

## **8000 INTERSTELLAR EXILES**

The 2nd Adventure of The colonists. In an Unknown Sector of the Milky Way. On the grey beast of a planet which they have named...Grauntier.

These belligerent ex-Terranians, exiled from Earth, have begun to subjugate a new world. They could have created another Paradise on this unchartered globe but for the enmity of 2 strong men: one a determined defender of democracy, the other a fanatic disciple of dictatorship.

The democratic leader of the Free Settlers has suffered near fatal wounds...and this is where the medical knowledge of an alien life form enters the picture.

Learn, now, of the way of life on Grautier...and the role of—

# **THE BLUE DWARFS**

## **1/ ASSASSINS' MISSION**

"IT'S PRETTY WEIRD!" said Milligan. "Booster's sick and whatever it is he's got is plenty strange."

Mullon, though not one for strict observance of the finer rules of etiquette, had originally been muchly miffed when Milligan threw open his door without knocking first but was instantly mollified by his report. "Where is Booster?" he asked.

"At home. He just wanted to—"

"Alright. Have you told Doc Flaherty?"

"No, not yet. I—"

"Then run right over, man! Flaherty will have to take a look at Booster. Freddy will certainly go along."

A woman's voice rang out from the small house's 2nd room: "Of course I'll come! Milligan, go get the doctor!"

Milligan turned and raced out.

Freddy came out of the room she proudly called her kitchen although it served for more than that single

function and had been constructed accordingly.

"I'll be going, then," she said, brushing a vagrant strand of hair out of her face. "You finish up your list."

"At your command, Madame General!" Mullon smiled. "I'll be done by the time you get back."

Freddy left, leaving Mullon to his list, which he had been working on when Milligan came crashing in. When finished, the list would contain all the things a 4 man expedition to the northern mountains would require. The People's Assembly, of which Mullon was President, had accepted his proposal to send out an exploration party to scout the neighbouring areas to the west of Grautier's new city, Greenwich. Mullon had maintained that no one could guarantee the town's safety if the surrounding territory remained unexplored. That much was evident to everyone—with the exception of a handful of Hollander's supporters—and a decision had been reached to send out at least 2 parties: one to the western mountains, the other to the east where the lowland jungles cut off the wide grasslands with an impenetrable wall. Since only a single helicopter had been salvaged from the wreckage of the *Adventurous*—the spaceship that had carried the 8000 deportees from Earth—it would have to be used by both expeditions: first by the one into the mountains, then by the one down into the jungle.

Mullon himself had been charged with leading both parties and he threw himself into the task of preparing for them with unparalleled energy and enthusiasm.

Even so, he did not succeed in completing his list before Freddy came back. Mullon turned to her—and her terrified expression frightened him.

"What is it...?" he asked.

"Booster's dead!" Freddy cried. "It was awful—it went so fast!"

Mullon leaped up. "What did he die of?"

"Nobody knows," Freddy sobbed. "Flaherty's at a loss. He called Weeney and Ashbury in but neither of them know any more than he does."

"What was the disease like?"

Freddy wiped the tears out of her eyes and answered: "Booster was about to plough up some ground so he could test some seeds. Suddenly he felt weak in the knees. At first he thought it was just an attack of weakness brought on by moving to another planet. You know—we've all experienced it at one time or another. So he laid down to wait for it to pass. But it didn't. When he tried to stand up, he fell down. He called for help. Milligan found him and dragged him home. By this time Booster had blue swellings all over his skin. When Flaherty and I arrived, he was hardly even able to talk. 10 minutes later, he was dead."

"What did they do with the body?"

"The doctors took it with them for an autopsy."

Mullon had grown extremely earnest. "I hope the disease isn't contagious!" he murmured.

It did not seem to be, as things worked out. 2 days passed without a new outbreak of the disease being reported but on the 3rd day 2 men came down with it. It was known that these 2 had never had anything

to do with Booster in the past.

From them the disease followed a completely different pattern. As before, an attack of weakness came first, but some hours went by before the blue pustules appeared—and above all, in neither case did the disease end in the patient's death. Or, at least, not yet. Both of the sick men were put under the care of Drs. Flaherty, Weeney and Ashbury in their 'Hospital'—a cabin somewhat larger than usual in the middle of the small town.

Nevertheless the recent events were so disquieting that Mullon called a special session of the People's Assembly to hear the 3 doctors' report.

They did not have much to say. On the Earth they had all been general practitioners, after all, and now they had been forced to deal with Bacteriology for the first time in their lives. That branch of medicine was nothing easily learned and they were having their share of difficulty.

Weeney, youngest of the 3 doctors and giving the impression of being inordinately ambitious, stated that he had been successful in identifying the cause of the strange disease, isolating it and starting a culture of it. According to Weeney's opinion, the results of the research done so far indicated that the virus would react to the strongest Earthly medicines like an elephant would to a fly: which is to say, not at all. In any event, Weeney went on, more exhaustive research would require at least several weeks, so people should not let lack of success at the beginning terrify them.

The People's Assembly then decided that although the situation was quite serious, the planned expeditions should not be delayed because of it. On the strength of that, Mullon set the following morning for the first expedition's departure.

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3 more outbreaks of the disease were reported the next morning. The newly infected persons were brought to the hospital, as well, and placed under round-the-clock observation. The disease was not taking with them the rapid course it had with Booster. Meanwhile, Weeney and his 2 colleagues had come to the conclusion that Booster's quicker death had been an exceptional case.

To accompany him on the expedition, Mullon had chosen Freddy, his wife; Milligan, a former member of the *Adventurous*' crew; and Pashen, once an enthusiastic follower of Hollander but who now said that he had realized Hollander's plans were ultimately a fast way for the settlers to bring ruin upon themselves. Pashen had been a medical orderly on Earth, which was why Mullon had chosen him. He could not take a doctor along, since all of them were needed in Greenwich, so he selected someone who at least knew a little about medicine.

In the early morning hours the helicopter was loaded with the things Mullon had put on his list: among the more important were food, weapons and a small short-wave radio for keeping in touch with Greenwich while the expedition was in the mountains.

Mullon started at 7 o'clock, local time, as the eastern horizon was becoming just a little lighter. The helicopter rotors, moved by small jets, began to revolve and the heavy craft lifted from the ground, humming and trembling, then shot upwards into the sky and disappeared into the early-dawn gloom.

No one noticed the 4 men at the small town's north-eastern boundary who were attentively watching the helicopter's takeoff. One of the 4 was a small, heavyset man who, as one could see when he moved, limped in the tight leg. Walter S. Hollander, formerly the leader of the sect of Natural Philosophy and now Mullon's bitterest enemy, had recovered from his wound but the stiffness in his right leg remained as a constant reminder.

"Alright, let's go!" Hollander ordered. "It'll be light in an hour at most and by then you must be so far away that you can't be seen from Greenwich. You know what you have to do, of course?"

"Of course," answered one of the 3 others. "I just hope you know what you're asking from us."

Hollander nodded. "I'm well aware of that and you'll get your reward afterwards. You'll become my closest associates as soon as Mullon is out of the way. Now get going!"

The 3 men followed the order without a word. They went first off to the left, where the grass had been so trampled by preparations for the helicopter's taking off that it would no longer show their tracks, then turned to the west and in a few minutes disappeared in the early morning half-light.

Hollander watched them go. He was a hardened man but as he saw his 3 hirelings vanish, unseen by anyone else, into the faintly luminous gloom, their stolen weapons over their shoulders, he felt a premonition of what would happen.

No one would know where the 3 men who had stolen the weapons out of the arsenal had gone off to. When anyone started looking for them—and it would be at least a day before a search was begun—a letter would be found according to which '3 conscientious men have left the city on their own initiative to scout the immediate vicinity and thus contribute their share to the safety of Greenwich.' Under such circumstances the thievery of the weapons—all the city's arms were held by the People's Assembly—would not count for much.

However the 3 men—Harper, Glannon and Cislarczik—would ambush Mullon when he least expected an attack and return to a city where Hollander had long before taken advantage of the death of his enemy by taking over the rulership for himself.

If the plan fell through... well, a few men would stand ready west of the city to make sure that Harper, Glannon and Cislarczik were never seen again in Greenwich. Mullon would never then be able to use one of the 3 as a star witness against his enemy Hollander.

No, there would be no failures... only a delay at most. Satisfied with his plans, Hollander returned home, arriving before it was light enough for anyone to see where he had come from.

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The distance from Greenwich to the first foothills in the north was about 60 miles. Mullon, sitting at the controls himself, flew the helicopter along at a moderate speed, several hundred yards above the ground. He thus reached the western end of the grasslands, which ascended gently all the way from the jungle at the other end, and crossed into the rocky mountain area just as the sun was coming up.

To the 4 occupants of the helicopter, the view offered by the radiantly clear light of the blue-white sun was overpowering in its size and loneliness. Mountains that no human eye had ever seen at close range reared far distant into the blue-white heavens, torn by faults and crevices that seemed to stretch deep into the heart of the planet itself. Where the mountainsides had consisted of relatively soft rock, rain, frost and storm had eaten away weird and uncanny shapes that seemed to stand guard over the ravines.

Mullon brought the helicopter up to 12000 feet for an overview of the foothills. Next to him sat Freddy, operating the built-in camera. Foot after foot of film sped humming through the machine from one reel to the other.

Meanwhile Milligan and Pashen surveyed the terrain below with their naked eyes. Shortly Milligan spotted a whitish-grey spot immediately below, moving swiftly across the face of a steeply rising mountain wall. So the mountains were not as devoid of life as they had seemed at first glance. There were animals down there and if one could see them from an altitude of about 6000 feet, they had to be rather large.

Mullon was a technician and knew his way around helicopters. He knew, therefore, that he could not descend much farther before he would be required to determine the patterns of air movements over the mountains. To descend suddenly into the confusion of conflicting winds and collisions of air masses of differing temperatures would be sheer folly.

Mullon spent the next 2 hours finding where the dangerous areas were and where he could move without risk. Then he let the helicopter drop to a low altitude and glide along just above the sides of the mountains.

But the animals Milligan had seen earlier had disappeared.

Mullon sent the helicopter through a narrow pass whose bottom lay some 7500 feet above the foot of the mountains. The pass stretched for some miles through the mountains, beneath extremely high rock walls that seemed to touch the sky on either side. On the other side of the mountain ridge, the pass opened up on a deep and broad valley which, to Mullon's surprise, was heavily overgrown with bushes and isolated trees. The valley ran more or less exactly from north to south and with its shadow-casting plant growth seemed so fitting for a temporary camp that Mullon landed the helicopter without further hesitation. He brought it down next to a huge plant growth that stood by itself in the midst of the valley floor.

The silence that followed the landing of the helicopter was not unimpressive. A soft wind blew through the wide valley and slightly rustled the smallest branches on the trees—and that was the only sound to be heard.

Freddy shut the camera off. Mullon turned around and addressed Milligan and Pashen. "Break out the tent and put it up under the tree. We're going to stay here for awhile, I think."

Milligan and Pashen responded by setting to work with energetic fervour while Freddy and Mullon remained sitting in the helicopter cab.

Freddy stared off into the sun-splashed valley where heat waves seemed to dance in the distance. She murmured: "A strange world... but a wonderful one!"

Mullon was less inclined to sentimentality. "It might as well be hell if we can't find any water nearby!"

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In the meantime Harper, Glannon and Cislarczik experienced some hard going as the hours went by. Since stealing one of the caterpillar-tracked vehicles that had been salvaged from the *Adventurous* would have been too much of a risk, they had been forced to cover on foot the same distance Mullon and his companions had flown over in so short a time in the helicopter.

From sunrise on, the blue-white sun drenched the gently rising plain with a flood of unbearable heat. Their gun-butts began to burn in their hands and their hair grew so hot that it became painful to run their hands through it. It was hard to breathe and instead of appearing to draw nearer, the mountains seemed to fall even farther away in the shimmering air.

The grassy plain was dotted with scattered bushes and trees none very tall or large. Harper, leader of the trio, quickly realized he would not get very far if he attempted to walk across the plain in the usual manner so he and his men rested for at least a minute in the shade of each bush or tree they came to, then made a quick dash across the sun-scorched grass to the next plant, which was usually several hundred yards farther on.

In this manner they made relatively rapid progress but Harper figured they could keep it up for 2 or 3 more hours at most. The rest period they would need then to recover from exhaustion would take more time than could be allowed.

Harper realized that Hollander had sent them off at the wrong time. It was crazy to make a forced march of 25 if not more miles across an all but shadeless plain on a sunny day. If they wanted to get much farther, they would have to make the trek at night.

Towards 8 o'clock Harper called a halt in the shadow of a tree. "We aren't going to get very far this way," he said.

"You can say that again," said Cislarczik sarcastically, looking around. "I'm surprised my tongue isn't already hanging out like a dog's. But what are we going to do now?"

"Wait," decided Harper. "We'll wait until the sun goes down and things cool off a bit."

"We'll lose almost 30 hours that way!" Glannon objected.

"So? It's better to lose 30 hours than kill ourselves in this heat," Harper retorted.

"OK, you're right," said Cislarczik, "but what'll we do right now? Can we take a drink?" He reached for the canteen hanging from his belt.

"Don't do anything stupid!" Harper exclaimed. "We may need the treated water more later on. The river can't be far from here—we'll get our drink there."

Cislarczik looked at him angrily. "What do I care about the treated water?" he demanded roughly. "I'm thirsty and I'm not going to take another step—I'm going to get a drink!"

Harper glared back, dangerously quiet. "Just try it!"

Cislarczik had known Harper for only a few days. He did not know what it meant for Harper to speak so softly and quietly. He unsnapped the canteen from his belt, unscrewed the cap and started to drink.

Before the first water droplets even touched his lips, Harper's fist slammed into his face from the left. With a yell, Cislarczik let the canteen fall and staggered to one side.

"Why, you—" he growled. The pain had made him almost a madman and some moments had to pass before he could see clearly again.

Then he threw himself at Harper. Cislarczik was a tall, broad-shouldered man and he was certain he could knock the smaller Harper to the ground in the first rush. He did not take into consideration the fact that Harper had something he did not: a cool head.

Harper stepped back and let Cislarczik rush past, then grabbed his neck in a lightning move, pulled him back somewhat and slammed the side of his right hand into Cislarczik's back, between the shoulder blades.

Cislarczik fell on the ground.

"The canteen!" Glannon cried, looking as though he had only now recovered his senses. "The water's running out of it!"

Harper looked around. Cislarczik's canteen lay a few steps away in the grass, its contents slowly flowing out and draining into the dry ground. Harper picked it up, held it with the mouth pointing downwards and allowed the rest of the water to fall out. "That'll teach him," he muttered.

Glannon swallowed.

"You've got paper and a stylus, right?" Harper went on, addressing Glannon. "Write him a note"—he pulled out a small compass, aligned it and made an observation—"that we've gone towards the north-northwest to reach the river."

Glannon did as he was told. Only after he had laid the sheet of paper in the grass next to the unconscious Cislarczik did he dare say: "But he doesn't have a compass! How is he going to know where the north-northwest is?"

Harper shrugged. "That's his problem. He didn't have to behave like an idiot."

They went on, not bothering themselves any further about the unconscious man they were leaving behind. Harper, anyway; Glannon was considerably more sensitive than Harper and worried. Harper's blows had been hard and pitiless. If Cislarczik lay unconscious any longer than the grass needed to spring back up and obliterate all sign of Harper's and Glannon's trail, he would have no choice but to follow the slope back down towards Greenwich. Whether or not he would find the town or go on past was a moot question.

Harper's pace was energetic, as though the heat no longer affected him. Glannon found it hard to keep up. The thought of plenty of cool water at the river gave him a little extra strength.

An hour went by. Then they began to hear a dull roar from somewhere in front of them. A little later they saw a dark line cutting through the grass ahead and 10 minutes after that they spotted the cloud of water vapour shimmering above the deep river gorge. In the glare of the sun a long, narrow rainbow stretched out of the spray and arced across the rushing stream.

## 2/ THE DEVIL'S BREW

They had been lucky. While Milligan and Pashen were still busy setting up the tents, Freddy and Mullon had taken a long walk around the area of their camp and in the process had found a small pond in the middle of some thick bushes. It was fed by 2 rivulets coming down from the western mountain wall. The pond had no outlet—which meant only evaporation and seepage balanced the steady inflow of water.

The pond was no more than a few steps away from the tents. Single trees grew along the banks and spread their branches so far across the water that they met in the middle. No wonder, then, that Mullon had not seen the pond from the helicopter.

Once the tents were up, Mullon passed out the breakfast rations. With them came water from the newly discovered pond, which perhaps tasted strange but it was good and was delightfully cool.

Afterwards, Mullon saw to the chores which were routine at any camping site: collecting soil, plant and water samples; drawing provisional maps; and determining the expedition party's current position.

It was noon when Mullon was finished and then he called for a 2-hour rest period. Following that, at 2200 hours—early afternoon on Grautier—Mullon and Pashen took off in the helicopter to fly along the valley and add more details to the maps in both directions.

Meanwhile, Freddy was writing the written report of the expedition and Milligan had nothing to do but stand watch over the camp. Since there had as yet been not the least sign of any animals—beetles and butterflies excepted—he did not consider his task a very difficult one. He sat in the shade, his back against a tree trunk, and after a drowsy half-hour fell asleep.

Freddy found him thus when she had finished writing her report an hour later. She let him go on sleeping and considered for awhile what she could do that would be useful. She finally turned towards the pond she and Mullon had discovered that morning.

It was refreshingly cool in the shade of the giant tree at the edge of the water. Freddy found a small patch of grass and lay down. The heat of the day, made bearable by the shade and water-evaporation, and the stillness had a drugging effect. Freddy no longer fought to keep from falling asleep.

But then, in the undergrowth behind her, she suddenly heard a light rustling. She sat up and looked around. At first she saw nothing but the bushes, standing dusty and unmoving in the sun. After awhile, however, the rustling repeated itself and at the same time a branch of a bush little more than a yard away from Freddy moved.

Freddy stared in terror. She carried no weapons with her. She wanted to get up and run away but at that moment the fist-sized head of a creature like none she had ever seen before appeared between the



branches.

Freddy did not move. The head emerged farther from the bush and behind it came a broad and flat scaly body. The large, yellowish eyes seemed to be sizing Freddy up. The wide mouth was half-open, revealing a row of sharp teeth. The animal moved, by undulating along its flat belly, producing the rustling sound that had alerted Freddy.

A snake, Freddy thought in alarm. The creature pushed itself farther out of the underbrush and raised itself so far up on its forebody that its repulsive head swayed back and forth less than 2 feet away from Freddy's face. She could smell the stench that the reptile seemed to gush forth,

If only Milligan would come!

He was asleep, the idiot! How could he sleep when he had watch duty?

The snake oozed farther. Freddy forced herself not to follow the movements of its head with her eyes. She was in the first place afraid of falling into some kind of trance and in the 2nd place it was possible the back & forth motion of her eyeballs could be a movement the snake would notice.

Freddy did not know how long she sat there, unmoving.

Then there was a light humming to be heard from the south. It rapidly swelled into the familiar roaring of the helicopter.

Horace was coming back!

For a few seconds Freddy's heart beat wildly with joy. Then, however, it struck her that Mullon would not be able to see her from the helicopter and that he did not even have any intention of landing: he was planning to fly on to survey the northern end of the valley.

The strange noise bothered the snake little. For some time its head swayed in a somewhat slower tempo but as the humming faded away into the north it took up the old pace again and continued to stare at its victim with cold, yellowish eyes.

Freddy sensed that she would not be able to hold out much longer. Sooner or later the moment would come in which she simply collapsed, her nerves gone and her muscles no longer able to support her.

Somewhat later she heard a voice calling in the distance. It came nearer, then fell away and finally approached so closely at one point she could clearly understand it:

"...Freddy! Mrs. Mullon! Freddy...!"

It was Milligan. He had awakened and begun to search for her.

Let him come here! Freddy prayed.

But Milligan did not come any nearer. His calls grew more distant again.

If she did not want to simply fall victim to the snake, Freddy realized she would have to attempt something on her own initiative.

How fast was a snake?

If I leap up and into the bushes, maybe it won't be able to follow me, Freddy considered. Or, better yet, if I let myself fall backwards into the water. Can snakes swim?

Of course they can swim, you stupid girl! You saw a grass snake swimming in a pond on Earth not 6 months ago.

Whatever! I've got to do something!

Slowly, ever so slowly, so that no movement could be seen, Freddy tried to put her weight on her right leg. A stab of pain shot through her foot and Freddy came within a hair of crying out.

With numb feet I won't get half a yard, she thought. Alright then, I'll have to go backwards into the water.

She hesitated momentarily—like someone who clings to the hope that, the apparently inevitable may yet be avoided by a miracle at the last moment.

And then the miracle *did* happen!

Freddy suddenly heard a burst of odd noises from the bushes, sounding like the shouting of a small child.

The snake's pendulations slowed as it heard. After the series of noises had been repeated a few times, Freddy heard crackling and rustling in the brush and then she noticed the shadows of some sort of movement. The temptation to turn her head and look was great.

But Freddy remained unmoving. Her heart began to beat faster as she saw the snake completely stop swaying, let its forebody sink back to the ground and slither away off to the left.

Freddy waited until she could no longer hear the rustling of the snake.

Then she simply allowed herself to fall to the side. The blood flowed back into her numb feet and legs, causing pain almost unbearable. Moaning, she rolled over and looked in the direction in which the snake had disappeared.

What she saw was extraordinary. A small, light-grey creature, rather resembling an Earthly Rhesus monkey, crouched on the low-hanging branch of one of the huge trees at the water's edge and watched curiously the snake crawling through the grass towards the tree's trunk.

When the snake reached the trunk and began to wind its way up, the little monkey let forth a mocking-sounding "Guhr-guhr-guhr!", leaped down from the branch and landed on the ground little more than a yard behind the snake.

The snake noticed that it had been fooled and turned. The monkey sat motionless in the grass. The snake, nearsighted as it was, raised its forebody into the air and began to sway in search of its victim.

The monkey sprang out of the way. The snake's ugly head moved for it like lightning but the monkey was agile enough to dodge the attack. It leaped a bit closer to the shore. The snake followed and the game repeated itself. Once again the monkey sat motionless for awhile, then suddenly sprang up, avoiding the pouncing snake's head with an unbelievably skilful turning manoeuvre and leaping closer to

the water's edge.

At length the monkey sat on the tip of a tongue of land that protruded a few yards into the water. Retreat was cut off, since the tiny peninsula was only a pace wide and the snake would not let its victim escape if it tried to spring past. To the rear there was only the water of the pond and Freddy had no reason to doubt that this little monkey was any less water-shy than his Earthly counterparts.

The monkey however continued to stare at the snake boldly and curiously. It did not seem to be afraid.

Freddy watched as it remained where it was, unmoving, while the snake moved within a foot and a half of it. Then—and Freddy screamed loudly in fear for the life of her small savior—the monkey quickly sprang and clamped its jaws around the snake's throat, right below the head.

The snake reared up, trying to either shake its tormenter or to reach it with its teeth. Neither ploy worked. The monkey held tight. The snake, in its convulsive and whirling struggles to throw the monkey off, came ever closer to the water's edge. Twisting and turning, the snake's forebody went past the peninsula's edge, taking with it the monkey who had long lost his contact with solid ground.

Freddy leaped to her feet. She saw how the monkey suddenly let go of the snake's throat—at just the right moment to be propelled back onto land by the snake's lashing movements. Suddenly free of the extra weight, the snake slid a little farther off the bank and splashed heavily into the water.

The monkey, safe on shore, watched what happened to his enemy and cried triumphantly: "Kekekeke!"

Then something took place that made Freddy shudder to watch. The pond suddenly became alive. The water began to bubble. Small jet-black shapes shot from all sides towards the snake.

The reptile started to rear up and thrash about with its broad, flat tail but the little black fish had seized their prey and would not let it go.

In a few moments nothing remained of the snake but a slowly sinking skeleton.

Freddy, who had watched the gruesome spectacle speechlessly, felt something touch her leg. She looked down and saw the small, grey-furred monkey looking back up at her with large and curious eyes.

Freddy bent down to take hold of it and strike its fur. The monkey willingly let her do it but after awhile seemed to become impatient. It sprang a short distance away, then chattering, boldly stopped and raised an arm as though wishing to show Freddy the way.

She followed him, which he seemed to enjoy tremendously. He pushed into the bushes and swung up onto one of the higher branches. Then he raised his arm again and pointed in the same direction as before.

Freddy had the impression it was trying to lead her somewhere. She followed it for a time, making an effort to mark her trail so that she could find her way back to the pond.

Only when the monkey left the brush which ringed the pond for some hundred yards and gestured to the western mountain wall did Freddy decide she had gone far enough and that she ought to turn back if she did not want to get lost. So she stopped. The monkey was not agreeable at all to that. It started to chatter and pointed a few times with evident impatience in the direction it wanted to lead Freddy. Finally it hopped back to her, sat down and raised both arms to her as though begging. Its eyes looked large

and sad.

Freddy did not give in. When the monkey realized she could not be convinced to follow any farther, it hopped around her a few times, cried out a number of times with strange sounds and finally sprang off towards the west. Freddy could see it until it reached the rocky wall. The stone had the same light grey colour as its fur and thus Freddy could no longer see the oddly comical animal.

Rather thoughtfully, Freddy remained where she was and looked around to see if there was a 2nd snake somewhere in the vicinity. Then she tried to figure out her little rescuer. It was known that monkeys in general and Rhesus monkeys in particular could often behave like human beings to an amazing degree.

But what Freddy had just experienced here seemed to go far beyond that. She was ready to admit that her rescuer had considerably more brain inside its skull than its Earthly counterparts.

She turned to go back to the pond and from there to the camp. At that moment something rustled and crackled in the bushes. Freddy took a terrified step back.

Then Milligan came panting out of the brush, a gun in his hand. He looked around and discovered Freddy.

"Thank God!" he cried. "I thought for sure that..." Freddy's anger, brought forth in her helplessness against the snake had long since flown. "You were almost right!" she answered with a relieved laugh. "For a moment there I was just about to say goodbye to this lovely world."

She told him briefly what had happened. Milligan's embarrassment increased with every word. "And all that," he finally said, "just because I went to sleep! If Mullon wants to skin me alive, it'll serve me right."

"Don't worry—he won't," Freddy assured him. "Nobody had any idea how dangerous this place is. Anyway, I should have told you when I went off by myself."

Milligan nodded, still not very happy. "I hope Mullon doesn't think different than you!"

Mullon agreed with his wife, however, saying later: "We know now what the situation is. I think that after today no one will sleep while they're standing watch." He glanced at his wife. "Nor will anyone run off without first telling someone where they're going."

Otherwise the story of the little monkey interested Mullon more than anything else. Freddy had memorized carefully the exact point in the western rock wall where she had seen the animal disappear and Mullon decided to investigate the wall as soon as possible. Freddy's small rescuer was the first representative of the primate class the settlers on Grautier had discovered.

Following Freddy's suggestion—the discoverer has the right to name the discovery, of course—the monkey species was dubbed 'Mungos'. Freddy had studied galactic biology in Terrania before going with Mullon and knew that an animal of the same name was to be found on Earth; she had decided that the name 'Mungo' fit her discovery.

Mullon and Pashen had returned with the helicopter towards 2500 hours. According to the custom now in effect on Grautier, a 3-hour rest period was called, to last until shortly before 2900 hours. Mullon had the intention of catching at least one of the black pond-dwellers before the evening was done—the fish that Freddy had escaped only because her feet could no longer carry her and to whom the monkey had so determinedly and inexorably led the snake.

The attempt to catch one of the monkeys in the western mountain wall was set for early the next morning. Mullon believed that it would be a long and difficult undertaking.

As things worked out, it was not quite as difficult as he imagined it would be.

Also at 2500 hours that day, Harper and Glannon left their cool, shaded rest spot under the overhanging riverbank and took up the march once more. They had paused there for more than 12 hours. Of Cislarczik they had seen nothing more.

Though the sun was still relatively high in the sky, the greatest heat was over. Harper and Glannon maintained a brisk pace: a little less than 3 miles an hour, according to Harper's estimate. That speed was considerable when one considered that in the first place they were going steadily uphill and that in the 2nd place the gravity was 20% greater than Earth's.

Harper did not seem to be concerned any further about Cislarczik but Glannon worried all the more.

Harper did not spare himself or his companion. Mile after mile passed beneath their feet. In the radiance of the setting sun, the mountains appeared noticeably closer for the first time. At sunset Harper ordered a short rest pause; then, half an hour later, set off again. "I hope you don't think nights are for sleeping," he growled to Glannon. "I want to see those mountains close up tomorrow morning!"

Glannon nodded indifferently and answered: "That's alright with me. Just be sure your feet will hold up, though."

Harper did not reply. They went on, his illuminated compass showing them the way. Until midnight their pace did not bring them any significant discomfort—aside from a numb feeling in the legs. The ground had soaked up the day's heat and was radiating it slowly back into the open air.

But then it grew cold. Harper and Glannon tried to force their way through the chill by walking more quickly but the faster they moved the greater the pain in their legs.

Harper had to call another halt, which they spent sitting on the ground, rubbing their hands together and waving their arms in an attempt to keep warm.

Then they ran on.

So it went for the next 14 hours. Then, out of the darkness before them, the first glow of day appeared—a golden glimmer on the highest mountaintops, reflected from the rising sun.

It grew gradually light and the foothills could be seen not far ahead.

A grassy valley cut through the mountains in a westerly direction and the entrance to the valley was no more than 2 or 3 miles away. There they would rest.

They reached their goal. At the valley entrance, in a recess along the southern valley wall, they made their camp.

Which is to say they let themselves collapse and fell asleep in the same instant.

\* \* \* \*

When Milligan tried to stand up at the end of the 3-hour rest period, his legs gave way. He fell over and remained there, lying in a prone position. Mullon thought Milligan had sprained his ankle and tried to help him up.

But Milligan could no longer stand up. He was so weak that he fell down when not held up.

Half an hour later the first symptoms of that mysterious disease appeared: blue pustules.

Mullon radioed Greenwich immediately and learned that Weeney had achieved a partial success in fighting the sickness. He had succeeded in slowing down the activity of the virus with one of the medications brought from Earth and if not curing the disease, at least bringing it to a standstill.

Then Mullon and Pashen loaded Milligan aboard the helicopter. Mullon wanted to fly the patient back to Greenwich but when he tried to turn the motor on, the machinery responded with a single rattling noise and died completely.

Mullon then tried to locate the problem but although he was a technician and familiar with helicopters, he was not successful. Meanwhile the sun sank and a flight to Greenwich was no longer even thinkable. The narrowness of the passes and the height of the mountains would have made such an enterprise fatal and one simply could not risk the only helicopter available to 8000 settlers.

Not to mention the fact Mullon had no more light to continue his investigation of the helicopter's propulsion system.

They would have to wait until the next morning, even though Milligan could be long dead by then.

Mullon assigned periods of watch-duty to the others, then took the first 3-hour period himself. The afflicted Milligan could not be left without anyone to keep an eye on him.

Milligan accepted his fate calmly. He was conscious and even the breakdown of the helicopter did not seem to bother him. "Don't worry, Boss," he said to Mullon, "everything will be alright!"

Mullon's watch-period ticked away without incident. He let 3½ hours go, since he did not feel tired himself and wanted to let the others have a little extra rest. Only then did he wake Freddy.

In the meantime, Milligan had fallen asleep.

Freddy took a gun and a small flashlight and sat down in front of the tent in which Milligan was sleeping. Next to her burned a small lantern, which Mullon had put up during his watch. The lantern threw a circle of weak light into the darkness and attracted a number of beetles and night butterflies.

Freddy spent her time observing the flying insects and since she did it with expert knowledge in the field, she was able at the same time to fulfil one of the expedition's objectives.

In this manner 3 hours passed relatively quickly. Freddy remained where she was, however. She wanted to wake Pashen only when she was so tired she could no longer keep her eyes open. It had not gotten to

that point yet: the variety of beetles and butterflies swarming around the small lantern offered no chance for monotony.

In spite of the intensity of Freddy's concentration on the insects she did not miss hearing a light rustling from the direction of the pond, suddenly coming through the bushes.

Freddy let fall the shining beetle that had been on her hand and reached for the flashlight. She flicked it on and turned it into the direction from which had come the rustling.

Her success was instant. The rustling became louder but quickly moved away. At the same time, the unknown creature made sounds that seemed terrified and fear struck.

Freddy switched off the flashlight and waited. After about 10 minutes the rustling began to approach again. Freddy patiently allowed it to come towards her until she heard a light thump, which meant that the unknown creature, whatever it might be, had sprung out of the bushes and onto the grass.

At that moment Freddy switched the flashlight on again. The harsh flood of light caught a small grey-white furred being that held its tiny front paws up in front of its eyes in a gesture of terror.

Considerable surprise was evident on both sides. Just as Freddy came to the realization that the bright light must be uncomfortable for the little monkey and was about to point the flashlight in another direction, the Mungo pulled its hands away from its face, turned and disappeared with one broad leap into the bushes.

Freddy was not satisfied, however. She was sorry that she had frightened the little fellow away. It was very possible that it was the same monkey that had saved her from the snake that afternoon. She began to call out.

The Mungo moved only once she had remembered a few of the sounds her rescuer had made earlier that day and tried to imitate them: "Gai-gai-gai... chrrrr... guhr-guhr-guhr..."

The results were astonishing. When Freddy paused, she heard rustling from all sides coming towards her. And soon appeared 6 small and curious, and at the same time amazed, faces in the narrow circle of light from the lantern.

Freddy stretched her hand out to one of the Mungos and the little fellow sprang the rest of the way to her. He looked up at her so winsomely that Freddy began to laugh.

Someone came up from behind and rested a hand on her shoulder. "Who's making funny noises in the middle of the night?" he asked.

It was Mullon. The Mungos did not seem to be afraid of him. They looked at him with the same curiosity as they did Freddy when he stepped into the light from the lantern.

"I imitated their speech to call them to me," Freddy explained. "The flashlight had scared them away."

"And they let themselves be called to you?"

"See for yourself."

One of the Mungos—the first to come forward—had in the meantime gone to the entrance to Milligan's

tent and was tugging at the flap. He looked at Mullon and Freddy so demandingly there was no more doubt that he wanted into the tent.

"What does he want there?" asked Mullon.

"I don't know," Freddy laughed. "Ask him!"

Mullon bent down to the little monkey, who tugged at the tent flap all the more. Mullon hesitated a bit, then raised the flap. The Mungo slowly walked into the tent. His 5 companions remained behind.

It was dark inside the tent until Freddy raised the lantern and held it behind the Mungo. He had already found his way to Milligan's cot in the darkness and now stood in front of the sick man. He looked back & forth from Milligan to Mullon, who had come in behind him.

Freddy raised the lantern high enough that the light touched Milligan's face and in a few moments he opened his eyes. "What in..." he mumbled sleepily and confused.

"You have visitors," answered Mullon.

Milligan looked to the side and discovered the little monkey. "Ah... is that the little guy who saved Mrs. Mullon this afternoon...?"

"I don't know, Milligan," said Freddy, "but it looks like it in any case."

The Mungo had followed the brief conversation with such attentiveness that it looked like he understood every word. Now, as everyone grew quiet, he sprang up on Milligan's bed and began to pull the man's shirt apart where it was unbuttoned at the collar. The blue spots all over Milligan's skin came into view. The Mungo laid its small, delicate hand on one of the pustules, looked at Freddy and with a deep and bewailing voice cried: "Uuuuuuh... ep-ep!"

Mullon bent down to him. "Yes, it's terrible," he answered, as serious as if he had understood what the monkey wanted to tell him.

The Mungo began to chatter and gesticulate with his arms. Mullon did not doubt that the monkey was not only excited but that he wanted to say something too.

"Can anyone help me brush up on my Mungoese?" Mullon inquired half-mockingly and half-desperately.

The Mungo seemed to understand that he was not being understood. With a long jump that surprised Mullon he sprang down from Milligan's bed and out of the tent. As Mullon and Freddy followed, they heard a sharp, shrill cry and when they finally emerged from the tent, the 6 Mungos had vanished without a trace.

Mullon scratched his head. "If I only knew what all this means," he murmured, thoroughly at a loss.

"I think I can tell you," Freddy answered. "They want to help Milligan."

Mullon looked at her, startled. Then he started to laugh. "You aren't serious! How could a bunch of little monkeys be able to help a sick Terran?"

"Let's wait and see," she suggested.



Mullon sat down in the grass next to his wife. Again came the rustling in the bushes and a moment later the monkeys appeared in the light from the lantern.

This time, however, they had brought something with them: they carried whole bunches of blue-green, fleshy leaves between their teeth. They laid the leaves before Freddy as though she had sent them out to get them. Then 5 of the monkeys stepped back to the edge of the light while the 6th stood in front of Freddy and looked at her demandingly.

"Now what?" Freddy asked, smiling.

The monkey took 3 or 4 of the leaves and put them in his mouth, then proceeded to chew on them. After a bit he stopped chewing and looked around as though searching for something.

"He needs a spittoon," Mullon ventured.

Freddy found a plastic bowl and placed it before the Mungo. He bent over and spat a solid stream of soupy green liquid into the bowl. Then he put more leaves into his mouth and began to chew energetically on them as well.

The other monkeys came over and helped him with the work. In a short time the bowl was half-full with the green and watery mush.

"And now?" asked Freddy.

One of the Mungos tried to lift the bowl but was not successful. So Freddy picked it up. The Mungo chattered in approval, then sprang to the tent flap. Mullon raised it and let Freddy and the monkey in. The other 5 remained outside as before.

Milligan was still awake. "Is he back again?" he asked weakly.

"Yes," answered Mullon, "and it looks like he's brought some medicine for you."

"The monkey...?"

"Yes."

Milligan raised himself up as far as his slight strength would carry him. The Mungo had gone to the head-end of his cot, thought for a moment, then sprang up. He settled by Milligan's head, stretched his arm out carefully and pointed to Milligan's mouth.

"No!" exclaimed Mullon horrified. "He's supposed to drink this stuff?"

Unmoved, the monkey held his tiny finger close to Milligan's lips, looking meaningfully at the bowl Freddy held in her hands.

"That's evidently what he means, alright," Milligan decided. "Let me have the stuff. Maybe it'll help."

Freddy gave him the bowl and before anyone had time to even breathe again, Milligan had swallowed the entire contents with a few large gurgling gulps.

He made a wry expression. "Brrr... good it wasn't—but hopefully it'll help."

No one had paid attention to the little Mungo in the past few moments. He had sprung down from Milligan's bed to sit on the ground. He waved his arms and the look on his face would have fit anyone who had just succeeded in pulling off a great prank.

Milligan yawned loudly. "I'm so tired," he murmured. "I think I'll go back to sleep."

"Do that," Mullon told him. "Sleep is always good. We'll be coming in to look after you."

They went out, the Mungo hopping in front of them. Mullon expected him to join his companions and leave but instead all the Mungos remained and sat around the lantern.

"What are they waiting for now?" asked Mullon in surprise.

"To see if Milligan gets well or not," answered Freddy.

Mullon laughed. "You and your infinite trust. I hope it isn't disappointed. Anyway, I'm going back to bed. Do you want to wake up Pashen yet?"

Freddy shook her head. "I'm still not tired."

Mullon disappeared into his tent. Freddy stayed by the lantern and talked quietly with the Mungos. They answered but no one understood the other.

About every 15 minutes Freddy looked in on Milligan and each time she was accompanied by the Mungo who seemed to be the leader of the group. Milligan slept peacefully and quietly.

2 hours later, Pashen awoke on his own and came out of his tent. He was surprised that he had been allowed to sleep. Freddy told him what had happened and that he had to look in on Milligan at regular intervals. Then she gave the 6 Mungos to his care and went to get some sleep.

When Freddy awoke once more, it was still dark outside. A pale glow could be seen above the eastern wall of the valley but at least an hour and a half remained before sunrise.

Mullon was no longer in the tent. Freddy heard him outside, talking quietly with Pashen. She stood up, washed from the small collapsible plastic container that belonged to every tent as standard equipment, then went outside.

The picture had not changed. Pashen and Mullon sat together in front of Milligan's tent, the lantern still burned and the monkeys still sat around it in a circle.

The 2 men stood up as they heard Freddy's steps.

"Milligan's getting on fine," said Mullon without waiting for her question. "He's sleeping peacefully and..."

"And...?"

"The blue spots are gone!"

"No—!"

Mullon nodded earnestly. "They are. It's a miracle but it's the truth."

Freddy bent down to the Mungos and stroked each one in turn on the head. "We must give them a present!" she decided.

With that she went over to the supply tent and began to search among the various items there. She returned shortly, carrying large pieces of brilliant yellow cloth.

Mullon leaped to his feet. "The outer covering for our life jackets! Are you alright, Freddy?"

"It's all from only one life jacket," Freddy corrected. "And anyway, so? When have you seen enough water in one place around here that you would need a life jacket?"

"There are oceans on Grautier," answered Mullon, "but..."

"Don't be so greedy," Freddy interrupted angrily. "These little fellows have helped Milligan get back on his feet and now you want to send them away without a reward. There's enough bright cloth back in Greenwich that we can sew the life jacket back together again." Mullon offered no more objections. Freddy sank to her knees and handed the Mungos their presents.

The little animals pressed the fabric to their bodies with their hands like one would do with an article of clothing before buying it, then danced for joy.

Freddy's eyes shone and Mullon and Pashen were so surprised by the sudden outburst of happiness that they did not notice Milligan raise the tent flap behind them and step out.

"Hey, I'm back," he said simply.

Mullon turned. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Stronger than ever," Milligan answered. "That stuff must have been the devil's own brew. I hope we can take some back for the sick in Greenwich."

Mullon laughed. "Do you have any idea what it was you drank?"

Milligan shook his head.

"Have you got a strong stomach?"

"Strong as the next man's, I guess."

"Well," hesitantly, "I guess I can risk telling you now. But remember what it did for you when I tell you it was chewed-up leaves..."

"Chewed up by whom?"

"The local brand of monkeys... plus a soupçon of their salivation."

Milligan momentarily went the colour of pea soup.

### 3/ CISLARCZIK'S FATE

A single blue-green leaf had escaped the nocturnal alchemy and the chewing and spitting frenzy of the Mungos. Mullon used the leaf to make clear to the monkeys that he would like to have more leaves. Mullon even went further: he tried to explain to the Mungos that where he had come from a number of people were sick like Milligan had been and that he wanted to heal them too.

The monkeys understood. An hour later Mullon had so many leaves that he was afraid he would not be able to get them all aboard the helicopter.

\* \* \* \*

If Glannon had wanted 20 hours to rest in, he was disappointed. After only 10 hours, Harper woke him up and made him drink from the canteen.

After drinking, Glannon felt his tiredness melt away in a short time. A warm current of fresh strength seemed to flow through his limbs.

The water in the canteen contained a small amount of highly concentrated compounds for restoring bodily energy.

Half an hour after Harper and Glannon had drunk of the miracle water, they were once more on the march.

The pass led in a straight line into the mountain range. It rose steeply and had been cut so deeply into the mountain walls that the sun did not penetrate to the pass floor. Harper and Glannon did not have to suffer any great heat for this part of the journey.

Towards noon they reached the summit of the pass. They stopped to rest briefly but then drank more of the fortified water and pressed on. The pass sank now, even more steeply than it had risen, and eventually opened out on a small plateau.

Harper and Glannon quickly crossed the plateau and on the other side entered a gorge that seemed to lead up to another pass.

Harper didn't know that this was the pass that Mullon had flown through in the helicopter on the day before and the broad valley in which Mullon was camped lay behind them.

He didn't know *ityet*. He would soon find out, however.

Yet a 3rd man was travelling westward through the rocky wasteland of the mountains at that time:

Cislarczik.

Harper's blow had knocked him out for only 2 hours. When he came to, he found the empty canteen and Glannon's note.

From that moment on, Cislarczik thought of nothing but how he could make Harper pay. He followed Harper and Glannon's plainly visible trail, which led on to the river. He camped about half a mile downstream from the place where the other 2 were resting and kept his eye on them until they took up the march once more. He followed their footprints for as long as he could see them, slept through the entire night, then pressed ahead the next morning as quickly as he could before the downtrodden grass straightened up again. He knew that without a compass he would never be able to find his way back to Greenwich from there so he had to find Harper and obtain his compass.

In that manner Cislarczik eventually caught another glimpse of his quarry—just as they were taking their first drink of fortified water and shortly thereafter entering the pass.

By this time Cislarczik had walked for 10 straight hours without stopping. When he saw Harper and Glannon making their way into the pass, he treated himself to an hour's rest. He had no way of restoring his depleted energy with a swallow of fortified water but events to come would prove that a burning desire to get revenge on Harper worked at least as well.

Without being tempted to take any of the numerous ravines or defiles leading off from the pass, Cislarczik reached the summit just in time to see Harper and Glannon, far below, leave the pass and emerge onto the level plain of the plateau.

Nevertheless, he stopped to rest—for 3 hours, this time—and only then began the descent. He reached the entrance to the 2nd pass towards nightfall but although he had no more footprints to follow, he knew Harper and Glannon could have gone only this way and marched on into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Mullon decided to forget about the black fish in the pond for the time being. The Mungos seemed much more important to him.

The 6 little fellows appeared to feel that their presence was no longer necessary, now that Milligan was back on his feet and that they had admired their presents enough and made it clear that they wanted to go on their way.

Like the first time one of them tried to take Freddy with him. While his 5 companions leaped ahead, he remained behind and pointed over to the western, valley wall.

Mullon had been waiting for this moment. He told Pashen to go with Freddy and find the Mungos' lair. The place was to be marked so that Mullon could fly over when he had repaired the helicopter.

So Freddy and Pashen followed the homeward bound Mungos. Mullon had been worried that the monkeys would not take kindly to Pashen's presence since in the past only Freddy had been the object of their affection or concern.

But the Mungo pointing the way did not even hesitate for a second. He sprang ahead and each time the distance between him and the 2 humans following behind had grown to about 30 yards, he stopped and stood with his arm pointing in the direction they were to go.

In the meantime Mullon and Milligan worked on the helicopter, trying to find out what was wrong.

Which was by no means an easy task.

Hours went by, yet their efforts had no results.

Freddy and Pashen came back in the afternoon. They had found the Mungos' lair and had been received there in a friendly manner. Freddy reported that there were about 100 Mungos to be found in the lair: a small grotto cut high over the valley floor into the west wall. As far as she could make out from the monkeys' gestures, it was not the only lair in the valley. There were evidently others in other places, even on the east wall.

While Freddy was occupied communicating with the Mungos, Pashen had marked the entrance to the grotto. He said that there was a rock ledge just outside where an experienced helicopter pilot could land, weather and light permitting.

Mullon was satisfied with the outcome. He intended putting the friendship between men and Mungos to use for the benefit of the small colony of settlers and to that end it was important to know where the monkeys could be found if necessary. Mullon decided to look for other Mungo lairs.

Much less success met further examination of the helicopter engine, although Pashen, who claimed to know something of fusion reactors, took part. Mullon became convinced that the reactor or some important part of it must have suffered damage in the crash-landing of the *Adventurous* and had now broken down—just when it was needed most.

Prospects for the future were now anything but pleasant. The distance from here to Greenwich was around 80 miles and 60 of them were across an open prairie that cooked by day and froze by night.

The fact that the short-wave radio still operated was proof that the reactor itself was still in order, since it supplied power to the radio.

Mullon reported the breakdown of the helicopter to Greenwich and that he would either repair the damage himself or return with the rest of the party on foot. As the hours passed that day, the more he believed that the 2nd solution to the problem would be necessary.

Meanwhile, Freddy and Milligan had set themselves the task of fishing out of the pond one of the carnivorous little monsters that had polished off the snake the day before. This they accomplished in surprisingly little time, once they had the idea of opening a tin can from the food supplies and using the contents for fish bait. Hardly had they thrown it into the water then the pond began to bubble and the black shadows of the little bloodthirsty carnivores shot from all sides to the food. Milligan had to do nothing more than throw out a net and draw it back in, 10 of the little black monsters had been caught and to Freddy's great surprise they did not look at all like fish but more like little crocodiles. They had 4 stubby legs, crooked fins and long, narrow heads that seemed to be all mouth. Freddy did not doubt that what was involved here was a Grautierian variety of lungfish, on the evolutionary trail from low-developed water creatures to more highly developed land creatures.

When Freddy and Milligan came back with their catch, Pashen and Mullon still had not succeeded in repairing the helicopter. So they had given up any idea of stopping for rest and worked continuously.

The day came to an end. Resigned, Mullon went to bed after assigning Freddy and Milligan to the first 2 watch periods. He had planned to stay in the valley for 3 or 4 more days, exploring the area, and then returning to Greenwich. 3 to 4 days was a long time but after the lack of success he had experienced that day he doubted if he would have the helicopter fixed even by then.

\* \* \* \*

The silence reigning in the deep recesses of the pass was to Cislarczik's advantage. Had there been any sounds he would not have heard the muted voices conversing only 20 yards ahead.

Cislarczik retreated another 100 yards, then lay down to steep in a niche in the rock.

*Tomorrow* Harper would have to die.

Cislarczik felt no anger against Glannon. Harper was the man he blamed for all his trouble. Glannon had been friendly and helpful all along and Cislarczik did not intend to make him suffer the same fate he planned for Harper.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning—almost before it had grown light enough—Mullon climbed up into the helicopter to continue the investigation. His long rest had not only restored his strength but also the conviction that the damage could be repaired, whatever it might be.

Pashen had had the last watch. He said he did not feel at all tired and went with Mullon into the engine compartment.

Not half an hour passed before Pashen cried out triumphantly: "I've got it!"

Mullon climbed over to him. "*What* do you have?" he asked with ill-concealed excitement.

"Here!" Pashen answered quickly. "A leak in the fuel tube."

He pointed to a capillary tube leading from the small hydrogen container into the reactor cowling. A tiny spot of frost was to be seen.

The fusion reactor used liquid hydrogen for fuel, cooled in a small tank and fed to the reactor as needed by way of several capillary tubes.

The frost showed that the tube leaked in that spot and the reactor was being supplied with too little fuel.

It was still perfectly capable of powering the radio but as a safety feature the motor would not even turn the helicopter blades when not enough energy was available for a safe flight.

"Good heavens!" Mullan exclaimed. "How did you find *that*?"

Pashen shrugged. A broad grin stretched across his face. "I didn't even think that something had gone wrong with fuel lines," he answered. "I only noticed the frost there by accident."

Spare capillary tubes belonged to the standard parts supply of every helicopter. In a few minutes the defective tube had been replaced and when Mullan climbed up to the cabin and pressed the starter the engine roared into life as though there had never been anything wrong.

\* \* \* \*

Before the morning was over, Harper and Glannon reached a point along the pass where they could look out over a part of the wide valley that ran from north to south. Here the steep rock walls, which hitherto had limited the pass to a width of 30 feet at most, parted widely. A narrow but deep gorge divided the pass floor into 2 paths, one leading northwest and the other straight on to the west.

Harper assumed that Mullan had set up camp in the valley the first day and like as not was still there. He could not find any sign of it, however: the baobab tree and the tents underneath were not visible from the pass. It could be easily reasoned, however, that Mullan would camp where there was a great amount of shady vegetation. The valley Harper and Glannon saw before them was well supplied with foliage, in contrast to the other valleys that they had so far seen or crossed.

"We'll stay here," Harper decided. "If they're still in the valley, we'll be hearing the helicopter sooner or later."

They made themselves as comfortable as possible amid the rocks on the edge of the gorge and kept watch on the valley below.

2 or 3 hours must have gone by in this manner before Harper pricked up his ears. A light humming noise floated up from the valley and a few moments later the characteristic back & forth sound of a helicopter could be plainly heard.

"There!" exclaimed Glannon and pointed.

Far below, just above the grey-green foliage, moved a shining dot.

"The helicopter!" Harper cried out. "We've got them!"

He watched as the craft wheeled to the east and began to climb along the valley wall. Several times it disappeared behind a rock formation, appeared again, and in general—according to Harper's opinion—held dangerously close to the rock wall, as though searching for something there.

Harper observed the helicopter suddenly describe a narrow curve, race towards the rock wall and disappear. From then on the motor noise was muted.



There was no doubt about it: there had to be a crevice out there and Mullon had directed the helicopter into it. After awhile the motor noise died away completely. Mullon had landed.

Glannon wanted to spring up but Harper held him back. "Wait!" he ordered. "That's a dangerous trail over there. We'll have to go over the wall and down the other side... if we can. But maybe Mullon will fly somewhere else soon."

Glannon obeyed. They sat for some time, motionless and silent. Only after an hour had passed did Harper stand up and growl: "Alright then, let's go! He's probably going to be there for some time."

They took their guns and started off.

By sheer chance Glannon happened to turn and glance back up into the pass.

He stopped cold, paralysed by fright.

A tall, broad-shouldered figure came striding out of the gloom of the pass.

Cislarczik.

\* \* \* \*

When Cislarczik had awakened, he sensed that he would not last much longer if he could not take the fortified water away from Harper and drink it. He had pushed himself too hard. There was no place on his body that didn't ache with almost unbearable pain.

He had to concentrate all of his energy and hatred for Harper just to keep from simply lying down again and going back to sleep. Staggering to his feet, he picked up his gun and unsteadily made his way on down the pass.

He managed to arrive at the broadening of the pass, where it opened out into the valley, at the same time that Harper and Glannon spotted the helicopter.

Cislarczik moved slowly onwards and finally discovered his quarry lying among the rocks. Cislarczik had to remain well behind, since he wanted to be able to make one sure shot, and there was no cover between where he now stood and where Harper lay. He had to wait until they stood up.

They did, after one long hour. Cislarczik came out from hiding and slipped up behind them. And that was the moment in which Glannon turned and discovered him.

Harper naturally noticed Glannon's odd behaviour. He turned as well but when he recognized Cislarczik he reacted considerably more quickly than Glannon.

Cislarczik also reacted quickly but Glannon still stood like a statue in the middle.

"Get out of the way, you fool!" Cislarczik screamed at him. "You're standing in my line of fire!"

Glannon came alive and sprang to one side, more falling down than lying down in the cover of a narrow niche in the rock wall.

Harper saw Cislarczik's gun barrel emerge from behind a boulder. He waited patiently until he could see the hand holding the gun underneath, then fired.

He missed the hand but hit the barrel. The gun was knocked out of Cislarczik's hands and Harper watched it sail through the air and fall into the gorge behind Cislarczik.

Harper was immediately on his feet. "Now I'll get you!" he shouted to Cislarczik.

He saw Cislarczik trying to move from one cover to another. He remained standing until Cislarczik's well-built body came into view for a second between 2 boulders, then shot without any hesitation.

Cislarczik reared up with a scream of pain. Harper saw him behind the boulders, beating the air with his arms as though struggling for his balance. Then he collapsed, falling backwards, and pitched over the edge of the gorge, dropping like a stone into the depths.

Harper lost no time. "Let's get out of here!" he cried to Glannon. "They probably heard those shots!"

Glannon came out of his hiding place. Panting, they ran along the pass and stopped only when they were half a mile from the place where Cislarczik had fallen over.

\* \* \* \*

Mullon had flown to the western valley wall where Freddy and Pashen had found and marked the Mungos' lair the day before. No problems accompanied the landing on the small rock ledge and the Mungos greeted Mullon and Milligan just as enthusiastically as they had Freddy and Pashen.

Mullon, meanwhile, had had an idea how he could find other Mungo lairs without resorting to tedious searches. The monkeys undoubtedly knew of many lairs in the area besides their own so one would need only take a Mungo along aboard the helicopter and fly where it directed.

Arranging it took a long time. But once the Mungos finally understood what was being asked of them, they were all ready to go. The Mungo who played the role of leader had the last word and picked out one of the many volunteers.

Oddly enough, the Mungo which was to accompany Mullon had no fear of the noisy helicopter. It was like a small child which is too young to understand it should be afraid of something. The pitching of the flying machine seemed to be a source of unending fun for it and Mullon had to make an effort to remind the small creature that it had not been brought along just for its enjoyment.

The Mungo directed the helicopter to the eastern valley wall and there pointed to a narrow crevice, into which the helicopter would just barely fit, with such forcefulness that it seemed to be positive another lair was to be found there.

That was in fact the case. A band of about 20 Mungos lived in a dark corner in the background. They watched the helicopter land attentively but without fear and once Mullan's little companion had explained to them in its chattering and hissing language what sort of a visit it was, they were ready to receive both strangers with the customary Mungo enthusiasm.

Even so, the behaviour of these Mungos was considerably more restrained than that of those Mullan and Milligan had met on the other side of the valley. Mullan accounted for it by reasoning that he and Milligan were completely strangers here, whereas they had dealt with the Mungos on the other side several times already. What was odd though, was that even their companion Mungo seemed to be bothered by something. As Mullan wanted to leave and search for other Mungo lairs, the monkey held him by the arm and cried something that sounded like "Khek!" several times.

Mullan had no idea what was meant and tried to climb into the helicopter but the Mungo held him back with all his strength, pointing up along the wall of the crevice and rapidly repeating: "Khek!... Khek!... Khek!..."

"What's wrong with him?" asked Milligan.

"I don't know," replied Mullan. "Perhaps there's a 2nd lair up there?"

Milligan looked up at the wall. It was steep but not insurmountable. There were enough fissures and ledges that secure holds could be found all the way up.

"Do we want to go up?" asked Milligan.

"Yes—onward!"

The Mungo appeared to be extremely happy that the men would follow it. With another monkey, one of those in the horde living in the crevice, it sprang ahead and pointed out a less dangerous route to the uppermost edge of the crevice.

Above was a flat, gravel-strewn plateau which was cut a few yards further to the north by a wide ravine. Mullan went to the ravine's edge and to his surprise saw beneath him the same pass he had come through in the helicopter 3 days before.

He saw something else too: Harper and Glannon, although he could not recognize them, and Cislarczik as he made his attack. Mullan watched as Harper defended himself and heard the wounded, Cislarczik's terrible scream as he plunged into the gorge.

Milligan had lain next to Mullan on the ground. "I don't understand this at all," he muttered. "What are they here for... and why are they trying to kill each other?"

"Hmm," answered Mullan. "I don't really know myself but with a little imagination I think I can make a good guess."

"What...?"

"Think of Hollander. Perhaps he thinks this is the best means to get me out of the way. Well, we'll find out now. Look! Those 2 are running away. If we hurry we'll still be able to catch them."

They went back to the Mungo lair, took their companion monkey on board the helicopter with them and

took off. Mullon carefully guided the aircraft out of the crevice, then directed it to the right, towards the pass entrance.

"Hold your gun ready," Milligan told him. "You don't know what those guys have up their sleeves."

\* \* \* \*

Harper heard the humming and roaring of the motor as the helicopter entered the pass from the west. "That's Mullon!" he cried to Glannon. "Take cover!"

They crawled behind some boulders. The helicopter cruised over them at a low altitude. From his hiding place Harper recognized Mullon at the controls and Milligan next to him, holding a gun at ready. Neither of them seemed to see the 2 men in hiding.

After awhile the helicopter disappeared behind a sharp bend in the passway. The motor noise remained for a bit at the same level of intensity, then came back, growing increasingly louder.

Harper noticed in surprise that the helicopter had ascended to a height of 200 yards in the meantime, moving along almost on a level with the upper edges of the pass walls. What was Mullon trying to do? Was he trying to get a better view this way?

Harper squeezed himself deeper into the boulder shadows and did not move. For what seemed like an eternity the helicopter hung motionless in the air, then suddenly began to descend.

They've spotted us! thought Harper fearfully.

The helicopter landed a stone's throw from their hiding place. Harper realized that there was now only one man in the cabin: Mullon.

Harper was not interested in finding out where the 2nd man had gone. The important thing was that he had before him the man he had been sent to kill. He saw that Mullon was still occupied, adjusting the runners beneath the helicopter so that it would not slip or slide.

Harper stood up from behind the boulders and took aim.

At that moment, a hard voice behind him spoke: "Drop the gun and raise your hands!"

Harper obeyed, paralysed by fear.

"You too!" ordered the voice.

Some distance away, a 2nd gun fell to the ground: Glannon's. Harper turned around. Behind him had been standing Milligan.

"Oh, you...!" growled Harper.

"Start walking toward the helicopter," ordered Milligan.

Trembling with rage, Harper obeyed.

Mullon waited for him with a serious face. In his left hand he held a few lengths of plastic rope. These he threw to Harper and ordered: "Tie up your buddy!"

Glannon had come along as well and let himself be bound by Harper without offering any resistance. Harper himself was tied up by Milligan. Then the 2 were led into the helicopter.

"Who sent you?" asked Mullon before he took off.

"No one," growled Harper.

Mullon looked at him earnestly. "It's alright with me," he said quietly, "if you want to stick with that story. But don't forget that there are people in Greenwich who know how to get the truth out of even the most obdurate."

\* \* \* \*

Even before the day was over, the expedition broke camp. Mullon had reported the incident to Greenwich and had also announced that he was returning as quickly as possible so that the investigation of Harper and Glannon—they had revealed their names in the meantime—could be carried out without any delay.

The 2 prisoners continued to maintain that they had set out to kill Mullon quite on their own initiative, for they considered him a danger to the colony. The incident with Cislarczik they related more or less truthfully and Mullon had to admit that they had acted in self-defence.

Mullon was completely convinced that all 3—Harper, Glannon and Cislarczik—had been recruited by Hollander. He said so to Harper and Glannon in just about as many words but they reacted only with mocking laughter.

Meanwhile Milligan and Freddy were busy trying to persuade a few of the Mungos to go with them. They succeeded after a tedious amount of dickering and 5 Mungos declared themselves ready to fly to Greenwich. The monkeys had been promised—and Freddy maintained that they had understood everything—that they would be brought back as soon as they asked.

The helicopter took off in the late afternoon. Mullon had had to leave a tent and some equipment behind to make room for the 2 prisoners in the helicopter. The tent could be picked up when the Mungos were brought back.

#### **4/ THE MYSTERIOUS BLUE CLOTHS**

Greenwich had its first great sensation. The news that someone secretly wanted to kill Mullon brought forth a wave of indignation but only with difficulty could one tell where the indignation was honest and where it was feigned. Certainly a good number of the settlers were Hollander's sympathizers and were indignant only because Mullon had come back alive.

The People's Assembly tried the 2 would-be assassins even before it considered the other results of the expedition. As before, Harper and Glannon claimed that they had acted on their own initiative. O'Bannon, Mullon's friend of many years, asked that the Assembly not give any credence to the false confession but lock up the prisoners until they were ready to reveal the name of the man who had sent them out.

O'Bannon had to admit, however, that a suspicion alone was not enough to justify such a step. To make the farce perfect Hollander stood up and proposed that O'Bannon be censured. The prisoners had made a complete confession and there was not the slightest reason to continue the hearing. The only issue remaining to the Assembly now was agreeing on a verdict.

On Grautier, the People's Assembly had to fill all 3 functions of democratic government—legislature, executive and judiciary—for as yet there was no final constitution.

O'Bannon was not censured but the Assembly took the 2nd part of Hollander's motion to heart and after several hours of debate sentenced Harper to 5 years and Glannon to 3 years of imprisonment.

The wreck of the *Adventurous* served as a prison for Harper and Glannon. They were brought by helicopter to a place that could be neither reached nor left by other means. The prisoners were supplied with enough water, food and other needs for several weeks, then left alone. They had also been given a distress signal which could be used if one of them became ill or had an accident.

For Mullon, the sentence was a disappointment. He had hoped to be able to tear the mask off Hollander's face. He had not succeeded. Moreover, he could well imagine that Harper and Glannon were far more agreeable to a long prison term than to admitting everything and thus being delivered to the vengeance of Hollander and his supporters.

\* \* \* \*

The next day the People's Assembly turned its attention to the other results of the expedition. The most important matter by far was the discovery of the half-intelligent race of Mungos and, in connection with it, the finding of a medicine for the blue pustules.

The night before, Mullon had set the Mungos to preparing the leaves they had brought back in the usual fashion. The medicine thus produced was given to the sick colonists, whose number had meanwhile grown to 22, and the results came with them just as quickly as with Milligan 3 days before. Dr. Weeney declared that it would be possible for him to manufacture a serum just as soon as the composition of the Mungo Medicine was known. In any event, experimentation showed that leaves chewed by humans instead of Mungos possessed not the slightest healing power. Evidently there was some element in the spittle of the little monkeys that in concert with the components of the leaves produced the curing effect.

Something—which Mullan more hesitantly brought up than the other matters, because he was not very sure of it himself, concerned the parapsychological ability of the monkeys to detect dangers which none of the 5 human senses could perceive. Mullan spoke of the 3 occurrences which had brought him to the conclusion that the Mungos were parapsychologically gifted: Freddy's rescue from the snake, the manufacture of medicine for Milligan's sickness and the warning of the presence of Harper and Glannon.

The People's Assembly appointed a commission with no other task than to study the language of the Mungos.

The word 'khek', which the Mungo had used to warn of Harper and Glannon, seemed to mean 'danger' or 'bad' or 'enemy'. It was the first word that men learned from the Mungo language.

Otherwise, the People's Assembly was of the opinion that Mullan should proceed as quickly as possible to the 2nd expedition since the first had had such surprising success.

There was one very compelling reason which encouraged haste: the men on watch posted in a circle around Greenwich had observed giant herds of those grey giraffe and elephant-like monsters which came from the east and so far had passed the small town by fortunately safe distances. According to the estimates of the watchers, most herds numbered more than a thousand heads.

When one such herd headed straight for the town, Greenwich would be all but defenceless. For weapons the settlers had mostly rifles and pistols. Besides those, there were only the hand beamers and disintegrators that had belonged to the crew of the *Adventurous*. They were certainly effective but there were not enough of them.

Besides the exploration of the lowlands, Mullan's 2nd expedition had the assignment of finding out where the vast herds came from and, if possible, discovering a way to keep the giraphants away from Greenwich.

After 2 days of rest, Mullan headed for the east. This time Hollander did not send an assassination squad after him. This time Hollander had taken care of the matter in a different way.

\* \* \* \*

Mullan had chosen the same companions as he had for the first expedition: Freddy Mullan, his wife; Milligan; and Pashen. Mullan had decided not to take one of the Mungos with him, although the little monkey could perhaps have given valuable help. There was the possibility that the Mungo, a mountain dweller, could not have tolerated the sultry and damp climate of the lowlands.

The helicopter covered the 50 miles separating the western edge of the jungle from Greenwich in less than half an hour. Mullan set up the first camp just outside the impenetrable green wall of foliage. The first attempts to enter the jungle would be made from there; moreover, being outside the jungle they would have a chance of getting a good idea of the dangers lurking in the forest darkness before venturing in.

He noticed one thing in the first few minutes: if the stark blazing heat of the sun had been unbearable up in the mountains, it was all the worse in the sultry humidity here.

The only animals to be found that first day were insects, spiders and several varieties of worms.

The gnats were a plague. They invaded the camp in huge swarms and Mullon attempted a variety of unsuccessful means to repulse them. Then Milligan managed to repel the humming, singing hordes with the smoke of a green tree branch. His success was so enduring that the 4 explorers had a number of hours of peace thereafter.

They spent a long and peaceful night in the camp. Early the next morning they took off in the helicopter and flew at a low altitude eastward over the jungle.

The view offered to the 4 occupants of the helicopter was monotonous and impressive at once: as far as one could see there was nothing but the grey-green sunlit roof of the unbroken forest.

The helicopter flew over small rivers which snaked through the jungle in a more or less easterly direction. The streams drew closer to one another, however, and after meeting in a series of closely spaced mergers, combined into a huge river flowing onwards to the east. 30 miles farther on it flowed into another, just as broad, river. From there on the only word to describe it was 'riversea'. On the other side of the merger, the combined river was more than 6 miles wide.

The river was freely dotted with islands and towards noon Mullon landed the helicopter on one of them. The small island of sand and dried mud did not support a great deal of vegetation. There were only 2 tall trees—one at each end of the long narrow island—and in between grew bushes and grass.

Mullon had the tents put up, saying he wanted to use the place as his most forward camp. The small expedition was now more than 240 miles from Greenwich and close to 200 of those miles were covered with impenetrable jungle. Mullon didn't dare press any farther into the east; he remembered the first breakdown with the helicopter all too well. 200 miles of jungle—that was a distance healthy and well-armed people could cover if they had to on foot... and if they had enough time.

Freddy and Mullon searched the island thoroughly together while Milligan and Pashen were setting up the tents. They came to the conclusion that aside from a few frogs living in the thick grass along the river, there was no animal life on the island.

While Mullon went back to camp to help Milligan and Pashen in erecting the tents, Freddy occupied herself with the frogs, which had excited her enthusiastic attention. On the way, Mullon went past a bush bearing oddly shining, pale white blooms on the tips of its branches. Mullon was surprised that he had not noticed this apparition before. He stepped closer and tried to take one of the blossoms in his hand.

He felt a brief, almost painful, prickling in his hand when he attempted to close his fingers around the blossom. He wanted to try again but at that moment Milligan called out: "Look at this, Boss! The whole island is full of St. Elmo's Fire!"

Mullon looked around. He spotted the pale-white blossoms on the tips of the grass and bushes, too. When he raised his hands, tiny white flames formed on his fingertips, standing quietly in the still air and looking like blooms.

Mullon looked up into the sky. The heavens were cloudless and bluish white, showing no signs of any approaching storm or whatever else the appearance of St. Elmo's Fire might mean. However, Mullon felt his own hair crackling and standing on end. The air must be full of electricity—but where did it come from?



Mullon looked around again. In the neighbourhood of the island on which they had landed there were a number of other sand and mud accumulations, some of which were also covered with grass and bushes. The small white flames of St. Elmo's Fire were conspicuous enough that Mullon would have seen them if there were any on the other islands.

But the strange electrification of the air seemed to be limited to just the one island—the one they had landed on!

That was unnatural. St. Elmo's Fire that limited itself to an area of at most 100 square yards and was to be seen nowhere else was no natural phenomenon—it was artificial.

Mullon's thoughts raced. Someone had laid an electrostatic field over the island and out of it produced St. Elmo's Fire. Mullon shuddered in contemplation, for laying an electrostatic field somewhere in the open air required technical knowledge that made that of Earth's technicians look like nothing.

Where was the enemy? Or was it an enemy at all? And what purpose did he have?

Among Mullon's thoughts was one that began to stubbornly push all the others aside: the small fusion reactor aboard the helicopter required the energy from a little battery to start up. What had happened to the battery in the meantime? Had the electrical field affected it?

Mullon started to run. While he swung up into the helicopter cabin, he called Milligan and Pashen over. He squeezed into the pilot's seat and turned on the motors.

His worst fears were confirmed. The needle indicating battery current did not move. None of the many control lights lit up and the radio, when he switched it on, was mute.

Milligan called from outside: "The St. Elmo's Fire is disappearing, Boss! Now it's gone!"

Mullon leaned resignedly back into the seat. *Too late*, he thought. *Much too late. The batteries are dead!* In Greenwich there were any number of devices that could have recharged the batteries instantly but Greenwich was 240 miles away. There was not even the possibility of reporting the problem.

Mullon climbed out. Milligan saw by his downcast expression that something had happened. Mullon gave a brief explanation.

"And now what?" asked Milligan, at a loss.

Mullon shrugged. "No idea. My opinion is that we'd do best to stay here tonight. Perhaps the enemy will show up. Perhaps we could force him to repair the damage. But if nothing happens, we'll have to walk..."

With that he made a despondent gesture toward the river and beyond, to the high, impenetrable wall of the jungle.

Milligan looked across the river. "Do you think we can do it?"

"Yes, I think so. Most of all, *we have* to do it if we don't want to starve."

Freddy, concerned with the small frogs, had neither noticed the St. Elmo's Fire nor learned as yet what had happened to the helicopter batteries. In her eagerness she had crept right up to the edge of the island

and sat there, one of the slippery, dark brown frogs in her hand. Then the water in front of her began to churn.

Frightened, she leapt up, dropping the frog. Then she lost her footing in the soft, steeply descending ground and slid feet first into the water.

An ugly, wide-mouthed head rose from the dirty river water in front of her—the head of an alligator. Freddy saw the beast watching her closely, poising for one mighty spring to the river's edge and pouncing on its defenceless prey.

Freddy screamed, hoping to alert Mullon and the others.

Hearing the scream, the men raced to the shore but only Milligan had had the presence of mind to grab his gun, which had been lying on the ground by the helicopter.

While Mullon and Pashen tried to scare away the alligator with yelling and stone throwing—succeeding in at least drawing the beast's attention away from Freddy for a few seconds at a time—Milligan slipped cautiously along the river's edge, bent down on one knee behind a bush and aimed his gun carefully. The first shot would have to be the fatal one: the alligator's head was at most 9 yards from Freddy.

Milligan's shot cracked unexpectedly. Mullon and Pashen gave a start and Freddy screamed.

Milligan had hit the animal in the left eye. The beast reared, coming 6 feet closer to the shore in the process. Then the long scaly body lay still in the slimy mud on the river's edge.

Freddy freed herself from the ooze into which she had sunk ankle-deep and climbed up on shore. She was trembling and pale but smiling. Mullon took her into his arms. "That was close," he murmured.

Freddy nodded. "And it's all my fault—I wasn't careful enough," she admitted. She turned and stared at the dead alligator. "Look how big he is!" she exclaimed. "Can you get him up on land for me? I'd like to examine him."

Mullon agreed, laughing. Milligan had already climbed down, grasped the animal by the pointed snout and was trying to pull it out of the water. He succeeded only when Pashen and Mullon came to help him. Freddy's thanks to Milligan were expressed tersely but fervently. Milligan seemed to be happy as Freddy pressed his hand.

Once on shore, the alligator was measured and found to be 37½ feet long, a size its Earthly cousins never reached. Otherwise it resembled them exactly, even to the arrangement of the scales. Nature seemed to have gone by and large in the same direction on 'Grey Beast' as it had on Earth.

Freddy began her examination immediately. She went to it with such fervour that when Mullon mentioned the fact the helicopter could no longer fly she answered: "Then we'll walk!"

Pashen and Milligan were given the job of skinning the alligator without ruining the skin in doing so. It was a difficult task for 2 men who had previously seen alligators only in zoos.

As Freddy looked closely into the alligator's mouth, she made an astounding discovery. Far back and half-swallowed she found something which looked like a piece of blue cloth. With Milligan's help she pulled it out and laid it out in the sun.

It looked indeed like a cloth although a weave could not be seen. It had soaked up a considerable amount of water and was rather heavy.

"Well, it looks like the crocodile ate somebody up but a piece of his clothes stuck on the croc's teeth on the way down," Mullon joked.

Freddy, however, was not in a joking mood. "I wish there was a laboratory around here," she sighed. "I'd really like to know what sort of thing this is."

Mullon picked it off the ground and looked at it closely. "A piece of cloth—what else?" he inquired.

Freddy became irritated. "We're in the middle of nowhere—how could a piece of cloth get here?"

"Maybe this river is the same one that flows past Greenwich?" Mullon said. "Then it would be quite possible someone in Greenwich threw an old shirt or something into the water and it floated until the alligator tried to eat it."

That was a credible explanation. Its one disadvantage was that it stripped Freddy of all her illusions. She was so angry about that that she no longer paid any attention to the piece of 'cloth'.

That was clearly an error. 2 hours later it was suddenly realized that the blue cloth had vanished. Freddy believed that one of the men had taken it but neither Milligan nor Pashen nor Mullon knew anything about it.

The entire island was searched step by step but the cloth remained unaccounted for.

"Maybe the wind blew it away," offered Milligan.

"Have you felt the slightest breeze since we landed here?" demanded Freddy, irritated.

After an hour of searching, the only conclusion was that the blue cloth was no longer on the island. How it had disappeared, one could guess—and Freddy's guesses were marvels of fantasy and imagination—but as far as knowing went, no, one could not know.

\* \* \* \*

The day gradually drew to a close. There had been hardly any rest stops, so much had the men been fascinated by Freddy's examination of the alligator.

Freddy had made careful notes and did not hide her pride at having discovered, examined and classified a hitherto completely unknown animal.

After the evening meal, Mullon assigned the watch periods. He explained to the others what was involved: "Assuming we do in fact have an enemy or just someone very curious on our hands, he can do nothing about us as long as he can't watch us from nearby. My guess is that he will take advantage of the darkness by coming across the river and getting a good look at us. So we must keep our eyes open. Our goal is to either deal with the unknown directly or take so many of his people captive that we can trade

their freedom for recharging our batteries."

Milligan nodded in approval.

"And if he—or they—do show up, what should I say?" asked Pashen.

Mullon returned his sarcastic look. "Well," he answered, "I do hope you'll be polite."

\* \* \* \*

Mullon woke up with a start. Barely an hour had gone by, according to his calculation, since he had ended his watch and woke up Milligan.

Why had he woken up?

He crept quietly—so as not to wake Freddy—out of the tent. As he let the flap drop behind him, he heard someone moan by the river's edge in front of him. "Milligan!" he called lightly.

A 2nd moan came in answer.

Mullon reached for his gun and moved quietly towards the place where Milligan had taken up his post. Mullon had hardly moved 10 feet when his attention was attracted by an apparition so astonishing he stopped dead in his tracks.

Over the gently splashing water of the river floated a group of ghostly blue little flames. Their form resembled the St. Elmo's Fire the party had seen the day before. But these were blue and at least 5 times larger.

The blue flames seemed to be coming over the river. The first had already reached the shore and floated over to where Milligan was standing watch.

Milligan! What had happened to him?

Mullon took a quick step forward but in that instant something soft but possessing irresistible force dropped on him from above. It checked his step and pressed him to the ground. He tried to get up again but the inexplicable strength holding him down proved to be insurmountable.

Mullon was still able to see how the most forward of the flames came directly towards him. He heard a choking scream from Freddy's tent, then the pressure bearing down on him became so heavy that he lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \*

As he came to once more, he found himself lying in a wide, half-lit room on a level, cold and solid floor. He noticed the vague outlines of strange objects in his vicinity.

He tried to get up but hardly had he made the first movement then the same force he had felt earlier pressed down on him again and pressed him against the floor. Then the pressure eased and finally vanished altogether as he made no further movements.

Taken prisoner, Mullon decided. But by whom?

Where were his companions?

He called their names and from somewhere in the half-light Milligan's voice answered.

"Milligan, where are you?"

"Here, Boss! I'm lying on the floor and can't move."

"The same with me."

"So where are we, anyway?"

Mullon told him he had just as little idea as he—Milligan—himself. Then Milligan explained to him what had happened while he was on watch-duty. "I suddenly saw a few blue lights out over the water. They moved back & forth like a will-o'-the-wisp over a moor. When the things started moving towards the island, I wanted to get up and go wake you. But just as I got to my feet, something threw itself at me, pushed me to the ground and cut off my air. I couldn't get any sound out and a few moments later I must have blacked out."

"Just like me," Mullon confirmed. "If only I had some idea of what's keeping me pinned down!"

He tried to get up for a 2nd time but the results were the same as before: something threw itself at him as soon as he moved, pressed him down and went away again once he lay motionless on the floor.

In the half-light, Mullon should have been able to see what pressed him down... if there was anything to see. Whatever it was that pressed him was either naturally invisible or possessed the power of making itself invisible.

Mullon remembered the St. Elmo's Fire. He was convinced that an electrical field had been set up over the island. Fields—no matter what sort—were invisible. Could something similar be at work here, like a gravity field, perhaps? Something whose field limit ran somewhere just above the floor and pushed him back whenever he tried to rise?

A 3rd voice called out from the half-light after some time: Freddy. She was spared the shock of finding herself alone in the darkness. Mullon and Milligan answered her timorous calls immediately.

Pashen came to 15 minutes later. It developed that the strange attack had surprised all 4 inhabitants of the island in the same way: each, except for Milligan, had first heard moaning and throat-rattling, had crawled out of the tent, had seen the blue flames and had sunk to the ground under the powerful pressure of an inexplicable force, losing consciousness shortly thereafter.

In any event, all 4 now found themselves in the same situation. None of them could get up. By the

slightest upward movement the unknown forcefield or whatever it was pushed back down from above and made it impossible even to bend a finger.

"We can do nothing except wait," said Mullan finally. "They wouldn't have brought us here just to let us starve. Someone will come sooner or later to look in on us... and then we'll have our chance to complain."

\* \* \* \*

The 'sooner or later' stretched out into just 'later'. The prisoners conversed in the meantime and tried to guess what sort of room they were in. The vague outlines they saw were too alien to form any conclusions from them.

After some long hours, just as the prisoners were exchanging ideas as to the size of the room, they heard chirping and humming noises from the background. The 4 were instantly quiet and listened as the noises gradually drew closer. Mullan thought he saw pale blue light somewhere in the distance but was not able to see any more as at that moment, harsh white lights flamed on and shone with glaring brilliance.

Blinded, Mullan shut his eyes. As he opened them slowly and cautiously once more, he discovered above him and just off to the side one of the light sources: a glass globe more than a foot in diameter. In its centre hung a glowing white filament.

A light bulb! Good Lord—a light bulb on Grautier!

At that moment, Freddy cried out: "There's our blue cloth!"

Mullan turned to the side. Freddy lay only a few yards away and by her, just above the floor, floated such a piece of blue cloth as they had rescued from the jaws of the alligator. It was in constant trembling motion, changing its colour from deep violet to bright turquoise and emitted the humming and chirping sounds that had been heard before the light came on.

More of the blue cloths came out of the background. They all moved just above the floor, as though the laws of gravity did not apply to them, gathered in circles around their prisoners and hummed incessantly.

Confused, Mullan sat up. He did not notice that there was no longer any force preventing him from doing so. He stared at the strange blue figures dancing around him.

He cautiously stretched out his hand to one and tried to grasp it. It freely allowed itself to be grasped and slid over Mullan's hand. It remained there motionless for awhile, then resumed its place in the dance and began to hum again.

Mullan looked around. Milligan, Pashen and Freddy were surrounded just as he was. They, too, had sat up and were trying to understand what was going on around them. To judge from their expressions, their success had been no greater than Mullan's.

"What kind of things are these?" demanded Milligan in desperation. "What do they want?"

*What kind of things are these* was also Mullon's question.

The answer was obvious—it was on the tip of his tongue—but it was so unthinkable he could not pronounce it. And yet, these blue beings had attacked the island and taken 4 prisoners with the help of their mysterious field technology. They had somehow brought the prisoners to this room, which was equipped with strange machinery and illuminated by old-fashioned light bulbs.

In any case, the blue cloths were a form of life, although it was impossible to think of a more unlikely one. But they were without a doubt intelligent!

Mullon stared at them but he could learn no more from them than he could earlier from the one they had pulled out of the alligator's mouth. There was no bodily structure, to say nothing of limbs or anything that could be compared with them. The bodies seemed to consist of a homogeneous mass and their shapes were irregular and rather arbitrary, if not elastic. No two of the blue beings looked alike and none of them looked now the way it did a second before. Everything was in flowing and gliding movement—the body as a whole just as much as its shapes and colours.

It was a spectacle that at the same time disturbed and fascinated the viewer.

"They won't do anything to us," said Freddy suddenly. "After all, we saved one of them from the alligator!"

## **5/ INCREDIBLY ALIEN**

And in the end, Freddy was right.

Strange as the behaviour of the blue beings was, it was not at all hostile. One even often had the impression that the creatures danced only to make peace with their 4 captives and to help them recover from the fright they had suffered.

The disappearance of the gravity field, which had earlier prevented the 4 from standing up, was a further proof that no danger threatened and that no one intended to hold the Terrans by force.

Nevertheless, Mullon saw a difficult task in front of him. All his logic so far had seemed quite reasonable but he must not simply assume that the blue beings were bound to the premises of Earthly logic. While he, Mullon, regarded the disappearance of the gravity field as a friendly sign, it might be just the opposite for the dancing blue creatures.

"Come here," Mullon said to his crew. "Who has any weapons?"

Milligan had a pistol with him, as did Pashen. Milligan had dropped his rifle when the island was attacked and it probably was still there.

"First," said Mullon, "we have to find out where we are, how we're to get out of here, what these blue fellows have in mind for us and if they can repair our helicopter or not. Anything else is secondary."

As the former prisoners got up and congregated, the blue will-o'-the-wisp stopped dancing. Now they floated in a tightly packed group a finger's breadth above the floor. They quivered now only slightly; the humming and chirping had grown softer and the body colours changed less rapidly. It looked like a conference.

"Yeah," sighed Milligan after hearing Mullan's priority list, "but how are we going to find all that out?"

"We'll probably be able to find a way out of this room by ourselves," said Mullan. "We'll go outside and look around. I think we're in the middle of the jungle—we're certainly not on the island any longer. I..."

"Look!" interrupted Freddy, excited. "They're flying ahead... no, now they've stopped!"

The group of blue beings had set itself in motion and was about 30 feet away, having glided between 2 odd-shaped machines. Now they stopped again and 2 of the blue beings came back, as though asking the Terrans to follow them.

"Alright, then," said Mullan, "onward! They want to show us something!"

The blues moved much faster than people could. Regularly they glided a few yards ahead, then waited for the Terrans to catch up with them; and the game began again.

In this way Mullan and his companions were led through the entire room—a huge rectangular chamber about 150 feet long and 90 feet wide. The ceiling was close to 12 feet above the floor. The room seemed to have no other purpose than to harbour some 20 of the strangely shaped machines, whose function the Terrans were unable to determine, even in the bright light from the bulbs.

At the end of the room was a row of exits. They were doorless and led into hallways that were no less brilliantly lit than the great room. The blues chose the middle exit. Through it was reached a hall whose ceiling was just 6 feet high. Its floor was level at first but soon began to gently ascend.

Mullan marched ahead. He was the first to see a grey fleck in the distance which seemed to be the end of the hallway. He then felt a touch of warm, damp air from ahead.

In a few minutes it could be seen that the grey fleck was nothing less than the light of early morning, which could not yet compete with the radiant glow of the large light bulbs. It could also be seen that the hallway led out on the side of a hill rising from the middle of the jungle. The hill itself was only lightly covered with bushes.

The hill was close to 150 feet high and the hall exit was about two-thirds of that distance up, allowing an overview of the jungle treetops. Mullan saw far to the east a dark stripe meandering through the midst of the forest: a river. Was it the same one in which their island lay?

Looking about, Mullan discovered a number of other exits cut in the face of the hill. The blues had probably constructed an entire city beneath the hill.

Mullan wanted to point the river out to his companions but just then other swarms of the blue beings gushed out of the other exits and merged with the group that had led the Terrans out of the subterranean room. Altogether there must have now been 200 of them, floating just above the bushes. For a moment Mullan feared that if things were going to become violent, it would be now.

But the blues remained calm. Unhindered, Mullan could turn to his companions and discuss with them



the best way to get to the river flowing through the jungle in the distance.

Then he suddenly felt himself lifted off his feet. He was frightened at first for he felt nothing but the sensation of free fall. He saw he was floating above the ground, held by some invisible force at a height of 15 feet.

His friends stared at him in horror.

"What is it?" cried Milligan. "Should I shoot, boss?"

Mullon waved defensively. "No!" he called back. "Put that pistol away. I think that..."

At that moment Freddy screamed in terror.

She staggered, seemed about to fall over but in the same second she was drawn up into the air and presently came to a stop next to Mullon.

"What's going on?" she cried fearfully to Mullon. "What are they doing with us?"

"Be calm," Mullon laughed. "They probably want to take us to the river."

"How? Over the trees?"

"That's right," said Mullon. "They have amazing powers at their disposal. The same gravity field they used to hold us down now holds us suspended in the air. Now they have only to propel us over, the jungle and we'll be at the river. Look, here comes Milligan!"

Now Milligan had lost touch with the ground and came floating by. Then at last Pashen was lifted into the air, too.

"Now we're all together," said Milligan, laughing. "And it looks like the fun isn't over yet."

The blues had started moving again. In closed formation they swept down the hillside and into the jungle. The thick underbrush seemed to offer no resistance to the small, slim figures.

"They're going on in!" Milligan exclaimed. "And what's going to happen to us?"

He had hardly pronounced the last word when Mullon had the feeling of being pushed. He glided through the air away from the hill and over the treetops. Looking around, he saw that his friends were being propelled by the same mysterious force and followed close behind.

The speed of travel accelerated rapidly until Mullon could hear the wind whistling loudly through his hair. He had to admire the abilities of the little blue creatures slipping through the jungle below and transporting their former captives through the air.

How were they able to do it?

Mullon had his suspicions. Besides those in the subterranean chamber, he had not seen any machines, and those had not appeared to him as designed for producing artificial gravity fields. So he felt justified in believing that the gravity field was not produced by any machinery but came from the bodies of the blues themselves. They seemed able to alter the structure of the very material they were composed of and not

only to give off electrical and gravitational fields at will but also to project them anywhere they chose. The whole matter could be understood only as a telekinetic ability and not as technological aptitude.

About half an hour later, Mullon and his companions reached the shore of the jungle river. Judging from the river's width, it had to be the same one in which their island lay, although the island itself was nowhere in sight.

At the same time the Terrans reached the riverbank, the swarm of blue dwarfs burst out of the foliage below. They had moved with the same speed through the jungle as Mullon and his party had over it.

From there on the way led along the riverbank to the southeast. Mullon figured the distance from the blues' hill to the island where the helicopter stood was at least 60 miles.

His estimate proved to be right. After just 2 hours a welter of small and large islands appeared along the right bank. On the largest of them stood the helicopter, still and peaceful in the sun.

The water was no barrier to the blue dwarfs. In a few moments Mullon and friends landed on the island just as softly as they had been picked up 2 hours before.

Meanwhile, the blues formed a ring around the helicopter as though they knew it was the single interest of the Terrans. The alligator Freddy had had dissected on the previous day lay nearby.

Mullon climbed into the helicopter—fevering with tension for what awaited him.

Had the blues already recharged the batteries? No, that they had not. When Mullon tried to switch on the engines, it was all as before: no needles moving on the dials, no control lights, no humming of the radio.

Mullon was disappointed. He bent over and opened the lid of the battery compartment. He disconnected one of the small boxes from its contact wires, pulled it out and took it with him as he climbed down from the cabin.

"Nothing," he told his companions unhappily. "Now let's see what the blues have to say about it."

He laid the battery down in front of one of the blue beings dancing in a broad circle around the helicopter. He had doubts if the blues would understand what was meant but hardly had he set the battery down then a number of blue dwarfs sped towards it as though they wanted to take it apart.

Mullon did not once see them touch it, although they floated within an inch or 2 of the small box. Nevertheless they seemed to come to a conclusion in a short time. They pulled back from the battery, hummed and chirped excitedly and convinced their fellows to form up into the same pattern as they had coming over the river. Before the Terrans could offer any objections, they were picked up again and set in motion towards the right-hand riverbank. As Mullon looked around, he saw that the battery was being taken along. It floated along just a few yards behind him.

They returned to the hill of the Blue Dwarfs in a rushing, whistling flight. After setting their passengers softly down, the blue dwarfs disappeared into one of their' hallways. Mullon and friends followed them. He carried the battery under his arm.

The way led back into the room where they had awakened long hours before. By this time the blues had already assembled before something that had roughly box-shaped outlines and a volume of about 20

cubic yards, and reached almost to the ceiling.

The box was made of metal. A door about half a man's height opened up—apparently automatically—as Mullon stood in front of it.

Mullon crawled through the low door. Milligan followed him. Inside they saw a circular disc about 10 feet in diameter, made of a transparent plastic material. The disc rested on an axis whose both ends were fastened in the walls of the metal box. In 2 places on the edges the disc was touched by objects that resembled nothing so much as sliding contacts. From the contacts and from the disc itself hung a row of wires whose ends rested on the ground.

Mullon examined the strange device: "It's an induction machine," he decided, "and a big one!"

Milligan knew nothing of the subject and Mullon began to explain.

"It's a device that produces voltage by dividing the charge. The first electrical experiments on Earth were carried out using induction machines. An induction machine can even be used as a generator. The voltage created is often several if not 10 thousand volts but the current is rather weak. I think we might be able to get up to half an ampere with this monster here."

"And so charge the batteries?"

"Yes. Now I only want to know who is going to get the machine going."

As though they had understood the thought, the blue dwarfs waiting outside set the transparent disc into sudden motion. Within moments it reached a speed of 2 revolutions per second. Mullon carefully picked up 2 insulated wires lying on the ground and touched their bare ends together. A large crackling spark leaped out.

"Fantastic!" exclaimed Milligan.

Mullon nodded, let the 2 wires drop back to the floor and looked thoughtfully up at the machine. "That also means," he said half to himself, "that alternating current generators are unknown here. They can radiate gravitational and electrical fields from their own bodies and perform the most amazing tricks but they produce their current with machinery my grandfather would have thought old-fashioned.—What strange creatures they must be!"

\* \* \* \*

5 hours later the battery was recharged.

"We can install it now," said Mullon, "and come back here so that the other batteries can be recharged. Now if we can only let the blue dwarfs know we have to go back to the island again."

The words were hardly out of his mouth than the blues started to move, floating towards the exit. Just like before, they all followed the corridor out to the hillside.

"We don't all have to go," said Mullon. "Freddy and Milligan can stay here. Pashen will come with me and help put the battery back in."

"Fine," said Pashen, "but what will you do when they take all 4 of us again?"

At that point something very odd took place: the group of blue dwarfs split up. About half of the small creatures—a hundred or so—disappeared into the various openings cut into the hillside. The others remained behind.

Mullon felt himself grasped and lifted into the air and Pashen followed close behind. For 1 or 2 minutes they floated motionless 15 feet above the ground, then the blues glided down the hill and disappeared into the jungle, drawing Pashen and Mullon through the air behind them.

Freddy and Milligan stayed behind.

Mullon felt fear clear to the bottom of his heart. What he had just experienced confirmed the suspicion he had already felt a few times—namely whenever he was wondering how to get across to the blues what he wanted them to do and they went ahead and did it precisely before he even said a word or made a gesture.

The blue dwarfs were telepaths!

The blues began to seem uncanny to him. They were not only incredibly alien but with all their para-abilities, a single blue dwarf was far superior to a single man.

This was a different problem than with the Mungos.

The Mungos were a primitive and half-intelligent species whose single advantage over men was a 6th sense that warned of danger before the 5 human senses were able to perceive it.

But here, a strange but decided intelligence was involved. Mullon realized that the most important effort of the colony in the future would be directed towards keeping the peace with the blue dwarfs and inducing them in a friendly manner to cooperate with the Terrans.

These thoughts went through his mind while he, Pashen and the recharged battery sped together over the treetops.

\* \* \* \*

After 2 hours of flying time, they reached the island. Pashen and Mullon were set down and they immediately began to install the battery again. Mullon sat in the pilot's seat to test the equipment and in front of him Pashen knelt on the floor, pushing the battery into place and closing the contacts.

Mullon saw the control lights blaze into life and heard the radio hum. "What a wonderful sound!"

Pashen murmured up from below: "And to think we believed we were going to have to spend the rest of our lives wearing leaves and eating alligator meat."

He shut the lid of the battery box and stood up but it seemed that his feet had gone to sleep while he was at work on his knees. He moaned as he stood, staggered and in trying to avoid Mullon fell to the side. "Oh!" he groaned through clenched teeth.

He held a pair of small pliers in his right hand and it was with his right hand that he reached out to catch himself as he fell. As he attempted to avoid falling on Mullon, he turned somewhat to the rear and the pliers jammed into the radio control panel.

Mullon leaped up. With his first glance he saw what damage the pliers had caused. Several knobs had been ripped away, the glass cover of a dial had been smashed in—and the main control light gaped dead, like a devilish black eye instead of glowing green. The radio humming had ceased.

"What the...?" Mullon exclaimed. Then he saw Pashen staggering. "What's wrong?"

Pashen clutched his head and groaned. "Hit my head. Hurts like the dickens!"

"Sit down and wait until you feel better!" Mullon told him.

He was rather angry but he realized that he could hardly reproach Pashen. The man had stood up and slipped, that was all. Although with the result that the helicopter no longer possessed a functioning radio.

Well, it doesn't matter, Mullon thought. We'll be home in a few hours anyway and then we can replace the radio.

"I'm so sorry, sir," Pashen stammered after awhile.

Mullon waved it away. "We won't speak of it. You couldn't help yourself."

"Thank you, sir," murmured Pashen.

Mullon sat back in the pilot's seat, then called out of the cabin: "We can now move under our own power! We're flying back to the hill!"

Pashen stared at him wonderingly but his wonder turned into fear as he saw the blue dwarfs resume their formation obediently and fly across the river on their way home. Mullon activated the engine and let the helicopter rise into the air. It raced over the river and then, 60 feet above the trees, struck to the northwest.

"You talk to the blues?" asked Pashen once he had overcome his fear. "And think they understand you?"

"Well, apparently they do, don't they?" answered Mullon "Didn't you see how they immediately took off?"

"Yes... but how... do you think they've learned English since they met us?"

Mullon shrugged. He didn't intend to reveal what he knew until he could make it evident to everyone by a series of tests that the blue dwarfs were parapsychologically gifted.

So he answered: "Who knows? All I can say is—they understand me."

\* \* \* \*

Mullon landed the helicopter on a small patch of level ground just above the hill entrance that led to the machine room. The batteries were unloaded and taken down into the room. As that was accomplished, the 100 blue dwarfs which had accompanied Pashen and Mullon to the island returned. Judging from their wild dancing and chirping, they seemed quite excited that someone had been able to move faster than they. But it was by no means an unfriendly excitement: the excitement of the blues seemed to be from sheer joy.

Mullon gave Freddy the job of recharging the batteries one after the other. He himself undertook yet another flight back to the island with Pashen and Milligan to take down the tents and bring them back to the hill. Mullon wanted to spend at least the coming night in the vicinity of the blues.

The dwarfs seemed to have nothing against Mullon setting up the tents on the hill slope. Quite the contrary: without being asked, they were helpful in utilizing their telekinetic abilities to drive in the tent stakes and erect the poles.

With the coming of darkness, however, they disappeared into the entrances to their hill and from that moment on were not seen until the next morning.

After the evening meal Mullon assigned the watches and since there had been virtually no pauses for rest that day, the 3 who were spared the first watch went to bed immediately.

Mullon had voluntarily taken the first watch—and with good reason. He wanted to take a close look at the helicopter radio and try to repair it. He had remembered with some alarm that Greenwich had heard nothing from the expedition for more than 60 hours.

Anyone knowing Hollander as well as Mullon did would not find it difficult to assume Hollander might have used the long period of uncertainty for his own purposes. Although the People's Assembly was nominally a democratic organization, it unfortunately existed on the strength of its president's will. O'Bannon and Wolley were certainly capable men and could have led the People's Assembly according to Mullon's wishes if they had to but they were no match for Hollander.

Mullon left the rifle where he had been standing watch and climbed up the hill to the helicopter. He opened the cabin door, climbed in and switched on the interior lights so he could take a look at the damage caused by Pashen's pliers.

Then he carefully removed the knobs that had been spared damage and slid the front cover off the radio. At first glance it seemed that he could never find his way through the confusion of wires, especially since he understood little of high frequency technology. But after an hour of determined effort he had obtained a good idea of how the radio worked and even believed that he could repair it.

He rested for a bit, then set to work once more. He took the necessary tools out of the box on the floor by the pilot's seat and began to reattach the disconnected wires so that they could again come in touch with the knob contacts.

Then he heard a slight noise behind him and turned around. On the other side of the cabin Pashen's face

looked in from the darkness outside. He stood on the ladder leading up to the cabin and stared calmly at Mullon

"You gave me one good fright!" Mullon exclaimed. "What do you want here?"

"I'm looking for the man who leaves his post in the middle of the night!" answered Pashen.

Mullon gave a start. "Don't be ridiculous: I have more important things to do than counting the gnats flying around the tent!"

Pashen shook his head. "You aren't going to need the radio anymore, Mullon," he said hollowly.

Mullon suddenly had a suspicion—so terrifying that he needed a few seconds to find his speech again. "Why not?"

Pashen's face twisted into a mocking grin. "Haven't you guessed yet?"

Try to win time, Mullon thought, just try to win time. Maybe someone will hear us and come over. Pashen probably has a pistol on him.

"I think I have," he answered grimly. "I should have guessed a long time ago, right?"

Pashen did not seem unwilling to talk. "You think so? What would have given me away?"

"Back in the mountains. The capillary tube started to leak. Even under the greatest stress, capillary tubes will only break. They can never get a hole in them."

Pashen nodded coolly. "You're a good observer," he said, "but a little late."

"Yes," sighed Mullon, "you're right there. Hollander wanted to be certain Harper and his buddies found me in the mountains. So you sabotaged the helicopter, making sure we couldn't fly. But when you felt Harper had gotten close enough to need a sign, you just happened to discover the leak in the capillary tube so we could get the helicopter going again. Am I right?"

"Exactly," said Pashen.

"And the radio wasn't damaged by accident," continued Mullon, almost easy-going and relaxed. "You of course had to stop me from sending news to Greenwich. But why? If I had been able to report back, what would that have changed in your plans?"

"Nothing in my plans," admitted Pashen, "but it would have changed Hollander's. Only Hollander will hear about the existence of the blue dwarfs. No one else."

"Aha," said Mullon. "You think he'll want to make use of the blues."

"When he learns of them, certainly."

"And what will *you* get out of all this treason you're taking part in?"

Pashen raised his shoulders. "Hollander rewards his men. You must know that it will be all over for democracy when Hollander comes to power."

"That wasn't hard to guess," answered Mullon sarcastically. "But how is he going to reward you? He can't give you money. What, then?"

"Perhaps he'll make me a governor. I've been promised I'll be the first one Hollander rewards."

Mullon nodded. "And one day you'll be inconvenient for him because you know too much and he'll send a man to kill you, just as he sent you to kill me."

"That's the risk I'll have to take," answered Pashen calmly. "Anyway, it was a pleasure chatting with you, Mr. Mullon. But now I'm afraid we'll have to bring the conversation to an end. Duty calls, you know. You understand, of course?"

Mullon had not expected him to raise his right hand so quickly over the bottom edge of the doorway—and with it his pistol.

Mullon sprang up and tried to throw himself to the side but Pashen followed every movement with steady aim. Mullon saw a pale tongue of fire leap out at him, felt a painful jolt in his chest and lost consciousness.

Pashen needed 4 seconds to drag the inert body out of the cabin and let it drop on the ground. From Mullon's wide-open eyes and limpness, Pashen had all the proof he needed that Mullon was dead.

As Pashen closed the cabin door, the first agitated cries resounded from the tents below. He started the engine and took off. The helicopter shot into the air like an arrow, climbed to 1500 feet, and then turned west.

Pashen had no hesitation about a night flight. He had a compass to show him the way and enough power to keep the helicopter in the air all night if he could find neither the town nor a suitable place to land for rest on the way.

## **6/ WORD FROM RHODAN**

When Mullon came to again, he felt so weak that even the effort of trying to remember where he was and how he had come there was painful and nearly made him lose consciousness once more.

He saw a familiar face, as though through a thin curtain. Freddy's face. It had changed. The cheeks were hollow and her eyes were red-rimmed, seeming to lie deep in their sockets. "Freddy!" Mullon whispered.

The curtain disappeared. Freddy's face came closer, growing clearer.

"What is it... where am I?" Mullon wondered.

"In safety," answered Freddy gently, tears in her eyes. "You're with me in the tent."

There was suddenly a movement somewhere. A breeze crossed Mullon's face and a tall,



broad-shouldered figure came into his field of vision. Mullon recognized the man: it was Milligan.

"Everything's alright, Miz," Milligan said as gently as he could with his rough voice. "The blues are on their way now and—oh, is the Boss awake?"

At that moment Mullon's memory suddenly and painfully returned. Pashen—the helicopter—Hollander! "How long have I been lying here?" he asked.

"For awhile," said Freddy circumspectly.

"Tell me exactly how long!"

"23 days."

Mullon groaned. "What happened?"

"You shouldn't talk so much," whispered Freddy. "You aren't at all well!"

"Please tell me," Mullon implored. "I must know!"

Freddy hesitated.

*"Please...!"*

"We found you where the helicopter had been," Freddy said. "You had been shot through the heart. You were dead! Pashen had disappeared with the helicopter. We brought you to the tents and at that moment the blue dwarfs appeared. They came out of the tunnels like bright blue flames shining in the night. They knew instantly what had happened. They busied themselves with you, removing the bullet and taking you into their care. They indicated to us that they could probably save you."

"I don't know how they did it but after a few hours you began to breathe again. Your eyes closed. You slept. The blues continued to take care of you. They gave you liquid nourishment, floated around you and you looked better every day. They must have incredible medical abilities."

"And today you woke up for the first time. That's all."

"But nothing else happened?" Mullon pressed. "Pashen... Hollander..."

Freddy shook her head. "No, nothing. We're all alone with the blue dwarfs."

"Then it's alright... ohhhh...!" He sank back and a second later had gone to sleep again.

\* \* \* \*

30 more days went by—Grautier days, each close to 40 hours long.

Mullon recovered noticeably under the attentive care of the blue dwarfs though he could not see what

they did to him. They floated humming around him, never once touching him. But he grew stronger. 5 days after he had awakened for the first time he could already stand up and take a few steps.

From then on it went quickly. From then on it was less the curing effects of the blues' treatment and more Mullon's driving wish to get back to Greenwich and look after things there.

To his surprise he learned that in the meantime Freddy had succeeded in coming to a sort of understanding with the blue dwarfs. She had expressed her wish and the blues understood it with the help of their telepathic capabilities.

Freddy had learned that the blue dwarfs communicated with each other in 3 ways: telepathy, colour changes and humming. Each method fulfilled its own purpose.

Telepathy was the means for general understanding, just as the speech of men is. The colour play on the other hand gave a value to what was expressed: if, for example, the statement was telepathically made that "The forest is far!", the message was accompanied by the colour reflecting the speaker's private opinion. If he was pleased by the fact the forest was far, his body glowed bright turquoise; if he were not pleased, his colour changed to deep violet. If he were unmoved either way, then his body remained the usual blue.

For its part, the humming indicated the importance of the message to the speaker. Depending on how important the fact the forest was distant was, the humming could be strong, weak or even non-existent.

Those were the outward manifestations of the dwarfs' language. It was clear from the beginning that unless the Terrans either bred a telepath or somehow taught the dwarfs to write, there would never be a perfect communication between man and dwarf. Everything that the dwarfs wanted to communicate to a human would be incomplete and necessarily limited, to easily understood matters. Whereas the dwarfs could understand human thoughts.

But there were limits even to that. Human logic was alien to the dwarfs and naturally they could act only on the thoughts that were intelligible within the framework of their own logic. Others they could not understand. The thought, 'A man is afraid of another man' was just as incomprehensible to them as the colour play of their iridescent bodies to the Terrans.

That example, however, had its basis not so much in the difference of logic but in the dwarfs' way of life. Freddy had found out that the dwarfs' telekinetic powers were effective only when the dwarfs were together in sufficient numbers. A single dwarf was hardly able to lift a small stone from the ground. So early in their development the dwarfs had realized that only a close communal society would be a favourable and advantageous way of life. Thus the dwarfs lived in a tightly knit clan in which there were never any disputes. This had of course influenced their manner of thinking and so the thought of someone being afraid of another member of the same species was completely alien.

Moreover, Freddy had not been able to determine as yet if there were other clans besides the one in the hill, which included about a thousand members, and how the various clans got along with each other. The question had not been understood and so Freddy suspected that the thousand dwarfs were the only ones in a considerable area, if not the only ones on all of Grautier.

There was something else, which she had understood more clearly: the technology of the blue dwarfs—if one could even speak of a technology at all—had developed on the basis of the telekinetic abilities of the strange beings. For example, the principle of the lever had never been discovered. When the dwarfs wanted to lift a heavy stone, they did it with the help of the gravitational field radiated from their bodies.

The result was that there were few examples of actual machines and other devices and these only in their most primitive form. The dwarfs were all but helpless when confronted with a technical problem that could not be solved with the help of their telekinetic power.

Thus their living quarters had been illuminated for centuries with torches. They understood the secrets of electricity intuitively but an electrical field projected somewhere is of little use for producing current as a storm. The primitive induction machines came out of considering the problem of producing current in some other fashion. There was a room under the hill in which a hundred such machines had been built and kept constantly in rotation by a part of the hill's inhabitants. In this way the current had been produced which had activated the huge light bulbs.

Besides that, Freddy had learned that the blue dwarfs had never had any unfriendly intentions towards the 4 Terrans.

The night Mullan was 'murdered' they had appeared on their own initiative. The frantic excitement of Freddy's thoughts had awakened them. That they would interrupt their sleep on Mullan's account had to be regarded as the highest sacrifice, since for the dwarfs sleep and thus renewal of their energy was nothing less than an almost religious action undertaken for the good of all. The custom was interrupted only when something extremely important had to be done.

That was all that Freddy had been able to experience, reason out or guess. Considering the difficulties of communication standing in the way between human and dwarf, it was a great deal. Each detail confirmed by experience only emphasized how vast a gulf yawned between the 2 life-forms, what endless patience was required and, finally, what an astonishing variety of life forms were to be found in the universe.

\* \* \* \*

After 30 days Mullan was so far along in recovery that he set the return to Greenwich for the next day. The dwarfs had made it clear that they willingly stood ready to transport the Terrans over the jungle.

"In any event," said Mullan to Freddy and Milligan, "we certainly can't expect to be greeted with open arms. I'm even certain that Hollander meanwhile has pushed his way to power and both of you know what that means.

"Let's consider the worst possible turn of events: Hollander has dissolved the People's Assembly and has taken over with his supporters. He knows that I'm dead but he still must take you into account. Moreover, Pashen has told him of the blue dwarfs' powers, so he knows that you won't have to walk 180 miles through the jungle. You're dangerous for him—only you can prove that Pashen told a fairy tale or whatever to account for what happened. Hollander will attempt to capture you then. That means he has posted watches between Greenwich and the western edge of the jungle. For us that means we'll have to veer far to the north or south to go around the watches and, if possible, approach Greenwich from the west.

"What we'll have to do in Greenwich, we'll have to wait and see. I assume that Hollander is not yet completely in control of the situation or else he wants time to consolidate things: otherwise he would have shown up here a long time ago. But no matter what the situation is, we won't have it easy."

\* \* \* \*

The flight went quickly and without incident. The place where Mullon and his 2 companions crossed the western edge of the jungle was 240 miles from Greenwich. The city itself lay off to the south-southwest and nothing was seen of Hollander's watch posts. Without stopping the blue dwarfs transported their passengers to a point about 20 miles northwest of Greenwich. The stream that flowed past Greenwich was only a few hundred yards away and under its overhanging banks Mullon and company found a sufficient hiding place from the helicopter Hollander was now probably using to keep a watch out for Milligan and Freddy.

Seeing that their proteges had been landed safely, the blue dwarfs said goodbye which is to say that they danced, humming and chirping, and radiated bright turquoise.

Oddly enough, 2 of them remained behind. Evidently they had been assigned to maintain communication between the Terrans and the dwarfs' hill. Mullon was happy about this and had Freddy, who had learned first how to make her thoughts understandable to, the dwarfs, convey his thanks.

The rest of the day passed in inactivity and nervous waiting. As soon as darkness fell, Milligan would go to Greenwich and there find out what had been going on. If worst had come to worst and Hollander had come to power in Greenwich, Milligan could not allow himself to be seen there and had a walk of 40 miles in front of him—20 to and 20 back. So he slept for almost the rest of the day, resting up for the night to come.

\* \* \* \*

Hardly had the sun set than Milligan started out. One of the most difficult parts of the trip had to be conquered first thing: crossing the fast-flowing river, Milligan stowed away his compass and pistol—the 2 most important pieces of equipment he had—so that the water could not get to them. Then he entered the water and let the racing current take him. With skilful strokes he steadily drew nearer to the other shore, reaching it little more than a quarter-mile downstream from where Mullon and Freddy were camped.

From then on he followed his compass and reached the unusual—on Grautier, anyway—speed of 3.5 miles an hour. And so after over 5 hours of it, without stopping to rest once, he saw the dark mass of the sparsely lit little town appear in the blackness ahead.

He threw himself into the grass and rested for a few minutes. Then he attempted to crawl closer to the town. He knew that O'Bannon lived in one of the northernmost houses. If he were able to get in touch with O'Bannon, he would have accomplished more than he had really dared hope. Assuming, of course, that O'Bannon was still at liberty.

Milligan was still about 30 yards from the outermost house when he heard a muffled throat clearing out

of the darkness in front of him. He pressed himself flat against the ground and, looking up, tried to make out in the weak starlight whom he had heard.

After a brief search he discovered the outline of a man, wrapped in a coat and carrying a gun at his back, standing motionless a few yards from the house wall.

Milligan crept a bit farther ahead. He didn't know who the man was. It could just as well have been one of Mullon's people as Hollander's. In any case, Milligan had to go past him if he wanted to reach O'Bannon's house.

Milligan had not yet come to a decision when he heard steps approaching from the left.

"Is that you, Suttney?" asked the sentry by the house.

"Yeah. Everything's OK."

With that the riddle was solved. Milligan knew that Suttney was one of Hollander's men. So, then, was the sentry.

"Damn cold here," growled the sentry. "I'd like to know why we have to stand here. It's impossible that Milligan and Mullon's wife would come this way."

"And because you believe that," said Suttney, "that's why we have to stand here. Those 2 are smarter than you think they are."

"Yeah, but..."

"Enough of that. Hurry up and go home to bed!"

The sentry left without further comment and Suttney took his place.

Milligan knew what he had to do. Moving in a wide curve, he approached Suttney at an angle from the rear. A gentle wind had blown up, rustling the grass and covering any sound Milligan made. Directly behind Suttney, Milligan stood up, pulled his pistol and prodded Suttney forcefully with it between the ribs."

"Don't make a sound!" Milligan hissed. "Put your arms out to the side!"

Suttney obeyed wordlessly and quickly: terror had overcome him. Milligan pulled the rifle off his shoulder.

"Alright, now—forward, march!"

Suttney hesitated but Milligan had no desire to lose any time. He raised the rifle and pushed the barrel against Suttney's back. Suttney stumbled forward, crying out involuntarily in pain. Like lightning Milligan had grabbed him by the collar and turned his head to look into his face.

"Listen, buddy," Milligan hissed to him: "Another sound like that and that'll be the last noise you ever make! There are a lot of other sentries around and I can find out what I want to know from one of them just as easily as I can from you!"

From then on Suttney marched willingly and made no further noises.

Milligan kept to a northeastern direction, counting the steps he took in order to have an orientation later.

When nothing more was to be seen of the town, he said to Suttney: "Now tell me everything that's happened in the last 35 days, friend. And don't forget to keep walking. We have a long ways to go tonight."

\* \* \* \*

Milligan stumbled, to the riverbank across from Mullon and Freddy's camp just before sunrise. He wanted to swim across but Mullon saw how exhausted he was and called to him: "Stay over there and rest! Your report can wait until later!"

He was in no way certain of that: it would be for Milligan to decide. That Milligan obeyed the instructions immediately and lay down to rest, Mullon took as a sign that nothing had happened that demanded haste.

Milligan rested for 2 hours then walked a ways up the river, crossing the water the same way he had the evening before.

"Now, tell us what's been going on!" Mullon urged.

Milligan took a deep breath. "It's all rather simple," he began. "Pashen was bright enough to land the helicopter a ways from Greenwich, which he did even before sunrise. Then he sneaked his way to Hollander and made his report. Hollander realized immediately that his hour had come. His men—the few hundred he could still depend on completely—looted the arsenal and surrounded all the houses before anyone was really awake. Hollander got everybody out of bed and declared a state of emergency, although he didn't give any reasons for it. A few people defended themselves but of course all resistance was pointless. Those who fought back were taken away and locked up—among them O'Bannon, Wolley and some others we know well. Hollander locked them up in the spaceship wreck and Harper and Glannon were freed.

"Then Hollander set up a so-called 'Defence Troop': 500 men altogether, the only people allowed to carry arms. He picked the right men for it too—back on Earth, every single one of them must have been nervous whenever a policeman went by.

"Naturally a lot of other people gave their support to Hollander, probably to spare themselves any trouble later. Hollander has been terrorizing the town and he's also been waiting for Mrs. Mullon and me. Once he's captured us, he'll want to look into the matter of the blue dwarfs. The man I questioned didn't know who or what blue dwarfs are, just that they interested Hollander tremendously.

"And that's about all there is to say, I think."

Mullon nodded thoughtfully. "And from whom did you find all this out?"

"From Suttney. I grabbed him while he was standing watch. I kicked him 6 miles out into the prairie,

then questioned him. Afterwards I turned him around so much he didn't know if he was coming or going. His cohorts probably started looking for him as soon as his relief didn't find him at his post but they can hardly have found him before this morning. Anyway, I went with him towards the northeast so that nobody will get the idea we're hiding in the northwest."

Mullon smiled a bit sadly. "You've earned a medal, Milligan. As soon as the People's Assembly is reestablished, I'll see that you get one."

Mullon then turned to Freddy. "Hollander hasn't even tried to make his take-over look legal. That will be the rope to hang him with as soon as we can undertake something against him."

"So what are we going to do now?" Freddy concentrated for awhile and then began to transmit her thoughts to the 2 blues which had remained behind. After about half an hour they glided out over the river and disappeared in the east.

"I don't think they understood everything literally," Freddy said, "but they did seem to understand that both we and they are in danger."

"Do you think they'll come back to pick us up?"

Freddy shrugged. "Perhaps. But with them, who can tell?"

\* \* \* \*

The long day passed almost without incident.

At length the sun set. Mullon and Freddy discussed the former's plans while behind them, in the shadow of the overhanging bank, Milligan sat cleaning the rifle he had commandeered from Suttney.

Mullon heard him as he suddenly leaped up and gave a warning cry. Instinctively Mullon rolled to the side and looked out across the river to the opposite shore.

On the riverbank stood a man whose outline was a sharply defined silhouette against the light of the setting sun. Astounded, Mullon saw him raise his arms and wave. He did not seem to be armed: at least he did not carry a rifle.

Mullon stood up. "Milligan, hold your gun ready!" he ordered, not looking at Milligan. Then he called over the roaring of the river to the stranger: "What do you want?"

The stranger put his hand to his mouth and called back: "Actually nothing! I only came by here by accident!"

"Come over here!" Mullon ordered.

The stranger obeyed. He was an even better swimmer than Milligan. Wet but smiling happily, he climbed up onto the bank. "Since you seem to be hiding out here," he said, "may I assume that you're not some of Hollander's people... good God! Is it really, you, Mullon?" He was shocked.

Mullon nodded. "In the flesh. I'm not the slightest bit dead. And who are you?"

"My name is Chellish. I can imagine you never heard of me before. Earlier I was a follower of Mr. Hollander. What he's been pulling off lately hasn't been at all to my liking, so I got up and left."

"And where were you going?"

"That way, to the northwest. I'd seen a little of the area from the helicopter while I was flying on Hollander's order to look for Mrs. Mullon and Milligan."

"What did you want in the northwest?"

"Off that way are some forests—real forests, not those clammy jungles like those in the east. I'm from Maine, on the Atlantic coast, and know my way around woods pretty well. I'd come out all right, I think. Besides, I have a pistol too."

Throwing caution to the winds, he pulled the gun out of his pants pocket and threw it to Mullon.

Mullon caught it and asked in surprise: "What should I do with it?"

Chellish grinned. "If I were in your place, Mr. Mullon, I wouldn't believe a word that damned Chellish says. And I bet that's just how you feel."

"Not so much now," smiled Mullon.

"So where are *you* going?" asked Chellish.

Mullon smiled more broadly. "I'm not quite sure yet if it's any of your business."

"Understandable," Chellish admitted. "I asked only because I'd really like to go with you. 4 are better than 1. So if you can get over your mistrust, I'd be very much obliged. And now, I hope you have no objection if I go sack out a little bit. I'm dog tired."

Without another word he stood up, walked up the bank a short distance and laid down. After awhile his regular breathing showed he was in fact asleep, in spite of the hard rock on which he lay.

\* \* \* \*

The opinion about Chellish was not unanimous. Milligan made it clear in no uncertain words that if it were up to him, he would chase the man away.

That would have been without doubt the safest procedure. But Mullon felt he could trust the young man and told himself that he would not be running too great a risk if he took Chellish along to the dwarfs—assuming that the dwarfs were able to transport a 4th man. One could withhold Chellish's pistol and what damage could he do then?



Freddy agreed with her husband. Milligan was outvoted and he was appeased only by the argument that they needed every available man. Basically he did not really mistrust Chellish; it was just that the risk of trusting him seemed too great.

Chellish got up again shortly after sundown and came over. "Good evening," he said politely. "Have you decided on anything?"

"Yes," said Mullon, "we're taking you with us—providing our means of transportation can be stretched to accommodate you."

Chellish raised his eyebrows. "Means of transportation?" he asked in surprise. "Do you have any?"

Mullon nodded. "I hope you'll see them presently." He had just finished speaking when a shining blue iridescence rippled over the edge of the riverbank and came to a stop, hovering just above the ground. The blue dwarfs had returned.

Mullon looked at Chellish, noting how the spectacle astonished him.

Meanwhile, Freddy had counted the dwarfs. "There are about 150," she told Mullon. "I don't think that's enough for Chellish."

"Please find out exactly," Mullon instructed her, then walked back to Chellish, who still stared at the flashing, dancing, shimmering figures.

"What are they?" he asked as Mullon came up.

"Those are our goblins," answered Mullon with a smile. "Anyway, I came to give you some bad news."

"Yes?"

"These 150... er, goblins aren't enough to carry 4 people. You'll have to remain behind—temporarily, if you're agreeable."

Chellish looked at him. "You mean you'll send your goblins to come fetch me?"

"That's right."

"How long will it take?"

"That I can't say. These beings are so alien that—"

"Are you trying to tell me these are *beings*?" Chellish interrupted vehemently. "And intelligent beings at that?"

"Of course! But let me finish what I was saying! These beings are so alien that no one can guess what they'll do next. Up to now they've done everything we've asked without expecting any thanks—Just a moment, here comes Freddy!"

"They can only take 3 people," Freddy said with some excitement. "But they're ready to send a messenger on ahead immediately so that another group can arrange as soon as possible to pick up Mr. Chellish."

"There you go!" said Mullan.

"Alright," said Chellish, "that's fine with me. No, more than that: I'm very grateful to you. I'll just wait right here, then?"

"Right. Under the circumstances it won't be even 3 hours before you're picked up."

"Great. And these... well, whatever-you-call-them—can I trust them?"

"Hmm," said Mullan, looking thoughtfully at the dancing hordes. An idea had just occurred to him: how he could tell if Chellish were trustworthy or a traitor?

"I can tell you this much," Mullan said at length. "They're telepaths. If you have something up your sleeve you'd better be a long way away by the time they come to pick you up."

Chellish laughed. "I'll be here."

Chellish watched as Freddy and Milligan and Mullan prepared to break camp. Then he saw them suddenly float into the air, rise past the summit of the steep bank and disappear beyond it. Before them glided the swarm of blue dwarfs, the iridescent light of their bodies quickly lost in the tall grass of the prairie.

For some time Chellish stood numb and speechless. The glow and faint whispering had vanished into the distance. Then he suddenly shook his head and murmured: "Hang it all, anyway! When I tell Capt. Blailey about this he'll think I've been trying out the colonists' home brew. Well, I'll try, anyway."

He crouched under the overhanging riverbank, made an adjustment on his wristwatch and spoke in a low voice: "Sunny Maid, Sunny Maid, Sunny Maid."

A thin, tinny voice sounded from the wristwatch a moment later: "You've waited long enough. Blailey here. Go ahead."

As per agreement, Chellish said: "Excuse me, sir, I don't know any Blailey."

"Then the devil take you. Sunny Maid is the prettiest girl in Kansas City. *Now* go ahead!"

Chellish grinned into the darkness, then began his report.

He told how it had taken him 3 days to reach Greenwich after leaving the Gazelle, now hidden in a mountain valley 60 miles from the town, and had arrived in the middle of chaos. He had no trouble concealing his identity, for the town stood on its ear. It had been much more difficult to restrain himself from showing Hollander who he was and telling him that it would take only one word for Hollander and his entire defence troop to be taken prisoner and shipped off to Earth for trial.

In the 5 days he spent in Greenwich, he had learned everything he needed to know. Finally, he had even witnessed the search for Suttney and the missing sentry's eventual discovery.

Chellish reported further that he had begun to search for the missing Terrans himself and instead of 2 had found 3.

In conclusion he described in a few words what he had just experienced on the riverbank.

"You're trying to lengthen my leg!" ("Pull my leg" in 20th century vernacular) snorted Blailey.

Chellish laughed. "I thought that would be your reaction, sir. But that part of the events lasted at least 10 minutes and I even pinched myself a few times."

"Alright. You say they'll pick you up?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let them. Report back to me later when you have an opportunity. Good luck. Over & out."

Chellish leaned back against the riverbank and waited.

In the Gazelle-type scouting craft lying amid the mountains far to the west, Capt. Blailey transmitted a coded message. A few astronomical units from Grautier it was received by a relay ship hanging motionless in space and passed on to Earth.

An hour later Blailey had a response: "Continue observation. No intervention yet. Make regular reports." The message ended with a code sign indicating none other than the Peacelord himself had sent it.

Blailey whistled through his teeth. "Rhodan!" he exclaimed. "He must be taking a personal interest in this Grey Beast planet business!"

He went to his seat and sat down. "This Mullon must be quite a man," he thought to himself. "He'll probably straighten the mess out *without* our help."

Rhodan hoped so too but hedged his bets with Blailey and Chellish, guardians of the banned.

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THE BLUE DWARFS

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

Jost Kulman enters the scene.

And what a scene.

The menace from the Other Dimension swoops and scoops up 20,000 Swoons!

The Swoons: the microtex, the micro-technicians, specialists in techniques of ultra-smallness whose scientists could prove of immense future help to Perry Rhodan's cosmic agents.

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Nevertheless, there'll be plenty of suspense in the next issue of this magabook when you encounter—

## THE MICRO-TECHS

by

Clark Darlton