



# TEST PIECE

*By Eric Frank Russell*

The three Earthmen who landed on Shaksembender were put to a test, and if they failed — their lives were forfeit! You have here the same problem which faced them. The difference is that if you fail, we exact no penalty; if you win, however, you stand to gain a great deal. You will find the rules and a list of prizes at the end of the story. Now, it's up to you.

A shining blue-green globe, approximately Earth-size, Earth-mass, the new planet was exactly as described in the report. It lay fourth from a type G7 sun and unmistakably was the one they were seeking. The unknown and long-dead scout who had first found it certainly had picked a sphere that looked like home.

Pilot Harry Benton swung his superfast navy cruiser into a wide orbit while his two companions gave their destination a pre-landing survey. They found the largest city in the northern hemisphere, some seven degrees above the equatorial line and near to the shores of a great lake. Obviously it had not moved, or been replaced in greatness by some other city, as might well have happened in the three hundred years since the report was written. Time brings many wide and sometimes unexpected changes.

"Shaksembender," pronounced Navigator Steve Randle. "What a heck of a name to give a planet." He was looking at an official resume of the oldtime space-prober's message which—after all these years—had brought them on this hunt. "And to make it worse, their sun is dignified by the name of Gwilp."

"I've heard tell of a world in the Bootes sector called Plub," commented Engineer Joe Hibbert. "And furthermore, it's pronounced like you were blowing your nose. Give me Shaksembender — it's a speakable word."

"Then try your teeth on its capital city," Randle invited. He spelled it slowly. "T'schilodrithashaksembender." He grinned at the other's expression. "Meaning, literally, the biggest burg on the little green world. For your comfort, the report says a native takes the strain off his epiglottis by referring to it in the shortened form of Taflo."

Benton chipped in with, "Hold tight. We're going down." He wrestled his controls, trying to watch six meters at once. The cruiser blew out of its orbit, spiralled earthward, hit atmosphere and went through it. Soon it roared on its last circle low over the city, leaving behind it a four-mile trail of fire and superheated air. The landing took the form of a prolonged and bumpy bellyslide across meadows to the east. Twisting round in his seat, Benton spoke with irritating self-satisfaction. "See, no corpses. Am I good!"

"Sheer luck," grunted Hibbert disdainfully. "I saw you let go everything and madly stroke a rabbit's foot. It has always worked, but some day it won't."

"We pilots being far above the primitive practices of the engineering profession—if one can call it a profession," began Benton with manifest superiority, "it is not our habit in moments of crisis to toy with any part of a coney's anatomy. Therefore I would have you understand —"

"Here they come," interrupted

Randle, who was looking through a side-port. "A dozen or more, on the run."

Hibbert joined him, gazed through the armorglass. "How nice to be cheered in by friendly humanoids. It's a welcome change from what we seem to meet almost everywhere else: suspicious or hostile things resembling figments of the mind after a ten-course Venusian supper."

"They're right outside now," continued Randle. He counted. "Twenty of them." His hand went out as he switched the automatic lock. "We'll let them in."

He had no hesitation about doing that despite rough and tough experiences on many other worlds. After centuries of exploration this was only the third humanoid-inhabited planet to be discovered, and when one has had more than one's fill of life-forms surpassing anything conceived in dreams there is something heartening about a familiar human shape and form. It gives confidence. Any bunch of humanoids in the outlandish cosmos were like a colony of nationals established in foreign parts.

THEY poured into the ship, a dozen of them, with a smaller group content to wait outside. It was good to look upon them; one head, two eyes, one nose, two arms, two legs, ten fingers, all the old familiar fixings. No especial difference from the ship's crew except that

they were a little smaller, a little lighter in build, and had skins of a deep, rich copper color. Yes, that was the greatest contrast: the dark glow of copper skins and gleam of jet black eyes.

Their leader spoke in archaic cosmoparla, forming his words like things learned painstakingly from tutors who had passed them down generation to generation.

"You are Earthlings?"

Benton said happily, "You're dead right. I'm Benton, the pilot. You can ignore these two cretins with me—they're just ballast."

The other received this assurance with uncertainty and a touch of embarrassment. He studied the two cretins doubtfully, returned his attention to Benton.

"I am Dorka the Scholar, one of those deputed to preserve your language against this day. We have been expecting you. Fraser assured us that eventually you would come. We thought you would be here long before now." His black eyes remained upon Benton, watching him, examining him, trying to peer into his mind. No joy of meeting shone within them; rather did they show a strange and wistful uneasiness, a mixture of hope and fear that somehow was communicated to his fellows and gradually grew stronger. "Yes, we expected you long ago."

"Maybe we should have been here long ago," admitted Benton, sobered by the unanticipated touch of ice in the reception. Casually,

he pressed a wall-stud, listened for the almost unbearable response of apparatus hidden behind. "But we navy boys go where we're told when we're told, and we got no instructions about Shaksembender until recently. Who's this Fraser? — the scout who discovered you?"

"Of course."

"H'm! I guess his report got buried in bureaucratic files where a lot of other valuable reports may still be resting. Those oldtime dare-devil space-snoopers like Fraser ran far beyond the official limits of their day, risking their necks and hides until they had a casualty list five yards long. An aged and bespectacled bureaucrat was about the only form of life that could frustrate them. That's the way to take the zip out of anyone troubled with excess of enthusiasm: file his report and forget it."

"Perhaps it is just as well," ventured Dorka, his peculiar air of uncertainty growing stronger. He glanced at the wall-stud but refrained from asking its purpose. "Fraser told us that the longer the time the better the hopes."

"He did, eh?" Mystified, Benton tried to analyze the other's deep copper features, but they revealed nothing. "What did he mean by that?"

Dorka fidgeted, licked his lips, behaved as if to say more was to say too much. Finally he evaded, "Which one of us can say what Earthlings mean? They are

like us, yet not like us, for our thought-processes are not necessarily the same."

This was unsatisfactory. To gain a common understanding, a genuine basis on which an alliance might be founded, the matter was worth pursuing to the bitter end. But Benton did not bother. He had a special reason for that. It had to do with the apparatus still hissing faintly behind the wall. Centuries of space-roving inevitably compelled mankind to produce all the tools best fitted for the job.

So in a kindly and disarming manner, he said to Dorka, "I guess this Fraser was banking on closer accord based on ships lots bigger and faster than any known in his day. He slipped up slightly there. They're bigger all right, but hardly any faster."

"No?" Dorka's manner revealed that spaceship velocities had little or no bearing on whatever was bedeviling his mind. It was a polite, "No?" lacking surprise, lacking interest.

"They could be a whole lot swifter," Benton went on, "if we were content with the exceedingly low safety-margins of Fraser's time. But the era of death-or-glory has passed away. We build no suicide-bottles these days. We get from sun to sun in one piece and with clean underwear."

It was evident to all three that Dorka could not care less. He was preoccupied with something else,



something elusive, unmentioned, some queer obsession to which there was no clue. In lesser degree it showed on the darkly colored faces of his companions crowding behind him, Amity chained by vague fear. Would-be friendliness concealed beneath a black shroud of doubt, of apprehension. They were like children who yearn to pat a strange animal but cannot be sure whether one end bites.

SO obvious was their common attitude, and so contrary to expectations, that Benton could not help but try mentally to find a reason for it. His mind milled and toiled until it became suddenly struck with the notion that possibly Fraser—their only Terrestrial contact to date—had fallen foul of his hosts sometime after transmitting his report. Perhaps there had been differences, words, threats and eventually a clash between these copper-skins and the tough Earthling. Perhaps Fraser had tried to fight his way out, impressing them for three hundred years with the efficiency of Terrestrial weapons and their tremendous power to kill.

The same or a similar process of reasoning must have operated within Steve Randle's mind, because before Benton could speak again he shot a fast and pointed question at Dorka.

"How did Fraser die?"

The result was disappointing in its negativity. No guilt, no alarm

came into the other's face. It merely showed retrospection as he answered.

"Samuel Fraser was no longer young when he found us. He said that we were his last venture, for the time had come to take root. So he stayed and lived among us until he grew old and weary and could no longer hold the breath of life. We burned his body as he had asked us to do."

"Ah!" said Randle, feeling defeated. His mind did not inquire why Fraser had not sought retirement on Earth, his home planet. It was notorious that the defunct Corps of Space Scouts had been composed entirely of very lone wolves.

"We had already melted down and made use of the metal of his ship, at his own suggestion," Dorka went on. "After his passing we placed the contents of his vessel in a shrine, along with his death-mask, and a bust of him made by our best sculptor, and a life-size portrait by our most talented painter. They are all here, those relics, still preserved and revered in Taflo." His eyes went inquiringly to each in turn as he added in quiet tones "*Would you like to come and look at them?*"

It was idiotic and unreasonable and completely without justification, yet little alarm-bells rang faintly in Benton's mind. No question could have been more innocent or put more mildly; nevertheless

it gave him a queer feeling that somewhere a trap-door had opened in readiness for him to drop through. The feeling was enhanced by the insufficiently concealed eagerness with which the copper-skins hung on his reply.

*Would you like to come and look at them?*

*Will you walk into my parlor?* said the spider to the fly.

That weird warning instinct, or intuition, or whatever it was, impelled Benton to yawn, stretch his arms wide and say, tiredly, "There is nothing we'd like more, but we're right at the end of a long, long trip and somewhat tuckered out. One good night's sleep will set us up like new men. How about first thing in the morning?"

Dorka became hurriedly apologetic. "I am so sorry. We should have known better than to impose ourselves upon you immediately you arrived. Please forgive us. We have waited so long for you and did not realize—"

"There is nothing to be regretted," assured Benton, trying in vain to reconcile his inward leeriness with the other's genuine and almost pathetic concern. "We could not have rested without first making contact. It would have been impossible. So your arrival saved us much trouble, for which we are truly grateful."

A little relieved, but still obviously bothered over what he chose to view as his own lack of consider-

ation, Dorka backed out through the lock, taking his companions with him.

"We will leave you alone to your rest and sleep and I will see to it that you are not bothered by others. In the morning we will call again and show you around our city." Once more his gaze went penetratingly over all three. "And we will show you Fraser's shrine."

He departed. The lock closed. The mental alarm-bells were still ringing.

SITTING on the rim of the control-desk, Joe Hibbert massaged his ears and complained, "What I don't like about these whizz-bang receptions is that the thunderous cheers and the blare of massed bands leave me half deaf. Why can't people behave with more restraint, speak quietly, and invite us to a mausoleum or something?"

Frowning at him, Steve Randle said seriously, "There is something fishy about this business. They acted as if they were hopefully welcoming rich uncles rumored to have smallpox. They yearn to be remembered in the will but hanker after no spots." He glanced at Benton. "What do you think, Frowsy? Did you smell icicles?"

"I'll shave when some no-good thief returns my depilator, and my nose isn't good enough to smell the unsmellable, and I'm not bothering to do any more thinking until I've got data to think upon."

Opening a recess just below the wall-stud, Benton took from it a platinum-mesh headpiece on the end of a length of thin cable. "Which data I am about to absorb."

He fixed the platinum on his own head, adjusted it carefully, set a couple of dials within the recess, lay back and appeared to go into a semi-trance. The others watched with interest. He sat there, saying nothing, eyes half-closed, while all sorts of expressions chased across his lean face. Finally he removed the cap, stowed it back in its hiding-place.

"Well?" prompted Randle, impatiently.

"His neural band coincides with ours, and the receiver picked up his thought-waves all right," said Benton. "It recorded them faithfully, but . . . I dunno."

"Most enlightening," commented Hibbert. "He doesn't know."

Ignoring him, Benton continued. "What all his thoughts boil down to is that they've not yet decided whether to kiss us or kill us."

"Huh?" Steve Randle stiffened aggressively. "Why the blazes should they contemplate the latter? We've done them no harm."

"Dorka's mind told a lot but it didn't tell enough. It said that reverence of Fraser has developed through the years until it has become almost a religion. Almost, but not quite. Being their only visitor from another world he's the most outstanding figure in their history,

see?"

"That's understandable," agreed Randle. "But what of it?"

"Three hundred years have cast an aura of near-holiness around everything Fraser did and said. All the information he gave is preserved verbatim, the advice is treasured, the warnings remembered." Benton mused a moment. "And he warned them against Earth—as if *was in his day*."

"Telling them to skin us alive first chance they got?" inquired Hibbert.

"No, definitely not. He warned them that Earth-psychology—as he knew it—would operate gravely to their disadvantage, even to their pain and sorrow, so that they might everlastingly regret the contact unless they had the wit and strength to break it by force."

"Growing old and on his last venture and ready to take root," remarked Randle. "I know the type. Doddering around, armed to the gums, thinking they're hot even while they're going cold. He was too long in the void and went queer with it. Ten to one he'd been space-happy for years."

"Maybe," conceded Benton doubtfully. "But I am not so sure. Pity we've no information about this Fraser. So far as I'm concerned, he's just a forgotten name dragged out of some bureaucrat's pigeon-hole."

"As I will be in due time," offered Hibbert morbidly.

"Anyway, he followed up that warning with a second one, namely, that it would be wise not to be impetuous in the matter of beating us off—because they might be beating their best friends. Human nature *does* change, he told them, and Earth-psychology changes with it. Any such change might be for the better, so much so that at some distant date Shaksembender would have nothing to fear. The longer it took us to make this contact, he asserted, the further into the future we'd be and the greater the likelihood of change." Benton looked vaguely worried. "Bear in mind that, as I told you, these views have become tantamount to heavenly commandments."

"This is one heck of a note," grumbled Hibbert. "By what this Dorka fondly imagines to be his secret thoughts—and probably they represent what all his fellows are thinking—we are going to be given the rah-rah or the rub-out according to whether in their opinion we've improved on some ephemeral standard laid down by a long-dead crackpot. Who the deuce was he to decide whether or not we're fit to associate with them? On what cockeyed basis are they going to determine the same thing today? How can they possibly *know* whether we've changed, and *how* we've changed, in the last three centuries? I don't see—."

Benton interrupted with, "You're planting your unwashed finger right

on the sore spot. They think they can find out. In fact, they're sure of it."

"How?"

"If we speak two given words in a given set of circumstances we thereby betray ourselves. If we don't speak them, we're okay."

Hibbert laughed with relief. "Ships weren't fitted with thought-recorders in Fraser's time. They weren't even invented. He couldn't foresee those, could he?"

"No."

"So," continued Hibbert, amused by the futility of the situation, "you just tell us what circumstances were shown in Dorka's mind, and the fateful words, and we prove we're good guys by keeping our lips buttoned."

"All that is recorded of the circumstances is a shadowy mind-picture showing that they surround this shrine to which we've been invited," Benton told him. "Definitely, the shrine is the testing-place."

"And the two words?"

"Were not recorded."

Paling a little, Hibbert said, "Why not? Doesn't he know them?"

"That I can't say." Benton was openly moody about it. "The mind operates with thought-forms, with meanings, and not with pictorial words visible as such. The meanings become translated into words when speech is employed. Therefore he may not know the words at all or, alternatively, he cannot think of them in recordable man-



ner because he doesn't know their meanings."

"Jeepers, they could be anything! There are millions of words."

"That would put the odds hugely in our favor," Benton pointed out grimly, "but for one thing."

"Such as what?"

"Fraser was a native Earthling who knew his own kind. Naturally he'd chose the two revealing words he considered *likeliest* to be used—then hope and pray he'd prove wrong."

Hibbert smacked his forehead in despair. "So early in the morning we amble to this museum like steers to a slaughterhouse. Then I open my big mouth and find myself holding a harp. All because these copper-faces place faith in a trap laid by an obscure space-nut." He stared irritably at Benton. "Do we blow free while the going is good, and report back to base? Or do we stay here and chance it?"

"Since when did the navy fail to see it through?" Benton inquired.

"I knew you would ask that." Sitting down, Hibbert resigned himself to what the morrow might hold. "Lend me your bit of rabbit, will you? I could use it right now."

**T**HE morning proved clear and cold. All three were ready when Dorka reappeared accompanied by a score who may or may not have been the same individuals as before. It was hard to talk; their fea-

tures looked so much alike.

Entering the ship, he said with restrained cordiality, "I trust you are rested? We do not again disturb you?"

"Not the way you mean," muttered Hibbert under his breath. He kept watch on the natives while his hands hung casually near the butts of two heavy belt-guns.

"We slept like the dead," assured Benton, unconsciously sinister. "Now we're ready for anything."

"That is good. I am happy for you." Dorka's dark gaze found their belts. "Weapons?" He blinked but did not change expression. "Surely those are not thought necessary here? Did not your Fraser live with us in peace? Besides, as you can see, we are unarmed. There is not so much as a fishing-stick between us."

"No mistrust is implied," Benton declared. "In the space-navy we are the poor slaves of multitudinous regulations. One such ruling orders that weapons will be worn during all first official contacts. Therefore we wear them." He put on a disarming smile. "If an order required us to wear grass skirts, high hats and false noses, you would now be confronted by such a spectacle."

If Dorka disbelieved this preposterous tale of slavery at such a distance from base, he did not show it. He accepted the fact that the Earthlings were armed and intended to stay that way no matter

whether the impression created thereby were good or bad.

He was on safe ground in this respect—his own ground, his own territory. Small arms, dexterously used, could avail nothing against great numbers if he chose to give the thumbs-down sign surreptitiously, without warning. They could only make the gesture costly, at best. There are occasions when results come cheap regardless of cost.

"Leman, the Keeper of the Shrine, awaits you there," Dorka informed. "He, too, is an able speaker of your cosmoparla. He is very learned. Shall we visit him first and the city afterward? Or have you other ideas?"

Benton hesitated. Pity this Leman had not attended with the others yesterday. It was extremely likely that *he* knew the two significant words. The thought-recorder could have picked them out of his brain and served them up on a platter after he had gone, thus springing the trap and making it harmless. There would be no way of examining Leman's mind at the shrine, since no pocket-sized version of the thought-recorder existed, and neither race was telepathic.

The shrine. The center-point of the circumstances laid down by Fraser. The spot marked X.

There, natives would crowd around them, strong in numbers, fired by unknown fear of unknown things, tensed for action, watching their every move, keyed to every

word they uttered, waiting, waiting, until one of them innocently mouthed the syllables that would be the signal.

In conditions like that the most they could hope for was the doubtful pleasure of taking a few with them. Two words—and a concerted jump as first and only evidence that unwittingly one of them had blundered. Blows, struggles, sweat, curses, choking sounds, perhaps a futile shot or two before oblivion.

Two words.

Death!

Afterward, a compounding with consciences as a quasi-religious service was held over their bodies. Coppery features suffused with sorrow but filled with faith as a chant sounded through the shrine.

"They were tried according to thy rulings and dealt with according to thy wisdom. They were weighed in the balance and found wanting. We thank thee, Fraser, for deliverance from those who were not our friends."

The same fate for the crew of the next vessel, and the next, and the next—until Earth either cut this world away from the mainstream of intergalactic civilization or subdued it with terrible retribution.

"Well, what do you wish?" persisted Dorka, eyeing him curiously.

Benton emerged from his mental ramblings with a start, conscious that all the others were looking at him. Hibbert and Randle were

anxious. Dorka's face showed only polite concern, mild, in no way bloodthirsty or aggressive. That, of course, meant nothing. The Chinese of a thousand years ago could operate the communal strangling-post with total lack of visible emotion.

A voice which he recognized as his own came whispering out of nowhere, "Since when did the navy fail to see it through?"

Loudly and firmly, Benton said, "We'll go first to the shrine."

NEITHER in appearance nor bearing did Leman resemble the high priest of some strange other-star cult. Tall above the average for his race, gentle, solemn and very old, he looked like an aged and harmless librarian long escaped from ordinary life into a world of dusty books.

"These," he said to Benton, "are snapshots of the Earthly home that Fraser knew only in his boyhood. There is his mother, there is his father, and that peculiar hairy creature is what he called his dog."

Benton looked, nodded, said nothing. It was all very ordinary, very humdrum. Every guy had a home at some time or other. Every one had a father and mother, and many of them had owned dogs. He pretended a deep interest he did not feel while surreptitiously he tried to estimate the number of copper-faces in the room. Sixty to seventy of them—and another crowd out-

side. Too many.

With pedantic curiosity, Leman continued, "We have no creatures like that and there is no mention of them in Fraser's notes. What is a dog?"

A question! It had to be answered. His mouth must open and speak. Sixty or more pairs of eyes watching his lips. Sixty or more pairs of ears listening, waiting, waiting. Was this the fateful moment?

Involuntarily his muscles strained against a stab in the back as he replied, with poorly simulated carelessness, "A lesser animal, intelligent and domesticated."

Nothing happened.

Did the tenseness go down a little, or had it never been up except in his own apprehensive imagination? There was no way of telling.

Producing an object for their inspection, handling it like a precious relic, Leman said, "This article is what Fraser called his pal. It gave him great comfort, though we do not understand in what manner."

The thing was an old, battered and well-used pipe, its bowl burned partway down one side. There was nothing about it other than evidence of how pathetic are personal treasures when their owner has gone. Benton felt that he ought to say something but didn't know what. Hibbert and Randle determinedly played dumb.

To their relief, Leman put the pipe away, asked no prying ques-

tions about it. His next exhibit was the dead scout's beam-transmitter, its outer casing polished with loving care, its insides corroded beyond repair. It was this piece of antiquated apparatus which had boosted Fraser's report to the nearest inhabited sector whence planet after planet had relayed it back to Earth-base.

Next came a jack-knife, a rhodium-plated chronometer, wallet, automatic lighter, a whole host of old and petty things. Fourteen times Benton went cold as he was forced to answer questions or respond to remarks. Fourteen times the general strain—real or imagined—appeared to shoot up to peak then gradually relax.

"What is this?" inquired Leman, handing over a folded document.

Benton opened it carefully. An officially issued form of last will and testament. There were a few words upon it, hurriedly written, but neat, decisive.

"I, Samuel Fraser, Number 727 of the Terran Corps of Space Scouts, have nothing to leave but my good name."

Refolding it, he handed it back, explaining it and translating its script into cosmoparla.

"He was right," remarked Leman. "But what man can leave more?" Turning to Dorka, he spoke briefly in the liquid syllables of the local language which the three earthlings did not understand. Then to Benton, "We will show you Fras-

er's likeness. You will then know him as we saw him."

Hibbert gave a mudge. "Why did he switch to that alien gabble?" he asked, doing substantially the same by speaking in English. "I'll tell you—because he didn't want us to know what he was saying. Get ready, brother, we're coming to it. I can feel it in my bones."

**B**ENTON shrugged, turned, the natives pressing close around him, too closely for the fast action that at any moment might be required. There was a peculiar fervor on the faces of the audience as they looked toward the end wall, an intensity as of people about to be favored once in a lifetime. The surge of emotion could be felt, a mass-emotion that could lead to anything, be directed anywhere, to everlasting brotherhood or to raging death.

A tremendous sigh came from this crowd as the aged Leman pulled aside high drapes and revealed the Man from Outside. There was a lifesize bust on a glittering pedestal, also an oil painting between six and seven feet high. Both had those confident but indefinable touches that mark superb talent. So far as could be judged, both were excellent studies of their subject.

Silence for a long time. Everyone seemed to be waiting for some remark from the Earthlings. There was a deep, expectant hush like that in court when the foreman of the



jury is about to pronounce the verdict. But here, in this crazily contrived and menacing situation, the defendants were saddled with the onus of mouthing their own verdict upon themselves. It was for those secretly on trial to pronounce themselves guilty or not guilty of an unknown crime committed in an unknown way.

The three had no illusions; they knew that this was indeed the crisis. They could sense it intuitively, could read it in surrounding coppery features. Benton posed grave-faced with firmly closed lips, Randle was fidgety, like one unable to decide which way to jump when the time came. Belligerently fatalistic, Hibbert stood with legs braced wide apart, hands poised in readiness above his belt, in the manner of a man determined not to go down without exacting payment for it.

"Well," invited Leman, his voice suddenly hard, "What do you think of him?"

No response. They stood together, in a tight little group, wary, prepared, and stared at the picture of a scout three hundred years dead. None spoke.

Leman frowned. His tones sharpened. "Surely you have not lost the faculty of speech?"

He was forcing the issue, pushing it along to a conclusion. It was too much for the irritable Hibbert. Grasping his guns, Hibbert spoke fiercely, resentfully.

"I don't know what you expect

us to say and it's got so I don't care a darn, either. But I'll tell you this, whether you enjoy it or not: Fraser is no god. Anyone can see that. He's just a plain, ordinary space-scout from pioneering days, and that's about as near as any man can get to being a god."

If he anticipated a violent reaction he was disappointed. Everyone hung on his words, but none viewed the speech as tantamount to insulting an idol in its own temple.

On the contrary, one or two listeners nodded in mild approval.

"Space breeds a certain type just as the great oceans breed a type," Benton put in by way of explanation. "That holds true for Terrestrials, Martians or any other cosmos-roaming form of life. You get so that you can recognize them at a glance." He licked dry lips, finished, "Therefore Fraser, being true to type, looks pretty ordinary to us. There's not much one can say about him."

"Guy's like him are ten a penny in the space-navy today," added Hibbert. "Always have been, always will be. They're no more than men with an incurable itch. Sometimes they do wonderful things, sometimes they don't. They've all got guts but not all have the luck. This Fraser struck lucky, mighty lucky. He could have sniffed around fifty sterile planets—but he hit on one loaded with humanoids. That's the sort of bonanza every spaceman prays for even today. It is what

makes history."

Hibbert ended, a little bemused because all his spouting had produced no adverse effect. It made him feel sort of triumphant. There is satisfaction in getting away with talk in circumstances where one's tongue might precipitate a sudden and violent end. Two words. Two commonplace and likely-to-be-used words, and somehow he had successfully dodged both of them without knowing what they were.

"You have nothing more to say?" asked Leman, watching them.

Benton offered amiably, "I guess not, except that it's nice to have seen what Fraser looked like. Pity he's not still alive. He would have been happy to find Earth at last responding to his call."

A slow smile came into Leman's dark features. He made a swift, peculiar gesture to his audience, pulled the drapes together and hid the picture.

"Now that you have finished here, Dorka will conduct you to the city center. Persons high in our government are anxious to talk with you. Let me say how glad I am to have met you. I hope it will not be long before more of your people—"

"There is one thing before we go," Benton interjected hurriedly. "We'd like an interview with you in private."

Faintly surprised, Leman signed toward a nearby door. "Very well. Please come this way."

Benton pulled Dorka's sleeve.

"You, too. This concerns you and you might as well be in on it."

**I**N the seclusion of his room Leman gave them chairs, seated himself. "Now, my friends, what is it?"

"Among the latest instruments in our ship," explained Benton, "is a kind of robot guardian which reads the minds of any life-forms utilizing thought-processes similar to ours. Maybe it is a bit unethical, but it's a necessary and valuable protection. Forewarned is forearmed, see?" He gave a sly smile. "It read Dorka's mind."

"What?" exclaimed Dorka, standing up. He gazed around in bewilderment, became sheepish, sat down again.

"It told us that we were in some vague but definite peril," Benton went on. "It said that inherently you were our friends, wanted to be and hoped to be friends—but two words would reveal us as enemies, fit to be treated as such. If we spoke those words we were through! We know now, of course, that we have not uttered those words, else the situation would not be as it is right now. We have passed muster. All the same, I want to know something." He leaned forward, his gaze penetrating. "What were those two words?"

Thoughtfully rubbing his chin, and in no way fazed by what he had been told, Leman said, "Fraser's advice was based on knowledge

we did not and could not share. We accepted it without question, knowing neither his reasons nor his motives, but recognizing that he drew from a well of other-worldly wisdom unavailable to us. He advised us to show you his shrine, his possessions, his picture. And if you spoke two words—"

"What were they?" Benton persisted.

Closing his eyes, Leman pronounced them clearly, painstakingly, like part of a long-preserved creed.

Benton rocked back. He stared dumbfoundedly at Randle and Hibbert, caught them staring similarly at him. All three were puzzled, defeated.

At last, Benton inquired, "What language is that?"

"Terrestrial of some sort," assured Leman. "Fraser's own natural speech."

"What do those two words mean?"

"That, I cannot tell you," said Leman, becoming equally puzzled. "I have not the remotest notion of their significance. Fraser never told their meaning and none asked him for an explanation. We have memorized and practiced the sound of them, as the words of warning which he gave us, and that is all."

"It beats me," confessed Benton, scratching his head. "In all my sinful life I've never heard them."

"If those words are of Earthly origin it may be they're too an-

cient for anyone but some long-haired professor of dead languages," suggested Randle. He mused a moment, added, "I once heard that in Fraser's time they referred to the cosmos as the 'void' despite that it is filled with many forms of matter and anything but void."

"They might not be even an ancient Earth-language," Hibbert offered. "Those words could come out of oldtime space-lingo or archaic cosmoparla."

"Say them again," Benton invited.

Obligingly, Leman said them again. Two simple words of two syllables each, and none had heard the like.

Benton shook his head. "Three hundred years is a heck of a long time. Doubtless those were common words in Fraser's day. But now they're discarded, buried, forgotten—forgotten so long and completely that I couldn't hazard a guess at what they meant."

"Me, neither," agreed Hibbert. "Good job none of us got over-educated. It's a hell of a note when a spaceman can have his stone put up early just because he remembers a couple of out-of-date noises."

Benton came to his feet. "Oh, well, no use pursuing what has disappeared for ever. Let's go see how the local bureaucrats compare with our own." He eyed Dorka. "Ready to take us along?"

Hesitating a moment, Dorka registered embarrassment as he asked,

"Have you still got this thought-reading contraption with you?"

"It is firmly fixed in the ship." Benton laughed as he patted the other reassuringly. "Much too big to carry around. You think your own thoughts and be happy, because we won't know what they're about."

They went out, making for the center of Taflo where the great silvery spire of the government building speared into a purplish sky.

"....." said Benton,

repeating the forbidden words. "I don't get it. One might as well say *psornid akshum*, since it's just as meaningless."

"It is so much clutter," indorsed Hibbert.

"Clutter," echoed Randle. "Now I come to think of it, they had a deuce of a funny word for that in olden days. I found it in a book once." He thought awhile, ended,

"Yes, I remember it. They called it gabbledogook."

THE END

## TEST PIECE

### Contest Rules and Prizes

**A**UTHOR Eric Frank Russell had three little words in mind when he wrote this story, and he kept them there! He didn't put them in the story; that little job he left to you! In other words, it's a contest. If you can name those three little words, you just might win a piffling little prize of some sort. (See list.)

Usually there are rules to a contest; but this magazine hates rules—we do things for fun. Contests are fun, rules are not. For instance, everybody knows we won't be stinkers enough to award the prize to a member of the office staff, or to a relative. Just take it for granted we won't cheat. Next, you can write on any darn side of the paper you choose, or on both sides. We aren't so stupid we can't find the other side of a sheet of paper. And third, what if you haven't got a pen, or it's out of ink, or you intend to submit your entry on a blotter? You use a pencil. Or a crayon. Or spell

it out with nail-heads on a board. Naturally, if we can't read it, you don't win—and that's not our fault. And it isn't a rule that you ought to submit your entry before the contest ends—that's just common sense. The contest ends April 15 (so's we can announce the winners in the July issue, on sale June 5.) No hekum about postmarks on your entry—you figure to get it to us by the 15th, and allow enough time for Uncle Sam to make delivery. Our readers are rated smarter than a postmark. As to the opinions of the judges being final, that never did make any sense to us. What if you did think your entry was better? What could you do about it? Most judges are selected anyway because they have no connection with the magazine, and therefore don't know what's going on. We'll judge the entries right here on the staff, and you take 'em or leave 'em.

Now for the prizes: For a while