A MACFADDEN BOOK 1968
MACFADDEN BOOKS are published by Macfadden-Bartell Corporation
A subsidiary of Bartell Media Corporation
205 East 42nd Street, New York, New York 10017
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 65-18008

Published *by* arrangement with The World Publishing Company.
Printed in the U. S. A.

CONTENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is given to the following for permis-sion to use the copyrighted material appearing in this anthology: Lurton Blassingame— ". . We Also Walk. Dogs" by Robert A. Heinlein, from *Astounding Science-Fiction, July, 1941*. Copyright, 1941 by Street & Smith Publi-cations, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Lurton Blassingame. Fritz Leiber—"Coming Attraction" by Fritz Leiber, from *Galaxy Science Fiction, No*-vember, 1950. Copyright, 1950 by World Editions, Inc. "Kind-ness" by Lester del Rey, from *Astounding Science-Fiction*, October, 1944. Copyright, 1944 by Street & Smith Publica-tions, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the' author's agents, Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc. "Requi-em" by Edmond Hamilton, from *Amazing Stories,* April, 1962. Copyright, 1962 by Ziff-Davis Publishing Company. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Scot Meredith Literary Agency, Inc. "The Witness" by Eric Frank Russell, from *Other Worlds Science Stories*, September, 1951. Copyright, 1951 by the Clark Publishing Company. Reprinted by permission of the author and author's agents, Scott Mere-dith Literary Agency, Inc. "The Vortex Blasters" by E. E. Smith, Ph.D., from *Comet, July, 1941*. Copyright, 1941 by H-K Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc. "We Guard the Black Planet" by Henry Kuttner, from *Super Science Stories*, November, 1942. Copyright, 1942 by Fictioneers, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the copyright owners.

THE VORTEX BLASTER

Safety devices that do not protect.

The "unsinkable" ships that, before the days of Bergenholm and of atomic and

cosmic energy, sank into the waters of the earth.

More particularly, safety devices which, while protecting against one agent of destruction, attract magnet-like another and worse. Such as the armored cable within the walls of a wooden house. It protects the electrical conductors within against accidental external shorts; but, inadequately grounded as it must of necessity be, it may attract and upon occasion has attracted the stupendous force of lightning. Then, fused, volatized, flaming incandescent throughout the length, breadth, and height of a dwelling, that dwelling's existence thereafter is to be measured in minutes.

Specifically, four lightning rods. The lightning rods protecting the chromium, glass, and plastic home of Neal Cloud. Those rods were adequately grounded, grounded with copper-silver cables the bigness of a strong man's arm; for Neal Cloud, atomic physicist, knew his lightning and he was taking no chances whatever with the safety of his lovely wife and their three wonderful kids.

He did not know" he did not even suspect, that under certain conditions of atmospheric potential and of ground-magnetic stress his perfectly designed lightning-rod system would become a super-powerful magnet for flying vortices of atomic disintegration.

And now Neal Cloud, atomic physicist, sat at his desk in a strained, dull apathy. His face was a yellowish-grey white, his tendoned hands gripped rigidly the arms of his chair. His eyes" hard and lifeless, stared unseeingly past the small, three-dimensional block portrait of all that had made life worth living.

For his guardian against lightning had been a vortex magnet at the moment when a luckless wight had attempted to abate the nuisance of a "loose" atomic vortex. That wight died, of course-they almost always do-and the vortex, instead of being destroyed, was simply broken up into an indefinite number of widely-scattered new vortices. And one of these bits of furious, uncontrolled energy, resembling more nearly a handful of material rived from a sun than anything else with which ordinary man is familiar, darted toward and crashed downward to earth through Neal Cloud's new house.

That home did not burn it; it simply exploded. Nothing of it, in it, or around it stood a chance, for in a fractional second of time the place where it had been was a crater of seething, boiling lava-a crater which filled the atmosphere to a height of miles with poisonous vapors; which flooded all circumambient space with lethal radiations.

Cosmiscally, the whole thing was infinitesimal. Ever since man learned how to liberate intra-atomic energy, the vortices of disintegration had been breaking out of control. Such accidents had been happening, were happening, and would continue indefinitely to happen. More than one world, perhaps, had been or would be consumed to the last gram by such loose atomic vortices. What of that? Of what real importance are a few grains of sand to an ocean beach five thousand miles long, a hundred miles wide, and ten miles deep?

And even to that individual grain of sand called "Earth"-or, in modern parlance, "Sol Three," or "Tellus of Sol," or simply "Tellus"-the affair was of negligible importance. One man had died; but, in dying, he had added one more page to the thick bulk of negative results already on file. That Mrs. Cloud and her children had perished was merely unfortunate. The vortex itself was not yet a real threat to Tellus.

It was a "new" one, and thus it would be a long time before it would become other than a local menace. And well before that could happen—before even the oldest of Tellus' loose vortices had eaten away much of her mass or poisoned much of her atmosphere, her scientists would have solved the problem. It was unthinkable that Tellus, the point of origin, and the very center of Galactic Civilization, should cease to exist.

But to Neal Cloud the accident was the ultimate catastrophe. His personal universe had crashed in ruins; what was left was not worth picking up. He and Jo had been married for almost twenty years and the bonds between them had grown stronger, deeper, truer with every passing day. And the kids . . . It couldn't have happened . . . fate COULDN'T do this to him ... but it had ... it could. Gone ... gone ... GONE.

And to Neal Cloud, atomic physicist, sitting there at his desk in torn, despairing abstraction, with black maggots of thought gnawing holes in his brain, the catastrophe was doubly galling because of its cruel irony. For he was second from the top in the Atomic Research Laboratory; his life's work had been a search for a means of extinguishment of exactly such loose vortices as had destroyed his all.

His eyes focused vaguely upon the portrait. Clear, honest grey eyes . . . lines of character and humor . . . sweetly curved lips, ready to smile or to kiss. . . .

He wrenched his eyes away and scribbled briefly upon a sheet of paper. Then, getting up stiffly, he took the portrait and moved woodenly across the room to a furnace. As though enshrining it he placed the plastic block upon a refractory between the electrodes and threw a switch. After the flaming arc had done its work be turned and handed the paper to a tall man, dressed in plain grey leather, who had been watching him with quiet, understanding eyes.

Significant enough to the initiated of the importance of this laboratory is the fact that it was headed by an Unattached Lensman.

"As of now, Phil, if it's QX with you."

The Grey Lensman took the document, glanced at it, and slowly, meticulously, tore it into sixteen equal pieces.

"Uh, uh, Storm," he denied, gently. "Not a resignation. Leave of absence, yes-indefinite-but not a resignation."

"Why?" It was scarcely a question; Cloud's voice was level, uninflected. "I won't be worth the paper I'd waste." "Now, no," the Lensman conceded, "but the future's another matter. I haven't said anything so far, because to anyone who knew you and Jo as I knew you it was abundantly clear that nothing could be said." Two hands gripped and held. "For the future, though, four words were uttered long ago, that have never been improved upon. `This, too, shall pass.'"

"You think so?"

"I don't think so, Storm-I know so. I've been around a long time. You are too good a man, and the world has too much use for you, for you to go down permanently out of control. You've got a place in the world, and you'll be back-" A thought struck the Lensman, and he went on in an altered tone. "You wouldn't-but of course you wouldn't-you couldn't."

"I don't think so. No I won't-that never was any kind of a solution to any

problem."

Nor was it. Until that moment, suicide had not entered Cloud's mind, and he rejected it instantly. His kind of man did not take the easy way out.

After a brief farewell Cloud made his way to an elevator and was whisked down to the garage. Into his big blue DeKhotinsky Sixteen Special and away.

Through traffic so heavy that front, rear, and side bumpers almost touched he drove with his wonted cool skill; even though, consciously, he did not know that the other cars were there. He slowed, turned, stopped, "gave her the oof," all in correct response to flashing signals in all shapes and colors-purely automatically. Consciously, he did not know where he was going, nor care. If he thought at all, his numbed brain was simply trying to run away from its own bitter imaging-which, if he had thought at all, he would have known to be a hopeless task. But he did not think; he simply acted, dumbly, miserably. His eyes saw, optically; his body, reacted, mechanically; his thinking brain was completely in abeyance.

Into a one-way skyway he rocketed, along it over the suburbs and into the transcontinental super-highway. Edging inward, lane after lane, he reached the "unlimited" way -unlimited, that is, except for being limited to cars of not less than seven hundred horsepower; in perfect mechanical condition, driven by registered, tested drivers at speeds not less than one hundred and twenty-five miles an hour flashed his registry number at the control station, and shoved his right foot down to the floor.

Now everyone knows that an ordinary DeKhotinsky Sporter will do a hundred and forty honestly-measured miles in one honestly measured hour; but very few ordinary drivers have ever found out how fast one of those, brutal big souped-up Sixteens can wheel. They simply haven't got what it takes to open one up.

"Storm" Cloud found out that day. He held that two and-a-half-ton Juggernaut on the road, wide open, for two solid hours. But it didn't help. Drive as he would, he could not outrun that which rode with him. Beside him and within him and behind him. For Jo was there. Jo and the kids, but mostly Jo. It was Jo's car as much as it was his. "Babe, the big blue ox," was Joe's pet name for it; because, like Paul Bunyan's fabulous beast, it was pretty nearly six feet between the eyes. Everything they had ever had was that way. She was in the seat beside him. Every dear, every sweet, every luscious, lovely memory of her was there ... and behind him, just out of eye-corner visibility, were the three kids. And a whole lifetime of this loomed ahead-a vista of emptiness more vacuous far than the emptiest reaches of intergalactic space. Damnation! He couldn't stand much more of—

High over the roadway, far ahead, a brilliant octagon flared red. That meant "STOP!" in any language. Cloud eased up his accelerator, eased down his mighty brakes. He pulled up at the control station and a trimly-uniformed officer made a gesture.

"Sorry, sir," the policeman said, "but you'll have to detour here. There's a loose atomic vortex beside the road up ahead—“

"Oh! It's Dr. Cloud!" Recognition flashed into the guard's eyes. "I didn't recognize you at first. It'll be two or three miles before you'll have to put on your armor; you'll know when better than anyone can tell you. They didn't tell us they were going to send for you. It's just a little new one, and the dope we got was that

they were going to shove it off into the canyon with pressure."

"They didn't send for me." Cloud tried to smile. "I'm just driving around-haven't my armor along, even. So I guess I might as well go back."

He turned the Special around. A loose vortex-new. There might be a hundred of them, scattered over a radius of two hundred miles. Sisters of the one that bad murdered his family-the hellish spawn of that accursed Number Eleven vortex that that damnably incompetent bungling ass had tried to blow up. . . . Into his mind there leaped a picture, wire sharp, of Number Eleven as he had last seen it, and simultaneously an idea hit him like a blow from a fist.

He thought. Really thought, now; cogently, intensely, clearly. If the could do it . . . could actually blow out the atomic flame of an atomic vortex ... not exactly revenge, but.... By Klono' s brazen bowels, it would work-it'd have to work-he'd make it work! And grimly, quietly" but alive in every fiber now, he drove back towards the city practically as fast as he had come away.

If the Lensman was surprised at Cloud's sudden reappearance in the laboratory he did not show it. Nor did he offer any comment as his erstwhile first assistant went to various lockers and cupboards, assembling meters, coils, tubes, armor, and other paraphernalia and apparatus.

"Guess that's all I'll need, Chief," Cloud remarked finally. "Here's a blank check. If some of this stuff shouldn't happen to be in usable condition when I get done with it, fill it out to suit, will you?"

"No", and the Lensman tore up the check just as he had torn up the resignation. "If you want the stuff for legitimate purposes, you're on Patrol business and it is the Patrol's risk. If, on the other hand, you think that you're going to try to snuff a vortex, the stuff stays here. That's final, Storm."

"You're right-and wrong, Phil," Cloud stated, not at all sheepishly. "I'm going to blow out Number One vortex with duodec, yes-but I'm really going to blow it out, not merely make a stab at it as an excuse for suicide, as you think."

"How?" the big Lensman's query was scepticism incarnate. "It can't be done, except by an almost impossibly fortuitous accident. You yourself have been the most bitterly opposed of us all to these suicidal attempts."

"I know it-I didn't have the solution myself until a few hours ago-it hit me all at once. Funny I never thought of it before; it's been right in sight all the time."

"That's the way with most problems", the Chief admitted. "Plain enough after you see the key equation. Well, I'm perfectly willing to be convinced, but I warn you that I'll take a lot of convincing-and someone else will do the work, not you."

"When I get done you'll see why I'll pretty nearly have to do it myself. But to convince you, exactly what is the knot?"

"Variability", snapped the older man. "To be effective, the charge of explosive at the moment of impact must match, within very close limits, the activity of the vortex itself. Too small a charge scatters it around in vortices which, while much smaller than the original, are still large enough to be self-sustaining. Too large a charge simply rekindles the original vortex-still larger-in its original crater. And the activity that must be matched varies so tremendously, in magnitude, maxima, and minima, and the cycle is so erratic-ranging from seconds to hours without discoverable rhyme or reason-that all attempts to do so at any predetermined instant have failed

completely. Why, even Kinnison and Cardynge and the Conference of Scientists couldn't solve it, any more than they could work out a tractor beam that could be used as a tow-line on one."

"Not exactly," Cloud demurred. "They found that it could be forecast, for a few seconds at least-length of time directly proportional to the length of the cycle in question-by an extension of the calculus of warped surfaces."

"Humph!" the Lensman snorted. "So what? What good is a ten-second forecast when it takes a calculating machine an hour to solve the equations. . . . Oh!" He broke off, staring.

"Oh," he repeated" slowly" "I forgot that you're a lightning calculator-a mathematical prodigy from the day you were born-who never has to use a calculating machine even to compute an orbit.... But there are other things."

"I'll say there are; plenty of them. I'd thought of the calculator angle before, of course, but there was a worse thing than variability to contend with. . .”

"What?" the Lensman demanded.

"Fear," Cloud replied, crisply. "At the thought of a hand-to-hand battle with a vortex my brain froze solid. Fear-the sheer, stark, natural human fear of death, that robs a man of the fine edge of control and brings on the very death that he is trying so hard to avoid. That's what had me stopped."

"Right . . . you may be right," the Lensman pondered, his fingers drumming quietly upon his desk. "And you are not afraid of death now—even subconsciously. But tell me, Storm, please, that you won't invite it."

"I will not invite it, sir, now that I've got a job to do. But that's as far as I'll go in promising. I won't make any super-human effort to avoid it. I'll take all due precautions, for the sake of the job, if it gets me, what the hell? The quicker it does, the better-the sooner I'll be with Jo."

"You believe that?"

"Implicitly."

"The vortices are as good as gone, then. They haven't got any more chance than Boskone has of licking the Patrol."

"I'm afraid so," almost glumly. "The only way for it to get me is for me to make a mistake, and I don't feel any coming on."

"But what's your angle?" the Lensman asked, interest lighting his eyes. "You can't use the customary attack; your time will be too short."

"Like this," and taking down a sheet of drafting paper, Cloud sketched rapidly. "This is the crater, here, with the vortex at the bottom, there. From the observers' instruments or from a shielded set-up of my own I get my data on mass, emission, maxima, minima, and so on. Then I have them make me three duodec bombs-one on the mark of the activity I'm figuring on shooting at, and one each five per cent over and under that figure-cased in neocarballoy of exactly the computed thickness to last until it gets to the center of the vortex. Then I take oft in a flying suit, armored and shielded, say about here. . . ."

"If you take off at all, you'll take off in a suit, inside a one-man flitter," the Lensman interrupted. "Too many instruments for a suit, to say nothing of bombs, and you'll need more screen than a suit can deliver. We can adapt a flitter for bomb-throwing easily enough."

"QX; that would be better, of course. In that case, I set my flitter into a projectile trajectory like this, whose objective is the center of the vortex, there. See? Ten seconds or so away, at about this point, I take my instantaneous readings, solve the equations at that particular warped surface for some certain zero time. . . ."

"But suppose that the cycle won't give you a ten-second solution?"

"Then I'll swing around and try again until a long cycle does show up."

"QX. It will, sometime."

"Sure. Then, having everything set for zero time, and assuming that the activity is somewhere near my postulated value. . . ."

"Assume that it isn't-it probably won't be"" the Chief grunted.

"I accelerate or decelerate-"

"Solving new equations all the while?"

"Sure-don't interrupt so-until at zero time the activity, extrapolated to zero time, matches one of my bombs. I cut that bomb loose, shoot myself off in a sharp curve, and Z-W-E-E-E-T-POWIE! She's out!" With an expressive, sweeping gesture.

"You hope," the Lensman was frankly dubious. "And there you are, right in the middle of that explosive, with two duodec bombs outside your armor-or just inside your flitter."

"Oh, no. I've shot them away several seconds ago, so that they explode somewhere else, nowhere near me."

"I hope. But do you realize just how busy a man you are going to be during those ten or twelve seconds?"

"Fully."

Cloud's face grew somber. "But I will be in full control. I won't be afraid of anything that can happen—anything. And," he went on, under his breath, "that's the hell of it."

"QX," the Lensman admitted finally, "you can go. There are a lot of things you haven't mentioned, but you'll probably be able to work them out as you go along. I think I'll go out and work with the boys in the lookout station while you're doing your stuff. When are you figuring on starting?"

"How long will it take to get the flitter ready?"

"A couple of days. Say we meet you there Saturday morning?"

"Saturday, the tenth, at eight o'clock. I'll be there."

And again Neal Cloud and Babe, the big blue ox, hit the road. And as he rolled, the physicist mulled over in his mind the assignment to which he had set himself.

Like fire, only worse, intra-atomic energy was a good servant, but a terrible master. Man had liberated it before be could really control it. In fact, control was not yet, and perhaps never would be, perfect. Up to a certain size and activity, yes. They, the millions upon millions of self-limiting ones, were the servants. They could be handled, fenced in, controlled; indeed, if they were not kept under an exciting bombardment and very carefully fed, they would go out. But at long intervals, for some one of a dozen reasons-science knew so little, fundamentally, of the true inwardness of the intra-atomic reactions-one of these small, tame, self-limiting vortices flared, nova-like, into a large, wild, self-sustaining one. It ceased being a servant then, and became a master. Such flare-ups occurred, perhaps, only once or twice in a century on Earth; the trouble was that they were so utterly, damnably

permanent.

They never went out. And no data were ever secured for every living thing in the vicinity of a flare-up died; every instrument and every other solid thing within a radius of a hundred feet melted down into the reeking, boiling slag of its crater.

Fortunately, the rate of growth was slow-as slow, almost, as it was persistent-otherwise Civilization would scarcely have had a planet left. And unless something could be done about loose vortices before too many years, the consequences would be really serious. That was why his laboratory had been established in the first place.

Nothing much had been accomplished so far. The tractor beam that would take hold of them had never been designed. Nothing material was of any use, it melted. Pressors worked, after a fashion: it was by the use of these beams that they shoved the vortices around, off into the waste places-unless it proved cheaper to allow the places where they had come into being to remain waste places. A few, through sheer luck, had been blown into self-limiting bits by duodec. Duodec-aplylatomate, the most powerful, the most frightfully detonant explosive ever invented upon all the known planets of the First Galaxy. But duodec had taken an awful toll of life. Also, since it usually scattered a vortex instead of extinguishing it, duodec had actually caused far more damage than it had cured.

No end of fantastic schemes had been proposed, of course; of varying degrees of fantasy. Some of them sounded almost practical. Some of them had been tried; some of them were still being tried. Some, such as the perennially-appearing one of building a huge hemispherical hull in the ground under and around the vortex, installing an inertialess drive, and shooting the whole neighborhood out into space, were perhaps feasible from an engineering standpoint. They were, however, potentially so capable of making things worse that they would not be tried save as last ditch measures. In short, the control of loose vortices was very much an unsolved problem.

Number One vortex, the oldest and worst upon Tellus, had been pushed out into the Badlands; and there, at eight o'clock on the tenth, Cloud started to work upon it.

The "lookout station," instead of being some such ramshackle structure as might have been deduced from the Lensman's casual terminology, was in fact a fully-equipped observatory. Its staff was not large-eight men worked in three staggered eight-hour shifts of two men each-but the instruments! To develop them had required hundreds of man-years of time and near miracles of research, not the least of the problems having been that of developing shielded conductors capable of carrying truly through fiveply screens of force the converted impulses of the very radiations against which those screens were most effective. For the observatory, and the long approach to it as well, had to be screened heavily; without such protection no life could exist there.

This problem and many others had been solved, however, and there the instruments were. Every phase and factor of the vortex's existence and activity were measured and recorded continuously, throughout every minute of every day of every year. And all of these records were summed up, integrated, into the "Sigma" curve. This curve, while only an incredibly and senselessly tortuous line to the layman's eye, was a veritable mine of information to the initiate.

Cloud glanced along the Sigma curve of the previous forty-eight hours and scowled, for one jagged peak, scarcely an hour old, actually punched through the top line of the chart.

"Bad, huh, Frank?" he grunted.

"Plenty bad, Storm, and getting worse," the observer assented. "I wouldn't wonder if Carlowitz were right, after all-if she ain't getting ready to blow her top I'm a Zabriskan fontema's maiden aunt."

"No periodicity-no equation, of course." It was a statement, not a question. The Lensman ignored as completely as did the observer, if not as flippantly, the distinct possibility that at any moment the observatory and all that it contained might be resolved into their component atoms.

"None whatever," came flatly from Cloud. He did not need to spend hours at a calculating machine; at one glance he knew, without knowing how he knew, that no equation could be made to fit even the weighted-average locus of thatwildly-shifting Sigma curve. "But most of the cycles cut this ordinate here-seven fifty-one-so I'll take that for my value. That means nine point nine or six kilograms of duodec basic charge, with one five per cent over and one five per cent under that for alternates. Neocarballoy casting, fifty-three millimeters on the basic, others in proportion. On the wire?"

"It went out as you said it," the observer reported. "They'll have 'em here in fifteen minutes."

"QX-I'll get dressed, then."

The Lensman and the observer helped him into his cumbersome, heavily-padded armor. They checked his instruments, making sure that the protective devices of the suit were functioning at full efficiency. Then all three went out to the flitter. A tiny speedster, really; a torpedo bearing the stubby wings and the ludicrous tail-surfaces, the multifarious driving-, braking-, side-, top-, and under-jets so characteristic of the tricky, cranky, but ultra-maneuverable breed. But this one had something that the ordinary speedster or flitter did not carry; spaced around the needle beak there yawned the open muzzles of a triplex bomb-thrower.

More checking. The Lensman and the armored Cloud both knew that every one of the dozens of instruments upon the flitter's special board was right to the bair; nevertheless each one was compared with the master-instrument of the observatory.

The bombs arrived and were loaded in; and Cloud, with a casually-waved salute, stepped into the tiny operating compartment. The massive door-hitters have no airlocks, as the whole midsection is scarcely bigger than an airlock would have to be rammed shut upon its fiber gaskets, the heavy toggles drove home. A cushioned form closed in upon the pilot, leaving only his arms and lower legs free.

Then, making sure that his two companions had ducked for cover, Cloud shot his hitter into the air and toward the seething inferno which was Loose Atomic Vortex Number One. For it was seething, no fooling; and it was an inferno. The crater was a ragged, jagged hole a full mile from lip to lip and perhaps a quarter of that in depth. It was not, however, a perfect cone, for the floor, being largely incandescently molten, was practically level except for a depression at the center, where the actual vortex lay. The walls of the pit were steeply, unstably irregular, varying in pitch and shape with the hardness and refractoriness of the strata

composing them. Now a section would glare into an unbearably blinding white puffing away in sparkling vapor. Again, cooled by an in rushing blast of air, it would subside into an angry scarlet, its surface crawling in a sluggish flow of lava. Occasionally a part of the wall might even go black, into pock-marked scoriae or into brilliant planes of obsidian.

For always, somewhere, there was an enormous volume of air pouring into that crater. It rushed in as ordinary air. It came out, however, in a ragingly-up rushing pillar, as--as something else. No one knew-or knows yet, for that matter-exactly what a loose vortex does to the molecules and atoms of air. In fact, due to the extreme variability already referred to, it probably does not do the same thing for more than an instant at a time.

That there is little actual combustion is certain; that is, except for the forced combination of nitrogen, argon, xenon, and krypton with oxygen. There is, however, consumption: plenty of consumption. And what that incredibly intense bombardment impinges up is . . . is altered. Profoundly and obscurely altered, so that the atmosphere emitted from the crater is quite definitely no longer air as we know it. It may be corrosive, it may be poisonous in one or another of a hundred fashions, it may be merely new and different; but it is no longer the air which we human beings are used to breathing. And it is this fact, rather than the destruction of the planet itself, which would end the possibility of life upon Earth's surface.

It is difficult indeed to describe the appearance of a loose atomic vortex to those who have never seen one; and, fortunately, most people never have. And practically all of its frightful radiation lies in those octaves of the spectrum which are invisible to the human eye. Suffice it to say, then, that it had an average effective surface temperature of about fifteen thousand degrees absolute-two and one-half times as hot as the sun of Tellus-and that it was radiating every frequency possible to that incomprehensible temperature, and let it go at that.

And Neal Cloud, scurrying in his flitter through that murky, radiation-riddled atmosphere, setting up equations from the readings of his various meters and gauges and solving those equations almost instantaneously in his mathematical-prodigy's mind, sat appalled. For the activity level was, and even in its lowest dips remained, far above the level he had selected. His skin began to prickle and burn. His eyes began to smart and to ache. He knew what those symptoms meant; even the flitter's powerful screens were not stopping all the radiation; even his suit-screens and his special goggles were not stopping what leaked through. But he wouldn't quit yet; the activity might--probably would--take a nose-dive any instant. If it did, he'd have to be ready. On the other hand, it might blow up at any instant, too.

There were two schools of mathematical thought upon that point. One held that the vortex, without any essential change in its physical condition or nature, would keep on growing bigger. Indefinitely, until, uniting with the other vortices of the planet, it had converted the entire mass of the world into energy.

The second school, of which the aforementioned Carlowitz was the loudest voice, taught that at a certain stage of development the internal energy of the vortex would become so great that generation-radiation equilibrium could not be maintained. This would, of course, result in an explosion; the nature and consequences of which this Carlowitz was wont to dwell upon in ghoulishly

mathematical glee. Neither school, however, could prove its point-or, rather, each school proved its point, by means of unimpeachable mathematics-and each hated and derided the other, loudly and heatedly.

And now Cloud, as he studied through his almost opaque defenses that indescribably ravening fireball, that esuriently rapacious monstrosity which might very well have come from the deepest pit of the hottest hell of mythology, felt strongly inclined to agree with Carlowitz. It didn't seem possible that anything could get any worse than that without exploding. And such an explosion, he felt sure, would certainly blow everything for miles around into the smitheriest kind of smithereens.

The activity of the vortex stayed high, way too high. The tiny control room of the Hitter grew hotter and hotter. His skin burned and his eyes ached worse. He touched a communicator stud and spoke.

"Phil? Better get me three more bombs. Like these, except up around. . . ."

"I don't check you. If you do that, it's apt to drop to a minimum and stay there," the Lensman reminded him. "It's completely unpredictable, you know."

"It may, at that . . . so I'll have to forget the five per cent margin and hit on the nose or not at all. Order me up two more, then-one at half of what I've got here, the other double it," and he reeled off the figures for the charge and the casing of the explosive. "You might break out a jar of burn-dressing, too. Some fairly hot stuff is leaking through."

"We'll do that. Come down, fast!"

Cloud landed. He stripped to the skin and the observer smeared his every square inch of epidermis with the thick, gooey stuff that was not only a highly efficient screen against radiation, but also a sovereign remedy for new radiation burns. He exchanged his goggles for a thicker, darker, heavier pair. The two bombs arrived and were substituted for two of the original load.

"I thought of something while I was up there," Cloud informed the observers then. "Twenty kilograms of duodec is nobody's firecracker, but it may be the least of what's going to go off. Have you got any idea of what's going to become of the energy inside that vortex when I blow it out?"

"Can't say that I have." The Lensman frowned in thought. "No data."

"Neither have I. But I'd say that you better go back to the new station-the one you were going to move to if it kept on getting worse."

"But the instruments . . .” the Lensman was thinking, not of the instruments themselves, which were valueless in comparison with life, but of the records those instruments would make. Those records were priceless.

"I'll have everything on the tapes in the flitter," Cloud reminded.

"But suppose. . . ."

"That the flitter stops one, too--or doesn't stop it, rather? In that case, your back station won't be there, either, so it won't make any difference." How mistaken Cloud was!

"QX," the Chief decided. "We'll leave when you do just in case."

Again in air, Cloud found that the activity, while still high, was not too high, but that it was fluctuating too rapidly.

He could not get even five seconds of trustworthy prediction, to say nothing of

ten. So he waited, as close as he dared remain to that horrible center of disintegration.

The flitter hung poised in air, motionless, upon softly hissing under-jets. Cloud knew to a fraction his height above the ground. He knew to a fraction his distance from the vortex. He knew with equal certainty the density of the atmosphere and the exact velocity and direction of the wind. Hence, since he could also read closely enough the momentary variations in the cyclonic storms within the crater, he could compute very easily the course and velocity necessary to land the bomb in the exact center of the vortex at any given instant of time. The hard part the thing that no one had as yet succeeded in doing-was to predict, for a time far enough ahead to be of any use, a usably close approximation to the vortex's quantitative activity. For, as has been said, he had to over-blast, rather than under-, if he could not hit it "on the nose" to underblast would scatter it all over the state.

Therefore Cloud concentrated upon the dials and gauges before him; concentrated with every fiber of his being and every cell of his brain.

Suddenly, almost imperceptibly, the Sigma curve gave signs of flattening out. In that instant Cloud's mind pounced.

Simultaneous equations: nine of them, involving nine unknowns. An integration in four dimensions. No matter-Cloud did not solve them laboriously, one factor at a time. Without knowing how he had arrived at it, he knew the answer; just as the Posenian or the Rigellian is able to perceive every separate component particle of an opaque, three-dimensional solid, but without being able to explain to anyone how his sense of perception works. It just is, that's all.

Anyway, by virtue of whatever sense or ability it is which makes a mathematical prodigy what he is, Cloud knew that in exactly eight and three-tenth seconds from that observed instant the activity of the vortex would be slightly-but not too far-under the coefficient of his heaviest bomb. Another flick of his mental trigger and he knew the exact velocity he would require. His hand swept over the studs, his right foot tramped down, hard, upon the firing lever; and, even as the quivering flitter shot forward under eight Tellurian gravities of acceleration, he knew to the thousandth of a second how long he would have to hold that acceleration to attain that velocity. While not really long-in seconds-it was much too long for comfort. It took him much closer to the vortex than he wanted to be; in fact, it took him right out over the crater itself.

But he stuck to the calculated course, and at the precisely correct instant he cut his drive and released his largest bomb. Then, so rapidly that it was one blur of speed, he again kicked on his eight G's of drive and started to whirl around as only a speedster or a flitter can whirl. Practically unconscious from the terrific resultant of the linear and angular accelerations, he ejected the two smaller bombs. He did not care particularly where they lit, just so they didn't light in the crater or near the observatory, and he had already made certain of that. Then, without waiting even to finish the whirl or to straighten her out in level flight, Cloud's still-flying hand darted toward the switch whose closing would energize the Bergenholm and make the flitter inertialess.

Too late. Hell was out for noon, with the little speedster still inert. Cloud had moved fast. too; trained mind and trained body had been working at top speed and

in perfect coordination. There just simply hadn't been enough time.

If he could have got what he wanted, ten full seconds, or even nine, be could have made it, But. . . .

In spite of what happened, Cloud defended his action, then and thereafter. Damn it all, he had to take the eight-point-three second reading! Another tenth of a second and his bomb wouldn't have fitted-he didn't have the five per cent leeway he wanted, remember. And no, he couldn't wait for another match, either. His screens were leaking like sieves, and if he had waited for another chance they would have picked him up fried to a greasy cinder in his own lard!

The bomb sped truly and struck the target in direct central impact, exactly as scheduled. It penetrated perfectly. The neocarballoy casing lasted just long enough that frightful charge of duodec exploded, if not exactly at the center of the vortex, at least near enough to the center to do the work. In other words, Cloud's figuring had been close-very close. But the time had been altogether too short.

The flitter was not even out of the crater when the bomb went off. And not only the bomb. For Cloud's vague forebodings were materialized, and more; the staggeringly immense energy of the vortex merged with that of the detonating duodec to form an utterly incomprehensible whole.

In part the hellish flood of boiling lava in that devil's cauldron was beaten downward into a bowl by the sheer, stupendous force of the blow; in part it was hurled abroad in masses, in gouts and streamers. And the raging wind of the explosion's front seized the fragments and tore and worried them to bits, hurling them still faster along their paths of violence. And air, so densely compressed as to be to all intents and purposes a solid, smote the walls of the crater. Smote them so that they crumbled, crushed outward through the hard-packed ground, broke up into jaggedly irregular blocks which hurtled, screamingly, away through the atmosphere.

Also the concussion wave, or the explosion front, or flying fragments, or something, struck the two loose bombs, so that they too exploded and added their contribution to the already stupendous concentration of force. They were not close enough to the flitter to wreck it of themselves, but they were close enough so that they didn't do her--or her pilot--a bit of good.

The first terrific wave buffeted the flitter while Cloud's right hand was in the air, shooting across the panel to turn on the Berg. The impact jerked the arm downward and sidewise, both bones of the forearm snapping as it struck the ledge. The second one, an instant later, broke his left leg. Then the debris began to arrive.

Chunks of solid or semi-molten rock slammed against the hull, knocking off wings and control-surfaces. Gobs of viscous slag slapped it liquidly, freezing into and clogging up jets and orifices. The little ship was hurled hither and yon, in the grip of forces she could no more resist than can the floating leaf resist the waters of a cataract. And Cloud's brain was as addled as an egg by the vicious concussions which were hitting him from so many different directions and so nearly all at once. Nevertheless with his one arm and his one leg and the few cells of his brain that were still at work, the physicist was still in the fight.

By sheer force of will and nerve he forced his left hand across the gyrating key-bank to the Bergenholm switch.

He snapped it, and in the instant of its closing a vast, calm peace descended,

blanket-like. For, fortunately, the Berg still worked; the flitter and all her contents and appurtenances were inertialess. Nothing material could buffet her or hurt her now; she would waft effortlessly away from a feather's lightest possible touch.

Cloud wanted to faint then, but he didn't-quite. Instead, foggily, he tried to look back at the crater. Nine-tenths of his visiplates were out of commission, but he finally got a view. Good-it was out. He wasn't surprised; he had been quite confident that it would be. It wasn't scattered around, either. It couldn't be, for his only possibility of smearing the shot was on the upper side, not the lower.

His next effort was to locate the secondary observatory, where he had to land, and in that too he was successful. He had enough intelligence left to realize that, with practically all of his jets clogged and his wings and tail shot off, he couldn't land his little vessel inert. Therefore he would have to land her free.

And by dint of light and extremely unorthodox use of what jets he had left in usable shape he did land her free, almost within the limits of the observatory's field; and having landed, he inerted her.

But, as has been intimated, his brain was not working so well; he had held his ship inertialess quite a few seconds longer than he thought, and he did not even think of the buffetings she had taken. As a result of these things, however, her intrinsic velocity did not match, anywhere near exactly, that of the ground upon which she lay. Thus, when Cloud cut his Bergenholm, restoring thereby to the flitter the absolute velocity and inertia she had had before going free, there resulted a distinctly anti-climactic crash.

There was a last terrific bump as the motionless vessel collided with the equally motionless ground; and "Storm" Cloud, vortex blaster, went out like the proverbial light.

Help came, of course; and on the double. The pilot was unconscious and the flitter's door could not be opened from the outside, but those were not insuperable obstacles. A plate, already loose, was sheared away; the pilot was carefully lifted out of his prison and rushed to Base Hospital in the "meat-can" already in attendance.

And later, in a private office of that hospital, the greyclad Chief of the Atomic Research Laboratory sat and waited-but not patiently.

"How is he, Lacy?" he demanded, as the Surgeon-General entered the room. "He's going to live" isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, Phil-definitely yes," Lacy replied, briskly. "He has a good skeleton, very good indeed. The burns are superficial and will yield quite readily to treatment. The deeper, delayed effects of the radiation to which he was exposed can be neutralized entirely effectively. Thus he will not need even a Phillip's treatment for the replacement of damaged parts, except possibly for a few torn muscles and so on."

"But he was smashed up pretty badly, wasn't he? I know that he had a broken arm and a broken leg, at least."

"Simple fractures only-entirely negligible." Lady waved aside with an airy gesture such small ills as broken bones. "He'll be out in a few weeks."

"How soon can I see him?" the Lensman-physicist asked. "There are some important things to take up with him, and I've got a personal message for him that I must give him as soon as possible."

Lacy pursed his lips. Then:

"You may see him now," be decided. "He is conscious, and strong enough. Not too long, though, Phil-fifteen minutes at most."

"QX, and thanks," and a nurse led the visiting Lensman to Cloud's bedside.

"Hi, Stupe!" he boomed, cheerfully. "Stupe' being short for stupendous, not 'stupid.'"

"Hi, Chief. Glad to see somebody. Sit down."

"You're the most-wanted man in the Galaxy," the visitor informed the invalid, "not excepting even Kimball Kinnison. Look at this spool of tape, and it's only the first one. I brought it along for you to read at your leisure. As soon as any planet finds out that we've got a sure-enough vortex blower-outer, an expert who can really call his shots-and the news travels mighty fast-that planet sends in a double urgent, Class A-Prime demand for first call upon your services.

"Sirius IV got in first by a whisker, it seems, but Aldebaran II was so close a second that it was a photo finish, and all the channels have been jammed ever since. Canopus, Vega, Rigel, Spica. They all want you. Everybody from Alsakan to Vandemar and back. We told them right off that we would not receive personal delegations-we had to almost throw a couple of pink-haired Chickladorians out bodily to make them believe that we meant it-and that the age and condition of the vortex involved, not priority or requisition, would govern, QX?"

"Absolutely," Cloud agreed. "That's the only way it could be, I should think."

"So forget about this psychic trauma. . . . No, I don't mean that," the Lensman corrected himself hastily. "You know what I mean. The will to live is the most important factor in any man's recovery, and too many worlds need you too badly to have you quit now. Not?"

"I suppose so," Cloud acquiesced, but somberly. "I'll get out of here in short order. And I'll keep on pecking away until one of those vortices finishes what this one started."

"You'll die of old age then, son"" the Lensman assured him. "We got full data-all the information we need. We know exactly what to do to your screens. Next time nothing will come through except light, and only as much of that as you feel like admitting. You can wait as close to a vortex as you please, for as long as you please; until you get exactly the activity and time-interval that you want. You will be just as comfortable and just as safe as though you were home in bed."

"Sure of that?"

"Absolutely-or at least, as sure as we can be of anything that hasn't happened yet. But I see that your guardian angel here is eyeing her clock somewhat pointedly, so I'd better be doing a flit before they toss me down a shaft. Clear ether, Storm!"

"Clear ether, Chief!"

And that is how "Storm" Cloud, atomic physicist, became the most narrowly-specialized specialist in all the annals of science: how he became "Storm" Cloud, Vortex Blaster-the Galaxy's only vortex blaster.

REQUIEM

Edmond Hamilton

Kellon thought sourly that he wasn't commanding a starship, he was running a

travelling circus. He had aboard telaudio men with tons of equipment, pontifical commentators who knew the answer to anything, beautiful females who were ex-perts on the woman's angle, pompous bureaucrats after publi-city, and entertainment stars who had come along for the same reason.

He had had a good ship and crew, one of the best in the Survey. *Had* had. They weren't any more. They had been taken off their proper job of pushing astrographical knowl-edge ever further into the remote regions of the galaxy, and had been sent off with this cargo of costly people on a totally unnecessary mission.

He said bitterly to himself, "Damn all sentimentalists."

He said aloud, "Does its position check with your calcu-lated orbit, Mr. Riney?"

Riney, the Second, a young and serious man who had been fussing with instruments in the astrogation room, came out and said,

"Yes. Right on the nose. Shall we go in and land now?"

Kellon didn't answer for a moment, standing there in the front of the bridge, a middle-aged man, stocky, square-shouldered. and with his tanned, plain face showing none of the resentment he felt. He hated to give the order but he had to.

"All right, take her in."

He looked gloomily through the filter-windows as they went in. In this fringe-spiral of the galaxy, stars were rela-tively infrequent, and there were only ragged drifts of them across the darkness. Full ahead shone a small, compact sun like a diamond. It was a white dwarf and had been so for two thousand years, giving forth so little warmth that the pla-nets, which circled it had been frozen and ice-locked all that time. They still were, all except the innermost world.

Kelton stared at that planet, a tawny blob. The ice that had sheathed it ever since its primary collapsed into a white dwarf, had now melted. Months before, a dark wandering body had passed very close to this lifeless system. Its passing had per-turbed the planetary orbits and the inner planets had started to spiral slowly in toward their sun, and the ice had begun to go—

Viresson, one of the junior officers, came into the bridge looking harassed, He said to Kellon, "They want to see you down below, sir. Especially Mr. Borrodale. He says it's ur-gent."

Kelton thought wearily, "Well, I might as well go down and face the pack of them. Here's where they really begin."

He nodded to Viresson, and went down below to the main cabin. The sight of it revolted him. Instead of his own men in it, relaxing or chinning, it held a small and noisy mob of over-dressed, overloud men and women, all of whom seemed to be talking at once and uttering brittle, nervous laughter.

"Captain Kelton, I want to ask you—"

"Captain, if you *please—"*

He patiently nodded and smiled and plowed through them to Borrodale. He had been given particular instructions to cooperate with Bormdale, the most famous telaudio commen-tator in the Federation.

Borrodale was a slightly plump man with round pink face and incongrously large and solemn black eyes. When he spoke, one recognized at once that deep, incredibly rich and meaningful voice.

"My first broadcast is set for thirty minutes from now, Captain. I shall want a view as we go in. If my men could take a mobile up to the bridge—"

Kellon nodded. "Of course. Mr. Viresson is up there and will assist them in any way."

"Thank you, Captain. Would you like to see the broadcast?"

"I would, yes, but—"

He was interrupted by Lorri Lee, whose glitteringly handsome face and figure and sophisticated drawl made her the idol of all female telaudio reporters.

"My broadcast is to be right after landing—remember? I'd like to do it alone, with just the emptiness of that world as background. Can you keep the others from spoiling the ef-fect? Please?"

"We'll do what we can," Kellon mumbled. And as the rest of the pack converged on him he added hastily, "I'll talk to you later. Mr. Borrodale's broadcast—"

He got through them, following after Borrodale toward the cabin that had been set up as a telaudio-transmitter room. It had, Kellon thought bitterly, once served an honest purpose, holding the racks of soil and water and other samples from far worlds. But that had been when they were doing an hon-est Survey job, not chaperoning chattering fools on this senti-mental pilgrimage.

The broadcasting set-up was beyond Kellon. He didn't want to hear this but it was better than the mob in the main cabin. He watched as Borrodale made a signal. The monitor-screen came alive.

It showed a dun-colored globe spinning in space, growing visibly larger as they swept toward it. Now straggling seas were identifiable upon it. Moments passed and Borrodale did not speak, just letting the picture go out. Then his deep voice spoke over the picture, with dramatic simplicity.

"You are looking at the Earth," he said.

Silence again, and the spinning brownish ball was *bigger* now, with white clouds ragged upon it. And then Borrodale spoke again.

"You who watch from many worlds in the galaxy—this is the homeland of our race. Speak its name to yourselves. The Earth."

Kellon felt a deepening distaste. This was all true, but still it was phony. What was Earth now to him, or to Borrodale, or his billions of listeners? But it was a story, a sentimental occasion, so they had to pump it up into something big.

"Some thirty-five hundred years ago," Borrodale was say-ing, "our ancestors lived on this world alone. That was when they first went into space. To these other planets first—but very soon, to other stars. And so our Federation began, our community of human civilization on many stars and worlds."

Now, in the monitor, the view of Earth's dun globe had been replaced by the face of Borrodale in close-up. He paused dramatically.

"Then, over two thousand years ago, it was discovered that the sun of Earth was about to collapse into a white dwarf. So those people who still remained on Earth left it forever and when the solar change came, it and the other planets became mantled in eternal ice. And now, within months the final end of the old planet of our origin is at hand. It is slowly spirall-ing toward the sun and soon it will plunge into it as Mercury and Venus have already done. And when that occurs, the world of man's

origin will be gone forever."

Again the pause, for just the right length of time, and then Borrodale continued in a voice expertly pitched in a lower key.

"We on this ship—we humble reporters and servants of the vast telaudio audience on all the worlds—have come here so that in these next weeks we can give you this last look at our ancestral world. We think—we hope—that you'll find interest in recalling a past that is almost legend."

And Kellon thought, "The bastard has no more interest in this old planet than I have, but he surely is smooth."

As soon as the broadcast ended, Kellon found himself be-sieged once more by the clamoring crowd in the main cabin. He held up his hand in protest.

"Please, not now—we have a landing to make first. Will you come with me, Doctor Darnow?"

Darnow was from Historical Bureau, and was the titular head of the whole expedition, although no one paid him much attention. He was a sparrowy, elderly man who bab-bled excitedly as he went with Kellon to the bridge.

He, at least, was sincere in his interest, Kellon thought. For that matter, so were all the dozen-odd scientists who were aboard. But they were far outnumbered by the fat cats and big brass out for publicity, the professional enthusers and sentimentalists. A real hell of a job the Survey had given him!

In the bridge, he glanced through the window at the dun- colored planet and its satellite. Then he asked Darnow, "You said something about a particular place where you wanted to land?"

The historiographer bobbed his head, and began unfolding a big, old-fashioned chart.

"See this continent here? Along its eastern coast were a lot of the biggest cities, like New York."

Kellon remembered that name, he'd learned it in school history, a long time ago.

Darnow's finger stabbed the chart. "If you could land there, right on the island—"

Kellon studied the relief features, then shook his head. "Too low. There'll be great tides as time goes on and we can't take chances. That higher ground back inland a bit should be all right, though."

Darnow looked disappointed. "Well, I suppose you're right."

Kellon told Riney to set up the landing-pattern. Then he asked Darnow skeptically. "You surely don't expect to find much in those old cities now—not after they've had all that ice on them for two thousand years?"

"They'll be badly damaged, of course," Darnow admitted. "But there should be a vast number of relics. I could study here for years—"

"We haven't got years, we've got only a few months before this planet gets too close to the Sun," said Keilon. And he added mentally, "Thank God."

The ship went into its landing-pattern. Atmosphere whined outside its hull and then thick gray clouds boiled and raced around it. It went down through the cloud layer and moved above a dull brown landscape that had flecks of white in its deeper valleys. Far ahead there was the glint of a gray ocean. But the ship came down toward a rolling brown plain and settled there, and then there was the expected

thunderclap of silence that always followed the shutting off of all machinery.

Kellon looked at Riney, who turned in a moment from the test-panel with a slight surprise on his face. "Pressure, oxygen, humidity, everything—all optimum." And then he said, "But of course. This place *was* optimum."

Kellon nodded. He said, "Doctor Darnow and I will have a look out first. Viresson, you keep our passengers in."

When he and Darnow went to the lower airlock he heard a buzzing clamor from the main cabin and he judged that Viresson was having his hands full. The people in there were not used to being said no to, and he could imagine their re-sentment.

Cold, damp air struck a chill in Kellon when they stepped down out of the airlock. They stood on muddy, gravelly ground that squashed a little under their boots as they trudged away from the ship. They stopped and looked around, shivering.

Under the low gray cloudy sky there stretched a sad, sunless brown landscape. Nothing broke the drab color of raw soil, except the shards of ice still lingering in low places. A heavy desultory wind stirred the raw air, and then was still. There was not a sound except the clink-clinking of the ship's skin cooling and contracting, behind them. Kelton thought that no amount of sentimentality could make this anything but a dreary world.

But Darnow's eyes were shining. "We'll have to make every minute of the time count," he muttered. "Every min-ute."

Within two hours, the heavy broadcast equipment was being trundled away from the ship on two motor-tracs that headed eastward. On one of the tracs rode Lorri Lee, re-splendent in a lilac-colored costume of synthesilk.

Kelton, worried about the possibility of quicksands, went along for that first broadcast from the cliffs that looked down on the ruins of New York. He wished he hadn't, when it got under way.

For Lorri Lee, her blonde head bright even in the dull light, turned loose all her practised charming gestures for the broadcast cameras, as she gestured with pretty excitement down toward the ruins.

"It's so *unbelievable!"* she cried to a thousand worlds. "To be here on Earth, to see the old places again—it *does* something to you!"

It did something to Kelton. It made him feel sick at his stomach. He turned and went back to the ship, feeling at that moment that if Lorri Lee went into a quicksand on the way back, it would be no great loss.

But that first day was only the beginning. The big ship quickly became the center of multifarious and continuous broadcasts. It had been especially equipped to beam strongly to the nearest station in the Federation network, and its transmitters were seldom quiet.

Kelton found that Darrow, who was supposed to coordi-nate all this programming, was completely useless. The little historian was living in a seventh heaven on this old planet which had been uncovered to view for the first time in milen-nia, and he was away most of the time on field trips of hit own. It fell to his assistant, an earnest and worried and harassed young man, to try to reconcile the clashing claims and demands of the highly temperamental broadcasting stars.

Kelton felt an increasing boredom at having to static around while all this tosh

went out over the ether. These people were having a field-day but he didn't think much of them and of their broadcasts. Roy Quayle, the young mall fashion designer, put on a semi-humorous, semi-nostalgic display of the old Earth fashions, with the prettier girls wearing some of the ridiculous old costumes he had had duplicated. Barden, the famous teleplay producer, ran off ancient films of the old Earth dramas that had everyone in stitches. Jay Maxson, a rising politician in Federation Congress, discussed with Borrodale the governmental systems of the old days, in a way calculated to give his own Wide-Galaxy Party none the worst of it. The Arcturus Players, that brilliant group of young stage-folk, did readings of old Earth dramas and poems.

It was, Kellon thought disgustedly, just playing. Grown people, famous people, seizing the opportunity given by the accidental end of a forgotten planet to posture in the spot-light like smart-aleck children. There was real work to do in the galaxy, the work of the Survey, the endless and wearying but always-fascinating job of charting the wild systems and worlds. And instead of doing that job, he was condemned to spend weeks and months here with these phonies.

The scientists and historians he respected. They did few broadcasts and they did not fake their interest. It was one of them, Haller, the biologist, who excitedly showed Kelton a handful of damp soil a week after their arrival.

"Look at *that!"* he said proudly.

Kelton stared. "What?"

"Those seeds—they're common weed-grass seeds. Look at them."

Kelton looked, and now he saw that from each of the tiny seeds projected a new-looking hairlike tendril.

"They're sprouting?" he said unbelievingly.

Haller nodded happily. "I was hoping for it. You see, it was almost spring in the northern hemisphere, according to the records, when Sol collapsed suddenly into a white dwarf. Within hours the temperature plunged and the hydrosphere and atmosphere began to freeze."

"But surely that would kill all plant-life?"

"No," said Haller. "The larger plants, trees, perennial shrubs, and so on, yes. But the seeds of the smaller annuals just froze into suspended animation. Now the warmth that melted them is causing germination."

"Then we'll have grass—small plants?"

"Very soon, the way the warmth is increasing."

It was, indeed getting a little warmer all the time as these first weeks went by. The clouds lifted one day and there was brilliant, thin white sunshine from the little diamond sun. And there came a morning when they found the rolling land-scape flushed with a pale tint of green.

Grass grew. Weeds grew, vines grew, all of them seeming to rush their growth as though they knew that this, their last season, would not be long. Soon the raw brown mud of the hills and valleys had been replaced by a green carpet, and everywhere taller growths were shooting up, and flowers be-ginning to appear. Hepaticas, bluebells, dandelions, violets, bloomed once more.

Kellon took a long walk, now that he did not have to plow through mud. The

chattering people around the ship, the con-stant tug and pull of clashing temperaments, the brittle, feb-rile voices, got him down. He felt better to get away by himself.

The grass and the flowers had come back but otherwise this was still an empty world. Yet there was a certain peace of mind in tramping up and down the long green rolling slopes. The sun was bright and cheerful now, and white clouds dotted the sky, and the warm wind whispered as he sat upon a ridge and looked away westward where nobody was, or would ever be again.

"Damned dull," he thought. "But at least it's better than back with the Babblers."

He sat for a long time in the slanting sunshine, feeling his bristling nerves relax. The grass stirred about him, rippling in long waves, and the taller flowers nodded.

No other movement, no other life. A pity, he thought, that there were no birds for this last spring of the old planet—not even a butterfly. Well, it made no difference, all this wouldn't last long.

As Kellon tramped back through the deepening dusk, he suddenly became aware of a shining bubble in the darkening sky. He stopped and stared up at it and then remembered. Of course, it was the old planet's moon—during the cloudy nights he had forgotten all about it. He went on, with its vague light about him.

When he stepped back into the lighted main cabin of the ship, he was abruptly jarred out of his relaxed mood. A first class squabble was going on, and everybody was either con-tributing to it or commenting on it. Lorri Lee, looking like a pretty child complaining of a hurt, was maintaining that she should have broadcast time next day for her special woman's-interest feature, and somebody else disputed her claim, and young Vallely, Darnow's assistant, looked harried and upset. Kelton got by them without being noticed, locked the door of his cabin and poured himself a long drink, and damned Survey all over again for this assignment.

He took good care to get out of the ship early in the morn-ing, before the storm of temperament blew up again. He left Viresson in charge of the ship, there being nothing for any of them to do now anyway, and legged it away over the green slopes before anyone could call him back.

They had five more weeks of this, Kellon thought. Then, thank God, Earth would be getting so near the Sun that they must take the ship back into its proper element of space. Until that wished-for day arrived, he would stay out of sight as much as possible.

He walked miles each day. He stayed carefully away from the east and the ruins of old New York, where the others so often were. But he went north and west and south, over the grassy, flowering slopes of the empty world. At least it was peaceful, even though there was nothing at all to see.

But after a while, Kelton found that there were things to see if you looked for them. There was the way the sky changed, never seeming to look the same twice. Sometimes it was deep blue and white clouds sailed it like mighty ships. And then it would suddenly turn gray and miserable, and rain would drizzle on him, to be ended when a lance of sun-light shot through the clouds and slashed them to flying ribbons. And there was a time when, upon a ridge, he watched vast thunderheads boil up and darken in the west and black storm marched across the land like an army with

banners of lightning and drums of thunder.

The winds and the sunshine, the sweetness of the air and the look of the moonlight and the feel of the yielding grass under his feet, all seemed oddly right. Kellon had walked on many worlds under the glare of many-colored suns, and some of them he had not liked at all, but never had he found a world that seemed so exactly attuned to his body as this worn out, empty planet.

He wondered vaguely what it had been like when there were trees and birds, and animals of many kinds, and roads and cities. He borrowed film-books from the reference library Darnow and the others had brought, and looked at them in his cabin of nights. He did not really care very much but at least it kept him out of the broils and quarrels, and it had a certain interest.

Thereafter in his wandering strolls, Kellon tried to see the place as it would have been in the long ago. There would have been robins and bluebirds, and yellow-and-black bumblebees nosing the flowers, and trees with names that were equally strange to him, elms and willows and sycamores. And small furred animals, and humming clouds of insects, and fish and frogs in the pools and streams, a whole vast complex symphony of life, long gone, long forgotten.

But were all the men and women and children who had lived here less forgotten? Borrodale and the others talked much on their broadcasts about the people of old Earth, but that was just a faceless name, a term that meant nothing. Not one of those millions, surely, had ever thought of himself as part of a numberless multitude. Each one had been to himself, and to those close to him or her, an individual, unique and never to be exactly repeated, and what did the glib talk-ers know of all those individuals, what could anyone know?

Kellon found traces of them here and there, bits of flotsam that even the crush of the ice had spared. A twisted piece of steel, a girder or rail that someone had labored to make. A quarry with the tool-marks still on the rocks, where surely men had once sweated in the sun. The broken shards of con-crete that stretched away in a ragged line to make a road upon which men and women had once travelled, hurrying upon missions of love or ambition, greed or fear.

He found more than that, a startling find that he made by purest chance. He followed a brook that ran down a very narrow valley, and at one point he leaped across it and as he landed he looked up and saw that there was a house.

Kellon thought at first that it was miraculously preserved whole and unbroken, and surely that could not be. But when he went closer he saw that this was only illusion and that de-struction had been at work upon it too. Still, it remained, incredibly, a recognizable house.

It was a rambling stone cottage with low walls and a slate roof, set close against the steep green wall of the valley. One gable-end was smashed in, and part of that end wall. Study-ing the way it was embayed in the wall, Kellon decided that a chance natural arch of ice must have preserved it from the grinding pressure that had shattered almost all other struc-tures.

The windows and doors were only gaping openings. He went inside and looked around the cold shadows of what had once been a room. There were some wrecked pieces of rot-ting furniture, and dried mud banked along one wall con-tained

unrecognizable bits of rusted junk, but there was not much else. It was chill and oppressive in there, and he went out and sat on the little terrace in the sunshine.

He looked at the house. It could have been built no later than the Twentieth Century, he thought. A good many differ-ent people must have lived in it during the hundreds of years before the evacuation of Earth.

Kellon thought that it was strange that the airphoto sur-veys that Darnow's men had made in quest of relics had not discovered the place. But then it was not so strange, the stone walls were so *grayly* inconspicuous and it was set so deeply into the sheltering bay of the valley wall.

His eye fell on eroded lettering on the cement side of the terrace, and he went and brushed the soil off that place. The words were time-eaten and faint but he could read them.

"Ross and Jennie—Their House."

Kellon smiled. Well, at least he knew now who once had lived here, who probably had built the place. He could imag-ine two young people happily scratching the words in the wet cement, exuberant with achievement. And who had Ross and Jennie been, and where were they now?

He walked around the place. To his surprise, there was a ragged flower-garden at one side. A half-dozen kinds of bril-liant little flowers, unlike the wild ones of the slopes, grew in patchy disorder here. Seeds of an old garden had been ready to germinate when the long winter of Earth carne down, and had slept in suspended animation until the ice melted and the warm blooming time came at last. He did not know what kinds of flowers these were, but there was a brave jauntiness about them that he liked.

Starting back across the green land in the soft twilight, Kellon thought that he should tell Darnow about the place. But if he did, the gabbling pack in the ship would certainly stampede toward it. He could imagine the solemn and cute and precious broadcasts that Borrodale and the Lee woman and the rest of them would stage from the old house.

"No," he thought. "The devil with them."

He didn't care anything himself about the old house, it was just that it was a refuge of quiet he had found and he didn't want to draw to it the noisy horde he was trying to escape.

Kellon was glad in the following days that he had not told. The house gave him a place to go to, to poke around and investigate, a focus for his interest in this waiting time. He spent hours there, and never told anyone at all.

Haller, the biologist, lent him a book on the flowers of Earth, and he brought it with him and used it to identify those in the ragged garden. Verbenas, pinks, morning glories, and the bold red and yellow ones called nasturtiums. Many of these, he read, did not do well on other worlds and had never been successfully transplanted. If that was so, this would be their last blooming anywhere at all.

He rooted around the interior of the house, trying to figure out how people had lived in it. It was strange, not at all like a modern metalloy house. Even the interior walls were thick beyond belief, and the windows seemed small and pokey. The biggest room was obviously where they had lived most, and its window-openings

looked out on the little garden and the green valley and brook beyond.

Kellon wondered what they had been like, the Ross and Jennie who had once sat here together and looked out these windows. What things had been important to them? What had hurt them, what had made them laugh? He himself had never married, the far-ranging captains of the Survey seldom did. But he wondered about this marriage of long ago, and what had come of it. Had they had children, did their blood still run on the far worlds? But even if it did, what was that now to those two of long ago?

There had been a poem about flowers at the end of the old book on flowers Haller had lent him, and he remembered some of it.

All are at one now, roses and lovers,
Not known of the winds and the fields and the sea,
Not a breath of the time that has been hovers
In the air now soft with a summer to be.

Well, yes, Kellon thought, they were all at one now, the Rosses and the Jennies and the things they had done and the things they had thought, all at one now in the dust of this old planet whose fiery final summer would be soon, very soon. Physically, everything that had been done, every one who had lived on Earth was still here in its atoms, excepting the tiny fraction of its matter that had sped to other worlds.

He thought of the names that were so famous still through all the galactic worlds, names of men and women and places. Shakespeare, Plato, Beethoven, Blake, the old splendor of Babylon and the bones of Angkor and the humble houses of his own ancestors, all here, all still here.

Kellon mentally shook himself. He didn't have enough to do, that was his trouble, to be brooding here on such shadowy things. He had seen all there was to this queer little old place, and there was no use in coming back to it.

But he came back. It was not,. he told himself, as though he had any sentimental antiquarian interests in this old place. He had heard enough of that kind of gush from all the glit-tering phonies in the ship. He was a Survey man and all he wanted was to get back to his job, but while he was stuck here it was better to be roaming the green land or poking about this old relic than to have to listen to the endless bab-bling and quarrelling of those others.

They were quarrelling more and more, because they were tired of it here. It had seemed to them a fine thing to posture upon a galactic stage by helping to cover the end of Earth, but time dragged by and their flush of synthetic enthusiasm wore thin. They could not leave, the expedition must broadcast the final climax of the planet's end, but that was still weeks away. Darrow and his scholars and scientists, busy coming and going to many old sites, could have stayed here forever but the others were frankly bored.

But Kellon found in the old house enough interest to keep the waiting from being too oppressive. He had read a good bit now about the way things had been here in the old days, and he sat long hours on the little terrace in the afternoon sunshine,

trying to imagine what it had been like when the man and woman named Ross and Jennie had lived here.

So strange, so circumscribed, that old life seemed now! Most people had had ground-cars in those days, he had read, and had gone back and forth in them to the cities where they worked. Did both the man and the woman go, or just the man? Did the woman stay in the house, perhaps with their children if they had any, and in the afternoons did she do things in the little flower garden where a few bright, ragged survivors still bloomed? Did they ever dream that some fu-ture day when they were long gone, their house would lie empty and silent with no visitor except a stranger from far-off stars? He remembered a line in one of the old plays the Arcturus Players had read. Come like shadows, so depart.

No, Kelton thought, Ross and Jennie were shadows now but they had not been then. To them, and to all the other people he could visualize going and coming busily about the Earth in those days, it was he, the future, the man yet to come, who was the shadow. Alone here, sitting and trying to imagine the long ago, Kelton had an eery feeling sometimes that his vivid imaginings of people and crowded cities and movement and laughter were the reality and that he himself was only a watching wraith.

Summer days came swiftly, hot and hotter. Now the white sun was larger in the heavens and pouring down such light and heat as Earth had not received for millennia. And all the green life across it seemed to respond with an exultant surge of final growth, an act of joyous affirmation that Kellon found infinitely touching. Now even the nights were warm, and the winds blew thrilling soft, and on the distant beaches the ocean leaped up in a laughter of spray and thunder, run-ning in great solar tides.

With a shock as though awakened from dreaming, Kelton suddenly realized that only a few days were left. The spiral was closing in fast now and very quickly the heat would mount beyond all tolerance.

He would, he told himself, be very glad to leave. There would be the wait in space until it was all over, and then he could go back to his own work, his own life, and stop fussing over shadows because there was nothing else to do.

Yes. He would he glad.

Then when only a few days were left, Kellon walked out again to the old house and was musing over it when a voice spoke behind him.

"Perfect," said Borrodale's voice. "A perfect relic."

Kellon turned, feeling somehow startled and dismayed. Borrodale's eyes were alight with interest as he surveyed the house, and then he turned to Kellon.

"I was walking when I saw you, Captain, and thought I'd catch up to you. Is this where you've been going so often?"

Kelton, a little guiltily, evaded. "I've been here a few times."

"But why in the world didn't you *tell* us about this?" exclaimed Borrodale. "Why, we can do a terrific final broadcast from here. A typical ancient home of Earth. Roy can put some of the Players in the old costumes, and we'll show them living here the way people did—"

Unexpectedly to himself, a violent reaction came up in Kelton. He said roughly,

"No."

Borrodale arched his eyebrows. "No? But why not?"

Why not, indeed? What difference could it possibly make to him if they swarmed all over the old house, laughing at its ancientness and its inadequacies, posing grinning for the cameras in front of it, prancing about in old-fashioned costumes and making a show of it. What could that mean to him, who cared nothing about this forgotten planet or anything on it?

And yet something in him revolted at what they would do here, and he said, "We might have to take off very suddenly, now. Having you all out here away from the ship could involve a danger-ous delay."

"You said yourself we wouldn't take off for a few days yet!" exclaimed Borrodale. And he added firmly, "I don't know why you should want to obstruct us, Captain. But I can go over your head to higher authority."

He went away, and Kellon thought unhappily, he'll mes-sage back to Survey headquarters and I'll get my ears burned off, and why the devil did I do it anyway? I must be getting real planet-happy.

He went and sat down on the terrace, and watched until the sunset deepened into dusk. The moon came up white and brilliant, but the air was not quiet tonight. A hot, dry wind had begun to blow, and the stir of all the tall grass made the slopes and plains seem vaguely alive. It was as though a queer pulse had come into the air and the ground, as the Sun called its child homeward and Earth strained to answer. The house dreamed in the silver light, and the flowers in the garden rustled.

Borrodale came back, a dark pudgy figure in the moon-light. He said triumphantly, "I got through to your headquar-ters. They've ordered your full cooperation. We'll want to make our first broadcast here tomorrow."

Kellon stood up. "No."

"You can't ignore an order—"

"We won't be here tomorrow," said Kellon. "It is my re-sponsibility to get the ship off Earth in ample time for safety. We take off in the morning."

Borrodale was silent for a moment, and when he spoke his voice had a puzzled quality.

"You're advancing things just to block our broadcast, of course. I just can't understand your attitude."

Well, Kellon thought, he couldn't quite understand it himself, so how could he explain it? He remained silent, and Bor-rodale looked at him and then at the old house.

"Yet maybe I do understand," Borrodale said thoughtfully, after a moment. "You've come here often, by yourself. A man can get too friendly with ghosts—"

Kellon said roughly, "Don't talk nonsense. We'd better get back to the ship, there's plenty to do before take off."

Borrodale did not speak as they went back out of the moonlit valley. He looked back once, but Kellon did not look back.

They took the ship off twelve hours later, in a morning made dull and ominous by racing clouds. Kellon felt a sharp relief when they cleared atmosphere and were out in the depthless, starry blackness. He knew where he was, in space. It was the place where a spaceman belonged. He'd get a stiff reprimand for this later, but he was not

sorry.

They put the ship into a calculated orbit, and waited. Days, many of them, must pass before the end came to Earth. It seemed quite near the white sun now, and its Moon had slid away from it on a new distorted orbit, but even so it would be a while before they could broadcast to a watching galaxy the end of its ancestral world.

Kelton stayed much of that time in his cabin. The gush that was going out over the broadcasts now, as the grand finale approached, made him sick. He wished the whole thing was over. It was, he told himself, getting to be a bore

An hour and twenty minutes to E-time, and he supposed he must go up to the bridge and watch it. The mobile camera had been set up there and Borrodale and as many others of them as could crowd in were there. Borrodale had been given the last hour's broadcast, and it seemed that the others re-sented this.

"Why must you have the whole last hour?" Lorri Lee was saying bitterly to Borrodale. "It's not fair."

Quayle nodded angrily. "There'll be the biggest audience in history, and we should all have a chance to speak."

Borrodale answered them, and the voices rose and bick-ered, and Kellon saw the broadcast technicians looking wor-ried. Beyond them through the filter-window he could see the dark dot of the planet closing on the white star. The Sun called, and it seemed that with quickened eagerness Earth moved on the last steps of its long road. And the clamoring, bickering voices in his ears suddenly brought rage to Kellon.

"Listen,"" he said to the broadcast men. "Shut off all sound transmission. You can keep the picture on, but no sound."

That shocked them all into silence. The Lee woman finally protested, "Captain Kelton, you can't!"

"I'm in full command when in space, and I can, and do," he said.

"But the broadcast, the commentary—"

Kelton said wearily, "Oh, for Christ's sake all of you shut up, and let the planet die in peace."

He turned his back on them. He did not hear their resent-ful voices, did not even hear when they fell silent and watched through the dark filter-windows as he was watching, as the camera and the galaxy was watching.

And what was there to see but a dark dot almost engulfed in the shining veils of the sun? He thought that already the stones of the old house must be beginning to vaporize. And now the veils of light and fire almost concealed the little pla-net, as the star gathered in its own.

All the atoms of old Earth, Kelton thought, in this moment bursting free to mingle with the solar being, all that had been Ross and Jennie, all that had been Shakespeare and Schubert, gay flowers and running streams, oceans and rocks and the wind of the air, received into the brightness that had given them life.

They watched in silence, but there was nothing more to see, nothing at all. Silently the camera was turned off.

Kellon gave an order, and presently the ship was pulling out of orbit, starting the long voyage back. By that time the others had gone, all but Borrodale. He said to Borrodale, without turning.

"Now go ahead and send your complaint to 'headquarters." Borrodale shook his head. "Silence can be the best requiem of all. There'll be no complaint. I'm glad now, Captain."

"Glad?"

"Yes," said Borrodale. "I'm glad that Earth had one true mourner, at the last."

THE WITNESS

Eric Frank Russell

No court in history had drawn so much world attention. Six television cameras swivelled slowly as they followed red and black-robed legal lights parading solemnly to their seats. Ten microphones sent the creaking of shoes and rustling of papers over national networks in both hemispheres. Two hundred reporters and special correspondents filled a gallery reserved for them alone. Forty representatives of cultural or-ganizations stared across the court at twice their number of governmental and diplomatic officials sitting blank-faced and impassive.

Tradition had gone by the board; procedure resembled nothing familiar to the average lawyer, for this was a special occasion devised to suit a special case. Technique had been adapted to cope with a new and extraordinary culprit, while the dignity of justice was upheld by means of stagy trim-mings.

There were five judges and no jury, but a billion citizens were in their homes watching and listening, determined to ensure fair play. Ideas of what constituted fair play were as var-ied as the unseen audience, and most of them unreasoning, purely emotional. A minority of spectators hoped for life, many lusted for death, while the waverers compromised in favor of arbitrary expulsion, each according to how he had been influenced by the vast flood of colorful and bigoted propaganda preceding this event.

The judges took their places with the casual unconcern of those too old and deeply sunk in wisdom to notice the lime-light. A hush fell, broken only by the ticking of the large clock over their rostrum. It was the hour of ten in the morn-ing of May 17, 1977. The microphones sent the ticking around the world. The cameras showed the judges, the clock, and finally settled on the center of all this attention: the crea-ture in the defendant's box.

Six months ago this latter object had been the sensation of the century, the focal point of a few wild hopes and many wilder fears. Since then it had appeared so often on video screens, magazine and newspaper pages, that the public sense of amazement had departed, while the hopes and fears re-mained. It had slowly degenerated to a cartoon character contemptuously dubbed "Spike," depicted as halfway between a hopelessly malformed imbecile and the crafty emissary of a craftier other-world enemy. Familiarity had bred contempt, but not enough of it to kill the fears.

It's name was Maeth and it came from some planet in the region of Procyon. Three feet high, bright green, with feet that were mere pads, and stubby limbs fitted with suckers and cilia, it was covered in spiky protrusions and looked somewhat like an educated cactus. Except for its eyes, great golden eyes that looked upon men in naive expectation of mercy, because it had never done anyone any harm. A toad, a

wistful toad, with jewels in its head.

Pompously, a black gowned official announced, "This spe-cial court, held by international agreement, and convened within the area of jurisdiction of the Federal Government of the United States of America, is now in session! Silence!"

The middle judge glanced at his fellows, adjusted his spec-tacles, peered gravely at the toad, or cactus, or whatever it might be. "Maeth of Procyon, we are given to understand that you can neither hear nor speak, but can comprehend us telepathically and respond visually."

Cameras focussed as Maeth turned to the blackboard immediately behind him and chalked one word. "Yes."

"You are accused," the judge went on, "generally of illegal entry into this world known as Earth and specifically into the United States of America. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"How else can one enter?" inquired Maeth, in bold white letters.

The judge frowned. "Kindly answer my question."

"Not guilty."

"You have been provided with defending counsel—have you any objection to him?"

"Blessed be the peacemaker."

Few relished that crack. It smacked of the Devil quoting Scripture.

Making a sign, the judge leaned back, polished his glasses.

Adjusting the robes on his shoulders, the prosecuting attorney came to his feet. He was tall, hatchet-faced, sharp-eyed. "First witness!"

A thin, reedy man came out of the well of the court, took his chair, sat uncomfortably, with fidgeting hands.

"Name?"

"Samuel Nall."

"You farm outside Dansville?"

"Yes, sir. I—"

"Do not call me `sir.' Just reply to my questions. It was upon your farm that this creature made its landing?"

"Your Honors, I object!" Mr. Defender stood up, a fat, florid man, but deceptively nimble-witted. "My client is a person, not a creature. It should therefore be referred to as the defendant."

"Objection overruled," snapped the middle judge. "Pro-ceed, Mr. Prosecutor."

"It was upon your farm that this *creature* landed?"

"Yes," said Samuel Nall, staring pridefully at the cameras. "It come down all of a sudden and—"

"Confine yourself to the question. The arrival was accom-panied by much destruction?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Two barns and a dollop of crops. I'm down three thousand dollars."

"Did this *creature* show any remorse?"

"None." Nall scowled across the court. "Acted like it couldn't care less."

Mr. Prosecutor seated himself, throwing a mock smile at the fat man. "Your

witness."

Standing up, the latter eyed Nall benevolently and in-quired, "Were these barns of yours octagonal towers with walls having movable louvres and with barometrically controlled roofs?"

Samuel Nall waggled his eyebrows and uttered a faint, "Huh?"

"Never mind. Dismiss that query and answer me this one: were your crops composed of foozles and bicolored mer-kins?"

In desperation, Nall said, "It was ripe barley."

"Dear me! Barley—how strange! Don't you know what foozles and merkins are? Wouldn't you recognize them if you saw them?"

"I reckon not," admitted Farmer Nall, with much reluc-tance.

"Permit me to observe that you seem singularly lacking in perceptive faculties," remarked Mr. Defender, tartly. "indeed, I am really sorry for you. Can you detect sorrow in my face?"

"I dunno," said Nall, feeling that his throne before the cameras was becoming somehow like a bed of nails.

"In other words, you cannot recognize remorse when you see it?"

"Objection!" roared Mr. Prosecutor, coming up crimson. "The witness cannot reasonably be expected—." He stopped as his opponent sat down. Recovering swiftly, he growled, "Next witness!"

Number two was big, beefy, clad in blue, and had all the assurance of one long familiar with courts and the tedious processes of the law.

"Name?"

"Joseph Higginson."

"You are an officer of the Dansville police?"

"Correct."

"You were summoned by the first witness?"

"I was."

Mr. Prosecutor wore the smile of one in complete com-mand of circumstances as he went on, "Discovering what had occurred, you tried to apprehend the cause of it, did you not?"

"I sure did." Officer Higginson turned his head, threw a scowl at the golden eyes pleading in the box.

"And what happened?"

"It paralyzed me with a look."

The judge on the left interjected, "You appear to have recovered. How extensive was this paralysis, and how long did it last?"

"It was complete, Your Honor, but it wore off after a cou-ple of hours."

"By which time," said Mr. Prosecutor, taking over again, "this outlandish object had made good its escape?" Lugubriously, "Yes."

"It therefore obstructed a police officer in the execution of his duty, assaulted a police *officer,* and resisted arrest?" "It did," agreed Higginson, with emphasis.

"Your witness." Mr. Prosecutor seated himself, well satis-fied.

Mr. Defender arose, hooked thumbs in vest-holes, and in-quired with disarming amiability, "You can recognize another police official when you see him?"

"Naturally."

"Very well. There is one at present seated in the public section. Kindly point him out for the benefit of this court."

Higginson looked carefully over the small audience which represented in person the vaster audience beyond. Cameras swung in imitation of his search. Judges, reporters, officials, all looked the same way.

"He must be in plain clothes," declared Higginson, giving up.

The middle judge interposed mildly, "This court can hardly accept witness's inability to recognize a plain clothes officer as evidence."

"No, Your Honor," agreed Mr. Defender. His plump fea-tures registered frustration and disappointment which glad-dened the heart of his watching opponent. Then, satisfied that the other had reached the heights, he plunged him to the depths by brightening and adding, "But the said official is in full uniform."

Mr. Prosecutor changed faces like swapping masks. Hig-ginson got a crick in the neck as he took in the audience again.

"Olive-drab with red trimmings," Mr. Defender went on. "He is a Provost Marshal of the Corps of Military Police."

"You didn't tell me that," Higginson pointed out. He was openly aggrieved.

"Did you tell the defendant that you were a police officer?" The witness reddened, opened his mouth, closed it, gazed appealingly at the prosecuting attorney.

"Answer the question!" insisted a judge.

"No, I did not tell it."

"Why not?"

Mopping his forehead, Higginson said' in hoarse tones, "Didn't think it was necessary. It was obvious, wasn't it?"

"It is for me to put the questions; for you to provide the answers. Do you agree that the Provost Marshal is obvious?"

"Objection!" Mr. Prosecutor waved for attention. "Opin-ions are not evidence."

"Sustained!" responded the middle judge. He eyed defend-ing attorney over his glasses. "This court takes cognizance of the fact that there was no need for witness to offer vocally any information available to defendant telepathically. Pro-ceed with your examination."

Mr. Defender returned his attention to Higginson and asked "Precisely what were you doing at the moment you were paralysed?"

"Aiming my gun."

"And about to fire?"

"Yes."

"At the defendant?"

"Yes."

"Is it your habit to fire first and ask questions afterward?"

"The witness's habits are not relevant," put in the middle judge. He looked at Higginson. "You may ignore that ques-tion."

Officer Higginson grinned his satisfaction and duly ignored it.

"From what range were you about to fire?" pursued defending attorney.

"Fifty or sixty yards."

"So far? You are an excellent marksman?"

Higginson nodded, without pride, and warily. The plump man, he had decided,

was a distinct pain in the neck. "About what time do you hope to get home for supper?" Caught on one foot by this sudden shift of attack, the witness gaped and said, "Maybe midnight."

"Your wife will be happy to know that. Were it not for the radio and video, you could not have told her vocally, could you?"

"I can't bawl from here to Dansville," assured Higginson, slightly sarcastic.

"Of course not. Such a distance is completely beyond range of the unaided human voice." Mr. Defender rubbed his chin, mused awhile, suddenly demanded, "Can you bawl *tele-pathically* for fifty to sixty yards?"

No reply.

"Or is your mental limit in keeping with what the defendant assures me to be the normal limit of twenty-five to thirty yards?"

Higginson screwed up his eyes and said nothing.

"Don't you know?"

"No."

"A pity!" commented Mr. Defender, shaking his head sadly and taking a seat.

The third witness was a swarthy, olive-skinned character who stared sullenly at his boots while the prosecuting attor-ney got to work.

"Name?"

"Dominic Lolordo." He gave it in an undertone, as if reluctant to have it coupled with his image on the video. "You operate a sea-food restaurant?"

"Yes."

"Do you recognize the creature in that box?"

His eyes slid sidewise. "Yes."

"In what circumstances did you last see it?"

"In my joint, after hours."

"It had forced an entrance, had it not, shortly before dawn, and it awakened you while plundering the place?" "That's correct."

"You did not try to catch it?"

Lolordo made a face. "Catch that? *Look* at it!"

`"Appearance alone would not deter you if you were being robbed," Mr. Prosecutor suggested meaningly. "Surely there was something else?"

"It had walked in through the window," said Lolordo, his voice rising considerably. "Right through the window, leaving a hole its own shape. It went out the same way, making another hole. No broken glass around, no splinters, nothing. What can you do with a green nightmare that walks through glass as if it wasn't there?"

"Seeing this demonstration of supernormal powers, you ran for assistance?"

"You bet!"

"But it came too late? This unscrupulous plunderer had gone?"

"Yes."

The questioner handed over with a gesture, and the defending attorney began.

"You assert that you were plundered? Of what?"

"Stuff."

"That is not an answer."

"Ain't it?" Lolordo yawned with exaggerated disinterest. The middle judge bent

forward, frowning heavily. "Does the witness desire to be committed for contempt?"

"Lobsters and oysters," said Lolordo, hurriedly and with bad grace.

"In other words, a square meal?" inquired Mr. Defender. "If that's what you want to call it."

"Was it being consumed as if the defendant were raven-ously hungry?"

"I didn't stick around to see. I took one look and went on my way—fast."

"So that if the defendant picked up enough of your thoughts to realise that a felonious act had been committed, there was no opportunity to apologise or make restitution?"

No reply.

"And, in any case, your departing thoughts were violently hostile?"

"I wasn't hot-footing for a bouquet," assured Lolordo.

Mr. Defender said to the judges, "This witness is imperti-nent. I have no further use for him."

The judges conferred, and the middle one decided coldly, "The witness will be detained within the precincts of this court until the case has been decided."

Lolordo stamped away from his seat, glowering right and left.

"Fourth witness!"

The chair was taken by a middle-aged, dapper man who resembled the movie notion of a bank president or an emi-nent surgeon. He could have been cast equally well for either part.

"Name."

"Winthrop Allain."

"You are a resident professor of zoology, are you not?" in-quired the prosecuting attorney.

"That is correct."

"You recognize the creature in the box?"

"I ought to. I have been in close communication with it for many weeks."

Mr. Prosecutor made an impatient gesture. "In what cir-cumstances did you first encounter it?"

An answer to that one seemed unnecessary. The whole world knew the circumstances, had been told them time and time again with many fanciful frills.

Nevertheless, Allain responded, "It appeared in the zoo some two hours after closing time. How it got there I don't know."

"It was snooping around, seeing all there was to see, mak-ing mental notes of everything?"

Hesitantly, "Well—"

"Was it or was it not looking over the place?"

"It certainly saw a good bit of the zoo before the keepers discovered it, but—"

"Please do not embellish your answers, Professor Allain," said Mr. Prosecutor, firmly. "Let us continue: owing to the great furore created by this strange object's arrival and subsequent exploits, your keepers had no difficulty in recognising it?"

"None at all. They reported to me at once."

"What did you do then?"

"I attended to the matter myself. I found it a warm and comfortable apartment in the unused section of the Reptile House."

The entire court along with the cameras peered respectfully at the expert who could treat such an occasion with such nonchalance.

"How did you achieve this without suffering paralysis, dis-integration or some other unnatural fate?" Mr. Prosecutor's voice had a touch of acid. "Did you graciously extend a cor-dial invitation?"

The witness, dryly, "Precisely!"

"There is a time and place for humor, Professor," reproved Mr. Prosecutor, with some severity. "However, the court un-derstands that you classified this nightmarish entity as a reptile and managed to put it in its proper place."

"Nonsense! The Reptile House was immediately available, convenient and acceptable. The defendant is unclassifiable."

Dismissing that with a contemptuous gesture, the prosecut-ing attorney went on, "You are not prepared to tell this court by what means you overcame this creature's menacing pow-ers and succeeded in trapping it?"

"I did not trap it. I knew it was sentient and treated it as such."

"If we can rely upon the evidence of other witnesses," said Mr. Prosecutor, tartly, "you were fortunate to have any choice about the matter. Why did this caricature permit you to make the contact it denied to others?"

"Because it recognized my mind as of a type accustomed to dealing with non-human forms. With considerable logic it assumed that contact with me would be far easier than with any others."

"With considerable logic," echoed prosecuting attorney, turning toward the judges. "I ask Your Honors to make espe-cial note of that remark, bearing in mind that witness has a distinguished status." He returned his attention to Allain. "By that, you mean it is intelligent?"

"Indubitably!"

"You have had many weeks in which to study the mind of this unwanted invader. Just how intelligent would you say it is?"

"As much so as we are, though in a different way."

"Do you consider this sample to be fairly representative of its race?"

"I have no reason to suppose otherwise."

"Which race, therefore, equals us in brain-power?"

"Very probably." Professor Allain rubbed his chin and mused a moment. "Yes, insofar as one can relate things which are not the same, I'd say they are our intellectual equals."

"Perhaps our superiors, not only in brains, but also in numbers?"

"I don't know. I doubt it."

"The possibility cannot be ruled out?" persisted Mr. Prose-cutor.

"Such data as is available is far from sufficient and therefore I—"

"Do not evade my question. There is a possibility, no matter how remote, that the life-form represented by this mon-ster now standing before us is the direst menace humanity has ever been called upon to face?"

"Anything can be construed as a menace if you insist, but—"

"A menace, yes or no?"

The middle judge interjected profoundly, "Witness cannot be required to provide a positive answer to a hypothetical question."

Not fazed in the least, Mr. Prosecutor bowed. "Very well, Your Honor, I will put it differently." He resumed with Allain. "In your expert estimation, is the intelligence quotient of this life-form high enough to enable it to conquer, subdue and enslave humanity if it so desired?"

"I do not know."

"That is your only answer?"

"I'm afraid so."

"It is quite satisfactory," commented Mr. Prosecutor, throwing a significant look through the cameras at the un-seen but billion-strong jury. "inasmuch as it admits the possi-bility of peril, extreme peril."

"I did not say that," protested Allain.

"Neither have you said the contrary," retorted the other. He seated himself, confident and pleased. "Your witness."

Mr. Defender began heavily, "Professor Allain, have your various hand-outs concerning the defendant been reported factually?"

"Without exception, they have been grossly distorted," said

Allain, grimly. He cast a cold look at the big group of report-ers who grinned back arrogantly.

"Defendant has repeatedly been described as a spy who must "receive drastic treatment lest worse befall. Does your data support that theory?"

"No."

"What status do you assign to the defendant?"

"A refugee," said Allain.

"It is impossible for the defendant's motives to be hostile?"

"Nothing is impossible," said Professor Allain, honest though the heavens fall. "The smartest of us can be fooled. But I don't think I am fooled. That is my opinion, for what it is worth."

Mr. Defender sighed, "As I have been reminded, opinions are not evidence." He sat down murmuring, "Most unfortu-nate! Most unfortunate!"

"Fifth witness!"

"Tenth witness!"

"Sixteenth witness!"

That one, number sixteen, ended the prosecution's roster. Four or five times as many witnesses could have been pro-duced, but these were the pick of the bunch. They had something cogent to offer, something calculated to help the public to decide once and for all—at least with its prejudices if not with its brains—whether gallivanting life-forms were to be tolerated, or given the bum's rush, or worse. The question at issue was the ephemeral one of public safety, and it was for the public to say whether or not they were going to take any risks. With this in mind, the evidence of the sixteen made a formidable indictment against the queer, golden-eyed thing on trial for its liberty or even its life.

Conscious that he was leading on points, Mr. Prosecutor came erect, gazed authoritatively at the defendant.

"Just why did you come to this world?"

"To escape my own."

"Do you expect us to believe that?"

"I expect nothing," chalked Maeth laboriously. "I merely hope."

"You hope for what?"

"For kindness."

It disconcerted the questioner. Left with no room for a telling retort, he was silent a moment while he sought another angle.

"Then your own world did not please you? What was wrong with it?"

"Everything," responded Maeth.

"Meaning you were a misfit?"

"Yes."

"Nevertheless you view *this* world as a suitable dumping-ground for misfits?"

No reply.

"I suggest that your plea is nonsense, your whole story a sheer fabrication. I suggest that your motives in coming here are deeper and darker than you dare admit. I will go further and put it to you that you do not come even from the region of Procyon, but from somewhere a good deal nearer, such as Mars."

Still no reply.

"Are you aware that astronautical engineers have subjected your damaged ship to long and careful examination and made a report on it?"

Maeth stood there, pathetically patient, eyes looking into the distance as if in search of peace, and said nothing.

"Are you aware that they have reported that while your vessel is far in advance of anything yet developed by us, and while it is undoubtedly capable of travelling far outside this solar system, it is not able to reach Alpha Centauri, much less Procyon?"

"That is true," wrote Maeth on the board.

"Yet you maintain that you came from the region of Pro-cyon?"

"Yes."

The prosecuting attorney spread despairing hands. "You have heard defendant, Your Honors. His ship cannot reach here from Procyon. All the same, it came from Procyon. This creature cannot manage to be consistent, either because it is dimwitted or, more probably, an ineffectual liar. I therefore see little purpose in continuing my—"

"I rode on a rock," scrawled Maeth.

"There!" Mr. Prosecutor pointed sardonically at the black-board. "Defendant rode on a rock. That is the escape from a self-created impasse—a rock, no less!" He frowned at the box. "You must have ridden a long, long way."

"I did."

"So you sat your ship on this rock and saved fuel by let-ting it carry you many millions of miles? Have you any idea of the mathematical odds against finding a wandering aster-oid in any section of space?"

"They are very large," admitted Maeth.

"Yet you discovered the very asteroid to bring you all the way here? Most astonishing spacemanship, is it not?"

"It did not bring me all the way. It brought me most of the way."

"All right," agreed Mr. Prosecutor, with airy contempt. "Ninety-nine millions

instead of one hundred millions or whatever the distance is supposed to be. It is still amazing."

"Moreover," continued Maeth, writing steadily, "I did not select one to bring me here, as you imply. I thankfully used the only visible rock to take me anywhere. I had no specific destination. I fled into the void at random, putting my trust in the fates."

"So some other rock might have borne you some place else, might it not?"

"Or no place at all," Maeth put morbidly. "The fates were kind."

"Don't be too sure of that." Mr. Prosecutor hooked thumbs in vest pockets and studied the other with sinister expression. "If your real purposes, your real motives are in fact those which have been attributed to you by our ever-alert news-services, it is to be expected that you would have a cover-up story replete with plausibility. You have given this court such a story but have offered no concrete evidence in proof. We are left with nothing but your unsupported word —and the word of an ill-formed alien, an unknown quantity, at that!" He paused, ended, "Can you not submit to this court something more material than a series of bald asserta-tions?"

"I have no way of combating disbelief," wrote Maeth, slowly and tiredly, "except with trust."

Mr. Prosecutor countered that one by striking hard and ruthlessly. "How many others of your kind are now upon this world, following their dastardly designs while you distract at-tention by posing in the full glare of publicity?"

The court, the hidden audience, had not thought of that. Half a dozen reporters quietly kicked themselves for not hav-ing conceived its first and played it up for all it was worth. It had been assumed from the beginning that the alien in their hands was the only one on the planet. Yet there might well be more, a dozen, a hundred, hiding in the less frequented places, skulking in the shadows, biding their time. People stared at each other and fidgeted uneasily.

"I came alone," Maeth put on the board.

"I accept that statement. It may be the only truthful one you have made. Experts report that your vessel is a single-seater scout, so obviously you came in it alone. But how many other vessels came about the same time?"

"None."

"It would be a comfort to think so," remarked Mr. Prose-cutor, thereby discomforting his listeners. "Doubtless, your world has many other ships, much larger and more powerful than yours?"

"Many," admitted Maeth. "But they can go no farther or faster. They can only have greater loads."

"How did you come by your own ship?"

"I stole it."

"Indeed?" The prosecuting attorney raised his eyebrows. gave a little laugh. "A self-confessed thief!" He assumed an air of broadminded understanding. "It is expected, of course, that one would suffer less by confessing to theft rather than espionage." He let that sink in before attempting another hard blow. "Would you care to tell us how many other bold and adventurous males are ready or making ready to follow your path to conquest?"

Defending attorney stood up and said, "I advise my client not to answer."

His opponent waved him down, turned to the judges. "Your Honors, I am ready

to state my case."

They consulted the clock, talked in undertones between themselves, then said, "Proceed."

The speech for the prosecution was able, devastating and long. It reviewed the evidence, drew dark conclusions, im-plied many things from which the hidden audience could draw other and still darker conclusions. This is not to say that Mr. Prosecutor had any real hatred of or fear of the stranger at the gate; it was merely that he was doing his spe-cialised job with ability that was considerable.

"This case, with its own new and peculiar routine," be reminded, "will go down in legal annals. As from today it will constitute a precedent by which we shall determine our atti-tude toward future visitors from space. And the final arbiters of that attitude will be you, the members of the general public, who will reap the reward of outside alliances or"—he paused, hardened his voice—"suffer the sorrows of other-world enmities. Allow me to emphasise that the rewards can be small, pitifully small—while the sorrows can be immense!"

Clearing his throat, he had a sip of water, started to get into his stride. "In trying to decide what should be done for the best we have no basis for forming conclusions other than that provided by the fantastic example who will be the subject of your verdict."

Turning, he stared at Maeth while he went on. "This crea-ture has not been put on oath because we know of no oath binding upon it. Its ethics—if any—are its own, having little in common with ours. All we do know is that its farfetched and highly imaginative story places such a strain upon human credulity that any one of us might be forgiven for deeming it a shameless liar."

Maeth's large eyes closed in pain, but Mr. Prosecutor went determinedly on. "While the question of its truthfulness or lack of same may remain a matter for speculation, we do have some evidences based upon fact. We know, for instance, that it has no respect for property or the law, which forms of respect are the very foundation-stones of the civili-zation we have builded through the centuries and intend to preserve against all corners."

He overdid it there. Maeth was too small, too wide-eyed and alone to fit the part of a ruthless destroyer of civiliza-tions. Nevertheless, the picture would serve to sway opinions. Some thousands, probably millions, would argue that when in doubt it is best to play safe.

"A thief. More than that: a self-admitted thief who steals not only from us but also from his own," declared the prose-cuting attorney, quite unconscious of switching his pronoun from neuter to male. "A destroyer, and an intelligent one, possibly the forerunner of a host of destroyers. I say that ad-visedly, for where one can go an army can follow." Dismiss-ing the question of whence said army was going to get its flock of trans-cosmic asteroids, he added, "A dozen armies!"

His voice rising and falling, hardening and softening, he played expertly upon the emotions of his listeners as a master would play on a giant organ, appealing to world patriotism, pandering to parochialism, justifying prejudices, enlarging fears—fear of self, fear of others, fear of the strange in shape, fear of tomorrow, fear of the unknown. Solemnity, ridicule, sonorousness, sarcasm, all were weapons in his vocal

armory.

"He," Mr. Prosecutor said, pointing at Maeth and still using the male pronoun, "he pleads for admission as a citi-zen of this world. Do we take him with all his faults and fol-lies, with all his supernormal powers and eccentric aptitudes, with all his hidden motives that may become clear only when it is too late? Or, if indeed he be as pure and innocent as he would have us believe, would it not be better to inflict upon him a grave injustice rather than court infinitely greater injus-tices to a great number."

Challengingly he stared around. "If we take him, as a refu-gee, who will have him? Who will accept the society of a creature with which the average human has no joint understanding?" He gave a short, sharp laugh. "Oh, yes, there have been requests for the pleasure of his company. Incredible as it may seem, there are people who want him."

Holding up a letter for all to see, he continued, "This persons offers him a home. Why? Well, the writer claims that he himself was a spiky thing in Procyon during his eighth incar-nation." He tossed the letter on his desk. "The crackpots are always with us. Fortunately, the course of human history will be decided by calmly reasoning citizens and not by incurable nuts."

For a further half hour he carried on, a constant flow of words which concluded with, "In human affairs there is a swift end for the human spy, quick riddance for the sus-pected spy. I conceive of no reason why any alien form deserves treatment more merciful than that which we accord to fellow humans. Here, we have before as one who at very least is an undesirable character, at most the first espionage agent of a formidable enemy. It is the prosecution's case that you have to consider *only* whether it is in the best interest of public safety that he be rewarded with death or with sum-mary expulsion into the space from which he came. The weight of evidence rules out all other alternatives. You will not have failed to note that the witnesses who have appeared are overwhelmingly for the prosecution. Is it not remarkable that there is not one witness for the defense?" He waited to give it time to sink home, then drove it further by repeating, "Not one!"

Another sip of water, after which he seated himself, carefully smoothed the legs of his pants.

One thing seemed fairly clear: Maeth was a stinker.

Mr. Defender created a mild stir right at the start by rising and saying, "Your Honors, the defense does not intend to state its case."

The judges peered at him as if he were a sight ten times more strange than his own client. They pawed papers, talked together in whispers.

In due time, the middle one inquired, "By that, do you mean that you surrender to verdict by public poll?"

"Eventually, of course, Your Honor, but not just yet. I wish to produce evidence for my side and will be content to let my case rest on that."

"Proceed," ordered the judge, frowning doubtfully.

Addressing Maeth, the defending attorney said, "On your home world all are like you, namely, telepathic and non-vocal?"

"Yes, everyone."

"They share a common neural band, or, to put it more simply, they think with a communal mind?"

"Yes."

"That is the essential feature in which your home world differs from this one of ours: that its people share a racial mind, thinking common thoughts?"

"Yes," chalked Maeth.

"Tell this court about your parents."

Maeth's eyes closed a moment, as if the mind behind them had gone far, far away.

"My parents were freaks of nature. They drifted from the common band until they had almost lost contact with the race-mind."

"That was something the race-mind could not tolerate?" asked Mr. Defender gently.

"No."

"So they were killed—for *having minds of their own?"*

A long pause and a slow, "Yes." The scrawl on the board was thin, shaky, barely decipherable.

"As you would have been had you not fled in sheer desper-ation?"

"Yes."

Mr. Defender eyed the judges. "I would like to put further questions to the fourth witness."

They signed agreement, and Professor Allain found his way back to the chair.

"Professor, as an expert who has made a long, personal study of my client, will you tell this court whether defendant is old or young."

"Young," said Allain promptly.

"Very young?"

"Fairly young," Allain responded. "Not quite an adult." "Thank you." Mr. Defender let his mild, guileless gaze roam over the court. There was nothing in his plump features to warn them of the coming wallop. In quieter tones, he asked, "Male or female?"

"Female," said Allain.

A reporter dropped a book. That was the only sound for most of a minute. Then came a deep indrawn hiss of breath, a rapid ticking as cameras traversed to focus on Maeth, a run-ning murmur of surprise from one end of the court to the other.

Back of the gallery, the most pungent cartoonist of the day tore up his latest effort, a sketch of defendant strapped to a rocket hell-bent for the Moon. It was captioned, "Spike's Hike." What could one call *it—him—her,* now? Spikina? He raked his hair, sought a new tack, knowing that there was none. You just can't crucify a small and lonely female.

Mr. Prosecutor sat with firmed lips and the fatalistic air of one who has had eighty percent of the ground snatched from under his feet. He knew his public. He could estimate their reaction to within ten thousand votes, plus or minus.

All stared at the golden eyes. They were still large, but somehow had become soft and luminous in a way not noticed before. You could see that now. Having been told, you could really *see* that they were feminine. And in some peculiar, inexplicable manner the outlines around them had become sub-dued, less outlandish, even vaguely and remotely human!

With effective technique, the defending attorney gave them plenty of time to stew their thoughts before carefully he struck again.

"Your Honors, there is one witness for my side."

Mr. Prosecutor rocked back, stared searchingly around the court. The judges polished their glasses, looked around also. One of them motioned to a court official who promptly bawled in stentorian tones.

"Defense witness!"

It shuttled around the great room in echoing murmurs. "Defense witness! There is a witness for the defense!"

A bald-headed little man came self-consciously from the public section, bearing a large envelope. Reaching the chair, he did not take it himself, but instead placed upon it a photograph blown up to four feet by three.

Court and cameras gave the picture no more than the brief-est glance, for it was instantly recognisable. A lady holding a lamp.

Rising with a disapproving frown, the prosecuting attorney complained, "Your Honors, if my learned opponent is permitted to treat the Statue of Liberty as a witness he will thereby bring into ridicule the proceedings of this—."

A judge waved him down with the acid comment, "The bench is fully capable of asserting the dignity of this court." He shifted his attention to Mr. Defender, eyeing him over the tops of his glasses. "A witness may be defined as one able to assist the jury in arriving at a just conclusion."

"I am aware of that, Your Honor," assured Mr. Defender, not in the least disturbed.

"Very well." The judge leaned back, slightly baffled. "Let the court hear witness's statement."

Mr. Defender signed to the little man who immediately produced another large photograph and placed it over the first.

This was of the enormous plinth, with Liberty's bronze skirt-drapes barely visible at its top. There were words on the plinth, written bold and large. Some in the court gave the picture only another swift look, since they knew the words by heart, but others read them right through, once, twice, even three times.

Many had never seen the words before, including some who had passed near by them twice daily, for years. Cameras picked up the words, transmitted them pictorially to millions to whom they were new. An announcer recited them over the radio.

Send me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me—
I lift my Lamp beside the Golden Door

In the deep, heart-searching silence that followed nobody noticed that Mr. Defender had bowed deeply to the judges and resumed his seat. The defense rested, having nothing more to add.

Midnight. A large stone cell with a metal grille, a bed, a table, two chairs and a radio in one corner. Maeth and the plump man sat there conversing, examining

correspondence, watching the clock.

"The opposition picked a sloppy one with that crackpot's letter," remarked Mr. Defender. He could not refrain from expressing himself vocally though he knew full well that the other was hearing only the thoughts within his mind. He tapped a heavy forefinger on the bunch of missives at which they had been looking. "I could easily have countered him with this bunch written from a week ago to way back. But what was the use? They prove nothing except that all people don't think alike."

He sighed, stretched his arms wide and yawned, had his twentieth or thirtieth look at the clock, picked up another letter. "Listen to this one." He read it aloud.

"My son, aged thirteen, keeps pestering us to offer your client a home for at least a little while. I really don't know whether we are being wise in giving way to him, but we shall certainly suffer if we don't. We have a spare room here, and if your client is clean about the house and don't mind a bit of steam around on wash-days—"

His voice petered out as he had to yawn again. "They say it will be six in the morning before this public poll is com-plete. Bet you it's at least eight o'clock and maybe ten. They're always late with these things." He jerked around in vain effort to make himself more comfortable in his hard chair. "However, I'm staying with you until we've seen this through, one way or the other. And don't kid yourself I'm the only friend you've got." He pointed to the letters. "You've plenty there, and none of them certifiable."

Maeth ceased perusal of a note in uneven spidery writing, reached for pencil and paper and scribbled, "Allain did not teach me enough words. What is a 'veteran'?" Having had it explained, she said, "I like this writer best. He has been hurt. If I am freed I will accept his invitation."

"Let me see." Taking the note, Mr. Defender read it, mur-muring, "Urn . . . um . . ." as he went along. He handed it back. "The choice is yours. You'll have something in com-mon, anyway, since you'll both be coping with a cock-eyed world." Throwing a glance at the wall, he added, "That clock has gone into a crawl. It's going to take us a week to get to morning."

Somebody opened the grille with a jangle of keys, and Mr. Prosecutor came in. Grinning at his rival, he said, "Al, you sure make it tough for yourself in clink—you don't even use the comforts provided."

"Meaning what?"

"The radio."

Mr. Defender gave a disdainful sniff. "Darn the radio. Noise, noise, noise. We've been busy reading—in peace and quiet." Sudden suspicion flooded his ample features. "What have we missed on the radio, if anything?"

"The midnight news." Mr. Prosecutor leaned on the edge of the table, still grinning. "They have thrown up the poll."

"They can't do that!" The defending attorney stood up, flushed with anger. "It was by international agreement that this case was—"

"They can do it in certain circumstances," interrupted the other. "Which are that a torrent of votes overwhelmingly in favor of your client has already made further counting a waste of time." He turned to Maeth, finished, "Just between you and me, Funny-face, I was never more happy to lose a fight."

The man in the back room was nearing middle age, prema-turely gray, and had long slender fingers that were sensitive tools. He was listening to the radio when the doorbell rang. There was no video in the room, only the radio softly playing a Polynesian melody. The bell jarred through the music, causing him to switch off and come upright. Very deliberately he moved around the room, through the door and into the passage.

Strange for anyone to call in the early evening. Not often that people came then. The mailman occasionally turned up in the morning and one or two tradesmen toward midday. Rarely did somebody appear later, all too rarely. He was not expecting a visitor, either.

He trod gently along the passage toward the front door, his feet silent on the thick carpet, his right hand brushing the wall.

There was something mighty queer about this summons be-cause as he neared the door he conceived the weird notion that he knew in advance who was waiting outside. The pic-ture crept into his mind, shadowy but discernable, as if insin-uated by some means he could not define, as if hopefully pro-jected by one of those beyond the door. It was a picture of a big, plump, confident man accompanied by something small, all green and golden.

Despite past trials and stern testings which had made him what he was today, his nerves were passably good and he was not subject to delusions, or had not yet developed a tendency to delusions. So he was puzzled, even a little upset by precon-ceptions without any basis. He had never known a big, heavy man such as his brain was picturing, not even in other more normal days. As for the second one . .

Here and there of course, are people with greatly sharp-ened senses, with odd aptitudes developed to an extreme.

That was to be expected, for the fates were kind and pro-vided compensation. Without them, it would be hard to get around. But he knew his own and they included none like this.

His fingers, usually so precise, fumbled badly as they sought the door-latch, almost as if they had temporarily forgotten where it was placed. Then, finding it, they began to turn the lock, and at that point a thin piping voice came into his mind as clearly as a tinkling bell.

"Open please—*I am your eyes!"*

KINDNESS
Lester Del Rey

The wind eddied idly around the corner and past the secluded park bench. It caught fitfully at the paper on the ground, turning the pages, then picked up a section and blew away with it, leaving gaudy-colored comics uppermost. Danny moved forward into the sunlight, his eyes dropping to the children's page exposed.

But it was no use; he made no effort to pick up the paper. In a world where even the children's comics needed explaining, there could be nothing of interest to the last living *homo sapiens*—the last normal man in the world. His foot kicked the paper away, under the bench where it would no longer remind him of his deficiencies.

There had been a time when he had tried to reason slowly over the omitted steps of logic and find the points behind such things, sometimes successfully, more often not; but now he left it to the quick, intuitive thinking of those about him. Nothing fell flatter than a joke that had to be reasoned out slowly.

Homo sapiens! The type of man who had come out of the caves and built a world of atomic power, electronics and other old-time wonders—thinking man, as it translated from the Latin. In the dim past, when his ancestors had owned the world, they had made a joke of it, shortening it to homo sap, and laughing, because there had been no other species to rival them. Now it was no longer a joke.

Normal man had been only a "sap" to *homo intelligens*— intelligent man—who was now the master of the world. Danny was only a left-over, the last normal man in a world of supermen, hating the fact that he had been born, and that his mother had died at his birth to leave him only loneliness as his heritage.

He drew farther back on the bench as the steps of a young couple reached his ears, pulling his hat down to avoid recognition. But they went by, preoccupied with their own affairs, leaving only a scattered bit of conversation in his ears. He turned it over in his mind, trying senselessly to decode it.

Impossible! Even the casual talk contained too many steps of logic left out. *Homo intelligens* had a new way of thinking, above reason, where all the long, painful steps-of logic could be jumped instantly. They could arrive at a correct picture of the whole from little scattered bits of information. Just as man had once invented logic to replace the trial-and-error thinking that most animals have, so *homo intelligens* had learned to use intuition. They could look at the first page of an old-time book and immediately know the whole of it, since the little tricks of the author would connect in their intuitive minds and at once build up all the missing links. They didn't even have to try—they just looked, and knew. It was like Newton looking at an apple falling and immediately seeing why the planets circled the sun, and realizing the laws of gravitation; but these new men did it all the time, not just at those rare intervals as it had worked for *homo sapiens* once.

Man was gone, except for Danny, and he too had to leave this world of supermen. Somehow, soon, those escape plans must be completed, before the last of his little courage was gone! He stirred restlessly, and the little coins in his pocket set up a faint jingling sound. More charity, or occupational therapy! For six hours a day, five days a week, he worked in a little office, painfully doing routine work that could probably have been done better by machinery. Oh, they assured him that his manual skill was as great as theirs and that it was needed, but he could never be sure. In their unfailing kindness, they had probably decided it was better for him to live as normally as they could let him, and then had created the job to fit what he could do.

Other footsteps came down the little path, but he did not look up, until they stopped. "Hi, Danny! You weren't at the Library, and Miss Larsen said, pay day, weather, and all, I'd find you here. How's everything?"

Outwardly, Jack Thorpe's body might have been the twin of Danny's own well-muscled one, and the smiling face above it bore no distinguishing characteristics. The mutation that changed man to superman had been within, a quicker, more complex relation of brain cell to brain cell that had no outward signs. Danny nodded at Jack, drawing over reluctantly to make room on the bench for this

man who had been his playmate when they were both too young for the difference to matter much.

He did not ask the reason behind the librarian's knowledge of his whereabouts; so far as he knew, there was no particular pattern to his coming here, but to the others there must be one. He found he could even smile at their ability to foretell his plans.

"Hi, Jack! Fine. I thought you were on Mars."

Thorpe frowned, as if an effort were needed to remember that the boy beside him was different, and his words bore the careful phrasing of all those who spoke to Danny. "I finished that, for the time being. I'm supposed to report to Venus next. They're having trouble getting an even balance of boys and girls there, you know. Thought you might want to come along. You've never been Outside, and you were always bugs about those old space stories, I remember."

"I still am, Jack. But—" He knew what it meant, of course. Those who looked after Man behind the scenes had detected his growing discontent, and were hoping to distract him with this chance to see the places his father had conquered in the heyday of his race. But he had no wish to see them as they now were, filled with the busy work of the new men; it was better to imagine them as they had once been, rather than see reality. And the ship was *here;* there could be no chance for escape from those other worlds.

Jack nodded quickly, with the almost telepathic understanding of his race. "Of course. Suit yourself, fellow. Going up to the Heights? Miss Larsen says she has something for you."

"Not yet, Jack. I thought I might look at—drop by the old Museum."

"Oh." Thorpe got up slowly, brushing his suit with idle fingers. "Danny!"

"Uh?"

"I probably know you better than anyone else, fellow, so —" He hesitated, shrugged, and went on. "Don't mind if I jump to conclusions; I won't talk out of turn. But best of luck—and good-by, Danny."

He was gone, almost instantly, leaving Danny's heart stuck in his throat. A few words, a facial expression, probably some childhood memories, and Danny might as well have revealed his most cherished secret hope in shouted words! How many others knew of his interest in the old ship in the Museum and his carefully-made plot to escape this kindly, charity-filled torture world?

He crushed a cigarette under his heel, trying to forget the thought. Jack had played with him as a child, and the others hadn't. He'd have to base his hopes on that and be even more careful never to think of the idea around others. In the meantime, he'd stay away from the ship! Perhaps in that way Thorpe's subtle warning might work in his favor—provided the man had meant his promise of silence.

Danny forced his doubts away, grimly conscious that he dared not lose hope in this last desperate scheme for independence and self-respect; the other way offered only despair and listless hopelessness, the same empty death from an acute inferiority complex that had claimed diminishing numbers of his own kind and left him as the last, lonely specimen. Somehow, he'd succeed, and in the meantime, he would go to the Library and leave the Museum strictly alone.

There was a throng of people leaving the Library as Danny came up the escalator, but either they did not recognize him with his hat pulled low or sensed his desire for

anonymity and pretended not to know him. He slipped into one of the less used hallways and made his way toward the Historic Documents section, where Miss Larsen was putting away the reading tapes and preparing to leave.

But she tossed them aside quickly as he came in and smiled up at him, the rich, warm smile of her people. "Hello, Danny! Did your friend find you all right?"

"Mm-hmm. He said you had something for me."

"I have." There was pleasure in her face as she turned back toward the desk behind her to come up with a small wrapped parcel. For the thousandth time, he caught himself wishing she were of his race and quenching the feeling as he realized what her attitude must really be. To her, the small talk from his race's past was a subject of historic interest, no more. And he was just a dull-witted hangover from ancient days. "Guess what?"

But in spite of himself, his face lighted up, both at the game and the package. "The magazines! The lost issues of *Space Trials?"* There had been only the first installment of a story extant, and yet that single part had set his pulses throbbing as few of the other ancient stories of his ancestor's conquest of space had done. Now, with the missing sections, life would be filled with zest for a few more hours as he followed the fictional exploits of a conqueror who had known no fear of keener minds.

"Not quite, Danny, but almost. We couldn't locate even a trace of them, but I gave the first installment to Bryant Kenning last week, and he finished it for you." Her voice was apologetic. "Of course the words won't be quite identical, but Kenning swears that the story is undoubtedly exactly the same in structure as it would have been, and the style is duplicated almost perfectly!"

Like that! Kenning had taken the first pages of a novel that had meant weeks and months of thought to some ancient writer and had found in them the whole plot, clearly revealed, instantly his! A night's labor had been needed to duplicate it, probably—a disagreeable and boring piece of work, but not a difficult one! Danny did not question the accuracy of the duplication, since Kenning was their greatest historical novelist. But the pleasure went out of the game.

He took the package, noting that some illustrator had even copied the old artist's style, and that it was set up to match the original format. "Thank you, Miss Larsen. I'm sorry to put all of you to so much trouble. And it was nice of Mr. Kenning!"

Her face had fallen with his, but she pretended not to notice. "He wanted to do it—volunteered when he heard we were searching for the missing copies. And if there are any others with pieces missing, Danny, he wants you to let him know. You two are about the only ones who use this division now; why don't you drop by and see him? If you'd like to go tonight—"

"Thanks. But I'll read this tonight, instead. Tell him I'm very grateful, though, will you?" But he paused, wondering again whether he dared ask for tapes on the history of the asteroids; no, there would be too much risk of her guessing, either now or later. He dared not trust any of them with a hint of his plan.

Miss Larsen smiled again, half winking at him. "Okay, Danny, I'll tell him. 'Night!"

Outside, with the cool of evening beginning to fall, Danny found his way into the untraveled quarters and let his feet guide him. Once, as a group came toward him, he crossed the street without thinking and went on. The package under his arm grew

heavy and he shifted it, torn between a desire to find what had happened to the hero and a disgust at his own *sapiens* brain for not knowing. Probably, in the long run, he'd end up by going home and reading it, but for the moment he was content to let his feet carry him along idly, holding most of his thoughts in abeyance.

Another small park was in his path, and he crossed it slowly, the babble of small children voices only partly heard until he came up to them, two boys and a girl. The supervisor, who should have had them back at the Center, was a dun shape in the far shadows, with another, dimmer shape beside her, leaving the five-year-olds happily engaged in the ancient pastime of getting dirty and impressing each other.

Danny stopped, a slow smile creeping over his lips. At that age, their intuitive ability was just beginning to develop, and their little games and pretenses made sense, acting on him like a tonic. Vaguely, he remembered his own friends of that age beginning uncertainly to acquire the trick of seeming to know everything, and his worries at being left behind. For a time, the occasional flashes of intuition that had always blessed even *homo sapiens* gave him hope, but eventually the supervisor had been forced to tell him that he was different, and why. Now he thrust those painful memories aside and slipped quietly forward into the game.

They accepted him with the easy nonchalance of children who have no repressions, feverishly trying to build their sand-castles higher than his; but in that, his experience was greater than theirs, and his judgment of the damp stuff was surer. A perverse glow of accomplishment grew inside him as he added still another story to the towering structure and built a bridge, propped up with sticks and leaves, leading to it.

Then the lights came on, illuminating the sandbox and those inside it and dispelling the shadows of dusk. The smaller of the two boys glanced up, really seeing him for the first time. "Oh, you're Danny Black, ain't you? I seen your pi'ture. Judy, Bobby, look! It's that man—"

But their voices faded out as he ran off through the park and into the deserted byways again, clutching the package to him. Fool! To delight in beating children at a useless game, or to be surprised that they should know him! He slowed to a walk, twitching his lips at the thought that by now the supervisor would be reprimanding them for their thoughtlessness. And still his feet went on, unguided.

It was inevitable, of course, that they should lead him to the Museum, where all his secret hopes centered, but he was surprised to look up and see it before him. And then he was glad. Surely they could read nothing into his visit, unpremeditated, just before the place closed. He caught his breath, forced his face into lines of mere casual interest, and went inside, down the long corridors, and to the hall of the ship.

She rested there, pointed slightly skyward, sleek and immense even in a room designed to appear like the distant reaches of space. For six hundred feet, gleaming metal formed a smooth frictionless surface that slid gracefully from the blunt bow back toward the narrow stern with its blackened ion jets.

This, Danny knew, was the last and greatest of the space liners his people had built at the height of their glory. And even before her, the mutation that made the new race of men had been caused by the radiations of deep space, and the results were spreading. For a time, as the log book indicated this ship had sailed out to Mars, to Venus, and to the other points of man's empire, while the tension slowly mounted at

home. There had never been another wholly sapient-designed ship, for the new race was spreading, making its greater intelligence felt, with the invert-matter rocket replacing this older, less efficient ion rocket which the ship carried. Eventually, unable to compete with the new models, she had been retired from service and junked, while the War between the new and old race passed by her and buried her under tons of rubble, leaving no memory of her existence.

And now, carefully excavated from the old ruins of the drydock where she had lain so long, she had been enthroned in state for the last year, here in the Museum of Sapient History, while all Danny's hopes and prayers had centered around her. There was still a feeling of awe in him as he started slowly across the carpeted floor toward the open lock and the lighted interior.

"Danny!" the sudden word interrupted him, bringing him about with a guilty start, but it was only Professor Kirk, and he relaxed again. The old archaeologist came toward him, his smile barely visible in the half-light of the immense dome. "I'd about given you up, boy, and started out. But I happened to look back and see you. Thought you might be interested in some information I just came onto today."

"Information about the ship?"

"What else? Here, come on inside her and into the lounge —I have a few privileges here, and we might as well be comfortable. You know, as I grow older, I find myself appreciating your ancestors' ideas of comfort, Danny. Sort of a pity our own culture is too new for much luxuriousness yet." Of all the new race, Kirk seemed the most completely at ease before Danny, partly because of his age, and partly because they had shared the same enthusiasm for the great ship when it had first arrived.

Now he settled back into one of the old divans, using his immunity to ordinary rules to light a cigarette and pass one to the younger man. "You know all the supplies and things in the ship have puzzled us both, and we couldn't find any record of them? The log ends when they put the old ship up for junking, you remember; and we couldn't figure out why all this had been restored and restocked, ready for some long voyage to somewhere. Well, it came to light in some further excavations they've completed. Danny, your people did that, during the War; or really, after they'd lost the War to us!"

Danny's back straightened. The War was a period of history he'd avoided thinking about, though he knew the outlines of it. With *homo intelligent* Increasing and pressing the older race aside by the laws of survival, his people had made a final desperate bid for supremacy. And while the new race had not wanted the War, they had been forced finally to fight back with as little mercy as had been shown them; and since they had the tremendous advantage of the new intuitive thinking, there had been only thousands left of the original billions of the old race when its brief course was finished. It had been inevitable probably, from the first mutation, but it was not something Danny cared to think of. Now he nodded, and let the other continue.

"Your ancestors, Danny, were beaten then, but they weren't completely crushed, and they put about the last bit of energy they had into rebuilding this ship—the only navigable one left them—and restocking it. They were going to go out somewhere, they didn't know quite where, even to another solar system, and take some of the old race for a new start, away from us. It was their last bid for survival, and it failed

when my people learned of it and blasted the docks down over the ship, but it was a glorious failure, boy! I thought you'd want to know."

Danny's thoughts focused slowly. "You mean everything on the ship is of my people? But surely the provisions wouldn't have remained usable after all this time?"

'They did, though; the tests we made proved that conclusively. Your people knew how to preserve things as well as we do, and they expected to be drifting in the ship for half a century, maybe. They'll be usable a thousand years from now." He chucked his cigarette across the room and chuckled in pleased surprise when it fell accurately into a snuffer. "I stuck around, really, to tell you, and I've kept the papers over at the school for you to see. Why not come over with me now?"

"Not tonight, sir. I'd rather stay here a little longer."

Professor Kirk nodded, pulling himself up reluctantly. "As you wish ... I know how you feel, and I'm sorry about their moving the ship, too. We'll miss her, Danny!"

"Moving the ship?"

"Hadn't you heard? I thought that's why you came around at this hour. They want her over in London, and they're bringing one of the old Lunar ships here to replace her. Too bad!" He touched the walls thoughtfully, drawing his hands down and across the rich nap on the seat. "Well, don't stay too long, and turn her lights out before you leave. Place'll be closed in half an hour. 'Night, Danny."

" 'Night, Professor." Danny sat frozen on the soft seat, listening to the slow tread of the old man and the beating of his own heart. They were moving the ship, ripping his plans to shreds, leaving him stranded in this world of a new race, where even the children were sorry for him.

It had meant so much, even to feel that somehow he would escape, some day! Impatiently, he snapped off the lights, feeling closer to the ship in the privacy of the dark, where no watchman could see his emotion. For a year now he had built his life around the idea of taking this ship out and away, to leave the new race far behind. Long, carefully casual months of work had been spent in learning her structure, finding all her stores, assuring himself bit by bit from a hundred old books that he could operate her.

She had been almost designed for the job, built to be operated by one man, even a cripple, in an emergency, and nearly everything was automatic. Only the problem of a destination had remained, since the planets were all swarming with the others, but the ship's log had suggested the answer even to that.

Once there had been rich men among his people who sought novelty and seclusion, and found them among the larger asteroids; money and science had built them artificial gravities and given them atmospheres, powered by atomic-energy plants that should last forever. Now the rich men were undoubtedly dead, and the new race had abandoned such useless things. Surely, somewhere among the asteroids, there should have been a haven for him, made safe by the very numbers of the little worlds that could discourage almost any search.

Danny heard a guard go by, and slowly got to his feet, to go out again into a world that would no longer hold even that hope. It had been a lovely plan to dream on, a necessary dream. Then the sound of the great doors came to his ears, closing! The Professor had forgotten to tell them of his presence! And—!

All right, so he didn't know the history of all those little worlds; perhaps he would have to hunt through them, one by one, to find a suitable home. Did it matter? In every other way, he could never be more ready. For a moment only, he hesitated; then his hands fumbled with the great lock's control switch, and it swung shut quietly in the dark, shutting the sound of his running feet from outside ears.

The lights came on silently as he found the navigation chair and sank into it. Little lights that spelled out the readiness of the ship. "Ship sealed . . . Air Okay . . . Power, Automatic . . . Engine, Automatic. . . ." Half a hundred little lights and dials that told the story of a ship waiting for his hand. He moved the course plotter slowly along the tiny atmospheric map until it reached the top of the stratosphere; the big star map moved slowly out, with the pointer in his fingers tracing an irregular, jagged line that would lead him somewhere toward the asteroids, well away from the present position of Mars, and yet could offer no clue. Later, he could set the analyzers to finding the present location of some chosen asteroid and determine his course more accurately, but all that mattered now was to get away, beyond all tracing, before his loss could be reported.

Seconds later his fingers pressed down savagely on the main power switch, and there was a lurch of starting, followed by another slight one as the walls of the Museum crumpled before the savage force of the great ion rockets. On the map, a tiny spot of light appeared, marking the ship's changing position. The world was behind him now, and there was no one to look at his efforts in kindly pity or remind him of his weakness. Only blind fate was against him, and his ancestors had met and conquered that long before.

A bell rang, indicating the end of the atmosphere, and the big automatic pilot began clucking contentedly, emitting a louder cluck now and then as it found the irregularities in the unorthodox course he had charted and swung the ship to follow. Danny watched it, satisfied that it was working. His ancestors may have been capable of reason only, but they had built machines that were almost intuitive, as the ship about him testified. His head was higher as he turned back to the kitchen, and there was a bit of a swagger to his walk.

The food was still good. He wolfed it down, remembering that supper had been forgotten, and leafing slowly through the big log book which recorded the long voyages made by the ship, searching through it for each casual reference to the asteroids, Ceres, Palas, Vesta, some of the ones referred to by nicknames or numbers? Which ones?

But he had decided by the time he stood once again in the navigation room, watching the aloof immensity of space; out here it was relieved only by the tiny hot pinpoints that must be stars, colored, small and intense as no stars could be through an atmosphere. It would be one of the numbered planetoids, referred to also as "The Dane's" in the log. The word was meaningless, but it seemed to have been one of the newer and more completely terranized, though not the very newest where any search would surely start.

He set the automatic analyzer to running from the key number in the manual and watched it for a time, but it ground on slowly, tracing through all the years that had passed. For a time, he fiddled with the radio, before he remembered that it operated on a wave form no longer used. It was just as well; his severance from the new race

would be all the more final.

Still the analyzer ground on. Space lost its novelty, and the operation of the pilot ceased to interest him. He wandered back through the ship toward the lounge, to spy the parcel where he had dropped and forgotten it. There was nothing else to do.

And once begun, he forgot his doubts at the fact that it was Kenning's story, not the original; there was the same sweep to the tale, the same warm and human characters, the same drive of a race that had felt the mastership of destiny so long ago. Small wonder the readers of that time had named it the greatest epic of space to be written!

Once he stopped, as the analyzer reached its conclusions and bonged softly, to set the controls on the automatic for the little world that might be his home, with luck. And then the ship moved on, no longer veering, but making the slightly curved path its selectors found most suitable, while Danny read further, huddled over the story in the navigator's chair, feeling a new and greater kinship with the characters of the story. He was no longer a poor Earthbound charity case, but a man and an adventurer with them!

His nerves were tingling when the tale came to its end, and he let it drop onto the floor from tired fingers. Under his hand, a light had sprung up, but he was oblivious to it, until a crashing gong sounded over him, jerking him from the chair. There had been such a gong described in the story. ...

And the meaning was the same. His eyes made out the red letters that glared accusingly from the control panel: RADIATION AT TEN O'CLOCK HORIZ—SHIP INDICATED!

Danny's fingers were on the master switch and cutting off all life except pseudogravity from the ship as the thought penetrated. The other ship was not hard to find from the observation window; the great streak of an invert-matter rocket glowed hotly out there, pointed apparently back to Earth— probably the *Callisto!*

For a second he was sure they had spotted him, but the flicker must have been only a minor correction to adjust for the trail continued. He had no knowledge of the new ships and whether they carried warning signals or not, but apparently they must have dispensed with such things. The streak vanished into the distance, and the letters on the panel that had marked it changing position went dead. Danny waited until the fullest amplification showed no response before throwing power on again. The small glow of the ion rocket would be invisible at the distance, surely.

Nothing further seemed to occur; mere was a contented purr from the pilot and the faint sleepy hum of raw power from the rear, but no bells or sudden sounds. Slowly, his head fell forward over the navigator's table, and his heavy breathing mixed with the low sounds of the room. The ship went on about its business as it had been designed to do. Its course was charted, even to the old landing sweep, and it needed no further attention.

That was proved when the slow ringing of a bell woke Danny, while the board blinked in tune to it: Destination! Destination! Destination Reached!

He shut off everything, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and looked out. Above, there was weak but warm sunlight streaming down from a bluish sky that held a few small clouds suspended close to the ground. Beyond the ship, where it lay on a neglected sandy landing field, was the green of grass and the wild profusion of a

forest. The horizon dropped off sharply, reminding bun that it was only a tiny world, but otherwise it might have been Earth. He spotted an unkempt hangar ahead and applied weak power to the underjets, testing until they moved the ship slowly forward and inside, out of the view of any above.

Then he was at the lock, fumbling with the switch. As it opened, he could smell the clean fragrance of growing things, and there was the sound of birds nearby. A rabbit hopped leisurely out from underfoot as he stumbled eagerly out to the sunlight, and weeds and underbrush had already spread to cover the buildings about him. For a moment, he sighed; it had been too easy, this discovery of a heaven on the first wild try,

But the sight of the buildings drove back the doubt. Once, surrounded by a pretentious formal garden, this had been a great stone mansion, now falling into ruins. Beside it and further from him, a smaller house had been built, seemingly from the wreckage. That was still whole, though ivy had grown over it and half covered the door that came open at the touch of his fingers.

There was still a faint glow to the heaters that drew power from the great atomic plant that gave this little world a perpetual semblance of Earthliness, but a coating of dust was everywhere. The furnishings, though, were in good condition. He scanned them, recognizing some as similar to the pieces in the Museum, and the products of his race. One by one he studied them—his fortune, and now his home!

On the table, a book was dropped casually, and there was a sheet of paper propped against it, with what looked like a girl's rough handwriting on it. Curiosity carried him closer, until he could make it out, through the dust that clung even after he shook it.

Dad:

Charley Summers found a wrecked ship of those things, and came for me. We'll be living high on 13. Come on over, if your jets will make it, and meet your son-in-law.

There was no date, nothing to indicate whether "Dad" had returned, or what had happened to them. But Danny dropped it reverently back on the table, looking out across the landing strip as if to see a worn old ship crawl in through the brief twilight that was falling over the tiny world. "Those things" could only be the new race, after the War; and that meant that here was the final outpost of his people. The note might be ten years or half a dozen centuries old—but his people had been here, fighting on and managing to live, after Earth had been lost to them. If they could, so could he!

And unlikely though it seemed, there might possibly be more of them out there somewhere. Perhaps the race was still surviving in spite of time and trouble and even *homo intelligens.*

Danny's eyes were moist as he stepped back from the door and the darkness outside to begin cleaning his new home. If any were there, he'd find them. And if not—

Well, he was still a member of a great and daring race that could never know defeat so long as a single man might live. He would never forget that.

Back on Earth, Bryant Kenning nodded slowly to the small group as he put the

communicator back, and his eyes were a bit sad in spite of the smile that lighted his face. "The Director's scout is back, and he did choose "The Dane's'. Poor kid. I'd begun to think we waited too long, and that he never would make it. Another six months—and he'd have died like a flower out of the sun! Yet I was sure it would work when Miss Larsen showed me that story; with its mythical planetoid-paradises. A rather clever story, if you like pseudohistory. I hope the one I prepared was its equal."

"For historical inaccuracy, fully its equal." But the amusement in old Professor Kirk's voice did not reach his lips. "Well, he swallowed our lies and ran off with the ship we built him. I hope he's happy, for a while at least."

Miss Larsen folded her things together and prepared to leave. "Poor kid! He was sweet, in a pathetic sort of way. I wish that girl we were working on had turned out better; maybe this wouldn't have been necessary then. See me home, Jack?"

The two older men watched Larsen and Thorpe leave, and silence and tobacco smoke filled the room. Finally Kenning shrugged and turned to face the professor.

"By now he's found the note. I wonder if it was a good idea, after all? When I first came across it in that old story, I was thinking of Jack's preliminary report on Number 67, but now I don't know; she's an unknown quantity, at best. Anyhow, I meant it for kindness."

"Kindness! Kindness to repay with a few million credits and a few thousands of hours of work—plus a lie here and there—for all that we owe the boy's race!" The professor's voice was tired, as he dumped the contents of his pipe into a snuffer, and strode over slowly toward the great window that looked out on the night sky. "I wonder sometimes, Bryant, what kindness Neanderthaler found when the last one came to die. Or whether the race that will follow us when the darkness falls on us will have something better than such kindness."

The novelist shook his head doubtfully, and there was silence again as they looked out across the world and toward the stars.

“—We Also Walk Dogs”

Robert A. Heinlein

“General services—Miss Cormet speaking!” She addressed the view screen with just the right balance between warm hospitable friendliness and impersonal efficiency. The screen flickered momentarily, then built up a stereo-picture of a dowager, fat and fretful, overdressed and underexercised.

“Oh, my dear,” said the image, “I’m *so* upset. I wonder if you *can* help me.”

“I’m sure we can,” Miss Cormet purred as she quickly estimated the cost of the woman’s gown and jewels (if real—she made a mental reservation) and decided that here was a client that could be profitable. “Now tell me your trouble. Your name first, if you please.” She touched a button on the horseshoe desk which enclosed her, a button marked CREDIT DEPARTMENT.

“But it’s all so *involved*,” the image insisted. “Peter *would* go and break his hip.” Miss Cormet immediately pressed the button marked MEDICAL. “I’ve *told* him that polo is dangerous. You’ve no idea, my dear, how a mother suffers. And just at this time, too. It’s *so* inconvenient—”

“You wish us to attend him? Where is he now?”

“Attend him? Why, how silly! The Memorial Hospital will do that. We’ve endowed them enough, I’m sure. It’s my dinner party I’m worried about. The Principessa will be so annoyed.”

The answer light from the Credit Department was blinking angrily. Miss Cormet headed her off. “Oh, I see. We’ll arrange it for you. Now, your name, please, and your address and present location.”

“But don’t you *know* my name?”

“One might guess,” Miss Cormet diplomatically evaded, “but General Services always respects the privacy of its clients.”

“Oh, yes, of course. How considerate. I am Mrs Peter van Hogbein Johnson.” Miss Cormet controlled her reaction. No need to consult the Credit Department for this one. But its transparency flashed at once, rating AAA—unlimited. “But I don’t see what you can *do*,” Mrs Johnson continued. “I can’t be two places at once.”

“General Services likes difficult assignments,” Miss Cormet assured her. “Now—if you will let me have the details . . .”

She wheedled and nudged the woman into giving a fairly coherent story. Her son, Peter III, a slightly shopworn Peter Pan, whose features were familiar to Grace Gormet through years of stereogravure, dressed in every conceivable costume affected by the richly idle in their pastimes, had been so thoughtless as to pick the afternoon before his mother’s most important social function to bung himself up—seriously. Furthermore, he had been so thoughtless as to do so half a continent away from his mater.

Miss Cormet gathered that Mrs Johnson’s technique for keeping her son safely under thumb required that she rush to his bedside at once, and, incidentally, to select his nurses. But her dinner party that evening represented the culmination of months of careful maneuvering. What was she to do?

Miss Cormet reflected to herself that the prosperity of General Services and her own very substantial income was based largely on the stupidity, lack of resourcefulness, and laziness of persons like this silly parasite, as she explained that General Services would see that her party was a smooth, social success while arranging for a portable full-length stereo screen to be installed in her drawing room in order that she might greet her guests and make her explanations while hurrying to her son’s side. Miss Cormet would see that a most adept social manager was placed in charge, one whose own position in society was irreproachable and whose connection with General Services was known to no one. With proper handling the disaster could be turned into a social triumph, enhancing Mrs Johnson’s reputation as a clever hostess and as a devoted mother.

“A sky car will be at your door in twenty minutes,” she added, as she

cut in the circuit marked TRANSPORTATION, “to take you to the rocket port. One of our young men will be with it to get additional details from you on the way to the port. A compartment for yourself and a berth for your maid will be reserved on the 16:45 rocket for Newark. You may rest easy now. General Services will do your worrying.”

“Oh, thank you, my dear. You’ve been such a help. You’ve no idea of the responsibilities a person in my position has.”

Miss Cormet cluck-clucked in professional sympathy while deciding that this particular girl was good for still more fees. “You do look exhausted, madame,” she said anxiously. “Should I not have a masseuse accompany you on the trip? Is your health at all delicate? Perhaps a physician would be still better.”

“How thoughtful you are!”

“I’ll send both,” Miss Cormet decided, and switched off, with a faint regret that she had not suggested a specially chartered rocket. Special service, not listed in the master price schedule, was supplied on a cost-plus basis. In cases like this “plus” meant all the traffic would bear.

She switched to EXECUTIVE; an alert-eyed young man filled the screen. “Stand by for transcript, Steve,” she said. “Special service, triple-A. I’ve started the immediate service.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Triple-A—bonuses?”

“Undoubtedly. Give this old battleaxe the works—smoothly. And look—the client’s son is laid up in a hospital. Check on his nurses. If any one of them has even a shred of sex-appeal, fire her out and put a zombie in.”

“Gotcha, kid. Start the transcript.”

She cleared her screen again; the “available-for-service” light in her booth turned automatically to green, then almost at once turned red again and a new figure built up in her screen.

No stupid waster this. Grace Cormet saw a well-kempt man in his middle forties, flat-waisted, shrewd-eyed, hard but urbane. The cape of his formal morning clothes was thrown back with careful casualness. “General Services,” she said. “Miss Cormet speaking.”

“Ah, Miss Cormet,” he began, “I wish to see your chief.”

“Chief of switchboard?”

“No, I wish to see the President of General Services.”

“Will you tell me what it is you wish? Perhaps I can help you.”

“Sorry, but I can’t make explanations. I must see him, at once.”

“And General Services is sorry. Mr Clare is a very busy man; it is impossible to see him without appointment and without explanation.”

“Are you recording?”

“Certainly.”

“Then please cease doing so.”

Above the console, in sight of the client, she switched off the recorder. Underneath the desk she switched it back on again. General Services was sometimes asked to perform illegal acts; its confidential employees took no

chances. He fished something out from the folds of his chemise and held it out to her. The stereo effect made it appear as if he were reaching right out through the screen.

Trained features masked her surprise—it was the sigil of a planetary official, and the color of the badge was green.

"I will arrange it," she said.

"Very good. Can you meet me and conduct me in from the waiting room? In ten minutes?"

"I will be there, Mister . . . Mister—" But he had cut off.

Grace Cormet switched to the switchboard chief and called for relief. Then, with her board cut out of service, she removed the spool bearing the clandestine record of the interview, stared at it as if undecided, and after a moment, dipped it into an opening in the top of the desk where a strong magnetic field wiped the unfixed patterns from the soft metal.

A girl entered the booth from the rear. She was blond, decorative, and looked slow and a little dull. She was neither. "Okay, Grace," she said. "Anything to turn over?"

"No. Clear board."

"'S matter? Sick?"

"No." With no further explanation Grace left the booth, went on out past the other booths housing operators who handled unlisted services and into the large hall where the hundreds of catalogue operators worked. These had no such complex equipment as the booth which Grace had quitted. One enormous volume, a copy of the current price list of all of General Services' regular price-marked functions, and an ordinary look-and-listen enabled a catalogue operator to provide for the public almost anything the ordinary customer could wish for. If a call was beyond the scope of the catalogue it was transferred to the aristocrats of resourcefulness, such as Grace.

She took a short cut through the master files room, walked down an alleyway between dozens of chattering punched-card machines, and entered the foyer of that level. A pneumatic lift bounced her up to the level of the President's office. The President's receptionist did not stop her, nor, apparently, announce her. But Grace noted that the girl's hands were busy at the keys of her voder.

Switchboard operators do not walk into the offices of the president of a billion-credit corporation. But General Services was not organized like any other business on the planet. It was a *sui generis* business in which special training was a commodity to be listed, bought, and sold, but general resourcefulness and a ready wit were all important. In its hierarchy Jay Clare, the president, came first, his handyman, Saunders Francis, stood second, and the couple of dozen operators, of which Grace was one, who took calls on the unlimited switchboard came immediately after. They, and the field operators who handled the most difficult unclassified commissions—one group in fact, for the unlimited switchboard operators and the unlimited field operators swapped places indiscriminately.

After them came the tens of thousands of other employees spread over

the planet, from the chief accountant, the head of the legal department, the chief clerk of the master files on down through the local managers. the catalogue operators to the last classified part time employee—stenographers prepared to take dictation when and where ordered, gigolos ready to fill an empty place at a dinner, the man who rented both armadillos and trained fleas.

Grace Cormet walked into Mr Clare's office. It was the only room in the building not cluttered up with electromechanical recording and communicating equipment. It contained nothing but his desk (bare), a couple of chairs, and a stereo screen, which, when not in use, seemed to be Krantz' famous painting "The Weeping Buddha'. The original was in fact in the sub-basement, a thousand feet below.

"Hello, Grace," he greeted her, and shoved a piece of paper at her. "Tell me what you think of that. Sance says it's lousy." Saunders Francis turned his mild pop eyes from his chief to Grace Cormet, but neither confirmed nor denied the statement.

Miss Cormet read:

CAN YOU AFFORD IT?
Can You Afford GENERAL SERVICES?
Can You Afford NOT to have General Services ? ? ? ??

In this jet-speed age can you afford to go on wasting time doing your own shopping, paying bills yourself, taking care of your living compartment?

We'll spank the baby and feed the cat.
We'll rent you a house and buy your shoes.
We'll write to your mother-in-law and add up your check stubs.
No job too large; No job too small—and all amazingly Cheap!
GENERAL SERVICES
Dial H-U-R-R-Y - U-P
P.S. WE ALSO WALK DOGS

"Well?" said Clare.
"Sance is right. It smells."
"Why?"
"Too logical. Too verbose. No drive."
"What's your idea of an ad to catch the marginal market?"
She thought a moment, then borrowed his stylus and wrote:

DO YOU WANT SOMEBODY MURDERED?
(Then *don't* call GENERAL SERVICES)
But for *any* other job dial HURRY-UP - It pays!
P.S. We also walk dogs.

“Mmmm . . . well, maybe,” Mr Clare said cautiously. “We’ll try it. Sance, give this a type B coverage, two weeks, North America, and let me know how it takes.” Francis put it away in his kit, still with no change in his mild expression. “Now as I was saying—“

“Chief,” broke in Grace Cormet. “I made an appointment for you in—“ She glanced at her watchfinger. “—exactly two minutes and forty seconds. Government man.”

“Make him happy and send him away. I’m busy.”

“Green Badge.”

He looked up sharply. Even Francis looked interested. “So?” Clare remarked. “Got the interview transcript with you?”

“I wiped it.”

“You did? Well, perhaps you know best. I like your hunches. Bring him in.”

She nodded thoughtfully and left.

She found her man just entering the public reception room and escorted him past half a dozen gates whose guardians would otherwise have demanded his identity and the nature of his business. When he was seated in Clare’s office, he looked around. “May I speak with you in private, Mr Clare?”

“Mr Francis is my right leg. You’ve already spoken to Miss Cormet.”

“Very well.” He produced the green sigil again and held it out. “No names are necessary just yet. I am sure of your discretion.”

The President of General Services sat up impatiently. “Let’s get down to business. You are Pierre Beaumont, Chief of Protocol. Does the administration want a job done?”

Beaumont was unperturbed by the change in pace. “You know me. Very well. We’ll get down to business. The government may want a job done. In any case our discussion must not be permitted to leak out—”

“All of General Services relations are confidential.”

“This is not confidential; this is secret.” He paused.

“I understand you,” agreed Clare. “Go on.”

“You have an interesting organization here, Mr Clare. I believe it is your boast that you will undertake any commission whatsoever—for a price.”

“If it is legal.”

“Ah, yes, of course. But legal is a word capable of interpretation. I admired the way your company handled the outfitting of the Second Plutonian Expedition. Some of your methods were, ah, ingenious.”

“If you have any criticism of our actions in that case they are best made to our legal department through the usual channels.”

Beaumont pushed a palm in his direction. “Oh, no, Mr Clare—please! You misunderstand me. I was not criticising; I was admiring. Such resource! What a diplomat you would have made!”

“Let’s quit fencing. What do you want?” Mr Beaumont pursed his lips. “Let us suppose that you had to entertain a dozen representatives of each intelligent race in this planetary system and you wanted to make each one of

them completely comfortable and happy. Could you do it?"

Clare thought aloud. "Air pressure, humidity, radiation densities, atmosphere, chemistry, temperatures, cultural conditions—those things are all simple. But how about acceleration? We could use a centrifuge for the Jovians, but Martians and Titans—that's another matter. There is no way to reduce earth-normal gravity. No, you would have to entertain them out in space, or on Luna. That makes it not our pigeon; we never give service beyond the stratosphere."

Beaumont shook his head. "It won't be beyond the stratosphere. You may take it as an absolute condition that you are to accomplish your results on the surface of the Earth."

"Why?"

"Is it the custom of General Services to inquire why a client wants a particular type of service?"

"No. Sorry."

"Quite all right. But you do need more information in order to understand what must be accomplished and why it must be secret. There will be a conference, held on this planet, in the near future—ninety days at the outside. Until the conference is called no suspicion that it is to be held must be allowed to leak out. If the plans for it were to be anticipated in certain quarters, it would be useless to hold the conference at all. I suggest that you think of this conference as a roundtable of leading, ah, scientists of the system, about of the same size and makeup as the session of the Academy held on Mars last spring. You are to make all preparations for the entertainments of the delegates, but you are to conceal these preparations in the ramifications of your organization until needed. As for the details—"

But Clare interrupted "him. "You appear to have assumed that we will take on this commission. As you have explained it, it would involve us in a ridiculous failure. General Services does not like failures. You know and I know that low-gravity people cannot spend more than a few hours in high gravity without seriously endangering their health. Interplanetary get togethers are always held on a low-gravity planet and always will be."

"Yes," answered Beaumont patiently, "they always have been. Do you realize the tremendous diplomatic handicap which Earth and Venus labor under in consequence?"

"I don't get it."

"It isn't necessary that you should. Political psychology is not your concern. Take it for granted that it does and that the Administration is determined that this conference shall take place on Earth."

"Why not Luna?"

Beaumont shook his head. "Not the same thing at all. Even though we administer it, Luna City is a treaty port. Not the same thing, psychologically."

Clare shook his head. "Mr Beaumont, I don't believe that you understand the nature of General Services, even as I fail to appreciate the subtle requirements of diplomacy. We don't work miracles and we don't

promise to. We are just the handyman of the last century, gone speed-lined and corporate. We are the latter day equivalent of the old servant class, but we are not Aladdin's genie. We don't even maintain research laboratories in the scientific sense. We simply make the best possible use of modern advances in communications and organization to do what already can be done." He waved a hand at the far wall, on which there was cut in intaglio the time-honored trademark of the business—a Scottie dog, pulling against a leash and sniffing at a post. "There is the spirit of the sort of work we do. We walk dogs for people who are too busy to walk 'em themselves. My grandfather worked his way through college walking dogs. I'm still walking them. I don't promise miracles, nor monkey with politics."

Beaumont fitted his fingertips carefully together. "You walk dogs for a fee. But of course you do—you walk my pair. Five minim-credits seems rather cheap."

"It is. But a hundred thousand dogs, twice a day, soons runs up the gross take."

"The 'take' for walking this 'dog' would be considerable."

"How much?" asked Francis. It was his first sign of interest. Beaumont turned his eyes on him. "My dear sir, the outcome of this, ah, roundtable should make a difference of literally hundreds of billions of credits to this planet. We will not bind the mouth of the kine that treads the corn, if you pardon the figure of speech."

"How much?"

"Would thirty percent over cost be reasonable?"

Francis shook his head. "Might not come to much."

"Well, I certainly won't haggle. Suppose we leave it up to you gentlemen—your pardon, Miss Cormet!—to decide what the service is worth. I think I can rely on your planetary and racial patriotism to make it reasonable and proper."

Francis sat back, said nothing, but looked pleased.

"Wait a minute,' protested Clare. "We haven't taken this job."

"We have discussed the fee," observed Beaumont.

Clare looked from Francis to Grace Cormet, then examined his fingernails. "Give me twenty-four hours to find out whether or not it is possible," he said finally, "and I'll tell you whether or not we will walk your dog."

"I feel sure," answered Beaumont, "that you will." He gathered his cape about him.

"Okay, masterminds," said Clare bitterly, "you've bought it."

"I've been wanting to get back to field work," said Grace.

"Put a crew on everything but the gravity problem," suggested Francis. "It's the only catch. The rest is routine."

"Certainly," agreed Clare, "but you had better deliver on that. If you can't, we are out some mighty expensive preparations that we will never be paid for. Who do you want? Grace?"

“I suppose so,” answered Francis. “She can count up to ten.”

Grace Cormet looked at him coldly. “There are times, Sance Francis, when I regret having married you.”

“Keep your domestic affairs out of the office,” warned Clare. “Where do you start?”

“Let’s find out who knows most about gravitation,” decided Francis. “Grace, better get Doctor Krathwohl on the screen.”

“Right,” she acknowledged, as she stepped to the stereo controls. “That’s the beauty about this business. You don’t have to know anything; you just have to know where to find out.”

Dr Krathwohl was a part of the permanent staff of General Services. He had no assigned duties. The company found it worthwhile to support him in comfort while providing him with an unlimited drawing account for scientific journals and for attendance at the meetings which the learned hold from time to time. Dr Krathwohl lacked the single-minded drive of the research scientist; he was a dilettante by nature.

Occasionally they asked him a question. It paid.

“Oh, hello, my dear!” Doctor Krathwohl’s gentle face smiled out at her from the screen. “Look—I’ve just come across the most amusing fact in the latest issue of Nature. It throws a most interesting sidelight on Brownlee’s theory of—“

“Just a second, Doc,” she interrupted. “I’m kinda in a hurry.”

“Yes, my dear?”

“Who knows the most about gravitation?”

“In what way do you mean that? Do you want an astrophysicist, or do you want to deal with the subject from a standpoint of theoretical mechanics? Farquarson would be the man in the first instance, I suppose.”

“I want to know what makes it tick.”

“Field theory, eh? In that case you don’t want Farquarson. He is a descriptive ballistician, primarily. Dr Julian’s work in that subject is authoritative, possibly definitive.”

“Where can we get hold of him?”

“Oh, but you can’t. He died last year, poor fellow. A great loss.”

Grace refrained from telling him how great a loss and asked, “Who stepped into his shoes?”

“Who what? Oh, you were jesting! I see. You want the name of the present top man in field theory. I would say O’Neil.”

“Where is he?”

“I’ll have to find out. I know him slightly—a difficult man.”

“Do, please. In the meantime who could coach us a bit on what it’s all about?”

“Why don’t you try young Carson, in our engineering department? He was interested in such things before he took a job with us. Intelligent chap—I’ve had many an interesting talk with him.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks, Doc. Call the Chief’s office as soon as you have located O’Neil. Speed.” She cut off.

Carson agreed with Krathwohl's opinion, but looked dubious. "O'Neil is arrogant and non-cooperative. I've worked under him. But he undoubtedly knows more about field theory and space structure than any other living man."

Carson had been taken into the inner circle, the problem explained to him. He had admitted that he saw no solution. "Maybe we are making something hard out of this," Clare suggested. "I've got some ideas. Check me if I'm wrong, Carson."

"Go ahead, Chief."

"Well, the acceleration of gravity is produced by the proximity of a mass—right? Earth-normal gravity being produced by the proximity of the Earth. Well, what would be the effect of placing a large mass just over a particular point on the Earth's surface. Would not that serve to counteract the pull of the Earth?"

"Theoretically, yes. But it would have to be a damn big mass."

"No matter."

"You don't understand, Chief. To offset fully the pull of the Earth at a given point would require another planet the size of the Earth in contact with the Earth at that point. Of course since you don't want to cancel the pull completely, but simply to reduce it, you gain a certain advantage through using a smaller mass which would have its center of gravity closer to the point in question than would be the center of gravity of the Earth. Not enough, though. While the attraction builds up inversely as the square of the distance—in this case the half-diameter—the mass and the consequent attraction drops off directly as the cube of the diameter."

"What does that give us?"

Carson produced a slide rule and figured for a few moments. He looked up. "I'm almost afraid to answer. You would need a good-sized asteroid, of lead, to get anywhere at all."

"Asteroids have been moved before this."

"Yes, but what is to hold it up? No, Chief, there is no conceivable source of power, or means of applying it, that would enable you to hang a big planetoid over a particular spot on the Earth's surface and keep it there."

"Well, it was a good idea while it lasted," Clare said pensively. Grace's smooth brow had been wrinkled as she followed the discussion. Now she put in, "I gathered that you could use an extremely heavy small mass more effectively. I seem to have read somewhere about some stuff that weighs tons per cubic inch."

"The core of dwarf stars," agreed Carson. "All we would need for that would be a ship capable of going light-years in a few days, some way to mine the interior of a star, and a new space-time theory."

"Oh, well, skip it."

"Wait a minute,' Francis observed. "Magnetism is a lot like gravity, isn't it?"

“Well - yes.”

“Could there be some way to maqnetize these gazebos from the little planets? Maybe something odd about their body chemistry?”

“Nice idea,” agreed Carson, “but while their internal economy is odd, it’s not that odd. They are still organic.”

“I suppose not. If pigs had wings they’d be pigeons.”

The stereo annunciator blinked. Doctor Krathwohl announced that O’Neil could be found at his summer home in Portage, Wisconsin. He had not screened him and would prefer not to do so, unless the Chief insisted.

Clare thanked him and turned back to the others. “We are wasting time,” he announced. “After years in this business we should know better than to try to decide technical questions. I’m not a physicist and I don’t give a damn how gravitation works. That’s O’Neil’s business. And Carson’s. Carson, shoot up to Wisconsin and get O’Neil on the job.”

“Me?”

“You. You’re an operator for this job—with pay to match. Bounce over to the port—there will be a rocket and a credit facsimile waiting for you. You ought to be able to raise ground in seven or eight minutes.”

Carson blinked. “How about my job here?”

“The engineering department will be told, likewise the accounting. Get going.”

Without replying Carson headed for the door. By the time he reached it he was hurrying.

Carson’s departure left them with nothing to do until he reported back—nothing to do, that is, but to start action on the manifold details of reproducing the physical and cultural details of three other planets and four major satellites, exclusive of their characteristic surface-normal gravitational accelerations. The assignment, although new, presented no real difficulties—

to General Services. Somewhere there were persons who knew all the answers to these matters. The vast loose organization called General Services was geared to find them, hire them, put them to work. Any of the unlimited operators and a considerable percent of the catalogue operators could take such an assignment and handle it without excitement nor hurry.

Francis called in one unlimited operator. He did not even bother to select him, but took the first available on the ready panel—they were all “Can do!” people. He explained in detail the assignment, then promptly forgot about it. It would be done, and on time. The punched-card machines would chatter a bit louder, stereo screens would flash, and bright young people in all parts of the Earth would drop what they were doing and dig out the specialists who would do the actual work.

He turned back to Clare, who said, “I wish I knew what Beaumont is up to. Conference of scientists—phooey!”

“I thought you weren’t interested in politics, Jay.”

“I’m not. I don’t give a hoot in hell about politics, interplanetary or

otherwise, except as it affects this business. But if I knew what was being planned, we might be able to squeeze a bigger cut out of it."

"Well," put in Grace, "I think you can take it for granted that the real heavy-weights from all the planets are about to meet and divide Gaul into three parts."

"Yes, but who gets cut out?"

"Mars, I suppose."

"Seems likely. With a bone tossed to the Venerians. In that case we might speculate a little in Pan-Jovian Trading Corp."

"Easy, son, easy," Francis warned. "Do that, and you might get people interested. This is a hush-hush job."

"I guess you're right. Still, keep your eyes open. There ought to be some way to cut a slice of pie before this is over."

Grace Cormet's telephone buzzed. She took it out of her pocket and said, "Yes?"

"A Mrs Hogbein Johnson wants to speak to you."

"You handle her. I'm off the board."

"She won't talk to anyone but you."

"All right. Put her on the Chief's stereo, but stay in parallel yourself. You'll handle it after I've talked to her."

The screen came to life, showing Mrs Johnson's fleshy face alone, framed in the middle of the screen in flat picture. "Oh, Miss Cormet," she moaned, "some dreadful mistake has been made. There is no stereo on this ship."

"It will be installed in Cincinnati. That will be in about twenty minutes."

"You are *sure*?"

"Quite sure."

"Oh, thank you! It's such a relief to talk with you. Do you know, I'm *thinking* of making you my social secretary."

"Thank you," Grace said evenly; "but I am under contract."

"But how stupidly tiresome! You can break it."

"No, I'm sorry Mrs Johnson. Good-bye." She switched off the screen and spoke again into her telephone. "Tell Accounting to double her fee. And I *won't* speak with her again." She cut off and shoved the little instrument savagely back into her pocket. "Social secretary!"

It was after dinner and Clare had retired to his living apartment before Carson called back. Francis took the call in his own office.

"Any luck?" he asked, when Carson's image had built up.

"Quite a bit. I've seen O'Neil."

"Well? Will he do it?"

"You mean can he do it, don't you?"

"Well—can he?"

"Now that is a funny thing—I didn't think it was theoretically possible. But after talking with him, I'm convinced that it is. O'Neil has a new outlook on field theory—stuff he's never published. The man is a genius."

“I don’t care,” said Francis, “whether he’s a genius or a Mongolian idiot—can he build some sort of a gravity thinnerouter?”

“I believe he can. I really do believe he can.”

“Fine. You hired him?”

“No. That’s the hitch. That’s why I called back. It’s like this: I happened to catch him in a mellow mood, and because we had worked together once before and because I had not aroused his ire quite as frequently as his other assistants he invited me to stay for dinner. We talked about a lot of things (you can’t hurry him) and I broached the proposition. It interested him mildly—the idea, I mean; not the proposition—and he discussed the theory with me, or, rather, at me. But he won’t work on it.”

“Why not? You didn’t offer him enough money. I guess I’d better tackle him.”

“No, Mr Francis, no. You don’t understand. He’s not interested in money. He’s independently wealthy and has more than he needs for his research, or anything else he wants. But just at present he is busy on wave mechanics theory and he just won’t be bothered with anything else.”

“Did you make him realize it was important?”

“Yes and no. Mostly no. I tried to, but there isn’t anything important to him but what he wants. It’s a sort of intellectual snobbishness. Other people simply don’t count.”

“All right,” said Francis. “You’ve done well so far. Here’s what you do: After I switch off, you call EXECUTIVE and make a transcript of everything you can remember of what he said about gravitational theory. We’ll hire the next best men, feed it to them, and see if it gives them any ideas to work on. In the meantime I’ll put a crew to work on the details of Dr O’Neil’s background. He’ll have a weak point somewhere; it’s just a matter of finding it. Maybe he’s keeping a woman somewhere—“

“He’s long past that.”

“--or maybe he has a by-blow stashed away somewhere. We’ll see. I want you to stay there in Portage. Since you can’t hire him, maybe you can persuade him to hire you. You’re our pipeline, I want it kept open. We’ve got to find something he wants, or something he is afraid of.”

“He’s not afraid of *anything*. I’m positive about that.”

“Then he wants something. If it’s not money, or women, it’s something else. It’s a law of nature.”

“I doubt it,’ Carson replied slowly. “Say! Did I tell you about his hobby?”

“No. What is it?”

“It’s china. In particular, Ming china. He has the best collection in the world, I’d guess. But I know what he wants!”

“Well, spill it, man, spill it. Don’t be dramatic.”

“It’s a little china dish, or bowl, about four inches across and two inches high. It’s got a Chinese name that means ‘Flower of Forgetfulness’.”

“Hmmm—doesn’t seem significant. You think he wants it pretty bad?”

“I *know* he does. He has a solid colorgraph of it in his study, where he

can look at it. But it hurts him to talk about it."

"Find out who owns it and where it is."

"I know. British Museum. That's why he can't buy it."

"So?' mused Francis. "Well, you can forget it. Carry on."

Clare came down to Francis' office and the three talked it over. "I guess we'll need Beaumont on this," was his comment when he had heard the report. "It will take the Government to get anything loose from the British Museum." Francis looked morose. "Well—what's eating you? What's wrong with that?"

"I know," offered Grace. "You remember the treaty under which Great Britain entered the planetary confederation?"

"I was never much good at history."

"It comes to this: I doubt if the planetary government can touch anything that belongs to the Museum without asking the British Parliament."

"Why not? Treaty or no treaty, the planetary government is sovereign. That was established in the Brazilian Incident."

"Yeah, sure. But it could cause questions to be asked in the House of Commons and that would lead to the one thing Beaumont wants to avoid at all costs—publicity."

"Okay. What do you propose?"

"I'd say that Sance and I had better slide over to England and find out just how tight they have the 'Flower of Forgetfulness' nailed down—and who does the nailing and what his weaknesses are."

Clare's eyes travelled past her to Francis, who was looking blank in the fashion that indicated assent to his intimates. "Okay," agreed Clare, "it's your baby. Taking a special?"

"No, we've got time to get the midnight out of New York. Bye-bye."

"Bye. Call me tomorrow."

When Grace screened the Chief the next day he took one look at her and exclaimed, "Good Grief, kid! What have you done to your hair?"

"We located the guy," she explained succinctly. "His weakness is blondes."

"You've had your skin bleached, too."

"Of course. How do you like it?"

"It's stupendous—though I preferred you the way you were. But what does Sance think of it?"

"He doesn't mind—it's business. But to get down to cases, Chief, there isn't much to report. This will have to be a lefthanded job. In the ordinary way, it would take an earthquake to get anything out of that tomb."

"Don't do anything that can't be fixed!"

"You know me, Chief. I won't get you in trouble. But it will be expensive."

"Of course."

"That's all for now. I'll screen tomorrow."

She was a brunette again the next day. “What is this?” asked Clare. “A masquerade?”

“I wasn’t the blonde he was weak for,” she explained, “but I found the one he was interested in.”

“Did it work out?”

“I think it will. Sance is having a facsimile integrated now. With luck, we’ll see you tomorrow.”

They showed up the next day, apparently empty handed. “Well?” said Clare, “well?”

“Seal the place up, Jay,” suggested Francis. “Then we’ll talk.” Clare flipped a switch controlling an interference shield which rendered his office somewhat more private than a coffin. “How about it?” he demanded. “Did you get it?”

“Show it to him, Grace.”

Grace turned her back, fumbled at her clothing for a moment, then turned around and placed it gently on the Chief’s desk.

It was not that it was beautiful—it was beauty. Its subtle simple curve had no ornamentation, decoration would have sullied it. One spoke softly in its presence, for fear a sudden noise would shatter it.

Clare reached out to touch it, then thought better of it and drew his hand back. But he bent his head over it and stared down into it. It was strangely hard to focus—to allocate—the bottom of the bowl. It seemed as if his sight sank deeper and ever deeper into it, as if he were drowning in a pool of light.

He jerked up his head and blinked. “God,” he whispered, “God—I didn’t know such things existed.”

He looked at Grace and looked away to Francis. Francis had tears in his eyes, or perhaps his own were blurred.

“Look, Chief,’ said Francis. “Look—couldn’t we just keep it and call the whole thing off?”

“There’s no use talking about it any longer,” said Francis wearily. “We can’t keep it, Chief. I shouldn’t have suggested it and you shouldn’t have listened to me. Let’s screen O’Neil.”

“We might just wait another day before we do anything about it,” Clare ventured. His eyes returned yet again to the ‘Flower of Forgetfulness’.

Grace shook her head. “No good. It will just be harder tomorrow. I *know*.” She walked decisively over to the stereo and manipulated the controls.

O’Neil was annoyed at being disturbed and twice annoyed that they had used the emergency signal to call him to his disconnected screen.

“What is this?’ he demanded. “What do you mean by disturbing a private citizen when he has disconnected? Speak up—and it had better be good, or, so help me, I’ll sue you!”

“We want you to do a little job of work for us, Doctor,” Clare began

evenly.

"What!" O'Neil seemed almost too surprised to be angry. "Do you mean to stand there, sir, and tell me that you have invaded the privacy of my home to ask *me* to work for *you*?"

"The pay will be satisfactory to you."

O'Neil seemed to be counting up to ten before answering. "Sir," he said carefully, "there are men in the world who seem to think they can buy anything, or anybody. I grant you that they have much to go on in that belief. But I am not for sale. Since you seem to be one of those persons, I will do my best to make this interview expensive for you. You will hear from my attorneys. Good night!"

"Wait a moment," Clare said urgently. "I believe that you are interested in china—"

"What if I am?"

"Show it to him, Grace." Grace brought the "Flower of Forgetfulness" up near the screen, handling it carefully, reverently. O'Neil said nothing. He leaned forward and stared. He seemed to be about to climb through the screen. "Where did you get it?" he said at last.

"That doesn't matter."

"I'll buy it from you - at your own price."

"It's not for sale. But you may have it—if we can reach an agreement."

O'Neil eyed him. "It's stolen property."

"You're mistaken. Nor will you find anyone to take an interest in such a charge. Now about this job—"

O'Neil pulled his eyes away from the bowl. "What is it you wish me to do?"

Clare explained the problem to him. When he had concluded O'Neil shook his head. "That's ridiculous," he said.

"We have reason to feel that is theoretically possible."

"Oh, certainly! It's theoretically possible to live forever, too. But no one has ever managed it."

"We think you can do it."

"Thank you for nothing. Say!" O'Neil stabbed a finger at him out of the screen. "You set that young pup Carson on me!"

"He was acting under my orders."

"Then, sir, I do not like your manners."

"How about the job? And this?" Clare indicated the bowl. O'Neil gazed at it and chewed his whiskers. "Suppose," he said, at last, "I make an honest attempt, to the full extent of my ability, to supply what you want—and I fail."

Clare shook his head. "We pay only for results. Oh, your salary, of course, but not *this*. This is a bonus in addition to your salary, *if* you are successful."

O'Neil seemed about to agree, then said suddenly, "You may be fooling me with a colorgraph. I can't tell through this damned screen."

Clare shrugged. "Come and see for yourself."

"I shall. I will. Stay where you are. Where are you? Damn it, sir, what's your *name*?"

He came storming in two hours later. "You've tricked me! The 'Flower' is still in England. I've investigated. I'll . . . I'll *punish* you, sir, with my own two hands."

"See for yourself," answered Clare. He stepped aside, so that his body no longer obscured O'Neil's view of Clare's desk top.

They let him look. They respected his need for quiet and let him look. After a long time he turned to them, but did not speak.

"Well?" asked Clare.

"I'll build your damned gadget," he said huskily. "I figured out an approach on the way here."

Beaumont came in person to call the day before the first session of the conference. "Just a social call, Mr Clare," he stated. "I simply wanted to express to you my personal appreciation for the work you have done. And to deliver this." "This" turned out to be a draft on the Bank Central for the agreed fee. Clare accepted it, glanced at it, nodded, and placed it on his desk.

"I take it, then," he remarked, "that the Government is satisfied with the service rendered."

"That is putting it conservatively," Beaumont assured him. "To be perfectly truthful, I did not think you could do so much. You seem to have thought of everything. The Callistan delegation is out now, riding around and seeing the sights in one of the little tanks you had prepared. They are delighted. Confidentially, I think we can depend on their vote in the coming sessions."

"Gravity shields working all right, eh?"

"Perfectly. I stepped into their sightseeing tank before we turned it over to them. I was as light as the proverbial feather. Too light - I was very nearly spacesick." He smiled in wry amusement. "I entered the Jovian apartments, too. That was quite another matter."

"Yes, it would be," Clare agreed. "Two and a half times normal weight is oppressive to say the least."

"It's a happy ending to a difficult task. I must be going. Oh, yes, one other little matter - I've discussed with Doctor O'Neil the possibility that the Administration may be interested in other uses for his new development. In order to simplify the matter it seems desirable that you provide me with a quitclaim to the O'Neil effect from General Services."

Clare gazed thoughtfully at the "Weeping Buddha" and chewed his thumb. "No," he said slowly, "no. I'm afraid that would be difficult."

"Why not?" asked Beaumont. "It avoids the necessity of adjudication and attendant waste of time. We are prepared to recognize your service and recompense you."

"Hmmm. I don't believe you fully understand the situation, Mr Beaumont. There is a certain amount of open territory between our contract

with Doctor O'Neil and your contract with us. You asked of us certain services and certain chattels with which to achieve that service. We provided them - for a fee. All done. But our contract with Doctor O'Neil made him a full-time employee for the period of his employment. His research results and the patents embodying them are the property of General Services."

"Really?" said Beaumont. "Doctor O'Neil has a different impression."

"Doctor O'Neil is mistaken. Seriously, Mr Beaumont - you asked us to develop a siege gun, figuratively speaking, to shoot a gnat. Did you expect us, as businessmen, to throw away the siege gun after one shot?"

"No, I suppose not. What do you propose to do?"

"We expect to exploit the gravity modulator commercially. I fancy we could get quite a good price for certain adaptations of it on Mars."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose you could. But to be brutally frank, Mr Clare, I am afraid that is impossible. it is a matter of imperative public policy that this development be limited to terrestrials. In fact, the administration would find it necessary to intervene and make it government monopoly."

"Have you considered how to keep O'Neil quiet?"

"In view of the change in circumstances, no. What is your thought?"

"A corporation, in which he would hold a block of stock and be president. One of our bright young men would be chairman of the board." Clare thought of Carson. "There would be stock enough to go around," he added, and watched Beaumont's face.

Beaumont ignored the bait. "I suppose that this corporation would be under contract to the Government - its sole customer?"

"That is the idea."

"Mmmm . . . yes, it seems feasible. Perhaps I had better speak with Doctor O'Neil."

"Help yourself."

Beaumont got O'Neil on the screen and talked with him in low tones. Or, more properly, Beaumont's tones were low. O'Neil displayed a tendency to blast the microphone. Clare sent for Francis and Grace and explained to them what had taken place.

Beaumont turned away from the screen. "The Doctor wishes to speak with you, Mr Clare."

O'Neil looked at him frigidly. "What is this claptrap I've had to listen to, sir? What's this about the O'Neil effect being your property?"

"It was in your contract, Doctor. Don't you recall?"

"Contract! I never read the damned thing. But I can tell you this: I'll take you to court. I'll tie you in knots before I'll let you make a fool of me that way."

"Just a moment, Doctor, please!" Clare soothed. "We have no desire to take advantage of a mere legal technicality, and no one disputes your interest. Let me outline what I had in mind - " He ran rapidly over the plan. O'Neil listened, but his expression was still unmollified at the conclusion.

"I'm not interested," he said gruffly. "So far as I am concerned the

Government can have the whole thing. And I'll see to it."

"I had not mentioned one other condition," added Clare.

"Don't bother."

"I must. This will be just a matter of agreement between gentlemen, but it is essential. You have custody of the 'Flower of Forgetfulness'."

O'Neil was at once on guard. "What do you mean, 'custody'. I own it. Understand me - *own* it."

"'Own it,'" repeated Clare. "Nevertheless, in return for the concessions we are making you with respect to your contract, we want something in return."

"What?" asked O'Neil. The mention of the bowl had upset his confidence.

"You own it and you retain possession of it. But I want your word that I, or Mr Francis, or Miss Cormet, may come look at it from time to time - frequently."

O'Neil looked unbelieving. "You mean that you simply want to come to *look* at it?"

"That's all."

"Simply to *enjoy* it?"

"That's right."

O'Neil looked at him with new respect. "I did not understand you before, Mr Clare. I apologize. As for the corporation nonsense - do as you like. I don't care. You and Mr Francis and Miss Cormet may come to see the 'Flower' whenever you like. You have my word."

"Thank you, Doctor O'Neil - for all of us." He switched off as quickly as could be managed gracefully.

Beaumont was looking at Clare with added respect, too. "I think," he said, "that the next time I shall not interfere with your handling of the details. I'll take my leave, Adieu, gentlemen - and Miss Cormet."

When the door had rolled down behind him Grace remarked, "That seems to polish it off."

"Yes," said Clare. "We've 'walked his dog' for him; O'Neil has what he wants; Beaumont got what he wanted, and more besides."

"Just what is he after?"

"I don't know, but I suspect that he would like to be first president of the Solar System Federation, if and when there is such a thing. With the aces we have dumped in his lap, he might make it. Do you realize the potentialities of the O'Neil effect?"

"Vaguely," said Francis.

"Have you thought about what it will do to space navigation? Or the possibilities it adds in the way of colonization? Or its recreational uses? There's a fortune in that alone."

"What do we get out of it?"

"What do we get out of it? Money, old son. Gobs and gobs of money. There's always money in giving people what they want." He glanced up at the Scottie dog trademark.

“Money,” repeated Francis. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

“Anyhow,” added Grace, “we can always go look at the ‘Flower’.”

COMING ATTRACTION

By Fritz Leiber

The coupe with the fishhooks welded to the fender shouldered up over the curb like the nose of a nightmare. The girl in its path stood frozen, her face probably stiff with fright under her mask. For once my reflexes weren’t shy. I took a fast step toward her, grabbed her elbow, yanked her back. Her black skirt swirled out.

The big coupe shot by, its turbine humming. I glimpsed three faces. Something ripped. I felt the hot exhaust on my ankles as the big coupe swerved back into the street. A thick cloud like a black flower blossomed from its jouncing rear end, while from the fishhooks flew a black shimmering rag.

"Did they get you?" I asked the girl.

She had twisted around to look where the side of her skirt was torn away. She was wearing nylon tights.

"The hooks didn’t touch me," she said shakily. "I guess I’m lucky."

I heard voices around us:

"Those kids! What’ll they think up next?"

"They’re a menace. They ought to be arrested."

Sirens screamed at a rising pitch as two motor police, their rocket-assist jets full on, came whizzing toward us after the coupe. But the black flower had become an inky fog obscuring the whole street. The motor police switched from rocket assists to rocket brakes and swerved to a stop near the smoke cloud.

"Are you English?" the girl asked me. "You have an English accent." Her voice came shudderingly from behind the sleek black satin mask. I fancied her teeth must be chattering. Eyes that were perhaps blue searched my face from behind the black gauze covering the eyeholes of the mask.

I told her she’d guessed right.

She stood close to me. "Will you come to my place tonight?" she asked rapidly. "I can’t thank you now. And there’s something else you can help me about."

My arm, still lightly circling her waist, felt her body trembling. I was answering the plea in that as much as in her voice when I said, "Certainly."

She gave me an address south of Inferno, an apartment number and a time. She asked me my name and I told her.

"Hey, you!"

I turned obediently to the policeman’s shout. He shooed away the small clucking crowd of masked women and barefaced men. Coughing from the smoke that the black coupe had thrown out, he asked for my papers. I handed him the essential ones.

He looked at them and then at me. "British Barter? How long will you be in New York?"

Suppressing the urge to say, "For as short a time as possible." I told him I’d be here for a week or so.

"May need you as a witness," he explained. "Those kids can’t use smoke on us. When they do that, we pull them in."

He seemed to think the smoke was the bad thing. "They tried to kill the lady," I pointed out.

He shook his head wisely. "They always pretend they’re going to, but actually they just want to snag skirts. I’ve picked up rippers with as many as fifty skirt snags tacked up in their rooms. Of course, sometimes they come a little too close."

I explained that if I hadn’t yanked her out of the way she’d have been hit by more than hooks. But he interrupted. "If she’d thought it was a real murder attempt, she’d have stayed here."

I looked around. It was true. She was gone.

"She was fearfully frightened," I told him.

"Who wouldn’t be? Those kids would have scared old Stalin himself."

"I mean frightened of more than ‘kids.’ They didn’t look like kids."

"What did they look like?"

I tried without much success to describe the three faces. A vague impression of viciousness and effeminacy doesn’t mean much.

"Well, I could be wrong," he said finally. "Do you know the girl? Where she lives?"

"No," I half lied.

The other policeman hung up his radiophone and ambled toward us, kicking at the tendrils of dissipating smoke. The black cloud no longer hid the dingy façades with their five-year-old radiation flash burns, and I could begin to make out the distant stump of the Empire State Building, thrusting up out of Inferno like a mangled finger.

"They haven’t been picked up so far," the approaching policeman grumbled. "Left smoke for five blocks, from what Ryan says."

The first policeman shook his head. "That’s bad," he observed solemnly.

I was feeling a bit uneasy and ashamed. An Englishman shouldn’t lie, at least not on impulse.

"They sound like nasty customers," the first policeman continued in the same grim tone. "We’ll need witnesses. Looks as if you may have to stay in New York longer than you expect."

I got the point. I said, "I forgot to show you all my papers," and handed him a few others, making sure there was a five-dollar bill in among them.

When he handed them back a bit later, his voice was no longer ominous. My feelings of guilt vanished. To cement our relationship, I chatted with the two of them about their job.

"I suppose the masks give you some trouble," I observed. "Over in England we’ve been reading about your new crop of masked female bandits."

"Those things get exaggerated," the first policeman assured me. "It’s the men masking as women that really mix us up. But, brother, when we nab them, we jump on them with both feet."

"And you get so you can spot women almost as well as if they had naked faces," the second policeman volunteered. "You know, hands and all that."

"Especially all that," the first agreed with a chuckle. "Say, is it true that some girls

don’t mask over in England?"

"A number of them have picked up the fashion," I told him. "Only a few, though—the ones who always adopt the latest style, however extreme."

"They’re usually masked in the British newscasts."

"I imagine it’s arranged that way out of deference to American taste," I confessed. "Actually, not very many do mask."

The second policeman considered that. "Girls going down the Street bare from the neck up." It was not clear whether he viewed the prospect with relish or moral distaste. Likely both.

"A few members keep trying to persuade Parliament to enact a law forbidding all masking," I continued, talking perhaps a bit too much.

The second policeman shook his head. "What an idea. You know, masks are a pretty good thing, brother. Couple of years more and I’m going to make my wife wear hers around the house."

The first policeman shrugged. "If women were to stop wearing masks, in six weeks you wouldn’t know the difference. You get used to anything, if enough people do or don’t do it."

I agreed, rather regretfully, and left them. I turned north on Broadway (old Tenth Avenue, I believe) and walked rapidly until I was beyond Inferno. Passing such an area of undecontaminated radioactivity always makes a person queasy. I thanked God there weren’t any such in England, as yet.

The street was almost empty, though I was accosted by a couple of beggars with faces tunneled by H-bomb scars, whether real or of make-up putty I couldn’t tell. A fat woman held out a baby with webbed fingers and toes. I told myself it would have been deformed anyway and that she was only capitalizing on our fear of bomb-induced mutations. Still, I gave her a seven-and-a-half-cent piece. Her mask made me feel I was paying tribute to an African fetish.

"May all your children be blessed with one head and two eyes, sir."

"Thanks," I said, shuddering, and hurried past her.

" … There’s only trash behind the mask, so turn your head, stick to your task: Stay away, stay away—from—the—girls!"

This last was the end of an anti-sex song being sung by some religionists half a block from the circle-and-cross insignia of a femalist temple. They reminded me only faintly of our small tribe of British monastics. Above their heads was a jumble of billboards advertising predigested foods, wrestling instruction, radio handies and the like.

I stared at the hysterical slogans with disagreeable fascination. Since the female face and form have been banned on American signs, the very letters of the advertiser’s alphabet have begun to crawl with sex—the fat-bellied, big-breasted capital B, the lascivious double 0. However, I reminded myself, it is chiefly the mask that so strangely accents sex in America.

A British anthropologist has pointed out that, while it took more than five thousand years to shift the chief point of sexual interest from the hips to the breasts, the next transition, to the face, has taken less than fifty years. Comparing the American style with Moslem tradition is not valid; Moslem women are compelled to

wear veils, the purpose of which is to make a husband's property private, while American women have only the compulsion of fashion and use masks to create mystery.

Theory aside, the actual origins of the trend are to be found in the antiradiation clothing of World War III, which led to masked wrestling, now a fantastically popular sport, and that in turn led to the current female fashion. Only a wild style at first, masks quickly became as necessary as brassieres and lipsticks had been earlier in the century.

I finally realized that I was not speculating about masks in general, but about what lay behind one in particular. That's the devil of the things; you're never sure whether a girl is heightening loveliness or hiding ugliness. I pictured a cool, pretty face in which fear showed only in widened eyes. Then I remembered her blond hair, rich against the blackness of the satin mask. She'd told me to come at the twenty-second hour—10 P.M.

I climbed to my apartment near the British Consulate; the elevator shaft had been shoved out of plumb by an old blast, a nuisance in these tall New York buildings. Before it occurred to me that I would be going out again, I automatically tore a tab from the film strip under my shirt. I developed it just to be sure. It showed that the total radiation I'd taken that day was still within the safety limit. I'm no phobic about it, as so many people are these days, but there's no point in taking chances.

I flopped down on the daybed and stared at the silent speaker and the dark screen of the video set. As always, they made me think, somewhat bitterly, of the two great nations of the world. Mutilated by each other, yet still strong, they were crippled giants poisoning the planet with their respective dreams of an impossible equality and an impossible success.

I fretfully switched on the speaker. By luck, the newscaster was talking excitedly of the prospects of a bumper wheat crop, sown by planes across a dust bowl moistened by seeded rains. I listened carefully to the rest of the program (it was remarkably clear of Russian telejamming), but there was no further news of interest to me. And, of course, no mention of the moon, though everyone knows that America and Russia are racing to develop their primary bases into fortresses capable of mutual assault and the launching of alphabet bombs toward Earth. I myself knew perfectly well that the British electronic equipment I was helping trade for American wheat was destined for use in spaceships.

I switched off the newscast. It was growing dark, and once again I pictured a tender, frightened face behind a mask. I hadn't had a date since England. It's exceedingly difficult to become acquainted with a girl in America, where as little as a smile often can set one of them yelping for the police to say nothing of the increasingly puritanical morality and the roving gangs that keep most women indoors after dark. And, naturally, the masks, which are definitely not, as the Soviets claim, a last invention of capitalist degeneracy, but a sign of great psychological insecurity. The Russians have no masks, but they have their own signs of stress.

I went to the window and impatiently watched the darkness gather. I was getting very restless. After a while a ghostly violet cloud appeared to the south. My hair rose. Then I laughed. I had momentarily fancied it a radiation from the crater of the Hellbomb, though I should instantly have known it was only the radio-induced glow

in the sky over the amusement and residential area south of Inferno.

Promptly at twenty-two hours I stood before the door of my unknown girl friend’s apartment. The electronic say-who-please said just that. I answered clearly, "Wysten Turner," wondering if she’d given my name to the mechanism. She evidently had, for the door opened. I walked into a small empty living room, my heart pounding a bit.

The room was expensively furnished with the latest pneumatic hassocks and sprawlers. There were some midgie hooks on the table. The one I picked up was the standard hard-boiled detective story in which two female murderers go gunning for each other.

The television was on. A masked girl in green was crooning a love song. Her right hand held something that blurred off into the foreground. I saw the set had a handie, which we haven’t in England as yet, and curiously thrust my hand into the handie orifice beside the screen. Contrary to my expectations, it was not like slipping into a pulsing rubber glove, but rather as if the girl on the screen actually held my hand.

A door opened behind me. I jerked out my hand with as guilty a reaction as if I’d been caught peering through a keyhole.

She stood in the bedroom doorway. I think she was trembling. She was wearing a gray fur coat, white-speckled, and a gray velvet evening mask with shirred gray lace around the eyes and mouth. Her fingernails twinkled like silver.

I hadn’t occurred to me that she’d expect us to go out.

"I should have told you," she said softly. Her mask veered nervously toward the books and the screen and the room’s dark corners. "But I can’t possibly talk to you here."

I said doubtfully, "There’s a place near the Consulate … "

"I know where we can be together and talk," she said rapidly. "If you don’t mind."

As we entered the elevator I said, "I’m afraid I dismissed the cab."

But the cab driver hadn’t gone, for some reason of his own. He jumped out and smirkingly held the front door open for us. I told him we preferred to sit in back. He sulkily opened the rear door, slammed it after us, jumped in front and slammed the door behind him.

My companion leaned forward. "Heaven," she said.

The driver switched on the turbine and televisor.

"Why did you ask if I were a British subject?" I said, to start the conversation.

She leaned away from me, tilting her mask close to the window. "See the moon," she said in a quick, dreamy voice.

"But why, really?" I pressed, conscious of an irritation that had nothing to do with her.

"It’s edging up into the purple of the sky."

"And what’s your name?"

"The purple makes it look yellower."

Just then I became aware of the source of my irritation. It lay in the square of writhing light in the front of the cab beside the driver.

I don’t object to ordinary wrestling matches, though they bore me, but I simply detest watching a man wrestle a woman. The fact that the bouts are generally "on the

level," with the man greatly outclassed in weight and reach and the masked females young and personable, only makes them seem worse to me.

"Please turn off the screen," I requested the driver.

He shook his head without looking around. "Uh-uh, man," he said. "They've been grooming that babe for weeks for this bout with Little Zirk."

Infuriated, I reached forward, but my companion caught my arm. "Please," she whispered frightenedly, shaking her head.

I settled back, frustrated. She was closer to me now, but silent, and for a few moments I watched the heaves and contortions of the powerful masked girl and her wiry masked opponent on the screen. His frantic scrambling at her reminded me of a male spider.

I jerked around, facing my companion. "Why did those three men want to kill you?" I asked sharply.

The eyeholes of her mask faced the screen. "Because they're jealous of me," she whispered.

"Why are they jealous?"

She still didn't look at me. "Because of him."

"Who?"

She didn't answer.

I put my arm around her shoulders. "Are you afraid to tell me?" I asked. "What is the matter?"

She still didn't look my way. She smelled nice.

"See here," I said laughingly, changing my tactics, "you really should tell me something about yourself. I don't even know what you look like."

I half playfully lifted my hand to the band of her neck. She gave it an astonishingly swift slap. I pulled it away in sudden pain. There were four tiny indentations on the back. From one of them a tiny bead of blood welled out as I watched. I looked at her silver fingernails and saw they were actually delicate and pointed metal caps.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," I heard her say, "but you frightened me. I thought for a moment you were going to … "

At last she turned to me. Her coat had fallen open. Her evening dress was Cretan Revival, a bodice of lace beneath and supporting the breasts without covering them.

"Don't be angry," she said, putting her arms around my neck. "You were wonderful this afternoon."

The soft gray velvet of her mask, molding itself to her cheek, pressed mine. Through the mask's lace the wet warm tip of her tongue touched my chin.

"I'm not angry," I said. "Just puzzled and anxious to help."

The cab stopped. To either side were black windows bordered by spears of broken glass. The sickly purple light showed a few ragged figures slowly moving toward us.

The driver muttered, "It's the turbine, man. We're grounded." He sat there hunched and motionless. "Wish it had happened somewhere else."

My companion whispered, "Five dollars is the usual amount."

She looked out so shudderingly at the congregating figures that I suppressed my indignation and did as she suggested. The driver took the bill without a word. As he

started up, he put his hand out the window and I heard a few coins clink on the pavement.

My companion came back into my arms, but her mask faced the television screen, where the tall girl had just pinned the convulsively kicking Little Zirk.

"I’m so frightened," she breathed.

Heaven turned out to be an equally ruinous neighborhood, but it had a club with an awning and a huge doorman uniformed like a spaceman, but in gaudy colors. In my sensuous daze I rather liked it all. We stepped out of the cab just as a drunken old woman came down the sidewalk, her mask awry. A couple ahead of us turned their heads from the half-revealed face as if from an ugly body at the beach. As we followed them in I heard the doorman say, "Get along, Grandma, and cover yourself."

Inside, everything was dimness and blue glows. She had said we could talk here, but I didn’t see how. Besides the inevitable chorus of sneezes and coughs (they say America is fifty per cent allergic these days), there was a band going full blast in the latest robop style, in which an electronic composing machine selects an arbitrary sequence of tones into which the musicians weave their raucous little individualities.

Most of the people were in booths. The band was behind the bar. On a small platform beside them a girl was dancing, stripped to her mask. The little cluster of men at the shadowy far end of the bar weren’t looking at her.

We inspected the menu in gold script on the wall and pushed the buttons for breast of chicken, fried shrimps and two Scotches. Moments later, the serving bell tinkled. I opened the gleaming panel and took out our drinks.

The cluster of men at the bar filed off toward the door, but first they stared around the room. My companion had just thrown back her coat. Their look lingered on our booth. I noticed that there were three of them.

The band chased off the dancing girls with growls. I handed my companion a straw and we sipped our drinks.

"You wanted me to help you about something," I said. "Incidentally, I think you’re lovely."

She nodded quick thanks, looked around, leaned forward. "Would it be hard for me to get to England?"

"No," I replied, a bit taken aback. "Provided you have an American passport."

"Are they difficult to get?"

"Rather," I said, surprised at her lack of information. "Your country doesn’t like its nationals to travel, though it isn’t quite as stringent as Russia."

"Could the British Consulate help me get a passport?"

"It’s hardly their—"

"Could you?"

I realized we were being inspected. A man and two girls had paused opposite our table. The girls were tall and wolfish-looking, with spangled masks. The man stood jauntily between them like a fox on its hind legs.

My companion didn’t glance at them, but she sat back. I noticed that one of the girls had a big yellow bruise on her forearm. After a moment they walked to a booth in the deep shadows.

"Know them?" I asked. She didn’t reply. I finished my drink. "I’m not sure you’d like England," I said. "The austerity’s altogether different from your American brand of misery."

She leaned forward again. "But I must get away," she whispered.

"Why?" I was getting impatient.

"Because I’m so frightened."

There was chimes. I opened the panel and handed her the fried shrimps. The sauce on my breast of chicken was a delicious steaming compound of almonds, soy and ginger. But something must have been wrong with the radionic oven that had thawed and heated it, for at the first bite I crunched a kernel of ice in the meat. These delicate mechanisms need constant repair and there aren’t enough mechanics.

I put down my fork. "What are you really scared of?" I asked her.

For once her mask didn’t waver away from my face. As I waited I could feel the fears gathering without her naming them, tiny dark shapes swarming through the curved night outside, converging on the radioactive pest spot of New York, dipping into the margins of the purple. I felt a sudden rush of sympathy, a desire to protect the girl opposite me. The warm feeling added itself to the infatuation engendered in the cab.

"Everything," she said finally.

I nodded and touched her hand.

"I’m afraid of the moon," she began, her voice going dreamy and brittle, as it had in the cab. "You can’t look at it and not think of guided bombs."

"It’s the same moon over England," I reminded her.

"But it’s not England’s moon any more. It’s ours and Russia’s. You’re not responsible. Oh, and then," she said with a tilt of her mask, "I’m afraid of the cars and the gangs and the loneliness and Inferno. I’m afraid of the lust that undresses your face. And"—her voice hushed—"I’m afraid of the wrestlers."

"Yes?" I prompted softly after a moment.

Her mask came forward. "Do you know something about the wrestlers?" she asked rapidly. "The ones that wrestle women, I mean. They often lose, you know. And then they have to have a girl to take their frustration out on. A girl who’s soft and weak and terribly frightened. They need that, to keep them men. Other men don’t want them to have a girl. Other men want them just to fight women and be heroes. But they must have a girl. It’s horrible for her."

I squeezed her fingers tighter, as if courage could be transmitted granting I had any. "I think I can get you to England," I said.

Shadows crawled onto the table and stayed there. I looked up at the three men who had been at the end of the bar. They were the men I had seen in the big coupe. They wore black sweaters and close-fitting black trousers. Their faces were as expressionless as dopers. Two of them stood about me. The other loomed over the girl.

"Drift off, man," I was told. I heard the other inform the girl, "We’ll wrestle a fall, sister. What shall it be? Judo, slapsie or kill-who-can?"

I stood up. There are times when an Englishman simply must be maltreated. But just then the foxlike man came gliding in like the star of a ballet. The reaction of the other three startled me. They were acutely embarrassed.

He smiled at them thinly. "You won’t win my favor by tricks like this," he said.

"Don’t get the wrong idea, Zirk," one of them pleaded.

"I will if it’s right," he said. "She told me what you tried to do this afternoon. That won’t endear you to me, either. Drift."

They backed off awkwardly. "Let’s get out of here," one of them said loudly as they turned. "I know a place where they fight naked with knives."

Little Zirk laughed musically and slipped into the seat beside my companion. She shrank from him, just a little. I pushed my feet back, leaned forward.

"Who’s your friend, baby?" he asked, not looking at her.

She passed the question to me with a little gesture. I told him. "British," he observed. "She’s been asking you about getting out of the country? About passports?" He smiled pleasantly. "She likes to start running away. Don’t you, baby?" His small hand began to stroke her wrist, the fingers bent a little, the tendons ridged, as if he were about to grab and twist.

"Look here," I said sharply. "I have to be grateful to you for ordering off those bullies, but—"

"Think nothing of it," he told me. "They’re no harm except when they’re behind steering wheels. A well-trained fourteen-year-old girl could cripple any one of them. Why, even Theda here, if she went in for that sort of thing … " He turned to her, shifting his hand from her wrist to her hair. He stroked it, letting the strands slip slowly through his fingers. "You know I lost tonight, baby, don’t you?" he said softly.

I stood up. "Come along," I said to her. "Let’s leave."

She just sat there. I couldn’t even tell if she was trembling. I tried to read a message in her eyes through the mask.

"I’ll take you away," I said to her. "I can do it. I really will."

He smiled at me. "She’d like to go with you," he said. "Wouldn’t you, baby?"

"Will you or won’t you?" I said to her. She still just sat there.

He slowly knotted his fingers in her hair.

"Listen, you little vermin," I snapped at him. "Take your hands off her."

He came up from the seat like a snake. I’m no fighter. I just know that the more scared I am, the harder and straighter I hit. This time I was lucky. But as he crumpled back I felt a slap and four stabs of pain in my cheek. I clapped my hand to it. I could feel the four gashes made by her dagger finger caps, and the warm blood oozing out from them.

She didn’t look at me. She was bending over little Zirk and cuddling her mask to his cheek and crooning, "There, there, don’t feel bad, you’ll be able to hurt me afterward."

There were sounds around us, but they didn’t come close. I leaned forward and ripped the mask from her face.

I really don’t know why I should have expected her face to be anything else. It was very pale, of course, and there weren’t any cosmetics. I suppose there’s no point in wearing any under a mask. The eyebrows were untidy and the lips chapped. But as for the general expression, as for the feelings crawling and wriggling across it …

Have you ever lifted a rock from damp soil? Have you ever watched the slimy

white grubs?

I looked down at her, she up at me. "Yes, you’re so frightened, aren’t you?" I said sarcastically. "You dread this little nightly drama, don’t you? You’re scared to death."

And I walked right out into the purple night, still holding my hand to my bleeding cheek. No one stopped me, not even the girl wrestlers. I wished I could tear a tab from under my shirt and test it then and there, and find I’d taken too much radiation, and so be able to ask to cross the Hudson and go down New Jersey, past the lingering radiance of the Narrows Bomb, and so on to Sandy Hook to wait for the rusty ship that would take me back over the seas to England.

WE GUARD THE BLACK PLANET!

Henry Kuttner

The stratoship dropped me at Stockholm, and an air-ferry took me to Thunder Fjord, where I had been born. In six years nothing had changed. The black rocks still jutted out into the tossing seas, where the red sails of Vikings had once flaunted, and the deep roar of the waters came up to greet me. Against the sky Freya, my father's gerfalcon, was wheeling. And high on the crag was the Hall, its tower keeping unceasing vigil over the northern ocean.

On the porch my father was waiting, a giant who had grown old. Nils Esterling had always been a silent man. His thin lips seemed clamped tight upon some secret he never told, and I think I was always a little afraid of him, though he was never unkind. But between us was a gulf. Nils seemed —shackled. I realized that first when I saw him watching the birds go south before the approach of winter. His eyes held a sick longing that, somehow, made me uneasy.

Shackled, silent, taciturn, he had grown old, always a little withdrawn from the world, always I thought, afraid of the stars. In the daytime he would watch his gerfalcon against the deep blue of the sky, but at night he drew the shades and would not venture out. The stars meant something to him. Only once, I knew, he had been in space; he never ventured beyond the atmosphere again. What had happened out there I did not know. But Nils Esterling came back changed, with something dead inside his soul.

I was going out now. In my pocket were my papers, the result of six years of exhausting work at Sky Point, where I had been a cadet. I was shipping tomorrow on the *Martins,* Callisto bound. Nils had asked me to come home first.

So I was here, and the gerfalcon came down wheeling, dropping, its talons clamping like iron on my father's gloved wrist. It was like a welcome. Freya was old, too, but her golden eyes were still bright, her grip still deadly.

Nils shook hands with me without rising. He gestured me to a chair. "I'm glad you came back, Arn. So you passed. That was good to hear. You'll be in space tomorrow."

"For Callisto," I said. "How are you, Nils? I was afraid—"

His smile held no mirth. "That I was ill? Or perhaps dying. No, Arn. I've been dying for forty years—" He looked at the gerfalcon. "It doesn't matter a great deal

now. Except that I hope it comes soon. You'll know why when I tell you about —about what happened to me in space four decades ago. I'll try not to be bitter, but it's hard. Damned hard." Again Nils looked at the gerfalcon.

He went on after a moment, threading the cord through Freya's jesses. "You haven't much time, if your ship blasts off tomorrow. What port? Newark? Well—what about food?"

"I ate on the ferry, Dad—" I seldom called him that.

He moved his big shoulders uneasily. "Let's have a drink." He summoned the servant, and presently there were highballs before us. I could not repress the thought that whiskey was incongruous; in the Hall we should have drunk ale from horns. Well, that was the past. A dead past now.

Nils seemed to read my thought. "The old things linger somehow, Arn. They come down to us in our blood. So—"

"Waes had," I said.

"Drinc hael." He drained the glass. Knots of muscle bunched at the corners of his jaw. With a sudden, furious motion, he cast off the gerfalcon, the leash slipping through the jesses. Freya took to the air with a hoarse, screaming cry.

"The instinct of flight is in our race," Nils said. "To be free, to fight, and to fly. In the old days we went Viking because of that. Leif the Lucky sailed to Greenland; our ships went down past the Tin Isles to Rome and Byzantium; we sailed even to Cathay. In the winter we caulked our keels and sharpened our swords. Then, when the ice broke up in the fjords, the red sails lifted again. Ran called us—Ran of the seas, goddess of the unknown."

His voice changed; he quoted softly from an old poet.

What is woman that you forsake her,
And the hearthstone, and the home-acre,
To go with the old gray Widowmaker ....

"Aye," said Nils Esterling, a lost sickness in his eyes. "Our race cannot be prisoned, or it dies. And I have been prisoned for forty years. By all the hells of all the worlds!" he whispered, his voice shaking. "A most damnable prison! My soul turned rotten before I'd been back on earth a week. Even before that. And there was no way out of my prison; I locked it with my own hands, and broke the key.

"You never knew about that, Arn. You'll know now. There's a reason why I must tell you—"

He told me, while the slow night came down, and the borealis flamed and shook like spears of light in the polar sky. The Frost Giants were on the march, for a sudden chill blew in from the fjord. Overhead the wind screamed, like the trumpet cries of Valkyries.

Far beneath us surged the sea, moving with its sliding, resistless motion, spuming against the rocks. Above us, the stars shone brightly.

And on Nils' wrist, where it had returned, the gerfalcon Freya rested, drowsy, stirring a little from time to time, but content to remain there.

It had been thus forty years and more ago, Nils said, in his youth, when the hot blood went singing through his veins, and the Viking spirit flamed within him. The

seas were tamed.

The way of his ancestors was no longer open to him. But there were new frontiers open—

The gulfs between the stars held mysteries, and Nils signed as A. B. on a spaceship, a cranky freighter, making the Great Circle of the trade routes. Earth to Venus, and swinging outward again to the major planets.

The life toughened him, after a few years.

And in Marspole North, in a *satha-divs,* he ran into Captain Morse Damon, veteran of the Asteroid War.

Damon told Nils about the Valkyries—the guardians of the Black Planet.

He was harsh and lean and gray as weathered rock, and his black stare was without warmth. Sipping watered *satha,* he watched Nils Esterling, noting the leatheroid tunic worn at cuffs and elbows, the frayed straps of the elasto sandals.

"You know my name."

"Sure." Esterling said. "I see the newstapes. But you haven't been mentioned for a while."

"Not since the Asteroid War ended, no. The pact they made left me out in the cold. I had a guerilla force raiding through the Belt. In another year I could have turned the balance. But after the armistice—"

Damon shrugged. "I'm no good for anything but fighting. I kept a ship; they owed me that. The *Vulcan.* She's a sweet boat, well found and fast. But I can't use her unless I sign up with the big companies. Besides, I don't want to do freighting. The hell with that. I've been at loose ends, blasting around the System, looking for—well, I don't know what. Had a shot or two at prospecting. But it's dull, sinking assay shafts, sweating for a few tons of ore. Not my sort of life."

"There's a war on Venus."

"Penny-ante stuff. I'm on the trail of something big now. On the trail of—" he smiled crookedly—"ghosts. Valkyries."

"Mars isn't the place, then. Norway, on Earth—"

Damon's gaze sharpened. "Not Norway. Space. Valkyries, I said—women with wings."

Esterling drank *satha,* feeling the cold, numbing liquor slide down his throat. "A new race on some planet? I never heard of winged humans."

"You've heard of Glory Hole and Davy Jones* Locker. Mean to say you've been in space three years and never heard of the Valkyries—the Black Planet?"

Esterling put down his glass gently. How did Damon know that he'd been a spaceman for three years? Till now he had thought this merely a casual acquaintance, two Earthmen drinking together on an alien world. Now—

"You mean the legend," he said. "Never paid much attention. When a ship cracks up in space, the crew go to the Black Planet after they die. Spaceman's heaven."

"Yeah. A legend, that's all. When wrecks are found, all the bodies are found in 'em—naturally! But the story is that there are winged women—call them Valkyries—who live in an invisible world somewhere in the System."

"You think they exist?"

"I think there's truth behind the legend. It isn't merely a terrestrial belief. Martians,

Vesuvians, Callistans—they all have their yarns about winged space-women."

Esterling coughed hi the smoky atmosphere. "Well?"

"Here it is. Not long ago I met up with an archeologist, a guy named Beale. James Beale. He's got a string of degrees after his name, and for ten years he's been going through the System, checking up on the Black Planet, collecting data all over the place. He showed me what he had, and it was plenty convincing. It added up. A scrap of information from Venus, a story from beyond Io. Legends mostly, but there were facts too. Enough to make me believe that there's an invisible world somewhere in space."

"How invisible?"

"I don't know. Beale says it must be a planet with a low albedo—or something of the sort. It absorbs light. The winged people live on it. Sometimes they leave it Maybe they have ships, though I can't tell about that, of course. So we have legends. Beale and I are going to the Black Planet."

"All right," Esterling said. "It sounds crazy enough, but you could be right. Only—what do you expect to find there?"

Damon smiled. "Dunno. Excitement, anyhow. Beale's sure there are immense sources of power on the black world. I don't suppose well lose anything on the deal. Hell, I'm fed up with doing nothing, knocking around the System waiting for something to happen—and it never does. I'm not alive unless I'm fighting. This is a fight, in a way."

"Well?"

"Want a job?"

"You short-handed?"

"Plenty. You look strong—" Damon reached across the table and squeezed the other's biceps. His face altered, not much, but enough to convince Esterling of what he already suspected.

"Okay, Damon." He rolled up his sleeve, revealing an arm-bracelet of heavy gold clasped about his upper arm. "Is this what you're after?"

The captain's nostrils distended. He met Esterling's stare squarely.

"You want the cards on the table?"

"Sure."

Damon said, "I just got back from Norway, on Earth. I went there to look you up. Beale found out about that bracelet."

Esterling nodded. "It's an heirloom. Belonged to my great-grandmother, Gudrun. I don't know where she got it."

"It has an inscription. A copy of it was made about a hundred years ago for the Stockholm Museum. Beale ran across that copy. He can read Runic, and the bracelet carries an inscription—"

"I know."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Something about the Valkyries. Part of an old *Edda,* I suppose."

Damon made a noise deep in his throat "Not quite. It gives the location of the Black Planet."

"The hell it does!" Esterling removed the bracelet and examined it carefully. "I

thought it was merely symbolism. The rune doesn't mean anything."

"Beale thought it did. He saw the copy, I said, and it was incomplete. But he found enough to convince him that the complete inscription gave the location of the Black Planet."

"But why—"

"How should I know? Maybe the winged people visited Earth once, maybe somebody found the Black Planet by accident and remembered his space-bearings. He wrote it down where he'd have it safely—on an arm-bracelet. Somehow your great-grandmother got it."

Esterling stared at the golden band. "I don't believe it."

"Will you sign on with me, as supercargo, to look for the Black Planet? You can use a job, by the looks of your clothes."

"Sure I can. But a job like that—"

"Talk to Beale, anyway. He'll convince you."

Esterling grimaced. "I doubt that. However, I suppose I can't lose." He looked again at the bracelet. "Okay, I'll see him."

Damon rose, tossing coins on the stained metalloy table. Esterling finished his *satha,* conscious that the treacherous Martian distillate was affecting him. *Satha* did that. It gave you a deceptive cold clarity that disguised its potency. Martians could take it, with their different metabolism; but it was dangerous to Earthmen.

It was doubly dangerous for Esterling now. He walked beside Damon along the curving street, the ornate, fragile-seeming buildings of Marspole North towering above him—the ones that were not in ruins. It was possible to build tall towers on Mars, because of the slight gravity-pull, but the frequent quakes that shook the ancient planet often brought down those towers in crashing wreckage.

Near the spaceport a man was waiting, thin, dwarfish, and with a pinched, meager face. He was fingering a scrubby mustache and shivering with cold in his thin whites.

"You kept me waiting long enough," he said complainingly, his voice a high-pitched whine. "I'm nearly frozen, drat it. Is he Esterling?"

Damon nodded. "Yeah. Esterling—Beale. He's got the bracelet."

Beale's fingers fluttered at his mouth. "Heavens, that's a relief. We've been tracking you all over the System, man. A week ago we learned you'd shipped out of Io for Marspole North, so we came here by fast express to wait for you. I suppose the captain's told you about the Black Planet."

Esterling was feeling a little sick in the icy air. He had a moment's qualm, wondering if Damon had doped his drinks. Automatically his hand went to his belt, but he'd pawned his gun that morning.

Damon said, "You talk to him. I'll attend to the ship." He slipped off into the shadows.

Beale peered up at the Norseman. "Would you mind letting me see the bracelet? Thanks . . . ." He blinked nearsightedly at the golden band. The two moons gave little light, and Beale took out a tiny flashlight. His breath hissed out.

"Good heavens, Mr. Esterling, you can have no idea what this means to me. That copy in the Stockholm museum was incomplete, you know. Some of the runes were illegible. But this—"

"It tells where to find this—this black world? I'm a little drunk, but the whole yarn

sounds crazy to me."

Beale blinked. "No doubt. No doubt. The legends about the Valley of Kings in Egypt seemed crazy till the tombs were finally discovered. The legend of the Valkyries—the flying women—is extremely widespread in space. There are clues ... I reasoned by induction. It added up. I'm firmly convinced that there is such a planet, and that a hundred thousand years ago the winged people visited our own world. They left traces. Perhaps they've died out by now, but their artifacts remain."

"So?"

"I picked these up on Venus. They were found floating free in space. What do you make of them?" Beale fumbled in his pockets and drew out a bit of bone and a thin, pencil-like rod.

Esterling examined them with puzzled interest.

"It looks like a human shoulder-blade—or part of it."

"Yes, of course! But the extension—the prolongation! The osseous base for a wing, man! Notice the ball-and-socket arrangement, and the grooves where tendons have played, tendons strong enough to move wings."

"A freak?"

"No scientist would agree with you," Beale said shortly, and put the bone back in his pocket. "Look at the rod." Esterling could make nothing of it. "Is it a weapon?"

"A weapon without power, at the moment. I took it apart. It's based on an entirely different principle from anything we've known. Atomic quanta-release, perhaps. I don't know. But I mean to find out, and there's only one place where I can do that."

The Norseman rubbed his jaw. "So the clue's on my bracelet. And you want me to join you, eh?"

"We're short-handed. There are difficulties—" Beale shivered again, glancing toward the dark spaceport. "I am a poor man, and it takes much money to outfit a ship."

"I thought Damon had a boat—the *Vulcan."*

Before Beale could answer, a faint whistle came out of the dark. The scientist caught his breath. "All right," he said. "Come on." He gripped Esterling's arm and urged the big man toward the field.

A ship loomed there, dull silver in the light of the double moons. Silhouetted against the entrance port was Damon, waving. Beale said, "Hurry up," in a tight voice, and started to run.

Satha had dulled Esterling's senses—or Damon had drugged his liquor. He sensed something amiss, but a heavy, languid blanket lay over his mind, making thought an intolerable effort. He let himself be guided toward the ship.

Damon reached down, seized his hand, and drew him up. The man was remarkably strong, for all his slight build. Esterling, off balance, went lurching against a bulkhead, and brought up sharply against the wall of the lock. He turned in time to see Beale clambering up, spider-like.

Footsteps sounded. A man in port officer's uniform came racing across the field, his voice raised in a shout. Esterling saw Beale turn, biting his lips nervously, and draw a gun. He shot down from the airlock, the bullet striking the officer squarely between the eyes.

The shock of that sobered Esterling abruptly. But before he could move, Damon

thrust him back into the ship. In the distance the faint wail of a siren began.

Beale said, "Drat it!" and came scrambling into the cabin. The valves slid shut with a dull thud. Esterling, his body numb with liquor or drugs, took a step forward.

"What the devil—"

Damon snapped, "Watch him, Beale! I've got to blast off."

The scientist's gun leveled at Esterling. Beale licked his lips. "Good heavens," he burst out. "Why does everything always go wrong .... Don't move, Mr. Esterling."

Damon had eased himself into the control seat. He spoke briefly into the mike, and then stabbed at the rocket jet buttons. The floor pressed hard against Esterling's feet.

Beale reached up and gripped a strap. "Hold on," he commanded. "That's right. We haven't time to take a smooth orbit out. They'll be after us—"

"They are after us," Damon said dryly. Esterling stole a glance at the visiplate. Marspole North was dropping away below, and a patrol ship was taking off with a burst of red rocket-fire. The ground swung dizzily as Damon played die controls.

Esterling said, "Obviously, this isn't your ship, Captain."

"Of course not," Beale snapped. "But we had to get one. They don't guard the spaceports. Damon picked up a dozen drifters and armed them—enough to take care of the skeleton crew. So—"

"So you killed the crew. I get it."

Without turning, Damon said, "Right. And we're manned by drunken roustabouts who don't know a jet from an escape valve. You'll come in handy, Esterling—You're an A. B."

The ship lurched sickeningly. The plates were red-hot in the atmosphere, and the visiplate was useless now. But speed was necessary to provide escape velocity. The hull was strong enough, Esterling knew; there was no danger through friction. The real peril lay in the patrol ship.

Damon grunted. "This is a fast boat. Once we're beyond the gravity-pull, we'll be safe. Nobody can catch us. Now—"

He jammed on more power. The red flare on the visiplate faded. They were beyond the atmosphere.

The patrol vessel was visible, specks of light flaming from its sides. Beale grimaced. "Magnetic torpedoes, eh? We— we'll be killed, Damon. Did we have to take such chances?"

Then it happened. The *Vulcan* seemed to stop in mid-course, a grinding, shaking vibration jolting through its hull. Esterling felt the floor drop away beneath him. He was slammed against the wall, the breath going out of his lungs in an agonizing rush. He saw Beale still clinging to the strap, his lean body jerking and tossing like a puppet on wires. Damon was hurled forward against the instrument board. He pushed himself half erect, blood streaming from a pulped face. Somehow he was still alive. His fingers went out towards the buttons.

Beale was screaming, "Torpedo! The air—"

Damon cursed him thickly, indistinctly. He dashed the blood from his eyes and peered at the visiplate. Under his swift hands the ship lurched again, jolted, and leaped forward like an unleashed greyhound.

It seemed faster now.

"Any leaks?" Damon asked quietly.

Beale was clutching the strap, eyes closed, face gray. Esterling hesitated a moment and then made a circuit of the control cabin, listening at the doors and valves for any betraying hiss of air.

"Try a cigarette," Damon said. "Got one? Here." He extended a bloodstained pack.

Esterling watched the 'smoke curl out of his nostrils. The only draft was toward the ventilator system, so that was all right. He nodded briefly.

Damon's black eyes were like glacial ice.

He indicated the mike.

"Been trying to raise the men. They were in the bow. No answer. Suppose you put on a suit and check up, eh?"

"Okay," Esterling said. He went to a locker and took out a regulation spacesuit, slipped into it with the ease of familiarity. "What about the patrol boat?"

"We're losing it."

Beale dropped down to a sitting position on the floor-plates, gripping his gun with both hands. He was praying in a low whisper, but interrupted himself to mumble, "Take off the rockets, Mr. Esterling. We don't want you to leave us."

The Norseman compressed his lips, but a glance at the gun muzzle, aimed directly at his heart, made him nod with sardonic resignation. He shrugged out of the rocket harness and let it drop to the floor.

He went out through the hull hatch, Beale handling the levers. Already Mars was far behind, a dull red ball against the black sky. The magnetic soles on his boots held him firmly against the hull, and Esterling clumped laboriously toward the bow. If he had his rocket harness. ...

Without it, the ship's gravitation prisoned him. He could not escape. Where was the patrol boat?

He could not locate it among the star-points. Well, it scarcely mattered now. He was in for it. Breath misted the faceplate of his helmet, and he turned on the heater coils.

Esterling felt a little sick when he reached the place where the bow had been. The entire nose of the ship had been blown off. Fragments of scrap and parts of bodies were plastered against the hull, covered by a treacly black fluid which Esterling recognized as rocket fuel. He paused on the jagged edge of the gap, peering down into the hole that had been blasted out of the ship. After a moment he took a deep breath and swung into the darkness.

Ten minutes later he returned to the control cabin and stripped off his suit. Beale was still praying. Damon was at the controls, mopping at his face with a crimson handkerchief. He looked up.

"Well? What damage?"

"Nobody's alive but us three."

"What damage to the ship?" Beale shrilled. "Good heavens, man, that's the important thing!"

Esterling grinned unpleasantly. "Did you know the *Vulcan* carried a full cargo of rocket fuel?"

"What of it?" Beale asked.

Damon turned sharply, a cold rage in his eyes. He showed his teeth in a snarl.

"Damn!" The oath exploded from him.

"Yeah," Esterling said. "The nose of the ship is blown off, and the inside bulkheads won't stand atmospheric friction. When we hit air again, the plates will get plenty hot. Rocket fuel won't explode without heat and oxygen, so we're safe as long as we're in space. But the minute we touch atmosphere, we go up like a rocket."

"Good heavens!" Beale gasped, ringers fluttering at his lips. "Damon, we've got to unload that fuel!"

The captain snorted. "In space? We can't. The ship's gravity would pull it right back again."

"Then we've got to land on an airless planet and unload it!"

Damon pointed at the visiscreen. "The patrol boat's following our jets. We're faster, but the minute we slow down, they'll be on our tail. Nope. We've just got to keep going till we lose the patrol. After that—"

"Yes. I suppose so. We'll head out, eh?"

"It's the safest course. We'll jet toward Pluto."

Esterling lit a cigarette. "You're spacetight. You can't dodge the patrol. Why not call it a day and send out a white jet?"

Beale shook his head. "We can't do that. Once we reach the Black Planet we'll be safe."

"We'd better be," Damon said. "Just to make you feel better, I might as well tell you the *Vulcan's* washed up. Our bow tubes are gone. We can make a crash landing, with spacesuits, but we can't take off again. You still think we'll find spaceships on the black world?"

"Yes. Yes, indeed. The winged people visited Earth, as well as other planets, in the past. It's a gamble, of course, but—"

"It's a gamble we've got to take." Damon looked at Esterling sardonically. "Want a gun?"

"Eh?"

"Here." The captain tossed over a compressed-air automatic. "I don't know what we'll find on the Black Planet, but it may be trouble. You won't use that blaster on us, anyway. D'you think the patrol would believe we'd kidnapped you?"

Esterling slowly bolstered the weapon. "I suppose not. But you're taking a chance."

"I don't think so. We'll split with you on whatever we find on the black world. According to Beale, that'll mean big money. Enough to buy off the law. Try any tricks, and the best you can expect is a patrol trial, with the cards stacked against you. Hell, keep the gun," Damon finished, with a careless shrug. "You're no fool. You'll play along."

"Yeah," Esterling said. "There's not much else I can do, I guess."

Damon chuckled.

Crippled, broken, a deadly time-bomb, the *Vulcan* thundered on into the eternal night of the void. The Asteroid Belt lay behind, with its flickering glare-dance of sunlight on the tiny worlds. Immense Jupiter grew larger, a pearly globe with a scarlet wound raw upon its surface—and Jupiter faded and dwindled.

Ringed Saturn was on the other side of the System, but Uranus watched them

from the visiplate. They were beyond the Life Zone now. It was too cold, too far from the sun, for life to exist except under artificial conditions. Here and there on frigid moons a few space domes were spotted, outposts of lonely pioneers. But there were not many. Uranus was the borderline, the invisible wall beyond which it was not safe to venture.

The deadly emptiness of the interstellar wastes had reached in with fingers of fiery cold and touched the worlds that swung too far from the sun. They were accursed. Stones from ruined cities had been found here, artifacts so old that no remotely human race could have built them. The freezing tides of space and time, pulsing in eon long beats, had swept up and buried them, and receded for a little while.

He had never been this far out. In the long weeks on the *Vulcan* a change came upon Nils Esterling, a blood heritage that fought its way to the surface and brought out all the latent mysticism of his race. He was plumbing uncharted seas, as his forefathers had done, and something deep within the man, atavistic and powerful, woke to life.

There's a legend that spacemen get their souls frozen on their first voyage. Esterling had been away from Earth for only a few years, but those years had been deadly ones. Planetary voyages are gruelling, racking jobs for the men who work the ships, and, on the far-flung, exotic worlds of the System, there is nothing akin to the green meadows and blue oceans of Earth. The red ochre of Mars blasts the vision; the stinging yellow fogs of Venus creep into your pores; the shifting rainbow light of Callisto shocks your nerves into jolting madness. Men do not live long in space—no! So, while they live, they make the most of the little they possess.

There are flaming brews from Blueland moss, distilled and potent with dreams. There is cold, stealthy *satha,* and there is the sweet mznga-liqueur they make in Ednes, on Venus. There is segzr-whiskey that turns the mind into red fire. There is absinthe from Earth and Fruit o' Worlds made by the dbrk monks of Io. And there are drugs. The sins of all the Systems are at the call of those who can pay.

Nils had gone down that dark path, for there was little choice. In a few years he had grown cold, reckless, embittered. He had tasted the exultation of space flight, and after that Earth would have seemed dull. Ahead of him lay more years alternating periods of arduous voyages and wild sprees. Nothing else. In the end, death, and space burial.

The life had toughened him, building a harsh shell under which the old idealism had died to an ember. But now—there was a difference.

Three thousand years before his ancestors had gone Viking, their red-sailed ships driving out from the Northland fjords. Recklessly they had pushed on into unknown seas. The lure of mysteries, of exploration, drove them on. That touched Nils Esterling now.

The patrol ship had been lost long since. They were utterly alone, in an emptiness almost inconceivable to the human mind. The old motionless brilliance of the stars merely enhanced their isolation. Day after day the ship roared on through the void, and nothing changed; the sun remained a small yellow star, and the Milky Way lay across the dark sky like Bifrost Bridge that reaches to Asgard. Bifrost, the Bright Rainbow, across which the Valkyries thunder, bearing the souls of warriors fallen in battle.

Legend was not far from fact in this inhuman place, the airless void where man penetrated only by suffrance, venturing in tiny ships that a meteor could destroy easily. Nils Esterling felt the mysticism of far places stealing into his soul. He had felt thus before, once in the Euphrates Valley where the Garden of Eden had been created; and again on Easter Island, facing the silent carved titans whose origins are hidden by the past.

There were gateways and barriers, he thought—walls built to keep intruders from venturing too far. Man had not conquered space. He had reached the nearer worlds, but beyond, in the vastoess of the galaxies, lay mysteries. Closer even than that! A black planet, rolling majestically, invisible, on the edge of the System, holding its secrets . . . .

What were those secrets?

Sometimes skepticism came back, and Esterling sneered at his own credulity. How could a planet have remained undiscovered through the ages, beyond the orbit of Pluto?

It would have to be invisible.

But even as long ago as the Twentieth Century astronomers had suspected the existence of a trans-Plutonian world, one so far out from the sun that its influence was negligible, a world unseen, lost in the incredible immensity of space.

Yes. The Black Planet could exist

Beale spent hours on abstruse calculations. He had figured dead reckoning by the runes on Esterling's bracelet, and Damon changed the course accordingly. The little scientist peered into the visiplate, using the telescopic attachment, but he could catch no glimpse of his goal.

"It must be invisible," he said. "That's a good sign."

Esterling stared at him. "Why?"

"In the plan of nature nothing is normally invisible, at least nothing of planetary size. That means the camouflage was created artificially. Physicists have speculated about the possibility of a negasphere—"

"I've seen dead-black planetoids," Damon broke in. "You never saw them till you were within a few hundred miles."

"Planetoids are small. And their presence could be detected by occlusion. An artificial negasphere would have the property of warping light-ray. Dwarf stars can draw light toward them, you know. A negasphere could bend it away—around the planet. The world wouldn't hide any stars with its bulk."

They watched the visiplate, but there was nothing there except the frozen rivers of stars in the night sky.

Monotonously time dragged on. There was neither sunrise nor sunset; they ate when hungry, slept when tired. Always the doomed ship fled on into the darkness. Until—

There was no warning. One moment they were in empty space; the next, Damon, at the controls, cried out harshly and cut the jets. The screen flamed white. A bell began to ring shrilly.

"What is it?" Beale hurried toward Damon, leaning over the captain's shoulder. He gasped. Esterling pushed him aside, eying the visiplate.

On the field a world was visible, huge, luminous, distinctly limned against the

misty background of the stars. It had sprung out of nothingness. But it was not black. It blazed with cold, swirling radiance, tides of living light rolled across it.

"The Black Planet," Damon said. "But—"

Beale's voice was shrill with excitement. "There *was* a nega-spherel We went through it without realizing. Of course! It isn't a tangible barrier; it's just a hollow shell of darkness around the planet. Out here, on the edge of the System—" He was silent, staring at the immense jewel-world that lay before them.

Esterling said. "We're in atmosphere. Look at those stars— misty, see? We can't stay with the ship."

Damon put the *Vulcan* at automatic controls, circling inward in a narrowing spiral. The alarm bell was still ringing.

"Yeah. We'd better get into our suits. Come on!"

They struggled with the fastenings. A jolting shock wrenched the vessel. Esterling snapped his helmet shut, looked to see that he had his rocket harness and gun, and lumbered toward the lock, awkward in the heavy spaceboots. He swung open the valve.

On the lips of empty space he paused, looking down. Far beneath him the shining planet lay. He could not gauge its size. There were fewer stars now; the negasphere did not seem to block their light, but the atmosphere did. There was an instant of sickening giddiness before he stepped out.

Then he was hurtling down, and panic clutched at his throat. Instinctively he pressed the stud that activated his rocket-harness, and his flight was arrested. Two figures shot past him, grotesque in their suits, Beale and Damon. They were gone.

He dropped again; there was still a long way to fall, and he did not wish to exhaust his fuel. The *Vulcan* slowly passed him, its tubes firing spasmodically, driving it down to destruction. From the smashed bow a tongue of flame licked up. There was oxygen in this atmosphere, then.

A Viking funeral for the dead men on the ship, Esterling thought. Against the blackness of the sky red fire blazed suddenly. It was like a beacon—

Struck by a new thought, he glanced down. The flames would certainly attract attention, if there was any life on the Black Planet. But what life could exist on that pearly, shinning globe, seething with luminous tides?

Still he fell. The *Vulcan* blazed, red against the dark. How many spacemen had watched similar sights, watched their vessels crack up while they remained alone in space, without hope of rescue? No marooned sailor could ever have felt one-tenth of the utter desolation that pressed in from the void. The seas of Earth were wide, but the seas of space had no shores.

He could not see Beale or Damon. What would happen when he reached the world below? Would those shining tides swallow him? There could be no life there!

Emptiness, and falling, and an hypnotic languor that dulled Esterling's brain.

Across the sky the Milky Way flamed. Bifrost, where the Valkyries rode, the spear-maidens of Asgard. The Valkyries—

Wings beat soundlessly past him.

For a timeless second a face looked into Esterling's. The blood drummed in his temples. Hallucination, he thought. For she could not exist!

Her hair was corn-yellow, her eyes as blue as the southern ocean. No curve of her

slender body was hidden by the single gossamer garment she wore, and in all his life Esterling had never seen a girl half so lovely.

Nor half so strange!

Pinions lifted from her shoulders; wings, shining with coruscating light, upheld her in emptiness. She was winged!

One moment the girl hung there, her gaze probing into Esterling's. Then a touch of elfin malice came into the blue eyes. She made a quick gesture—and Esterling was swung off balance by an abrupt tug at his harness. Still falling, he revolved slowly in midair, in time to see another girl, almost a duplicate of the first, holding his rocket harness.

She had ripped it away—and Esterling was falling free, with nothing to halt his plunge to the glowing world beneath!

His mouth was dry with sudden panic; he wrenched out his gun. Apparently the winged girls knew the meaning of the weapons. The one holding the harness let it drop, and in perfect unison they dived toward Esterling. Handicapped as he was by his bulky suit, he had little chance. A hand gripped his arm. The gun was forced up and back. Falling through space, he could get no leverage, no way of exerting his strength.

Helpless, he fought the Valkyries.

It was useless, as he knew from the start. They were in their own element, agile, strong, deft. In the end he let them tear the gun from him, a suicidal hopelessness overcoming him. But the girls did not wish him to die, it seemed. Their arms wrapped about him, while the great pinions pulsed and beat. Esterling's fall slowed.

Far below, the planet grew larger. The tides of light swept across its surface. It filled half the sky. The *Vulcan,* still afire, plunged down and was swallowed by the luminous glow.

The world grew concave, then flat. Perspective changed. The sphere no longer hung in the void; it was an immense, seething ocean beneath. On that glowing sea were islands— and they drove with the mighty tides like ships.

Cities were built on the isles, fragile-seeming, with a curious architecture, unlike anything Esterling had seen before. There was no regular pattern. Some of the islands were huge, others tiny. But all were garden places, spotted with clusters of towers and minarets that were like lustrous jewels.

The Hesperides—the Isles of the Blessed. Oceans of living light washed those strange shores. Across the rolling, seething seas the islands moved majestically, flotsam of a lost planet.

Toward one of them Esterling dropped, a prisoner of the Valkyries.

He saw above the towers a myriad darting shapes, flying with graceful, easy movements. The winged people! Nor were they all women; there were men among them, their wings stronger, darker.

Walls lifted above Esterling. He was being carried down a shaft. There was an instant of dizzying confusion, during which he was half-blinded by wings flailing and beating about him. Then he felt the strong arms relax.

Solid ground was under his feet. He stood on a little platform of some plastic, blue-tinted substance. Behind him a passageway gaped in the wall. From his feet the pit dropped down to unknown depths.

The Valkyries alighted beside him. He felt slim fingers fumbling with his helmet, and, too late, made a gesture to halt the girl. The faceplate swung back. The air of the new world rushed into his lungs.

One breath told him that there was no danger. It was pure, fresh, and sweet, with a subtle tingling exhilaration that was almost intoxicating. Blue eyes laughed into Esterling's.

"D'rn sa asth'neeso." The words were meaningless, but the gesture that accompanied them was significant. Esterling hesitated. A Valkyrie slipped past him, folded her wings like a cloak about her. She moved into the depths of the passage.

"lyan sa!"

He followed, the other girl at his heels. A tapestry was flung aside, and he found himself in an apartment, obviously a sleeping-chamber, though not built for humans. The walls were transparent as glass.

He was, apparently, in one of the tallest towers. Beneath him lay the city. Beyond that, a luxuriance of rainbow forest, and, farther away, the, blazing turmoil of the sea of light. The winged people swooped and glided among the towers.

The Valkyrie Esterling had first seen came closer. She murmured a few liquid, trilling syllables, and her companion vanished. Then, smiling fearlessly up into Esterling's eyes, she tapped the chest of his spacesuit and made a movement of inquiry.

His voice sounded harsh in the silence.

"Yeah. I don't need this, I guess." Gratefully he unburdened himself of the awkward overall garment and helmet.

The girl touched her breast. "Norahn." She repeated it. "Norahn—Norahn."

"Norahn," Esterling said. Her name? He imitated her gesture. "Nils."

There was a scuffle behind them. A group of Valkyries appeared from beyond the curtain, among them two struggling figures—Beale and Damon. They paused at sight of Esterling. Damon snapped open his helmet.

"What's this? Did they get your gun, too?"

"Take it easy," Esterling said. "They're friendly. Our being alive now proves that."

Damon grunted and began to remove his suit. Beale, his lips moving silently, did the same. The Valkyries drew back, as though waiting.

"Norahn—" Esterling said, rather helplessly. The girl smiled at him.

"Vanalsa into,"

She pointed to the door. A Valkyrie entered, carrying a great basket loaded with fruits, unfamiliar to the Earthmen. Norahn picked up a scarlet globe and bit into it, afterward offering it to Esterling.

The taste was strange, but acidly pleasant. Damon grunted, squatted on the floor, and began to eat. Beale was more hesitant, sniffing at each fruit warily before he tried it, but soon the three men were gorging themselves. It was a welcome change from space rations. They scarcely noticed when the Valkyries slipped out.

Only Norahn remained. She touched the red sphere Esterling was eating and said, *"Khar. Khar."*

"Khar. Norahn."

His mouth full, Beale mumbled, "A good sign. They're taking the trouble to teach us their language. Good heavens, I still can't quite believe this. A whole race of flying

people-"

"Khar, Nils. *Khar."*

Time did not exist on the world of the Valkyries. The floating islands drifted with the shining tides, borne by an unchanging current that swept around the world. What the strange sea was Esterling never learned. It was not water, though one could bathe in it. The winged folk swooped down, dipped below the surface, and came up with glowing star-drops limning their bodies. Radioactivity, perhaps. Or some less understandable source of power, the alien force that had made the Black Planet unlike any other in the System.

It had come from outside, Norahn said, after they had learned to speak her tongue. In the old days, beyond the memory of the winged people, the planet had revolved around another sun, light-years away. That had been the age of science. There was no need for science now, though the tools still remained.

Beale's eyes brightened.

"We have no records, no memories. It was too long ago. There was a war, I think, and our people fled, moving this world like a ship. Across space we went. Long ago we visited the planets of this System. They had life but—that life was not intelligent. And we were afraid our enemies would follow and destroy us. So we made the negasphere, to hide ourselves from those who might pursue. We waited. The years passed. The centuries passed, and the ages. And we changed."

Norahn's wings swept wide. "Science was forgotten; we had no need for it. We fly. We *fly!"* Briefly her eyes were luminous with ecstasy. "It is decadence, perhaps, but we ask nothing more from the universe. It has been very long since any of us ventured beyond the negasphere. Indeed, it is forbidden. A curse falls on all who leave this world."

"A curse? What—"

"I do not know that. There have been some who ventured out in ships, but they did not return. The life is good here. We have our wings, and our cities. When we drift near the Darkness, we migrate."

Esterling said, "I don't understand. What is the darkness?"

"You will soon know. The tides bring us near to it now, and soon we must find another island. You will see—"

It was a wall of blackness looming upon the horizon. A monstrous pile of cloudy dark, lit luridly by red flashes sparking intermittently through the gloom. The isle swept on toward it—and the bird-people made ready to depart.

"No life can exist in the Darkness." Norahn said. "The only land on this world are the floating isles, and they follow the tide. While they are on the lightside, we can dwell on them. When they enter the darkness, we find another isle, till they have half-circled the-planet and emerge once more."

Esterling stared at the "great cloud. "What about your cities? Aren't they harmed?"

"No, we find everything as we left it. Our wise men say there is a certain radiation in the Darkness that destroys life—just as there are radiations here, in the sea, that give us power, and make us winged."

"How—"

"I do not know. There are only legends." Norahn shrugged. "It does not matter. In a few hours we must leave for another isle. Be ready."

Esterling would never forget that strange migration across the glowing sea. Like a cloud the winged people rose, carrying the few belongings they needed—there were not many, Two Valkyries supported Esterling; others took charge of Beale and Damon. Their great wings carried them easily above the ocean.

Behind them the deserted islet drifted on into the Darkness.

Looking back, Esterling felt a tiny chill strike through him. His Norse blood thrilled to sudden warning. He thought of Jotunheim, the place of night, where the Frost Giants wait their time to break forth against the Aesir. . . .

The new isle was like the first, though larger, and with a greater expanse of forest. And the life was unchanged.

The three Earthmen took little part in it; without wings, they were handicapped. The existence of the winged people went on without touching them though Esterling was not so far withdrawn as the others. He did not chafe. He was content to watch, and to talk with Norahn; to see her gliding above the shining sea.

Norahn told them they were prisoners. "If you can call it that, when the freedom of our world is yours. But you cannot leave. In the past, ships from your System have sometimes crashed here, and men have survived. Not for a long time, though. We treated them well. We took them with us to safety when the isles reached the Darkness—and in time they died. You will remain here, too."

"Why?" Damon asked.

"You would bring down the rest of your people upon us. We are happy; we have passed the Age of Science, and no longer need it. We are perfectly adapted to our environment. But we have great sources of power here. Your race would want that power. Our planet would be ruined for us. You would take our islands to build huge, ugly machines. Nor could we fight. We have forgotten how."

"You must have some weapons," Beale said.

"Perhaps—but we do not need them. We have hidden our world; we guard it against intrusions—that is our greater safety. We could not fight, nor do we wish to. Ages ago all that died out of our race, soon after our science reached its peak and froze there. All we need lies ready to our hand, without further effort on our part."

"But the machines—" Beale persisted. "Don't they ever break down? Don't they ever need repair?"

Norahn shrugged her shining wings. "They are so simple a child could make repairs. That was the last interest that held our scientists, so legend says—they worked until no further need remained for invention, and then they worked to simplify. Even one of you, who never saw a food-maker or a *noyai-loom* before, could repair it in a few minutes if it broke down. No, we have no need any longer for weapons or invention of anything except—flight." Her great wings lifted away from her body and quivered a little. "It tires me to be still and talk, even to you, Nils. I shall be back." She dropped from the tower and was gone into the cool, pearly light.

Beale said, "They have spaceships here, then." His voice was eager. "That's obvious, or Norahn wouldn't have bothered to tell us we were prisoners. And we could fly them if we could find them. I wonder where—"

"We'll find out," Damon told him.

Then the incredible happened. For a long time Esterling had been conscious of a curious sensation centering around his shoulder-blades. But he did not realize its

significance till the day when, stripped to the waist, he was shaving before an improvised mirror. Damon, lounging by the balcony, said something in a surprised voice.

"Eh?" Esterling scraped at his cheek. "What's up?"

Instead of answering, Damon called for Beale. The scientist came out of the adjoining room, rubbing his eyes.

"Look at Esterling's back," the captain said. "Do you—"

Beale caught his breath. "Good heavens! Don't turn around, man; let me see."

"What is it?" Esterling squirmed before the mirror. . "Something's growing on your shoulder-blades. I'll be damned!" Damon murmured. "It can't be. *Norahn!"*

The girl's slim figure appeared above the balcony. *"Es-tan'ha?* Oh!" She leaped lightly to the floor and ran forward. "Be still, Nils." He felt her cool hand touch his back.

A queer, tingling excitement was pulsing within Esterling. Even before Norahn spoke, he guessed the truth.

"Wings," she said. Yes—that is how they grow. From the buds, slowly expanding till they reach full size."

Damon had stripped off his shirt and was at the mirror. "Funny," he muttered. "I haven't got 'em. Have you, Beale?"

The scientist blinked. "Of course not. I haven't any such recessive characteristics in my background. Nor have you."

Esterling looked at him. "What d'you mean?"

"The answer's obvious, isn't it? I'd wondered how the bracelet, with its rune about the Black Planet, came into your possession. It belonged to your great-grandmother, didn't it?"

"Gudrun. Yes. But—"

"What do you know about her?"

"Damned little," Esterling said. "She was supposed to be blonde, with blue eyes, and very lovely. There was some mystery about her. She didn't live long, and the bracelet was given to her son."

"There was space-travel in your great-grandmother's day," Beale said. "And Norahn said some of her people used to leave this world in their ships. They never came back. It's pretty obvious where Gudrun came from, isn't it?"

"She—she had no wings."

"Wings can be amputated. They're apparently a recessive characteristic, handed down to you from your great-grandmother."

Esterling was trembling a little. "Then why should they grow now? Why wasn't I born with them?"

Beale nodded toward the window, beyond which the shining sea rolled. "There are certain radiations on this planet— radiations that don't exist elsewhere in the System. You were born with wing-buds on your back. But they needed the right kind of environment to develop. That particular radiation exists here. If you'd never come to this world, you'd never have grown wings."

Norahn smiled happily into Esterling's eyes.

"Soon you can fly, Nils! I will show you the way—"

It was like recovering sight after being blind from birth. Flight, to Nils Esterling, unfolded vistas he had never known. The trick of it came with surprising ease. After the wings had reached their full development, the supporting muscles grew stronger, too. He never forgot that first flight. It was not long, but the feeling of complete and absolute freedom, the abrupt and easy checking of his fall, sent the blood singing through his veins. Flight was a heady drunkenness. The wine of it was stronger than any liquor Esterling had ever tasted.

And Norahn taught him, as she had promised.

He understood now the intoxication the winged people felt.

Earthly humanity had dropped from Esterling. He was one of the winged people now. Flight was his heritage, the high, keen delight of utter freedom, not bound by dimensions.

The islet swept on inexorably toward the Darkness.

It was time for the migration again. The winged folk rose and sped away, in search of a new home. Beale and Damon delayed, however. They were determined to remain with the island when it entered the Darkness.

At the window-opening Norahn watched the sky, where the great blackness grew momentarily more menacing. "It is dangerous. You will die."

Damon grunted. "The radiation might not harm us. And I'd like to know what's in the Darkness. Beale thinks—"

"Don't be a fool," Esterling said roughly. "You know damned well you can't live where the winged people can't. I can't stop you from committing suicide, I suppose. But what can you hope to gain by staying with the island?"

Illogically, Beale and Damon persisted in their arguments —persisted, while the Darkness grew nearer. Norahn's two companions grew more and more uneasy. At last they took flight, white-faced at their closeness to the barrier of the dark.

Esterling watched them go. "Okay," he said. "Maybe Norahn and I can carry you. Make up your minds. Because we're leaving too—right now!"

Damon capitulated with surprising suddenness. "All right. I suppose we'll have to. If you won't wait till we get nearer to the Darkness."

"We're near enough. You'll have to forget your curiosity, Beale. Norahn, can you call back some of your people to help?"

She shook her head. "They are too far. They will not remain on the isle when it drifts near the Darkness. But I can carry the little man easily."

"Okay. Get on my back, Damon. That's it. Lock your legs around my waist. Now—"

The wings were powerful. Beale was a small man, and Damon no giant. Esterling and Norahn dropped from the balcony, flung their pinions wide, and swooped up, gaining altitude. The islet slid away beneath them.

They flew on above the shining sea. Far in the distance was a smudge that showed where the bird-people were, in a close band.

"Listen," Damon slid, .into Esterling's ear, "those people have spaceships, don't they?"

"They used to."

"Where are they?"

"On some of the islands. None we've ever lived on, though."

"But you've seen them."

"From above—yeah."

"So have I. Once, when they carried us off to visit another island. I know where they are from here, allowing for tidal drift." There was a pause. Damon went on, "How'd you like to get off this world?"

Esterling smiled a little. "Funny. I've never thought of that. This place—I like it here."

"Well, I don't. How about dropping us where we can get at a spaceship?"

"One of theirs, you mean? Not a chance. For one thing, you couldn't fly it. For another, what about fuel? Remember, they haven't used the ships for ages."

"Oh, yes they have. Norahn told us about how some of them go out into space and never return. And about how simple everything here is to operate. I'll gamble on the fuel. My guess is it's there ready—that's how machinery on this world seems to operate. And if the ship's that simple—well, I can handle anything that flies."

"And you'd be back with an army, wouldn't you? Norahn was right, Damon. This world should be kept isolated. The people here are happy."

"Happy, hell! Beale!" Damon's voice was sharp. "Now!"

Esterling saw the scientist, a dozen yards away, move quickly. There was a gun in his hand. He pressed its muzzle against Norahn's temple. Simultaneously the Norseman felt a cold ring of steel touch his own temple.

"Take it easy," Damon said quietly. "Don't try any stunting. I can fire before you can drop me. So can Beale."

Esterling's face was white. "It's all right," he said, his voice unsteady. "Just keep on, Norahn."

"Yeah," Damon seconded. "Keep on. But in a different direction. You're going to take us to a spaceship, Esterling, or you and Norahn get your heads blown off."

"Where'd you get the guns?" he asked.

"Where they'd been hidden," Damon said. "I've been planning this for some time. I couldn't buck the whole gang of you, but I figured if I could get you and Norahn alone—"

"Yeah," Esterling said. "Yeah."

It was a long flight. Wing muscles were tired and aching when an islet grew in the distance from a tiny speck to a broad expanse. Beale shouted something and pointed.

Damon said into Esterling's ear, "I can see ships down there. No winged people, though. I guess they stay away from anything that reminds them of science. Go 'down— easy."

Obediently Esterling glided down the slopes of shining air, Norahn beside him. The silvery, torpedo-shaped rows of ships grew larger. Damon whistled at their design. "I'll bet they're plenty fast!"

Esterling landed lightly. Damon leaped from his back, gun ready, waiting till Norahn and Beale were down.

"Keep your gun out," he said to the scientist. "I want to check up on this ship."

Its lock was childishly simple. In a moment he had vanished into the ulterior. The others waited tensely. Presently Beale reappeared, smiling.

"I was right. Simple instructions and controls. Anybody could operate who could

astrogate. And there's plenty of fuel. Now, Esterling, what about going with us?" The Norseman looked at Norahn. "No," he said. "I'm staying."

Beale bit at his thin lips. "Drat it," he mumbled. "Damon, we should take some proof back with us—"

"We've got the ship."

"Sure. But when we bring men back here, it'll help to know as much as possible about the winged people. Perhaps they can't fight, but they've inherited weapons. We've never been able to locate them. Now Norahn could give us plenty of information—"

Esterling yelled, "Norahn! Get out of here! Quick!" He jumped Damon, his fist striking at the captain's gun. There was a rush of footsteps behind him, and something crashed down on his head with sickening force. Weakness ran like water through his body. He scarcely felt Damon's fist jolt against his jaw.

Dimly he heard Norahn scream. There was the thud of a valve closing, and then a fiery blast of rockets and a shriek of cleft air. Esterling, flat on his face, groaned weakly and tried to rise. It was useless. A black speck dwindled in the sky. "Norahn!" he said hoarsely. *"Norahn—"* Somehow Esterling dragged himself to his hands and knees. He was blind and sick with pain, and his skull felt as though it had been fractured. But there was another spaceship looming through the trees, and he had to reach it.

Somehow he did. He never knew how. Somehow he stumbled along shining corridors and found an instrument board that swam before his eyes. Afterward he knew that he must have done the requisite things his reflexes were trained to do on any ship that plies the spaceways. He must have closed the valves and fallen into the astrogater's seat and found the proper instruments ready to his fumbling hands. But it was sheer willpower that did it.

When his head cleared the starry emptiness of space filled the visiplate before him. Already he was through the negasphere. Norahn's world had vanished. And for an instant he remembered the curse that was said to fall upon all natives who left that world.

After that was eternity. Esterling could not leave the controls; he scarcely dared glance away from the visiplate. And a throbbing, blazing ache inside his skull pounded at his brain.

Damon fled sunward. Esterling followed doggedly. They reached the orbit of Pluto.

And now at last, slowly, by infinite degrees, the fleeing ship grew larger in the visiplate.

Esterling manipulated the controls with dizzy recklessness. Now they were almost together, the hunter and the pursued. And *now*—now—

With a surprisingly light impact he crashed his ship against Damon's, and without pausing to see the results, turned to the rack where the spacesuits hung.

It was while getting into the suit that he noticed for the first time what had happened to his wings. The great shimmering pinions that had carried him over the glowing seas of Norahn's world were colorless—limp.

Out in the void, he kicked himself across to the other ship. He didn't head for the entrance lock; Damon would be expecting that move. Instead, Esterling drew

himself, hand over hand, to the emergency escape hatch in the bow. He levered it open.

Beale was waiting for him.

Esterling looked to see that the bow compartment was airtight, the door sealed. Norahn was in this ship, and he had to be careful. But the valve was right.

Beale fired. The bullet went through Esterling's suit and shoulder as he lurched aside. But it was only a flesh wound. He plugged the tear in the suit by bunching the fabric together with one hand, and with the other he reached back and opened the escape hatch.

Beale was not wearing an air-helmet.

He managed one more shot before his breath was wrenched out of his lungs, but the bullet went wild, spattering against metal. The blasting gust of wind racing out of the hatch pulled Beale with it, smashing him against Esterling. The scientist's finger clawed frantically at the other's suit.

Beale slide down, his eyes glaring, his tongue protruding. Esterling looked at the dead man without emotion.

He closed the hatch behind him, opened the door to the rest of the ship, and quickly removed the encumbering suit and helmet. Already fresh air had replaced the vacuum. Esterling picked up Beale's gun and stepped across the threshold.

Four strides took him to another door. He thrust it open.

He was facing Damon. In a corner of the control cabin lay Norahn, bound. Her wings were—withered.

Damon fired. The bullet struck Esterling somewhere. He took a step forward. Norahn was crying, very softly, like a hurt child.

Damon whispered, "Get back. Stay where you are. I'll—"

He thrust the gun forward, his finger contracting on the trigger. Esterling threw his own weapon straight at the other's face as he sprang. His right hand found Damon's gun-wrist His left touched the corded muscles of a throat.

Norahn was crying bitterly, hopelessly—

"I killed him," my father said. "With my hands. But he died only one death."

Breakers crashed beneath us in Thunder Fjord. The sky had grown light. Freya, the gerfalcon, hooded and asleep, stirred on Nils Esterling's shoulder.

I looked out at the dark sea. "You couldn't go back?"

"No. Those wings would never grow again. Only on the Black Planet could they ever have grown. Once withered—" he made a hopeless gesture—"Norahn and I were earth-bound. It was the legendary curse that fell on any of her folk who left that world. And—and she had been born to flight."

The sun's rim loomed on the horizon. Nils stared up into the burning rays.

"She wouldn't let me take her back. The Black Planet is for those with wings. Not for the earthbound. I brought her to Earth, Arn. I brought her here. She died when you were born. Scarcely a year. . . . We had happiness, but it was bittersweet. For we had known flight."

Nils unhooded the gerfalcon. Freya moved, ruffled her feathers, blinking a golden eye.

"Flight," my father said; "To stop flying is to die. Norahn died in a year. And for over forty years I have been chained here, remembering. Arn—" He slipped

something from his arm and dropped it into my hand—"this is yours now. You're going into space. Your heritage is out there, beyond the orbit of Pluto, where the isles of the winged folk drift on the bright tides of Norahn's world. It's your world as well. In you are the seeds of flight"

He looked at the gerfalcon. "I have no words to tell you of your heritage, Arn. You will never know, till you have wings. And then—"

Nils Esterling stood up, casting the gerfalcon free. Freya screamed harshly. Her wings beat the air. She circled, mounted, climbing the winds.

My father's gaze brooded on me as I slipped the golden bracelet on my arm. He dropped back into the chair, as though exhausted.

"That's all, I suppose," he said wearily. "It's time for you to go. And—I'll say good-by."

I left him there. He did not watch me go. Once I turned, far down the path above Thunder Fjord, and Nils Esterling had not moved. He was looking up at Freya, wheeling in the blue.

The next time I looked, the outthrust of the crag hid the Hall. All I could see was the empty sky, and the gerfalcon circling there on splendid wings.