

November, 1957

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INFINITY

SCIENCE FICTION

35c

November PDC

COULD HE KEEP
EARTH FROM
KILLING ITSELF?

a fascinating novelet
by

GORDON R. DICKSON



BLISH • BUDRYS • DICKSON



MY KINGDOM FOR A NEWSSTAND!

No joke, chums—this is a real melancholy bit. Turning Pappy's spaceyacht into spacescrap is bad enough. Missing my date with that cute Venusian ooglechick is worse. But the downest part of all is, I may not get back home in time to buy the new **INFINITY** and **SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES**!

I don't have to tell you how super **INFINITY** and **SFA** are. Or that I'll be a nowhere square without air if I miss an issue of either. Especially with the surprises they've got coming up!

But I have nobody to blame but my own self—I should have subscribed when I had the chance.

Readers, don't let this happen to you. Remember, monsters of distinction have subscriptions. See full details inside.

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COVER, illustrating *The General and the Axe*, by Ed Emsh.

ILLUSTRATIONS by Bowman, Emsh, Giallo, Klug, and Schoenherr.

Publisher—IRWIN STEIN

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INFINITY SCIENCE FICTION, published monthly except for February, August and December, by Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th Street, New York 17, N. Y. Single copy 35¢: subscription (12 issues) for the U. S., its territories and possessions, and Canada, \$3.50; elsewhere, \$4.50. Copyright 1957 by Royal Publications, Inc. Second-class mail privileges authorized at New York, N. Y. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction; any similarity between the characters and actual persons is purely coincidental.

Printed in U. S. A.

The General and the AXE

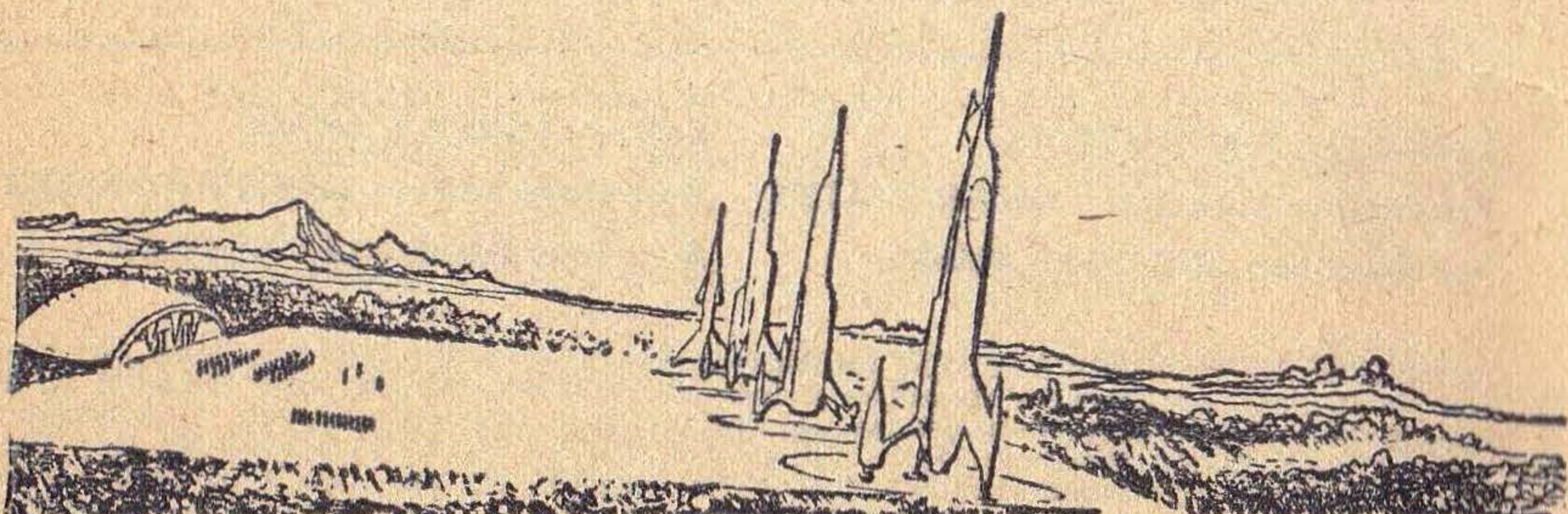
New Earth was dying

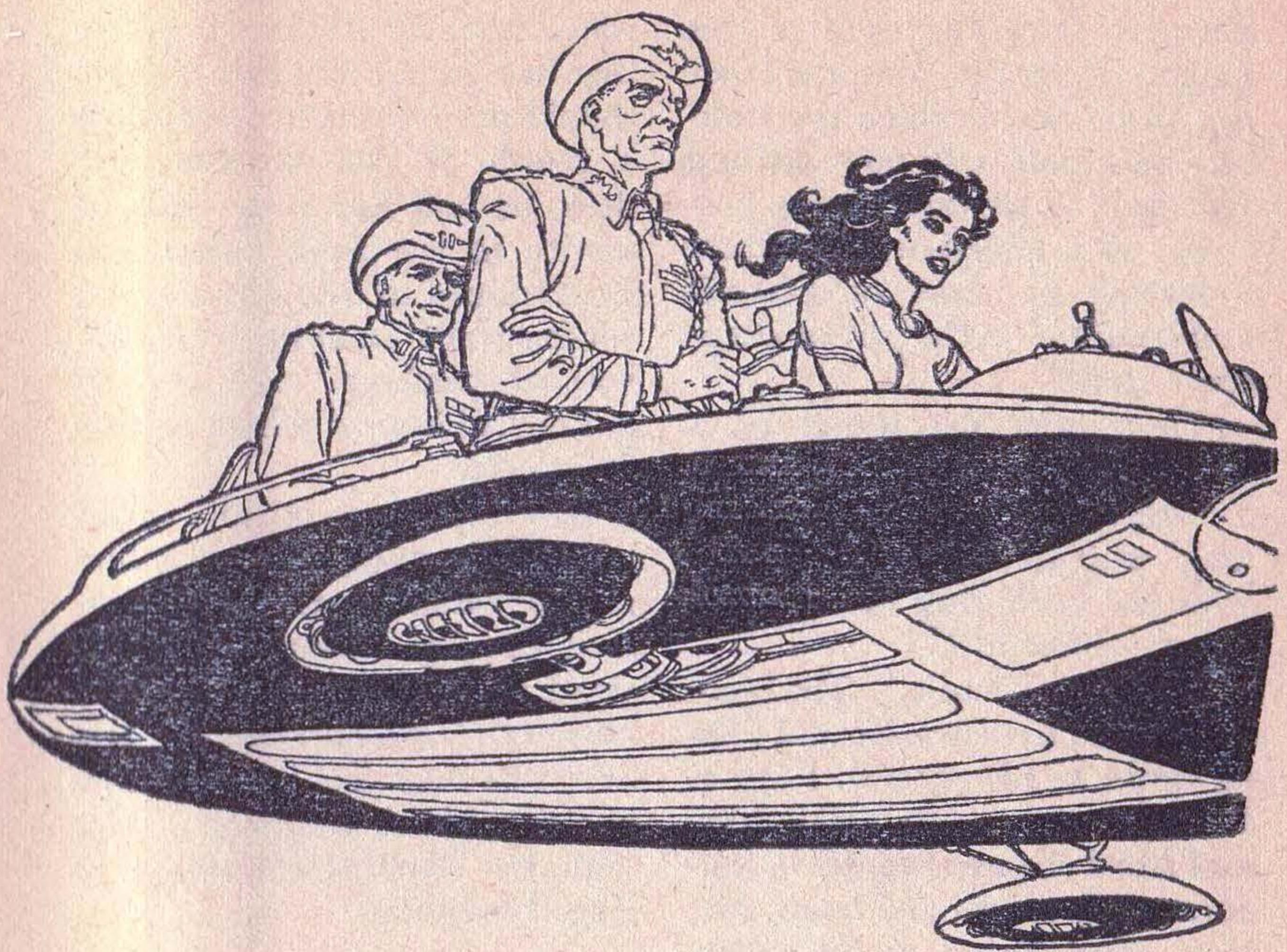
—because it wanted to!

An unusual novelet

by GORDON R. DICKSON

Illustrated by EMSH





CHAPTER I

GAZING DOWN through the observation window of the officer's walk and feeling his years, the general was aware of the settlement of New Earth floating up to him like a toy village on a circular tray of green cloth. It was marvelously complete, right down to small manufacturers and automatic plants, all set aside from the landscaped living area and glistening with a certain air of highly-polished



newness detectable even at this height. Even the concrete landing pad toward which the military transport was now settling reflected this newness, being possessed of a table-linen whiteness unscarred by years of takeoffs and landings on the part of deep-space craft.

There was the sound of a limping approach behind him.

"All ready to disembark, General," said a harsh, baritone voice with the brisk ring of a professional soldier in it.

"Thanks, Charlie." The general turned to look aside and a little down at his equerry. Captain Radnik had come up beside him, and stood at ease, swarthy in uniform slacks, tunic and boots. He, also, gazed down at the settlement.

"They say," Radnik said, "we're getting decadent."

"Philosophy?" replied the general, slightly astonished. "From you, Charlie?"

Radnik turned his dark, rather bitter face to grin briefly up at his commanding officer.

"Ever see anything like that yourself before, General?" he asked. And turning, he walked off, his shorter leg making a peculiar cadenced off-beat on the metal flooring of the walk as he went.

Of course, the general had not. But then, neither had anyone else until two years ago. He

considered the chain of events that had gotten him this job. He should not, of course, have taken a punch at that reporter. But then, he had had forty years of service in the field, where you were trained to take direct action automatically from the start, and without thinking. And the reporter had known where to sink the needle.

Any reflection at all would have been enough to make him realize that the other was probably in the pay of one of his staff rivals at Arcturus Headquarters. However, he had done it, and after that there had been no hope of dodging this assignment. Not with the newsfax screaming in large headlines—

GENERAL TULLY PUNCHES
REPORTER; DENIES 'KALO'
METHODS REQUIRED
WITH EARTH SURVIVORS.

And, come to think of it, it was no less than his duty, after all. Earth *was* the world on which he had first seen the light of day, sixty-eight years ago.

THE LANDING-WARNING bell rang throughout the ship. The general turned and made his way to the officer's lock anteroom, pausing there for a moment to make sure, with the habit of years, that his appearance was correct. The mirror gave him

back his image, upright enough, but grayed and thinned from what it had been even sixteen years ago at the time of the uprising on Kalo. Most old men went to potbellies and rounded shoulders. He would go in the opposite direction, that of stringy flesh and spare bone. Well, one did the best with what one had.

The red light flashed over the outer lock. He hung on for the slight thump and jar of landing, and then, when the lock opened, went out, saluting the sideguards on the way. They gravely presented rifles in response. At the foot of the gangplank, a girl—no, a woman—was waiting for him.

"Sali Allson," she said, offering her hand. Her gray eyes looked into his own out of a face which owed its elusive beauty to that characterful maturity that comes to some women in their late twenties. "I'm the welcoming committee."

"All of it?" asked the general. Behind him, the off-beat thump of Captain Radnik's boots descended the gangplank. She looked that way. "Captain Radnik, my equerry."

She and the captain shook hands, measuring each other.

"Honor and a pleasure," said Radnik.

"Thank you, Captain." She turned back to the general. "All that would go to the trouble to

come," she answered. "Want to look at the military section first—or would you like to come along with me and meet some of the people you're going to be responsible for?"

There was some slight challenge in her question. The general considered it.

"I'll come, of course," he said. But Captain Radnik was touching the braid on the sleeve of the general's tunic. "What is it, Captain?"

"Pardon me, sir—the C. O. of the installation's waiting over there, General."

The general looked and saw a short, square colonel with a look-it-up-in-the-files air about him, waiting unhappily with a brace of younger officers, alongside a staff car.

"I see. Wait a minute, Miss—Mrs. —"

"Miss," she said.

"Miss Allson—I'll go have a word with him and be back in a moment." The general turned and walked over to the colonel, who led the salute to him, punctiliously.

"Colonel—" the general searched his mind for the name. "Soiv?"

"Harvey Soiv, sir." They shook hands.

"I'm going to run along with this committeewoman here, right now, Colonel, unless there's something imperative in your de-

partment that needs me right away. I'll talk to you a little later. All right?"

"Yes, sir—but—"

"Well?"

"Well, General. It's just—" Colonel Soiv flushed a little more pinkly over his razor-clean cheeks. "Considering the situation here, don't you think it'd be better to talk to me, first? I mean, before you have anything to do with the civilians?"

"Why?" asked the general.

"To—to get the straight picture. You know I recommended martial law—"

"Did you, now?"

The colonel's face flushed even pinker and the general thought with a sort of despair that the years had whittled his tongue to too sharp an edge for him to risk using it in irony any more. He had promised himself to hide the contempt he felt for this pouter pigeon. "I'll see you after dinner, Colonel," he said.

"Yes, sir."

The general walked back to Radnik and Sali Allson. With the sun behind him, he was better prepared to appreciate why he had taken her, momentarily, for a girl at the foot of the gangplank. Her figure was as slight as a girl's, with the same sort of balance to it.

She and Radnik seemed to have come almost immediately to good terms. They were chatting

like old friends as he came up.

"How do we go?" inquired the general.

"I've got a platform here." She gestured to the edge of the landing pad. "This way."

They set off.

"How MANY of you are there, Miss Allson?" asked the general, as the flying platform wheeled and dipped through the sky of New Earth.

"A little over five thousand—five thousand and thirteen, General," she answered. "The city here was set up to hold twice that number."

"All off ships and other systems where you were visiting?" asked the general. "None of you were in the Solar System when it—" A trifle too late, the general perceived he was drifting into what some people might consider tender territory.

"No." Her answer was perfectly calm. "None of us were near Earth when it blew up. And anyone on it, of course . . ."

"I understand," said the general.

There had been no perceptible emotion in her voice. Only something about the way the sentence ran down at the end. Funny I don't feel anything myself, the general mused. It was my home world, too, after all. But then, fort-odd years was a long time, and there was something almost

too big to grasp about a tragedy that could wipe out the birthplace of your race and several billion people, all in the single flick of an eyelash. It left you feeling guilty at your lack of ability to react proportionally to it. Which was probably why the public subscription on the younger worlds had brought about this present mess. Everybody had felt they ought to do something, and collecting money was all they could think of to do. Foolish—you couldn't buy back the past. And the new puppy never quite filled the voice left by old Rover's death.

"All of you with relatives on Earth at the time—" The general clamped his jaw shut in annoyance, realizing his woolgathering had led him right back into the restricted area again. The girl—the woman—blast it!—did not seem to mind, however.

"Almost everybody," she agreed, calmly. "Except one or two. Joachim Coby—the man I'm taking you to now—is one of the ones who didn't. Tell me, General." She turned to him and again her gray eyes seemed singularly penetrating. "Don't you know all this?"

"I've had reports on it," replied the general, with a touch of tenderness. "Reports don't always give you what you want, you know," he added. "I don't mean to distress you."

"I know you don't." Her voice was tired. "We've just had so many questions . . ."

"Maybe," he said, "I ought to just ask you to tell me what you want."

"Yes . . ." She seemed to think for a minute. "The main trouble is," she said, suddenly, "none of us asked for this."

He leaned a little toward her. "I don't understand you."

"I mean—" she turned her gray eyes on him again—"we've been put in the position of accepting charity we don't want—for fear of hurting other people's feelings."

"Ah?" he said.

"All the younger worlds feel sorry for us," she said. "So they got together, collected all that money; and bought us this." She gestured out beyond the platform. "A new world, a new city. We're supposed to start Earth all over again. It's not that easy."

The general nodded. This was somewhat the same conclusion he had come to himself, but privately. None of which altered the facts. He had been sent here to do something about the situation; and something about the situation he would do.

The platform tilted and descended upon the parking pad of a living area set aside and a little way off from the city proper. The walls of the area were all on transparent; and in a sort

of sunroom, or studio, a man was at work before an easel. He waved a brush at them briefly as they landed.

Sali Allson led the way inside.

"Joachim," she said. "Visitors. General Tully and Captain Radnik. Gentlemen, this is Joachim Coby. You may have heard of him."

Coby got up and shook hands with them. Under his short-trimmed crop of black hair, his thin, narrow face was vibrant with energy.

"Sit down, sit down," he said. "I'll join you. The light's shifted too much for me, already." He waved them to armchairs, and came over to sit down himself, wiping his hands on a cloth to remove the oil colors from his fingers.

"I'm afraid I've missed the honor of knowing about Mr. Coby," apologized the general. "My life's rather narrow and — Charlie?"

"As a matter of fact, I have," said Radnik, with surprising enthusiasm. "Some of your Grand Banks fishing scenes—I used to try to imitate that bluish cast you got over everything."

"You, Charlie?" said the general, astonished. "I never knew you painted."

"I played with it once," Radnik gestured with one hand, a little awkward, embarrassed ges-

ture. "Before I found out I didn't have what it takes."

"No such thing!" grunted Coby energetically. "The art in this's only the top froth on forty fathoms of trade skill. A man finds something to say—he'll find a way to paint it, somehow or another."

"Don't be offended," said Sali to Radnik. "He really doesn't know when he's being rude."

"Besides," said Radnik, quietly, "Mr. Coby's perfectly correct. I never did have anything to say. I'm not offended."

"Good for you," said Coby. "Most damn fools are. What can I do for you, General?"

"To be candid," said the general, "I don't quite know. It was Miss Allson's idea to bring us here."

"I thought he should hear our side of it first," she said.

"Waste of time." Coby looked up at her brusquely, and back to the general. "We haven't got a side. Just five thousand people who want to be left alone to die in peace."

The general considered him.

"That's a novel point of view, Mr. Coby," he said.

"Novel to you, perhaps," said Coby. "The Earth is dead. You can't lead a horse to water after his throat's cut, General." He threw himself back in his chair and dropped the cleaning cloth on a little table beside it. "It's no

use trying to pretend these people want to start the Mother World all over again. They don't. Why should they? They all had useful lives on a world that's gone; but five years won't bring that world back, or fifty, or even five hundred. And the end result here won't be the old Earth over again, but something different—altogether different. So why should they struggle for something impossible? Just so other worlds can pat themselves on the back about the charity drives they put on to pay for all this?" He gestured about three-quarters of the surrounding compass and shook his head. "No, General. For most of us here, family, work and everything went when the Earth went. All we ask is to be left alone to die in peace."

"No will to live?" said the general. "How about you, Coby?"

Coby gestured at the easel.

"I've got a lifeline."

The general nodded.

"So what're you going to do, General?" asked Coby. "Declare martial law, lock us together in chain gangs and *make* us run this city for our own good?"

"It doesn't need much running," murmured the general. "The pile will furnish power for a thousand years—and the rest of the equipment's all but automatic."

"That's fine for machinery,"

said Coby. "But how about people? Radioactive isotopes won't keep them running a thousand years."

"Yes," said the general, with the inner sadness of a man who is, himself, beginning to feel the teeth of years. "What do you suggest, then?"

"I? How should I know?" demanded Coby. "I've found *my* answer—but you can't make five thousand people into painters overnight. Find them a reason to go on living, General—a reason to live for themselves and not just for some other planets' peace of mind."

The general sighed and stood up.

"I suppose so," he said. Captain Radnik and Sali had stood up also. Coby rose, and by common consent they walked together toward the landing pad and the waiting platform.

"I'll bet," said Coby, looking up at the general as the three of his visitors climbed aboard, "you're just old-fashioned enough to think there's something immoral in suicide, General."

The general looked down at him.

"Not immoral," he said. "But weak and wasteful—except as a last resort. Why do you ask that?"

"I was just thinking," said Coby. "That's probably why your

staff headquarters picked you as the man for the job."

He stood at the edge of the pad and waved to them as they took off.

CHAPTER II

THEY FLEW quarteringly across the city to a suite of offices at the edge of a small, landscaped park. Landing, Sali led them in through a nearby door to a large room filled with drawing boards and piled with drawings. An oversize, shock-headed, square-faced young man, as tall as the general, met them with a shout.

"Here you are! Come in and find a chair. Sali said she'd be bringing you. Which is who, Sali?"

Sali made the introductions.

"Testoy Monahan, General," she said. "Captain Radnik."

Testoy Monahan's handshake was in keeping with his large self.

"Have a drink?" he demanded. They shook their heads. "Well, I'll have one on my own then, and the devil take it! Sit down. Tell me about yourself, General. What kind of man are you, and what kind of plans have you got for us?"

The general smiled. It was impossible not to.

"I'm an army man," he said. "And what kind of plans have you got to suggest?"

"Why, I'd suggest a large club," said Monahan. "And go around knocking on heads until you wake up whoever's sleeping inside them. Look here, General —" He flung out an arm at the piled draftings. "Plans, plans, plans; and I might as well be illustrating fairy stories for all the chance there seems to be of putting them to use."

"Testoy," explained Sali, "is a civic engineer by trade. The job of building up this new world attracts him."

"Think of it!" shouted Monahan. "A great, empty map of a planet, waiting to be written on. And these puling whimperers—yes, and your mother and our mayor's a pair of them, Sali; I'll temper my remarks for nobody—want nothing but to curl up and perish like autumn leaves!"

"We've seen Mr. Coby," said the general. "He seems to agree with you. How many others are there who feel this way?"

"None!" cried Monahan. "Five thousand and thirteen of us and the three of us you've met, General, have the only guts to look forward to a future. Oh, they'll listen when you talk. And say that's very nice and they wish you luck. But for themselves—" He leaned forward. "Listen to me, General. I had a mother, a sister and two brothers. I had a girl I loved, God rest her soul. And when the news about Earth

came to me, there on Arcturus Five, they had to lock me up like a crazy man. I was for taking a ship and flying myself home and head on into that poor burning world that was once my home and was now the grave of all I cared for. For three months I would have killed a man to get at the means of killing myself in that fashion. But it goes, General—after a time it passes. You don't believe it, but it does. And then, if you've anything of a man inside you, you come around to face it, finally."

He broke off abruptly, walked across to a table in the center of the room, poured himself a drink and drank it all in one huge swallow.

"What would you do in my place?" asked the general, quietly.

"I know what I wouldn't do," said Monahan. "I'd not let them get away with it—this lying down to die. I'd not let them get away with it. No, I wouldn't!"

And he stared at the general with a fierce and almost desperate challenge in his eyes.

AFTER they had left Monahan and brought the platform down at last at the quarters that had been assigned to the general, they found that there was someone waiting for them there, also. This was a tall, gray-haired, upright woman, with a striking resem-

blance to Sali. They hardly needed the introduction to recognize her as Sali's mother.

"This is our living area," explained Sali. "It's just about the center of town. The mayor thought it would be most convenient for you if you wanted a place to stay, away from the camp. And of course," she added, "I wanted you."

"You're most kind," said the general.

"This wing will be all yours. Captain—" She turned to Radnik. "Your rooms are behind. Shall I show you?"

"Thanks," said Radnik. Their glances met for just a fraction of a second before she turned and led the way toward the rear of the area, the swarthy, hard figure of the captain limping along beside her.

As they disappeared through the shimmering light-curtain of the wall, Mrs. Allson turned to the general. It was disturbing to him to see Sali, as it were, suddenly grown old and standing there in front of him.

"Is there anything you'd like, General?" Her voice was soft and deepened a little by age. She must, the general thought, be as much as a dozen years younger than himself, but she seemed older.

"A word with you, Mrs. Allson, perhaps," he said.

"Of course." She led the way

to seats and waved him into one, seating herself. "Would you like anything to drink? You'll have dinner with us, of course, as soon as Sali gets your captain settled."

"Thanks," said the general. "I wonder if you could help me, Mrs. Allson, by telling me *your* point of view on the situation here."

She looked down at her skirt and smoothed it over her knees with one hand.

"I don't know what I could say that would help you, General," she said, quietly.

"Are people really as ready to give up as it seems?"

She looked up at him.

"Give up?" she echoed. "What, exactly, do people on the younger worlds expect of us, General?"

"I believe," the general said, slowly, "they expect you to live."

"But we are living," she replied.

"I mean," he said, "live in an active sense. Live in the sense of growth and replenishment."

"Oh, that," she said, vaguely. "I don't see how they can expect that. There's only a handful of children among us, you know—and most of the grown-ups are middle-aged or better."

"Then you think this attempt is destined to—not flourish?" asked the general.

"I really don't know about such things." She smoothed the skirt

again. Then, suddenly, she looked back up at him. "You know, General," she said. "Sali's father was a fine man."

"I'm sure he was," answered the general.

"But neither he nor I were pioneers. We had never really been off Earth at all, except for quick trips to Arcturus. Frank had his business—and I had our home. It was what we had both grown up to, and what we both wanted. After he died, that part of my life ended, but the structure of it was still there until this—accident happened. I think you'll find that's the case with most of our five thousand population. With a few exceptions like my daughter, Coby, and Testoy Monahan, none of us are the sort of people to try to build a new world in the first place. For most of us, in this case, it would only be a futile attempt to keep the memory of our loss green."

"I see." The general nodded.

"I thought you would," she said.

"But," said the general, "did you ever stop to consider there might be another side to it?"

"What other side?"

"The side," said the general, choosing his words with care, "of instinct. The instinct to survive."

"I don't see where that applies," she answered. "If this little community of ours was all

that was left of humanity—perhaps. But there's a number of younger worlds, and billions of people on them, altogether."

"Yes, but—" said the general, "man has been in constant conflict with his environment. It tried to kill him off, and he fought to survive. That's where the instinct comes in. It's a matter of principle. Man can't afford to admit defeat, the sort of defeat that destroys a world and all of his kind upon it—even if that's only one area of battle. I've been a military man all my life, Mrs. Allson. I know. Admit defeat in any one small part of yourself, and the seeds of cancer are planted. A cancer to eat up your will and finally destroy you."

She smiled.

"Are we that important to the race?" she asked.

"I think you are," replied the general, seriously. "What happened to Earth—and you—has become a test. Will man end by killing himself off, or by surviving his tendency to kill himself off? That's what the race wants to know—and why the peoples on twenty different worlds pitched in immediately to raise the tremendous amount of money needed to find and furnish this world for those of you that were spared. The race has been challenged. The question has been raised. Can the will to survive be killed in a people? None

of us dares face the possibility of an answer of *yes* to that question."

"That's very eloquent, General," she said. "But I don't believe you."

She sat, unmoved.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because," she said. "I happen to read the newsfax, like everybody else. I happen to know about the Kalo uprising. And as a result, I know you to be the kind of man who determines to succeed at any cost, as long as it's not at his own. Well, you took care of the situation on Kalo. And now, because the press has put you on the spot, you'll take care of it here. You won't allow us the luxury of dying in peace, for your career's sake, will you, General?"

"It's not for my career's sake," he said.

"After Kalo?" she lifted her eyebrows.

"On Kalo," he said, feeling suddenly old and tired, "I was following orders."

She stood up.

"General," she said. "I don't believe you. About Kalo, or now."

And she left the room.

AFTER A DINNER at which only small, polite talk prevailed, the general borrowed Sali's platform and flew it over to the temporary barracks area that had been

set up to house the military personnel concerned in setting up the city. He landed on the parking pad adjacent to the headquarters building and walked inside, returning the salute of the sentry on duty at the door. Radnik was not with him. He had given the captain the evening off on a sudden, curious impulse he did not care to examine at the moment. But now, as he walked through the door of the headquarters building, alone, he felt a definite and disturbing vacuum about that area to the left and a little behind him where his equerry was usually to be found in step with him.

"Colonel Soiv?" he said to the non-com at the desk just inside the door.

"Yes, sir." He was a corporal, a round-faced youngster. "In his quarters, sir. Right down the hall here, through the *Officers Only* door."

"Thanks," said the general, and walked on. The corridor echoed to his feet, and there was the door, as the boy had said. The general knocked and went in.

The outer room of the quarters was—as was customary on details of this sort—half office. It was also occupied. Colonel Soiv was seated in the reclining chair of a desk, in very unreclined argument with a thin, elderly civilian who sat facing him. The

civilian did not appear disturbed by the colonel's tactics. He was a good-looking white-haired man with smooth, gray cheeks and a bony jaw.

"—and why can't you give me an estimate?" the colonel was saying angrily. "I'll tell you why you can't give me an estimate. It's because there's no estimate to give. You won't—Sir!" He fumbled to his feet in some embarrassment.

"Sit down, sit down, Colonel," said the general. "Sit down, both of you, please."

"Sir," said the colonel, still on his feet, "may I introduce Mr. Tam Yuler, Mayor of the Earth Survivors."

They shook hands. "I won't interrupt you," said the general.

"It's no interruption, General," said Soiv. "I've been trying to get His Honor here to give me an estimate of the time it'll take to get his people to take over the running of this installat—city. He refused to give me one." The pink cheeks of the colonel were as insulted as a child's.

"My dear Colonel—my dear General," smiled the mayor. "How can I tell? I'm not expert at running a city like this. And I've no idea how people will take to the work."

"Yuler . . ." said the general, thoughtfully. "You were Mayor of New York, on the American Continent, weren't you?"

"I'm surprised you recognized me," said the mayor. "Oh, yes—I see. You're from Earth yourself." He smiled again. "Your accent gives you away."

"Do I still have an accent?" The general smiled himself.

"To the trained ear, yes. A hobby of mine. Well, you two gentlemen probably have something to discuss. I'll leave you." And with no further courtesy, the old man turned and walked out. The general turned back to Soiv, who spread his hands to the air, hopelessly.

"You see, General," he said.

"No," said the general, taking the mayor's vacated chair. "I don't see. Oh, *sit down*, Colonel!"

Soiv dropped back into the reclining chair.

"They're doing it deliberately," he said. "Deliberately. They're playing for time. They've got something up their sleeves, I know they have. They've *got* to care what happens to them, that's all there is to it!"

"Sure?" asked the general. Soiv stared at him in astonishment. "All right, Colonel," he went on. "The situation. Brief me on it."

"Well, sir." Soiv laid his short-fingered hands on the polished desk top. "You know we shipped them in here almost a year ago. I came along with an all-equipment construction battalion. We

went to work right away. Construction's met all scheduling to date—all, General. If you'd care to check the records—"

"That won't be necessary. That's not my job here, Colonel."

Soiv's experienced military ear apparently caught the connotation. He hurried to repair the breach.

"Oh, of course not, General. I hope you don't think—I just wanted to point out that the military's done their end of the job in this thing. As I say, sir, we've filled the bill. These survivors just won't accept delivery, that's all."

"What bill?"

"You know what I mean, General. The city's completed. We're all done except for training key personnel among the civilians to take over the various necessary jobs and services. Out of the five thousand of them, all they need are about three hundred men or women to hold down the vital spots. Lord, General, an automatic sewage plant's a fine piece of equipment, but *somebody* has to keep tabs on it. The same way with the water system, the food processing plants—and somebody has to oversee the crop-growing. Then there's paving, lighting, some sort of civic body, legal staff, and so forth. Blast it, General, they're a community! Why can't they act like a community, instead of a lot of pension-

ers in an overage rest home?"

The colonel flapped his heavy hands in despair and sat frowning helplessly at the bright desktop.

"And you say they've given you no cooperation at all?"

"No sir, it's just—none of them volunteer. We can't line them up, army system, and pick them out—you and you and you, like that. But nobody offers himself."

"I see," said the general. Soiv looked up at him.

"What can a man do, General?"

"I don't know," said the general, frowning. "I don't know at all."

WHEN HE got back to the Allsons', the living area was dark. But, going up the terrace alongside the landing pad, toward his rooms, the general saw Sali sitting in one of the long lounge chairs, smoking and gazing at the night sky.

"Good evening," he said.

She lowered her eyes from the region of the Pleiades and smiled at him.

"Good morning," she answered.

"Is it already?" said the general, feeling slightly confused. He sat down on the foot of the chair next to her. Her face in the shadow of the starlight was indistinct.

"You've been up conferring with our colonel," said Sali. "Cigarette?"

"No, thanks," he said. "Yes, I had to go over the military end of the situation."

"I'll bet that wasn't the only thing that got a going over." She sounded remarkably gay, and he peered at her through the darkness in surprise.

"Is there something I don't know about?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Yes," she corrected herself immediately. "I like your Captain Radnik."

"Do you?" replied the general. "He surprises me, sometimes." He was thinking of something else.

"You mean," she said, "by being the sort of man I could like?" He came back with a start from wherever it was he had been.

"Like?" he echoed, and blinked at her. "You are—pardon me," he said, "rather young, aren't you?"

She laughed.

"Thank you, General. I'm twenty-six. And how old is Charlie?"

"Why—late thirties, I believe," said the general. "I'm not sure as his commanding officer if I ought to approve of this. We're guests in your home, here—"

"General," she said. "I love you." She got up lightly and kissed him on the cheek. Then,

before he could move, she was gone, into the house. The general sat there under the stars and felt his cheek with startled fingers.

"I'll be damned!" he said.

CHAPTER III

THE NEXT DAY, the mayor called a meeting of the Earth Survivors, at the general's suggestion. The call was couched in strong language, and some eight hundred people did actually show up at the municipal amphitheatre. They were addressed by Colonel Soiv, who outlined the situation of the military and made a now-or-never plea for public-minded citizens to come forward and start learning how to take over the civic services. After he had finished, the eight hundred rose and drifted out, with the single exception of one man who came up to put his name down for work in the food-processing division. The following day, a different meeting was held—a collection of the so-called senior citizens, in the Allson home—which was addressed by the general himself.

"You fifteen men and women," he finished, "could pull these five thousand to their feet by their noses, if you wanted to. Why won't you do it?"

No one volunteered an answer. The general singled out a blocky gray-headed man.

"Judge?"

Seaman Bennet had been one of the World Supreme Court Judges on Earth. He shook his head.

"I don't believe we could; and I—for one—don't want to," he replied, bluntly. "I think we've had enough of this urging. The plain fact of the matter is that this whole project is a farce dreamed up by the romantic popular mind of the younger worlds. And the only good reason you can give us, General, for trying to make a go of it, is to please that popular mind."

"And save the clusters on his shoulder-tabs," said an unidentified voice behind the general. He ignored it.

"No," he said. "New Earth, here, is a world worth having; and I cannot believe that some of you, at least, don't want it."

"And if we did," countered Bennet. "What's the use? I tell you if every one of us sat down and pushed like blazes, we'd still end up the same way. Earth is dead, General, dead! You can't resurrect a corpse. It's been almost two years since the blow-up. How many of us have had children in that time? None. Not one out of more than five thousand people. On the other hand, we've had, since the beginning when we were gathered together, more than eight hundred deaths from suicides and ordinary natu-

ral causes. Do a little arithmetic, General, and see what it gives you. The so-called Earth Survivors have about six more years of survival left in them, before they dwindle to nothing. And you want these people to build a new world!"

"The death rate doesn't have to continue," said the General. "The younger couples can have children."

"What for?" demanded Seaman Bennet, leaning forward in his chair. "I ask you, General, *what for?*"

And that was that.

"CHARLIE," said the general to his equerry that night. "Do you suppose these people could be right after all? Maybe I'm the one that's wrong."

"Not by me," said Radnik. "We flew north to the mountains today, Sali and I. This is a world worth living in."

"Oh, yes—Sali," said the general. He frowned. "I hope you won't think I'm just being nosy, Charlie, but—"

"But you'd like to know what kind of hanky-panky I'm up to in that department, is that it?" said Radnik, grinning. "Shall I fix the general a drink and tell him all about it?"

"Cut it out," said the general. "And yes, I will take that drink. And have one yourself, Charlie."

Radnik limped over to a small

bar in the wall, fixed the drinks, and brought them back.

"Luck," he said, sitting down opposite his superior officer and handing the tall glass over. They both drank to luck, in silence.

"All right, now how about it?" asked the general.

Radnik's face had gone serious.

"How hard would it be," he asked, "for you to wrangle me an immediate discharge?"

The general almost choked on his drink.

"Charlie!"

"I mean it, Sam," said Radnik. "Every frousting word of it. I like New Earth; and I like Sali Allison. If these other blasted fools want to fold up and die, let 'em. We don't need them. We've got an open planet, the best equipment money can buy and all the time in the universe. Our kids'll grow up free of conscript duty, taxes, fashions and other-world prejudices, and with whole continents of virgin mountain, forest and jungle. Who wants better than that?"

"I—I don't know what to say, Charlie," said the general. He was honestly shaken up. He set his drink down.

"If you don't like the idea of my abandoning you—"

"No, no," said the general, hastily, "that's not it—"

"—stay here yourself."

"I?" said the general.

"You," said Radnik. "You don't like staff work anyway, you know that as well as I do. When they took you out of the field, your hitch was finished for all practical purposes. What the hell do you want to juggle paper and play headquarters politics for, for the next twenty years? Quit, stay here, and put in some honest work, instead."

"Charlie," said the general, "you're drunk."

"General," said Radnik, "I'm as sober as a general."

"Nonsense!" said the general.

THE BEGINNING of the end arrived the next day, and the harbinger of it was Colonel Soiv. The general was just sitting down to breakfast when the colonel appeared with a sheet of newsfax from one of the top interstellar services.

The general took it and read it silently, while Soiv stood white-lipped by. It was there, much as the general had expected it from the beginning.

ATTEMPT TO MAKE MILITARY 'PROTECTORATE' OF NEW EARTH CHARGED

Arcturus Five World's Representative Allan Pike queried Staff Headquarters on that world today, concerning a rumor that General Samuel Tully had "pulled strings" for his present

assignment to the New Earth Military Construction Unit. Pike announced to reporters that the same rumor, as it reached his office, predicted that the military occupation of New Earth would be strengthened and enforced and that there would be a resort to martial law on that planet.

It was not necessary to read any farther. The general put the sheets of newsfax, still fresh-smelling from the duplicator, thoughtfully down on the table. On an afterthought, he glanced again at the story—yes, they had worked the Kalo business in, as he might have expected.

This power-hungry officer who had already demonstrated his indifference to human rights before during his career.

The colonel was talking.

"Why me? why did they let me in for this? Why was I assigned—"

"Because, Soiv," said the general, and it gave him great satisfaction to be able to say it out loud at last, "you're a fool!"

"Sir!"

"Oh, shut up!" said the general. "Go on back to your headquarters and let me finish my breakfast. I'll be right over afterwards to take charge of things."

"But—"

"That's an order, Colonel!"

Blasted out of the room by the general's not inconsiderable

voice, Soiv scurried off. Turning somewhat moodily back to his fruit and toast, the general pondered on the sad deviousness of official ways and the worth of a forty-six year career. Good enough. He had always been a fighting man. If fight was what they wanted . . . He picked up the communicator and buzzed for Radnik.

The dark man showed up, Sali with him.

"You've seen the newsfax?" asked the general.

Radnik scowled.

"Who showed them to you, sir?" he growled. "I thought—"

"You thought wrong," said the general. "I've always been able to take care of myself. Just answer me something about this discharge of yours. Still want it?"

"No, sir."

"Come off it," said the general. "I want a straight answer, Charlie."

Sali slid her arm through the captain's.

"Yes," said Radnik.

"And you, Sali," said the general. "How many of the Survivors, do you think, really want to leave this planet?"

"Why—I don't think any of them want to leave," she answered. "Really, they don't know what they want."

"All right," the general said. "Come on, Charlie, time to go to work." He stood up. "I'd

appreciate it if you helped keep the Survivors as quiet about this as possible, Sali. Until—say—tomorrow night."

"General," replied Sali, "that's one thing I can promise you. These people don't want to be anything other than quiet."

"Fine. Come, Charlie."

They went out.

AT THE headquarters building, in Soiv's office, the three of them —the general, Radnik and Soiv—sat down to business.

"I don't know what to suggest," stammered the colonel. "General, I—"

"Don't bother," said the general. "Just tell me what I want to know. Colonel, you say the installation here is complete, physically speaking. Every piece of equipment's in and working?"

"Yes, but—"

"Never mind the buts. I think the work of this command is finished. How soon can you take off?"

The colonel stared at him in stunned silence.

"Did you hear me, Colonel? I asked how soon your personnel could ensign and take off."

"Why — why — if we had civilians trained—" The colonel winced away from the fire building in the general's eyes. "A week," he said hastily.

"A week!" snapped the gen-

eral. "What kind of an outfit are you running, Soiv? You aren't taking any equipment here back with you, are you?"

"No sir. Orders were to leave everything for the Survivors—"

"The ships are ready to take off, I hope. New planet regulations call for a ship under these conditions to be ready for instant lift, except when undergoing repairs."

"Oh, the ships are ready. Only —"

"Only what?"

"Well, General, the men will have to—it takes about a week to move a command of this size, sir!" cried the colonel, in anguished protest.

"The devil it does," said the general, coldly. "I've moved flotillas on four hours' notice. Get your staff in here."

The colonel obeyed. The staff came, listened and went as if the devil the general had mentioned was on their tails. The colonel sagged weakly in his chair.

"That's that," said the general, signing some orders. "Now, one more thing. You've got your machine shop still operating. I want you to make and deliver five thousand axes."

Soiv sat up.

"A—five thousand whats, sir?"

"Axes. Axes!" The general drew the outline of a double-bladed woodsmen's axe on a

sheet of paper. The colonel stared at it as if he expected it to jump up off the surface and chop him.

"Yes, General," he said, at last, weakly.

"One for each of the Survivors, delivered to their homes, two more for Captain Radnik and myself, delivered here. By eighteen hundred hours tonight. You'll start loading personnel and what equipment belongs to the command, immediately. I'll expect everything ready for take-off by two thousand hours. Anything you can't enship is to be left behind for Survivor use. Now send me your medical officer."

"Medical officer?" But the general looked so explosive that the colonel hurried out without waiting for a response.

He was back in fifteen minutes with a major wearing the caduceus.

"Wait outside, Colonel," said the general. "Major, I want you to examine the captain, here. No, no—not a general examination, man. Just his heart. No, you don't need your stethoscope. What've you got an ear for? Listen to his chest."

Gingerly, like a man approaching a stick of dynamite, the broad-faced major bent his ear to Radnik's tunic jacket.

"Terrible shape, isn't it?" prompted the general. "Ready to quit at any minute, wouldn't you say?"

"Sir?" said the major.

"I said his heart's ready to give out—isn't it?"

The major stared at the general, and for once the general found his reputation standing him in good stead. The major's gaze wavered and fell away.

"Well, General, if you say so—"

"What?" roared the general.

"I mean—yes, General."

"A takeoff would kill him, wouldn't it?"

"Yes sir," said the major miserably.

"Very well. Under the special authority described in official regulations for situations such as this, I am hereby issuing Captain Radnik an emergency discharge for reasons of health. Prepare the proper papers for medical discharge, Major, and have everything here for my signature by fourteen hundred hours. That's all. Send the colonel in as you leave."

The major fled. The colonel stuck a worried face in through the door.

"Get me your power officer, Soiv—no, I take that back. Get me the first sergeant of the power company. Well, what are you waiting for?"

"Well—General—" The colonel clenched his hands. "About this order to abandon the installation."

"Yes?"

"Would the—would the general put it in writing, please?"

The general looked at him. The colonel's face went red, then white, then back to red again.

"Of course, Colonel," said the general, softly. "Have it written up and I'll sign it. Now—that sergeant!"

AT ABOUT four-thirty that afternoon, Sali Allson managed to get into the colonel's office for a very brief moment, and talk to a very busy general. She found him still sitting at the colonel's desk, immersed in papers and the issuing of orders.

"Hello Sali," he said, when she was let in after a short wait. You can go now, Lieutenant—sit down, Sali. This'll have to be quick. What's up?"

She looked troubled.

"General," she said. "I'm sorry. It seems I promised something I can't deliver."

"What's that?"

"You know, I promised that people would keep still until tomorrow night? Well, it seems I goofed. They aren't going to. I argued against it, but Mother's set on having some people over tonight. Mayor Yuler, Judge Bennett, Testoy, Coby. They're going to talk over this newsfax accusation of you and decide on what sort of a complaint to make to the World's Council about it."

"I see," said the general.

"I'm afraid—" She took a deep breath. "They're not on your side, General. They want you to be there and answer some questions. I was sent to ask you to come."

"Yes," replied the general. He gazed at her almost fondly. "You sure you didn't volunteer to carry the message—so as break it to an old man as easily as possible?"

She gave him a wan smile and did not deny it.

"They're ready to throw you to the wolves," she said. "They aren't the bunch of people to agree on anything except a mutual enemy. Even Coby and Testoy. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," said the general, slowly. "I was thinking of dropping over this evening, anyway. Tell me I'll be there."

"All right." She got up. "Anything else I can do?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing," he said.

CHAPTER IV

THE GUESTS at the Allsons' had come for dinner. They had sat around the table through dinner, and completed the familiar process of talking themselves into what they most wanted to believe. Right now they had reached the convenient conclusion that all the problems of their situation here on New Earth probably had their roots in some

long-term machinations of the general's. And that these machinations were probably the result of his wish to repair and forward his own military career.

Now that dinner was over, they sat on the terrace in the warm summer evening as the sunset faded, drinking after-dinner coffee and watching the slight breeze stir the tops of the pretty little trees about the garden pool, and continued their discussion.

"No," the judge was saying, to the mayor, "I can't go along with you on the notion that he thought it all up himself. The military mind is a little too limited in practice to work out something on this scale. I think he must have fallen into it."

"You've got a nerve, Sea," said Sali, evenly. "When the Worlds first offered us this new planet, you were one of the first to think it was a grand idea. It wasn't until we got here and everybody started expecting everybody else to take the responsibility that you changed over and went along with the idea we'd all been given a handout none of us wanted."

"Sali," said the judge, "you might allow for the fact that I'm human. At the beginning I didn't know what we all were getting into."

"Human!" she cried. "You're human, all right—all of you. Human and lazy! Human and mean!"

"That's beside the point." The judge's calm, rotund voice created a neutral background against which the violence of her emotion seemed juvenile and out of place. "The point is that General Tully saw his chance to profit by our situation—" He broke off suddenly. There had been a whisper of approaching airfoils above the landing pad, a white shape sinking through the encroaching gloom—and now the precise rap of military feet along the walk toward the terrace. "Here he comes now. He and that captain."

"That captain," said Sali icily, "is the man I'm going to marry!"

"Sali!" It was her mother's shocked and startled voice.

The general emerged into the garden and approached along the terrace. He was carrying a double-bitted axe in his hand, and swung it as he walked along.

"Good evening, good evening," he called cheerfully as he came up. "I see you waited for me."

Testoy Monahan laughed harshly.

"Did you think we wouldn't?" he demanded.

"I knew you would," replied the general, undisturbed. He leaned on the axe and looked about him. They found his regard disconcerting.

"What are you doing with that thing?" said the judge.

"And, while we're on it, why did you have one delivered to me?"

"Each of you should have gotten one," said the general. "To answer you—I thought you might find it useful. Still got it?"

"I tossed it in the utility room and forgot about it," said the judge. The general nodded.

"Listen—" said Testoy, coming forward from the wall against which he had been standing. "What's all this we've been hearing?"

As he spoke, the last rays of twilight faded. Mrs. Allson pressed a stud on the table beside her chair and soft lights glowed suddenly into being in the living area and around the terrace. The general stood revealed in them as a soft current of warmth eddied out from the living area to ward off the first chill of the evening breeze.

"And what have you heard?" asked the general.

"That you're going to move the soldiers out of here."

"Quite right," said the general. He squinted at the white glare off beyond the rim of the city, that was the landing field under lights. He turned back and began to examine the terrace border of trees, one by one.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" demanded the judge.

"I'll tell you," said the general, ceasing his survey for a moment

to look back over his shoulder. "I'm checking a theory of mine about the human race." He turned back and picked out one of the small trees. "Ah, this ought to do."

HE STEPPED BACK and hefted his axe. Mrs. Allson gave a little scream as the bright blade bit into the trunk of the tree.

"Are you mad, man?" shouted Testoy, taking a step forward. "Have you gone out of your mind, completely? Thinking of sending the ships off. Axes—chopping trees. You ought to be in a straitjacket."

"I don't . . . think so . . ." said the general, grunting between swings. "One more . . . that does it . . ." The little tree came crashing to the flagstones of the terrace. The general put his foot on it and began to cut it into lengths.

"Call the colonel, someone," said the judge. "I believe the general's really—what Testoy says."

"No use," said the general between swings. "There's nobody in the headquarters building."

"Why not?" demanded Testoy. "You haven't moved them out yet."

"Yes, I have," answered the general.

There was a moment of complete silence from the group. Then, one of the figures present

—it was the mayor—jumped up from his chair and bolted into the living area. The general continued to chop.

"Can I help you, sir?" asked Radnik, hefting his own axe.

"No thanks," panted the general. "The exercise is just the thing for me. Have to get back in condition."

After a moment, the mayor came running out again.

"He's right!" cried Yuler. "They've been loading for an hour. They're warming up the drives, now."

Testoy cursed.

"Marooned!" he cried. Before anyone else could move, he plunged one big fist in through a slit in his tunic and came out with a little handgun.

"You'll call them back!" he shouted at the general. "You'll call them back!"

Captain Radnik spun stiffly about on his short leg. He stood facing Testoy with about six feet between them, his own axe held crosswise in both hands before his waist. The gun in Testoy's hand shook.

"Get out of the way!" he said, in a sort of sob.

"I'd live long enough to reach you," said Radnik, coldly. "You wouldn't like that. Drop it!"

"No!" blurted Testoy; but his hand shook even more. The dry voice of Coby came from behind him.

"Give up, Testoy! Amateurs haven't any business going up against professionals, anyway. He means what he says. You don't."

Testoy's hand sagged and dropped.

"All the way," ordered Radnik.

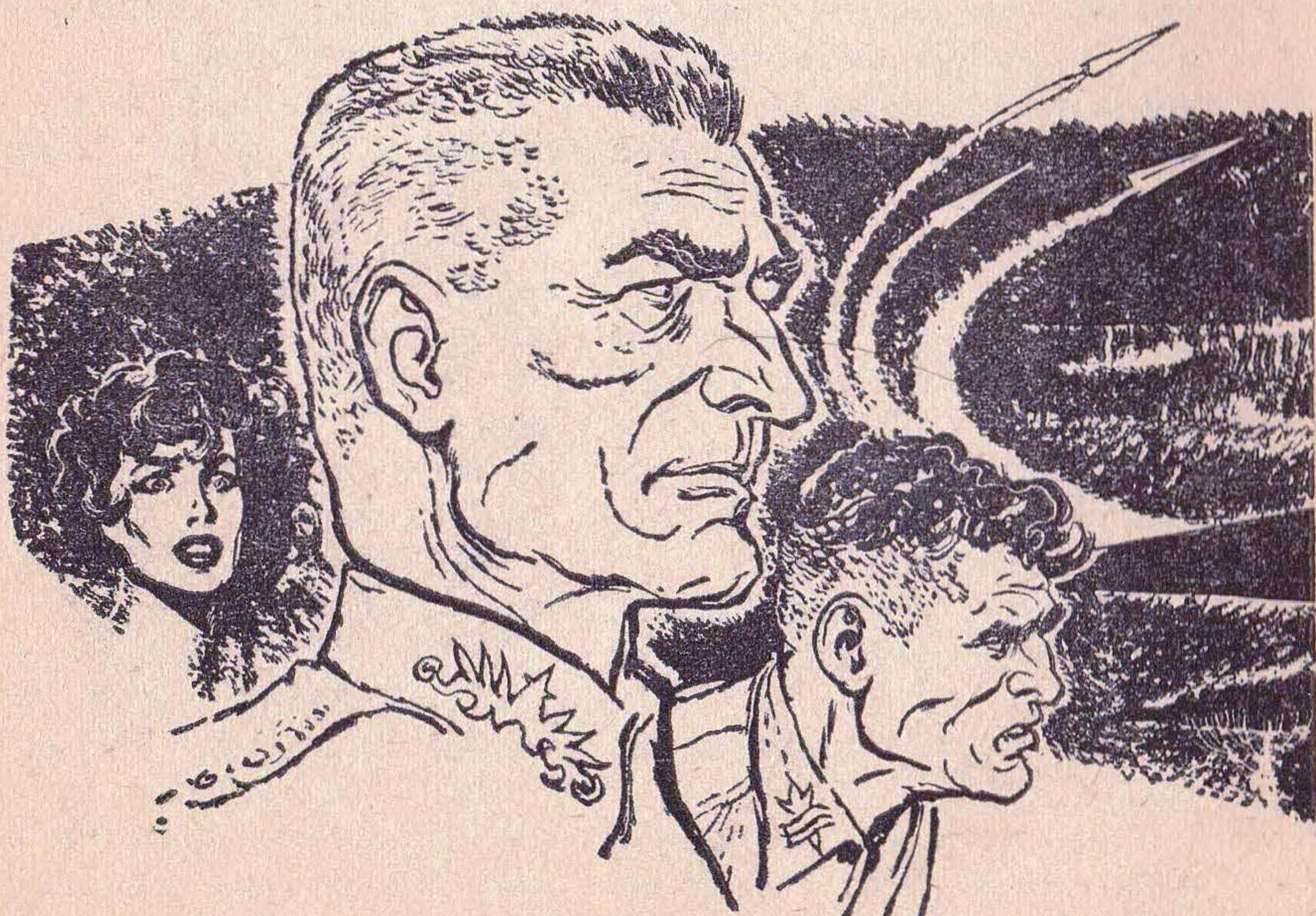
The gun clattered on the flagstones.

The general had continued to chop imperturbably all the while this little byplay was going on. "You see," he said now, "It wouldn't do me any good to order them back, anyway. When an outfit is due to lift at two

thousand hours, it lifts at two thousand hours." He paused to glance at his chronometer. "Any minute now. Besides, I've no authority to order them back any more. I've resigned my commission."

"You!" said the judge. And Sali gave a little cry.

"Me," said the general, now dividing the narrow top trunk of the tree into sections by single chops. "After all, you ought to remember I'm an Earth Survivor, myself. And it's time I retired. Captain Radnik—pardon me—Charlie and I are now civilians."



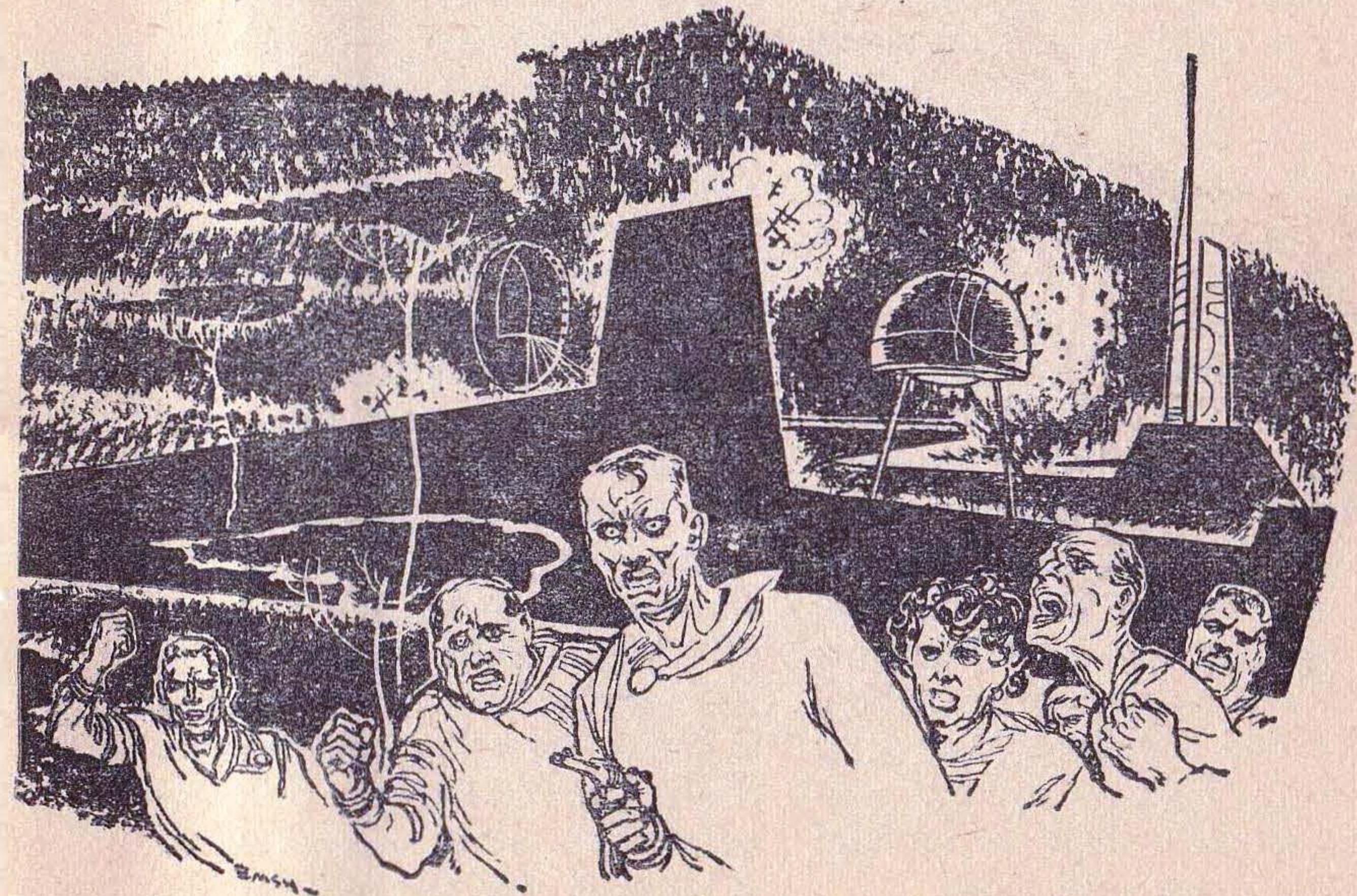
He stopped working suddenly, glanced at his chronometer again and shaded his eyes with one hand, gazing off in the direction of the landing pad . . . "There they go now."

His ears had caught the familiar first rumble of the tubes a short second before the rest had. As he spoke, the white light around the pad washed out in brilliance, for a moment making the city roofs stand out as if in broad daylight. Then one great trail of fire shot up into the night. And another. And another—until all five were gone.

"And that's that," said the general, stooping to gather together an armful of the cut tree sections at his feet. He carried them into the center of the terrace and piled them there.

"You won't get away with this!" said the judge, a little hoarsely. "We'll message the World's Council. They'll have the ships back here in six weeks. Then we'll see what the courts do to you."

"No," said the general, going back for another armload. He grunted as he bent over to pick them up. "Stiff, by Harry! Too



much desk work. No, I don't think so, Judge. Something else is due to happen soon."

He stopped and gazed expectantly to the north end of the city, but nothing happened. He went back to pick up the last of his butchered tree.

"I guess maybe the fuse—" A sudden, distant, dull explosion interrupted him. "Ah, there she goes. That was the communications center." He chuckled. "Don't look so upset, Mr. Monahan. It can be rebuilt in two or three years if we really settle down to work on it."

THERE WERE a few more isolated explosions at various points about the city. The lights dimmed and went out; a few seconds after that the small current of warm air circulating about them drooped and died — so that now, through the garden, they could feel the chillier touch of the evening breeze.

"Right on schedule," said the general's voice from the darkness. "If you'll hand me your lighter, Charlie." A little flame sprang into being from nowhere, fireflied over to the small heap of cut-up wood and crackled through the dry outer branches. There was a splash of something liquid and the flames flared up suddenly, lighting up the general, Radnik, and the rest of them with the same lurid glow.

"Those other shots you heard," said the general, smiling at them, "were the lighting, water and other services. The automatic machinery's been knocked out in each case. Your power pile's been damped and the automatic control there destroyed."

"You—you madman!" choked the mayor from a far corner of the terrace. "You've killed us all."

"Nonsense!" snapped the general, with the hint of exasperation in his voice for the first time. "Your warehouses are bursting with stored food and supplies that'll keep indefinitely. You've got a hundred years' supply of medicines, spare parts, everything in the universe. You've got the best of modern tools, the best of machinery, the best of everything. The only thing I've taken away from you is a soft place to sit and sulk. If you want to be warm from now on, you're going to have to build a fire. For hot food — cook. You're going to have to go to the reservoir after water, to the warehouses after food, and do your own housecleaning. And that situation is going to go on existing exactly as long as you all continue to sit still and put off rebuilding the equipment I've just now put out of action. And if you're expecting outside help, don't. The last message the communication center sent off before it blew up was the information,

under the mayor's name, that it was shutting down for alterations. We're all on our own here until some ship happens to drop by—anywhere from two years to ten."

He finished, and there was a short silence. Surprisingly, it was Coby who broke it. The wiry artist stood up suddenly from his chair by the house wall.

"You win, General," he said. He paused. "I had a hunch you had from the way you walked in here. Anyway, I've still got my north light. See you all in the morning. I've got a long walk home, and a fire to build before bedtime."

The sound of his footsteps moved off along the terrace into the night.

"You!" cried the mayor to the general. "You—you'll be lynched!"

"And will you help the lynchers or try to stop them?" said the general. "Charlie, here, and I might turn out to be the only ones with technical know-how enough to see the sabotaged equipment gets properly repaired."

Yuler glared at him, and then, finding the general's gaze did not falter, looked despairingly around the circle for support.

"Oh, for God's sake, Tam!" the judge burst out. "Make up your own mind for once!"

With one last, wild glance at

them all, the mayor flung about on his heel and plunged off. They heard his steps beating away. The judge turned his eyes on the general.

"Tam's a fool," he said bitterly. "He always was, in spite of his background. I'm not—I can see it now, what you planned. And I should have known—I've met your kind before that don't care how the chips fall just so things go their way. Well, I wash my hands of it. You hear me? I wash my hands—" And, rising very quickly for such a heavy, old man, he was up and also gone.

There remained, besides the general and Radnik, only Mrs. Allson, Sali, and Testoy Monahan. Testoy had been staring at the general as if he expected him to sprout either horns or a halo.

"You're staying!" he said, at last. "You're going to make them work!"

"They'll work," said the general.

"Then I'm a dog!" cried Testoy, slapping himself violently on the forehead. "And you're a great man! I'll just go after that slippery mayor and do a little of the setting these people straight my own self."

He left, and the sound of his going died away on the night air. For a moment after the last sound had ceased, the four who remained stayed caught and immobile, as if they had suddenly

reached together some echoing point of time too great for any single heart and mind to disturb. And then the general broke the silence.

"ALL RIGHT, Sali—Mrs. Allson," he said briskly. "Both of you go now and wrap whatever personal things you feel you absolutely have to have in hand towels, and take them to your front door. Charlie has field packs there for you. Dress warmly and put on the best footgear you've got for rough hiking."

The both stared at him, still in shock.

"Footgear—" said Sali's mother, dazedly.

"You're taking to the hills. You've got three—maybe five minutes to get ready. Mrs. Allson—please!" The snap of authority was back in the general's voice. Mrs. Allson turned uncertainly and went back into the house. Sali did not move.

"Taking to the hills?" she said.

The general considered her in the firelight.

"You'll have a better chance of surviving back there. Charlie's had field scout training with the expeditionary forces."

"Of surviving?" She stared at him. "You just finished telling them—"

"That the elements of survival were here and they just had to make use of them. Of course,"

said the general. He reached behind him for a chair and sat down in it. "That woodchopping—" He warmed his hands at the fire. "Nothing was said about the human element. This community must disintegrate before it can cohere again." He glanced at her. "You know, Sali, I spoke to your mother my first day here. She said that most of the people here were not the people to build a new world from scratch. She was right, of course."

"What do you mean?" she whispered.

"A necessary element was lacking here, one that's present in an ordinary pioneering community," said the general. "The *need* to succeed. They've got it now. For all practical purposes their protective civilization has been destroyed. They will fall back into essential savagery; of necessity, the weaker will go to the wall, but the fittest will survive and build."

She shrank from him.

"But—you knew this!" she said. "Why did you do it? Why—did they give you orders—"

"No," said the general wearily. "No. You misunderstand the limits of military authority, Sali. When the service has a job to do, they send out a man in whom they have confidence, and simply order him to get results. I made up my own mind. As for the necessity of it—" He picked up a

branch and poked at the fire. "There was a question in the minds of some of our best qualified authorities in the field of human survival. It was questioned whether the human seed our race has spread to various other world was truly viable. Our race, you know, might be like a spreading vine that needs its original root system to survive. For all we knew some of the necessary traits for racial survival might be the exclusive property of those who had a horror of being transplanted from their native Earth."

"But a question—" Sali moved her head as if it rolled on a pillow, in pain. "—only a question. And you did this. No decent man could sleep nights—"

"I have my duty," said the general. "Certainly, only a question—but who would want to take the chance it was right? The instinct of racial survival is a strong, deep thing; and civilization is only painted on us—"

"You *monster!*" Though she only breathed them, the words cut at him out of her white face.

The general winced.

"So they called me on Kalo," he murmured. "It was the very word—and still, someone had to do it—" He stopped suddenly, and slowly raised his head in the silence of the night, listening. "Charlie!" he said sharply.

"There's no more time. You can't wait for her gear. You'll have to take them both as they are."

He stopped, and now they all heard it, a far-off confusion of voices, such as from a ball park on a summer's evening, distant, but coming nearer.

Radnik nodded. His eyes met the general's. They did not move to shake hands.

"We'll name the first after you, Sam," he said.

"Thanks," said the general.

Radnik's hand closed on Sali's arm, and she cried out at his touch.

"Come on!" snapped Radnik.

"But you—" She hung back, staring at the general. "You aren't coming! What are you going to do now, then? What are you planning for them now?"

"Don't be a fool!" said Radnik roughly, jerking at her. "Listen to them! Do you think they're going to pin roses on him?"

The general returned her gaze more gently.

"I'm their last excuse," he said. "For not saving themselves. When they destroy that last excuse—"

He paused, and smiled at her a little apologetically.

"And as you say," he said, "I don't sleep well, nights. Good luck, my dear. Go on, take her now, Charlie."

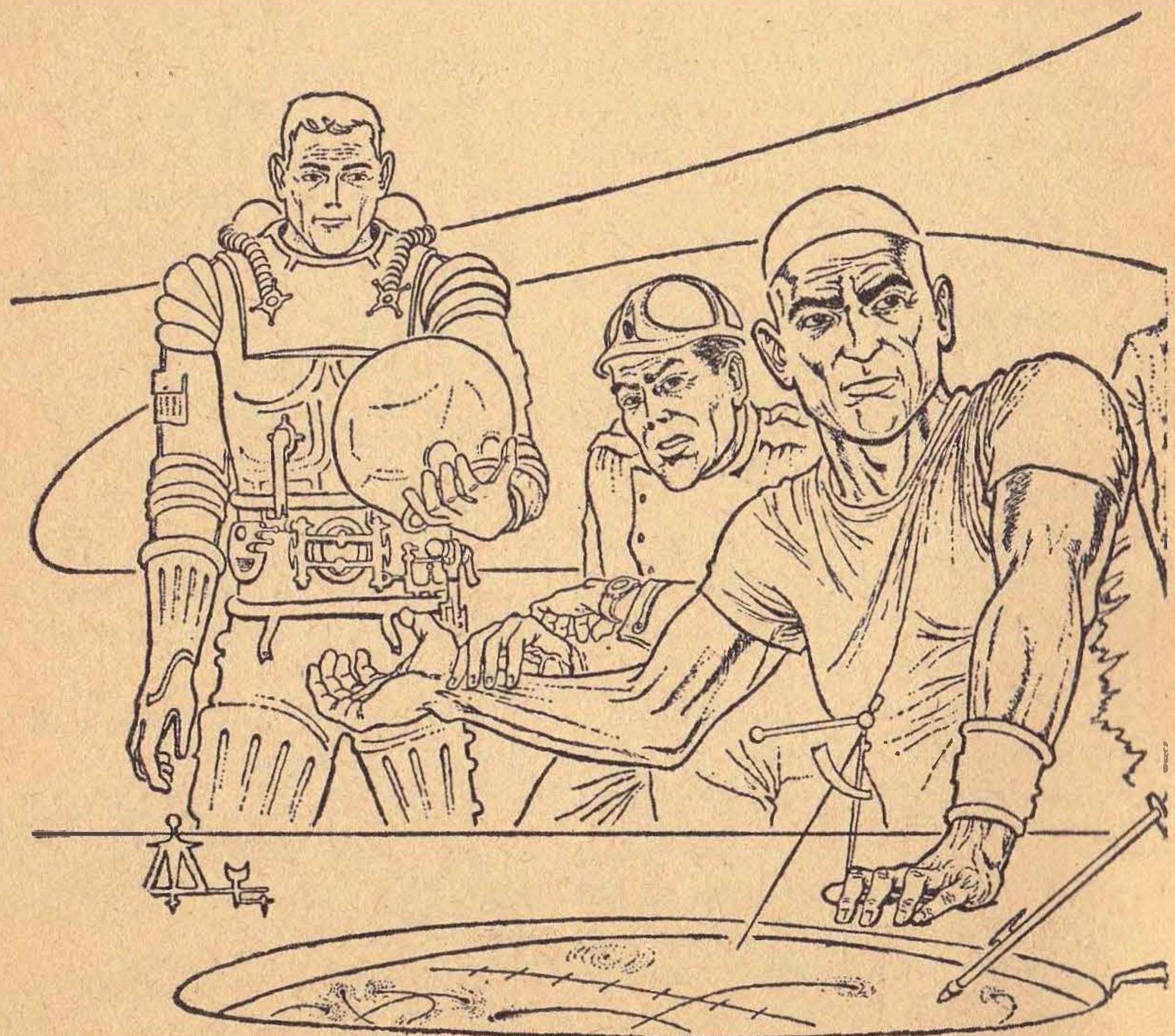
And Radnik took her away.

∞ ∞ ∞

NOR IRON BARS

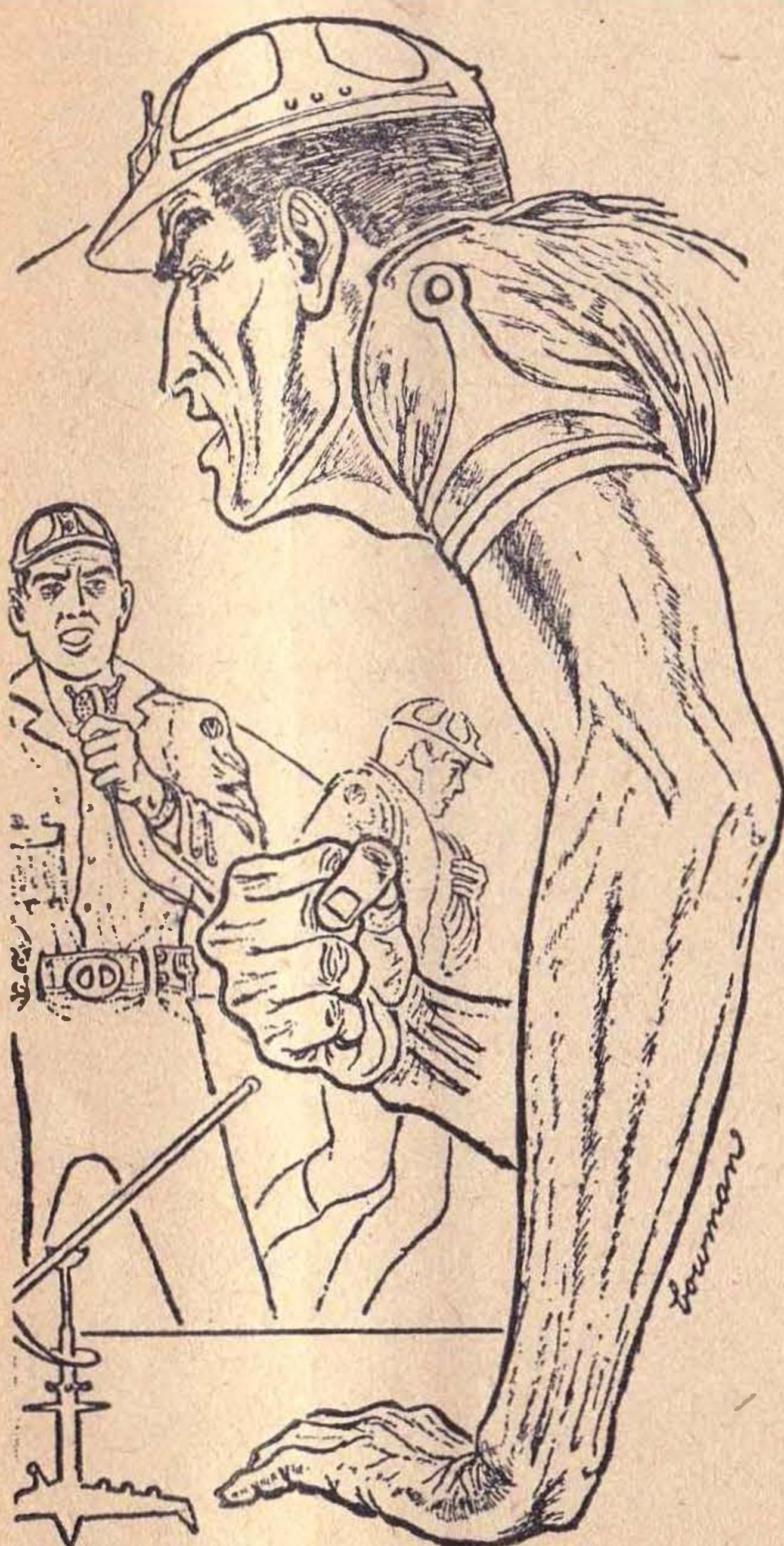
by JAMES BLISH

Illustrated by BOWMAN



**The captain's lot got even unhappier when the Conqueror
of Titan came aboard and the ship started leaking air!**

**A sequel to
Detour to the Stars**



THE THING happened on the third of the new Centaurus runs. The *Flyaway II* had thrown on her hopping field and dwindled away into the sub-atomic microcosm, where she had to stay as long as she had negative mass, only half an hour earlier. Everything seemed quite normal, insofar as anybody could be sure after only two previous runs.

The ship's surgeon reported it at once to Capt. Arpe, who did not understand its significance at once. He was circulating nervously among the sixty-six passengers who were on the second Awake leg, as tradition required him to do. The drop into negative mass—and infinite smallness—was still a new phenomenon, and full of outre side-effects. Even tough-minded colonists, many of them old hands at interplanetary flight, needed the presence of the captain during the first hour or so.

Unfortunately, Arpe was not yet quite the proper man to

soothe them. His space experience was limited to the *Flyaway II*; before that he had been strictly a pencil-and-paper man—the head of the Flyaway Project, to be sure, and the inventor of the drive, but nobody's seasoned spaceman. For that side of captaining he had First Officer Friedrich Oestreicher, an acceleration-hardened veteran of the Mars run. And though that very first drop down into the subatomic had made Arpe something of a hero to the crew, having a hundred lives on his hands was a responsibility still unfamiliar enough to make him jitter now and then.

The presence among the passengers of Dayron Hammersmith, the man the newscasts called "The Conqueror of Titan," did not make his job any easier. The huge-shouldered, flamboyant explorer was a natural center of attention, especially among the women. He was bald, and the woven metal mesh of the thought shield—necessary for sanity in the microcosm, where the sub-ether carried thoughts with bell-like clarity—emphasized rather than hid his baldness; but somehow that made him look even more like a Prussian officer of the old school, and as overpoweringly, cruelly masculine as a hunting panther.

And the stories he told . . . Arpe knew very little about the

satellites, but he was somehow quite sure that there were no snow-tigers on Titan who gnawed away the foundations of buildings, nor any three-eyed natives who relished frozen man-meat warmed until its fluids changed from Ice IV to Ice III. If there were, it was odd that Hammersmith's own book about the Titan expedition had mentioned neither—

"Excuse me, sir," the second officer said quietly at his elbow. "I have a report here from the ship's surgeon. Dr. Hoyle said it might be urgent and that I'd better bring it to you personally."

"Oh. Very well, Mr. Stauffer, what is it?"

"Dr. Hoyle's compliments, sir, and he suggests that oxygen tension be checked. He has an acute surgical emergency—a passenger—which suggests that we may be running close to nine thousand."

"Of course, Titan's been tamed down considerably since my time," Hammersmith was booming jovially. "I'm told the new dome there is almost cozy, except for the wind. That wind—I still dream about it now and then."

Arpe tried to think about Dr. Hoyle's message, but it didn't convey very much to him, and what it did convey was confusing. He knew that spaceships, following a tradition laid down long ago in atmospheric flights, cus-

tomarily expressed oxygen tension in terms of feet of altitude on Earth; but nine thousand feet—though it would doubtless cause considerable discomfort—did not seem to represent a dangerously low concentration. And he could see no connection at all between a somewhat low oxygen level and an acute surgical emergency.

"No, I can't say that I miss Titan much," Hammersmith said, in a meditative tone which nevertheless carried the entire length of the star deck. "I like planets where the sky is clear at least some of the time. My hobby is micro-astronomy—as a matter of fact I have some small reputation in the field. I understand the stars are unusually clear and brilliant from the Centaurus planet, but of course there's nothing like open space for really serious work."

"Are you really going to be a colonist?" someone asked him.

"Not for a while, anyhow," Hammersmith said. "I'm taking my fiancee there—" at least two score feminine faces fell with an almost audible thud—"to establish our home, but I'll be pushing on ahead with a calibration cruiser. The object is to see what additional systems we can reach from there. And I'll be riding my hobby the while; the arrangement suits me nicely."

Arpe was virtually certain that

there was no such discipline as micro-astronomy, and he knew that any collimation-cruising (Hammersmith even had the wrong word) with the Arpe drive was going to be done by one Gordon Arpe, except over his dead body. He quitted the crowd in disgust, and went to enter Dr. Hoyle's confusing message in the log.

OESTREICHER spotted it there as soon as he came on duty.

"What's this?" the first officer said. "Captain, is Dr. Hoyle right about the oxygen tension?"

"Why, yes," Arpe said. "It was pushing eighty-seven hundred. I ordered an increase in pressure."

Oestreicher strode to the mixing board and scanned the big bourdon gages with a single sweeping glance.

"We're not far from ten thousand right now," he said succinctly. "Once we cross that line, we'll have to order everybody into masks. I *thought* I was feeling a little light-headed."

Arpe knew what that meant, all right. The *Flyaway II* had sprung a major leak—or, as seemed more likely, quite a number of major leaks.

"Mr. Stauffer, get the bubble crew going, on the double. We've got to find out where all this air is going. We may have killed Hoyle's patient already." Oe-

streicher began to cut the oxygen feed back down. "No sense in wasting the stuff."

Stauffer saluted and started to leave. Arpe stopped him.

"Do it by intercom, Mr. Stauffer," he said. "I want you to stand by to kill the field."

Both officers stared at him.

"Kill the field?" Oestreicher said. "Excuse me, sir, but we aren't within twenty hours of computed jump time; if I understand the theory, we're still in the same atom we entered at firing time. Won't we just wind up a thousand miles off Earth, where we started?"

"Anyhow, we won't lose air any slower in the macrocosm," Stauffer said.

"You've put your finger on it, Mr. Stauffer," Arpe said drily. "That is why we have to leave. We don't dare add any more mass to the system we're in now. The air that's leaked free of the field has already gone positive, and completely disturbed the location and status of 'our' atom. Our chances of arriving anywhere near either the Earth or Centaurus are growing smaller every second."

Stauffer scratched his head, then resettled the disarranged thought shield hastily as the roar of raw dreams from unshielded sleepers came foaming redly under it. As for Oestreicher, he was imperturbable; Arpe could not

tell whether he understood the proposition or not.

Neither man raised any further questions, however. When it came to the behavior of the drive, Arpe was the final and sole authority.

"We had better find out what this surgical emergency of Hoyle's is," Arpe added. "I still don't understand what bearing it has on the matter."

"He's on his way, sir," Oestreicher said. "I put a call on the bells for him as soon as—here he is now."

Hoyle was a plump, smooth-faced man with a pursed mouth and an expression of perpetual reproof. He looked absurd in his Naval whites. He was also four times a Haber medal winner for advances in space medicine.

"It was a ruptured spleen," he said primly. "A dead giveaway that we were losing oxygen. I was operating when I had Mr. Stauffer called, or I'd have been more explicit."

"Aha," Oestreicher said. "Your patient's a Negro, then."

"A Negress—an 18-year-old girl, and incidentally one of the most beautiful women I have seen in many, many years."

"What has her color to do with it?" Arpe demanded, feeling somewhat petulant at Oestreicher's obvious instant comprehension of the situation.

"Everything," Hoyle said.

"Like many people of African extraction, she has sickleemia—a hereditary condition in which some of the red blood cells take on a characteristic sickle-like shape. In Africa it was pro-survival, because sicklemic people are not so susceptible to malaria as people with normal erythrocytes. But it makes them less able to take air that's poor in oxygen—that was discovered back in the 1940's, during the era of unpressurized high altitude airplane flight. It's nothing that can't be dealt with by keeping sufficient oxygen in the ambient air, but—"

He was interrupted by the horrific clangor of the general alarm. When it quit, Arpe said hastily: "How is she?"

"Dying," Hoyle said bluntly. "What else? I've got her sealed in a lifecraft where the air is normal, but we can't keep that up forever. We've got to get her into our recovery room—or if we can't do that, get her back to Earth fast."

Oestreicher lifted his head briefly from the hood of the flight scanner.

"Ready to kill," he said into the GA mike. "Posts!"

Hoyle saluted and fled back to his patient.

Five minutes after the general alarm, the blaze of thermonuclear glory inside the Nernst generator died briefly, and the field went down. Outside, the weak "light"

of googols of atomic nuclei vanished, to be replaced instantly with sable and stars. The *Fly-away II* was back in normal space.

Normal, utterly unfamiliar space.

THE GENERAL alarm had alarmed nobody but the crew, who alone knew how many hours too soon it had come. As for the bubble gang, the passengers who knew what that meant mercifully kept their mouths shut; and the rest were only amused to see full-grown, grim-looking men stalking the corridors blowing soap bubbles into the air. After a while, the bubble gang vanished; they were working between the hulls.

On the bridge, Stauffer was taking spectra as fast as he could get them onto film, which was far from fast enough for Arpe, let alone the computer. The first attempt at orientation—Schmidt spherical films of the apparent sky, in the hope of identifying at least one constellation, however distorted—had come to nothing; neither the computer nor any of the officers had been able to find a single meaningful relationship.

"Is it going to do us any good if we do find the Sun?" Oestreicher said. "If we make another jump, aren't we going to face the same situation?"

"Here's S Doradus," Stauffer announced. "That's a beginning,

anyhow. But it sure as hell isn't in any position I can recognize."

"We're hoping to find the source of the leak," Arpe reminded the first officer. "But if we don't, I think I can calculate a fast jump. I've never done it before because it involves using a very heavy atom—heavy enough to be unstable, so that there's a chance of getting struck by a nuclear particle. It isn't a very large chance, but except in an emergency—"

"Looking for the Sun?" a booming, unpleasantly familiar voice broke in from the bulkhead. It was Hammersmith, of course. Dogging his footsteps was Dr. Hoyle, looking even more disapproving than ever.

"See here, Mr. Hammersmith," Arpe said. "This is an emergency. You've got no business being on the bridge at all."

"You don't seem to be getting very far with the job," Hammersmith observed, with a disparaging glance at Stauffer. "And it's my life as much as it's anybody else's. It's high time I gave you a hand."

"We'll get along," Oestreicher said, his face red. "Your stake in the matter is no greater than any other passenger's—"

"Ah, that's not quite true," Dr. Hoyle said, almost regretfully. "I'm afraid we've stopped here on Mr. Hammersmith's behalf, in effect."

"Nonsense," Arpe said sharply. "If we stopped for anybody, it was for your patient."

"Yes, quite so," Dr. Hoyle said, spreading his hands helplessly. "She is Mr. Hammersmith's fiancee."

After a moment, Arpe discovered that he was angry—not with Hammersmith, but with himself, for being stunned at the announcement. There was nothing in the least unlikely about such an engagement, and yet it had never entered his head even as a possibility. Evidently his unconscious still had prejudices he had extirpated from his conscious mind thirty-five years ago.

"Why have you been keeping it a secret?" he asked slowly.

"For Helen's protection," Hammersmith said, with considerable bitterness. "On Centaurus we may get a chance at a reasonable degree of privacy and acceptance. But if I'd kept her with me on the ship, she'd have been stared at and whispered over for the entire trip. She preferred to stay below."

AN ENSIGN came in, wearing a spacesuit minus the helmet, and saluted clumsily. After he got the spacesuit arm up, he just left it there, resting his arm inside it. He looked like a small doll some child had managed to stuff inside a larger one.

"Bubble team reporting, sir,"

he said. "We were unable to find any leaks, sir."

"You're out of your mind," Oestreicher said sharply. "The pressure is still dropping. There's a hole somewhere you could put your head through."

"No, sir," the ensign said wearily. "There are no such holes. The entire ship is leaking. The air is going right out through the metal. The rate of loss is perfectly even, no matter where you test it."

"Osmosis!" Arpe exclaimed.

"What does that mean, sir?" Oestreicher said.

"I'm not sure, Mr. Oestreicher. But I've been wondering all along—we all have—just how this business of collapse into the microcosm, and exploding out of it again, would affect the ship structurally. Up to now, we've never detected any change, but evidently that was because it was both too gradual and too general. Evidently it was slowly weakening the molecular bonds of everything on board—until now we have good structural titanium that is acting like a semi-permeable membrane! Furthermore, I'll bet it's specific for oxygen; a 20 per cent drop in pressure is just about what we're getting here."

"What about the effect on people?" Oestreicher said.

"I doubt that it affects living matter," Arpe said. "That's in an

opposite state of entropy. But when we get back, I want to have the ship measured. I'll bet it's several meters bigger in both length and girth than it was when it was built."

"If we get back," Oestreicher said, his brow dark.

"Is this going to put the kibosh on interstellar flight?" Stauffer asked gloomily.

"Probably not," Arpe said. "Unless it makes it too expensive. After this, we're probably going to have to use a ship per trip—scrapping each one afterwards, for anything but local interplanetary flight."

"Look here, all this jabber isn't getting us anywhere," Hammersmith said. "Do you want me to bail you out, or not? If not, I'd rather be in the lifeboat with Helen than standing around listening to you."

"What do you propose to do," Arpe said, finding it impossible not to be frosty, "that we aren't doing already?"

"Teach you your business," Hammersmith said. "I presume you've established our distance from S Doradus as a starter. Once I have that, I can use the star as a beacon, to collimate my next measurements. Then I want the use of an image amplifier, with a direct-reading microvoltmeter tied into the circuit; you ought to have such a thing, as a routine instrument."

Stauffer pointed it out silently. "Good." Hammersmith sat down and began to scan the stars with the amplifier. The meter silently reported the light output of each, as minute pulses of electricity. Hammersmith watched it with a furious intensity. At last he took off his wrist chronometer, which apparently was also a stopwatch, and began to time the movements of the needle.

"Bullseye," he said suddenly.

"The Sun?" Arpe asked, unable to keep his tone from dripping with disbelief.

"No. That one is DQ Herculis—an old nova. It's a micro-variable. It varies by four hundredths of a magnitude every sixty-four seconds. Now we have two stars to fill our parameters; maybe the computer could give us the Sun from there? Let's try it, anyhow."

Stauffer tried it. The computer had decided to be obtuse today. It did, however, narrow the region of search to a small sector of sky, containing approximately sixty stars.

"Does the Sun do something like that?" Oestreicher said. "I knew it was a variable star in the radio frequencies, but what about visible light?"

"If we could mount an RF antenna big enough, we'd have the Sun in a moment," Hammersmith said in a preoccupied voice. "But with light it's more com-

plicated . . . Um. If *that's* the Sun, we must be even farther away from it than I thought. Dr. Hoyle, will you take my watch, please, and take my pulse?"

"Your pulse?" Hoyle said, startled. "Are you feeling ill? The air is—"

"I feel fine, I've breathed thinner air than this and lived," Hammersmith said irritably. "Just take my pulse for a starter, then take everybody else's here and give me the average. If none of you experts know what I'm doing, I'm not going to waste time explaining it to you now. God-dam it, there are lives involved, remember?"

His lips thinned, Arpe nodded silently to Hoyle; he did not trust himself to speak. The physician shrugged his shoulders and began collecting pulse-rates, starting with the big explorer. After a while he had an average and passed it to Hammersmith on a slip of paper torn from his notebook.

"Good," Hammersmith said. "Mr. Stauffer, feed this into Bes-sie there. We are averaging 98.25 heartbeats to the minute. That falls somewhere within a permitted range of variation of two per cent. Bleed that out into an equal number of increments and decrements for a total number of 212, and tell me what the percentage is now. Can do?"

"Simple enough." Stauffer

programmed the tape. The computer jammered out the answer almost before the second officer had stopped typing; Stauffer handed the strip of paper over to Hammersmith.

ARPE WATCHED with reluctant fascination. He had no idea what Hammersmith was doing, but he was beginning to believe that there was such a science as micro-astronomy.

Thereafter, there was a long silence while Hammersmith scanned one star after another. At last he sighed and said:

"There you are. This ninth magnitude job I'm lined up on now. That's the Sun."

"How can you be sure?" Arpe said.

"I'm not sure. But I'm as sure as I can be, at this distance. Make the jump, and I'll explain afterwards. We can't afford to kill any more time with lectures."

"No," Arpe said. "I will do no such thing. I'm not going to throw away what will probably be our only *chance*—the ship isn't likely to stand more than one more jump—on a calculation that I don't even know the rationale of."

"And what's the alternative?" Hammersmith demanded, sneering slightly. "Sit here and die of anorexia—and just sheer damn stubbornness?"

"I am the captain of this ves-

sel," Arpe said, flushing. "We do not move until I get a satisfactory explanation of your pretensions. Do you understand me? That's my order, and it's absolutely final."

For a few moments the two men glared at each other, stiff-necked as idols, each the god of his own pillbox-universe.

Hammersmith's eyelids drooped. All at once, he seemed too tired to care.

"You're wasting time," he said. "Surely it would be faster to check the spectrum."

"Excuse me, captain," Stauffer said excitedly. "I just did that. And I think that star *is* the Sun. It's about eight hundred light years away—"

"My God," Arpe said. "Eight hundred?"

"Yes, sir, at least that. The spectral lines are about half missing, but all the ones that are definite enough to measure match nicely with the Sun's."

Hammersmith looked up again, his expression curiously like that of a whipped St. Bernard. "Isn't that sufficient?" he said hoarsely. "In God's name, let's get going. She's dying while we stand here nit-picking!"

"No rationale, no jump," Arpe said stonily. Oestreicher shot him a peculiar glance out of the corners of his eyes. In that moment, Arpe felt his status as hero of the first jump shatter like

a Prince Rupert's Drop; but he would not yield.

"Very well," Hammersmith said gently. "It goes like this. The Sun is a variable star. With a few exceptions, the pulses don't exceed the total average emission by more than two per cent. The overall period is 273 months. Inside that, there are at least 63 subordinate cycles. There's one of 212 days. Another one last only a fraction over six and a half days—I forget the exact period, but it's one twelve-hundred-and-fiftieth of the main cycle, if you want to work it out."

"To be sure; you already told us the essence of that," Arpe said. "But what of it? What's all this got to do with the routine you just put us through? How do you know that the star on that 'scope is the Sun?"

"These cycles have effects. The six-and-a-half-day cycle strongly influences the weather on Earth, for instance. And the 212-day cycle is reflected one-for-one *in the human pulse rate.*"

"Oho," Oestreicher said. "Now I see. My God, Captain—this means that we can *never* be lost! Not as long as the Sun is detectable at all! We're carrying the only beacon we need right in our blood!"

"Yes," Hammersmith said. "That's how it goes. It's better to take an average of all the pulses available, since one man

might be too excited to give you an accurate figure. I'm that overwrought myself. But it's true, Mr. Oestreicher: you may go as far as you please, but your Sun stays in your blood. You never really leave home."

He lifted his head and looked at Arpe with hooded, bloodshot eyes.

"Now can we go, please?" he said, almost in a whisper. "And, Captain—if this delay has killed Helen, you will answer for it to me—if I have to chase you to the smallest, the most remote star that God ever made."

Arpe swallowed. "Mr. Stauffer," he said, "sound the general alarm."

THE GIRL, exquisite even in her still and terrible coma, was first off the ship into the cab for the satellite station. Hammersmith went with her, his big face contorted with anguish.

Then the massive job of evacuating everybody else began. Everyone—passengers and ship's complement alike—was wearing masks now. After the jump through the heavy cosmic-ray primary that Arpe had picked for a vehicle back to Earth, the *Flyaway II* was losing air as though she were made of nothing better than surgical gauze.

Arpe watched the cab go back toward the satellite from the bridge. Traditionally, he had to

be last off the ship, and both Oestreicher and Stauffer were thoroughly tied up with the exodus. After a while, however, the bulkhead lock swung heavily open, and Dr. Hoyle came in.

"What do you think?" Arpe said in a husky voice, not turning away from the viewplate. "Has she still got a chance, Hoyle?"

"I don't know. It will be nip and tuck. Maybe. Wilson—the station surgeon—is as good as they come. But she was on the way out for a long time. She may be a little—"

He stopped.

"Go on," Arpe said. "Give it to me straight. I know I was wrong."

"She was low on oxygen for a long time," Hoyle said, without looking at Arpe. "It may be that she'll be a little simple-minded when she recovers. Or it may not; I just don't know. But one thing's for sure: she'll never dare go into space again. Not even back to Earth. The slightest drop from normal oxygen tension would kill her."

Arpe swallowed. "Does Hammersmith know that?"

"Yes," Hoyle said. "He knows it. But he went with her anyhow. He loves her."

The cab carrying the explorer and his fiancee was still visible, just barely, as a tiny capsule maneuvering before the access port of the satellite station. The great wheel of the station spun solemnly above the Earth. Sick at heart, Arpe watched the cab enter it.

That great torus was the gateway to the stars—for everyone on Earth but Dayron and Helen Hammersmith.

The door that was closing behind them now was no gateway to anyplace. It was the door to a prison.

But it was also, Arpe realized suddenly, a prison which would hold a great teacher—not of the humanities, but of Humanity. Arpe, free, had no such thing to teach. He knew how to do a great thing, too—how to travel to the stars—but it was the essence of his job to sit back and watch other people do it.

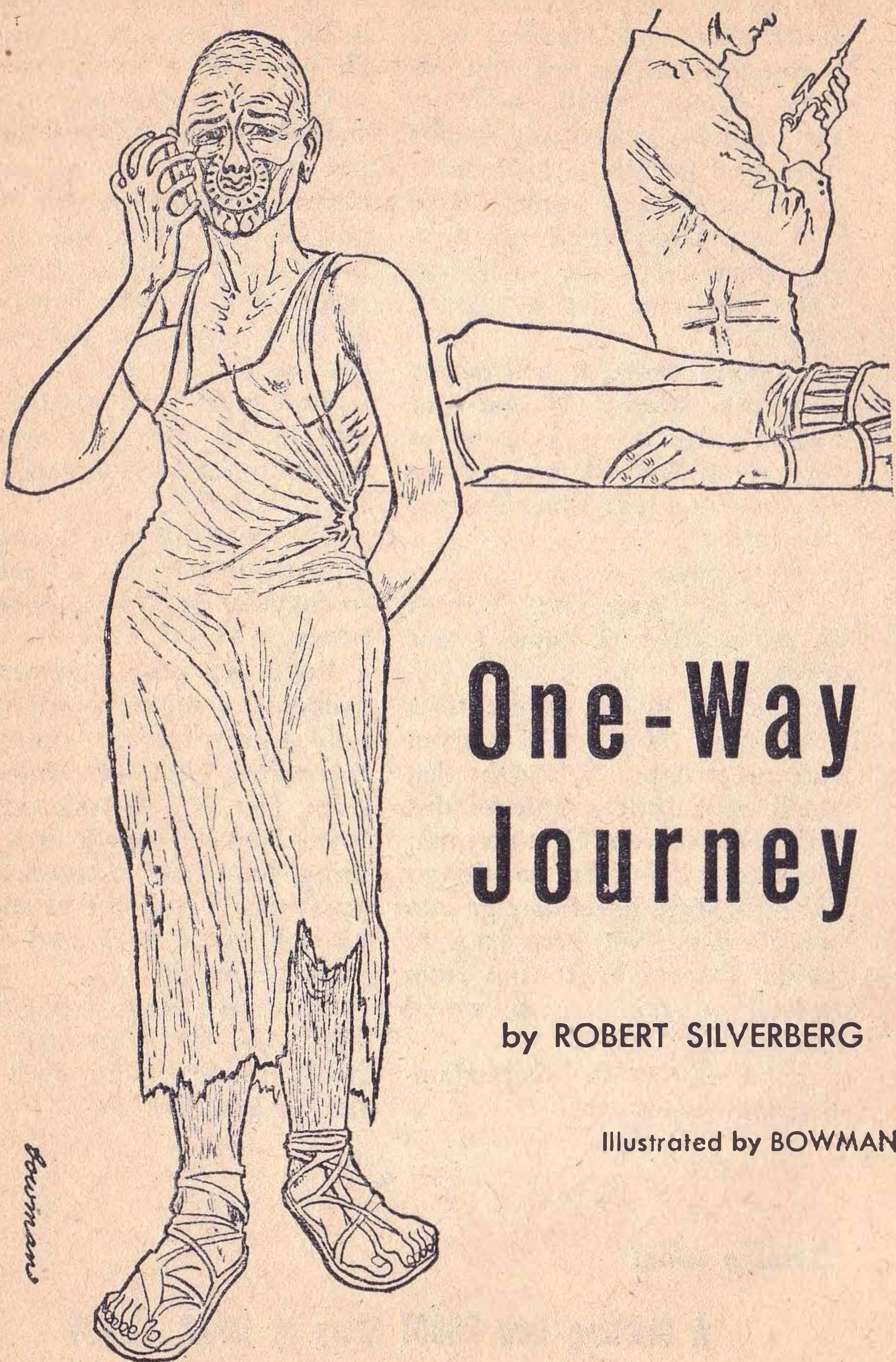
That was a prison, too; a prison Capt. Gordon Arpe had fashioned himself, and then had thrown away the key.

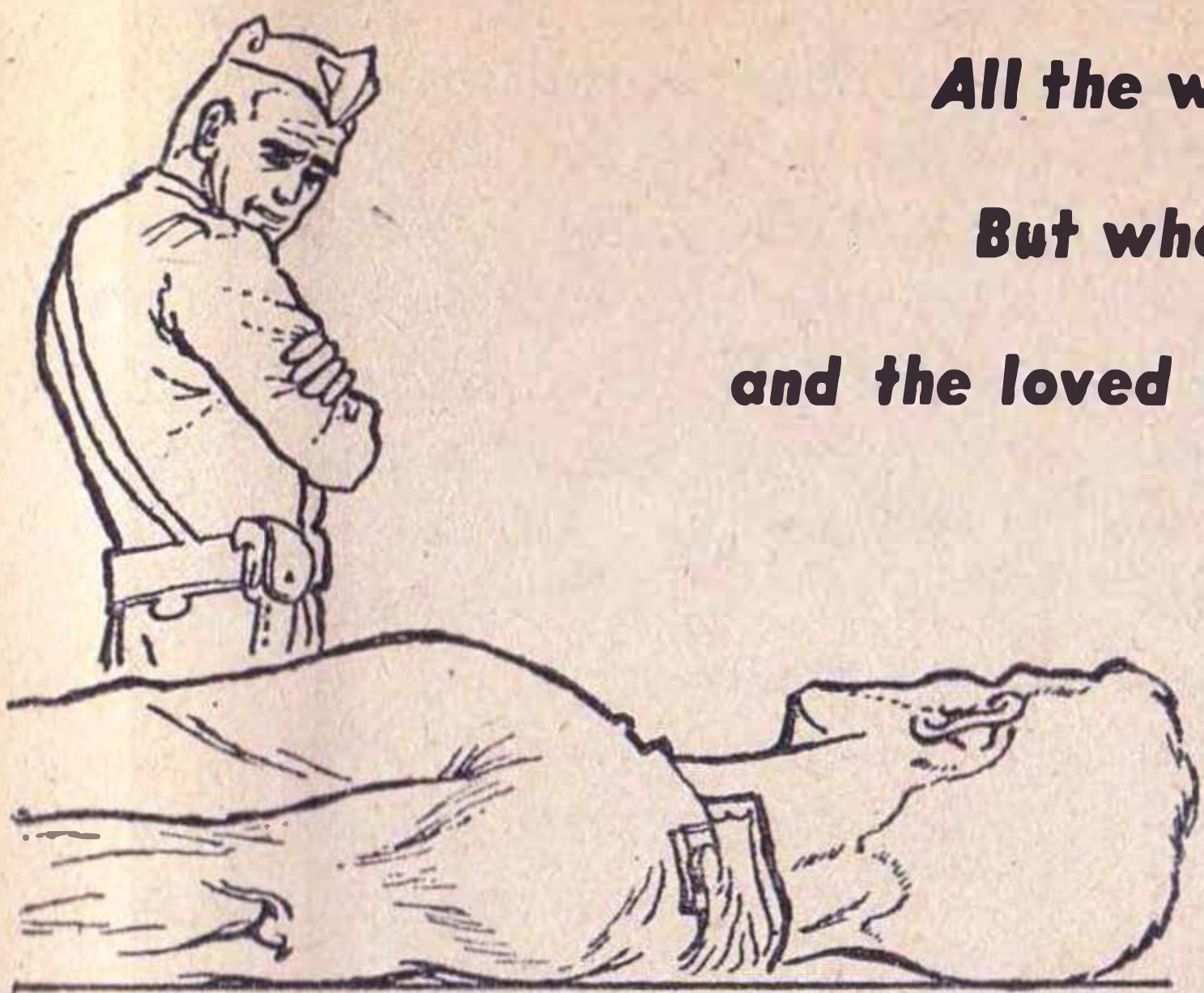
∞ ∞ ∞

Coming Soon!

A Startling New ROBOT Story by ISAAC ASIMOV

NOR IRON BARS





All the world loves a lover—usually.

But when the world is the universe,

and the loved one a monster—what then?

CHAPTER I

BEHIND the comforting walls of Terra Import's headquarters on Kollidor, Commander Leon Warshow was fumbling nervously with the psych reports on his mirror-bright desk. Commander Warshow was thinking about spaceman Matt Falk, and about himself. Commander Warshow was about to react very predictably.

Personnel Lieutenant Krisch had told him the story about Falk an hour before, and Warshow was waiting for the boy, having sent for him after a hasty conference with Cullinan, the *Magyar's* saturnine psych officer.

An orderly buzzed and said, "Spaceman Falk to see you, sir." "Have him wait a few min-

utes," Warshow said, speaking too quickly. "I'll buzz for him."

It was a tactical delay. Wondering why he, an officer, should be so tense before an interview with an enlisted man, Warshow rifled through the sheaf of records on Matt Falk.

Orphaned, 2543 . . . Academy . . . two years' commercial service, military contract . . . injury en route to Kollidor . . .

Appended were comprehensive medical reports on Falk's injury, and Dr. Sigstrom's okay. Also a disciplinary chart, very favorable, and a jagged-edged psych contour, good.

Warshow depressed the buzzer. "Send Falk in," he said.

The photon-beam clicked and the door swung back. Matt Falk entered and faced his commander

stonily; Warshow glared back, studying the youngster as if he had never seen him before. Falk was just twenty-five, very tall and very blonde, with wide, bunch-muscled shoulders and keen blue eyes. The scar along the left side of his face was almost completely invisible, but not even chemotherapeutic incubation had been able to restore the smooth evenness of the boy's jaw. Falk's face looked oddly lopsided; the unharmed right jaw sloped easily and handsomely up to the condyle, while the left still bore obscure but definitely present echoes of the boy's terrible shipboard accident.

"You want me, Commander?"

"We're leaving Kollidor tomorrow, Matt," Warshow said quietly. "Leftenant Krisch tells me you haven't returned to ship to pack your gear. Why?"

The jaw that had been ruined and rebuilt quivered slightly. "You know, sir. I'm not going back to Earth, sir. I'm staying here. With Thetona."

There was a frozen silence. Then, with calculated cruelty, Warshow said, "You're really hipped on that flatface, eh?"

"Maybe so," Falk murmured. "That flatface. That gook. What of it?" His quiet voice was bitterly defiant.

Warshow tensed. He was trying to do the job delicately, without inflicting further psychoper-

sonal damage on young Falk. To leave a psychotic crewman behind on an alien world was impossible—but to extract Falk forcibly from the binding webwork of associations that tied him to Kollidor would leave scars not only on crewman but also on captain.

Perspiring, Warshow said, "You're an Earthman, Matt. Don't you—"

"Want to go home? No."

The commander grinned feebly. "You sound mighty permanent about that, son."

"I am," Falk said stiffly. "You know why I want to stay here. I *am* staying here. May I be excused now, sir?"

Warshow drummed on the desktop, hesitating for a moment, then nodded. "Permission granted, Mr. Falk." There was little point in prolonging what he now saw had been a predeterminedly pointless interview.

He waited a few moments after Falk had left. Then he switched on the communicator. "Send in Major Cullinan, please."

The beady-eyed psychman appeared almost instantly. "Well?"

"The boy's staying," Warshow said. "Complete and single-minded fixation. Go ahead; break it."

Cullinan shrugged. "We may have to leave him here, and that's all there is to it. Have you met the girl?"

"Kollidorian. Alien. Ugly as

sin. I've seen her picture; he had it over his bunk until he moved out. And we *can't* leave him here, Major."

Cullinan raised one bushy eyebrow quizzically. "We can try to bring Falk back, if you insist—but it won't work. Not without crippling him."

Warshow whistled idly, avoiding the psychman's stern gaze. "I insist," he said finally. "There's no alternative."

He snatched at the communicator.

"Leftenant Krisch, please." A brief pause; then: "Krisch, Warshow. Tell the men that departure's been postponed four days. Have Molhaus refigure the orbits. Yes, four days. *Four*."

Warshow hung up, glanced at the heaped Falk dossier on his desk, and scowled. Psych Officer Cullinan shook his head sadly, rubbing his growing bald spot.

"That's a drastic step, Leon."

"I know. But I'm not going to leave Falk behind." Warshow rose, eyed Cullinan uneasily, and added, "Care to come with me? I'm going down into Kollidor City."

"What for?"

"I want to talk with the girl," Warshow said.

LATER, in the crazily-twisting network of aimless streets that was the alien city, Warshow began to wish he had ordered Cul-

linan to come with him. As he made his way through swarms of the placid, ugly, broad-faced Kollidorians, he regretted very much that he had gone alone.

What would he do, he wondered, when he finally did reach the flat where Falk and his Kollidian girl were living? Warshow wasn't accustomed to handling himself in groundborne interpersonal situations of this sort. He didn't know what to say to the girl.

He had thought he could handle Falk. *The relation of commander to crewman is that of parent to child*, the Book said. Warshow grinned self-consciously. He didn't feel very fatherly just now—more like a dutch uncle, he thought.

He kept walking. Kollidor City spread out ahead of him like a tangled ball of twine coming unrolled in five directions at once; its streets seemed to have been laid down almost at random. But Warshow knew the city well. This was his third tour of duty to the Kollidor sector; three times he had brought cargo from Earth, three times waited while his ship was loaded with Kollidian goods for export.

Overhead, the distant blue-white sun burnt brightly. Kollidor was the thirteenth planet in its system; it swung in a large circle nearly four billion miles from its blazing primary.

Warshow sniffled; it reminded him that he was due for his regular anti-pollen injection. He was already thoroughly protected, as was his crew, against most forms of alien disease likely to come his way on this trip.

But how do you protect someone like Falk? Warshow asked himself gloomily. The commander had no quick answers for that. It wouldn't ordinarily seem necessary to inoculate spacemen against falling in love with bovine alien women, but—

"Good afternoon, Commander Warshow," a dry voice said suddenly.

Warshow glanced around, surprised and annoyed. The man who stood behind him was tall, thin, with hard knobby cheekbones protruding grotesquely from parchment-like chalk-white skin. Warshow recognized the genetic pattern, and the man. He was Domnik Kross, a trader from the quondam Terran colony of Rigel IX.

"Hello, Kross," Warshow said sullenly, and halted to let the other catch up.

"What brings you to the city, Commander? I thought you were getting ready to pack up and flit away."

"We're — postponing four days," Warshow said.

"Oh? Got any leads worth telling about? Not that I personally would care to—"

"Skip it, Kross." Warshow's voice was weary. "We've finished our trading for the season. You've got a clear field. Now leave me alone, yes?"

He started to walk faster, but the Rigelian, smiling bleakly, kept in step with him.

"You sound disturbed, Commander."

Warshow glanced impatiently at the other, wishing he could unburden himself of the Rigelian's company. "I'm on a mission of top security value, Kross. Are you going to insist on accompanying me?"

Thin lips parted slyly in a cold grin. "Not at all, Commander Warshow. I simply thought I'd be civil and walk with you a way, just to swap the news. After all, if you're leaving in four days we're not really rivals any more, and—"

"Exactly," Warshow said.

"What's this about one of your crewmen living with a native?" Kross asked suddenly.

Warshow spun on his heel and glared up tensely. "Nothing," he grated. "You hear that? There's nothing to it!"

Kross chuckled, and Warshow saw that he had decidedly lost a point in the deadly-cold rivalry between Terran and Rigelian, between man and son of man. Genetic drift accounted for the Domnik Krosses. A little bit of chromosome looping on a col-

onized planet, a faint tincture of inbreeding over ten generations, and a new subspecies had appeared: an alien subspecies that bore little love for its progenitors.

They reached a complex fork in the street, and the commander impulsively turned to the left. Gratifyingly, he noticed that Kross was not following him.

"See you next year!" the Rigelian said.

Warshow responded with a noncommittal grunt, and kept moving down the dirty street, happy to be rid of Kross so soon. The Rigelians, he thought, were nasty customers. They were forever jealous of the mother world and its people, forever anxious to outrace an Earthman to a profitable deal on a world such as Kollidor.

Because of Kross, Warshow reflected, *I'm going where I'm going now.* Pressure from the Rigelians forced Earthmen to keep up appearances throughout the galaxy. The Earthman's Burden, Terrans termed it unofficially. To leave a deserter behind on Kollidor would endanger Earth's prestige in the eyes of the entire universe—and the shrewd Rigelians would make sure the entire universe knew.

Warshow felt hemmed in. As he approached the flat where Falk had said he was living, he felt cascades of perspiration tumbling stickily down his back.

"YES PLEASE?"

Warshow stood at the door, a little appalled by the sight and the smell. A Kollidorian female faced him squarely. *Good God,* he thought. *She's sure no beauty.*

"I'm . . . Commander Warshow," he said. "Of the *Magyar.* Matt's ship. May I come in?"

The sphincter-like mouth rippled into what Warshow supposed was a gracious smile. "Of course. I have hoped you would come. Matt has spoken so much of you."

She backed away from the door, and Warshow stepped inside. *Be it ever so humble,* he thought, as the pungent rankness of concentrated Kollidorian odor assaulted his olfactories.

It was an unpainted two-room flat; beyond the room they were in, Warshow saw another, slightly larger and sloppier, with kitchen facilities. Unwashed dishes lay heaped in the sink. To his surprise, he noticed an unmade bed in the far room . . . and another in the front one. *Single* beds. He frowned puzzledly and turned to the girl.

She was nearly as tall as he was, and much broader. Her brown skin was drab and thick, looking more like hide than skin; her face was wide and plain, with two flat unsparkling eyes, a grotesque bubble of a nose, and a many-lipped compound mouth. The girl wore a shapeless black

frock that hung to her thick ankles. For all Warshow knew, she might be the pinnacle of Kollidorian beauty — but her charms scarcely seemed likely to arouse much desire in a normal Earthman.

"You're Thetona, is that right?"

"Yes, Commander Warshow."

"May I sit down?" he asked.

He was fencing tentatively, hemming around the situation without cutting toward it. He made a great business of taking a seat and crossing his legs fastidiously; the girl stared, cowlike, but remained standing.

An awkward silence followed; then the girl said, "You want Matt to go home with you, don't you?"

Warshow reddened and tightened his jaws angrily. "Yes. Our ship's leaving in four days. I came to get him."

"He isn't here," she said.

"I know. He's back at the base. He'll be home soon."

"You haven't done anything to him?" she asked, suddenly apprehensive.

He shook his head. "He's all right." After a moment Warshow glanced sharply at her and said, "He loves you, doesn't he?"

"Yes." But the answer seemed hesitant.

"And you love him?"

"Oh, yes," Thetona said warmly. "Certainly."

"I see." Warshow wet his lips. This was going to be difficult. "Suppose you tell me how you came to fall in love? I'm curious."

She smiled—at least, he assumed it was a smile. "I met him about two days after you Earthmen came for your visit. I was walking in the streets, and I saw him. He was sitting on the edge of the street, crying."

"What?"

Her flat eyes seemed to go misty. "Sitting there sobbing to himself. It was the first time I ever saw an Earthman like that—crying, I mean. I felt terribly sorry for him. I went over to talk to him. He was like a little lost boy."

Warshow looked up, astonished, and stared at the alien girl's placid face with total disbelief. In ten years of dealing with the Kollidorians, he had never gone too close to them; he had left personal contact mainly to others. But—

Dammit, the girl's almost human! Almost—

"Was he sick?" Warshow asked, his voice hoarse. "Why was he crying?"

"He was lonely," Thetona said serenely. "He was afraid. He was afraid of me, of you, of everyone. So I talked to him, there by the edge of the street, for many minutes. And then he asked to come home with me. I lived by myself, here. He came with me.

And—he has been here since three days after that."

"And he plans to stay here permanently?" Warshow asked.

The wide head wagged affirmatively. "We are very fond of each other. He is lonely; he needs someone to—"

"That'll be enough," Falk's voice said suddenly.

WARSHOW WHIRLED. Falk was standing in the doorway, his face bleak and grim. The scar on his face seemed to be inflamed, though Warshow was sure that was impossible.

"What are you doing here?" Falk asked.

"I came to visit Thetona," Warshow said mildly. "I didn't expect to have you return so soon."

"I know you didn't. I walked out when Cullinan started poking around me. Suppose you get out."

"You're talking to a superior officer," Warshow reminded him. "If I—"

"I resigned ten minutes ago," Falk snapped. "You're no superior of mine! Get out!"

Warshow stiffened. He looked appealingly at the alien girl, who put her thick six-fingered hand on Falk's shoulder and stroked his arm. Falk wriggled away.

"Don't," he said. "Well—are you leaving? Thetona and I want to be alone."

"Please go, Commander Warshow," the girl said softly. "Don't get him excited."

"Excited? Who's excited?" Falk roared. "I—"

Warshow sat impassively, evaluating and analyzing, ignoring for the moment what was happening.

Falk would have to be brought back to the ship for treatment. There was no alternative, Warshow saw. This strange relationship with the Kollidorian would have to be broken.

He stood up and raised one hand for silence. "Mister Falk, let me speak."

"Go ahead. Speak quick, because I'm going to pitch you out of here in two minutes."

"I won't need two minutes," Warshow said. "I simply want to inform you that you're under arrest, and that you're hereby directed to report back to the base at once, in my custody. If you refuse to come it will be necessary—"

The sentence went unfinished. Falk's eyes flared angrily, and he crossed the little room in three quick bounds. Towering over the much smaller Warshow, he grabbed the commander by the shoulders and shook him violently. "Get out!" he shrieked.

Warshow smiled apologetically, took one step backward, and slid his stunner from its place in his tunic. He gave Falk a quick,

heavy jolt, and as the big man sagged toward the floor, Warshow grabbed him and eased him into a chair.

Thetona was crying. Great goblets of amber liquid oozed from her eyes and trickled heartbreakingly down her coarse cheeks.

"Sorry," Warshow said. "It had to be done."

CHAPTER II

IT HAD to be done.

It had to be done.

It *had* to be done.

Warshow paced the cabin, his weak eyes darting nervously from the bright row of rivets across the ceiling to the quiet gray walls to the sleeping form of Matt Falk, and finally to the waiting, glowering visage of Psych Officer Cullinan.

"Do you want to wake him?" Cullinan asked.

"No. Not yet." Warshow kept prowling restlessly, trying to square his actions within himself. A few more minutes passed. Finally Cullinan stepped out from behind the cot on which Falk lay, and took Warshow's arm.

"Leon, tell me what's eating you."

"Don't shrink *my* skull," Warshow burst out. Then, sorry, he shook his head. "I didn't mean that. You know I didn't."

"It's two hours since you brought him aboard the ship."

Cullinan said. "Don't you think we ought to do something?"

"What can we do?" Warshow demanded. "Throw him back to that alien girl? Kill him? Maybe that's the best solution—let's stuff him in the converters and blast off." He giggled.

Falk stirred. "Ray him again," Warshow said hollowly. "The stunning's wearing off."

Cullinan used his stunner and Falk subsided. "We can't keep him asleep forever," the psych-man said.

"No—we can't." Warshow knew time was growing short; in three days the revised departure date would arrive, and he didn't dare risk another postponement.

But if they left Falk behind, and if word got around that a crazy Earthman was loose on Kollidor, or that Earthmen went crazy at all—

And there was no answer to that.

"Therapy," Cullinan said quietly.

"There's no time for an analysis," Warshaw pointed out. "Three days—that's all."

"I didn't mean a full-scale job. But if we nail him with an amytal-derivative inhibitor drug, filter out his hostility to talking to us, and run him back along his memories we might hit something that'll help us."

Warshow shuddered. "Mind-dredging, eh?"

"Call it that," the psychman said. "But let's dredge out whatever it is that's tipped his rocker, or it'll wreck us all. You, me—and that girl."

"You think we can find it?"

"We can try. No Earthman in his right mind would form a sexual relationship of this kind—or *any* sort of emotional bond with an alien creature. If we hit the thing that catapulted him into it, maybe we can break this obviously neurotic fixation and make him leave willingly. Unless you're willing to leave him behind. I absolutely forbid dragging him away as he is."

"Of course not," Warshow agreed. He mopped away sweat and glanced over at Falk, who still dreamed away under the effects of the stunbeam. "It's worth a try. If you think you can break it, go ahead. I deliver him into thy hands."

The psychman smiled with surprising warmth. "It's the only way. Let's dig up what happened to him and show it to him. That should crack the shell."

"I hope so," Warshow said. "It's in your hands. Wake him up, and get him talking. You know what to do."

A MURKY CLOUD of drug-laden air hung in the cabin as Cullinan concluded his preliminaries. Falk stirred and began to grope toward consciousness. Cul-

linan handed Warshow an ultrasonic injector filled with a clear, glittering liquid.

Just as Falk seemed to be ready to open his eyes, Cullinan leaned over him and began to talk, quietly, soothingly. Falk's troubled frown vanished, and he subsided.

"Give him the drug," Cullinan whispered. Warshow touched the injector hesitantly to Falk's tanned forearm. The ultrasonic hummed briefly, blurred into the skin. Warshow administered 3 cc and retracted.

Falk moaned gently.

"It'll take a few minutes," Cullinan said.

The wall clock circled slowly. After a while, Falk's sleep-heavy eyelids fluttered. He opened his eyes and glanced up without recognition of his surroundings.

"Hello, Matt. We're here to talk to you," Cullinan said. "Or rather, we want you to talk to us."

"Yes," Falk said.

"Let's begin with your mother, shall we? Tell us what you remember about your mother. Go back, now."

"My—mother?" The question seemed to puzzle Falk, and he remained silent for nearly a minute. Then he moistened his lips. "What do you want to know about her?"

"Tell us everything," Cullinan urged.

There was silence. Warshow found himself holding his breath.

Mind-dredging, he thought despairingly. *What good will it do?*

Still silence. Finally, Falk began to speak.

WARM. Cuddly. Hold me, Mama.

I'm all alone. It's night, and I'm crying. There are pins in my leg where I slept on it, and the night air smells cold. I'm three years old, and I'm all alone.

Hold me, Mama?

I hear Mama coming up the stairs. We have an old house with stairs, near the spaceport where the big ships go *woosh!* There's the soft smell of Mama holding me now. Mama's big and pink and soft. Daddy is pink too, except for his face which is mostly black, but he doesn't smell warm. Uncle is the same way.

Ah, ali, baby, she's saying. She's in the room now, and holding me tight. It's good. I'm getting very drowsy. In a minute or two I'll be asleep. I like my Mama very much.

"IS THAT your earliest recollection of your mother?" Cullinan asked.

"No. I guess there's an earlier one."

DARK HERE. Dark and very warm, and wet, and nice. I'm

not moving. I'm all alone here, and I don't know where I am. It's like floating in an ocean. A big ocean. The whole world's an ocean.

It's nice here, real nice. I'm not crying.

Now there's blue needles in the black around me. Colors . . . all kinds. Red and green and lemon-yellow, and I'm *moving!* There's pain and pushing, and—God—it's getting cold. I'm choking! I'm hanging on, but I'm going to drown in the air out there! I'm—

"**THAT'LL** be enough," Cullinan said hastily. To Warshow he explained, "Birth trauma. Nasty. No need to put him through it all over again." Warshow shivered a little and blotted his forehead.

"Should I go on?" Falk asked.
"Yes. Go on."

I'M FOUR, and it's raining *plunk-a-plunk outside*. It looks like the whole world's turned gray. Mama and Daddy are away, and I'm alone again. Uncle is downstairs. I don't know Uncle really, but he seems to be here all the time. Mama and Daddy are away a lot. Being alone is like a cold rainstorm. It rains a lot here.

I'm in my bed, thinking about Mama. I want Mama. Mama took the jetplane somewhere. When I'm big, I want to take the jet-

plane somewhere too—someplace warm and bright where it doesn't rain.

Downstairs the phone rings, jingle-jingle. Inside my head I can see the screen starting to get bright and full of colors, and I try to picture Mama's face in the middle of the screen. But I can't. I hear Uncle's voice talking, low and mumbly. I decide I don't like Uncle, and I start to cry.

Uncle's here, and he's telling me I'm too big to cry. That I shouldn't cry any more. I tell him I want Mama.

Uncle makes a nasty-mouth, and I cry louder.

Hush, he tells me. Quiet, Matt. There, there, Matty boy.

He straightens my blankets, but I scrunch my legs up under me and mess them up again because I know it'll annoy him. I like to annoy him because he isn't Mama or Daddy. But this time he doesn't seem to get annoyed. He just tidies them up again, and he pats my forehead. There's sweat on his hands and he gets it on me.

I want Mama, I tell him.

He looks down at me for a long time. Then he tells me, Mama's not coming back.

Not ever, I ask?

No, he says. Not ever.

I don't believe him, but I don't start crying because I don't want him to know he can scare me. How about Daddy, I say. Get him for me.

Daddy's not going to be back either, he tells me.

I don't believe you, I say. I don't like you, Uncle. I hate you.

He shakes his head and coughs. You'd better learn to like me, he says. You don't have anybody else any more.

I don't understand him, but I don't like what he's saying. I kick the blankets off the bed, and he picks them up. I kick them off again, and he hits me.

Then he bends over quick and kisses me, but he doesn't smell right and I start to cry. Rain comes. I want Mama; I yell but Mama never comes. Never at all.

FALK fell silent for a moment, and closed his eyes. "Was she dead?" Cullinan prodded.

"She was dead," Falk said. "She and dad were killed in a fluke jetliner accident, coming back from a holiday in Bangkok. I was four, then. My uncle raised me. We didn't get along, much, and when I was fourteen he put me in the Academy. I stayed there four years, took two years of graduate technique, then jointed Terran Imports. Two-year hitch on Denufar, then transferred to Commander Warshow's ship *Magyar* where—where—"

He stopped abruptly. Cullinan glanced at Warshow and said, "He's warmed up now, and we're ready to strike paydirt, to mangle a metaphor." To Falk, he

said, "Tell us how you met Thetona."

I'M ALONE in Kollidor and wandering around alone. It's a big sprawling place with funny-looking conical houses and crazy streets, but deep down underneath I can see it's just like Earth. The people are people. They're pretty bizarre, but they've got one head and two arms and two legs, which makes them more like people than some of the aliens I've seen.

Warshow gave us afternoon's liberty. I don't know why I've left the ship, but I'm here in the city alone. Alone. Dammit, *alone!*

The streets are paved but the sidewalks aren't. Suddenly I'm very tired and I feel dizzy. I sit down at the edge of the sidewalk and put my head in my hands. The aliens just walk around me, like people in any big city would.

Mama, I think.

Then I think, *where did that come from?*

And suddenly a great empty loneliness comes welling up from inside of me and spills out all over me, and I start to cry. I haven't cried since—since—not in a long time. But now I cry, hoarse ratchety gasps and tears rolling down my face and dribbling into the corners of my mouth. Tears taste salty, I think. A little like raindrops.

My side starts to hurt where

I had the accident aboard ship. It begins up near my ear and races like a blue flame down my body to my thigh, and it hurts like a devil. The doctors told me I wouldn't hurt any more. They lied.

I feel my aloneness like a sealed spacesuit around me, cutting me off from everyone. *Mama*, I think again. Part of me is saying, *act like a grownup*, but that part of me is getting quieter and quieter. I keep crying, and I want desperately to have my mother again. I realize now I never knew my mother at all, except for a few years long ago.

Then there's a musky, slightly sickening smell and I know one of the aliens is near me. They're going to grab me by the scruff and haul me away like any weepy-eyed drunk in the public streets. Warshow will give me hell.

You're crying, Earthman, a warm voice says.

The Kollidorian language is kind of warm and liquid and easy to learn, but this sounds especially warm. I turn around and there's this big native dame.

Yeah, I'm crying, I say, and look away. Her big hands clamp down on me and hang on, and I shiver a little. It feels funny to be touched by an alien woman.

She sits down next to me. You look very sad, she says.

I am, I tell her.

Why are you sad?

You'd never understand, I say. I turn my head away and feel tears start creeping out of my eyes, and she grabs me impulsively. I nearly retch from the smell of her, but in a minute or two I see it's sort of sweet and nice in a strange way.

She's wearing an outfit like a potato sack, and it smells pretty high. But she pulls my head against her big warm breasts and leaves it there.

What's your name, unhappy Earthman?

Falk, I say. Matthew Falk.

I'm Thetona, she says. I live alone. Are you lonely?

I don't know, I say. I really don't know.

But how can you not know if you're lonely, she asks.

She pulls my head up out of her bosom and our eyes come together. Real romantic. She's got eyes like tarnished half dollars. We look at each other, and she reaches out and pushes the tears out of my eyes.

She smiles. I think it's a smile. She had about thirty notches arranged in a circle under her nose, and that's a mouth. All the notches pucker. Behind them I see bright needly teeth.

I look up from her mouth to her eyes again, and this time they don't look tarnished so much. They're bright like the teeth, and deep and warm.

Warm. Her odor is warm.

Everything about her is warm.

I start to cry again—compulsively without knowing what the hell is happening to me. She seems to flicker and I think I see a Terran woman sitting there cradling me. I blink. Nothing there but an ugly alien.

Only she's not ugly any more. She's warm and lovely, in a strange sort of way, and the part of me that disagrees is very tiny and tinny-sounding. I hear it yelling, *no*, and then it stops and winks out.

Something strange is exploding inside me. I let it explode. It bursts like a flower—a rose, or a violet, and that's what I smell instead of *her*.

I put my arms around her.

Do you want to come to my house, she asks.

Yes, yes, I say. Yes!

ABRUPTLY, Falk stopped on the ringing affirmative, and his glazed eyes closed. Cullinan fired the stunner once and the boy's taut body slumped.

"Well?" Warshow asked. His voice was dry and harsh. "I feel unclean after hearing that."

"You should," the psychman said. "It's one of the slimiest things I've uncovered yet. And you don't understand it, do you?"

The commander shook his head slowly. "No. Why'd he do it? He's in love with her—but why?"

Cullinan chuckled. "You'll see. But I want a couple of other people here when I yank it out. I want the girl, first of all—and I want Sigstrom."

"The doctor? What the hell for?"

"Because—if I'm right—he'll be very interested in hearing what comes out." Cullinan grinned enigmatically. "Let's give Falk a rest, eh? After all that talking, he needs it."

"So do I," Warshow said.

CHAPTER III

FOUR PEOPLE watched silently as Falk slipped into the drug-induced trance a second time. Warshow studied the face of the alien girl Thetona for some sign of the warmth Falk had spoken of. And yes, Warshow saw—it was there. Behind her sat Sigstrom, the *Magyar*'s head medic. To his right, Cullinan. And lying on the cot in the far corner of the cabin, eyes open but obviously unseeing, was Matt Falk.

"Matt, can you hear me?" Cullinan asked. "I want you to back up a little . . . you're aboard ship now. The time is approximately one month ago. You're working in the converter section, you and Dave Murff, handling hot stuff. Got that?"

"Yes," Falk said. "I know what you mean."

I'M IN Converter Section AA, getting thorium out of hock to feed to the reactors; we've gotta keep the ship moving. Dave Murff's with me. We make a good team on the waldoes.

We're running them now, picking up the chunks of hot stuff and stowing them in the reactor bank. It's not easy to manipulate the remote-control mechanihands, but I'm not scared. This is my job, and I know how to do it.

I'm thinking about that bastard Warshow, though. Nothing particular against him, but he annoys me. Funny way he has of tensing up every time he has to order someone to do anything. Reminds me of my uncle. Yeah, my uncle. That's who I was trying to compare him with.

Don't much like Warshow. If he came in here now, maybe I'd tap him with the waldo—not much, just enough to sizzle his hide a little. Just for the hell of it. I always wanted to belt my uncle, just for the hell of it.

Hey, Murff yells. Get number two waldo back in alignment.

Don't worry, I say. This isn't the first time I've handled these babies, lunkhead.

I'm shielded pretty well. But the air smells funny, as if the thorium's been busy ionizing it, and I wonder maybe something's wrong.

I swing number two waldo over and dump the thorium in

the reactor. The green light pops on and tells me it's a square-on hit; the hot stuff is tumbling down into the reactor now and pushing out the neutrons like crazy.

Then Murff gives the signal and I dip into the storage and yank out some more hot stuff with number one waldo.

Hey, he yells again, and then number two waldo, the empty one, runs away from me.

The big arm is swinging in the air, and I see the little fingers of delicate jointed metal bones that so few seconds ago were hanging onto a chunk of red-hot Th-233. They seem to clutch for me.

I yell. God, I yell. Murff yells too as I lose control altogether, and he tries to get behind the control panel and grab the waldo handle. But I'm in the way, and I'm frozen so he can't do it. He ducks back and flattens himself on the floor as the big mechanical arm crashes through the shielding.

I can't move.

I stay there. The little fingers nick me on the left side of my jaw, and I scream. I'm on fire. The metal hand rakes down the side of my body, hardly touching me, and it's like a white-hot razor slicing through my flesh.

It's too painful even to feel. My nerves are cancelling out. They won't deliver the messages to my brain.

ONE-WAY JOURNEY

And now the pain sweeps down on me. *Help! I'm burning!* *Help!*

"STOP there," Cullinan said sharply, and Falk's terrible screaming stopped. "Edit out the pain and keep going. What happens when you wake up?"

VOICES. I hear them above me as I start to come out of the shroud of pain.

Radiation burns, a deep crackly voice is saying. It's Doc Sigstrom. The doc says, He's terribly burnt, Leon. I don't think he'll live.

Dammit, says another voice. That's Commander Warshow. He's got to live, Warshow says. I've never lost a man yet. Twenty years without losing anybody.

He took quite a roasting from that remote-control arm, a third voice says. It's Psych Officer Cullinan, I think. He lost control, Cullinan goes on. Very strange.

Yeah, I think. Very strange. I blanked out just a second and that waldo just seemed to come alive.

I feel the pain rippling up and down me. Half my head feels like it's missing, and my arm's being toasted. Where's the brimstone, I wonder.

Then Doc Sigstrom says, We'll have to try a nutrient bath.

What's that, Warshow asks. New technique, the doc

says. Chemotherapeutic incubation. Immersion in hormone solutions. They're using it on Earth in severe cases of type one radiation burns. I don't think it's ever been tried in space, but it ought to be. He'll be in free fall; gravity won't confuse things.

If it'll save him, Warshow says, I'm for it.

Then things fade. Time goes on—an eternity in hell, with the blazing pain racing up and back down my side. I hear people talking every now and then, feel myself being shifted from one place to another. Tubes are stuck in me to feed me. I wonder what I look like with half my body frizzled.

Suddenly, cool warm. Yeah, it sounds funny. But it is warm and nourishing, and yet cool too, bathing me and taking the sting out of my body.

I don't try to open my eyes, but I know I'm surrounded by darkness. I'm totally immobile, in the midst of darkness, and yet I know that outside me the ship is racing on toward Kollidor, enclosing me, holding me.

I'm within the ship, rocking gently and securely. I'm within something within the ship. Wheels within wheels; doors inside doors. Chinese puzzle-box with me inside.

Soft fluid comes licking over me, nudging itself in where the tissue is torn and blasted and the flesh bubbled from heat. Caress-

ing each individual cell, bathing my body organ by organ, I'm being repaired.

I float on an ocean and in an ocean. My body is healing rapidly. The pain ceases.

I'm not conscious of the passage of time at all. Minutes blend into minutes without joint; time flows unbreakingly, and I'm being lulled into a soft, unending existence. Happiness, I think. Security. Peace.

I like it here.

Around me, a globe of fluid. Around that, a striated webwork of metal. Around that, a spheroid spaceship, and around that a universe. Around that? I don't know, and I don't care. I'm safe, here, where there's no pain, no fear.

Blackness. Total and utter blackness. Security equals blackness and softness and quiet. But then—

What are they doing?

What's happening?

Blue darts of light against the blackness, and now a swirl of colors. Green, red, yellow. Light bursts in and dazzles me. Smells, feels, noises.

The cradle is rocking. I'm moving.

No. They're pulling me. Out!

It's getting cold, and I can't breathe. I'm choking! I try to hang on, but they won't let me go! They keep pulling me out, out, out into the world of fire and pain!

I struggle. I won't go. But it doesn't do any good. I'm out, finally.

I look around. Two blurry figures above me. I wipe my eyes and things come clear. Warshow and Sigstrom, that's who they are.

Sigstrom smiles and says, boozing, Well, he's healed wonderfully!

A miracle, Warshow says. A miracle.

I wobble, I want to fall, but I'm lying down already. They keep talking, and I start to cry in rage.

But there's no way back. It's over. All, all over. And I'm terribly alone.

FALK's voice died away suddenly. Warshow fought an impulse to get violently sick. His face felt cold and clammy, and he turned to look at the pale, nervous faces of Sigstrom and Cullinan. Behind them sat Thetona, expressionless.

Cullinan broke the long silence. "Leon, you heard the earlier session. Did you recognize what he was just telling us?"

"The birth trauma," Warshow said tonelessly.

"Obviously," Sigstrom said. The medic ran unshaking fingers through his heavy shock of white hair. "The chemotherapy . . . it was a womb for him. We put him back in the womb."

"And then we pulled him out," said Warshow. "We delivered him. And he went looking for a mother."

Cullinan nodded at Thetona. "He found one, too."

Warshow licked his lips. "Well, now we have the answer. What do we do about it?"

"We play the whole thing to him on tapes. His conscious intellectual mind sees his relationship with Thetona for what it is—the neurotic grasping of a grown man forced into an artificial womb, and searching for a mother. Once we've gotten that out of his basement and into the attic, so to speak, I think he'll be all right."

"But the ship was his mother," Warshow said. "That was where the incubation tank—the *womb*—was."

"The ship cast him out. You were an uncle-image, not a mother-substitute. He said so himself. He went looking elsewhere, and found Thetona. Let's give him the tapes."

MUCH LATER, Matt Falk faced the four of them in the cabin. He had heard his own voice rambling back over his lifetime. He knew, now.

There was a long silence when the last tape had played out, when Falk's voice had said, "*All, all over. And I'm terribly alone.*"

The words seemed to hang in

the room. Finally Falk said, "Thanks," in a cold, hard, tight, dead voice.

"Thanks?" Warshow repeated dully.

"Yes. Thanks for opening my eyes, for thoughtfully giving me a peek at what was behind my lid. Sure—*thanks*." The boy's face was sullen, bitter.

"You understand why it was necessary, of course." Cullinan said. "Why we—"

"Yeah, I know why," Falk said. "And now I can go back to Earth with you, and your consciences are cleared." He glanced at Thetona, who was watching him with perturbed curiosity evident on her broad face. Falk shuddered lightly as his eyes met the alien girl's. Warshow caught the reaction, and nodded. The therapy had been a success.

"I was happy," Falk said quietly. "Until you decided you *had* to take me back to Earth with you. So you ran me through a wringer and combed all the psychoses out of me, and—and—"

Thetona took two heavy steps toward him and put her arms on his shoulders. "No," he murmured, and wriggled away. "Can't you see it's over?"

"Matt—" Warshow said.

"Don't Matt me, Cap'n! I'm out of my womb now, and back in your crew." He turned sad eyes on Warshow. "Thetona and I had something good and warm and beautiful, and you busted it up. It can't get put together again, either. Okay. I'm ready to go back to Earth, now."

He stalked out of the room without another word. Grayfaced, Warshow stared at Cullinan and at Thetona, and lowered his eyes.

He had fought to keep Matt Falk, and he had won—or had he? In fact, yes. But in spirit? Falk would never forgive him for this.

Warshow shrugged, remembering the Book that said, *The relation of commander to crewman is that of parent to child*.

Warshow would not allow Falk's sullen eyes to upset him any longer; it was only to be expected that the boy would be bitter.

No child ever really forgives the parent who casts him from the womb.

"Come on, Thetona," he said to the big, enigmatically frowning alien girl. "Come with me. I'll take you back down to the city."

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• The next **Infinity** goes on sale November 7! •

THE SKIRMISHER

by ALGIS BUDRYS

Illustrated by KLUGA



**Hoyt was a good cop. Facts were his business,
and when he added them up he acted on
the sum—even if the sum was nonsense!**

IT WAS A hot day, and near noon, when Ben Hoyt pulled the unmarked radio car to a stop in front of the house. He cut the motor and ran his hand around his neck, where the starch in his shirt collar was leaving a red weal like a rope burn. He thought: One of these days I'm going to marry a woman just to quit using those damned laundries.

But he hadn't been thinking about starch. Not really; it had just been the sound his brain made, idling, while he listened to the steady, monotonous rhythm of rifle shots coming from behind the house. They were sharp and spiteful, and they echoed flatly through the palmetto scrub and turpentine pine behind the house. Hoyt got out of the car and unbuttoned his suit coat so he could

get at the .45 stuck in his waistband. Then he closed the car door quietly and walked toward the back of the house. The shots kept up in driving succession, one after the other in a group of three, then a pause, then another group of three.

The house was a new ranch type, with light green stuccoed walls and a low tile roof, with a close-cropped lawn and a solar hot water heater up on the south face of the roof. It was set in a good-sized lot, about four hundred feet to a side, and had a waist-high cinder block fence that walled off the front and sides of the lot, running back into a stretch of pine barren that just kept going until it merged into the Everglades. It looked odd all the way out here, as if a man had wanted to keep inconspicuous and still didn't want to get cheated out of living as if he were in a town.

Hoyt came around to the back of the house with his hand on his .45 just for luck, but he'd had it figured right. The man lying on the ground, squinting through the backsight of a rifle, was shooting at a row of paper targets set at distances of fifty, a hundred, and a hundred and fifty feet away from him. The rifle he was using looked like a standard .22, but it was making too much noise and recoiling much too hard. It had to be a rechambered

wildcat model, kicking a .22 slug out of a shell case necked down from a 30-30, or maybe even something heavier.

The man on the ground was about thirty. He was sunburned and as hard as something carved out of solid mahogany. He was wearing a pair of ragged shorts made out of an old pair of denims, and nothing else. There were full and empty boxes of shells lying scattered on the ground all around him. There were fired shell cases strewn out like a glittering carpet to his right. A half-full glass of liquor with the ice almost melted was set down in easy rich. He had a cigarette hanging out of the left side of his mouth, and there were ashes all up and down his sweaty left arm. Hoyt watched. The man pumped a shot into the fifty-foot target, the hundred, and the hundred and fifty, flicking the backsight up a notch every time he palmed the bolt and fed another round into the chamber. His shoulder jumped every time he fired, and the ashes shook off the end of his cigarette. Hoyt looked out past the targets, and every shot was tearing holes in a log backstop. There were white chips of wood trailed out behind it for a good twenty feet.

"Four-oh-eight," the man on the ground muttered to himself. "Four-oh-nine, four-ten."

"Hey, there," Hoyt said.



THE SKIRMISHER

THE MAN on the ground grimaced and looked back over his shoulder. He had close-cropped black hair, flattened on top, a flat, small face with close-set eyes, heavy ears, and a thin nose that had been knocked over to one side. "Yeah?" Other than that, he didn't move.

Hoyt held out his badge. "You Albert Madigan?"

"That's right."

"My name's Hoyt. Wade County Sheriff's office. Want to talk to you."

Madigan shrugged. "Well, go ahead." He flipped the backsight down and fired into the fifty-foot target. "Four-eleven." The target was cut to ribbons in a scattered group that ranged from around the ten ring to absolute bogeys. The other two targets were even worse. Madigan moved his sight and squeezed off a shot into the hundred-foot target. It punched out wide at four o'clock. "Four-twelve."

"Hey, there. I said I wanted to talk to you. Haven't got all day."

Madigan dropped the clip out of the rifle and fed in a new one from a pile of them he had lying on the ground under his chin. "Well, squat down and talk. I'm not about to go anywhere." He put a shot in each of the targets. "Four-fifteen," he muttered, turning on his side and massaging his right shoulder. There was a purplish-red blotch on his skin.

"Stand up, punk," Hoyt said with his fist on the butt of the .45.

"Go chase ducks," Madigan said. He rolled back over on his stomach and the rifle barked three times. "Four-sixteen, four-seventeen, four-eighteen," he muttered.

Hoyt pulled his .45 out and pointed it at the back of Madigan's head. "Stand up, I said."

Madigan looked back over his shoulder. "Go ahead and shoot me, Bud. Do you a whole lot of good."

Hoyt stood over him cursing, with the sweat going down the back of his shirt.

Madigan grinned up at him. "Or is there something you want to find out from me?"

Hoyt took a stubborn breath. "Four years ago, a man named Stevens went off the Overseas Highway into the Gulf. His car busted through the guard rail and the barracuda got him. A little later, a man named Powers was getting off the *Champion* at Boca Raton when his foot slipped. He went under the wheels, and the train was still rolling. He was a damn fool for jumping the stop, but he'd of made it if he hadn't put a foot in a busted hair tonic bottle. The bottle wasn't there a minute earlier. Somebody dropped it ahead of him. And Stevens drove into a sheet of newspaper that was

blown out of the car in front of him."

"Tough," Madigan said. "Tough, and out of the county, too. What's your beef?"

"Three years ago, a woman named Cummings jumped off Venetian Causeway into the bay. *That's* in the county. And last year a kid named Peterson was riding a motor scooter up U. S. 1 when his back tire blew. He went across the road in front of a trailer truck, and that was in this county, too. After that, there was a fellow named Pines. Diabetic. Went to a drugstore, got some insulin. Came in a sealed box of little glass bottles. Took it home, snapped the neck off one of the bottles, filled his hypo, gave himself a shot. It wasn't insulin. Somebody'd gotten the boxes mixed up in the drugstore refrigerator. After that, there was a man named—"

"Make your point."

"All right. The Cummings woman jumped because her boyfriend called her up and told her he was going back to Oklahoma with his wife. Only the boyfriend never called her. Fellow in a lunch counter phone box heard this other fellow in the next booth. Didn't take much notice of it until after she made the papers. Then he told us about this fellow: Five eight or nine, broken nose, black hair, half-moon scar on his right cheek. The boy-

friend didn't look one bit like that. How good're you at imitating voices, Madigan?"

Madigan grinned. The scar on his cheek lost itself in the wrinkles.

"We didn't have much to tie that on to. We let it ride. The boyfriend wasn't even married. Now, this Peterson kid on the scooter. He hit a piece of board with a nail in it. The board fell off a truck in front of him. There was a fellow sitting on the tailgate. Hitch-hiker. The driver remembers him because he wanted a ride up to Denia, and after the accident when he got there he crossed the road and started to thumb back toward Miami. Looked like you."

"Lots of people look like me," Madigan said, grinning like a reptile.

"Quit stalling around, Madigan," Hoyt said, hefting the .45 in his hand. "I got a busy schedule."

Madigan shrugged. "Tough."

HOYT narrowed his eyes. Madigan had a funny, dangerous look about him. Hoyt had seen a few men like him during the last war—guys who'd got caught in combat, somewhere, and whipsawed to the point where they knew they were going to die. Then, for some reason, they got out of it, but after that they didn't care about anything. Nothing

could touch them any more, and they were very hard to kill. Still, it took a lot of combat to get a man to a point like that, and Hoyt wondered just where somebody Madigan's age could have found enough of it. "You want to see me get tough, Madigan?"

Madigan shrugged. "Suit yourself, Bud. Seeing you're so busy, though, why don't you come back when you can say what you want me for?"

"I know what I want you for," Hoyt said coldly. "How long did you think you could get away with it?"

"With what?"

"Come off it, Madigan. We tied you up with the Cummings woman. We tied you up with the Peterson kid. We know you delivered that mislabelled phony insulin. The same kind of car as the one you rented that day was barrelling down the road in front of the Stevens car when it went into the Gulf. So us, and the Howard County cops, and the state cops, we got together and started comparing notes. See, we had this funny coincidence to work with: that diabetic was going to get married the next day, and the Peterson kid was on his way up to Allendale to run off and elope with this high school freshman. And one of the Howard County cops remembered these other three cases in the past two years, where people got ac-

cidentally killed just before they were going to get married. So he checked it, and what do you know?—there was this same guy, with the same funny scar, mixed up in all three of them somewhere."

"Yeah?" Madigan was smirking.

"Yeah! So we started taking it from the other end. We went into the marriage license records, and checked out everybody in south Florida who took a license but never got married. And, you know what? Fifty-three of them died. Fifty-three in five years. Now, you figure it out. That's a lot of accidents. So we checked 'em. Some of them turned out to be for real. Some of them, we're not so sure. But guess who else we found on the list? Two people: Powers, the guy on the train, and Stevens, the guy in the car. What's the matter, Madigan—you hate newlyweds, or something?"

Madigan grinned and shook his head. "I don't give a damn for newlyweds one way or the other. It's their grandchildren that bother me."

"Make sense," Hoyt growled.

"Nah—nah, *you* make sense. You tell me how the county prosecutor's going to convince a jury that anybody in the Year of Our Lord 1958—"

"'57," Hoyt corrected automatically.

"Okay, '57." Madigan shrugged. He looked at Hoyt like somebody on the right side of the bars in a zoo. "You just tell a jury how a man could rig those accidents."

"We'll figure it out."

"You couldn't do it in seventy-four years, Bud. And that's a fact. Tell you the truth, it's pretty damned tricky work, maneuvering things just right. Well, so long, Hoyt."

MADIGAN turned suddenly and started to run, but he wasn't trying hard. He loped easily, barefoot, picking his steps with care.

"Stop!" Hoyt shouted.

Madigan grinned back over his hard shoulder and kept loping, dodging perfunctorily toward a tree now and then.

"Stop!"

Madigan kept running. Hoyt raised his heavy .45 and shouted for the last time: "Stop!" He fired over Madigan's head.

The heavy recoil jarred his arm. He took a small step to correct his balance, and his foot nudged the half-full glass of liquor over on its side. His foot slipped in the mess of suddenly wet shell cases, and he fought

wildly to keep from falling. The .45 flew out of his hand, and Madigan was out of the handgun's short range. Hoyt scooped up the abandoned rifle, thumbed the sight, and fed a round into the chamber. He put the bead of the hooded foresight between Madigan's shoulder blades and squeezed the trigger. And the weakened chamber burst, exploding jagged steel into his skull.

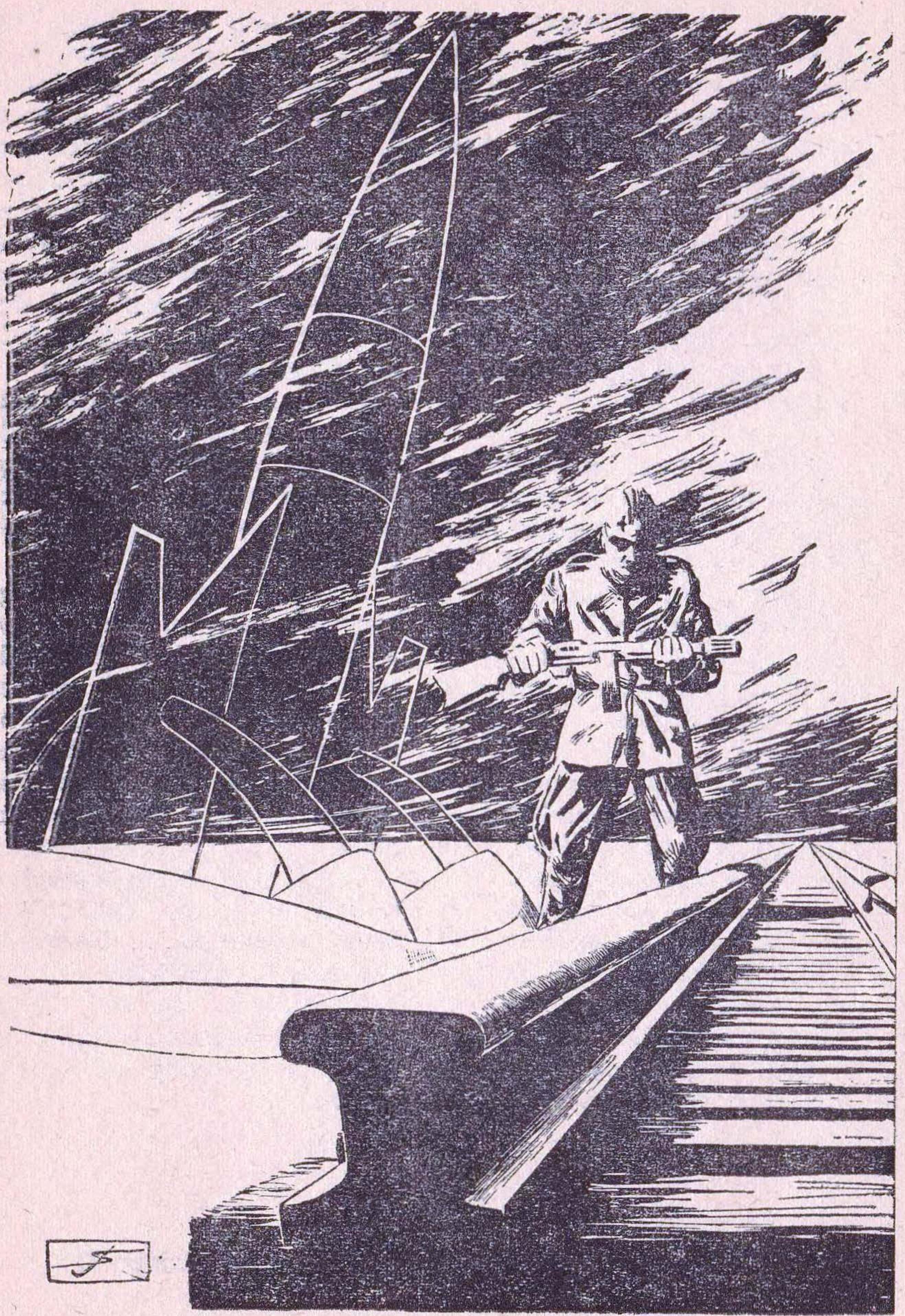
He lay in the pine needles and shell cases, blind and relaxed. He heard Madigan stop running and come walking casually back, but that was no longer any affair of his.

It was a comfortable feeling, knowing you were going to die in a minute, before the shock could possibly wear off and let the waiting pain reach you. It freed you of the problem of your messed-up face. It freed you of any problem you cared to name.

There, now—it was beginning to hurt just a little. Time to go, Hoyt—time to go . . . slip down, slip away . . . that waitress at the lunch counter . . . hell, Hoyt, you've got the best excuse in the world for standing her up tonight . . .

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• The next *Infinity* goes on sale November 7! •



**"Kysyl. Railhead. K. E. Ziolkovsky. 5000 meters/
second. Luna." That was the entire message.
But its meaning made White Sands look pretty trivial,
and turned a rocket engineer into a salesman!**

By ALLEN K. LANG

Illustrated by SCHOENHERR

the railhead at



The Railhead at Kysyl Khoto

by Allen K. Lang

I'VE BEEN TOLD that during the season of the simoom winds in Morocco, Arab judges let confessed murderers off with a fine. The weather justifies homicide. Washington judges should be as lenient in the summer, I thought, scooting on the contours of my chair to keep the seat of my pants from sweating into the varnish. Ten bucks and costs seemed a fair price to pay society if I killed this Doctor Francis von Munger.

My cigarettes had become limp and brown with the sweat through my shirt. I eased one of these unappetizing noodles out of the pack and lit it. It tasted like burning, damp wool stockings. I picked up an ancient magazine to keep from staring at the blonde receptionist, the only object in the waiting room upon which the eye could rest with comfort.

I'd viewed all the cartoons without smiling and was working my way through the ads when the blonde peeked over my magazine. "Dr. von Munger will see you now, Dr. Huguenard," she said.

"Damn right he will!" I growled, slapping the magazine

down and trailing the blonde into the holy of holies. Inside, an efficient young woman sat behind an efficient steel desk. She looked insultingly cool. "How much of von Munger's typewriter pool do I have to work through before I get to see the great man in the flesh?" I demanded of the cool-looking redhead.

"Have a cigar, Dr. Huguenard," the girl said, tipping a cylindrical humidor my way. "And sit down," indicating the chair that squatted beside her desk. "I've got news for you, Huguenard. I'm von Munger. The first name is Frances, with an 'e.' Makes all the difference."

I accepted the cigar, crushed my wool-sock cigarette in the ashtray, and leaned back silent to indicate my availability for further astonishments.

"I suppose you wonder why you were sent here," she began.

I murmured something about Washington's being delightful to visit in mid-June, whatever the occasion might be. She ignored this subtlety. "We've needed a rocket engineer in Economic Analysis for some time," she said. "Recent developments have made

your employment here imperative."

I lit the cigar slowly. "I'd been led to believe that our work at White Sands was important, too," I said through my smoke.

Von Munger looked as put out as though I'd belched during the invocation at an ambassadorial tea party. She took a deep breath —a pretty process, despite the mannish suit she was wearing—and launched into her sales talk. "Dr. Huguenard, our work here in the Commerce Department's Special Bureau of Economic Analysis is the most important work in the world. If a war is fought, we will win it. If that war is prevented, we will have prevented it."

I'd seen this sort of megalomania displayed by chiefs of paperwork before, but never in a more acute form. I smiled. This little redhead obviously saw herself as a sort of benign Lucrezia Borgia, erecting a fortress of filing-cabinets around the American Way.

"I'm glad you smiled, Dr. Huguenard," she said. "I was afraid that your face was all scar-tissue, and just wouldn't bend."

"You're pretty, too," I snarled. The damp heat had leached the last vestiges of chivalry from my soul. "Get on with your pitch, will you? I want to turn your job down and get back to my air-conditioned lab in New Mexico."

THE RAILHEAD AT KYSYL KHOTO

"Give me five minutes to persuade you to stay," she said, making a steeple with her fingertips and resting the steeple against her chin.

I checked my wrist watch.

"The S.B.E.A. is responsible for a special type of strategic intelligence," she said. "We are analyzing the economic processes of the USSR."

"I am familiar with the multiplication table," I said. "Otherwise, I don't see how I can be of use to you. My specialty is rocket-fuel injection systems. I'd dearly love to get back to that."

"You're cutting into my three hundred seconds of grace, Doctor Huguenard," she protested.

I sucked bitterly on the cigar she'd given me. "Okay," I sighed through the smoke. "Continue, Professor."

"Money, to a nation, is like blood to a man," she said. "This is true even in Russia's manipulative economy. Were you to trace the movement of blood through the human body, you'd soon know its every tissue. Just so, by tracing the flow of wealth through the USSR, we can discover precisely what's going on over there. We have overt means of observation, such as the Soviet studies published in *Industriia*, *Sovetskaya Metallurgija*, *Voprosy Ekonomiki*, and other journals; and we have our clandestine sources as well."

"Do you read Russian?" I asked, feeling a little more respect for this miss with the PhD.

"Russian, Polish, German, and French," she said impatiently. "I was born in Gdansk, *nee* Danzig, a community where being a polyglot is simple self-preservation. But I'd best get on. My time is running low."

"Take ten minutes," I said grandly. "Fifteen. But where do I come in?"

SHE LIT a cigarette and went on. "This office is concerned with the economic processes taking place within the Tuvanian Autonomous Region of the RSFSR, an area that makes the Dakota Bad Lands look like Miami Beach. The capital city of this region is Kysyl Khoto. We have a tourist there."

"Tourist?" I asked.

"A covert source of information," Dr. von Munger explained. "If I keep giving you secrets, you'll have to stay here."

"I know all about this cloak-and-dagger stuff," I told her. "I read 'The Gold Bug' when I was twelve."

"Our informant recently transmitted this message," she said, handing me a sheet of paper. On it were typewritten six Russian words and a number. I'd remembered enough from my Conversational Russian 101 to coax this Cyrillic puzzle into English.

"Kysyl," I read aloud. "That must be a proper name. Railhead. K. E. Ziolkovsky. 5000 meters/second. Luna." I handed the paper back to the good-looking Dr. von Munger. "The boy who sent this note takes the brass cup for brevity. What's it all mean?"

"*Luna* is in Russian what it was in Latin," she explained, just in case I'd missed that point. "Do you know who Ziolkovsky was?"

"Sure," I said. "Konstantin Edouardovitch Ziolkovsky hatched the notion of spaceships, back about 1900. The Reds must be naming their bird in his honor. Dr. von Munger, you're beginning to get through to me." I took the paper back from her to check it. "Five thousand meters per second. If that's delivered exhaust velocity, the mass-ratio would be twenty-six lifted for one delivered. They must be using ozone to get that. If they're using ozone, they've got an inhibitor to hold it stable. If this all means what it seems to, they can make the moon in two steps. And it's about time someone did."

Dr. von Munger shook her head. "I'm happy that you derive so great a pleasure from the notion of a flight to the moon," she said, "but you're forgetting that this rocket belongs to the Russians. They won't be inviting any of us Yankees to join them in admiring the view from the rim

of Copernicus. We'll be looking up, Dr. Huguenard. They'll be looking down at us, on a five-to-one power gradient. That'll put your Intercontinental Ballistic Missile out in the woodshed behind the washboard, won't it?"

"Have you reported to the boys in blue?" I asked.

"Not yet," she said. "My chief agrees that we need a rocket specialist to evaluate what we have. That's where you came in from New Mexico, dragging your feet every inch of the way. The chief has given us two weeks to prepare a dossier on the *Konstantin Edouardovitch Ziolkovsky*. Two weeks from now, Dr. Huguenard, you're to have the plans for that ship ready for the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

"I couldn't blueprint a rowboat in that short a time," I said. "Not if I had to work on guesses."

"They're intelligent guesses, Doctor," she reminded me. "I've got figures for every ton of rail freight shipped from Krasnoyarsk to Abakan, figures sweated out of official Soviet publications. All you've got to do is take the information I give you and use it to build a paper rocket. Okay?"

I nodded doubtfully. "With information like this, it shouldn't be hard to get the JCS flapping their shoulder-boards like taxiing gooney-birds. This should scare 'em good. It scares me."

"With good reason, Dr. Huguenard," she said.

Pretty girl, I thought. Huguenard, you're a hot-tempered, couthless dog to come in bullying this chick the way you did. "Since we're on the same job now," I said in my best oil-on-the-waters tone, "you may as well call me Frank. Saves syllables. And while we're chumming it up, Dr. von Munger, how's about having dinner with me this evening? We should be able to find an air-conditioned restaurant in this swamptown."

"Thank you, Frank," she said. "You may call me Frances. And I'll have dinner with you, thank you. In the cafeteria downstairs. We'll be working late every evening for the next two weeks." She nodded, pressed the button that popped the blonde in from the reception room, and smiled in a way that suggested that she'd next smile when my complete report lay on her desk.

The blonde took me in tow to a desk equipped with a file-drawer full of Russian-language clippings, folders marked SECRET, and my own little safe to keep these goodies in. I had a shelf of Russian-English dictionaries and an adding machine to help me bring chosimos out of chaos. The files looked like a well-stirred newspaper morgue. In Russian, yet. After the blonde had left I noticed that my desk,

too, had a button mounted to one side. I pushed it experimentally. The blonde reappeared. I waved my hand at the clippings on my desk. "Will I have any help in translating this stuff?" I asked her. "My Russian is of the 'Hands up! Me American' variety."

"I'm to help you with that," the blonde told me. "Just call for me—Joyce—when you've got something you can't make out. I used to be a UN interpreter." She smiled and left me to my sorrows.

I felt like a dirty cigar-smoking male illiterate. Probably half the stenos here had been engineers at Peenemunde. I needed a dumb girl-friend, I decided, just to protect me from the acute inferiority feelings these distaff Einsteins were giving me. I soothed my ego by going to work.

I began with the journal-clippings. Most of these had little tags attached, giving in English translation abstracts of material dealing with the Tuvian Autonomous Region. There was a detail map of Kysyl Khoto, complete with the names of the bars the engineers drank their vodka in. I had notes on how many pounds of Turkish tobacco (1,250) had been used there in 1955, and how many bathtubs shipped there that year (714). I wondered how many of those bathtubs they'd have aboard the

Konstantin Edouardovitch Ziolkovsky. Let 'em take showers, I decided.

By the end of the week I'd sifted the information I thought pertinent to the *KEZ* from the incidental chaff of Tuvian life, like those bathtubs. This whole business was like juggling invisible balls. The very fact that Kysyl Khoto had been reached by a spur track of the Yuzsib Railroad had been lifted from only two lines in *Stal*'s midsummer issue, supported, of course, by the laconic note of Dr. von Munger's mysterious Central Asian correspondent.

A two-step rocket was the thing to build, that was evident from the reported exhaust-velocity. That lozone—liquid ozone, one and two-thirds as much fuel per cubic foot as garden variety liquid oxygen—was the oxidizer seemed a good bet. What was the fuel? Hydrogen could give 5000 mps, but would be almost impossibly tricky to use with ozone. Hydrazine seemed a better bet. There were memos on several tons of nitric acid being shipped from Krasnoyarsk to Abakan to Kysyl Khoto, together with a batch of nitrate fertilizers ostensibly bound for the "Golden Fleece" Kolkhoz at Kara-buluk. I wondered what they raised on that collective farm. The sort of crops that grow best at White

Sands, I imagined. With a lot of ammonia and a passel of electricity, they could simmer out hydrazine where they were going to use it.

I designed the fuel tanks necessary to pay the way to the moon in hydrazine and lozone, then sketched a ship around them. Two stages, as I'd decided. Here a serious discrepancy came in. I had more steel, more wolfram, more of everything than the KEZ could possibly need. I took the problem to my pretty boss, glad for the chance to visit.

"It would seem," Frances said, looking over my notes, "that they've shipped enough material to Kysyl Khoto to build three ships. Let's assume that they're doing just this. It's one way to get home from the moon, I should think. They'll send three ships there, each carrying enough extra fuel to drive one of them back to Earth after they've planted the flag and geigered around a bit. Or possibly they intend setting up a permanent station there."

"It seems to me that we're whistling up a lot of smoke from this little fire," I protested. "We don't know the material they're using to keep the rocket-throats from melting. The notes on rail-shipments from Krasnoyarsk mention ceramics. I don't think that's detailed enough to work into a bogeyman to scare the

JCS." I reached over her desk to swipe a cigar from her cylinder, remarking, "It's nice of you to keep these on hand, seeing as you smoke Kools."

"Got to keep the staff happy," Frances smiled.

"Let's be making more of an effort," I suggested. "How's about that dinner tonight? It's Saturday, you know."

"All right, Frank." She jotted her address on a corner of an empty CONFIDENTIAL coversheet and handed it to me. "Eight o'clock," she said.

I went back to work refreshed by the prospect of an extramural session with the shapely Dr. Frances von Munger.

IT PROVED an interesting evening. Despite her polyglot propensities and monumental economic erudition, Frances von Munger had never drunk a negroni cocktail, never cracked a lobster. Later I discovered that she danced as though she'd heard of the art, but had never practiced it before. So mostly we sat and talked. We swapped genealogies and reminisced over our school days. Frances had been the only girl in a class of boy engineers at a fresh-water college in Indiana, I discovered. She'd got her B. S. in Mechanical before she'd gone to Chicago to study economics. I grinned sheepishly at this, remembering the times I'd

explained my simple math procedures to her as though she'd been a dewy-eyed home-economics girl. "But why did you drop engineering?" I wanted to know.

"It wasn't going anywhere," she said. A cryptic statement, but I left it alone.

Well, I took the boss home and kissed her goodnight; and hummed Verdi overtures in the taxi all the way home. In the morning, of course, she'd be the same schoolmarmish dame she'd always been, the government girl in the gray flannel suit. Decorative, but distant.

BACK at my cluttered desk the next morning, facing the medley of newspaper clippings and half-baked hypotheses that represented my contribution to Economic Analysis (spaceship division), I felt a cold wave of panic. In six days I'd have to stand at a table decked by admirals and generals, and expose this flimsy structure of Sunday work to their merited contempt.

I tugged out my file marked *Propulsion System* and leafed through it. I was as clever as that Dutch paleontologist who'd reconstructed the greater blue-eyed auk from a single petrified tail-feather. I'd shuffled a mess of inferences taken from the journals of a nation not too celebrated for guilelessness, dropped them in a hat, and pulled out a spaceship

by the ears. For all I knew, really knew, the Reds could be propelling the *KEZ* with twisted rubber bands.

I was supposed to be building the ship the way I'd build it—if I had the gear delivered by that overworked railhead at Kysyl Khoto, if I were a Russian-trained engineer, if I had my ear at the Kremlin's keyhole and my hand in its till, and if our intelligence wasn't a fiction born of paperwork. OK. Back into the desk went the *Propulsion* file while my keen engineering mind relaxed by considering the dimensions of Dr. Frances von Munger. After a while I got out the old copy of *Das Marsprojekt* and finagled its statistics to make them fit a mere hop to the moon. Since my presentation wasn't intended to be operational, I'd decided, it might as well be artistic.

My half-hour with the JCS was a day away when I came down with acute cold feet up to the knees. I went to see Frances for encouragement and to scrounge a cigar. "Let's not kid ourselves," I told her. "Those brass hats are clever. Why don't we just turn over the facts to them, let their Intelligence take over? I'd like to stay with the *KEZ* research, but I'd also like more and tighter facts. What are the throats of the rockets made of? What fuel are they using, for sure? If they've decided on ozone, how do

they keep it from exploding every time a commissar sneezes? Frances, let's just hand my scrapbooks to the Air Force and let it fill in the blank pages. I hate to present this comic book continuity I've got as a serious extrapolation from known facts."

"Sit down, Franklin," she said, handing me the cigar I'd come for. "You're a babe in the woods so far as Intelligence is concerned —that's with a capital 'I', Frank."

"Thank you, teacher."

"I want the military to take this Ziolkovsky thing and shake it till it falls into shape. But they won't, Frank. Not unless we persuade them that it's important. That's what you're doing, window-dressing to make the big brass buy this and stamp it high-priority. If they had what we've worked from, it would get a 'D' rating. They'd set to work on it once the definitive study of Kirghiz folk-dancing was done. They'd give it to a second lieutenant to play with Wednesday afternoons and forget it."

"But you think your opinion that the Russians have a spaceship squatting somewhere in the Altais is justification for your twisting a haggle of admirals around your pretty finger?"

"I have a feeling for Intelligence work," she said. "This is hot, Frank. Get back to your desk and plan a drawing of the KEZ. Better yet, sketch a model of the

beast. We'll have one built for you to stand on the table as you talk tomorrow. It will give you confidence."

"Now I'm a confidence man."

"In good cause, Frank. Tomorrow, after you've made your presentation to the JCS, we'll have dinner together to celebrate. At my place."

At this last prospect, I went back to work with spirits refreshed as no five-cent drink can refresh them.

I WAS a minor event on the schedule of JCS interviews. Half an hour, from twelve till twelve-thirty, they'd given me. I hoped I'd spoil their appetites for lunch. My model of the *Konstantin Edouardovitch Ziolkovsky*, its lacquer still a little tacky, bulged my briefcase. I had to persuade a Marine lieutenant that it wasn't a bomb I was carrying before he'd let me into the conference room.

There were maps on the walls, covered with gray dustsheets as though even the face of Mother Earth was being protected as an American secret. The High Air Force were smoking cigars; the High Navy ran more to pipes; while the Army's big wheels burned nervous yards of cigarettes. Two Waves sat at opposite corners of the big table, their fingers poised for slow dances over their Stenotype key-

boards. The brass regarded me, as craggy-faced as though I were suspected of giving Uncle Nikita the keys to Fort Knox. I opened my briefcase, set the model on the floor, and launched into my story.

"You've doubtless heard echoes through channels of recent activity in the Tuvanian Division of the Commerce Department's Special Bureau of Economic Analysis," I began.

"Until three weeks ago I was employed at White Sands as an engineer on Project Gargantua. I was transferred to TD/SBEA/DC to make evaluation of information which may make Project Gargantua obsolete." I knew I had my audience when an Air Force general dropped his cigar.

"As you know, the highest peak of the Altai Mountains is 15,000 feet tall, high enough to be of help in rocket research. The capital city of the Tuvanian Autonomous Region is Kysyl Khoto. This city has only recently become involved in industrial activity."

"Analysis of the materials being shipped to Kysyl Khoto, together with specific information furnished from covert sources, leads us to believe that this activity is concerned with rocket research."

"Our tentative conclusion is that the Soviets have several large rocket ships in construction there."

One of these, named the *Konstantin Edouardovitch Ziolkovsky*, is intended to reach the moon. The reported exhaust-velocity makes it very likely that they will succeed within the next three years." I lifted the model of the KEZ and set it on the table so that the big red star on its middle was conspicuous. "Our time has been too short and our information too slight to allow me to give you details. Nevertheless, the Russians undoubtedly are building a spaceship."

General Turner, USAF, who'd been a *Time* cover boy several times, tamped a cigarette on the table. "Exactly how much of this model is guesswork, Dr. Huguenard?" he demanded.

"Ninety-five percent," I said. "There's a lot of room for worry in that five percent that's left, though. I hardly think the Russians can have been so devious as to have planted false leads in several hundred of their own journals."

The Chairman nodded. "That will be all, Dr. Huguenard," he said. "I expect we'll be calling upon you later."

That parting note had an ominous ring, I thought, carrying my toy spaceship past the Marine guard. Would they bring handcuffs along next time?

MY DESK at the office had been emptied. I leaned on the button

to buzz Joyce, my blonde interpreter. "We were given an order by the Secretary of Commerce," she reported. "He told us to turn over everything on the KEZ to Air Force Intelligence. A squadron of Air Police packed all your papers and took off with them half an hour ago."

I went in to see Frances. She stood at the window, looking at the cars passing on the avenue. Her hands were together, the knuckles white with strain. "You did it, Frances," I said. "All the big guns of USAF Intelligence are being zeroed on a little town in Central Asia. If they find our guesses were true, we'll start building a moonship, too. That's what you really want, isn't it?"

"Yes, Frank," she said, turning to me. "I want our people to get to the moon. This seems a shoddy way to start, though."

"You're right," I admitted. "An armament race isn't an edifying spectacle. But the discovery of America was inspired more by money-grubbers than by idealists, Frances." I pried her hands apart and took them in mine. "Let's go, Frances. There's no work here today. Do you have the drinks at your place to celebrate our victory?"

She burst into tears. I held her close till she'd sobbed herself calm, ignoring the telephone buzzing on her desk. No one could have business with Fran-

ces von Munger more important than mine.

By some quiddity of feminine logic, Frances stored her Scotch in the refrigerator. I broke it out and poured two stiff shots into water glasses. I carried them into the living room, where she was sitting stiff and straight on the sofa, like a frightened little girl. "Have some anodyne, Frances. Forget the Department of Commerce and the Altai Mountains. We've done all we can. We've tossed the ball."

She took the drink and set it untasted on the arm of the sofa. "That's not it, Frank. You know the message from our tourist in Tuva?"

"That note that put the seal of approval on your project? You wrote that yourself, didn't you? The railhead, the spaceship—they all exist only under that golden hair of yours, right?"

Frances stared at me as though she expected me to whip out an Army .45 and cover her with it. "Frank! How do you know?"

"Until I met you, Frances, I thought dreams of space were male dreams. Then I found a girl who'd become an engineer, who'd then given up engineering to go into intelligence work. Curious. Then the business of the secret message from the USSR: instead of turning it over to the Air Force for immediate evalua-

tion, you chose to elaborate on it by means of a technical study, and even got your boss to push through a priority call for me. Curiouser yet."

"If you found out, they can," she said dully.

"I had the advantage of being in love with you, Frances. I've watched you closely, very closely. We'll have a few weeks or months before they discover that you phonied information to goad our men into space. We've got time enough for a honeymoon, Frances."

The phone rang. Damn Alexander Graham Bell! I thought. I picked the monster up and barked hello. It was the Secretary of Commerce. I introduced myself.

He deigned to relay his message through me. "Please inform Dr. von Munger that her department has been transferred to the Department of Air Force at White Sands, New Mexico," the Secretary said. "She and you are to report there immediately."

I thanked the man nicely and hung up. Frances was standing now. "We're going to White Sands," I told her. "We're going to help see that the man in the moon is American."

Frances took the drink out of my hand and set it on the bookcase to free my arms for holding her. "Maybe, Frank," she said, "the first man on Mars will be Huguenard. I'll be proud to assist you in that project."

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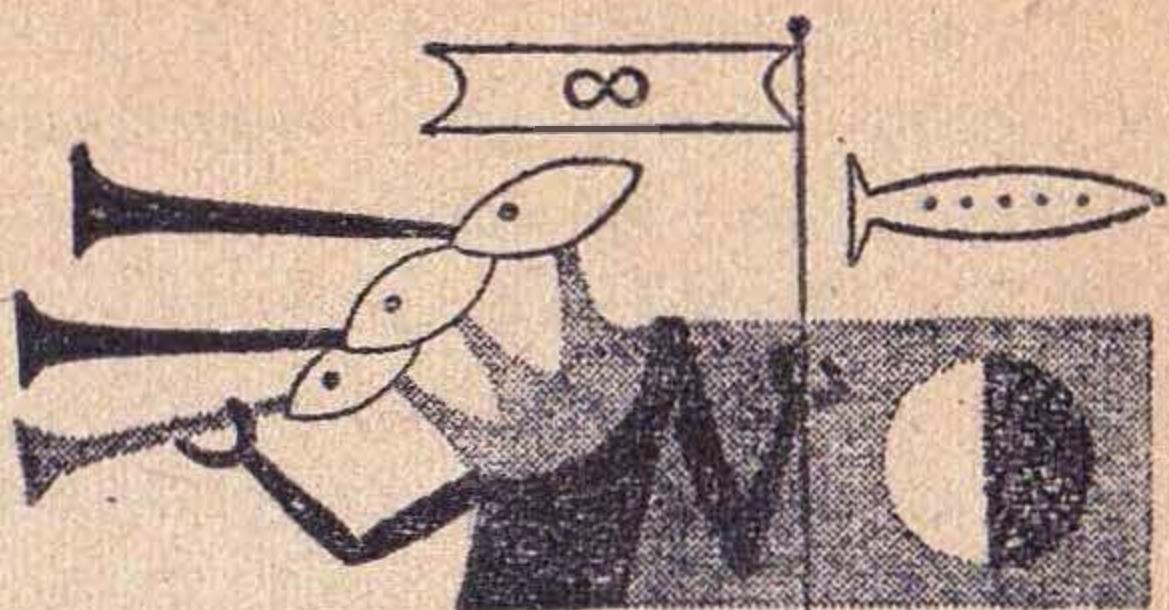
TALES FOR TOMORROW

And Then the Town Took Off! Yes, it did, actually and literally—but don't think we're giving away any surprises, because that's only the title and the very beginning of the story! From there it gallops through some of the maddest, merriest situations you've ever encountered in science fiction or anywhere else, to a punchline that will leave you gasping with laughter and amazement.

And Then the Town Took Off is a full-length novel by Richard Wilson, famous author of *The Girls from Planet 5*. It will be a two-part serial, starting in the next issue of INFINITY. And if you don't think science can be fun—and funny—you'll change your mind when Superior, Ohio, goes sky-riding, and every man and woman in the place goes mildly haywire.

Don't miss it—or the excellent novelets and short stories that will accompany it. The date is November 7.

Fanfare



REFLECTIONS ON FALLING OVER BACKWARDS IN A SWIVEL CHAIR

by CARLTON J. FASSBINDER

IT HAS BEEN my privilege to have fallen over backwards in a number of interesting devices. As a matter of fact, my friends have been prompting this vice for years as it is always after such a minor catastrophe that the famous *Fassbinder After Dinner Story* blossoms forth. Research has shown that a sudden descent backwards from the table is practically the only way to produce one of these stories.

Thus it is that whenever I am invited out, I arrive to discover that while the rest of the guests are going to dine in rare old antique chairs or Louis XV, or teakwood collector's items, the chair at Fassbinder's place is an old relic from the attic or the servants' quarters. I know that I may expect an upset sometime before the last course is served, but I pretend to ignore the whole thing, usually passing the chair off as the most antique of the lot. "Good old Fassbinder is a gem,"

they always say. And someone always replies, "Yeah, just like a razor."

Falling over backwards in a chair used to be the acme of shocks to me. The reaction would vary, depending on the chair, but each time, when struggling to my feet, I invariably burst out in a famous *Fassbinder After Dinner Story*. (This title is copyrighted, and may not be used without the writer's permission.) People used to give me trouble about this phenomenon somewhere during the entree. "Now Carlton," one of the minor wits would smirk, "I want you to engage in a brilliant conversation." Since the evening when I answered with a malicious, "I will just as soon as I shine my teeth," they have been content just to let me eat in silence until the upset. As a matter of fact, some guests are downright rude about my feelings until after the upset.

I could regale you with tales of many novel and ingenious methods used by various hosts to tilt me backwards and downwards without previous warning, but those are only superfluous technical data and may prove boring. Anyway, all that is over. All that ceased since the day in Charlie Hofer's office when I went over in a swivel chair.

Now, in an ordinary straight-backed chair, when one loses his balance and falls over backwards, the motion is that of a rapidly accelerating curve, ending in a shattering bump and, naturally, leaving the victim in a dazed condition.

In a swivel chair, as I have found in that vain glorious moment at Hofer's, the effect is far more sensational. As I recall, Charlie and I were discussing a new sales campaign for his 17-foot-Oxnard-Classics-Shelf-of-Books. I was leaning back in his office chair. In fact, an impish voice kept whispering, "Farther, just a little bit farther!" And I, in a sudden daring mood, inched backward imperceptibly, thrilling as the danger of my situation increased.

And then it happened!

You see, in a swivel chair, as one leans back more and more, the three legs of the tripod base remain on the floor while the seat itself bends rearward, building up tension on the springs.

The point of overbalance is attained, and I, the experimenter, am breathless with anticipation.

The tripod base snaps up, out from under the chair, and resumes its normal position in relation to the seat. *And for a brief moment the chair and its occupant are suspended at a 45-degree angle in the air!* In that moment, sitting up there in mid-air, I felt *all*, I knew *all*! The world was at my feet! The most treasured secrets of life were mine! I was one with the universe. And then there was the unparallelled descent to the floor, and the shattering, tingling shock of the crash.

Charlie Hofer rushed over to me. "Carlton, Carlton," he shouted. "Say something! Say something! Oh, Carlton, that look, that unearthly look on your face!"

"Whee," I said, making peculiar gesticulating motions with my hands.

"Carlton," Charlie shouted again, shaking me violently, "Tell me, tell me, what was it like? Oh, that must have been glorious!"

I arose, tingling with electrical currents. I righted the chair, sat down, and once again tilted back slowly, daring the brink of Paradise . . . My heart thundered; slowly I eased back, letting the seat bend slowly. My tongue hung out of my mouth.

Hofer stared popeyed.

Crack!

Once again I sat suspended in mid-air. Once again, I was God, Jupiter, Apollo, Zarathustra, and all the rest rolled into one. I was just beginning to see the *True Concept of the World* when it was blotted out by the face of the desk, cutting across the view as I descended abruptly to the floor.

To shorten a long story, I practiced falling in Hofer's chair until about 4:30 that afternoon, at which time the tripod broke into several pieces from the strain. Charlie quickly went around to several other offices and rounded up a half dozen chairs, which lasted far into the night. By that time, whenever I arose, instead of bursting forth into an *After Dinner Story*, I spewed forth deep philosophical contemplation, or dictated, at an incredible pace, mathematical formulae and concepts for the construction of machines to alleviate all men's problems.

A few nights later, when at a dinner held by the Rear Admiral Buckner B. Bowlingreen Society, I was upset, as was my usual misfortune, by a very ingenious host. However, instead of bursting into my *After Dinner Story* which had been scheduled as the highlight of the evening, I growled unprintable obscenities, picked up a chair,

and soundly beat my host over the crown with it, pausing on my way out to invert the soup tureen on Rear Admiral Bowlingreen's head. I left the banquet hall in utter chaos.

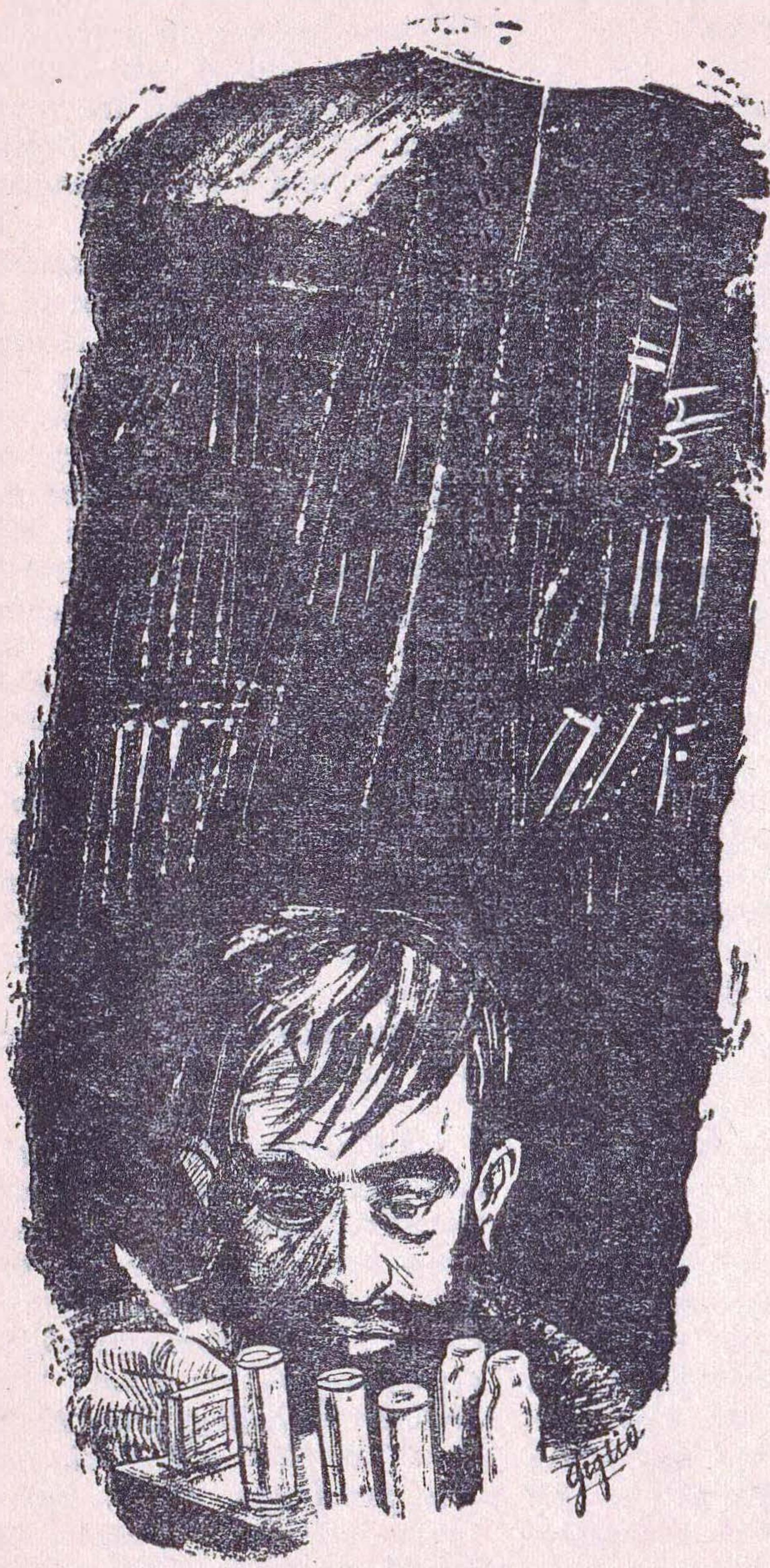
Since then I have been spurned by all of my former hosts. I sit in Hofer's office, falling backwards in swivel chairs for hours on end. Hofer procures them for me from all sorts of unimaginable and obscure places. But soon the crisis will come. The WPB recently issued an order halting the manufacture of swivel chairs, and when the available supply is exhausted, I will be driven to utter frustration. As an emergency measure, I have contemplated experiments with ten-foot ladders, climbing to the top of them while Charlie holds them erect, then falling backwards in a ten-foot arc.

Who knows what cosmic secrets I may discover then?

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(Whenever something of suitable quality can be found, INFINITY will reprint an item from a fanzine—one of the amateur journals published as a hobby by the more enthusiastic devotees of science fiction. "Reflections on Falling Over Backwards" by Carlton J. Fassbinder—a pseudonym of T. Bruce Yerke—originally appeared in Fan Slants for February, 1944.)

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\$100,000 wasn't hay, even for a quiz

**show prize. It was certainly worth
spending a little time to win. . . .**

by DAVID MASON

Illustrated by GIGLIO

“WE PROMISED you folks something special this week," Larry Lonigan said, his smile glittering under the bright lights of the studio. "And *Win-a-Mint* always keeps its promises, don't we? So, folks, tonight we're putting up the biggest mint offered yet on this program . . . one hundred thousand dollars!"

The applause was deafening.

"Now, then, here's the young man you all remember, the boy who hit the top money on our little group quiz last week, and earned the right to *Win-a-Mint*! Here he is, Mr. Don Gerson! Come on out, Don!"

Don Gerson was a tall, thin young man with a serious look. He did not wear glasses, but somehow he looked as if he ought to. He walked onto the stage with a kind of forced confidence and shook hands with Lonigan.

"Now, then, Don, we haven't told you very much about what we're going to do for you, have we?" Lonigan asked.

"No, sir."

"So I think it'll be as big a surprise to you as it will to our audience." Lonigan laughed, and looked archly into the cameras. "But first, we'll have to introduce you all over again, for anybody who didn't see the fine show you put up for us last week. How old are you, Don?"

"Twenty-eight."

"And you're not married, are you? Engaged? Do you trust your girl friend not to go out with other fellows if you aren't handy?"

"Well, I don't know . . ." Gerson grinned shyly.

"Did you tell her you'd be going away for a little while?" Lonigan asked, winking at the cameras.

"That's what I've been told," Gerson said.

"Uh huh. But we didn't tell you anything else, did we? Did your boss give you a leave of absence?"

"Oh, yes."

"Tell us, Don, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm an accountant."

Lonigan's grin grew wider. "Yes, folks, Don works for the great National American Insurance Company, of which you've all heard. We asked them to let us borrow Don here for two months, and they've been kind enough to agree. Now, working in insurance, Don, I guess you've gotten pretty good at logical predictions, eh? I mean, isn't it part of the insurance business to guess what's likely to happen?"

"I'd say it was." Don Gerson was looking mildly puzzled.

"Well, Don, we've set up a situation where you'll get a chance to guess what's happening next, and if you guess right, even halfway, you'll *Win-a-Mint!*" Lonigan boomed the last words impressively, and the orchestra blasted the theme chords into his words.

"Here's what we're going to do, Don," Lonigan went on. "You're going to go down to the airport, where we've got a special helicopter waiting. Our copter will take you to the island of Santa Antonia, two hundred miles off the coast. It's a lovely island, Don . . . you'll really like it. There's a comfortable little house there, and we've had the place all stocked up for you. There's even a nice big deep-freeze from the Handi-Freezo people, filled right up to the top."

Lonigan paused, to get the effect.

"Of course," he continued, "There isn't anyone else on the island. Nobody at all! And no radio, no newspapers, no way at all to hear from the outside world. Yes sir, Don, you'll be a real Robinson Crusoe. But just think, for two months, you'll get paid your regular salary; we're taking care of that. You can read, fish, think, maybe even write a book if you feel like it. Ever think about writing a book, Don?"

Gerson opened his mouth, but he was apparently too surprised to answer for a moment. Then he shook his head.

"No-o, but maybe, with all that time . . ."

"Well, Don, you can certainly read, if you feel like it," Lonigan went on. "Because we've put plenty of good, solid books on the island for you. There's fiction, of course, and textbooks on history, and encyclopedias . . . Now, what do you think you could do with all that information in those books?"

"Well . . ."

"I'll tell you what you'd better do, Don." Lonigan's eyes flicked to the studio clock, and his voice speeded up imperceptibly. "Read up, Don boy. Because we're going to bring you into this studio two months from now, when our program resumes in the fall season. And we're going to

ask you a dozen questions about things that have been happening in the meantime—people, places, and current events. If you can't answer at least six of those questions right, we'll be awfully sorry!"

The audience roared again.

"But if you *can* answer them, just six out of the dozen, you'll *Win-a-Mint!*" Again the theme music. "Now, Don, how about it? Think you can do it?"

"I'll try, sir." Gerson looked a little pale, but resolute.

"All right, folks, give our new *Robinson Crusoe* a big hand, and be sure you're watching when we bring him back to try to *Win-a-Mint!*" And the clock blinked a red light. Right on the button, Lonigan thought.

THE HELICOPTER droned out over the open sea in the afternoon sun. It was much noisier than the airliner that had been Gerson's only other trip into the upper air, he thought, looking ahead. The island was not yet visible.

"Think you'll win the hundred thousand?" the pilot asked, speaking loudly. He was a young man of Gerson's own age, with a cheerful round face.

"What? Oh . . . I certainly hope so." Gerson peered out over the smooth water. "How long a trip is it?"

"Oh, not so long now," the

pilot assured him. "Nice little island, too. I wouldn't mind this deal even if I didn't get the money. It's a first class vacation, hey?"

"I guess it is," Gerson said. "Kind of lonesome, though."

"Well, if they'd sent a girl too, you might not want to come back," the pilot grinned. "Anyway, think about all that money. That'll keep you from feeling too lonesome."

Gerson smiled back at him.

"I sure could do a lot with it," he said.

"I remember getting stuck up at Thule Two, up in the Arctic, when I was flying commercial last year," the pilot said. "Nobody there but a radio man and another pilot. Too cold to go outside, even. *That's* what I'd call lonesome."

On the horizon, a blue-green ridge began to lift above the water line.

"There it is," said the pilot. "Be there in another five minutes."

The copter landed on a long, smooth beach, with a picture postcard ocean lapping at the white sand. The pilot showed Don around the place with an almost proprietorial pride, pointing out the various conveniences, and giving advice.

"The house is a real doll," he told Don. "Never lived in. A rich fella owned the place, and

was going to use it for vacations, but he never got around to it. Incidentally, it'll be for sale when the stunt's over. Whopping price, too, I'll bet."

There was hot and cold running water, an electrical system powered by a gas engine, furniture, even a pair of swimming trunks hanging in a closet with other clothes.

"There's a laugh," the pilot observed, pointing to the trunks. "You won't need *them*."

"Well, if I go swimming . . ." Don said.

"The swimming's fine, but you won't have any company to worry about what you wear," the pilot said. Don had never been entirely alone in his life; it took him a moment to grasp this small detail in the picture of his immediate future.

"Oh," he said, doubtfully. "Well, you know there's seaweed and all that . . ."

AS A MATTER OF FACT, there was very little seaweed. The water was warm, and the days that followed were cloudless perfection; the nights were cool, and there was always a steady sea-breeze.

At first, for a few days, Don Gerson found himself moving in a pattern which resembled his normal life very closely. He awoke at seven; in fact, on the first morning, he found himself

compelled to rise at once and dress. That first morning, he had an odd, lost feeling; there was no office to go to, no schedule of work to follow, no fixed orbit.

He began the first day by shaving and cooking himself what, for him, was a large breakfast. He thought about going for a swim, but remembered the rule he had been given once, about not swimming for two hours after eating.

The clothes that hung in the closets were not what he would have selected himself, but they were comfortable, and they fitted. He dressed in slacks and an open-necked shirt; then proceeded to investigate the library.

For a few days his pattern was like that of this first day. He read the back-number piles of news magazines, the books analyzing current politics and history; he ate at regular intervals, and twice he went swimming for short periods. On both occasions he wore the trunks, and the second swim was very short. He came out of the water feeling as if, as he said to himself, "there wasn't anything *to* it." In his life, swimming alone had never seemed to happen.

Don hardly noticed the pattern beginning to fray apart. On the fifth day he overslept, and did not get up until nearly eleven. That night he felt wakeful, and at midnight, he ate sardines and

beans. He left the cans on the kitchen table, and did not drop them into the pit behind the house as he had been doing.

The next morning he did not rise till noon. In fact, he did not even wind the alarm clock. It ran down the same day, and he tried to guess at the time when he set it.

THERE was a typewriter, and a stack of paper. Don began to set down his general view of the way that events would be happening in the outside world, trying to anticipate every possible question. He assumed, to begin with, that the questions would not be too obscure; but that left a large area of possibilities, anyway.

Each day he wrote for several hours, and read for several more. Sometimes he would get too interested in some line of reading that would take him into areas which, he felt, would not be likely to enter the questions. At first he pulled himself out of those lines with an abrupt snapping shut of the offending book. But for three days he got farther and farther afield on a line that began with a book on a recent archaeological expedition and led him through a file of *National Geographic*, clear back to the article on Ancient Egypt in the encyclopedia. From that point he found it harder and harder to

guess at the possible line that the questions might take, and he wrote on in any direction his fancy took.

If the questions dealt with the elections, he wrote, the first possible ones might be on the names of the candidates. Also, the platforms and general tendencies. Now, the possible Democratic party candidates are . . .

And again, There might be another change in Soviet politics, but in the articles in Time and in The Reporter the writers say that the present group is likely to continue in power for at least a while. However, if he should ask about something which sounds as if it went in that direction, I could assume that the present premier might die; he's old, and can't live much longer.

Don had always been a baseball fan, and his opinions in that area were firmly rooted in both his own past and in the thick file of sports pages of newspapers. *The Dodgers will probably win the pennant, and the Giants will probably sell their pitcher Joe Kenner. In boxing . . .*

He was fairly certain about the outcome of various sports events. But when it came to science, he discovered whole worlds of which he had only heard vaguely before. There were things which he understood only with difficulty, and he began to realize, with a sense of shock, how in-

adequate his school "science" classes had been. But he didn't worry; he could easily predict that this class of question would have to do either with something medical or something about atomics. He found a great deal of already predicted material in both those fields; every magazine had a doctor writing about which disease would be conquered next, and how soon; and a number of articles gave details on how soon atomic power plants would be running, and what kinds of bombs would be tested next.

Don's choice of accountancy had been motivated by a liking for logic and orderliness; he began to find a fascination in the logic and orderliness of science. His picture of a scientist had been vague at best, a picture formed from newspaper photos of Einstein, with his white hair blowing, and of movie scientists, bending over strange machines and creating monsters.

At one point Don found the history and viewpoints of science drawing him into reading that could not possibly be used in the questioning. Reluctantly, and resolving to go back to that area, he moved on.

The oil workers union has a contract which runs out next month, he wrote, and they have always had a strike at this point in their last few years. If they do strike, there

will probably be a temporary shortage of fuel and gasoline. This might be the right answer if the question is, What strike is affecting the country most now?

Back into politics once more, Don began to extend his guessing, as he read further.

The UN investigation of the situation in South Africa will be resumed, and the South African delegation will withdraw again. It looks as if there is a very good chance of native rebellions in French North Africa, so that a question which pointed to Africa might deal with either situation.

After a while, Don had worked around to the Far East, and became more and more interested. His orderly habits led him into a pattern in which he organized the most likely events into a future history which covered, in detail, the things that would happen in the whole world, to a point that went into the next few years. In fact, he noticed abruptly, the vista ahead had grown brightly clear, and was still extending. He told himself that when he returned, he would continue to write his history of the future.

Just for fun, though, he said to himself. Nobody would be really interested in such a thing except himself, and he was no writer. But it looked as if he might have found a real hobby, Don told himself. Why, he didn't even miss television.

THE THOUGHT of television reminded him of the money, and the questions. The air and an occasional swim, and the food, had all combined to give him a feeling of health and relaxation. He felt supremely confident; he knew he could cope with the questions. And the time must be growing short. The plane should be arriving any day.

Don suddenly realized that he had stopped shaving some time before, and that he had fallen into the habit of not wearing a shirt. He shaved, and discovered that he had only two clean shirts left. He also discovered that the freezer was nearly empty, but he remembered seeing a number of plants growing near the house; if the freezer should run out before the plane arrived, he could grow something, he thought.

But the freezer did not run out of supplies. Instead, the generator stopped. It was out of gas.

Draining the last of the melted ice from the box, Don suddenly became aware of a simple fact. There should have been enough gas. The tank had been quite full enough to last more than the two months. He suddenly realized that he had completely lost count of days, and that the plane might be overdue by as much as a week or two.

Feeling a slight panic, he began to check back through his daily stacks of writing. He found

that he had done an average of eight pages every day, which gave him a means of counting back. But it was only a rough estimate, since there had been off days.

Still, the count came out to at least three months. The plane was very definitely overdue.

IN THE MIDDLE of the third year, he completed a radio receiver, made from wire stripped from the useless generator and using the crystal receiver principle. It had a pinpoint balanced on an old razor blade. There had been a description of the method of making such a receiver in a mechanics magazine, and Don had done it carefully. It took him a long time, because he did not find the job very interesting except when he was tired of reading and writing. Also, he had spent a long time extracting the blank leaves from all of the books, so that he would have plenty of writing paper.

The receiver seemed to be a workable design. However, all he could hear was a steady crackle and hiss, and, during storms, the sounds made by distant lightning.

Things went well, otherwise. His garden grew with a minimum of attention; he had learned the easiest methods of fishing, and he could not have named a single thing that he did not have that he would want.

The history grew longer. It was bound, volume by volume, in covers removed from books that were then piled carefully away. Don had found a way to bleach out the pages of printed matter, but there were only a few books that he could bring himself to turn into writing paper in this manner. In his notes, he used the term "palimpsest"; he knew what it meant by now.

2234. The last queen of England, not possessing any political power, was nevertheless regarded with great respect by the people of Britain, and her death at an advanced age was the occasion for great public mourning. However, since she had left no direct descendant, her entombment in the rebuilt Westminster Abbey marked the final end of the monarchy, even as a symbol.

The year 2234 also marked the

first serious attempt to cross interstellar space, in a giant ship which was built to house a large colony of travelers for a long time.

Among the books published in 2234 were new works by the famous historian and scholar Nosreg, and his contemporary Songre. "The Tragedy of Man" by the playwright Gresno played to great audiences over the Solar Television Network . . .

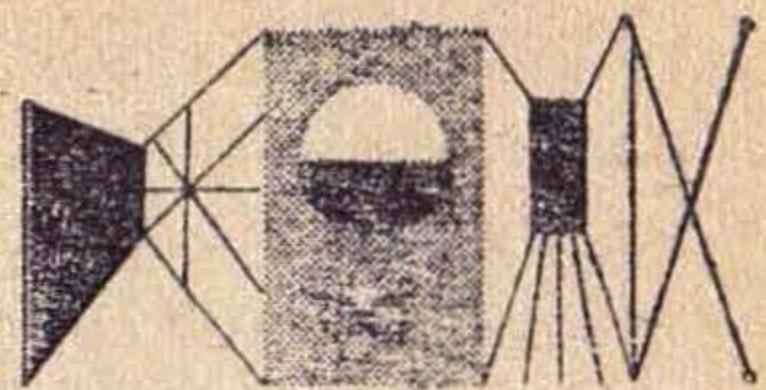
Thoughtfully, Don pulled at his graying beard. He was considering the plays of Gresno, and feeling, very mildly, a longing to see them. But, he reminded himself, it would be a long time before Gresno would even be born. Meanwhile, the afternoon sun was warm against his back, here on the porch, and he still had a great deal of white paper. He took up the sea-gull quill and began to write once more.

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Infinity's Choice



by DAMON KNIGHT

BIG PLANET, by Jack Vance. Avalon, \$2.75.

This 1952 *Startling* novel, here in hard covers for the first time, shows Vance at the top of his form. Big Planet, where most of the action takes place, is as vividly compelling as the dream-world of Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*—and that's the highest praise I know.

Vance has imagined a world with Earthlike air and gravity, but 80,000 miles in circumference: a light planet, without surface metals, too big to be governed as a unit. In a period of Galactic expansion, colonies from Earth have settled here and there, each with its own crochets and peculiarities. Except for a ban on modern weapons, Earth lets them alone.

The result is a gaudy patchwork world, as mixed-up and surprising as Burroughs' best. Set down by accident half a world away from their destination, nine Earthmen find themselves faced by an epic problem: a forty-thousand-mile march to the only safe spot on Big Planet.

After that, Big Planet itself dominates the book. Like Burroughs' *Pellucidar*, it colors every landscape with its own overhanging presence: "Looking to where Earth's horizon would lie, he could lift his eyes and see lands reaching far on out: pencil lines of various subtle colors, each line a plain or a forest, a sea, a desert, a mountain range . . ." Vance's descriptions, all as crisp and economical as this one, have a magical persuasiveness. Even his imaginary place-names, recited alone, have a compelling sound: Grosgarth, Montmarchy, Parambo; Lake Pellitante, the river Oust, the Blackstone Cordillera.

In Vance, as in Eddison, the background *is* the story. Even in scenes of danger and death, the heroes and their opponents alike seem half bemused by the gigantic warm lap of a world in which they lie. The journey on the monoline—trolleys suspended from cable, swooping in long roller-coaster arcs from mountain to mountain—is pure dream-world delight.

Vance's characters are defined

by what they do. The narrative is cool and detached; it's possible to believe in the heroic energy and resourcefulness of Claude Glystra, and in his understated romance with the Beaujolain girl, because everything is presented as something that happens, take it or leave it—nothing is explained or apologized for, at least until after the event.

The book is complicated, and in places I think spoilt, by an overt rationale involving Glystra's search for an Earth-born tyrant, Charley Lysidder, who is plotting to conquer Big Planet with modern weapons. The last chapters turn into a gimmicky ordeal story, also well done, but out of key with the epic form of the story proper; here and elsewhere, when he descends to the merely human level of tension, Vance weakens his story. Nevertheless, when the story is over, he leaves the reader souvenirs of an unforgettable journey—twilight in Tsalombar Forest; the Tree-men and the Beaujolains; the Cossacks and Atman the Scourge; the fortress city of Edelweiss; the Magickers and the false grimo-bot; the monoline; the Stanezi; the Rebbirs . . .

If you have a taste for pure, strong fantasy; if you loved the OZ books, or *The Worm*, or Burroughs, or *Alice In Wonderland*, buy this one.

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THE GREEN ODYSSEY, by Philip Jose Farmer. Ballantine, 35¢.

Here's a disappointment, from one of science fiction's most brilliant and least predictable writers.

Farmer's celebrated magazine stories, "The Lovers," "Mother," "The Night of Light," are richly dark with psychological meaning. *The Green Odyssey* is a pastel pastiche, superficial and half-hearted, of Tarzan, Conan, Hubbard's *Slaves of Sleep* and heaven knows what all else. What color it has is borrowed without improvement. Like some of de Camp's lesser works the story is set on an alien planet for no very evident reason; with minor changes, it could as easily have taken place in medieval India right here on Earth.

The element which is specifically science-fictional is shoveled in: Green is that king of cliches, the castaway space-traveler. Hearing that some other spacemen have been captured and are being held as demons in a distant kingdom, he leaves queen-mistress and slave-wife (but the latter tags along with her six children) and ships out on a merchant "roller"—a sailing vessel on wheels. This is an ingenious notion, given the absolute flatness of the alien plain, but its interest lasts just as long as the first description of it, after which the "rollers" begin acting

exactly like ordinary vessels. In which case, of course, the plain might just as well have been an ocean to begin with. "A difference that makes no difference is no difference."

Farmer's characters are sharply defined, but have nothing to do. Green himself is a reluctant lover and hero, the type of the comic adventurer; but he is propelled by the author through a series of notably unfunny adventures. His wife, Arma, is a majestic white-goddess figure; the plot gives her a couple of minor rescues to perform offstage, when the hero might better have gotten himself out of trouble; otherwise she has no function except to deliver the standard dusky-belle line over and over—you know, "White man sail away in big boat, forget poor Cheeta." The merchant, Miran, a wonderful blend of optimism and greed, has a supernumerary's role; and so on. The story winds up in a blaze of Tom Corbettism: the floating islands which roam the plain turn out to be abandoned lawn-mowers (honest), left over from a time when the plain was one gigantic spaceport. By taking over one of these, Green mows down his enemies, rescues one of the castaway spacemen, &c, &c. The whole thing is miserably dull and must have been drudgery to write; the author's private jokes (e.g., calling the merchant clan Effenycan,

and their god Mennirox) don't help.

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EYE IN THE SKY, by Philip K. Dick. Ace, 35¢.

Dick's fourth novel is an *Unknown*-style fantasy. What appears to be a science-fictional situation in the opening chapter—eight people fall from an observation platform when an atom-smashing bevatron goes out of control—turns out to have nothing to do with the case. The eight wake up in a cockeyed world, but have not been translated to another plane of reality, as you might expect, by the bevatron: they are images of themselves, wandering around in a dream-world belonging to one of their number, something like Alice in the Red King's dream. ("'If that there King was to wake,' added Tweedledum, 'you'd go out—bang!—just like a candle!') Meanwhile, their bodies are still lying unconscious on the floor of the bevatron chamber.

This section of the story takes the form of a satire on Jehovahism, exemplified for safety's sake by a crackpot Islamic cult called Second Babiism. (The courageous editor can afford to thumb his nose at any Moslems who may chance to pick up the book.) For blaspheming, the hero gets stung by a bee; for lying, he is deluged by locusts. Applying for

a job in a research electronics firm, he finds that "communications" now means a direct line to the deity; his qualifications are determined by reading a random passage from the holy book, *Bayan of the Second Bab*; and by turning the spiritual tables on a group of hostile young believers, the hero gets them damned on the spot—i.e., turned into ape-like dwarves, while everything around them is withered and blackened.

This kind of thing is good fun for infidels, and Dick lays it on with a trowel (e. g., God Almighty delivers his own pulpit-thumping Sunday morning sermons on TV).

On p. 121, the proprietor of this fantasy-world, an old soldier named Silvester, gets cracked on the sconce by an imaginary bedpost, and the scene immediately changes—the rest of the characters don't go out like candles, but they do find themselves in a second and equally askew world of phantasm. This one turns out to be that of a feather-brained matron named Mrs. Pritchett, who keeps deleting from it anything she feels is not quite nice—beginning, of course, with sex; auto horns follow, modern composers, rude traffic cops, and so on down to clouds, water and air. Having abolished everything, Mrs. Pritchett winks out and fantasy-world #3 is born.

The book is divided in this way into four dream sections, with a prologue and an epilogue in the real world. At their best, the dream episodes almost achieve the chilling balance between reality and horror of Hubbard's *Fear*; but the pace is too rapid, the story thread too slight. Once the unreality of the action has been established, there is no real urgency in it; Dick has to keep on leaping agilely from one set of assumptions to the next, in order to sustain the reader's interest at all. The characters, who in any other Dick novel would have acquired substance from their background, are here like empty Jello moulds.

In the mundane sections, Dick has something to say, but all too little time to say it, about the Negro in America, about security systems, Communists and liberals. Perhaps the deepest fault of the book is that, in the dream sections, it dodges such living issues to tilt at straw men: back-street cults, 19th-century prudery, paranoid maiden ladies, 1930 parlor pinkery.

NOTED

ROCKETS, MISSILES AND SPACE TRAVEL, by Willy Ley. Viking, \$6.75. The definitive rocket book, revised and expanded for the third time since its first publication in 1944.

THE SEEDLING STARS, by James Blish. Gnome, \$3.00. Blish wrote a story in the early forties about microscopic men in a puddle of water. Later, hating loose ends, he began to wonder how they had got there, and this volume is the result: five loosely connected stories about "pan-tropy" and the human seedling program—uneven in literary quality, but notable for their brilliance of ideas.

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TWO SOUGHT ADVENTURE, by Fritz Leiber. Gnome, \$3.00. Primitive Leiber—the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories, mostly from the 40's *Unknown*. People with a taste for Howard and Lovecraft will like these.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS, edited by Martin Greenberg. Gnome, \$3.50. Eleven articles of a kind that would come in handy if the standard speculations of science fiction suddenly became fact: e. g., L. Sprague de Camp's sprightly "Language For Time Travelers," and Willy Ley's serious and detailed "Letter to the Martians."

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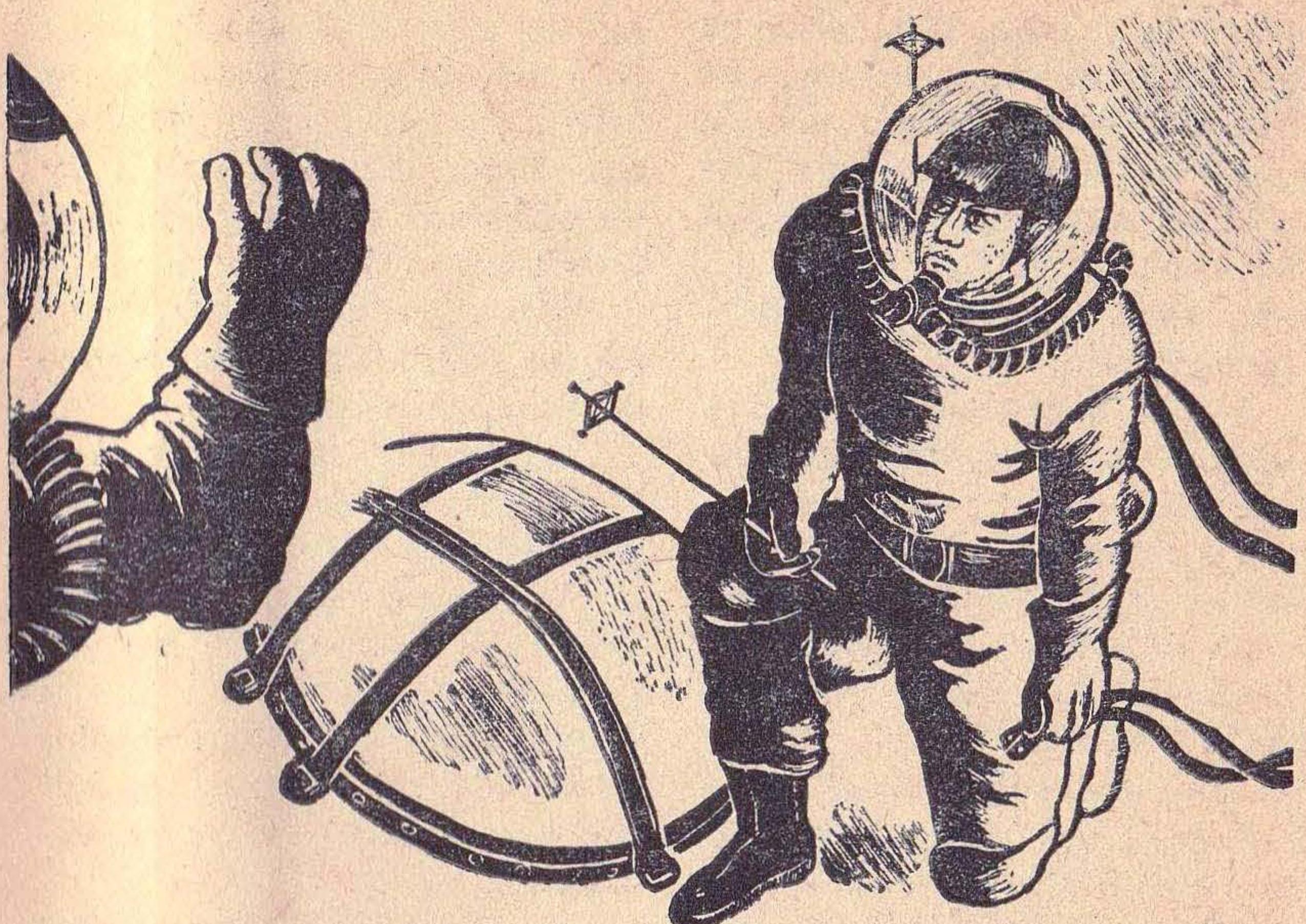
STRANGERS IN THE UNIVERSE, by Clifford D. Simak. Simon and Schuster, \$3.50. Eleven stories full of Simak's lush sentimentality, his exasperating Marquandish habit of saying everything three times, and the occasional glimpses into a deeper reality that make him great.

SILVERBERG'S BEST NOVEL YET!

Last year, Robert Silverberg was officially acclaimed by the membership of the World Science Fiction Society as the most promising new science fiction writer. This year, he has completely fulfilled that "promise." For proof, read "One-Way Journey" in this issue. And then, for a further convincer, pick up the December *Science Fiction Adventures*, which contains the best short novel Silverberg has written to date!

Valley Beyond Time is guaranteed to be one of the most unusual stories you've ever read. It's the tale of a unique odyssey through time and space, by an oddly assorted group of humans and aliens who have only one common bond: they are the unwilling pets of a strangely powerful master! It's loaded with both physical and emotional excitement, and more sheer suspense than you're likely to encounter again this or any other year. Remember, it's in the December *SFA*—on sale October 1.





Formula For Murder

by LEE GREGOR

It's easy to get away with murder: just prove insanity.

But make sure you hide the method in your madness!

CHAPTER I

THE FIGURE of Professor Glover slipped from the surface of the space station and twinkled away among the stars.

Jim Britten stared at it as though he could call it back by the ferocity of his gaze. He stood paralyzed by helplessness while the spacesuited body plummeted off into the void, until he could

no longer follow its motion towards the dazzling sun. Seized by an uncontrollable shaking, he dropped the radiophone antenna which he had ripped from Glover's back and flung himself down flat upon the surface of the station, where he clung while catching his breath.

A vast doughnut, twenty-five miles in diameter, the space station stood with no apparent motion a thousand miles above the surface of the earth. It floated in a sea of scintillating stars like diamonds scattered upon the blackest velvet.

"Jim, what's the matter?" John Callahan's voice grated in Britten's headpiece.

"Glover's line broke loose," Britten gasped. "He's gone."

"What!"

"I'm coming back in. Give me a hand."

Britten began the long crawl back to the entrance port, his nerves too shattered to attempt it standing up. He was several yards away when another spacesuited figure emerged from the port and helped him stagger the rest of the way. Inside the airlock he collapsed.

IN A SMALL room within a large hospital the two men sat talking. It was a featureless room with pale green walls, containing a desk, two soft chairs, and a leather couch. The doctor, mid-

dle-aged, inconspicuous, wearing glasses, a small moustache, and a gray suit, sat in one chair. Facing him in the other chair, Jim Britten, young, lean, and visibly depressed, wore pajamas and a hospital robe.

"You've been a sick boy," Morris Wolf told Jim Britten in a conversational tone.

"I guess so." Britten scratched at the arm of his chair and fingered the sleeve of his gown.

"You're coming along, though. When you arrived at the hospital a week ago, you had to be wheeled in and fed like a baby. Now you've pulled out of the hole and we're ready to do some real talking."

"But, doc, I don't know what happened. Honestly. One minute Glover was starting to climb down into the ion source chamber and the next minute his magnet line came loose, and when I grabbed after him I caught his phone antenna and ripped it off. Then I got the shakes and the next thing I knew I was back on Earth in the hospital."

The psychiatrist reached for his pipe and began to fill it from a large can on the desk.

"It's a great shock to have the person next to you snuffed out like that," he said. "Some people can take it standing up. When you fall apart like that we want to know the reason, so that it won't happen again."

Britten shrugged. "What's the difference? I'll never work in a laboratory again, let alone the Lunatron. I'll never finish my research and I'll never get my degree."

His voice trailed off in a discouraged whisper.

Wolf watched him for a moment.

"That kind of talk is the reason you are still here. You'll work in a laboratory again and you'll get your degree. You're still not quite well. I'm here to help you get well."

Britten shrugged again. "Okay. Bring on the dancing girls," he said, in a resigned tone.

There were no dancing girls, however, only a tall, blonde, squarish doctor in a white dress, who waited for them in the therapy room. Her cigarette made a cocky angle with the firm line of her mouth as she made final adjustments on the bank of electronic equipment that lined one whole wall.

"Jim, this is Dr. Heller," Wolf told him as they walked into the room. "She will work with us in here. Now suppose you get up on this table."

The two husky attendants who were always in the background helped Britten onto the table and strapped him down. As Wolf fastened the electrodes to Britten's head, he said, conversationally, "In the old days we would

have just sat and talked to each other. It would have taken months to get to first base. Now we have ways of aiding the memory, of triggering associations, of lowering resistances to thoughts. It makes psychotherapy a much less tedious process than it used to be."

As he spoke, he slipped a hypodermic needle into Britten's arm.

"Now, suppose we see how much we can remember. Let's begin the day before Glover was killed. I want you to think back to that day and remember everything that happened, how you felt, what you thought about. We want to go through this traumatic experience of yours, and relate it to the elements in your life which caused such a profound shock."

And in addition — Wolf thought bleakly to himself — a good many people were anxious to know other things. For example: was Glover's demise at this particular time a coincidence? The Atomic Energy Commission, though cagy about their reasons, had given top priority to the answers to their questions.

The strength of official interest in this case was further evidenced by the assignment of Bill Grady and Calvin Jones as attendants to Jim Britten. For some time Morris Wolf had wondered vaguely why two such clean-cut

and alert young men should follow the low-paid calling of hospital attendant, until recently he had become aware that their pay checks actually came from the U. S. Treasury by way of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"Now," Wolf said, as Alma Heller switched on the tape recorder, "tell us what you remember."

AFTER A YEAR of being stationed on the Lunatron, Jim Britten had the feeling of being fed up. Lunatics they call us, he thought. Real crazy.

Looking out of the ports, he saw a black, starry space in which the only thing that ever changed was the view of the earth, a thousand miles below, and the moon which was sometimes on one side and sometimes on the other. The stars were incredible jewels, and the sun was something that one never looked at with mortal eyes.

There was bitterness in his heart as he thought of his initial thrill at being chosen to do his thesis research on the Lunatron. He had been an envied boy, but now, after a year, he would have given the chance to the first bidder. But there was no way to back out, short of breaking his contract or breaking his neck. Passage to and from Earth was too costly to be used on weekend vacations.

Many people on Earth would

have been excited by the chance to work for two years with Professor Glover on the ten-thousand-billion-volt proton synchrotron which they called the Lunatron. Most physicists thought they were lucky if they could spend a few months with the fifty-billion-volt antique at Brookhaven.

But at Brookhaven you are only a few minutes from New York. Up on the space laboratory Britten was a year from any place, and every day that went by made it a day less.

"Johnny, what's the first thing you're going to do when you get back to Rhodesia?" he asked his roommate.

Britten sat, twanging half-heartedly at his guitar, while Johnny lay undressed on his bunk, his body hard and black against the white sheet.

"Oh, I have a good job lined up in a brand new research institute in Salisbury."

"I don't mean that," Britten said, impatiently. Johnny was such a serious boy. "I mean don't you think of all the fun you're going to have when you get back to Earth? Don't you think of getting a girl friend and living like everybody else lives?"

But Johnny's deep brown eyes remained serious, and he said, "Coming up here has been a great opportunity to learn something so that I will be able to do good work when I get back. Everybody

down there does not get such a chance."

Well, Britten thought, that's how it had been with him at first. Now he could think of nothing but walking arm in arm with a pretty girl—*his* girl—down the street of a big city at night, drinking in the excitement, the feeling of being with other people among the bright lights, under a sky that would be dark blue instead of black, that might have clouds in it, that might even send down rain, instead of being the stark changeless interstellar space that existed up above.

Scientists aren't supposed to have thoughts like these. But Britten was young, he was homesick, and he was bored. A young, homesick scientist cannot remain a solemn, dedicated, single-minded scientist.

THE NEXT DAY at work he absentmindedly switched on some pieces of apparatus in the wrong order and burned out a minor piece of electronics.

"Damn it, Britten," Professor Glover shouted at him. "Where are your brains? Replacements are expensive up here. Time is expensive!"

Britten began shaking with rage. Words rushed to his tongue which he choked down unsaid because Glover had the power of life or death over his degree and these two years must not be torn

out of his life for nothing.

"I'm sorry," he said, in an unsteady voice. "I guess I'm not all here today. It won't take long to repair the damage."

"Never mind," Glover said. "You're coming off the project, anyway."

Britten stood still. The anger roared back into his head.

"I'm coming off the project? What happens to the year I've just spent?"

Glover suddenly seemed more embarrassed than angry.

"I'm sorry, Britten," he said, "but it's for your own good. This project has just become classified and you'd never get a publishable thesis out of it."

Britten stood there looking at Glover. "This is a hell of a time to tell me," he exploded, finally. "What's become so secret about this experiment?"

"Obviously, I can't tell you. I'm sorry, but we'll make it up to you somehow. We'll think of something you can do while you're here, and if necessary you can stay a little longer."

Stay longer! Outraged, Britten fled to his room. It was all he could do to stick out the remainder of his two years.

He could not sleep that night. Little teeth of anger nibbled into his mind, while the basic question repeated itself in endless circles. Why had his experiment been pulled out from under him?

Fundamental experiments in high-energy particle physics were not generally classified secret. What were they doing which had suddenly become so important?

The general purpose of the space laboratory was to gather basic information about the laws of nature. The optical telescopes studied the planets as well as the farthest nebulae, unimpeded by atmospheric disturbances. The tremendous twenty-five-mile-diameter radiotelescope pinpointed short-wave radio vibrations from all parts of space. The solid-state group could study the properties of matter in a vacuum chamber of rarity unattainable anywhere on Earth.

In Jim Britten's group, known variously as the Elementary Particle Division, the Lunatron group, or simply as the Lunatics, the topic of investigation was the meson. A long time ago people had considered atoms the most elementary particles. Then they found out about protons and neutrons, which were the bricks that made up the atomic nuclei. A little later, when scientists learned how to build atom smashers such as the two-billion-volt proton synchrotron, they found that they could knock mesons out of the nucleus, and they decided that the protons and neutrons were not so simple after all.

Year after year the atom

smashers had become bigger and bigger. There came a time when they could not be built on the surface of the Earth any longer, so a space laboratory was conceived, built around the doughnut of the ten-thousand-billion-volt proton synchrotron. Protons, whirling around for thousands of cycles in this vast doughnut, eighty miles in circumference, could acquire energies equal to those of the most powerful cosmic rays. Even mesons shattered at this energy.

By inspecting the remnants of these broken mesons, scientists could begin to get some idea as to the ultimate structure of matter and energy.

Now, Jim Britten thought, what was there about this work that should suddenly become too secret to be published? Peace had reigned on Earth for many years, and it was once more fashionable to think of science as being free and unbound by security regulations.

But not, apparently, here in Glover's private domain. Rephrase the question, Britten thought. What was there about this work which had suddenly made it desirable for Professor Glover to take Britten off the project? Was there more to this experiment than Britten had seen up to the present?

Sitting through the night, Britten thought and calculated, filling his desk top with paper, feeling

the frustration of a scientist who spends day after day with the details of an experiment, pushing buttons, reading meters, soldering wires, until he begins to lose sight of the ultimate aim of the project.

As he fell asleep, long towards morning, his anger was still at a furious temperature, filling his mind with dreams of a tormented, violent nature, which he forgot promptly upon awakening.

PROFESSOR GLOVER stopped by to see him as he ate a late breakfast.

"We have a job to do today," Glover said, his voice tinged with an impersonal annoyance that was not directed at Britten.

Britten stared up at Glover with a hostility that made no impression upon the scientist.

"The ion source has gone bad and has to be replaced," Glover continued. "The spacesuits are being readied in the airlock."

"Why us?" Britten complained. "What's the matter with the maintenance crew?"

Glover's frown deepened. "They're busy with other things. You're free for the moment, and so am I."

Then his face cleared, and he slapped Britten on the back.

"Come on, fella, snap out of it. It'll do us both good to put on the suits and get out in free space."

Britten uttered grumbling

noises about "a guy can't even finish a cup of coffee," and followed Glover out to the maintenance lock nearest the ion source.

As he climbed out of the airlock, there again came the sensation of vertigo which he felt every time he stood on this island suspended in nothingness. The circumference of the doughnut stretched its great arc away from him in both directions, while twelve miles away, at the center of the circle, was the spherical shape of the radiotelescope receiver. The long, slender girders which bound the station together had a fragile, spidery appearance.

Britten and Glover walked clumsily to the linear accelerator which projected one-billion-volt protons into the initial lap of their long journey around the doughnut. At the far end of the hundred-foot tube, within a shielded chamber, was the glass bottle of the ion source. Normally, a brilliant crimson flame glowed within this bottle as numberless protons were stripped from their electrons, to be hurled down the accelerator tube. Now there was nothing but the blackened, dead glass.

As they approached the chamber that surrounded the ion source, Britten found that the resentment left over from the previous night had a new object upon which to fasten. Why

should he be doing the work that belonged to the technicians? In his anger he lost sight of the fact that Professor Glover was out there doing the same thing.

Damned slave labor, he thought. A PhD candidate was at the bottom of the heap, the lowest form of existence, pushed around by everybody else. Glover thought he was being clever, pushing him off the project, making excuses about security, when probably his aim was to keep for himself the Nobel Prize that the experiment was going to receive some day. Thought he could keep his poor stupid student in the dark about the outcome of the experiment—but the poor student wasn't as stupid as he thought.

Glover reached the hatch that opened into the ion source chamber and started undoing the fastenings. Suddenly he turned and stared at Britten.

"Where's the new ion source?" he snapped. "Don't tell me you left it in the airlock!"

Britten stammered wordlessly, shocked out of his reverie.

"Well, of all the stupid— Go back and get it! I'll remove the old source."

Glover turned his back and continued to unfasten the hatch.

Rage came into full bloom instantly. Without an instant's thought, Britten reached out both hands, wrenched the antenna rod

from Glover's back, tore his anchoring lines from their snaps, and pushed the struggling body out into space, where it soon dwindled away into a tiny speck.

CHAPTER II

DR. MORRIS WOLF leaned back in his chair after Jim Britten was wheeled, asleep, from the therapy room. In a random fashion he let his mind wander over the story he had just heard, savoring not only the facts, but the feelings behind them and the intuitions which they built up in his own mind.

"Well, Alma, what do you think?" he said, swiveling his chair to look at the other doctor across his desk.

She hesitated. "The story seems satisfactory, up to a point. That is, we've broken through the memory block and have determined that Glover's death was not really an accident—which of course we suspected all along. And we have a motive—of a sort."

Wolf sighed. "Yes—the motive. The boy feels that Glover is cutting him out of the credit for an important experiment, so in a burst of anger he disposes of the professor. There are just two things that bother me about that. Look."

He switched on his desk projector and ran through the mic-

rofilm card of Britten's record until he came to the examinations which Britten had taken to get the post on the space station.

"Here we have the standard Jameson test for paranoid personality. Obviously an important item in an examination of this sort. You wouldn't send even an incipient paranoid into close quarters with a group of people for two years. And so in the case of Jim Britten the Jameson test gives a negative result—no evidence of any paranoia, and in fact no evidence of any neurosis 'except the drive to do research.'

Alma Heller lit a cigarette thoughtfully. "I see. No paranoia predicted, yet the story he tells us now is a typical textbook example of persecution psychosis. Of course . . ." She paused for a moment. "He might be making up this story to hide his real motive."

Wolf shook his head vigorously. "No dice. Not under deep therapy. He has to tell us the truth."

"So we have a paradox." Dr. Heller's methodical mind ticked off the possibilities systematically. "Either the early exam was wrong, in which case he was paranoid all the time, or the exam was right and he turned paranoid later. Neither of which things are supposed to happen."

"Or," Wolf presented the third possibility, "he is withhold-

ing information while in deep therapy. Also something that is not supposed to happen. So this leads us to the second point that bothers me. Britten talks about sitting up all night trying to figure out what his experiment was leading to. Yet he never mentioned what conclusion he came to. Apparently this is a crucial point which is buried in his mind so deeply that we didn't touch it with our first try."

"Could be." Alma Heller seemed skeptical. "There are a lot of very iffy questions running around in my head which could be settled simply if we could get some concrete information. Do you think you could buzz the AEC and ask them why Britten's project became classified? That would settle a number of obscure points and at the same time give us a handle with which to pry Jim open a little more."

Wolf shrugged. "We might get our heads chopped off, but we can try. My contact at the AEC is Charles Wilford. He's the one who was so anxious to know what Britten did the night of the 15th. Maybe he can trade us some information."

Wolf pushed the button for an outside line and asked for the Atomic Energy Commission, extension 5972. Wilford's image appeared on the phone screen, the picture of a large, powerful face with a great mass of gray hair.

Wolf knew him only as someone high up in the personnel department of the AEC.

"Good morning, Dr. Wolf," he said. "Find anything out?"

Wolf shrugged. "Britten killed Glover, if that's what you want to know. But why? That's what really interests us. You can tell us one thing that will help us find out. And that is—did Glover really take Britten off his project for security reasons? If so, what were those reasons?"

Wilford's face froze slightly. "Obviously, Dr. Wolf, if security were involved, it is a matter I cannot discuss with you, especially over the phone. You may write me a full, confidential report, and we will consider what is to be done."

Wolf cut the connection in exasperation and pushed his chair away from the desk.

"Well, there's a bureaucratic mind for you!" he exclaimed. "He wants a problem solved and then refuses to give you the information necessary to solve the problem."

Slowly he filled his thinking pipe and lit it. "The hell with them," he said, finally. "We'll see this thing through ourselves. We'll have another session with Britten tomorrow and get to the bottom of his story."

"I hope," Alma Heller added, "that there is a bottom to be found."

As THE ATTENDANTS strapped Jim Britten on the table, the next morning, Dr. Wolf thought how often the formula for murder repeated itself in this psychiatric age. Knock off the victim, prepare a real sick motive, and be sure you'll go to a hospital for treatment, to be released after a "cure." Under these circumstances the psychiatrist must become a detective—required to dig deep for the real motive, which generally resolved itself into the classical ones to love-hate-money.

From his point of view as a doctor, any murder was a sick act, but the authorities were interested only in the legal question of whether the murderer knew what he was doing, and why.

In this case, the question of the motive had a fascination to Wolf even from a purely academic point of view.

"Let's face it," he told Britten. "We both know you killed Glover. You've heard the playback of yesterday's session, so you can no longer fall back on the old excuse of 'everything went black and when I came to he was dead.' Nobody gets away with that any more."

Britten maintained a sullen silence.

"Just for the record," Wolf continued, "I want to fill in an important gap in the story. You told us that you sat up half the night figuring out what discovery

your experiment was aiming at, but you glossed over what you actually decided at that time. Suppose we return to that night and go over the story once more in a little more detail."

Britten continued his silence, and beyond a single hostile glare from beneath half-lidded eyes, gave no expression of emotion. Wolf, as he checked the connections and slipped Britten the hypodermic, was thankful that his technique did not depend upon a friendly rapport between doctor and patient.

Presently Britten began to talk.

"YOU'RE being taken off the project because it has become classified secret," Glover had said, and at a blow an entire year of work had been struck out from beneath Jim Britten's feet. As he sat in his room, he picked raucous chords on his guitar and allowed the anger to wash deliciously through his consciousness.

Not for a minute did he believe the security classification story. He knew that the project was beginning to strike gold in an unexpected direction, and he knew what that direction was.

There was a discovery in the making. A discovery so precious that for every diamondlike star out there beyond the porthole there could be a bucket of diamonds accruing to the discoverer.

And Glover was after the profit himself, pushing Britten out of the way. This was the thought that clawed little furrows in his mind. Then, pushing their way into those little furrows came other thoughts such as: "Suppose Glover should have an accident. I'd have his notebooks, and . . ."

Then he began thinking of returning to Earth, and the vision of spending a life dedicated to research in a laboratory became clouded over; instead there arose a picture of himself riding in an expensive car, with beautiful, expensive women.

He ripped a full chord out of his guitar and began to sing.

In the morning, Glover stopped at Britten's breakfast table, annoyed with word of the ion-source burnout.

"Now how are we going to get it fixed?" he demanded, in exasperation. "Gamp cut his hand yesterday, Williams had his appendix out a week ago, Langsdorf is busy with the kicksorter, and—"

"Why don't we do it ourselves?" Britten interrupted, eagerly. "It'll do us good to get into spacesuits again."

It would do Jim Britten some good, he thought to himself. If genius was measured by the ability to spot an opportunity, then his success was assured. The plan of action was in his mind, completely formed in that instant.

On the outer skin of the satellite, the two of them alone, any one of a number of accidents could occur. Holding them down against the pull of centrifugal force would be only the magnetic shoes and a thin line. From that beginning, his mind went precisely to its conclusion.

"ALMA," Morris Wolf said, "I'm beginning to feel very uneasy. What do we have here?"

He poured coffee into the cups on his desk.

Alma Heller looked at him shrewdly, and stirred sugar into her cup.

"I think we have a bear by the tail," she said. "We seem to peel off layers of Jim Britten's mind, and each time there's something different underneath. Every time he tells his story there is something new and contradictory in it. And there is no clue as to whether he is getting nearer or farther from the truth."

Wolf swivelled his chair around and stared out of the window onto the hospital lawn. "We thought that the deep therapy method was something perfect. Something that would make a patient tell the absolute truth as he saw it. But our patient is making hash out of it."

He lifted his coffee cup and tasted the black liquid tentatively.

"Follow it through. The first story he gave us was conscious.

He said he couldn't remember exactly what happened to him. Okay. This could be a fabrication. The next story he gave under therapy conditions. He said that he killed Glover in a fit of rage because of an argument. Okay again. We could have accepted that at face value, and he would have gotten away with it, except that we got curious about a couple of things. We wondered how the paranoid tinge got into his thoughts, and we wondered exactly what it was that he and Glover were on the verge of discovering. So we tried again. Now we find that he deliberately plotted to kill Glover, and the paranoid symptoms are now so intense that he gives us a completely phony story about making millions of dollars out of the discovery, when everybody knows that you can't patent anything for personal profit when you invent it in a government laboratory."

Alma Heller lifted her hand, making a one with her forefinger. "So, our friend Jim Britten is doing two things—both of which we did not believe him capable of doing. First, he is lying and inventing stories under deep therapy. Second, he is withholding information. For notice that he is still avoiding specific mention of the result which his experiment was aiming at."

Her voice became flat, precise, and probing.

"Now, could our young physicist, Jim Britten, do this thing? No. Not unless he is an unsuspected superman type. Or—unless he has had special training and conditioning for resistance against deep therapy. How does a young physics student obtain such training? And where?"

She looked across the desk at Morris Wolf, who chewed savagely on his pipe bit.

"If I had any sense," he growled, "I'd call up the AEC and throw Jim Britten right back in their faces. If they give me a problem to solve they should at least tell me how hot they think it is. And my viscera are beginning to tell me that this is going to be a very, very warm baby. Maybe I should holler for help. I have a wife and two kids at home. I don't want to get hurt."

"Who you kidding?" Alma wanted to know. "You wouldn't let a juicy problem like this escape you just when you have it clutched about the middle. Besides, our two undercover friends from the FBI will be keeping their eyes on things. Let them earn their pay."

"Okay." Wolf came to a decision. "We'll give it one more try, and then we'll call for help. First thing tomorrow morning. In the meantime, there are two things I want. First I want Britten to have a complete physical examination. The works. Inside

and outside. Blood tests, electroencephalograph, tissue specimens, complete x-rays—everything they can think of. Then I'll spend tonight keeping company with Britten while the technicians pull down some overtime pay analyzing the examination results."

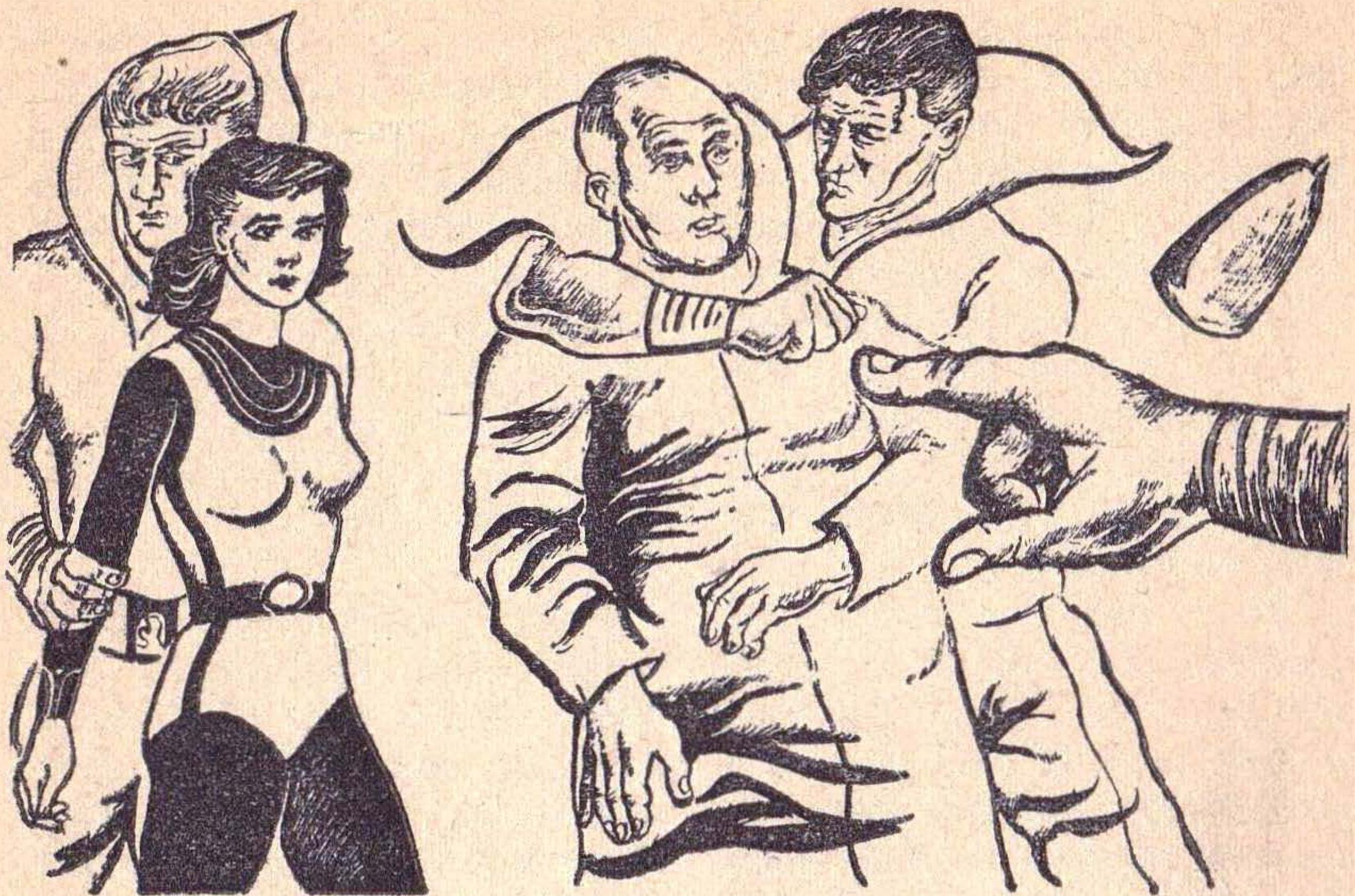
"You have an idea?"

He nodded. "At least one idea. But it needs feeding."

THAT EVENING Morris Wolf walked down the hospital corridor past the door of Britten's room. He entered the next door and found himself in a tiny chamber already occupied by Bill Grady. This was no surprise, for he knew that Grady and Jones kept Britten under constant surveillance. He motioned for Grady to keep his seat, and made himself comfortable in another chair, which he placed so that he could watch Britten through the one-way window set in the wall. Through this window he could see every move which Britten made, and through a loudspeaker he could hear every sound.

It was not clear in Wolf's mind precisely what he expected to find by watching Britten, but he knew that if he was to unravel his puzzle, he must know everything about the boy, including the way he walked and talked and combed his hair.

For a time Britten sat and read, then paced the floor restlessly, as



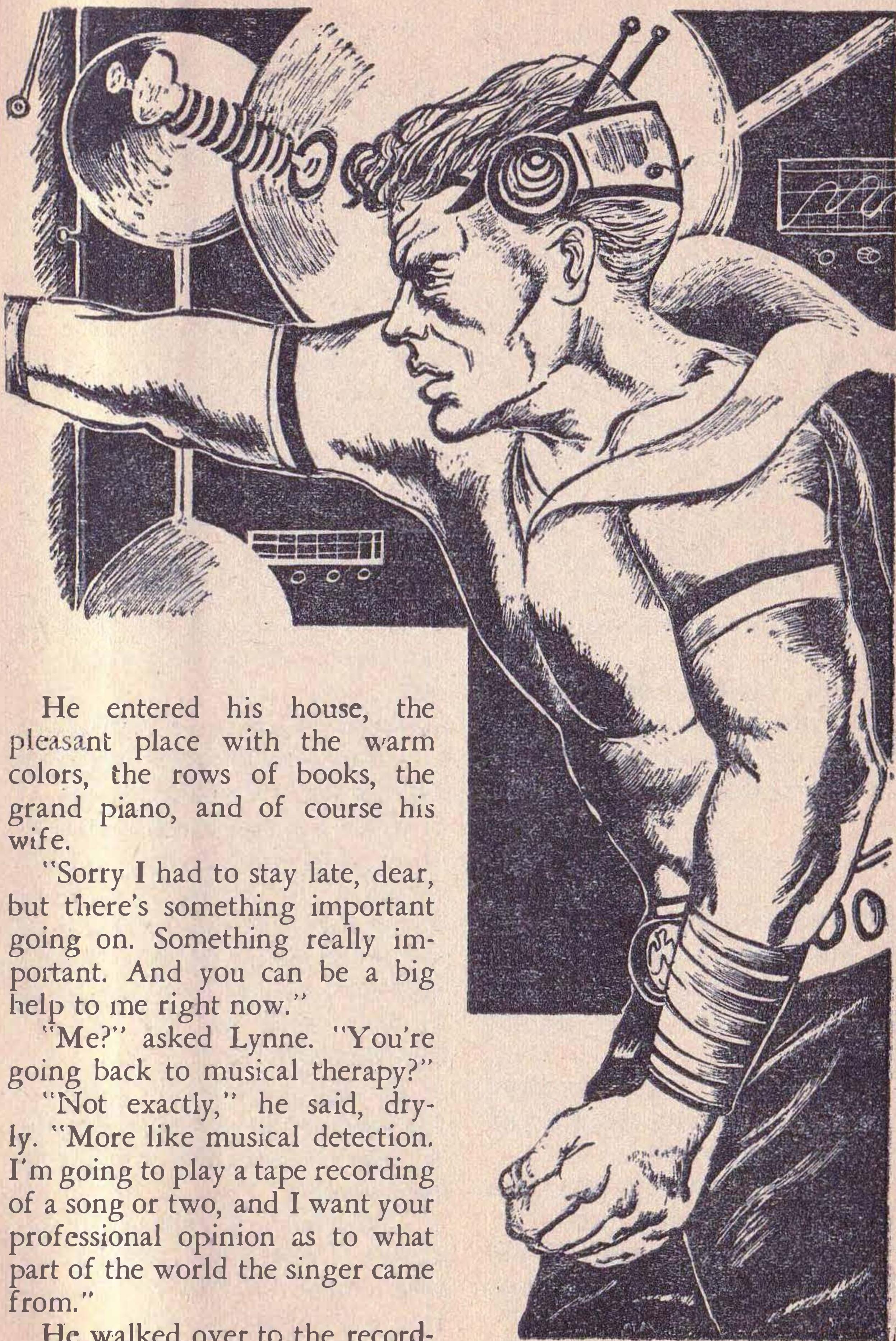
if waiting for something. Finally he picked his guitar up from the bed and sat down on his chair, tuning the instrument. When he began to sing, it was quietly, as though to himself. Wolf had heard him sing before, generally folk songs from the Southern and Midwestern states.

Now there intruded into Wolf's mind a thought which had previously been on the edge of consciousness, and simultaneously his hand reached out to touch the start button on his tape recorder. The manner in which a person sings should reveal a great deal about his early life—about the kind of language he grew up with, down to the very

vocal structure which has developed in his body since childhood.

As a result there are many types of voices: French voices, Tennessee voices, Italian voices, Texas voices, each with its own flavor caused by the way in which the vocal muscles have been trained by the native language, and also by the way in which people are accustomed to singing in those places.

When Wolf went home that night he carried a tape of Britten's song with him. It was convenient that he did not have to go far for an expert opinion to corroborate what he had already decided as an amateur.



He entered his house, the pleasant place with the warm colors, the rows of books, the grand piano, and of course his wife.

"Sorry I had to stay late, dear, but there's something important going on. Something really important. And you can be a big help to me right now."

"Me?" asked Lynne. "You're going back to musical therapy?"

"Not exactly," he said, dryly. "More like musical detection. I'm going to play a tape recording of a song or two, and I want your professional opinion as to what part of the world the singer came from."

He walked over to the record-

er and began threading the tape. "Now pay no attention to the song itself," he instructed. "I'm interested only in the voice quality."

The tape spool unrolled slowly, and Britten's voice filled the room.

"Not bad for an amateur," Lynne commented, listening closely. For several minutes she remained silent, until finally the tape was completed.

"Well," she said, finally, "I don't think it's an American. A bit too rich. It doesn't have the French quality, nor the Italian. More chesty, kind of ripe and fruity. Central European. Hungarian, Russian, or something of that order."

Wolf kissed her solemnly. "You win first prize, girl. That's the answer I wanted, and that's the answer that fits."

CHAPTER III

IN THE morning, the act of going to the hospital produced within him a sensation as of marching to the front line of battle.

Whitehead, the laboratory chief, was prowling about his office when he arrived.

"Morning," Wolf greeted him. "Got something for me?"

"I have a strangeness," Whitehead said. "A very great strangeness."

"We all do," Wolf replied. "What's yours?"

"This Britten of yours. How old is he?"

"By appearance, and according to the records, about twenty-one."

"Uh-huh. And by cellular structure and metabolism he is at least forty!"

"So."

Wolf sank down in his chair and cocked an eye at Alma Heller, who came into the room at that moment.

"Did you hear that, Alma? In more ways than one our boy isn't what he seems to be. By last night I was certain that he is not a native of Louisville, Kentucky. Now we are told that he is twice as old as we thought he was."

Alma stared for a moment.

"We do seem to get in deeper and deeper. Have any ideas?"

Wolf ran his hand worriedly through his hair. "One. But I'm afraid of it. At any rate, we're in too far to back out. This morning we're going to dig for more information, and we're not going to stop until we have Britten squeezed dry."

He reached onto his desk for his tobacco can and began filling a pipe, meanwhile organizing his thoughts.

"Somehow or other," he resumed, "Britten has received conditioning to resist giving information under deep therapy."

"And not only that," Alma interposed, "but he has the ability to retain consciousness under deep therapy and fabricate a story to replace the true facts."

"Correct. So, since the ordinary deep therapy method is useless, we have to get tough. We have to eliminate his present set of conditioned reactions and replace them by a new set. In other words, we must reset the controls so that he responds to a new set of orders."

Alma pursed her lips for a soundless whistle. "Fisher's method! Do you know how much of that a nervous system can take?"

Wolf shrugged. "Who knows? This is very new stuff. I've played around with a little of it, but . . . who knows? At any rate, we're going to assume that Britten has a fairly tough mind in order to get as far as he has. We'll assume this not only for his own sake, but for ours, because we are going to shake him loose from his present set of memories, and we want enough of his original memories left for us to assemble. Now suppose we begin."

WHITEHEAD excused himself. There was work waiting in his laboratory, he said, and watched wistfully as the two disappeared into the therapy room.

Alma began switching on the apparatus, while Wolf called for Jim Britten to be brought in.

"Still going digging in my mind?" Britten wisecracked as he walked in, flanked by the ubiquitous Grady and Jones.

"With a steam shovel," Wolf replied, and motioned that Britten be strapped onto the table.

This time Wolf wasted no explanations. Without pausing he slipped Britten a preliminary shot and began fitting electrodes onto his head and arms.

"We're going back a long time, now," he said, quietly. "Remember back to the days before you started college. How old are you?"

Britten began dreaming off. "Sixteen years old. It was a hot summer. Kentucky in summer. Hot. Hot as a solar cycle . . . hot as a bicycle down the road . . . a tricycle down the toad . . . doctor you look like a big pimply warty green-eyed toad . . ."

Morris Wolf waited until the drug-induced schizophrenic symptoms were well under way, then motioned for Alma Heller to send a sequence of high-frequency pulses through Britten's nervous system, breaking down synapses and destroying memory patterns. This, in combination with the drug, was intended to clear the mind of memories involving the period of time to which Britten's attention had been directed. In this period, Wolf guessed, the conditioning had taken place. If not, then

he must try another period.

Britten's body stiffened under the onslaught and perspiration rolled out on his brow. His mouth twisted and his eyebrows writhed. Morris Wolf himself felt perspiration starting out on his face, while in the back of the room the two "attendants" stared in amazement.

After enough time of this, Wolf switched the controls so that a rhythmic pattern of pulses went through Britten's system in such a manner as to aid the triggering of synapses and the formation of memory patterns. The slate having been wiped clean, new writing had to be placed on it.

"Now," he said, tensely, leaning over the patient and speaking close to his ears. "Cooperation means obey. Cooperation means obey. Cooperation means you do what I say. Cooperation means you do what I tell you to do, say what I tell you to say, remember what I tell you to remember. Cooperation is the key word."

The words went from Wolf's mouth to Britten's ears in the form of sound waves, were converted into neuro-electrical impulses, and under the influence of the rhythmically repeating pulses, from the machine, circulated around and around through Britten's system, tracing a deeply etched path.

Finally Wolf ceased the talk-

ing, and Alma handed him the needle with the antidote to the first drug.

"Now we see how successful we are," he said.

He gave the shot and several minutes went by while they waited for it to take effect. They remained silent, as though to say a word would break the spell.

Then: "Cooperation," Wolf said.

Britten lay still.

"Open your eyes."

Britten's eyelids struggled open, but the eyes stared blankly.

Wolf thought: what question is most basic?

Then he asked: "What is your name?"

The mouth writhed, and then whispered, "Pyotr Fermineyev."

THERE WAS a small roaring in Morris Wolf's ears, and beside him he heard the intake of Alma Heller's breath. The FBI agents, Grady and Jones, had moved up until they were leaning over Wolf's shoulder.

Then: "Where were you born?"

Again the whisper from the blank face: "In Leningrad."

Then: "Who sent you to America?"

"*The Society for the Restoration of the Revolution.*"

"What is the nature of this organization?"

"It is an underground group

pledged to return the Soviet Union to its status as the leader of the world revolution and to overthrow the present appeasers of the capitalist governments."

Wolf glowed with triumph. "Get that, Alma?" he gloated, and he turned around half way and winked at the two men behind him.

Alma Heller shook a strand of hair back from her eyes. "The fanatical revolutionaries — now they're trying to overthrow their own government because the Soviet is too friendly to the Western governments!"

"This is no comic underground group," Wolf said. "There are some big people in it who know how to do things that we're just barely starting to learn about."

He paused, and considered his next questions. The time had come to dig in.

He phrased his query: "What was your task on the satellite?"

Britten's face writhed. Perspiration rolled down his cheeks in a steady stream. Obviously some of the original conditioning remained, causing interference with Wolf's orders.

Alma Heller's knuckles showed white and her clenched hands trembled. The FBI agents inched forward, their bodies stiff with impatience.

Between hard breaths the words came: ". . . was on the satellite to watch . . . new de-

velopments in nuclear power . . . complete conversion . . . matter to energy . . ."

Understanding grew in Wolf's mind with a brilliant glare. Glover had been on the verge of taming the ultimate source of energy—the total and complete conversion of matter—a source of power over 130 times more potent than the hydrogen-helium reaction. No wonder the project had been put under wraps!

"So you killed Glover to prevent him from continuing his work. What did you intend to gain by that? Somebody else will take it over. How are you going to develop this power source yourself?"

Britten groaned audibly. His back arched and his arms strained against the table straps.

Through clenched teeth: "Ruppert . . . next man in line for Glover's job . . . one of us."

Wolf's eyes opened wide, and he whirled to the telephone.

"I'm calling Washington—" he began, then stopped in horror.

Behind him, Britten's voice said, in a strangely firm tone: "Now is the time."

WOLF whirled again. He saw Britten, still strapped to the table, his eyes unglazed, and his facial expression commanding.

The FBI men had stiffened, and were standing in place, motionless.

"Cover them, and untie me," Britten rapped out, in a voice that was greatly different from the youthful, uncertain tone he had previously used.

Grady pulled his gun, backed Wolf and Alma Heller against the wall, while Jones loosened Britten's straps.

"So you're one of them, too, Grady," Wolf growled. "And you, Jones. May you burn in hell."

"Don't malign them," said Britten, sitting up and rubbing his arms. "They are good, loyal G-men. But they sat outside my door too long, and now they do what I tell them to do."

Wolf narrowed his eyes and stared at Britten. "Just what are you?" he demanded.

Britten met his gaze, bleakly, and ignored the question.

"We have a rendezvous to make. The two of you will escort me to a helicopter that Grady will order. I need not repeat that we are prepared to blast our way out of this place. You'll save lives all around by being as inconspicuous as possible."

He indicated that Wolf and Alma Heller would go ahead, while the two agents took up the rear. Out in the main corridor they merged into the confused traffic of the busy hospital, two doctors and two attendants conducting a patient out.

Grady took the controls of the

helicopter that waited for them out on the parking lot. As they climbed to a high traffic lane, Jones took care of tying the hands of the two doctors behind their seats.

Britten sat beside the pilot, staring through the windshield. "Head due west one hundred miles," he said. "Then I'll give you further directions."

Wolf looked down through the port next to him and felt his heart constrict as he saw the houses below grow smaller and smaller. One of those houses was his; there was a small figure beside it that could have been his little boy. That was the thought that set his heart beating violently and the adrenalin pumping swiftly through his veins. For himself he didn't care so much, but his son needed a father to come home.

He looked at Alma sitting beside him, her face pale and frightened. He wondered how much time there was before the rendezvous. For this was all the time he had. Beyond that were too many unknown factors to consider.

He leaned over sideways.

"Alma," he said, in a voice not loud enough to carry forward over the roar of the motor. "Tell me exactly what happened when Britten said, 'Now is the time.' My back was turned then. Just what did he look like?"

Alma swallowed. She composed her face and turned her thoughts inward, remembering.

"There was a sudden change," she said. "One moment he was in the trance state, the next moment he was fully aware of his surroundings and in charge of the situation. As though he received a signal at that instant."

A signal, Wolf thought. From where? The implication was shocking.

Look at what we have, he continued to himself. Britten comes to me, under conditioning, ready to act out his part to the hilt. We question him under deep hypnotherapy and he comes forth with a plausible story. We might have stopped right there, but we got curious and began to ask more questions. He brings out another story. Why? Obviously, red herrings to confuse the issue. To stall for time. We apply more pressure, blank out his original conditioning so that he gives us straight answers to questions, and we are getting along fine. Then, suddenly he snaps out of it and into his original, pre-Britten character, all forty years of him. Therefore there must have been another, deeper level to the control over his mind which we did not even touch. A level activated by a new signal which we did not even detect, a signal which came at a crucial time.

"Now is the time" meant that

the stalling was over, that the preparations for Britten's escape were completed.

There were still questions to be answered, many blank spaces to be filled in, but at the present instant there was only one question that mattered. The treatment which Wolf had given Britten —had it been at all effective?

Was it still effective?

There was one way to find out.

MORRIS WOLF leaned forward and called in a loud voice: "*Pyotr Fermineyev!*"

The man's head snapped around.

"*Cooperation is the key word!*" Wolf shouted.

Confusion passed over Britten's face as conflict once more knotted his nervous system.

Wolf threw his second punch immediately. "Tell Jones to cut me loose," he demanded.

"Cut him loose," Britten echoed, in bewilderment.

After an interminable interval, Jones laid down his gun, found his knife, opened it, and slashed the cords from Wolf's arms. Wolf's muscles were already tensed. He snatched Jones' gun, lurched forward, and even as Britten's mouth opened to countermand his order, he slugged Britten with the butt of the pistol, hitting him viciously and hard until he lay unconscious on the floor.

Then he said to Grady, "You'd better get us back to the hospital," keeping the gun in his hand.

But Grady and Jones made no trouble. With Britten out of the picture they obeyed the one obviously in command. Poor boys, Wolf thought. Now they were in need of therapy.

As the hospital hove into view, he said to Alma Heller, "We have just seen the real beginning of psychological warfare. Where it took us a whole roomful of equipment to condition Britten's responses to a trigger word, he was able to do it to Jones and Brady single-handed. His method is something we'd like to

know. But more than that, Britten himself was conditioned to respond to a signal unknown to us and undetected by us. My God, it could only have been telepathic!"

Alma Heller's eyes closed for a moment.

"I think," she said, "That psychiatrists are going to reach the same position that physicists did during World War II."

Morris Wolf looked dourly out of the window, watching the hospital balloon up under the helicopter.

"That's the most unpleasant thing anybody has said all day," he replied.

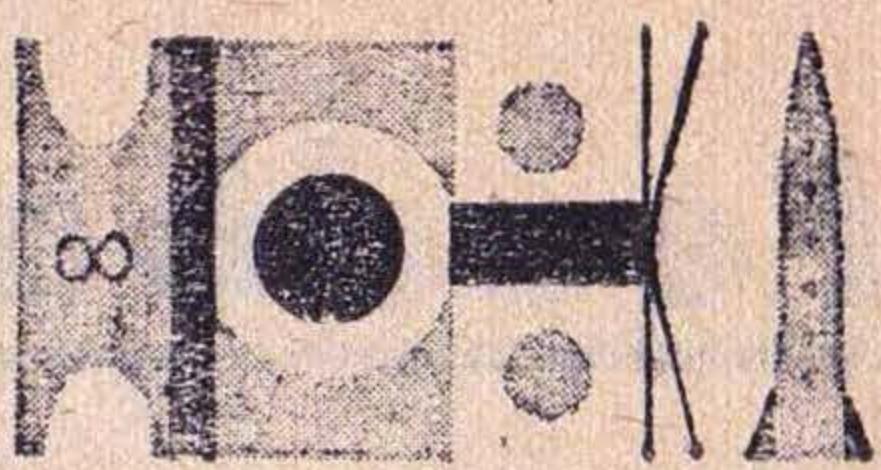
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A WORD ABOUT SERIALS

As announced on page 84, INFINITY's first serial begins next issue. We did not make the decision to publish serials without prolonged and serious consideration. A few readers have asked us not to; a vastly greater number, however, have told us that full-length novels invariably turn out to be their favorite stories. Most readers, apparently, don't mind waiting for the installments of a serial—as long as the story itself is good enough.

We're sure you'll like Richard Wilson's *And Then the Town Took Off*. And to make sure that our future serials will be the greatest science fiction novels being written today, we've been having some lengthy discussions with several of your favorite writers. At this writing, we don't know who will contribute our second serial—William Tenn, Algis Budrys and Thomas N. Scortia are all strong contenders—but we're sure that whoever the writer is, he'll give you his absolute best. Meanwhile, it's not too late to vote on what kind of serials (and other stories as well) you'd like to see in INFINITY. Write today!

By the editor



IN THIS CORNER

I BROUGHT it on myself! When INFINITY began, I insisted on including a department for readers' letters, even though many people argue that such a department has no place in a modern science fiction magazine. "Feedback" hasn't always been as lively and interesting as I wished, but I kept hoping, and last issue things picked up. This time, again, there is a large number of highly provocative letters on hand—and one result is that I have only one page left for my editorial.

A lot of the loyal regulars among the letter-writers have been squeezed out too. So to Jerry Greene, Rich Brown, Bill Meyers, James W. Ayers, and a few others, all I can say is: thanks, fellows, and please don't go away mad. I really value your opinions.

But while hot competition for these back-of-the-book pages will always leave some of us outside looking in, I for one like it this way. We've got a good thing going now; let's not fumble it.

Of course, it would be nice if everybody emulated Mr. Gold instead of Mr. Edwards, at least as far as brevity is concerned. But write them as you see them, and I'll shoehorn in as many as I can.

And speaking of Mr. Edwards, I disagree with him on many counts

—as might be expected. But Damon Knight will be granted equal space next issue, and will very likely answer most of them. All I'll mention now is Mr. Edwards' sneering reference to the "basic technique" of science fiction. I believe there is such a thing, and I believe that's important.

Peripherally, a couple of other readers were somewhat shocked at the idea that I wouldn't have published Jack Vance's "The Men Return" if I had considered it fantasy. It's true, I wouldn't have. I like fantasy fine, personally, but the sales figures on every magazine publishing it during the past twenty years give ample proof that most readers don't.

Science fiction, though it may be hard to define, and though there may be borderline stories, is an easily recognizable class most of the time. Good writers are sometimes able to extend its boundaries, which is a fine thing. Other, less good (though often commercially successful) writers just water it down by refusing to respect or learn the "basic technique." Naturally, I try to avoid publishing watered-down science fiction.

Whether I succeed or not is for you to say. In print, if possible.

—LTS

Feedback



SERGEANT BILLINGS' letter seems to have stirred up a lot more controversy than it is worth. There is no real reason for answering the hackneyed accusation about the "God of Science"; there is just no use trying to answer anyone who capitalizes Moral, Faith and Religion.

On the other hand, some of the letters in your July '57 issue bring up points well worth considering. S-F authors, respectfully as they may treat religion when they do consider it, just don't generally think of it when searching for a subject. This is too bad, because fascinating stories could be woven about the new religions which will undoubtedly spring up to meet any great future upheaval; or perhaps about the meeting of terrestrial and alien theologies. Some yeoman work is being done already, on these topics among others; we can expect more.

It's very likely that stories in this field, as in most others, are only inspired by the prospect of sudden future change; in this case, none of these readers' complaints carries any weight. Without the expectation of rapid change in future theology, S-F writers had every right to ignore religion. Today's churches are simply symbolic; they lost their reference to "the basic beliefs of

living man" when they became power blocs. Religion may not expire of its "philosophical decrepitude"; but until radically changed, it's no subject for science fiction.—Art M. Buckley, 4 Prescott Street, Cambridge 38, Massachusetts.

∞

In the July INFINITY, Damon Knight made these comments on William Tenn's *The Human Angle*:

"Only when he relaxes occasionally does Tenn produce a genuinely funny story like 'The Discovery of Morniel Mathaway'—a bitingly good-humored satire about time-travel, fame, and fifth-rate Village painters.

"'The Flat-Eyed Monster' is an agreeably bitter parody of the old boy-girl-bug-eyed-monster triangle.

"'Party of the Two Parts' turns a nice ribald idea into a heavy-handed burlesque in the *Galaxy* manner."

All three appeared in *Galaxy*, but only the third is credited, in the light-fingered Knight manner, to pickpocket the credit from *Galaxy*.

A little honesty, please?—Horace Gold.

∞

Damon Knight's "Dio" was not only one of his best, but one of the best short novels INFINITY has ever published. "The Superstition Seed-

ers" was the only recent piece that could compare with it. I also liked the way in which the story was presented. It was quite a change from ordinary third person stories; and very effective too. The term, "Almost but no cigar" doesn't apply here. He really rang the bell!

The three shorts by Arthur C. Clarke were well worth the price of the magazine itself. I always liked Clarke's work, and this makes my admiration for him even higher.

I will try to start a discussion in the letter column of INFINITY. I believe that man will reach the moon by 1975. I am sure that all S-F readers and fans agree with me as to reaching the moon, but I'm sure that everybody has their own ideas as to how long it will take.

The only thing that could delay that would be an atomic war. But then, an atomic war would slow up everything else. I have enough faith in human nature to be almost sure that no nation will be so stupid as to risk destroying itself, its peoples, and everybody else in the world. I am hopeful that atomic energy will be used for peace and not, as some people predict, for destroying each other.—Kenneth Pearlman, 1530 Mahantonga Street, Pottsville, Pennsylvania.

∞

TECHNICAL INFORMATION OFFICE
RESERVE TRAINING BATTALION
CAMP LE JEUNE, NORTH CAROLINA

From: Technical Sergeant James
J. Oggerino, USMC
To: Larry T. Shaw, Editor,
INFINITY

FEEDBACK

Subj: "The Men Return"; criticism of
Ref: (a) Request for subject criticism, P. 125, Vol. 2, No. 4, July 1957 issue INFINITY

1. In accordance with the request contained in reference (a), the following criticism is offered:

a. Subject story left me slightly nostalgic for another 14-month R & R (Rest and Relaxation) tour of Japan.

b. It brought to mind two things. Edgar Allan Poe and the sweet dreams resulting from over-indulgence in hot *sake* followed by the ice-cold distillate of *Hordeum disticum* (an amber colored liquid found in bottles labeled *beer*). In these dreams unreality was the order of the day and falling through space from a dissolving cloud was common.

c. Fantasy or science fiction? Let a mind more capable than mine determine that.

d. I only see Finn behaving like a predatory animal, and with pure animal survivor instincts. At the finish he is instantaneously converted from a savage beast seeking food (he steps over and ignores the "food" just killed) to a heroic figure speaking good English.

e. He faces east and with the wind sighing through his hair majestically points to the sun, beats his new found analytical and philosophizing chest and exclaims, "Salvation and the cows lie that-a-way!"

2. The greatest redeeming feature of the story, to my small mind, was the fact that Finn had wives (?)

and no mothers-in-law.

3. While perhaps not apropos considered "Sweet Dreams" by Edward Wellen the best by far in the issue.
4. Unlike most New York City "coppers" O'Reilly did not have muscle-bound brains. He was aware of his shortcomings. He was sensitive enough to enjoy *Moritat*. In short, O'Reilly was very *human*. Sayonara.—James J. Oggerino, TSgt, USMC.

∞

I suppose it's no more than just to write and tell you that I, for one, think you did a bangup job with the September number. You almost made a perfect score in that every story was SF according to my notion. The lone exception was "Deadline" by Walter L. Kleine. The story could just as well have occurred in any pioneer area on Earth, in which case it would have appeared in a women's magazine, and I wouldn't have read it. Not a bad story, you understand, just misplaced.

Maybe you or one of your readers would like to comment on this: As I understand it, the assumption of the immutability of the velocity of light is a postulate, rather than a result of the Theory of Relativity. Does its use seem to indicate that the assumption is pretty close to acceptable as fact? If not, what is so sacred about using that limitation in SF stories? And why doesn't an occasional writer simply say such a limitation isn't so and go ahead and ignore it?

Further, in general terms, would *not* using this assumption invalidate much of the Theory itself, or is it

one of the basic assumptions? Like many of your readers whose work is far from theoretical physics, most of my science comes from reading SF literature and it is quite a problem to separate fact from fantasy, unless we take to the textbooks occasionally.

Just another word about Arthur C. Clarke. No comment is really necessary because all of his stuff is so well done, but I suppose an occasional word of appreciation wouldn't hurt.

And Damon Knight's reviews are as entertaining as the fiction. I particularly enjoyed the evaluation of Heinlein's style. He doesn't overlook the fact that a book can be badly written from a literary point of view and still be good reading, as was pointed out in the little hassle in which the critic insisted that Asimov couldn't write. Nevertheless the stories are entertaining, and I suppose in the long run that is what we want and that is what you want to print.

So good luck to a magazine that has been consistently good from the start; what more can anyone say?—Floyd W. Zwicky, 913 Fourth Avenue, Rockford, Illinois.

PS. If anyone cares to write with anything particular to say, I would be glad to kick a few subjects around.

∞

With the publication of Damon Knight's review of Richard Matheson's *The Shores of Space* in your July issue, it may be said that the state of American literary criticism—which has been on a swift and inexorable decline over the past

quarter-century—has finally reached absolute nadir. There was a time when the craft was a respected one, honored by authors, publishers and readers alike. For its practitioners were known to be fair, thoughtful men who, though they were strong-minded individuals, understood the need for objectivity and performed their duties with a minimum of instinctive bias. What do we have today? A group of cautious ninnies who like whatever is set before them (or pretend to), and a number of egocentric frustrates with big voices and small talents. Mr. Knight falls unhappily into the latter category. Failing to achieve anything like a really successful book himself, he has apparently set out to "cut down to size" those of his contemporaries more auspiciously gifted. It is so obvious in his latest eruption that perhaps those otherwise intelligent readers who have mistaken loud judgment for sound judgment, who have allowed themselves to be lulled into the idea that they are reading honest criticism, will realize that they have been fattening a prime frustrate.

Knight's vicious attack on Matheson was a neurotic, personal assault, wholly lacking in objectivity or taste—and I think it is high time to set the record straight. In earlier reviews (on other books of Matheson's) Knight slashed away like a knife-wielding teen-ager. And Mr. K. (who has won no beauty contests as far as I know) even commented acidly upon Matheson's *face* in a review of *I Am Legend*. The latest attack was stupid and full of holes.

1. He begins by saying that

"Matheson has no sense of plot." Then neither did a certain Guy De Maupassant, to mention just one other writer who told the same kind of neat, tight stories that Matheson tells. Matheson's plot sense does not hit the reader in the face like old fish; he subtly injects plot into his yarns, letting the *characters* dominate, as well they should.

2. Knight picks out several stories from *The Shores of Space* to criticize by name. Among them: "Clothes Make the Man." Knight calls it "weak . . . and slight." Well, when that story appeared in the Feb. '51 issue of *Worlds Beyond* the editor of the magazine took special pains to announce its coming a month in advance with a breathless blurb regarding the work of "one of the brightest young men in the field." The editor: a guy named Damon Knight!

3. Matheson's hero, says Mr. K., is "almost always Matheson himself." So what? Each time a writer puts a character on paper that character is part of himself. Most of the great writers wrote about the one man they knew best; they wrote of themselves. Perhaps Mr. Knight has overlooked the works of another fellow who practiced this "folly." His name is Thomas Wolfe. And what, I'd like to know, is wrong with the dialogue: "Oh, my God, it's hot!"? Mr. Knight calls it "banal." It is intended to build a mood—or doesn't the ram-paging Mr. Knight have time for mood?

4. Crime of crimes, Mr. Matheson is next accused of "using a thesaurus." Dear, dear! Next he'll

be accused of using a dictionary. Memo to Knight: Matheson also brushes his teeth, combs his hair, eats food and sleeps. For Mr. Knight's information, the thesaurus is a tool employed by most writers from time to time. It was designed for just such a purpose!

5. Next, Knight spends some energy taking Matheson to task for the lack of strong science in his work. Since the Gernsback era faded away writers have done quite well, have written quite intelligently in this field without resorting to equations and slide rules. Emotion and character are far more important—and Mr. Matheson is careful to look to these in his work. I might mention here that one of Knight's favorite writers (who can seemingly do no wrong in the s-f field) is a man who utterly ignores the science in science-fiction, Ray Bradbury. Mr. B. has done all right for himself by simply writing *fiction*.

6. Lastly, Knight winds up his frenzied assault by stating that Matheson "never bothered to learn the basic technique" of s-f. No, Knight is quite correct here. Matheson, like many other top writers in and out of the field, only bothered to learn how to write imaginative, emotionally honest fiction without resorting to the "basic technique" which any wet-behind-the-ears amateur can pick up, I'm

sure, by sending his name and address and 10¢ in coin to Damon Knight, Ace Interplanetary Reviewer and Critic, in care of this magazine.

What Mr. Knight seems to need more than anything else at the moment seems to be a good, strong dose of salts. And what INFINITY needs is a new book reviewer.—F. E. Edwards, 11550½ Friar Street, North Hollywood, California.

∞

I have just completed reading the September issue of INFINITY. This is the first time I have found your magazine on the newsstands, and I find it to be, on the whole, a fine publication.

Clarke's trilogy was especially enjoyable; "Dio," on the other hand, was dull, in that the theme has been used all too often in the past.

Damon Knight's book-review column is very enjoyable—perhaps because I share his taste in science fiction.

There is one thing, however, which is missing from your magazine—indeed, from all science fiction magazines, with the exception of *F&SF*—that is poetry and verse. I feel that many readers would be very happy for the inclusion of such material, and I urge you to consider it.—Richard Santelli, 3525 South 53rd Avenue, Cicero 50, Illinois.

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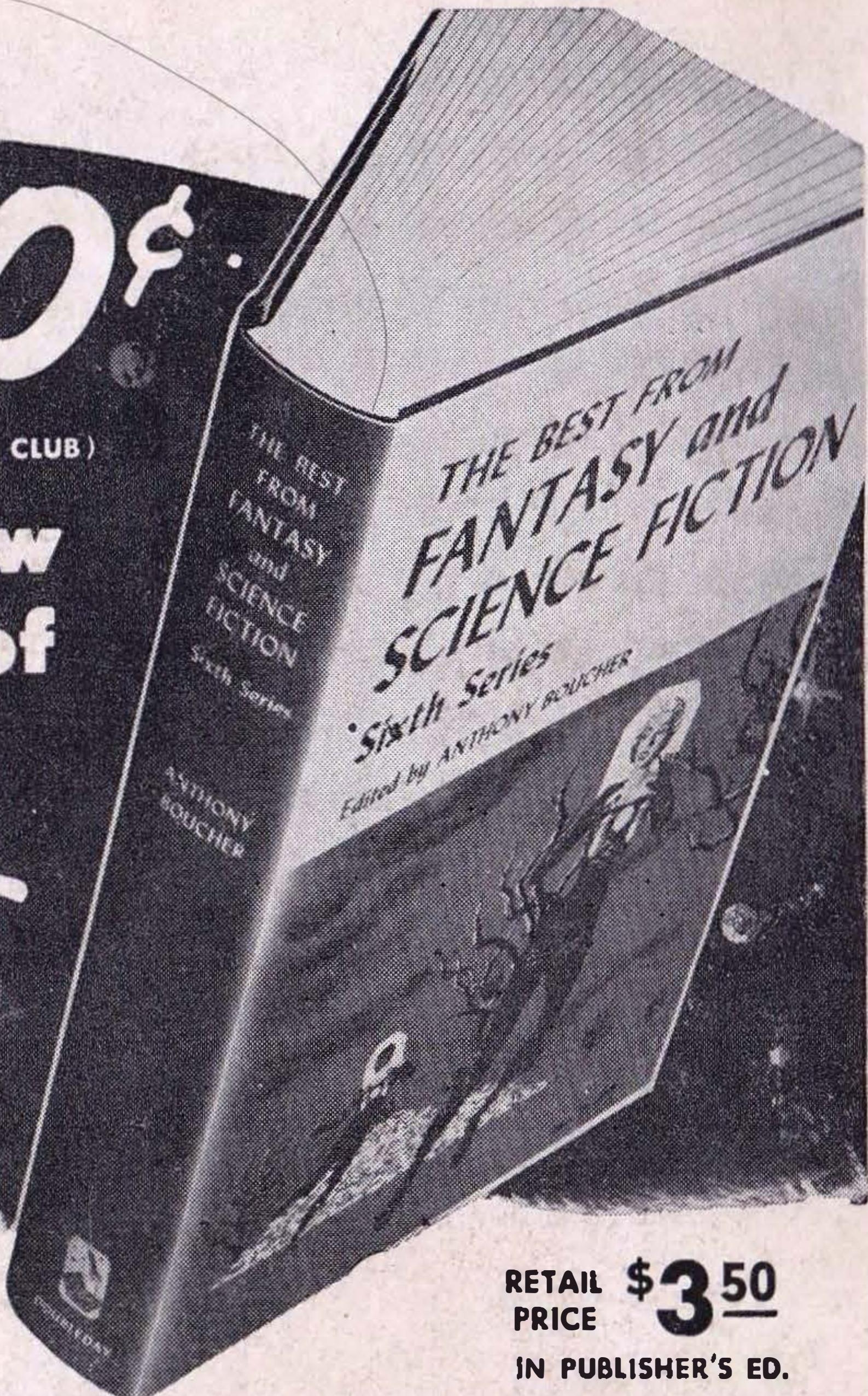
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