

SYMBIOTICA by Eric Frank Russell

They had commissioned the *Marathon* to look over a likely planet floating near Rigel and what some of us would have liked to learn was how the devil our Terrestrial astronomers could select worthwhile subjects at such an enormous distance.

Last trip they'd found us a juicy job when they'd sent us to that mechanical world and its watery neighbour near Bootes. The *Marathon*, a newly designed Flettner boat, was something super and had no counterpart in our neck of the cosmos. So our solution of the mystery was that the astronomers had got hold of some instrument equally revolutionary.

Anyway, we had covered the outward trip as per instructions and had come near enough to see that once again the astronomers had justified their claim to expertness when they'd said that here was a planet likely to hold life.

Over to starboard Rigel blazed like a distant furnace about thirty degrees above the plane which was horizontal at that moment. By that I mean the horizontal plane always is the ship's horizontal plane to which the entire cosmos had

to relate itself whether it likes it or not. But this planet's primary wasn't the far-off Rigel: its own sun - much nearer - looked a fraction smaller and rather yellower than Old Sol.

Two more planets lay farther out and we'd seen another one swinging round the opposite side of the sun, That made four in all, but three were as sterile as a Venusian guppy's mind and only this, the innermost one, seemed interesting.

We swooped upon it bow first. The way that world swelled in the observation-ports did things to my bowels. One trip on the casually meandering *Upsydaisy* had given me my space-legs and made me accustomed to living in suspense over umpteen million miles of nothingness, but I reckoned it was going to take me another century or two to become hardened to the mad bull take-offs and landings of these Flettner craft.

Young Wilson in his harness followed his pious custom of praying for the safety of his photographic plates. From his expression of spiritual agony you'd have thought he was married to the darned things. We landed, kerumph! The boat did a hectic belly-slide.

"I wouldn't grieve," I told Wilson. "Those emulsified

window-panes never fry you a chicken or shove a strawberry shortcake under your drooling mouth."

"No," he admitted. "They don't" Struggling out of his harness, he gave me the sour eye and growled, "How'd you like me to spit in the needlers?"

"I'd break your neck," I promised.

"See?" he said, pointedly, and forthwith beat it to find out whether his stuff had survived intact.

Sticking my face to the nearest port I had a look through its thick disc and studied what I could see of the new world. It was green. You'd never have believed any place could be so thoroughly and absolutely green. The sun, which had appeared a primrose colour out in space, now looked an extremely pale green. It poured down a flood of yellow-green light.

The *Marathon* lay in a glade that cut through a mighty forest. The area immediately around us was lush with green grasses, herbs, shrubs and bugs. And the forest itself was a near-solid mass of tremendous growths that ranged in colour from a very light silver-green to a dark, glossy green

that verged upon black.

Brennand came and stood beside me. His face promptly became a spotty and bilious green as the eerie light hit it. He looked like one of the undead.

"Well, here we are again." Turning away from the port, he grinned at me, swiftly wiped the grin off his face and replaced it with a look of alarm. "Hey, don't you be sick over me!"

"It's the light," I pointed out. " Take a look at yourself. You resemble a portion of undigested haggis floating in the scuppers of a Moon-tripper."

"Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it."

For a while we remained there looking out the port and waiting for the general summons to the conference which usually preceded the first venture out of the ship. I was counting on maintaining my lucky streak by being picked from the hat. Brennand likewise itched to stamp his feet on real soil. But the summons did not come.

In the end, Brennand griped, "The skipper is slow-
what's holding him?"

"No idea."

I had another look at his leprous face. It was awful.
Judging by his expression he wasn't fanatically in love with
my features either.

I said, "You know how cautious McNulty is. Guess that
spree on Mechanistria has persuaded him to count a
hundred before issuing an order."

"Yes," agreed Brennand. "I'll go forward and find out
what's cooking."

He mooched along the passage. I couldn't go with him
because at this stage it was my duty to be ready at the
armoury. You never could tell when they'd come for the
stuff therein, and they had a habit of coming on the run.

Brennand had only just disappeared around the end corner
when sure enough the exploring party barged in shouting
for equipment. Six of them. Molders, an engineer; Jepson,
a navigating officer; Sam Hignett, our Negro surgeon; young

Wilson, and two Martians, Kli Dreen and Kli Morg.

"Hah, lucky again?" I growled at Sam, tossing him his needle ray and sundry oddments.

"Yes, sergeant " His very white teeth glistened in his dark face as he smiled with satisfaction. "The skipper says nobody is to go out afoot until first we've scouted around in number four lifeboat"

Kli Morg got his needler in a long, snaky tentacle, waved the dangerous thing around with bland disregard for everyone's safety, and chirruped, "Give Dreen and me our helmets."

"Helmets?" I glanced from him to the Terrestrials. "You guys want spacesuits, too?"

"No," replied Jepson. "The stuff outside is up to fifteen pounds and so rich in oxygen you whizz around thinking you're merely ambling."

"Mud!" snapped Kli Morg. "Just like mud! Give us our helmets."

He got them. These Martians were so conditioned by the

three pounds pressure of their native planet that anything thicker and heavier irritated their livers, assuming that they had livers. That's why they had the use of the starboard airlock in which pressure was kept down to suit their taste. They could endure weightier atmosphere for a limited time, but sooner or later they'd wax unsociable and behave as though burdened with the world's woes.

We Terrestrials helped them clamp down their head-and-shoulder pieces and exhaust the air to what they considered comfortable. If I'd lent a hand with this job once I'd done it fifty times and still it seemed as crazy as ever. It isn't right that people should feel happier for breathing in short whiffs.

Jay Score lumbered lithely into the armoury just as I'd got all the clients decorated like Christmas trees. He leaned his more than three hundred pounds on the tubular barrier which promptly groaned. He got off it quickly. His eyes shone brightly in a face as impassive as ever.

Shaking the barrier to see if it was wrecked, I said, "The trouble with you is that you don't know your own strength."

He ignored that, turned his attention to the others and told them, "The skipper orders you to be extra careful. We

don't want any repetition of what happened to Haines and his crew. Don't fly below one thousand feet, don't risk a landing elsewhere. Keep the autocamera running, keep your eyes skinned and beat it back here the moment you discover anything worth reporting."

"All right, Jay." Molders swung a couple of spare ammo belts over an arm. " We'll watch our steps."

They traipsed out. Soon afterwards the lifeboat broke free with a squeaky parody of the *Marathon* 's deep-throated, sonorous drumming. It curved sharply through the green light, soared over huge trees and diminished to a dot. Brennan returned, stood by the port and watched the boat vanish.

"McNulty's as leery as an old maid with a penitentiary out back," he remarked.

"He has plenty of reasons. And he has all the explaining to do when we arrive home."

A smirk passed over his seasick complexion. "I took a walk to the noisy end and found that a couple of those stern-gang bums have beaten everyone to the mark. They didn't wait for orders. They're outside right now, playing

duck-on-the-rock."

"Playing *what*? " I yelled.

"Duck-on-the-rock," he repeated, deriving malicious satisfaction from it.

I went to the tail-end, Brennand following with a wide grin. Sure enough, two of those dirty mechanics who service the tubes had pulled a fast one. They must have crawled out through the main driver, not yet cool. Standing ankle-deep in green growths, the pair were ribbing each other and slinging pebbles at a small rock poised on top of a boulder. To look at them you'd have thought this was a Sunday school picnic.

"Does the skipper know about this?"

"Don't be silly," advised Brennand. "Do you think he'd pick that pair of unshaven tramps for first out?"

One of the couple turned, noticed us staring at him through the port. He smiled toothily, shouted something impossible to hear through the thick walls, leaped nine feet into the air and smacked his chest with a grimy hand. He

made it plain that the gravity was low, the oxygen-content high and he was feeling mutinously topnotch. Brennan's face suggested that he was sorely tempted to crawl through a tube and join the fun.

"McNulty will skin those hoodlums," I said, dutifully concealing my envy.

"Can't blame them. Our artificial gravity is still switched on, the ship is full of fog and we've come a long, long way.

"It'll be great to go outside. I could do some sand-castling myself if I had a bucket and spade."

"There isn't any sand."

Becoming tired of the rock, the escapees picked themselves a supply of round pebbles from among the growths, moved toward a big bush growing fifty yards from the Marathon's stern. The farther away they went, the greater the likelihood of them being spotted from the skipper's lair, but they didn't care a hoot. They knew McNulty couldn't do much more than lecture them and enter it in the log disguised as a severe reprimand.

This bush stood between twelve and fifteen feet high, had

a very thick mass of bright green foliage at the top of a thin, willowy trunk. One of the pair approached it a couple of yards ahead of the other, flung a pebble at the bush, struck it fair and square in the middle of the foliage. What happened next was so swift that we had difficulty in following it.

The pebble crashed amid the leaves. The entire bush whipped over backwards as if its trunk were a steel spring. A trio of tiny creatures fell out at the limit of the arc, dropped from sight into herbage below. The bush whipped forward in a return swipe then stood precisely as before, undisturbed except for a minute quivering in its topmost branches.

But the one who'd flung the stone now lay flat on his face. His companion, three or four paces behind, had stopped and was gaping like one petrified by the utterly unexpected.

"Hey? " squawked Brennand. "What happened there?"

Outside, the man who had fallen suddenly stirred, rolled over, sat up and started picking at himself. His companion got to him, helped him pick. Not a sound came into the ship, so we couldn't hear what they were talking about or

the oaths they were certainly using.

The picking process finished, the smitten one came unsteadily erect. His balance was lousy and his fellow had to support him as they started back to the ship. Behind them the bush stood as innocent-looking as ever, its vague quivers having died away.

Halfway back to the *Marathon* the pebble-thrower teetered and went white, then licked his lips and keeled over. The other glanced anxiously toward the bush as if he wouldn't have been surprised to find it charging down upon them. Bending, he got the body in a shoulder-hitch, struggled with it toward the midway airlock. Jay Score met him before he'd heaved his load twenty steps. Striding powerfully and confidently through the carpet of green, Jay took the limp form from the other and carried it with ease. We raced toward the bow to find out what had happened.

Brushing past us, Jay bore his burden into our tiny surgery where Wally Simcox - Sam's side-kick - started working on the patient. The victim's buddy hung around outside the door and looked sick. He looked considerably more sick when Captain McNulty came along and stabbed him with an accusative stare before going inside.

After half a minute, the skipper shoved out a red, irate face and rapped, "Go tell Steve to recall that lifeboat at once - Sam is urgently needed."

Dashing to the radio-room, I passed on the message. Steve's eyebrows circumnavigated his face as he flicked a switch and cuddled a microphone to his chest. He got through to the boat, told them, listened to the reply.

"They're returning immediately."

Going back, I said to the uneasy duck-on-the-rock enthusiast, "What happened, Stupid?"

He flinched. "That bush made a target of him and filled his area with darts. Long, thin ones, like thorns. All over his head and neck and through his clothes. One made a pinhole through his ear. Luckily they missed his eyes."

"Hell!" said Brennand.

"A bunch of them whisked past me on my left, fell twenty feet behind. They'd plenty of force; I heard them buzz like angry bees" He swallowed hard, shuffled his feet around "It must have thrown a hundred or more."

McNulty came out then, his features somewhat fierce.

Very slowly and deliberately he said to the escapee, "I'll deal with you later!" The look he sent with it would have scorched the pants off a space cop. We watched his portly form parade down the passage.

The victim registered bitterness, beat it to his post at the stern. Next minute the lifeboat made one complete circle overhead, descended with a thin zoom ending in a heavy swish. Its crew poured aboard the *Marathon* while derricks clattered and rattled as they swung the boat's twelve-ton bulk into the mother ship.

Sam remained in the surgery an hour, came out shaking his head. "He's gone. We could do nothing for him."

"You mean he's-dead?"

"Yes. Those darts are loaded with a powerful alkaline poison. It's virulent. We've no antidote for it. It clots the blood, like snake venom." He rubbed a weary hand over his crisp, curly hair. "I hate having to report this to the skipper."

We followed him forward. I stuck my eye to the peephole

in the starboard airlock as we passed, had a look at what the Martians were doing. Kli Dreen and Kli Morg played chess with three others watching them. As usual, Sug Farn snored in one corner. It takes a Martian to be bored by adventure yet sweat with excitement over a slow motion game like chess. They always did have an inverted sense of values.

Keeping one saucer eye on the board, Kli Dreen let the other glance idly at my face framed in the peephole. His two-way look gave me the creeps. I've heard that chameleons can swivel them independently, but no chameleon could take it to an extreme that tied your own optic nerves in knots. I chased after Brennand and Sam. There was a strong smell of trouble up at that end.

The skipper fairly rocketed on getting Sam's report. His voice resounded loudly through the partly open door.

"Hardly landed and already there's a casualty to be entered in the log ... utter foolhardiness ... more than a silly prank ... blatant disregard of standing orders ... sheer indiscipline." He paused while he took breath.

"Nevertheless the responsibility is mine. Jay, summon the

ship's company."

The general call blared as Jay pressed the stud. We barged in, the rest following soon after, the Martians arriving last. Eyeing us with an air of outraged authority, McNulty strutted to and fro, lectured us to some length.

We'd been specially chosen to crew the *Marathon* because we were believed to be cool, calculating, well-disciplined individuals who had come of age, got over our weaning, and long outgrown such infantile attractions as duck-on-the-rock.

"Not to mention chess," he added, his manner decidedly jaundiced.

Kli Dreen gave a violent start, looked around to see whether his tentacled fellows had heard this piece of incredible blasphemy. A couple indulged underbreath chirrupings as they stirred up whatever they use for blood.

"Mind you," continued the skipper, subconsciously realising that he'd spat in somebody's holy water, "I'm no killjoy, but it is necessary to emphasise that there's a time and place for everything." The Martians rallied slightly. "And so," continued McNulty, "I want you always to"

A 'phone shrilled, cutting him short. There were three 'phones on his desk. He gaped at them in the manner of one who has every reason to suspect the evidence of his ears. The ship's company stared at each other to see if anyone were missing. There shouldn't have been : a general call is answered by the entire company.

McNulty decided that to answer the 'phone might be the simplest way of solving the mystery. Grabbing an instrument, he gave it a hoarse and incredulous, " Yes?" One of the other 'phones whirred again, proving him a bad chooser. Slamming down the one he was holding, he took up another, repeated, "Yes?"

The 'phone made squeaky noises against his ear while his florid features underwent the most peculiar contortions. Who?" "What?." he demanded. "What awoke you? His eyes bugged. " Somebody knocking at the door?"

Planting the 'phone, he ruminated in faint amazement; then said to Jay Score, "That was Sug Farn. He complains that his siesta is being disturbed by a hammering on the turnscREW of the starboard airlock." Finding a chair, he flopped into it, breathed asthmatically. His popping eyes roamed around, discovered Steve Gregory. He snapped,

"For God's sake, man, control those eyebrows of yours."

Steve pushed one up, pulled one down, let his mouth dangle open and tried to look contrite. The result was imbecilic. Bending over the skipper, Jay Score talked to him in smooth undertones. McNulty nodded tiredly. Jay came erect, addressed us.

"All right, men, go back to your stations. The Martians had better don their helmets. We'll install a pom-pom in that airlock and have the armed lifeboat crew standing by it. Then we'll open the lock."

That was sensible enough. You could see anyone approaching the ship in broad daylight but not once they'd come close up : the side ports didn't permit a sharp enough angle so that anyone standing right under the lock would be shielded by the vessel's bulge.

Nobody was tactless enough to mention it, but the skipper had erred in holding a revival meeting without maintaining watch. Unless the hammerers saw fit to move outward, away from the door on which they were thumping, we'd no means of getting a look at them except by opening the door. We weren't going to cook dinner and tidy the beds

before discovering what was outside, not after that last nasty experience when hostile machines had started to disassemble the ship around us.

Well, the dozey Sug Farn got poked out of his corner and sent off for his head-and-shoulder unit. We erected the pom-pom with its centre barrel lined on the middle of the turnscrew. Something made half a dozen loud clunks on the outside of the door as we finished. It sounded to me like a volley of flung stones.

Slowly the door spun along its worm and drew aside. A bright shaft of green light showed through and with it came a stream of air that made me feel like a healthy hippopotamus. At the same time old Andrews' successor, Chief Engineer Douglas, switched off the artificial gravity and we all dropped to two-thirds normal weight.

We gazed at that green-lit opening with such anxious intentness that it became easy to imagine an animated metal coffin suddenly clambering through, its front lenses glistening in unemotional enmity. But there came no whirr of hidden machinery, no menacing clank of metal arms and legs, nothing except the sigh of this strangely invigorating wind through distant trees, the rustle of blown grasses and

a queer, unidentifiable, faraway throbbing that may or may not have emanated from jungle drums.

So deep was the silence that Jepson's breathing came loud over my shoulder. The pom-pom gunner crouched in his seat, his keen eyes focused along the sights, his finger curled around the trigger, his right and left hand feeders ready with reserve belts. All three of the pom-pom crew were busy with wads of gum while they waited.

Then I heard a soft pad-pad of feet moving in the grass immediately below the lock.

We all knew that McNulty would throw a fit if anyone dared walk to the rim. He nursed annoyed memories of the last time somebody did just that and was snatched out. So like a gang of dummies we stayed put, waiting, waiting.

Presently there sounded a querulous gabble beneath the opening. Next moment a smooth rock the size of a melon flew through the gap, missed Jepson by a few inches, shattered against the back wall.

Skipper or no skipper, I became fed up, hefted my needler in my right hand, prowled half bent along the footwalk cut through the threads of the airlock worm. Reaching the

rim which was about nine feet above ground level, I thrust out an inquiring face. Molders pressed close behind me. The muffled throbbing now sounded more clearly than ever, yet remained just as elusive.

Beneath me stood a small band of six beings startlingly human at first appearance. Same bodily contours, same limbs and digits, similar features. They differed from us mostly in that their skins were coarse and crinkly, a dull, drab-green in colour, and they had a peculiar organ like the head of a chrysanthemum protruding from their bare chests. Their eyes were jet black, sharp, and darted about with monkeylike alertness.

For all these differences, our superficial similarity was so surprising that I stood gaping at them while they stared back at me. Then one of them shrilled something in the singsong tones of an excited Chinese, swung his right arm, did his best to bash out the contents of my skull. Ducking, I heard and felt the missile swish across my top hairs. Molders also ducked it, involuntarily pushed against me. The thing crashed inside the lock, I heard somebody spit a lurid oath as I overbalanced and fell out.

Clinging grimly to the needle-ray, I flopped into soft

greenery, rolled like mad and bounced to my feet. At any instant I expected to see a shower of meteors as I was slugged. But the alien sextet weren't there. They were fifty yards away and moving fast, making for the shelter of the forest in long, agile leaps that would have shamed a hungry kangaroo. It would have been easy to bring two or three of them down, but McNulty could crucify me for it. Earth-laws are strict about the treatment of alien aborigines.

Molders came out of the lock, followed by Jepson, Wilson and Kli Yang. Wilson had his owl eye camera with a colour filter over its lens. He was wild with excitement.

"I got them from the fourth port. I made two shots as they scrambled."

"Humph!" Molders stared around. He was a big, burly, phlegmatic man who looked more like a Scandinavian brewer than a space-jerk. "Let's follow them to the edge of the jungle."

"That's an idea," agreed Jepson, heartily. He wouldn't have been hearty about it if he'd known what was coming to him. Stamping his feet on the springy turf, he sucked in a lungful of oxygen-rich air. " This is our chance for a legitimate walk."

We started off without delay, knowing it wouldn't be long before the skipper started howling for us to come back. There's no man so hard to convince that risks have to be taken and that casualties are the price of knowledge, nor any man who'd go so far to do so little when he got there. Reaching the verge of the forest, the six green ones stopped and warily observed our approach. If they were quick to take it on the run when caught out in the open, they weren't so quick when in the shadow of the trees which, for some reason, gave them more confidence. Turning his back to us, one of them doubled himself and made faces at us from between his knees. It seemed senseless, without purpose or significance.

"What's that for?" growled Jepson, disliking the face that mopped and mowed at him from beneath a crinkled backside.

Wilson gave a dirty snigger and informed, "I've seen it before. A gesture of derision sometimes described as the Arab's farewell to his steed. It must be of cosmic popularity."

"I could have scalded his seat if I'd been quick," said Jepson, aggrievedly. Then he put his foot in a hole and fell

on his face.

The green ones set up a howl of glee, flung a volley of stones that dropped short of the target. We broke into a run, going along in great bounds. The low gravity wasn't spoiled by the thick blanket of air which, of course, pressed equally in all directions; our weight was considerably below Earth poundage so that we loped along several laps ahead of Olympic champions.

Five of the green ones promptly faded into the forest.

The sixth shot like a squirrel up the trunk of the nearest tree. Their behaviour carried an irresistible suggestion that for some unknown reason they regarded the trees as refuges safe against all assaults.

We stopped about eighty yards from that particular tree. For all we knew it might have been waiting for us with a monster load of darts. Our minds thought moodily of what one comparatively small bush had done. Scattering in a thin line, each man ready to flop at the first untoward motion, we edged cautiously nearer. Nothing happened. Nearer again. Still nothing happened. In this tricky manner we came well beneath the huge branches and close to the trunk. From the tree or its bark oozed a strange fragrance halfway between pineapple and cinnamon. The elusive throbbing

we'd heard before now sounded more strongly than ever.

It was an imposing tree. Its dark green, fibrous-barked trunk, seven or eight feet in diameter, soared up to twenty-five feet before it began to throw out strong, lengthy branches each of which terminated in one great spatulate leaf. Looking at that massive trunk it was difficult to determine how our quarry had fled up it, but he'd performed the feat like an adept.

All the same, we couldn't see him. Carefully we went round and round the tree a dozen or twenty times, gazing up past its big branches through which green light filtered in large mosaic patterns. Not a sign of him. No doubt about it, he must be somewhere up there but he just couldn't be spotted by us. There was no way in which he could have hopped from this tree to its nearest neighbour neither could he have come to ground again unobserved. Our collective view of this lump of alien timber was pretty good despite the peculiar, unearthly light, but the more we stared the more invisible he remained.

"This is a prime puzzler!" Stepping well away from the trunk, Jepson sought a better angle of view.

With a mighty *swoosh!* the branch immediately above

his head drove down. I could almost hear the tree's yelp of triumph as the swipe gave a boost to my imagination.

The spatulate leaf smacked Jepson squarely across his back and a waft of the pineapple-cinnamon smell went all over the place. Just as swiftly the branch swung up to its original position, taking the victim with it. Swearing like a drunken tail-mechanic, Jepson soared with the leaf and struggled furiously while we gathered in a dumbfounded bunch below. We could see that he was stuck to the underside of that leaf and slowly becoming covered in thick, yellowy-green goo as he writhed madly around. That stuff must have been a hundred times stickier than the best bird-lime.

Together we roared at him to keep still before he got the deadly junk smeared over his face. We had to use a large dollop of decibels and some shameful invective to force his attention. Already his clothes had become covered with goo and his left arm was fastened to his side. He looked a hell of a mess. It was obvious that if he got any of it over his mouth and nostrils he'd remain up there and quietly suffocate.

Molders had a determined try at climbing the trunk and found it impossible. He edged away to have a look upward, came hurriedly inward when he noticed another leaf

strategically placed to give him a dose of the same.

The safest place was beneath the unfortunate Jepson.

Something over twenty feet up, the goo was now crawling slowly over its prey and I estimated that in half an hour he'd be completely covered - in much less if he wriggled around. All this time the dull pulsations continued as though sonorously counting the last moments of the doomed. They made me think of jungle drums heard through thick walls.

Gesturing toward the golden cylinder that was the Marathonly five hundred yards away in the glade, Wilson said, "The more time we waste the worse it's going to be. Let's beat it back, get ropes and steel dogs. We'll soon bring him down."

"No," I decided. "We'll get him a darned sight faster than that "

I stamped around a few times to check the springiness and cushioning qualities of the stuff underfoot. Satisfied, I aimed my needle-ray at the point where Jepson's leaf joined the end of its branch.

Watching me, he let out a bellow of, "Lay off, you crack-brained moron ! You'll have me ---"

The needler's beam lanced forth at full strength. The leaf dropped off and the tree went mad. Jepson fell twenty-five feet at the incredible rate of two vulgar adjectives per foot. The leaf still fastened to his back, he landed in the undergrowth with a wild yelp and a flood of lurid afterthoughts. While we all lay flat and frantically tried to bury ourselves still deeper, the tree thrashed violently around, its gum-laden spatulates thirsting for vengeance.

One persistent branch kept beating its leaf within a yard of my head as I tried to shove said turnip below ground. I could feel the waft of it coming with rhythmic regularity and sense the pineapple-cinnamon stink permeating the air.

It made me sweat to think how my lungs would strain, my eyes pop and my heart burst if I got a generous portion of that junk slapped across my face. I would far rather be needled.

After a while the tree ceased its insane larruping, stood like a dreaming giant liable to go into another frenzy at any moment. Crawling on hands and knees to Jepson, we dragged him out of reach, pulling him along on the leaf to

which he was fastened.

He couldn't walk, his jackboots and the legs of his pants being firmly glued together. His left arm was just as securely gummed to his side. He was in an awful pickle and cursed steadily without pause for breath or thought. Before this happening we had never suspected him of such fluency. But we got him into the safety of the open glade and it was there I recited the few words he'd failed to mention.

Typically stolid, Molders said nothing, contenting himself with listening to Jepson and me. Molders had helped me do the dragging and now neither of us could let go. We'd become fixed to the original victim, bonded like brothers but not talking like brothers, nor full of anything resembling brotherly love.

So we could do nothing but carry Jepson bodily, with our hands sealed to the most inconvenient parts of his anatomy.

This meant he had to be borne horizontally and face downward, like a drunken sailor being frog marched back to ship.

He was still adorned with the leaf. He was still reciting, biological errors being the subject of his passionate lecture.

The task wasn't made any easier or more enjoyable by that young fool Wilson who thought there was something

funny in other people's misfortunes. He followed us tee-heeing and steadily snapping his accursed camera which I could have stuffed down his gullet with the greatest pleasure. He was indecently happy at having no goo on himself.

Jay Score, Brennand, Armstrong, Petersen and Drake met us as we lumbered awkwardly across the sward. They stared curiously at Jepson, listened to him with much respect. We warned them not to touch. The pair of us were far from sprightly by the time we reached the *Marathon*. Jepson's weight was only two-thirds normal but after five hundred yards he seemed like the last remains of a glutinous mammoth.

We dumped him on the grass below the open airlock, perforce sitting with him. The faint booming sound continued to throb out of the forest. Jay went into the ship, brought out Sam and Wally to see what they could do about the super-adhesive. The stuff had stiffened and grown hard by now. My hands and fingers felt as though they'd been set into glassite gloves.

Sam and Wally tried cold water, luke-warm water, fairly hot water and very hot water, but none of it did any good. Chief Engineer Douglas had a try with a bottle of rocketfuel which he frequently used for removing stains, polish-ing

brasses, killing bugs and as a vapour-rub to relieve his lumbago. It could do eighteen other things, too-according to him. But it couldn't dissolve goo.

Next they tried some specially refined gasoline which Steve Gregory keeps for the crew's cigarette lighters. They wasted their time. That gasoline could eat up rubber and one or two other things, but not this stuff.

"Stick it, fellers!" advised Wilson, cackling loudly. Jepson promptly cast doubts upon the validity of his mother's wedding certificate, if she had one. I carried it on to the grandparents. Jepson then turned to the highly exploitable subject of Wilson's non-existent progeny. Molders sat blue-eyed and placid, his hands fastened in yellow-green glass.

"You sure are in a fix," said Wilson, with false sympathy.

"By gum!"

Sam reappeared with iodine. It didn't work but it did cause a queer foaming on the surface of the adhesive and made a terrible stench. Molders permitted his face to look slightly pained. Some diluted nitric acid brought bubbles on the surface of the hard goo but achieved no more than

that. It was risky stuff to use, anyway.

Frowning to himself, Sam went back to look for some other possible solvent, passed Jay Score coming out to see how we were doing. Jay stumbled as he got near to us, a very strange thing for him to do considering his superhuman sense of balance. His solid bulk accidentally nudged young Wilson between the shoulder blades and that grinning ape promptly flopped against Jepson's legs where the goo must have remained soft enough to catch hold.

Wilson struggled, started to tie himself up in it, changed his tune when he found it futile. Jepson gave him the sardonic ha-ha as fair swap for a look of sudden death.

Picking up the dropped camera, Jay dangled it from one powerful hand, said with dead-pan contriteness, "I never missed a step before. It was most unfortunate."

"Unfortunate, hell!" bawled Wilson, wishing Jay would melt down to a tin puddle.

Just then Sam returned bearing a big glass jar, dribbled some of its contents over my imprisoned hands. The sickly green coating at once thinned to a weak slime and my mitts came free.

"Ammonia," remarked Sam. He need not have told me:

I could smell the pungent stuff. It was an excellent solvent and he soon had us cleaned up.

Then I chased Wilson three times round the ship. He had the advantage of fewer years and was too fast for me. I gave up the pursuit, breathless. We were about to go aboard and tell our tale to the skipper when that tree started threshing again. You could see its deadly branches beating the air and hear the violent *swoosh* ! of them even from this distance.

Pausing beneath the airlock we studied the spectacle wonderingly. Then Jay Score spoke, his tones harsh, metallic.

"Where's Kli Yang?"

None of us knew. Now I came to think of it, I couldn't recall him being with us as we dragged Jepson home. The last I remembered of him was when he stood beside me right under that tree and his saucer eyes gave me the creeps by carefully scanning two opposite branches at once.

Armstrong dived into the ship, came out with the report that Kli Yang definitely wasn't among those present. His own eyes as bulgy as the missing Martian's, young Wilson said he couldn't recall Kli Yang coming out of the forest.

Upon which we snatched our needlers and made for that tree on the run. All the while it continued to larrup around like a crazy thing tied down by its own roots.

Reaching the monstrous growth, we made a circle just beyond the sweep of its leaves, had a look to see where the Martian was enveloped with glue.

He wasn't.

We discovered him forty feet up the trunk, five of his powerful tentacles clamped around its girth, the other five embracing the green native. The captive struggled wildly and futilely; all the time yelling a high-pitched stream of gibberish.

Carefully Kli Yang edged down the trunk. The way he looked and moved made him resemble an impossible cross between a college professor and an educated octopus. His eyes rolling with terror, the native battered at Kli's head-and-shoulder harness. Kli blandly ignored this hostility, reached the branch that had trapped Jepson, didn't descend any further: Retaining a tight hold on the furiously objecting green one, he crept along the whipping limb until he reached its leafless end. At that point he and the native were being waved up and down in twenty feet arcs.

Timing himself, he cast off at the lowermost point of one downward sweep, scuttled out of reach before another vengeful branch could swat him. Came a singing howl from a near part of the forest and something vaguely like a blue-green coconut soared out of the shadows and broke at Drake's feet. The queer missile was as thin and brittle as an empty eggshell, had a white inner surface and apparently contained nothing whatever. Taking no notice of the howls or the bomb that wasn't a bomb, Kli Yang bore his still struggling captive toward the *Marathon* .

Drake hung back a moment, had a curious look at the coconut or whatever it was, contemptuously kicked its fragment of shell with his boot. At the same time he caught the full benefit of something floating invisibly from the splinters, sucked in his cheeks, screwed up his eyes and backed away fast. Then he retched. He did it with such violence that he fell over as he retreated. We had the sense to pick him up and rush him after Kli Yang without getting too nosey about what had bitten him. He continued to regurgitate all the way across the grass, recovered only when we came under the ship's bulging side.

"Holy smoke!" he wheezed, nursing his middle. "What

an abominable stench. It'd make a skunk smell like the rose of the animal world!" He wiped his lips. "It made my stomach turn right over"

We went to see Kli Yang, whose captive now had been conducted to the galley for a peace-making feed. Dragging off his helmet, Kli said, "That tree wasn't so difficult to mount. It walloped around as I went up but couldn't get at anything on its own trunk." He sniffed with displeasure, rubbed his flat, Red Planet face with the flexible tip of a great tentacle. "Don't know how you primitive bipeds can swallow this soup you call air. I could swim!"

"Where did you find the greenie, Kli? " asked Brennand.

"He was stuck to the trunk more than forty feet up. His entire front fitted perfectly into an indentation in the bark, and his back matched the fibrous trunk so well that I couldn't see him until he moved uneasily as I got close"

He picked up the helmet. "A most remarkable example of natural camouflage." Using one eye to look at his helmet, he fixed the other on the interested Brennand, made a gesture of disgust. "How about pulling down the pressure someplace where higher forms of life can live in peace and comfort?"

"We'll pump out the port lock," Brennand promised.

"And don't be so high and mighty with me, you outsize caricature of a rubber spider."

"Bah!" retorted Kli Yang, with great dignity. Who invented chess yet cannot tell a white pawn from a black rook? Who can't even play duck-on-the-rock without grabbing a load of grief?" With this reference to Terrestrial inexperience, he slapped his helmet on again and gestured to me to pump it down, which I did. "Thanks!" he said through the diaphragm.

Now to find out something about the greenie.

Captain McNulty himself interviewed the native. The boss sat grandly behind his metal desk, eyed the jittery captive with a mixture of pomposity and kindness. The native stood before him, his black eyes jerking around with sheer fright. At this close range I could see that he wore a loincloth matching his skin. His back was several shades darker than his front, coarser, more fibrous, with little nodules here and there-perfect simulation of the surface of the tree-trunk on which he had sought refuge. Even his loincloth was darker at the back than the front. His feet were broad and unshod, the toes double-jointed and as long as the fingers of his hands. Except for the loincloth he was

completely naked and had no weapons. The peculiar chrysanthemum on his chest attracted general attention.

"Has he eaten?" asked the skipper, full of solicitude.

"He was offered a meal," Jay told him. "He refused it. He wouldn't touch it. As far as I can make out, all he wants is to get back to his tree."

"Hm-m-m," grunted McNulty. "All in good time."

Assuming the expression of a benevolent uncle, he said to the native, "What is your name?"

Grasping the note of interrogation, the green one waved his arms, broke into an untranslatable tirade. On and on and on he went, helping his gabble with many emphatic but incomprehensible gestures. His language was liquid, his voice singsong.

"I see," murmured McNulty as the flood of talk petered out. He blinked inquiringly at Jay Score. "Do you suppose this fellow might be telepathic, like those lobster-things were?"

"It is much to be doubted. I'd put him at the mental level of a Congo pygmy-and maybe lower. He doesn't

possess so much as a simple spear, let alone bow and arrow or a blowgun."

"I think you're right. His intelligence doesn't seem in any way 'remarkable.'" Still maintaining his soothing paternal air, McNulty went on, " There's no common basis on which we can gain his understanding at this stage, so I guess we'll have to create one. We'll dig up our best linguist, set him to learning the rudiments of this fellow's language and teaching him some of ours."

"Let me have a try," Jay suggested. "I have the advantage of a mechanical memory."

He lumbered nearer the green native, his huge, well-proportioned body moving silently on the sponge-rubber cushions of his feet. The native didn't like his size nor his quietness, neither did he approve of those brightly lit eyes. He edged away from Jay, edged right to the wall, his optics darting hither and thither as vainly he sought an avenue of escape.

Ceasing his approach as he noted the other's fear, Jay slapped his own head with a hand that could have knocked mine clean off my neck. "Head," he said. He did it half a

dozen times, and repeated, "Head, head!"

The green one couldn't have been so stupid; he caught on, faltered, a "*Mah*"

Touching his own bean again, Jay inquired, "*Mah?*"

"*Bya!*" lilted the other, starting to regain his composure.

"See, it's dead easy," approved McNulty, beginning to fancy his own linguistic abilities. "*Mah*-head; *bya* -yes."

"Not necessarily," Jay contradicted. "It all depends upon how his mind translated my action. *Mah* might mean head, face, skull, man, hair, god, mind, thought, or alien, or even the colour black. If he's thinking of my hair as contrasted with his own, then *mah* probably does mean black, while *byamay* mean not yes, but green."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that " The skipper looked crushed.

"We'll have to carry on with this performance until we've picked up enough words to form structurally simple sentences. Then we should be able to deduce further meanings from contexts. Give me two or three days."

"Go ahead, then. Do your best, jay. We can't expect to be able to talk turkey in the first five minutes-it isn't reasonable."

Taking the captive to the rest-room, Jay summoned Minshull and Petersen. He thought three might as well learn something as one. Minshull and Petersen both excelled at languages, speaking Ido, Esperanto, Venusian, high Martian and low Martian-especially low. They were the only ones aboard the ship who gave the chess-maniacs a boiling in their own jargon.

I found Sam at the armoury waiting to hand in the stuff he'd taken out, and I asked, "What did you see from the lifeboat, Sam?"

"Not so much. We weren't out long enough. Didn't get more than a hundred and twenty miles away. Forest, forest, nothing but forest with a few glades scattered here and there. A couple of the glades were large, the size of counties. The biggest in view lay at the end of a long, blue lake. We saw several rivers and streams."

"Any signs of superior life?"

"None." He gestured down the passage toward the restroom where Jay and the others were cross-examining the native, or trying to. "It seems that there must be higher life but you can detect no signs of it from above. Everything remains hidden under thick foliage. Wilson is processing his reel in the hope of finding something our eyes missed. I doubt whether his camera caught anything remarkable."

"Oh, well," I shrugged, "One hundred twenty miles in one direction is nothing by which to estimate an entire world. I don't let myself be deluded, not since that drummer sold me a can of striped paint"

"Didn't it come out?"

"I laid it wrong side up," I told him.

It was right in the middle of that hoary banter that a powerful idea smote me. Following Sam out of the armoury,

I made a rush for the radio-room. Steve Gregory sat by his instruments and tried to look busy doing nothing. I was all set to paralyse him with the sheer brilliance of my brain-wave.

As Steve cocked an eyebrow at me, I said, "Hey, how about combing the wave-bands?"

"How about combing your hair? " he gave me, frowning.

"My hair is nit and tiddy," I retorted. "Remember those weird whistles and waterfalls we picked up on Mechanistria? Well, if there are any high-lifes on this ball of dirt they may know how to make noises. They'd radiate and you could detect it"

"Sure" He kept his bushy eyebrows still for once, but spoiled it by wiggling his large ears. "If they were radiating."

"Then why not go ahead and find out? It would tell us something. What're you waiting for?"

"Look," he said, somewhat deliberately; "have you kept the needlers cleaned, charged and ready for action?"

I stared at him. "You bet I have. They're always ready. That's my job."

"And this one's mine!" He waved the ears again. "You are approximately four hours behind the times. I scoured

the ether right after we landed, found nothing but a faint, unmodulated hiss on twelve point three metres. That is Rigel's characteristic discharge and it came from the same direction. D'you think I'm like that snake-armed snorer Sug Farn?"

"No, I don't. Sorry, Steve-it just struck me as a bright idea."

"Oh, it's all right, sergeant," he said amiably. "Every, man to his job and every tail-mechanic to his dirt" Idly he twiddled the dials of his slow-motion selectors.

The loudspeaker coughed as if clearing its throat and announced in sharp tones, "*Pip-pip-whop! Pip-pip-whop!*"

Nothing could have been better calculated to upset the determined serenity of his brows. I'll swear that after they'd climbed into his hair they continued over the top, down the back and lodged someplace under his collar.

"Morse," he said in the complaining tone of a hurt child."

"I always thought Morse was an earth-code, not an alien code," I commented. "Anyway, if it is Morse you'll be able to translate it" I paused while the loudspeaker shouted

me down with, "*Pip-pipper-pee-eep-whop!*" then concluded,
"Every cat to its ash-can."

"Tain't Morse," he contradicted himself. "But it's spark signals." He might have frowned if it hadn't taken too long to drag the eyebrows back to his face. Giving me one of those tragic looks you get sometimes, he snatched a pad and started recording the impulses.

The spacesuits, pom-pom chargers and other things had to be serviced, so I left him, returned to the armoury, carried on with my own work. He was still fiddling around when darkness fell. So were Jay and his gang, but not for long.

The sun went down, its long, greenish streamers gradually fading from the sky. A velvet pall came over the forest and glade. I was ambling along the passage toward the galley and near the rest-room when its door jerked open and the green native burst out. His face expressed desperation, his legs were moving as if there were a thousand international smackers tied to the winning tape.

Minshull yelped back in the room as the native went full tilt into my arms. The greenie squirmed like an eel, beat

at my features, used his bare feet to try kick my legs off my torso. His rough, harsh body exuded a weak odour of pineapple-cinnamon.

The others came out at the run, got him tight, talked to him in halting words until he relaxed at least a little. His shifty eyes full of anxiety, he jabbered excitedly at Jay Score, making urgent gestures and waving his woody arms around in a way that reminded me of branches beating the air. Jay managed to soothe him with fair if faltering speech. They had picked up enough words to get along though not enough for perfect understanding. Still, they were managing, after a fashion.

Eventually Jay said to Petersen, "I think you'd better tell the skipper that I want to let Kala go."

Petersen cleared off, returned in a minute. "He says do whatever you think is best"

"Good" Conducting the native to the opening in the starboard lock, Jay yapped at him briefly and gave him the sweet release. The greenie didn't need any second telling; he dived off the rim. Someone in the dark forest must have owed him for a loincloth because his feet made swift brushing sounds as he fled across the turf like one who has

only seconds to spare. Jay stood framed by the rim, his glowing orbs staring into outer gloom.

"Why open the cage, Jay?"

Turning, he said to me, "I've tried to persuade him to come back at sunrise. He may or he may not-it remains to be seen. We didn't have time to get much out of him, but his language is exceedingly simple and we picked up enough of it to learn that he calls himself Kala of the tribe of Ka. All members of his group are named Ka-something, such as Kalee, Ka'noo or Kaheer."

"Like the Martians with their Klis, Leids and Sugs."

"Yes," he agreed, not caring what the Martians might think of being compared with the green aborigines. "He also told us that every man has his tree and every gnat its lichen. I don't understand what he means by that, but he satisfied me that in some mysterious manner his life depended upon him being with his tree during darkness. It was imperative. I tried to delay him but his need was pitiful. He preferred to die rather than be away from his tree."

"Sounds silly to me." I blew my nose, grinned at a passing

thought. "It would sound far sillier to Jepson."

Jay stared thoughtfully into the deep murkiness from which came strange nocturnal scents and those everlasting pulsations suggestive of muffled drums.

"We also learned that there are others in the dark, others mightier than the Ka. They have much *gamish* ."

"They have what?" I inquired.

" Much *gamish* ," he repeated. "That word defeated me. He used it again and again. He said that the *Marathon* has much *gamish* . I have much *gamish* and Kli Yang has very much *gamish* . Captain McNulty, it appears, has only a little. The Ka have none at all."

"Is it something of which he's afraid?"

"Not exactly. He views it with awe rather than fear. As far as I can make out, anything unusual or surprising or unique is chockful of *gamish* . Anything merely abnormal has a lesser amount of *gamish* . Anything ordinary has none whatever."

"This goes to show the difficulties of communication. It isn't as easy as people back home think it ought to be."

"No, it isn't" His gleaming optics shifted to Armstrong who was leaning against the pom-pom. "Are you doing this guard?"

"Until midnight, then Kelly takes over."

Picking Kelly for guard struck me as poor psychology. That tattooed specimen was permanently attached to a four-foot spanner and in any crisis was likely to wield said instrument in preference to such newfangled articles as pom-poms and needlers. Rumour insisted that he had clung to the lump of iron at his own wedding and that his wife was trying for a divorce based on the thing's effect upon her morale. My private opinion was that Kelly was a Neanderthal misplaced in time by many centuries.

"We'll play safe and fasten the lock," decided Jay, "fresh air or no fresh air."

That was characteristic of him and what made him seem so thoroughly human-he could mention fresh air for all the world as if he used it himself. The casual way he did it made you forget that he'd never taken a real breath since

the day old Knud Johannsen stood him on his feet and gave him animation.

"Let's plug-in the turnscrew."

Turning his back upon the throbbing dark, he started to walk into the lighted airlock, treading carefully along the cutout through the threads.

A piping voice came out of the night and ejaculated, "Nou baiders!"

Jay halted in mid-step. Feet padded outside just underneath the lock's opening. Something spherical and glassy soared through the worm, skidded over Jay's left shoulder, broke to shards on the top recoil chamber of the pom-pom. A thin, golden and highly volatile liquid splashed out of it and vapourised instantly.

Reversing on one heel, Jay faced the black opening. The startled Armstrong made a jump to the wall, put out a thumb to jab the stud of the general alarm. He didn't make it. Without touching the stud he went down as though slugged by someone invisible.

My needler out, its muzzle extended, I moved cautiously

forward, saw the glittering thread of the worm making metallic rings around the picture of Jay posing against the ebony background. It was a hell of a mistake; I ought to have had a stab at that stud.

Three steps and the stuff from that busted bottle got me the same way as it had caught Armstrong. The picture of Jay swelled like a blown bubble, the circle widened, grew enormous, the threads of the worm became broad and deep with Jay as a gigantic figure standing in the middle of them. The bubble burst and I went down with my mind awhirl and fading away.

Don't know how long I remained corpselike, for when I eventually opened my eyes it was with the faint uncertain memory of hearing much shouting and stamping of feet around my prostrate form. Things must have happened over and all around me while I lay like so much discarded meat. Now I was still flat. I reposed full length on deep, dew-soaked turf with the throbbing forest close on my left, the indifferent stars peering down from the vault of night.

I was bound like an Egyptian mummy. Jepson made another mummy at one side, Armstrong at the other. Several more reposed beyond them.

Three or four hundred yards away angry noises were spoiling the silence of the dark, a mixture of Terrestrial oaths and queer, alien pipings. The *Marathon* lay that way; all that could be seen of her was the funnel of light pouring from her open lock. The light flickered, waxed and waned, once or twice was momentarily obliterated. Evidently a struggle was taking place in the shaft of light which became blocked as the fight swayed to and fro.

Jepson snored as though it were Sunday afternoon in the old home town, but Armstrong had recovered the use of his wits and tongue. He employed both with vigour and imagination. Rolling over, he started chewing at Blaine's bindings. A vaguely human-looking shape came silently from the darkness and smote downward. Armstrong went quiet.

Blinking my eyes, I adapted them sufficiently to discern several more shapes standing around half-hidden in the bad light. Keeping still and behaving myself, I thought uncomplimentary thoughts about McNulty, the *Marathon*, old Flettner who invented the ship, plus all the public spirited folk who'd backed him morally and financially. I'd often had the feeling that sooner or later they'd be the death of me and now it seemed that said feeling was going to prove justified.

Deep down inside a tiny, nagging voice said, "Sergeant, do you remember that promise you made your mother about obscene language? Do you remember that time you gave a Venusian guppy a can of condensed milk in exchange for a pinfire opal not as big as the city clock? Repent, sergeant, while yet there is time!"

So I laid in peace and did a bit of vain regretting. Over there by the intermittent light-shaft the pipings rose crescendo and the few earthly voices died away. There sounded occasional smashings of fragile, brittle things. More dim shapes brought more bodies, dumped them nearby and melted back into the gloom. I wish I could have counted the catch but darkness wouldn't permit it. All the newcomers were unconscious but revived rapidly. I could recognise Brennand's angry voice and the skipper's asthmatic breathing.

A cold blue star shone through a thin fringe of drifting clouds as the fight ended. The succeeding pause was ghastly : a solemn, brooding silence broken only by a faint scuffle of many naked feet in the grass, and by the steady booming in the forest.

Forms gathered around in large number. The glade was

full of them. Hands lifted me, tested my bonds, tossed me into a wicker hammock and I was borne along shoulder-high. I felt like a defunct warthog being toted in some hunter's line of native porters. Just meat-that was me. Just a trophy of the chase. I wondered whether God would confront me with that guppy.

The caravan filed into the forest, my direction of progress being head-first. Another hammock followed immediately behind and I could sense rather than see a string of them farther back.

Jepson was the sardine following me; he went horizontally along making a loud recitation about how he'd been tied up ever since he landed in this unprintable world. Not knowing the astronomer who had selected this planet for investigation, he identified him by giving him a name in which no man would take pride and embellished it with a long series of fanciful and extremely vulgar titles. He also informed his unheeding bearers that said astronomer had been born out of wedlock.

Curving warily around one semi-visible tree, our line marched boldly under the next, dodged the third and fourth. How the deuce they could tell one growth from another in this lousy light was beyond my

comprehension.

We had just come deeply into the deepest darkness when a tremendous explosion sounded way back in the glade and a column of fire lit up the sky. Even the fire looked faintly green. Our line halted. Two or three hundred voices cheeped querulously, starting from the front and going past me to a hundred yards farther back.

"They've blown up the *Marathon*," thought I. "Oh, well, all things come to an end, including the flimsiest hope of returning home."

Surrounding cheeping and piping became drowned out as the noisy pillar of flame built itself up to an earth-shaking roar. My hammock tilted and swayed while those holding it reacted in alarm. The way they put on the pace had to be experienced to be believed; I almost flew along, avoiding one tree but not another, sometimes turning at safe distance from unseen growths that were not trees at all. My heart lay down in my boots.

The bellowing in the glade suddenly ended in a mighty thump and a crimson spear flung itself into the sky and stabbed through the clouds. It was a spectacle I'd seen

many a time before but had thought never to see again. A space-ship going up! It was the *Marathon* !

Were these alien creatures so talented that they could grab a thoroughly strange vessel, quickly understand its workings and take it wherever they wanted? Were these the beings described as superior to the Ka? The whole situation struck me as too incongruous for belief: expert astronauts carrying prisoners in primitive wicker hammocks. Besides, the agitated way in which they'd jabbered and put on the pace suggested that the *Marathon* 's spectacular spurt of life had taken them by surprise. The mystery was one I couldn't solve no how.

While the fiery trail of the ship arced northward our party hurriedly pressed on. There was one stop during which our captors congregated together, but their continual piping showed that they had not halted for a meal.

Twenty minutes later there came a brief hold-up and a first-class row up front. Guards kept close to us while a short distance ahead sounded a vocal uproar in which many voices vied with a loud mewing and much beating of great branches. I tried to imagine a bright green tiger.

Things went phut-phut like fat darts plonking into wet leather. The mewing shot up to a squeal then ended in a

choking cough. We moved on, making a wide bend around a monstrous growth that I strove in vain to see. If only this world had possessed a moon. But there wasn't a moon; only the stars and the clouds and the menacing forest from which came that all-pervading beat, beat, beat.

Dawn broke as the line warily dodged a small clump of apparently innocent saplings. We arrived at the bank of a wide river. Here, for the first time, we could give our guards a close examination as they shepherded burdens and bearers down the bank.

These were creatures very much like the Ka, only taller, more slender, with large intelligent eyes. They had similarly fibrous skins, grayer, not so green, and the same chrysanthemums on their chests. Unlike the Ka, their middles were clothed in pleated garments, they had harness of woven fibre, plus various wooden accoutrements like complicated blow-guns and bowl-shaped vessels having a bulbous container in the base: A few also bore small panniers holding glassy spheres like the one that had laid me flat in the airlock.

Craning my head I tried to see more but could discern only Jepson in the next hammock and Brennand in the one

behind that. The next instant, mine was unceremoniously dumped by the water's brink, Jepson's alongside me, the rest in a level row.

Turning his face toward me, Jepson said, "The smelly bums!"

"Take it easy," I advised. "If we play it their way they may give us more rope."

"And," he went on, viciously, "I don't care for guys who try to be witty at the wrong time."

"I wasn't trying to be witty," I snapped back. "We're bound to hold our own opinions, aren't we? You're all tied up."

"There you go again!" He did some furious writhing around and strove to stretch his fastenings. "Some day I'll tie you, and for keeps!"

I didn't answer. No use wasting breath on a man in a bad mood. Daylight waxed stronger, penetrating the thin green mist hanging over the green river. I could now see Blaine and Minshull supine beyond Armstrong and the portly form of McNulty beyond them.

Ten of our captors went along the line opening jackets and shirts, baring our chests. They had with them a supply of the bowls with bulbous containers. A pair of them pawed my uniform apart, got my chest exposed, stared at it like Anthony stared at Cleopatra. Something about my bosom struck them as wonderful beyond the power of telling, and it wasn't the spare beard I kept there.

It didn't require overmuch brains to guess that they missed my chrysanthemum and couldn't figure how I'd got through life without it. For all I know, they may have viewed me as a sort of eunuch. Calling their fellows, the entire gang debated the subject while I lay bared before them like a sacrificial virgin. Finally they decided that they had struck a new and absorbing line of research and went hot along the trail.

Seizing Blaine and the boob who'd played duck-on-the-rock, they untied them, stripped them down to the raw, studied them like prize cattle at an agricultural exhibition. One of them prodded Blaine in the solar plexus where his whatzis ought to have been, whereat he jumped on the fellow with a savage whoop and brought him down. The other nudist promptly grabbed the opportunity to join in.

Armstrong, who never had been a ninety pound weakling, made a mighty effort, burst his bonds, came up dark-faced with the strain and roared into the fray. Fragments of his mangled hammock swung and bounced on his beefy back.

All along the line we made violent attempts to bust out of bonds but without avail. Green ones centred on the scene of the struggle, brittle spheres plopped all around the three fighting Earthmen. The tail-mechanic and Blaine collapsed together. Armstrong shuddered and bawled, teetered and pulled himself together, held out long enough to toss two natives into the river and slug the daylights out of a third. Then he too went down.

Dragging their fellows from the river, the green ones dressed the slumber-wrapped Blaine and the other, added Armstrong, securely tied all three. Once more they conferred. I couldn't make head or tail of their canary-talk but conceived the notion that in their opinion we had an uncertain quantity of *gamish* .

My bonds began to irk. I'd have given a lot for the chance to go into action and bash a few green heads. Twisting myself, I used a lack-lustre eye to study a tiny shrub growing near the side of my hammock. The shrub jiggled its midget branches and emitted a smell of burned caramel.

Local vegetation was all movement and stinks.

Abruptly the green ones ended their talk, crowded down the bank of the river. A flotilla of long, narrow, shapely vessels swept round the bend, foamed in to the bank. We were carted on board, five prisoners per boat. Thrusting away from the bank, our crew of twenty pulled and pushed rhythmically at a row of ten wooden levers on each side of the boat, drove the vessel upstream at fair pace and left a narrow wake on the river's surface.

"I had a grandfather who was a missionary," I told Jepson.

"He got into trouble of this kind."

"So what?"

"He went to pot," I said.

"I sincerely hope you do likewise," offered Jepson, without charity. He strained futilely at his bindings.

For lack of anything better to occupy my attention I watched the way in which our crew handled their vessel, came to the conclusion that the levers worked two large pumps or maybe a battery of small ones, and that the vessel

made progress by sucking water in at the bow and squirting it out at the stern.

Later, I found I was wrong. Their method was much simpler than that. The levers connected under water with twenty split-bladed paddles. The two flaps of each blade closed together on one stroke, opened on the return stroke. By this means they got along rather faster than they could have done with oars since the subsurface paddles moved forward and back with only their own weight on the boat - they didn't have to be raised, turned and lowered by the muscles of the rowers.

The sun climbed higher while we made way steadily upriver. At the second bend the waterway split, its current flowing at increased pace on either side of a rocky islet about a hundred yards long. A group of four huge, sinister-looking trees stood at the upstream end of the islet, their trunks and limbs a sombre green verging on black. Each of them bore a horizontal spray of big branches above which the trunk continued to soar to a feathery crest sixty feet higher. Each of these branches ended in half a dozen thick, powerful digits that curved downward like the fingers of a clutching hand.

The crews speeded up their levers to the limit. The string

of boats headed into the right-hand channel over which reached the biggest and most menacing of those branches. As the first boat's prow came underneath it, the branch hungrily twitched its fingers. It was no illusion: I saw it as clearly as I see my trip bonus when they slide it toward me across the mahogany. That mighty limb was getting all set to grab and from its size and spread I reckoned it could pluck the entire boatload clean out of the water and do things of which I didn't care to think.

But it didn't do it. Just as that boat came into the danger area its helmsman stood up and yelled a stream of gibberish at the tree. The fingers relaxed. The helmsman of the next boat did the same. And the next. Then mine. Flat on my back, as ready for action as a corpse, I gaped at that enormous neck-wringer while all too slowly it came on, passed above and fell behind. Our helmsman went silent; the one in the following boat took up the tale. There was dampness down my spine.

Five miles farther on we turned in to the opposite bank. My head was toward that side and I didn't get a view of the buildings until the greenies tossed me out of my hammock, released me from the thing and stood me on my feet. I promptly lost balance and sat down. Temporarily, my

dogs were dead. Rubbing them to restore the circulation, my curious eyes examined this dump that might have been anything from a one-horse hamlet to a veritable metropolis.

Its cylindrical buildings were of light green wood, of uniform height and diameter, and each had a big tree growing through its middle. The foliage of each tree extended farther than the radius of each house, thus effectively hiding it from overhead view. Nothing could have been better calculated to conceal the place from the air, though there wasn't any reason to suppose that the inhabitants had cause to fear a menace from above.

Still, the way in which trees and buildings shared the same sites made it quite impossible to estimate the size of the place, for beyond the nearer screen of round houses were trees, trees and still more trees, each one of which may have shielded an alien edifice.

I couldn't tell whether I was looking at a mere kraal or at the riverside suburb of a super-city extending right over the horizon. Little wonder that the exploring lifeboat had observed nothing but forest. Its crew could have scouted over an area holding many millions and thought it nothing but jungle.

Weapons ready, eyes alert, a horde of green ones clustered around us while others finished the task of untying prisoners. The fact that we'd arrived in a miraculous contraption like the *Marathon* didn't seem to impress them one little bit. My feet had become obedient by now. I lugged on my jackboots, stood up and stared around. It was then that I got two shocks.

The first hit me as I made a mental list of my companions in misery. It consisted of little more than half the complement of the *Marathon*. The others weren't there. One hammock held a pale, lax figure I recognised as the body of the guy who'd caught that load of darts soon after we landed. Why the greenies had seen fit to drag a cadaver along I just don't know.

Upon a pair of linked-together hammocks reposed the awake but dreamy and disinterested form of Sug Farn. But he was the only Martian present. None of the rest of the Red Planet mob were there. Neither were Chief Douglas, Bannister, Kane, Richards, Kelly, Jay Score, Steve Gregory, young Wilson and a dozen more.

Were they dead? It didn't seem so, else why should the greenies have transported one body but not the others?

Had they escaped? Or did they form a second party of prisoners that had been taken somewhere else? There was no way of determining their fate, yet it was strange that they should be missing.

I nudged Jepson. "Hey, have you noticed?"

A sudden roar over the river cut me off in mid-sentence.

All the green ones gaped upward and gesticulated with their weapons. They were making mouth motions but couldn't be heard because the noise drowned what they were saying. Whirling around to have a look, I could feel my own eyes bug out on stalks as the *Marathon*'s sleek pinnace dived within a few feet of the river's surface soared upward again. It vanished over the tree-tops and bellowed into the distance.

But one could still follow the sound of it sweeping round in a great circle. The note screamed higher as it accelerated and went into another dive. Next instant it shot again into view, swooped so low that it touched the water, whisked a shower of green droplets behind it and sent a small wash lapping up the bank. For the second time it disappeared in a swift and ear-racking soar, bulleting past and away at such a pace that it was impossible to tell who was spotting us from the pilot's cabin.

Spitting on his knuckles, Jepson gave the greenies a sour eye. "They've got it coming to them, the lice!"

"Tut!" I chided.

"As for you," he went on. He didn't add more because at that moment a tall, thin, mean-looking greenie picked on him. This one gave him a contemptuous shove in the chest and piped something on a rising note of interrogation.

"Don't you do that to me!" snarled Jepson, giving him an answering shove.

The green one staggered backward, taken by surprise. He kicked out his right leg. I thought he was trying to give Jepson a hearty crack on the shins, but he wasn't. The gesture was a good deal deadlier. He was throwing something with his foot and what he threw was alive, superfast and vicious. All I could see of it was a thing that may or may not have been a tiny snake. It had no more length and thickness than a pencil and for a change-wasn't green, but a bright orange colour relieved by small black spots. It landed on Jepson's chest, bit him, then flicked down his front with such rapidity that I could hardly follow its

motion. Reaching the ground, it made the grass fairly whip aside as it streaked back to its master.

Curling around the green one's ankle, it went supine, looking exactly like a harmless leg ornament. A very small number of other natives wore similar objects all of which were orange and black except one that was yellow and black.

The attacked Jepson bulged his eyes, opened his mouth but produced no sound though obviously trying. He teetered. The native wearing the yellow and black lump of wickedness stood right by my side studying Jepson with academic interest.

I broke his damn neck.

The way it snapped reminded me of a rotten broomstick.

The thing on his leg deserted him the moment he became mutton, but fast as it moved it was too late. I was ready for it this time. Jepson fell on his face just as my jackboot crunched the pseudosnake into the turf.

A prime hullabaloo was going on all around. I could hear McNulty's anxious voice shouting, "Men! Men!" Even at

a time like this the overly conscientious crackpot could dwell on visions of himself being demoted for tolerating ill-treatment of natives.

Armstrong kept bawling, "Another bugger!" and each time there followed a loud splash in the river. Blow-guns were going phut-phut and spheres breaking right and left. Jepson lay like one dead while combatants milled over his body. Brennand barged up against me. He breathed in long, laboured gasps and was doing his utmost to gouge the eyes out of a green face.

By this time I'd helped myself to another aborigine and proceeded to take him apart. I tried to imagine that he was a fried chicken of which I never seem to get any more than the piece that goes last over a fence. He was hard to hold, this greenie, and bounced around like a rubber ball. Over his swaying shoulders I caught a glimpse of Sug Farn juggling five at once and envied him the bunch of anacondas he used for limbs. My opponent stabbed hostile fingers into the chrysanthemum I didn't possess, looked surprised at his own forgetfulness, was still trying to think up some alternative method of incapacitating me as he went into the river,

Now several spheres cracked open at my feet and the last I remember hearing was Armstrong releasing a bellow of triumph just before a big splash. The last I remember seeing was Sug Farn suddenly shooting out a spare tentacle he'd temporarily overlooked and using it to arrange that of the six greenies who were jumping on me only five landed. The other one was still going up as I went down.

For some reason I didn't pass out as completely as I'd done before. Maybe I got only a half-dose of whatever the spheres gave forth, or perhaps they contained a different and less positive mixture. All that I know is that I dropped with five natives astride my ribs, the skies spun crazily, my brains turned to cold and lumpy porridge. Then, astonishingly, I was wide awake, my upper limbs again tightly bound.

Over to the left a group of natives formed a heaving pile atop some forms that I couldn't see but could easily hear. Armstrong did some champion hog-calling underneath that bunch which-after a couple of hectic minutes-broke apart to reveal his pinioned body along with those of Blaine and Sug Farn. On my right lay Jepson, his limbs quite free but the lower ones apparently helpless. There was now no sign of the pinnacle, no faraway moaning to show that it was still airborne.

Without further ado the greenies whisked us across the sward and five miles deep into the forest, or city, or whatever it ought to be called. Two of them bore Jepson in a wicker hamper. Even at this inland point there were still as many houses as trees. Here and there a few impassive citizens came to the doors of their abodes and watched us dragging along our way. You'd have thought we were the sole surviving specimens of the dodo from the manner in which they weighed us up.

Minshull and McNulty walked right behind me in this death parade. I heard the latter give forth pontifically, "I shall speak to their leader about this. I'll point out to him that all these unfortunate struggles are the inevitable result of his own people's irrational bellicosity."

"Without a doubt," endorsed Minshull, heartily sardonic.

"Making every possible allowance for mutual difficulty in understanding," McNulty continued, "I still think we are entitled to be received with a modicum of courtesy."

"Oh, quite," said Minshull. His voice was now solemn, like that of the president of a morticians' convention. "And we consider that our reception leaves much to be desired."

"Precisely my point," approved the skipper.

"Therefore any further hostilities would be most deplorable," added Minshull, with a perfectly dead pan.

"Of course," McNulty enthused.

"Not to mention that they'd compel us to tear the guts out of every green-skinned bastard on this stinking planet"

"Eh?" McNulty missed a step, his features horrified.

"What was that you just said?"

Minshull looked innocently surprised. "Why, nothing, skipper. I didn't even open my mouth. You must be dreaming things."

What the outraged shipmaster intended to retort to that remained a mystery for at this point a greenie noticed him lagging and prodded him on. With an angry snort he speeded up, moving in introspective silence thereafter.

Presently we emerged from a long, orderly line of tree-shrouded homes and entered a glade fully twice as large as that in which the missing *Marathon* had made its landing. It was roughly circular, its surface level and carpeted

with close-growing moss of a rich emerald-green. The sun, now well up in the sky, poured a flood of pale green beams into this alien amphitheatre around the fringes of which clustered a horde of silent, expectant natives, watching us with a thousand eyes.

The middle of the glade captured our attention. Here, as outstanding as the biggest skyscraper in the old home town, towered a veritable monster among trees. How high it went was quite impossible to estimate but it was plenty large enough to make Terra's giant redwoods look puny by comparison. Its bole was nothing less than forty feet in diameter and the spread of its oaklike branches looked immense even though greatly shrunk in perspective way, way up there. So enormous was this mighty growth that we couldn't keep our eyes off it. If these transcosmic Zulus intended to hang us, well, it'd be done high and handsome. Our kicking bodies wouldn't look more than a few struggling bugs suspended between earth and heaven.

Minshull must have been afflicted with similar thoughts, for I heard him say to McNulty, "There's the Christmas tree. We'll be the ornaments. Probably they'll draw lots for us and the boob who gets the ace of spades will select the fairy at the top"

"Don't be morbid," snapped McNulty. "They'll do nothing so illegal."

Then a big, wrinkled-faced native pointed at the positive skipper and six pounced on him before he could dilate further on the subject of interstellar law. With complete disregard for all the customs and rules that the victim held holy, they bore him toward the waiting tree.

Up to that moment we'd failed to notice the drumming sound which thundered dully from all around the glade. It was very strong now; and held a sinister quality in its muffled but insistent beat. The weird, elusive sound had been with us from the start; we'd become used to it, had grown unconscious of it in the same way that one fails to notice the ticking of a familiar clock. But now, perhaps because it lent emphasis to the dramatic scene, we were keenly aware of that deadly throb-throb-throb.

The green light made the skipper's face ghastly as he was led forward unresisting. All the same, he still managed to lend importance to his characteristic strut and his features had the ridiculous air of one who nurses unshakable faith in the virtue of sweet reasonableness. I have never encountered a man with more misplaced confidence in

written law. As he went forward I know he was supported by the profound conviction that these poor, benighted people were impotent to do anything drastic to him without first filling in the necessary forms and getting them properly stamped and countersigned. Whenever McNulty died, it was going to be with official approval and after all official formalities had been satisfied.

Halfway to the tree the skipper and his escort were met by nine tall natives. Dressed in no way differently from their fellows, these managed to convey in some vague manner that they were beings apart from the common herd. Witch-doctors, decided my agitated mind.

Those holding McNulty promptly handed him over to the newcomers and beat it toward the fringe of the glade as if the devil himself were due to appear in the middle. There wasn't any devil; only that monstrous tree. But knowing what some growths could and did do in this greenwrapped world it was highly probable that this one - the grandpappy of all trees - as capable of some unique and formidable kind of wickedness. Of that statuesque lump of timber one thing was certain: it possessed more than its fair share of *gamish* .

Briskly the nine stripped McNulty to the waist. He continued talking to them all the time but he was too far away for us to get the gist of his authoritative lecture of which his undressers took not the slightest notice. Again they made close examination of his chest, conferred among themselves, started dragging him nearer to the tree. McNulty resisted with appropriate dignity. They didn't stand on ceremony when he pulled back; picking him up bodily, they carried him forward.

Armstrong said in tight tones, "We've still got legs, haven't we?" and forthwith kicked the nearest guard's feet from under him.

But before any of us could follow his example and start another useless fracas an interruption came from the sky. Upon the forest's steady drumming was superimposed another fiercer, more penetrating moan that built up to a rising howl. The howl then changed to an explosive roar as, swift and silvery, the pinnace swooped low over the fateful tree.

Something dropped from the belly of the bulleting boat blew out to umbrella. shape, hesitated in its fall, lowered gently into the head of the tree. A parachute I I could see a figure dangling in the harness just before it was swallowed

in the thickness of elevated foliage, but distance made it impossible to identify this arrival from above.

The nine who were carrying McNulty unceremoniously dumped him on the moss, gazed at the tree. Strangely enough, aerial manifestations filled these natives more with curiosity than fear. The tree posed unmoving. Suddenly amid its top branches a needle-ray lanced forth, touched a large branch at its junction with the trunk, severed it. The amputated limb plunged to ground.

At once a thousand budlike protuberances that lay hidden between the leaves of the tree swelled up like blown toy balloons, reached the size of giant pumpkins and burst with a fusillade of dull plops. From them exploded a yellow mist which massed at such a rate and in such quantity that the entire tree became clouded with it in less than a minute.

All the natives within sight hooted like a flock of scared owls, turned and ran. McNulty's nine guardians also abandoned whatever they had in mind and dashed after their fellows. The needler caught two of them before they'd gone ten steps; the other seven doubled their pace. McNulty was left struggling with the bonds around his wrists while slowly the mist crawled toward him.

Again the beam speared high up in the tree. Again a huge branch tumbled earthward. Already the tree had grown dim within the envelope of its own fog. The last native had faded from sight. The creeping yellow vapour had come within thirty yards of the skipper who was standing and staring at it like a man fascinated. His wrists remained tied to his sides. Deep inside the mist the popping sounds continued, though not as rapidly.

Yelling at the witless McNulty to make use of his nether limbs, we struggled furiously with our own and each other's bonds. McNulty's only response was to shuffle backward a few yards. By a superhuman effort, Armstrong burst free, snatched a jackknife from his pants pocket, started cutting our arms loose. Minshull and Blaine, the first two thus relieved, immediately raced to McNulty who was posing within ten yards of the mist like a portly Ajax defying the power of alien gods. They brought him back.

Just as we'd all got rid of our bonds the pinnacle came round in another wide sweep, vanished behind the column of yellow cloud and thundered into the distance. We gave it a hoarse cheer. Then from the base of the mist strode a great figure dragging a body by each hand. It was Jay Score. He had a tiny two-way radio clamped on his back. He came toward us, big, powerful, his eyes shining with

their everlasting fires, released his grip on the cadavers, said, "Look - this is what the vapour will do to you unless you move out mighty fast!"

We looked. These bodies belonged to the two natives he'd needled but the needlers had not caused that awful rotting of the flesh. Both leprous objects were too far gone to be corpses, not far enough to be skeletons. Mere rags of flesh and half-dissolved organs on frames of festering bone. It was easy to see what would have happened to Jay had he been composed of the same stuff as ourselves, or had he been an air-breather.

"Back to the river," advised Jay, "even if we have to fight our way through. The *Marathon* is going to land in the glade alongside it. We must reach her at all costs."

"And remember, men," put in McNulty officiously, "I want no unnecessary slaughter."

That was a laugh! Our sole weapons now consisted of Jay's needler, Armstrong's jackknife and our fists. Behind us, already very near and creeping steadily nearer, was the mist of death. Between us and the river lay the greenie metropolis with its unknown number of inhabitants armed with unknown devices. Veritably we were between a

yellow devil and a green sea.

We started off, Jay in the lead, McNulty and the burly Armstrong following. Immediately behind them, two men carried Jepson who could still use his tongue even if not his legs. Two more bore the body which our attackers had brought all the way from the ship. Without opposition or mishap we got a couple of hundred yards into the forest and there we buried the remains of the man who first set foot on this soil. He went from sight with the limp, unprotesting silence of the dead while all around us the jungle throbbed.

In the next hundred yards we were compelled to bury another. The surviving duck-on-the-rock player, sobered by the dismal end of his buddy, took the lead as a form of penance. We were marching slowly and cautiously, our eyes alert for a possible ambush, our wits ready to react to any untoward move by a dart-throwing bush or a goosmearing branch.

The man in front swerved away from one tree that topped an empty greenie abode. His full attention remained fixed upon the dark entrance to that house and thus he failed to be wary of another tree under which he was moving. Of medium size, this growth had a silvery green bark, long, ornamental leaves from which dangled

numerous sprays of stringy threads the ends of which came to within three or four feet of the ground. He brushed against two of the threads. Came a sharp, bluish flash of light, a smell of ozone and scorched hair, and he collapsed. He had been electrocuted as thoroughly as if smitten by a stroke of lightning.

Mist or no mist, we carried him back the hundred yards we'd just traversed, interred him beside his comrade. The job was done in the nick of time; that crawling vaporous leprosy had reached near to our very heels as we resumed our way: High in the almost concealed sky the sun poured down its limpid rays and made mosaic patterns through overhead leaves.

Giving a wide berth to this newest menace, which we dubbed the voltree, we hit the end of what passed for Main Street in these parts. Here we had an advantage in one respect but not in another. The houses stood dead in line and well apart; we could march along the centre of this route beneath the wider gap of sky and be beyond reach of this planet's bellicose vegetation. But this made us so much the more vulnerable to attack from any direction by natives determined to oppose our escape: We would have to do the trip, one way or another, with our necks stuck

out a yard.

As we trudged stubbornly ahead, mentally prepared to face whatever might yet come, Sug Farn said to me; "You know, I have an idea well worth developing."

"What is it?" I asked, enjoying a thrill of hopefulness.

"Suppose that we had twelve squares a side," he suggested, blandly ignoring present circumstances, "we could then have four more' pawns and four new master pieces per side. I propose to call the latter `archers'. They would move two squares forward and could take opponents only one square sidewise. Wouldn't that make a beautifully complicated game?"

I hope you swallow a chess-set and suffer blockage of the bowels," I said, disappointed.

"As I should have known, your mental appreciation accords with that of the lower vertebrates." So saying, he extracted a bottle of hooloo scent which somehow he'd managed to retain through all the ructions; moved away from me and sniffed at it in a calculatingly offensive manner. I don't give a damn what anybody says - we don't smell like Martians say we do! These snake-armed snoots

are downright liars!

Stopping both our progress and argument, Jay Score growled, "I guess this will do." Unhitching his portable radio, he tuned it, said into its microphone, "That you, Steve?" A pause, followed by, "Yes, we're waiting about a quarter of a mile on the river side of the glade. There's been no opposition yet. But it'll come. All right, we'll stay put awhile." Another pause. "Yes, we'll guide you."

Turning his attention from the radio to the sky, but with one earpiece still held to his head, he listened intently. We all listened. For a while we could hear nothing but that throb-throb-throb that never ended upon this crazy world, but presently came a faraway drone like the hum of a giant bumble-bee.

Jay picked up the microphone. "We've got you now. You're heading right way and coming nearer." The drone grew louder. "Nearer, nearer." He waited a moment. The drone seemed to drift off at an angle. "Now you're away to one side!" Another brief wait. The distant sound suddenly became strong and powerful. "Heading correctly." It swelled to a roar. "Right!" yelled Jay. "You're almost upon us!"

He glanced expectantly upward and we did the same like one man. The next instant the pinnacle raced across the sky-gap at such a pace that it had come and gone in less time than it takes to draw a breath. All the same, those aboard must have seen us for the little boat zoomed around in a wide, graceful arc, hit the main stem a couple of miles farther along, came back up it at terrific speed. This time we could watch it all the way and we bawled at it like a gang of excited kids.

"Got us?" inquired Jay of the microphone: "Then make a try on the next run."

Again the pinnacle swept round, struck its former path, tore the air as it shot toward us. It resembled a monster shell from some oldtime cannon. Things fell from its underside, bundles and packages in a parachuted stream. The stuff poured down as manna from heaven while the sower passed uproariously on and dug a hole in the northern sky. But for these infernal trees the pinnacle could have done even better by landing and snatching the lot of us from danger's grasp.

Eagerly we pounced on the supplies, tearing covers open, dragging out the contents. Spacesuits for all. Well,

they'd serve to protect us from various forms of gaseous unpleasantness. Needlers, oiled and loaded, with adequate reserves of excitants. A small case, all sponge rubber and cotton wool, containing half a dozen midget atomic bombs. An ampoule of iodine and a first-aid pack per man.

One large bundle had become lodged high up in the branches of a tree, or rather its parachute had become entangled and left it dangling enticingly by the ropes. Praying that it contained nothing likely to blast the earth from under us, we needled the ropes and brought it down. It proved to hold a large supply of concentrated rations plus a five gallon can of fruit juice.

Packing the chutes and shouldering the supplies, we started off. The first mile proved easy; just trees, trees, trees and houses from which the inhabitants had fled. It was on this part of the journey I noticed it was always the same type of tree that surmounted a house: No abode stood under any of those goo-slappers or electrocuters of whose powers we were grimly aware. Whether these house-trees were innocuous was a question nobody cared to investigate, but it was here that Minshull discovered them as the source of that eternal throbbing.

Disregarding McNulty, who clucked at him like an agitated hen; Minshull tiptoed into one empty house, his needler ready for trouble. A few seconds later he reappeared, said that the building was deserted but that the tree in its centre was booming like a tribal tomtom. He'd put his ear to its trunk and had heard the beating of its mighty heart.

That started a dissertation by McNulty on the subject of our highly questionable right to mutilate or otherwise harm the trees of this planet. If, in fact, they were semisentient, then in interstellar law they had the status of aborigines and as such were legally protected by subsection so-and-so, paragraph such-and-such of the Transcosmic Code governing planetary relations. He entered into all legalistic aspects of this matter with much gusto and complete disregard for the fact that he might be boiled in oil before nightfall.

When eventually he paused for breath, Jay Score pointed out, "Skipper, maybe these people have laws of their own and are about to enforce them." He pointed straight ahead.

I followed the line of his finger then frantically poured myself into my spacesuit. The record time for encasing oneself is said to be twenty-seven seconds. I beat it by twenty, but can never prove it. This, I thought, is the pay-off. The

long arm of justice was about to face me with that poor guppy and one can of condensed milk.

Awaiting us half a mile ahead was a vanguard of enormous snakelike things far thicker than my body and no less than a hundred feet in length. They writhed in our general direction, their movements peculiarly stiff and lacking sinuosity. Behind them, also moving awkwardly forward, came a small army of bushes deceptively harmless in appearance. And behind those, hooting with the courage of those who feel themselves secure, was a horde of green natives. The progress of this nightmarish army was determined by the pace of the snakish objects in the lead, and these crept forward in tortuous manner as if striving to move a hundred times faster than was natural.

Aghast at this incredible spectacle, we halted. The creepers came steadily on and somehow managed to convey an irresistible impression of tremendous strength keyed-up for sudden release. The nearer they came, the bigger and nastier they looked. By the time they were a mere three hundred yards away I knew that any one of them could embrace a bunch of six of us and do more to the lot than any boa constrictor ever did to a hapless goat.

These were the wild ones of a vast and semisentient

forest. I knew it instinctively and I could hear them faintly mewling as they advanced. These, then; were my bright green tigers, samples of the thing our captors had battled in the emerald jungle: But apparently they could be tamed, their strength and fury kept on tap. This tribe had done it. Veritably they were higher than. the Ka.

"I think I can just about make this distance;" said Jay
Score when the intervening space had shrunk to two hundred yards.

Nonchalantly he thumbed a little bomb that could have made an awful mess of the *Marathon* or a boat twice its size. His chief and most worrying weakness was that he never did appreciate the power of things that go bang. So he carelessly juggled it around in a way that made me wish him someplace the other side of the cosmos and just when I was about to burst into tears; he threw it. His powerful arm also whistled through the air as he flung the missile in a great arc.

We flattened. The earth heaved like the belly of a sick man. Huge clods of plasma and lumps of torn green fibrous stuff geysered high, momentarily hung in mid-air, then showered all around. Getting up, we raced forward a hundred yards, went prone as Jay flung another. This one made me think of volcanoes being born alongside my abused

ears. Its blast shoved me down in my boots. The uproar had scarcely ceased when the pinnacle reappeared, dived upon the rear ranks of the foe and let them have a couple there. More disruption. It tied me in knots to see what went up even above the tree-tops.

"Now!" yelled Jay. Grabbing the handicapped Jepson, we tossed him over one shoulder and pounced forward. We drove with him.

Our first obstacle was a huge crater bottomed with tired and steaming earth amid which writhed some mutilated yellow worms. Cutting around the edges of this, I leaped a six-foot length of blasted creeper that, even in death, continued to jerk spasmodically and horribly. Many more odd lengths squirmed between here and the next bomb-hole. all were green inside and out, and bristled with hairlike tendrils that continued to vibrate as if vainly seeking the life that had gone.

The one hundred yards between craters were covered in record time, Jay still in the lead despite his awkward burden. I sweated like a tormented bull and thanked my lucky stars for the low gravity that alone enabled me to maintain this hectic pace.

Again we split our ranks and raced around the ragged rim of the second crater. This brought us practically nose to nose with the enemy and after that all was confusion.

A bush got me. Sheer Terrestrial conditioning made me disregard the darned thing in spite of recent experiences. I had my attention elsewhere and in an instant it had shifted a pace to one side, wrapped itself around my legs and brought me down in full flight. I plunged with a hearty thump, unarmed, but cursing with what little breath I had left. The bush methodically sprinkled my space-suit fabric with a fine grey powder. Then a long, leatherish tentacle snaked from behind me, ripped the bush from my form, tore it to pieces.

"Thanks, Sug Farn," I breathed, got up and charged on. A second antagonistic growth collapsed before my needler and the potent ray carried straight on another sixty or seventy yards and roasted the guts of a bawling, gesticulating native. Sug side-swiped a third bush, scattered it with scorn. The strange powder it sprayed around did not seem to affect him.

By now Jay was twenty yards ahead. He paused, flung a bomb, dropped, came to his feet and pounded ahead with

Jepson still bouncing on one shoulder. The pinnacle howled overhead, swooped, created wholesale slaughter in the enemy's rear. A needle-ray spiked from behind me, sizzled dangerously close to my helmet and burned a bush. I could hear in my helmet-phones a constant and monotonous cursing in at least six voices. On my right a great tree lashed around and toppled headlong, but I had neither the time nor inclination to look at it.

Then a snake trapped Blaine. How it had survived in one piece, alone among its torn and tattered fellows, was a mystery. It lay jerking exactly like all the other bits and pieces but still existed in one long lump. Blaine jumped it and at the same instant it curled viciously, wound itself around him. He shrieked into his helmet-microphone. The sound of his dying was terrible to hear. His space-suit sank in where the great coils compressed it and blood spurted out from the folds between: The sight and sound shocked me so much that involuntarily I stopped and Armstrong blundered into me from behind.

"Keep going!" he roared, giving me an urgent shove.

With his needler he sliced the green constrictor into violently humping sections. We pushed straight on as hard as we could go, perforce leaving Blaine's crushed corpse to

the mercy of this alien jungle.

Now we were through the fronting ranks of quasi--vegetable life and into the howling natives whose number had thinned considerably. Brittle globes popped and splintered all around our thudding feet but our suits protected us from the knock-out effects of their gaseous contents. In any case, we were moving too fast to get a deadly whiff. I needled three greenies in rapid succession, saw Jay tear off the head of another without so much as pausing in his weighty onrush.

We were gasping with exertion when unexpectedly the foe gave up. Remaining natives faded with one accord into their protecting forest just as the pinnacle made yet another vengeful dive upon them. The way was clear. Not slackening our headlong pace in the slightest, with eyes alert and weapons prepared, we pelted to the waterfront. And there, reposing in the great clearing, we found the sweetest sight in the entire cosmos - the *Marathon* .

It was at this point that Sug Farn put a prime scare into us, for as we sprinted joyfully toward the open airlock, he beat us to it, held up the stump of a tentacle, said, "It would be as well if we do not enter just yet"

" Why not? " demanded Jay. His glowing eyes focused on the Martian's stump, and he added, " What the devil has happened to you?"

" I have been compelled to shed most of a limb," said Sug Farn, mentioning it with the casual air of one to whom shedding a limb is like taking off a hat. "It was that powder. It is composed of a million submicroscopic insects. It crawls around and eats. It started to eat me. Take a look at yourselves."

By hokey, he was right! Now that I came to examine it I could see small patches of grey powder changing shape on the surface of my space-suit. Sooner or later it was going to eat its way through the fabric-and then start on me! I've never felt more thoroughly lousy in my life. So, keeping watch on the nearest fringe of the forest, we had to spend an irritating and sweaty half-hour roasting each other's suits with needlers turned to wide jet and low power. I was well-nigh cooked by the time the last pinhead louse dropped off.

Young Wilson, never the one to pass up a public humiliation, seized the opportunity to dig out a movie camera and record our communal decontamination. I knew that this

eventually would be shown to an amused world sitting in armchair comfort far, far from the troubles surrounding Rigel. Secretly I hoped that somehow a quota of surviving bugs would manage to get around with the film and lend a taste of realism to the fun.

With a more official air, Wilson also took shots of the forest, the river, and a couple of upturned alien boats with all their bivalve paddles exposed. Then, thankfully, we piled into the ship.

The pinnacle was lugged aboard and the *Marathon* took off without delay. There's never been a time when I felt more like a million dollars than at the moment when normal and glorious yellow-white light poured through the ports and the bilious green colouring departed from our faces. With Brennand standing at my side, I watched this strange, eerie world sink below, and I can't say I was sorry to see it go.

Jay came along the catwalk and informed, "Sergeant, we're making no further landings. The skipper has decided to return to Terra forthwith and make a full report."

"Why?" asked Brennand. He gestured toward the diminishing sphere. "We've come away with practically

nothing worth having."

"McNulty thinks we've learned enough to last us for a piece." The rhythmic hum of the stern tubes filled in his brief period of silence. "McNulty says he's conducting an exploratory expedition and not managing a slaughterhouse. He's had enough and is thinking of tendering his resignation."

"The officious dope!" said Brennand, with shameful lack of reverence.

"And what have we learned, if anything?" I inquired.

"Well, we know that life on that planet is mostly symbiotic," Jay replied. "Its different forms of life share their existence and their faculties. Men share with trees, each according to his kind. The communal point is that queer chest organ."

"Drugs for blood," said Brennand, showing disgust.

"But," Jay continued, "there are some higher than the Ka, higher than all others, some so high and godlike that they could depart from their trees and travel the globe by day or by night. They could milk their trees, transport the

life-giving fluids and absorb them from bowls. Of the symbiotic partnership imposed upon them, they had gained the mastery and-in the estimation of the planet-they alone were free."

"How are the mighty fallen!" I offered.

"Not so," Jay contradicted. "We have fought our way out of their power - but we have not conquered them. The world remains theirs and theirs alone. We are retiring with losses, and we have yet to find a way to cure Jepson."

A thought struck me as he turned to go. "Hey, what happened after that assault on the ship. And how did you keep track of us?"

"It was a losing fight. Discretion became the better part of valour. So we blew free before they could incapacitate the ship. After that, we followed you very easily." His eyes always remained inscrutably aflame but I will swear that a touch of malicious humour came into them as he went on, " You had Sug Farn with you. We had Kli Yang and the rest of his gang." He tapped his head suggestively.

"The Martians have much *gamish* ."

"Hell's bells, they're telepathic among themselves,"
yelped Brennand, flushing with ire. "I forgot all about
that. Sug Farn never said a word. The cross-eyed spider
just slept every chance he got"

"Nevertheless," said Jay, "he was in constant touch with
his fellows."

He went along the catwalk, rounded the far corner. Then
the warning alarm sounded and Brennand and I clung like
brothers while the ship switched to Flettner drive. The
green world faded to a dot with swiftness that never fails
to astound me. Taking fresh hold on ourselves, we rubbed
our distorted innards into shape. Then Brennand gripped the
valve of the starboard airlock, turned the control, watched
the pressure gauge crawl from three pounds up to fifteen.

"The Martians are inside there," I pointed out. "And
they won't like it"

"I don't want 'em to like it. I'll teach those rubber
caricatures to hold out on us!"

"McNulty won't like it, either!"

"Who cares what McNulty likes or dislikes!" he bawled.

Then McNulty himself suddenly came around the corner, walking with portly dignity.

Brennand promptly added in still louder tones, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, talking like that. You ought to be more respectful and refer to him as the skipper."

Look, if ever you take to the spaceways don't worry too much about the ship-concentrate your worrying on the no-good bums who'll share it with you!