

NUMBER TWO

DECEMBER

FIVE SHILLINGS

VISION OF TOMORROW



Hunted by men and beasts alike on the Prison Planet !

QUARRY

by E. C. TUBB

Jack
Wodhams



William
Temple



Lee
Harding



John
Rankine

VISION OF TOMORROW

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AHEAD OF REALITY

A short while ago, your editor, along with millions of other people all over the world, watched enthralled as television brought into our homes live coverage of the greatest adventure of mankind. The flight to the moon confounded the cynics who hitherto had regarded interplanetary travel as "science fiction nonsense." One could almost feel sorry for them in their discomfort, so it is not surprising that they should still be trying to discredit the school of writing that has brought them their present embarrassment and discomfiture.

"Now that space travel is a reality, the science fiction writer is out of business!" Thus runs their latest cry. It is, of course, quite untrue. For one thing, the sf writer is not confined to interplanetary stories—the whole of time and space and the human spirit can be his canvas. Psychiatry, time, surgery, telekinesis, telepathy, cybernetics, the past or the future—there are no limits to which the sf writer may not go. And so it is with space travel. Man will not be content with the moon, our nearest neighbour in space. Inexorably, he will reach outward, to Mars, Venus, Jupiter, Saturn, and beyond to the stars themselves. The universe is infinite, and so is man's curiosity. It will drive him ever onward, and wherever he goes, you can be sure that the sf writer will have been there before him, moving as he is moving, but always that one step ahead of reality.

Nothing is more certain than that sf is here to stay, fulfilling a vital and expanding role in man's thinking—truly a VISION OF TOMORROW.

The Editor.

QUARRY

E.C.
TUBB

Suspense, sizzling action, and colourful writing are just three of the many reasons why E. C. Tubb has been one of Britain's most popular sf authors for more than fifteen years. His latest story, specially written for VISION, is one that will enhance his reputation still further.

On the far wall a man sprang into life, running towards a distant horizon. Leaver waited until the target became small in simulated distance and fired. A red spot glowed on the back of the figure's head as a bell rang success. He tripped the switch to repeat the projection.

'Your turn,' he said to Radford. 'Fire at a hundred and aim at the body.'

The Chief of Terran League Special Intelligence grunted, stubbornly waited until the reeling numerals showed three times that distance then fired. He missed. Quickly he fired again scoring a hit on the third attempt. Leaver chuckled as he repeated the projection. His gun coughed five times. A red spot glowed on each arm, each leg and the head of the target-figure.

'You're getting rusty,' he commented. 'That's what comes of letting others do your dirty work. Or maybe you should use a knife. You're pretty good at planting those—in the back.'

Radford ignored the sarcasm. 'I've got work for you,' he said. 'You'll have to leave right away.'

'I've only just got back!'

'So what?' Radford threw a folder on the firing-bench. 'All right,' he said before the agent could protest. 'I know that you're overdue for a vacation but it can't be helped. Things are on the boil. The discovery of the Free Union has shot the status quo all to hell and everyone's out snatching for what they can grab. Both us and our friends of the Outworld Federation are eager to make friends and influence people—especially the people of the Free Union. We tell them that, as children of Earth, descendants of long-forgotten expeditions, they should come back to Mamma and take their place in the Terran League. The opposition claim that, as long-term settlers on extra-terrestrial planets, their real interest lies in becoming a part of the Outworld Federation.'

'Two dogs snarling over a juicy bone,' said Leaver. 'What do they say? The peoples of the Free Union. Or don't they get a chance to say anything?'

Radford was grim. 'They are playing it smart,' he confessed. 'Running a stand-off by playing the League against the Federation and vice versa. If one moves in to make a grab the other will jump to protect. The Free Union hold the balance of power and they know it.' He scowled, thinking. 'We'll probably recognize them as

an independent autonomy and the Federation will have no choice but to do the same. That means from now on everything will have to be looked at in the light of three-power politics instead of two. Defence, diplomacy, intelligence, the lot.'

'Difficult,' said Leaver.

'That's an understatement. From now on life's going to be a hell of a sight more complex for all of us. With only two of us there are two ways to look at a thing. With three there are six.' Radford shook his head. 'Never mind that. The thing is we've got to dig in fast and deep. To do it I need all the help I can get.'

Leaver looked down at the folder.

'Quelto Daruti,' said Radford. 'An exchange student who came to us some years ago. Brilliant and with an unusual talent we can use right now. I want him.'

Leaver picked up the folder.

'A Federation citizen with pro-League sympathies,' continued Radford. 'A remarkable man. He attracted the attention of the Paraphysical Institute. They tested him and notified us when they found out what he was. We decided to leave him alone. A sleeper.'

'Conditioned?'

Radford nodded. 'In times of stress he will think of the League as a comforting mother-figure. Nothing too specific, of course, his own people would have spotted signs of tampering, but a subconscious trigger aligned to his childhood personality will make him think of us as his friends.' He added, casually, 'You won't have to worry about that part of it. His conditioning must be triggered by now. He's in jail.'

'Naturally.' Leaver was bitter. 'Do I ever get any of the easy ones? Just where is this character being held?'

'Didn't I tell you?' Radford remained casual. 'He's being held on Zen.'

'Zen!' Leaver knew of the prison-planet whose main import was that of human flesh. Zen was a poor world, willing to accept the responsibility of burdensome prisoners for a fraction of what it would cost the richer worlds of the Federation to guard and maintain their social misfits. It was a convenient working arrangement for everyone but the prisoners. 'You realize,' he said quietly, 'that no one has ever managed to escape from the planet? That the entire government and population are determined to safeguard Zen's reputation and with it their major source of income?'

Radford shrugged. 'Did I say it would be easy?'

'No,' said Leaver. 'You didn't.' He scowled at the folder in his hands. 'This man you want. What makes him so important?'

'He's a telepath,' said Radford. 'One of the best.'

He was small and thin with a round head which seemed



STAFFORD

too big for his narrow shoulders. His lips were full above a vestige of a chin and his eyes looked like those of a beaten dog. He was boyish, insignificant, painfully fragile. He did not look like a murderer.

Warden Calumet was not deluded. He had long since discarded any notion he may have held as to the physical characteristics of criminals together with any sympathy he may have had towards their crimes. Fifty years on Zen, thirty of them in the prison service, ten as warden, had turned him into a machine. And the record was plain. Quelto Daruti had murdered two men and had been sentenced to spend the remainder of his life in confinement.

'You have made an official application to become recognized quarry,' said Calumet. His voice, like his face, was emotionless. 'Are you serious?'

'Yes, sir.'

Daruti spoke in little more than a whisper. It seemed incredible that he should ever shout or deal in violence but twenty-seven people had watched him commit double-murder. He had killed two men riding in a public transport, smashing their skulls with a bottle, acting too fast to be stopped. He'd had no chance of escape and had made no attempt to do the impossible. To Calumet it was amazing that anyone could be so stupid—but then, if criminals weren't stupid they would never be caught.

He gestured towards a chair. 'You may sit.' And then, as the prisoner obeyed. 'Have you any idea at all of what you are asking?'

The beaten-dog eyes moved so as to focus on the warden's face. 'Yes, sir.'

'Well?'

'It is the only opportunity I shall ever have of leaving this place alive.'

It was true enough taken in the broadest sense. Daruti had been sentenced to life imprisonment and only a remission of sentence from the appropriate court could cut his sentence. Obviously he did not expect any such remission.

Curiously the warden looked at the prisoner where he sat, nondescript in his drab uniform, obviously enjoying the relative coolness of the office. Daruti had adapted well since his arrival but for him to volunteer as quarry was the last thing the warden had expected. For a moment he brooded on what the reason could be and then recognized the impossibility of his ever finding out. No one but a prisoner could understand the pressures which drove them.

'You realize,' said Calumet evenly, 'that of the last twenty to volunteer only one managed to reach sanctuary?'

'Yes, sir.'

'He was a native of Soma. It is a hot, harsh world as close to Zen as can be found in the Federation. You come from—where?'

'Rio, sir.'

'A soft world.' The warden stepped to the window and adjusted the polarizing control. The glass brightened revealing a rocky expanse of burning sand shimmering beneath the furnace-heat of a swollen sun. In the distance a range of hills climbed towards an impossibly blue sky. Calumet darkened the pane. 'Out there I doubt if you would last a single day. Are you eager to die?'

Daruti ran the tip of his tongue over his lower lip. 'No, sir.'

'Then why be so foolish? Once I accept your application you are as good as dead. There can be no reversal of your decision. Now why not be sensible and forget the whole thing?'

'I can't do that, sir!' The soft voice held a note of desperation. 'I've got to get out! I—' He broke off, swallowing. 'Please, sir! I understand that it is my right to volunteer.'

'That is correct.' Calumet took his chair. How did the man know of his rights? A guard, perhaps, or another prisoner could have told him. He knew, that was all that mattered, the warden was a hard but honest man. 'A residue from the old days,' he explained. 'A man had to have a fantastically high survival-factor to be able to escape from this place. The early settlers knew better than to eliminate such a trait. For the sake of his genes a successful volunteer was forgiven his crimes, his citizenship restored, compensation paid. Some of them reached high position. All were given the opportunity to father many children.'

His voice carried the pride of ancestry.

'But that was in the old days when men were hardier than they are now. Believe me when I tell you that, as things stand, you have literally no chance at all. You would be going to certain death.'

He meant it. He believed it but Daruti dared not. No thinking creature can sanely accept the inevitability of its own destruction.

'With respect, sir. A five per cent chance is hardly no chance at all.'

Calumet was patient. 'When I said that of the last twenty volunteers only one had managed to reach sanctuary I should have added that even he died of his wounds and exposure within two days. Nineteen failures out of nineteen attempts is a record of one hundred per cent failure. Twenty deaths from the same number of volunteers is the same. Do you wish to reconsider?'

He sighed as Daruti shook his head.

Zen was a savage world. Cramped in his seat Leaver examined it as the ferry orbited down from the vessel which had brought him to the prison-planet. A place of endless desert, scarred with jagged peaks, dotted with patches of sparse vegetation. A world of rock and sun and sand. A hard place which bred hard men.

'There!' The man sitting beside the agent was short, swarthy, built like a tank. He pointed with a stubby finger. 'Did you see it?'

'See what?'

'The prison.' The man grunted as the world span beneath them. 'Never mind. You here on business?'

Leaver nodded, the man grinned.

'Name's Lopan,' he said, and held out his hand. It engulfed the agent's with a meaty embrace. 'I own a ranch close to Zenville. Lizards for meat and hides and let me tell you those hides are the finest leather to be found in the Federation. You interested in hides?'

'I'm with Interworld Trading,' explained Leaver. 'We're interested in anything which shows a profit.'

It was true enough and the fact that the company never ran at a loss, managed to pay its representatives fabulous salaries and seemingly bought rubbish to sell

at grotesque profits could have been coincidence or cunning trading or both. In fact it was subsidized by the Terran League and existed for the benefit of Special Intelligence. For every active agent like Leaver there were a score of others who lived an apparently normal life, ate high on the hog—and provided cover, assistance, knowledge and material when necessary.

Lopan looked thoughtful. 'Interworld, eh? You've got a factor here. Right?'

'Aleem Hassan. You know him?'

'By sight.' The rancher grinned. 'Maybe I'll get to know him better soon. When you've had a chance to see those hides of mine I've a feeling you'll want to do business. Iridescent finish and I can supply all you need. When can you look them over?'

Leaver hesitated, frowning. 'I'm not here to step on any toes,' he said. 'Hassan is a good man and we leave all local business to his judgment. But I tell you what I'll do. I'll talk to him about it. Right?'

'You do that.' If Lopan was disappointed he didn't show it. Suddenly he lunged forward, finger hard against the window. 'There! Now you can see it!'

A long, thin tongue of land thrust itself into the bed of a long-departed sea. On three sides of the plateau the ground fell away in an undercut curve for something like five hundred feet. A line of dusty vegetation rimmed the edge. In the centre of the plateau sprawled the buildings of the prison.

Leaver followed it with his eyes until it fell away behind them.

'You saw that hedge?' Lopan was eager to please. 'Thorn plants twenty feet thick and ten feet tall. They carry spines four inches long. Not even a wild lizard could get through that.'

The agent grunted, looking through the window.

'You'll see it again soon,' promised the rancher. 'One edge of the landing spiral runs close to the jail. We could even see my ranch—it's pretty close.'

'To the jail?'

'That's right. Makes it convenient for labour. I've a score of contract-men in the field and a couple of women for the house. Fine women the pair of them. Good cooks too.' His elbow dug into the agent's ribs. 'You want to come out some time and sample the chow. We could even have a party.'

Leaver grinned with his mouth, only half-paying attention to the rancher. He was watching as the ferry went into its landing spiral. The prison wasn't a medieval-type fortress but an assembly of spacious buildings clearly designed to provide the maximum protection against the heat. On the land side of the spit a double-barrier of thorns met those on either side. Gates broke the centre. Beyond ran a waste of scarred and broken terrain. The only real access to the prison was by air.

And he would bet his life that the innocent-seeming mounds scattered about contained enough anti-air defences to wreck a fleet.

Hib Tyler hefted the rifle, running his hands over the stock, the universal sight. He worked the action and studied the ammunition. Each missile packed sufficient power to blast through a twenty-inch brick wall at a thousand-yard range. The gun was warranted to be accurate to within a centimetre at the same distance. It

cost more than he earned in a year.

'Nice rifle,' he commented.

'The best.' Lac Thergood was sweating—all new arrivals sweated on Zen. 'It could be yours.'

Tyler slowly fed the ammunition back into the magazine.

'You're a hunter,' said Thergood. 'I'm told that you're one of the best.' He looked at the room in which they sat. It was bare, conspicuously lacking in comfort. On Zen a hunter couldn't live from his kills. He had to rely on rich sportsmen employing his abilities. Such sportsmen were obviously few and far between. 'Have you ever hunted men?'

'Quarry?' Tyler closed the action, snapped on the safety and set the rifle to one side. 'A few times.'

'And gained the trophy?'

'Twice.'

Thergood raised his eyebrows.

'I wasn't alone,' explained the hunter. 'Those who stalk quarry never are. It isn't like going after a lizard or a klarge. A quarry-hunt is about the most vicious thing you can imagine. Everyone is against you and you can never be certain that you aren't in someone's sights. You can't even be certain the quarry is headed for your sector at all.'

Thergood scowled. He wasn't interested in excuses, he'd had all he could stomach from Calumet. The warden had been very precise and stubborn. Zen had accepted the Daruti contract, admitted, but Zen had its own laws and custom had to be maintained. Daruti had claimed his right to be quarry and his right would be protected. Courtesy had caused the warden to notify Hind as to the development. The sentencing world had the right to send a representative to oversee the hunt but there was no reason for alarm. It was inconceivable that the quarry would reach sanctuary.

Lac Thergood intended to make sure of that.

'A man has volunteered for quarry,' he said abruptly. 'His name is Daruti.' He watched for a reaction. None came, the name meant nothing to the hunter. 'I want to hire you for the hunt. It is important that the man does not escape. Can you arrange that?'

Tyler pursed his lips. 'With money, yes.'

'You shall have money. When the man is dead you shall have more. Double the official prize.'

'And the trophy?'

'That shall be mine.' Thergood was grim, there were those who wouldn't be satisfied until they had actual proof. 'But I must insist that there be no possibility of failure. That rifle will help you to succeed.'

Tyler picked up the weapon, his hands caressing it as though it were a woman. Reluctantly he shook his head. 'No.'

'Why not?' Thergood was impatient. 'It is a good weapon.'

'Too good. It would never be allowed. The quarry is given his chance,' explained the hunter. 'No rocket-missiles, no lasguns, nothing but a short-range weapon with open sights. To use anything else would be murder.'

Thergood was ironic. 'There's a difference?'

'Yes,' said the hunter tightly. 'There's a hell of a difference.'

The waiting was the hard part. During the day when

he was kept busy there was little time to brood but at night, when settling for sleep, there was time for thought. Time too for the noise to smash past his defences. The dull, endless, hopeless noise from the minds of those who could have no hope.

Daruti moaned and rolled on his bunk.

'Getting the jitters?' A man whispered from the darkness. His voice was concerned but his mind held a red hunger. 'It won't be long now, but watch out for the lizards—they're worse than the hunters.'

'Shut up, Marco!' A second voice, deep, harsh, but the mind held sadness. 'The guy's got enough on his plate without you worrying him.'

'I was only trying to help,' protested Marco. 'I've seen quarry go out before—and seen them when they come back.' His mind radiated obscene images coloured by his imagination but based on truth. Did they always remove the heads?

'You'll make it,' comforted the second man. 'Calumet's doing his best to give you a chance. That's why he's working you so hard. It's his way of helping out.'

'Of giving the hunters a run for their money you mean,' sneered Marco. 'What good's a quarry that simply lies down and dies? You know what I think? Daruti had better find a nice sharp rock, open his veins and take it easy until he dies. That'd be the smart thing to do.'

'Shut up, Marco!'

Farther down the dormitory a man moved and muttered in his sleep. Daruti cringed at the impact of murderous anger—the residue of nightmare, an incoherent burst of savage imagery and the primeval stuff of madness. And it was loud. Loud!

He moaned again, hands clamped uselessly to his ears, face buried in the soft cloth of his pillow. Always it had been like this but always before there had been a medium of escape. Distance, solitude, personal discipline—all had helped to muffle and dissipate the ceaseless noise. But here there could be none of that. In prison he could do nothing but be constantly aware of himself and those around him.

Unless he could escape he would go insane.

Restlessly he turned trying to ignore the beating roar of mental sound, the inescapable choice he had to make. Death of the body or death of the mind?

In the darkness the easy tears of childhood stung his eyes.

Mother! Please help me! Mother!

'Quarry!' Leaver's hand thudded on the map-strewn table. 'The damn fool! Why didn't he wait?'

Hassan was reasonable. 'Wait for what? He couldn't know that you were coming to rescue him. Anyway, it's the best chance he'll ever get.'

Leaver wasn't as sure of that as the factor seemed to be. At first sight it seemed that only a taskforce gassing the area and landing to snatch Daruti from his cell would have stood a hope of springing the man but the agent knew the power of money and how to use it. There would be a guard or two, ambitious or simply greedy who would be willing to listen to a proposition. But finding such guards took time and Daruti had taken care of that.

'Two days,' said the agent bitterly. 'Is that all the

notice given?'

'Local notice is at the discretion of the warden,' said Hassan. 'The only time limit is that the prisoner should make his attempt within thirty days of volunteering. From what I gather Calumet has stretched it to the limit.'

'Why?'

Hassan shrugged. 'Maybe he wants to give the man a chance.'

Or maybe he wanted to give others time so as to get in the act. Leaver sat back, brooding. Lac Thergood couldn't be here by accident. Daruti was a telepath and if the League knew it then so could the Federation. A radiated message might have persuaded the man to volunteer for quarry with the promise of help waiting. Irritably he dismissed the notion as being unrealistic. The Federation didn't have to do that when they could have released him at any time with an appropriate court order. The volunteering then must be genuine. Radford must have heard about it and moved so as to save an instrument of potential value. The Federation?

'They might have wanted to put him on ice,' said Hassan slowly in answer to the problem. 'Where would he be safer than on Zen? They could get him any time they wanted and who would guess that such a man was important? But once he volunteered—'

'They would have to take care of him,' said Leaver grimly. 'Permanent care. Thergood can have no other reason for being on Zen. They've got to kill him in order to keep him from talking or acting or whatever it is they're afraid of. Can you spike his guns?'

'No.' Hassan was emphatic. 'The hunt is wide open,' he explained. 'I can bid high for the sectors but that won't stop him if he has money to spend. Frankly I don't think that Daruti stands a chance.'

'Then we'll have to give him one.' Leaver stared thoughtfully at the map. He reached out and touched a spot close to a blue line. 'Lopan's ranch,' he said. 'Let's pay a visit.'

The ranch was a boulder-strewn area of sand and thorn. The ranch house was of local stone fused into place. A warehouse and power plant were of the same construction. A sonic barrier enclosed the boundaries the line marked by flaring red dye bonded to the sand. Lopan was waiting when they arrived. He came forward as the rotors slowed, grinning at Leaver as he jumped from the cab.

'I knew it,' he chortled. 'A good businessman can smell a profit a mile away. Just wait until you see those hides!'

He turned shouting orders. Two men dressed in grey trotted towards the warehouse. They wore identical collars of dull metal, the badge of the prisoner or contract-man as he was known on Zen. Try to break it and a trigger would inject three-day poison at the same time sending out a radio-howl. The same thing could be accomplished by a switch in the prison. If a prisoner tried to escape that switch would be thrown. No one ever tried to break free more than once.

Lopan noticed the agent's interest and misunderstood. 'Good enough workers if you keep them at it,' he confided, 'but you've got to be hard. Treat them soft and they'll take advantage. Now let's look at those hides.'

The skins were nothing special but Leaver had his

own reasons for wanting to do business. 'Nice,' he said casually. 'We might be able to get together at that. What do you think, Aleem?'

The factor rubbed his chin and frowned. 'Well—'

'You're thinking of the supply angle?' Leaver nodded. 'A good point. It's no good us creating a demand,' he said to the rancher, 'unless you can be sure of the supply. What is your potential?'

'I've got three hundred head—about half ready for slaughter,' said Lopan quickly. 'And there are two hundred hides stacked in the warehouse. If we make a deal I can treble the output within three months.' He caught the glance Leaver gave Hassan. 'Something wrong?'

'Maybe,' said the agent flatly. 'What's wrong with the hides that you should have stored so many for so long?' He gave the man no time to answer. 'Well, never mind that, but I've got to be sure of the rest. When can I see them?'

Lopan blinked. 'You want to see the beasts?'

'That's right. How else am I going to be sure that you can deliver?' Leaver glanced pointedly at his watch. 'Tell you what. Have them all assembled by the south fence the day after tomorrow. If I like them we'll make a deal. Right?'

Lopan hesitated. 'That's the day of the hunt,' he pointed out.

'So it is,' said Leaver. 'What of it?'

'Nothing,' said the rancher. 'Nothing at all.'

Sanctuary was a thousand yards of cleared sand with observation towers at either end. At night floodlights illuminated the area. Blue dye made a sharp demarcation. Hassan paused beside the agent.

'This is it,' he said. 'Once Daruti passes into the blue area he's safe.'

'And if someone shoots him as he crosses?'

'If he falls outside nothing. If he falls on the blue then the one who fires takes the quarry's place in jail.' The factor looked up as a file of men approached. 'Here come the other hunters. You'll have to join them for the search.' He hesitated. 'I did a lousy job bidding for the sectors,' he admitted. 'Hib Tyler ran the prices sky high. Had I tried to beat him it would have attracted too much notice. What would a factor be wanting with a half-dozen places?'

Nothing and once suspicion had been aroused Hassan's value to the League would have been lost. But he had managed to get one place. It would have to do.

'You'd better get to the ranch,' said Leaver. 'You know what to do. Luck.'

'Luck,' echoed Hassan. He guessed that Leaver would need it.

The hunters were in a festive mood. The sectors had fetched record prices and even though the government took half the pot the remainder was worth winning. Worth getting too if the quarry managed to reach sanctuary alive, but no one would take bets on that happening. Leaver recognized Hib Tyler, too much the professional to be other than serious and smiled at Lac Thergood unhappy in the heat. He scowled at Leaver and said something to Tyler who shrugged. Obviously the hunter considered that an inexperienced business-

man out after a thrill offered little competition.

A sightseer stepped forward and touched Leaver on the arm. 'I was late at the bidding. I'll offer you a bonus of a hundred for your place.'

'Get back there! No contact with the hunters!' A guard irritably waved Leaver to join the line. 'Take your places for the search.'

All were clean. An attendant thrust a parcel into the agent's hands and checked his token. 'Number seven. Walk down to the third flag from the end.'

The flags were a hundred yards apart, those in the centre marking the favoured places. Leaver lengthened his stride and caught up with the man in the lead. 'Change places?'

'Uh?' The man was suspicious. 'Why?'

'I had a dream last night,' said Leaver easily. 'And ten's my lucky number. Swap?'

No quarry had ever been caught by a man at the edge of the ground and the man probably thought Leaver to be a fool. He wasn't. He liked to have all his enemies on one side and Thergood was at number eight.

A voice boomed from a loud-hailer. 'Pay attention. At the signal you will pass from sanctuary into the open ground. If you see the quarry you may kill it. The one returning with the trophy will receive the prize.'

It was an neat way of putting it. The one who did the actual killing would be certain of nothing but that every other hunter would be after him for the trophy. In the open ground anything went—and there were nine of the opposition. No wonder Tyler had shrugged.

Calumet lifted a hand. Before the gate men struggled to open the barrier. Other men, prisoners and guards watched the small, insignificant figure standing beside the warden. Clear to everyone present was Daruti's invisible stamp of death.

'You realize what it is you have to do?' Calumet quashed a momentary sympathy. The man was quarry and by his own volition. Anger had no place here and neither did pity. 'You walk through the gate and head north. You will either be killed or you will reach sanctuary. If you do your collar will be removed, you will receive a substantial sum of money and you will be free to do as you please. On Zen, at least,' he added. 'You understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'It will not be easy.' Calumet was strangely reluctant to send the man to his death. 'The terrain is rugged and there is more than the hunters to fear. I suggest that you rest during the day and travel at night.' He glanced at the sun, furious with noon-day heat. 'It is cooler then.'

'I understand, sir.' Daruti fingered his collar, feeling the skin underneath wet with perspiration and feeling a sudden panic at the loss of precious water. 'And thank you, sir.'

Calumet was surprised. 'For what?'

'For wishing me well.'

'I wish you nothing.' The warden was curt. It took little to undermine the power of authority and too many were listening. To show humanity now could be to sow later discord. 'You are quarry. Neutral. Your fate rests in your own hands. Now go!'

Outside the heat was even worse. Within the prison

area the slight breeze coming from over the dried sea helped to cool the air, but closer to the foothills the rock flung back the savage heat of the sun. Daruti paused to regain his breath. Looking back he could see the barrier of thorn small in the distance. There could be no return and yet, behind those thorns, lay safety of a kind. A safety he would be willing to accept if only the noise had not been so loud, the mental impact so relentless.

He looked at the sky. Calumet had said it would be best to travel at night and he had spoken the truth as he knew it. But a man without food, without water and no means of defence was fighting more than the sun. He was fighting the terrain and one misstep, a wrenched ankle or a heavy fall, could kill from exposure as surely as a hunter's bullet.

Doggedly he continued on his way. One path was as good as another as long as it led north. They all did that though some were longer than others, some rougher, some ended in blind gulleys. All could hold enemies other than human.

He jerked to a halt, mind reeling beneath a soundless blast of hate. Immediately he corrected the impression. Not hate but a savage determination to kill. It was dangerously loud. His heart pounded as he searched for its origin.

Nothing. He could see only the rock and sand and burning sunlight. He looked again and this time caught a hint of movement. A seeming boulder a few yards ahead shifted, the lines dissolving into a tail, limbs, a snouting jaw. The giant chameleon gaped and revealed teeth and a long, barbed tongue. Claws scrabbled as it lurched to its feet. It was venomous and all of eight feet long.

Daruti ran.

The parcel contained a slab of concentrate, a canteen of water, a knife with an eight-inch blade and a short-barrelled rifle with three rounds of solid ammunition. The weapon was absurdly primitive, inaccurate at distance but effective enough when used at short range. Leaver checked it and slung it from his shoulder. From an inner pocket he took out a map of Zenville. He spat on it, the saliva triggering a chemical reaction. The map faded, sharpened into a large-scale depiction of the open ground. It may not have been considered a concealed weapon but the agent had taken no chances.

The open ground extended from the thousand-yard sanctuary into a rugged expanse almost three miles wide before narrowing towards the prison. Much of it was impassable. Most of it difficult, the places that weren't too bad falling into several winding paths forming something like a labyrinth. From Hassan he had learned that the hunters usually stationed themselves on the sanctuary-side of the hills. That way they gained the double advantage of a tired and perhaps careless quarry together with less distance to cover with their trophy. But he doubted if Tyler would stick to accepted practice.

The man would be in his element. If the other hunters were in his employment he could afford to leave himself unguarded. In that case he would probably station a couple of men close to the sanctuary while forging ahead with the rest. Or perhaps he would just make a tight line and wait.

Leaver scowled and put away his map. Either way he had no choice. It was hopeless for him to stalk and kill all nine of the opposition. They knew the area while he had only the map and the odds were too high against success. All he could do was to travel as fast and as far as possible in order to meet up with Daruti before it was too late.

Glancing at the sun he got on with the job, cursing Radford, Zen and Daruti in that order. If the man hadn't volunteered or had waited before doing so the thing would have been simple. A few agents posted in the open ground days in advance of the hunt. A waiting flyer and it would have been all over. A heterodyning device would have taken care of the radio-howl, flexmetal against the skin the poisoned needle.

But when had he ever been given the easy ones? As usual he was on his own.

Almost.

Aleem Hassan sighed as he looked at the sun. It was still late afternoon and Lopan was getting impatient.

'Look,' he snapped, no longer the smiling, eager-to-please rancher. 'Either you want the hides or you don't. And where's that boss of yours?' Worriedly he looked towards the south fence. Three hundred lizards, a half of them full-grown, milled behind the sonic barrier. They were hungry and in a savage temper. Sixty-thousand pounds of lizard-meat was ready to explode like a bomb.

'I don't think he's coming,' confessed the factor. 'But not to worry. He said that if he wasn't here by dusk for me to go ahead on my own judgment.'

'And that is?'

'You have a fine potential. I'm impressed by what I've seen and there's not much doubt that we can get together.'

'We can do business? Good.' Lopan turned away. Hassan caught his arm.

'Where are you going?'

'To summon men to disperse the herd. I—'

'Leave them!' His tone was too sharp and Hassan smiled to soften the command. 'It's that boss of mine,' he said mildly. 'You know how off-worlder's are. He might still be along so why not leave them a while.' He turned towards the ranch house. 'Let's talk terms over a bottle of wine. You have wine?'

'The best.' The scent of money had dulled Lopan's nose for danger. 'A bottle of Aruille which is really something special. Now, as to the value of the hides. I reckon . . .'

Thirty minutes later the first bottle of Aruille had been drunk and a second half-emptied. The Terran League had pledged itself to buy hides which it didn't want and Lopan was delicately hinting that a sizable bonus would find its way into the factor's pocket if they could agree to inflate the price. Fifteen minutes later the herd broke loose.

Three hundred ill-tempered lizards plunged over the suddenly inactive sonic barrier, tore across the blue sand of sanctuary and vanished into the open ground. They kept to the west, the side opposite to where Leaver moved south. He heard the distant spealing, the faint yells and echoes of shots and was satisfied.

Lopan's contract-men had earned their bribe.

* * *



Daruti shook his head trying to get rid of the ceaseless noise of running water, of cool lakes, glaciers, surging oceans. The pulse of the sea merged with the tinkle of ice, the sweet, liquid perfume of rain. His brain was awash with watery imaginings. Fountains, waterfalls, the spray from a shower, the gush from a faucet. The concept of thirst-quenching liquid filled the universe.

He tripped and fell, the shock of impact just another shock, the ache of bruised flesh just another ache to add to all the rest. His lips were cracked, the tongue swollen, his febrile skin like leather to the touch. His sweat had dried leaving salty encrustations. His feet were horribly blistered and one ankle was puffed where something had driven its sting.

He knew that he was dying.

Death had been coming closer for two days now. Or was it three? Or four? Day into night into day into night into day and again into night. The nights that were cooler than the days and because of that all the more dangerous. Things left their burrows at night. Crawling, stinging things with a stunning ferocity of mind. Hateful things.

Mother! Help me, mother! Help me!

He fell again and lay against the hard stone looking up at the dying sky. Soon there would be stars. Starlight would give birth to monstrous shadows. Shadows which could hide lurking dangers. He lifted himself and felt the wetness of blood on his scraped face.

Mother! I'm hurt! Help me!

Nothing but the ceaseless tinkle of ice, the drip of water, the roaring flood of a waterfall. A glass frosted with condensation filled with fruit-juice and ice. Pearls of rain running down a window. And close! So very clear and therefore so very close!

Painfully he struggled to his feet, wincing as he rested his weight on his poisoned leg, hobbling over the sand as he moved towards the mental imagery. Water. He burned with the need of it. He would die without it.

He fell again, moaning, struggled to his feet in a blind reaction to stimuli. An unthinking organism he groped towards the source of the tantalizing noise; obeying the dictates of survival. In the growing shadows something stirred.

'At last!' Leaver lifted the canteen as Daruti came into sight. The agent was haggard with dark blotches beneath his eyes. For sixty hours he had thought of nothing but water in all its forms while resisting the urge to drink. He shook the canteen as Daruti approached. 'Have yourself a drink.'

The quarry recoiled, eyes huge with fear.

'Have some water.' The man was like a child. He crumpled in the agent's grasp. Slowly Leaver fed a trickle of water into the swollen mouth, face hard with anger. He felt bad but Daruti looked more dead than alive. Inwardly he cursed the system which forced men to emulate animals for the prize of freedom. 'That's enough for now.'

Daruti made a grab at the canteen then, incredibly, tried to run. Leaver clung to one arm as he helped himself to a drink. 'Relax. You're safe now.'

'Safe?'

'That's right. I'm your friend. I gave you water.'

'And the price?' Daruti looked at the knife in the

agent's belt. 'My head for your trophy?'

'Forget that. I came to help you not to kill you. Listen,' snapped Leaver impatiently as Daruti shook his head. 'Look at me. Read my mind!'

Daruti winced. 'Too loud,' he complained. 'You think too loud.' And then, abruptly. 'Mother?'

'From Earth,' agreed Leaver. 'From the Terran League and good old mother Earth.' He handed Daruti the canteen. 'Here, have yourself a ball.'

The night closed in with its dangers. Leaver halted, blinking sore eyes, uncomfortably aware of his accumulated fatigue. They seemed to have been walking forever yet they still had to break out of the trap.

He turned at a faint sound, rifle levelling in his hands. Daruti moved towards him in the starlight. He looked and acted like a very old man or an exhausted boy. It seemed impossible that he could ever have killed two men with his own hands.

'They intended to kill me,' whispered Daruti as he drew level, answering the unspoken question. 'They would have shot me with a coagulator as I left the transport. I had to protect myself.'

It was reasonable enough. Even a mouse will fight to save its life, but Leaver was curious. 'Why did they want to eliminate you?'

'I don't know,' said Daruti and added. 'You could be right. Perhaps I do know something dangerous to others but if so I don't know what it is.'

'Don't worry about it,' advised Leaver. It gave him an uneasy feeling to have no privacy of thought and he could make a guess as to why the man had been put on ice. Who would want to have a telepath hanging around? Radford, he admitted, but the chief had a penchant for odd types.

'You were clever to use the lizards,' mused Daruti. His head nodded and he caught himself. 'I heard them and moved away from where they were. You intended that. It was the only way you could be certain I would head towards your vicinity.' His head nodded again.

'Stay awake,' warned Leaver.

'And you thinking of water. You knew I would be craving for a drink. I couldn't help but move towards where I thought it might be.'

'Bait.' Leaver reached out and shook Daruti by the shoulder. 'Up,' he ordered. 'We've got to get moving. Is there danger ahead?'

There was, a scorpion-like insect almost a foot long that darted from beneath a rock, tail raised to sting. Leaver watched it, waited, smashed down with the heel of his boot. Exoskeleton crunched wetly against stone.

'All right,' said the agent patiently. 'Is there anything else?'

The trouble with Daruti's talent was its limitations. At short range he could read a person's intent, his deepest thoughts and intentions. At long range he became confused and could only determine overall impressions. A hungry lizard, a hunting scorpion, a man lurking with a rifle and intending to kill all became the same. Apparently size had nothing to do with intensity of thought.

But it was the only advantage Leaver had over the other hunters. He had to use it.

Progress became mechanical. Daruti would listen for

dangerous impressions. Leaver would advance as far as he dared. Daruti would catch up with him, mentally scout the area ahead, wait as the agent moved forward. It was safe but slow. The night wore away as they crept over rock and across limited expanses of sand. Anxiously the agent studied the sky. Dawn was close and they still had a long way to go.

He gritted his teeth as Daruti dug fingers into his arm.

'Over there.' The man read his question. 'A man. Waiting.'

'How close?'

'I'm not sure.' Daruti frowned as he tried to isolate impressions. 'Not very close. I—'

'Tell me what he sees.'

'A gully. He's hidden at the far end looking along it. The rocks are steep to either side.' The telepath was apologetic. 'That's the best I can do. He's very faint.'

'Probably a long way off,' said Leaver thoughtfully. 'We'll swing east and pass him.'

'Leave him behind? An enemy?'

'There are eight more just like him,' reminded the agent. 'If he lets out a yell or fires his gun they'll know just where we are. Better if we leave him alone. Now let's get moving!'

Two hours later he halted, pointing as Daruti came staggering to his side. Ahead, down the slope of the hill, a thin shimmer of blue made a ghost-light against the paling sky. Sanctuary.

At noon it was less than a mile distant but still remote. Leaver studied his map, irritated at the way detail tended to blur, sweat and fatigue combining to fog his vision. He shut his eyes, palmed them, stared again at the map. Five black circles stared back at him.

Five?

'You're certain there aren't others?' He turned to where Daruti lay sprawled on the rocky sand. A trained mountaineer would have found the going hard during the night and the telepath was no athlete. 'Daruti!' Leaver yelled the thought. 'Answer me, damn you! Are these all you can find?'

Daruti spoke to the sky. 'That's all,' he whispered. 'Two are very faint. One a little louder. Two are very close.'

Leaver scowled. One they had passed in the night, but he could have left his position hours ago. Assume that he hadn't. Where were the other five?

Ignore those that were very faint. If Daruti's ability was of any use at all it meant they were too far to be dangerous. Ignore the one a little closer. Concentrate on the other two. The rest? Either too far towards the east or the lizards had done better than he'd expected.

He frowned at the map. They had managed to get into one of the natural exits of the open ground, a relatively deep passage wending between the rocks and leading directly towards sanctuary. Alone the agent would have waited for night and made his way over the rocks away from the path. But Daruti would never be able to make it. For him it was the path or nothing and, unless he moved soon, he wouldn't be able to move at all. Another full day of dehydration would be fatal.

'All right,' said Leaver, deciding. 'We'll have to chance it. Get up and get ready to move.'

Daruti whimpered.

'Up!' Leaver used his mind like the lash of a whip. 'Up you weak-kneed whining freak! Get up and stand like a man! Up!'

He watched as Daruti rolled over on his face, eased hands and knees to support his weight, slowly lifted his body from the sand.

'Up! You want to die out here? Roasted like a pig in the sun? Up and let's get to where there is water. Lots of water. Ice and rain and shimmering pools. Waterfalls, seas and endless snow. Up, damn you! Up!'

'Don't!' The telepath staggered to his feet, eyes anguished. 'Loud,' he complained. 'You don't have to think so loud!'

'Now listen,' said the agent, ignoring the complaint. 'I'm going to pull the teeth of the opposition. When you get my signal start walking. Don't waste any time and don't stop for any reason. Understand?'

'I think so.' Daruti tried to lick his lips with a tongue too swollen to leave his mouth. 'Will there be water in sanctuary?'

'Gallons of it.'

Turning to the rocks he mounted to the surface of a large boulder. He crossed it, dropped to a lower level, reached an almost blank slope. He climbed it, using elbows and knees to gain traction, rising to his feet as he cleared the edge. A jumble of close-packed stone made an uneven plateau sloping towards the north. Leaver walked openly, collar thrown wide to reveal his bare throat, the rifle in full view. On the exposed, sun-drenched surface he was as conspicuous as a fly on a plate, impossible to miss if anyone should look his way.

He didn't want to be missed. He wanted to be spotted, recognized as a hunter, allowed to get close to where he could locate and take care of those waiting for Daruti. It was a simple plan and could have worked.

The first shot came as he reached a shallow gully. There was a hard, flat sound and something slammed into his left side, spinning him backwards and down. He rolled as a second bullet chipped stone an inch from his face dropping into the shallow trench. Safe in cover he shouldered his rifle and waited.

The hunter was overconfident. He rose, a black silhouette against the sky, head craned forward as he searched for his victim. He caught a glimpse of Leaver's exposed foot, the bright crimson of blood on the rock and yelled his triumph.

'I've got him! Here! He's mine!'

Lac Thergood was still shouting when Leaver shot him through the mouth.

He rose, dropping his rifle, ripping open his shirt to examine his wound. Blood welled from a neat puncture in the fleshy part of his waist, gushed from a larger hole to the rear. Stripping the sling from the rifle Leaver wadded his shirt against the wound and bound it tight. He reached down for the rifle as a foot kicked it away.

'You won't need that,' said Hib Tyler.

Leaver straightened and met the hunter's eyes. 'Are you intending to finish what your friend started? You could have murdered me from where you watched.'

'Murder?'

'He knew I wasn't the quarry. He could see my gun, my bare neck, the way I walked even. Would a quarry

walk in plain sight?'

'He might,' said Hib Tyler slowly. 'If he wanted to fool someone.'

'Were you fooled? Did you mistake me for the quarry?' Leaver scowled at the body of Thergood. 'He knew what he was doing. That yell was for your benefit so that he could later claim to have made a genuine mistake.'

'There was no need for that,' said Tyler evenly. 'This is the open ground where anything goes. But you're wrong. He was new to Zen, unaccustomed to the heat, the visual effect of sun on stone. He was watching for the quarry. He expected to see the quarry. He saw something move and that was good enough. It's lucky for you that he was a bad shot.'

He kept looking at Leaver for which the agent was grateful. Beyond the hunter, down towards the last part of the passage, he caught a glimpse of movement.

'Keep moving!' he mentally yelled. 'Don't stop! You're safe now. Just keep moving!' And then, casually to the hunter. 'The open ground. A nice place. Just the right set-up for real, red-blooded men.'

'You dislike our ways?' The sting of the offended patriot was in Tyler's voice—the reactive prickle of the defensive Outworlder.

'I think it stinks,' said Leaver coldly. 'You give your quarry as much chance as the old bullfighters gave the bull and that is no chance at all. Look at you, just sitting down waiting, ready to pump lead into some poor devil's belly. Has he got a gun? Does he have rations of food and water? Do they give him a knife? Mister, when you talk about fair play, you make me want to spit!'

'Keep moving, Daruti! Keep moving!'

'You're a stranger,' said Tyler. 'There is much you have yet to learn. You—' He broke off, eyes suspicious. Abruptly he turned and stared down into the passage. At the far end it ran almost straight to the blue sand of sanctuary. On it Daruti was the only thing moving.

'The quarry!' Tyler swung up his rifle. He tensed, taking aim, inflating his chest and stilling his breathing. It was a long shot with such an inaccurate weapon but the hunter was experienced. He wouldn't miss.

Leaver threw his knife.

Daruti was waiting when he arrived, standing just within the safety zone of the blue sand, oblivious to those around him. They had waited to see his head delivered in triumph but they were more than ready to cheer the whole man. He moved forward as the agent stumbled and almost fell.

'You're hurt.'

'A little.'

'You—' Daruti paused. 'Earth,' he whispered. 'Mother Earth.' Tears glistened in his eyes. 'You killed for me,' he said. 'Helped me to reach sanctuary. Will it be allowed?'

'You made it on your own,' thought Leaver. 'I had nothing to do with it. Remember that.' Aloud he said, 'The Zenians are hard but honest. You'll be all right.'

'And later?'

'Back to Earth with me to work for the Terran League. It's the only way you'll be safe.'

'Is it pleasant work?'

'Yes,' he said blandly. 'It's a wonderful job.'

STRICTLY LEGAL

DOUGLAS FULTHORPE



When the spider-men of Proxima Centauri laid claim to the Moon, the people of Earth were highly amused. At first, that was . . .

I doubt if half the world's population had even heard of Proxima Centauri, before the trouble. It's different now, of course. Probably every man, woman and child know only too well that it is the nearest star to our own system. I suppose the 'Proxima' part of the name derives from this nearness, or proximity.

According to the English-language edition of the Encyclopaedia Galactica, Proxima Centauri has seven planets, four of which are populated by a race of creatures who are believed to have originated on the fifth planet from the star. Their name for themselves is completely unpronounceable by men, the Encyclopaedia explains, and it refers to them subsequently as Proxima Centaurians. Their state of technological development, says the Encyclopaedia, is somewhat advanced of those of any of mankind's civilizations.

When we on Earth first learned that the Proxima Centaurians had laid claim to our moon, we treated it as a joke. It seemed so silly, the idea of a race of intelligent spiders from another star system wanting the moon. It was true enough, though. The Centaurians had dispatched their equivalent of a note to our Government, in which they asserted their right to the moon, and demanded its return forthwith.

Various entertainers and commentators derived a fund of witty material from the demand, but more serious persons wondered what lay behind this strange claim. The Government were concerned enough to send back to Proxima Centauri a reply which repudiated the claim and asserted the irrevocable ownership and jurisdiction of the moon by the peoples of Earth.

With the passage of a week or so, in which there was no further news on the matter, the interest of the good

folk of Earth waned, and they returned to their sports and quiz games. As for the millions who were dedicated to the ancient, eternally booming pastime of bingo; they hardly raised their heads long enough to appreciate who was claiming what.

The Centaurians were not jesting, however, as they demonstrated in their repeated inflammatory broadcasts to their own creatures and to anyone else in the galaxy who cared to listen. They professed to have incontrovertible proof that the moon encircling the planet of Earth rightly belonged to the fifth planet of Proxima Centauri, and, they said, they were preparing to take action to regain possession of the property.

At this some of the more thoughtful of us conjectured that the claim might be the pretext for a war prior to the annexation of parts of our solar system. If the Centaurians did invade, they would have to deal with the Saturnian space-navy first, we reasoned. The authorities on Saturn, although they had made no comment, had alerted all their forces and had put their Deep Space Fleet on manoeuvres in the orbit of Pluto.

Our government's next act was to refer the claim and counter-claim to the Galactic Court. In taking this step they affirmed their conviction of the absolute legality of Earth's ownership of the moon.

I think that it was roughly at this time that I began to feel seriously disturbed over the developing interstellar situation. I discussed it with Fiamma, my current wife, with friends and with my colleagues on the two days per week on which I am permitted to work. One or two of the older ones could remember just over a hundred years ago when the authorities of Earth believed they had legal ownership of the whole of the solar system.

Well, the wayward colonies of Saturn and Jupiter had modified that notion considerably. They had won their revolutions, and, possessing natural resources greatly in excess of those of Earth, they had far surpassed us in terms of wealth, population, weapons and so forth.

Earth had seen its colonies and possessions dwindle away, either becoming independent or falling subject to the men of Saturn or of Jupiter, until finally all we had left was the moon and our home planet.

At the time of the dispute with Proxima Centauri, what navy Earth possessed was fully integrated in the mighty Saturnian navy, as part of the common front against Jupiter. The two giant powers of the solar system had been belligerently aligned against each other for over fifty years, each with its retinue of subordinate or auxiliary powers.

During the century or so which spanned Earth's decline from supreme authority to little more than nuisance value, in interplanetary politics, communication had been achieved and had developed with star systems other than our own. The galaxy, we had learned from neighbouring races such as the Proxima Centaurians, was populated by many thousands, if not millions, of cultures.

There were many varieties of intelligent creatures; a few were manlike, but others, including the Centaurians, were nightmarishly hideous by our standards.

Among the various societies there were scores of empires and federations, countless independent states and numerous unions and alliances. Viewed against the back-cloth of galactic political geography, Earth was

a very unimportant, insignificant little world.

I watched the Galactic Court proceedings on television whenever I could. Even now the memory of the Centaurians scuttling around the courtroom still causes my legs to make involuntary trotting motions, so profound was the terror they induced in me. Glittering black eyes staring implacably from pale, squat bodies. I've known a parlour empty of people at the sight of one advancing towards the camera on its flickering brown-furred legs.

There was no possibility of physical contact between any of the three parties concerned in the legal action, namely the representatives of Earth, of Proxima Centauri and the legal panel. The Centaurians were in a hall on one of their planets, the Earthmen were gathered in a room in Government City, Earth, and the judicial board, as frightful an assortment of monstrosities as I hope never to see again, were in their permanent headquarters, many, many light years removed from Earth. A simple stereo link-up created the illusion on television of their all being assembled in the one chamber.

The court proceedings progressed slowly. By now everyone on Earth had ceased to regard the affair as a joke, and was following events with uneasy interest.

The moon was not of exceptional material importance to us. It had three small settlements under air domes, and was a minor holiday resort for those who enthused over the savage beauty of the soaring lunar landscape. Some minerals were extracted, and the absence of an atmosphere made the moon a natural centre for automobile racing and testing.

Nobody wanted the spider-creatures for neighbours, though. And, if they succeeded in gaining a foothold on the moon, then their next goal would probably be Earth itself.

Earth had no armed forces under the direct command of her own administration, having long since abandoned all pretences as a military power. Apart from our small contribution to the Saturnian navy, we had no effective weapons at all. We had no need of them, for mighty Saturn was pledged by treaty to come to our aid against any aggressor.

In court the Proxima Centaurians presented evidence which purported to prove that Earth's moon had originally been part of the fifth planet of Proxima Centauri. They argued that some cosmic mishap, in very ancient times, had removed part of this planet, and had then dispatched it from its parent solar system to wander in space until it had been captured by the gravitational attraction of Earth.

The Centaurians then produced spectograms of Proxima Centauri 5 and the moon. These spectograms, they claimed, were almost indistinguishable, indicating nearly identical composition and distribution of elements in the structure of the two worlds. The spectogram for Earth, which they exhibited also, bore marked dissimilarities to the other two worlds under consideration.

The counsel for the government of Earth conceded that the moon had possibly originated outside of the solar system of which Earth was a member. They believed, however, that ownership was not affected by such considerations.

Ownership belonged to the people of Earth, they claimed, by right of discovery and settlement. Even if

the moon had originally been part of Proxima Centauri 5, and this they did not concede, the cosmic mishap which had removed part of the planet had almost certainly occurred when the planet was in a molten or fluid state, many millions of years before the spider-creatures had evolved.

In reply to this the Proxima Centauri Counsel stated that, although the accident had taken place many millions of years ago, the ancestors of the present race had existed on the planet as rudimentary life forms. Ownership of the original whole planet belonged, therefore, to these primitive creatures and to their ultimate descendants, the existing race of Proxima Centaurians.

This stimulating debate continued over several weeks, and would undoubtedly have extended much longer, but for the sudden appearance, near the moon, of a number of strange space-ships. This force, which the Proxima Centaurians described as their reclamation fleet, had presumably evaded the Saturnian fleet, which admittedly was no great accomplishment in the enormous wastes of the solar system.

Now, we thought, the Saturnian Deep Space Fleet would make its appearance with unmistakable, warning intent, demonstrating the strength and unity of mankind.

Nothing happened. Not a whisper or sign of activity came from Saturn. The great fleet continued its intricate manoeuvres in the orbit of Pluto, far away from the trouble spot.

Alarmed and apprehensive, the World President called for aid from Saturn, or at least for the services of the fifty ships of Earth attached to the Saturnian navy.

Meanwhile the Centaurian fleet had taken up positions in close formation to one side of the moon.

After several days of silence the Saturnian government issued a statement. In it they extended their sympathy to the people of Earth, but regretted that developing trade and friendship ties between themselves and the Centaurians did not permit any act or gesture which might antagonize their new-found partners. Furthermore they were not prepared to release the fifty cruisers which the President of Earth had requested, as they, the Saturnian government, had subsidized heavily the cost of constructing these ships.

We were on our own.

Then an incredible thing happened. Our tracking telescopes suddenly indicated that the moon was moving out of orbit. Up to that moment everyone on Earth had assumed that the implementation of the Centaurians' claim to the satellite would assume the form of a military occupation. Now the truth burst upon us. The Centaurians were removing the moon bodily from its familiar place in our night sky.

The moon, our moon, slowly diminished in our skies as the Centaurians withdrew it from the solar system, while the World President pleaded for help from Saturn, Jupiter, the Galactic Court, the Galactic Council—from anyone who might care.

Apparently no one did care. Night after night, from the polar metropoli to the vast farmlands of the equatorial belt, Earth's multitudes watched in silent horror as the moon receded steadily.

I remember those last nights with chilling clarity. Out in the black wastes of space, the moon dwindled from

a silver coin to a sequin, a bright pinhead, a needle-point . . . away on the long road to Proxima Centauri.

In its place the Centaurians were good enough to leave, by way of compensation for our loss, a large disc of brightly polished material, which was ingeniously contrived to represent the moon in its various phases during the month.

In a succession of statements, becoming progressively more and more ridiculous, the government has tried to convince us that our loss is trifling. Their conscience is clear, they have said. The crisis is past, now that we have no moon to dispute over. Little devastation was caused, they say, apart from the abnormally high tides which drowned approximately three million people, so easing our population problem. Furthermore, they assure us, from the present time onward there will be little or no tide to cause coastal erosion or interfere with estuarial navigation.

If I were a Proxima Centaurian I would laugh my head off—if I had a head, that is.

But the final humiliation is at hand.

Half an hour ago, television programmes were interrupted for a special live newscast of a speech by the Warlord of a star system in the cluster of Pleiades.

The auto-translator was obviously tuned for high persuasion characteristics, no doubt through an oversight by some panicked executive, and in consequence the message was delivered in the most ludicrously genial and reasonable of tones.

'To the people of Earth and other inhabited worlds of your stellar system. Greetings from the warriors of Agnar!

'In the dawn of history, the lesser member of the double-star system of Agnar was naturally induced to break her gravitational bonds to her mate, and henceforth to roam the starways.

'After centuries of diligent research, warrior-scientists of Agnar have established conclusively that the star around which your planets revolve, is the long lost star of Agnar.

'Soon the ships of our battle-fleet, more numerous than leaves in a thicket, will escort our reclamation fleet in its task of restoring our star to its rightful place in the cosmos.

'Then once again our sacred double-star will bestow its glorious radiance on the nascent, invincible armies of Agnar.

'Earthmen, your sacrifice will not be in vain!

'We have no need, however, for the encumbering planets of our wandering star, and these we will accordingly detach and jettison . . .'

By an ironic coincidence, the static picture accompanying the relayed message, depicted the sun and crescent moon of the Authority For Earth.

I'm sitting here on my porch, stunned by the enthusiastically expressed sentence of doom I have just heard, contemplating the sunset. There won't be many more sunsets to watch . . .

But—'detach and jettison'! That it should come to this! And all because nobody cared enough to make a stand over an ostensibly worthless little satellite. Lord help the navies of Saturn and Jupiter now.

It's going to be a long, cold winter!



MOONGHIP

john rankine

Here is a grimly fascinating little story by an author who is rapidly making a name for himself in British sf. And if you are thinking of buying a second-hand car, you should be very, very careful. Don't say we didn't warn you!

Not more than five centimetres across when its urgent, heated passage through Earth's atmospheric layers had pruned down its mass. Thin, flat oval slicing down like a free-acting, cutting edge deep into the heart of an iron-ore mountain.

Mined after millenia of waiting. Heat again. New form. Spreading, expanding, infiltrating into the intimate molecular empty spaces of a shining sheet of freshly-minted steel. Into the pressing shop. Given identity and a name. Sleekly streamlined. Wheels, upholstery, a thousand refined, technological details.

Mobility at last as an object. Flexing its emerging personality by shoving its fender with a percussive smack into the rear of the queue which had preceded it off the assembly line.

Jarring collisions spread out like a textbook illustration for the travel of sound in air.

The floor foreman, anxious not to exacerbate labour relations made himself civil. He was also inhibited by his visitor.

A Chinese trade delegation visiting the plant had been split among the departments and he had drawn a small yellow smiler with button-black eyes, who followed him like a shadow with a large notebook.

'What do you want to come off of it like that for, Jack?'

'No bloody brakes. How does a thing like that pass the bloody checks? Like putting your foot on a bloody jelly.'

'Let's see, well.'

The foreman manœuvred it out of the waiting column and made an elaborate mime for his yellow cross to wait for him on the spot. Then he ran it on to the test ground and made it sit up and beg.

'It's all right now.'

'I tell you, I had my foot flat down. No bloody pressure.'

'You must have got the clutch. Easy enough to do once in a while.'

'I tell you, I used the bloody brake.'

'Okay, okay. Don't let's make this thing a national

issue. Get that line moving, there's a bottleneck starting.'

A whistle blew to make a period and the line stopped. He went on, 'I know, I know. It'll have to wait. Tea up.'

The visitor was looking apprehensively around him as though he expected to see flames leap from the very floor.

'What is the disaster, if I might have the honour to ask?'

'Tea.'

'T.N.T.?'

'No, tea. Same like you drink in China. Break time.'

'They all stop to take tea?'

'That's right.'

'That would not happen in my country. In my country the workers love to grind away from seven in the morning to noon indeed, without a break.'

'You couldn't get away with that here. They wouldn't stand for it. Too many communists in this plant, and that's the truth.'

It was hot behind a hundred-odd square metres of plate glass. Heavy exhalations of rubber; gasoline and p.v.c. were brought to a unique and richly flowering bouquet.

Granger, senior salesman, flexed his feet one at a time in the shade of a maroon convertible and checked his strap watch with the Happy Motoring Clock mounted above the central kiosk.

Greta Lingham, telephonist and general hey-you, anxious to be all things to all men said, 'Only another four minutes, Mr Granger, and I'll be giving them all a call.'

It was her moment of authority. At thirteen hundred on the stroke, she rang each extension on her board and told every last member of the hive that the morning stint was past and gone and only a slave would linger on.

The rhyme was Granger's and she had already over-paid him for it in the retreat bay.

In the event, Granger was unable to take advantage of the invitation. At a minute to the hour, a harassed, round-faced man in dark-grey slacks and a check jacket, made two unsuccessful attempts to find their ultra-modern plain glass door, like a lizard clawing at the side of a vivarium, then stumbled on it by accident and was in with a rush.

He sighted Granger, who had not moved, and crossed to him on strips of red carpet between glittering new cars,

with a nice blend of determination and embarrassment.

Years of experience told the salesman that affability would be wasted. The man was definitely not a customer. He wanted somebody to do him a favour, and at twelve fifty-nine point five he had picked the wrong man. With distant civility he rumbled into transmit with, 'Well, sir. What can we do for you, then?'

'Do you buy cars?'—it came out with a rush. A prepared speech.

Granger thought. 'Just so. Wants to offload a banger.' Aloud he said, 'We can make an offer for a motor-car. Naturally it is a better offer where the transaction is in the nature of a two-way deal. An allowance against a purchase on your part, you understand. But in certain circumstances we might consider an outright purchase. Showroom space is, of course, very valuable. I could not consider anything unless it was exceptional. Mr . . . ?'

'Oh it's exceptional.'

'Is it here, Mr . . . ?'

It dawned suddenly that identification was being sought. 'Scholes. Scholes is my name. Oh. Yes. It's out there on the apron.'

'We are just about to close, Mr Scholes. I can't promise anything; but I'll take a look at it.'

Granger collected a look of womanly understanding from the hub and moved his aching feet in dignified progress to the world beyond the glass. Such was the force of personality that Scholes found the door and deferentially held it open for him.

It was a medium-sized family saloon, the current model for its *marque*. Birch-grey. Chromium shining in showroom splendour. An eye-catcher in its own right, even without the ancillary drama of the tableau in which it shared the central role.

Mavis the pump-girl was gently pinned against the end pump of the crescent by its fender, which was nudging firmly against the back of her legs. She was half turned torso-wise, waving a pint oil-measure and a sheet of trading stamps in the classical, ecstatic stance of a cymbal-playing maenad in a Dionysian rout.

Scholes said, 'Oh my God. I must have left the brake off. It ran down the incline. It slopes that way. I'll go and move it.'

'Do that, Mr Scholes,' said Granger. 'Let us hope, for everybody's sake you have reliable insurance cover.'

Mavis, however, was more indignant than hurt.

Gripped just below full calves in western-style pants, she was saying, 'I was just bending down to put this can on this plinth and I felt this push against my legs and I thought it was Fred with his jacking trolley; so I said, "Don't muck about Fred, it's nearly dinner-time." But it just went on pushing and I ended up flat against this pump.'

When she was free and massaging the spot, Granger thoughtfully joined in as resident consultant and she said, 'That's nice, Mr Granger. Very soothing that is. You have a lovely touch.'

An apologetic voice from behind them said, 'I hope the young lady is all right,' and spoiled this civil enquiry by going on in nervous speculation, 'It might have been a lot worse if I hadn't taken my lucky mallard mascot off the radiator grille.'

Mavis treated him to a slow burn which made him blush crimson and said severely, 'Thank you very much

I'm sure. People who can't take simple precautions shouldn't own cars. You're lucky anyway. I shan't be making a claim.'

Granger said, 'That's a good girl, Mavis. But just slip inside and give Greta your particulars. She can log it on the day sheet. Just in case anything happens to these nice legs of yours. We wouldn't want to miss anything would we?'

'It wouldn't get me new legs though would it?'

They both looked at Scholes to emphasize this cosmic truth and he said hastily, 'I'm really very sorry. I know I haven't a leg to stand on.' He was looking with some fascination at Mavis's plenty and suddenly dried up again in embarrassment.

She looked at Granger and shook her hair back in a gesture of regal contempt, then walked with her chin up and a very pleasing undulation into the ranch house.

Granger watched her in with a speculative eye and then turned to Scholes as one who reluctantly accepts that the call of duty is paramount and pleasure must wait its turn.

'Well now, Mr Scholes. Let's see then. I take it you've had this car from new. Six months is it? If we can say "one careful driver" it's an advantage.'

Scholes was head and shoulders through the nearside door rummaging in the parcel tray for documentary evidence. He backed out like a retriever with a registration booklet and handed it over.

Granger, who had given the interior a professionally thorough scrutiny, took it with his right hand and moved his left from the door pillar only marginally in time to save it from being lopped by the closing door.

It was a near thing and made him realize afresh how much he needed his lunch and a healing draught. He opened the brochure with a shaking hand and found that Scholes's name was the third entry.

He said, '*Three* owners, then. That's not good. Not good at all. Has it had a knock?'

'I don't think so. Not as far as I know.'

'That last entry is a Reverend. What did he want to get rid of it for?'

'It was his widow. She didn't like to see it about. Just outside Ilkley the vicarage is, on a very windy corner.'

'So?'

'Well, the vicar was checking his battery with the hood up, Leaning in, you know, with his head well inside and there was a sudden gust. Very fierce gusts they get there sometimes on that moor.'

'So?'

'The hood catch slipped and it took it right off.'

'The hood?'

'Oh no. No, there's been no damage to the car. Took his head off. Flush with his clerical collar. It wasn't noticed for some time. Not many people go past that corner and those that did thought it was just the vicar bending down in front of his car.'

'Then a young couple came up who wanted to see him about putting banns up. He always liked to see young couples personally and give them a little run-down on basics. Gave them quite a shock. The girl said it was like an omen and if that was what happened to the righteous, she'd rather go on as they were. So she gave him his ring back.'

'So you got the car?'

'Well, my elder brother lives up that way. He heard about it and let me know. It was only three months old then. Three-thousand on the clock. I got it for two-fifty below list and that's what I'm asking now. It's only done five thousand. Just nicely run in you might say.'

It was a long piece of exposition and he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

Granger said, 'Is there an H.P. contract on it?'

'No. Cash I paid. All used notes actually. I don't know why she stipulated that.'

Granger cleared his throat, deliberately. There was no doubt, he had a saleable proposition here. Even at Scholes's price there was a nice margin. But it would go hard if he couldn't pull in a bit more slack and make a little for his own sinking fund.

He said, 'There's not much moving just now in this trade. I could take you upstairs and show you two more like this. One owner jobs. Mint condition. Going for a hundred less than your price. You'll have to come down a bit Mr Scholes. Fair's fair. We all have to live. It isn't as if we were selling you a new model and could squeeze a bit out that way. All the risks are on our side. That car will take up valuable floor space for months before I find a customer. Months.'

'Now, let's see. Stretching it a bit for you, because I appreciate your frank attitude and honest dealing deserves honest dealing, I could take it at three-fifty under list. You won't do any more. Not with that record.'

Scholes's apprehensive look changed to one of relief. He said, 'All right. That's all right. I'll let it go at that. Cheque or cash, I don't mind. But I've got to get back so I'd like it all fixed up.'

'It'll take an hour. We're closed now as you can see. I couldn't get the cashier's authorization on it before two o'clock. But leave the car and I'll make out an undertaking to purchase. Send you the cheque by post, if you like.'

Scholes's face, which had clouded in disappointment, cleared again and he said, 'I don't mind. Certainly. That will do. I'll run it off the apron and give you the keys.'

Granger followed Mavis inside and got himself an agreement blank while Scholes shifted his car in small kangaroo leaps to a parking lot on the right flank.

They met again at Greta's command island in the centre of the showroom. Scholes was apologetic, 'I'm afraid I can't give you those keys right away.'

He was looking in a puzzled way at his right index finger which was stuck out as though it had gone rigid on him.

Granger felt a stirring of self-pity. He was missing his lunch and he could have passed up this fringe nut. The incidence of eccentric clients was creeping up. Only last week he'd had that purple-rinse job who'd backed a demonstration model off its stand and through the wall of the gentlemen's rest room.

He said patiently, as though reasoning with a backward child, 'Why not then, Mr Scholes? What have we done with them, eh?'

'Well, I was just spinning the ring on my finger. It's a little habit I have. There's an R.A.C. key, two ignition and a little black cat with a hole in its head.'

'Well?'

'Well they fell off and dropped through that grating over there.'

'Both ignition keys I think you said?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Not to worry, Mr Scholes. It's a popular make. We carry hundreds of spare keys. Just sign here. Cheque by tomorrow's post.'

'Thank you very much.'

'Not at all. When you're ready to buy, just come in and have a word with me. I'll see what I can do for you.'

Scholes was already, however, almost out of earshot. Only iron self-control was preventing him from breaking into a run. A last scrabble round to find the door and he was off.

Odd that. Very odd, thought Granger. Still as he had often confided to Greta, 'It takes all sorts.'

He went reflectively over to the hat-rack, past a small, new Italian job with its door wide open, which smelled of over-ripe bananas. It reminded him in an obscure way of Greta and he stopped with his hand stretched out for his sporting trilby. Late now for lunch out. Get a couple of sandwiches at the delicatessen and join her amongst the tyres.

As he crossed the forecourt, he had a definite feeling that he was being watched, but there was no one in sight, so he put it down to conscience and stoutly shrugged it off. He had lived with a bad conscience for too long to start being worried by it now.

On the way back, with his frugal lunch balanced on his left palm, he stopped by the birch-grey car and forgot his tired feet in a glow of self-satisfaction.

Tyres showed no wear. Inside immaculate. He lifted the hood. Even the engine was polished. Reminded, however, of the severed Anglican head, he closed it with some caution.

He drove round the pumps and two blocks up the street. Gear shift sweet as a nut. Silky purr from the power pack. Very nice. Very nice indeed. In fact it wouldn't be a bad idea to slip in his own two-year model and take this on.

'You are a very thoughtful and long-sighted foxy bastard,' he said fondly to himself. 'A good motor-car and a nice little profit. You are a very smooth man.'

He went to share his glow with Greta who was very complimentary.

On the afternoon stint, he had the special pleasure of finding a buyer as uncritical in his way as Scholes had been on the selling angle.

Every now and then you got one. Wide open. In expansive mood, Granger believed that he could have sold the man a motor-car without an engine. Even got him to push it away himself. *And* sold him gasoline.

The bonus of ten thousand trading stamps had brought tears of gratitude to the man's eyes. Waste there. He could have got himself a nice little gift with that lot. Something for Greta, even. My god, what an impulsive, generous fool he was.

Granger's hard-driven saloon with twenty-three thousand on the clock had a whine in the transmission like a power take-off for a band-saw, had been driven off as though it had armorial bearings on its rumbling doors. Licence due too, at the end of the month.

The birch-grey had six months to run and not a thing to be done as far as he could see. Get Fred to put it up on the ramp and check over. Then a little spin with

Greta on Sunday afternoon. See what it was like out on the moors.

Accident-minded Greta said, 'You keep your hands on that wheel Alf Granger or you'll never make it.'

They were coming round on a tight, right-hand lock on an unfenced moorland road with red clusters of cats-eyes on white bollards marking a long drop on the left.

Granger fractionally eased the throttle and had the unusual experience of seeing his speed register a contradictory spurt. He took his foot right off and gave the road ahead his full attention.

They were still climbing, turning and accelerating. It was unbelievable. Now it was taking all his considerable skill to keep them on the road.

Greta said, 'There'll be an accident. I *know* there'll be an accident. Stop it, Alf. Slow down.' Then with the sort of logic that finds a banana in a crate of snakes, she began to wail, 'I shouldn't have come.'

Granger slammed through a spectacular change down and the engine tone dropped in pitch to a fierce roar. Speed fell momentarily, then built again until he felt that the power unit would tear itself free and appear through the hood.

His tension communicated at last to Greta and she realized that it was not just a mating display. He couldn't help it. The car was nearly out of control.

They took the crest as if it was a take-off ramp in an acrobatic interlude at a stock-car meeting and went flat out over the empty plateau. Jewelled eyes of sheep along the verge. Any one that decided to move on the thesis that the grass is greener on the other side of the street would be instant mutton.

Now the engine note was a howl as it developed every microfraction of horse-power built into its design.

Granger, fighting to keep the car on the road had no time to think about what might happen. He had one illuminating flash of insight as to why Scholes had been so glad to offload, then he was straining every nerve to hold a course on his share of the narrow tarmac strip and avoid the boring eyes of a car coming from dead ahead.

They were past in a wow of speed with a turbulence that set up a sympathetic vibration in his snap-back, wing mirror.

White faced, a pharmaceutical representative pulled up a hundred metres farther on and said to his companion, 'That's my lot, Donna. I'm trembling like an aspen. Lean over into the back there and pull out that little black grip. I need something to steady my hand.'

His passenger, who had been grinding his ear off for the last ten minutes with a complex account of the unscrupulous behaviour of her friend Bella, had gone mercifully spellbound and it was a pity to call her back. But necessity knows no law. He gave her a sharp dig in her pneumatic side with a nicotine-stained forefinger, 'Look alive, Donna. The bag.'

With a lithe twist, she leaned over the seat in a taut stretch which did only good for a figure which had first claimed his interest. But on survival's rim, sex is in eclipse and when there was a further hiatus he was merely impatient.

'What is it, then? Can't you find it?'

'It's that car.'

'What about it?'

'It's turned off across the moor. There's no road there. It's going lickety-split right through the bracken. Straight for Caster Tump.'

He twisted wearily on his seat. She was a talker this one. The sooner he dropped her off in the town below the better. He must be getting old. All the ancillary chat made it hardly worth it.

But the action through the rear window was spectacular enough to take his mind off the elixir in his black bag.

Twin headlight beams were weaving a crazy pattern against the night sky. In spite of the uneven ground and the drag of the knee-high bracken, the other car had hardly slackened speed.

Donna told no lie. It was storming ahead on a direct line for Caster Tump, the bland, hemispherical mount which dominated this stretch of the moor. He tried to remember whether or not there were any of the low, dry-stone walls along that way, and could not picture the place in daylight.

One headlamp of the bucking car winked out. Now there was a single glaring eye. Up, down, left, right, as the random run of the ground took it.

Donna said, 'Whoever's inside is getting well shaken up.'

It was her night for truth. Greta Lingham had long gone into a coma of convulsive dread. She braced her left heel against the parcel shelf and was kneeling round with her head braced into Granger's side and her arms locked round the back of her seat.

This complicated posture would have raised professional interest in any flying Gupta. If they did meet a dry-stone wall, she would present the ergonomic analysts with a pretty problem in reconstruction. Fortunately this sacrifice in the cause of fundamental research was not required of her.

Alf Granger as a veteran motorist, was going through the motions of driving, but any control he had was as remote as that of a child on a fairground roundabout.

Brakes gone. Gear shift jammed home and immovable. Wheel whipping everywhichway, like a maddened serpent. He hung on unaware that the pressure in his side was from Greta's head.

One-in-three, lower slope of Caster Tump loomed up like a green wall in their one glaring beam. He gave up the unequal struggle and recognized that the time had come to abandon ship. He yelled, 'Get your door open. Get out. Get yourself out.'

The car hardly faltered and flung itself up the slope.

Greta heard the yell and, like an obedient girl, felt round with her right hand and yanked down the opening lever.

A sharp roll that way threw back the door in a weighty swing that beat the friction bar and slammed it flat against the shuddering wing.

At the same time Greta shot out as though from an ejector seat on a horizontal flight-path which took her in a flat trajectory to the cold but welcome mattress of a springy peat bog.

Granger had lost his grip on the wheel and without her wedging force chocking him in his corner was moving freely under centrifugal urge to follow her out,

when the car took a contrary slant. He had reached a kind of top dead centre with his head out in the cool night air when the heavy door came back like a flailing blade.

His detached head, bounding back down Caster Tump, had a fixed look of open-mouthed incredulity on its pale features, whenever they came uppermost to the marginal light of a thread of silver moon.

Freed from a fair part of its human load, the car stormed on up the next pitch. Its probing searchlight beam occasionally lit up the remains of a bailey wall which ringed the summit in a ragged oval. When the fender finally wedged itself in a crumbling gap, the tortured engine barked once like a saluting gun and locked solid.

Torn-out battery leads crossed briefly with a flaring blue-white arc and flame exploded out from every buckled vent.

The watchers below saw the instant beacon and Donna said uncertainly, 'We should go for help.'

'The flare will be seen for miles hereabout. There'll be plenty to report it. We don't want our pictures all over a paper with those snide cracks, *Mr J. N. Crabtree and Mrs D. Enfield happened to be passing and raised the alarm. Mrs Enfield's husband, a long-distance haulier was gainfully employed in another part of the forest. When asked he concurred with their action. "Ho, yes," he said, "I reckon, had I been there, I would of done the same myself. As I was not there, I can't wait to get my hands on my busy wife's neck."*

'Okay, okay. I take your point.'

'Now just hurry that black bag along. I just need a small tranquillizer before we move off.'

'And leave them?'

'Look, there's nothing anybody can do. Right? What's the point in being involved. All that's needed up there is a scrap-metal dealer and a dedicated mortician.'

She completed her delayed mission and swung the bag round to his lap.

Ever courteous he passed her the flask for first drink. Unlike the recipient of Philip Sydney's water bottle she was not one-hundred-per-cent grateful.

She said, 'Here's to a proper selfish swine.'

With the bottle comfortable against his hand and confidence partially restored, he said, 'Now, Donna, take a reasonable view. Nothing is gained by losing your head.'

Neatly baled and stacked by the scrap metal compressor, twenty portmaneau-sized blocks, which had been cars, waited in the delivery bay.

Joe Fleck brought his two V.I.P. visitors to take their pick.

He said, 'If it's a typical scrap bundle you're after you could take any one of this lot. Not a pin to choose. All recent wrecks without much rust. Burned all the dross out as we always do. Batteries and such-like all taken out. Each one a complete car body crunched up as you can see.'

'I hope you have some success with your process. I do that. It'll improve the market for this lot and that's a

fact. You'd think there'd be a big demand for metal, wouldn't you, now? But sometimes it hangs on till this bay here's full to the roof. That's because it can only be used for low-grade steel at present.'

The taller of the two men who carried a black brief case and had listened with patient resignation said, 'Quite.'

His companion, short and broad with a large dome-like bald head, bare to the morning sun, had been watching the rams and guillotine jaws of the processing machine as it went through its powerful packaging chore, with simple pleasure.

He said, 'Did you see that, Carstairs? A wonderful machine that. The other side of the coin. Reduction of an artifact to a primitive block. There should be one in every home.'

'Quite. But may I remind you, Dr Fredericks, we are on a tight schedule. I am here to verify that your experiment begins with a truly random selection of steel scrap. Let us make our choice without delay.'

'Certainly. Certainly. It does not matter. Pick where you like. That is the beauty of the process. There is such a wide tolerance. I guarantee to turn any of this material into the most superior grade of steel. You will see.'

'Quite. What do you say to that one then? Number seven from the end. A dark streak running to left of centre.'

'It's all right as far as I'm concerned. Just chalk your mark on it and have the crew pick it out.'

Joe Fleck said, 'There's nothing special about that bale. Just an ordinary medium-sized saloon as I remember. Except that it was a rugged job to collect. Stuck up on the moor. Some crazy cowboy ran it up Caster Tump. Took some getting down, I can tell you. Lost a good man on that job. Never seen anything like it. Foot slipped and he got his head in a loop in the tow line. Still it's a good clean bit of metal, that.'

'Quite. It will be collected in about thirty-five minutes.'

'A pleasure. And I hope it comes off. It'll give a big boost to the scrap trade I can tell you. What's the test steel to be used for?'

Carstairs was silent; but the metallurgist had no big thing about caution. He was a happy man, who never feared that he might look foolish if a project failed to go according to plan.

But this time, he knew he had it in the bag. Test runs with small samples had been uniformly successful. The days when metal had to make a slow regression into unusable dross were definitely over.

All he needed now, was this final run through under test conditions set up by the Ministry and his process would be accepted practice. He had even designated the product. One where only the very highest grade of special steel had ever been tolerated.

He said, 'That bale will have a distinguished future. I have it all set up with an instrument-maker. This time next week, it will be metamorphosized into surgical instruments. Once they have been tested by the officials I shall donate a set to every major hospital in the metropolis.'

A JUDGE OF MEN

Michael G. Coney

Many readers will remember SIXTH SENSE by Michael Coney in our first issue, a story notable for its strong human interest. In the present story, reminiscent of the great Stanley Weinbaum, he takes us to a distant planet and its strange inhabitants who, although they may not walk on two legs, are still recognizable as people!

The ship was small; the accommodation, cramped. The two men stood at the viewscreen, watching with varying emotions the green and silver planet as it swam slowly towards them, occasionally distorted by darting flecks of interference. The equipment was not modern, and the ship had seen many years, many stars.

To a lesser extent, the same could be said of Bancroft. He watched the planet approach with the slightly bored air of one who has seen it all, and certainly, he had seen this particular planet many times before.

Scott was different. He was some twenty-five years Bancroft's junior and he observed the planet intently. He was tall and thin where the other was short and inclined to stoutness, and he possessed the fresh complexion of youth as compared with Bancroft's face which was lined and mottled with many atmospheres of varying degrees of hostility.

'Won't be long now,' observed Bancroft. 'Before we land, though, I'd like to remind you of one thing. Whatever you do, don't tell the Karambans why you've come. I'll explain you away somehow, and you'll have to back me up.'

'Oh?' Scott looked puzzled.

'They've got some odd notions,' explained Bancroft, 'and somehow the chief's got it into his head that we keep subject species on Earth, as slaves. He went to Earth once, and some fool took him round a zoo. It was very unfortunate.'

'I get it. I'm just along for the ride.'

'That's it. Now, I think we've covered just about everything else . . .'

'You'd better run over it again.' Scott was always anxious to learn; couldn't seem to absorb enough.

Bancroft sighed tiredly. He found Scott's enthusiasm wearing. He found Scott himself wearing; the man's flashing spectacles, thin pointed face, boundless energy. But he hadn't got the heart to say so, to explain that when Scott got to Bancroft's age, then one planet looked much like another, and you looked upon aliens as people, not as interesting life-forms.

'What do you want to know?'

'Everything. The terrain, the life-forms, the climate, the atmosphere. Everything.' Scott took a pen from his breast-pocket, a notebook from his side-pocket, and poised the former above the latter, listening intently for Bancroft's words of wisdom backed by years of experience. Scott respected experience, since he possessed none himself. This was his first assignment, to sort out the problems of Karamba, a very minor planet but nevertheless a member of the Union. Scott was a bio-ecologist, fresh out of college.

'I think it's better for you to find out for yourself,' replied Bancroft carefully. 'Then you won't be influenced by any pre-conceived notions and you'll be able to approach the problem from a fresh viewpoint. Much better that way.'

'Of course. Of course,' agreed Scott eagerly. Bancroft relaxed. 'Just tell me about the planet, then. What's it like?' resumed Scott relentlessly.

Again, Bancroft sighed. Scott made him feel old. 'Karamba,' he began, 'is a comparatively young planet, and is the only planet in the system. It is volcanic and the surface tends to be porous.'

Scott was taking notes. '. . . porous surface. Yes?'

'It appears that some sort of ice-age has commenced. It is possible that the planet is tilting slowly on its axis. Normally, this would not be unduly serious, as the animal life would just migrate to a warmer place, but there's only one fairly small continent on Karamba. The rest is water. In other words, they've got nowhere to go.'

'Interesting problem.' Scott's spectacles gleamed at the prospect.

'I don't look at it that way,' retorted Bancroft harshly. 'I think it's bloody tragic. I like the Karambans. True, they may be a little unusual to look at, but . . . I've got friends among them. I've been visiting them for years, collecting Shoom, and they're good people. They've never tried to pull a fast one on me, and now that Shoom is in short supply they apologize, instead of putting up the prices.'

'Not very businesslike.'

'No, and I respect them for it. I've spent a lifetime haggling over prices with bloody-minded aliens, and I look on my trips to Karamba as holidays. The chief, now. Mor, his name is. I've known him for twenty years, and a finer person you couldn't hope to meet.'

'Person,' Scott chuckled. 'You sound as though you're going native. Tell me, do they really look like this?' He held up a photograph. It showed a group of Karambans standing beside a pile of Shoom. Among the group, looking incongruous, stood Bancroft in shirt and shorts, his arm around a particularly gnarled Karamban. From the photograph it was apparent that Karambans stand about seven feet tall, have a greyish, leathery hide, and present the appearance of a pillar about three feet in diameter, almost featureless except for a dangling, slender tentacle about two-thirds of the way up the body. The single eye is set near the top of the pillar, just above a small, round mouth. On the top is a single ear, trumpet-shaped and movable.

All in all, they look rather like sawn-off elephants' legs with a grey daffodil stuck on top.

'You mustn't be deceived by their appearance,' remarked Bancroft. 'They're very intelligent.'

'How about sex?' sniggered Scott, dropping the scientific attitude and examining the photograph closely.

Karambans have no visible sex organs. The question of sex among Karambans has been the subject of much speculation among biologists, who enjoy speculating upon such matters, particularly as the Karambans are extremely reticent about the subject. It is therefore concluded that the process must be incredibly enjoyable and flavoured with a spicy sensation of great guilt. (This, after the problem had been referred to the psychologists.) Serious papers have been written about it, advancing unusual theories.

'I don't know,' replied Bancroft firmly. 'I've never asked. I'll advise you not to ask, either. Mor, the chief, attended the Festival of Earth, and he was surrounded by reporters, all asking the same damned silly question. And if a crowd of reporters can't get an answer, I don't think you will. It's no good asking how they produce Shoom, either. That's one of the most closely-guarded secrets of the Universe.'

'Oh,' Scott was vaguely nettled. 'I must say, you seem to have very little curiosity. Not at all what one might call the scientific approach.'

'I'm a trader,' Bancroft replied shortly.

'But the opportunity you've had!' Scott's spectacles were gleaming with enthusiasm again. 'To be able to study, at first hand in the field, a planet like this. A monologist would give his right arm!'

'Monologist?'

'Sort of biologist, specializing in life-forms such as the Karambans. Monopods. One legged, one eyed, one armed, etcetera. Fascinating. I read it all up when I found they were sending me here. Did you know that the only similar race so far discovered is on the—'

'Strap yourself in, Scott. We're landing.'

'There they are,' remarked Bancroft unnecessarily, standing at the viewport.

'God, yes. Fascinating.' Scott peered eagerly, wiping the surface with his sleeve, impatiently straining to obtain a clear view through a gradually-settling cloud of grey, volcanic ash.

About two hundred yards away, motionless, stood the grey monolithic figures of five Karambans, watching the ship fixedly.

'They won't come much nearer until the dust settles and we get out,' explained Bancroft. 'They're very sensitive about their eyes. I suppose it's only having one, they don't like to take any chances. They never go near the sea, for instance, because it is extremely saline and they are scared stiff of getting it in their eyes in some way. The coastal areas are virtually unpopulated.'

Scott, encouraged, fired a fusillade of acute questions at Bancroft. By the time the latter had explained fully the monopods' phobia the dust had settled and they descended to the ground. The atmosphere was much the same as Earth's but with a rather unpleasant sulphurous tang, Scott discovered, sniffing disgustedly.

As the pair reached the foot of the steps the group of Karambans began to jig, oddly, raising little puffs of dust around their bases. Then suddenly they began to move forward, bouncing towards Scott and Bancroft like animated ninepins. Scott grinned to himself. They

looked faintly ridiculous. It wouldn't have appeared so absurd if they had bounced in unison, with some sense of discipline.

His grin faded, however, as the aliens came nearer, and the ground trembled slightly with the concussion of their approach. They looked massive, ponderous, and faintly menacing in a very alien way. The slender tentacles appeared nevertheless powerful, and capable of dashing a man to the ground to be trampled underfoot by those huge base-pads . . .

'Greetings, friend Bancroft.' The deep voice spoke Unilingua in a strangely staccato manner, like a series of quick belches.

'Hello, Mor,' Bancroft replied. 'It's good to see you again. This is Scott. He's . . . er . . . come along for the ride, to gain a little experience.'

'Greetings, friend Scott.'

Scott extended a hand uncertainly and found it grasped firmly by the leathery tentacle. Meeting Mor's eye, he was astonished to find himself favoured by an enormous wink. Assuming this to be the local form of greeting he winked back, hastily, not wishing to offend this giant alien who still retained his hand in an iron grip.

Bancroft watched them, grinning, realizing that Mor's fascination for Scott's spectacles had produced the involuntary spasm. Mor was old, and very eye-conscious.

They exchanged pleasantries for a while and Mor introduced them to the rest of the group. Then Bancroft got down to business.

'Does your village prosper, Mor?'

Mor's abdominal pump flickered visibly, a tremor beneath the grey hide. 'Things are no better, Bancroft. Indeed, they get worse . . . The Shoom harvest is very bad. I regret that we have little for you, this trip.'

'Don't worry, I'll get you a good price . . . Do you mind if we stay for a few days? I have some repairs to make to the ship, and Scott has a few studies to do on your plants . . .' Bancroft disliked deceiving the monopods in this way, but he knew of old how any offer of assistance in Karamban problems would be received. They just didn't seem to want to be helped.

'My village is yours,' replied Mor simply. 'Come.'

Scott watched in fascination as the abdominal pump accelerated, beating powerfully under the wrinkled hide, giving the impression of a vast piston beneath the flesh with a travel of some two feet. Gathering momentum, Mor pounded into action and, turning, led the way along the trampled track to the village.

The two men followed. At first Scott tried walking on the grey, ashy soil, but found it so soft and porous that he sank to his ankles with each step. He gave up, and followed behind Bancroft on the narrow, packed track which had been rammed to a level at least a foot below the surrounding surface by the thunderous passing of countless monopods.

'Can't we use the ship as a base?' he whispered to Bancroft as they strode along behind Mor and his henchmen, a file of bobbing, thumping monoliths.

'No.' Bancroft spoke over his shoulder with twisted mouth. 'It looks bad, if we do that. The village is O.K. They keep a hut specially for me. Mustn't spurn their hospitality.'

'Oh.' Scott cast a longing glance back at the ship, clean



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and sparkling in the afternoon sunshine then, with slight repulsion, at the village, a group of dark featureless domes in the middle distance. The comparison was depressing. He didn't suppose they had running hot and cold laid on. And, for God's sake, what were the sanitary arrangements?

'Here we are.' Bancroft pulled aside the entrance curtain, a hanging fringe of some dead, stringy vegetable matter. 'This is home.'

Scott glanced at him sharply, suspecting sarcasm. 'This?'

The interior was rounded, igloo-shaped; the floor was unevenly-packed volcanic ash. There was no window. Against the wall roughly opposite the entrance thrived a small colony of grey fungoid spheres. A pile of dank skins lay on the floor. Bancroft bent down and divided them into two heaps.

'This is luxury, Scott. You may not realize it, but your bed is worth approximately two million Unicredits.'

'No!' Scott picked up a skin and carried it to the entrance. 'Good God!' he muttered in amazement.

In his hand he held a perfect, untreated Shoom.

That evening they squatted in Mor's hut and around them towered Mor and the four elders and they drank Kurm, a powerful distillate of the whip-tree produced in the village from apparatus supplied years ago by Bancroft. Bancroft had no conscience on the subject of introducing innocents to alcohol in this case, for very good reasons.

'You mean to say that you supplied them with equipment to distil alcohol?' grated Scott, putting down his mug. 'That's despicable. You ought to know the laws of the Union. It's a damned disgrace, introducing strong drink to innocent speci—er, life-forms. Why did you do it, for God's sake?'

'I like to think of myself as a connoisseur of local brews. Particularly those of my own invention,' replied Bancroft lightly, with a disarming smile that was meant to irritate, and succeeded. 'I get tired of shipboard gin, and it gives me something to look forward to, on the long pull through Space.'

'You swine. I ought to report this.'

'Take it easy, Scott. I was only joking. In point of fact, the Karambans only drink the stuff when I'm here, and then in small doses. For one thing, they don't enjoy handling the whip-tree because occasionally it throws a bifurcated sport instead of the usual single trunk. This seems unnatural to this single-minded lot. They think it's evil. It took them a hell of a time to get used to my two-legged appearance.'

The sinful Kurm already downed by Scott was having a warming effect. He thawed slightly. 'I hope you're right, Bancroft. I damned well hope you're right. By God, if I thought you were getting these bastards drunk . . .' He glanced up at the huge forms nervously.

'Anyhow, Karambans are naturally abstemious creatures. They prefer to keep a clear head.'

'So you say.' Scott took another gulp. The stuff had certainly got something. He decided to let the matter drop for the time being, reserving it as a trump card should he ever have some radical disagreement with Bancroft in the future. Then pressure could be brought to bear. He smiled privately at the thought that Ban-

croft had, in effect, placed himself in his, Scott's, power. 'Good stuff, this, Bancroft,' he remarked after a lengthy, contemplative silence.

But Bancroft was listening intently to Mor, as the chief related the misfortunes which had befallen the village; and, indeed, the whole race of monopods.

'And it grows so cold in the winter, and even the summers are less warm than they used to be. The Shoom production falls; each year less to sell than the last . . . and there are many empty huts in the village. Our people are rich, but what good is wealth when our very home is becoming hostile?'

'This is all you have produced, since I was here last?' Bancroft gestured at the heap of skins in the centre of the floor.

'That is all, save the six skins in your hut. Fifteen in all. And even they are not of the best quality.'

Bancroft smiled, a little sadly. 'You shouldn't say that, Mor. You'll never make a businessman. Anyway, the Shoom seem O.K. to me. Have a look, Scott. You don't often see Shoom in the raw.'

Scott reached out and pulled a Shoom from the heap, gingerly. He held it in his lap and struggled to focus his Kurm-blurred eyes. The skin looked much the same as the dingy object back in their bedroom; untreated, it did not appear nearly so attractive as the beautiful, downy-leather coats so prized by the women of Earth. The basis was there; the incredibly fine-textured soft leather, but the short, fine hairs were matted and black, and the whole skin gave the impression that it could do with a damned good wash. He threw it back on the heap and wiped his hands on the thighs of his trousers.

'Amazing what processing can do,' he remarked, not really in the best of taste.

The evening wore on and the lamps were lit, and the atmosphere in the domed hut grew thick and hot, and Kurm was consumed in quantities. At last Bancroft rose to his feet, and helped Scott up, and together they stumbled out into the icy, harsh air, leaving behind the group of Karambans now dozing upright with hooded eyes.

'Right,' said Bancroft, breakfast finished. 'Time to show you around.'

Bancroft had a sadistic turn of mind. He was aware that, for once, he held the upper hand over Scott, who was sitting on the floor of the hut clutching his head in his hands. He knew that Scott wanted nothing more than to get back into the Shoom skins and try to sleep it off. Whereas he, Bancroft, accustomed to Kurm, was feeling aggressively fit and energetic. Such a chance might not occur again, and he intended to make the most of it.

With a groan Scott rose to his feet, steadying himself with outstretched hand against the rough wall. He followed Bancroft out of the hut, wincing as the sharp light stabbed his eyeballs.

Ten minutes later they were crossing the blinding pumice fields, the fierce sun bleaching the honeycomb soil silver, the sky metallic blue and cloudless, the thin air nevertheless chill.

'Doesn't it ever rain here?' asked Scott.

'Only on the Great Koh Plain,' explained Bancroft, 'and that's about ten miles away, beyond the whip-tree groves. It's to do with the winds which blow inland

from all points of the compass. The Great Koh Plain covers most of the middle of the continent, and the air rises over it during the day, bringing in the wet winds from the sea. They condense as rain during the night. It rains every night on the plain, so they say.'

'How does the village get its water?' asked Scott.

'Wells,' replied Bancroft. 'There are no rivers. The soil is too porous.'

Scott, his headache abating slightly now that he had donned sunglasses, squinted around at the blazing landscape, which was almost featureless. The arid soil stretched in all directions, interrupted only by the deep track which they were following. This ran straight to the horizon where an emerald blurring marked the beginning of the whip-tree groves. There was no sign of vegetation, and the air smelt dead and sulphurous.

'What's that?' he asked. A large dark shape was approaching, moving along the track towards them and trailing a cloud of grey dust.

'Ah, yes. This is going to be the second of your interesting life-forms, Scott. A giant Gastropod, if I'm not mistaken; with attendant Karamban.'

Scott swallowed his inward flush in indignation at Bancroft's deliberately patronizing tone, for the sake of the furtherance of knowledge.

Bancroft continued: 'A semi-aquatic beast of the snail family which migrates inland on reaching maturity, which is convenient for the Karambans, as they use them as beasts of burden. It is also rumoured that they are the source of Shoom. Mor once hinted that it was the inner lining of their shell. You can take that any way you like, but personally I think it's a red herring.'

The creature was close now, and Scott saw that it resembled, in fact was, a huge grey snail at least fifteen feet long and moving in energetic undulations. A thick rope was slung around its giant shell and the ends attached to a four-wheeled cart loaded with green shoots and white fungi. In the middle of the load stood a Karamban, apparently asleep, swaying to the bouncing of the cart.

The Gastropod possessed a single antenna at the extremity of which was a globular eye. The antenna stood bolt upright from the blunt forepart, seemingly gazing at the sky, the animal following the track from a combination of memory and touch.

Just as Scott was debating whether to step aside to allow the entourage to rumble by with the maximum clearance, the antenna dipped in their direction with a jerk of alarm. The Gastropod, startled at finding its headlong course obstructed, veered from the track and ploughed across the soft soil to halt in a cloud of dust. The cart continued straight towards Bancroft and Scott until, brought up by the angled snatch of the rope, it too veered away. The wheels mounted the edge of the track and the Karamban toppled from his standpoint, crashing to the thack with an earth-shaking thump. He lay prone, clinking in terror, tentacle waving feebly.

'Quick!' urged Bancroft. 'We must get him upright.'

They hurried forward and seized the helplessly writhing figure. The abdominal pump, its beating obstructed by the hard soil beneath, was fluttering unevenly and the Karamban's breathing was alarmingly feeble and jerky.

'Hold yourself stiff, friend,' Bancroft instructed.

The Karamban had enough sense left in him to obey,

and Bancroft and Scott worked their hands under his upper body. The weight was considerable, but with a concerted heave they were able to tilt the monopod and, pivoting him on his foot, prop him against the side of the cart, where he stayed for a moment at a rigid angle of forty-five degrees, his pump gulping air and restoring the circulation.

'Ready?' asked Bancroft at last, peering solicitously into the creature's eye.

A faint affirmative. Bancroft stooped, got his back underneath the thick, stiff body, and with a grunt levered it upright. The Karamban swayed for an instant, Scott hurried to steady it, then the stance became more confident, and the pumping steadied.

'I thank you, friend Bancroft. And you, friend Scott. Thank you both very much.'

'That's all right,' muttered Scott. 'It was my fault really, not getting out of the way.' He felt a sense of sympathy for the monopod despite himself, for this creature which was apparently so powerful in its natural element, yet so helpless when overtaken by a misfortune which a man would shrug off in an instant. He brushed the hard ash chippings from the Karamban's flank.

Bancroft was regarding Scott oddly, 'I should think he'll be O.K. now,' he said and, as they continued up the track, 'they're not such frightening specimens when you get to know them.' He was smiling faintly to himself, dusting his palms against his jacket. From behind came a series of crashes as the Karamban, revitalized, bounded up the stout steps at the rear of the cart to regain his original position.

'Now you can see why they go easy on the Kurm,' continued Bancroft. 'A good sense of balance can be a matter of life or death to a Karamban. Once they go down, the pump can't function properly. This means that the blood flow is slowed and respiration impaired to such an extent that they can't even shout for help.'

'Strange that such a vulnerable life-form should have survived,' commented Scott.

'No competition, that's why. The only other mobile creatures I've ever seen here are the Gastropods and the monopters, and they hardly rank as evolutionary rivals. The one's too clumsy and the other's too small.'

'I caught a monopter this morning,' remarked Scott, 'in the hut. It's an amazing insect. Have you ever looked at them closely?'

'They've looked at me closely. Last trip, I slept in the hut without my ointment, and woke up in the night and found one of them perched on my arm with his damned long ovipositor stuck into the flesh, laying God knows what under the skin. Never forget your ointment, Scott.'

'It's not an ovipositor,' Scott informed him. 'It sucks; it doesn't blow.'

'Oh.' Bancroft was a little put out at being corrected by the inexperienced Scott. 'As it was on the underside of the insect, I naturally assumed it was an ovipositor.'

'It was sucking your blood,' Scott explained ghoulishly. 'In some ways it is very like the Karamban. It has a pump in the body which deals with sucking and the circulation and respiration; and instead of the tentacle it has this flail-like propellor which it whirls above itself. I cut it open, and it was full of blood. Whether it was yours, or mine, or its own I couldn't tell, not without

testing it.'

Bancroft was silent, amazed that anyone could have the enthusiasm to dissect a three-inch monopter in the early morning, while in the throes of a Kurm-induced hangover.

'What are these?' A yelp from Scott broke into his thoughts. The young bio-ecologist was on his knees, unshipping his rucksack and eagerly opening his specimen boxes. Around him, pushing through the crumbly soil, were scores of small white fungus-like objects. Eagerly he dug out a selection of the puff-plants with his small trowel and placed them carefully in the boxes.

'Finished?' Bancroft shuffled boredly, kicking up little puffs of volcanic ash.

'Wait a moment. What are those, over there?' Scott crunched across to where a group of larger fungi grew. These were slightly larger than tennis balls, each with a slender, single root, and he stuffed a few of them into his bag.

Two days later Bancroft awoke to the cold light streaming through the tendrils of the entrance curtain, sat up, and saw that Scott was not in his bed. He chuckled, imagining him impatiently examining the next batch of specimens, unable to wait until after breakfast.

There had been an unexpected development the previous day, when Scott's small puff-plants had hatched into whirling monopters and devoured all the larger plants, much to the surprise of the bio-ecologist, who had thought he was dealing with comparatively immobile fungi.

Bancroft stretched and got to his feet, yawned and pulled aside the curtain. Another typical Karamban day had begun. The sky was a cold steel-blue and the sun barely took the chill off the air.

A huge shadow flitted across the entrance as he emerged and he looked up to find Mor thumping towards him across the compacted area bounded by the circle of huts.

'Good morning, Mor. Come to join me for breakfast? We'll be eating as soon as Scott gets back.'

'He won't be back for a long time yet,' replied the monopod, and something in his tone alerted Bancroft.

'What's up?'

Mor waved a tentacle vaguely. 'I don't know for certain. But one of my elders was returning from a pilgrimage to the Great Koh Plain, and he met Scott. Scott was heading for the whip-tree groves.'

'Collecting specimens?'

'He was not collecting anything, friend Bancroft. He had passed the puff-plant fields, following the Pilgrims' Trail which leads through the whip-tree groves to the sacred burial grounds on the Great Koh Plain.'

'Oh, my God. I'm sorry, Mor.'

'Did you tell him about the sacred burial grounds, friend Bancroft?'

'Yes, I did. He was out collecting some more specimens yesterday afternoon, and before he went I warned him not to go as far as the whip-trees. He asked why, and of course I had to tell him that it was forbidden to set foot on the Plain.' Bancroft thought for a moment. 'You don't think he intended to collect whip-tree specimens, and then come back?'

'I do not,' said Mor firmly. His eye was unblinking,

his ear trumpet rigid with outrage. 'You may be able to deceive yourself, but you cannot deceive me. I have observed your colleague Scott, and I can tell that he is a man of great curiosity. He has also so far failed in his research, and he is a young man and impetuous, and he does not suffer failure gladly. Also, you say that he is here to investigate our food supply, to try to help us. This also I do not believe. I believe that he is here to investigate *us*.' Mor was silent for a while, his pump hammering powerfully, his tough hide rippling. However, when he spoke again, his voice was gentler. 'I like you, Bancroft. You are fair to us. But I do not like your race as a whole, and I do not like the way your race treats its subject species. And above all, I do not intend that Karambans shall become one of those subjects.'

'Mor!' Bancroft was shaken out of his habitual calm by the vehemence of the monopod's statements. 'What are you talking about? For heaven's sake, take it easy.' His eyes were drawn to the hypnotic oscillation of the pump; the old Karamban was doing himself no good, getting steamed up like this. 'Nobody's going to enslave you. We don't do that sort of thing.'

'I've been to Earth, remember that. What about your cattle, your sheep?'

'What about your Gastropods?' retorted Bancroft, nettled despite himself.

'That is of no consequence,' replied Mor illogically. 'In any case, we do not imprison the Gastropods. We do not fence them in or keep them in zoos. Neither do we eat them. They are free to come and go as they please.'

'What exactly are you frightened of, Mor?' asked Bancroft, after a pause for thought. 'Why do you think it would be worth our while to enslave you?'

Mor blinked. He had got carried away; he had said too much. 'Only the Karambans know how to produce Shoom,' he answered, his voice already staccato as his pump accelerated fiercely, jolting him into motion. 'Go . . . and . . . get . . . your . . . friend!' he jerked, as he turned and pounded off across the parched grey soil.

The trail through the whip-trees was clear and depressed, the slender green trunks emerging vertically from the otherwise barren soil and towering, tapering gradually, some fifty feet into the sky. As Bancroft plodded on he was struck by the dreamlike quality of the groves, the light filtering through the teeming, featureless trunks possessing an eerie emerald hue, and the trunks themselves translucent and smooth. The whole effect was strangely submarine, like an underwater forest of algae fronds waving gently in the current.

He emerged at last into clear daylight and paused, irresolute, as the trail divided into several less deeply-trampled paths, scattering in all directions across the featureless silver-grey vastness of the Great Koh Plain. He had no idea which path Scott might have taken.

Searching the multiplicity of tracks and circular monopod prints he at last came across the imprint of human shoes, deep through the porous surface for a few yards before becoming lost in the general confusion of a major path which had obviously been much used by Gastropods and carts, as well as Karambans. He began once more to walk, striding out along the dusty, ashy-grey track, scanning the silver-blue horizon.

He had covered some two miles when he saw a group of

tall, pearly-coloured shapes in a rough circle, reminding him with a sudden spasm of nostalgia of the circle of Stonehenge, back on Earth. The illusion was heightened by the sight of Scott on his hands and knees, apparently in an attitude of prayer before the nearest column. For a moment Bancroft hesitated, watching the motionless scene in some perplexity, then he strode forward.

Scott looked up at his approach, face flushed, and took off his spectacles, wiping the lenses with a handkerchief. 'I say, Bancroft!' he called cheerfully. 'Come and look at this!'

'What the devil are you doing here?' snarled Bancroft. 'Don't you know this is holy ground? You've caused an incident, for Christ's sake!'

'Never mind that,' replied Scott abstractedly. 'Just see what I've found. I saw something sticking out of the ground at the base of this thing, so I started to dig. Look at this!'

It was obvious that Scott had put in a lot of work. With his small trowel he had uncovered a pit some eight feet long and three feet wide, and in the bottom of the pit lay the mortal remains of a Karamban.

Bancroft gazed, aghast.

'Do you realize what you've done?' he asked harshly. 'Do you realize the trouble there's going to be over this?'

'A little difficulty is nothing compared with the importance of my work here.' Scott rose to his feet, still smiling eagerly. 'What do you make of this?' He tapped a tall column before them. 'Another member of the puff-plant family. Fertilized by rotting flesh. Look at the size of it! I suppose that's why they bury themselves here . . .' His voice trailed off. He was gazing at the plant on the far side of the circle, incredulously.

'Look there!' he shouted.

Bancroft followed his gaze. The plant in question was indeed different from all the others. The sun had shifted slightly and now illuminated the side of the plant with a glow which was not reflection alone. The plant itself seemed suffused with an inner light, deep bronze, and the outline was softened by a thick coating of furry down.

'Shoom!' yelled Scott, racing across the circle. 'We've found it, Bancroft! We've found the source of Shoom! We're rich! All we've got to do is take one or two of these back, and we can raise them on Earth, on farms!' He laughed with joy. 'I'm going to have this one, for a start!' Ignoring the problem of transporting the giant plant back to the ship, he snatched the knife from his belt and dropped to his knees, sawing busily at the tapering base.

After a few energetic, frantic strokes, with Bancroft watching irresolutely, the plant began to sway. Scott leaped to his feet and pushed. There was a creaking, a snapping, and the great trunk crashed to the ground, raising a cloud of powdery dust.

Scott, knife in hand, bent to slit the Shoom open.

There was no need. Split by the impact, a crack developed near the base and travelled smoothly along the length of the plant, following a slight indentation in the skin. The Shoom fell away and the both stared in horror . . .

Inside, writhing feebly, was a partly-formed monopod, its vestigial tentacle twitching, its eye closed, its pump fluttering.

As they watched, the pump ceased to throb and the creature lay motionless, still-born.

'My God,' whispered Scott. 'What have I done?'

'You have committed a crime which I find it difficult to forgive,' came a deep voice from behind them. They swung round.

The towering form of Mor stood motionless, eyeing them coldly.

'If I could only explain, Bancroft. If only he would stop for a moment, I could tell him how I felt. My God, why couldn't they have told us? I never wanted this to happen.'

'It's a bit late for that now,' replied Bancroft irritably. 'I can see now why Mor was scared of us finding out. I know that you wouldn't want to take Karambans back to Earth and rear them like sheep for their skins, but *he* doesn't know that. Damn it, you started talking about terrestrial Shoom-farms yourself.'

The majestically bounding figure of Mor moved on at speed, leading them back to the village, confident of their following, not deigning to pause or look back. There was a long silence as they strode swiftly through the whip-trees, the viridescent glow now appearing eerie and nightmarish; the translucent, swaying trunks alien and menacing.

Scott jerked the handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his spectacles, then his brow, which was streaming with sweat. He glanced at Bancroft, then at the tall figure ahead. 'I've been a fool, Bancroft,' he said. 'I should have learned from the small puff-plants that animal life on this planet all takes the same basic form. I expect that those larger puff-plants also hatched into a mobile life form, centuries ago, but its now too cold for larger plants to mature. Except for the very big ones, which grow an insulating coat of Shoom to protect the monopod developing inside.'

'Pity you didn't think of that before you started chopping things down.'

Before Scott could think of an answer Mor halted abruptly, turning to face them, the village at his back.

'I will speak here, because no one in the village knows of your outrage, nor do I want them to know. Friend Bancroft, I know you; I know your weaknesses and strengths. You are not a man of action, more, you are a man of engaging idleness and I like you for it. Therefore I must accept that you had not sufficient strength of purpose to prevent Scott from his act.'

'And as for you, Scott, I had intended to deal with you as severely as the law of this planet allows. But I am not without mercy, and I have been thinking deeply as we returned. And I remember Bancroft as I first knew him, trying in his youthful ignorance to swindle me over the price of Shoom. And then I think of Bancroft now, who is somehow unlike the humans I saw on Earth; and I think that, given a chance and a few years experience, you will improve. I might even, then, enjoy to drink Kurm with you. But now . . . you will go to your hut and collect your belongings, and Bancroft will take you away from here. Go now!'

Mor turned his back on them and pounded away.

The village was stark and geometrical under the steely glare of the sun and Scott stood inside the hut, watching

the Karambans bounding about their business or talking in little groups. One Karamban was working at an old well set between two huts, the throbbing exertion of his abdominal pump matching his strokes at the lift-pump handle. Scott watched absently, pondering. Despite his experiences and his imminent departure, he was still the seeker after knowledge.

'Who says there's an ice-age coming?' he asked, suddenly.

Bancroft looked up from stowing belongings into his pack. 'I don't know. The place is cooling down, so everybody assumes there's an ice-age coming. Why not?'

'Because,' said Scott definitely, 'I don't see how you can have an ice-age on the only planet in a system. There is only one source of gravitational pull. For an ice-age to start, something would cause Karamba to tilt on its axis.'

'O.K.' Bancroft was not particularly interested. 'So there isn't going to be an ice-age. It may have been an idea some journalist put about, to try to stir up interest in the place. Perhaps it's just that the planet is big and light, and porous, and it's losing its heat quickly by radiation. So what? The Karambans still die out.'

'So why are the Karambans, who develop on the surface of the planet and are used to extremes of temperature, not maturing in the cocoon stage as they should? What is it that is slowing down the development of the plant stage?'

'Why . . . What . . .' mimicked Bancroft wearily. 'I should have thought that you would have had enough of scientific enquiry for the time being. Scott, I'm tired. Let's get back to the ship and have a drink.'

But Scott was watching the Karamban at the well. He was working steadily and when his plastic bucket, like the well mechanism a relic of one of Bancroft's previous visits, was full, he bounded away in slow motion holding the bucket carefully in his tentacle and endeavouring to retain at least half the contents.

'That's it,' whispered Scott to himself. 'Christ, that's the answer.'

'Ready?' asked Bancroft, standing up.

'Bancroft . . .' Scott clutched the older man's arm, still whispering. 'I've got it . . . I know the answer. God, Bancroft, it's right under our noses!'

'What are you drivelling about?'

'What's wrong with the Karambans! Why the reproduction rate has fallen off!' Scott's voice had risen to an excited shout. 'I realized, when I saw that monopod at the well!'

'Go on, Scott. Make it good. You're taking up my drinking time.'

'O.K. . . . O.K. . . . You know the way Earth plants have a lot of roots, branching out, drawing up water by osmosis through the root walls and capillary action up the stem?'

'I do know that.'

'Well, the Karambans in the plant stage, like all plants on this planet, only have a single, thick root with no branches. In the case of stage one Karambans, the Shoom plants, the root is obviously too thick to draw up water by capillary action. So what happens?'

Bancroft shrugged his shoulders.

'So the root goes straight down to the system of underground lakes beneath the Great Koh Plain. There are

no rivers, remember? The nightly rainfall must go somewhere, and my guess is that it collects beneath the surface of the plain, filtering back to the sea eventually by means of streams through the soil. The well in the village must be above one of those streams.

'Anyway, the roots go down vertically into these lakes, and the water is drawn up into the plant by means of the abdominal pump! It's beating all the time, even at the plant stage. Then, when the fully-grown monopod emerges from the Shoom, the pump takes over the process of circulation and respiration.'

'I can see that,' said Bancroft slowly. 'But it doesn't explain why so many don't develop.'

'My guess is that eggs form when the Karamban grows old, almost like the flowering of a plant before it dies. So they bury one another on the Plain, the body rots and the eggs get washed through the porous soil to the underground lakes. The eggs cling to the underside of the lake roof and then develop, pushing up through the soil above the lengthening root. Now, the lakes were once warm and most of the eggs would have developed like this. But with the cooling of the planet and, consequently, the lakes, very few eggs develop, and when they get to the surface and the really tricky process begins . . . instead of warm water pumping through the plant, they get it stone cold! The plant can stand the variations in surface temperature, but only the very few hardiest can stand ice-cold water being pumped round their interiors!'

Scott finished, breathless, gazing at Bancroft for approbation.

'Yes,' said Bancroft shortly, a little wearied by yet another scientific discourse. The trouble with scientists, he thought, was that they got all steamed up about theories which had no practical application. And gradually the Karambans died out . . .

'Don't you see?' Scott insisted, as Bancroft turned, disinterested, to pick up his bags. 'The only problem is that the water supply is cold. It's just a question of hard cash. How much are the Karambans worth, in Uni-credits?'

'Millions. You've seen how they live. They never spend the money they make on Shoom. It's been building up for centuries in the Union Bank.'

'So they could easily afford a few dozen reactors, suspended into the underground lakes.'

There was a long silence.

'Christ . . .' muttered Bancroft at last. 'Why didn't I think of that? It's so simple. Well done, Scott,' he concluded, rather reluctantly.

Scott was jubilant. At last the older man was on his side, and had realized that there was, perhaps, some value in science. He felt that a victory of sorts had been won. 'Shall we go and suggest this to Mor straight away? At least we'll be able to leave here in more friendly circumstances. He'll probably give you an order for the reactors. You'll do pretty well out of these people!' He chuckled.

'People?' Bancroft repeated in assumed surprise. 'So you've begun to think of them as people?'

'All right. All right. I agree that not all people walk on two legs, if that's what you want me to say.'

Bancroft, too, felt that a victory had been won.

FROZEN ASSETS

Dan Morgan

Dan Morgan is noted for his sharp eye for future trends in our society. In recent years he has concentrated more on novels, but happily he still finds time to write the odd short story that shows his sardonic humour is equally effective in the shorter length. If the 'deep freeze' system of suspended animation is eventually perfected, it might very well attract the ingenious attentions of shady characters like Uncle Fred.

There's something humiliating about the idea of losing the woman you love to a bank account—especially when that bank account belongs to a chinless, pop-eyed, pot-bellied nit like Marsden Clout III. I got out of my beaten-up old Ford and hurried across towards the elevator, as his over-sized Rolls Bentley purred its way up from the roof park. A genuine, red-blooded Realist takes the long view, and for fifty per cent of ten million credits—less Death Duties—I could tolerate a fair amount of humiliation.

Olivia was lying on the divan, wearing a semi-transparent pyjama outfit and looking like something out of the Arabian Nights. It has always been held as one of the self-evident truths of Realism that a woman is a woman is a woman. That is, when it comes down to fundamentals, one hundred pounds or so of flesh, skin, hair and bone must, by the essential similarity of the ingredients, be much like another. But in Olivia's case the ingredients had been mixed together in a very special way; black hair, warm as a tropic night, skin soft as an angel's wing, a mouth melting with promise and dark eyes that a man would be happy to drown in. I kicked the little house-robot out of the way, and was just about to take the plunge when she held up her left hand.

'Later, Larry darling,' she purred, a solitaire diamond the size of a bull's testicle glistening triumphantly on her engagement finger.

'You made it!' I said.

'Naturally . . . Now be a good child and check through this, will you?' She handed me a foolscap envelope.

I was still panting slightly, but Olivia was right—business first, *then* animal instincts. I sat down in the chair opposite the couch and took the Marriage Contract out of the envelope.

'Clouty says there's nothing personal about it, but his lawyers insist,' Olivia said. 'He's flying to Europe tonight, but he'll be back on Saturday to make the

final arrangements.'

'Good! And the honeymoon?'

'All fixed. I've told him that nothing but three weeks' skin-diving in the Gulf will do. He was a bit doubtful at first, but now I think he's almost beginning to like the idea.'

'Why not? They tell me that drowning is one of the more pleasant ways of dying,' I said.

The Marriage Contract appeared to be routine stuff. After the usual preliminary guff, the first clause with any real meat was the one in which Olivia waived any possible future claim for Alimony. Considering the beating Clout had taken from the four previous Mrs Marsden Clout IIIs, this was only to be expected. In fact, it looked to me as though only the natural luck of the stupid, plus a team of first-class lawyers, had managed to leave him with his last ten million intact, instead of on the breadline where he belonged. So much for smart lawyers. *We weren't interested in Alimony—we were shooting for the works.*

One of the first principles of Realist philosophy as expounded by the guru Hynam is to make the fullest use of your natural abilities, whatever they may be. This was where all those summers on the coast were going to pay off; making Olivia one of the most beautiful—and the richest—widows in the whole continent. I may be a lousy second-hand aircar salesman, but underwater I've got seal blood in my veins. Ripping Marsden Clouth III's air-hose and holding his flabby body down while he drowned, would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

It was only when I came to Clause 7.b. that I realized just *how* smart Clout's lawyers were. I went through it again, just to make sure, but it seemed just as leak-proof the second time.

'Have you *read* this?' I asked Olivia.

'Who—little me?' she said, giving me the big, fluttery-eye. 'Larry baby, you know I'm not clever with words, and all that stuff.' Then she must have seen something in my expression, because she sat up suddenly and said: 'Why? What happened—is that fat bum trying to put one over on me?'

'I don't suppose *he* even knows anything about it,' I said. 'But this Clause 7.b. washes the whole thing up, as far as we are concerned.'

'Like *how*?' she grated.

'Well, to put it in its simplest form, this clause says that, should Clout die a violent death, through any accidental or other cause, within five years of the marriage—you *don't* get to inherit a single credit.'

'You're right—that must have been the lawyers,' Olivia said. 'Clout would never have had the brains to think up a deal like that.' She smiled confidently. 'Don't worry about it too much—I can handle him. I'll have a talk with him on Saturday and get that clause cut out.'

'Maybe you can,' I said. 'But we've got to be Realistic about this thing. If you talk him into having the clause taken out and then he gets drowned only a couple of weeks later, those lawyers are going to start asking questions—not to mention the other heirs . . .'

'Yes . . . I guess it would look kind of suspicious,' she said thoughtfully.

'Never mind, darling,' I said. 'Something else will turn up, you'll see.' I got up from the chair and moved over towards the couch, with the intention of offering

the kind of physical comfort we both appreciated.

'To hell with that!' she said, hopping off the couch. She grabbed the Marriage Contract from the table. 'Here, let *me* check this thing.'

'I'm telling you, darling. It's just no good to us,' I said. 'We'll have to make it some other way.'

She didn't answer for a long time. She just stood there, near to the standard lamp, frowning as she read through the contract intently enough to burn the print right off the paper.

'Uhuh . . .' she said at last, folding the contract up and putting it back into its envelope. She turned and looked at me in a distant way that made me feel like a badly fixed image in a photograph that is beginning to fade out. It was a very uncomfortable feeling.

'You see what I mean?' I said. 'It just wouldn't work, would it? I'm afraid we're back where we started . . .'

'Not really,' she said, flashing the diamond testicle. 'I'm still engaged to be married to a multi-millionaire.'

'But you couldn't go through with it now . . . I mean you'd be stuck with him for life—well, at least five years.'

'And his money,' Olivia pointed out. 'I could learn to tolerate him.'

'But I love you,' I protested.

'And I love you,' she said sweetly. 'But let's be Realistic about this—you couldn't expect me to live on a used aircar salesman's pay, could you?'

I couldn't argue with that. It was Realistic logic. If she couldn't have me *and* the money; then she'd just have to settle for the money. I'd have done the same thing in her place, I suppose, and there was no use in arguing about it. But I did.

'You can't do this to me, Olivia,' I began. 'We planned this whole thing together, and you . . .'

That was as far as I got. At that moment the time-switch clicked over and the wall-to-wall TV screen blared into life. It was one of those standard Blood Opera pre-credit sequences you see maybe a couple of dozen times a week; with the surgeon giving the usual sympathetic, cheerful chatter to the patient's anxious relatives. Most of the time he was looking directly into the camera, his ruddy, butcher's face and crinkly black hair filling the big screen, so that you felt like a tame rat in a box and he gave the impression of being God, or somebody talking in at you. That's all part of the Blood Opera image, of course, which is fine if you're keen on the Omnipotent Surgeon bit.

Olivia is not only keen, she is an addict, and she wouldn't give up her nightly session in the wall-to-wall operating theatre for marriage to half a dozen millionaires. From that very first moment her eyes were held by the screen. Moving in a jerky, puppet manner, she made her way to the couch and sat down, blind and deaf to anything else but the show. For the next ninety minutes I knew that she would be held in a spell so tight that it would carry her right on through the commercials, her only movement the periodical dive of her right hand into a box of candy that lay open on the table beside the couch, and a steady chomping of her beautiful jaws. Blood Opera gets people that way; tapping directly into their way-down sado-masochistic motivations. The way I see it, it's sort of unhealthy, but you've got to accept the fact that people get their jollies in different ways. Anyway, I was stuck. There was nothing else I could do

but sit around and wait until the show was finished, if I wanted to get any sensible conversation out of her.

The credit titles were coming on the screen now: KARL KATZENJAMMER—SURGEON. A DRAMA OF LIFE AND DEATH . . . over a shot of this Katzenjammer, in his vest, showing his big hairy arms as he scrubs up in the washroom before going into the Operating Theatre. Katzenjammer in his vest goes down big with the female audience, so this is a standard shot in ever episode. An off-screen voice that sounded as if it had been dubbed by one of the Old Testament prophets was giving us a rundown on the essential background of the series—like the fact that last week's patient died on the operating table, but only because he had lived a wicked life, and neglected to take his Allengrun's Allfortin Vitamin Capsules daily.

Then there was a fade-in on the Operating Theatre, with a steady pan shot round the masked faces of the trinity—the Surgeon, the Theatre Sister and the Anaesthetist. Katzenjammer was easily identifiable by the hairs. A quick shot of the patient's pale, anonymous face, and then down his body, just in time to build up to the first climax of the show. Katzenjammer's hand stayed poised for a long moment, while the background music died down to a single, suffering violin. Then, with a roll of tympani and a crash of cymbals, he plunged the knife down and made the incision.

The first blood began to well out from the wound, and along with about fifty million other women throughout the country, Olivia gave a pleasurable gasp and reached for another handful of candy. The Old Testament Prophet began another pronouncement, laying it on the line again for late switchers-on and those too stupid to understand Katzenjammer's opening speech, that this week they were doing the new liver transplant operation.

I'm more for Combat shows, where both sides have a fighting chance, but I had to admit that for Blood Opera the Katzenjammer show was pretty slick, but I had other things to think about. I was in big trouble, whichever way you looked at it. I'd been counting on the Clout/Olivia deal to solve all my problems, and I'd spent a lot of think-time on it when I should have been concentrating on my job. Frogmore, the Sales Director at Paramount Aircars Inc., is a one hundred per cent Realist, who works on the Goose and Chop system. He is also a two hundred per cent bastard, but that is not germane at this time.

The point was that, out of the eight salesmen on the lot, I was bottom of the Sales Chart, with only three more days to go to the end of the month. This was something more than a matter of mere pride, because the salesman who makes the lowest figure each month is automatically fired. This month, barring a miracle, that would be *me*. Being a Realist myself, I had to approve of the system, but I couldn't help feeling that my own case was rather special. I mean, selling used aircars hadn't seemed very important beside the prospect of fifty per cent of ten million credits—less Death Duties.

I sat there, my mind worrying at my problems with about as much effect as a rat gnawing at the corner of a beryllium steel cage. On screen, the operation was proceeding according to plan, and they were now giving

us a close-up shot of the replacement liver. The organ sat there, throbbing and magnificently purple under its clear plastic cover; looking about three feet wide on the wall-to-wall screen scale. The off-screen prophet was filling us in on the finer points of the liver; explaining that until only a few months ago a complete failure caused by the effects of a disease such as Cirrhosis would have meant certain death for the patient.

As the word Cirrhosis filtered through my misery-clogged brain, something clicked and it began to work again.

'Uncle Fred!' I yelped, leaping to my feet in excitement.

'Shh!' Olivia flashed me a brief scowl and turned her attention back to the screen.

I knew that it would be impossible to prise her loose from the show without mortally offending her, so I went through into the kitchen and fixed myself a cool drink. Whoever that guy was who said: 'When one door closes, another opens', he must have been a Realist. Here had I been worrying and scheming about the Clout/Olivia deal, when the solution to all my problems must have been lying around awaiting my attention for some time. Maybe if I'd watched less Combat shows and more Blood Operas I would have connected the ideas of liver transplantation and Uncle Fred earlier—but better late than never . . .

Fred Twayne was my father's younger brother, but as far back as I can remember his name was a dirty word in our house, so that when you did something wrong, somebody would say: 'Better watch it, Junior, or you'll end up like your Uncle Fred' or 'That was a nasty, Uncle Fred type trick'. My father was an honest, hard-working clerk in a shoe store for nearly forty years, so honest and so self-effacing that he never even considered *himself* for a manager's job. Uncle Fred was apparently the complete opposite of his brother; pushing, grasping and a bit on the shady side. And as if this wasn't enough to ensure my father's disapproval, he offered the mortal insult of being a success, making his first million before he was thirty, and going right on from there.

He had amassed a fortune of a reputed twenty million credits when he fell ill with a disease that was diagnosed as Cirrhosis of the liver. The doctors only gave him a few months to live, and there was some smug talk in the family about poetic justice. But instead of going ahead and dying in a considerate manner, Uncle Fred took a lease on a locker in the Happy Vale Cryogenic Centre. To compound this act of supreme selfishness, he tied up all his fortune in an unbreakable Trust Fund that could only be dissolved on his being De-frosted, or in the unlikely event of his death.

His only considerate act—and *that* was basically selfish—was to leave a letter, promising a considerable reward to the next of kin who requested his De-frosting when his disease became curable. Since my father and mother were killed in a jet crash ten years ago, I was that next of kin. I poured myself another drink and added an extra jigger of Scotch to celebrate the golden future.

When I heard the closing music of the Blood Opera I went back into the lounge. As usual after one of those shows, Olivia was in a loving mood, and when I told her about my Uncle Fred inspiration, she was *extra* loving. Even so, she wouldn't let me tear up Clout's Marriage

Contract, just in case anything went wrong with the Uncle Fred deal. After all, as she explained, Clout wasn't due back until Saturday, and there was no sense in rushing things. I admired her Realism—but it was pretty obvious to me that nothing *could* go wrong.

The next morning I decided, to Hell with Paramount Aircars Inc., and Mr Frogmore. Leaving Olivia's apartment early, I drove out to the Cryogenic Centre, which was about fifty miles from the city.

The visible part of Happy Vale was an enormous neo-grecian building, standing in the middle of beautifully landscaped grounds. Beneath this, vaults going over half a mile into the depths of the earth held upwards of half a million Freezees, with accommodation for as many more. Most of the Freezees, like Uncle Fred, were incurables, and they were paying high fees for the privilege of waiting, deep-frozen until such a time as medical science had found a way of conquering their particular diseases.

I signed a Withdrawal Form and a De-Frosting Order at the reception desk, where they told me that there would be a three-hour wait. As a way of minimizing boredom I was offered a guided tour of Happy Vale, which I accepted. I shouldn't have bothered. My guide was a thin, long-nosed technician with a sinus condition, who explained to me that he had entered Cryobiology from the ground floor, so to speak, having previously been employed in a frozen food firm. His cheery comparisons between the two jobs were disturbing—and his habit of opening up lockers and exhibiting their unappetizing contents, even more so. When we arrived back at the reception hall, I rejected his offer of a cup of coffee and a hamburger and sat in the waiting-room, alone with my nausea, anticipating the arrival of Uncle Fred.

The old man was going to see quite a few changes after his twenty years in the vaults of Happy Vale. Perhaps he had been a sharp operator in his time, but he was going to need a trustworthy guide to put him right about the ways of the modern world—somebody with a good grounding in the Realist philosophy. Then there was the question of his health. After all, older people usually needed quite a long convalescent period and special care after an operation. Yes, looking after poor old Uncle Fred was going to be a full-time job.

Then I got to thinking about his business affairs. It would surely be some time before he was fit enough to handle such matters. This seemed to lead to the only logical conclusion. If he did the sensible thing and granted me a Power of Attorney there would be no need for him to shoulder such a burden of worry. After all, there couldn't be any doubt about the trustworthiness of an ever-loving nephew who had sacrificed a golden future in the used aircar business in order to arrange his De-frosting, could there? The more I thought about it, the better the set-up looked.

I walked across to the Vid booth in the corner of the waiting room and called Olivia. Arrangements at her end were going smoothly. She had already taken delivery of the cake with WELCOME HOME, UNCLE FRED on it, in gold-tinted icing, and she had ordered the simple meal we had agreed on—a little clear soup and some steamed fish to pamper the old man's digestion. The loving niece bit I'd mapped out for Olivia wasn't exactly in her line,

but for a slice of twenty million credits she would have nursed an alligator.

I was walking back to my seat after the Vidcall when somebody else came into the waiting-room. He was a tall, well-built character with ruddy features that seemed vaguely familiar and crinkly black hair. But the first thing I noticed about him was his suit, which was a god-awful Tattersall Check creation with bell-bottomed pants and a cutaway jacket—the kind of thing you see people wearing in the late late shows.

He grinned at me, and said: 'Hallo, there! Are you Laurence Twayne?'

'Yes, that's me,' I said, guessing that he was on the staff of Happy Vale. 'How's the old bat coming? Have you got the snow out of his whiskers yet?'

'I guess you'd say that,' the newcomer said, his grin broadening as he stood back and looked me over. 'So you're Albert's boy, are you? Well, I suppose you didn't turn out so bad, considering your parentage.'

'You . . .' I was having difficulty with my articulation.

'C'mon,' he said, grabbing my arm and propelling me out of the waiting-room. 'Let's get out of this goddamned morgue.'

'You're Uncle Fred?' I managed to blurt out as we whizzed through the reception hall.

'You'd better can that Uncle routine,' he said. 'Just call me Fred.'

'All right, Fred,' I said. 'That's one thing I can't understand—you don't look much older than I am.'

'So what did you expect—Methuselah?' he said, rushing me down the staircase at the main exit. 'I was pushing thirty-six when I went into Deep-Freeze, and you don't get any older in there, you know.'

'Is this your heap?' he said, when we reached the parking lot.

'Yes,' I said, opening up the old Ford.

He sniffed, as if he suspected me of keeping hogs in the car, and said: 'Well, I suppose it will have to do for the time being. Come on—let's go! You drive—I've got some calls to make.'

Fred Twayne was a man of action. I'd hardly got the car into the air before he was deep in conversation with the senior partner of a city law firm. Most of the stuff was pretty cryptic, and before I had time to get any real clue as to what they were talking about, we hit the afternoon city traffic. Apart from avoiding head-on collisions with maniac commuters, I was fully occupied in doing a re-orientation job on myself. Uncle Fred as a senile invalid fitted in with my plans for a golden future—but this volatile, ruddy-faced stranger at my elbow was something else again.

'What's this dump?' Uncle Fred asked, as I landed the Ford on the roof-park of Olivia's apartment building.

'My fiancée lives here,' I explained. 'She's arranged a little welcome home dinner for you.'

'Cute!' His response was hardly enthusiastic, but he didn't raise any violent objections as I escorted him down to Olivia's apartment.

He brightened visibly when she opened the door, wearing a little number by Giacometti that had set Marsden Clout III back a couple of thousand credits. For that price it didn't cover much, but it did heighten the effect of what it revealed. As I introduced Uncle Fred the poleaxed look in Olivia's eyes prompted me

to realize just why his face had seemed so familiar when we met. He was the spitting image of Karl Katzenjammer, the Blood Opera hero. The way they looked at each, I began to feel superfluous.

'Don't you think it's time you made a call to the City General Hospital?' I said, by way of breaking in on this case of lust at first sight.

'Huh?' grunted Uncle Fred.

'There may very well be a waiting list for this operation,' I pointed out. 'And you can't afford to delay too long, in your condition.'

'Operation . . . condition?' Uncle Fred turned his attention to me reluctantly.

'Your Cirrhosis—the liver transplant,' I said.

He looked at me dimly for a moment, then his face cracked open and he began to laugh so hard that he collapsed on to the couch.

'So what's so funny?' I asked, more than a little peeved. Olivia wasn't looking very happy either—but her bile was flowing in my direction, on account of my spoiling her beautiful opening scene with Uncle Fred.

His fit of laughter subsided eventually, and he stood up nursing his ribs. 'I guess I owe you a kind of apology, and an explanation, Larry,' he said. 'I suppose you'd be too young to remember the Goldfarb Industrials Scandal?'

'I'm acquainted with the matter,' I said stuffily. It just so happened that only a week previously I had accidentally switched on near the end of a TV documentary on the Great Stock Market Crash of 1996. According to the experts, the ruthless coup known as the Goldfarb Industrials Scandal was the last straw that had finally broken confidence in the market and put the finances of the whole country on the skids.

'Well, good for you,' Uncle said, looking at me with a new expression of surprised respect.

Racking my brains for details, I pressed my advantage. 'As far as I remember there was a mysterious Mr X who was never named, or prosecuted, but was reputed to have made something like fifteen millions credits out of the deal,' I said.

'Twenty-five, actually,' said Uncle Fred.

'YOU!' I said.

'Why, natch,' said Uncle Fred. 'Treasury, Inland Revenue, Police . . . I had the whole bunch of them breathing down my neck. The only thing to do was get out from under. I talked it over with my lawyer, and we decided to put out an announcement that I was suffering from Cirrhosis. I don't know whether you're familiar with the law on this point, but a Freezie is held to be in a unique position. He isn't dead, so his estate is held in suspension indefinitely—and he can't be forcibly de-frosted on anything less than a Capital charge.'

'But you're de-frosted now,' I said. 'Surely they'll throw the book at you as soon as they know you're out of Happy Vale.'

'Nope,' Uncle Fred said, grinning like the canary that swallowed the cat. 'Didn't you ever hear of the Statute of Limitations?'

The full impact of his cunning began to filter through into my mind. 'You mean they can't touch you—even now?'

'That's about the size of it,' Uncle Fred said. 'I

checked with Finkelberger, my lawyer, on the way here, as you know. He says there's absolutely no chance of a prosecution.'

'Twenty-five million credits!' Olivia said dreamily. 'Why you beautiful, beautiful man you . . .'

MEET THE AUTHOR

Dan Morgan

DAN MORGAN WRITES: 'The fact that I have been around sf for a very long time was brought home to me in no uncertain manner by the charming gent I had the pleasure of meeting this year at the Oxford Convention, who said disbelievingly: "No! You're not really Dan Morgan, are you? I was expecting a little old bald-headed bloke walking with two sticks." The only possible reply to this was to blush modestly and mumble something about "having started young".

My first story was published in the Jan 1952 issue of *New Worlds*, and it proved to be the opening shot in a lengthy battle between two of my three heads. These two had literary and musical ambitions respectively, and the final resolution of the conflict only came about four years ago with the completion of a book called *Guitar*. Since that time the musical head has been reasonably content to sit back and allow the writing head to get on with it. Even so, you're liable to walk into a Jazz Club anywhere in the East Anglian area and find me beating out choruses on a beat-up old Guild just for the hell of it. It has always seemed to me that there is a great affinity between Jazz and sf, and oddly enough this was confirmed for me only a couple of weeks ago, when it turned out that five out of the six musicians playing on a session were devoted readers of sf. The exception was the drummer—maybe there's a moral there somewhere.

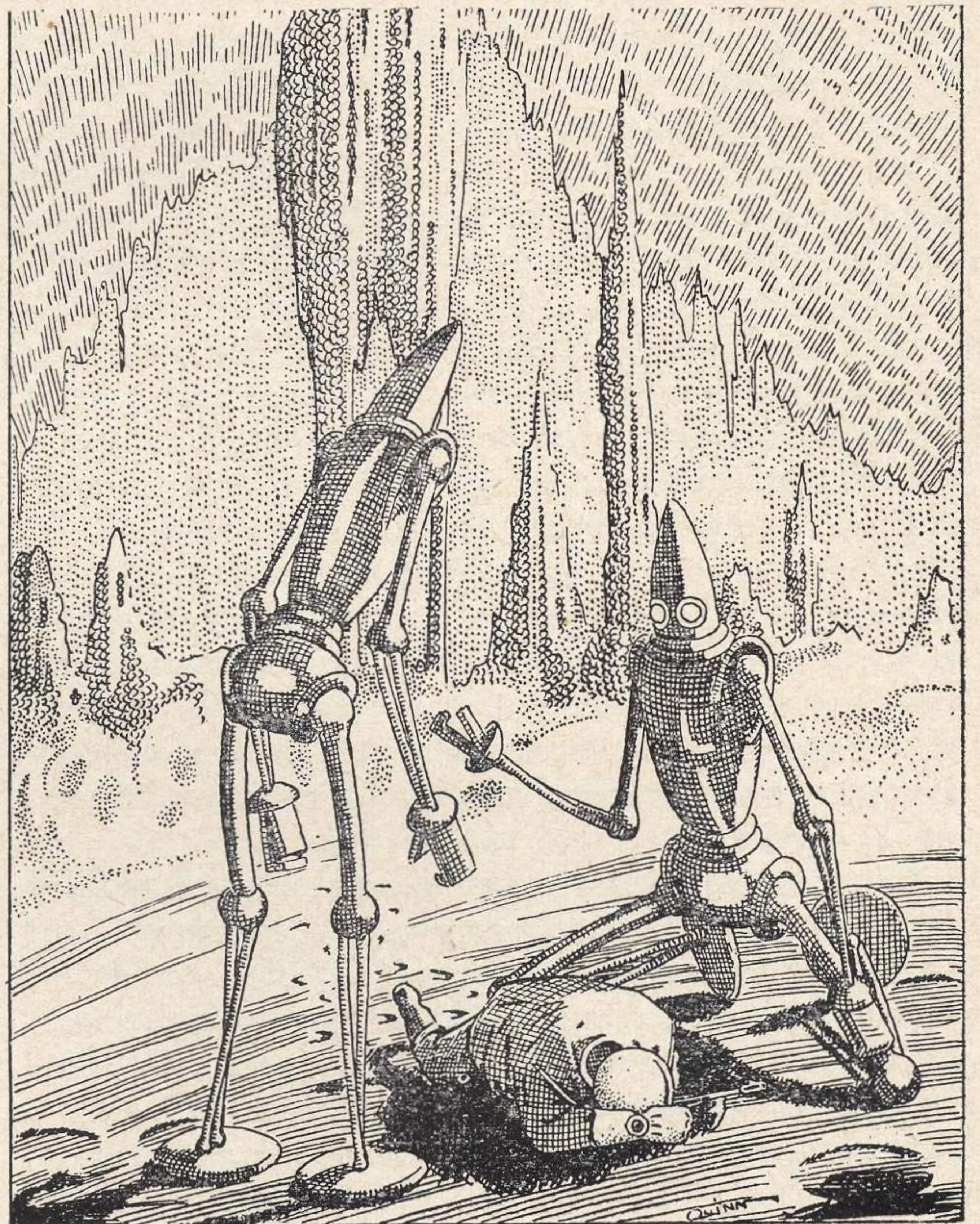
The third head—the bread-and-butter one—has been occupied with the running of a Carnaby Street type Menswear business for a number of years, but he's now beginning to take a back seat and leave things to the writer. I suppose all this amounts to really is that I've probably had the longest adolescence in the history of the human race, but that now I've settled down to the thing I really want to do, writing on a full-time basis. This is probably the hardest, but to me at least, it is the most worthwhile occupation there is, and I count myself lucky to be able to pursue it in a world that is becoming more and more sf conscious. Any of you who were at Oxford will know how I feel about the New Wave, but I don't think there's a lot of point in opening up that bag again. Let it suffice to say that I am simple-minded enough to believe that sf should be entertaining, and that it should tell a story. It should *not* leave the reader scratching himself in bewilderment and saying. "Well, yes—but what was all that about?"

I've published a number of sf novels in the past few

There's something humiliating about the idea of losing the woman you love to a bank account—especially when that bank account belongs to a walking anachronism like my Uncle Fred . . .

years, including a collaborative effort with John Kippax called *Thunder Of Stars*—which was panned by the *Times* Lit. Supp., but has just been optioned by Hammer Films. (Make of that what you will.) Major project at the moment—apart from three months in Spain researching on Flamenco and kindred subjects, like sunshine and wine—is a continuation of my *Mind* series, two of which, *The New Minds* and *The Several Minds* have been published here by Corgi and in the States by Avon. A third, *Mind Trap* is due next year. These books are explorations around the general theme of ESP, which has been a major obsession with me for a long time. I started out to write just one book—but the thing just grew and grew and doesn't show any signs of stopping.

I wrote *Frozen Assets* with the thought that whatever advances are made in scientific techniques, people are, and will remain, people!'



The Impatient Dreamers

WALTER GILLINGS

In this series of articles which is being specially presented by Vision of Tomorrow, Britain's pioneer of magazine science fiction looks back 40 years to the days when he founded the Science Literary Circle, one of the first sf fan groups in the country, and tried to establish a national association to overcome the prejudice of publishers towards the medium.

2: AIMS AND OBJECTS

I suspect that it was Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales*, absorbed at a village school, that started my latent powers of imagination developing along creative lines. Though it was Kipling's *Just So Stories* that really did the trick; by the time I was eight I was writing in an exercise book my own versions of *How the Elephant Got His Trunk* and *How the Dog Got His Bark*.

Not long afterwards I was dramatizing a Sydney Horler murder mystery serial from the *Daily Sketch*, which I staged on a model theatre in the back garden to an audience of village lads and lasses. The price of admission—the subject of a special interrogation by the village constable—went into my Church Missionary Society collecting box.

This was about the time of my initiation to science fiction through Edward Rice Burroughs and George Goodchild. Six years must have passed before I graduated to Wells; and the effect of my studied reading remains evident in my laboured typing, at intervals in my office-boy's duties, of an intended novel which I still have by me after fifty years . . . unfinished. I recall that it involved communication with the Martians, whose messages could be scanned as they appeared in type-written form. An unconscious anticipation of computerization . . . ? It was another fifteen years before I saw a teleprinter.

Yet, in spite of the opportunities they offered the merest amateur through essay and story contests, my discovery of *Amazing* and *Wonder Stories* served only to distil my hazy literary aspirations into a single, burning ambition—to edit a British sf magazine. I didn't particularly want to write sf, though in those days I had no doubts about my capacities. Unaccountably, in one so callow, I had set my heart on becoming a magazine editor rather than a writer; and here was a field

which fascinated me and remained uncultivated in this country. It was necessary, therefore, to create a demand for sf of the sort that was being produced in America, so that in due course some British publisher might be induced to enlist my specialist knowledge in catering for it.

So the plan—or hope—grew in my mind; not at once, but by degrees over the next few years. Remember, I was only eighteen, with my feet not yet securely placed on the bottom rung of the journalistic ladder. But the ambition must have been behind my resolve to propagate science fiction, much as Gernsback had done, besides my earnest belief in its intrinsic qualities which he was always preaching. It was not enough to try—ineffectually, for the most part—to impart my enthusiasm to my more studious friends (who had usually succumbed to Edgar Wallace) and to my girl friend, whom I first lured with Dr David H. Keller's 'A Biological Experiment', with Paul's picture of babies growing in great glass spheres.

I had yet to discover that John Russell Fearn nurtured much the same ambition, at least to the extent of converting publishers to the idea of a sf magazine—which I suspect he wanted to edit as well as write for, such was the boundless energy (and inborn egotism) of the man we came to dub 'The Blackpool Wonder'. In due course we joined forces, at least in spirit, but I found it difficult to cope with his precipitate methods, well-intentioned though they were always. Had we been in closer contact than regular correspondence would allow, I doubt if we could ever have worked in true cooperation, let alone harmony, though our association on paper was happy enough. And, of course, by reason of his single-mindedness of purpose and prodigious industry, he accomplished much more than I could . . . and made a lot more money!

But in 1930 my only ally was my sole comrade in science fiction, Len Kippin. He was several years my senior; a commercial traveller, already married, with a sence of humour which bubbled in him constantly. His main interest being amateur radio, he was rather less in earnest about sf than I; but he thoroughly enjoyed the magazines he picked up on his travels and critically appraised the ideas they presented. Among them were some copies of Gernback's *Radio News* and *Science & Invention*, and a few tattered copies of *Weird Tales* which had filtered through.

This was the first I had seen of this now much-revered publication—and the last I wanted to see after sampling some of the puerile stuff it was printing at the time. I had my fill of LeFanu, Blackwood and other exponents of the creepy story in the local library; and though his sole contribution to *Amazing*, 'The Colour Out of Space', left an indelible impression, it was not until many more years had passed that I fell under the spell of Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Nor, evidently, did I find the contributions of Edmond Hamilton, which *Weird* was featuring in competition with *Amazing* and *Wonder*, as acceptable as 'The Comet Doom' or 'The Other Side of the Moon'—though, basically, they were all the same story, told in those long, repetitious paragraphs which was Hamilton's irritating style in those days. But Len Kippin took it all in his stride, chuckling, and stowed it all away in his collection.



In the late 1920s the prolific Edgar Wallace was all the rage. Like Edgar Rice Burroughs, he wrote his stories with the aid of a dictaphone. This dust-jacket covered a sixpenny Readers Library edition of his sole attempt at science fiction, published in 1929—with what almost amounted to an apology. Said the Editor's Note: 'The reader who suspects that Mr Wallace may one day "give

out" and exhaust his stock of plots for "crook" stories . . . will discover that even an unheard-of world situated 186,000,000 miles from the Earth can, with Mr Wallace to introduce it, have a most intimate connection with the fate of nefarious criminals practising in the Thames valley.'

It was a 'letter to the Editor' in the *Ilford Recorder*, carefully written and inserted by myself—with the sanction of my indulgent chief—that proclaimed to the world the proposed formation of the Science Literary Circle, which was to offer readers with similar tastes 'the opportunity of becoming familiar with more recent examples of "scientifiction".'

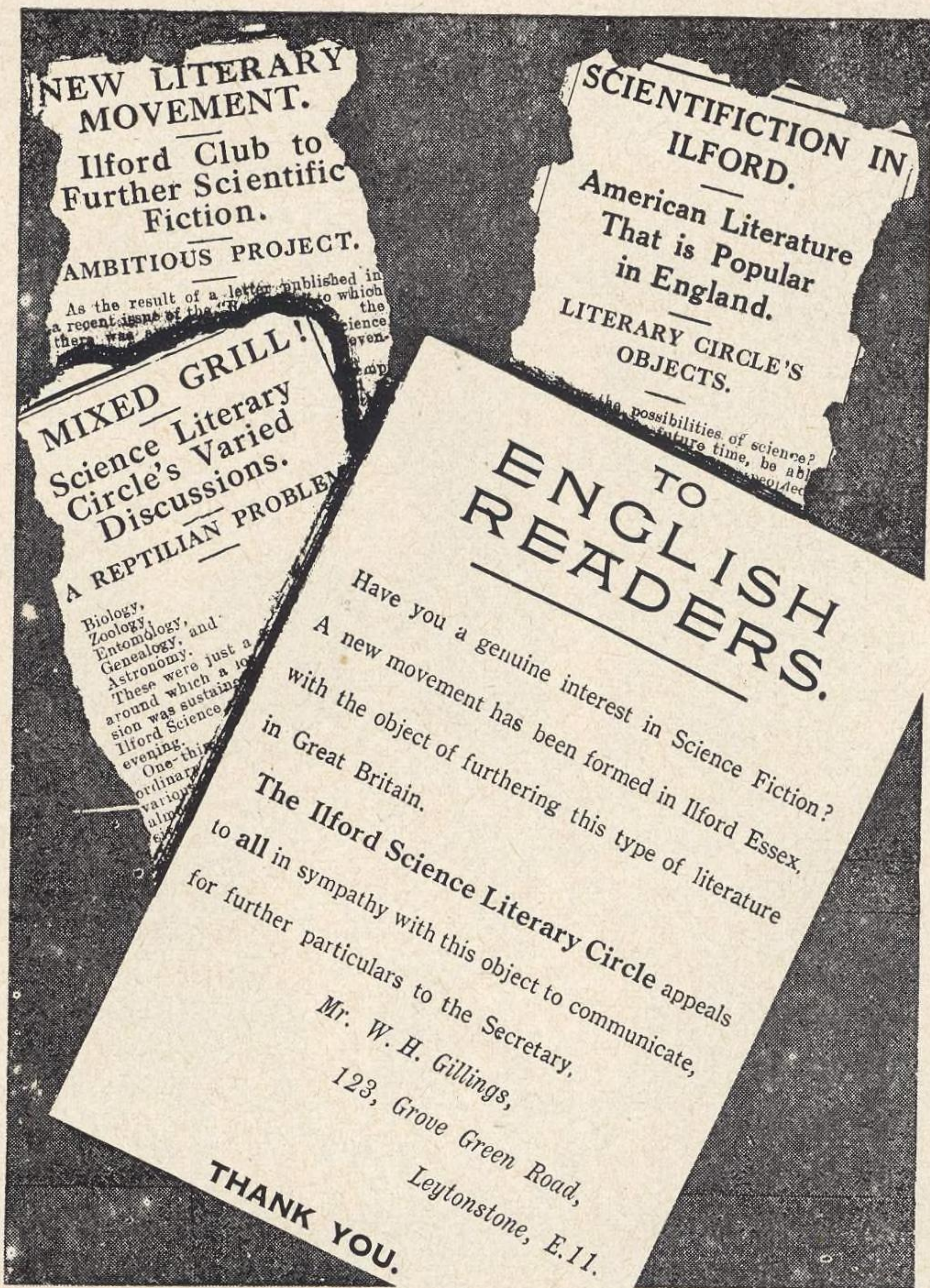
The response was hardly overwhelming. Besides the Kippins and myself, there were only five at the first meeting, including the middle-aged couple who, without realizing quite what it was all about, were willing to lend their front parlour so long as we contrived to enliven their Monday evenings—there was, of course, no TV in those days. But the rest were already familiar with the magazines from which we decided to read stories aloud and discuss them, and any topic they might suggest.

So we disposed of 'The Thought Machine' of Ammianus Marcellinus, J. Rogers Ullrich's 'The Moon Strollers'. Dr Miles J. Breuer's 'The Gostak and the Doshes', and other tales by such as Capt. S. P. Meek, Walter Kateley, G. Peyton Wertenbaker, Bob Olsen, Raymond Z. Gallun, and the Nathan Schachner-Arthur

Leo Zagat combination, several of which still linger in my memory. What's more, I can still spell the names without reference to the detailed index I kept, as Kippin did, until it got beyond me round about 1934 . . . There were some even stranger, such as Henrik Dahl Juve and, capping the lot, Clifton Constantinescu. The man who wrote as 'Marius' was a rare bird indeed! How many are alive today, I wonder?

The arguments prompted by these readings, if not the stories themselves, provided me with 'copy' for my paper (usually half to three-quarters of a column a time), which I enjoyed producing under such headings as you may see pictured here, in the style of the day—and ours was one of the more modern suburban weeklies. It was a nice change from reporting the speeches of local councillors on parish-pump affairs, or praising the pitiful efforts of Miss Whatsaname's pupils at a town hall dancing display—events of the sort it was my task to chronicle week in, week out, for several years in my progress towards the more exciting realms of suburban activity.

Dr Keller's tales of 'The Yeast Men' (which I later reprinted in *Tales of Wonder*) actually sparked off a



Headlines from the Ilford Recorder of 1931 proclaimed the 'new literary movement' which aimed to popularize science fiction. A leaflet circulated through remainder magazines on sale here appealed to readers to get in touch with the Science Literary Circle started by Walter Gillings and Len Kippin.

piece in the 'leader' column, where my watchful editor observed acutely that: 'Although born to blush unseen, the Ilford Science Literary Circle is not wasting its sweetness on the desert air.' In all, in the nine months of its existence, I filled a good eight of the *Recorder's* capacious columns with accounts of the Circle's meetings. Not the least prominent of these write-ups was an initial splurge on the 'ambitious project' of our NEW LITERARY MOVEMENT, in which Chairman Kippin was purported to have described the thriving state of sf in America, for the benefit of the uninformed. It also held out a challenge to those who would call us cranks:

'We are always encountering sceptical people who seem to regard us as having peculiar and rather offensive literary tastes, but we are all unanimous in that although our favourite type of story looks . . . fantastic at first sight, there is nothing more entertaining, instructive and thought-provoking . . .', etcetera.

A later article on SCIENTIFICTION IN ILFORD also reviewed the history of the 'American Literature That is Popular in England', mentioning all the exist-

ing magazines by name and reiterating (despite the heading) our aim 'to popularize science fiction so that publishers and authors on this side of the Atlantic may pay more heed to its development'. This report concluded, more or less accurately:

'Large quantities of leaflets have been issued . . . all over London, and circular letters have been sent to English readers . . . advising them of the formation of the new movement, the novelty of which cannot be over-estimated . . . But the suggestion of forming similar clubs in other districts has met with but little response up to the present.'

The leaflets were a subtle move. They were printed slips addressed 'To English Readers' informing them of our effort to further sf and appealing to all sympathizers to get in touch with me, as Circle secretary. Kippin took them on his journeys and, wherever he found back numbers of sf magazines on sale, coerced the shopkeeper or stallholder into slipping them between the pages. Meanwhile I typed and despatched a stock letter to the English addresses I found in the magazines' correspondence pages, explaining our purpose more fully and urging others to follow our lead. Though hinting at the 'tremendous possibilities' of concerted action, this epistle did not try to conceal our realization of what we were up against:

'The Briton, we feel, is invariably antagonistic towards American magazine literature and to anything scientifically speculative. It is, however, hoped that this prejudice will be eliminated . . . and that a thriving national society will be evolved . . . May we ask you to support us in this and organize a similar Circle in your district?'

In an attempt to spread the germ, I myself procured the publication in my own local paper at Leytonstone, where I was still living, of a letter similar to that which had started the Ilford Circle. But the trick was not to be repeated—no response. More encouraging results came from the announcement of our activities in *Wonder Stories*, which reprinted in the March 1931 issue the send-off the *Recorder* had given us. Before we had the satisfaction of seeing our letter in print, I had heard from three well-wishers in America, two of them sf writers. One was Edward E. Chappelow, organizer of an Amateur Scientific Club in Chicago; the other, one of sf's three women writers, Lilith Lorraine, who later established the Avalon World Arts Academy at Rogers, Kansas, and the poetry magazine *Different*.

At that time Miss Lorraine lived at Corpus Christi, in Texas, which her grandfather had helped to found and where her husband owned a couple of ranches. And she was interested in launching her own sf magazine—in England, if she was assured of its success in the country to which, apparently, she intended to come in a year or two. Her object in writing to me, in fact, was to ascertain if there was any market for sf here and what I considered were the chances for such a venture. No wonder I recorded in the Circle's minute-book: 'It was anticipated that great things might evolve from

this unusual inquiry'!

The resulting correspondence did not last long, however. To a woman of thirty-seven (though I did not know her age then, nor that she was married), my earnest affirmations must have sounded a little too eager. Anyway, after declaring her views on the standardization of American sf and the more expansive policy of any magazine she might establish, she postponed the whole proposal for two years while soliciting from me contributions for the poetry journal she was editing; whereupon my enthusiasm, and my hopes, rapidly waned. To an impatient youth of 19, two years is a long time, and I was never much gone on poetry anyhow.

It was perhaps fortunate for Miss Lorraine that she was not moved by my enticements. She would almost certainly have lost all her money, or at least have made her journey for nothing. For whichever way I turned I was more persuaded that, for the present, the American magazines were sufficient to cater for the unknown quantity of fans who relied on Woolworth's or the street markets to satisfy their unorthodox tastes. Rather, it was evident that while these cheap sources of supply existed, there was little chance of a home-produced publication selling at four times the price as these three-penny remainders. More than that, I was assured—though I would not accept it—that even if this supply was cut off, as the bookselling trade would have wished, there was no publisher interested enough to fill the gap.

Science fiction, I was reminded in response to my approaches, was not a new thing: the Americans had merely taken their cue from Wells, who had started it thirty years before and covered the ground pretty thoroughly. What was more, the kind of stuff they were presenting 'would not be very attractive to English readers as a whole. It is rather crude from the scientific and literary point of view.' Which, of course, it was in many cases; though Uncle Hugo would hardly have conceded the point about science-content, with his panel of twenty-odd associate editors 'passing upon the scientific principles of all stories' published in *Wonder*.

But note the typical attitude of British editors and publishers, which I was to come up against repeatedly: as if it had all been done before and there was no future in this country for science fiction, or at least for sf magazines. For it had to be borne in mind that, while sf was being nurtured in the U.S.A. as a specialized form of popular magazine reading, England had no publications which limited themselves to one particular kind of fiction, except in the juvenile field.

There was nothing, for instance, comparable to the American *Argosy*, which had made a feature of fantastic fiction since the days of Garrett P. Serviss, George Allen England and other writers whose 'classic' tales Gernsback revived, along with those of Verne, Wells and Burroughs, in building a foundation for *Amazing*. Burroughs was, in fact, the only American writer whose work was accepted here, because his books sold readily as adventure stories: and, to my knowledge, it was never presented in an adult English periodical before 1933, when his Venus stories were serialized in the now defunct *Passing Show* after it had been re-vamped from a humorous weekly into a slap-up 'family journal'.

There are some who might argue that the essential juvenility of Burroughs' tales of John Carter's exploits on Barsoom was enough to account for the attitude of British editors towards the whole of sf in those days. But in 1930 I had not acquired the experience or acumen to account at all logically for what I felt was no more than a foolish prejudice among them, and a shameful neglect of a still promising line of country. So I came to embark on a campaign of propaganda directed at their unimaginative heads.

In his next article Walter Gillings will tell how Britain's few sf writers of the 1930s began to ally themselves with him in the effort to establish a home-produced magazine, and of the encouragement they received from America.

READERS' REACTION

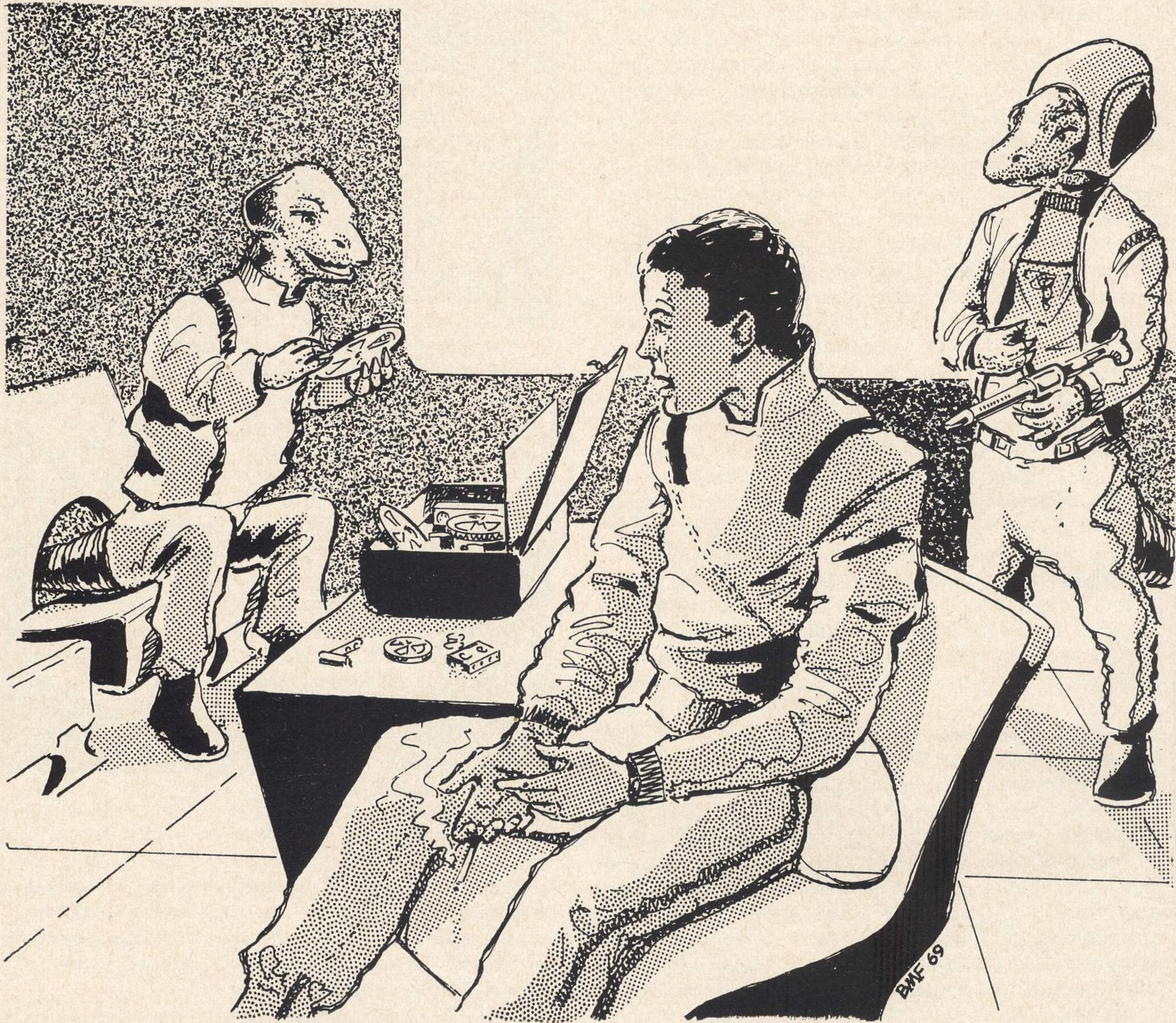
Many readers responded to our Merit Award competition in the first issue and we publish here the final placing of the stories. Jack Wodhams emerged a clear winner and wins our bonus of £10. The reader whose votes most nearly tallied with the final result was Mr Peter Singleton of Berks. who wins our cash prize of £2 2s. od.

Vision Of Tomorrow, No. 1:

1. *Anchor Man* by Jack Wodhams
2. *The Vault* by Damien Broderick
3. *When in Doubt—Destroy!* by W. F. Temple
4. *Sixth Sense* by Michael G. Coney
5. *Are You There, Mr Jones?* by S. Lem
6. *Swords For A Guide* by Ken Bulmer
7. *Consumer Report* by Lee Harding

This month's Merit Award is on page 47.

Send in your votes!



ECHO

William F. Temple

Many actors nurture an ambition to play Hamlet. Not so Narvel: he contented himself with impersonating Richard Gaunt, terran businessman and amateur spy. But then, Narvel was a Venusian . . . and his role was to be just as tragic.

Dear Richard Gaunt,

I shall die tomorrow and I'm only three months old.

I'm not sorry for myself but I'm sorry for you.

Tomorrow you'll awaken and ask that old question:

'Where am I?'

I'll tell you: in prison. For life. Unless this document saves you. That's dependent on your persuading some authority to believe it's fact and not your wild fiction.

Actually, there are two authorities who know already that it's fact. The Terrestrial Foreign Intelligence Directorate. The Venusian Foreign Intelligence Group. Neither will admit it merely to free you, and you'll know why. A Secret Service must remain secret.

You're a Terrestrial spy who failed. Your people don't want to know you.

I'm a Venusian spy who also failed. But I have no

people. For I am not a person. I'm only an echo. Echoes die young. And who cares about them when they're dead?

You failed, dear Richard, because you were two times an amateur. An amateur actor. An amateur spy.

I'm an amateur spy, too, but a professional actor—or, at least, the echo of one. Not that it helped all that much.

I'm the echo of Narvel, who's still back there on Venus, acting his reptilian head off to unresponsive reptiles. 'Reptile' used to be a term of abuse to you Terrestrials. Narvel—I refer to him in the third person although I'm a part of him—wouldn't disagree on that point. His opinion of his fellow Venusians is not high.

Venusians are literal-minded, not literary-minded. Life is real, life is earnest—not a fairy tale. So they make good scientists, engineers, and businessmen—and damn poor poets, artists, playwrights . . . and playgoers. The number of theatres on Venus can be counted on one's claws.

A Venusian actor spends half his life chasing a good part of the other half chasing an audience to play it to.

The really great parts are tragi-comic, because life is a tragi-comedy. They always present a challenge, and the greatest challenge Narvel ever accepted was playing the role of you, Richard Gaunt.

Yet he was like you in some ways. You shared a love of the theatre. Also, a certain youthful *naïveté*. Most Venusians are born prosaic and worldly-wise. They see things in hard monochrome, not warm colours. Possibly the pervading grey of their climate conditions their outlook. But Narvel was—is—an artist.

I'll remind you of him—you'll be in need of re-orientation when you read this. The best way to help is to imaginatively re-create your first meeting with him . . . and continue from there.

Can you recall that hotel room in Lower 8 Quarter of our new City of Contina?

'Nevertheless, I should prefer a room at the front,' you (Richard Gaunt) said, gently but firmly.

The manager, who'd been extolling the larger, plushier rooms overlooking the rear garden, almost imperceptibly swished his tail. It was the equivalent of a human shrug.

Gaunt got the front room. It faced the mint-new Synthetics Corporation factory. The big windows of the drawing-office were bang opposite. Later, alone, he used his visorscope to peer over the draughtsmen's shoulders. He photographed their plans even as they drew them. His directional listening beam swept from room to room over there, eavesdropping. It lingered long in the board-room. He taped anything that sounded hot.

Mid-afternoon on the third day, a short burst of clicking noises came from his own windows. There was no visible cause. He had shut them against a thickening mist. Now, one by one, he tried to push them open. They were immovable: locked.

Something had gone wrong and he wasn't going to stay to investigate. He had plenty of working material now stacked in the case with the false bottom. He packed some clothes and toilet articles, too, locked the case and made for the door.

It opened before he reached it.

The manager entered, with another Venusian. Both carried pistol-style stunners with careful negligence.

'Checking out, Mr Gaunt?' asked the manager.

'Yes, I am.'

'I'm afraid you're not.' The manager shut the door behind him and locked it. 'Sit down, Mr Gaunt, and make yourself at home. For this will continue to be your home for some time yet.'

'Would you please explain this fantastic behaviour?'

'Why not just go back there and sit down?'

'Now look here,' said Gaunt, coldly, 'you've picked the wrong man to push around. This will almost certainly cost you your job.'

'My job? What job?'

'Managing—if that's the word—this hotel.'

'This,' said the manager, 'is not really an hotel. At least, that's not its basic function. It is, in fact, a spy-trap.'

Fear stabbed Gaunt. Although he realized that silence underlined his guilt, he could muster no reply.

'So it follows that I'm not an hotel manager. I'm a spy-trapper. For the Foreign Intelligence Group. And this is Narvel—'

'The actor?' cut in Gaunt, surprised.

Narvel said, 'You know of me?'

'Yes, indeed. I've seen and admired several of your performances.'

'Thank you, Mr Gaunt. Do sit down.'

Feeling lost, Gaunt retreated to the group of couches.

Narvel sat opposite him, and said, 'No doubt, Mr Gaunt, you're wondering how *I* come into this.'

Gaunt played dumb. 'Into what?'

Even as he spoke, the manager opened his case, emptied it and exposed the false bottom. His expertise showed that this wasn't the first time he'd done this kind of thing. He rummaged among the spools of tape and the various collapsible instruments.

Further pretence was futile. Gaunt lit a cigarette at the second attempt: his fingers were trembling. He became aware that Narvel was studying his reactions.

The manager said, 'What surprisingly crude gear! Surely, Mr Gaunt, these are only toys?'

Gaunt shrugged. 'They're fitted with the latest anti-bleep devices. I don't see how—'

'Really?' We've used anti-anti-bleep detectors since—well, since the first Terrestrial came to Venus. We registered your output the minute you gave these things a trial run.'

'Then I was already under suspicion?'

'Oh, of course,' said the manager. 'Anyone—Earthling or Venusian—who checks in at this—um—hotel automatically becomes suspect. It rather conveniently overlooks our newest factory. It's a kind of spy magnet, you see.'

'I see,' said Gaunt, heavily. 'All the same, aren't you running a risk? I might have shot you both and got away with that information. It's amounted to quite a heap over the last couple of days . . . Incidentally, why did you let me carry on for so long if you spotted me in the first minute?'

'To give our Intelligence Group time to check up on you. We know your history now, Mr Gaunt. More fully than does your own company, indeed. For instance, Organics Limited doesn't know about the woman you're

maintaining, together with your illegitimate son, in Chester.'

Gaunt's face reddened. After a pause, he said, quietly, 'That's the only piece of mud you could make stick to me, because that's all there is. My company would disapprove, but they certainly wouldn't fire me. So if you're contemplating blackmailing me into spying for you, forget it.'

The manager regarded him thoughtfully. 'No,' he said. 'That wasn't quite the idea.'

'Then what is? If you send me for trial, the repercussions will be serious. If you imprison me, they could be disastrous. My brother—'

'Is the Earth Council Chief Secretary. Naturally, we know that. Don't worry, Mr Gaunt. Nothing about this affair will leak out. You're supposed to be on 'holiday' here for a fortnight—correct? Very well, you may have your holiday and then return to Earth. Meanwhile, be our guest . . . within these walls.'

A week passed, and Gaunt remained a puzzled prisoner.

Narvel was his constant warder and companion, doing his best to dispel the prison atmosphere. His fund of theatrical lore and anecdotes was rich, yet it wasn't enough to pass all of the time. So they argued about Terrestrial and Venusian philosophies, played cards, tennis on the hard-court (on the roof), swam in the pool (in the basement), walked in the high-walled garden . . .

Gaunt learned a few things. For instance, that none of the information he'd obtained from the Synthetics factory was worth a row of beans. That drawing-office was merely a front, used only when a suspected spy was resident in the hotel. Ditto the so-called boardroom. The diagrams and figures would never add up to sense: they were fabrications. All the real offices were deep underground, lead-sheathed and bugproof.

Such decoy offices were a comparatively new idea, even on spy-conscious Venus.

But there was one thing Gaunt couldn't learn.

'Why has Venus honoured me with the company of her greatest actor?'

Narvel answered (and Gaunt could detect no humour in his tone), 'It's just a temporary job while I'm "resting" between parts. I'm forced to do quite a lot of resting, you know.'

'You're not resting, Narvel. You're working. You're studying my every movement, voice inflexion, gesture, my stance . . . I don't get it. You couldn't possibly impersonate me.'

He surveyed Narvel from crest to tail, pointedly, rudely. The greenish, scaly skin. The short forearms. The claws—dexterous but horny. The thick, clumsy legs, and the long tail forever moving to counterbalance the body's forward tilt.

'Impossible,' he concluded.

'Oh, quite,' said Narvel.

I fell flat on my face—or rather, Gaunt's face—twenty times that first day.

'I should be defined. I was an echo. An echo of Narvel.'

It was discovered long ago that the codes of memory are carried by Ribo-nucleic acid. I was a memory-

pattern fashioned in molecules of RNA: the pattern of Narvel's memory, decoded, electronically copied, and planted in Richard Gaunt's brain tissue.

There I was, behind Gaunt's face. So, too, was Gaunt—but he was moribund. Above the thalamus his neuron paths were temporarily sealed off. Therefore, he was without stimuli, and so slept. Whether he dreamed in his sleep, I couldn't tell.

There was plenty of room for both of us. In a human brain a large proportion of the cells remain unused during the average individual's life. From a saurian point of view it seems an awful waste of brain matter. Anyhow, I reposed there snugly, employing some of Gaunt's spares.

Pro tem. For I had the seeds of death in me: a slow absorbent, planted with me. It was already working, scarcely perceptible, but gathering strength, all the same. Finally, I should be chemically nullified. I should fade away without trace.

Simultaneously, the seals on Gaunt's neuron paths would start to dissolve. The outer world would break in upon him again.

If I played my part well, his colleagues would notice no change in his behaviour. But Gaunt himself would discover that there had been a blank period in his life. His doctor would label it amnesia. Where the pair of them went from there mattered nought to me. I should have done my job and departed. Even Narvel, my alter ego, wouldn't mourn my passing. What's a mere echo?

My short-lived task was none-the-less complex. On planet Earth I had to ape Gaunt convincingly to his friends and co-workers. Perform his work at Organics Ltd. efficiently, and examine the secret files there undetected. Pass that information back to my Intelligence Group, who were paying Narvel for this amateur service. And at the same time pass phoney information about Synthetics to the Terrestrial Foreign Intelligence Directorate, who were paying (as they thought) Gaunt for this amateur service.

None of that worried me overmuch. I could cope. That was merely cerebral work, and Gaunt's cerebrum was as available to me as if it were my own (although the cerebellum, the hinder and lower portion of the brain, was not).

I had sounded Gaunt subtly about his personal life, his friends and business associates, for a whole week. And Intelligence had filled me in over some of the gaps.

Also, I'm what's known professionally as a quick study. I picked up Gaunt's speech and mannerisms easily.

Luckily, his nearest legitimate relatives including his brother, were in Scotland, far from London, and he saw them infrequently. He was a bachelor—and a philanderer, although the puritan firm of Organics Ltd. would have been shocked to learn that part of it. And Chester, too, was a long way from London . . .

I was confident about all that. The really tough task, I found, was to achieve control of that ungainly, ill-formed mass of bone and protoplasm, the human body.

Once *in situ* I discovered that I could handle Gaunt's hands, so to speak, beautifully. For instance, my copy of his handwriting was faultless. These were consciously directed actions. It was the unconscious actions of the body which threw me—literally on my face, as I've said.

It took me all of Gaunt's second holiday week just to learn to walk. The gravity of Venus being almost the same as Earth's was an initial advantage. But I never realized before the extent to which we saurians adjust our balance with our tails.

Gaunt's automatic body-guidance mechanisms were buried in his still functioning thalamus, and I couldn't tap them. The thalamus had to be left undisturbed, for it was the body's power-house. To put it out of action would deprive the body of all drive.

Although Terrestrials and Venusians shared the same kind of fishy ancestors, we Venusians hadn't wandered so far from the fish. But the Terrestrials had branched out to become mammals.

I became a tyro mammal among experienced mammals.

My deficiencies first began to show on the spaceship to Earth. On the passenger list I was Richard Gaunt. I *was* Gaunt, physically. I did my best to act like him personally.

I knew he had this social habit of drinking whisky. I gave it a whirl at the bar with an engineer from Minneapolis.

After two whiskies, I remarked, 'What's gone wrong with the grav-motors?'

For it seemed to me that the artificial gravity was failing and the ship was approaching the condition of free fall.

My companion looked at me strangely.

'They seem okay to me. Sure it's not the whisky hitting you? This special space brew is potent, you know, if you're not used to it.'

I laughed it off and thereafter stuck to fruit juice. And that proved to be a strain. Gaunt was no alcoholic but he liked his whisky. Once his bloodstream tasted it again, it began crying out for it. If I yielded, in the privacy of my cabin, I found that three small shots had my mind (which was all there really was of me) floating confusedly detached from Gaunt's body. And a fourth shot would knock me right out.

The withdrawal symptoms were a fiery hell.

Even worse than the withdrawal from nicotine. Luckily, Gaunt was only a light smoker. I gave up tobacco for him. I had to. The coughing paroxysms kept panicking me. There was nothing I could do about them.

Facing me across his spotless, shining desk was the director of Organics Ltd. Good old Lee Moss, Gaunt's boss . . . *my* boss.

'Glad to see you back, tanned and fit, Dick.'

I recognized it for human humour. Venus is, of course, sunless.

'It's good to be back, Lee.'

'I don't wonder,' he said, looking at me quizzically. 'Those cold fish begin to get you down after a time. They don't know what fun is. All they think of is business, business, business.'

'It's life or death to them, Lee. Competition is razor-keen there. You've always got to be one jump ahead . . . or starve. It's no Welfare State, you know.'

'Cold claws, cold heart,' said Lee. 'There's no Venusian equivalent of the word "generosity". What a place to go for a holiday!'

I made no comment. I was pretty sure he knew the

purpose of Gaunt's 'holiday'. Officially, it was strictly a private arrangement between the Terrestrial Foreign Intelligence Directorate and Richard Gaunt, amateur spy. But I knew that Organics Ltd. were profiting from such arrangements, too, and were using Venusian processes which had been secret before Terrestrial industrial spies uncovered them. Obviously, Intelligence had passed them on.

'I'll bet you could use a drink,' said Lee, and pulled a bottle of whisky from his drawer.

'Not just now, thanks,' I said, quickly. 'I picked up a stomach bug on Venus, and whisky makes me queasy.'

'Have a beer, then. That won't hurt you.'

As I hesitated, he spiked a can and poured it. I sipped it. It seemed weak and innocuous. I gulped the rest of the glass.

Lee raised an eyebrow. 'You *were* thirsty. Another?' No, thanks, I want—'

At that moment Richard Gaunt's body went mad. It started jerking violently and I couldn't stop it. It made weird, sharp noises. It kept wanting to be sick, and couldn't. My thought processes went to pieces, my control and dignity disintegrated. I have never felt more completely helpless.

'Help!' I cried, feebly, doubled up.

Incredibly, Lee Moss laughed. I knew there was a sadistic streak in human humour, but this shocked me. These convulsions were terrible and possibly mortal.

'You downed that beer too fast, Dick. Try holding your breath.'

I tried, but it did no good. Human lungs have small capacity.

More indignities followed. Lee had me trying to drink water from the side of a glass, when I wasn't all that practiced at drinking it from the right side. I drenched my shirt front. Lee thought that was funny, too.

Then he tried to 'shock' me out of my fit. Shouted unexpectedly in my ear, thumped my back, flipped cold water on my neck.

Suddenly, he turned serious. He said, sternly, 'That information you brought back from Venus was all a fake.'

That shocked me, all right. My convulsions ceased. I sat there, flaccid, exhausted, staring at him.

And he laughed again. 'That cured your hiccups, didn't it? I always said that psychological shocks hit you harder than physical ones.'

Hiccups. Later, I read up this malady. Spasms of the stomach diaphragm. A Joke to Terrestrials. Naked fear to me. Fear comes to me whenever self-control is snatched away. Acting is my life, and acting is the art of self-control.

Lee Moss, grinning, said, 'Naturally, you're surprised. But we've known for some time about your hobby—spying. It's a pity that these things have to be handled by Intelligence, and you can't work direct for us. But all Venusian/Terrestrial relationships are State matters, of course.'

'What was that you said about fake information?' I asked, cautiously.

Lee's grin broadened. 'That was just shock tactics, old man, to cure your hiccups. Actually, Intelligence is a long way from releasing any of that particular harvest to us. They mull things over for months first. Off the

record, did you pick up anything really good, Dick?’

‘Off the record, my lips are sealed—you know how it is.’

He said yes, he knew. I had to laugh myself, at that—but privately.

I carried on with Gaunt’s work at Organics.

Part of it was working on Lee’s personal secretary, Kathy.

Kathy was *chic* and twenty-five and not an ideal secretary. She was slow to anticipate your wishes. Her eyes were slumberous and a mite sulky. She didn’t smile much. But she was pretty and she knew how to dress.

She had a husky voice which I’d heard described as ‘provocative’.

There was truth in that, for it provoked Gaunt’s glands. Every time Kathy was near, Gaunt’s body became wayward.

She noticed it. She gave me a faint but unmistakable smile. It seemed to me there was invitation in it.

She whispered (although we were alone in my office), ‘Do you still like me, Dick?’

That did it. Quite of their own volition, my hands grasped her shoulders and pulled her mouth to mine.

‘Um. Nice,’ she murmured. ‘But mind you don’t catch my cold.’

I caught it, though.

Next morning, as I drove to the office, a tickling in my nostrils rapidly became acute and a frightful convulsion seized me. Momentarily, I blacked out, and lost control of the car.

I had plenty of time to reflect, as I sat on the grass verge waiting for the breakdown truck to come and pull my car out of the ditch, upon the dangers of being human.

This new type of bodily spasm—the sneeze—was worse than the hiccup, and almost as frequent when the cold germ was in your system.

Road accidents are frequent on Earth. I don’t wonder. If you’re speeding, and a sneeze hits you, your survival chances must be low.

I wondered what this vile human body would persecute me with next. I soon learned: glandular trouble. There was nothing wrong with Gaunt’s glands: that was the trouble. Glands are a human’s safety valves. Pressures build up and must have an outlet.

No saurian can imagine the stresses of Terrestrial sex life. With us, eggs and their incubation form as mechanical a process as eating. To the average Venusian, both eating and procreation are necessary evils, interrupting the proper business of life—money-making.

Narvel kids himself that he’s different, that he’s an actor because of his burning need for self-expression. But he wouldn’t act if nobody paid him to—I’m in a position to know.

Even though I’m not Narvel, really, any more. That essence has been changed by an admixture of humanity. I’m a bewildered in-between, and only non-existence will solve my problems.

Speed the day . . . tomorrow.

That clinch with Kathy began the ruin of the master plan. It stimulated the urges in that truncated thalamus. They rose to flood level.

Kathy.

Her image plagued all my hours, waking and sleeping. One whiff of her heady perfume and I tended to become an animal. And this was often unbearably frustrating, because Kathy played fast and loose with me, as I suspected she’d always done with Gaunt.

She was sparing with her dates. She was fitting me in with at least one other man. I wondered who he was, or they were, and felt murderous sometimes.

Murder is a crime peculiar to Earth. It’s unthinkable on Venus. The killer instinct has full play in cut-throat business: physical violence is unnecessary.

I cursed out Intelligence for not being intelligent enough to foresee this kind of complication.

I made an effort to pull myself together and complete the job I’d been sent to do.

‘Kathy,’ I said, one afternoon, ‘would you do me a favour?’

‘Not tonight, Dick. It’s my Women’s Institute night.’

That was a gag we’d both accepted. No one was farther from the Women’s Institute type than Kathy. It meant that she was booked for another kind of night out, with a man.

‘I don’t mean tonight. I mean now. Lee has a confidential report of mine—Sperov’s recent work on organic molecules. I want to refer to it, but there’s only the one copy.’

‘Can’t say I remember seeing that report,’ she said—not surprisingly: I’d only just invented it.

‘Maybe you didn’t file it—Lee did. Come on, girl, you’re holding me up.’

‘Well . . . all right. But I’ll have to put it back right away, you know.’

Reluctantly—because it was hallowed—she went into Lee’s inner sanctum. I allowed her five minutes of fruitless searching, then followed her. For the first time I beheld the polished steel door of that safe standing open. I wished there were some good and plausible reason for spending half an hour alone in this room . . .

Standing at the safe, Kathy looked over her shoulder at me. Her black hair was as glossy as the door. Her full red lower lip, protruding with petulance, made her mouth voluptuous. Those blind urges began to stir.

‘I can’t find it. What kind of folder did you use?’ she asked, sulkily.

‘It’s . . . well, just an ordinary . . . Here, I know what it looks like. I’ll find it.’

I made to push her gently aside. The S.I.C. (Society of Industrial Chemists) button on my lapel camouflaged a micro-camera. All I had to do during my pretended search was to hold the choicest top secret formulae before it, for no more than a second at a time. And then I could go away and never return to the perils of Organics Ltd. or to the greater peril of Kathy herself.

One small thing—but the last straw—defeated me. The touch of her soft flesh, her bare forearm.

It set Gaunt’s body on fire.

‘Stop!’ I cried inwardly. ‘Not now. For heaven’s sake, *not now.*’

The body ignored my command. It knew it wasn’t its master’s voice nor any real voice at all. Only an echo—an empty echo.

I was riding a tiger, without a choice to dismount.

Desperately, foolishly I appealed to my sleeping partner.

'Gaunt—wake up! Help me. How do handle this monster?'

But Gaunt slept on within our skull.

All through his life he'd been socially conditioned to suppress these mad impulses. And even he hadn't always been successful. But I had had no such training. I was a tyro, and the body sensed that and disregarded me.

It seized Kathy and crushed her cruelly to itself. Its lunatic violence frightened her. She opened her mouth to cry out and one hand clapped itself brutally over those red lips. The other hand ripped the blouse from her shoulders.

Looking back at that scene, I realize that whichever way subsequent events went, they would inevitably have been disastrous. I had lost, utterly, the battle for control.

Anyhow, the unexpected took a hand.

'What the hell's going on here?'

Lee Moss's voice was strident with anger and incredulity.

Surprise loosened my grip. Kathy broke away.

Lee stood just inside the doorway. He dropped his travelling case: it thumped on the carpet. His hands began to bunch themselves into fists. His expression was a queer mixture of shock, dismay, and fury.

The dismay spread. Misery creased his face. All at once his eyes were full of tears.

'Kathy, Kathy . . . how could you do this?'

She gave a little moan and went to him. She clung to him as though he were a rock in a rough sea instead of a broken, unhappy creature.

My body poised itself, tense, understanding that it was rejected in favour of that other male's—and that this was certainly not the first time that it had happened.

Lee was murmuring. 'I came back early, darling, because I just couldn't stay away any—'

My body launched itself in a mighty leap at them and wrenched them apart. My attempt to check it was so much beating at the air.

It landed a punch on Lee's jaw which sent him flat on his back half out of the doorway. The impulse to kill was throbbing in great waves through Gaunt's nervous system. I feared for the life of the prostrate Lee.

However, humans in the grip of overwhelming emotion are unpredictable—and quite illogical. I could have understood Gaunt's body eliminating its rival. That would be murder with a motive.

But it switched its attack to Kathy, seized her by the throat. Her piercing scream was cut short.

I think that I, the helpless spectator, must have suffered as much as she as her lovely face empurpled and those sleepy brown eyes opened wide at last in the stare of death.

Men came—shouting. It took two of them to unclasp Gaunt's hands from around her neck.

Narvel's memory is fading fast and tomorrow should be gone altogether. But among the records still remaining intact is his sole attempt to play a famous Terrestrial part, Shakespeare's Othello. It was a failure. He smothered Desdemona but he could never understand why a man should kill the woman he loves. How *could* Narvel understand? He had never experienced that strange and terrible emotion, jealousy.

It's ironic to reflect that if I, this dwindling fragment of RNA, were planted now in his brain, then Narvel's Othello could become his greatest role.

I've learned other emotions alien to him, also. Remorse. Though the crime was not mine, each time I remember Kathy this self-torturing ache begins. Then there is another, and nobler, emotion: compassion.

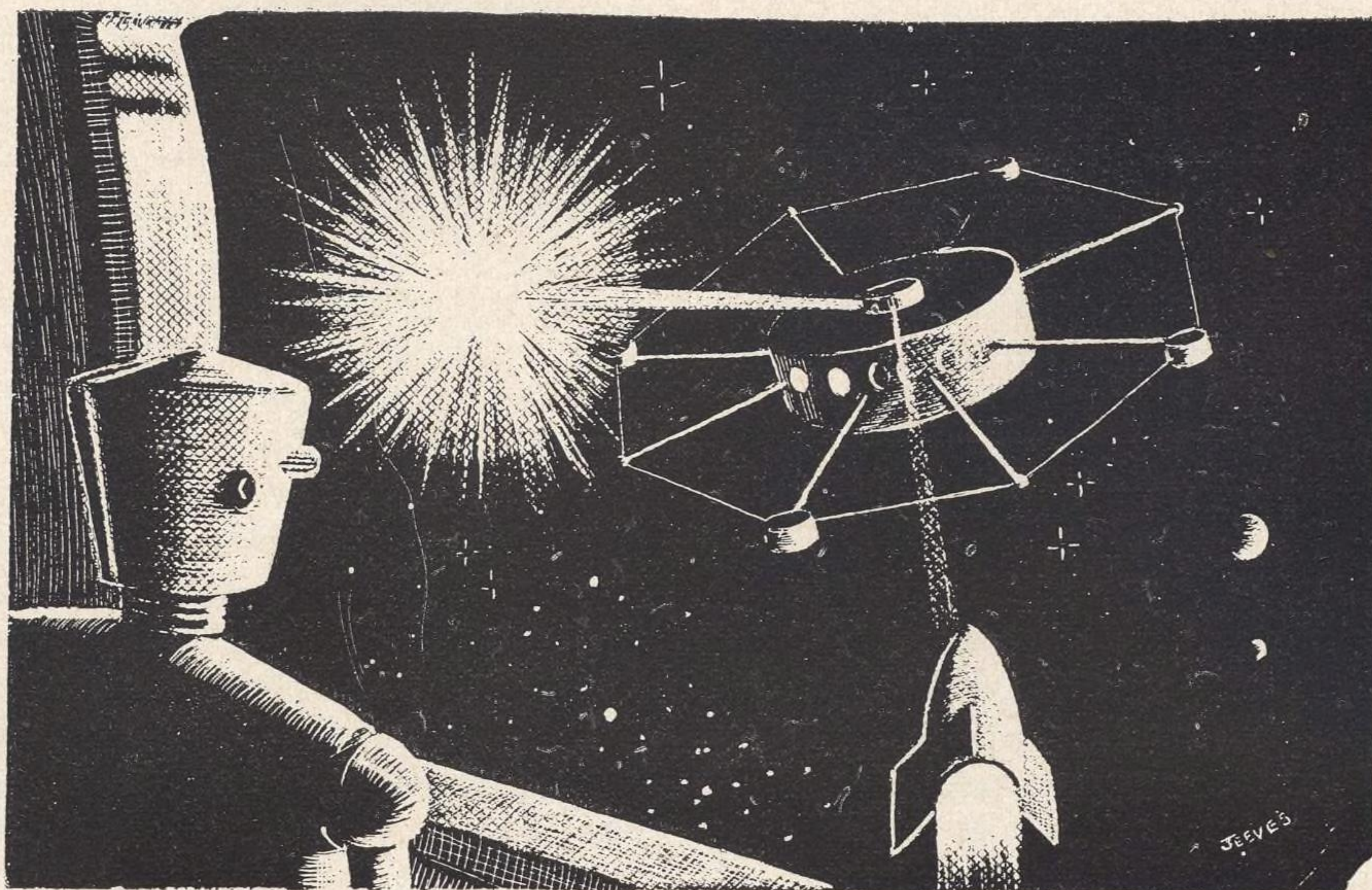
Compassion has driven me to write this letter to you, Richard Gaunt, to warn you of your situation when you awake and to convince you that you are innocent of murder. I hope it will convince your accusers, too. To that end, I shall add an appendix describing in detail the Venusian Intelligence network here and my contacts with it. And giving the location of the transmitter which beamed to Venus the few photographs I did succeed in taking . . .

I am betraying my race? Do I have a race? Not even Narvel felt truly one of that frigid race. And now I no longer feel truly an echo of him.

What can I sign myself? I have no name.

I'm just a passing echo . . .

Maybe of humanity?



UNDERCOVER WEAPON

Jack Wodhams

Most of us have enjoyed the risqué novels of the late Thorne Smith at one time or another. Not sf, of course, but amusing fantasies none the less. If you've ever wished that Thorne Smith had written sf, then Jack Wodhams has his finger on your doorbell!

Mikhail Venividivitch was worried. He had been picked up only minutes before he was able to transmit vital information he had uncovered to his superiors. It was essential that he conveyed the news and diagrammatic data of this intriguing new invention to his government. So close! And now it was too late. He was a prisoner. They would brainwash him. They would cleanse his mind of the facts stored photographically therein.

Mikhail Venividivitch groaned. It was depressing to be a secret agent with an important secret but no agency.

'Gentlemen,' the Comptroller General said, 'it must be acknowledged that well-intended research and development cannot assure that successful resultant innovations will not in some wise be put to reprehensible employment. Such, it must sadly be reported, is the case in the invention of the Fiberphut fabric disintegrator.

'For those few present who may be unfamiliar with the term, this process was originally inspired by the observations of a radiologist in the Casualty Ward of the Benkinton County Hospital. The particular phenomenon noted knew initial development towards the painless removal and disposal of soiled bandages and suchlike adhesive and tainted material. Happily, this useful function should shortly be given license and, always providing that it is correctly used, should be a valuable addition to the medical apparatus of the future.

'Similarly, from the fact that the process, unlike fire, causes the breakdown and cold consumption of the elements commonly involved but releases the oxygen and hydrogen that they contain, it can readily be seen that the operation of a large unit could be extremely useful in disposing of a high percentage of our combustible garbage. This aspect is at present undergoing close investigation.

'However, the abuse and misuse to which this fundamentally beneficial device may be put has already been made plain, and it is alarming to think how the general availability of this mechanism may cause the occasionment of acute distress to various persons and give rise to situations that, well, you may imagine for yourselves.

'The identified culprit, if such he may be called, who has brought to direct notice the alternate and undesir-



able facets when this instrument is permitted to fall into selfish and indiscriminate hands, was a certain officer at the Army's Experimental Weaponry Division at Loughborough Springs. The Army, of course, has been interested in the fiberphut process for its obvious potential in denuding enemy personnel of protective covering and comfort, but they are having, I understand, problems in achieving a satisfactory saturation effect over distance. Nevertheless, they had made sufficient progress a few months ago to encourage one Lieutenant Cladwell to privately construct a fiberphut unit for his own use and purposes. This was totally in contravention to his sworn oath of secrecy, but the effects of his misdemeanour clearly illustrate the dangers and consequences we may anticipate should this technique become more widely apprehended.

'In the first place . . .'

In the first place be it well known that Lieutenant Cladwell was a first-class electronics technician who served his country ably by his dedicated application to the scientific duties allotted to him. So involved did he become with his work, so keen was he to demonstrate his ability and devotion to his seniors, that to gain complete mastery of the subject matter that absorbed the brilliant minds of the Army's research establishment, Cladwell began to take work home for study.

Cladwell, purely for his own edification, constructed a modified version of the special unit that at that time was attracting special attention. And Cladwell, simply in the course of advancing his own knowledge that he might be of greater benefit and utility to the arm that

he represented, succeeded in fashioning a small efficient replica of the instrument known there as the Fiberphut Reducter.

By chance Cladwell chose to affix his version of the instrument behind his wardrobe mirror, the glass being of a necessary thickness to filter and inhibit the emission of certain unwanted wavelengths, the mercury-oxide coating happily even partially accentuating the efficacy of the device.

To earn deserved kudos for his minor discovery, Cladwell, in the best scientific tradition, resolved to make exhaustive tests to ensure indisputable validity before declaring his find to his more eminent colleagues. It was in the interest of science, and purely for testing purposes, that Miss Amelia Crochwarey received an invitation to visit the comfortable government-provided bachelor quarters of Lieutenant Cladwell. And it was while this young lady in imagined privacy took occasion to admire herself in the flatteringly-tinted Cladwell mirror, that the lieutenant overcame pedestrian qualms of conventional behavioral correctness and, sternly admonishing himself that the pursuance of enlightenment permitted and demanded lack of restraint by petty considerations, threw a switch and faithfully timed the progressive stages of his activated machine's effectiveness.

Miss Crochwarey, as well may be envisioned, was stunningly shocked to observe that her attire appeared to be dissolving. In numb amazement she watched the entire foreportion of her dress puddle out, as it were, into great empty patches over the more directly prominent areas, to swiftly creep out like ragged netting till even the strands and shreds vanished. Losing the cohesive bonding of its frontal assembly, the protected and whole rear composition of her outer garment unavailingly fell away from her back.

Miss Crochwarey gaped in disbelief, goggled. Her stockings, to a line above her ankles, melted—her slip, a flimsy, became even more so, a whisp, leaving her with nothing but shoes and last-ditch underwear as her defence against indecency. As these essential items also rapidly gave sign of being under threat, Miss Crochwarey, at last, let out a squeal of pure horror.

Cladwell snapped his stopwatch. Nine seconds. Not bad, not bad at all. He switched off. Of course he would have to qualify his findings by appraising the substantive composition of the residual material, but for a first test his equipment had performed most promisingly.

He stepped in haste to answer the shrill cry of a damsel in distress. 'Why, Amelia,' and his eyebrows twitched naughtily, 'what an impulsive creature you are . . .'

Often, in research, there are unexpected bonus by-products.

All, perhaps, would have been well had Cladwell's singular pursuit of massive unarguable documentation of his improved process remained just that—singular. In his case, the moralistic side-issues of incidental amatory conquest might have been excused in cognizance of his genuine, and therefore permissively licensed, continuing scientific quest for perfection.

Cladwell, however, had a brother-in-law, and this brother-in-law was wont, on occasion, to visit Cladwell

and perhaps relieve the lieutenant of items militarily considered redundant, items that the lieutenant in the course of his employ found to become tediously cumulative in his quarters. Cladwell was always pleased when Arthur, his brother-in-law, called and helped to make the place tidy by clearing away the junk.

On the particularly relevant visit by Arthur, *the* visit, Cladwell, with the notorious incaution of a true-born truth-for-truth's sake innovateur, unwisely commented upon the nature and progress of his own personal enterprise and, when prevailed up to do so, unguardedly elaborated his own small achievement and ambition.

Keeping in mind that like many another creative thinker he was essentially a lonely figure in his struggle towards a specific goal, Cladwell may, perhaps, be pardoned for erroneously assuming that Arthur would be a safe repository for the unburdenment of his secret hopes and successes. Cladwell trusted Arthur. He was his brother-in-law after all. And as a civilian, an outsider, discussing matters with Arthur seemed no more indicative of a security breach than might have a conversation between the O.C. and his mother. Not for one moment, it can be believed, did Cladwell suspect that his highly descriptive enumeration of his attainments thus far would excite Arthur's curiosity to such an intense degree—to have it come that nothing would do but that Arthur be given a demonstration. The obligation and revelation of which aroused in Arthur sentiments of a most disreputable kind.

From here on Arthur fully displayed his acquisitive character, and nothing would appease him but that he should possess Cladwell's prototype instrument. Cladwell with a great deal more inquiry yet to make in his studies, was understandably reluctant to be parted from the instrument that was integral to his programme. Nevertheless, he was misguidedly fond of Arthur and, after extracting avowals to the employment of the utmost discretion, getting assurance that the unit would be used for charitable work only, and finally agreeing to accept the sum of fifteen hundred dollars, Cladwell aided and allowed Arthur to circumspectedly remove the machine to the safety of Arthur's beat-up station-sedan.

Cladwell, watching Arthur's departure, philosophically comforted himself that he could always build himself another unit.

Arthur, driving away, had much grander visions of duplication.

Arthur Fontgart was himself a man of no mean technical aptitude and organizational ability. He commissioned the assembly of parts sections from a number of small contractors and, more or less directly copying the proportions of the cabinet-boxing affixed to the original wardrobe door, was able to put together complete fiberphut units as he required them.

With a few models on hand, satisfactorily tested, Arthur began a sly but not altogether admirable selling campaign.

Arthur's first, may they be so nobly designated, customers, were those gentlemen of leisure who appreciated the convenience that the well-sited instrument could obtain, gentlemen in name who could mollifyingly afford to assuage the tears and tantrums of loss with

compensating apparel of acceptable design and cut. Afterwards.

In this, his first selected and specialized outlet, Arthur was no doubt inspired by his brother-in-law Cladwell's account of the subsidiary advantages that had accrued while the machine was being experimentally evaluated. Whereas by the wildest stretch of the imagination it can be conceived that Cladwell's intentions were basically motivated towards honourable illumination, Arthur, materialistically and unashamedly, touted the Fiber-phut for its secondary usefulness.

In a while, though, Arthur found that he did not have the number of likely prospects that he had thought to garner. Many playboys, by virtue of their charm, accomplishments and wealth, denied the ten-second claim as a record and professed a complete disinterest in the new assistant force that Arthur brought to their notice. Quite a few, it seemed, preferred to follow their own quixotic *modus operandi*, and it was a good thing to note that the sportive element was not to be so easily eliminated.

Arthur did dispose of a few models, but mainly to those who were not quite as agile as they once had been. Arthur avoided the too-playful and over-funloving as being poor risks, too irresponsible and undesirably attention-getting, and this narrowed his limited field even further.

All in all, Arthur was not made happy by the slow pace of his chosen market. He had expected more unequivocal and universal enthusiasm. True, he was able to purchase a new car from the proceeds of his canny industry, and his bank-balance improved somewhat. And it was true also that he was showing a fair profit on his initial investment. Yet somehow Arthur knew that he was not exercising to the full the endowment of this device that by sheer good fortune was yet his own exclusive preserve. He felt, he *knew*, that there had to be a fortune in it, a *real* fortune. And he had to make it before some other throb-head awoke and beat him to the snatch.

Arthur, at one time or another, applied a great deal of stress to his resourceful wits in order to devise a more lucrative channel for his wares—and many a fool notion did he wrestle with. But one day, closing his car-door too hurriedly, he ripped a large piece out of his jacket—and just like that the Big Idea came. Of course. It was so simple. It was so simple, no wonder it had been so hard to think of.

'Well, so we got privacy,' Madame Chonson said. She put her cigarette to the centre of her pouted mouth and puffed. Through the smoke her eyes were sharp and not devoid of hostility. She watched Arthur unplug a fan and plug in his own cord. 'You lug that thing in through my shop. You wasting my time, it go out again faster'n it came in.'

Madame came plumply over to stare at the unit, and at herself in the mirror-face. 'It's a storage cabinet? Storage cabinets I got. Mirrors I got.'

Arthur smiled. 'Just look at yourself for a moment.'

In suspicion she looked. 'I see nothing. I know what I look like, don't I?' She frowned. 'I don't . . .' She gasped. 'Hey!' Her dress-front whorled away into multiplying vacancies. 'What the . . . ?'

Arthur switched off. 'There you are, see?'

With weakened underwear creaking alarmingly, Madame swore. 'What the hell you mean, here I am?'

'Don't you see? How do you feel? Now that's exactly . . . Hey, no! Let me explain!'

Then for a while there was pandemonium, with the incensed proprietress giving Arthur scant opportunity to elucidate.

At last, prone, sat-upon and being critically throttled, Arthur did manage to choke out five words that mercifully penetrated sufficiently to relax the lethal grip on his throat.

'Say that again,' the irate lady demanded.

So Arthur said it again. And a great deal more. Very fast.

Arthur looked up at a constrictedly bulging bosom but inches from his nose and prayed fervently that the marvellous engineering of the containing structure would hold out. The sight was frightening enough as it was. However had he managed to be so thoughtless? Arthur swore to himself ardently and sincerely that he would never in the future make such a forcefully direct effort to create an impression.

Not without reluctance, Madame took her weight from Arthur's chest and stood up. Arthur, with care, shakily resumed his feet.

'Now then,' she said grimly, 'you give me more demonstration. You stand in front mirror and let *me* try for see how it work.'

Arthur laughed, fronting. But it was not, he found, very funny.

The contretemps at the dress-shop was resolved finally with exceptional amiability and mutual understanding and, after rendered extra service over and above the call of salesmanship, Arthur concluded his first such deal, sent out for a new suit, and went on to develop an entire new world of demand.

The five decisive words he had uttered in his moment of peril had been 'Window—Shoppers—New dress—Money'. And this, most succinctly, was the essence of Arthur's brainchild.

The mirrored cabinet was placed unobtrusively in a doorway corner of the display window of the establishment. A trusted employee, observing from behind a screen, made judicious selection and was ready to make contact as soon as any lady passer-by paused to admire herself. Such a lady, rarely in a hurry, soon was to become consternated at her appearance and in some wildness desperately search her surroundings for a pathway to immediately necessary sanctuary. Thank god it all happened right outside a dress-shop, and the distraught woman could precipitately dive within to the delightfully welcoming arms of a readily commiserating sales staff.

Madam Chonson's swift appreciation of the new contrivance may be taken as a fair example of the appreciation that was subsequently often to be repeated elsewhere. In a week Madame Chonson was advertising for more help: in a fortnight she was coming close to outselling Macy's.

By agreement and for a weekly commission on improved sales, Arthur guaranteed defined areas of

uncompetitive territory. He was able to discriminate and choose the most rewardingly-sited premises, and to engage the participation of those with a most sharply practical and shrewdly businesslike turn of mind.

Arthur must be granted his due. He laboured with the unpretentious rapidity of a man who mayhap feared preventive legislation to be imminent. He was keenly aware that sooner rather than later some spoilsport was sure to raise objection to his introduced method of stimulating the rag-trade. Arthur knew that he was racing against time. He knew that despite the self-interested cloak of security readily grasped, accorded and implemented by each customer, inevitably there would be a leak that would reach an astute and perceptive ear and cause his entire undertaking to be brought to unwanted authoritative scrutiny.

Arthur, in fact, was amazed as one week succeeded another without bringing indictment or aroused query pertinent to the phenomenon that occurred with greater frequency every day. He did, it seemed, underestimate the persuasively protectionist cupidity of his jealously gimmick-alert patrons and, indeed, co-operation in guardedness generally reached an exemplary standard within one working day of installation.

After a few weeks of unremitting toil, Arthur was well ahead and feeling generous enough to share his load and expand his company beyond its family limits. High wages soon hired skill for assembly-work, and the promise of fat returns brought willing salesmen to push his product.

Arthur was conscious that it couldn't last, that his own team would betray him. But he knew also that the betrayal would not be made deliberately, but most likely inadvertently, through greed. But now he felt that he had had a better run than he would have credited possible, and that he could afford to relax a measure and quite cheerfully continue to hope for the best.

When the crash came at last, a surprising full three months after the placement of the first unit in Madame Chonson's window, it came, as Arthur had anticipated, swiftly. As raindrops upon a plate can be numerically increased to a certain degree yet each remain individual, nevertheless a point is reached where the addition of one drop or two can effect the integration of the separate blobs into one flood of interconnection. A spark to the inflammable can explode and expose.

As it happened, there were three sparks that by strange fortune were all struck in the same working day.

The first igniting shard was provided by the elegant socialite Mrs Emery-Dickforthsen. This poised lady, morning shopping, called at Madame Chonson's renovated salon to perhaps discover for herself the reason for the recently booming sales in that modest emporium. Mrs Emery-Dickforthsen, be it noted, had financial interest in a chain that offered Madame Chonson a nearby rival. Arthur, for a number of reasons, had partisanly decided in favour of small business, and had unkindly excluded chainstores from his contact list.

As had happened to many unknown predecessors, Mrs Emery-Dickforthsen chanced to find herself dismayingly publicly disrobed. This nightmarish experi-

ence caused her, as it had others before her, to scramble for the most proximate accommodation. Unlike her forerunners, though, she had lost a genuine St Laurent original, and this honed her professional wit and additive powers to a markedly fine edge. While being re-suited, the squealing entry of another partially-clad victim did not gratify her as one graduate at the initiation of another, and her mind was not sidetracked by the irrefutably valid excuse to legitimately surrender to the pleasure of purchasing new attire.

Re-clothed expensively (not well—but in disputation the urgently needy are at a distinct disadvantage) and adequately, Mrs Emery-Dickforthsen took her departure from the store—but only to take up a quiet post of observation nearby. What she saw in a couple of hours gave her insight enough to occupy all her attention thenceforward.

The second glowing ember was cast in another city.

A Fiberphut salesman had an uncle, a tailor, who ran his own haberdashery. The salesman had seen no reason why a men's outfitters should not also benefit from an appropriately located machine, and he had, thoughtful nephew that he was, given his relative first option on the neighbourhood franchise. The uncle had accepted, and had thereby prospered.

But in this instance penny-pinching management placed the actual operation of the device into the hands of the uncle's seventy-eight-year-old father-in-law. The elderly fellow found his duty not too onerous and even gained a measure of relish in eradicating great segments of the garb of young bloods who were unlucky enough to stop and preen before the inviting mirror.

All went well for quite a while, and the turnover in vests, pants and coats climbed, starting the uncle to browsing through catalogues for luxury yachts and higher-class dwellings.

And then this day a blonde of striking composition halted before the magic mirror to adjust her diminutive chapeau and otherwise make negligible corrections to enhance her perfection. The old boy (God may his soul rest in peace) was overcome by an irresistible temptation, and the young lady, in short order, was fetchingly benumbed to observe her reflected transformation into chick au naturale.

With that shriek of our unfeathered femme that the more travelled might have recognized as becoming more frequently heard this year, the damsel fled at a high rate of knots to a boutique an agonizingly long three doors away. The old fellow meanwhile had not been of a constitutional elasticity to withstand the provocation of his own prankish whimsy. As the fair maiden had become more evidently alluring, so had the old reprobate bug-eyed himself into a seizure, and toppling from his concealed perch he knocked the still-functioning fiberphut console over on to its side.

Two male passers-by who had, at great sacrifice, put aside their more pressing business in order to motionlessly follow the flight of the horseless Godiva, both soon learned that their nether garments were decaying with inordinate celerity. They looked at each other, down at belly-buttons and beyond, and at fallen-away scraps upon the ground. They gaped at each other. No shirt-tail, no singlet, no convenient span of cloth was

in tug-worthy reach, and even the navel fluff was gone. Certainly they were left shoes and socks and a serviceable six inches of cuff at the end of each leg. But such cuffs, drawn up as high as they might be upon the thighs would have looked like overwide and uncommonly-placed bands of mourning, and would have in no way provided the decent enclosure of those parts that custom demands should be withheld from public exhibition.

A piercing scream from a mere few feet galvanized the men to a frantic consciousness of the reality of their condition, and they repaired with jostling eagerness to plead instant service inside the providentially situated menswear shop.

The screaming woman had not been caused to do so by the inexplicable dissolution of parts of her covering, but by the flagrantly revealed portions of masculine anatomy that had been so brazenly flaunted. Even in these times there are people who live sheltered lives, and this woman poor dear, was one of them. It was as though her worst fears had suddenly been realized, and she fainted dead away on the spot.

The commotion secured the attention of a small crowd, and of the policeman on this beat. Little more, it is thought, need be said. Some people in the vicinity began to notice a draught where draught is normally excluded, and the solicitously bending policeman himself soon became oddly aware that he was protruding more than somewhat barrenly and in a manner uncondusive to dignity. And when he turned around, the partly revived woman promptly passed out again.

That incident brought a very strong spotlight to bear upon fiberphut usage.

The third, and perhaps most whitely incendiary particle of the day was shed at an afternoon rally in the western megapolis. This rally announced the radically nouveau birth of the Nudists For Peace organization. With an apparent theory, unconsciously borrowed from the Defence Department, that he who is nude, though rude, is militarily screwed, the small but energetic founder-coterie of the N.F.P. cajoled and inveigled unsuspecting pedestrians into a hired hall.

The chosen title and some inviting illustrations performed sterling service as a lure. Inside the hall was a corridor comprised of one authentic fiberphut machine and a number of rough but comparably active home-made units. Enjoined to look upwards and follow the moving pictures, the trapped unwary incautiously obeyed instructions, and at the end of their tour, their leisurely strolling turned by this time into a panic-stricken gallop, they escaped nakedly through the rear exit, shoes and short socks their only armament against social censure and the inclemency of the weather. A solitary skimpy pamphlet was tendered to the panting beggars who importuned for raiment, *any* raiment, that might permit the bridging to homes and security with even the minimum of respectability. The pamphlet, outlining the credo of the N.F.P. with greater clarity than hitherto and thanking them for their demonstrated support, was not of material extravagance to more than be a tokenly substitute fig-leaf-like provision against ocular intrusion. And the paper soon became soggy. The pamphlets were stoically rationed from behind a stout

grill.

Naturally, the wailings and lamentations and vociferous protestations of an ever-growing knot of people curiously and negligibly clothed in seeming disregard to the understood priorities could not, for any duration of time, go unnoticed. The number of milling agitated bodies in the alleyway increased, testimony to the public's trusting credulity and benevolent tolerance of extremist viewpoints. Until one, snapping under the strain, ran shrilling along the passageway back to the main thoroughfare, thus quickly bringing attention to the predicament of them all.

The N.F.P. was not much later constrained to abandon its tryout ex-sampler and, astonishingly, at the onset of official probing its principals disappeared with a miraculous facility that strongly intimated the pre-arranged.

The forces of law and order, as may be conjectured, were vastly intrigued and, as with any other novel and not thoroughly comprehended development, chose to be prudently reticent until the matter had been fully investigated.

'These episodes that have so recently come to light,' the Comptroller General said heavily, 'have brought us to conclude that continued suppression of common knowledge of this device is not practicable. At any time now the press will unearth the reason behind some of the strange events of the past months, and already they clamour more intensively for the details and motives that lie behind the many confiscations that we have managed to make. Much of their surmising comes very close to the truth, and we cannot rely upon our threats to take severe legal action to quell every of the many tongues that have knowledge of the workings of the Fiberphut unit. And it might well be argued that the public has a right to know, for its own defence.

'In the short time that we have become aware of the private production of the units, we cannot hope to track down all that have been sold. Publicity will only ensure that versions of the instrument undiscovered throughout the country will be destroyed or, as is more likely, hidden.

'This deplorable commercial application of the unit, needless to say, has been a great blow to us, and reflects adversely upon the efficacy of our screening procedures. That Lieutenant Cladwell—missing from his post and now believed to be in Tahiti with that other prime offender, Fontgart—that he should have obtained the high rating that he did is scandalous. However, the damage has been done.

'Now let us look at General Miltshire's report. As it happens, only three days ago the army on the closed test-range at Loughborough Springs carried out small-scale manœuvres to decide the worth of several fiberphut 'guns'. These proved to perform with a reasonable degree of efficiency over open terrain, but over distance suffered progressive diminishment in projected potency and, where the cover of trees or trenches could be found, this shielding prevented garment loss.

'But,' and here the Comptroller General became soberly pensive, 'if the performance of the weapon in the field was hardly startling, greater "success" was achieved by the device when it was diversely used for purposes other than combat by the enlisted men re-

cruited. Disporting, it is believed, at first with one another, their enthusiasm in stages led them into gross violations of discipline.

'Gentlemen, when I tell you that a party of nurses, fourteen WACS, one general and numberless other commanders and NCO's were "accidentally" subjected to the stripping action of the weapon, you will appreciate that this force can be an unprecedented temptation in the hands of personnel who may feel less than contented with their lot. Apart from a mild depilating effect, fiberphut treatment is relatively harmless to physical well-being and is therefore inviting as an innocuous retaliatory resort. But the demoralizing aspect is considerable. Militarily the device has its limitations, and the complex psychological implications, particularly in the defining of basic measures to defeat the unreasoning impulse promptings to misuse, have yet to be fully explored.'

The Comptroller General sighed. 'The situation then, is this. The secret cannot possibly be kept a secret for very much longer. Also, taken superficially, it would not seem as important an innovation as the inflight-airfueller, or the MB 1616 virus. We could, as with so many other things, wish that it had never been invented and, taking all factors into consideration, it can be seen that maintaining national exclusive possession of the knowledge is infeasible, and perhaps not even desirable. Human nature being what it is, it is thought at this time that we should not be ungenerous or seek to prohibit the dissemination of interesting but not vital scientific information to, ah, other world powers.'

THE MERIT AWARD

Each issue, *Vision of Tomorrow* will pay to the author of the leading story in that issue, as determined by the readers' votes, a bonus in addition to our regular rate. In this way, we will reward authors of outstanding stories, and provide extra incentive to create better fiction for our readers.

After you have read the stories in this issue, fill in the coupon alongside. Number the stories in the order which you place them, from 1 to 8. The results will be announced in a later issue. The reader whose voting most nearly parallels the final result, and who writes the best letter of 20 words or longer on why he or she selected the first place story for that position will also be awarded a prize of £2 2s. od.

Send your votes to:
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'Fortunately we have a courier who is able and eager to facilitate the delivery of the details of this process to the most sympathetic quarters. If you approve, it is suggested that this person be sent as expeditiously as can be managed on a return journey to his homeland . . .'

'The fools!' Mikhail Venividivitch crowed. 'If only they knew!'

'So, so, comrade,' his chief said. 'What is this thing that you have brought home to us?'

'Wait till you see. It is fantastic! I shall become as famous as Cicero or Fuchs,' Mikhail declared. 'More famous, even. The fools. They even allowed me to collect my belongings and bring this machine with me. Right under their noses!' He unravelled the lead, found himself a socket.

'What is it?' his chief asked impatiently. 'What does it do?'

'No, no, I will show you. You will see for yourself. Mikhail tilted the instrument, took the cover from the mirror. 'Look,' he said, 'and you will see.'

Solemnly his chief went to look, put his hands behind his back. He did not appear to be impressed. And in a few moments he appeared to be even less impressed.

'There you are,' Mikhail said proudly. 'You see what it does?'

'Yes.' The chief gently raised and lowered himself a couple of times on his heels. His calm was of the kind known as monumental. 'How . . . very . . . very . . . interesting . . .'

(Please use facsimile of this form if you do not wish to mutilate your copy.)

In my opinion the stories in this issue rank as follows :

No.	Here
.....	<i>A Judge Of Men</i> by Michael G. Coney
.....	<i>Strictly Legal</i> by Douglas Fulthorpe
.....	<i>Quarry</i> by E. C. Tubb
.....	<i>Dancing Gerontius</i> by Lee Harding
.....	<i>Undercover Weapon</i> by Jack Wodhams
.....	<i>Echo</i> by William F. Temple
.....	<i>Frozen Assets</i> by Dan Morgan
.....	<i>Minos</i> by Maurice Whitta

Name

Address

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DANCING GERONTIUS

Lee Harding

Critics of the American and Russian Space Programmes point out that there are a lot of urgent problems here on Earth that need attention, before we go out into space looking for new ones. One such problem is the care of the Aged. Lee Harding suggests a possible solution in a moving story which is just about the best thing he has done to date.

The knock was perfunctory; a small courtesy for old Berensen.

'Go away,' he croaked. He did not wish to be disturbed. This one small room was his world and intruders were

unwelcome.

But they did not honour his command. Instead, the door slid open to admit two smiling aides. As they moved towards him Berensen struggled to sit up in bed but the flimsy weight of a blanket prevented him.

Firm hands grasped his shoulders and helped him into an uncomfortable sitting position.

'Come on old man—this is Year Day. Time to be up and about and enjoying yourself!'

But their enthusiasm was not yet catching. His eyesight had become a clumsy tool, and so he could not make out the message in their faces, and the meaning of their words escaped him.

Time had betrayed him. Only the dim light of his muddled yesterdays crowded this narrow room and any

contact with the outside world had become difficult and unwarranted; any cognizance of the future impossible. Such was the stasis which had consumed and maintained his useless life. Now they wanted to break it open and take him elsewhere.

Why couldn't they leave him alone? And what was so important about Year Day that it brought such a disturbance into his life?

'A Day of festivities, old man . . .'

He felt a gentle pressure upon his back and his body hunched forward over his knees.

'But first you must be prepared . . .'

One by one he felt the tiny needles nose their way under his skin and squirt their marvellous little juices into his blood.

There had been a time—long ago, it now seemed—when he had feared this gentle rupture of his flesh; but he had since grown accustomed to the ritual and thankful for the benefits the injections brought to his aged body.

'There—that didn't hurt a bit, now did it? Now, we just have to wait a while and then . . .'

The voice of the aide droned on—to himself or to his companion. Berensen wasn't quite sure, nor did he care. A pleasant euphoria had crept over him and dissipated his uncertainty. Hands lowered him to a prone position and then fitted a complicated tracery of fine wire probes over his body and connected the trailing ends to a diagnostician.

The comfortable confusion of his late world was receding. Already the insidious drugs were working their way through his weary body with astonishing speed and hustling his sluggish thoughts towards time-present in a most subtle and unwanted manner.

He did not feel the fourth, fifth or sixth injections, nor was he conscious in any way of the other small adjustments they made to his mind and body. The euphoria gave way to a heightened awareness. His pulse quickened; he could feel it beating away in his throat in a most unfamiliar manner. His breathing strengthened and became a steady, purposeful movement in his ancient chest—and a faint flush crept into his leathery cheeks. The small sounds around him were magnified and the narrow room snapped cruelly into focus for the first time in years. He saw his dreams stripped bare and their bones exposed: white walls; low ceiling; a dreadful emptiness.

He closed his eyes. He wanted desperately to speak but no word passed his trembling lips.

'Now take it easy, old man. No sense in hurrying things. All in good time. All in good time . . .'

He knew, without looking up, that one of them was bending over him, smiling and solicitous, for that was the manner of their trade.

'You must rest and give yourself time to prepare for the festivities, and in no time at all you'll feel your old self again . . .'

And what, Berensen wondered, will my old self be like?

He sighed; it was a broken gesture. For a moment his face crumpled and a solitary tear forced its way from underneath a tightly closed lid and worked its way down one leathery cheek.

Slowly, with all the reluctance of his hundred and

four years, Nicholas Berensen returned to the world.

When they had finished their work they taped a small monitor to his chest and left the room.

Time passed. He consumed it staring up at the uncommunicative ceiling and listening to the unfamiliar rustlings of his mind. Eventually another aide arrived and help him out of bed and into a powered wheel-chair.

He was surprised at the agility with which his limbs accomplished such a feat, and found time to marvel at what sort of wizardry made it possible.

The chair whisked him quickly down a silent, sterile corridor, and into another room bustling with activity. Here he was undressed and placed inside an industrious machine which immediately set about exercising his protesting body in a most cautious manner.

The seat beneath him began moving imperceptibly until it was rotating his skinny buttocks from side to side in sharp, regular intervals. A clamp closed judiciously around his scrawny neck and began a similar movement of his head. At the same time his legs and his arms were pulled, and extended, and returned to their original lax position with increasing determination. His whole body squeaked at this violation but his mind remained inert and unresponsive. He could detect by now the basic rhythm of the operation and sensed how it was accelerating and working the stiffness out of his body.

He knew that he was not alone in the room. The air was filled with the industrious gesticulations of the exercising machines, and in his narrow field of vision he could see several pale bodies, trapped, like his own, in the ingenious webs of metal. They made no effort to communicate but one nearby smiled weakly. He felt no desire to return the compliment and was content to let his mind unravel itself as best it could.

When his body began to ache intolerably they released him from the machine and lifted him back into his wheel-chair.

He was exhausted in a way that should have killed him long ago; but the drugs they had administered previously ensured a beneficial rather than a deleterious effect upon his aged body. He wanted more than anything else to sleep but this luxury was withheld by the insidious chemicals now in command of his body and his thoughts.

The next room was immense but bare. They lifted him from the chair and unpeeled his robe and placed him in a shallow nutrient bath, the contours of which were shaped to accommodate his skinny frame, so that he would not roll over and in any ways injure himself.

There were hundreds of these shallow troughs recessed into the colourful mosaic of the tiled floor, and most of them were occupied and attended by white-smocked aides or nurses.

Berensen felt the water rise over his pale white skin and felt his buttocks come to rest in a comfortable niche on the bottom and he slipped readily into a general mood of tranquillity. Already he felt younger; the fiery ache in his limbs had receded, and his body was beginning to remember things his mind still hesitated to summon.

It was unnaturally quiet in the room. Aides and nurses softfooted across the tiles and conversed *sotto-voce*.

From the baths there came only occasional liquid slapping sounds as old bodies moved fitfully in their coffin-shaped troughs.

Little by little he became conscious of where he was. He was at the Clinic, where all those who were weary and wasted ultimately went, to make way for the young and ambitious in a crowded and sometimes senseless world.

At the Clinic, where a benevolent stasis took command of the remnants of their lives and softened the barbs of the terminal quest.

At the Clinic, where the mind turned inwards and devolved into darkness . . .

Except for today. Today was Year Day and stasis would be absolved, and they would live together as they had lived long ago—as men and women with purpose to their lives and not as mindless old things with nothing else to do but dream and enjoy their useless dreaming.

He remembered now. It was all coming back to him. Year Day—the Day when science was good and golden and would make them talk and laugh together for a while before the numb anonymity of their lives overtook them and they returned without question to their tiny rooms and their muddled dreams.

This much he remembered—but there was more. Much more. His name—who he was and what he had been before his life had been swallowed whole by the spectre of old age. What had he known of life that so much had been forgotten and replaced by the fanciful memories of his youth? Surely there was something worthwhile he could summon up and take stock of . . . ?

But not yet. His mind was unready. Patience and time would see to it that all things necessary came to pass. He had only to wait.

The ache had been sifted away from his body and now they lifted him out of the nutrient bath and swaddled him in his robe and wheeled him into a sweet-smelling ante-room.

Here it was even quieter, and they placed him face down upon a long table. Dimly he could make out a number of similar tables where other bodies like pale, skinny slugs rested and were administered to by soft-voiced nurses.

Several of them surrounded him and began fussing over him like some wounded eagle. Happily he submitted himself to their care. They poured rich and fragrant oils over his body and worked the nourishment gently into his skin and deep into his muscles, their white hands moving deftly and solicitously over the dry, crumpled tissue.

They fussed over him for what seemed an inordinate amount of time, chattering amongst themselves from time to time like mindless birds; but when they went away the silence seemed unnatural and unwanted, so quickly had he become beguiled by the sound of women's voices.

He lay alone for some time, naked and anointed, and felt no other need. The drugs maintained his mind in repose the better for his body to respond to the many ministrations it had endured. Like a delicate time-lock, Berensen's mind waited for Year Day to begin.

It was into this great silence of his thoughts that they finally came, and dressed him, and permitted him to go; and he found that he wore—not the white anonymity

of their uniforms—but the vibrant colours of the day.

To his bony legs they had bequeathed a pair of rich maroon slacks, tapered cunningly so that they moulded his calves with youthful contours. To blend with this they added a dark green shirt with voluminous sleeves and a soft white ruff around his scrawny neck. To complete the ensemble they put smart leather boots upon his feet and wrapped a striking check cummerbund round his waist—and topped it all off by placing a long blonde wig upon his bald pate. Then they smiled approvingly, and indicated that he was free to set off and enjoy himself.

But where?

His flesh was eager and willing to enjoy itself but his senile mind remained unresponsive to the promises of the Day. To have been so long without need for physical volition imposed an awkward handicap upon his limbs, and so he just stood there, shaking a little with indecision, and looked at the people around him. Like him they seemed ill at ease in their festive get-up and seemed unsure what to do. Most of them were centenarians and shared his problems. They gaped uncomfortably at each other, their ages camouflaged or made grotesque by the clothes they wore and the bright make-up that had been plastered on their dumb faces.

Berensen felt foolish, and wished that he could hide somewhere or return to his room until the masquerade was over. But his young body twitched anxiously and would not be dictated to.

And at that precise moment, while they wavered and writhed with indecisions they were loath to communicate to each other, Year Day was officially begun.

There was a triumphant fanfare of music that flooded the Clinic and echoed from the walls. The old people stood stunned for several seconds while certain drugs inside them released their intent with stunning force, and then they were galvanized suddenly into frantic activity. They began to laugh in clumsy, broken sounds, and they jumped about and sang and whistled and stamped the floor and called out nonsensically and pummelled each other like children. Some of them buffeted Berensen in this fashion but he remained rooted to the spot, as yet not participating in what was happening around him.

With one accord the great multi-coloured tide of people boiled suddenly out of the room and mindlessly down the many corridors running every which-way through the Clinic, corridors that boomed and encouraged their passage to the outside world.

Berensen was borne along on this eager tide, his mind as yet unready for what was happening. It seemed for a moment that a corruscating shaft of pure energy had up-thrust itself inside him. On a vague, intellectual level he knew that this was only the product of some time-delayed drug being triggered inside him and that the result was an intense earnestness flooding his system.

He wanted to *belong*; to become part of Year Day and rediscover his youth. His doubts were banished by an overpowering desire to become *involved* in what was happening; he wanted to race after these people and discover their names and unlock the secret joys of their lives.

It could not occur to him while his agile body pursued them that he had long ago forgotten his own name, and

what he had been, and the identity of the faceless lady who haunted the darklands of his dreams and mouthed words he could no longer understand.

The Clinic boiled and bubbled with festivity. Aides and nurses had traded their drab uniforms for bright scarlet dresses and fancy blue coveralls. They were the angels of the day. They would be everywhere and nowhere, always nearby when needed and to direct the activities of the Day, but always discreetly at a distance when unwanted.

The old people boiled their way anxiously down every corridor to the outside world where they would find the forgotten sun, and every one of them was an aged, toothless harlequin and their eyes were fired with drug-induced fervour.

They passed through a hall of mirrors and Berensen, still borne by the tide, found himself pushed aside by more eager companions, who gaped and wondered and admired themselves where they were reflected by the mirrors. When the last of the stragglers had left the room he found his own gaudy shape reflected on the walls of the room, but a shape that was not him as he remembered himself, but as he might have been an age or two ago.

He crossed the room and the image before him mimicked his movements precisely. But there was something that Berensen found unnatural. The glass was more than it seemed: it was a magic mirror, proffering a reflection modified by some psyche-triggered mechanism that showed him the face of a young and handsome man.

He moved forward and ran his hand down one side of the mirror. The young man followed his cautious movement smoothly, and his hand was beautifully shaped and untwisted by time, and the crooked, knowing smile on his face was uncomfortably sardonic.

Himself?

No—a trick. Of course it must be a trick. Something to encourage the muddy egos of less gullible minds. People, happy in their gaudy clothes of the Day, would readily accept this fancified image of themselves as they passed through.

If they wished.

And Berensen—Berensen had a moment of doubt. He stood back from the mirror and studied his false reflection for some time, perhaps hoping that he might catch it out and so be confident of its fabrication. But it remained still, mute and looking him straight in his wavering eye, as though it was waiting for *him* to move out, so that it might dutifully accompany him through numerous glass panels and finally disappear into whatever limbo preserved such mendacity.

He shivered, and was reminded of his years and of his mortality, and he thought how distant now were the sounds of revelry.

But he pressed on, towards the sunlight and the open grounds outside, and the sounds of voices he could no longer do without.

The Clinic was immense, a concentration of drab, featureless buildings grouped around a central park and recreation area. For most of the time this free and well-landscaped area went unused for the majority of the inmates of this institution were unable to exercise

in more than the most fundamental manner. But in scope this area was aesthetically pleasing and offset the severity of the administration and hospitalization buildings, which had been constructed with more thought towards efficiency rather than attractiveness—and for one day of the year it became very functional indeed.

The location of the Clinic went unadvertised, so very discreetly was its business undertaken, away from the restless and unworrying community that made up the outside world. A well-trained staff made it their special preoccupation to ensure that the twilight years of a great number of senior citizens were made as comfortable as possible, and that their lives were agreeably extended and their every small whim catered for. They nursed, nurtured and looked after their charges and their duties hardly ever became more complex than this—except on Year Day. Only for that one day of the year were their abilities severely pressed, for the people were set free to enjoy themselves in one glorious and sustained crescendo of festivities. While it lasted each and every one of them would be employed to the full and there would be no excuse for carelessness. They had many feeble lives to oversee and not one must relapse until his appointed time. That much was the Law of the Clinic.

This was an enlightened age. Since the euthanasia bill had been thrown out of the senate several decades ago a benevolent government had ensured that the care and feeding of the aged people of the world would become something of an industry. So the Clinics slumbered discreetly in isolated corners of the world and conducted their compassionate business away from the guilty eyes of society. This was also a magnanimous age and the responsibility of man towards man hardly needed reiterating.

It was the Chief Administrator's responsibility to see the Day off to a propitious beginning but not to watch over each small detail of the big Board and its thousands of tiny tell-tales. That meticulous duty was reserved for his many trained subordinates.

He saw that everything was in order and running smoothly and then turned to go.

'Wake me when it's over,' he said.

Sleep was sometimes the better of the three oblivions and responsibility sometimes had its drawbacks.

Outside the lawns blazed with colour and a benevolent sun put a successful seal upon the Day. The old people milled and jostled uncertainly and seemed undecided. In the distance, somewhere in the centre of the park, a brass band played stirring music and the many tall trees scattered over the landscape were hung with gaudy banners and faceted baubles which caught and magnified the sunlight. There were striped tents and stalls pitched everywhere but the people merely gawked uncertainly at what they had to offer and waited for some sort of organization to descend upon them. They had become unaccustomed to not thinking for themselves and they respected and needed the authority of their aides to get them going.

Momentarily dazed by the crushing sunlight and the great open spaces put before him, Berensen flopped into a deck-chair by a nearby picnic table and began sipping a glass of some clear beverage that someone in

their thoughtfulness had placed there beside a brimming pitcher.

It tasted like cider. He smiled, with his eyes closed, and was pleased with himself that the word had dropped so readily from his muddled thoughts. He drained the glass and reached forward for the pitcher.

An arm sheathed to the wrist in a bright scarlet cloth moved across his field of vision and a soft hand closed down over his.

'Come on, sir,' she said—and he dare not face her solicitous smile—'we've been waiting for you. Come on . . . over here.'

Waiting for him?

For *him*?

What special place had this day reserved for him?

He could not know that he was the oldest and most respected inmate of this shuttered part of the world, and to him fell the honour to lead the Day.

So in the centre of the grounds, on a rich and royal dais, they solemnly made him King. He had a golden throne to sit upon and saw a thousand senile faces bow obedience in the manner of a ritual ripped from the pages of an ancient fairy tale, and croakily announced the beginning of the festivities.

They played organized games and made up riddles and prancing old crones serenaded him with their cracked but happy voices, and the men did contest for the favours of these servile wenches, and did disport themselves as knights and jostled valiantly—and clumsily, for that was the manner of the Day—on horseback across the sun-drenched landscape. The air shook to the slightly mad activity and the triumphant blare of the brasses marked each formidable achievement. It was all very jolly. And when they had tired of this they chased a multitude of balls across the grass, and threw them high in the air where the sunlight blazed against them; and they caught them, and hit them with sticks of all shapes and sizes; and pushed them through hoops; and kicked them with varying degrees of success. And as the day wore on more competitive sports were introduced. The old people ran and jumped and wrestled with each other and the sweat stood out brightly on their faces and the drugs saw to it that they did not push themselves unnecessarily. They became intoxicated with their ability to perform feats of strength and endurance which would have weakened much younger men.

There was an abundance of food and drink everywhere; the bright-coloured stalls clamoured for their attention in between bouts and games. Stomachs which had become accustomed to the thick, syrupy nourishment provided by the Clinic now found delight with food so rich and edible that eating once more became an adventure. And their digestions did not protest—the drugs saw to that. And they drank copious quantities of a sparkling, refreshing drink which the stalls pumped out in seemingly inexhaustible quantities.

But some part of Berensen remained aloof from all this. It was as though he had been sent unfinished into this foolish world, as though they had rejuvenated his body but kept some vital part of his mind under wraps. Perhaps they wanted him as a figurehead, as King, in which case he must cogitate in a somewhat distant manner. But the drugs made sure that such cogi-

tation was of a harmless nature and that he did not direct his thoughts willy-nilly to the puzzling nature of his past.

The past held no currency for the noisy crowd about him. Their purpose was pure pleasure and the pursuit of the many enjoyments of the day. Only Berensen sat on his throne, and was conveyed from time to time by sedan chair, through the many chaotic manifestations of the Day. But he did not blame the drugs entirely. It seemed possible that the dark lady of his dreams had set her hand upon his mind. It would be like her to do so for she always seemed to know him better than he did himself. She was absent now, as she always was when his mind focused on the business of reality. It was only in the brightlands of his dreams that she came to him and spoke with her unmeaning, ambiguous lips.

Through all this activity the scarlet figures of the nurses and the blue shapes of the aides moved unobtrusively. Whenever a body succumbed blissfully to the grass they were shaken awake and moved on about their pleasures. The people must not stop, they must not squander for a moment the bounty of this Day, and these ministering angels saw that the pace was maintained throughout the Day.

Berensen sat uninvolved upon his throne and was attended by his servile court.

Was there to be no more than this? Had they summoned him from his dreams for nothing more purposeful than to set a royal seal upon the Day?

And so he sat, and brooded, while his subjects roistered through the remainder of the Day.

Towards evening the sparkling drink was replaced by wine and enjoyment turned to carouse while the sun stained the landscape with the terminal colours of the day. Something ugly took command of the old people and fights began to break out here and there but were soon brought under control by the dutiful aides. And they smiled even as they separated the panting oldsters for they knew that even this was a necessary part of the Day. For what was youth if not a struggling, sinful property that must find itself whatever way it can?

When the darkness was complete great bonfires were lit upon the grass and the people danced and jigged their way around them and spilled more wine than they drank.

On the Big Board high in the main administration building the tell-tales flickered erratically, and were watched by intent young men whose job it was to direct aides to any of the old people who had sudden palpitations. Such was the nature of their dutiful scrutiny of the Board.

Some time later Berensen noticed that the music had begun. Softly at first, no more than a few persistent beats on some distant, unseen drum, but it had soon attained a volume that commanded the subliminal attention of everyone around him.

From some deep and half-forgotten cache of memory Berensen recognized the basic rhythm of the piece; it was primitive, but the sort of beat that got people's feet moving.

Out there, in the darkness disturbed by the tumultuous bonfires, they had begun to respond, stabbing out drunken measures that somehow would never coincide with the muted beat of the distant drums.

Berensen felt his feet tapping insistently. He stood up and the few remaining attendants of his throne backed away, and dropped over the side of the dais to find more wine and victuals.

A distant spotlight cut across the crowd and painted a dark picture of the festivities. Not everyone danced to the compulsive music. Some rolled and grovelled on the ground in untidy little groups, striving in some obscure and mindless way to represent the orgies of their youth. Drunken hags threw themselves upon men and clawed at their bodies seeking something obscene. He could smell the thick, sweet smell of wine everywhere and closed his ears to the sour voices that stained the night air. Only the music mattered.

He moved, and something inside him was released. He stood stock-still, his eyes wide, his heart hammering, and realized that the music had changed abruptly. A fresh more insistent beat was hammering the night air; drums reinforced by other familiar instruments.

His body shook and would not contain what he had found: it was the dark lady of his dreams. She had come to him again and this time there was purpose in her presence.

He began to move, to describe some meaningful movement with his feet upon the polished wooden floor of the dais.

The King danced, and the spotlight focused upon the grotesque figure stumbling across the dais, and for some reason every pair of wine-bleared eyes on the grass turned to face him, their features made wild and colourful by the suddenly flaring bonfires.

He danced, and found a meaning for his feet. The clumsiness disappeared and he remembered who he was. His name was Nicholas Berensen; he was one hundred and four years old and tonight he would dance again.

His body remembered where his mind did not, and so his feet moved faster than his thoughts because they understood more directly the nature of the throbbing music that ate up the landscape. He danced, leaped, performed terrifying pirouettes and did not want to stop while the music carried him on.

His name was Nicholas Berensen, and he had danced for kings and princes when there had been such people; and then he had grown old and his art became a burden for it had lost its youth.

But not tonight. Tonight he danced as he had never danced before, dancing Reigger's *Chiaroscuro* with an ardour youth had never summoned. And his dark lady smiled and whispered and was understood at last: *this is what you are; this is what you had forgotten. Take it; use it. There is none better . . .*

And he did. And so it was. And there was nothing other than the music and his own flying feet.

The music softened in preparation for the orgiastic coda. The rhythm became broader and more amenable to clumsy feet. Slowly the drunken mob around the dais began to beat out the time of the *Chiaroscuro* with their feeble feet. The music had at last possessed them.

And he led them. Sweeping and gliding now like a bird caged in an old man's body, now striking and elemental as he hammered out the fierce tattoo of the finale on the bare wooden floor. Dancing as he had never danced before he felt that he had mastered for all time the dark lady of his dreams, and even while his

feet hammered at the music he found time to smile. And he leaped and whirled around his golden throne and the spotlight held and followed his movements with a patient persistence others found gratifying, and the mob around him began to break up like some coarse unthinking animal.

They leapt and danced and tried to emulate his mighty movements and wept and shouted and shrieked, so powerfully had the moment taken command of their senses. Wilder and wilder grew the coda and the drunken rabble urged themselves to even more impossible gestures. On the dais Berensen danced blindly for an audience of himself and one more: for his Muse, the dark lady of his dreams.

And one by one the people began to fall, like slim sheaves of wheat blown down by a wild wind, and the crushed wet grass took them in. And they died, one by one, as their lives were snuffed out; died because the drugs had betrayed them and had departed, leaving behind only their true and feeble bodies to accommodate the excesses of this Day.

Died.

Died from their excesses, of drink and rich food and the promises of the night, of a yearning and exultation quite beyond them.

Died.

Died at the end of a long and joyous Day crammed with more living than they had ever done before.

Died.

Because death was the natural order of all things and such death was necessary.

Dead because there were more—and more again—to take their place. The world was overfilled and howling for release from an old age that hobbled and whimpered and constantly reminded them of their mortality.

And still he danced. While they fell about him and made aimless, whimpering circles in the cruel light of the bonfires; danced while they died and grew strength from their dying. His blond wig had fallen and the spotlight now gleamed impatiently upon his polished skull. The masquerade was over. The drugs had worked out of their bodies, and out of his, and still he danced, danced while they died like flies around his golden throne.

His gaudy clothes were drenched with sweat and his eyes burned fiercely upon some distant, private vision. His heart hammered unsteadily but the music swept on to its climax. And at that triumphal moment he reached for his Muse and in one incandescent moment he found her, and embraced her, and when at last the cruel fist closed down upon his heart it found him smiling. And death could not erase that smile but only etched it deeper, and with pain, upon that ancient face.

He fell with the last lingering notes of the music; fell slowly, his arms folded about him like some damaged bird, and with the light of discovery dying in his wild eyes. The spotlight caught and embalmed his grotesque body where it lay in a huddled posture at the very foot of the golden throne.

Outside, beyond the gravel pool of light, only a few mindless things wandered and whimpered aimlessly among the dead and the dying.

Some of the younger ones would survive. They were relative newcomers to the Clinic and, like Berensen be-

fore them, they would live to enjoy—but not remember—many more Days before the annual thinning of the inmates claimed their useless lives.

The spotlight held this tableau for several long minutes, and then winked out. Something unseen extinguished the bonfires and left only the lost, animal cries to disfigure the night.

In the morning the Chief was woken and shown the figures. He was impressed. Even struggling out of his drug-induced sleep he was impressed. It had been a very good Day indeed. Now there was ample space for next week's fresh influx of inmates and perhaps the political pressures would lessen. Something had to be done to siphon off this embarrassing accumulation of old age that the welfare state had made inevitable. But some useless residue of conscience remained.

He sniffed, dressed, and went out to survey the grounds. On this cold, sunless morning the grass was no longer

friendly. Already most of the dead had been removed and while the vans hurried about scooping industriously at what remained a few dumb, crying things crawled out of their way.

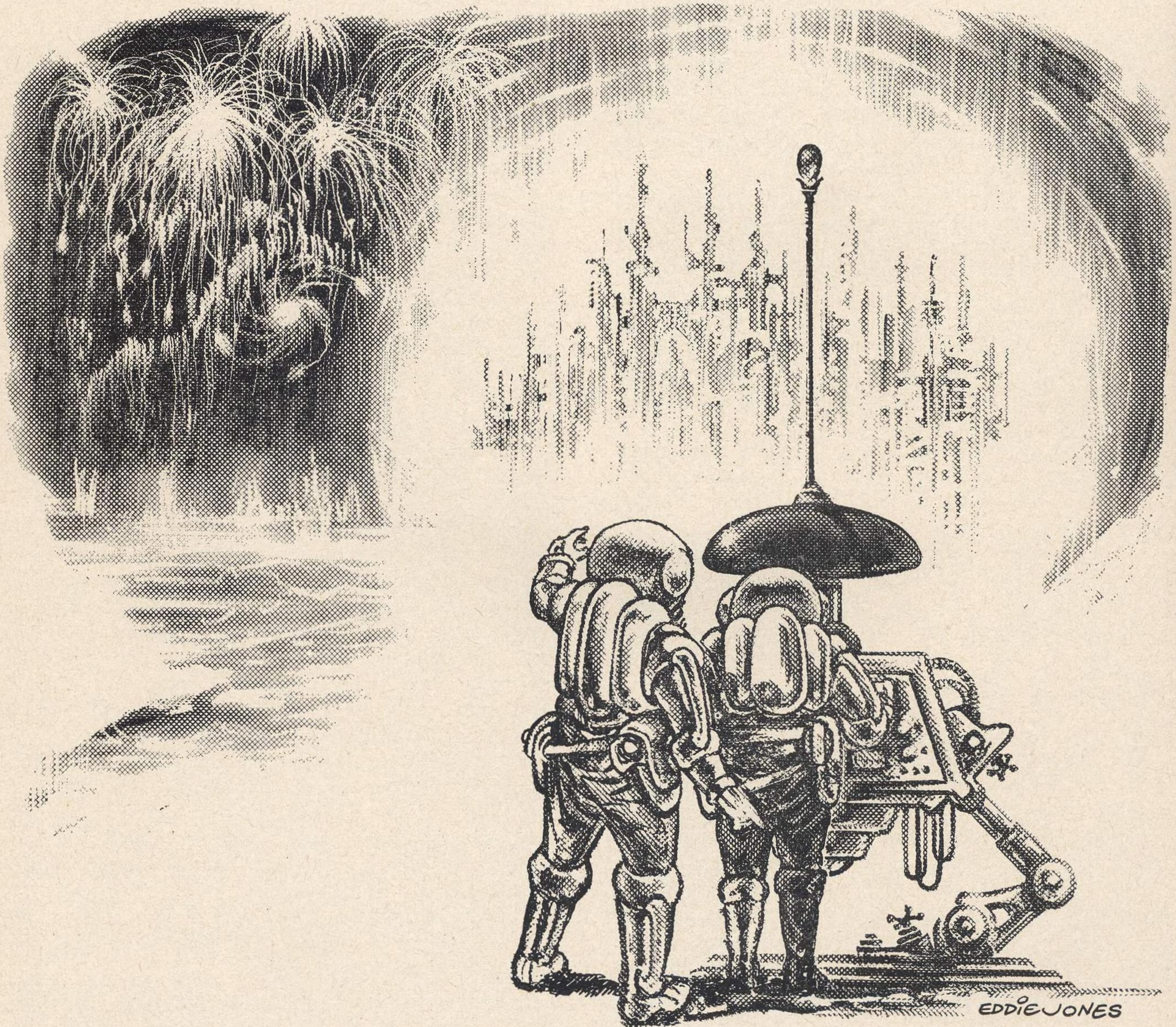
'Put them away,' he commanded.

And they did.

Last of all they lifted Berensen from where he had fallen on the dais. They straightened out his limbs with a certain reverence for they were, after all, compassionate creatures, and bore him from the grounds with all the ceremony due to an artist.

They wondered, briefly, at the smile that had died so sweetly upon his face. They could not know that Berensen had found at last the dark lady of his dreams and that this much, at least, had been worthwhile.

Underfoot the land seemed to stir restlessly, as though uncomfortable with the burden these men had placed upon it, and after a while it settled down to slumber and to forget and to prepare itself for Year Day.



MINOS

maurice whitta

The men on board the spaceship 'Lancelot' were hardy pioneers, prepared to do battle with whatever perils the world of Amor VII had to offer. But the colonists faced a totally unexpected enemy, which was altogether more than they'd bargained for!



Eddie

'All the women are dead!'

Screeching, Perry began to tremble, and Bors Wendl was glad to steady the man's shoulder with a grip that held down his own terror too. Desperately calm, he turned his blue eyes to Needle Champin. 'Go on, Needle.'

'There are no women, Captain,' Needle repeated. 'The crash killed a hundred women and forty-one men. We've fifty-nine survivors out of two hundred: fifty-nine men.' He moved his feet to brace himself on the Lancelot's tilted bridge. Even the rosy daylight of Amor VII left him pale.

Bors stood firm as though he had lived his thirty years in his three-months-new captain's uniform. Tim, his cobber, a strip of golden fur on his shoulder, fidgeted, sensing the strain in its master. He made his hope into dogma: 'Perry, there'll be enough women from the Guinevere to get the colony started.'

'If there are any,' Perry moaned. 'They must have crashed too. How do we know any of them are alive?'

Bors froze with fear for Barbara on the sister ship, alive or dead, where, and how far away? The cobber yelped.

'We'll know as soon as the radio's fixed,' Bors said. 'Let's see how it's going.' He steered Perry down the corridor.

In the communications room technicians worked in chaos. The communications had been ruined when last night's storm caught the ships in their landing curves and smashed them down on Amor VII. As Bors steered Perry in, one of the technicians looked up from a patched circuit. 'This is the last bit, Captain.'

'Good,' Bors nodded. As soon as they got in touch with Guinevere, he would ask for a roll-call. That way he'd learn if Barbara was . . . well. Certainly he couldn't just ask for her. The women were supposed to be strangers to the men on the Lancelot until the computer paired everyone after landing. The future of the colony depended on the marriages, and the computer was programmed to bring together couples whose marriages were likely to succeed. Bors couldn't tell two ships that in defiance of the law he had plans for a particular girl; or that he had arranged for her to be included in the expedition he commanded . . .

'How long before the check ship gets here?' asked Perry, calmer, and starting to think out consequences.

'Fifty years,' Bors told him. For a moment Barbara faded. If there were no women, his fifty-nine men would live out their lives fruitlessly on Amor's fertile soil, tilling land they couldn't populate, dying without heirs . . .

'Testing,' a technician said, and touched the send switch.

Five mouths breathed out relief as the monitor tape showed the call going out. GUINEVERE ANSWER LANCELOT? GUINEVERE ANSWER . . .

'We have you, Lancelot,' the speaker said.

Over the gasps of the others, Bors asked, 'What shape are you in?'

'Hundred and nine dead. Engines intact, but all our fuel's lost. Life plant and defences are intact.'

'How many women?'

The room stopped breathing until the speaker offered 'All survivors except three are women . . .' and stopped.

Relief howled bedlam. 'It's incredible,' Needle said. 'The probability is only about . . .', but Bors lost the rest in his own calculations. One hundred and nine dead out of the two hundred Guinevere had carried left ninety-one, three of them men. So eighty-eight of the hundred women lived. Barbara had nine chances in ten of being alive . . .

The urge to ask for her by name was so strong that he sweated and trembled keeping it back.

'We're in bad shape,' Perry broke in, 'We've lost all our women . . .'

In her sexless, mechanical voice, Guinevere gasped.

'We have no serviceable aircraft or trucks,' Bors said. 'Can you get to us?'

'Yes, Lancelot. We have transport. We'll . . .' The voice stopped.

'Get it back!'

A technician pointed to green tell-tale lights. 'We're working. They've stopped sending.'

Perry moaned.

'It's just that their radio's failed,' said Bors, holding down fear. 'Where are they?'

'Twenty-four point four two kilometres, bearing two three oh.'

'We can make it on foot in three hours,' burst out Needle.

'They can make it by air in five minutes,' Bors said. 'You know what the old bull said to the young bull.'

Needle grinned. 'I s'pose so.'

'Captain Wendl!' A big colonist loomed through the door, filling the room to the brim. 'There's an aircraft coming.'

'They must have taken off straight away,' Perry said. 'Let's go.'

'Too soon,' Needle murmured. 'I make it only three minutes since they started talking.'

'Let's look, Needle.'

Outside the breach in the hull, the few colonists who were not afraid of the open air had broken off burying bodies and salvaging spilled cargo. They watched the southern sky. A dark bird hung low.

'That's no aircraft,' said Needle.

'What are they doing?' blurted Perry.

'Just taking care,' Bors said. He raised his voice to reach the staring colonists. 'Gentlemen, the thing up there is a watchbird. It's part of the defences of our sister ship. They've put it out, and probably others too, to keep an eye on things. Naturally, there's no danger on a well-surveyed world like this. But ladies like to make sure.'

They were all facing him now, so he went on. 'You'll be glad to know that most of the survivors there are women: eighty-eight of them.'

He waited until the tired men had finished shouting a relief which he didn't feel; Barbara's chances were still only eighty-eight in a hundred. 'They have vehicles and should reach us soon. Meanwhile, let's get on clearing up.'

Minutes later, seated in the common room, he told the story to men who huddled in the safety of purified air, away from the open space and strange breaths of the world of Amor.

They cheered hysterically. In the tunnels of Earth,

where bread, circuses, and work, were rationed, only sex was free. These men had learned to need women almost as badly as they needed air conditioning.

'They're the best,' said Needle. 'These are the pioneers, the few in every million who have enough spark to answer the ads.'

'Freedom, adventure, lots of room,' quoted Bors. 'Find romance and excitement in the stars.' Then he remembered the themes for women: 'Be a mother on a new world. There's room for babies out there.' Tim moaned in despair for Barbara.

At nightfall no one had come from Guinevere, and no calling could draw an answer.

In his cabin, Bors finished Salter exercises, and stood up from his chair with his agony for Barbara quietened. He had lowered his anxiety and got back control of his thoughts so she would not interrupt him as he tried to do his duty.

'Captain!' the intercom barked. 'C deck. We've some madmen here trying to get out through the breach.'

'Coming. You stay here, Tim.' The little cobbler settled back to drowsing on the bunk.

On C deck Needle and a guard held at gun point two colonists in trek kit. 'We know what we're doing,' the smaller of the two said, before Bors could speak. 'There's something wrong at Guinevere or they would have reached us by now. Tomorrow might be too late.'

'I want to go, too,' said Bors, 'but there's twenty-four kilometres of strange country between us; really strange, not just unfamiliar. It's supposed to be safe, but we can't be sure, and I won't risk the few lives we have trying to cross it in the dark. There's no reason to think anything's wrong with Guinevere. Her radio's broken down, but she's in better shape than we are, and her defences are working. We'll go at first light.'

He hoped neither of them would ask why no truck or aircraft had come.

'Captain,' Needle said. 'We might also tell these heroes that the watchbirds would collect a pair of men as soon as they got within eight kilometres of her.'

Bors frowned.

'We got our watchbird control circuit fixed a little while ago and questioned them. Accidentally or not, they've been set to attack any number of men more than one. I was on my way to tell you when I ran into these.'

'Did you try to control the birds?'

'Guinevere has them. We can't do anything unless she lets them go.'

Bors saw the breach in the hull suddenly fill with a huge body. 'Get back!'

Needle jumped aside as a long horn, with the weight of a big head behind it, punched through the guard's chest.

Needle fired and missed, fired again and knocked blood and flesh from the huge intruder. Both colonists were firing. Bors ran in under a sweeping horn, felt hot breath, grabbed the guard's gun and fired a shot up into the beast's belly. The bulk surged—he leaped back, and it rolled dead.

Another beast shoved past it, bellowing at the fire which met it.

Bors saw the dead guard smashed by a wild shot, and a third beast looming in the breach. He fired, and it

sagged from sight.

A ricochet yipped past his head, and the ship's alarm yelled wildly. More men clattered into the compartment, but there were no more beasts.

The two lying dead on the deck were demon bulls, each as big as four men. Tiger claws and teeth helped their horns and weight.

'According to survey, there's no dangerous life on this planet,' said Needle.

'Maybe they weren't here when we arrived,' said Bors. 'I wish that biologist girl had survived.'

'Yes?'

'These look too much like bulls. Earth bulls. Or what a life plant could produce from bull germ if something went wrong.'

'Hell!' screeched Perry from the door. 'Guinevere's plant must have been messed up in the crash. That's why the women didn't get to us! These things must've wiped them out!'

'Shut up, Perry! A few bulls don't wipe out armed people, women or not.' But his heart tightened in fear for Barbara, and his face stiffened at the agony in the faces around.

He found the right thing to say. 'We don't know what happened, but there's no reason to think it's bad. We'll find out first thing in the morning. Obviously it'd be suicide to go to Guinevere in the dark. Needle, I think we'll have half-a-dozen guards here. See they have grenades.'

In the morning, thirty or so fit men packed the common room listening to Bors. 'Gentlemen, we're going to Guinevere to see what's up and get those watchbirds called in. Because of them, only one man can go at a time. Because we have no vehicles, he'll have to go through the bush on foot.'

Faces paled, twisted, gasped. Glancing over them in sick scorn, Bors saw how many of these coneys from the warrens of overbuilt Earth had never seen open sky, let alone bush.

'Who's had outdoor experience?'

Nine.

'You are all volunteers? Line up. Needle has some straws.'

Duncan, the nasty little cock sparrow who drew the short straw, smirked. 'I'll save some of the girls for you mugs.'

'Y're wasting y'time,' said a man called Leather. 'They're all bloody Simonettes anyway.'

'What are they?' murmured a Martian voice.

'Simonettes: ain't y'got 'em on Mars? They're all over Earth. Sheilas what won't have men. They 'ave kids parthen-o-genetically . . .'

A condescending voice explained: 'They use Simon's technique to conceive without insemination. It's not so much that they object to men: they don't like the ban on having children on Earth . . .'

'That's right. But most of them are anti-man too; they reckon the only good husband's a henpecked one.'

'Gee,' murmured the Martian.

'Y'd better watch out,' grated Leather, 'or one'll marry yer.'

Salter exercises or no, Bors was suddenly back on Primavera, four years ago, at that party where Barbara

had talked about Tim. And forgotten what she was saying . . . 'I kissed her where she stood,' he whispered to the cobbler.

Chaff flew round Duncan's smirk until Bors rescued him for briefing. Noble in the silver of a space suit worn for armour and hung with weapons, he listened.

'Set your radio on send,' Needle said at last. 'Leave it on and talk to us all the way. The radar's smashed, so this is the only way we can keep track of you. Give us a running account as you go. What you tell us will help the next man.'

'Can't I fly in this thing?'

'They're designed to fly in space,' Needle told him. 'That doesn't need much power. They don't push hard enough or long enough to fly in air. If you need to, you can make a few long jumps, and that'll just about use up the fuel. Keep it for an emergency.'

'We'll be sending a man after you every half hour,' Bors broke in. 'That'll space you far enough apart to keep the watchbirds quiet. Good luck.'

Outside the breach, Bors, Needle, and the eight others who dared to stand under the open sky, watched him go. The little knight in armour walked steadily towards the horizon.

'Hurry up, squirt,' someone called. 'If they're as hot as we are, they'll be making their own men by now.'

'Their plant won't produce men,' someone scoffed.

'It'll produce better than we're sending.'

Bors went quickly into the ship. One hand muffled his cobbler's sickly moaning.

Duncan's comments, piped through the intercom, went steadily on while Bors and Needle looked at the bodies of last night's beasts.

'All these colonists are supposed to be stuffed with every useful skill, aren't they?' Bors complained. 'Surely someone knows enough histology or anatomy to tell us if these are Earth stock.'

'Nobody seems to. They certainly look like adapted bulls.'

'C'mon, we'll open one up. We should be able to spot anything grossly different.'

Needle shrugged, went out, returned with two cook's knives.

'I think we'll make one across the belly and one straight up,' Bors said.

'Yep.'

From the wall, Duncan's voice said, 'Smooth going. Nothing but birds and small animals.'

With fingers hooked over the slimy edge of a flap, Bors struggled to pull the skin back, while on the other side Needle balanced his efforts. The stubborn skin peeled back at last, and they began to hack through the revealed muscles.

'Steady going,' said Duncan.

With more hacking and sweating, layers of tissue reluctantly parted and opened.

'Looks ordinary enough,' Needle said across the slimy huddle of organs, grey, pink, purple.

'Well, let's see. One heart, two lungs, two kidneys. Stomach, intestines. That's the end of my knowledge. I can't see anything wrong with the general scheme.'

'It could still be a native,' said Needle. 'We might have missed a dozen details that make it different from

Earth stock.'

'Yes. Just the same, I can't imagine the original survey missing animals as big and plentiful as these. And they're too much like bulls for it to be a coincidence.'

'Except for the claws instead of hoofs, and being so damn big, they are bulls, detail for detail.'

'Mm. Well, let's get clean, Needle. It's time for the boys to draw straws again.'

The second man went out as dourly as now-distant Duncan.

Restless among excited men who listened to reports of steady going from both knights errant, Bors patrolled the broken ship with Needle.

Under the rosy light of day, or huddled inside, the colonists talked lust, girls, the future, girls . . .

'No one thinks the women are dead,' said Needle.

Thinking in agony of Barbara, Bors did.

They were checking Perry, snoring full of trunk in his bunk, when Duncan's voice turned to a grunt in mid-word, and stopped for good. A moment later even the hum of his carrier wave died.

All smiles ceased. When Bors went among the men again, the flushed faces only muttered.

Things got better. The second man was moving faster than Duncan had, and the ship yelled when he shot down a bull beast which rushed him as he was wading a stream. By the time the seven men filed past Needle to draw straws for the third sortie, they were joking again.

'Don't bother about straws, send us in order of eagerness.'

'Yeah, send Schulzie, he's the randiest.'

The third man went out.

No message or aircraft came from Guinevere. The watchbirds hovered.

The second man called back when he found the wreckage of Duncan, and was killed soon after, perhaps by the same beast.

'We aren't going to make it this way,' said Bors. 'I'll call back the third one.'

'If we can. He's gone silent too.'

When Bors called, whimpering answered him.

'It's too big, it's too open, it's too bright.'

'Pull yourself together! You've had outside experience.'

'Only repairing the roof. It used to be smooth to stand on, and we had suits, and safety lines, and kept in pairs. It's all rough. I keep falling over. There aren't any colour tracks to follow . . .' They heard the sobbing of a lost child.

'Citizens, listen!' Deliberately loud, Bors called the words which introduced public announcements in the tunnels of Earth. The sobbing stopped. 'Get up and come back. You'll be safe here with us. Get up and come back. Turn round till your compass reads fifty. Got it? Now walk straight ahead.'

Needle was struggling into a suit. 'I'll go and lead him back.'

'I can't get up. I fall down every time . . .' The child went on sobbing. A brave citizen had found adventure and romance in the stars.

The child screamed through sudden scrapings and animal snarls. The radio died.

Bors forced himself back to work. 'How many sets of

gear are left?’

‘Three, plus some the boys are repairing,’ Needle gulped. ‘We’ll have to see someone with real experience gets the next set.’

‘We’ll have to do more than that. What about increasing the flying power?’

‘Try.’

‘And see if we can knock down that watchbird.’

Needle shrugged. ‘In a few days maybe. There’s too little power and too little left of our control circuits to take it over. All our missiles are damaged.’

‘Get on to the suits.’

The glowing noon of Amor warmed the dull wreck of the Lancelot.

In his cabin, Bors tried to write up the log. ‘Barbara, Barbara, I don’t even think she’s alive,’ he told Tim. The golden cobber whimpered and shuffled as its empathy picked up his pain.

‘Have to sit here doing nothing, while these fellers get killed.’

Tim moaned.

‘I didn’t sign on to send out suicides every hour on the hour. I signed on to command a ship, command a colony. Not sit in the middle of this mess.’

He stabbed the desk with his pen, and began to pace the cabin. ‘If these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it . . . surely an armed man ought to get past those bulls.’

He soothed Tim with a hand . . . The other touched the intercom switch. ‘Ask Needle to come to my cabin.’

‘Barbara, Barbara, Barbara.’ He slapped the bulkhead while the cobber growled. ‘While these fools muck around . . . Self done is well done.’

‘We’ll stop picking straws,’ he told Needle. ‘I’m going next.’

‘Can’t do it Bors. You’re the commander. You’ve got to see us through this. It’s not your job to go out scrapping.’

‘It’s not my job to wave goodbye while these blokes go off to be killed, Needle.’

‘But we’re all taking our chance. You’ll get your turn.’

‘As you say, I’m the commander. It’s my turn now because I say so. I’m one of the few trained fighters on this ship, and I’m not sitting back while these damned clerks and farmers do the fighting.’

‘Bors, you’re not that good . . . and we need you. Let’s stop sending people for a while until we’re sure they’ll get there. I’ve got a crew rigging extra power units on the suits so we can fly right up to the eight kilometre mark and still have reserve power. They won’t have to start walking until they get in range of the watchbirds. Means they’ll only have to fight over the last eight.’

‘Good. See there’s one ready for me in ten minutes.’

‘Bors you can’t!’

‘I can’t sit!’ Bors shouted in a rage so unusual that Needle was merely surprised. ‘I’m away, Needle. I’m outward bound. I’m getting some action.’

Needle went out. Bors stroked the tense cobber vigorously. Tim squealed enthusiasm.

‘It’s all right Tim. We’re getting out of here and going to Barbara.’ He thought he had finished speaking, but heard his voice go on; ‘I’m running out.’

Ten metres up, he flew steadily north-east. If he flew higher he would see Guinevere, but climbing wasted power, and took time.

The sun was low, reluctantly rouging the face of the land. Twice it showed him beasts stirring, and he shot the second as it ran across a meadow.

‘Quiet, Tim,’ he told the jubilant cobber, squirming between his chest and the suit. He was not going to turn aside, but he would have liked to examine the last beast. It was strangely shaped, as much man as bull, a Minotaur.

‘The plant must have been programmed again,’ he told Needle.

‘Well, it means they’re alive! They’ve been fiddling with it, trying to turn it off.’

The shadows on the ground were long. He flew on towards Barbara.

Tim moaned. The two watchbirds were almost above now and his suit clock told him he was within eight kilometres of Guinevere. He nuzzled the send switch and told Needle, ‘I’m going down now. There’s a bald ridge running north from here that should be open going. I’ll trek along that till it runs out.’

‘Good luck, Bors.’

He dropped down while Tim moaned more loudly. Craning up he saw the watchbirds still flying on their beats.

The ridge had no cover for anything the size of the minotaurs, and he slogged ahead fast. He began to sweat and itch in his suit, even though it floated its own weight, and circulated cool air around him. Suits were uncomfortable necessities. As always the little cobber shared his discomfort, moaning and scrabbling.

‘All right Tim, this is easy,’ he soothed, ‘Wait until . . .’

Bull men came over the end of the ridge straight ahead, and others either side. His carbine shuddered and spat, bull figures toppled. He swung and shot another that came from behind, so close that it brushed him as it fell past.

He circled warily, shaking and sweating for a full minute before he spoke to Needle.

‘We’ll have to watch this ridge. Top is clear, but they hang around just below. I’ve finished five.’ Tim trumpeted as though he had slain these dragons himself.

‘You’re all right?’

‘Just frightened. Needle, I’ll stay on send from here on; there isn’t going to be time to switch this thing on and off. I’m going down the end of the ridge now.’

‘O.K. Bors, but listen. One: have you reloaded?’

Bors slid the used magazine back into his bandolier, slipped in a fresh one.

‘I have now. Thanks.’

‘Two: we’ve had a good look at watchbird specs. You can afford to fly for about five seconds at a time without much chance of their registering you. Keep your pack on Ready. If needs be you can hurdle one of the bulls.’

Bors switched his pack to Ready. ‘Done. Thanks again. Anything else?’

‘That’s all. I’ll be listening.’

No more minotaurs came. Below and beyond he saw rolling land covered in thin bush and trees.

He couldn’t see the nearer ground because the sharp fall of the end of the ridge hid it. On impulse he stopped, set a grenade, and flung it over the brow. He

heard something like a howl just before it exploded, and went on down confidently.

'The slope's getting steeper, Needle, I'm going to fly.'
'Roger.'

He counted five seconds and landed in the mud of talus water at the foot of the ridge.

'Watchbirds are staying on their beats. You were right, Needle.'

'Okay. Be careful.'

'There's scrub up ahead with plenty of cover. I'm going to bomb the big clumps before I get to them. You ought to issue more grenades to the next man.'

'We won't need to. You'll get through.'

He walked cautiously down a slight slope. Matching his descent, the opposite horizon climbed up towards the low sun.

'There's a little stream at the bottom,' he told Needle. 'It looks easy enough to cross, if I'm not tackled.'

'Use your belt.'

'Yeah.'

As he touched down on the far bank, bushes ahead threw two bullmen at him. He blasted carbine fire, dropped them both, saw one rise and run screaming away.

'Two of them jumped me Needle. One got off wounded. They time their attacks well.'

'Are you all right?'

'Fine.'

He grenaded a stand of saplings as he trudged on up the slope from the stream, and reached the top without more attacks.

'There's a fairly open grass slope ahead, Needle. Down then up. Not much cover. I'm checking equipment. Suit's working. Flight pack has another five kilometres. Six full magazines for the carbine, two part-used. Only four grenades. Ten pistol magazines. I'm pretty tired but in good shape. Tim's asleep. Starting down now.'

'You're going fine, Bors. We think you're within four kilos of Guinevere. You may be able to see it from the next high ground.'

'I'll have the sun in my eyes.' He ploughed on. 'The grass isn't as good as it looks, Needle. It's getting waist high, probably taller at the bottom.' Unwilling to use more grenades he stopped and carefully emptied one of his magazines down the slope, searching ahead with short bursts close to the ground. Before he walked on he changed the empty magazine for a full one.

At the bottom he was looking over grass almost as high as his shoulders. 'I'm going to fly, Needle.' As he rose above the grass a horned and clawed monster rushed from three metres, hooked him down sideways. Its bulk pinned his legs, a claw struck at his shoulder. His carbine was gone, his pistol was under him. He dragged out his machete and chinned his belt to full lift. It dragged him through the grass while the bull man bellowed and clawed.

Awkwardly he drove the machete at its muzzle, saw blood and ripped flesh, stabbed again, tried to swing, stabbed again at a cow eye. The thing reared back and he jabbed at its throat.

He was suddenly free and high, rising fast above the thrashing minotaur. He remembered the watchbirds and dropped down towards the top of the slope whose short grass could hide no bull men.

'Bors? Bors?' dinned at his ears as he slumped on the ground. 'Bors!!'

'Needle, uh, uh. All right. It's all right.'

'What's up. We heard you yelling.'

'Uh, uh, uh! Phew! One of them jumped me. My leg's a, uh, uh, my leg's a mess.'

'Take it easy. Bors? Fly back! Fast and low. You're no good with a bad leg.'

'Needle, play it cool. Get this: the watchbirds haven't moved.'

'You've been flying?'

'Trying, with that damn brute hooked into me. I must have been twenty seconds. They didn't move.'

'Wait a minute, Bors.'

Waiting, Bors looked down at his leg. Blood seeped from the ripped fabric of the suit. The suit should have clamped around his thigh to stop the bleeding, but the claws must have disabled the sphincter. He had nothing to use for a tourniquet.

'Bors, the birds couldn't have been armed. There's no other way about it. Whoever sent them out didn't know enough to arm them.' Needle's voice was jubilant. 'Come on in. We'll fly out in a body at dawn.'

'Needle, I'm losing blood. Going to try and get my suit off.'

'Don't! Hold on. We'll come for you.'

Pain in his hip and knee sickened him as he stood up. The leg bore his weight, but he wasn't going to put up with the contortions of getting off the suit.

Something was pressing uncomfortably against his chest. Looking down past his chin he saw Tim crushed.

He still held his machete. The carbine was gone, and his grenades had been clawed away. Tiredly he pulled out his pistol. It looked all right, but he couldn't quite bother firing it to make sure.

He fired anyway as another bull came out of the grass thirty metres away on the far slope, fired desperately and went down under its bulk. In a moment its weight left him as it toppled over and fell on its back. He was too tired to stand up again and sat for a moment looking at the bullet holes in its chest and belly.

He twisted suddenly and peered against the low sunbeams.

'Needle, I can see Guinevere.'

No one answered, but he could still see the globe that was his goal. Not so far away, its top curved dark pink against the disc of the sun Amor.

'Hope they came soon.' He was too tired even to raise his pistol when the minotaur beside him moved and turned dull eyes on him. It was dying anyway—it couldn't hurt him.

'I must be dying too,' he murmured . . . 'No, just doped from losing blood. Barbara . . . dying for you. Find romance and excitement in the stars; amour under Amor . . .'

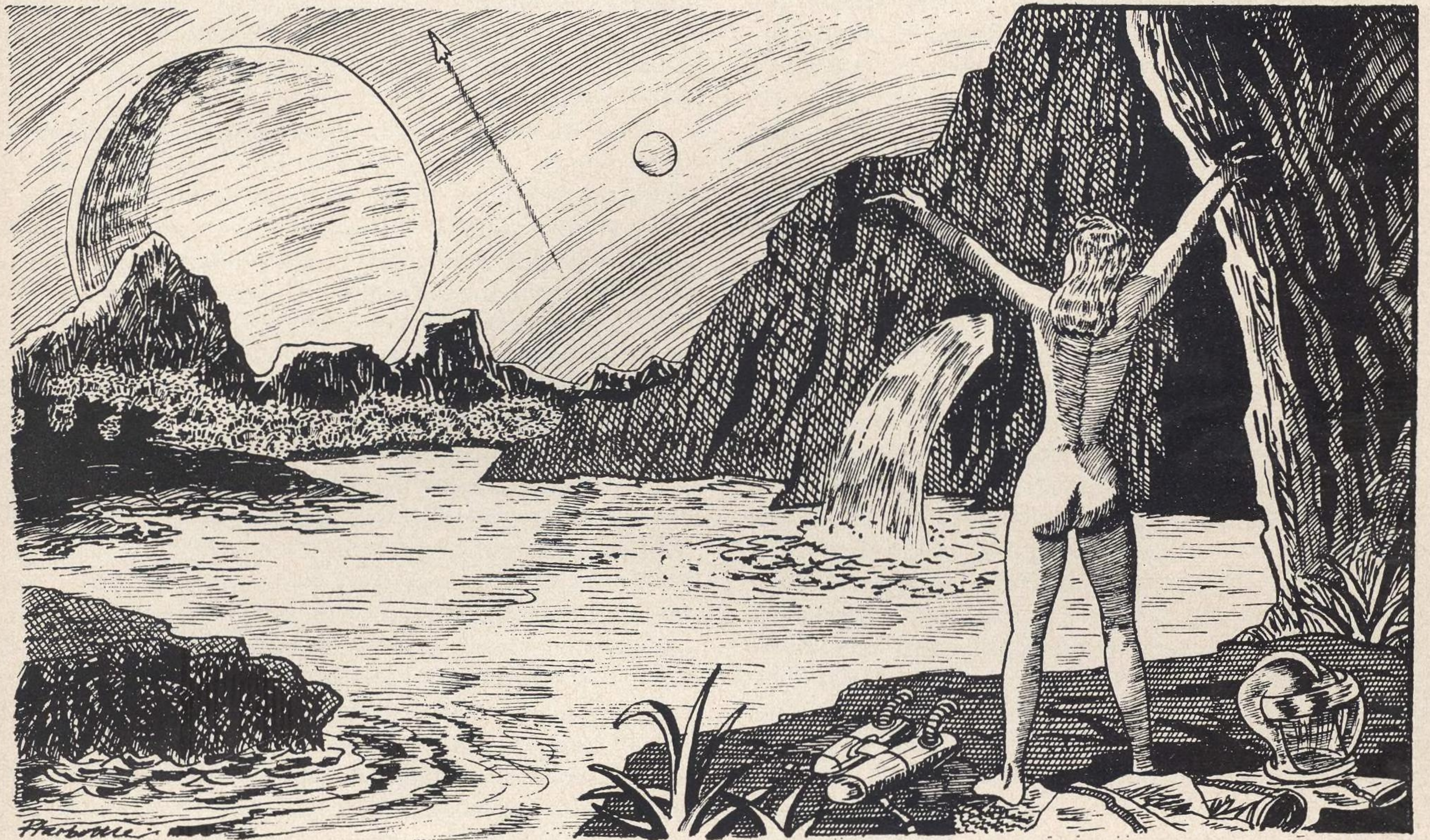
The beast groaned and he looked at it, vaguely surprised to see how manlike it was. Almost more man than beast.

'You bastards want to get there, don't you?' the minotaur said like a man.

Bors said suddenly, 'Are the women all right?'

It laughed like a man. 'Who do you think sent us?'

FANTASY REVIEW



TIMEPIECE, by Brian N. Ball. Dobson, 144 pp, 18/-

Reviewed by Ken Slater

This book is, I regret, one which I did not enjoy particularly well; although I usually like the work of Brian N. Ball I found it somewhat obscure. The first thirty or so pages introduce one of the leading characters, a sort of trouble-shooter in the entertainment field of the 29th century—the Time Frames. It remains unclear to me whether these time frames, in which historical sequences (with variations) are played out, are objective or subjective, whether the participants travel in time, or to a different time-space reference; in fact very little of this presumably 'scene-setting' section got through to me. I gathered that Jordan Delvaney, the nul-hero, is on the way out in his chosen vocation, and that one of the participants in a 'time-frame' sequence he tries to correct but botches (it says here) has designs on him. In the next part of the story Delvaney and the girl from the botched time-frame (happens she is the daughter of the big man around these parts) and a couple of other characters are introduced all round and to a space ship which the girl has discovered (space travel appears to be common, but this is a special hyperspace ship) and they all set out to discover the world where Time stands still—the Forever Planet. This had previously been discovered but the information suppressed for assorted reasons. Now, you'll probably have gathered I'm not very clear on what went on. I could see the motivations of the various characters; I could understand the general idea of the

story—but I frankly can't connect the first part with the rest. I read the book in the same aura of doubt as seems to surround the nul-hero throughout the book. And so I fear I found it disappointing—the ideas are novel, but for me they remain obscure and confusing.

If you have not read more than fifty per cent of the sf published since 1920 you may be able to bring a fresher mind to the book, and for you it may be clear and lucid. It is definitely worth a try.

DEATHWORLD 3, by Harry Harrison
Faber & Faber, 251 pp, 25/-

Reviewed by Ken Slater

Here is a book which I can recommend to those who like action, skulduggery, primitive scenes (with the odd super-scientific product held behind the back of pseudo-primitive) and Harry Harrison. *Deathworld*, you will recall introduced Jason dinAlt and the people of Pyrrus, engaged in a continuing battle with the world on which they had settled. In the opening chapter of this book we are introduced to the world of Felicity, where dwells a predator to awe even the Pyrrans. Man—barbarian nomad Man, obsessed with the need to destroy any building, any fixed locale which he sees—rightly—as a threat to his way of Life. The Pyrrans are losing the battle on Pyrrus (except for those who have changed to a frame of mind acceptable to the symbiotic entity of the total life-forms of the world) and Jason offers them an alternative: break the nomad grip on Felicity to allow the

mining of the ores which exist in the nomad regions. These ores are valuable—vital fuels and so forth—but the nomads have already wiped out one engineering task force, with ease and within hours. Felicity has a major land mass divided by a miles high escarpment, insurmountable, cutting off the nomads—and the ores—from the more civilized people of the lower lands. Jason convinces a few—very few—of the Pyrrans that this is a job worth tackling, and they set out to undertake a task which will be physically hard but economically simple; or so it would seem.

Almost immediately after their spaceship lands the first nomad attack captures Jason, but after suffering some hurt and considerable indignity he escapes—with some useful information. He then returns, with Meta accompanying him as his woman, a Pyrran boy as his apprentice, in the guise of a tribal 'jongleur'—ballad-singing memory man and medicine man. A combination of luck and audacity bring him to the attention of Temuchin, a tribal chief well on the way to becoming an overlord despite the nomad's tribal independence. Temuchin makes an expedition to the lowlands, using the device of another tribe (intriguing idea possibly inspired by the Melenisian tree-divers?) and raids the garrison of a nearby town, making off with some gunpowder. Jason has accompanied him, and introduces gunpowder to the warfare of the nomads. Helped by the 'Pyrran Tribe' Temuchin finally becomes overlord of the nomads—but this doesn't solve the problem of mining. At this point Temuchin decides to rid himself of Jason, on whom he comes to look with something approaching awe—his personal demon, come to tempt him to disaster. At which point I'll leave the story. There is still a good way to go, although Jason has at last realized that perhaps he is going about things the wrong way.

STAND ON ZANZIBAR by John Brunner
(MacDonald, 42/-)

Reviewed by Kathryn Buckley

'... He is setting up a mosaic configuration or galaxy for insight ... Innis makes no effort to "spell out" the interrelations between the components in his galaxy. He offers no consumer packages in his later work, but only do-it-yourself kits ...'

—Marshall McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*
(Extract from Context (O) *The Innis Mode.*)

The opening Context to John Brunner's *Stand On Zanzibar* is both a key and a colossal undersell. Any suspicion that this is a 'do-it-yourself' kit, with its connotations of the amateur, can be dismissed. This '*mosaic configuration for insight*' is skilfully woven to present a tourists' eye view of earth, in the year 2010.

A foreigner gets him impressions of a country in a fragmented way, he sees fashions, overhears snatches of conversation in cafes, on public transport, perhaps even at parties, he hears the news broadcasts and may even watch television. The picture will inevitably be fragmented, inconsistent, perhaps inaccurate and confusing, but it will be real.

The structure of *Stand on Zanzibar* may prove strange and even a little disconcerting to those who have not encountered Dos Passos, whose influence John Brunner acknowledges. The reader is handed strands of the fabric which is to be woven into a complete whole and, just as he is about to feel he has too much to handle and is completely disoriented, the author weaves them deftly and skilfully into a frighteningly vivid picture of an all too possible tomorrow.

The focus story (indexed as 'Continuity') concerns two room-mates, Norman House and Donald Hogan in overcrowded New York, whose lives separate, each to change the shape of the world before converging again. Synthesist/Spy Donald Hogan is activated to investigate rumours of a breakthrough in genetic engineering by Dr Sugaiguntung, which threatens to undermine the strictly enforced eugenic legislation by which the developed countries limit their population. Norman House, as an employee of General Technics, and with the aid of its computer Shalmaneser, becomes involved with the fortunes of backward Beninia whose inhabitants, though poor and overcrowded, are breaking all the known rules of human behaviour by a conspicuous lack of aggression.

The background is conveyed by means of essays, from real or imaginary books (Context), short stories about minor characters subtly brushing against the main story line (Tracking with Closeups) and a hodge podge of headlines, TV shows, commercials, gossip, bits from books and newspapers (The Happening World).

In such an impressive book, so cleverly constructed, criticism is apt to sound like quibbling. The reader could have found himself reading 'Continuity' with the same kind of added dimension that background knowledge of Medieval England brings to Chaucer, or Elizabethan England to Shakespeare, but his awareness remains that of a tourist, rather than a foreigner who has lived and worked in the country for some time. Indeed, both Hogan and House seem to inhabit ivory towers and to be themselves unaware of the sense of overcrowding so vividly conveyed through the other sections of the book. Neither academic isolation nor personal disorientation account adequately for Hogan's astonishment when he is involved in a riot. A Parisian last summer might well have been surprised that he triggered off a riot—but he would have been well aware that one might happen.

The depiction of a world in a state of flux, with new social mores being assimilated haphazardly, lacking continuity, must have presented formidable technical difficulties if the book was not itself to be totally chaotic. The result is an integrated rather than a fused picture, like watching a television play with breaks for commercials which are in themselves as important as the main play.

A more generous use of poetry, which imposes its own discipline by its form, enabling the author to convey his material in a terser, more compact way, would have enhanced the sensuous continuity. The aptly titled 'Citizen Bacillus' encapsulates pages of the text, as does the Calypso 'Mr and Mrs Everywhere', which reminded me incongruously of A. A. Milne, whilst the 'Old Lady Under the Juggernaut' could almost be said to symbolize Donald Hogan's fate. As the sense of smell plays so important a part in *Stand on Zanzibar* it is surprising that this was not made the subject of another poem and

that even more use is not made of it in the text.

The world of 2010 reflects many present day trends, such as the power wielded by great corporations, represented by General Technics and the autonomy and ruthlessness of State, the loss of individuality, the desire to escape from reality into a world of fantasy. Mr and Mrs Everywhere, a TV device which enables the individual vicariously to enjoy a fantasy extension of territoriality from the safety of his own home, also acts as insidious hidden persuaders: it is a little too close to home for comfort.

It is undeniably a man's world, as Norman House reflects 'There are odds against Aframs, but there are odds against women too and they're a bigger minority group than we are.' The idea that vast numbers of women would be content with the nomadic existence on the shiggy circuit (a kind of legalized prostitution where payment is in terms of shared accommodation—an incongruous piece of double think in a world where accommodation is as expensive as diamonds or mink today) dependent on the whim of their current codder and useful principally for sexual gratification, is not a believable extrapolation from the present day trend, albeit a struggling one, towards women as people. None of the main women characters are likeable, the minor ones are simply domestic vegetables and 'love' as an emotion between men and women, other than in the context of procreation, appears to be non-existent.

The emotional tension throughout 'Continuity' is controlled; in an overpopulated world passion is a dangerous luxury liable to erupt into riot and violence. Apart from sporadic outbursts of muckers there is little evidence of a decrease in mental stability, the population conveniently uses drugs as a safety valve, though present evidence indicates a direct correlation between the density of population and incidence of mental breakdown, so that one would expect by the year 2010 that the threshold for normality would be raised, blurring into the neurotic and psychotic.

Some of the ideas seem to have been thrown in and then forgotten, such as Donald Hogan reaching the peak of his formal education at the age of 14. This seems an unlikely eventuality if our present trend towards the extension of the education span continues, and in the face of an exploding population it would seem more likely that we will endeavour to keep the younger generation off the labour market for as long as possible. But this is a minor cavil, in the main the book is volcanic, stimulating and generously laced with a cryptic humour.

The fact that I found the solution to the puzzle of Beninia totally unconvincing is a subjective reaction; many readers will find John Brunner's suggestion about the cause of aggression very plausible. That this solution should be found in an imaginary country is not without significance; in the real world there are no panaceas waiting to be discovered by doctors with unpronounceable names, despite the procession of sociological and psychological analyses which have been proving, disproving and re-proving one another's theories

throughout the last century. 'Genetic influences on behaviour are always masked by social processes like teaching and parental care; but equally, these social processes are themselves reflections of man's biological possibilities and limitations . . .' (Part of a quotation from 'New Scientist' quoted in Context (15)). Genetics, of course are not the complete answer as Hogan's eptification (a sophisticated re-moulding of a man to do a particular job whether he wants to or not) symbolizes. He is a tragic illustration of what can happen when we tamper with the makeup of a man, and his society is littered with the debris of similar victims.

Although *Stand on Zanzibar* makes demands on the reader, as will any book which aims to do more than entertain at a purely superficial level, it is an enjoyable, satisfying 'good read'; moreover it is a book which can be re-read with pleasure or dipped into, crammed with quotes. 'Population Explosion: . . . an event which happened yesterday but which everyone swears won't happen until tomorrow.'

It is surprisingly perceptive and honest and does not shrink from demonstrating the male attitude to contraception and sterility, a reluctance to accept responsibility for procreation (excessive fertility is grounds for divorce in some places), in spite of a male oral contraceptive and a reversible sterility operation, these are not widely used, the onus still being left to women; understandably since an expectant father, unlike an expectant mother, can always walk away, or say it isn't his. Hogan's reaction to his sterility operation is marginally more mature than his counterpart today—a reaction which, had it been exhibited by a woman, would prompt some such remark as 'well what can you expect—women are such *emotional* creatures'.

It is a pity that the figure of Chad Mulligan had to assume godlike proportions in order to rescue the abysmally stupid technicians at Shalmaneser, but as he says, 'without being totally stupid, we do display a tremendous aptitude for it', and '(Shalmaneser)'s as intelligent as a thousand of us put together, which isn't really saying much, because when you put a thousand of us together look how stupidly we behave'. Still, when Shalmaneser refuses to accept data as real I did find myself muttering 'of course he won't, that's obvious', and in a computer age would technicians really forget how to make Shalmaneser accept fresh but inexplicable data?

Stand on Zanzibar is a most impressive book, impressive in size and structure, and not least in the interesting and amusing linguistic derivations the author uses and which contribute to the many memorable scenes. Episodes such as the riot, Guinevere Steel's party—a brilliant vivid cameo of a society—Eric Ellerman's story, Gerry Lindt, Benny Noakes, Hogan's mucker scene and many, many more. That it did not receive a 'Nebula' award is surprising, especially since it has an extra appeal to other writers, and it will be even more surprising if it does not receive a Hugo.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

The Phalonim charged up, guns ready for a second salvo. Cullen slumped, then triggered a quick Stonham-Argus burst. The leading alien sprouted a cabbage-sized red-rimmed black hole in his square chest. He screeched and went down. The other two skidded to a halt, the second one got his gun up when Cullen's blast cut his arm and right side away.

The power gun coughed its roseate glow of fire again and the third alien dived sideways, whipped his projectile gun up, fired full in Cullen's face. He felt the crack along his head and everything danced scarlet and yellow and white, fire and thunder and thumbscrews and racks tearing claws of pain down his head.

He got his legs under him and tried to force himself up. His legs were made of chewed dough. He collapsed and saw mistily, limned with light, the Phalonim bringing the gun around to bear down on him.

The Stonham-Argus grunted again and the whole front of the Phalonim blossomed out into red and black gobbets flying out to splatter the bulkhead.

Then Cullen flopped back on to the decking and felt the whole mass of the ship fall in on him.

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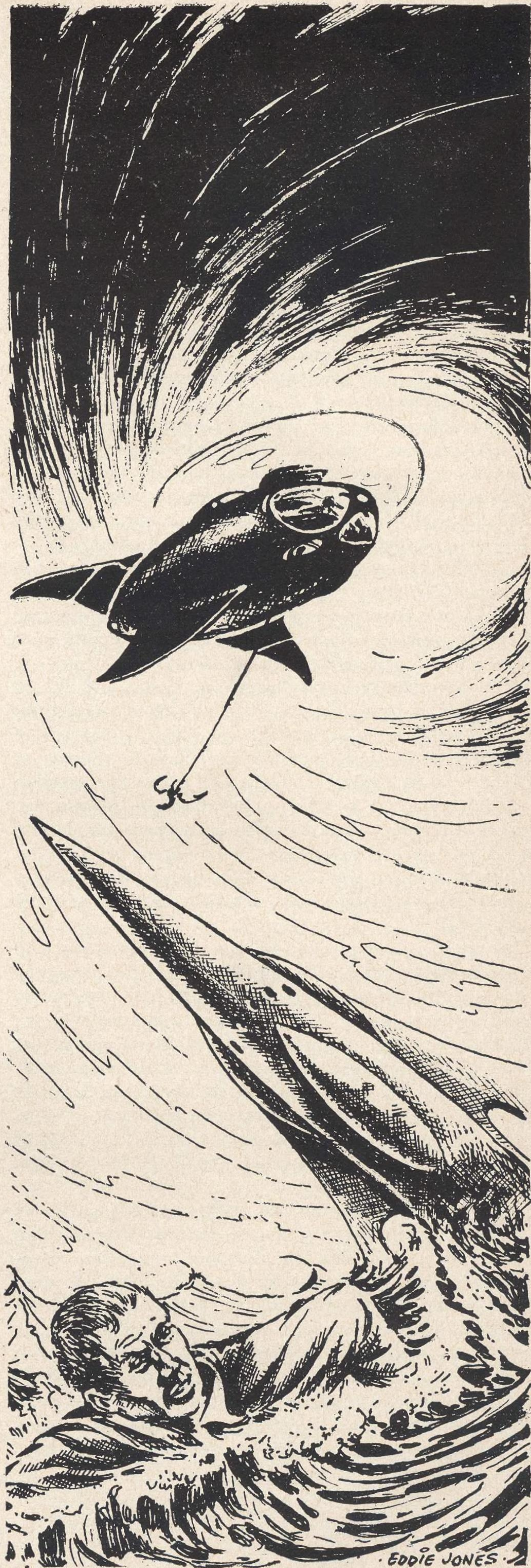
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Meet The Author

Lee Harding

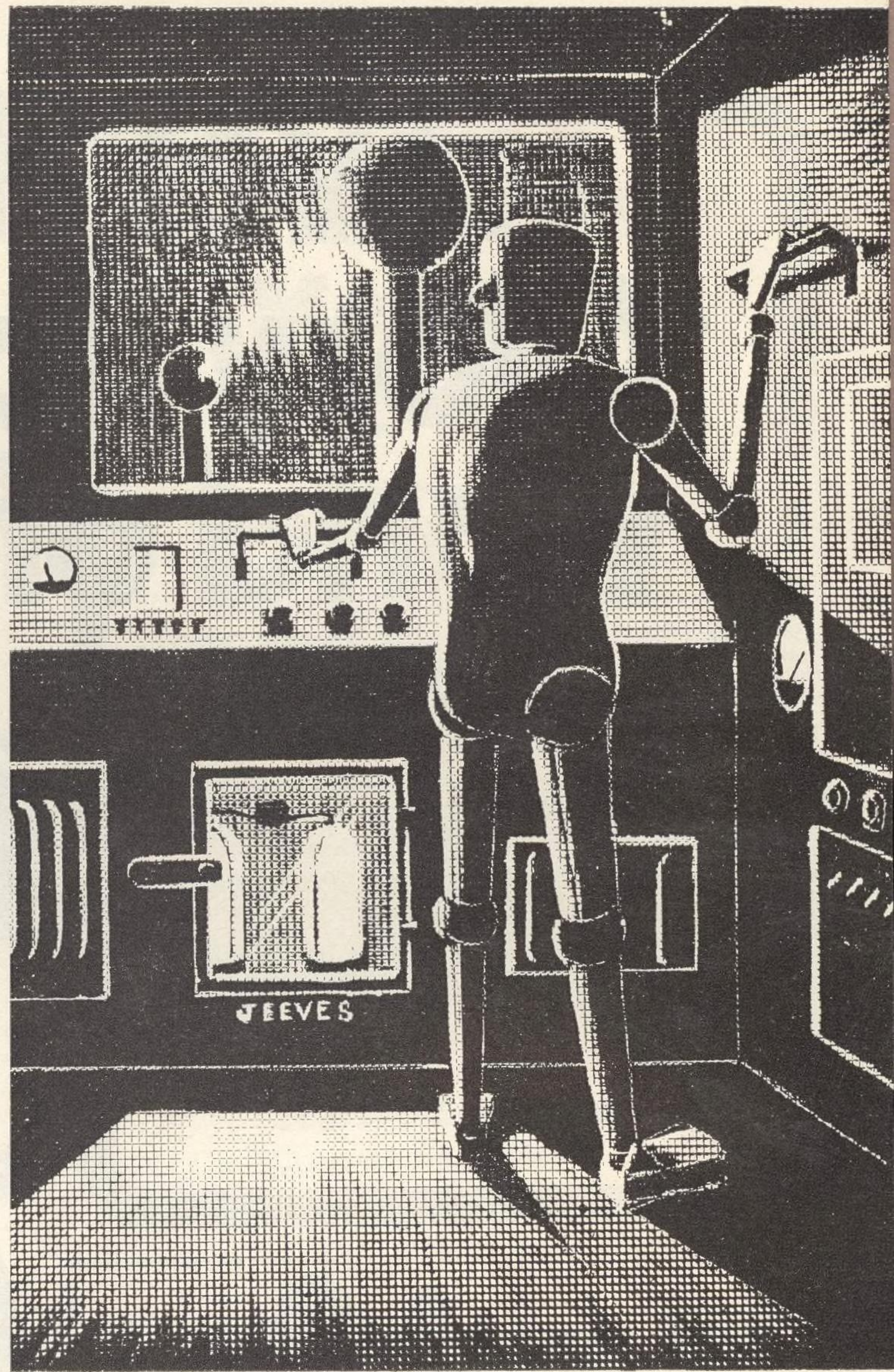
LEE HARDING was born thirty-two years ago in Colac, a small town in the Western District of Victoria. He spent his youth in the cosmopolitan inner Melbourne suburb of Carlton, and there acquired his taste for the good things of life—music, books, friends, money, booze, and of course, science fiction.

A modest youth, Lee left the glories of academic achievement to those who need or enjoy such things, and at the age of fourteen entered the photographic profession. After a few years of photographing canned foods, cutlery and vacuous young females, of printing miles of Antarctic aerial survey films, and of dabbling in photo-journalism (covering, among other things, the filming of *On The Beach*), he decided to become a portrait photographer, feeling that people are more interesting than things.

He retains that feeling to this day and it is finding real expression now that he is writing full-time.

He sold his first sf story to John Carnell in 1961, and continued to sell steadily to *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy* for a few years. Then he took time off to think out his attitude to writing. And to start raising a family in the house the Hardings bought at THE BASIN, up in the ranges, twenty miles from Melbourne.

Lee believes in the uniqueness of sf, but maintains that this in no way excuses sf writers from trying to write as well as their contemporaries in the mainstream. He is enthusiastic about the New Wave, and is prepared



to suffer its extravagances and idiocies for the sake of the enduring influence it is exerting on the field as a whole.

He hastens to add that he still enjoys both the Old Wave and what he calls the Permanent Wave.

Lee is not so much interested in writing full-time as in living full-time. He is the friendly, open kind of man who takes a genuine interest in everyone and everything he encounters. He loves classical music and, like his lovely wife, Carla, is a talented performer in the local amateur dramatic society.

But above all, Lee is a born writer, and it is our good fortune that science fiction is his chosen medium.

THE IMPATIENT DREAMERS

We apologise to our readers for not being able to present PART II of this popular series last month, when instead we ran the third instalment. This was due to circumstances beyond our control. Next month Walter Gillings is back with us with PART IV of his series, which we shall be continuing normally.

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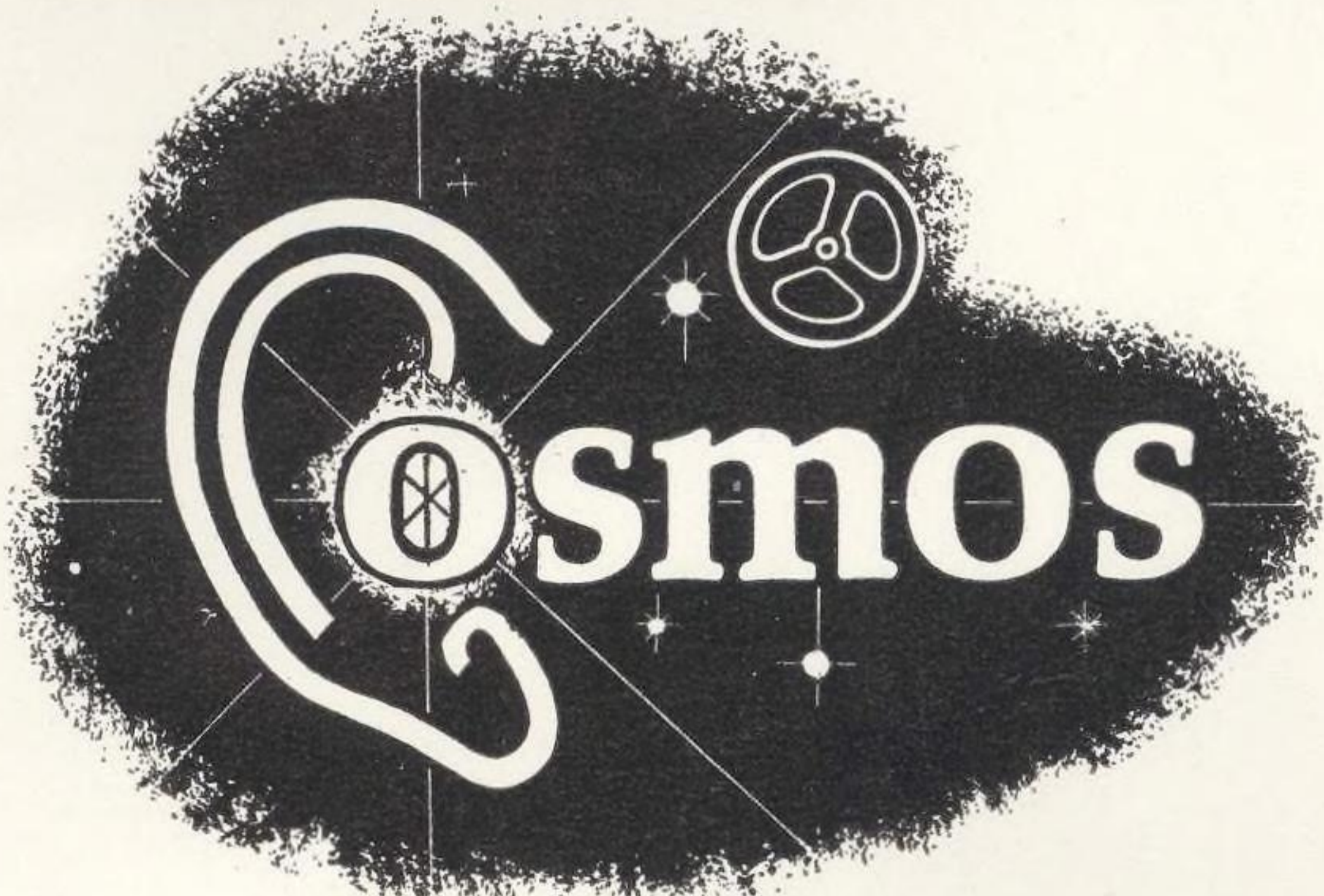
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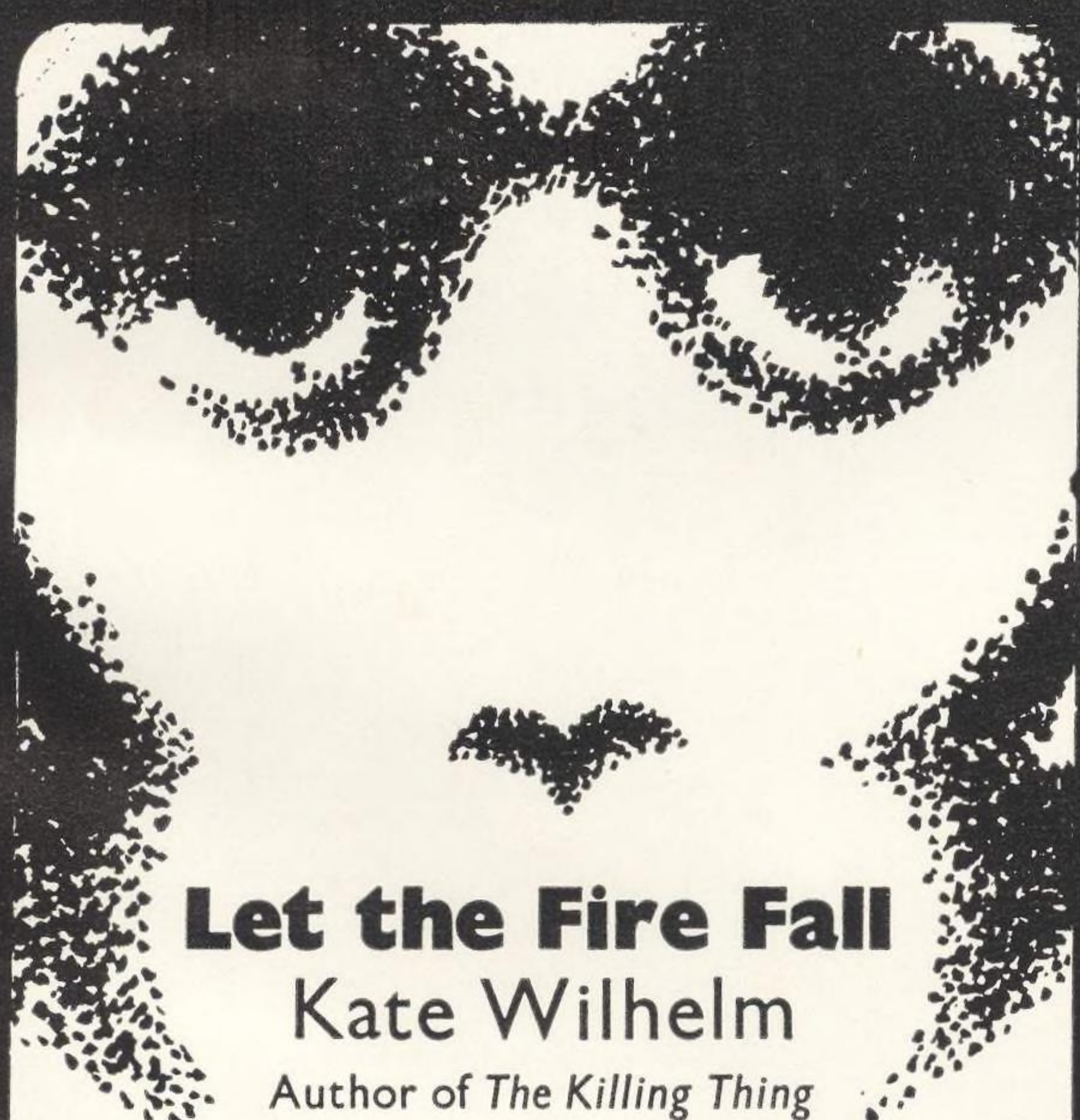
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