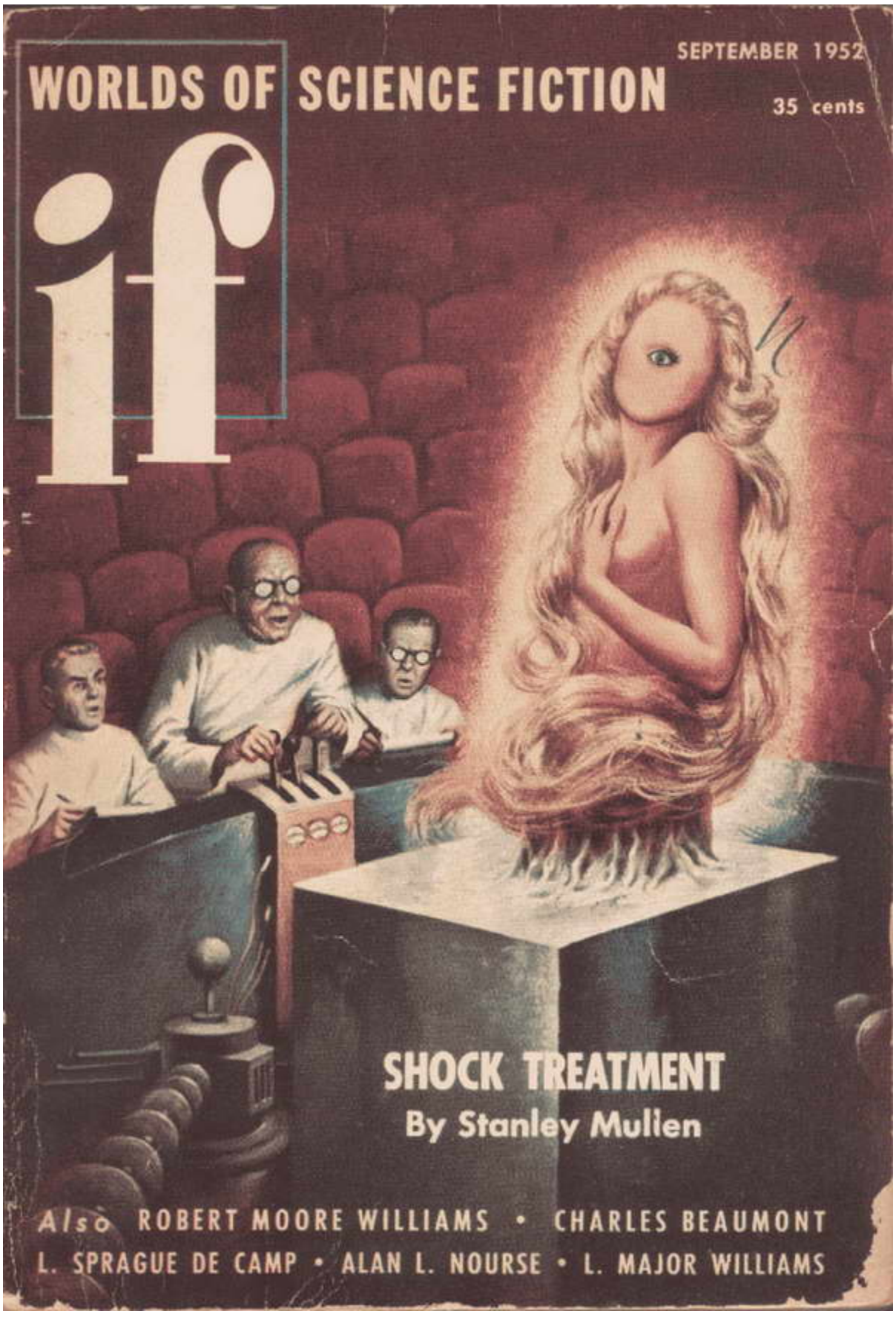

WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION
SEPTEMBER 1952
35 cents
if
SHOCK TREATMENT
By Stanley Mullen
Also ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS • CHARLES BEAUMONT
L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP • ALAN L. NOURSE • L. MAJOR WILLIAMS

WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION SEPTEMBER 1952

All Stories New and Complete

Publisher JAMES L. QUINN

Editor PAUL W. FAIRMAN

NOVEL

SINISTER PARADISE by Robert Moore Williams

NOVELETTES

SHOCK TREATMENT by Stanley Mullen
THE SKULL by Philip K. Dick

SHORT STORIES

THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE by Charles Beaumont
MARLEY'S CHAIN by Alan E. Nourse
HOLES, INCORPORATED by L. Major Reynolds
AN EMPTY BOTTLE by Mari Wolf
THE SPACE CLAUSE by L. Sprague de Camp
THE CLEAN AND WHOLESOME LAND by Ralph Sholto
THE LAST SUPPER by T. D. Hamm

FEATURES

A CHAT WITH THE EDITOR
PERSONALITIES IN SCIENCE FICTION
SCIENCE BRIEFS
GUEST EDITORIAL
POSTMAN COMETH

Cover by RALPH JOINER

IF is published bi-monthly by Quinn Publishing Company, Inc. 8 Lord St., Buffalo, N. Y. Volume 1, No. 4. Application for Entry as Second Class matter at Post Office, Buffalo, New York, pending. Subscription $3.50 for 12 issues in U.S. and Possessions; Canada $4 for 12 issues; elsewhere $4.50. Allow four weeks for change of address. All stories appearing in this magazine are fiction. Any similarity to actual persons is coincidental. 35c a copy. Printed in U.S.A.

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE SEPT. 9TH AT YOUR LOCAL NEWSSTAND

It was like a mirage in reverse, this strange island off the California coast—
it couldn't always be seen, but it was there—in Time.

Sinister Paradise

By Robert Moore Williams

THERE'S the island, Parker!" Retch called. Bill Parker shifted the controls of the 'copter and the big craft swung in the direction Retch was pointing. Squinting his eyes against the sun glare rising from the Pacific, Parker clearly saw the island. It was miles away as yet but it swam like a mirage suspended just above the surface of the sea.

The island was not large—Parker guessed it as probably being less than two miles in circumference—but he could make out a fringe of trees along the shore and a central peak rising like a cliff in the center.

"I've found it again!" Retch spoke with fierce satisfaction—clenched fists. Parker heard the indrawn hiss of breath following the words; a hiss that seemed to hold a promise for the future. Revenge, vengeance, triumph, or something else? Parker could not determine what emotional overtone had found expression in Retch's words. But the emotional overtone was there. Out of the corner of his eyes, Parker glanced at the man sitting in the seat next to him. What he saw did not please him.

Retch was big. He had the muscular build of a prize fighter. The scar over his left cheekbone did not add to the attractiveness of his appearance. He did not, in Parker's opinion, look like the scientist he had claimed to be.

Parker shrugged such thoughts aside. What difference did it make what Retch was, or the nature of his business here? He had paid charter charges on the big helicopter.

"There it is, Parker!" Retch almost screamed the words. As he pointed again toward the island in the far distance, Parker caught a glimpse of a pistol in a shoulder holster under the man's arm.

The sight of the gun caused a split second of alarm in the big pilot. He had not known that Retch was armed. Then the alarm subsided. Parker pressed his left arm down against his body, assurring himself that his own gun was where it belonged.

The woman, Mercedes Valdar, seemed to catch some of Retch's excitement. She leaned forward across Retch's shoulder to stare at the island. Parker caught another whiff of the musky perfume that she used. He noticed again what he had realized the first time he met her—that in any man's language she was a beauty. Aquiline face, smouldering black eyes, high cheek bones, a delicate brown complexion that hinted at Indian blood back several generations in the past, she looked like something out of an exotic movie. The slacks and sport coat that she wore accentuated the fact that she was a woman.

Parker was aware again of the enigma of her presence. Retch had introduced her as his secretary. Parker, accepting the man's statement, had asked no questions. Asking questions in a matter such as this was a fine way to get a bust in the snoot.

"It ees the island!" Her whisper was sharp. A glow appeared on her face. "Soon we will be reech!" She slapped Parker heartily on the shoulder. "Beel, is not that wonderful!"

"It sure is," Parker answered. He was as astonished by the statement as he was by the slap on the shoulder.

"Shut up, Mercedes!" Retch spoke. "Parker, turn some juice into this thing."

"She's cruising at about her best speed," Parker answered.

"Then get her faster than cruising speed. We've found the island." His manner indicated that finding the island was very important but that something else perhaps of equal importance remained to be done.

"What's the big rush!" Parker countered. "You don't think it will vanish before we get there, do you?"

A startled look appeared on Retch's face. "No, of course not. That is—"

A thudding jar went through the ship.

"What 'appened?" Mercedes screamed in fear.

With a snarling crash of breaking metal, one of the helicopter blades was yanked from its mounting above them.

Parker had the dazed impression that he saw the big blade jerked away through the air. Then, like a leaf suddenly caught in a violent hurricane, the helicopter began to turn flip-flops in the air.

"Do somesing!" Mercedes cried.

As the ship jumped and began to yaw, she was thrown across the cabin. Jerking, buckling, jumping, twisting, the big helicopter lurched its way toward the surface of the sea below. Cutting the power, Parker leaped from his seat. He knew what was going to happen. He intended to try and be ready for it.

RETCH, gripping his seat with both hands, yelled. "We're falling!"

"It's not news to me," Parker answered, jerking open the door to the compartment at the rear. Inside that compartment was a mass of synthetic fabric. Tossed to the surface of the sea, inflated by the self-contained flask of gas under pressure, it would make a rubber raft.

"You've left the controls!" Retch barked. "Do something to stop us. We're going to fall." The man's face was wild with fear as he twisted his head around to see what Parker was doing.

"You damned right I've left the controls!" Parker answered. "We've lost the equivalent of a wing in an ordinary plane. If you know any way to stop a plane from falling you tell me." Working with deft, sure hands, he pulled the mass of synthetic fabric out of its compartment.

"But we've got to get to that island. We've found it. We've got to get there while—"

"If we get there, we'll have to swim," Parker answered. "Personally, I'll consider myself lucky to get there by swimming. Here we go."

The last was spoken as the helicopter began its final plunge to the surface of the blue water below them.

Parker, with the mass of fabric clutched firmly in both hands, threw himself flat on the floor.

The 'copter hit with a terrific thud. An instant later, Parker was on his feet. The life raft was under one hand. With the other hand, he was reaching for the handle that opened the cabin door.

"We've got to get out of here. This ship will go the bottom like a rock."

Behind him, Mercedes and Retch were struggling to their feet. Parker yanked on the handle that opened the cabin door.

The handle did not budge.

The heavy jolt the craft had taken when it struck the surface had twisted the whole frame.

"Get that door open!" Retch moaned. "We'll be drowned like rats."

"Hell, I'm trying!" Parker answered. He yanked upward with all his strength.

The door still did not budge. Outside Parker could see the green water rising around the cabin. He backed away, ducked his head, threw himself with all his strength against the door.

Under the driving impact of his body, the door was knocked open. The mass of synthetic fabric in his arms, Parker catapulted through the opening and into the sea. He hit with a terrific splash. Mercedes followed him. Parker, treading water and working with the valve that would release the gas and inflate the raft, saw that Retch was still standing in the door of the 'copter.

"What am I going to do?" Retch screamed.

"Jump."

"But I can't swim."

"Then wait until I get this goddamned raft inflated. Ugh!" Parker's voice went into silence as arms came up out of the water and closed around his neck with a grip of death.

Mercedes, in a panic that often comes to people catapulted suddenly and unexpectedly into the water, was grabbing the nearest source of potential safety.

"Let go!" Even as he spoke, Parker felt her arms close even tighter around his neck. He knew then that she was not going to let go. She was pulling him under with her.

Giving one final jerk at the valve of the gas container, Parker found himself pulled under water.

The arms around his neck seemed to grip like iron. He caught them in both hands, yanked at them. His hands slipped. He grabbed again. She was behind him, on his back, so he could not slug her. Meanwhile each passing second was sending both of them deeper into the sea.

He yanked at her arms again. This time his fingers held. Her grip was broken.

Twisting, he grabbed her hair. Then he began to fight his way to the surface.

His head broke water. As he gulped air, he realized the blessed sight before his eyes.

The rubber raft! His last jerk at the valve before Mercedes dragged him under had opened it.

From the door of the sinking helicopter Retch was staring at the raft. At the, same instant in final desperation, he jumped. His clutching fingers caught the edge of the rubber raft. Like a frightened river rat, he pulled himself out of the water.

TREADING water, Parker dragged Mercedes to the edge of the raft. Retch leaned over and lifted her in. For an instant, Parker remained in the water, his fingers firm on the raft, letting it support him while he gasped air into his lungs. Behind him, with a gurgle and a rumble, the helicopter sank. He swung himself into the raft. Mercedes, her masculine garb clinging to her, was sitting up.

"I am sorry, Beel," she said. "I get the scare up and I grab at you. I not know for sure what I am doing. You will forgive me, no?"

"Think nothing of it," Parker answered. "Anybody can get scared under these circumstances."

"That I know," she answered. "But you saved my life. And that I will remember."

"Forget it," Parker said. "I did what had to be done, nothing more."

"But I will remember it," she calmly repeated.

Parker was silent. Under her hardness for the first time he glimpsed something deeper, finer. She was the type who meant what she said. She was a woman who paid her debts. Under other circumstances ... Parker put the thought out of his mind.

Now he set about doing what had to be done—paddling to the island. He turned his eyes toward it.

The island was gone. Calm, serene, the level face of the sea stretched away to the horizon.

Fear, dark, sudden, and overwhelming, arose in Bill Parker. The fear did not come up just because the face of the sea was level and calm, the island not visible, but because of something else, something that he had forgotten, something that he had put out of his mind and out of his life. Could it be possible that—

He caught himself. In that direction lay madness. Words exploded out of him. "Hey, what the hell? Am I nuts? What became of that island? I saw it!"

"I told you we had to hurry to get there when we saw it." Retch was hesitant. "It's—it's not always there."

"But it's got to be there! I, saw it!"

"There is a trick about that island," Retch said. "I—it—I—you don't always see it. Something funny."

Parker was across the "shaking, unsteady raft. His impulse was to take Retch by the throat, to shake words out of him. "What do you mean?" He was restraining himself with difficulty.

Retch spread his hands. "I'm sorry, I can't explain. That's all I know. Believe me."

Retch was telling the truth Parker decided. The big pilot swung his gaze in every direction, searching for land. Somewhere in the far distance was the peninsula of Lower California. But it was beyond range of his eyes. As far as he could see, was barren water.

Setting his course by the small compass that was included as part of the standard equipment on the life raft. Parker paddled toward the south. The clumsy raft made little progress. Parker hardly noticed, hardly cared. Deep in his mind was a lurking thought he was trying to keep below his consciousness.

In the front of the raft, Retch sat with his back to Parker. From Retch's motions, Parker knew the man was cleaning his gun. Parker made no comment. When Retch had finished and had turned back to him, Parker spoke. "I want to know a little more about that island. How does it happen we can't see it?"

"I'm not certain," Retch answered. "I think it's a lot like the mirages you see on the desert. This island is something like that, only in reverse. In a mirage, you see something that doesn't exist. In the case of this island, you don't see something that does exist."

"Um," Parker said, then was silent. The explanation sounded reasonable enough, as far as it went. The trouble was it didn't go Tar enough, not nearly far enough to quiet the thought lurking deep in the big pilot's mind. He worked with the paddle. "When you hired me to fly you down here, you told me that you knew where this island was located but you didn't tell me it had a bad habit of vanishing."

"I didn't believe it myself," Retch answered. "So far as I was concerned, it was just a wild rumor."

"Um," Parker said again. As he spoke, part of the thought that he had been keeping buried in his mind came blasting to the surface. "She said it was a mirage too!" he blurted out the words. "And that goddamned Dr. Yammer—" He caught himself. Into his mind had come a vision of a woman he had once known, and a psychiatrist called Dr. Yammer. Pain crossed his face.

"What?" Retch asked. "Who are you talking about?"

"Nobody," Parker answered. "Just a woman I once knew."

Her name had been Effra. Effra of the Green Eyes, he had called her. Rigidly he forced the thought of her from his mind, forced himself to think of what Retch had said. But it was no good. His mind kept going back to Effra and Yammer.

"She is caught, trapped in a net of delusion and hallucination that is as solid as a block of steel," Dr. Yammer had once said, his voice precise with authoritarian certainty. "I cannot get her out of this steel block unless I hospitalize her, perhaps operate. There is no other choice, no other decision that can be

made. Putting it bluntly—she is insane. A delicate thing, insanity. We still work in the dark with things of the mind."

AT THE memory of Yammer's words, Parker twisted uncomfortably. He used the paddle much more vigorously than was necessary. It was as if Yammer's face showed in the water into which he thrust the paddle.

Mercedes was studying Parker. "About this woman—"

"She was just a woman I once knew."

"You loved her, yes?"

"Well—" Parker was silent.

"Tell me what 'appened."

"Nothing," Parker said. "Oh, hell —all right. Up in LA three years ago I knew Effra. She was a pilot too, and we got to running around together. She liked to fly out over the Pacific all by herself. I don't know why; she just liked to flirt with danger, maybe. One time she came in a couple of hours overdue. Figuring she was down in the drink, I was about to rouse out the Navy to hunt for her when she came in." He paused.

Mercedes was silent. In the front of the raft, Retch said nothing. His eyes were still searching the skyline.

"She was wildly excited," Parker went on. "She said she had made a forced landing on an island somewhere off the coast of Southern Cal. She also said there were a lot of strange people living on the island." He shook his head. There was a feeling in him he did not like.

His eyes came to focus on a ripple in the water. A shark. It made him think of Dr. Yammer.

"What 'appened then?" Mercedes asked softly.

"I helped her look for the island," Parker said. "We spent months looking in our spare time. We flew over more ocean than I ever knew existed. But we didn't find it."

"No?"

"That island was awfully important to her. She thought something wonderful was there, what it was, she could not tell me, just that it was there. When we could not find it, she began to doubt herself, to think perhaps she had not seen it, that she had not landed there. She reached the conclusion then—well, she went to see one of these fancy mental specialists who know everything about nothing and nothing about anything."

Under the water, he could see the eyes of the shark. They reminded him of the expression in Dr. Yammer's eyes, except that the shark's eyes looked more honest.

"And then?" Mercedes said, very softly.

"She—vanished," Parker said. "Yammer was going to stick her into a hospital, use something that he called 'shock' on her, maybe operate. She ran away."

"Did you try to find her, Beel?"

"For asking that question, Mercedes, I ought to choke you!" Parker said hotly. "I hunted high and low. All we knew for certain was that her plane was missing. I think she decided she would simply fly out to the sea she loved, and never come back." Again his voice sank to a whisper as he visualized Effra of the Green Eyes flying out over this wilderness of waters.

"I am sorry, Beel," Mercedes said gently. "Will you remember one thing, Beel?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"You saved my life back there. I will not forget it. If the time ever comes, I will pay my debt."

"Thank you," Parker said. "But there is no debt."

"You think this island we are hunting might be the same island your girl claimed she found?" Retch spoke from the front end of the boat.

"And if it is the same island?" Mercedes said.

Anger came boiling up in Parker. "If it is that island, and if I ever get back to Los Angeles, I am going to hunt up a psychiatrist by the name of Yammer and take care of him!" Parker dug the water savagely. Gradually, his anger subsided "Where did you run into the rumor about this island?"

Retch shrugged. "It was just one of those things you hear." He studied the landscape. "We should spot a boat soon."

"We are not exactly on the well-traveled ocean lanes," Parker pointed out. "Does it happen that there are any other little things about this island that you forgot to tell me when you chartered my ship to fly you down here?"

Retch flushed. "Such as—"

"Such as how it happened that my 'copter threw a vane just after we sighted the place?"

Retch did not answer.

"Seemed as though somebody shot at us."

"Oh hell no! The loss of the vane was accidental."

"Accidents like that can happen but they usually don't. I checked the ship before we took off." Parker turned silent. There was no proof that the wrecking of the 'copter had been anything but an accident.

"What do you expect to find on this island?"

"I told you—"

"Just before the 'copter started down, Miss Valdar was yakking about how we were all going to be rich," Parker interrupted.

The glance Retch gave Mercedes had no love in it. "Sometimes she's got her mouth open when she ought to have it shut."

MERCEDES was silent. "I see," Parker said. "When you chartered my ship, you told me you were a scientist and that you wanted to investigate certain phenomena on this island. You said your investigation would take only a few hours. I was to fly you here and wait for you. You said you might want me to fly you back to the mainland, or might not, depending on what you found here. Is this correct?"

"Certainly," Retch answered. "I'm sorry you lost your ship but the insurance will take care of it."

"Insurance will take care of the 'copter but not of my neck. Are you a scientist?"

"Of course. Didn't I tell you—" "What kind of a scientist are you?"

"I—ah—What do you mean?" "What's your specialty? Are you a biologist, a physicist, or what?"

"I don't believe you Are a scientist at all. You don't talk like one."

"Damn it, I told you what I am and that's what I am!" Retch's face showed sullen and his hand moved toward the gun. Parker tensed. Retch stopped the movement of his hand. He glared at the big pilot.

"Okay," Parker said. "It doesn't make any difference anyhow." He resumed paddling.

The sun slid down the western sky. Retch and Mercedes huddled in the front end of the raft and whispered to each other. From time to time, the woman glanced at Parker. He paid no attention to her. The sea was calm. In the distance, a school of flying fish skittered over the surface. A dozen gulls played near the surface. A high-riding fin cut the water. Shark, sensing food.

The sun reached the horizon and wallowed in the sea like a fat, round shining pig on fire.

Mercedes screamed, pointed, jerked a terror-stricken face toward Parker. "Beel! Beel!" She scuttled across the raft, threw herself into his arms. "Look, Beel, look!"

Terror and panic almost beyond understanding were in her words. Parker looked where she was pointing. His heart climbed up into his mouth and threatened to choke him. He had thought he was shockproof, that nothing could jar him. But here was something that made his mind reel.

Walking across the water toward the raft were three men.

Clad in knee-length breeches, wearing cloaks, the three men looked as if they had just stepped out of the 17th century. Two wore big, broad-brimmed hats, the third had a handkerchief wrapped around his head. He also had a wooden leg and he stalked across the surface of the sea with all the sureness he might have had with concrete under him. He carried a curved cutlass in one hand. The other two men were armed with swords, in scabbards. In addition, heavy, clumsy-looking pistols were thrust into sashes at their belts.

They looked like men out of a nightmare—or like pirates out of the olden days; swash-buckling buccaneers who had somehow managed to survive their proper period in history and to live into the 20th century.

"Ghosts!" Mercedes screamed. "Devils! They've come up out of hell because of our sins!" She wrapped her arms around Parker's neck. "Save me, Beel, save me!"

Parker caught her wrists, jerked her arms loose from his neck, and rose quickly to his feet. He hoped fervidly that his eyes had been deceiving him and that standing up would cause this mirage to disappear.

His eyes continued to deceive him. The three men did not disappear. They continued to walk across the water toward the raft. They moved with the sureness of men who know where they are going.

Behind them, suddenly outlined against the fat sun that was wallowing in the sea, rocky, grim, and forbidding, the mysterious island was now visible. It had reappeared. They had found it.

Three men coming from it had found them.

The shark found the three men.

Parker saw the triangular fin cut through the water toward them. Like a speed boat taking off on a race, the fin gathered momentum.

The three men saw it coming.

"Ho!" one yelled.

"A shark!" the second said.

"Have at him, boys!" the third shouted.

THE shark charged them. Drawing their swords, the three men executed a nimble dance on the surface of the sea. They thrust downward—their swords entering the water with no difficulty whatsoever although their feet did not enter it—drew them back dripping red. They skipped lightly out of the way of the wounded and infuriated monster.

"Zounds!"

"Chop the sea pig down!"

"Carve his heart out!"

Old battle cries rang in the air as they fought the shark. Blood colored the surface of the sea.

The wounded shark suddenly took its death blow. It dived, was gone from sight, then broke the surface a hundred yards away. It beat the water into foam, threshing out its life.

With pleased interest, the three men watched the shark die. Dipping their blades into the sea to clean the blood from them, they wiped them dry on their pants legs.

Again they moved toward the raft.

Parker's hand went to the pistol inside his leather, jacket. He loosed it in its holster but did not draw it.

Mercedes moaned and covered her eyes. At the other end of the boat, Retch had risen to his feet.

Bracing himself, Bill Parker waited for—whatever was to happen. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Retch slowly drawing his gun.

"Damn it, Retch, put that gun away!" Parker shouted. "Don't shoot until you know what the hell is going on."

Retch turned, the gun visible in his hand. "What the hell—" Retch didn't put the gun away. He lifted it. Parker found himself staring into the muzzle.

"Get your hands up!" Retch snarled the words. "Mercedes, get' that gun out of his holster. Get your goddamned hands up or I'll blow your blasted head off!"

The last was spoken to Parker as the dazed pilot tried to understand what had happened. He could hardly believe his own eyes. Automatically he lifted his hands. Mercedes slid past him, got behind him, taking no chances on getting between him and Retch's gun. He felt her fingers go inside his jacket. Expertly she lifted the gun from its holster.

"Toss me the gun!" Retch said. He caught the weapon the woman tossed toward him, glanced at 'Parker. "You thought I was going to start shooting at them?" He gestured toward the three approaching men. "You made a slight mistake." The grin on his face was wolfish.

"What the hell have I got into?"

"You'll find out, if you live long enough," Retch said. "Just behave yourself and do as you're told and maybe you'll stay alive." Again the wolfish grin showed on his face but under the grin, the words were harsh with meaning.

"Ho, Johnny!" the three men were drawing near the raft. "Ho, Johnny Retch! What kind of at flying ship is this that you have brought back with you?"

Retch turned to the three men. "Gotch! Peg-leg! Masterville!" Retch greeted them as old friends. The one he had called Gotch had spoken. All three of them stared at the raft and its occupants. Mercedes drew bold, appreciative stares. Parker got blank looks. Standing lightly and easily on the water, the three men surveyed the raft with doubtful contempt.

"Does this thing fly through the air like the Jez—" Gotch caught himself. "It looks to me as if it were more fit for sailing on a mill pond back in Devon."

"This is not the ship that flies through the air, that ship was wrecked. This is a rubber boat that it carried."

"Wrecked?" Gotch spoke. "But where does that leave us?"

"Everything has been taken care of," Retch spoke quickly. "You can always trust Johnny Retch to have two strings for his bow."

"Hmmmm. And who is this?" Gotch gestured toward Parker.

"The pilot of the flying ship that was wrecked," Retch answered.

"Ummmm. And what are we going to do with him?" Gotch glanced around toward the still floundering and dying shark as if he regretted their haste in disposing of what might have been a handy scavanger. "Um." He moved around the raft and stood close to Parker, staring at him. The sword in his hands still showed faint traces of red from the blood of the shark.

"We do not need any more men on the island!" Lifting his blade, Gotch glared at Parker.

"Do you, per'aps, need women?" Mercedes spoke quickly. Gotch turned his eyes on her. As he looked, some of the anger seemed to go out of him.

"Perhaps what you need on the island are more women," Mercedes said. She smiled boldly.

GOTCH broke into a grin. "But definitely, we need more women, if they are like you."

"Hey, lay off of her, she belongs to me!" Retch spoke violently.

"Come, let us pull the boat to the island," Peg-leg spoke quickly. "We have too many things to do to stand waiting here."

Grumbling, Gotch allowed himself to be persuaded to get in front of the raft and join the other men in pulling it.

Not until then did Parker dare to breathe. "Thanks," he spoke to Mercedes.

"It was nothing, Beel. Anyone could have done it."

"Thanks, anyhow," Parker said. "But what have we got ourselves into here?"

"I do not know for sure, Beel. Johnny, he like me, and he ask me to come along. He say we will both get reech—"

"Shut up!" Retch spoke.

Parker, sitting in the raft, watched the three men tow it toward the shore. He watched their feet. Where they stepped, the water seemed to grow firm. Pirates, cut-throats, killers, they certainly were. But added to , that was the equally obvious fact that they could walk on water. In all history, Parker had only heard of one man who could do that, and he hadn't been a man, but a God.

Ahead of them, the island loomed in the sunset; a long strip of white, sandy beach ; behind it a thick growth of trees; behind the trees the rocky central mass of the island rising up into the sky. Off to the right, Parker caught a glimpse of a wreck that lay against rocks jutting from the shore. He stared at it. Unless his eyes were deceiving him, it was the wreck of a Spanish galleon, a ship that belonged to the days when Spain had been draining the gold and silver and jewels of the new world into her coffers.

The men stopped, stared uneasily at the shore. Parker could make out two men barely visible between the beach and the grove of trees.

"Rozeno and Ulnar!" Gotch spoke. "Watching us." His lips curled and his hand went automatically to the hilt of the sword he was wearing. "Some day I will slit the throats of that priest and that Indian." Gotch spat into the sea.

"They're not causing any trouble," Peg-leg spoke.

"They're witches, by Gactil" Gotch answered. "They're warlocks, wizards."

"Father Rozeno is a very devout and holy man," Peg-leg said.

"He pretends to be a priest but he is more of a warlock than he is a holy man. As for that Indian, if he ever gives me the chance—" Gotch glared at the figures at the edge of the grove.

"Come on," Peg-leg said.

Mercedes contrived to move closer to Parker. "Beel, what are theese theengs here? I do not understand them. I do not like them."

"Nor do I;" Parker said.

A shiver passed over her.

"What's the matter, baby, you cold?" Retch grinned at her. "Don't worry about it. We'll get you warmed up on the island."

Imperceptibly she again moved closer to Parker. "Beel, it ees not good."

"You got into this of your own free will."

"Yes, but I did not know that theengs like theese were going to 'appen. I just thought—"

"Mercedes, if you open your mouth again, I'll knock your teeth down your throat!" Retch said.

Mercedes was silent.

As they came in to the shore, the two men who had been visible on the beach disappeared. Off to the left something else came into view. It was a small cabin plane, wrecked there in what had apparently been an attempt at a forced landing.

Before they reached the shore, the fat sun had wallowed itself out of sight into the sea. In the dusk, the island looked like a vast, rocky pinnacle thrust up out of the Pacific Ocean, or out of the ocean of time—Parker couldn't tell which. Mysterious, silent, it waited in the darkness like a vast sleeping monster on the surface of the sea, a monster on which Spanish galleons and planes had been wrecked. Parker, his nerves juinpy, half-way expected it to vanish beneath the surface before they reached it.

But it didn't vanish. It remained fixed, solid, firm. When they stepped from the raft, the sand under their feet was solid, the crunch of it reassuring.

A BREEZE whispered through the trees. The island was quiet, too quiet. It seemed to brood in the darkness. In the vast stillness that hung like a pall over the place, the only sound was that of a bird, chittering sleepily in the dark woods.

It was the most out-of-place sound Bill Parker had ever heard. It seemed to affect the others. At the bird-sound they were suddenly quiet, listening.

"To hell with it, it's nothing," Gotch said. "Come on."

Following a well defined path, they moved inland, toward the base of the cliff. Through the trees, Parker glimpsed fires. As he moved closer, he saw the source of the lights, the cooking fires of a village set against the base of the cliff.

"Ho!" Peg-leg called, announcing their arrival.

As they entered the village, the inhabitants came rushing out to them. They were the queerest lot of human beings Parker had ever seen. Spaniards, bearded grandees in tattered and mended bits of ancient finery, Indians, squat, stalwart, Englishmen, tall and blond, a motley crew.

They looked like the relics of half a dozen different nations, drawn from the fringes of time. Their garments did not belong in the 20th century. Their weapons were knives, swords, bell-mouthed pistols. Their language was a mixture of Spanish, English, Portuguese, and Indian dialects.

"What kind of a mad-house is this?" Parker muttered. "Get away, you!" The last was spoken to a slender Spaniard who was trying to jerk Parker's leather jacket from his back.

The man snarled at him, drew back.

"Get out of our way!" Retch yelled. The crowd made way for him. Calling greetings, snarling, Retch seemed very much at home here.

Mercedes looked hopelessly confused and at a loss. She stared around her as if she was appalled at what she saw. Parker drew the obvious inference. Mercedes had never been here before. All this was as new to her as it was to him. But Retch had been here.

Off in the woodland behind them somewhere a bird chirped, the same sleepy quiet sound that Parker had heard as they landed. Now it was louder, nearer, and even more out of place than it had been before.

The people around Parker also heard the sound. Startled faces turned toward the dark forest.

The sound came again, louder now. Parker was certain it was the call of a bird.

But if it was the chirp of a bird, it was frightening these people. Why should a bird-sound in the night frighten grown men? Utter silence fell. Even Gotch was still. Parker saw that the man's face had turned gray, that all the bristling bravado had passed out of him.

Even Retch, showing signs of strain and growing temper, was silent.

"The Jezbro!" someone whispered.

At the words, the strain and temper coming up in Retch burst the surface. "There is no such thing as the Jezbro!" His voice was almost a scream. "It's only superstitious nonsense—" His shouting voice went into silence as the sound came again.

The chirp was louder now. It was no longer one bird chirping in the dark night, it was a dozen. And it wasn't quite the sound of a bird any longer, it was a musical tinkle, an air-borne throbbing somewhat similar to the sound of a harp, a softly ringing chime. Parker could easily imagine that somewhere among those dark trees was a harper, moving closer.

The harpist did not seem to be upon the ground. He—or she—seemed to be up in the air, somewhere near the tree tops, moving in the dark night.

As the sound came louder, a man in the village suddenly went down on his knees, then another and another, until the whole group, including Gotch, were kneeling. Evan Mercedes went to her knees in response to deep internal, superstitious pressures. Only Retch and Parker stood erect as two men strong enough to face the sound coming from the night.

"Get down, you fools!" Peg-leg's voice had real anguish in it.

"Get down, hell!" Retch answered. He had a gun in each hand, his own and the one he had taken from Parker.

"Beel! Beel!" Mercedes was jerking at Parker's leg. "What is 'appening?"

"Something," Parker answered. "I don't know what." There was fear in him. He could feel it in his heart, sense it in his bones, taste in his mouth. He rose above it.

The sound swept through the air.

It came out over the trees above them. On the ground, the kneelers moaned in response.

The harping sound leaped up, became a melody of weird notes filling the night air. Mingled with the eerie music were the moans from the prostrate humans.

Looking upward, Parker caught a glimpse of something moving through the sky. It blotted out the light of the stars and it looked a lot like a bird but like no bird he had ever seen before. It was too big to be any bird that had ever flown through Earth's air, but yet it flew. As it flew, it made the sound of a gigantic harp.

THE bird passed over the village, moving along the cliff. As it slid into the distance, the harp music faded slowly away, became again the sound of a sleepy bird.

Around the village, the prostrate humans moaned, stirred, began to rise.

"What the hell was that thing?" Parker gasped.

"The damned fools call it the Jezbro!" Retch snarled. "The yellow cowards are afraid of it. I don't know what it is."

Parker was silent. To him, Retch sounded like a man scared right down to the soles of his shoes but desperately trying to pretend he wasn't.

"It was a warning sent by them," Peg-leg whispered, gesturing up toward the cliff in the darkness. "A warning to us to mend our ways."

"It was no such thing!" Retch shouted.

Peg-leg did not argue. He got slowly and silently to his feet. The group was silent, perturbed, and afraid. Even Gotch was silent. Whatever had passed overhead, had cast a pall of fear over them. "You bilious, yellow-livered cowards!" Retch raged at them.

They made no response. The fear the Jezbro had inspired in them seemed to have made even his anger unimportant.

"But what is the Jezbro?" Parker questioned again. "I mean—" "I told you it's nothing and that's enough of an answer. Hey!" The guns that Retch held came up sharply as another figure came soundlessly out of the forest and moved toward them. An old, bent, wrinkled Indian who hobbled along with the aid of a staff.

"Oh, it's you, Pedro!" Retch said. "What the hell do you want?" For all the sign he gave, the Indian, Pedro, did not hear Retch's question. He hobbled straight to Parker.

"En la manana Padre Rozeno huit nole el hombre e la mujer.

Father Rozeno will see the man and the woman in the morning." The voice was broken with age.

"I don't get it," Parker said. The Indian was already turning. He had delivered his message, his errand was finished.

"That damned Rozeno is not going to see anybody in the morning!" Retch yelled.

The Indian staffed his way into the forest. He still seemed not to hear Retch.

"Tell him they won't be there!" Retch screamed.

Pedro's back went out of the firelight as he moved into the trees.

Retch seemed almost to go mad. His face turned purple. Both guns came to focus on the spot where the Indian had disappeared.

"Why shoot him?" Parker said. "He was just a messenger."

"Damn it!" Slowly, while the group watched impassively, Retch got himself under control. Suddenly he began to laugh. Strangely his laughter in this moment was more horrible than his anger had been.

"He sent for you, and the woman. All right, he'll get you. But I'll go with you. If he wants you, I'll take you to him." Again the laughter sounded.

"Who is Rozeno?" Parker asked.

"He is, or he was once, a Spanish priest. He and Ulnar think they rule this island. They are the two men we saw watching us from the shore. You'll see them in the morning."

That was the last word Retch said on the subject. He took Gotch apart, to talk to him. Peg-leg found food for Parker, but refused to talk. "Na, na, my son, when the Tezbro passes over us as a great bird—when it goes through the woods at night as a great howling beast—we do not talk about it."

Parker pressed for more information, but the old man turned stubbornly silent. Later he found Parker a place to sleep in his own hut. Parker had the impression that, all during the night Peg-leg, sat on guard at the entrance.

But nothing came in the night. In the morning Retch was there, saying, with grim bitterness, that now it was time to go up the cliff to see Rozeno and Ulnar. Mercedes, looking wan and bedraggled, with hate in her hot black eyes, was with him. So was Gotch. Gotch did not look in the least happy.

"What's biting you?" Parker said to Retch.

"Nothing."

"I get the impression something around here is just about scaring the pants off of you."

"You're crazy!" Retch's voice was a snarl. "I'm not afraid of anything around here—you—or anybody else." As he spoke, the man's face was a mask and his eyes were wild.

"Sure, okay, I get it," the pilot answered.

They moved along the cliff until they came to a ledge that sloped upward.

"We go up here," Gotch grunted.

AS THEY went upward, they rose above the tops of the trees. Sparkling thinly in the morning sunlight, the sea came into sight. Circling the shoreline at a distance of about a mile, a curtain of mist was visible. It seemed to close in above them too, shielding the island like a thin, shining dome.

"That's a strange fog," Parker said.

"It's not a fog," Retch answered. "I don't know exactly what it is, but when it is there, the island is invisible. If you are on the other side of it, you see nothing at all."

"Um," Parker said. They continued upward. The ledge twisted, curved, went around the rising cliff. Slowly Parker became aware that the rising ledge was not a natural formation, it was a pathway cut into the face of the cliff.

At the realization, the pilot felt a touch of awe rise in him. This ledge was old. It must have been cut into this cliff long before Columbus had sailed westward.

Off in the distance beyond the curtain of mist was the coast of California, the beaches bright with bathers, the cities wrapped in warm sunshine, the roads alive with traffic. Over there in the distance were orange groves and millions of people.

Here on this island, behind this mist, unknown to millions of people so close to it, was something that did not belong in the 20th century, or in any other century Parker could imagine.

His back felt cold. In him, somewhere, was gnawing anger. This island, this place, was real. Back in his past a horrible wrong had been done, a wrong that now would never be corrected. He put the thought out of his mind.

The ledge turned into the cliff and became a tunnel that had been carved into solid stone. The walls of the tunnel were as smooth as polished marble. What tools could men have used in the old days to cut a tunnel with walls so smooth that they looked like glass? Modern equipment could not have done the job so well.

Niches in the wall of the tunnel admitted light and gave them glimpses of the island.

"Where the hell will we find—Oh, Pedro!" Retch spoke. The Indian messenger of the night before had appeared in the tunnel. He beckoned to them. They followed him into a large room cut out of solid stone.

It was one of the cleanest and most simply furnished rooms Parker had ever seen. It contained handmade chairs along the wall and a big table, also hand-made. Light from a wall slit flowed into the room.

Seated behind the table, illumined by the light flowing in from the wall slit behind them, were Rozeno and Ulnar. Rozeno had a thin nose, the narrow face of the typical high bred Spaniard. Ulnar was short and squat, his cheeks were flat, his nose hooked. Both had black eyes that were utterly fathomless.

The faces were old, wrinkled, and kind. Parker took one look at this priest, and instantly liked him. As he glanced at Rozeno, saw the kindness on that face, he also saw, out of the corners of his eyes, Retch drawing gun.

In that split second he knew why Retch had laughed so violently the night before, when Retch had said that he would go with them to see Rozeno and Ulnar.

Retch intended to kill both of them; to shoot them as they sat there at that table, unarmed and defenseless; shoot them like dogs!

The gun was already in Retch's hand. Parker's fist went out, up, connected with Retch's jaw, a blow that had all the pilot's strength behind it.

Retch's head was twisted to one side. He reeled away from Parker's blow. The snarl that came from his lips was the snarl of a wild animal. Metal thudded as the gun hit the floor. The room echoed with sound —Mercedes screaming. Parker followed Retch, followed him as a dog follows a rat. He caught a wild man.

Retch stumbled against the wall, caught himself on one of the handmade chairs, jerked himself up, and drove at Parker. The pilot met the charge head on. They went down locked together.

Retch was a tornado erupting with violent fury. He threw Parker away from him, leaped to his feet. Parker pulled himself to one knee. The fallen pistol lay. in front of him. He snatched it up.

Retch was coming toward him. He saw the gun in Parker's hand, hesitated.

"I'll kill you," the pilot said.

RETCH caught himself. For an instant he seemed to hang in the air before Parker, yellow glaring in his eyes as he tried to make up his mind whether or not to buck the gun.

"Get your hands up," Parker said.

Slowly the yellow went out of Retch's eyes.

"Get your hands up!" Parker repeated.

This time Retch obeyed him. Parker backed him against the wall, took the second pistol from his pocket, his own gun.

"Damn you!" Retch snarled. Parker saw that the man was not speaking to him but to Gotch, he saw also that during all this Gotch had not moved. The man stood transfixed; afraid to move.

Parker turned to the two men behind the table. They had not moved either, though Ulnar looked as if he was about to come to his feet. Rozeno sat very still. There was sadness on his face.

"Go away," he gestured toward Retch. "And you, 'too, Gotch, go away."

"You mean we can go after—" Gotch faltered.

"I don't want to see either of you again," Rozeno said. There was actual living pain in his voice. "Go!"

"Wait a minute," Parker spoke quickly.

"Yes, my son?" Rozeno's face lost its sadness when he looked at Parker, it came alive with sudden animation.

"You don't mean to tell me you are going to let these two go?" the pilot protested.

"Of course."

"But Retch tried to kill you." "I know—"

"And he'll try it again. There's something here that's driving him crazy. I don't know what it is but he knows. If you turn him loose—I would just as soon turn loose a rattlesnake, Johnny Retch."

Parker's words were hard, blunt, forceful. But for all the effect they had on the old priest, he might as well not have spoken them. Rozeno smiled. "I do not think. Retch or Gotch will ever harm us. They have no means to harm us." He made a gesture with his hands, spoke a single word, "Go!"

Retch and Gotch went quickly from the room, like men who were very glad to go.

"I hope you know what you are doing," Parker said, saw that Rozeno was not looking at him. The old priest was watching Mercedes.

"You may stay here, with us," Rozeno added.

Mercedes' face mirrored gratitude. "Thank you."

Rozeno turned his attention to Parker. "You are new to our island, are you not, my son?"

"Yes."

"How did you arrive here? Was your ship wrecked?"

"Yes. Actually, however, we were looking for this island." Swiftly Parker explained what had happened.

"Retch went away, he hired you to bring him back in a ship that flies?" Rozeno seemed a little perturbed.

For the first time, Ulnar spoke, a single grunted sound. Rozeno answered with a swift flow of gutturals that Parker did not understand. Ulnar grunted again, a hot light appeared in his eyes. "Kill him!" His fist came down upon the table.

Again Rozeno looked pained. "I have worked so long and so hard with him, trying to show him the Way, trying to explain to him that killing is not a part of the Way. But the old savagery is still in his heart. Sometimes I despair of him." He shook his head very gently. The light flowing in from behind him made a halo of his long white hair. His eyes searched Parker. They were the kindest and at the same time the keenest eyes the pilot had ever met. They looked at him and through him; they probed deep down inside of him; they seemed to search down to the bottom of his soul. Parker had the feeling he was being weighed, measured, probed.

"It is not often that I offer a choice to those who come here," Rozeno spoke. "Usually they prefer to live in the village at the base of the cliff. You may live here with us, if you wish." The smile on Rozeno's face was a living thing.

Deep down inside of him, Parker felt his soul come to sudden life. "I'll stay here, Father, if I may." The smile on Rozeno's face became even brighter. "Good, my son. You have made a very wise choice."

Parker was silent, perturbed, suddenly uneasy. Here in this place two old men lived in rooms near the top of a cliff. Down below was a village where brawling men lived, men who could walk on water. In the night, in this place something called a Jezbro went on the wings of a harp. There was magic here, mysteries that went beyond his understanding. What else was here? "Tell me about this place, Father?"

Rozeno nodded. "Gladly, my son, gladly. I will show you and tell you as I show you. There are things here that even I do not understand." For a second, the old priest frowned as if he was contemplating mysteries that lay afar. Then his smile came back and he was rising to his feet. "Come with me, my son."

AS THEY moved from the big room, Ulnar grunted hastily and gestured toward the wall slit. Looking through it, Parker saw a speedy craft moving inside the veil —a PT boat. His heart jumped at the thought that the Navy had finally penetrated the secret of this strange island. His heart sank when he saw that even if this was a PT boat, it was not a Navy ship. The craft was dirty, unkempt, it was not the smart, spick and span vessel that the Navy would operate.

As he watched, the boat veered abruptly, slowed, almost came to a halt as if its occupants had suddenly discovered the presence of the island.

Ulnar shook his fist at the boat. "Vondel me sego!" he said.

"No, no, Ulnar," Rozeno spoke hastily. "You must not vondel them. They are just some people who have stumbled through the veil and now are bewildered."

"Me make 'em more frightened," the Indian spoke. He brought one fist down into the other fist, a smacking sound.

"What is vondel?" Parker spoke.

Rozeno seemed not to hear him. The priest was already moving from the room.

"We do not know who cut these passages here," Rozeno said. "We do not know who cut these rooms into the rock. Some race that lived a long, long time ago—perhaps the legendary Murians, perhaps some other race—had this island as an outpost. I think, also, they used it as a scientific laboratory; a dangerous laboratory that they put far away from their homeland. A place where their wise men—their philosophers—could seek out the mysteries of nature."

"Um," Parker said. There was cold in him. He tried to force it away, discovered it would not go.

"There is something else that is very strange about this island," the priest continued. "Time is different here."

"How is time different?"

"In this way," Rozeno answered. "I came to the New World with Cortez."

"I see," Parker said.

"You take it very calmly."

"I do not doubt my own eyes nor do I doubt you."

The old priest glowed. "Good. Good. Tell me, my son, are there many men like you in the world of today? I have a dream, a secret private dream, that the scientists from your world might come here and study the strange things on this island."

"They would come here in droves if they knew about it. And so would everybody else. You would be overrun by hordes of the curious."

"Yes, we know that. That isn't quite what I meant. It was my hope that perhaps we could make this island what it was in the olden days —secret place where the wise men could come to study." The priest's face glowed again. "There is so much here to be learned and here, also, is the time in which to learn. Here great discoveries might be made. Here could possibly be discovered not only the secrets of nature but the secrets of the minds and the hearts of men. From this place, as the centuries passed, there might be fed out, little by little, knowledge that would change the world; knowledge that would change the hearts and the minds of men; knowledge that would eliminate poverty, stop wars, knowledge that would help the human race become what it must one day be."

The glow on Rozeno's face was bright. The dream he dreamed was suddenly, in Parker's mind, a living, breathing vital hope, the hope of all honest men everywhere, that tomorrow might be better!

"Would you, my son, help me achieve that dream? Will you go back through the veil and explain to some of your greatest scientists what we have here?"

"I would like nothing better," the big pilot answered. In a way, this was his dream too, though up until now it had always been a secret, hidden, impossible-to-accomplish thing. His hand went out to Rozeno. Deep inside of him, the glow grew to greater heights. Only one other thing was needed to make this glow a really perfect feeling, Effra, who had found this island and had tried to tell him about it. But Effra was gone.

They moved on to a big room where some of the scientific equipment of the vanished site still functioned. Set in a sunken pool ten feet in diameter in the center of the room was a circle of what looked like mercury. Leading up from it were heavy bus bars of some unknown metal. The bus bars came together and marched across the room to a control panel, one of the strangest control panels Parker had ever seen. The meters were graduated in colors. In front of the chair where the operator sat was a keyboard like that of a vast pipe organ. How much training would an operator need to operate this keyboard? Directly in front of the operator's seat was a square panel that looked like a television screen.

SET in niches where the right hand of the operator could reach them easily were statuettes of birds, animals, reptiles. Made of some metal, they were perfect representations. Parker saw a condor, a bald-headed eagle, a humming bird, a cougar, a jaguar, an alligator. His eves went back to the pool in the center of the room.

"It is generating power," Rozeno said. "As it turns, it creates some force, some energy. I do not understand this energy. No one now alive understands it. Understanding is one of the things I hope your scientists may achieve—come away, Ulnar." The last was spoken as the Indian strayed near the operator's seat.

Ulnar grunted impatiently. There was something about that seat that lured him. But he came away. They went into another room, leaving behind them the pool of mercury that turned slowly, like a miniature earth on some axis of its own. Parker took one look at the contents of this room, and gasped.

The crown jewels of England were no greater than these! Here were crowns of pounded yellow gold; here were gargoyle masks made of the same yellow metal; masks that sparkled with gems. Here, lying on the rock shelves, were ingots of what looked to be solid gold, each one heavy enough to be a full load for a grown man. Ulnar was examining a gargoyle mask. He touched a gold bar, his old withered fingers seeming to savor the feel of it.

Rozeno smiled gently. "Ulnar treasures these things, they were put in his charge a very long time ago. He has been faithful to his trust."

"But—" Parker whispered.

"This is a part of Montezuma's treasure, a part that Cortez did not get. There is as much of it here as 400 men could carry away. Ulnar was one of Montezuma's most trusted sub-chiefs. He brought the treasure here, to keep it for his Chieftan."

Ulnar's wrinkled face broke into a grin. "Me take good care," he said simply. "Me clean, me polish, me save for my Chief."

"Tell me one thing?" he said.

"Gladly, my son."

"Does Johnny Retch know this is here?"

"I suppose so. All who live on our island know about it."

Muscles knotted at the corners of Parker's jaws. He pressed his arms down against his jacket so that he could feel the guns in the pockets. The guns felt good.

"Father Rozeno!" a voice called from a corridor outside the treasure room. "Father Rozeno? Where are you?"

"Here I am, my dear," the priest answered.

At the sound of that voice, Bill Parker forgot all about the guns in his pockets, Johnny Retch, Montezuma's treasure, and everything else that was on this island. He stood stock still, paralyzed.

A girl came through the opening into the treasure room. She wore a dark dress; sandals; her hands were gloved; she had apparently been working at some task. She smiled at Ulnar, glanced at Parker, nodded, looked at Rozeno, smiled, then glanced back quickly at Parker as if he reminded her of someone she had once known, then turned again to the priest. "Father, I have been cleaning all morning —"

So far she got. Bill Parker broke his paralysis and swept her into his arms.

"Effra Effra — Effra —" His voice was a choked whisper, almost inaudible in the treasure chamber of Montezuma. As she had come through the door, his mind had given him a flashing picture of the plane wrecked on the shore. Effra, fleeing from Dr. Yammer, had taken one last desperate chance on finding her island; one last lonely flight out over the Pacific. No wonder he had been unable to find her. She had found her island. She had come here. She was here, in his arms.

There was wonder and awe and bewilderment in the big pilot. Here was a miracle almost past the understanding. "I've found you Effra—"

For an instant, she lay in his arms like a frightened child who dared not move. "Please—" she whispered. He did not hear her. His lips sought hers, found them. She did not draw away, but neither did she respond. "Effra—" Parker looked up. Rozeno and Ulnar were regarding him with mild astonishment. In his arms, Effra stirred again. "Please—let me go."

This time the big pilot heard her. Setting her back on her feet was one of the hastiest movements he had ever made in his life. "Effra—I did not mean to startle you—but darling—"

She stood irresolute, staring at him. "Please—You have no right—"

He saw that her eyes, fixed on him, regarded him as an utter and complete stranger.

"Don't you know me, Effra?" There was almost a sob in his voice.

"I never saw you before in my life."

PARKER turned, moved to a window slot, stood looking out. The trees below him, the island, the sea, the PT boat lying at anchor off shore, he saw all of these things, but yet he did not see them.

He had found Effra and she did not remember him, did not know him. Inside of him was agony, such pain as he had never known. He felt a touch on his arm. Rozeno stood there, his face troubled. "Do you know our Effra, my son?"

"Yes."

"Do you, perhaps, love her?"

"Yes."

"And you are very unhappy because she does not respond?"

"Yes."

The old priest's face grew a little more sad. "When she landed here, the last time, she made an awkward landing. She was thrown forward and she hit her head. She does not remember anything that happened before that." Rozeno's finger bit deeply into Parker'g arm. "Come now, and I will introduce you to her, as a stranger."

Bill Parker found himself being introduced to the woman he loved. "I'm sorry about my actions of a minute ago," he said. "I thought you were someone else."

The smile she gave him was forgiving but it was also cool and distant. "That's all right, Mr. Parker. I understand." Her voice went into silence as another sound came into the room. The sound of rapid gunfire.

Parker had thought he had in his pocket the only two modern weapons on the island, but somewhere in the growth of trees far below the window slot, someone was firing a sub-machine gun.

Parker raced to the slot. Below him the island lay quiet. He turned. Mercedes, her face working, was staring at him.

"Beel—Beel—I have not told you everything! That Johnny Retch, he hire you to fly him here in 'copter, to find thees island. He also have men in boat coming. Your job, which you did not know, was to find island, then lead men in boat to it. Johnny means to take all thees. The gesture of her hand included all the treasure of Montezuma. "He have men in boat to help him take it. He does not mean to let anything stop him. Not anything!"

Parker saw what he had not seen before, that Johnny Retch was a man who would always have two strings for his bow. Too late, he saw that the boat lying at anchor was not an accident.

"I should have killed that dog when I had the chance!" he snarled.

Shambling feet sounded in the corridor outside. Pedro burst into the room. He grunted words at Ulnar.

"Pedro says men come up the ledge," Rozeno said. "They must be from the boat. We must go to meet them. It will be a great pleasure to them. Come, Ulnar. Come, Bill." He moved toward the door.

Parker was across the room in quick strides, catching Rozeno's arm. "You can't do it, Father Rozeno. Those men who are coming up the ledge mean to kill."

"My son!" Hurt showed on the priest's face. "Surely you do not know what you are talking about!"

"But I do know!" Parker almost shouted the words. Quickly, desperately he tried to explain the situation to Rozeno. To his growing horror, he saw no comprehension in the old priest's eyes. Slowly Parker began to realize that this old man was so gentle and so kind himself that he Could not comprehend even the thought of anyone else being—evil!

"You may stay here, if you wish, my son, but Ulnar and I will go speak to these people who are coming up the ledge. Come, Ulnar."

His face glowing at the thought of meeting new people, the priest moved from the room. Ulnar grunted once, a hot, savage sound, then followed Rozeno like a dog following its master.

Effra started to follow them.

Parker caught her arm. "Please, at least you stay here. Understand me now if you never understood me before. Is there a window slot from which the ledge can be seen?"

"Yes."

"Then take me to it. Quickly!"

FROM the slot, Parker could see a section of the ledge. Two men were crawling along it, advancing as cautiously as scouts trying to surprise an outpost. Parker had never seen either of them before but their faces confirmed everything Mercedes had said—they were thugs, killers. Thrusting the pistol through the slot, the pilot took careful aim, pulled the trigger.

The thunder of the gun rang through the room, echoed across the island. The bullet knocked rock chips into the face of the lead man. He recoiled as if he had been stung. The Tommy-gun in his hand spouted lead blindly at the face of the cliff. The second man spun around—began shooting blindly.

Parker moved away from the slot, listened to the rattle of the guns outside. He could distinguish the heavy thud of the Tommy-gun, the sharper crack of the carbine, but other weapons were also firing. "They've got men with high-powered rifles posted in the tree down below."

He glanced from the slot. The men had disappeared from the ledge. As he moved back, a slug whined into the room. Mercedes cowered against the wall. Effra remained cool and poised. She was looking at Parker. "Haven't I met you somewhere before?" She seemed completely unaware of the rifle bullet that had just screamed through the slot.

"I—" Parker caught himself. There was agony in him. What good would it do if she did, finally, remember who he was, who she was? What they had once been to each other? He had three old men, and two women, and himself, with which to defend Montezuma's treasure against Johnny Retch, who had a small army of trained killers at his back.

What chance did they have? Johnny Retch, even if given Montezuma's gold, would not leave anyone alive except possibly Mercedes and Effra.

"Do—do you know anything we can do to stop those men?" Parker said.

Light seemed to come into Effra's eyes.

"We might—we might use the Jezbro!"

From the shelter of the trees, Johnny Retch operated like a general in charge of a force of Commandos engaged in attacking a miniature Gibralter. He was a very deliberate general. When the first shot from a slot in the cliff had driven the two men downward, he met them at the bottom of the ledge, a cigarette dangling from his lips, a sub-machine gun in his hands. "Okay, boys, go back on up."

"There's a guy in there with a gun," one of the two protested. "He's inside and we're outside. We're sittin' ducks for him."

"We're covering the slots with rifles in the trees."

"But—" Neither of the men wanted to go up that ledge again. They might be hardened killers but they did not like the idea of facing a gun they could not see.

"Go on back up, boys," Retch said. He lifted the muzzle of the gun he held.

"But—"

"Either go back up or you'll stay down here a long time!"

They went back up the ledge. Retch retired to the shelter of the trees and watched.

No shots came until they reached the mouth of the tunnel leading into the cliff. There, one of the men was killed. He fell backward from the ledge, screaming as he turned over and over.

The falling man broke his way through the top of a tree and sprawled thudding on the ground. He did not move after he hit. Retch did not waste a second glance on him.

Muffled but clearly audible, the blasting roar of the machine gun came from the tunnel.

"He got in," Retch said. "Okay. Two more of you go up."

Two more men went up the ledge.

The entire population of the village had gathered to watch this storming of the cliff. They regarded Retch with wonder and with awe. Some of these men had been pirates in their day, they had known how to loot a tall ship, to kill its crew, to take over any wealth and any women it happened to carry.

Watching Retch, they discovered they had been amateurs in the fine art of attacking and killing. They had needed a man from the modern world to show them how the job ought to be done. They were greatly impressed, Gotch most of all.

Waving his sword, Gotch explained what he would do to that black priest, Rozeno, and to that cowardly Indian, Ulnar. Of all the listening group, only Peg-leg protested.

"Yeah, you'll get them all right —if the Jezbro don't get you first!" Peg-leg said.

Retch overheard the words. "Come here, Peg-leg, I want to talk to you."

The old sailor stumped his way to where Retch stood.

"Aye, Cap'n." He saluted. A look of surprise appeared on the old sailor's face as the first heavy slug hit him. As the second, third, and fourth slugs hit him, the expression of surprise became one of agony. He fell without a sound.

RETCH stood looking down at him. The group was silent. Gotch hastily lowered his sword.

"I don't want to hear any more superstitious talk," Retch said. "There are a lot of funny things here on this island but there is nothing to be afraid of—except this!" He patted the stock of the stumpy little gun he held. "And there's enough stuff up there to make all of us rich; we'll have everything we can ever want." A glow crept into Retch's eyes as he spoke. They glowed with a yellow color and the yellow seemed to come out of his eyes and spread over his face. He glanced down at Peg-leg.

"Dump him into the sea," he said, walking away.

The two men climbing the ledge reached the opening. They stopped there and apparently held a conference with the man who was already inside. They went inside. A few minutes later, one appeared at the opening.

"You can come on up now," he yelled, waving his gun. "All secure here."

"Gotch!"

"Yes, Cap'n."

"Come on."

Gotch went up the ledge with Retch. He went in shivering fear which he tried desperately to conceal.

"What the hell are you scared of?" Retch snarled at him.

"Nuthin', nuthin', Cap'n. Nuthin'."

"You yellow ;livered—" Retch stopped in midsentence. A sound was in the air, the cheeping of a sleepy bird. It was a tiny sound, fragile, distant, far-away, almost too weak to register on the ears. Hearing it, Retch jerked his eyes to the sky, seeking the source.

Gotch threw himself flat on the ledge.

"The Jezbro!" Gotch gasped. "God—God—"

Looking at the sky, Retch caught a glimpse of something moving there. It looked like a bird, but it was like no bird he had ever seen in his life. It was more like shadow —a darkness that had a darting elusive silver color about it.

Like a swooping hawk, it was diving toward the ground, aiming at the group clustered in the trees at the spot where the ledge began to rise up the face of the cliff. As it dived, the cheeping sound of a sleeping bird was becoming a flooding blast of wild harp notes.

"The Jezbro!" Gotch wailed. The Jezbro dived at the men on the ground. They heard it, saw it; they scattered through the trees like frightened chickens fleeing from a hawk.

The Jezbro selected a victim. Retch caught a glimpse of long, cruel talons extended; saw the man grasped in them. The man screamed as the talons touched him, tried to throw himself flat, tried to jerk away from them. Huge wings fluttered, beating the air. The man did not escape. The talons held. The beating wings lifted him.

Wild notes flooded outward. There was triumph in the music now. Huge wings beat the air. The Jezbro climbed up above the trees. Held firmly in the extended talons was a fully grown man.

Watching, Johnny Retch felt panic tumble through him, panic that was like a sudden touch of an ice cold hand. They had warned him about the Jezbro. Old Peg-leg had tried to tell him. Gotch had trembled in fear. They had all insisted that there was something here that did not belong in the world as he knew it.

He had laughed at them, he had called them superstitious fools. To him, there was nothing that was not of this world.

Nor was there now, when the moment of wild panic had passed. As the Jezbro swept upward through the air, rising along the face of the cliff, Retch jerked up the Tommy gun.

Smoke and lead blasted from the muzzle. The Jezbro was unharmed. Taking careful aim this time, Retch fired again, a furious blast of rattling sound.

The Jezbro swerved, the harp notes missed a beat.

From the suddenly loosened talons a figure plummeted downward, screamed as it fell, stopped screaming as it crunched against the ground.

The Jezbro circled in the air. It rose upward, swooped. Huge wings flapped, a tail structure was extended. From the gaping, extended mouth, a scream arose. The Jezbro seemed to leap toward the summit of the sky.

A flash of light as brilliant as the explosion of a miniature atom bomb flared for a brief second. Thunder clapped, rolled around the horizon; echoed back. In the distance the veil that circled the island shimmered and twisted as if it was about to collapse. It righted itself.

Except for a puff of swiftly dissipating white vapor, the air was clear. Where wild harp notes had once flooded now was silence. Where a creature that had once looked like a giant bird had flapped through the air now there was nothing.

ON THE ledge, Johnny Retch wiped sweat from his face. From his pockets, he methodically refilled the almost empty clip of the gun. He looked down at Gotch, who was sitting up.

"You killed the Jezbro!" Gotch was whispering. His eyes were searching the sky as if he still did not believe what he had seen happen.

"Sure," Retch answered. "I don't know what the hell it was, but it could be killed. Anything can be killed, Gotch. Remember that." The sting of acid crept into his voice. "Get up. We're going on up the ledge."

"By God, Johnny, you can do anything!" Gotch spoke. He rose with suddenly renewed confidence. "Wait'll we get to them—" He looked up the ledge toward the mouth of the tunnel.

Effra was seated in the operator's chair in front of the complex control panel that resembled the key board of a strange organ. She had been watching an image move in the screen directly in front of her eyes.

This image—it had been that of a great bird—had suddenly vanished.

"The Jezbro was destroyed!" she whispered. "The core of it was struck. When that happens, the complete projection is torn to pieces!" Her face was white with strain.

Parker took his eyes off the screen where he had been watching something that he did not pretend to understand.

"Sometimes they are very difficult to control," Effra continued, her voice a whisper. "Once set in motion, they seem almost to achieve life of their own. I did not send the Jezbro against the men on the ground, I sent it against the man on the ledge, against this Retch. But—" her voice faltered.

"I saw it get away," Parker said. There was turmoil in his mind, confusion. He was in a place where miracles came to life. The secret of the ability to walk on the water lay here in this room. Effra, in swift sentences had explained to him that the men who walked on the water carried little pieces of metal in their pockets; pieces of metal which increased tremendously the surface tension of the water where they stepped on it. She had also told him that Ulnar, working this equipment, had vondeled his helicopter, had sent out a tiny Jezbro that had struck at the ship, wrecking it. The Jezbro, the secret of the men walking on the water, had come from this room. The striking of the Jezbro was to Ulnar the act of vondel. Even the veil that surrounded the island was generated here; in the power being generated in the slowly circling pool of mercury; power that was changed and modified by the other equipment.

Here was the heart and the secret of the magic of this island; here even time was set aside.

Ulnar poked at Effra, grunted harshly. "I know," the girl said quickly. "In just a minute."

Ulnar grunted again. He hovered over her like some massive brooding spirit. He was eager to get his hands on the control board but his old fingers were no longer sufficiently flexible to play on that key board the tune that had to be played.

"Pater noster—Our Father—" In the silence came Rozeno's voice as he knelt in prayer. Bewildered and hurt and horrified, Rozeno and Ulnar had come back into the room to find Parker and Effra and Mercedes already there. Mercedes knelt beside him.

Pedro thrust his head through the opening behind them. "Him two more men, him man that kill Jezbro, him still coming up ledge."

"That's Johnny Retch," Parker said. "He's still coming. And there are probably others already inside here, looking for us in the rooms and corridors. We've got to move, Effra."

"I knows Bill." Her fingers started toward the control board, drew back. "I called you Bill. Is that your name?"

"Yes."

"It's a nice name."

"But now we must hurry," Parker said. As he spoke, Ulnar grunted a single sound that set the girl into motion.

Her fingers went to one of the little statuettes, an eagle, a perfect thing in its way, a marvelous representation of the bird of prey. Effra had told Parker, in hasty sentences, how these images were made, deep down in the mountain, of a particular kind of metal that was almost weightless. He watched her slip the eagle into a slot, held his breath as her fingers darted across the key board.

A soft hum sounded—currents moving—a glow sprang into existence surrounding the little image. Slowly, the statuette began to glow with a silver light. The glow played over it, it shifted, changed, was one thing this instant, was something else the next instant. It looked like a moth emerging from a cocoon and becoming a butterfly. The tiny wings came free, the head moved.

The cheeping of a sleepy bird was in the room.

At the sound, a wave of cold from the deepest depths of space seemed to sweep over Parker. Here was magic beyond the comprehension of the mind. Only it wasn't magic, it was a scientific achievement of the highest caliber.

AT THE cheeping sound, Effra's fingers moved swiftly on the control board, playing a symphony that only she understood. The little eagle moved out of the slot, it spread its wings, they fluttered, it moved upward into the air of the room.

With each circling of the room, it grew larger. The cheeping sound became louder, there was a touch of harp music in it now. Effra's fingers moved like lightning over the control panel. The growing eagle seemed to pick up its controls, it swirled, circled, went through the open slot, went out of the room, and into the air outside. It was now the Jezbro.

Its image appeared on the screen. It shot high into the air, still growing. The scene on the screen revealed in miniature tilt whole island, the sea lapping its shores, the boat lying at anchor. Effra's fingers moved frantically over the controls. "This is one of the hardest things to do. They seem to be attracted to the sun, when first released. They struggle desperately to escape into space—There! I've got it under control."

The scene changed, became a group of men climbing the ledge. Parker saw these men suddenly jerk their heads toward the sky as they became aware of the Jezbro. He could imagine the fear that was shooting through them. They had seen Johnny Retch destroy the Jezbro, only here the Jezbro was again.

From their viewpoint, it had miraculously come back to life and was diving again upon them from the sky. Guns were fired upward. But these men did not have the coot, hard nerves of Johnny Retch, did not have his shooting eye. They missed. The Jezbro dived among them.

They scattered, screaming. Two went off the ledge, three raced down it. One mounted to the sky to the triumphant harping of the Jezbro.

Parker felt a wave of relief flow through him. Here in the Jezbro was actually a most potent weapon, the means of stopping an attack. "Girl! You've done it!"

A second later he caught himself. "But Johnny Retch wasn't in that bunch. He must already be inside the cliff."

A gun roared three times inside the mountain. Footsteps faltered in the corridor outside. Pedro stumbled into the room. His face was a bloody mask.

"Him men inside." As he coughed out the words, he coughed out blood—and his life. He stumbled, caught himself, stumbled again, went down the way a dead man goes down, never to rise again.

"Qui est in Coelis—who are in Heaven—" Rozeno's voice whispered through the room. The only sound.

Ulnar moved slowly, stood beside Pedro. They had been master and servant but in the old days they had come up out of Mexico together, guarding a treasure. Ulnar moved to the wall, took down a heavy battle axe that hung there. "Time come for me," he said. "Me go meet men as my chief went to meet Cortez!" His eyes glinted.

"Wait!" Rozeno called. The priest was on his feet. "I have resolved the conflict in my soul. There comes a time when men, even good men, must fight against the forces of evil." From the wall he took a spear.

"I'll go with you two," Parker said. "In just a moment." From his jacket, he took one of the two pistols. Silently he passed it to Effra. "As a last resort, use it."

"But, Bill, there is still time—" Parker didn't hear her. He was moving with Rozeno and Ulnar through another opening. "At least," Rozeno was saying. "We have this advantage. We know our way around here."

They moved silently, by side passages, through the rooms. "Find Retch," Parker whispered over and over again. "He's the heart and the core of this business. With him out of the way, we can handle the others."

"Do you see anybody, Pfluger?" Reteh's voice came from somewhere.

"Naw. I think I got the old gink but he ducked out of sight somewhere."

"Retch is on the other side of the corridor," Rozeno whispered. "The man who spoke last is in the next room."

They slipped to the opening, peering into the next room. A man in there was crouching against the wall and watching the opening into the corridor. At the sight of the man, Ulnar went berserk. This was the man who had killed Pedro.

A shrill battle cry pealing from his lips, massive axe uplifted, Ulnar charged through the door.

The crouching man whirled. Smoke and thunder rolled from the gun in his hand. Ulnar had taken death wounds before he was halfway across the room. But death wounds or not, he kept going.

The heavy axe came down on the head of the man who was desperately trying to fend it off. The man went down. For an instant, Ulnar's battle cry of triumph, wild and savage, and fierce, roared through the honeycomb of passages, then went into silence with Ulnar, forever.

"Hey, Pfluger, what the hell happened?" Retch's startled voice came.

"We've got to cross the corridor to get at him," Parker whispered. "And there are other men in here somewhere."

"Listen!" Rozeno whispered. Voices, a babble of sound, were coming from behind them.

"The men from the village," Rozeno whispered. "When they ceased fearing the Jezbro, they found the courage to come up here."

THE BABBLE grew stronger. Running feet moved along the corridor. Retch shouted somewhere, but the words were lost.

Rising above the other sounds was the cry of a woman—Effra.

Parker cursed beneath his breath as he ran. At the side entrance to the big room where the pool of mercury turned, he stopped, appalled.

The room seemed full of men. Some of them he recognized as coming from the village, others he had never seen before. From their appearance he judged they had come in the boat. Retch was coming through the door. that led into the main corridor. The gun in his hands was centered on Effra, who crouched at the key board of the vast machine. There was a smile on Retch's face.

"Parker!" Retch's voice lifted in a yell. "Parker! I've got your girl. Come on out and give yourself up or I'll let her have it."

This was his moment of triumph, this was the moment when he won his victory. Parker, peering around the edge of the doorway, knew now that he had no way to go. If he moved into the room, and tried to shoot Retch, the man would certainly kill Effra in one wild burst of slugs as he turned the gun on the pilot.

"Parker!" Retch yelled again. A smile on his face, he waited for an answer.

Effra's fingers moved on the control panel. Mercedes got slowly to her feet. The men in the room were silent, waiting for an answer to Retch's command. Parker stood just outside the door, hesitant. No matter what he did, it seemed to him that there was only one answer. Behind Retch, coming from the corridor, something moved. At the sight of it, Parker felt a flood of biting cold surge through him.

It was a puma—a gigantic puma. In its jaws, as it swung its head from side to side, dangled the body of a man it had killed in the corridor.

It was a puma.

Once it ad been a little image in a niche beside the machine from the old time. Then life had flowed into it, its own kind of life, now it walked as a huge ravening beast through the room where once it had been a tiny image.

The first man who saw it went dead white and slumped downward in a faint. The others saw it in almost the same instant. Pandemonium swept through the room. No man's nerves were proof against such a sight as this. Screaming met were suddenly trying to fight their way out of a place that had suddenly become haunted.

The puma flowed into the room. Like Retch, it had yellow eyes. They glared now, with a burning light. There was a vague mistiness about this puma but there was also about it the appearance of solid reality.

Retch spun to face the menace coming from behind him. The gun in his hands spat flame and fury.

He had destroyed the Jezbro hawk. He would also destroy this Jezbro puma.

The puma dropped the man from its jaws. It crouched. It leaped straight at the gun spouting lead. Retch slid to one side. The puma missed. It hit the floor, slid; tried to turn as a frantic girl moved buttons on the key board.

The floor was slick, the padded feet did not grip. The tail of the sliding puma touched the pool of mercury. The tail smoked as if it was suddenly onsfire.

The puma screamed. It seemed to be drawn into the pool. It was as if something in the pool caught the puma, held it, pulled it into the. mercury.

It went out of sight, vanished. No puff of flame followed. The life that had animated it had come from this pool. Now the life had returned to its source.

The dazed Retch lowered his smoking gun.

Parker moved silently forward. "Lay down the gun, Johnny Retch!" he said.

Retch seemed to stiffen. His back was to Parker. He did not attempt to turn.

"You called for me," Parker said.

"Here I am. Drop the gun!"

Retch snarled, spun, dropping flat as he turned. His eyes were narrowed. They glared at Parker like twin flames of yellow hate. He tried to bring up the gun.

Something came through the air, something that he did not see. It grabbed his arms, clutched them with a fierce grip, screamed at him. Mercedes!

Retch, with one savage thrust, flung her aside. Again the two yellow eyes glared at Parker as Retch brought up the weapon that he held.

"You haven't licked me yet!" Retch screamed.

The gun in Parker's hand exploded.

Suddenly Retch had three eyes. One of them was in the middle of his forehead. It was round and blue.

He stood for a second, transfixed. Something had happened to him. He did not know exactly what it was. He had come here seeking Montezuma's treasure. He had it in the reach of his hand. But something had happened to him. What it was he did not quite know. Something—

He tried to lift the gun he held. His hands would not obey him. Or perhaps the gun had suddenly grown too heavy for him to lift. He could not raise it.

The yellow light in his eyes did not change. But suddenly he collapsed, went down, did not move.

EVEN after he was on the floor, his eyes remained fixed on Parker, glaring, yellow. Then, little by little, the yellow flames began to go out.

In the silence were two sounds. The first, Mercedes, whispering. "'Ave I paid my debt, Beel? I tried."

"You have paid it," Parker said.

The other sound was that of the old priest beginning the prayers for the dying. He had laid aside his spear. Now he was kneeling again, his voice lifting as he prayed even for those who had misused him.

Then there was another sound, voices shouting in the distance. The men who had run from this room were trying to regain their courage, trying to find the will to come back again.

Parker moved to the girl who sat at the key board.

"Effra, my dear, if you would—"

Catching his idea, she nodded. Her fingers lifted the image of an alligator from its niche.

Parker saw the 'gator waddle from this room of mystery and of magic, from this room of lost science, from this forgotten laboratory of a vanished race.

After the alligator, went a jungle cat, full of spit and scratch and the sounds of fury. After the cat went a jaguar, black, fanged, also with yellow eyes.

In the corridors the screaming stopped. Parker, listening, shuddered. He was glad he was not out in one of those corridors; one of the men who had tried to steal the treasure of Montezuma, one of the men who had followed Johnny Retch. Hell was walking through those tunnels—hell in the form of an alligator; hell in the form of a jungle cat; hell in the form of a jaguar with yellow eyes.

From the window slot, Parker watched men swarm out of the cliff. Some found the small boats, pushed out in them to the PT boat. Others swam. A jaguar went along the shoreline screeching at them. A jungle cat spat at them from the edge of the water.

On the boat, the anchors were hastily cast off. Powerful motors growled. Gathering speed, leaving a growing wake behind it, the boat drove itself into the veil, went out of sight.

Parker went back to the girl at the key board.

Her eyes came up to him. "Hello, Bill," she said.

"Effra?" he whispered.

"As I was sitting here, I remembered who you were—and who I am—Bill—Bill—" She came into his arms.

Hours later, on a balcony in front of one of the window slots, they still stood very close together. Rozeno and Mercedes were with them. Rozeno was speaking.

"Do you think, my son, that you can go out into the world, and contact the great men of this time, and bring them here one by one, so that we may build in this secure spot a group from which the lines of progress can flow out to all men in al' the corners of the earth?"

"I can, Father," Parker answered, "Unto all men—".

Rozeno's lip moved in prayer. "Unto all men—'

THE END

"I'll give you the cure for the most horrible disease," Songeen said. "The sickness of life itself." Newlin replied, "Fine. But first, give me a couple of minutes to kill your husband. Then we'll go on from there."

The spolight meant violence and sudden death.

Shock Treatment
By Stanley Mullen

IN VENUSPORT, on payday- night, it is difficult to tell for certain where the town leaves off and the pink elephants begin. It is difficult to tell about other things, too. Spud Newlin had heard that a man could sometimes get rich overnight just tending bar on such occasions, and he was putting the rumor to the test. Not many bartenders had lasted long enough to find out.

The night had had a good start. Clock hands over the bar in the Spacebell registered 1:18 Venus-time, and considering, things were almost dull at the moment. The place had been jumping earlier, but hilarity had worn itself out, the dead had been removed and excitement dulled. No relatives or widows of the dead sportsmen had yet appeared; all corpses-elect had died clean, with the minimum of messy violence and, surprisingly, only three more or less innocent bystanders had been burned down in the proceedings. After shattering uproar, such calm was disturbing. Newlin was actually getting bored. Then she came in—and he was no longer bored. But, perversely, he resented the surge of interest that ran through him at sight of this out-of-place girl.

At a casual glance, she might seem ordinary, but Newlin was never superficial. Her kind of beauty was something to be sensed, not catalogued. It was part of the odd grace of movement, of the fine, angular features, of the curious emotion which dwelt upon them, sad and subdued. Even her costume was as out of place in the Spacebell as her mood; the dress was simply cut and expensive, but drab for the time and place. It clung about a slight, well-formed body in smoothly curved lines that seemed almost a part of her. Only her hands and eyes showed nervous tension.

At first he thought her eyes were cold, but it was something racial rather than personal. He noticed that they were large and luminous —like moonstones—with a pearly opaque glimmer as if only upper layers colored and reflected light. In their depths was an odd effect, like metalflakes drifting through ribboned moonlight with abysses of deepest shadow beyond. There was pain, trouble, and sadness in them, and behind that, fear—a desperate fear. You thought of wailing, haunted moonlight, and of dreadful things fled from in dreams.

Newlin's first thought was that she was one of the new-made widows, and was likely to be all too human about it. Later, when he had begun to doubt that she was all-human, her physical charms still went inside him and turned like a dull knife. He was no mort, immune to animal attraction than the next man, but in this particular woman there was something else even more intriguing and unpredictable. He felt a powerful impulse to do something to relieve her of that paralyzing supernatural dread.

A situation pregnant with violence was working up at one of the gaming tables but Newlin wilfully tore his attention from the mounting tension between the fat Martian gambler and an ugly character from Ganymede.

"Anything I can do for you, sister?"

Her smile was strange, thoughtful, preoccupied. "Yes," she told him. "There is something you can do for me. Unless your question was purely professional. If so, forget it. I need something stronger than the —the liquors you serve here."

Newlin grinned sourly. "You don't know our drinks. One sip and a mouse snarls at a snow-leopard. The question was not purely professional. Not my profession, anyhow. I don't know about yours. Or do I?"

HER HEAD jerked on its slender stalk of neck. Pale eyes stared into his; her lips twisted in cold scorn.

"I don't think you do. And I'll do without your help. Perhaps you'd better go back to polishing glassware."

The rebuke failed to impress Newlin. He waited while her glance swung about the room, evaluating the place and its occupants in one quick sweep. Dissatisfied, she turned back to Newlin and again the moonstruck eyes probed and assessed him.

"Take your pick," he said sharply. "But don't judge them by their clothes. On Venus, a man in ragged spaceleather may have heavy pockets. Now, take me—"

"I was told I could find Spud Newlin here. Point Him out and I'll pay your fee—"

Newlin was suddenly cautious. "Yes, he's here—but what would a woman like you want with such a notorious—"

"I'm asking questions, not answering," she said calmly. "And I'm well aware of his failings. I selected him because of his . . . his reputation. It's revolting, but even such a man may have uses. My requirements of him, and my reasons for the choice, I will discuss with him. No one else."

"Free advice, sister. Forget it, and get out of here. He's no good. Particularly bad, for a choice morsel like you."

"I'm used to making up my own mind. Where is he?"

Newlin shrugged. "You win. I'm Newlin. You take it from there."

Incredulity flooded her face and slowly drained away. "You! Yes, you could be Newlin. But you're working here. A famous man like you. Why?"

Newlin laughed easily. "It's very simple. I need money. If I can last through till morning, I'll have it. Now I'll ask the questions. You answer them. What do you want? Why me?"

A variety of expressions flowed over her mobile features.

"But—you could leave?" she faltered.

"I could, but I won't. This isn't charity night, kid. So go home and come back another time. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow won't do. Maybe I've chosen the wrong man, but there's no time for second chances. I wanted a man with courage, a man used to living dangerously and going his own way, a man who wouldn't ask questions and would do anything for money. You sounded like something out of the old books; a rogue; a rebel."

Newlin sighed. Did it show so much? From the gutter that spawned him, he had fought and gouged and elbowed his way up. To him all men were enemies. As a spacebum, he had explored the raw, expanding frontiers as Man surged from planet to planet. As a hunted outlaw he had existed perilously on the twilight fringes of civilization. Ruthless and savage, a thief and despoiler, a criminal and adventurer, he had found his way back to Earth, Mars, Venus and wrested a niche of sorts within the citadels he had attempted to overthrow.; Despite the brittle amnesty, he knew that authority awaited only a single slip to deal with him according to their views. But in the bitterness of ultimate disillusions, he had found the fountainhead as lacking in civilization and sanity as its furthest riples. He longed, now, only for the final gesture of rejection. Escape. . . .

"I had expected more of Newlin," said the girl.

HIS REPLY was a short, bitter laugh. "So had I. My character is as corrupt as the rest of mankind. Poverty is' undignified and degrading; it poisons virtue and debases the outlook. Without money a man cannot claim his birthright of freedom; getting money he loses his independence and his character."

"You think money would make you free?" the girl asked. .

"Not of itself." Newlin scowled. "With money, a free man can be free; a slave with money is still a slave. Perhaps I want to learn for myself which I am. I want enough to pay for a spaceship, the best to be had. A one-man ship in which I can escape this madhouse and venture alone—beyond Pluto. Such a plan requires money, so I work in the Spacebell. Between wages, tips, graft and my winnings, I may have half enough, by dawn. If I live that long."

The girl nodded, then spoke contemptuously, "I can pay very generously. You can set your own price. Enough even for your spaceship. But what do you expect to find—beyond Pluto?"

"Myself, first. After that, who knows? This solar system is a vast pesthouse. I am contaminated by fools, moneygrubbers, sheep and the corrupt authorities that rule them. What else I find isn't important if I find myself. Even death." Newlin's eyes burned with a hot glare of fanaticism. Dread sprang into the girl's heart. Always with these people there was this fear, this panic-desire to escape, always an urge to destruction coupled with eery mysticism, compulsions, conflicts—and always the final delusion of personal sanity in the atmosphere of chaos. Some of Newlin's words found echo in herself, but she checked a momentary sympathy. The system was mad, true—but how sane was Newlin? How sane and trustworthy? He could be a dangerous tool in her unskilled, frightened hands.

She had chosen him on the basis of his reputation. From his police record, and other documents. A capable man, courageous and self-reliant, ingenious, but a person of tensions and conflicts, a man of violence, unpredictable, torn by contradictory impulses, a savage but not without kindness and generosity. For her purposes, he might do as well as any other. At worst a man, cast in heroic mold. Quickly, but not without revulsions and reservations, she made fateful decision.

"For a man of your talents," she said, "the task should be simple. I want you to break into a building and bring me something. There is danger you would not understand. If you fail, death for both of us. For success, you set the price. Are you interested?"

Newlin laughed cynically. "You promise the moon if I can steal it for you, nothing if I can't?"

"No such shrewd bargaining," the girl murmured uneasily. "But name the amount you hoped to make here. I will match it now—and double it if you accomplish my errand."

"Fair enough," said Newlin. "But keep your money. I'll case the job first. Pay me later—if I don't change my mind again."

Ducking behind the bar, he shed his apron and buzzed for the stand-in bartender. Ed Careld forsook his interminable game of Martian chess and appeared to take over.

"Seems quiet," he said. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Newlin told him. "Private business. I may not be back. Keep an eye on Table Three."

Careld nodded, eyed the gamblers at Table Three dubiously. He tied his apron carefully and sidled toward the table to oversee the situation and clamp down a lid if necessary. Table Three picked that moment to erupt in profane violence. Three languages splashed pungently in dispute which passed quickly to a climax of crisscrossed heat-beam brilliance. Marksmanship was poor; both the fat Martian and his adversary from Ganymede survived, and only two questionable kibitzers blazed into sudden oblivion. Careld swept up the corpses into neat piles of ash, then tried to warn the combatants against further displays of short temper.

HE DIED in an outburst of majority resentment, punctuated by heat-beams. Newlin returned behind the counter and buzzed for Careld's stand-in. Then clutching the girl's arm, he left the place, dragging her along.

The street was dim, silent, deserted. "Where to?" asked Newlin.

Her quick nod indicated direction.

"Walking distance?" he persisted. "Inside the city? If not, I'll have to get protection suits from a public locker."

"Just inside. Monta Parlc."

Newlin whistled. "Nice neighborhood. Do you live there?"

"No," she faltered. "I'm just in from—Earth."

Earth! It was a long time since Newlin had seen Earth. Few of his memories were pleasantly nostalgic. Born there, in the poorest quarter of the international spaceport of Sahara City, his early life had been hard. Both parents had died there, broken from strain and poverty, and Newlin escaped only by stowing away in the dangerous after-holds of a rocketship bound for Mars, risking the unpleasant death from leaking radioactives in preference to being poor on Earth.

He had been poor since, in many places, but never with the grinding hopelessness of those early nightmare years. Their mark stayed with him and colored his life. He knew every rathole of the system, with the same intimacy the rats knew them. Once, on a non-stop express rocket from Mars to Pluto, he had lost a finger and all the toes from his left foot in ceaseless guerilla warfare with rats which had disputed possession of the hold in which he stowed away. More than once he had bummed passage near the atomic fuel vats of cranky old space-freighters that were mere tin cans caulked with chewing gum. As boy and man, he slept in jails from the dark, mad moons of Neptune to the fiery beach-head colonies of Mercury. And with fists, brain and nimble fingers he had written an epic biography in Security Police annals.

Like other cities of the space frontier, Venusport was raw and crude, exotically beautiful and cruelly violent. To Newlin it was old stuff, picturesque, with the spicy flavor of a perilous vacation spot. After abrasive years on a dozen planets and habitable moons, the ugly savageries of Venus had only a quaint charm. Survival was always comparatively easy there, and a man shed normal fears with the shredding, blistered skin of spaceburns. He was surprised when the girl shuddered and drew close to him. Her instinctive trust amused him, and he laughed brutally. The sound slashed between them like a chilled blade.

They went together, in silence. Faint, flat breeze from the city's air-conditioners fanned their faces. It was dark enough, and for Venus, reasonably cool. Buildings strewn like a careless giant's toys formed a vague and monstrous backdrop. Street-lighting was poor, for such luxuries are expensive and the city fathers cared little what happened to the poor, diseased, half-starved nonenities. All streets were crooked aimless alleys, all black and empty. Only near landing stages and space-freight elevators was there any activity. Darkness and the Cyclopean setting gave more menace than intimacy to the dim tangles of avenues and parkways.

The girl stopped, panting for breath. Newlin waited for her. "You're a fool to trust yourself alone with me in a place like this," he told her grimly.

She hugged the loose mantle tightly across her shoulders and tried vainly to read his face in the murk.

"If you're trying to frighten me, you're wasting time," she said "I have more important fears." Newlin chuckled. Skinny wench, but she had something. There was pride in her, and scorn, and a hot spark that burned through the tones of cold scorn. Something else, too. A hint of desperate courage that baffled him.

"I still think you should have tried the panther sweat at the Spacebell," he suggested. "One sip and —"

"I know," she snapped. "And I hope you've had yours for tonight. You'll need it. We're almost there."

"In that case, we'd better talk," he said curtly. "I still know nothing about you. Who you are, what you want? I don't even know your name."

She spoke in low, vibrant tones, but the language seemed unfamiliar to her. She groped for exact words, extracted subtle meanings. But there was a hesitance, an uneasiness, about speech itself, as if she found it a tedious and inflexible medium for thought expressions.

"I told you. In a—building, there is a man I must see. He does not wish to see me, and there are barriers I cannot pass. The building is a combination workshop and living quarters, and something else you would not understand. You must go inside for me and induce him to come out to me. My name is Songeen. Tell him that. He will know me, and perhaps he will come. But it has been so long—"

Newlin grunted. "That man I must see. One who wouldn't come when you whistled. However long it has been?"

"He has changed—greatly. He may be insane. He may be dangerous. In self-defense, it may be necessary for you to kill him. For your protection, I have provided a weapon. Use all other means to

persuade him first, but threaten if you have to. And be ready to kill if he attacks you. But dead or alive, bring him to me."

SUDDENLY Newlin disliked his errand. Even more, he disliked himself. For a brittle moment, he was moved to turn back, refuse to carry out a bargain he now regretted. Killing for pay, at the whim of a jealous or scorned woman, was too ugly even for his calloused morality.

"Preferably dead?" he asked thinly.

"Preferably alive," Songeen murmured. "You would not understand, of course. It is because I love him. He will not come, but he must have the chance. And I must send a stranger to kill him, because he has—forgotten."

Newlin stiffened angrily. He was on the point of rejecting the girl and her project when a battery of lights moved toward them from the winding lanes of the Park. Too well he knew what they meant.

As the wealthiest district of Venusport, Monta Park was smug, respectable, luxurious—and protected. Roving radio-patrols of Protection Police—privately hired thugs—guarded its dwellers and their possessions. A prowling mono-car slowed and maneuvered to cast a revealing spotlight on the loitering pair. Newlin, had he been alone, might have dodged into the dense shrubbery, but the girl knew better. Calmly she turned to face down the occupants of the PP car, and her haughty expression would have chilled the blood of any PP constable presumptuous enough to question her. Her attitude and the obvious richness of her clothing seemed to satisfy the patrol, for the beam swung briefly and hesitated on Newlin. He dropped behind her like a servant bodyguard and hoped his scuffed space-leather was not too noticeable. The beam held for seconds, then flicked out. Soundlessly the patrol car vanished.

Neither spoke as the pair moved quickly into the precincts of the Park. As residence area, it was splashy; a series of interlocked estates rather than expensive mansions packed closely together. Each unit sat alone in sprawling, neatly sheared grounds, landscaped with flowering trees and set with the chill sophistication of statuary in gold, silver and platinum. Botanical splendors from exotic worlds rioted in orderly tangles of aromatic greenery, with sculpture of glass, marble and the noble metals glinting like pale ghosts against the darker masses.

Shadows parted before them. Half-hidden among trees rose a slender spire, needle-shaped, tall as a tower, but unwindowed. For a dwelling, its design was curious, and the interior must consist of circular rooms one above the other. At the base, an arched, oval aperture should have been the door, but neither handle nor keyhole showed on the flat, polished plate.

"Here we are," the girl said needlessly, her voice soft as a hint of pain trembled in it. A tremor ran through her body as she thrust out two objects toward him. A key and a gun.

"You will need these," she went on. "He will be in one of the upper rooms. His name is Genarion. Perhaps he will talk with you, especially if you surprise him. But remember, he is deadly. His scientific knowledge is a more frightful weapon than this. So do not hesitate to use violence."

Newlin fumbled the gun into a pocket, fingered the key. It was slim as a needle and as smooth. Without comment, he stared at her as weariness and disgust strangled him.

"Tell me your price," she said quickly, as if in haste to get words out before either could think too much. "I will pay—now."

Shabby bargaining, he thought. But he would call her bluff and force her to back down. "Not money," he said savagely. "I don't kill for money. For a woman, yes. I want you."

He expected anger, scorn, even hatred. She gasped and her face went pale and hard. Wilting under his glare, she nodded.

"Yes, even that—if you wish. I have no choice."

Newlin felt sick, empty. He no longer desired her, even if she were willing. He despised her and himself. But a bargain was still a bargain. He shrugged.

Like an outsize toy, a child's model of a spaceship, the oddly graceful structure towered upward into arching darkness. Like her, it was slender, radiant, beautiful. Bitterly, he caught the girl, dragged her to him, felt her flesh yielding to him. She leaned and met his lips with hers. The kiss was cold and ugly as writhing snakes. Cold. Ugly. Alien. . . .

THE KEY went in smoothly, did turn. It must have been impregnated with magnetism. Somewhere electronic relays clicked switches faintly. The door was open, its movement indescribable in familiar terms. It neither slid, nor swung on hinges. There was no door, much as if a light had switched off.

A rush of air came out. It had the high, sharp tang of ozone, and something unfamiliar.

Newlin stood inside what was obviously an airlock valve. A door inside had opened soundlessly.

He went on. Beyond the inner doorway was a large circular room. Its dimensions seemed far greater than Newlin would have guessed from the exterior of the building. This was no mere dwelling, no laboratory or workshop. It was a spaceship of radical design. Elfin stair-ladders spiralled up and down. The girders seemed impossibly delicate and fragile, as if their purpose was half-decoration, half-functional; and stresses involved were unimportant. Such support framework was insane—in any kind of spaceship. It had the quality of fairyland architecture, a dream ship woven from the filaments of spiderwebs.

But there was hidden strength, and truly functional design, as may be found in spiderwebs. Newlin was no engineer, but he sensed solidity and sound mathematics behind the toy structure's delicacy.

The stair ladder supported him without vibration, without give or any feeling of insecurity. He climbed.

Walls and the floor and ceiling bulkheads were rigid to his touch, supported his weight firmly, despite their eggshell-thin appearance of fragility. There were no corners; everything fused together seamlessly in smooth curves. Walls were self-luminous and oddly cool.

The lower chambers were bare of all furnishing. Higher levels contained a hodge-podge of implements, all in the same light, strong formula of design. But none familiar, either as to material or their possible function. There were machines, but all too simple. Neither the bulk of atomic engines nor the intricate complexities inseparable from electric or combustion motors.

Newlin was puzzled.

He stopped to listen, feeling like an intruder into a strange world. The building, or spaceship, ached with silence.

Another stairwell beckoned. He climbed, slowly, with increased caution. It would do no harm to have the gun in hand, ready. Where was the man who lived in such a place? And what sort of man could he be? What would he have in common with the frightened, haughty girl outside? The obvious explanation no longer satisfied.

As Newlin ascended, another floor opened and widened to his vision. The stair-ladder ended hire. It was the top floor. But this chamber seemed infinitely larger than the others. At first there was no sight of the man. Newlin stood alone in the center of a vast area. He did not seem indoors at all.

Endless vistas extended to infinity in all directions. In all directions save one, in which stood a tall shadow. Newlin gasped. It was his shadow, detached, seemingly solid.

Three-dimensional, it stood stock still. It moved when he moved. He gasped, then found the answer. By the shadow's echo of his movements, he could trace a vague outline of encirclement.

The walls were a screen, a circle about the room upon which were cast pictures so perfect that the beholder had illusion of being surrounded by eery, exotic landscapes. The scenes were panoramic, all taken at the same angle, by the same camera, and so cunningly fused into a whole that the effect was beyond mere artifice. For a moment, Newlin had stood within the strange world, its crystalline forms and strange jeweled life as tridimensional and real as himself.

It was a large screen, alive with light, alive with dancing, flickering figures. There was no visible projector, and the images were disturbingly solid and real. There was depth, without any perception of perspective. It was a reflection of reality, cast upon the plane of circling walls.

Then a man stepped from the screen. He had been invisible, because the projected images had flowed and accommodated themselves to his metal-cloth smock.

For the moment, he had been part of the screen.

Newlin could not tear his eyes from that glaring plane of illusion. Something about the glare played havoc with nerves, and a faint hint of diabolical sound tortured his brain. No such world could exist in a sane universe. Not even with its terrible and heartbreakingly poignant beauty. It was a vision of Hell, bright with impossible octaves of light, splendid with raging infernos of blinding color, some of it beyond the visible range of human sight. And there was sound, pouring in maddening floods, sound in nerve-shattering symphonies like the tinkling clatter of many Chinese windbells of glass, all pouring out cascades of brittle, crystalline uproar.

Sound and light rose in storming crescendos, beyond sight and beyond hearing. They ranged into madness.

NEWLIN screamed, tried to cover eyes and ears at once. He, tried to run, but nerve-agony paralyzed movement. He was chained to the spot.

Sound and color descended simultaneously into bearable range.

He stared at the man he had come to see. He stared and the man stared back.

"Genarion?" Newlin asked, his voice thin and vague among the tumultuous harmonies bursting from the screen.

"Who are you that calls me by that name?" cried Genarion. He spoke in the same curious manner as the girl. He showed amazement, mixed with an ugly kind of terror. "You're not one of them!"

"Them?" Newlin said, striving for sanity as sound and light swelled again. His brain reeled. "Songeen sent me—!"

Speech itself was a supreme effort.

Genarion was beyond speech. Tigerishly, he moved. He leaped upon Newlin and thrust him back. Newlin sprawled painfully, his back arched and twisted by invisible machinery.

Genarion stood with a gun in his hand. Aiming hastily, he pressed trigger. The beam flashed and licked charred cloth and smoking leather from Newlin's sleeve. There was an odd jangle from the invisible machinery which gouged so tangibly into Newlin's body.

Instinctively, Newlin fired. He did not bother to aim. For him, such a shot was point blank, impossible to miss.

Genarion staggered. Part of his body vaporized and hung in dazzling mist as the projected images of light played over it.

Dazed, Newlin scrambled to his feet. He was sick. But the screen held him. He stared, hypnotized. Images jigged and flowed in constant, eery rhythms. They moved and melted and rearranged themselves in altered patterns, without ever losing their identities or the illusion of solidity. The scene was not part of Venus, or of any world Newlin had seen. He had seen every planet or moon in the Solar system. But this was different, alien, frightening.

And the screen was not really a screen at all, for the body of Genarion, hideous in the distortion of death, lay halfway, through its plane. And it was changing, subtly, as he watched. It was no longer even a man, totally unhuman, as alien as the world it lay partway in. The body flowed, molten, hideous.

The screen was a surrealist painting, come alive, solid and real. And the solid, physical body of Genarion was part of it. He was dead, but real. His alien form was a bridge between two worlds, and now dead, Genarion was alien to both of them.

It was madness. The madness of the screen communicated itself to Newlin. Before his shocked eyes, Genarion's body began to steam and rise in a cloud of vaporous, glittering crystals. Swiftly the

haze dissipated. It was gone, gone invisibly into the alien world. Whatever Newlin had killed, it was not human, not a man.

Newlin turned and fled down the fairy stair-ladder.

He went through the still-open airlock doors and out into the screaming night. Behind him alarms were ringing frantically. Now they would be ringing in the stations of the Protection Police and call orders would go out to the radio-equipped prowl cars. Police would converge swiftly.

Sound shattered the night stillness. From far away, coming closer, was the shrill wail of a siren. Other sirens.

There was a harsh bleat of police whistles, near at hand. Newlin's imagination quivered with the possibility of blaster beams thrusting at his back. He fled.

The alarms had burst into sound too quickly. Had the girl, set the police on him, waiting only long enough to make sure he would accomplish his mission?

Whatever he had been set to kill, had not been human. Not a man. Intuitively, Newlin realized that the girl had anticipated everything. She knew what would happen, he reflected bitterly. She had promised payment only on delivery of a corpse, when there could be no corpse.

Spud Newlin, Sucker No. 1.

Conscience did not trouble him. After all, the man—or the thing—had fired first, without warning, without waiting to hear him out. Without waiting for details like identity, or even asking to hear the message he brought. It was self-defense, in a peculiar way.

NEWLIN ran and tried to lose himself in the shadowy fastness of Monta Park. He was not surprised that the girl had not troubled to wait and meet him.

He was not even angry. It was part of the game.

The Protection Police radios were carrying the alarm. Soon the Security Police would take up the hunt. If the girl had turned him in, she would be able to give a detailed and accurate description. Newlin guessed that he would be lucky to last even the few hours till daylight—or what passes for daylight on cloud-shrouded Venus.

Long before then, his career might end suddenly in a wild network of blaster or heat beams. By dawn he would very likely be crumpled among the ashcans and refuse in any dark alley.

But still the city would be his best bet. No use beating his way to the spaceport landing stages. Space Patrol units must have been notified, and would already be searching all outgoing units.

For the moment, he had a brief interval of grace in which to think things over and try, if only for his own satisfaction, to figure out what had happened. It—whatever it was —had writhed hideously when the blaster beam drove home. Part of it vaporized instantly, and the organs revealed did not even look animal. Eery, geometric, but not the naked electronic symmetries of a mechanical robot. Not metal. But what? Collapsed like wet sacking, it had lain half-inside and half-outside the screen. He could not recall clearly its rapid mutations of form after that.

Did it matter? The alarms were out. Blaring metallic clangor, and the uncanny banshee wailing of the hunting sirens. Police care little who is murdered in the nameless dives of Venusport, but let one of the lordly rich men die, and all Hell is loosed on the killer.

If the girl had turned in the alarm, it was only a matter of time. They would have his name and number; his ident-card would be listed and reproduced, sent everywhere. They would probably have the robot trackers out, those hideous electronic bloodhounds which can unerringly sort out a man's trail from the infinity of other scents and markings, following not smell, but a curious tangle of electrical impulses left by his body like static electricity or intangible magnetism. No layman could even guess how such a robot worked, but fugitives had learned to dread its infallible tracking ability.

Newlin fled, and as he went, he cursed himself for getting involved in such a nightmare.

Figures moved and blundered about him in the darkness of the park, but none got in his way. None seemed to notice him. Since it was not a man he had killed, perhaps others hunted him; other remote; alien beings he could not see, or sense.

The girl would know, of course. If he could find her. But she had vanished before he ever issued from the strange tower, and it was highly unlikely that he would ever see her again.

Chance, and a sudden rush of blue-clad figures across a street ahead of him, turned Newlin back toward his own, familiar part of town. The scant shelter of shadows in deserted alleyways was a comfort, but little real protection. He had friends, of a peculiar sort, in the old native quarter, and the Spacebell lay just outside the fringe of the mutants' district, where the half-human natives laired up. These friends might hide him, for a while, although such refuge was of little use against the robot-trackers. By daylight, he could be smuggled outside the domed city, and once into the wastelands, there was a chance. Not a good one; but there, even the robot-tracker could hardly come upon him without his knowledge. A lucky blaster shot would leave a blank trail and a shattered robot for his pursuers to follow. He wondered if they would risk another such expensive machine merely to hunt down a murderer in the wastelands. Scarcely, when the wastelands would kill the fugitive sooner or later anyhow.

His first task was to reach the Spacebell and collect his pay. Then to get protection-armor, against the peril of sandstorms and the radioactive sinks that spot the old sea-beds outside Venusport. After that, the native quarter, if he lived to reach it.

Shortly before daylight, he turned the last alley-corner and came in sight of the Spacebell.

A shadow stirred with movement. A lithe, loosely draped figure hurried to meet him. It was the girlSongeen.

"Don't go in there," she said. "They know who you are, and the police are waiting for you."

Newlin felt numb all over. "How did they know? Did you tell them?" he snapped.

"Of course not. Don't be a fool. Would I inform, then wait to warn you? I did not know he had automatic alarms, and automatic cameras to make records of anyone who came into the—the place. It was the pictures. They were identified with your ident-card at the Central Police Bureau. And the robot-trackers are out."

NEWLIN and Songeen studied each other for a long moment of silence.

"I guess it doesn't matter now," Newlin said finally, "but I'm glad you didn't turn me in. I might almost as well give up and get the thing over with. There's no place to run. Not without money."

Songeen produced a small sack of platinum coins which jingled as she offered it.

"That's one reason I tried to find you. After the alarms, I knew I would only handicap your flight. I hid. Then I came here, because I thought you might come back. I'm sorry I have no more money, but the rest is all in credits. It would be no help to you in the wastelands."

"I see," muttered Newlin. "Why did you care? Were you afraid I'd talk if the Police caught me?"

Songeen shrugged coldly. "No, I hadn't thought of that. But I think I owe you something. Murderer's wages. I knew you couldn't fulfil your bargain when you made it. But, in a way, I am responsible for you."

"In a way," agreed Newlin bitterly. He snatched at the bag of coins. "This will do. Thanks for nothing."

"Don't blame me too much. I had no choice, and I did not know it would work out like this."

"Perhaps not, but next time do your own killing. It's rough on both your victims."

Songeen was crying, tearless wracking sobs that shook her frail body.

"I'm sorry," she moaned. "But I couldn't even get in to see him. He knew the exact vibration level of my body, and had set supersonic traps to kill me if I tried to enter. Even my bones would have shattered. I would have died painfully and horribly. I would rather have died myself than cause his

death. Believe that. There is always a third victim. He was my husband, and I loved him. You can't understand, of course—"

"I understand less than ever now." Newlin knew that it was madness to remain so close to the Spacebell. But he could not force himself to leave Songeen. She seemed near collapse.

A thought struck him. "Say, is there anything there to tie you up with this business?"

Songeen gave a wry thrust of her thin shoulders. "Much—but does it matter? It was my—our home. Before he tricked me outside and would not let me return. They don't know what happened—yet. But there will be enough evidence against both of us. Part of what you saw was illusion. His body is still there. Changed—but the trackers can identify it. The charge is murder, and they will want both of us. Not just you."

"Come with me." Newlin spoke harshly—sharply.

The girl's eyes flickered. "Are you threatening me?"

"No. It's just that I've led them to you. We're in the same boat now. With the mechanical hounds on our heels. They will connect you through me, now that our trails have crossed. And they'll follow both of us. How will you manage?"

Songeen smiled wearily. "One always takes risks. I came here prepared for—anything."

"Don't be a fool! Protection Police don't stop to ask questions. They're hired Killers."

"I suppose not. What do you suggest?"

"Run and hide. Come with me, if you like. But suit yourself. I'm getting out of here. Out into the wastelands. It's almost dawn now. In the city, we're lost. Outside, there's a chance. A poor one, but—"

Light was that gray ugliness that precedes the smeary glare of dawn on Venus. The girl seemed very slight and young and helpless. Again, Newlin felt that impulse to save and protect her. He could see no details of feature, even her face was shadowed, and not quite human; but her body was beautiful, and trembling.

"Are you coming?' he asked, savagely.

"I'll go with you," she said. "You're kind. Perhaps I can help you. If they corner us, please kill me. I don't like—being hurt."

Newlin laughed grimly. "It's a promise. But I'll kill some of them, first."

"Please," she begged. "No killing —not for me."

TEN HOURS later, far out in the wastelands, Spud Newlin called a halt. The girl had trudged wearily behind him, uncomplaining and with patient determination. They wasted no precious breath in words, and walking had been doubly difficult for her. The protection armor was twice too large, and very cumbersome for such a slight figure; but such garments never come in half-size. Children and women are forbidden to venture into the wastelands, except in special vehicles.

Actually they had started out by vehicle. But it was old, cranky and ready for the junkyard. In the first flurry of sandstorm, it had clogged, burned out and died. Nothing very reliable was available in the black market without more notice.

Newlin accepted the inevitable and proceeded on foot. Perhaps they could reach the Archaeological Station at Sansurra. He was not certain if it would be inhabited at the Sandstorm season, but there was a good chance of stored food and water. Turning back to Venusport was impossible. So they went on.

Now he was confused. Directions are difficult at best on Venus, and his radio-compass proved faulty. He had only the vaguest idea where they were, and none at all where they were headed. But if he stopped too long, the shifting dunes would cover them. And if they tried to go too fast, it would be fatally easy to blunder into one of the open sinkholes of molten, radioactive metal.

He stopped and motioned the girl to rest.

She sank down, exhausted.

Newlin adjusted the throat microphones and headsets in their plastic helmets to make for easier conversation. But for a while, neither could talk. They sat and gasped, yearning for a breath of fresh,

unreclaimed air. Water supplies were low, and already Newlin had established iron rations. Drinking by tubes was difficult in the helmets and the water was warm and foul.

"You're lost?" Songeen asked at last.

Newlin nodded. He produced a wrinkled, battered map. "I can't even trust the compass. I don't know where we are."

The girl took the map in her gloved hands and peered intently through her face-mask. One finger traced a tiny circle in the film of dust.

"I know," she said. "We are somewhere about here. And over there—" she indicated a direction behind Newlin—"is the city from which my people came."

Newlin was startled. The directional instinct with which all Venusians are endowed was familiar enough, yet he would have sworn the girl was not from the enfeebled and mutant races of the veiled planet. She was, at once, more human—and more remote. Songeen guessed his doubt. Through the fused quartz faceplate, her angular features wore a curious, faint smile.

"No, not Venusian. This was an —an outpost. A colony and a quarantine station. The city was abandoned long ago. Long before the atomic holocaust my people fled. Eons have passed. Everything is now in ruins—if even ruins remain. See, it is not marked on the map. Not even as ruins. But we have unusual race-memory. I can see the fabulous towers and arsenals, the terraced gardens and the palaces —as if they still stood today as they were in that vanished yesterday. And we have the homing instinct. It was my people who gave it to the Venusians. The one thing of value that still remains to them."

Newlin was still dubious. "Unless you're dreaming."

Her finger jabbed at the map. "We are here," she insisted. "And if you care to search and dig, the city is probably still there, as it was a million years ago."

"Would there be water in your ruined city?" Newlin asked.

"Who knows? The wells are probably all filled with sand now. Or gone dry, or become contaminated. There is always much radioactivity near the ruined cities. They were primary targets when the peoples of Venus destroyed themselves. Even this desert is mute evidence of the holocaust; if one needs evidence. My people fled before that madness, because they anticipated it."

Newlin snorted. The pre-holocaust Venusians were purely legendary. No written records could exist, amid such conditions as must have followed the ancient wars. Science knew that at least half a million years had passed since Venus was a fair green planet peopled with hearty, beautiful, ease-loving races. Half a million years since the surface people had even looked upon the sun.

"If you're right about where we are," Newlin growled, "I'm still interested in that city. We can never make Sansurra with the water we have. Ruined or not, there may be wells. Is there a chance?"

"Not a good one," Songeen replied. "But better than none."

"Whenever you're ready," Newlin said. "You lead."

Wearily, man and girl struck off across the seas of shifting sand. Great dunes blocked their way. Some they circled, others must be climbed laboriously.

FROM the top of a huge, wind-ribbed billow, Newlin stared at a pale flickering in the dust ahead. In all other directions stretched endless humps and hollows. But before him lay a great wind-scoured hollow of bare rock. Beyond that, crowning a series of low hills, which must have thrust above water line in this shallow part of the ancient, vanished sea, were ruins.

Even as ruins, the city was spectacular. Massive columns had eroded slowly into stone toothpicks. Walls crumbled into formless heaps resembling the dunes. A few outlines of smoothed blocks and shattered lintels huddled the ground, half hidden by the encroaching sand. Details had vanished eons ago, but something still remained to tantalize imagination. The few buildings that still stood, and the soaring, fragile towers evidenced an engineering civilization of staggering proportions. Surface dimensions were still tremendous, and the city itself must have been of first importance, covering hundreds of square miles.

"Our city," said Songeen.

Newlin glanced quickly behind. Still distant, but moving very rapidly was the string of dark objects that could only be sandsleds of the pursuit. One tiny figure, scarcely visible, was far in advance of the others. The robot tracker.

He gestured. "They're covering three miles to our one," he told her grimly. "We'll try to reach the city before they catch up with us. Perhaps we can hide out among the ruins, and—with luck, booby-trap the tracker. If there's water, we can hold out for quite a while."

Songeen nodded crisply. Her voice was strained with emotion and fatigue. "As fugitives my people abandoned this city. Now, as a fugitive, I return."

Then she was off, running awkwardly, the cumbersome suiting of her protection armor giving her bounding strides the laughable appearance of a lumbering teddy-bear.

Descent into the hollow was riding a series of miniature sand avalanches. Each step buried the foot deep, but the sand gave way and slipped in loose spills. His boots struck hard on rough, bare rock. He grunted, fought for balance, then sprawled heavily. She helped him up, then took off again. Newlin followed.

Over the wind-carved rock, they made good time. Ascent of the long, jagged slopes to the city was heart-killing work, delicate and treacherous. The surface was like sponge-glass, brittle and deadly with knife-edges when broken.

Sheltering from wind-driven sand under the cover of a great monolith, Newlin and Songeen watched the racing figures of pursuit top the crest of the opposite ridge and start down. Man and girl were too winded and weak even to get up. They dared rest only a moment, then plunged on into the maze of tumbled ruins. Ultimate exertion had taken toll of their energies and rapidly burned up air reserves. Both were cruelly thirsty. The heat, even inside their insulated suits, was stifling.

There was no time to take stock of manifold discomforts.

The race was neck and neck. Death sniffed at their heels in the guise of mechanical trackers. On Venus, life is to the swift and cunning. To Newlin, life was perilous, but sweet.

Their helmet microphones picked up and amplified a curious droning buzz. It was the deathsong of the electronic tracker and it seemed closer than it was.

Slowly, inexorably, it grew louder. Sound swelled steadily, and it was a whiplash to their flagging energies. They fled in panic through the streets of the dead city.

It was no real refuge to them, but its megalithic precincts gave some lying illusion of safety. They chose a twisting, tangled route into the very heart of the ruined city, with the instinct of a hunted animal to confuse its trail. They doubled back to cross their own trail twice, in the vain hope of baffling the electronic enemy.

Newlin had been hunted before, on Mars, but by live bloodhounds. Pepper, oil of mustard, and perfumes had saved him then. But this hound followed not scent, but something intangible, electrical, and as mysterious as the soul-aura itself. It sorted two life-complexes from all other impulses and followed its own prime-directive—hunt down and kill.

The end was inevitable as death.

NEWLIN laid ambush for the mechanical monster. Crouched in a nest of rubble, he waited for it, blaster gun ready. Around a corner of shattered stones, it appeared. It moved like a whipping shadow, like part of the gathering twilight.

Silent, save for the high, nerve-tearing drone, it came warily across the courtyard paved with eroded stone. It was low, not animal in appearance, with the form of a fat, ugly snake. Fading light of the Venusian day cast a glint of metallic gray from its scaling of interlocked rings.

Newlin waited for a close shot. How vulnerable was such a soulless, mechanical monster to even the shattering-heat-forces of a blaster gun?

Songeen lay quietly beside him, her body quivering as much from strained muscles as from fear. Behind the face-mask, her thin features were pale, ghostlike.

With elaborate caution, the tracker circled their hiding place. Its froglike head, with a ruff of exposed filaments lifted, like an animal scenting blood. It edged slowly closer, its movement a glide, sinuous, crafty, with no suggestion of mechanical action.

Newlin pushed the girl's form roughly away, lest her trembling foul his aim. Sighting, he pressed trigger. Bright flame leaped from the weapon, crackling.

The beam lashed at the tracker, which stopped suddenly, threw back its monstrous head, and burst into hideous uproar of sparklng, electrical discharge. Like a live thing, it twitched, jerked, and flung itself in mad spasms. Convulsions stopped as short-circuits flared in both head and body. Molten, flowing, its metallic carcass glowed eerily in the dimness. Dying, it blazed up in a fireworks display spectacular enough to attract half of Venus to the terrified fugitives.

But the drone continued.

From behind the same corner came a duplicate of the first metal monster. Another tracker.

Its drone rose into shrill crescendo. Like a dog, it approached the wreckage of its fellow. And like a dog, it summoned help. Then, without pausing to examine the mechanical casualty, it turned its electronic attentions back to the hunted. Hopelessly, Newlin urged Songeen to her feet. They fled, and the game began all over again.

IT WAS a madman's dream. Desperate flight, the haunted ruins of an unknown city, deadly pursuit closing in, slowly, patiently inevitably. The familiar hare and hounds pattern of nightmare.

They fled through vague, littered streets, treacherous with the rubble of lost centuries. Buildings were lighter patterns upon the gathering darkness. Stone flagging underfoot was rough, eroded, rotten.

A pinnacled precipice rose suddenly to bar their way. Immense, sheer, buttressed by spills of loose rock, it towered above them and lost its heights in gloom.

Within a massive, deep-carved archway of stone, set an oval of polished red granite. A doorway, barren of carving save for one, scrawled and monstrous hieroglyph. Uneasiness stirred in Newlin, for something in his buried race-memories recalled that symbol with supernal dread. Ice formed about his spine and melted in trickling terror-drops. Instinct cringed, but his conscious mind rebelled at even the effort of memory.

Songeen stopped and stared at the hideously marked doorway, as if tranced.

"I remember this place," she said in swift excitement. "But I had thought it vanished—eons ago."

Newlin swerved on her angrily. "This is no time for experiments with your subconscious," he growled, savage with strain.

"It is—sanctuary," she replied softly. "Come!"

Boldly she stood before the oval door. Her finger traced its complex symbol, and the symbol responded with a glow like moonfire.

Again, as it had been with that oval door in Monta Park, there was baffling suggestion of unmechanical movement.

The stone block did not slide, roll, or swing open. It gave a slight quiver and dissolved.

Songeen stepped through its aperture and the inner darkness of the building claimed her. Reluctantly, Newlin followed—caught as much by curiosity as driven by the yelping spectres of pursuit.

No light entered the building from any source. It was dark as the pits of Ganymede or the under-surface laboratories of Pluto. It was dense and tangible as a block of black crystal. Newlin could see nothing, not even Songeen. And there was an alien feel to the interior.

He was aware that Songeen operated some hidden mechanism, and that the door, though he could not see it, was replaced.

"Now, for the moment, we are safe," she said slowly. "They cannot enter here."

Newlin shrugged bitterly. "It's all one. They can't enter and we don't dare go out. So we stay here and die of thirst. If you were really a top-rung witch, you'd think of details like air, food and water."

Songeen's laugh was a ripple of eery crystal in the darkness.

"How did you guess I was a witch?" she asked whimsically. "But we need not die here. Not unless you prefer to die among surroundings familiar to you. There is another way out. If we dare take it. For me, it will be simple. For you—"

"Not so simple, eh? You paint an interesting picture. Like one I once saw on Mars, in the Gneiss Gallery. `Nocturne—Yenusport,' it was titled. Beautiful. Dark purple background, the city seemed like fountains of flowering stars. It's not like that, not from the places I've seen it. Filth and dirt, people dying from poverty, disease or violence. Just a comparison. How close does your picture match the reality?"

"Close enough. You're a strange man, full of contradictions. I think you're only slightly mad. But for anyone, the way I could take you would be difficult. The pathway leads to my own world. To you—or anyone, not native—it will seem madness. Something of it you saw in the tower."

Around him in the darkness, he was conscious of her swift movements. She seemed untroubled by the lack of light. Neither by vision or hearing could he distinguish anything, but he sensed activity.

Then, suddenly, as if she had uncovered a cache of implements and struck a fire, radiance spread around her. Its source was not definite, and it spread slowly, like a stain through water. But something illuminated a vast, vaulted interior, Gothic in a sense, with a church-like air of gloom and mystery. It was Gothic, but of spiderweb delicacy, soaring arches, vague fretted ceilings, walls intricately carved into lacework of stone. Everywhere were echoes of that same eery symbolism in the door hieroglyph, and Newlin's folk-memories were oddly disturbed.

HE COULD not place the feeling. Certainly none of the symbols bore even slight resemblance to any written language known to him.

Something about their intricacy clouded even clear perception, and the emotional effect was not religious in any sense—it was stark, abysmal fear, as if the mysteries behind such symbols were too great for humanity to bear.

Ignoring him, Songeen persisted at her curious tasks. Newlin went and stood beside her, watching.

With gloved hand, she appeared to be tracing out some maze of deep cut markings that figured what must have been an altar-fane.

"Do you expect any results from this ritual mumbo-jumbo?" he questioned irritably.

Songeen looked up, startled. "Not more ritual than any other mathematics," she chided. "This is no temple, as you seem to imagine. It is the old quarantine station. I seek a doorway, but not into a hidden passage. There are other doorways. This one leads between dimensions. My world exists in a different plane. At least, our pathway to it follows strange ways, that you could never understand. You are no scientist or scholar. How could you grasp such unknown and forgotten matters? How could anyone in your world?"

Newlin stared at her, seeing things he had only guessed before. "You are—alien," he said.

"You can't guess how alien," she answered. "I said I was not of Venusian stock. My people came from outside. Our world exists in the same plane as yours, a planet circling one of the nearer stars. This place was never our home, but we had colonies on Venus, Earth, Mars and one of Jupiter's moons. Other colonies—like this one—and observatories and quarantine stations. Our scientific observers and the medical staff stayed here. They studied and recorded and treated.

"We were not gods nor demons nor anything else supernatural. Just a people not human, but not too remote from humanity. Just emissaries and workers, students and doctors. You might call us elder brothers to the human race. We came not to conquer, enslave and exploit, but to help. Sometimes the Masters came with us, since they were interested in our work.

"Many times, by our guidance, human beings reached high levels of development in the arts and sciences. We taught them and guided their stumbling steps, and released to them such knowledge as we dared trust to them. Time and again, we raised them from the slime, only to have them fall back. There is fatal disease in the race, a disease of instability and cruelty and violence. Call it madness—insanity—in the technical sense. It is pathological, and the disease is common to the human race, in all its ramifications. The Solar System is mad, and all who dwell in it are lunatics. Dangerous arid homicidal lunatics. Sol's system is the asylum and pesthouse of our, galaxy. We—my people—are its keepers and doctors.

"We are charged with the care and treatment of an ailing form of life. Because of our near likeness, in form and thought, it was hoped that we could understand and help them; in time, perhaps, find a cure. There are other races inhabiting the galaxy—many of them, civilized, intelligent, living, and sometimes even of matter similar to ours. Their minds and bodies are too different. We are nearest, both in form and feeling.

"We have tried, patiently and hopefully. For the most part, it is a long history of frustration and failure. The corruption is too deep, too basic. It is part of the life-pattern of the race. Some individuals may rise above it, but its taint lies dormant even in them. At best, they are carriers. And there seems little future for such a race.

"Your galactic neighbors have been patient. But now a time of decision is near. Your ships explore, exploit at will within your system. You have pushed your limits to the furthest expansion of that system. Colonized and despoiled. Now, you stand at the expanding horizon of stellar flight. Other star-systems tempt your imaginations, and technology batters at the problems involved.

"Your neighbors are watching, and afraid. If your people burst outside the limits of Sol's system, the contagion of your madness will spread and engulf the galaxy. At our request, they have given time, granting extensions freely. For countless centuries we have tried, and our effort, all our work and thought, has led only to failure. Now, the others have set a time limit, and the deadline is very close. Very close. You are all living on borrowed time; and but for our pleadings, it would be still less.

"The masters often send emissaries to us, as we send ours to the planets of Sol. They help and advise us—not as superior beings or as gods, commanding—but as elder brothers, trying to share their wisdom, trying tq help and guide us. They only help and advise, never intervene unless asked. Their advice is wisdom—sometimes terrible, difficult to understand, painful to accept. Recently, they brought a message from the other peoples—a message and ultimatum. And the Masters advised us to accept failure, to let them destroy humanity as a blot on the galaxy. We begged- one more chance, a last, desperate gamble, probably foredoomed to failure. But they granted us the painful right of the doctor. We can operate, but if the patient dies, so do we. That was our choice."

AS SHE talked, Songeen had engaged herself busily with the queerly formal operations of tracing the intricate diagrams.

"Do you believe me?" she asked, looking up.

"I'm not sure," Newlin replied frankly. "Are these Masters your gods?"

"Not gods. Living, intelligent beings, civilized, but not like us. Not material. I cannot explain. Even they are but advisers and messengers. Not all-wise, nor all-powerful. I wish they were; for they are kind."

"You sound like nice people," Newlin admitted. "I wish I could believe you. Off-hand, I think you're crazy. You say we're all off the beam. Then you talk like delusions of grandeur, and I have reason to know you can be homicidal. One of us is nuts. It's a toss-up."

Songeen smiled wearily. "It is possible that I am infected. I am inoculated against it, but so was Genarion. Will you believe that I loved him? He was my husband. We were children together, like brother and sister. Later, we were schooled together, were married, and asked to be assigned our task together. I did not sentence him, and I would have died myself first. But he had been here too long. If

he had gone back, the contagion would have gone with him. It was fated. You and I were mere tools. Weapons."

"I'm sorry, Songeen. I do believe you loved him."

She shook her head in curious ruffle of emotion. "He was not the first. Many of our kind have renounced their birthright to go among your people, become like you and share your hideous lives. They are part of your great religions, part of the legendary history of your races."

Silence fell between them. Newlin thought of dying Mars, the burnt-out husk of Venus, the political and economic pesthole of Earth —even the grim, gray, terrible frontiers on the further planets and moons. His recollections were a dreadful pageant of spectres, of an ugly, terror-haunted childhood, of the bleak years of his barren, lonely wanderings—the memory kitbag of a homeless, and often hunted, spacebum.

"I can believe you," Newlin admitted slowly. "Most of the truly worthwhile leaders of mankind stand so far above the mob that they seem cast in a different mold. The real leaders—not politicians, nor military brass. The thinkers and scientists, even the prophets. Every great religion sprang from the vision or inspiration of a single leader. Beyond the chaff, the fragments of his actual thoughts and words—always sound good. But their followers don't follow them."

Songeen's face twisted in bitter wrath. "How terribly true! Can blind men follow the sun? They feel its warmth and reach out to it, but they stumble and fall on their own clay feet. Blind eyes and hands can never reach the light. Most of our emissaries, of that kind, die horribly, and their message is distorted to serve the ends of madness and corruption."

"Is there no hope for us?"

She stared at him. The pale glow of her moonbright eyes softened and intensified.

"One hope, and only in yourselves. We have tried and failed. If you feel so strongly, why have you done nothing?"

Bitter hatred snagged in Newlin's throat, making his laugh a sound of horror. "Not me. I can pity the masses of poor and downtrodden, but only as masses. As abstractions. Individually, I loathe them. Cornered rats will fight back —but men lick the boots of their tormentors. I learned only hate and defiance. I'm a cornered rat, not a man."

There was sound now, outside the door they had entered. Low at first, a mere scrabbling, as if the trackers had located their refuge. In moments only, there came a heavy pounding, followed by the skirl of atomic drills. Newlin tensed, his hand itching at the butt of his blaster.

"I'm a rat," he went on. "Cornered, like any other rat. And the terriers are out there scratching at my hole. If you'll open that non-squeak door, I'll talk to them. Maybe even kill a few."

"No," said Songeen positively. "No killing."

"But I'm a killer," Newlin insisted. "I've killed men before for a lot less reason. They're mining the door. How long do you think that will last against explosives?"

"Not long," the girl admitted. "But long enough. I have the key at last. Stand back."

SOMETHING formless and faintly radiant hovered indescribably in space. Suspended above the worn flooring, without visible support or tangible outline—it existed. Something like weird emptiness, a void appearing in the air itself.

"This is the portal," Songeen told him calmly. "Choose now. I will take you with me if I can without permission. But do not come with me, unwarned. There is grave peril, beyond anything I can describe to you. Beyond your experience or imagination. I will try to get you safely back, somehow. But h can promise nothing. And if you stay too long, there is no coming back. You must remain there; even if the terror of your surroundings kills you."

She stood beside the mysterious doorway, waiting. Newlin made a start to follow her, then balked. "Wait!" he ordered roughly, as she was about to lead the way. "I can't go with you—not like this."
"Afraid?"

"Yes, but not of you or your world. I trust you. But you say everyone here is crazy. That it's infectious. Won't I carry the contagion into your world?"

Songeen hesitated. Shadows deepened inside her eyes. "You would, yes. But you will have contact with no one but me. Perhaps with the Masters—if I can take you to them. They may help us, but they are strange, unpredictable. Remember, I promise nothing and you come at your own risk. But your disease will harm no one—I'm inoculated, and the Masters are immune. If you overstay the limit and cannot return, you will be decontaminated just as we must be when we return to our own people.

"Here, in this room, is the place where the people of our colony on Venus were decontaminated before they could be allowed to enter the place of refuge the Masters had prepared for them. It is a cruel and harrowing experience. I know. There may be a way to get you safely back, without that. But your mind could never stand the shock. Understand that, before you choose."

"If it won't harm you, I'll go along," Newlin decided. "Almost any world would be an improvement on this."

"Don't be too sure," she warned. "At worst, the terror here is familiar. Come, then. Hold my hand, stay close, and try not to be frightened. It will be bad enough. And try not to change too much, or I will have difficulty returning you alive."

The portal swallowed her, and Newlin felt himself drawn into the force-vortex, still clinging to her hand.

TRANSITION was mild enough, less shock than he had expected. A moment of chill detachment, as if something indescribably cold shattered his body into component atoms and readjusted them to new patterns. He gasped, his body making the same thermal changes as if he stood under a cold shower. He shivered.

Then it was like coming out of the blanketing fog of horror into the sunlight of sanity; like rebirth, painlessly, into an eery other-dimension.

There was light and sound about him, a stir of cool air. Songeen had become separated from him in that moment of strange passage. She stood apart, watching him with laughter in her eyes. Laughter as cool and calm and soothing as the soft wind that riffled her hair. She had stripped off the bulky armor, shed her plastic helmet. Now she was all woman again, and some- how, oddly, a symbol of all women.

Other senses than his five sprang into life within him. Weird awareness through new perceptions which were nameless to his mind or to his memory.

At first there was no terror, no surprise. Merely an overwhelming difference.

Overhead was starless night, but not darkness. It was a vaulted, infinite sky, like an inverted ocean of tinted crystal, transparent, but softly colored, deepening imperceptibly to a heart of emerald, a-glow with faintest witchlights. All around him was a maze of shimmering crystal in odd forms, grotesque, clear but echoing the witchlights of that haunted sky.

Wind-borne, came the faint, sweet chiming of distinct porcelain bells. The place was alive with movement, sensed but incompletely seen. Even the wind flowed in almost visible currents, thickened as if the air had become dense, molten glass. All forms in the maze of crystal varied constantly. Light flared and died in odd rhythms, and the almost visible winds played icy arpeggios upon strings of spun glass, like Aeolian harps. Showering notes like those of Chinese windbells hung in clusters in the eddies of great wind rivers, and both sound and light flowed together and wove strange patterns and infinite variations.

It was not quite pleasant, vaguely nerve-tightening, but highly stimulating. Sound was muted at first, as was the light. Images blurred and outlines were unsteady, baffling. Everything fused and flowed together like half molten shards of broken glass. Wavelengths of troubled sound formed trembling notes that hung in the air, almost visible, crystalline and somehow painfully dissonant.

Like Songeen, her world or the pathway to it was strange, alien, but poignantly beautiful.

It was stranger than he thought.

He realized almost at once that his mind was making adjustments. It was lying to him, translating unfamiliar concepts into terms known to memory. It was diluting and enfeebling his sensations. But dread grew in him.

When his mind tired, stopped lying to him, what would it really be like? Could he stand the factual perception?

They trod the forest aisles of crystalline forms. There was light, of odd, gray, glary kind. A twilight, silvery, unreal as the trans-Lunar dreams of drugged poets. Songeen moved ahead slowly, making no effort to regain her clasp of his hand. Almost she seemed to avoid him, waiting until he almost overtook her, then skimming lightly away from him. Her slim, pale witchery was both taunt and challenge. She appeared to float rather than walk.

One by one she dropped her clinging robes. She became part of the mad forest, part of its dreamy gray enchantments.

Light grew steadily, and with it came more color, more magic, and more confusion of senses. The forest-forms assumed strange geometries. They stretched about him in endless vistas, blurring and transmuting as he watched. The dreamlike cloudiness was fading from his perceptions. He caught dreadful hints now and then of new, unheard-of forms and colors, of unstable geometries as far beyond Einstein's as his were beyond Euclid's. Nothing was tangible or definite, and perhaps that was the secret. Nothing ever is. Fear wove a crystalline web about Newlin's throat, strangling.

He halted and took stock. Ahead, Songeen waited, watching him, her figure a pale, elfin flame form against the shadowy mass of colored crystals. It was a forest of gemfires, and she was the purest jewel of the forest. Naked, alien, but—

WHY HAD he come here? His balked at backtracking. There was no going back. Perhaps he had already come too far. Was Songeen a vampire luring him into the hideous depths of this unknown place? He had been here before. It was like that awful illusion in the tower, but muted. How much did he perceive? How much was sheerest self-deception? Was he mad in the midst of awful sanity, or sane in the ultimate horror of lunacy?

Her voice floated back to him, its sound the chiming crash of splintering glass.

"Try not to change too much," she warned.

"Change?" Even the word sounded strange to him, as she said it. He felt a swift surge of anger. There was no change in him—none!

The tinkling bell-tones matched the swirl of his emotion and rose to jangling, tormented heights. It was shrill, maniacal tumult, that ranged upward and upward into octaves beyond sound. It was a rollicking, tortured insanity. Windbells chiming, jangled; tinkling, shimmering, exploding inside his brain. Wind-bells shattering in a hurricane of sound and ecstasy.

With his fists, Newlin pounded at his bursting skull. Pain deadened perception, gave him a moment's relief.

He was not changing, he shouted in loud defense. He was not! Songeen poised, watching. Her body-outlines swirled and altered in swift mutations before his eyes. She was not woman now. Not even human. She danced and flickered and gibbered at him. She was jeweled movement. Change. She was as crystalline as the forest, as molten emerald as the sky. Points of fire inside her caught and flared and burned inside his eyes. She was not Songeen!

Newlin screamed. He looked down at his hands. He screamed again, louder. His hands were transparent as glass, and as fluid as water. Outlines wavered, changed.

"Try not to change too much," Songeen pleaded. But her voice joined the clattering crystalline tumult which raged about him. He was cracking. He could feel the seams in his mind giving way.

Like a great, floundering beast, he charged toward her. Forms of brittle crystal shattered at his touch. Shattered into sound and pain. The forest-forms changed color, echoing his violence. New

vortices of movement, converged upon him. Perceptions expanded and radiance showered about him, through him.

The hovering, dancing crystal notes were now visible. Beads of light, dripping from a sky of light. They were sound a color, bright, bursting bubbles of sound. Their rhythmic tempos increased, murmur swelled into insistent roaring and the jangling of insane dissonance. Vitreous grotesques shimmered like a forest of aspens quivering in wind and sunlight. Glassy fragments of splintered sound poured in floods from sky and ground. Trampled grass gave way under his feet in brittle crunching, and the brush shivered at his touch, dissolving into chill slivers of slashing sound.

Blood was dripping. The forest changed color, as if crimson stain spread through it. Hellish glare was a roaring torrent of musical color. Red stains spread swiftly, dying the crystal columns, the glassy sward, seeping into the reeling brain.

There was blood. The taste of it in his mouth, the hot, salt smell, the sound of its dripping. He swam in seas of ruby light, crashing and plunging wildly, sinking into its crimson depths. Red light thickened around him, deepened, smothering.

The darkness was red, fire-shot, roaring. . .

Then pain and timeless darkness. Newlin awakened slowly, to ugly tension in his mind. Shadows like beating wings disturbed his memory.

The churning light and sound were gone. He drifted idly, body and mind coming softly to rest upon a bank of soft grass.

Someone knelt beside him. Someone cried softly, to the same murmurous rhythms of the crystalline forest. Without opening his eyes he sensed this, and knew also that he was still within the eery precincts of the maze. He opened his eyes, painfully.

This time, there were tears, glistening and falling slowly, glistening like crystal dewdrops in sunlight, and falling in softly tinkling shower like spilled jewels.

"Songeen!" he cried.

"Yes," murmured a tympany of glass bells, "I am here."

It was Songeen—almost, again, as he remembered her, almost human. It was Songeen, small, delicate, unreal, but sweetly feminine—almost human. It was Songeen, but with something added, changed, oddly blended into both form and personality.

"I tried to save you," she murmured. "I tried, but could not reach you. My knowledge is incomplete. I thought you were weak, confused, too frightened and disturbed to be changed easily. But you were strong, and your violence was a challenge to it. Only the Masters could understand. They saved you—not I. They intervened in time."

"The Masters!" Newlin glanced round, quickly, warily. "They are here?"

"Not here—now. But they saved you. I did not know all the dangers. They—not I—"

"Saved me from what—death?"

"No—worse. And now they say you must go back. At once. The Masters urge haste."

NEWLIN tasted bitterness on his lips. "Orders from headquarters. Well, I've been kicked out of better places—but few more interesting. Too bad I forgot my brass knuckles."

Physically, he tried to rise. Every bone and muscle ached. But it could have been worse. He seemed intact. Hints of vagrant color rippled over his visible skin, but he sensed neither pain nor menace from them.

Songeen bent over him. Her arm supported him in sitting position. It was unnecessary, but the sensation of contact was pleasant. He yielded to her ministrations and looked about. It was still the forest, crystalline, murmurous—but now muted. The same glary, unpleasant light beat down from the same impossible sky. Storming, eery colors flowed infinite mutations of form through the crystal spectres of the maze. And the tinkle of myriad glass wind bells held a maddening overtone.

He had thought, somehow, that it would be different. That it would have changed, subtly, as had Songeen. But from a brief survey, nothing had changed. The tumult had faded, become bearable—but identity remained.

Disappointed, he rose slowly, and felt her strong arm clasp about him. He felt clumsy, off-balance, but not weak. If anything, he was stronger. Stronger, and more cleanly, clearly alive than he had felt before.

"Come," urged Songeen. "I will take you back to the portal." "Back—to that?"

Newlin struggled with the futility of words. He was not sure what he wanted, let alone what he wanted to say. That insinuating crystalline clatter got inside his brain, scattered thought.

Songeen caught a stirring of rebellion in him and sensed his mental confusion.

"Don't fear the hunters," she said. "There are other doorways, and you can issue onto some other planet, if you wish. Try not to think, or even feel."

Her voice penetrated the uproar of his mind, stilling troubled waters, blanketing other sounds. For seconds, it seemed to elevate him to some remote, lofty plane where' life was serene, uncomplicated. Detached, he drifted with his own alien thoughts. Through senses other than visual, he watched his stumbling progress at her side as the girl threaded a pathway through the maze. Through senses not normally his own, he was aware of the utter strangeness behind this forest and its crystalline mysteries. He recognized the girl as part of the strangeness.

Dimly, he sensed some cosmic reluctance in himself, and was disturbed by his trend of thought. Faintly, he was aware of bodily movement and the crowding feel of shadowy aisles about him. But he was more aware of the girl, of her physical presence, and of the unrest she inspired in him.

Songeen! He had known many women on many, strange worlds. But none like this, none ever so strange, so wonderful, so terrifying. He had wanted her, yes. But only for an hour of passion, at first. An hour of the blinding futility of trying, in her arms, to forget the crowding ugliness of life. He had not cared if the women he knew had souls, or if he had. Souls were unfamiliar, vague, and he would not have known one if he encountered it. Soft, white bodies, glowing like pale witchlights in the darkness. Yes, he had known many such.

He had known many women, loved none.

Newlin had not spoken, not in words. But Songeen heard, by some subtle sense that was part of this abnormal forest.

Her laugh was a soft tinkle of breaking glass. She did not speak aloud, but word-symbols of thought poured from her mind. Newlin was aware of them, springing suddenly into his own brain, but he knew they came from her.

"Many women, yes. But none like me. If you loved me, it would not be for this body. It is not what you think. I hold this substance, this form, only by power of will. It is mine only for a short while more. My flesh is not like yours, subject to different laws of form and movement."

MEWLIN answered her, but now in words. His voice sounded like a note of strained sanity in such a place of nightmare.

"I never learned love in the sense you mean," he said. "Nor had I thought of you again, in that way—after Monta Park. You were too alien for me. I understood that. Too alien for any kind of love I knew. You were—repulsive."

In silence, then, thoughts blocked out, Songeen guided Newlin. She seemed aloof, withdrawn. They filed slowly amid towering masses of smoky crystal. She led, drifting like a smoke wraith, before him. Newlin picked a cautious pathway over treacherous, unstable footing. He followed, bemused, and reluctance grew into agony of mind.

What was wrong with him? He grappled with himself, and strains grew into open rebellion. What did he want?

Near the portal, sensing it or another like it, he balked.

"Songeen!"

At his call, she glided back, phantomlike. "Yes?"

"You're in trouble here, aren't you? Because of bringing me?"

Shoulders as translucent as thin ivory shrugged. "No matter."

"But you are?" Newlin insisted, as if it mattered suddenly to him.

"Yes," she granted softly. "But do not alarm yourself. Only misunderstanding. I will explain my motives. They will point out my error. There is no punishment here."

"You're not telling everything. What is wrong?"

Her moonfire eyes were troubled. "Nothing you can help."

Newlin probed mercilessly. "Tell me. Why did you bring me here? It was not only to save me from the hunters. Even I guessed that. Why?"

Poised, slender, defiant as a sword, Songeen met and parried his attack. "I cannot tell you that."

Newlin took her rebuff gracelessly. He was a son of Chaos, a man of the brawling, violent Solar breeds. His temper was short, his words and actions direct. He saw challenge and answered in kind.

"Then take me to the Masters."

Fear and fury blazed in her eyes. "They have not sent for you. I cannot take you to them like this. You are mad. You will live to regret this. Why, why?"

"I'll tell you. You said I could be decontaminated. You said I could be cured, that I could stay here—afterwards. I want to stay now. Is there a way. Can I be cured?"

"Of the madness, yes. But it is a fearful way. Do you know how all lunatics are treated? How they are cured, if at all? In your own asylums, do you know how madness is treated?"

"Yes, I know," Newlin answered roughly. "By shock treatment. I suspected something of the sort, all the time. Am I right? Is your treatment similar?"

Songeen nodded, her movement a shimmering echo of the forest's mirrored quivering.

"Similar—but not the same. The shock used is different. More intense and terrible than insulin or electrical shock. Could you survive such treatment?"

Newlin snorted. "I don't know. I'm just crazy enough to try. I won't say I like this place—your world or the nuthouse entrance to it. But with you, I like it better than any other place without you. I think I'm in love with you."

Worms of pale light flared and writhed in her eyes. Something shifted, the oddments of woman-flesh shredded from her. Like a transparent mannequin of glass, she stood. Inside her, luminous organs squirmed visibly. Like a dream-woman, she stood just outside the boundaries of sanity. But like a dream-woman, she was beautiful, immortal, desirable.

"You've said it," she murmured. "Now that you see me as I am, do you still want me? Say it again, now, Spud Newlin, say it in your new knowledge of the things as they really are."

NEWLIN hesitated, made his choice. Wandering, ill and alone, terrified, in the forests of nightmare—he chose. Madman's choice.

"I love you, Songeen. Take me to the Masters."

Nightmare wavered. A hand, oddly shaped, sought his as the witchfires burned low and faded from the sky.

"I can take you now. It is not far, and the Masters are waiting. I have warned you. If, after that warning, you still ask to stay, they will grant your wish. It needed only your free choice. I am glad you have chosen, but shock treatment is a dangerous chance. Are you sure you love me—enough?"

"Songeen!" his mind pleaded. "Wait!"

She heard his wordless cry, and waited, opening the glowing, pure citadel of her thoughts to him. She gave no answer in words or glowing thought symbols. She waited.

"No, I haven't changed my mind. I want to stay. Maybe I can learn to like your world. I want the decontamination—the shock treatment. I'm scared, but I want it, no matter how it hurts. I want to stay

here—but not if you're not here. I want to be with you—Hell, Venus or even Callisto—I want to go with you. I love you. If my love is part of my madness, don't cure me. I haven't asked you, but I'd like to know. Do you love me?"

Songeen was silent. In the glittering forest of crystalline tree forms, jeweled birds sang wild riots of bubbling, bursting notes. Darkness gathered swiftly in the dense air.

"Didn't you know?" Songeen chimed, matching the bird-notes. Our names are already enrolled in the Great Book. It was custom here, our mating rite. It was the only way I could bring you. I did not tell you, because—"

She stopped, then continued. "Because I had to be sure of you. Because I wanted you to have free choice. Now you must share all my tasks, my responsibilities. Before, the task was mine alone. Now we must share it. You and I are selected—"

"Selected for what?" Newlin broke in.

He could not see her for thick darkness. But he sensed eery tension of movement, and emotion flowed to him from her mind.

"For the great task, the last and greatest of all. We must go back together. To Hell. To the system you sprang from. It is for us to release to them the ultimate weapon. The deadline is close, as I told you. Other races grow desperate, now that your system's isolation is breaking down. Pressure for interstellar expansion is extreme on all of Sol's planets. The technicians work full time at the problems, and they will solve it, soon. We have until then, to kill or cure the patient.

"Other powers and weapons have been released to them in the hope that mounting responsibility would bring sanity. Atomic power was turned into dangerous toys, implements of murder. We gave them knowledge of atomic fission and fusion, and they use the knowledge to butcher and destroy each other. We tried all the minor shock treatments. They have failed. The time has come for the final treatment. The major shock. We—you and I—must give them the ultimate weapon."

NEWLIN knew his humanity. He protested. "But why? If they have misused everything else. Why give them something still more hideous? Why give them means for further destruction?"

Her answer pulsed through darkness which glittered like black crystal.

"Because it is the final experiment. The last hope for your people, your system. We cannot help them beyond that. They must choose for themselves, as you did. We must go back to Earth, this time. And it is our task to give them the final treatment and test. The ultimate weapon. Gravity displacement. Once used, it is the end. Planets will be wrenched from the Sun, electrons from their parent nuclei within the very atoms. It is the same force. The choice is theirs —kill or cure. Sanity or destruction. You and I will stay, try to guide and help, advise, but not interfere. Like you, your people must have free choice.

"We must stay with them, and share whatever happens. This is their shock treatment—and yours. We will share it together. But come, the Masters are waiting. I will take you to them."

"Together!" said Newlin, awed. "You will stay with me and share my—our shock treatment!"

"Together, always—now. It is a small price to pay, whatever happens," murmured Songeen.

Her hand drew him close, and she led him outside the zone of crystalline murmurs. Darkness leaned closer, solid, tangible. Ahead, was a great and terrible light.

THE END

Conger agreed to kill a stranger he had never seen. But he would make no mistakes because he had the stranger's skull under his arm.

THE SKULL
By Philip K. Dick

WHAT is this opportunity?" Conger asked. "Go on. I'm interested."

The room was silent; all faces were fixed on Conger—still in the drab prison uniform. The Speaker leaned forward slowly.

"Before you went to prison your trading business was paying well—all illegal—all very profitable. Now you have nothing, except the prospect of another six years in a cell.

Conger scowled.

"There is a pertain situation, very important to this Council, that requires your peculiar abilities. Also, it is a situation you might find interesting. You were a hunter, were you not?. You've done a great deal of trapping, hiding in the bushes, waiting at night for the game? I imagine hunting must be a source of satisfaction to you, the chase, the stalking—"

Conger sighed. His lips twisted. "All right," he said. "Leave that out. Get to the point. Who do you want me to kill?"

The Speaker smiled. "All in proper sequence," he said softly.

The car slid to a stop. It was night; there was no light anywhere along the street. Conger looked out. "Where are we? What is this place?"

The hand of the guard pressed into his arm. "Come. Through that door."

Conger stepped down, onto the damp sidewalk. The guard came swiftly after him, and then the Speaker. Conger took a deep breath of the cold air. He studied the dim outline of the building rising up before them.

"I know this place. I've seen it before." He squinted, his eyes growing accustomed to the dark. Suddenly he became alert. "This is—"

"Yes. The First Church." The Speaker walked toward the steps. "We're expected."

"Expected? Here?"

"Yes." The Speaker mounted the stairs. "You know we're not allowed in their Churches, especially with guns!" He stopped. Two armed soldiers loomed up ahead, one on each side.

"All right?" The Speaker looked up at them. They nodded. The door of the Church was open. Conger could see other soldiers inside, standing about, young soldiers with large eyes, gazing at the ikons and holy images.

"I see," he said.

"It was necessary," the Speaker said. "As you know, we have been singularly unfortunate in the past in our relations' with the First Church."

"This won't help."

"But it's worth it. You will see."

THEY passed through the hall and into the main chamber where the altar piece was, and the kneeling places. The Speaker scarcely glanced at the altar as they passed-by. He pushed open a small side door and beckoned Conger through.

"In here. We have to hurry. The faithful will be flocking in soon."

Conger entered, blinking. They were in a small chamber, low-ceilinged, with dark panels of old wood. There was a smell of ashes and smoldering spices in the room. He sniffed. "What's that? The smell."

"Cups on the wall. I don't know." The Speaker crossed impatiently to the far side. "According to our information, it is hidden here by this—"

Conger looked around the room. He saw books and papers, holy signs and images. A strange low shiver went through him.

"Does my job involve anyone of the Church? If it does—"

The Speaker turned, astonished. "Can it be that you believe in the Founder? Is it possible, a hunter, a killer—"

"No. Of course not. All their business about resignation to death, non-violence—"

"What is it, then?"

Conger shrugged. "I've been taught not to mix with such as these. They have strange abilities. And you can't reason with them."

The Speaker studied Conger thoughtfully. "You have the wrong idea. It is no one here that we have in mind. We've found that killing them only tends to increase their numbers."

"Then why come here? Let's leave."

"No. We came for something important. Something you will need to identify your man. Without it you won't be able to find him." A trace of a smile crossed the Speaker's face. "We don't want you to kill the wrong person. It's too important."

"I don't make mistakes." Conger's chest rose. "Listen, Speaker—"

"This is an unusual situation," the Speaker said. "You see, the person you are after—the person that we are sending you to find—is known only by certain objects here. They are the only traces, the only means of identification. Without them—"

"What are they?"

He came toward the Speaker. The Speaker moved to one side. "Look," he said. He drew a sliding wall away, showing a dark square hole. "In there."

Conger squatted down, staring in. He frowned. "A skull! A skeleton!"

"The man you are after has been dead for two centuries," the Speaker said. "This is all that remains of him. And this is all you have with which to find him."

For a long time Conger said nothing. He stared down at the bones, dimly visible in the recess of the wall. How could a man dead centuries be killed? How could he be stalked, brought down?

Conger was a hunter, a man who had lived as he pleased, where he pleased. He had kept himself alive by trading, bringing furs and pelts in from the Provinces on his own ship, riding at high speed, slipping through the customs line around Earth.

He had hunted in the great mountains of the moon. He had stalked through empty Martian cities. He had explored—

The Speaker said, "Soldier, take these objects and have them carried to the car. Don't lose any part bf them."

The soldier went into the cupboard, reaching gingerly, squatting on his heels.

"It is my hope," the Speaker continued softly, to Conger, "that you will demonstrate your loyalty to us, now. There are always ways for citizens to restore themselves, to show their devotion to their society. For you I think this would be a very good chance. I seriously doubt that a better one will come. And for your efforts there will be quite a restitution, of course."

The two men looked at each other; Conger, thin, unkempt, the Speaker immaculate in his uniform.

"I understand you," Conger said. "I mean, I understand this part, about the chance. But how can a man who has been dead two centuries be—"

"I'll explain later," the Speaker said. "Right now we have to hurry:" The soldier had gone out with the bones, wrapped in a blanket held carefully in his arms. The Speaker walked to the door. "Come. They've already discovered that we've broken in here, and they'll be coming at any moment."

They hurried down the damp steps to the waiting car. A second later the driver lifted the car up into the air, above the house-tops.

THE SPEAKER settled back in his seat. "The First Church has an interesting past," he said. "I suppose you are familiar with it, but I'd like to speak of a few points that are of relevancy to us.

"It was in the twentieth century that the Movement began—during one of the periodic wars. The Movement developed rapidly, feeding on the general sense of futility, the realization that each war was breeding greater war, with no end in sight. The Movement posed a simple answer to the problem: Without military preparations—weapons—there could be no war. And without machinery and complex scientific technocracy there could be no weapons.

"The Movement preached that you couldn't stop war by planning for it. They preached that man was losing to his machinery and science, that it was getting away from him, pushing him into greater and greater wars. Down with society, they shouted. Down with factories and science! A few more wars and there wouldn't be much left of the world.

"The Founder was an obscure person from a small town in the American Middle West. We don't even know his name. All we know is that one day he appeared, preaching a doctrine, of non-violence, nonresistance; no fighting, no paying taxes for guns, no research except for medicine. Live out your life quietly, tending your garden, staying out of public affairs; mind your own business. Be obscure, unknown, poor. Give away most of your possessions, leave the city. At least that was what developed from what he told the people."

The car dropped down and landed on a roof.

"The Founder preached this doctrine, or the germ of it; there's no telling how much the faithful have added themselves. The local authorities picked him up at once, of course. Apparently they were convinced that he meant it; he was never released. He was put to death, and his body buried secretly. It seemed that the cult was finished."

The Speaker smiled. "Unfortunately, some of his disciples reported seeing him after the date of his death. The rumor spread; he had conquered death, he was divine. It took hold, grew. And here we are today, with a First Church, obstructing all social progress, destroying society, sowing the seeds of anarchy—"

"But the wars," Conger said. "About them?"

"The wars? Well, there were no more wars. It must be acknowledged that the elimination of war was the direct result of non-violence practiced on a general scale. But we can take a more objective view of war today. What was so terrible about it? War had a profound selective value, perfectly in accord with the teachings of Darwin and Mendel and others. Without war the mash of useless, incompetent mankind, without training or intelligence, is permitted to grow and expand unchecked. War acted to reduce their numbers; like storms and earthquakes and droughts, it was nature's way of eliminating the unfit.

"Without war the lower elements of mankind have increased all out of proportion. They threaten the educated few, those with scientific knowledge and training, the ones equipped to direct society. They have no regard for science or a scientific society, based on reason. And this Movement seeks to aid and abet them. Only when scientists are in full control can the—"

HE LOOKED at his watch and then kicked the car door open. "I'll tell you the rest as we walk."

They crossed the dark roof. "Doubtless you now know whom those bones belonged to, who it is that we are after. He has been dead just two centuries, now, this ignorant man from the Middle West, this Founder. The tragedy is that the authorities of the time acted too slowly. They allowed him to speak, to get his message across. He was allowed to preach, to start his cult. And once such a thing is under way, there's no stopping it.

"But what if he had died before he preached? What if none of his doctrines had ever been spoken? It took only a moment for him to utter them that, we know. They say he spoke just once, just one time. Then the authorities came, taking him away. He offered no resistance; the incident was small."

The Speaker turned to Conger. "Small, but we're reaping the consequences of it today."

They went inside the building. Inside, the soldiers had already laid out the skeleton on a table. The soldiers stood around it, their young faces intense.

Conger went over to the table, pushing past them. He bent down, staring at the bones. "So these are his remains," he murmured. "The Founder. The Church has hidden them for two centuries."

"Quite so," the Speaker said. "But now we have them. Come along down the hall."

They went across the room to a door. The Speaker pushed it open. Technicians looked up. Conger saw machinery, whirring and turning; benches and retorts. In the center of the room was a gleaming crystal cage.

The Speaker handed a Slem-gun to Conger. The important thing to remember is that the skull must be saved and brought back—for comparison and proof. Aim low—at the chest."

Conger weighed the gun in his hands. "It feels good," he said. "I know this gun—that is, I've seen them before, but I never used one."

The Speaker nodded. "You will be instructed on the use of the gun and the operation of the cage. You will be given all data we have on the time and location. The exact spot was a place called Hudson's field. About 1960 in a small community outside Denver, Colorado. And don't forget—the only means of identification you will have will be the skull. There are visible characteristics of the front teeth, especially the left incisor—"

Conger listened absently. He was watching two men in white carefully wrapping the skull in a plastic bag. They tied it and carried it into the crystal cage. "And if I should make a mistake?"

"Pick the wrong man? Then find the right one. Don't come back until you succeed in reaching this Founder. And you can't wait for him to start speaking; that's what we must avoid! You must act in advance. Take chances; shoot as soon as you think you've found him. He'll be someone unusual, probably a stranger in the area. Apparently he wasn't known."

Conger listened dimly.

"Do you think you have it all now?" the Speaker asked.

"Yes. I think so." Conger entered the crystal cage and sat down, placing his hands on the wheel.

"Good luck," the Speaker said.

"We'll be awaiting the outcome. There's some philosophical doubt as to whether one can alter the past. This should answer the question once and for all."

Conger fingered the controls of the cage.

"By the way," the Speaker said. "Don't try to use this cage for purposes not anticipated in your job. We have a constant trace on it. If we want it back, we can get it back. Good luck."

Conger said nothing. The cage was sealed. He raised his finger and touched the wheel control, He turned the wheel carefully.

He was still staring at the plastic bag when the room outside vanished.

For a long time there was nothing at all. Nothing beyond the crystal mesh of the cage. Thoughts rushed through Conger's mind, helter-skelter. How would he know the man? How could he be certain, in advance? What had he looked like? What was his name? How had he acted, before he spoke? Would he be an ordinary person, or some strange outlandish crank?

Conger picked up the Slem-gun and held it against his cheek. The metal of the gun was cool and smooth. He practiced moving the sight. It was a beautiful gun, the kind of gun he could fall in love with. If he had owned such a gun in the Martian desert—on the long nights when he had lain, cramped and numbed with cold, waiting for things that moved through the darkness.

He put the gun down and adjusted the meter readings of the cage. The spiraling mist was beginning to condense and settle. All at once forms wavered and fluttered around him.

Colors, sounds, movements filtered through the crystal wire. He clamped the controls off and stood up.

HE WAS on a ridge overlooking a small town. It was high noon. The air was crisp and bright. A few automobiles moved along a road. Off in the distance were some level fields. Conger went to the door and stepped outside. He sniffed the air. Then he went back into the cage.

He stood before the mirror over the shelf, examining his features. He had trimmed his beard—they had not got him to cut it off—and his hair was neat. He was dressed in the clothing of the middle-twentieth century, the odd collar and coat, the shoes of animal hide. In his pocket was money of the times. That was important. Nothing more was needed.

Nothing, except his ability, his special cunning. But he had never used it in such a way before.

He walked down the road toward the town.

The first things he noticed, were the newspapers on the stands. April 5, 1961. He was not too far off. He looked around him. There was a filling station, a garage, some taverns, and a ten-cent store. Down the street was a grocery store and some public buildings.

A few minutes later he mounted the stairs of the little public library and passed through the doors into the warm interior.

The librarian looked up, smiling.

"Good afternoon," she said.

He smiled, not speaking because his words would not be correct; accented and strange, probably. He went over to a table and sat down by a heap of magazines. For a moment he glanced through them. Then he was on his feet again. He crossed the room to a wide rack against the wall. His heart began to beat heavily.

Newspapers—weeks on end. He took a roll of them over to the table and began to scan them quickly. The print was odd, the letters strange. Some of the words were unfamiliar.

He set the papers aside and searched farther. At last he found what he wanted. He carried the Cherrywood Gazette to the table and opened it to the first page. He found what he wanted:

PRISONER HANGS SELF

An unidentified man, held by the county sheriff's office for suspicion of criminal syndicalism, was found dead this morning, by-

He finished the item. It was vague, uninforming. He needed more. He carried the Gazette back to the racks and then, after a moment's hesitation, approached the librarian.

"More?" he asked. "More papers. Old ones?"

She frowned. "How old? Which papers?"

"Months old. And—before."

"Of the Gazette? This is all we have. What did you want? What are you looking for? Maybe I can help you."

He was silent.

"You might find older issues at the Gazette office," the woman said, taking off her glasses. "Why don't you try there? But if you'd tell me, maybe I could help you—" He went out.

The Gazette office was down a side street; the sidewalk was broken and cracked. He went inside. A heater glowed in the corner of the small office. A heavy-set man stood up and came slowly over to the counter.

"What did you want, mister?" he said.

"Old papers. A month. Or more."

"To buy? You want to buy them?"

"Yes." He held out some of the money he had. The man stared. "Sure," he said. "Sure. Wait a minute." He went quickly out of the room. When he came back he was staggering under the weight of his armload, his face red. "Here are some," he grunted. "Took what I could find. Covers the whole year. And if you want more—" Conger carried the papers outside. He sat down by the road and began to go through them.

WHAT he wanted was four months back, in December. It was a tiny item, so small that he almost missed it. His hands trembled as he scanned it, using the small dictionary for some of the archaic terms.

MAN ARRESTED FOR UNLICENSED DEMONSTRATION

An unidentified man who refused to give his name was picked up in Cooper Creek by special agents of the sheriff's office, according to Sheriff Duff. It was said the man was recently noticed in this area and had been watched continually. It was Cooper Creek. December, 1960. His heart pounded. That was all he needed to know. He stood up, shaking himself, stamping his feet on the cold ground. The sun had moved across the sky to the very edge of the hills. He smiled. Already he had discovered the exact time and place. Now he needed only to go back, perhaps to November, to Cooper Creek

He walked back through the main section of town, past the library, past the grocery store. It would not be hard; the hard part was over. He would go there; rent a room, prepare to wait until the man appeared.

He turned the corner. A woman was coming out of a doorway, loaded down with packages. Conger stepped aside to let her pass. The woman glanced at him. Suddenly her face turned white. She stared, her mouth open.

Conger hurried on. He looked back. What was, wrong with her? The woman was still staring; she had dropped the packages to the ground. He increased his speed. He turned a second corner and went up a side street. When he looked back again the woman had come to the entrance of the street and was starting after him. A man joined her, and the two of them began to run toward him.

He lost them and left the town, striding quickly, easily, up into the hills at the edge of town. When he reached the cage he stopped. What had happened? Was it something about his clothing? His dress? He pondered. Then, as the sun set, he stepped into the cage.

Conger sat before the wheel. For a moment he waited, his hands resting lightly on the control. Then he turned the wheel, just a little, following the control readings carefully.

The grayness settled down around him.

But not for very long.

THE man looked him over critically. "You better come inside," he said. "Out of the cold."

"Thanks." Conger went gratefully through the open door, into the livingroom. It was warm and close from the heat of the little kerosene heater in the corner. A woman, large and shapeless in her flowered dress, came from the kitchen. She and the man studied him critically.

"It's a good room," the woman said. "I'm Mrs. Appleton. It's got heat. You need that this time of year."

"Yes." He nodded, looking around.

"You want to eat with us?"

"What?"

"You want to eat with us?" The" man's brows knitted. "You're not a foreigner, are you, mister?"

"No." He smiled. "I was born in this country. Quite far west, though."

"California?"

"No." He hesitated. "In Oregon."

"What's it like up there?" Mrs. Appleton asked. "I hear there's a lot of trees and green. It's so barren here. I come from Chicago, myself."

"That's the Middle West," the man said to her. "You ain't no foreigner."

"Oregon isn't foreign, either," Conger said. "It's part of the United States."

The man nodded absently. He was staring at Conger's clothing.

"That's a funny suit you got on, mister," he said: "Where'd you get that?"

Conger was lost. He shifted uneasily. "It's a good suit," he said. "Maybe I better go some other place, if you don't want me here."

They both raised their hands protestingly. The woman smiled at him. "We just have to look out for those Reds. You know, the government is always warning us about them."

"The Reds?" He was puzzled.

"The government says they're all around. We're supposed to report anything strange or unusual, anybody doesn't act normal."

"Like me?"

They looked embarrassed. "Well, you don't look like a Red to me," the man said. "But we have to be careful. The Tribune says—"

Conger half listened. It was going to be easier than he had thought. Clearly, he would know as soon as the Founder appeared. These people, so suspicious of anything different would be buzzing and gossiping and spreading the story. All he had to do was lie low and listen, down at the general store, perhaps. Or even here, in Mrs. Appleton's boarding house.

"Can I see the room?" he said.

"Certainly." Mrs. Appleton went to the stairs. "I'll be glad to show it to you."

They went upstairs. It was colder upstairs, but not nearly as cold as outside. Nor as cold as nights on the Martian deserts. For that he was grateful.

He was walking slowly around the store, looking at the cans of vegetables, the frozen packages of fish and meats shining and clean in the open refrigerator counters.

Ed. Davies came toward him. "Can I help you?" he said. The man was a little oddly dressed, and with a beard! Ed couldn't help smiling.

"Nothing," the man said in a funny voice. "Just looking."

"Sure," Ed said. He walked back behind the counter. Mrs. Hacket was wheeling her cart up.

"Who's he?" she whispered, her sharp face turned, her nose moving, as if it were sniffing. "I never seen him before."

"I don't know."

"Looks funny to me. Why does he wear a beard? No one else wears a beard. Must be something the matter with him."

"Maybe he likes to wear a beard. I had an uncle who—"

"Wait." Mrs. Hacket stiffened. "Didn't that—what was his name? The Red—that old one. Didn't he have a beard? Marx. He had, a beard."

Ed laughed. "This ain't Karl Marx. I saw a photograph of him once."

Mrs. Hacket was staring at him. "You did?"

"Sure." He flushed a little. "What's the matter with that?"

"I'd sure like to know more about him," Mrs. Hacket said. "I think we ought to know more, for our own good."

"HEY, MISTER! Want a ride?" Conger turned quickly, dropping his hand to his belt. He relaxed. Two young kids in a car, a girl and a boy. He smiled at them. "A ride? Sure."

Conger got into the car and closed the door. Bill Willet pushed the gas and the car roared down the highway.

"I appreciate a ride" Conger said carefully. "I was taking a walk between towns, but it was farther than I thought."

"Where are you from?" Lora Hunt asked. She was pretty, small and dark, in her yellow sweater and blue skirt.

"From Cooper Creek."

"Cooper Creek?" Bill said. He frowned. "That's funny. I don't remember seeing you before."

"Why, do you come from there?"

"I was born there. I know everybody there."

"I just moved in. From Oregon."

"From Oregon? I didn't know Oregon people had accents."

"Do I have an accent?"

"You use words funny."

"How?"

"I don't know. Doesn't he, Lora?"

"You slur them," Lora said, smiling. "Talk some more. I'm interested in dialects." She glanced at him, white-teethed. Conger felt his heart constrict.

"I have a speech impediment."

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "I'm sorry."

They looked at him curiously as the car purred along. Conger for his part was struggling to find some way of asking them questions without seeming curious. "I guess people from out of town don't come here much," he said. "Strangers."

"No." Bill shook his head. "Not very much."

"I'll bet I'm the first outsider for a long time."

"I guess so."

Conger hesitated. "A friend of mine—someone I know, might be coming through here. Where do you suppose I might—" He stopped. "Would there be anyone certain to see him? Someone I could ask, make sure I don't miss him if he comes?"

They were puzzled. "Just keep your eyes open. Cooper Creek isn't very big."

"No. That's right."

They drove in silence. Conger studied the outline of the girl. Probably she was the boy's mistress. Perhaps she was his trial wife. Or had they developed trial marriage back so far? He could not remember. But surely such an attractive girl would be someone's mistress by this time; she would be sixteen or so, by her looks. He might ask her sometime, if they ever met again.

THE NEXT day Conger went walking along the one main street of Cooper Creek. He passed the general store, the two filling stations, and then the post office. At the corner was the soda fountain.

He stopped. Lora was sitting inside, talking to the clerk. She was laughing, rocking back and forth.

Conger pushed the door open. Warm air rushed around him. Lora was drinking hot chocolate, with whipped cream. She looked up in surprise as he slid into the seat beside her.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Am I intruding?"

"No." She shook her head. Her eyes were large and dark. "Not at all."

The clerk came over. "What do you want?"

Conger looked at the chocolate. "Same as she has."

Lora was watching Conger, her arms folded, elbows on the counter. She smiled at him. "By the way. You don't know my name. Lora Hunt."

She was holding out her hand. He took it awkwardly, not knowing what to do with it. "Conger is my name," he murmured.

"Conger? Is that your last or first name?"

"Last or first?" He hesitated. "Last. Omar Conger."

"Omar?" She laughed. "That's like the poet, Omar Khayyam."

"I don't know of him. I know very little of poets. We restored very few works of art. Usually only the Church has been interested enough—" He broke off. She was staring. He flushed. "Where I come from," he finished.

"The Church? Which church do you mean?"

"The Church." He was confused. The chocolate came and he began to sip it gratefully. Lora was still watching him.

"You're an unusual person," she said. "Bill didn't like you, but he never likes anything different. He's so—so prosaic. Don't you think that when a person gets older he should become—broadened in his outlook?"

Conger nodded.

"He says foreign people ought to stay where they belong, not come here. But you're not so foreign. He means orientals; you know."

Conger nodded.

The screen door opened behind them. Bill came into the room. He stared at them. "Well," he said. Conger turned. "Hello."

"Well." Bill sat down. "Hello, Lora." He was looking at Conger. "I didn't expect to see you here." Conger tensed. He could feel the hostility of the boy. "Something wrong with that?"

"No. Nothing wrong with it." There was silence. Suddenly Bill turned to Lora. "Come on. Let's go."

"Go?" She was astonished. "

"Why?

"Just go!" He grabbed her hand.

"Come on! The car's outside."

"Why, Bill Willet," Lora said. "You're jealous!"

"Who is this guy?" Bill said. "Do you know anything about him? Look at him, his beard—".

She flared. "So what? Just because he doesn't drive a Packard and go to Cooper High!"

Conger sized the boy up. He was big—big and strong. Probably he was part of some civil control organization.

"Sorry," Conger said. "I'll go."

"What's your business in town?" Bill asked. "What are you doing here? Why are you hanging around Lora?"

Conger looked at the girl. He shrugged. "No reason. I'll see you later."

He turned away. And froze. Bill had moved. Conger's fingers went to his belt. Half pressure, he whispered to himself. No more. Half pressure.

He squeezed. The room leaped around him. He himself was protected by the lining of his clothing, the plastic sheathing inside.

"God—" Lora put her hands up. Conger cursed. He hadn't meant any of it for her. But it would wear off. There was only a half-amp to it. It would tingle.

Tingle, and paralyze.

He walked out the door without looking back. He was almost to the corner when Bill came slowly out, holding onto the wall like a drunken man. Conger went on.

AS Conger walked, restless, in the night, a form loomed in front of him. He stopped, holding his breath.

"Who is it?" a man's voice came. Conger waited, tense.

"Who is it?" the man said again. He clicked something in his hand. A light flashed. Conger moved. "It's me," he said.

"Who is 'me'?"

"Conger is my name. I'm staying at the Appleton's place. Who are you?"

The man came slowly up to him. He was wearing a leather jacket. There was a gun at his waist.

"I'm Sheriff Duff. I think you're the person I want to talk to. You were in Bloom's today, about three o'clock?"

"Bloom's?"

"The fountain. Where the kids hang out." Duff came up beside him, shining his light into Conger's face. Conger blinked.

"Turn that thing away," he said.

A pause. "All right." The light flickered to the ground. "You were there. Some trouble broke out between you and the Willet boy. Is that right? You had a beef over his girl—"

"We had a discussion," Conger said carefully.

"Then what happened?"

"Why?

"I'm just curious. They say you did something."

"Did something? Did what?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm wondering. They saw a flash, and something seemed to happen. They all blacked out. Couldn't move."

"How are they now?"

"All right."

There was silence.

"Well?" Duff said. "What was it? A bomb?"

"A bomb?" Conger laughed. "No. My cigarette lighter caught fire. There was a leak, and the fluid ignited."

"Why did they all pass out?"

"Fumes."

Silence. Conger shifted, waiting. His fingers moved slowly toward his belt. The Sheriff glanced down. He grunted.

"If you say so," he said. "Anyhow, there wasn't any real harm done." He stepped back from Conger. "And that Willet is a troublemaker."

"Good night, then," Conger said. He started past the Sheriff.

"One more thing, Mr. Conger. Before you go. You don't mind if I look at your identification, do you?"

"No. Not at all." Conger reached into his pocket. He held his wallet out. The Sheriff took it and shined his flashlight on it. Conger watched, breathing shallowly. They had worked hard on the wallet, studying historic documents, relics of the times, all the papers they felt would be relevant.

Duff handed it back. "Okay. Sorry to bother you." The light winked off.

When Conger reached the house he found the Appletons sitting around the television set. They did not look up as he came in. He lingered at the door.

"Can I ask you something?" he said. Mrs. Appleton turned slowly. "Can I ask you—what's the date?"

"The date?" She studied him. "The first of December."

"December first! Why, it was just November!"

They were all looking at him. Suddenly he remembered. In the twentieth century they still used the old twelve month system. November fed directly into December; there was no Quartember between. He gasped. Then it was tomorrow! The second of December! Tomorrow!

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks."

He went up the stairs. What a fool he was, forgetting. The Founder had been taken into captivity on the second of December, according to the newspaper records. Tomorrow, only twelve hours hence, the Founder would appear to speak to the people and then be dragged away.

THE day was warm and bright. Conger's shoes crunched the melting crust of snow. On he went, through the trees heavy with white. He climbed a hill and strode down the other side, sliding as he went.

He stopped to look around. Everything was silent. There was no one in sight. He brought a thin rod from his waist and turned the handle of it. For a moment nothing happened. Then there was a shimmering in the air.

The crystal cage appeared and settled slowly down. Conger sighed. It was good to see it again. After all, it was his only way back.

He walked up on the ridge. He looked around with some satisfaction, his hands on his hips. Hudson's field was spread out, all the way to the beginning of town. It was bare and flat, covered with a thin layer of snow.

Here, the Founder would come. Here, he would speak to them. And here the authorities would take him.

Only he would be dead before they came. He would be dead before he even spoke.

Conger returned to the crystal globe. He pushed through the door and stepped inside. He took the Slem-gun from the shelf and screwed the bolt into place. It was ready to go, ready to fire. For a moment he considered. Should he have it with him?

No. It might be hours before the Founder came, and suppose someone approached him in the meantime? When he saw the Founder coming toward the field, then he could go and get the gun.

Conger looked toward the shelf. There was the neat plastic package. He took it down and unwrapped it.

He held the skull in his hands, turning it over. In spite of himself, a cold feeling rushed through him. This was the man's skull, the skull of the Founder, who was still alive, who would come here, this day, who would stand on the field not fifty yards away.

What if he could see this, his own skull, yellow and eroded? Two centuries old. Would he still speak? Would he speak, if he could see it, the grinning, aged skull? What would there be for him to say, to tell the people? What message could he bring?

What action would not be futile, when a man could look upon his own aged, yellowed skull? Better they should enjoy their temporary lives, while they still had them to enjoy.

A man who could hold his own Skull in his hands would believe in few causes, few movements. Rather, he would preach the opposite—A sound. Conger dropped the skull back on the shelf and took up the gun. Outside something was moving. He went quickly to the door, his heart beating. Was it he? Was it the Founder, wandering by himself in the cold, looking for a place to speak? Was he meditating over his words, chosing his sentences?

What if he could see what Conger had held!

He pushed the door open, the gun raised.

Lora!

He stared at her. She was dressed in a wool jacket and boots, her hands in her pockets. A cloud of steam came from her mouth and nostrils. Her breast was rising and falling.

Silently, they looked at each other. At last Conger lowered the gun.

"What is it?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

She pointed. She did not seem able to speak. He frowned; what was wrong with her?

"What is it?" he said. "What do you want?" He looked in the direction she had pointed. "I don't see anything."

"They're coming."

"They? Who? Who are coming?"

"They are. The police. During the night the Sheriff had the state police send cars. All around, everywhere. Blocking the roads. There's about sixty of them coming. Some from town, some around behind." She stopped, gasping. "They said—they said—"

"What?"

"They said you were some kind of a Communist. They said—"

CONGER went into the cage. He put the gun down on the shelf and came back out. He leaped down and went to the girl.

"Thanks. You came here to tell me? You don't believe it?"

"I don't know."

"Did you come alone?"

"No. Joe brought me in his truck. From town."

"Joe? Who's he?"

"Joe French. The plumber. He's a friend of Dad's."

"Let's go." They crossed the snow, up, the ridge and onto the field. The little panel truck was parked half way across the field. A heavy short man was sitting behind the wheel, smoking his pipe. He sat up as he saw the two of them coming toward him.

"Are you the one?" he said to Conger.

"Yes. Thanks for warning me."

The plumber shrugged. "I don't know anything about this. Lora says you're all right." He turned around. "It might interest you to know some more of them are coming. Not to warn you—Just curious."

"More of them?" Conger looked toward the town. Black shapes were picking their way across the snow.

"People from the town. You can't keep this sort of thing quiet, not in a small town. We all listen to the police radio; they heard the same way Lora did. Someone tuned in, spread it around—"

The shapes were getting closer. Conger could, make out a couple of them. Bill Willet was there, with some boys from the high school. The Appletons were along, hanging back in the rear.

"Even Ed Davies," Conger murmured.

The storekeeper was toiling onto the field, with three or four other men from the town.

"All curious as hell," French said. "Well, I guess I'm going back to town. I don't want my truck shot full of holes. Come on, Lora."

She was looking up at Conger, wide-eyed.

"Come on," French said again. "Let's go. You sure as hell can't stay here, you know."

"Why?"

"There may be shooting. That's what they all came to see. You know that don't you, Conger?"

"Yes."

"You have a gun? Or don't you care?" French smiled a little. "They've picked up a lot of people in their time, you know. You won't be lonely."

He cared, all right! He had to stay here, on the field. He couldn't afford to let them take him away. Any minute the Founder would appear, would step onto the field. Would he be one of the townsmen, standing silently at the foot of the field, waiting, watching?

Or maybe he was Joe French. Or maybe one of the cops. Anyone of them might find himself moved to speak. And the few words spoken this day were going to be important for a long time.

And Conger had to be there, ready when the first word was uttered!

"I care," he said. "You go on back to town. Take the girl with you."

Lora got stiffly in beside Joe French. The plumber started up the motor. "Look at them, standing there," he said. "Like vultures. Waiting to see someone get killed."

HE truck drove away, Lora sitting stiff and silent, frightened now. Conger watched for a moment. Then he dashed back into the woods, between the trees, toward the ridge.

He could get away, of course. Anytime he wanted to he could get away. All he had to do was to leap into the crystal cage and turn the handles. But he had a job, an important job. He had to be here, here at this place, at this time.

He reached the cage and opened the door. He went inside and picked up the gun from the shelf. The Slem-gun would take care of them. He notched it up to full count. The chain reaction from it would flatten them all, the police, the curious, sadistic people—

They wouldn't take him! Before they got him, all of them would be dead. He would get away. He would escape. By the end of the day they would all be dead, if that was what they wanted, and he—

He saw the skull.

Suddenly he put the gun down. He picked up the skull. He turned the skull over. He looked at the teeth. Then he went to the mirror.

He held the skull up, looking in the mirror. He pressed the skull against his cheek. Beside his own face the grinning skull leered back at him, beside his skull, against his living flesh.

He bared his teeth. And he knew. It was his own skull that he held. He was the one who would die. He was the Founder.

After a time he put the skull down. For a few minutes he stood at the controls, playing with them idly. He could hear the sound of motors outside, the muffled noise of men. Should he go back to the present, where the Speaker waited? He could escape, of course

Escape?

He turned toward the skull. There it was, his skull, yellow with age. Escape? Escape, when he had held it in his own hands?

What did it matter if he put it off a month, a year, ten years, even fifty? Time was nothing. He had sipped chocolate with a girl born a hundred and fifty years before his time. Escape? For a little while, perhaps.

But he could not really escape, no more so than anyone else had ever escaped, or ever would.

Only, he had held it in his hands, his own bones, his own death's-head.

They had not.

He went out the door and across the field, empty handed. There were a lot of them standing around, gathered together, waiting. They expected a good fight; they knew he had something. They had heard about the incident at the fountain. And there were plenty of police—police with guns and tear gas, creeping across the hills and ridges, between the trees, closer and closer. It was an old story, in this century.

One of the men tossed something at him. It fell in the snow by his feet, and he looked down. It was a rock. He smiled.

"Come on!" one of them called. "Don't you have any bomb?"

"Throw a bomb! You with the beard! Throw a bomb!"

"Let 'em have it!"

"Toss a few A Bombs!"

THEY began to laugh. He smiled. He put his hands to his hips: They suddenly turned silent, seeing that he was going to speak.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I don't have any bombs. You're mistaken."

There was a flurry of murmuring.

"I have a gun," he went on. "A very good one. Made by science even more advanced than your own. But I'm not going to use that, either."

They were puzzled.

"Why not?" someone called. At the edge of the group an older woman was watching. He felt a sudden shock. He had seen her before. Where?

He remembered. The day at the library. As he had turned the corner he had seen her. She had noticed him and been astounded. At the time, he did not understand why.

Conger grinned. So he would escape death, the man who right now was voluntarily accepting it. They were laughing, laughing at a man who had a gun but didn't use it. But by a strange twist of science he would appear again, a few months later, after his bones had been buried under the floor of a jail.

And so, in a fashion, he would escape death. He would die, but then, after a period of months, he would live again, briefly, for an afternoon.

An afternoon. Yet long enough for them to see him, to understand that he was still alive. To know that somehow he had returned to life.

And then, finally, he would appear once more, after two hundred years had passed. Two centuries later.

He would be born again, born, as a matter of fact, in a small trading village on Mars. He would grow up, learning to hunt and trade—

A police car came on the edge of the field and stopped. The people retreated a little. Conger raised his hands.

"I have an odd paradox for you," he said. "Those who take lives will lose their own. Those who kill, will die. But he who gives his own life away will live again!"

They laughed, faintly, nervously. The police were coming out, walking toward him. He smiled. He had said everything he intended to say. It was a good little paradox he had coined. They would puzzle over it, remember it.

Smiling, Conger awaited a death foreordained.

THE END


MARTIN

Mary was a misfit. She didn't want to be beautiful. And she wasted time doing mad things—like eating and sleeping.

The Beautiful People

By Charles Beaumont

MARY sat quietly and watched the handsome man's legs blown off; watched further as the great ship began to crumple and break into small pieces in the middle of the blazing night. She fidgeted slightly as the men and the parts of the men came floating dreamily through the wreckage out into the awful silence. And when the meteorite shower came upon the men, gouging holes through everything, tearing flesh and ripping bones, Mary closed her eyes.

"Mother."

Mrs. Cuberle glanced up from her magazine.

"Hmm?"

"Do we have to wait much longer?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

Mary said nothing but looked at the moving wall.

"Oh, that." Mrs. Cuberle laughed and shook her head. "That tired old thing. Read a magazine, Mary, like I'm doing. We've all seen *that* a million times."

"Does it have to be on, Mother?"

"Well, nobody seems to be watching. I don't think the doctor would mind if I switched it off."

Mrs. Cuberle rose from the couch and walked to the wall. She depressed a little button and the life went from the wall, flickering and glowing.

Mary opened her eyes.

"Honestly," Mrs. Cuberle said to a woman sitting beside her, "you'd think they'd try to get something else. We might as well go to the museum and watch the first landing on Mars. The Mayoraka Disaster—really!"

The woman replied without distracting her eyes from the magazine page. "It's the doctor's idea. Psychological."

Mrs. Cuberle opened her mouth and moved her head up and down knowingly.

"Ohhh. I should have known there was *some* reason. Still, who watches it?"

"The children do. Makes them think, makes them grateful or something."

"Ohhh."

"Psychological."

Mary picked up a magazine and leafed through the pages. All photographs, of women and men. Women like Mother and like the others in the room; slender, tanned, shapely, beautiful women; and men with large muscles and shiny hair. Women and men, all looking alike, all perfect and beautiful. She folded the magazine and wondered how to answer the questions that would be asked.

"Mother—"

"Gracious, what is it now! Can't you sit still for a minute?"

"But we've been here three hours."

Mrs. Cuberle sniffed.

"Do—do I really have to?"

"Now don't be silly, Mary. After those terrible things you told me, of *course* you do."

An olive-skinned woman in a transparent white uniform came into the reception room.

"Cuberle. Mrs. Zena Cuberle?"

"Yes."

"Doctor will see you now."

Mrs. Cuberle took Mary's hand and they walked behind the nurse down a long corridor.

A man who seemed in his middle twenties looked up from a desk. He smiled and gestured toward two adjoining chairs.

"Well—well."

"Doctor Hortel, I—"

THE doctor snapped his fingers. "Of course, I know. Your daughter. Ha ha, I certainly do know your trouble. Get so many of them nowadays—takes up most of my time."

"You do?" asked Mrs. Cuberle. "Frankly, it had begun to upset me."

"Upset? Hmm. Not good. Not good at all. Ah, but then—if people did not get upset, we psychiatrists would be out of a job, eh? Go the way of the early M. D. But, I assure you, I need hear no more." He turned his handsome face to Mary.

"Little girl, how old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir."

"Oh, a real bit of impatience. It's just about time, of course. What might your name be?"

"Mary.

"Charming! And so unusual. Well now, Mary, may I say that I understand your problem—understand it thoroughly?"

Mrs. Cuberle smiled and smoothed the sequins on her blouse.

"Madam, you have no idea how many there are these days. Sometimes it preys on their minds so that it affects them physically, even mentally. Makes them act strange, say peculiar, unexpected things. One little girl I recall was so distraught she did nothing but brood all day long. Can you imagine!"

"That's what Mary does. When she finally told me, doctor, I thought she had gone—you know."

"That bad, eh? Afraid we'll have to start a re-education program very soon, or they'll all be like this. I believe I'll suggest it to the senator day after tomorrow.1

"I don't quite understand, doctor."

"Simply, Mrs. Cuberle, that the children have got to be thoroughly instructed. Thoroughly. Too much is taken for granted and childish minds somehow refuse to accept things without definite reason. Children have become far too intellectual, which, as I trust I needn't remind you, is a dangerous thing."

"Yes, but what has this to do with—"

"With Mary? Everything, of course. Mary, like half the sixteen, seventeen and eighteen year olds today, has begun to feel acutely self-conscious. She feels that her body has developed sufficiently for the Transformation—which of course it has not, not quite yet—and she cannot understand the complex reasons that compel her to wait until some future date. Mary looks at you, at the women all about her, at the pictures, and then she looks into a mirror. From pure perfection of body, face, limbs,

pigmentation, carriage, stance, from simon-pure perfection, if I may be allowed the expression, she sees herself and is horrified. Isn't that so, my dear child? Of course—of course. She asks herself, why must I be hideous, unbalanced, oversize, undersize, full of revolting skin eruptions, badly schemed organically? In short, Mary is tired of being a monster and is overly anxious to achieve what almost everyone else has already achieved."

"But—" said Mrs. Cuberle.

"This much you understand, doubtless. Now, Mary, what you object to is that our society offers you, and the others like you, no convincing logic on the side of waiting until age nineteen. It is all taken for granted, and you want to know why! It is that simple. A non-technical explanation will not suffice —mercy no! The modern child wants facts, solid technical data, to satisfy her every question. And that, as you can both see, will take a good deal of reorganizing."

"But—" said Mary.

"The child is upset, nervous, tense; she acts strange, peculiar, odd, worries you and makes herself ill because it is beyond our meagre powers to put it across. I tell you, what we need is a whole new basis for learning. And, that will take doing. It will take *doing,* Mrs. Cuberle. Now, don't you worry about Mary, and don't *you* worry, child. I'll prescribe some pills and—"

"No, no, doctor! You're all mixed up," cried Mrs. Cuberle,

"I beg your pardon, Madam?"

"What I mean is, you've got it wrong. Tell him, Mary, tell the doctor what you told me."

Mary shifted uneasily in the chair.

"It's that—I don't want it."

The doctor's well-proportioned jaw dropped.

"Would you please repeat that?"

"I said, I don't want the Transformation."

"D—Don't want it?"

"You see? She told me. That's why I came to you."

The doctor looked at Mary suspiciously.

"But that's impossible! I have never heard of such a thing. Little girl, you are playing a joke!"

Mary nodded negatively.

"See, doctor. What can it be?" Mrs. Cuberle rose and began to pace.

THE DOCTOR clucked his I tongue and took from a small cupboard a black box covered with buttons and dials and wire.

"Oh no, you don't think—I mean, could it?"

"We shall soon see." The doctor revolved a number of dials and studied the single bulb in the center of the box. It did not flicker. He removed handles from Mary's head.

"Dear me," the doctor said, "dear me. Your daughter is perfectly sane, Mrs. Cuberle."

"Well, then what is it?"

"Perhaps she is lying. We haven't completely eliminated that factor as yet; it slips into certain organisms."

More tests. More machines and more negative results.

Mary pushed her foot in a circle on the floor. When the doctor put his hands to her shoulders, she looked up pleasantly.

"Little girl," said the handsome man, "do you actually mean to tell us that you *prefer* that body?"

"Yes sir."

"May I ask why."

"I like it. It's—hard to explain, but it's me and that's what I like. Not the looks, maybe, but the *me."*

"You can look in the mirror and see yourself, then look at—well, at your mother and be content?"

"Yes, sir." Mary thought of her reasons; fuzzy, vague, but very definitely there. Maybe she had said the reason. No. Only a part of it.

"Mrs. Cuberle," the doctor said, "I suggest that your husband have a long talk with Mary."

"My husband is dead. That affair near Ganymede, I believe. Something like that."

"Oh, splendid. Rocket man, eh? Very interesting organisms. Something always seems to happen to rocket men, in one way or another. But—I suppose we should do something." The doctor scratched his jaw. "When did she first start talking this way," he asked.

"Oh, for quite some time. I used to think it was because she was such a baby. But lately, the time getting so close and all, I thought I'd better see you."

"Of course, yes, very wise. Er—does she also do odd things?"

"Well, I found her on the second level one night. She was lying on the floor and when I asked her what she was doing, she said she was trying to sleep."

Mary flinched. She was sorry, in a way, that Mother had found that out.

"To—did you say 'sleep'?"

"That's right."

"Now where could she have picked that up?"

"No idea."

"Mary, don't you know that nobody sleeps anymore? That we have an infinitely greater life-span than our poor ancestors now that the wasteful state of unconsciousness has been conquered? Child, have you actually *slept?* No one knows how anymore."

"No sir, but I almost did."

The doctor sighed. "But, it's unheard of! How could you begin to try to do something people have forgotten entirely about?"

"The way it was described in the book, it sounded nice, that's all." Mary was feeling very uncomfortable now. Home and no talking man in a foolish white gown ...

"Book, book? Are there *books* at your Unit, Madam?"

"There could be—I haven't cleaned up in a while."

"That is certainly peculiar. I haven't seen a book for years. Not since '17."

Mary began to fidget and stare nervously about.

"But with the tapes, why should you try and read books—where did you get them?"

"Daddy did. He got them from his father and so did Grandpa. He said they're better than the tapes and he was right."

Mrs. Cuberle flushed.

"My husband was a little strange, Doctor Hortel. He kept those things despite everything I said.

"Dear me, I—excuse me."

The muscular, black-haired doctor walked to another cabinet and selected from the shelf a bottle. From the bottle he took two large pills and swallowed them.

"Sleep—books—doesn't want the Transformation—Mrs. Cuberle, my *dear* good woman, this is grave. Doesn't want the Transformation. I would appreciate it if you would change psychiatrists: I am very busy and, uh, this is somewhat specialized. I suggest Centraldome. Many fine doctors there. Goodbye."

The doctor turned and sat down in a large chair and folded his hands. Mary watched him and wondered why the simple statements should have so changed things. But the doctor did not move from the chair.

"Well!" said Mrs. Cuberle and walked quickly from the room.

The man's legs were being blown off again as they left the reception room.

MARY considered the reflection in the mirrored wall. She sat op the floor and looked at different angles of herself: profile, full-face, full length, naked, clothed. Then she took up the magazine and studied it. She sighed.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall—" The words came haltingly to her mind and from her lips. She hadn't read them, she recalled. Daddy had said them, quoted them as he put it.

But they too were lines from a book — "who is the fairest of—"

A picture of Mother sat upon the dresser and Mary considered this now. Looked for a long time at the slender, feminine neck. The golden skin, smooth and without blemish, without wrinkles and without age. The dark brown eyes and the thin tapers of eyebrows, the long black lashes, set evenly, so that each half of the face corresponded precisely. The half-parted-mouth, a violet tint against the gold, the white, white teeth, even, sparkling.

Mother. Beautiful, Transformed Mother. And back again to the mirror.

"—of them all ..."

The image of a rather chubby girl, without lines of rhythm or grace, without perfection. Splotchy skin full of little holes, puffs in the cheeks, red eruptions on the forehead. Perspiration, shapeless lair flowing onto shapeless shoulders down a shapeless body. Like all of them, before the Transformation.

Did they all look like this, before? Did Mother, even?

Mary thought hard, trying to remember exactly what Daddy and Grandpa had said, why they said the Transformation was a bad thing, and why she believed and agreed with them so strongly. It made little sense, but they were right. They *were* right! And one day, she would understand completely.

Mrs. Cuberle slammed the door angrily and Mary jumped to her feet. She hadn't forgotten about it. "The way you upset Dr. Hortel. He won't even see me anymore, and these traumas are getting horrible. I'll have to get that awful Dr. Wagoner."

"Sorry—"

Mrs. Cuberle sat on the couch and crossed her legs carefully. "What in the world were you doing on the floor?"

"Trying to sleep."

"Now, I won't hear of it! You've got to stop it! You *know* you're not insane. Why should you want to do such a silly thing?"

"The books. And Daddy told me about it."

"And you mustn't read those terrible things."

"Why—is there a law against them?"

"Well, no, but people tired of books when the tapes came in. You know that. The house is full of tapes; anything you want."

Mary stuck out her lower lip. "They're no fun. All about the Wars and the colonizations."

"And I suppose books are fun?"

"Yes. They are."

"And that's where you got this idiotic notion that you don't want the Transformation, isn't it? Of course it is. Well, we'll see to that!"

MRS. CUBERLE rose quickly and took the books from the corner and from the closet and filled her arms with them. She looked everywhere in the room and gathered the old rotten volumes.

These she carried from the room and threw into the elevator. A button guided the doors shut.

"I thought you'd do that," Mary said. "That's why I hid most of the good ones. Where you'll never find them."

Mrs. Cuberle put a satin handkerchief to her eyes and began to weep.

"Just look at you. Look. I don't know what I ever did to deserve this!"

"Deserve what, Mother? What am I doing that's so wrong?" Mary's mind rippled in a confused stream.

"What!" Mrs. Cuberle screamed, *"What!* Do you think I want people to point to you and say I'm the mother of an idiot? That's what they'll say, you'll see. Or," she looked up hopefully, "have you changed your mind?"

"No." The vague reasons, longing to be put into words.

"It doesn't hurt. They just take off a little skin and put some on and give you pills and electronic treatments and things like that. It doesn't take more than a week."

"No." The reason.

"Don't you want to be beautiful, like other people—like me? Look at your friend Shala, she's getting her Transformation next month. And *she's* almost pretty now."

"Mother, I don't care—"

"If it's the bones you're worried about, well, that doesn't hurt. They give you a shot and when you wake up, everything's moulded right. Everything, to suit the personality."

"I don't care, I don't care."

"But *why?"*

"I like me the way I am." Almost —almost exactly. But not quite. Part of it, however. Part of what Daddy and Grandpa meant.

"But you're so ugly, dear! Like Dr. Hortel said. And Mr. Willmes, at the factory. He told some people he thought you were the ugliest girl he'd ever seen. Says he'll be thankful when you have your Transformation. And what if he hears of all this, what'll happen then?"

"Daddy said I was beautiful."

"Well really, dear. You *do* have eyes."

"Daddy said that real beauty is only skin deep. He said a lot of things like that and when I read the books I felt the same way. I guess I don't want to look like everybody else, that's all." No, that's not it. Not at all it.

"That man had too much to do with you. You'll notice that he had *his* Transformation, though!"

"But he was sorry. He told me that if he had it to do over again, he'd never do it. He said for me to be stronger than he was."

"Well, I won't have it. You're not going to get away with this, young lady. After all, I *am* your mother."

A bulb flickered in the bathroom and Mrs. Cuberle walked uncertainly to the cabinet. She took out a little cardboard box.

"Time for lunch."

Mary nodded. That was another thing the books talked about, which the tapes did not. Lunch seemed to be something special long ago, or at least different. The books talked of strange ways of putting a load of things into the mouth and chewing these things. Enjoying them. Strange and somehow wonderful.

"And you'd better get ready for work."

"Yes, Mother."

THE office was quiet and without shadows. The walls gave off a steady luminescence, distributed the light evenly upon all the desks and tables. And it was neither hot nor cold.

Mary held the ruler firmly and allowed the pen to travel down the metal edge effortlessly. The new black lines were small and accurate. She tipped her head, compared the notes beside her to the plan she was working on. She noticed the beautiful people looking at her more furtively than before, and she wondered about this as she made her lines.

A tall man rose from his desk in the rear of the office and walked down the aisle to Mary's table. He surveyed her work, allowing his eyes to travel cautiously from her face to the draft.

Mary looked around.

"Nice job," said the man. "Thank you, Mr. Willmes."

"Dralich shouldn't have anything to complain about. That crane should hold the whole damn city."

"It's very good alloy, sir."

"Yeah. Say, kid, you got a minute?"

"Yes sir."

"Let's go into Mullinson's office."

The big handsome man led the way into a small cubby-hole of a room. He motioned to a chair and sat on the edge of one desk.

"Kid, I never was one to beat around the bush. Somebody called in little while ago, gave me some crazy story about you not wanting the Transformation."

Mary said "Oh." Daddy had said it would have to happen, some day. This must be what he meant.

"I would've told them they were way off the beam, but I wanted to talk to you first, get it straight."

"Well, sir, it's true. I don't want to stay this way."

The man looked at Mary and then coughed, embarrassedly. "What the hell—excuse me, kid, but—I don't exactly get it. You, uh, you saw the psychiatrist?"

"Yes sir. I'm not insane. Dr. Hortel can tell you."

"I didn't mean anything like that. Well—" the man laughed nervously. "I don't know what to say. You're still a cub, but you do swell work. Lot of good results, lots of comments from the stations. But, Mr. Poole won't like it."

"I know. I know what you mean, Mr. Willmes. But nothing can change my mind. I want to stay this way and that's all there is to it."

"But—you'll get old before you're half through life."

Yes, she would. Old, like the Elders, wrinkled and brittle, unable to move right. Old. "It's hard to make you understand. But I don't see why it should make any difference."

"Don't go getting me wrong, now. It's not me, but, you know, I don't own Interplan. I just work here. Mr. Poole likes things running smooth and it's my job to carry it out. And soon as everybody finds out, things wouldn't run smooth. There'll be a big stink. The dames will start asking questions and talk."

"Will you accept my resignation, then, Mr. Willmes?"

"Sure you won't change your mind?"

"No sir. I decided that a long time ago. And I'm sorry now that I told Mother or anyone else. No sir, I won't change my mind."

"Well, I'm sorry, Mary. You been doing awful swell work. Couple of years you could be centralled on one of the asteroids, the way you been working. But if you should change your mind, there'll always be a job for you here."

"Thank you, sir."

"No hard feelings?"

"No hard feelings."

"Okay then. You've got till March. And between you and me, I hope by then you've decided the other way."

Mary walked back down the aisle, past the rows of desks. Past the men and women. The handsome, model men and the beautiful, perfect women, perfect, all perfect, all looking alike. Looking exactly alike.

She sat down again and took up her ruler and pen.

MARY stepped into the elevator and descended several hundred feet. At the Second Level she pressed a button and the elevator stopped. The doors opened with another button and the doors to her Unit with still another.

Mrs. Cuberle sat on the floor by the T-V, disconsolate and red-eyed. Her blond hair had come slightly askew and a few strands hung over her forehead. "You don't need to tell me. No one will hire you."

Mary sat beside her mother. "If you only hadn't told Mr. Willmes in the first place—"

"Well, I thought *he* could beat a little sense into you."

The sounds from the T-V grew louder. Mrs. Cuberle changed channels and finally turned it off. .

"What did you do today, Mother?" Mary smiled.

"Do? What can I do, now? Nobody will even come over! I told you what would happen."

"Mother!"

"They say you should be in the Circuses."

Mary went into another room. Mrs. Cuberle followed. "How are we going to live? Where does the money come from now? Just because you're stubborn on this crazy idea. Crazy crazy crazy! Can I support both of us? They'll be firing *me,* next!"

"Why is this happening?"

"Because of you, that's why. Nobody else on this planet has ever refused the Transformation. But you turn it down. You *want* to be gly!"

Mary put her arms about her mother's shoulders. "I wish I could explain, I've tried so hard to. It isn't that I want to bother anyone, or that Daddy wanted me to. I just don't want the Transformation."

Mrs. Cuberle reached into the pockets of her blouse and got a purple pill. She swallowed the pill. When the letter dropped from the chute, Mrs. Cuberle ran to snatch it up. She read it once, silently, then smiled.

"Oh, I was afraid they wouldn't answer. But we'll see about this *now!"*

She gave the letter to Mary.

Mrs. Zena Cuberle
Unit 451 D
Levels II & City
Dear Madam:

In re your letter of Dec 3 36. We have carefully examined your complaint and consider that it requires stringent measures. Quite frankly, the possibility of such a complaint has never occurred to this Dept. and we therefore cannot make positive directives at the moment.

However, due to the unusual qualities of the matter, we have arranged an audience at Central-dome, Eighth Level, Sixteenth Unit, Jan 3 37, 23 sharp. Dr. Elph Hortel has been instructed to attend. You will bring the subject in question.

Yrs,
DEPT F

Mary let the paper flutter to the floor. She walked quietly to the elevator and set it for Level III. When the elevator stopped, she ran from it, crying, into her room.

She thought and remembered and tried to sort out and put together. Daddy had said it, Grandpa had, the books did. Yes, the books did.

She read until her eyes burned and her eyes burned until she could read no more. Then Mary went to sleep, softly and without realizing it, for the first time.

But the sleep was not peaceful.

LADIES and gentlemen," said the young-looking, well groomed man, "this problem does not resolve easily. Dr. Hortel here, testifies that Mary Cuberle is definitely not insane. Drs. Monagh, Prinn and Fedders all verify this judgment. Dr. Prinn asserts that the human organism is no longer so constructed as to create and sustain such an attitude through deliberate falsehood. Further, there is positively nothing in the structure, of Mary Cuberle which might suggest difficulties in Transformation. There is evidence for all these statements. And yet we are faced with this refusal. What, may I ask, is to be done?"

Mary looked at a metal table. "We have been in session far too long, holding up far too many other pressing contingencies. The trouble on Mercury, for example. We'll *have* to straighten that out, somehow."

Throughout the rows of beautiful people, the mumbling increased. Mrs. Cuberle sat nervously, tapping her shoe and running a comb through her hair.

"Mary Cuberle, you have been given innumerable chances to reconsider, you know."

Mary said, "I know. But I don't want to."

The beautiful people looked at Mary and laughed. Some shook their heads.

The man threw up his hands. "Little girl, can you realize what an issue you have caused? The unrest, the wasted time? Do you fully understand what you have done? Intergalactic questions hang fire while you sit there saying the same thing over and over. Doesn't the happiness of your Mother mean anything to you?"

A slender, supple woman in a back row cried, "We want action. *Do* something!"

The man in the high stool raised his hand. "None of that, now. We must conform, even though the question is out of the ordinary." He leafed through a number of papers on his desk, leaned down and whispered into the ear of a strong blond man. Then he turned to Mary again. "Child, for the last time. Do you reconsider? Will you accept the Transformation?"

"No."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, then. I have here a petition, signed by two thousand individuals and representing all the Stations of Earth. They have been made aware of all the facts and have submitted the petition voluntarily. It's all so unusual and I'd hoped we wouldn't have to—but the petition urges drastic measures." The mumbling rose.

"The petition urges that you shall, upon final refusal, be forced by law to accept the Transformation. And that an act of legislature shall make this universal and binding in the future."

Mary's eyes were open, wide. She stood and paused before speaking. "Why?" she asked, loudly.

The man passed a hand through his hair.

Another voice from the crowd, "Seems to be a lot of questions unanswered here."

And another, "Sign the petition, Senator!"

All the voices, "Sign t, sign it!"

"But why?" Mary began to cry.

The voices stilled for a moment. "Because—Because—"

"If you'd only tell me that. Tell me!"

"Why, it simply isn't being done, that's all. The greatest gift of all. and what if others should get the same idea? What would happen to us then, little girl? We'd be right back to the ugly, thin, fat, unhealthy-looking race we were ages ago! There can't be any exceptions."

"Maybe they didn't consider themselves so ugly."

The mumbling began anew. "That isn't the point," cried the man. "You *must* conform!"

And the voices cried "Yes" loudly until the man took up a pen and signed the papers on his desk.

Cheers, applause, shouts.

Mrs. Cuberle patted Mary on the top of her head.

"There, now!" she said, happily, "Everything will be all right now. You'll see, Mary."

THE Transformation Parlor covered the entire Level, sprawling with its departments. It was always filled and there was nothing to sign and no money to pay and people were always waiting in line.

But today the people stood aside. And there were still more, looking in through doors, TV cameras placed throughout the tape machines in every corner. It was filled, but not bustling as usual.

Mary walked past the people, Mother and the men in back of her, following. She looked at the people. The people were beautiful, perfect, without a single flaw.

All the beautiful people. All the ugly people, staring out from bodies that were not theirs. Walking on legs that had been made for them, laughing with manufactured voices, gesturing with shaped and fashioned arms.

Mary walked slowly, despite the prodding. In her eyes, in *her* eyes, was a mounting confusion; a wide, wide wonderment.

The reason was becoming less vague; the fuzzed edges were falling away now. Through all the horrible months and all the horrible moments, the edges fell away. Now it was almost clear.

She looked down at her own body, then at the walls which reflected it. Flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone, all hers, made by no one, built by herself or someone she did not know. Uneven kneecaps, making two grinning cherubs when they bent, and the old familiar rubbing together of fat inner thighs. Fat, unshapely, unsystematic Mary. But *Mary.*

Of course. Of course! This *was* what Daddy meant, what Grandpa and the books meant. What *they* would know if they would read the books or 'hear the words, the good, reasonable words, the words that signified more, much more, than any of this.

The understanding heaped up with each step.

"Where *are* these people?" Mary asked half to herself. "What has happened to *them* and don't they miss *themselves,* these manufactured things?"

She stopped, suddenly.

"Yes! That *is* the reason. They have all forgotten themselves!"

A curvacious woman stepped forward and took Mary's hand. The woman's skin was tinted dark. Chipped and sculptured bone into slender rhythmic lines, electrically created carriage, stance, made, turned out.

"All right, young lady. We will begin."

They guided Mary to a large, curved leather seat.

From the top of a long silver pole a machine lowered itself. Tiny bulbs glowed to life and cells began to click. The people stared. Slowly a picture formed upon the screen in the machine. Bulbs directed at Mary, then redirected into the machine. Wheels turning, buttons ticking.

The picture was completed. "Would you like to see it?"

Mary closed her eyes, tight. "It's really very nice." The woman turned to the crowd. "Oh yes, there's a great deal to be salvaged; you'd be surprised. A great deal. We'll keep the nose and I don't believe the elbows will have to be altered at all.

Mrs. Cuberle looked at Mary and smiled. "Now, it isn't so bad as you thought, is it?" she-said.

The beautiful people looked. Cameras turned, tapes wound. "You'll have to excuse us now. Only the machines allowed." *Only the machines.*

The people filed out.

Mary saw the rooms in the mirror. Saw things in the rooms, the faces and bodies that had been left; the woman and the machines and the old young men standing about, adjusting, readying.

Then she looked at the picture in the screen.

And screamed.

A woman of medium height stared back at her. A woman with a curved body and thin legs; silver hair, pompadoured, cut short; full sensuous lips, small breasts, flat stomach, unblemished skin.

A strange, strange woman no one had ever seen before.

The nurse began to take Mary's clothes off.

"Geoff," the woman said, "come look at this, will you. Not one so bad in years. Amazing that we can keep anything at all."

The handsome man put his hands in his pockets.

"Pretty bad, all right."

"Be still, child, stop making those noises. You know perfectly well nothing is going to hurt."

"But—what will you do with me?"

"That was all explained to you."

"No, no, with *me, me!"*

"Oh, you mean the castoffs. The usual. I don't know exactly. Somebody takes care of it."

"I want me!" Mary cried. "Not that!" She pointed at the screen.

HER chair was wheeled into a semi-dark room. She was naked now, and the men lifted her to a table. The surface was like glass, black, filmed. A big machine hung above.

Straps. Clamps pulling, stretching limbs apart. The screen with the picture brought in. The men and the woman, more women now. Dr, Hortel in a corner, sitting with his legs crossed, shaking his head.

Mary began to cry above the hum of the mechanical things.

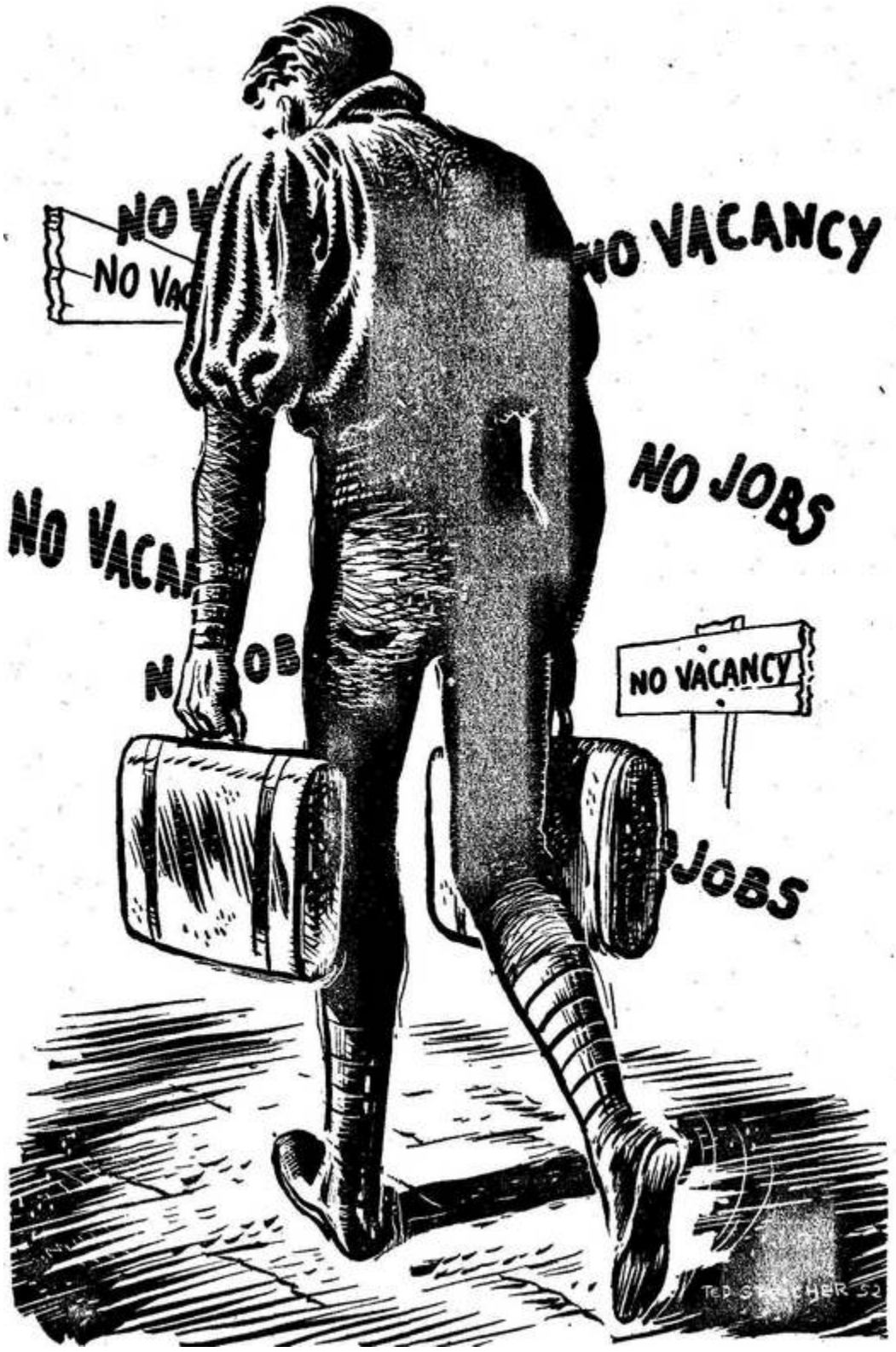
"Shhh. My gracious, such a racket! Just think about your job waiting for you, and all the friends you'll have and how nice everything will be. No more trouble now."

The big machine hurtling downward.

"Where will I find *me?"* Mary screamed, "when it's all over?" A long needle slid into rough flesh and the beautiful people gathered around the table.

They turned on the big machine.

THE END



Tam's problem was simple. He lived in a world that belonged to someone else.

MARLEY'S CHAIN

By Alan E. Nourse

THEY saw Tam's shabby clothing and the small, weather-beaten bag he carried, and they ordered him aside from the flow of passengers, and checked his packet of passports and visas with extreme care. Then they ordered him to wait. Tam waited, a chilly apprehension rising in his throat. For fifteen minutes he watched them, helplessly.

Finally, the Spaceport was empty, and the huge liner from the outer Asteroid Rings was being lifted and rolled by the giant hooks and cranes back into its berth for drydock and repair, her curved, meteor-dented hull gleaming dully in the harsh arc lights. Tam watched the creaking cranes, and shivered in the cold night air, feeling hunger and dread gnawing at his stomach. There was none of the elation left, none of the great, expansive, soothing joy at returning to Earth after eight long years of hard work and bitterness. Only the cold, corroding uncertainty, the growing apprehension. Times had changed since that night back in '87—just how much he hardly dared to guess. All he knew was the rumors he had heard, the whispered tales, the frightened eyes and the scarred backs and faces. Tam hadn't believed them then, so remote from Earth. He had just laughed and told himself that the stories weren't true. And now they all welled back into his mind, tightening his throat and making him tremble

"Hey, Sharkie. Come here."

Tam turned and walked slowly over to the customs official who held his papers. "Everything's in order," he said, half defiantly, looking up at the officer's impassive face. "There isn't any mistake."

"What were you doing in the Rings, Sharkie?" The officer's voice was sharp.

"Indenture. Working off my fare back home."

The officer peered into Tam's face, incredulously. "And you come back here?" He shook his head and turned to the other officer. "I knew these Sharkies were dumb, but I didn't think they were that dumb." He turned back to Tam, his eyes suspicious. "What do you think you're going to do now?"

Tam shrugged, uneasily. "Get a job," he said. "A man's got to eat."

The officers exchanged glances. "How long you been on the Rings?"

"Eight years." Tam looked up at him, anxiously. "Can I have my papers now?"

A cruel grin played over the officer's lips. "Sure," he said, handing back the packet of papers. "Happy job-hunting," he added sardonically. "But remember—the ship's going back to the Rings in a week. You can always sign yourself over for fare—"

"I know," said Tam, turning away sharply. "I know all about how that works." He tucked the papers carefully into a tattered breast pocket, hefted the bag wearily, and began trudging slowly across the cold concrete of the Port toward the street and the Underground. A wave of loneliness, almost overpowering in intensity, swept over him, a feeling of emptiness, bleak and hopeless. A chilly night wind swept through his unkempt blond hair as the automatics let him out into the street, and he saw the large dirty "New Denver Underground" sign with the arrow at the far side of the road. Off to the right, several miles across the high mountain plateau, the great capitol city loomed up, shining like a thousand twinkling stars in the clear cold air. Tam jingled his last few coins listlessly, and started for the downward ramp. Somewhere, down there, he could find a darkened corner, maybe even a bench, where the police wouldn't bother him for a couple of hours: Maybe after a little sleep, he'd find some courage, hidden away somewhere. Just enough to walk into an office and ask for a job.

That, he reflected wearily as he shuffled into the tunnel, would take a lot of courage—

THE girl at the desk glanced up I at him, indifferent, and turned her eyes back to the letter she was typing. Tam Peters continued to stand, awkwardly, his blond hair rumpled, little crow's-feet of weariness creeping from the corners of his eyes. Slowly he looked around the neat office, feeling a pang of shame at his shabby clothes. He should at least have found some way to shave, he thought, some way to take some of the rumple from his trouser legs. He looked back at the receptionist, and coughed, lightly. She finished her letter at a leisurely pace, and finally looked up at him, her eyes cold. "Well?"

"I read your ad. I'm looking for a job. I'd like to speak to Mr. Randall."

The girl's eyes narrowed, and she took him in in a rapid, sweeping glance, his high, pale forehead, the shock of mud-blond hair, the thin, sensitive face with the exaggerated lines of approaching middle age, the slightly misty blue eyes. It seemed to Tam that she stared for a full minute, and he shifted uneasily, trying to meet the cold inspection, and failing, finally settling his eyes on her prim, neatly manicured fingers. Her lip curled very slightly. "Mr. Randall can't see you today. He's busy. Try again tomorrow." She turned back to typing.

A flat wave of defeat sprang up in his chest. "The ad said to apply today. The earlier the better."

She sniffed indifferently, and pulled a long white sheet from the desk. "Have you filled out an application?"

"No."

"You can't see Mr. Randall without filling out an application." She pointed to a small table across the room, and he felt her eyes on his back as he shuffled over and sat down.

He began filling out the application with great care, making the printing as neat as he could with the old-style vacuum pen provided. Name, age, sex, race, nationality, planet where born, pre-Revolt experience, post-Revolt experience, preference—try as he would, Tarn couldn't keep the ancient pen from leaking, making an unsightly blot near the center of the form. Finally he finished, and handed the paper back to the girl at the desk. Then he sat back and waited.

Another man came in, filled out a form, and waited, too, shooting Tam a black look across the room. In a few moments the girl turned to the man. "Robert Stover?"

"Yuh," said the man, lumbering to his feet. "That's me."

"Mr. Randall will see you now."

The man walked heavily across the room, disappeared into the back office. Tam eyed the clock uneasily, still waiting.

A garish picture on the wall caught his eyes, a large, very poor oil portrait of a very stout, graying man dressed in a ridiculous green suit with a little white turban-like affair on the top of his head. Underneath was a little brass plaque with words Tam could barely make out:

Abraham L. Ferrel (1947-1986)

Founder and First President Marsport Mines, Incorporated

"Unto such men as these, we look to leadership."

Tam stared at the picture, his lip curling slightly. He glanced anxiously at the clock as another man was admitted to the small back office.

Then another man. Anger began creeping into Tam's face, and he fought to keep the scowl away, to keep from showing his concern. The hands of the clock crept around, then around again. It was almost noon. Not a very new dodge, Tam thought coldly. Not very new at all. Finally the small cold flame of anger got the better of him, and he rose and walked over to the desk. "I'm still here," he said patiently. "I'd like to see Mr. Randall."

The girl stared at him indignantly, and flipped an intercom switch. "That Peters application is still out here," she said brittlely. "Do you want to see him, or not?"

There was a moment of silence. Then the voice on the intercom grated, "Yes, I guess so. Send him in."

The office was smaller, immaculately neat. Two visiphone units hung on a switchboard at the man's elbow. Tam's eyes caught the familiar equipment, recognized the interplanetary power coils on one. Then he turned his eyes to the man behind the desk.

"Now, then, what are you after?" asked the man, settling his bulk down behind the desk, his eyes guarded, revealing a trace of boredom.

TAMTAM was suddenly bitterly of his shabby appearance, the two-day stubble on his chin. He felt a dampness on his forehead, and tried to muster some of the old power and determination into his

voice. "I need a job," he said. "I've had plenty of experience with radio-electronics and remote control power operations. I'd make a good mine-operator—"

"I can read," the man cut in sharply, gesturing toward the application form with the ink blot in the middle. "I read all about your experience. But I can't use you. There aren't any more openings."

Tam's ears went red. "But you're always advertising," he countered. "You don't have to worry about me working on Mars, either—I've worked on Mars before, and I can work six, seven hours, even, without a mask or equipment—"

The man's eyebrows raised slightly. "How very interesting," he said flatly. "The fact remains that there aren't any jobs open for you." The cold, angry flame flared up in Tam's throat suddenly, forcing out the sense of futility and defeat. "Those other men," he said sharply. "I was here before them. That girl wouldn't let me in—"

Randall's eyes narrowed amusedly. "What a pity," he said sadly. "And just think, I hired every one of them— His face suddenly hardened, and he sat forward, his eyes glinting coldly. "Get smart, Peters. I think Marsport Mines can somehow manage without you. You or any other Sharkie. The men just don't like to work with Sharkies." Rage swelled up in Tam's chest, bitter futile rage, beating at his temples and driving away all thought of caution. "Look," he grated, bending over the desk threateningly. "I know the law of this system. There's a fair-employment act on the books. It says that men are to be hired by any company in order of application when they qualify equally in experience. I can, prove my experience—"

Randall stood up, his face twisted contemptuously. "Get out of here," he snarled. "You've got nerve, you have, come crawling in here with your law! Where do you think you are?" His voice grated in the still air of the office. "We don't hire Sharkies, law or no law, get that? Now get out of here!"

Tam turned, his ears burning, and strode through the office, blindly, kicking open the door and almost running to the quiet air of the street outside. The girl at the desk yawned, and snickered, and went back to her typing with an unpleasant grin.

Tam walked the street, block after block, seething, futile rage swelling up and bubbling over, curses rising to his lips, clipped off with some last vestige of self-control. At last he turned into a small downtown bar and sank wearily onto a stool near the door. The anger was wearing down now to a sort of empty, hopeless weariness, dulling his senses, exaggerating the hunger in his stomach. He had expected it, he told himself, he had known what the answer would be —but he knew that he had hoped, against hope, against what he had known to be the facts hoped desperately that maybe someone would listen. Oh, he knew the laws, all right, but he'd had plenty of time to see the courts in action. Unfair employment was almost impossible to make stick under any circumstances, but with the courts rigged the way they were these days—he sighed, and drew out one of his last credit-coins. "Beer," he muttered as the barkeep looked up.

The bartender scowled, his heavy-set face a picture of fashionable distaste. Carefully he filled every other order at the bar. Then he grudgingly set up a small beer, mostly foam, and flung some small-coin change down on the bar before Tam. Tam stared at the' glass, the little proud flame of anger flaring slowly.

A fat man, sitting nearby, stared at him for a long moment, then took a long swill of beer from his glass. "'Smatter, Sharkie? Whyncha drink y'r beer 'n get t' hell out o' here?"

Tam stared fixedly at his glass, giving no indication of having heard a word.

The fat man stiffened a trifle, swung around to face him. "God-dam Sharkie's too good to talk to a guy," he snarled loudly. "Whassamatter, Sharkie, ya deaf?"

Tam's hand trembled as he reached for the beer, took a short swallow. Shrugging, he set the glass on the bar and got up from his stool. He walked out, feeling many eyes on his back.

He walked. Time became a blur to a mind beaten down by constant rebuff. He became conscious of great weariness of both mind and body. Instinct screamed for rest.. .

TAM sat up, shaking his head to clear it. He shivered from the chill of the park—the cruel pressure of the bench. He pulled up his collar and moved out into the street again.

There was one last chance. Cautiously his mind skirted the idea, picked it up, regarded it warily, then threw it down again. He had promised himself never to consider it, years before, in the hot, angry days of the Revolt. Even then he had had some inkling of the shape of things, and he had promised himself, bitterly, never to consider that last possibility. Still—

Another night in the cold out-of-doors could kill him. Suddenly he didn't care any more, didn't care about promises, or pride, or anything else. He turned into a public telephone booth, checked an address in the thick New Denver book.

He knew he looked frightful as he stepped onto the elevator, felt the cold eyes turn away from him in distaste. Once he might have been mortified, felt the deep shame creeping up his face, but he didn't care any longer. He just stared ahead at the moving panel, avoiding the cold eyes, until the fifth floor was called.

The office was halfway down the dark hallway. He saw the sign on the door, dimly: "United Continents Bureau of Employment", and down in small letters below, "Planetary Division, David G. Hawke."

Tam felt the sinking feeling in his stomach, and opened the door apprehensively. It had been years since he had seen Dave, long years filled with violence and change. Those years could change men, too. Tam thought, fearfully; they could make even the greatest men change. He remembered, briefly, his promise to himself, made just after the Revolt, never to trade on past friendships, never to ask favors of those men he had known before, and befriended. With a wave of warmth, the memory of those old days broke through, those days when he had roomed with Dave Hawke, the long, probing talks, the confidences, the deep, rich knowledge that they had shared each others dreams and ideals, that they had stood side by side for a common cause, though they were such different men, from such very different worlds. Ideals had been cheap in those days, talk easy, but still, Tam knew that Dave had been sincere, a firm, stout friend. He had known, then, the sincerity in the big lad's quiet voice, felt the rebellious fire in his eyes. They had understood each other, then, deeply, sympathetically, in spite of the powerful barrier they sought to tear down.

The girl at the desk caught his eye, looked up from her work without smiling. "Yes?"

"My name is Tam Peters. I'd like to see Mr. Hawke." His voice was thin, reluctant, reflecting overtones of the icy chill in his chest. So much had happened since those long-dead days, so many things to make men change—

The girl was grinning, her face like a harsh mask. "You're wasting your time," she said, her voice brittle.

Anger flooded Tam's face. "Listen," he hissed. "I didn't ask for your advice. I asked to see Dave Hawke. If you choose to announce me now, that's fine. If you don't see fit, then I'll go in without it. And you won't stop me—"

The girl stiffened, her eyes angry. "You'd better not get smart," she snapped, watching him warily. "There are police in the building. You'd better not try anything, or I'll call them!"

"That's enough, Miss Jackson." The girl turned to the man in the office door, her eyes disdainful. The man stood in the doorway, a giant, with curly black hair above a high, intelligent forehead, dark brooding eyes gleaming like live coals in the sensitive face. Tam looked at him, and suddenly his knees would hardly support him, and his voice was a tight whisper—"Dave!"

And then the huge man was gripping his hand, a strong arm around his thin shoulders, the dark, brooding eyes soft and smiling. "Tam, Tam—It's been so damned long, man—oh, it's good to see you, Tam. Why, the last I heard, you'd taken passage to the Rings—years ago—"

Weakly, Tam stumbled into the inner office, sank into a chair, his eyes overflowing, his mind a turmoil of joy and relief. The huge man slammed the door to the outer office and settled down behind

the desk, sticking his feet over the edge, beaming. "Where have you *been,* Tam? You promised you'd look me up any time you came to New Denver, and I haven't seen you in a dozen years—" He fished in a lower drawer. "Drink?"

"No, no—thanks. I don't think I could handle a drink—" Tam sat back, gazing at the huge man, his throat tight. "You look bigger and better than ever, Dave."

DAVE Hawke laughed, a deep bass laugh that seemed to start at the soles of his feet. "Couldn't very well look thin and wan," he said. He pushed a cigar box across the desk. "Here, light up. I'm on these exclusively these days—remember how you tried to get me to smoke them, back at the University? How you couldn't stand cigarettes? Said they were for women, a man should smoke a good cigar. You finally converted me."

Tam grinned, suddenly feeling the warmth of the old friendship swelling back. "Yes, I remember. You were smoking that rotten corncob, then, because old Prof Tenley smoked one that you could smell in the back of the room, and in those days the Prof could do no wrong—"

Dave Hawke grinned broadly, settled back in his chair as he lit the cigar. "Yes, I remember. Still got that corncob around somewhere—" he shook his head, his eyes dreamy. "Good old Prof Tenley! One in a million—there was an honest man, Tam. They don't have them like that in the colleges these days. Wonder what happened to the old goat?"

"He was killed," said Tam, softly. "Just after the war. Got caught in a Revolt riot, and he was shot down."

Dave looked at him, his eyes suddenly sad. "A lot of honest men went down in those riots, didn't they? That was the worst part of the Revolt. There wasn't any provision made for the honest men, the really good men." He stopped, and regarded Tam closely. "What's the trouble, Tam? If you'd been going to make a friendly call, you'd have done it years ago. You know this office has always been open to you."

Tam stared at his shoe, carefully choosing his words, lining them up in his mind; a frown creasing his forehead. "I'll lay it on the line," he said in a low voice. "I'm in a spot. That passage to the Rings wasn't voluntary. I was shanghaied onto a freighter, and had to work for eight years without pay to get passage back. I'm broke, and I'm hungry, and I need to see a doctor—"

"Well, hell!" the big man exploded. "Why didn't you holler sooner? Look, Tam—we've been friends for a long time. You know better than to hesitate." He fished for his wallet. "Here, I can let you have as much as you need—couple hundred?"

"No, no—That's not what I'm getting at." Tam felt his face flush with embarrassment. "I need a job, Dave. I need one bad."

Dave sat back, and his feet came off the desk abruptly. He didn't look at Tam. "I see," he said softly. "A job—" He stared at the ceiling for a moment. "Tell you what," he said. "The government's opening a new uranium mine in a month or so—going to be a big project, they'll need lots of men—on Mercury—"

Tam's eyes fell, a lump growing in his throat. "Mercury," he repeated dully.

"Why, sure, Tam—good pay, chance for promotion."

"I'd be dead in six months on Mercury." Tam's eyes met Dave's, trying to conceal the pain. "You know that as well as I do, Dave—"

Dave looked away. "Oh, the dots don't know what they're talking about—"

"You know perfectly well that they do. I couldn't even stand Venus very long. I need a job on Mars, Dave—or on Earth."

"Yes," said Dave Hawke sadly, "I guess you're right." He looked straight at Tam, his eyes sorrowful. "The truth is, I can't help you. I'd like to, but I can't. There's nothing I can do."

Tam stared, the pain of disillusionment sweeping through him. "Nothing you can do!" he exploded. "But you're the *director* of this bureau! You know every job, open on every one of the planets—"

"I know. And I have to help get them filled. But I can't make anyone hire, Tam. I can send applicants, and recommendations, until I'm blue in the face, but I can't make a company hire—" He paused, staring at Tam. "Oh, hell," he snarled, suddenly, his face darkening. "Let's face it, Tam. They won't hire you. Nobody will hire you. You're a Sharkie, and that's all there is to it, they aren't hiring Sharkies. And there's nothing I can do to make them."

Tam sat as if he had been struck, the color draining from his face. "But the law—Dave, you know there's a law. They *have* to hire us, if we apply first, and have the necessary qualifications."

The big man shrugged, uneasily. "Sure, there's a law, but who's going to enforce it?"

Tam looked at him, a desperate tightness in his throat. *"You* could enforce it. You could if you wanted to."

THE big man stared at him for a moment, then dropped his eyes, looked down at the desk. Somehow this big body seemed smaller, less impressive. "I can't do it, Tam. I just can't."

"They'd have to listen to you!" Tam's face was eager. "You've got enough power to put it across—the court would *have* to stick to the law—"

"I can't do it." Dave drew nervously on his cigar, and the light in his eyes seemed duller, now. "If it were just me, I wouldn't hesitate a minute: But I've got a wife, a family. I can't jeopardize them—"

"Dave, you know it would be the right thing."

"Oh, the right thing be damned! I can't go out on a limb, I tell you. There's nothing I can do. I can let you have money, Tam, as much as you need—I could help you set up in business, maybe, or anything—but I can't stick my neck out like that."

Tam sat stiffly, coldness seeping down into his legs. Deep in his heart he had known that this was what he had dreaded, not the fear of rebuff, not the fear of being snubbed, unrecognized, turned out. That would have been nothing, compared to this change in the honest, forthright, fearless Dave Hawke he had once known. "What's happened, Dave? Back in the old days you would have leaped at such a chance. I would have—the shoe was on the other foot then. We talked, Dave, don't you remember how we talked? We were friends, you can't forget that. I *know* you, I *know* what you believe, what you think. How can you let yourself down?"

Dave Hawke's eyes avoided Tam's. "Times have changed. Those were the good old days, back when everybody was happy, almost. Everybody but me and a few others —at least, it looked that way to you. But those days are gone. They'll never come back. This is a reaction period, and the reaction is bitter. There isn't any place for fighters now, the world is just the way people want it, and nobody can change it. What do you expect me to do?" He stopped, his heavy face contorted, a line of perspiration on his forehead. "I hate it," he said finally, "but my hands are tied. I can't do anything. That's the way things are—"

"But *why?"* Tam Peters was standing, eyes blazing, staring down at the big man behind the desk, the bitterness of long, weary years tearing into his voice, almost blinding him. *"Why is that the way things are?* What have I done? Why do we have this mess, where a man isn't worth any more than the color of his skin—"

Dave Hawke slammed his fist on the desk, and his voice roared out in the close air of the office. "Because it was coming!" he bellowed. "It's been coming and now it's here —and there's nothing on God's earth can be done about it!"

Tam's jaw sagged, and he stared at the man behind the desk. "Dave —think what you're saying, Dave—"

"I know right well what I'm saying," Dave Hawke roared, his eyes burning bitterly. "Oh, you have no idea how long I've thought, the fight I've had with myself, the sacrifices I've had to make. You weren't born like I was, you weren't raised on the wrong side of the fence—well, there was an old, old

Christmas story that I used to read. Years ago, before they burned the Sharkie books. It was about an evil man who went through life cheating people, hating and hurting people, and when he died, he found that every evil deed he had ever done had become a link in a heavy iron chain, tied and shackled to his waist. And he wore that chain he had built up, and he had to drag it, and drag it, from one eternity to the next—his name was Marley, remember?"

"Dave, you're not making sense—"

"Oh, yes, all kinds of sense. Because you Sharkies have a chain, too. You started forging it around your ankles back in the classical Middle Ages of Earth. Year by year you built it up, link by link, built it stronger, heavier. You could have stopped it any time you chose, but you didn't ever think of that. You spread over the world, building up your chain, assuming that things would always be just the way they were, just the way you wanted them to be."

The big man stopped, breathing heavily, a sudden sadness creeping into his eyes, his voice taking on a softer tone. "You were such fools," he said softly. "You waxed and grew strong, and clever, and confident, and the more power you had, the more you wanted. You fought wars, and then bigger and better wars, until you couldn't be satisfied with gunpowder and TNT any longer. And finally you divided your world into two armed camps, and brought Fury out of her box, fought with the power of the atoms themselves, you clever Sharkies, and when the dust settled, and cooled off, there weren't very many of you left. Lots of us—it was your war, remember—but not very many of you. Of course there was a Revolt then, and all the boxed up, driven in hatred and bloodshed boiled up and over, and you Sharkies at long last got your chain tied right around your waists. You were a long, long time building it, and now you can wear it—"

TAM'S face was chalky. "Dave—there were some of us—you know there were many of us that hated it as much as you did, before the Revolt. Some of us fought, some of us at least tried—"

The big man nodded his head, bitterly. "You thought you tried, sure. It was the noble thing to do, the romantic thing, the *good* thing to do. But you didn't really believe it. I know—I thought there was some hope, back then, some chance to straighten things out without a Revolt. For a long time I thought that you, and those like you, really meant all you were saying, I thought somehow we could find an equal footing, an end to the hatred and bitterness. But there wasn't any end, and you never really thought there ever would be. That made it so safe—it would never succeed, so when things were quiet it was a nice idea to toy around with, this equality for all, a noble project that couldn't possibly succeed. But when things got hot, it was a different matter." He stared at Tam, his dark eyes brooding. "Oh, it wasn't just you, Tam. You were my best friend, even though it was a hopeless, futile friendship. You tried, you did the best you could, I know. But it *just wasn't true,* Tam. When it came to the pinch, to a real jam, you would have been just like the rest, basically. It was built up in you, drummed into you, until no amount of fighting could ever scour it out—"

Dave Hawke stood up, walked over to the window, staring out across the great city. Tam watched him, the blood roaring in his ears, hardly able to believe what he had heard from the big man, fighting to keep his mind from sinking into total confusion. Somewhere a voice deep within him seemed to be struggling through with confirmation, telling him that Dave Hawke was right, that he never really *had* believed. Suddenly Dave turned to him, his dark eyes intense. "Look, Tam," he said, quickly, urgently. "There are jobs you can get. Go to Mercury for a while, work the mines—not long, just for a while, out there in the sun—then you can come back—"

Tam's ears burned, fierce anger suddenly bursting in his mind, a feeling of loathing. "Never," he snapped. "I know what you mean. I don't do things that way. That's a coward's way, and by God, I'm no coward!"

"But it would be so easy, Tam—" Dave's eyes were pleading now. "Please—"

Tam's eyes glinted. "No dice. I've got a better idea. There's one thing I can do. It's not very nice, but at least it's honest, and square. I'm hungry. There's one place where I can get food. Even Sharkies get

food there. And a bed to sleep in, and books to read—maybe even some Sharkie books, and maybe some paper to write on—" He stared at the big man, oddly, his pale eyes feverish. "Yes, yes, there's one place I can go, and get plenty to eat, and get away from this eternal rottenness—"

Dave looked up at him, his eyes suspicious. "Where do you mean?"

"Prison," said Tam Peters.

"Oh, now see here—let's not be ridiculous—"

"Not so ridiculous," snapped Tam, his eyes brighter. "I figured it all out, before I came up here. I knew what you were going to say. Sure, go to Mercury, Tam, work in the mines a while—well, I can't do it that way. And there's only one other answer."

"But, Tam—"

"Oh, it wouldn't take much. You know how the courts handle Sharkies. Just a small offense, to get me a few years, then a couple of attempts to break out, and I'd be in for life. I'm a Sharkie, remember. People don't waste time with us."

"Tam, you're talking nonsense. Good Lord, man, you'd have no freedom, no life—"

"What freedom do I have now?" Tam snarled, his voice growing wild. "Freedom to starve? Freedom to crawl on my hands and knees for a little bit of food? I don't want that kind of freedom." His eyes grew shrewd, shifted slyly to Dave Hawke's broad face. "Just a simple charge," he said slowly. "Like assault, for instance. Criminal assault—it has an ugly sound, doesn't it, Dave? That should give me ten years—" his fist clenched at his side. "Yes, criminal assault is just what ought to do the trick—"

The big man tried to dodge, but Tam was too quick. His fist caught Dave in the chest, and Tam was on him like a fury, kicking, scratching, snarling, pounding. Dave choked and cried out, "Tam, for God's sake stop—" A blow caught him in the mouth, choking off his words as Tam fought, all the hate and bitterness of long weary years translated into scratching, swearing desperation. Dave pushed him off, like a bear trying to disentangle a maddened dog from his fur, but Tam was back at him, fighting harder. The door opened, and Miss Jackson's frightened face appeared briefly, then vanished. Finally Dave lifted a heavy fist, drove it hard into Tam's stomach, then sadly lifted the choking, gasping man to the floor.

The police came in, seconds later, clubs drawn, eyes wide. They dragged Tam out, one on each arm. Dave sank back, his eyes filling, a sickness growing in the pit of his stomach. In court, a Sharkie would draw the maximum sentence, without leniency. Ten years in prison—

Dave leaned forward, his face in his hands, tears running down his black cheeks, sobs shaking his broad, heavy shoulders. "Why wouldn't he listen? Why couldn't he have gone to Mercury? Only a few months, not long enough to hurt him. Why couldn't he have gone, and worked out in the sun, got that hot sun down on his hands and face—not for long, just for a little while. Two or three months, and he'd have been dark enough to pass—"

It was getting so a person couldn't sleep nights anymore.

Would you like to see all hell break loose? Just make a few holes in nothing at all—push some steel beams through the holes—and then head for the hills. But first, read what happened to some people who really did it.

HOLES

INCORPORATED
By L. Major Reynolds

THE red headed secretary asked, "Names, please?"

"Ted Baker."

"Bill Stephens."

"To see H. Joshua Blair. We have an appointment."

"It's for three-thirty. We called up two weeks ago."

The secretary said, "Oh yes. I have you on the list." She checked them off, studied them vaguely, asked, "What was it you wanted to see Mr. Blair about?"

Ted Baker held out the small steel box he was carrying. "About this."

"Ah—what is it?"

"It's a box."

"I can see that," the red head snapped. "What is it for? What does it do?"

"It's for construction work. It makes holes."

The girl sighed. It was late in the day and she didn't care much, really. She snapped an intercom button. An inquiring voice rasped at her. She said, "A Mr. Baker and a Mr. Stephens to see you."

Evidently it was all right because she snapped off the button and pointed to a door. "In there."

They went in the door and faced a desk large enough to play tennis on. The man behind the desk gave them a cordial snarl. "Well, what have you got on your mind? And don't take all day to tell me."

Ted extended the box. "This. We'd like to sell it to you."

"What is it? A bomb?"

"No sir. It makes holes. It makes holes real quick."

Blair scowled at the box. "What the hell do I want of holes?"

Bill Stephens came forward with further explanation. "You see, sir, Ted and I are inventors we make, well—things. We've been working on this invention in our basement and it seems to be a success."

"We don't quite know why it's a success," Ted said, "but it is."

"We'd like to demonstrate it for you."

"Well, go ahead and demonstrate."

Ted raised the box and aimed it horizontally at nothing in particular. He pressed a black button. There was an odd whirring noise. He took his hand off the button and lowered the box.

"What are you waiting for?" Blair growled.

"Nothing. That's it. I've made the hole."

"Are you two crazy? What kind of a fool trick—?"

Ted reached down and took a pencil off the desk. "May I borrow this?" Without waiting for permission, he put the pencil carefully into the place he'd pointed the box. Half the pencil disappeared. He took his hand away. The part of the pencil still in sight didn't come with it. It stayed where it was, lying in thin air, horizontally, with no apparent support.

H. Joshua Blair goggled and turned three shades whiter. "Wha-wha-what the hell!"

"And now, if you'll try to move the pencil, the demonstration will be complete."

LIKE a man in a trance, Blair got up from his desk and grasped the pencil. It wouldn't move. He got red in the face and threw all his weight on it. It would neither pull nor push. It stayed where it was. Finally Blair backed away from the thing. He leaned on his desk and panted.

"You see," Ted said, "The hole goes into the fourth dimension. There's no other explanation. And the fourth dimension holds solider than concrete."

Old Blair's head was spinning, but business instinct came quickly to his rescue. "What happens," he asked, "if something in the third dimension is in the way?"

"It gets out of the way," Bill said.

Ted demonstrated. He trained the box on the visible remains of the pencil. It vanished.

Blair said, "Well I'll be damned!"

"We figure this will save you a lot of money in construction work," Bill said. "You can get along without riveters. You just have a man put holes in girders with this and push the rivets through. You also make holes for the beam-ends, and your entire building will be anchored in the fourth dimension."

"Do it again," Blair said.

Ted made another hole and put another pencil into it. Blair grasped the pencil and applied leverage. The pencil snapped at the point it entered the next dimension but the broken end of the far piece was not to be seen.

Blair asked, "You say you two invented this gadget?"

"That's right," Bill said. "We've got a workshop in my basement. We invent in the evenings after we come home from work."

"What do you work at?"

"I read gas meters. He's a clerk in a supermart."

"I suppose you want money for this thing."

"We'd like to sell it, yes sir." "How much do you want for it?"

"Well, we don't know. What's it worth to you?"

"Nothing probably. Leave it here a few days. I'll look it over and let you know."

"But—"

"And don't call me—I'll call you."

"But—"

"Leave your address and phone number with my secretary."

After Ted and Bill left, Blair yelled, "Get me Jake Steadman in the engineering department!" He didn't bother using the intercom, but his secretary heard him anyhow.

Ted and Bill went to work on an idea they had for the treatment of leather. You dipped your shoes in a solution and they lasted forever. The thing didn't work too well, however. It was full of bugs. They tried to eliminate the bugs and once in a while they thought of H. Joshua Blair.

"Don't you think it's about time he called us?" Ted asked.

"Don't be so impatient. He's a big man. He owns a big company. It takes time."

"He's had over a month."

"Relax. We'll hear from him."

ANOTHER week passed, and another, until one evening Ted came galloping into the workshop with news. "That big new addition to the city hall! They're working on it! H. Joshua Blair Construction Company. A big sign says so!"

"Relax. You'll blow a tube."

"Relax hell! He's using our invention to put up the steel girders. Just like we suggested to him. Guys with boles like ours making holes and putting in rivets!"

Bill stopped what he was doing. "He said he'd call us. Maybe he forgot. Maybe we better go see him,"

They both knocked off work the next day and got to Blair's office at nine o'clock. The red headed secretary said, "You'll have to make an appointment."

"Appointment hell!" Ted headed for the inner door. Bill followed him. They went into H. Joshua Blair's office to find him in conference with two vice-presidents. Ted said, "Mr. Blair, we came—"

"Who in the devil are you?"

"You remember us. Ted Baker and Bill Stephens. We came about our invention."

"What invention?"

"Our hole maker. You're using it on the city hall addition."

Blair glowered. "Where'd you get the idea it was yours? Have you got any patents to show?"

"Well, no. We didn't—"

"I did! Fourteen good solid patents. You two better go peddle your groceries."

"Now look, Mr. Blair."

Blair raised his voice. "Throw these two bums out!"

Three huskies appeared as by magic to do Blair's bidding. As Ted and Bill landed on the sidewalk, one of the vice-presidents said, "Do you think that was smart, H. J.? They might cause trouble."

Blair snorted. "They haven't got a prayer. A meter reader and a grocery clerk!"

"We could have at least given them a few hundred."

"Not on your life. Never give a sucker an even break, Jim. Give them anything at all, we acknowledge their claim. That'd be stupid."

"Maybe your right."

"Of course I'm right. It's business. Now about those other bids. By gad! We can run every contractor in town out of competition! They can't touch our prices!"

Out on the sidewalk, Bill and Ted sat mournfully looking up at the vast steel skeleton, held together literally by their own genius. Ted said, "We got a raw deal."

"Maybe we had it coming. We were pretty stupid."

"Anything we can do?"

"Doesn't look like it."

"Maybe the leather solution will turn out."

"Maybe." Bill looked wistfully up at the steel skeleton. "At even a cent a hole, we'd have done all right."

"Let's go home and get to work."

In the Mighty and Benevolent Kingdom of Szkazia, a minor reign of terror existed. The King, tired of complaints from his subjects, had just finished dressing down his Prime Minister. The Prime Minister was passing the abuse on to his Chief Scientist. "If something isn't done soon, I won't be responsible for your head, my friend. The King is in a rage."

The eyes of the Chief Scientist watered—partly from fear, and partly from nights and days spent in his laboratory beating out his brains on one idea after another. "I'm doing my best, sire—"

"It's not good enough! These steel girders coming out of nowhere! Banging people in the head — whacking them in the stomach! Why it isn't safe to walk through the halls of the Administration Building. Even the bedrooms of the Executive Apartments are not safe! The other night the Director of Propaganda had just gone to bed—"

"I know of the incident," the Chief Scientist said hurriedly.

"Oh, you do? But you've done nothing about—"

"I've been working hard," the scientist said patiently, "and I think I have the solution. Give me another day."

"One day, then. After that—" The Prime Minister made a significant slicing motion with his finger.

THE Prime Minister chewed his fingernails and watched the clock. Sleep was out of the question with the King calling up every little while yelling for action. The Minister counted the hours and presented himself at the Royal Laboratories precisely twenty-four hours later. "Time's up," he snapped.

The Chief Scientist was wiping his face. There were new lines around his mouth. He indicated a small steel box. "I think I've got it," he said. "Come with me."

They went swiftly to the Administration Building. "This should be close enough. We depress this lever and—and hope."

"Well, do it—do it!"

The Chief Scientist pushed the lever on the steel box. A whirring sound came from within. All the steel girder ends in sight—all the nasty little rivets—disappeared. The Chief Scientist smiled and wiped his face again. "It worked," he said:

"Excellent. I'll see that you get a medal."

"Thank you," the Chief Scientist said sadly. That was the trouble with people nowadays. They either handed you a medal or your head.

TED and Bill stared sadly at the mess around the City Hall. Bill said, "It's a good thing it collapsed at night so nobody was killed, isn't it?"

"You said it. I'd have felt guilty if there'd been any casualties."

"What do you suppose went wrong?"

"You got me. What do you think they'll do to old Blair?"

"I don't know, but it looks pretty bad. They refused to let him out on bail."

"Serves him right. The way he treated us."

"You've got it wrong. He treated us swell. He did us a big favor. We could have been blamed for this."

Bill thought it over before saying, "I guess you're right. I hadn't looked at it that way."

"Let's go home and get to work on the leather solution."

So they did.

THE END

HANDY SUBSCRIPTION FORM

Extra Gift Subscriptions Only $2.50

By this time you know whether you like IF or not. You also know that you may subscribe for the next 12 issues for $3.50 ... BUT what you don't know is that, if you include a gift subscription along with your own, it costs only $2.50, or both subscriptions for six bucks! Thus, two can enjoy IF cheaper than one! Just fill in below and mail with remittance to IF Magazine, Kingston, New York.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY ZONE STATE Send Gift Subscription to:

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY ZONE STATE

They wanted to go home—back to the planet they'd known. But even the stars had changed. Did the fate of all creation hinge upon an—

AN EMPTY BOTTLE

By Mari Wolf

HUGH McCANN took the last of the photographic plates out of the developer and laid them on the table beside the others. Then he picked up the old star charts—Volume 1, Number 1—maps of space from various planetary systems within a hundred light years of Sol. He looked around the observation room at the others.

"We might as well start checking."

The men and women around the table nodded. None of them said anything. Even the muffled conversation from the corridor beyond the observation room ceased as the people stopped to listen.

McCann set the charts down and opened them at the first sheet—the composite map of the stars as seen from Earth. "Don't be too disappointed if we're wrong," he said.

Amos Carhill's fists clenched. He leaned across the table. "You still don't believe we're near Sol, do you? You're getting senile, Hugh! You know the mathematics of our position as well as anybody."

"I know the math," Hugh said quietly. "But remember, a lot of our basics have already proved themselves false this trip. We can't be sure of anything. Besides, I think I'd remember this planet we're on if we'd ever been here before. We visited every planetary system within a hundred light years of Sol the first year."

Carhill laughed. "What's there to remember about this hunk of rock? Tiny, airless, mountainless—the most monotonous piece of matter we've landed on in years."

Hugh shrugged and turned to the next chart. The others clustered around him, checking, comparing the chart with the photographic plates of their position, finding nothing familiar in the star pattern.

"I still think we would have remembered this planet," Hugh said. "Just because it is so monotonous. After all, what have we been looking for, all these years? Life. Other worlds with living forms, other types of evolution, types adapted to different environments. This particular planet is less capable of supporting life than our own Moon."

Martha Carhill looked up from the charts. Her face was as tense and strained as her husband's, and the lines about her mouth deeply etched. "We've got to be near Earth. We've just got to. We've got to find people again." Her voice broke. "We've been looking for so long—"

Hugh McCann sighed. The worry that had been growing in him ever since they first left the rim of the galaxy and turned homeward deepened into a nagging fear. He didn't know why he was afraid. He too hoped that they were near Earth. He almost believed that they would soon be home. But the others, their reactions— He shook his head.

They no longer merely hoped.

With them, especially with the older ones, it was faith, a blind, unreasoning, fanatic faith that their journey was almost over and they would be on Earth again and pick up the lives they had left behind fifty-three years before.

"Look," Amos Carhill said. "Here are our reference points. Here's Andromeda Galaxy, and the dark nebula, and the arch of our own Milky Way." He pointed to the places he had named on the plates. "Now we can check some of these high magnitude reference stars with the charts."

Hugh let him take the charts and go through them, checking, rejecting. Carhill was probably right. He'd find Sol soon enough.

It had been too long for one shipful of people to follow a quest, especially a hopeless one. For fifty-three years they had scouted the galaxy, looking for other worlds with life forms. A check on diverging evolutions, they had called it—uncounted thousands of suns without planets, bypassed. Thousands of planetary systems, explored, or merely looked at and rejected. Heavy, cold worlds with methane atmospheres and lifeless rocks without atmospheres and even earth-sized, earth-type planets, with oceans and oxygen and warmth. But no life. No life anywhere.

That was one of the basics they had lost, years ago—their belief that life would arise on any planet capable of supporting it.

"We could take a spectrographic analysis of some of those high magnitude stars," Carhill said. Then abruptly he straightened, eyes alight, his hand on the last chart.

"We don't need it after all. Look! There's Sirius, and here it is on the plates. That means Alpha Centauri must be—"

He paused. He frowned and ran his hand over the plate to where the first magnitude star was photographed. "It must be Alpha Centauri. It has to be!"

"Except that it's over five degrees out of position." Hugh looked at the plate, and then at the chart, and then back at the plate again. And then he knew what it was that he had feared subconsciously all along.

"You're right, Amos." he said slowly. "There's Alpha Centauri—about twenty light years away. And there's Sirius, and Arcturus and Betelgeuse and all the others." He pointed them out, one by one, in their unfamiliar locations on the plates. "But they're all out of position, in reference to each other."

HE stopped. The others stared back at him, not saying anything. Little by little the faith began to drain out of their eyes.

"What does it mean?" Martha Carhill's voice was only a whisper.

"It means that we discarded one basic too many," Hugh McCann said. "Relativity. The theory that our subjective time, here on the ship, would differ from objective time outside."

"No," Amos Carhill said slowly. "No, it's a mistake. That's all. We haven't gone into the future. We can't have. It isn't possible that more time has elapsed outside the ship than—"

"Why not?" Hugh said softly. "Why not millions of years? We've exceeded the speed of light, many times."

"Which disproves that space-time theory in itself!" Carhill shouted.

"Does it?" Hugh said. "Or does it just mean we never really understood space-time at all?" He didn't wait for them to answer. He pointed at the small, far from brilliant, star that lay beyond Alpha Centauri on the plates. "That's probably Sol. If it is, we can find out the truth soon enough."

He looked at their faces and wondered what their reactions would be, if the truth was what he feared.

* * * * *

The ship throbbed softly, pulsating in the typical vibrations of low speed drive. In the forward viewscreens the star grew larger. The people didn't look at it very often. They moved about the corridors of the ship, much as they usually moved, but quietly. They seemed to be trying to ignore the star.

"You can't be sure, Hugh!" Nora McCann laid her hand on her hushand's arm.

"No, of course I can't be sure."

The door from their quarters into the corridor was open. Several more people came in—young people who had been born on the ship. They were talking and laughing.

"Would it be so hard on the young ones, Hugh? They've never seen the Earth. They're used to finding nothing but lifeless worlds everywhere."

One of the young boys in the hall looked up at the corridor viewscreen and pointed at the star and then shrugged. The others turned away, not saying anything, and after a minute they left and the boy followed them.

"There's your answer," Hugh McCann said dully. "Earth's a symbol to them. It's home. It's the place where there are millions more like us. Sometimes I think it's the only thing that has kept us sane all these years—the knowledge that there is a world full of people, somewhere, that we're not alone."

Her hand found his and he gripped it, almost absently, and then he looked up at their own small viewscreen. The star was much bigger now. It was already a definite circle of yellow light.

A yellow G-type sun, like a thousand others they had approached and orbited around and left behind them. A yellow sun that could have been anywhere in the galaxy.

"Hugh," she said after a moment, "do you really believe that thousands of years have gone by, outside?"

"I don't know what to believe. I only know what the plates show." "That may not even be Sol, up ahead," she said doubtfully. "We may be in some other part of space altogether, and that's why the charts are different."

"Perhaps. But either way we're lost. Lost in space or in time or in both. What does it matter?"

"If we're just lost in space it's not so—so irrevocable. We could still find our way back to Earth, maybe."

He didn't answer. He looked up at the screen and the circle of light and his lips tightened. Whatever the truth was, they didn't have long to wait. They'd be within gravitational range in less than an hour.

He wondered why he was reacting so differently from the others. He was just as afraid as they were. He knew that. But he wasn't fighting the thought that perhaps they had really traveled out of their own time. He wondered what it was that made him different from the other old ones, the ones like Carhill who refused even to face the possibility, who insisted on clinging to their illusions in the face of the photographic evidence.

HE didn't think that he was a pessimist. And yet, after only three years of their trip, after only fifty Earthlike but lifeless worlds, he had been the first to consider the possibility that life was unique to Earth and that their old theories concerning its spontaneous emergence from a favorable environment might be wrong.

Only Nora had agreed with him then. Only Nora could face this possibility with him now. The two of them were very much alike in their outlooks. They were both pragmatists.

But this time there would be no long years during which the others could slowly shift their opinions, slowly relinquish their old beliefs and turn to new ones. The yellow sun was too large and urgent in the screen.

"Hugh!"

He turned to the door and saw Amos Carhill standing there, bracing himself against the corridor wall. There was no color at all in Carhill's face.

"Come on up to the control room with me, Hugh. We're going to start decelerating any minute now."

Hugh frowned. He would prefer to stay and watch their approach on the screen, with Nora at his side. He had no duties in the control room. He was too old to have any part in the actual handling of the ship. Amos was old, too. But they would be there, all the old ones, looking through the high powered screens for the first clear glimpse of the third planet from the sun.

"All right, Amos." Hugh got up and started for the door.

"I'll wait here for you, Hugh," Nora said.

He smiled at her and then followed Carhill out into the crowded corridor. No one spoke to them. Most of the people they passed were neither talking, nor paying any attention to anything except the corridor screens, which they could no longer ignore. The few who were talking spoke about Earth and how wonderful it would be to get home again.

"You're wrong, Hugh," Amos said suddenly.

"I hope I am."

The crowd thinned out as they passed into the forward bulkheads. The only men they saw now were the few young ones on duty. Except for their set, anxious faces they might have been handling any routine landing in any routine system.

The ship quivered for just a second as it shifted over into deceleration. There was an instant of vertigo and then it was gone and the ship's gravity felt as normal as ever. Hugh didn't even break stride at the shift.

He followed Carhill to the control room doorway and pushed his way in, taking a place among the others who already clustered about the great forward screen. The pilot ignored them and worked his controls. The screen cleared as the ship's deceleration, increased. The pilot didn't look at it. He was a young man. He had never seen the Earth.

"Look!" Amos Carhill cried triumphantly.

The screen focused. The selector swung away from the yellow sun and swept its orbits. The dots that were planets came into focus and out again. Hugh McCann didn't even need to count them, nor to calculate their distance from the sun. He knew the system too well to have any trouble recognizing it.

The sun was Sol. The third planet was the double dot of Earth and moon. He realized suddenly that he had more than half expected to see an empty orbit.

"It's the Earth all right," Carhill said. "We're home!"

They were all staring at the double dot, where the selector focused sharply now. Hugh McCann alone looked past it, at the background of stars that were strewn in totally unfamiliar patterns across the sky. He sighed.

"Look beyond the system," he said.

They looked. For a long time they stared, none of them speaking, and then they turned to Hugh, many of them accusingly, as if he himself had rearranged the stars.

"How long have we been gone?" Carhill's voice broke.

Hugh shook his head. The star patterns were too unfamiliar for even a guess. There was no way of knowing, yet, how long their fifty-three years had really been.

CARHILL shook his head, slowly. He turned back to the screen and stared at the still featureless dot that was the Earth. "We can't be the only ones left," he said.

No one answered him. They were still stunned. They couldn't even accept, yet, the strange constellations on the screen.

End of the voyage. Fifty-three years of searching for worlds with life. And now Earth, under an unfamiliar sky, and quite possibly no life at all, anywhere, except on the ship.

"We might as well land," McCann said.

The ship curved away from the night side of the Earth and crossed again into the day. They were near enough so that the planetary features stood out sharply now, even through the dense clouds that rose off the oceans. But although the continental land masses and the islands were clearly defined, they were as unrecognizable as the star constellations had been.

"That must be North America," Amos Carhill said dully. "It's smaller than the continent on the night side. . . ."

"It might be anywhere," Hugh McCann said. "We can't tell. The oceans look bigger too. There's less land surface."

He stared down at the topography thousands of miles below them. Mountains rose jaggedly. There were great plains, and crevasses, and a rocky, lifeless look everywhere. No soil. No erosion, except from the wind and the rains. "There's no chlorophyll in the spectrum," Haines said. "It seems to rule out even plant life."

"I don't understand." Martha Carhill turned away from the screen. "Everything's so different. But the moon looked just exactly like it always did."

"That's because it has no atmosphere," Hugh said. "So there's no erosion. And no oceans to sweep in over the land. But I imagine that if we explored it we'd find changes. New craters. Maybe even new mountains by now."

"How long has it been?" Carhill whispered. "And even if it's been millions of years, what happened? Why aren't there any plants? Won't we find anything?"

"Maybe there was an atomic war," the pilot said.

"Maybe." Carhill had thought of that too. Probably all of them had. "Or maybe the sun novaed."

No one answered him. The concept of a nova and then of its dying down, until now the sun was just as it had been when they left, was too much.

"The sun looks hotter," Carhill added.

The ship dropped lower, its preliminary circle of the planet completed. It settled in for a landing, just as it had done thousands of times before. And the world below could have been any of a thousand others.

They dropped quickly, braking through the atmosphere, riding it down. The topography came up to meet them and the general features blurred, leaving details standing out sharply, increasing in sharpness as if the valleys and mountains below were tiny microscopic crystals under a rapidly increasing magnification.

The pilot picked their landing place without difficulty. It was a typical choice, a spot on the broad shelving plain at the edge of the ocean. The type of base from which all tests on a planet could be run quickly, and a report written up, and the files of another world closed and tagged with a' number and entered in one of the great storage encyclopedias.

Even to Hugh there was an air of unreality about the landing, as if this planet wasn't really Earth at all, despite its orbit around the sun, despite its familiar moon. It looked too much like too many others.

The actual landing was over quickly. The ship quivered, jarred slightly, and then was still, resting on the gravelled plain that had obviously once been part of the ocean bed. The ocean itself lay only, a few hundred yards away.

Hugh McCann looked out through the viewscreen, turned to direct vision now. He stared at the waves swelling against the shore and his sense of unreality deepened. Even though this was what he had more than half expected, he couldn't quite accept it, yet.

"We might as well go out and look around," he said.

"Air pressure, Earth-norm." Haines began checking off the control panel by rote. "Composition: oxygen, nitrogen, water vapor—"

"There's certainly nothing out there that could hurt us," Martha Carhill snapped. "What could there be?"

"We might check for radioactivity," Hugh said quietly.

She turned and stared at him. Her mouth opened and then snapped shut again.

"No," Haines said. "There's no radioactivity either. Everything's clear. We won't need space suits."

He pressed the button that opened the inner locks.

CARHILL glanced over at him and then switched on the communicator, and the noises from the rest of the ship flooded into the control room. Everywhere people were milling about. Snatches of talk drifted in, caught up in the background as various duty officers reported clearance on the landing. Most of the background voices were young, talking too loudly and with too much forced cheerfulness about what lay outside the ship.

Hugh sighed, as aware of all the people as if he were out in the corridors with them. It was the space-born ones who were doing most of the talking. The children, the young people, the people no longer young but still born since the voyage started, still looking upon Earth more as a wonderful legend than as their own place of origin.

The old ones, those who had left the Earth in their own youth, had the least of all to say. They knew what was missing outside. The younger ones couldn't really know. Even the best of the books and the pictures and the three dimensional movies can give only a superficial idea of what a living world is like.

"Hugh." Carhill clutched his arm.

"Yes, Amos."

"There must be people, somewhere. There have to be. Our race can't be dead."

Hugh McCann looked past him, out at the sky and the clouds of water vapor that swirled up to obscure the sun. The stars, of course, were completely hidden in the daylight."

"If there are any others, Amos, we can be pretty certain they're not on Earth."

"They may have left. They may have gone somewhere else."

"No!" Martha Carhill's face twisted and then went rigid. "There's no one anywhere. There can't be. It's been too long. You saw the stars, Amos—the stars—all wrong, every one of them!"

Her hands came up to her face and she started to cry. Amos crossed over to her and put his arms around her.

Hugh McCann watched them for a moment and then he turned and left them and went out through the locks after the young people. He didn't know what to think. He wished that they had never turned back to Earth at all, that they had kept going, circling around the rim of the galaxy forever.

He went through the outer lock and then down the ramp to the ground.

He stood on the Earth again, for the first time since his early youth. And it was not the same. There was bare rock under his feet and bare rock all around him, gravel and boulders and even fine grained sand. But no dust. No dirt. No trace of anything organic or even ever touched by anything organic.

He had walked too many worlds like this. Too many bare gray worlds with bare gray oceans and clouds of vapor swirling up into the warm air. Too many worlds where there was wind and sound and surf; where there should have been life, but wasn't.

This was just another of those worlds. This wasn't Earth. This was just a lifeless memory of the Earth he had known and loved. For fifty-three years they had clung to the thought of home, of people waiting for them, welcoming them back someday. Fifty-three years, and for how many of those ship-years had Earth lain lifeless like this?

He looked up at the sky and at all the stars that he couldn't see and he cursed them all and cursed time itself and then, bitterly, his own fatuous stupidity.

The people came out of the ship and walked about on the graveled plain, alone or in small groups. They had stopped talking. They seemed too numbed by what they had found to even think, for a while.

Shock, Hugh McCann thought grimly. First-hysteria and tears and loud unbelief, and now shock. Anything could come next.

HE STOOD with the warm wind blowing in his face and watched the people. In the bitter mood that gripped him he was amused by their reactions. Some of them walked around aimlessly, but most, those who were active in the various departments, soon started about the routine business of running tests on planetary conditions.

They seemed to work without thinking, by force of habit, their faces dazed and uncaring.

Conditioning, Hugh thought. Starting their reports. The reports that they know perfectly well no one will ever read.

He wandered over to where several of the young men were sending up an atmosphere balloon and jotting down the atmospheric constituents as recorded by the instruments.

"How's, it going?" he said.

"Earth-norm. Naturally—" The young man flushed.

"Temperature's up though. Ninety-three. And a seventy-seven percent humidity."

He left them and walked down across the rocks 'to the ocean's edge. Two young girls were down there before him, sampling the water, running both chemical and biological probing tests.

"Hello, Mr. McCann," the taller girl said dully. "Want our report?"

"Found anything?" He knew already that there was nothing to find. If there were life the instruments would have recorded its presence.

"No. Water temperature eighty-six. Sodium chloride four-fifths Earth normal." She looked up, surprised. "Why so low?"

"More water in the ocean, maybe. Or maybe we've had a nova since we were here last."

It was getting late, almost sunset. Soon it would be time for the photographic star-charts to be made. Hugh brought himself up short and smiled bitterly. He too was in the grip of habit. Still, why not? Perhaps they could estimate, somehow, how many millions of years had passed.

Why? What good would it do them to find out?

After a while the sun set and a little later the full moon rose, hazy and indistinct behind the clouds of water vapor. Hugh stared at it, watched it rise higher until it cleared the horizon, a great bloated bulk. Then he sighed and shook his head to clear it and started to work. The clouds were thick. He had to move the screening adjustment almost to its last notch before the vapor patterns blocked out and the stars were bright and unwavering and ready to be photographed. He inserted the first plate and snapped the picture of the stars whose names he knew but whose patterns were wrong, some subtly, some blatantly.

There was something he was overlooking. Some other factor, not taken into account. He developed the first plates and compared them with the star charts of Earth as it had been before they left it, and he shook his head. Whatever the factor was, it eluded him. He went back to work.

"Oh, here you are, Hugh."

He jumped at the sound of Carhill's voice. He had been working almost completely by habit, slowly swinging the telescope across the sky and snapping the plates. And trying to think.

"Why waste time on that?" Carhill added bitterly. "Who's ever going to see our records now?"

Behind Carhill, several of the other old ones nodded. Hugh was surprised that they had managed to come back to the ship without his hearing them. But of course they had come back in at sundown, as usual on a routine check, and now they were gathering to compile their reports. Hugh looked from face to face, wondering if he too was as numb and dazed and haggard appearing as they were. He probably was.

"What do you suggest; Amos?" he said.

"I say there's no use going on," Carhill said flatly. "You've all run your tests. And what have you found? No fossils. Not even a single-celled life form in the ocean. No way even to tell how many millions of years it's been."

"Maybe it hasn't been so long," Haines said. "Maybe something happened here fairly recently, and the people all went to some other system—to one of the Centauri planets, maybe."

Amos Carhill laughed bitterly. "You can say that in the face of the evidence? We *know* that millions of years have passed. Nothing's the same. Even the tides are three times what they were. It's obvious what happened. The sun novaed. Novaed and cooled. Do you really believe that our race has lasted that long, on some nearby system?"

HIS voice rose. He glared about at the others. He threw back his head suddenly and laughed, and the laughter echoed and re-echoed off the steel walls.

"I say let's die now!" Carhill cried. "There's no use going on. Hugh was right, as usual. We shouldn't have tried to come back. We've been fools, all these years, thinking we had a world to come home to."

The people muttered, crowded closer. They pushed into the observation room, shoved nearer to it in the outside corridor. They muttered in a rising note of panic as the numbing shock that gripped them gave way.

"Why not die here?" Martha Carhill's voice rose shrill above the sound of her husband's laughter. "We should have died here millions of years ago!"

Hugh McCann looked at her and at Amos and at all the others. He sighed. Why not? Why go on? There was no answer. Even a pragmatist gave up eventually, when the facts were all against him.

He glanced down at the reports on the table. All the routine reports, gathered together into routine form, written up in routine terminology. Reports on an Earth-type planet that just happened to be the Earth itself.

And then, quite suddenly, the obvious, satisfactory answer came to him. The factors clicked into place, and he wondered why he hadn't thought of them long ago. He looked up from the reports, at the people on the verge of panic, and he knew what to say to quiet them. He had the factors now.

"No!" he cried. "You're wrong. There's no reason at all to assume that our race is dead!"

Ames Carhill stopped laughing and stared at him and the others stared also and none of them believed him at all.

"It's simple!" he cried. "Why has so much time passed outside the ship while to us only fifty-three years have gone by?"

"Because we traveled too fast," Carhill said flatly. "That's, why."

"Yes," Hugh said softly. "But there's one thing we've been forgetting. What we did, others could do also. Probably lots of expeditions started out after we left, all trying for the speed of light."

They stared at him. Slowly the dazed look died out of their eyes as they realized what he meant, and what the concept might mean to them. The concept of other ships, following them out into time. The concept of other men, also millions of years from the Earth they had left.

"You mean," Carhill said slowly, "that you believe other people got caught in the same trap we did —that there may be others *in this time also?"*

Hugh nodded. "Why not? Maybe they colonized some of those Earth-type planets we checked on. Anyway, we can look for them."

"No." Carhill shook his head. "If any of them had started after us we would have crossed their paths already. We never have. We never found a trace of any other expedition. Even if there is another, even if there are colonies somewhere, we could spend another fifty years looking."

"Well," Martha Carhill whispered. "Why not? It would give us something to look for."

Hugh McCann glanced around the circle of faces and saw the new hope that came into them, the new belief that sprang into existence so quickly because they wanted to believe. He smiled, somewhat sadly, and picked up the pile of reports and the photographs he had just developed. Then he slipped out of the room, through the crowd outside, away from them and the rising hum of their voices. He didn't need to say anything more. The ship would go on.

"HUGH, is that you?"

"Yes, Nora."

She was waiting for him in the corridor. She came up to him and smiled and slipped her arm through his. They walked on together, down the hall past the last of the people.

"I heard what you said, Hugh. You convinced them."

He nodded. "I wonder why it took me so long to think of it." The voices died away behind them. They were all alone. They rounded a corner where a view-screen picked up the image of the moon, so familiar, now the only thing that was familiar about this Earth. Nora shivered.

"You were very logical, Hugh. But I didn't believe you."

He glanced around and saw that there was no one near them and that the communicators in this part of the ship were turned off. Only then did he answer her.

"I didn't believe myself, Nora."

"Tell me."

"When we're outside."

They went down the winding ramp that led to the interior of the ship. It too was deserted now. They left the carpeted, muffled corridors and their footsteps rang on the steel plates that lay down the middle of the ship, its heart, where the energy converters were, and the disposal units, and the plant rooms, and the great glass spheres of the hydroponics tanks.

"It's ironic, isn't it?" Nora said slowly. "We left here so long ago, looking for worlds with life, and we come back to find our own world dead."

"It's ironic, all right." He walked along the row of tanks until he came to the one he was searching for, and then he picked up a glass cylinder and filled it from the tank.

"I had to tell them something, Nora. They couldn't have gone on, otherwise."

The bottle was full. He stoppered it and then turned away. They crossed to the nearest lock and he pushed the button that opened it. They waited a few minutes until the door came open, and then they went out, down the ramp to the ground, across the slippery rocks. Even through the clouds there was enough light to see by.

"It's warm," she said.

"It always is, now."

They were approaching the ocean. The surf beat loudly in their ears. The spray was warm against their faces, almost as warm as the night wind.

"Tell me," she said. "You know what really happened, don't you?"

"I think so. I can't really be sure."

They paused on the low ledge where he had stood earlier and watched the girls gather their data for the reports. At their feet the waves washed up to the edges of tie tide pools, eddying into and out of them softly. The water looked dark and cold, but they knew that it too was warm.

"There've been lots of changes, and they all fit a pattern," he said. "The temperature. The difference in salt content in the water. The higher tides. Those things could happen for several reasons. But there's only one explanation for the other changes, the ones I found on the star charts."

She waited. The water lapped in and out, reaching almost to where they stood.

"The Earth rotates faster now," he said. "And the stars are nearer. Much nearer than they were."

"Isn't that impossible?"

"How do we know? We exceeded the speed of light. Who could say what continuum that might have put us in? I remember an analogy I read once, in a layman's book on different theories of space-time. '— The future and the past, two branches of a hyperbola, each with the speed of light as its limit —' "

"You mean," she whispered, "that we're not in the future at all? We're in the past—the far past — before there was any life on Earth?"

HE looked down at the pools of water at their feet, the lifeless water that according to all their old discarded theories should have been teeming with life. He nodded slowly and lifted the glass cylinder he had brought from the ship and stared at it.

"That bottle," she whispered. "You filled it with bacteria, didn't you?"

He nodded again.

"You're mad, Hugh. You can't mean that *that bottle* is the origin of life on Earth! You can't."

"Maybe this isn't our Earth, Nora. Maybe there are thousands of continuums and thousands of Earths, all waiting for a ship to land someday and give them life."

Slowly he unstoppered the cylinder and knelt down at the water's edge. For a minute he paused, wondering if there were other continuums or only this one, wondering just how deep the paradox lay. Then he tipped the bottle up and poured, and the liquid from the cylinder ran down into the tide pools and eddied there and was lost in the liquid of the ocean. He poured until the bottle was empty and all the single-celled bacteria from the ship's tank mingled with the warm, lifeless waters.

The water temperatures were the same. Everything was the same, and the conditions were very favorable and the bacteria would divide and redivide and keep on dividing for millions of years.

"Well hold the ship under light speed," he said. "And in a few million years we can drop back here and see how evolution is getting along."

He stood up and she took his hand and moved closer to him. They were both shivering, despite the warmth of the air.

"But how did life originate in the beginning?" she asked suddenly. Hugh McCann shook his head in the darkness. "I don't know. We've been all over the galaxy and haven't found life anywhere. Perhaps it can't have a natural cause. Perhaps it's always planted. A closed circle from beginning to end."

"But something—someone—must have started the circle. Who?" He looked down at the empty cylinder that he had dropped at the water's edge and then he looked out at the ocean, lifeless no longer. And once again he shook his head.

"We did, Nora. We're the beginning."

For a long moment their eyes met and held, and then they turned and walked away from the ocean, back toward the ship, and the people. And the moonlight glinted off the empty bottle.

THE END

It was in neither the stars nor the cards that Dr. Mateo Marco Lope Aguirre Malaria, the eminent jurist, should retain his neck ...

The Space Clause
By L. Sprague de Camp

DR. MATEO Marco Lope Aguirre Malaria, the eminent jurist, sat at a table in the bar of the Convention Quarters and wept into his rum.

These Quarters were those of the World Government Constitutional Convention, in a set of concrete chambers deep underground in the Rhone Valley. The accommodations had been hastily converted from the former Supreme Headquarters' United Civilized States, usually known as SHUCKS. The Convention was taking place in this armored warren, first, because most of the earth's larger cities had taken hits in the war and were therefore short of housing—when they had any houses left at all; second, because the war was not quite over. A Communist force still held out in the Altai Mountains, and for all anyone knew they might have a missle or two left with which to scotch the Convention if it met on the surface.

A journalist named Dagobert Heck sat down at the same table and asked: "Why do you weep, Dr. Aguirre?"

"My friend," said Aguirre, "I weep because we are off on the wrong track. Once again we fail to grasp opportunity by the forelock."

"Oh, I don't know," said Dagobert Heck. "Considering what the world has been through lately—most of its cities mashed flat and a half-billion of its population blown to bits—I think we're doing better than we had any right to expect. We're getting a bigger improvement on the United Nations than the United Nations was on the League of Nations. The new World Government will have a directly elected legislature, the right to tax, and the world's only armed force. Ten years ago we'd have said this was utopian moonshine. Why then so sad?"

"Because these narrow-minded, so-called statesmen cannot look beyond the petty confines of their own planet!"

"Oh, you mean the Space Clause." Heck closed his eyes and recited the beginning of the controversial clause from memory: " 'The authority shall have the exclusive right to represent the peoples of the earth in relations with extra-terrestrial life-forms, should any such forms be discovered to exist; to limit, regulate, and forbid intercourse between the peoples of the earth and such life-forms; and to limit, regulate, and forbid movement of persons and things between the earth and other heavenly bodies—' Oh well, it's probably not vital. We've been to the moon and found nothing but a few viruses, and conditions don't look promising for life on the other planets either."

"Exactly what that fool Carstairs-Brown said!" Aguirre mimicked the speech of the British delegate. " 'Really, you know, wouldn't Her Majesty's Government look a bit silly getting all set to welcome the Martians, and having it transpire there aren't any?' They forget that this is not the only sun in the universe."

Heck nodded sympathetically. Aguirre went on:

"And others, I think, hope to defeat the clause so that they can carry on nationalistic and imperialistic policies, if not on the earth, then off it somewhere."

"Look here, are you sure the fact that you're the author of this clause hasn't prejudiced you?"

"Sit, I have no prejudices!" Aguirre lowered his voice. "Save perhaps a slight one in favor of living."

"What do you mean?"

"You know my glorious chief?"

HECK nodded. Aguirre's glorious chief was Juan Serafin de la Torre Baroja, President of the Andean Federation, a new political entity that had taken the place, amid the general uproar of World War III, of several of the nations of western South America. Not satisfied with making himself president for life of Andea, la Torre had appointed himself head of the Andean delegation to the Convention so as to have a personal finger in the new constitutional pie.

"Well," said Aguirre, "he is, as you know, a man of the utmost sense of personal dignity. I—ah—sold him on this Space Clause, as you would express it, with the result that he has placed the Andean delegation squarely behind it and made speeches in its behalf. Now if the clause is not adopted he will feel that his honor has been insulted. And since he cannot take his feelings out on Carstairs-Brown and the other skeptics, he will vent them on me."

"What'll he do? Can you?"

"If that were all! Did you not hear how he had fourteen political opponents shot without trial before taking off for this Convention?"

"I probably did. So he's the guy who calls himself the great democratic liberator?"

"Oh, but he is! Think of all the things that he has done for the masses—free parades, extra holidays to hear his speeches, and all the rest! But these now-dead politicians were criticising him in public. Naturally he could not tolerate such insults to his dignity, or the people would have doubted his virility and thrown him out. After all, one must remain respected. But that, alas, will not save my neck."

"Too bad," said Dagobert Heck. "You Andeans have certainly done all you could to put the clause across. Short of having a spaceship land with a load of little green men with tentacles—Hey!" Heck frowned into his drink. "That gives me an idea. There's an old friend of mine in India named Dick Nugent, used to work with me on the World-Telegram-Sun. He retired a few years ago to become a yogi. Maybe—Say, when does this clause come up for a final vote?"

"Tomorrow, if the meeting goes according to schedule."

Heck consulted his watch. "Excuse me. I think I can just make it."

"Make what?" asked Aguirre. But Dagobert Heck had gone.

Myron Kalish, the American Secretary Of State, took his turn as president of the Convention the following noon. His bland exterior concealed a battalion of worries that would have floored a lesser man, the chief being that after all his toil and travail the Senate of the United States would insert a long sharp knife into his back by refusing to ratify the new Constitution. Already senators from the Middle West were talking ominously about "giving away the rights that our boys fought and died for at Valley Forge, Antietam, Château-Thierry, Midway, and Teheran. . ."

NEVERTHELESS Kalish prepared to call the meeting to order. With luck the Steering Committee should be able to wind the thing up in three more days. Most of the terms and clauses of the document had already been agreed upon. There remained only the controversial questions of what power if any the World Government should have over tariffs and immigration, and this silly Space Clause in which Juan de la Torre seemed so inexplicably interested. Kalish thought such a provision absurd, but did not wish to offend la Torre, who despite his domestic sins had brought the Andean Federation into the war on the side of the United States.

Kalish was opening his mouth to speak when the sight of a messenger-boy hurrying down an aisle stopped him. It must be pretty urgent or the guards would never have let the boy through during the actual session.

The boy walked up to the President's desk and handed a fistful of radiogram forms to Kalish, who said "Thank you" in an absentminded way and peered at the forms. The boy murmured "Bienvenu, monsieur," and walked off.

Kalish swallowed as he read. The message was one long radiogram running over a half-dozen sheets. At last he laid down the message and spoke into the microphone:

"The meeting will please come to order. The first item on today's agenda is the so-called Space Clause proposed by the delegation from the Andean Federation. It was planned to conclude arguments pro and contra this clause and vote on it this afternoon. However, news has just reached me which, if authenticated, has so great a bearing on the adoption of this clause that I think I should read it to you. It is a Reuters dispatch from Darjeeling, India, and reads as follows:

November fifth. An object described as a space-ship of extraterrestrial origin landed yesterday in eastern Nepal, near the Tibetan border in the vicinity of Kishanganj. First reports indicate that the beings who man the ship are green bipeds nine feet tall with tentacles for arms. Their intentions are said to be friendly.

The arrival of a visitor from outer space is confirmed by a number of witnesses in Sikkim, over which the ship slowly passed while looking for a. landing-place. In view of the enormous importance of this arrival, both as proving the long-surmised existence of intelligent extra-terrestrial life and as bearing upon the political organization of the world to 'deal with the problems posed by this fact, the government of Nepal has waived its usual prohibition against entry of foreigners into the country to permit qualified experts and officials of the Indian Government to investigate the visitors. As Prime Minister Rajendrachandramohananath of Nepal expressed it in a telephone-call to Darjeeling, "For the sake of God, sirs, let wise men be sent forthwith to cope with this appalling manifestation. We of Nepal are not qualified to do so."

Pending the arrival of an official mission of the Indian Government to welcome the visitors in the name of the peoples of the earth, Richard Nugent, a retired American journalist living in Darjeeling, has crossed the border into Nepal and struck out into the wild region where the ship is said to have come to earth—

KALISH finished the radiogram, took off his glasses, and rubbed his eyes with his finger-tips. Then he said:

"In view of the importance—"

Wilhelm Feuer, of the German delegation, was waving for attention. When recognized he said:

"This is all very impressive, Mr. President, but let us not by our emotions carried away be. To me it seems that the coincidence of such a landing, just when the so-called Space Clause is under consideration, is simply too perfect to be believed. At least we should await confirmation to be sure that we are not the victims of a hoax."

"As I was about to say," continued Kalish, "in view of the importance of this development, the chair will entertain a motion to defer action on this clause until this time tomorrow."

The motion was made and carried, and for the rest of that session the Convention devoted itself to a long wrangle over tariffs.

When the meeting adjourned, the members swarmed around the newsstand. By that time the newspapers bore not only the Reuters dispatch that Kalish had read, but a confirmatory Associated Press dispatch giving further information. Richard Nugent, it seemed, had radioed that he had reached the space-ship and met the aliens, who had brought an elaborate equipage of linguistic apparatus, picture-books and the like, to enable them to get into communication with the Terrans. Further information was promised soon.

Mateo Marco Lope Aguirre Malaria glanced up from his newspaper with a smile of quiet triumph. It seemed to him that the other delegates were looking at each other with a new seriousness. When he had brought up the Space Clause, some had thought it ridiculous because there were no intelligent extra-terrestrials; others preferred to leave all nonessential controversies to the future, counting on amending the Constitution when and if civilized e. t.'s were discovered. Now that the delegates were faced with extra-terrestrial reality, the petty national disputes that had stirred up such high words and hard feelings seemed small.

Next morning the papers carried still more information. By working furiously Nugent had gotten into communication with the aliens. He announced that they were from a planet of the small star Ross 154. There was a blurry radiophotograph which Nugent had transmitted with his portable set to Darjeeling and which had then been re-transmitted around the world. It showed a bald man standing between two tall things that might have been a backward child's attempt to model a man in plasticene. The Indian party had already flown to Darjeeling and would take off the following day for the spaceship in a helicopter with a television camera.

At that afternoon's session, Aguirre braced himself for argument. But none came. In fact one of his bitterest critics, Jacob Atta of Nigeria, rose to say:

"While I have been opposed to this clause in the past, the events of the last twenty-four hours have changed my mind. Even if the space-ship should turn out to be a hoax, I now think it advisable to have this clause in the Constitution, just in case."

After a minor bicker over the meaning of the world "intercourse," the Convention adopted the Space Clause and went on to the rest of its business. There was little debate; everybody's mind was far away, in the rhinoceros-haunted wilds of Nepal. In fact the President (Bretkun of Lithuania) managed to get compromise proposals on tariffs and immigration adopted that afternoon, leaving nothing to do but make laudatory speeches until the Drafting Committee finished polishing and homogenizing the final draft. The Sheikh of Aden made a speech in Arabic, followed by speeches from delegates of Afghanistan, Albania, and Algeria, and then the meeting adjourned.

AGUIRRE was relaxing in the bar when his glorious chief stalked in and rode up to him.

"Aguirre," said la Torre, "we leave tomorrow. Are you ready?"

"Carajo! Why, chief?"

"I have received word that my enemies conspire against me, so I must get back to Andea at once."

"But you will miss the final ratification!"

"No; I have arranged it with Kalish and Carstairs-Brown. The Drafting Committee shall work all night and present the Constitution tomorrow morning to a special session. Then I will make my speech —Andea comes alphabetically after Algeria—and we shall rush to the airport as soon as I have finished. Get packed."

"Yes, yes, chief, of course." And so it was done.

La Torre's airplane was over Venezuela when the radio broke the news that the arrival of the extra-terrestrial space-ship had been a hoax after all, perpetrated by a group of journalists including Dagobert Heck and Richard Nugent. The announcer ended with a sardonic note:

"—the delegates to the World Government Constitutional Convention are having a hearty laugh over the departing speech made this morning by Senor Juan de la Torre Baroja, in which he boasted in extravagant terms of his authorship of the Space Clause and claimed sole credit for any benefits that might accrue to the earth hereafter as a result of communication with other civilized planets. However, inquiries at the Convention indicated that there is no present intention of repealing the Space Clause, as this would require procedural complications, and since the clause is regarded as at worst a harmless piece of whimsy—"

Aguirre became conscious of his chief's glittering black eyes. La Torre rasped:

"So! My dignity has been insulted! And who is responsible? Who put me up to backing that accursed Space Clause, saying that it would rebound to the eternal fame and credit of the Andean Federation and its President, the people's choice, Juan Serafin de la Torre Baroja? Who led me astray and exposed me naked to the pitiless laughter of the world? Fool! Poltroon!"

The President's voice rose to a scream as he added details of Aguirre's ancestry and love-life. He caught Aguirre by the lapels and shook the smaller man until the latter's teeth rattled. He slapped his face, forehand and backhand, a dozen times, then hurled the eminent jurist from him, shouting:

"Guards! Tie up this filth until I can deal with him in a more appropriate manner!"

In the prison, Aguirre stood on the trap with the rope around his neck. In one corner his wife and his mistress sobbed quietly in each other's arms. In front of him stood la Torre with fists on well-padded hips, grinning ferociously.

"Ha!" snarled the President. "So, you thought I should weaken and let you go for old times' sake? Have you ever known me to forget an insult to my dignity?"

"No, sir," said Aguirre miserably. "If you are going to hang me, will you please get it over with?"

"I will hang you when I am ready. I have had requests from many quarters, including the President of the United States himself, to let you off. I threw these impertinent requests back in their faces! I told them that if I heard any more such mush, I should refuse to ratify the Constitution! That is what I, Juan Serafin de la Torre Baroja, think of the rest of the world! Well, hangman, are you ready?"

"Ready, chief," replied the hangman.

La Torre gave the final command. The hangman did his duty. The wife and mistress screamed in perfect timing with the snap of the rope. Dr. Aguirre departed for happier climes.

While the body still swung, an officer of the Federal Police hurried on the scene. He said, "Chief, you won't believe this, but—"

"But what?"

"The ambassador Mencias Mola is here with a visitor. This visitor is one of a group who arrived in Mexico a few hours ago. Senor Mencias flew this one here as fast as possible."

La Torre gaped. The visitor blinked three of his seven eyes and extended a tentacle. La Torre took the tentacle in his right hand and shook it.

The other four eyes of the visitor were trained upon the figure dangling on the scaffold, with—la Torre thought—a definite indication of curiosity. "Does he," la Torre asked the officer, "speak the language of my people?"

"Oh yes. Very smart, these extraterrestials."

"We have machines that teach quickly from your radio broadcasts," the e. t. said. "Ah—the suspended individual—"

"A martyr to his country. A paragon of wisdom and loyalty. Even now I am planning a special medal for him." La Torre stepped close to the scaffold and peered upward through experienced eyes. "It will of course be awarded posthumously," he said with marked sadness.

THE END

Utopia had been reached. All the problems of mankind had been solved. It was the perfect State. If you doubted it, you died.

The Clean and Wholesome Land
By Ralph Sholto

WHILE Professor Cargill lectured from the rostrum, Neil Pardeau prowled the dark auditorium. This, he knew, was the place to find them. Here was where they whispered and plotted and schemed—feeling safe in this pure, hard core of patriotism.

Safe because Cargill was the Director of Education in the New State, just as Pardeau was the Director of Public Security. Safe because Cargill's lectures were given before a commanded audience, with attendance strictly mandatory.

The insistance was not really necessary of course. The people would have come to hear Cargill regardless. His was a compelling, magnetic personality. Even now his great voice was booming out:

"—and upon this anniversary of the New State, we can look out with great pride upon a clean and wholesome land. With strong emotion, we can look upon the physical manifestation of our glorious principles—that only through self-effacement—through fanatic love for the state—can the individual come to complete physical and mental fruition. Upon this anniversary we see our enemies, both within and without, broken, and completely subjugated—"

This was the place they whispered and schemed and plotted. Pardeau prowled the aisles, his eyes piercing the darkness—spotting them, cataloguing them. And thus he came upon Emil Hillerman, his Deputy of Vital Intelligence sitting dutifully in the end seat of a middle aisle. Hillerman's thick lips hung lax, his eyes squinted laboriously as he sought to follow the thread of Cargill's lecture.

Pardeau tapped Hillerman on the shoulder. The latter started guiltily. He whirled and sought to identify Pardeau in the semi-darkness. Pardeau said, "Please step outside with me. I have some questions."

There was fear in Hillerman's bearing as he got clumsily to his feet and followed Pardeau. But none of Cargill's speech was missed. A battery of loud speakers carried it even into the foyer where Pardeau stopped and turned on Hillerman. He regarded the man through cold, calculating eyes. He seemed to be both enjoying Hillerman's discomfort and also listening to Cargill's booming words.

"—these pale weaklings, these traitors with twitching muscles and twitching minds who skulked in dark places have been finally and decisively defeated. Even their vaunted leader—"

"What have you been doing," Pardeau asked, "relative to Karl Lenster?"

The frightened Hillerman licked his fat lower lip as he sought for words. "Everything—everything possible. But Lenster is clever. You know that. You know that yourself."

Pardeau's eyes bored into those of the Intelligence Director. They were noted for their icy penetration, but upon this night they were like steel knives. It was as though he surveyed Hillerman from behind the bulwark of some new and hostile information. Even as he stared, Cargill was booming from the rostrum:

"—Karl Lenster, their peerless leader—"

And Cargill's voice crackled with the inflections of pure contempt. "—a degenerate—a dope addict who's greatness lay only in the realms of his sensual dreams. A weak, pitiful figure bereft of followers, cringing alone in—"

When Pardeau spoke, his voice held a new sharpness to complement the new ice in his eyes. He said, "In half an hour I am attending a meeting of the Council. They will want a report. What about Lenster?"

Hillerman looked quickly to right and left, then back at his Chief. He hesitated as though fearing the consequences of what he was about to reveal. "You know of the Wyckoff Chemical Transformation Process—"

"Certainly I know of it," Pardeau blazed. "What about it?"

"I—I—" But Hillerman seemed to lose the courage he'd screwed up to continue in this direction. He straightened and a little of the hangdog servility dropped away. "I am doing all that is humanly possible to apprehend Lenster. All that any man could do. The secret jails are full. My interrogators work night and day. Even a superficial check of my records would show that more has been done in the last six months and is being done now than—"

Pardeau raised an impatient hand, opening a gap of silence into which the voice of Cargill poured.

"—land in which the voice of dissenter is not heard; in which Lenster and men of his despicable ilk are forever crushed and beaten—"

Pardeau was scowling. Almost unconsciously he had held the pause, with hand upraised, until Cargill finished his passage. As Cargill stopped for breath, Pardeau jerked his hand down sharply, completing the gesture. "I have no time for any more of this. And I resent having to seek you out. Next time report to my office as is proper and keep me posted as to your activities. Next—"

Pardeau eyed Hillerman for one blank moment and allowed the threat to reflect clearly that possibly there would not be many more next times. Then he turned and strode swiftly from the foyer.

CARGILL'S voice had hardly faded when he picked it up again on his car radio. It was a foregone conclusion that every radio in the land would be tuned to the lecture. So great was Car-gill's popularity that every citizen traveling in a car would wish to hear it and turn on his receiver. It was foolish not to have a radio properly tuned when Cargill spoke. He was saying:

"—and so under the banner of complete solidarity, we will march forward, a solid phalanx against which no force can stand. Now that our own house is swept clean of vermin—rid forever of carrion like Lenster and his ilk, we can—"

Pardeau had traveled swiftly through the streets at the high speed reserved for higher servants of the New State. Lesser servants of the New State had learned caution and thus no regrettable deaths or maimings occurred; the lesser servants having grown wary and fleet of foot.

Pardeau switched off his motor but left his radio blaring. Cargill's voice followed him up the broad steps of the Executive Building and was just fading out when Pardeau was able to pick it up again from the loudspeaker under the great arches.

He entered the building and traversed the vast foyer to a niche which housed a private elevator. He entered the lift, deserting it on the ninth floor, where he entered an unobtrusive door and joined a group which consisted of the New State's well guarded pool of power and brains.

There was Blanchard of Finance —Keeley, Director of Foreign Education. Masichek overlord of the nation's larder, and seven others.

When Pardeau entered, all conversation stopped and every , man looked up from a luxurious overstuffed chair. Pardeau must certainly have swelled inwardly with pride at this unconscious tribute. It was well known that he held a key position on the chessboard of politics. His was in reality the most important job of all. It was to Pardeau that this powerful group of men looked for that which they most treasured—their own personal safety.

A chair was waiting for Pardeau. He said, "I'm sorry to be late, gentlemen. I have been on a personal tour of inspection. I'm sure you will forgive me however. I have a most interesting report."

He seated himself, timing the action so it coincided with the ebb of applause coming over the speaker—applause from the loyal multitudes who had just heard Professor Cargill end his lecture. As it was now permissible, Blanchard reached under the table and snapped a button. The speaker went silent.

"An interesting report?" Keeley asked.

"Amazingly so," Pardeau said. "I have just unearthed a traitor—a traitor in a high place."

Every man in the group strove not to react and this striving was in itself a reaction. "Most interesting," Blanchard murmurtd. "Are you ready to name names?"

"That is my intention, but in order to forestall a great many questions, let me give you a complete background."

Leiderman, Ambassador without Portfolio, and very close to the Man of Almost Sacred Name who never attended these meetings, felt strong enough to evince impatience. "The name, man! First the name. Then the details."

Pardeau smiled coldly. "Very well. The name is, Karl Lenster."

Leiderman sprang from his chair, his face bordering on purple. "Is this a joke, Pardeau? We all know Lenster is the arch-traitor of our times—the leader of the resistance movement. Talk sense!"

Pardeau, not in the least disconcerted, smiled coldly. "I'm sorry. Perhaps I should have said Emil Hillerman, my Deputy of Vital Intelligence, the man who holds immeasurable power in his two hands."

Blanchard was not given to outbursts. But his lips were grim as he said, "We are waiting for you to talk sense, Pardeau."

"The confusion comes from your not allowing me to tell it as I wished. There is a gap between Lenster and Hillerman; one which —with your permission—I will fill."

"Talk, man! Talk!"

"You have all heard of Formula 652, known also as the Wyckoff Chemical Transformation Process."

There were expressions of both understanding and bewilderment. Noting these, Pardeau said, "For those of you who haven't made a point of looking into the thing, I'll explain. Wyckoff, in case you don't recall, was a chemical engineer of more than average ability who stumbled onto this formula before he died, most regretfully, four years ago, in 1984."

Leiderman continued to scowl. "We all know each other, Pardeau. Call a spade a spade. Wyckoff was a reactionary scoundrel whom you did away with for reasons of security."

"Precisely," Pardeau said. "In its essence, the formula is a process for taking over a man's brain—his body —his personality."

"You mean—"

Pardeau refused to be interrupted. "We were of the opinion that Wyckoff, though he and Lenster were great friends, was not able to impart his knowledge to the latter. We took him into custody shortly after he perfected the formula and were fortunate in persuading him to give it to us."

"But he gave it to Lenster also?"

"We were certain, at the time of his death that he had not been able to do that—we are still certain."

Keeley, with a gesture, requested the floor. "I wonder if you could go into a little more detail concerning the formula—for those of us who—"

"Of course," Pardeau said. "The formula is a combination of six chemicals and the process of transformation is relatively simple, yet highly dangerous to both subjects involved. It means sure death for the proposed host, and if not delicately handled will also result in death for the usurper. The transformation requires three hours to perform. Once completed successfully, the usurper can never return to his own body. It must be destroyed. Also, the mentality of the host vanishes after it is pushed from its original brain tissue through the influence of the formula."

"Then if Wyckoff didn't give the formula to Lenster, it was stolen from our vaults—or wherever it was kept?"

"Exactly. Certain investigations I have made prove beyond doubt that Lenster got to my Deputy, Hillerman. I never considered Hillerman very bright, but I thought him to be honest and loyal. But beyond all doubt, with his aid, Lenster stole the. formula—possibly got it verbally—and used it to take Hillerman's body from him." Pardeau smiled grimly. "Therefore, gentlemen, we have a traitor in a high place. My Deputy of Vital Intelligence."

PARDEAU sat silent now, seeming to enjoy the fear he had engendered in his colleagues—sat silent until Leiderman said, "You've arrested him of course." "No. I have not."

"Then get at it, man—get at it." "I have no intention of arresting Hillerman."

Leiderman's eyes widened as did those of the rest of the company. But Blanchard, even under the impact of such a bombshell had the presence of mind to glance at his watch. Immediately he snapped on the loudspeaker. The voice of Professor Cargill blared forth:

"—and upon this anniversary of the New State, we can look with pride upon a clean and wholesome land—"

It was the rebroadcast, from recordings, of Cargill's speech and no man in his right mind would have refrained from tuning it in because everyone wanted to hear it at least twice.

Leiderman, almost apoplectic, ignored the speech. "Not arresting him! Are you mad?"

"I'm quite sane, and the situation is well in hand." Pardeau grinned and there was wickedness in the grin—wickedness and intelligence. "As I said before, Hillerman was not a smart man. His job was too much for him and I would have been faced, soon with the necessity of replacing him regardless. Lenster, on the other hand, is of grade-A intellect. But, gentlemen, he is frightened—badly frightened in his new environment—and in order to insure his own safety, is doing an excellent job. Ever since the transformation, that department has gained in efficiency until it now ranks as one of the highest in our entire government."

Slowly, Pardeau's strategy dawned on the group. Blanchard suddenly smiled. Then Pardeau scowled and went on with a new and sudden ferocity. "I have the proof, and I have Lenster-Hillerman under my palm. So he stays—continues to do a good job for us. But he'll be watched, gentlemen. He won't be able to go to the bathroom without being under surveillance. We will learn a great deal from him. All we need to know."

"Then you'll arrest him?" the boss of the state larder, wanted to know.

Pardeau came to his feet. His fist slammed down on the table. "I shall not arrest him—ever. When the time comes, I shall personally shoot him down in the street like a dog. There will come a day, gentlemen, when you will witness this act of vengeance—when I shall make such an example of LensterHillerman as the resistance will not forget—a morale-crumbling example, I promise you."

"—in which Lenster and his ilk axe forever crushed and beaten," the speaker said.

Blanchard took the floor. "Gentlemen—I move a vote of thanks and confidence for our colleague, Neal Pardeau."

The Director of Public Security stood at attention and assayed a sharp, military bow. It was a moment of rare triumph. "Thank you, gentlemen," he said.

An hour later, Lenster-Pardeau was alone in his apartments. He stripped off his uniform with an air of grim satisfaction. While he undressed, he thought of the martyrs to the Cause; the men who had died. He thought of Wyckoff and wished Wyckoff could have had the pleasure of knowing who had usurped the body of Neal Pardeau —Pardeau the Butcher—the infamous Pardeau.

From the speaker came the third and final rebroadcast of Cargill's speech:

—a clean and wholesome land—"

"A clean and wholesome land," Lenster murmured, and the tone of his voice was a prayer.

THE END

Before reading this story, prepare yourself for a jolt and a chill in capsule form. O Henry could have
been proud of it. It could well become a minor classic.

The Last Supper
By T. D. Hamm

HAMPERED as she was by the child in her arms, the woman was running less fleetly now. A wave of exultation swept over Guldran, drowning out the uneasy feeling of guilt at disobeying orders.

The instructions were mandatory and concise: "No capture must be attempted individually. In the event of sighting any form of human life, the ship MUST be notified immediately. All small craft must be back at the landing space not later than one hour before takeoff. Anyone not so reporting will be presumed lost."

Guldran thought uneasily of the great seas of snow and ice sweeping inexorably toward each other since the Earth had reversed on its axis in the great catastrophe a millenium ago. Now, summer and winter alike brought paralyzing gales and blizzards, heralded by the sleety snow in which the woman's skin-clad feet had left the tracks which led to discovery.

His trained anthropologist's mind speculated avidly over the little they had 'gotten from the younger of the two men found nearly a week before, nearly frozen and half-starved. The older man had succumbed almost at once; the other, in the most primitive sign language, had indicated that, of several humans living in caves to the west, only he and the other had survived to flee some mysterious terror. Guldran felt a throb of pity for the woman and her child, left behind by the men, no doubt, as a hindrance.

But what a stroke of fortune that there should be left a male and female of the race to carry the seed of Terra to another planet. And what a triumph if he, Guldran, should be the one to return at the eleventh hour with the prize. No need of calling for help. This was no armed war-party, but the most defenseless being in the Universe—a mother burdened with a child.

Guldran put on another burst of speed. His previous shouts had served only to spur the woman to greater efforts. Surely there was some magic word that had survived even the centuries of illiteracy. Something equivalent to the "bread and salt" of all illiterate peoples. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted, "Food! food!"

Ahead of him the woman turned her head, leaped lightly in mid-stride, and went on; slowing a little but still running doggedly.

Guldran's pulse leaped. He yelled again, "Food!"

The instant that his foot touched the yielding surface of the trip, he knew that he had met defeat. As his body crashed down on the fire-sharpened stakes, he knew too the terror from which the last men of the human race had fled.

Above him the woman looked down, her teeth gleaming wolfishly. She pointed down into the pit; spoke exultantly to the child.

"Food!" said the last woman on earth.

A chat with the editor . . .

I HAVEN'T got an editorial and it's too late to write one. It's two a. m. on a Monday morning—the Monday this issue has to go to the printer.

I had an editorial. But I'm in Kingston and the editorial is lying on the table down in Patterson. That's forty miles from here and there isn't time to go get it.

The rest of the issue is all ready to go. I left Patterson Saturday and drove down to New York City and took the readied manuscripts with me. Saturday evening I went up to see Horace Gold, the guy that puts out a stf mag called *Galaxy.* He lives in a big ant hill on Fourteenth Street and a lot of people drop in. We killed some time and I gave him a copy—for free—of IF, and then I went out and found a parking ticket on my car. *Fifteen bucks.*Fifteen bucks, they charge in that town for putting your car in the wrong place! They were having a little financial trouble, but I sent in a check for the fine, so I guess their money matters are all straightened out now.

ANYHOW, I drove straight up here to Kingston from Manhattan and didn't stop off at Patterson, so that's why I haven't got an editorial.

My car runs pretty good. I've only had it a couple of months. It's a 1946 Cadillac, but it had only been driven a few thousand miles and it's just like new and I got a terrific bargain on it.

I was going to buy a Ford or a Chevy, but the man came along with this one and showed me where it's a lot more economical in the long run. This car, he said, will last me all my life, where a light car falls to pieces after about thirty years. You take care of a Cadillac and it will never let you down. In the long run you save a lot of money.

What a line of malarky! Sure—take care of it and it'll take care of you. New tires at forty bucks a throw. High test gas—only the best. Drain the crankcase every thousand miles. And use only the best oil—the kind they bring around in an armoured car.

Brother, I've been had! If that old 1937 Dodge I came east in hadn't dropped its motor in the middle of the road, I'd still be a happy guy.

I WISH I had that editorial because it was a pretty good one. I spent a lot of time on it.

It was all about how lucky we are to be living now—in this fantastic, scientific age. About all the things we have—and take for granted — that are so wonderful. Not the big things necessarily. The little things. The allegedly common ordinary things.

Like, for instance, a tooth brush and a tube of tooth paste and a visit to a dentist. It's a matter of historical record that Queen Elizabeth, back around the Middle Ages, who had everything the people of that time could devise, always held a fan in front of her face when she talked. That was to cover her decayed and blackened teeth. The queen of a great nation, and when her teeth went, they went. There was nothing on the face of the earth that could be done about it.

So you and I have got what kings and queens would have given fortunes to possess. A clean and efficient set of teeth. Even if they're the kind you take out at night—they're still clean and efficient. You should go to the museum sometime and see what George Washington had to put up with.

AS A matter of fact, the premise can be cut a lot finer. Think how lucky you and I are to be Americans and live in the United States. Have you, as an example, ever been hungry? By that I don't

mean just ready for dinner. I mean really *hungry* deep down in the bone—down to the point where getting something to eat is the most important single ambition of life.

By far the majority of people on this earth are that way all the time. There are millions of people living today this minute — who have never, at any time in their lives, had enough to eat. There are people living today who have never seen a bar of soap, have never seen a moving picture show; have never tasted an ice cream soda or a piece of roast beef. The point is worth a moment's thankfulness for being who you are—living in the place you are—in these times of pure magic.

That's what the editorial was about and it was a pretty good one. I wish I had it here.

I THINK we've got some pretty good stories in this issue. If you don't get a chance to read anything else in the book, don't miss Charley Beaumont's*The Beautiful People.* This will be a good chance to see how our tastes jibe. I think the yarn has everything.

Incidentally, the Mari Wolf that wrote *An Empty Bottle,* is Rog Phillip's wife. She does nice work.

I don't know who T. D. Hamm is. I bought his *Last Supper* through an agent, but it's one of the most chilling short-shorts I've ever read. The short-short is supposed to be the hardest type of fiction to do. I think it must be, because you find a good one once in a blue moon. If *Last Supper* isn't snapped up for an anthology, I'll be badly mistaken.

By the way, Walt Miller's *It Takes A Thief* was grabbed by Shasta for their 1952 Anthology. It appeared in the May issue of IF. My favorite in that issue was *Infinity's Child* by DeVet.

Sorry about not having the editorial. I'll run it next issue if I can find it.

—pwf

Personalities
IN SCIENCE FICTION

JULES VERNE

Today, He Would Be Amazed

IN DESIGNATING Jules Verne as the father of science fiction as it is known today, one can immediately draw sharp criticism from those who allocate the role to Leonardo da Vinci. It is an honor, however, that the great Italian could easily give away as a crumb from his table. And one Verne must have in order to gain the stature he deserves, and also as payment for well nigh incredible work as a pioneer.

Verne, a Frenchman, was born in 1828 in Nantes. There was neither great wealth, nor excessive poverty in his background. He received an adequate education, and if there was any point of particular interest in his youth, it was the vague, but definitely tangible restlessness that plagued his early years.

He became a fairly successful playwright long before there is any indication of his later interest in the scientific fiction through which his name will live.

A close study of Verne, highlights the fact that he himself is only half his own story. To get the full picture, he must be considered along with the time in which he lived.

It was a time of the colossal French unrest that ended in one of the greatest bloodbaths in history. The masses—a designation so dear to the heart of the ponderous historian—were stirring under the perfumed heels of the French aristocrats. Every school child knows what happened.

But another revolution of the period, centered in the industrial Europe of the times, has been to a great extent overlooked or generalized, perhaps because its end result was not outlined by the sharp blade of a guillotine.

The industrial revolution.

The intellectual level, nay the intelligence level, of the period was low, but there was enough perception to fear the Machine and what it could do. Science was a completely unknown and untried component. The theory of science creating machines which would in turn free men from previously necessitous slavery was not readily grasped. Such a concept had to come from some proof in that direction, and at that time there was no proof.

There was, however, even then, proof that machines could put vast numbers of men out of work. Under the systems of the seventeenth century, this could mean actual starvation for people who earned their bread in the labor market.

It is little wonder, then, that science was a thing to be feared and this point, in itself, makes Jules Verne not only a pioneer, but a very remarkable literary technician. To understand a man, it is necessary to understand what he faces. To get the picture, we have but to compare his time with ours.

THE writer of today has little I else to do but experience an urge to write and then look around for his field. If he selects science fiction as his creative medium, he finds a well worn rut into which to fit his steering gear. The momentum has already been provided. He rides along in an established field, partaking of the dignity built by those who came before.

Verne was the first of these. He faced a world that really did not want what he had—or rather—what his imagination and instinct forced him to produce. He won his audience from a fearful, reluctant public, who cringed from what he gave them, yet read it from pure fascination.

His works are filled, of course with a perceptive power. Perhaps very few people today would care for them. They are styled to another day, a slower and more ponderous day when the streamlined stylism of today's literature would have been as quickly rejected as some of us, today, reject the styles of the old masters.

VERNE'S work is a paradox, in that it is a mixture of astounding perceptions and naive inconsistencies. The inconsistencies, however, spring from the limitations of the time; limitations which even a genius of Verne's stature could not overcome.

As an example, there is an illustration of one of his books on a trip to the Moon. The picture is meant to highlight the absolute cold of space. It shows three men, obviously halfway to the Moon, inside their rocket. The room, or cabin, they occupy is that of a typical, seventeenth century parlor. It could have as easily illustrated a scene from a Charles Dickens novel. The three men are dressed for the street—for a warm day in the street, that is—because they haven't a single overcoat among them. One wears a top hat and the other two have shawls over their heads. They are crouched, and stomping their feet to keep warm. There seems to be some snow drifting in from somewhere.

But those who would laugh at this illustration, could be quickly silenced by a drawing of an undersea burial, the stunning impact of which has probably never been equalled to this day. Save for an ancient handlamp held by one of the mourners, the illustration would do far more than justice to any current science fiction story of underwater activities.

There are many indications that Jules Verne did not write scientific fiction from choice; that he possibly nurtured an actual dislike for it. He left the field many times to further other literary ends. But he always came back; possibly because his vital and entirely original imagination would not let him do otherwise.

He produced a prodigious amount of copy, all of which in its day, was widely read. But it is natural that a writer is remembered for certain of his works, while the bulk of his efforts is lost in the sweep of time. Of all his works, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea,* could be rated as his greatest. Possibly because, in this story, he described with inconceivable accuracy, the almost exact shape of a single thing to come.

The submarine.

HIS *Around the World in Days* will also, probably live as long as books are read.

But the impact here is somewhat blunted in that Verne accurately foretold a general future condition —the speed at which man would someday travel, by whatever method.

Also, the story is somewhat blurred by the fact that even Verne himself could not envision a condition which time and progress would not antiquate. His error here was that he left an opening for a sequal —*Around the World in Eighty Minutes.*

This situation does not hold true in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea.* After reading it, one can experience only anticlimax no matter what has been or will be. When Verne finished, there was no more to be said.

But regardless, Verne's niche is secure. In a dim and groping past, he established, with a quill pen and an agile mind, a trend in scientific fiction from which the writer of today or tomorrow will deviate but little.

—pwf

SCIENCE BRIEFS
By Charles Recour

Substitute For Thought!

POETS and philosophers agree: the hardest thing the human being is called upon to do is—to think! No task is more arduous or more difficult, and to confirm this supposition all you have to do is reflect on any difficult problems which have ever engaged your mind. Thinking is no joke!

It is generally conceded that the most abstract realm of thinking is mathematical. Ih some respects that is true and in others it is the exact opposite of the facts. Actually mathematics is "simplified" thinking, a sort of thinking with nine-tenths of the work taken out. The reason for that rather surprising statement is the fact that much of what we call mathematics is actually "symbol manipulation"—which is a sort of machine into which you put ideas, turn the crank and grind out answers.

Great mathematicians have frequently reiterated the truism "a good symbology is half the battle." What they are referring to is that mathematical ideas, while very hard to, discover and understand, become ridiculously easy in many cases, when they are framed in a set of symbols which can be easily manipulated according to standardized rules. That in effect for example, is what algebra is. Algebra is a machine for handling mathematical relationships. So is trigonometry, calculus and many other branches of mathematical thinking. The difficulty lies in first, mastering the symbology, then the understanding of what's being done. After that you just supply the problem, turn the symbolic crank and out pop the answers, neat and automatically.

IF YOU doubt that that is the case, take a very simple arithmetic or algebra problem, rephrase it in words and then try to solve it in words. It's tough, mighty tough! That's what the earliest of Babylonian and Assyrian thinkers did. It's a tribute to them that they got anywhere at all, and as positive evidence of the importance of symbols, it may be recalled that mathematics didn't begin its enormous expansion until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by which time, the symbols had been worked out and the science had been reduced to a game of "chess on paper." This is an over simplification of course, a half truth, since the thinking still must be done. But symbols cut the work into a tiny fraction of what it was.

Today symbology is all important and tomorrow, symbolic logic will be one of the guiding spirits of scientific advances as it is suggesting itself today. When the first savage recognized that two men and two rocks have in common their "twoness" he made an enormous step; equally important and much richer in results are the superb ideas of calling things and ideas by symbols, letters, marks—what have you. Don't sell "X marks the spot" short!

Well-Digger Giganticus

WHOEVER has glanced at any of the earth-moving machinery in common use today, has automatically marveled at the size and impressiveness of these robotic mechanisms whose scale is that of the prehistoric monsters. It is one thing to speak of telephone switchboards and electronic calculating machines as robots; it is another to observe the gigantic robots some machines have become. Latest in this chain of automaticity is the mobile oil-well driller!

Thousands of wells per year are drilled in the United States in a tremendous effort to keep the hungry maw of oil-consumers satisfied, especially since resources appear to be dwindling at a rapid rate. The setting up of an oil drilling system has been a major operation. Much equipment, massive and bulky and powered by large amounts of energy, is needed. Then, because nine out of ten wells prove dry, the equipment must be torn up and moved elsewhere.

Enterprising entrepreneurs — tough-bitten pioneers who would flinch at the word "entrepreneur" —have devised a truck-borne setup which, powered and completely self-contained with two 1200 horsepower diesel engines, practically drills a deep-well by itself! The equipment is so flexible and so ingeniously contrived, that it operates from a console-panel arrangement much like a control tower or an organ. The well is drilled; should it be dry—as it most often is—the drillers tear up stakes with no trouble at all, move on, and start elsewhere. The thing is done so rapidly and so smoothly that it has a truly robot-like effect on a hypnotized observer.

What is more important is that this effort points another signpost towards the future. The coal mines have seen the introduction of automatic machinery, the factories have become more mechanized, the farms too are machinery plus—all these things confirm positively the outline of the future; machines, machines and more machines, in every degree of complexity, with every conceivable type of modern scientific development, all operated by an engineer-technician. The pattern is outlined heavily; the future belongs to the technician!

Optical Sandblasting!

OPTICS is probably one of the most precise of all the applied sciences and the technicians in the field are accustomed to working in millionths of an inch. It is hard to reconcile this fact with the recent technique devised by Dr. William A. Rhodes, who makes telescope mirrors by *sandblasting!*

Amateur telescope-making has been discussed before in these pages since many a science fiction reader is also an amateur astronomer. Consequently the technique ordinarily used in making precise reflecting telescope mirrors is familiar to many. The practice of simply rubbing two circular discs together with an abrasive between, producing a resultant mirror as the abrasives selected become finer and finer, results in a parabolic mirror with an accuracy of a fractional millionth of an inch. This is old hat and has been done ever since the Newtonian telescope.

Dr. Rhodes, however, wishing to minimize the tedious work of rough-grinding telescope mirrors, decided to blast out the basic curve with a sandblaster, and then finish off the mirror with conventional grinding practices. The sixteen inch mirror, with an f/3.3 curve was roughed out with a cemetery monument sandblaster. And that's all there was to it. After finish grinding the mirror was perfect.

That suggests a whole new technique in optical work which has always deplored the necessary tedium of slow grinding of resistant glass which seems after a time to develop an obstinacy and an obtuseness all its own.

Today's age is characterized by instruments, electronic, optical and mechanical. Tomorrow will even be more of an instrument decade—or century—any techniques designed to make instrument-making simpler and just as accurate are more than eventful—they are news!

Cat's Foot Seismograph!

THE two-hundred inch reflecting telescope is the gadget at Mount Palomar that ordinarily makes the news. But Palomar is more than an astronomical observatory with the world's biggest telescope. It is also a seismological station, shortly to be second to none in the world. In particular it is making use of the new electromagnetic seismograph, a machine so sensitive it can record the footsteps of a cat through hundreds of feet of solid rock!

An ordinary seismograph is essentially nothing more than a large mass suspended from a wire. Delicate pick-up instruments connected to it, record its inertia while the earth about it shakes. Hence, the seismographic mass remains "at rest" while the earth quakes. As is well known seismographs pick up earth tremors from distances equal to the diameter of the Earth, so sensitive are they.

But the electromagnetic instrument puts even these to shame. It is a long quartz tube, about two and one half inches in diameter and one hundred and twenty feet long. It is anchored at each end to a pier set deep into the earth, while flexible supports along its length take up its weight. This "strain seismograph" like any strained quartz crystal then delivers an electrical impulse no matter how slightly it is disturbed. This, amplified and recorded automatically, provides a sonic and visual picture of earth tremors anywhere. Its sensitivity is so great it must be installed miles from human disturbances.

One of the neat aspects of the recording mechanism is that it catches at a definite rate; then during play-back it speeds up this rate so that a long drawn out quake may be recorded as a pistol shot or a slightly longer rumble! Seismography is extremely important (witness its detection of the Soviet atomic bomb explosions!) and Mount Palomar is due to become the center of its research here.

Metals Made To Order!

METALLURGICAL research is opening up an entirely new field, a field in which specific metals are tailored exactly to suit a given purpose, much in the manner in which ordinary, alloys have been prepared, but differing in that the rarest, oddest metals are now used, with the most unusual techniques.

Zirconium, hafnium, molybdenum, rhenium, columbium, cerium, thallium—the list reads like a recitation of the Periodic Table, are being put to work in applications not even thought of so short a time as five years ago.

Rhenium for example is a metal whose commercial importance cannot be underestimated. It is the densest metal known, it has a melting point as high as tungsten, its electron emission rate is better than that of tungsten and its is greater than that metal when used in vacuum tube applications. The only drawback to wide use of this exotic metal is that it now costs $900 a pound!

Most of these metals require refining and extraction methods far different from the relatively simple methods of the blast furnace or the electrolytic refining tank. They often must be prepared in a high vacuum chamber at temperatures extremely high. In addition they are usually associated with large quantities of "dead" ore or a sort of gangue which must be discarded slag-like. In a word, the recovery of these metals is difficult.

Applied technology is jumping forward however at such a fabulous rate that no metal can be ignored, and every possible metal must be examined carefully for potential uses. It has gotten so that, if you desire a metal with certain properties, you simply specify them to the metallurgist and he goes into the pilot-plant-laboratory, operates equipment unthought of two years ago, and comes out with your sample—done! Metallurgy has some amazing surprises coming up in the near future—tailor-made metals are only a beginning!

Rockets Made Of Light!

LIGHT is generally regarded as the most ethereal of material substances. You don't think of mass or weight associated with dancing beams of sunlight or the flickering glitter of the stars! Never the less, light has mass, measurable and computable, and it can move "mountains." A glance at the familiar "E equals mc squared" of Einstein shows that if you work the other way around, measure the energy of a beam of light, it is possible to figure out the mass associated with that light.

Even more directly it is possible to measure the force exerted on an object by the pressure of a beam of light streaming against it. This implies momentum and where you have momentum, you have mass.

Thoughts like these have been occuring with increasing frequency among men who have to do with rocketry and the ultimate hope of putting men into space. Recently it was suggested by an authority on rocketry that space ships be propelled by "sails"—gigantic thin-faced mirrors capable of catching

sunlight and using its pressure as a propellent medium! As fantastic as that suggestion sounds it is perfectly conceivable in the vacuum of space where the slightest amount of thrust would have effect.

Perhaps even more suggestive of the ultimate importance of using a light beam as a propellant, is the suggestion that eventually a motor of sorts will be designed, capable of emitting light in such quantities as to be enough to offer substantial thrust to its attached rocket—sort of like a flashlight turned around.

WHEN the actual thrust of ordinary sunlight against the Earth's surface is computed, it turns out that the figure measured in dynes or Newtons of thrust is quite surprisingly large. Now while the Earth is huge, and any rocket would be comparatively minute, the principles are still the same. Light has mass; mass ejected at the speed of light exerts powerful measurable thrust—enough to move things!

Scientists who have taken the measure of this theory of light-propelling naturally don't expect to see this as one of the early means of securing interplanetary flight. But many think that ultimately it may prove to be the way Man will reach the stars! That goal, remote as it may seem now to people who know we haven't even gotten into space yet, is still in the consciousness of rocketmen. Someday, interstellar flights are going to be made, and if the physics of the future hasn't given us some sort of "space-warp" drive, the insignificant motes of force exerted by beams of light may do the trick!

THE END

GUEST EDITORIAL

By Lila Shaffer
Editor *Fantastic Adventures*

INEXORABLY, we seem to be drifting toward mass suicide in an ever-increasing momentum. As we contemplate the vicious and deadly weapons which man, in his fears continues to produce, we have the impulse to call out: "Hold on there. You're not accomplishing a thing, you're only destroying*yourself."* But no one is listening. Everybody is too intent on building his own protective arsenal, to stop to think how much better if we didn't need one in the first place.

Let's think about it. What are we? And what are we trying to do? There's this great big beautiful planet, rich in everything we could possibly want—or ever absorb. Enough of everything for everybody. And then there are people—*homo sapiens*—you and me.

God—or anything you want to call Him—created Heaven and Hell, and the Earth between. And on Earth he put Man, the highest thinking of all animals. With life, He gave man a free will, which probably includes the ability to commit suicide. But man suffers from delusions of grandeur. He's too highly impressed with an importance that isn't there. He's not irreplaceable, nor is he as tough or as smart as he thinks he is. Sure, he can blow himself to Kingdom Come. But 10,000 years from now trees and grasses will still cover the land and the seasons will go on.

All man will ever succeed in killing is *himself.*

It would stand to reason that God has plans for this planet of ours. With or without us. If man chooses to drop out, he will hardly be missed.

Throughout our entire history, we have been busy inventing weapons that would either put an end to warfare—or depopulate the world. Probably gun powder was the most terrifying invention of all. It created stupendous vistas of destruction—but the world survived. Hundreds of thousands of people may have been killed, but the world survived, with enough of man remaining to continue running the show.

When Robert Fulton launched the first steamboat on the Seine River that day in 1803, he was—without being aware of it—introducing a new era: the invincible navy. But the best this development did was to make the British fleet invincible for 100 years or so. And then other, and stronger, weapons came along.

WORLD WAR rushed in a triple dose of horror: the airplane, the tank, and poison gas. The awful aftermath of the gas was the nearest thing to bringing man to mutual agreement: it was the first weapon which man felt had to be eliminated.

But then Einstein's theories, and all the neutrons and protons and electrons—and it was August 1945 and an atomic bomb was dropped on two cities, with devastating results. But the world went on. And will continue to go on.

Let's face it. No bomb has ever been invented—and there's no possibility of one ever coming up—which will knock the seams of this planet apart. No weapon of destruction will ever be devised which can do the damage that one small tremor of nature can accomplish: like the San Francisco earthquake, the destruction of Pompeii, the cataclysm that removed Atlantis.

TRULY, only a creature as conceited as Man could indulge in the fears that are currently sweeping the earth. Only a creature steeped in his own egotism could seriously contemplate the possibility of destroying, with his feeble brain and hands, the work of a Creator, the power and scope of which can be only dimly conceived. We feel that we have gone far in our climb toward the stars and, in some ways, we have. But little is ever said concerning the departments in which we have progressed not at all.

And the backwardness far outweighs the progress. We look up into the depths of the heavens with scarcely more understanding of what it entails then had our club-bearing ancestors. Our minds are too puny to conceive either the structure of a space that never ends or—in relation to the complete concept—a space that has fixed boundaries somewhere beyond our reach. We have found, through stubborn searching, seemingly miracle-working drugs. But we know little of *why* they work. One could go on for hours, sounding the true depths of human ignorance.

In fact, it somehow smacks of sacrilege, to conceive a God that would allow a handful of microorganisms such as we, to endanger, by our stupidity, any of His majestic works.

So the sooner we get wise to ourselves, the better. The world will go on—and if we don't play the leading role on its stage, there will be other actors in our place; others more deserving, perhaps, of the gift of life.

OUR FAVORITE TOO

Ed:

Let me congratulate you on the selection and publication of Charles DeVet's *Infinity's Child.* Once every so often, science fiction turns up a tale of this excellence which gives the fans something to rave about. I hope we will continue to hear from Mr. DeVet who had the freshest slant on things I've ever had the pleasure to read.

—Frank Edwards Manhattan, Tenn.

FROM THE SCIENCE MAN

Paul:

This is just a note commenting on the second issue of IF. I liked *Resurrection Seven,* but for the most part, the remaining stories left me cold. I imagine you get plenty of favorable response, however. What really got me was the piece on Raymond. It was the fairest, most honest and genuinely objective piece of criticism or reportage I've ever seen in any s-f mag. You didn't flatter or cajole, or rip bitingly. You told the Palmer saga with plenty of emphasis on the intriguing Shaver thing as should have been told. Damned good!

My criticisms of the stories perhaps isn't fair, because I'm speaking somewhat as a jaded roue who has seen too much s-f. I'm too hipped on Heinlein and Clark I guess, to really enjoy any others from the s-f line. You're doing all right. Incidentally, whoever prints your mag does a bang-up make-up job.

—Henry Bott
6309 W. Grace St. Chicago, Ill.

Henry Bott is also Charles Recour who does that short, very interesting science stuff.

A TOUGH GUY TO GRAB

Ed:

. . . In my opinion, your first issue topped your second. How about grabbing another Browne story (if possible).

—Bacil Guiley
219 Jefferson St. Warren, Pa.

$3.50—TWELVE ISSUES

Dear Sir:

Just finished the second issue of IF. I thought the first one was a world-beater, but I can honestly say that issue #2 was the best single issue of science fiction I've ever read and I grab them all the minute they hit the stands. Due to the spotty performance of most of the others I've never felt assured about a magazine to send in a subscription. But if your next issue of IF comes even close to the first two, brother you'll have my subscription in the next mail—and that's a promise.

. . . Incidentally, I hope you have guts enough to keep the magazine free of the so-called active fan nonsense. I buy and read magazines for the stories in them, and any space given to other garbage is paid for by my money too.

—F. J. Robertson

2755 Constitution Rd. Camden, New Jersey

Mr. Robertson! What you said!

PAGING A PLAYWRIGHT

Dear Mr. Sturgeon:

My wife and I have just read your short story, *Never Underestimate* in this month's issue of IF magazine.

May I be so bold as to suggest you put this delightful and amusing tale into play form? Although we are not connected professionally with the theater, we feel sure that your charming plot and snappy dialogue would be enthusiastically received on the boards.

Thank you very much for the pleasant moments supplied by your story that is both provocative and amusing.

—Philip W. Rubin 111-14 76th Ave., Forest Hills, N. Y.

A STATEMENT OF POLICY

Dear Ed:

On the basis of your first two issues, I think we can rate IF among the top stf mags. As for the story ratings:

1.It Takes a Thief
2.Infinity's Child
3.Jungle in the Sky
4.The Revealing Pattern
5.Dreamer's World
6.Resurrection Seven
7.The Beast
8.Welcome Martians

Your cover, I thought, was the mag's worst point. Seems to me I've seen it before a hundred times. How about a quasi-modern art cover? At least it would be different.

A couple of the institutions of secondary education in this fair city, namely Central and North High, have organized fan clubs. The former has twelve members, including me, and the latter twenty-four.

By the way, why not publish a list of national science fiction clubs and requirements for membership?

—Jerry Watkins

2561 Jones St.

Omaha, Neb.

As a matter of policy, Jerry, we are not going to publicize fan clubs. Therefore, the item that a couple of institutions of secondary education in your fair city, namely Central and North High, have

organized fan clubs, the former having twelve members including you, and the latter twenty-two, cannot appear in these columns. So solly.

TWO GRIPES

Dear Sir:

I've just finished the May issue of IF. Liked it very much. I won't make any attempt to rate the stories because what I like sometimes I dislike at another time.

I do have a gripe, two in fact. Why must experience be the deciding factor so much? In your editorial you say, pardon me, in answer to a letter, that writers stay on top because they're good. I say they stay on top because they have been good. Just as long as it takes for a few stinkers to force the editors to take drastic action. It appears very much as if a writer's reputation counts all too highly when it comes to buying his stories. I depend on the editor of my favorite magazines to choose good stories and if he starts failing I'll quit buying.

My other gripe concerns the topic and twist the author gives the stories. Let one have the hero fail and there's a dearth of heroes failing. Every outstanding story has a host of copy cats hoping to cash in on the new twist. Every new theme gets worked to death.

But don't take my gripes too seriously. You can put in a stinker once in a while and I won't give up entirely. I might miss an issue or two but hope will rise up and I'll try again. I'm only trying to keep you on your toes. DON'T DEPEND ON YOUR REPUTATION. I think that accounts for more failures than any other Cause.

—Delbert C. Boecher

Port Byron, Ill. —AND IMPROVEMENT

Dear Editor:

Your second issue has just finished completely amazing meat the great deal of improvement IF has undergone in the short space of a month or two.

The "Jungle in the Sky" by Lesser was well written but could of had a better plot. Your short stories were of such good quality that I wish all mags would follow suit. The best was "Resurrection Seven". But the best story of the issue was "Infinity's Child" by Charles V. DeVet.

I don't see what was so great about your cover. It just didn't jell with me. That hairy arm holding hands with the hero while he quite deftly shoots his pistol (?) at the little green men. I'll take a Bronstell any day.

—Robert Kessler

North Hollywood, Calif.

Let us know what you think about the cover on the next (November) issue. We're trying to get the best nothingness.

LOVELIES, GHOULS AND FIRST ISSUES

Dear Sirs:

I have just finished reading your May issue of IF. It is great. Not many science fiction magazines come up to your quality. Most of them usually show a frontpiece of a well-proportioned lovely in the arms of a three-headed ghoul, who is about to be killed by a "Super-Hypo-Sonic Galaxy Blaster" held by the hero.

Again, let me say that this magazine is great; keep the good stories coming.

By the way, I missed your first issue of IF (March) and would like to have it. Enclosed please find 35c for it. Thank you.

—Paul Minches
Los Angeles, Calif.

Sorry, Paul, that we had to return your 35c, along with that of many others, because we had no available copies of the first (March) issue at the time you wrote. However, since then we have managed to obtain a limited supply and if you still want it, shoot us the 35c again.

NO FANTASY AND CHOCK FULL

Dear Editor:

For two years I've been an avid science fiction fan . . . Over this time I have acquired two pet hates: SF mags, which have around 2/3 fantasy (which I can't stand) and 35c mags that give you nothing for your money. IF answers both of these. No fantasy and a mag chockfull of stories. When I saw your first issue with 6 shorts, a novelette and a full length novel I said to myself "I don't care how had it is with so much in it I have to have it." I was really surprised when I didn't find a bad story in it. I raced to get your next issue. By the way, would you please tell Janet Steiner those old hacks (sarcastic) like Palmer, Lesser, Shaver, Sturgeon, and Phillips satisfy most of us just fine.

—Hal Shane
Lawrence, New York

WE HOPE OUR EGGS ARE, TOO!

Dear Mr. Fairman:

Congrats on a good new mag; your May "ish" compared favorably with any of the other digest-size mags in the SF field. I waited until now to write, so as to see your second "ish"; you can't really tell the merits of a mag by its first issue. I can now say, and that truly, that you have a 'zine worth reading; but first, a few gripes. (1) How about some better cover artists? also interiors. (2) Drop the Science briefs and put in more letters. There are too many of those little hunks of science going the rounds in stf today.

"Twelve Times Zero" was very good, but the shorts were all better. Ditto in the May "ish". Improve your novels. Personalities in SF I like—let's have more of it. Guest editorial . . . Keep it up in future issues . . . Incidentally, thanks for your *startling* expose of Palmer in May "ish"; our *Palmer For President* club greatly appreciated it .. So may Krishna bless you and may all Thy eggs be fertile.

—Bruce Beatie Walnut Creek, Cal.

TOPS

IN PUZZLE PLEASURE!

OVER 100 scintillating new word puzzles! Crosswords, Askews, Skeletons, Word Chains, Slidograms, Cryptograms, Diagramless, Crosties, Round-and-Round, Movies, Sports, Politics, Radio, Television—hours and hours of fun and thought-provoking entertainment! . . . Ask for QUALITY CROSSWORD PUZZLES whenever you are looking for puzzle pleasure! . . . At all newsstands —*only* 25 cents!