spun around; she had followed him back. Then he gasped; how had she known —

"— what you were thinking?" She finished his mental question. "Because I can read your mind now, of course."

She stood there in the doorway, framed in soft moonlight, smiling at him as a mother smiles at her child.

"It's true," she said. "I can also move faster than you can. I'm much stronger. In fact, I could easily kill you with one blow. Easily."

"Good God," said Spencer. "What kind of nonsense is this?"

"Not nonsense. Fact. All of it can be yours, too. The trees will accept you, I know they will."

Spencer began to speak, but she raised a silencing hand.

"I walked out for air, earlier, while you slept — but it was really not for air at all. The trees had called me. They wanted me to become part of them, part of this place . . . and so I did."

"Paula, what are you telling me?"

"That this asteroid is alive. That the blue trees are alive, and have mental powers far beyond our own. They called me tonight, and I went out to them, ate the fruit I found on their branches. Then I was one of them. I'm sure they want you too, Don. Go to them . . ."

"You're just tired. The trip, the new house . . . Maybe in the morning we can —"

"In the morning," she told him, "I won't be here. At least not as you see me. The mutation will be complete by then. This creature you call Paula will be gone; I'll be part of *them*."

She extended a hand. Spencer saw that she held a triangular piece of fruit, which cast a subtle blue glow in the darkness.

"We're in a new Garden of Eden," she said softly. "Eat this and you'll be free, as I am free."

Spencer moved back from her. He believed Paula now; she *had* changed, and something of this asteroid had effected that change. The Luani Cluster was undeveloped, wholly alien; no one could specify exactly what man would encounter here . . . That was one of the risks. He knew he'd made a terrible error in seeking out this place, that because of his error the woman he had loved was lost to

him. Paula was no longer his wife — no longer human.

“Well, Don?”

“I — I don’t want to join you,” he said, watching her cold eyes. “I’ll leave in the morning. The house, the asteroid is yours. Everthing.”

She laughed, and a sudden chill made him shiver beneath his robe.

“You’ll never leave. No one can. All the others — the construction crew — they’re out . . . with the trees. By morning you’ll be one of us.”

“Then I won’t wait for morning. I’ll go now. I can make contact with a passenger ship near Ariel and —”

“You’re acting like a fool, Don.”

Her voice was edged. Whatever possessed her was angry.

Spencer turned, entered the bedroom, and hurriedly began to dress. Paula watched him from the doorway, unsmiling, silent.

He walked quickly past her, out to the waiting space craft.

“Paula . . . goodbye.”

“Not goodbye, Don. There’ll never be a goodbye for us.”

Spencer mounted the ladder, opened the airlock, put one foot inside the rocket. Then, on impulse, he turned.

The trees seemed much closer.

“They are,” Paula said, reading his thought. “You only have a few

seconds, Don. Eat from the tree, or —”

“Or what?” he demanded.

“Or be destroyed with the rocket.”

“Go to hell!” said Spencer as he closed the airlock.

Outside, the trees were all around the silver ship; the clearing had completely vanished.

Sweating and impatient, Spencer turned to the controls — then paused. He slowly raised his head. Something . . . someone was calling him with an urgency he could not resist. Something wanted him . . .

The trees. The trees wanted him.

Moving with a calm deliberation, Spencer opened the lock. They waited for him, offering their shining blue branches in the bright moonlight, offering immortality.

He climbed down the ladder, putting out a hand toward Paula, toward the fruit of the tree.

Hungrily, he ate of the fruit.

Paula welcomed him into her arms. “Now, my darling, we’re together again. Forever.”

Spencer smiled at her, then looked at the trees. He wondered why he had been unwilling to accept his destiny; men were so weak and foolish . . . so hopelessly *mortal*.

And, on Asteroid K-157 of the Luani Cluster, Donald and Paula Spencer lived happily ever after.

James Stammers is a pseudonym for a California C.P.A. and Doctor of Law who contributes frequently to science-fiction magazines. He has been writing for twenty-one years during intervals seized from his professional practice. He is married and has three children. He has lived on four continents, holds a black belt in Judo from the Kodokan in Tokyo, and is interested in oriental metaphysics.

DON'T TOUCH ME I'M SENSITIVE

James Stammers

He fell over the empty doorway, put his elbow through my telescreen, recovered onto the master-switchboard, put out the City lights, and fell to rest on a period aluminum chair, crushing it into an over-size party puzzle.

"Gee," he said. "President James, I guess I'm just not used to city living yet."

I waited while some sort of order was restored, the City relit, the telescreen replaced and a sturdy chair shoved under Huckelberry Waterstone Smith. He sat in it like the Lincoln Memorial half-finished in very rough granite. One of my secretaries was so busy look-

ing at him she walked into the door. As President of Personnel, it is my duty to be observant, to sense these delicate changes of human relationship, to foster sensitivities, calibrate the nuances of emotional engagement and record the lot so we have the goods on someone when we want to fire him. Or her.

"Thank you, Petita. That will be all, for the moment."

She wiggled out, still looking back at this specimen of Apollonian over muscled rough-hewn arrival from the outback of Space.

I picked up his microtape, noticing, by chance, a reflection of my own pure egg-contoured head,

bald of barbaric hair, product of eighteen City-generations, masterful, wise, discerning and crafty enough to be one of the fourteen Presidents of G.L.C. Services Inc. I made a note questioning Petita's capacity for objective value-judgment, thought of her a little longer, and reluctantly turned back to Huckleberry Waterstone Smith.

"May I call you Huck?"

It is Company Policy to be friendly and democratic, human and warm, sincere and considerate. So long as the work gets done.

"Guess so," he said.

"You arrived yesterday from Ur-sus Major, triple-Earth scale heavy gravity planet 56738299?"

"Huh?"

"Your father is a Conservator," I said respectfully and patiently. "You grew up in the Natural Zone."

"Sure did."

"Well, Huck, what do you think of the City?"

"It was sort of foggy when we got in. Guess I haven't seen any of the City yet."

"My boy," I said carefully. "The City to which I refer is the City of G.L.C. Services Inc. in which you now are. Running from vertical blocks 19 to subsurface 24, bounded by B.L.C. Services Inc., R. L. C. Services Inc. and Y. L. C. Services Inc. three dimensionally, is

the City. We are just one large happy family run like a large happy, though taut, ship. The whole Earth is composed of such Cities, edge to edge, under and over mountain, sea and, possibly to a surveyor, plain to plane."

"Sort of crowded," he said.

"Very apt. You have a gift for finding the root of the matter, Huck. Now, I know your time is valuable. What would you like to do?"

"About what," he asked.

"Work."

"Oh! Guess I want to be a Space Warden, like Pa. How long will it be before I can get out of here?"

I sighed. Decisions, decisions. I punched the Company Policy machine and listened to the quiet voice seeping into my engrafted Company ear — hidden plastically behind my unobtrusive left natural ear, itself delicately convoluted by centuries of City living.

'Company Policy is,' whispered the record, 'to keep employees happy but if unavoidable to tell the truth.'

"Do you recall your grades in mathematics, Huck?"

"I passed third grade matrix coordinate calculus."

"But only third grade."

"Guess so."

"And Space Wardens have to be

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able to figure four dimensional astrophysics in their head, or they'd be lost one hour after the start of every mission."

"Heck," said Huckelberry Waterstone Smith scratching his head. "Guess that's why Pa kept beefing about maths."

"Advanced mathematics," I affirmed, "is what the a-b-c used to be."

"The who?"

"The alphabet. Oh, I suppose you don't read?"

"Guess not. Never had time on Apollo."

"Never mind, my boy," I said kindly. "We have several illiterates in every office in G.L.C. Numbers will carry you through any civilised society. I think, subject to my colleagues agreement, I will start you in the micromail transmitting rooms."

"You mean I'm not going to get out of here?"

"Out!" I said, shocked. "Do you realize most people spend their lives as consumers, vainly trying to get into any G.L.C. or another Company City. If it were not for your father . . ."

"Gee, President James, I never meant . . ."

"Please wait in the anteroom," I snapped, and tabbed an incoming message on my darkscreen.

'Mr. President, Personnel, G.L.C. Services Inc. from Mr. President, Outside Services, G.L.C. Services Inc. Jim, please tell that secretary of yours to watch her color codes. We have another jurisdictional dispute with B.L.C. and Y.L.C. because of a mistranscription from your office. These Inter City problems must be avoided, Jim. See you for conference at your convenience, Chuck. Message ends.'

I sighed and buzzed Petita into my office.

She came, wiggling and giggled when she saw Smith still sitting in the chair in front of my audience couch.

I tutted reprovngly and she turned her large blue eyes towards me.

"Petita, how long is it since I promoted you into G.L.C. from your Happy Consumer Center?"

"Ooo, two years, Mr. President."

"And what does G.L.C. stand for?"

"G.L.C. Services Incorporated is the greatest of the Cities and services with incomparable efficiency all green lasser contacts on Earth," she rolled off automatically.

"And B.L.C.? And Y.L.C.?"

"They service blue lasser contacts . . and yellow lasser contacts, President James"

"Why?" I asked.

"I . . . why, I don't know. They just do."

"Because," I explained patiently, "we live in a specialized age in which all Cities are equal and none must have a monopoly of any significant economic sector."

"Oh," she said.

"In other words, don't send a green lasser contact job to a blue or yellow lasser contact city, or the other way round. A lasser contact is a sort of wire made of light and carries current. Some are one color, some are another color. Just don't muddle them, that's all."

She smiled and nodded as if she understood.

"President James," she said, trying to be helpful. "There's something the matter with the optics in my office, I thought you ought to know."

"Thank you," I said. "Call Internal Service Optics. And take Huckelberry Waterstone Smith out with you, while I go into conference about his appointment."

"But . . ."

"That's all, Petita."

I revolved on my couch and had a long conference, as Company Policy prescribed, on whether Smith should micromail vertical or horizontal transmissions and wheth-

er he was entitled to sit on a stool, type M23bar4, or a stool, type M23bar3. The conference concluded in the best traditions of the Company with mutual invitations to a symbolic meal.

I was irritated, and almost forgot to smile, when I revolved back again and saw Smith still sitting in the chair.

"I thought I asked you to wait outside?" I said politely.

He did not answer.

I peered carefully at him. I took off my viewers, polished them, put them back on my pupils, and looked again.

I could see the chair Smith was sitting on and the rug and the far wall through Smith.

I buzzed Petita in.

"Is anything the matter with our young friend?" I asked casually.

"Oh, no, President James. He's quite happy, watching a comic in my office."

I indicated the chair Smith was still sitting in.

"Oooo!"

We both peered closely at Smith, then Petita wiggled back to the door and looked into her office.

"He's there," she whispered. "Oooo, Jim, come and stand here."

I came as quickly as I could, being unused to biped activity in my senior administrative position.

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Standing beside her, I could see a whole line of Huckelberry Waterstone Smith, arrested images like an old stroboscopic film, flowing from the door to the replaced tele-screen, to the master-switchboard, onto the floor and up onto the new chair, then up from the chair and out of my office and into Petita's, to the couch where he was sitting watching comic-film.

I walked hesitantly through the line of images. They remained unaltered and looked as lifelike from the other side.

"That's what I meant about the optics, President James," Petita whispered. "It's some sort of after-image, 'like looking at a bright light and then at a dark space.'"

She might be right. But I said nothing until I checked the Company Policy machine on latent neurasthenia and mental collapse at the Executive level. Company Policy was none too reassuring on the matter.

"Internal Service Optics," I smiled into the desk communicator, "I wonder if you would be kind enough to check out the optics in my office."

"Right away, Mr. President," clacked the machine.

"Sit down and say nothing," I told Petita.

We waited until the serviceman arrived.

His eyes flickered at the lines of images as he came into the office, then at me, back to the images, back to me.

"Hmph," he said. "Good morning, Mr. President."

And he went round the office checking the optics as if nothing was the matter.

"What exactly was the trouble?" he asked carefully not looking at the images and fiddling with a switch.

"My secretary thought the optics dimmed once or twice," I lied.

He fiddled some more with the switch.

"There," he said. "That should correct it."

His eyes wandered towards the images, and he closed his mouth firmly.

"Thank you," I said, and he left.

"Ooo, he saw them," whispered Petita.

"Of course. Ask that young man to come back in here."

Petita wiggled rapidly out of the office, the comic film shut off, there was a pause, and Huckelberry Waterstone Smith appeared in the doorway, superimposing himself on his own images coming in and going out. He was appreciably more solid than his images.

"Yes?" he said.

"Well?" I asked.

"Oh," he said. "You mean these?" He waved a large hand at his images, leaving a curved trail of images of his large hand in the air as he did so.

"Yes, these," I said.

"Doc said they'd do no harm. It's just a side-effect of being raised under heavy-gravity. Just fractional molecular dispersion at a viral level."

"Who said so?" I demanded.

"Doc."

"What medic was that?"

"The Doc on Appollo. They go away after a time. You get used to them, I guess."

I took a deep breath.

"Do you mean to tell me," I asked carefully, "that you leave a trail of pictures of yourself behind everywhere you go?"

"Guess you could put it that way."

"Can't you stop it?"

"No," he said, shuffling his feet. "Do I still get the job?"

I thought that one through to an unpleasant conclusion.

The conference on Smith had already been held. If I tried to reverse the decision now, I would have to show my colleagues these after-images. And like the service-

man, they would prefer not to see them in case their own mental processes were suspected. And there I'd be, half-way towards being retired as an unreliable enurotic.

"Take Huckelberry down to his new station, Petita," I said, and off he went, leaving an image of himself scratching his head in the doorway in addition to the row of images already in the office.

My office was getting too full of Huckelberry Waterstone Smith.

I declared it closed for repair, moved to my emergency office and tried to forget the whole thing.

After two weeks, the images in my office were no more than faint shadows but there was a mounting barrage of complaints about the vertical micromail. I went down myself to the small cell in which Smith was located, if not working. The evidence was in the air.

The transmitting cell was full of images, almost all of them leading to a comic viewer and very few of them anywhere near the vertical micromail transmitter. A stack of untouched messages piled up in an undisturbed corner of the cell.

I fired him.

"Gee," he said. "Where do I go now?"

"My secretary will arrange your transportation to the appropriate

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Happy Consumer Area," I told him.

"Sounds fine," he said.

If you like wearing ruffles, lace and silly hats, and as many other evidences of conspicuous consumption that the organizers can think up, you might like a Happy Consumer Area. Of course, you had to keep consuming. You had to grow accustomed to a permanent background of 'use it up, use it up,' 'get a new one now!', 'wear it out, wear it out'. 'Everything must be re-cycled faster, faster.' Oh, consuming was hard work. Its social value lay in the necessary turnover of reuse material. After all, only the top ten feet of the Earth's surface were used, in general, in the first five thousand years of our history. It's the same molecules that made the dinosaur makes us, and other cliches. So nothing can be allowed to stand stagnant and unused. We are short of raw materials of all kinds. And it is the happy consumers who get the last possible use out of an article before it is transmuted and recycled as something else, which in turn when it gets out of date must be happily consumed and recycled.

Stale food, the happy consumer's eat; old inventions they wear out; scrap cloth they fray with use; appliances not quite junk, they turn to junk. It is a busy life being an

unemployed happy consumer. By unemployed, I mean unemployed by a City, not a good Company-man, just a happy consumer.

"I hope you find it so," I said and went back to my office.

It was the day after Smith left the Company that Petita complained of a slight sore throat. And the day after that, she started leaving images of herself behind her wherever she went.

This could have been awkward, if I had not noticed Petita's trail before my wife entered the office. As it was, I was just able to stop Siliva from seeing my work couch, on which for Company reasons which are irrelevant Petita's image was reclining in a way the ignorant might have misinterpreted. Petita had also, it was clear in the air, had occasion to adjust her stockings and her zippers, for reasons utterly unknown to me, of course.

It was, naturally, an utter coincidence that shortly afterwards I myself developed a slight cold and began to leave images of myself wherever I went and whatever I did.

It was only when I played back the tape of Smith's conversation that I noticed he had said 'molecular dispersion at a viral level', and for the first time the signific-

ance of 'viral' struck me. Viral spelt virus contagion, apparently.

I suppose there may be many people who have not had the experience of coming into a room through a solid-looking image of themselves going out. Nor sat down for a symbolic meal beside yourself swallowing in distinct and graduated impression the previous fifteen meals taken at that same spot. Matters of personal toilet, I will pass discreetly over. Even that our family rooms on subsurface 23 became a woven pattern of myself coming and going.

And not only myself. Silliva, my wife, caught the contagion quite quickly. And there she was, plump, pink and curved, in attitudes that surprised me and made her, after her first blushing embarrassment, giggly and somewhat lewd. It was not altogether unpleasant.

But it was in the office that the greatest benefits showed. I made all the personnel shake hands with each other until everyone had developed image-production. And from that moment, I had a phenomenally productive and efficient department. When your unnecessary movements, your paper-shuffling and stylus-grinding, are there in the air for all to see for what they were, a waste of time and motion, it is marvellous how much

work you do. And how little impropriety shows up around the ozone-coolers, once I had fired three men on the evidence of their tweaking gestures towards Petita as she passed. No one saw them do anything, but anyone could see what they did.

Naturally, when the phenomenon was sufficiently established, I advised my colleagues, my fellow Presidents. Perhaps not as soon as they could have wished but then it is my duty to maintain accurate personnel files on everyone, including them, and their movements were most revealing before they learned what had happened to them. The air of the office was filled with evidence of conferences off the records, of visits to the storage vaults for information out of hours, even for moral delinquency with pretty little females in their staff. The very idea.

Unfortunately, the images were not long-lasting. After five or six weeks the infection seemed to wane, the new images became fainter and finally stopped. Efficiency fell off.

So I sent for Huckelberry Waterstone Smith.

He arrived in my office, trailing clear bright images and wearing a vast feathered hat, hip boots,

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and a lace jerkin. Someone has to happily consume the previous seasons extravagancies from Costumes Male Social Leisure Inc. and their affiliates.

"Gee," he said miserably. "Can you get me out of this?"

"I might," I said. "In fact, I will."

I appointed him doorchecker, with instructions to shake the hand of everyone who came into the office or left it.

"Gee, President James, thanks, can I take this stuff off?"

I gave orders for a regulation Company Policy suit appropriate to his rank and occupation, and confirmed the order by conference with my colleagues.

He rapidly reinfected the whole City, and this time they stayed infected. According to the City Medical Corps, whatever Smith had was endemic in him and, we hoped, incurable. His presence was a constant source of infection, a guarantee of office efficiency, of clear renewed images. Every man his own faithful recorder. Marvelous.

Huckelberry became popular in the City. I came across his images in many select and private rooms among the images of high level administrators like myself.

Indeed, it became impossible to go anywhere without seeing his large image, even in my own home.

He certainly moved around, the result no doubt of being raised on a large and open planet. On Earth, the pressure of populations enclosed in the Cities have made us insular, jealous of our privacy, slow to welcome strangers beyond the sincere warmth demanded by Company Policy.

I was not too surprised to find a deputation of Company sociologists waiting for me in my office one morning.

"And what can I do for you gentlemen?" I asked.

There were six of them, and the effect of so many people with repeating images, superimposed on everyone who had visited my office in the past weeks, and interspersed by trails of Petita, looking wistful always a discreet distance from my own images, made me dizzy. I grabbed the corner of my couch and closed my eyes.

"Excuse me," I said.

"That was our point, Mr. President," said the senior sociologist, stroking his black beard. "The whole City is becoming disturbed and Happy Consumer Area XII is on the verge of rioting. That was the Area the man Smith was in."

"Why?"

"Too many images, too great a social readjustment. There is no privacy with these images, no se-

clusion, no-one is ever truly alone. Instead of private social contacts in private places, the only privacy now is to be found in a crowd, where there are so many images that none is distinguishable. Many people spend their leisure travelling up and down in the public elevators and transits."

"But surely the interests of Company efficiency . . ." I began.

"Excuse me, Mr. President. We grant that point. Also the remarkable increase in divorces, the virtual abolition of drunkenness . . . who can stand to see the morning after what he looked like the night before . . . the fall in driving offences among carriers . . . their images prove what they did or failed to do. But against this we must set the complete collapse of the entertainment Corporations . . . any theatrical performance becomes a hopeless jumble . . . and the enormous pressures towards introspection. Even our most unbounded extroverts cannot help re-examining their every act over and over again. It is all recorded in the air for them to see. Mental collapse has reached a record and dangerous level, Mr. President."

"Oh, very well," I said. "What do you recommend?"

"Crime."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Use the man Smith in crime detection. Instead of infecting normal Companymen, let him infect every passee from a correctional City. Consider, Mr. President, the difficulties of robbery. When your image is there before and after the act."

"Disguises?"

"Have to be taken off eventually. Proceeds have to be spent. Crimes must be planned. If the criminal is imaging, the police can start at the scene of the crime and trace the criminal both ways, before and after the crime. Murder, other than felony murder, is a crime but not the act of a criminal, so we will still have those to deal with. But we already have a great increase in murders because of the increase in frayed nerves and loss of temper domestically. Other crimes will be reduced to first offenders who thought of it for themselves without criminal conspirators. . . ."

"Mr. President, allow the infection to die down, except for known criminals."

"I will consult with my colleagues," I said, but I knew the answer. Huckleberry Waterstone Smith was about to embark on a new career. And at least I would not have to see his large, overhandsome torso lurking in every social apartment I visited.

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My colleagues agree with me with amazing unanimity.

Huckelberry Waterstone Smith refused.

"Gee," he said. "My father wouldn't like that."

He shuffled his feet in a pool of overlapping feet images and peered out at the tops of the Cities, block beyond block to the horizons around us. I had taken him up to the 19th vertical block in the hope of awakening his sense of power and responsibility. Some people react favorably to a high view of small mortals far below.

"Nope," Smith said. "I don't see I should mix with criminals. They're no friends of mine. And my father said I should never shake hands with anyone who wasn't a friend."

I could not budge him from this somewhat frontier viewpoint.

"Think of the benefits to society," I urged. "The abolition of crime. An honest world."

"See them," Smith said, pointing down to the transits on the fourth vertical block.

I looked down at the milky trail of innumerable images tracking each way on the transit.

"That's what I've done to them," Smith said.

"What?"

"Turned people into a sort of animal. Ever see a snail?"

"A what?"

"Snail," he said firmly. "A monopod that leaves a slimy trail. Guess you never saw a Natural Zone."

"I was talking to a couple of young kids," Smith said, scratching his head and his leg and leaving a forest of arms and hands in the air around him. "And they said I'd just about ruined their lives. There's no romance down there any more. They can't kid around the way young people should. Anything they do is there for the whole City to see. Gets pretty embarrassing, they said."

"In every advance of society," I recited from Company Policy, "there are individual adjustments to be made. Think of the improvement in our work schedule. You could do the same for the police, that's all I'm asking."

"Gee, I don't see how I could do that. No, I don't."

He was disappearing in a cloud of his own images, so I took him down to the Stimulant Room. There were several of the girls from my office lying relaxedly enjoying their stimulant drink. They all, including Petita I noticed, smiled and waved at Smith. I sat him

in a corner where he could not move around so rapidly in a flurry of images.

"I don't know what to do with you," I said. "Stop gawking at the girls."

"Gee, I was just being friendly," he grumbled.

"Well don't."

I decided to make one last effort.

"You realize, Smith, I cannot let you mix with Companymen any more? And I cannot send you back to a Happy Consumer Area. Your disease is disrupting the whole City."

"I thought you were pretty happy with my imaging," he said.

"I was. But you've turned the whole City upside down. The sociologists tell me your disease is driving our people neurotic. The only privacy is in public. Public entertainment is impossible. All our microfilms of people are blurred and unreadable. The whole Record system is breaking down. I'm bound to put you in isolation, so that the City can get back to work."

"Guess so," he said.

"Unless you will take the opportunity to be of real service to the City and join the Police."

Smith sat still for a while, apparently thinking.

"No," he said. "I guess I can't do that."

"Well, my boy," I said in the immortal words of Company Policy. "I'm sorry it didn't work out but it has been nice knowing you."

And I signalled for the Reallocators to come and take him away. Far away, deep in the minor clerical levels of the 18th subsurface block, where he could be a button-pusher of low social status among the machines and electronics. His supervisor was ordered to wear a mask and gloves during the weekly inspection visit. And that, I thought, was the end of trouble from Huckelberry Waterstone Smith. I thought.

My own images faded out within a couple of weeks and then I was free from imaging. It was a great relief. I could move, visit, work or just sit, without leaving a visual record of every gesture. Marvellous.

My colleagues, I noticed in conferences, were unusually affable. The offices settled down placidly, faces became less taut and haggard, and the sociologists reported that normal social patterns were re-establishing themselves.

Some people seemed to have greater powers of recovery than others. There were still images all over the City. My own family rooms were heavily traced by Silliva, but I love my wife and did not

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mind seeing so much of her. For a while.

The diseases seemed to be taking a long time to die out in Petita, too. But a permanent record of her wiggling through the air of my office was itself a pleasure.

After a couple of months, though, I began to worry in case the disease had become permanent. Silliva and Petita were still imaging strongly and clearly. Four or five of my colleagues who had been entertaining Smith frequently in the early days were having the same trouble. Their wives and daughters were still imaging and, by contact, were reinfesting them.

I called in the Medical Corps.

"This disease must be eliminated," I ordered.

So they dispersed my colleagues to different Vacation Cities and studied the whole matter carefully. There was, they said, no trace of permanent infection. Merely a cycle of reinfection which the dispersal to Vacation should break.

I managed with a temporary secretary and a lonely suite of family rooms until they all returned, image free and normal. I could kiss Silliva and consult closely with Petita in a normal manner again without imprinting the air with every movement. The office fell off to its normal inefficient

human level, and I put Huckelberry Waterstone Smith out of my mind at last.

Then it broke out again. Petita, Silliva and the females of my colleagues' families began to image again.

"It seems, Mr. President," the Medical Corps reported. "That the same social strata is responsible."

"Trace it down," I said irritably.

"We have. All the females concerned meet and dance together."

"They what?"

"They dance together, by themselves. We've followed the trails carefully and they all lead to a jumble of images revolving round each other in a sort of dance."

"And then what?" I demanded.

"Then they go back to their family rooms and offices."

"And that's all?"

"That's all, Mr. President."

"But this is impossible."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"Oh, very well," I said. "I suppose I'll have to see for myself."

So I followed the trail Petita left, from my office to the little family room I had established for her, in the Company's interests, on the 2nd subsurface block. And from there to the Superstore blocks, across the City to the Recreation Theaters and into a Symbolic Banquet room, where her trail mingled

with the images of several other Companywomen, including Silliva. And there they were, in image, circling together in some sort of ballet dance in a hopeless confusion of images.

I stood there for a long time before it struck me that what goes in must come out. Following Petita's image trail from the office here was, in fact, going backwards down the way she had come. But how did she get there in the first place?

I walked slowly round the dancing images. And found there was no trace of Petita arriving but there were four separate trails of images of Petita leaving the confused dance. The same was true of Silliva.

The only distinction in an image trail was, of course, the way the image faced. The trail of a person walking one way was indistinguishable from the image of the same person walking backwards the other way. And there was the answer.

I followed the trail of Petita backwards and returned sadly to my office.

I tapped the interstellar communicator with a message to Conservator Smith out in Ursus Major.

'Regret advise you your son suffers from communicable disease

considered incurable also physically attractive to too many local females.'

And I spelled out the whole sad conspiracy among the Executive level Companywomen, their effort to muddle their trails and how I had traced them back to Huckelberry Waterstone Smith on the minor clerical levels of the 18th subsurface block. I tried to break the news as gently as possible to the Conservator. Obviously it would be a grave disappointment to him.

'Suggest,' I ended, 'immediate return to you in Natural Zone where social unrest minimal.'

The reply came super-priority with Conservator over-ride, crashing through the communication system in full exercise of Conservatorial rank.

'What in purple Pluto is my son doing on a minor clerical level? Reply.'

I consulted the Company Policy machine and held an urgent conference with my colleagues to draft a suitable answer.

'Mathematical education substandard.'

'Substandard for what? What is the matter with you senile idiots down there? Train my son as Space Warden immediately repeat immediately.'

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'Mathematics essential for Space Warden.'

'Why, you nincompoop?'

Why? I could not understand the question. Obviously a Space Warden had to navigate through space and solve spatial tensors and four dimensional astrophysics without a heavy battery of calculators. Or he would lose himself and his ship within an hour of blast-off. It was not enough to know where he was going, a Space Warden had to know where he was and where he had been.

I tried to explain this to the Conservator.

His reply, omitting the expen-

sive expletives, boiled down to this:

'How . . . can my son . . . get lost anywhere so long as he makes his own . . . trail . . . wherever he goes . . .'

And that is how G.L.C. Services Inc. played a historic part in creating our new Corps of Space Wardens, eliminating the years of mathematical training previously required by a simple touch from Chief Conservator Huckelberry Waterstone Smith. My office was the first to recognize his extraordinary talent and, I can truthfully say, to make wide use of his sensitive touch.

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

Brand new stories by some of your favorite authors:

Richard Matheson

Charles Beaumont

George Clayton Johnson

Since his previous literary appearance in GAMMA, Ron Goulart bravely decided to forsake the palm-treed sunshine of Los Angeles, California for the great cold steel canyons of New York City. After several months in the marketplace lining up assignments for the Goulart typewriter, he returned to California, this time to reside in his beloved San Francisco with his lovely redheaded wife and a two-year-old son.

His writing talents extend into many unexpected fields. As an example, every morning across America, several million sleepy people are confronted with *The Chex Press* printed on the back of cereal boxes; this was written by Goulart.

The following story can be read at breakfast or any other meal; Ron tells us it's the first story he's ever written about sinister Orientals.

THE HAND OF DR. INSIDIOUS

Ron Goulart

NOTE: I am pleased to acknowledge that I came in first in the recent competition to select the logical successor to Rex Sommers, immortal master of science-fantasy and international intrigue. It is an honor to be chosen to write these further adventures of Mr. Sommers' famous characters. I hope the millions who have read and loved *The Drums Of Dr. Insidious*, *The Mask Of Dr. Insidious* and *Insidious For President* will find something to their liking in these new adventures.

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Chapter One: Summons Out Of The Smog

A palpable miasma of evil shrouded the more fashionable parts of Beverly Hills and eye irritation was at an alarming level as the hour crept nearer midnight. It has long been my custom to enjoy an ice cream bar before retiring and so I was on that fateful night listening intently for the jocund bells of the Good Humor wagon on its last run. But all sound from the outside world had become muffled that night and no note of gayety reached me in my Beverly Hills lair.

THE HAND OF DR. INSIDIOUS

In the expectant hush nearby sounds seemed magnified indeed. It was for this reason that I heard the unmistakable sound of a tarantula tiptoeing across the patio toward me. I must explain that I am one of Hollywood's leading plastic surgeons and I often sit beside my nose shaped pool and sketch ideas for new faces. It was thus that I was occupied on that fearful near-midnight night when I heard the telltale sound of a poisonous spider creeping closer.

Very cautiously I inched my hand toward the pocket of my smoking jacket wherein I kept a few spare scalpels. Even as I, bathed in chill perspiration, inched my sinewy fingers nearer to the pocket I heard the unmistakable sound of the tarantula crouching to spring. I took a long careful breath, well believing it might be my last.

"Sit easy, old man," hissed a familiar voice and then I heard the unmistakable sound of a silencer.

Turning I found myself face to face with the cleverest undercover agent in the world, the well-known Ian Naismith. A giant of a man, tanned a rich cocoa brown, Naismith was such a crack spy that he worked not for one country but for all the larger Western powers. Three months for America, three

for Great Britain and so on, with two weeks off in July for fishing and recreation. "Naismith," I exclaimed. "That was a near thing."

"Yes," he replied, kicking the dead spider with an impressively shoed toe. "Big devil, wasn't he?"

Now that I noticed it, the spider was nearly two feet in diameter. "No wonder he had such a heavy tread."

"Only one man on this earth keeps spiders of such grotesque proportions," said my secret agent friend.

"I believe I can guess to whom you refer," I said, shuddering uncontrollably. "You allude to the man who, in poll after poll, comes out on top for the title of world's vilest villain. You are speaking of that man with the jade green eyes of a sinister cat, the high intellectual brow of a twisted Shakespeare, the moustache of an excessive Dali, the nose of a . . ."

"I mean the one and only Dr. Insidious," interjected Naismith, looking uneasily around him.

"That's who I meant, too," I said, somewhat crestfallen that I hadn't been allowed to catalogue the rest of that master fiend's features. "Speaking of Dr. Insidious, by the way. I thought that radioactive fungus of his gobbled you up in Macao last fall." Indeed,

now that I considered it I was stunned to see old Naismith alive and in fighting trim.

"I was fortunate enough to have time to dress up my bedding to resemble me," said Naismith.

"No bedding could have your savoir faire," I said, good-naturedly. "Come inside now and let's have an eggnog. I would suggest we split a pint of our favorite ice cream or sherbert but the Good Humor man is much overdue."

Naismith took my arm in his steel-like grip and hurried me within. "The Good Humor man will not call tonight," he said. "He was one of our boys, known fondly around secret agent circles, as 007. Dr. Insidious used his new fiendish heat ray on the poor beggar just a few scant moments ago."

"Oh," I said. "I had wondered why I had not heard the bells of the truck."

My friend shaded his metallic eyes for a second. "It was unpleasant. Poor 007 spreadeagled there in seventy-three quarts of melted ice cream."

"What was tonight's special flavor, by the way?"

"Banana nut."

"I was rather hoping for strawberry whirl. Well, we have important work afoot, do we not, Naismith?"

"Once again, Phoebus, you are only too correct."

My name is Dr. Maxwell Phoebus, Jr., for those of you who are new to the series. "I simply deduced, Naismith, that Dr. Insidious does not send out giant tarantulas for the mere sport of it."

"You don't know what he did to the St. Marelybone Waifs Home picnic," said Naismith, making a fist. "I tell you, Phoebus, that man is a constant source of irritation to me. His latest all-encompassing scheme is the most sinister and terrifying to date."

"Tell me," I encouraged.

Lighting his old familiar briar, Naismith flexed the muscles of his formidable chin and replied, "Dr. Insidious has taken a home in Beverly Hills."

I scoffed. "Come now, Naismith. They have zoning laws in this part of the country, you know."

"He bought the house through an agent," replied Naismith. "He even intends to send his daughter to one of the finest schools in the Greater Los Angeles area."

"The Daughter of Dr. Insidious?" I was stunned. We had met that singularly evil girl two novels back and the loathsome memory of her lingered yet like the palpable miasma of a decadent un-

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speakeableness. "This younger generation, Naismith, what is it coming to?"

"The apple never falls afar from the tree, Phoebus."

"Beg pardon?"

"Like father, like daughter."

"Oh, yes, I see," I answered, straining to keep up with his chain lightning mind. "But you have not yet told me, Naismith, why it is that Dr. Insidious has come to Hollywood."

"He is," said Naismith, "going to open a talent agency."

I fainted.

• • •

Chapter Two: The Agent's Kiss

I came to with the odor of cinnamon strong in my nostrils.

"Drink this, old man," said Naismith, proffering a healthful-looking eggnog, made as only his internationally skilled hands could make it.

"You must have been making a cruel joke," I said. "You can't seriously mean that Dr. Insidious is going into the talent agency business."

"Phoebus," said Naismith, his voice a harsh controlled ironlike whisper, "he will be bigger than the pre-chastised MCA, bigger

than General Artists Corporation. Already plans are in motion for the Dr. Insidious' talent agency to take over every major talent in Hollywood. He intends to form Insidious-Mirisch Pictures and eventually assimilate all other film companies. Then he will create the Insidious Broadcasting Company and, finally, Batten, Barton, Durs-tine and Insidious."

I stammered. "In that way he will control our minds, our lives, our destinies."

"Such is his intention."

"Now, Naismith, can even the all-powerful Dr. Insidious make the greats and near-greats of the show business capital do his bidding?"

"Four of our best men perished trying to learn the answer to the question you have just asked."

"Let me withdraw the question."

"No. I vow that 003,005,006 and 007 shall not have perished in vain."

"What of 004?"

"He's now an associate producer with Insidious Pictures."

"And what then is Dr. Insidious' secret?"

"All that we know," barked my friend, "is that the sinister new thing Dr. Insidious has devised to conquer Hollywood is called . . . *The Agent's Kiss*."

"The Agent's Kiss? What is it? A drug, a ray, a new sinister germ?"

Naismith shook his handsome head. "We know no more."

"An effort to penetrate Dr. Insidious' defences, to get within his walls, seems in order. Am I right, Naismith?"

Naismith chuckled. "Exactly, which is where you come into the picture, Phoebus. You see, for all his infinite command of diabolical cleverness, Dr. Insidious is not the show business expert he thinks he is. You are going to use your wonderful gift as a plastic surgeon to make us over to temporarily resemble two big name actors."

"What two actors?"

"Two who are no longer about," replied the suave secret agent. "I'm gambling that Dr. Insidious won't be aware of it. I'll pose as Clark Gable. You will become, for the sake of your country and possibly the whole free world, Wallace Beery."

I hesitated. Just then there was the unmistakable sound of a phone ringing. I unpronged the receiver and spoke into the mouthpiece, little dreaming what lay in store for me. "Hello?"

"Dr. Maxwell Phoebus, Jr.?" asked an operator with a soft throaty voice.

"Yes," I replied. There was

something naggingly familiar about that voice.

"I have a long distance call for you from Washington, D. C. Stand by."

What I heard next stunned me.

• • •

Chapter Three: A Familiar Voice

"But the President of the United States," I said to Naismith after I had numbly hung up from my recent telephone conversation.

"Yes," said my friend. "I'm afraid he now works for Dr. Insidious. What is worse that villain takes ten per cent of the President's salary as an agent's fee."

"What does he hope to accomplish?"

"Besides complete political control of our nation Dr. Insidious wants to have the President cut three comedy albums."

"The fiend. That's in questionable taste," I observed. "Say, though, if our President is now a dupe of Dr. Insidious, it would explain why he invited me to that sneak preview at Grauman's Chinese tomorrow night."

"Dr. Insidious has ordered him to fly here for the opening and at that premiere Dr. Insidious' play to gain control of our entire enter-

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tainment industry will no doubt be made."

"I forgot to ask the name of the movie."

"It makes little difference."

"You know something, Naismith," I said, reflectively, "there was something unmistakably familiar about the voice of the phone operator just now."

"Yes, it was more than likely Charisma herself."

I regret to report that I fainted again and it took two expertly mixed egg nogs to revive me this time. "Charisma?" I moaned when I was myself again.

"Forgive me, old man, for breaking it to you this way. The girl is alive and did not perish when the Orient Express was derailed late last year."

"I believed that Charisma, dupe that she was, was dead. I even broke down and sent flowers to that fiend, Dr. Insidious."

"Charisma didn't become Dr. Insidious' right hand by being foolish. She merely dressed up her bedding to resemble her and slipped out of her compartment window."

"I know the FBI and the CIA can't understand this," I said feebly. "In fact, I've had to explain it to three separate senate committees. The fact remains,

Naismith, that I deeply and sincerely love that woman, Charisma."

"She is the symbol of all that is dangerous and unwholesome in the opposite gender," said my friend. "Yet I understand how you feel."

"She has such lovely ankles."

Quite suddenly my servant, the trusted valet who had been with me since that unfortunate business in Amenhotep's tomb, rushed into the room. "Quickly, sir, there is little time," cried Assagai, brandishing a large coil of rope. "You and the good Mr. Tuan Naismith must tie selves to your chairs at once."

"Whatever for, Assagai?" I asked curiously.

"Beverly Hills is about to slide into the Pacific Ocean. Hurry." He advanced and made ready to fasten me to my lounging chair.

"Wait now, Assagai." I pointed out, "We are several miles from the ocean."

"So! You see through my little ruse," he sneered, leaping back and drawing a wicked knife from the folds of his white jacket. "Then I must take more desperate measures."

"Assagai. My devoted servant turning against me."

"Silence, foolish master," he

jeered. "I am now a member in good standing of the Santa Monica chapter of the assassins brotherhood."

"That's disloyal."

"Well, I joined on my day off." He tensed, ready to spring at us with his deadly knife. He never had the chance.

For the clever Naismith, while pretending to fill his pipe, had drawn his silenced pistol. "Duck, Phoebus," cried out Naismith as he quietly filled my until recently loyal servant with bullets.

I shook my head sadly. "This has been a night of surprises."

* * *

Chapter Four: The Sinister Premiere

In our impenetrable disguises as two Hollywood notables Naismith and I were, the next evening, stationed in front of the world-famed Grauman's Chinese Theater, signing autographs for the eager cheering throngs of onlookers.

Naismith nudged me suddenly with one of his steel like elbows. "See this now, Phoebus." He held an autograph album for my inspection.

I gasped. On the page opposite to that upon which Naismith was

about to sign was this inscription: "Best wishes to Bobbie, from Dr. Insidious." I clutched the eager teenage owner of the album by her slender sweater clad elbows and demanded, "The man who gave you this autograph. What did he look like?"

The pretty youngster chewed her gum ruminatively and replied, "He had the jade green eyes of a sinister cat, the high intellectual brow of a twisted Shakespeare, the moustache of . . ."

Naismith cut in with, "Inside at once, Phoebus."

Leaving behind a throng of disappointed cinema fanciers we rushed hurriedly inside.

The huge ornate theater, though seemingly filled with all the famous of Hollywood, was strangely silent. "Not a particularly outgoing bunch, these show business luminaries," I observed as we crept down a darkened theater aisle.

"Look more closely," chided Naismith.

"Good Lord." The whole vast place was filled not with living breathing Hollywood celebrities, but with dummies cleverly wrought from bedding dressed up in fashionable clothes.

Behind us now there began the unmistakable sound of a motion picture projector, whirring. Then

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upon the enormous screen flashed the old familiar face of our adversary. "So very clever, Naismith, to try to pull a childish trick and lure me into a trap," intoned the evil doctor. "However, if you look about you even more closely you will see that you are not in Grauman's Chinese Theater at all but in an ingeniously made duplicate that certain of my minions substituted for it early this morning while you and your secret agent cronies slept."

"He's guyed us sure enough," I gasped.

The doctor continued gloatingly. "Naismith, you and your fawning follower, the clumsy Dr. Phoebus, are in reality in one of my years-ahead experimental rocket ships. In less than two minutes the entire thing will take off for a remote spot in the galaxy and that will be fine for your meddling."

"A rocket ship shaped like Grauman's Chinese," I said. "You have to hand it to the man, Naismith."

"Ah, but watch this now," whispered Naismith.

Even as he spoke I saw that something was going wrong with the film of Dr. Insidious. The good doctor was casting basilisk-like glances off screen. Suddenly a voice cried, "Cut!" and five FBI men, two CIA agents and a selec-

tion of Los Angeles' finest burst into the hidden studio where Dr. Insidious had been filming.

"This all happened five hours ago," explained Naismith. "I let his hirelings go ahead with this little masquerade tonight and run the film, which they thought a complete message from their master, in order to trap them."

"We've made Dr. Insidious look the fool right enough," I observed with a smile.

"Exactly," replied Naismith, selecting a comfortable lounge chair to relax in.

"The only problem," I reflected, "is who was it then who signed that autograph book outside."

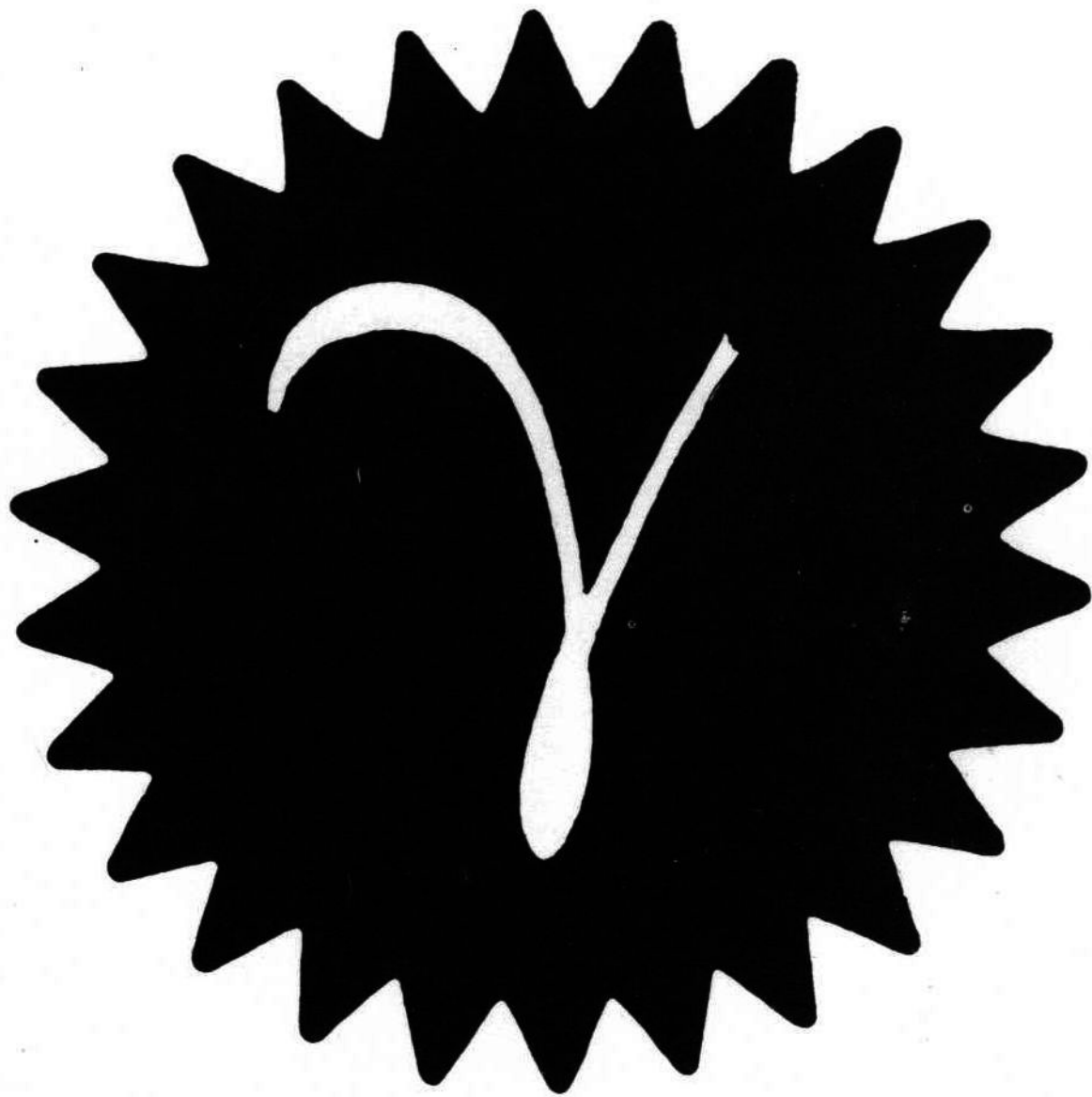
Naismith straightened. "Phoebus, I had completely forgotten that occurrence."

Over a loud speaker drifted the words, "Five, four, three, two, one." Then with a mighty roar the entire theater rose into the air.

"He's put one over on us," I had to admit.

Naismith nodded ruefully as we climbed higher and higher above the Earth. "We may be bound for the outer reaches of the galaxy, Phoebus," he said. "But at least we have saved Hollywood."

As it turned out, which you will learn in a later novel, Naismith was wrong about that, too.



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