

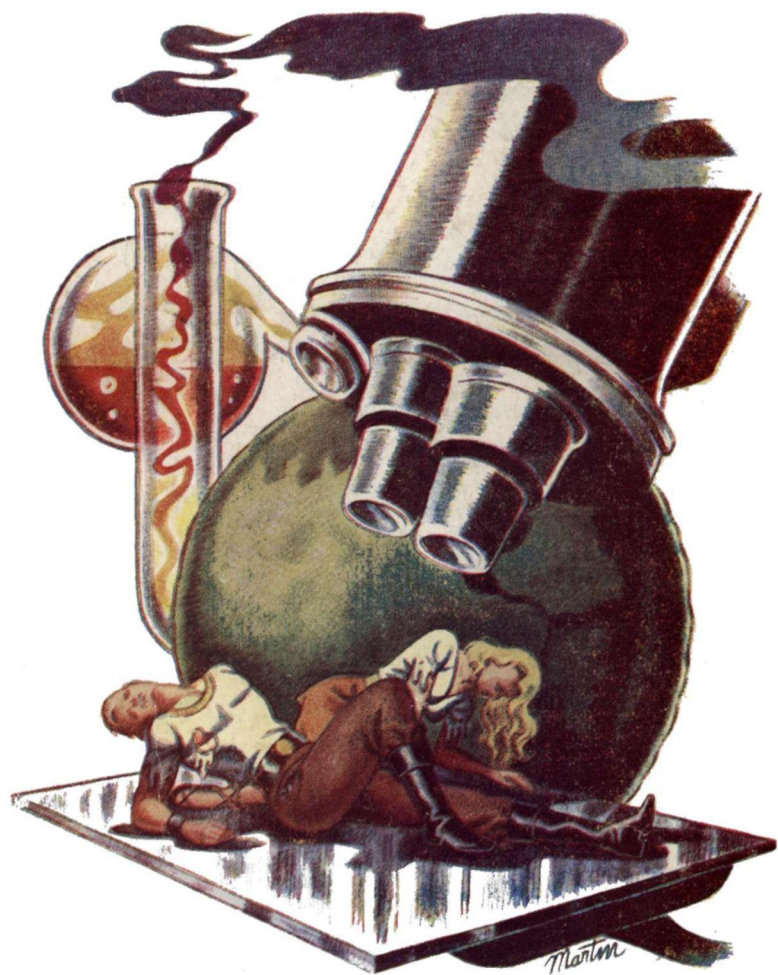
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# VORTEX

SCIENCE FICTION

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# Love Affair

By DERFLA LEPOC

The Watcher was too human  
for his job — the girl,  
too human to live.

**T**HE first time I saw her, she stood in the rain forest under the watchtower with the slanting sun glistening in her hair. She wore animal skins and her flesh was burned brown from the sun. I knew her for one of the lost ones from beyond the hills, where the ruins smoulder near the sea.

She stood, ragged and unmaintained, a sorry figure on the rain-soaked earth, looking up at the summit of the watchtower. Waiting,

perhaps, for the killing energy to stop her, not knowing that the sight of her had made me neglectful of my trust.

They are different, these wild ones from the ruins. How different from us, I could not have known that sullen twilight when she first appeared. I knew, of course, that I should have stopped her, destroyed her, and then reported it to the great machine in the City. That was my duty as a watcher. Instead, I

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opened the portal below and took her in out of the forest. I can't say why. The sight of her overcame many things. My conditioning must have been faulty. I did not want to destroy her. I saw her and wanted her for my own.

The tower, of course, sought to reject her. I was forced to deactivate the alpha screens and the suppressor circuits. Even then, the tower's displeasure was almost tangible.

She was one of those called the middle people. The unfortunate sav-

ages that came into being after the End and before the start of the Age of Machines. The lost ones, half-finished and archaic—racial reminders of the bitter people who caused the End and the ruins of the humming air that polluted metal and set the counters clicking a threnody.

When she saw me coming down the ramp toward her, she raised her weapon and backed against the wall of the tower. I stopped and made a gesture of friendship. It was not understood. I tried to communicate

with her, but so archaic was she that only spoken words would do.

"I am the watcher," I said.

"I know." Her voice held nuances unknown to me. Of anger, of fear, of other things that I could only imagine.

"Are you afraid?" I asked.

Her savage mouth opened, showing oddly sharp and feral teeth. "I am hungry," she said.

For a moment, I did not understand. The word was something out of the far distant past. And then I began to comprehend. I smiled at her and extended my hand.

"Come with me," I said.

She came, with her hand in mine, but with her stone axe firmly held in the other. We made our way up the spiralling ramp to the fourth level of the tower, where the energy banks stood with their prehensible couplings.

"Feed yourself," I said. "Eat." I stumbled badly over the unfamiliar term.

She stood looking blankly at the humming banks. The couplings did not seek her. Nothing happened.

It came to me then that she was more savage than I could have guessed. She required *food*. Actual fuel, ingested through the mouth. I shuddered slightly, understanding the purpose of those sharp white teeth.

**I** am making no excuses. I should have known what she was. But, by the circuits of the machine and

the City that gave me life, I would have acted no differently had I known and understood. I had seen her standing in the forest and I had desired her. Loved her, if you will. I will not talk of the loneliness of a watcher's life, nor of the faulty conditioning I received at birth. I have known something denied to most of our kind. A fragment of reality from before the End. I have few regrets.

I hunted for her. Actually. I left the tower and killed small animals so that she might eat. I brought them to her and watched her devour them half-cooked and bloody. I washed her and clothed her and cared for her and the days fled by uncounted.

Her name, a sound of strangeness in my ears, was Lillith. I loved her and was content.

Her eyes were sky-colored, and they would darken when she grew angry with me for some imagined slight. I tried to teach her history, knowing that the lost ones are assembled in darkness without the wisdom of the City or the machine. I tried to tell her of the ancient's from before the End, and how they died and only the machines were left. I spoke of the City and many other things but she would not listen. Savage she was and savage she remained, in her habits, in her furies, in her lovemaking.

Time passed and I was happy with Lillith, but the tower was not. It

argued with me, demanded her finish. I refused.

As the days went by I became conscious of the fact that I had become almost a slave to Lillith. If I held her, and she said: "Warm yourself, you are cold," I obeyed. If she wished to cover her body with fabric like gauze filled with stars, I created it, dragging unwilling help from the resentful tower.

But if I imagined that the tower would be content, I was mistaken. The City that made me made the tower also, and gave it purpose. And that purpose was to guard against the creatures of the past.

Lillith sickened. She grew wan and listless. Her strong body began to change unaccountably. Her limbs thinned. Her face paled. I threatened the tower, but the tower adhered to the purpose the City had built into it. The trust I had abused when I failed to destroy Lillith.

I even tried to run away. But the way was too hard now for Lillith, and I returned to the tower, filled with hopelessness.

I could see my love disintegrating before my eyes. I could hear her unspoken cry for help. And so at last I knew that I must *try*,

**I** am no technician. I am only a watcher. But I had no choice. There was no help to be had for her anywhere. She was being destroyed by the tower. I had to try

to armor her against the killing energy.

I went to her. She lay on her pallet, eyes wide with fear.

Her voice was only a whisper.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Help you," I said gently.

"Can you?"

"I must try. Or you will stop," I said.

Her face contorted. "Not *stop* . . . *die!*"

The word was strange to me.

She screamed. A long shrilling liquid scream like the organisms of the forest voice in pain.

A warm red moistness welled up out of her, staining my hands. I felt the beginnings of irrational fear. I searched for her chest-case that I might armor it. She had none. Frantically, I searched inside her, and each movement of my hands bringing forth a shrill cry of pain.

It was no use. Even when all her parts lay redly on the floor beside her pallet, there was nothing I could understand. They were soft, sticky and dark red.

I called her name. But even then I knew. She had stopped.

The tower had won. The tower and the City and the machines which say to our kind that there shall be no more men. Only robots.

Now disassemble me and have done with it. I wish to be with Lillith.

— DERFLA LEPPOC

# Tourist on Minotaur Moon

By MILTON LESSER

For ten months Each year,  
Applebee was just a lowly research clerk  
— but during the other two,  
He was a giant, yes, a veritable giant!

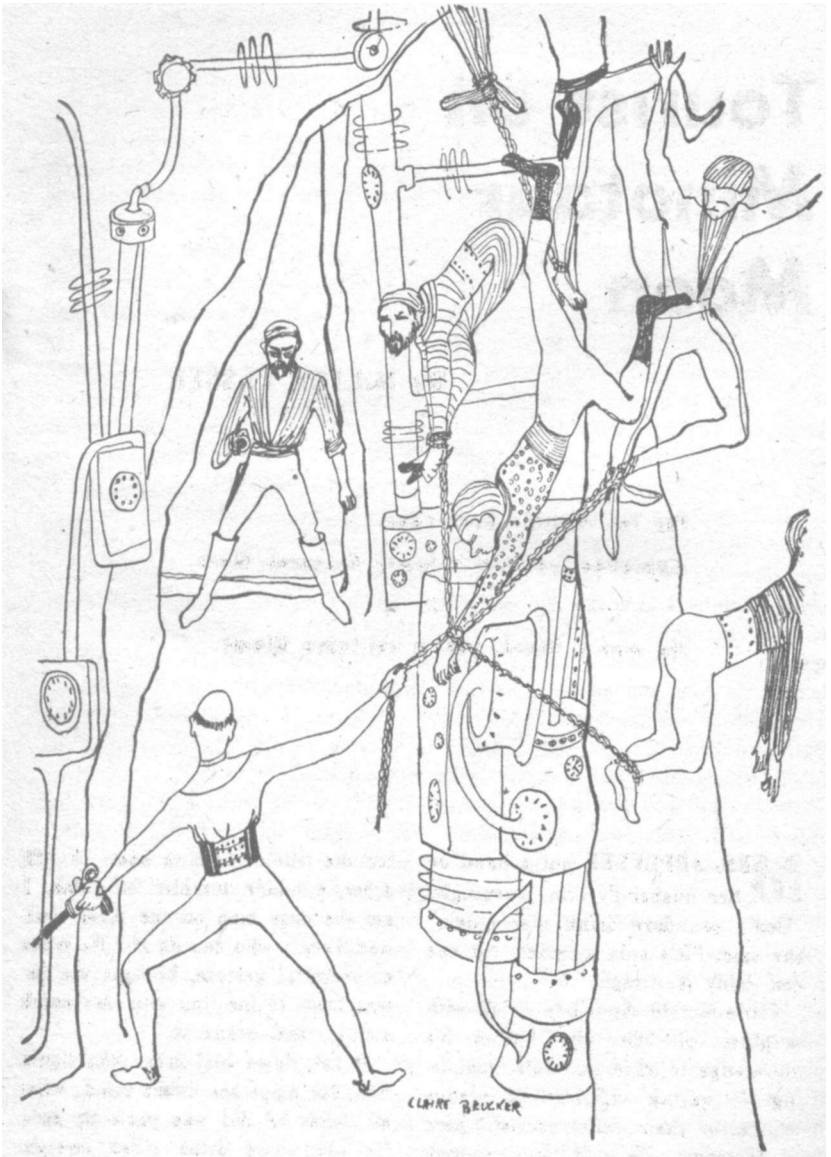
MRS. APPLEBEE put a hand on her husband's arm, warningly. "Don't you dare drink that q'dak," she said. "It's only a mixer. No one can drink it straight."

Little Gerald Applebee shook with laughter of one who knows his knowledge is superior. This was living' — having sufficient knowledge to startle their fellow-tourists here in Marsport. He said, loud enough

for the whole room to hear, "I will drink a whole tumbler of q'dak. I am the only man on the three civilized worlds who can do it." He made a theatrical gesture, brought the potent brew to his lips with one quick motion, and drank it.

It ran down his throat like liquid fire, but Applebee didn't mind. After all, what he did was perfectly safe. No one could drink q'dak straight





and walk away from the table — unless he took precautionary measures: all one had to do was chew a clump of snith weed before he downed the fierce liquor. Then the stuff would be no more potent than water.

Ten months of the year Applebee worked as a research clerk for I.T.A. — Interplanetary Tourist Association — and the other two months he spent travelling with his wife, using the knowledge of his research to prove himself a man, despite the smallness of his frame. Oh, it was glorious fun. He could remember last year on Venus —

Then why did his head spin so? Kelly's bar had been a square room, yet now it was a great spinning oval, spinning and foggy. Applebee's head reeled with the effects of the q'dak. A ridiculous smile crept across his face, and although he was aware of it and knew it meant he was drunk, he could do nothing to hold it back. That hawker who sold him the snith weed had been a fraud, had given Applebee useless grass in place of the antidote for q'dak.

Dimly he could feel his wife prodding him with an angry elbow. Still more dimly he heard the laughter of his fellow tourists seated about him in Kelly's Marsport Bar. And particularly he heard the loud laughter of Hogan, the I.T.A. field man in charge of this touring group. The field men always held I.T.A.'s office

workers — researchers like Applebee — in contempt. With a twang of jealousy amusing for his forty-five years, Applebee had realized that his wife seemed attracted by the coarse gruffness of their guide. Now that laughter louder than all the rest.

The room whirling — whirling, and Mrs. Applebee saying something, her husband couldn't tell what. He felt a cold draft, as if the door to Marsport Avenue had blown open. Or maybe he was out on the avenue? No, the door had opened. With an effort, he opened his eyes and tried to focus them. A big figure stood in the doorway, a massive man larger even than Hogan. A loud voice barked some commands, but Applebee couldn't quite hear them. Then he was aware that the big man seemed frozen to the spot as his glance levelled on—himself!

"S'matter?" Applebee began, but he burped and couldn't finish the sentence.

Still dimly, he saw the big man turn rapidly and stalk out of Kelly's Marsport Bar. He heard murmuring, but it sounded far away. His head slumped slowly to the table, as through a sea of molasses. This q'dak had a kick. He must remember to report the phoney hawker to the I.T.A. What was his name. . .

Applebee next saw the pastel colors of his hotel room. He sat up in bed and felt a trip-hammer go off in his skull.

"Mr. Applebee," someone sard, "I want to thank you."

With an effort, Applebee focused his eyes. There at the foot of the bed stood Kelly (of Kelly's bar), Hogan, and Mrs. Applebee. Kelly was talking. "But I want you to tell us how you knew Stacey would try to rob the Marsport Bar last night. Oh, I knew rumors said he was in town, but still—"

"Well, I—" Applebee began.

"Don't be modest," coo'd Mrs. Applebee. "Tell him."

"It was brilliant," Kelly broke in. "Not many people know that q'dak temporarily discolors your face with symptoms identical to the deadly plague of the desert. When Stacey saw you, he thought you had the plague. I never saw anyone hightail it out of the Marsport Bar as fast as he went. He must still be running!"

Hogan growled uncomfortably. "Applebee probably didn't know q'dak would do that to a man. Just an accident."

Applebee was thinking fast, despite the trip-hammer in his skull. Of course, q'dak would have just such an effect without the snith weed. But on the other hand, he didn't even know that the fabulous brigand Stacey was on Mars, let alone attempting to pilfer cash from the game rooms of the Marsport Bar. He was about to say as much when his wife turned angrily on Hogan:

"Of course my husband knew!" she said. "He doesn't work as a researcher for I.T.A. for nothing. He may not be big, *Mr. Hogan*, but he can handle himself, my Gerald."

Applebee cleared his throat. "Certainly I knew of the effects of q'dak," he told them. That much was true. Applebee winked affectionately at his admiring wife. This he was beginning to like.

Kelly thanked him again and left the room, followed by a still-growling Hogan, more red-faced than ever.

"Oh, Gerald," Mrs. Applebee murmured—she had never said Gerald that way before—"you're so brave! When we leave for Canal City tomorrow all the tourists will be talking about you. I'm so proud of you, dear."

Carelessly, Gerald gestured that it was nothing.

**A**LL tourists on Mars visit Canal City. They can be flown there by rocket, of course, but the scenic overland route is favored by many. It takes one two-hundred miles across the ochre sands of the desert from Marsport, along the banks of the ancient canal. Canal city itself is something of a relic—an ancient monument of the long-dead past, a city constructed by the canal-builders—how many centuries ago? It stands quiet and alone at the junction of two great canals, mute testimony to the splendor of a long-dead race.

Now the two-dozen tourists under

Hogan's leadership were three days out along the canal rout on their corats. These animals were oddly like earthian camels, except they were smaller and somewhat more intelligent, and had big flat pads at their hoof-bottoms which could glide effortlessly over the shifting ochre sands of the Martian desert.

"Tell us about your trip to the Venusian swamplands," while Appelbee had visited them transiently, a mere tourist. Yet all ears turned to Appelbee as he spoke. Hogan snorted and hurried his corat up ahead.

"—rains constantly, drearily, without end," Appelbee was saying, choosing his words carefully, like an experienced rhetorician. Then he reigned in his corat. Ahead, the extreme blue of the Martian sky was obscured by a haze. Mechanically, Appelbee's mind flipped the pages of I.T.A.'s booklet on Martian meteorology. That haze—so unusual for this time of year—could mean only one thing.

"Hogan," Appelbee called. "Hogan, stop! We're in for a sandstorm. A bad one, by the looks of things."

"Wadya mean, sandstorm?" Hogan himself was storming. "Hardly a wind blowing: I'll let you know when we have to worry about a storm, Mr. Appelbee."

"If you look at that haze in front of you—" Appelbee suggested.

Contemptuously, Hogan raised his eyes from where they had been con-

templating the rust color of the Martian sand. He almost jumped out of his saddle. "By the Canal Builders!" he exclaimed.

APPLEBEE laughed softly to himself: rule three of the booklet for I.T.A. field men said they should adopt the local idiom thoroughly. Even Hogan knew his rule book.

"By the Canal Builders!" Hogan repeated. "That storm will be on us in a couple of hours. We could go back and—"

"We'd never make it," Appelbee told him. I.T.A.'s thorough survey of Martian meteorology had said that the desert storms come up incredibly fast. "Our best bet is to—"

"Stop talking and let me think!" roared Hogan.

"Just a moment, Mr. Hogan." one of the tourists said. "If Mr. Appelbee here has a suggestion, I'm sure we'd all like to hear it. He's been around."

"He's been around!" moaned Hogan. Then he said, "We could work our way down into the dry canal bed. It would protect us from the storm."

The tourists shifted about on their saddles, but none moved to follow Hogan as he edged his corat towards the canal.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Well," the tourist who had just spoken said, "we'd like to hear what Mr. Appelbee thinks of the matter."

Mrs. Appelbee smiled.

Appelbee considered. Hogan's suggestion was precisely what I.T.A. itself would advise. "That's a satisfactory idea." Then he raised himself upright between the two fatty lumps on the corat's back. "Men," he said, gesturing dramatically, "into the canal."

"What a man!" someone cried as all the steeds began moving after Hogan. Hogan growled a particularly fierce Martian word. Still using rule three, Appelbee thought.

A twenty-foot wall stood between them and any attempted descent into the canal bed, but every several hundred yards it was pierced by a narrow defile. Through one of these, single file, the tourists followed Hogan. The bank of the canal sloped at an angle of some thirty degrees, but the flat foot-pads of the corats acted admirably as brakes.

Down they went and down. The ochre rock stretched out on all sides and faded into shadow far below. These canals had been great water-conducting troughs in the days of old, to bring the precious liquid from the polar caps to equatorial Mars. At the top they were several miles in width, but each bank sloped inward at a steady angle of thirty degrees until it ended abruptly, thousands of feet below, on what was now a dry and narrow bed.

With a gulp, Appelbee realized this descent was dangerous. It was all very well to read about it in the I.T.A. booklet, but another thing

entirely actually to attempt it. The man who lost his saddle now wouldn't have a chance. He would plunge helplessly over and over for thousands of feet and wind up a broken mass at the bottom of the dry bed.

"Careful," Hogan warned. "Careful. Keep your saddles, whatever you do."

Once Appelbee fancied that his corat slipped a little, and his heart began to pound furiously. Probably that had been a trick of his overwrought imagination, for these corats were amazingly sure-footed.

Gradually, it got dark. Not in any way that could be noticed at once, but as they descended, the ochre slope lost some of its brightness. Soon they were completely in shadow. The tourists were afraid: Appelbee could tell that many of them trembled with fear. Whenever he could, he smiled reassuringly, but he didn't feel nearly as confident as he tried to look.

**T**HE darkness covered them like a blanket. Looking across the chasm, Appelbee could see that the further bank was a mere hundred yards away, and sloping to meet them. Down below, not more than a few hundred feet now, was the bed of the canal.

Stiffly, they dismounted. Appelbee looked up. Overhead was a broad expanse of velvety sky, star-studded.

"It's night!" Hogan exclaimed. "That descent took so long—"

"Ridiculous," Appelbee contradicted him. "Of course, Hogan, you're new to Mars and—"

"I'm not new!" cried Hogan, frowning. "I've been here for three months, after an extensive course in the area at I.T.A.'s Luna City."

"Whom," Appelbee smiled condescendingly, "do you think prepared that course. I did." He smiled again, happily. "The reason you see those stars is due to our position. This is just like looking up the barrel of a tall chimney. Ever try it?"

They were first aware that the sandstorm had reached their area by the disappearance of the velvety strip of sky above them. In its place — a dull gray-black canopy over their heads. Soon it began to rain particles of sand — slowly at first, then faster. Before long the two-dozen tourists and their guide were being pelted with it.

"We'll just stay here," Hogan told them, "until the storm blows itself away. Then we'll climb back to the desert and continue on for canal city."

"Tch-tch," said Appelbee, enjoying his role all the more.

"What's wrong?" Hogan demanded furiously.

"Nothing much. I can just tell you're inexperienced."

"Don't tell me—"

"You'll never be able to drive a corat back up that slope, that's all."

Hogan glared at him. Wordless, he climbed into his saddle and

reached the slope. A few paces up his corat carried him, then it came tumbling back, head over heels. Hogan landed in a heap at Appelbee's feet.

"See?" Appelbee said. "I'm surprised you passed the course at Luna City, Hogan. Those corats are not very strong uphill."

"My gosh," Hogan began.

"What now?"

"How're we gonna get out here?"

"At Canal City," Appelbee explained patiently. "Every old Martian city has a long winding tunnel leading to the canal bed. The corats can climb there."

Hogan nodded sullenly. Still sullen, he gave orders for an evening meal to be prepared, and the four members of the party who had previously volunteered to handle the cooking chores began their work.

Much later, Appelbee rolled open his sleeping bag and climbed into it for the night, aware that the fury of the sandstorm above him had died down to a slight blowing of the tiny particles on his face. He rested comfortably, too tired to tell his fellow-travellers that they had no danger of being buried. The rough surface of the huge sloping banks caught most of the sand before it reached them. Well, no matter. And Appelbee felt so good. Of course, Hogan didn't like him. But then, the feeling was mutual. The rivalry between field workers and office men in I.T.A. was extreme. But the office men always

proved superior, Appelbee thought.

"I'll show that guy," Hogan muttered as he went to sleep.

**A**PPLEBEE awoke with the odd feeling that something was distinctly not as it should be. He could see the canopy of stars overhead again: the sandstorm had passed. But what was the odd cramped feeling in his limbs? He tried to get up.

He couldn't!

His arms and legs were bound securely. All about him now he could hear startled oaths of surprise and indignation, and the whimpering of the women. The entire party of two-dozen tourists were bound hand and foot.

"What the hell?" Hogan said with a snort.

A big figure loomed out of the semi-darkness. There was something familiar about the huge frame, the dark face, the walk of the man, but Appelbee couldn't quite tell what. Then he heard Hogan roar:

"Stacey!"

Stacey—the system's most notorious brigand, in a day when brigandry was not common. Stacey, whose very name was feared on the three civilized worlds and all their colonial outposts in the solar system. Stacey, for whom the Interplanetary police offered a staggering reward, and for whom the I.T.A. knew its business had been seriously curtailed in recent years.

"Yes, I'm Stacey," the big man

swaggered. Behind him came half a dozen other figures, dark and menacing. Stacey said, "if you agree not to resort to violence, the ropes won't be a permanent necessity. I'll take you to my headquarters and—"

"What for?" Hogan demanded.

"Come, come," chided their captor. "Two dozen tourists wealthy enough to visit Mars for a considerable period of time. I think it is distinctly possible I can secure a gem or two for the release of each of my guests here."

"You wouldn't dare!" Hogan blurted.

Stacey smiled. His voice was soft and somewhat cultured, for all his great size and uncouth appearance. "That's a matter of opinion, my friend. As you can see, I have dared."

Appelbee frowned and spoke for the first time. "Well, you'll never get away with it. The I.T.A.—"

"Is helpless!" Stacey laughed. "They have all they can do to keep their tourist trade functioning, let alone do anything about me "personally. Of course, the Interplanetary police are another matter, but their jurisdiction is limited to the three civilized worlds, and although they thus could capture me here on Mars, they don't know my whereabouts. Rather clever, don't you think, using an abandoned canal bed for a hide-away?"

Hogan grunted something unprintable in Martian or any other lan-

guage. He said, "I'll speak for everyone. You can untie us. There'll be no violence, not with those guns your men have."

**W**ORDLESS, Stacey motioned his crew in out of the shadows. They went to work rapidly, untying the tourists. With a sigh of relief, Appelbee felt his own ropes go slack and then fall away. He got up slowly, rubbing circulation back into his arms and legs. His wife looked at him as if to say, "well, do something," but all Appelbee could do was shrug and await the next move of Stacey.

For what Appelbee judged to be about three miles they were ushered further along the canal bed. Ahead in the dimness he could see the pear-shaped bulk of a spaceship filling their path. Stacey's ship—bound for where?

They entered, prodded along if they hesitated by the blast guns of Stacey's crew. Stacey himself carried no weapon: he seemed above that sort of thing, content thoroughly with his capacity as engineer of the scheme. Within the ship, all the tourists were led into one big room. A door was locked behind them and the uncomfortable silence at once gave way to the frenzied babbling of Applebee's companions. In spite of himself, Appelbee felt amused at what he heard.

"Wait till I tell the girls in the

bridge club," one woman said. "Will they be envious!"

"Shuddap!" ordered a man who must have been her husband.

The little jewel manufacturer from South Africa said, uneasily, "I hope he doesn't know who I am. He'll expect so much."

"Mama," the one child in the party declared with finality, "I want to."

"You can't," his mother said.

Someone suggested, "Perhaps Mr. Appelbee has an idea."

Hogan snorted, then tempered his wrath with self-pity. "The I.T.A. will take my permit away for this. If I have to go back to selling souvenirs at the Asteroid Carnival—"

"So that's what you did," a woman said. "Such a nerve the I.T.A. has, making you a guide."

Abruptly, the talking ceased. A muted roar surged into the room through its thick walls and the pressure threw the two dozen tourists to the floor, where they were obliged to remain seated while acceleration increased. The ship had blasted off from the ancient canal bed—bound for where?

Appelbee didn't know. The headquarters of Stacey and his brigands had always been a mystery. One consolation here: when he got back to earth, Appelbee would know the whereabouts of that mystery, and would include a daring expose of it in his next report.

If he got back to earth.



**I**T hardly turned out to be a space trip at all. Not more than an hour could have passed when Appelbee felt the effect of the braking rockets. The ship was preparing to land—where?

Appelbee thought furiously. They must have circled Mars and come around the other side. Perhaps Equator City had been their destination. But that seemed impossible. Surely, Stacey couldn't have kept his rumored storehouse of wealth in a place as big as Equator city without discovery. Of course, they could be approaching some isolated region in the Martian desert. Perhaps Stacey had his headquarters in an oasis, or in the bed of another canal. Again, this wasn't likely, because the Interplanetary Police had combed the three civilized planets in vain for Stacey and his men. Their jurisdiction, however, didn't extend beyond the thousand mile limit. That would place Stacey's headquarters, in all probability, out in space, where, assuming the Interplanetary Police knew it, they still would be unable to do anything about it.

But the trip couldn't have taken more than an hour. It was sheer lunacy to believe that Stacey had ventured far out into space in sixty minutes.

Lunacy! Appelbee gasped. Moon! Certainly — the long-sought headquarters of Stacey could be found on one of the Martian satellites, the two tiny companions of the planet.

In all probability it was Phobus, the fast inner moon. One hour would be more than enough time to drive a ship there, considering the minutes necessary for acceleration and those now being consumed by deceleration.

Phobus, by all means. Appelbee thought still more furiously. How could his knowledge be of service? He withdrew for the moment into himself and brought back memories of his research work on the Martian moons. Phobus was the inner satellite, revolving about the parent body at a distance of less than four thousand miles from its surface, its tiny, ten mile bulk completing the revolution in less than a third of the Martian day so that it apparently rose in the west and set in the east. Years ago—twenty, thirty—Appelbee didn't remember—Phobus had been a little pleasure planet, frequented by the interplanetary millionaire - set for gambling and other recreation. But the fad had passed, and today the system considered Phobus to be deserted, hurling its tiny globe about Mars in a silent, endless journey.

Still Appelbee's mind raced along in thought as the ship neared its destination. The rule book for I.T.A. field men, section three, paragraph seven—revised by Appelbee himself, had said: "Always consider your belongings for any resources that might prove of value in an emergency."

Appelbee went through his pockets. Sixteen solar dollars. Identifica-

tion papers. A monogrammed handkerchief. Comb. Vial of vitamin pills. Key to his helicopter back on earth. A stratopen. Horn-rimmed glasses, used for reading and televising. A souvenir of his trip to Ceres — the tiny, compact gravity equalizer which adjusted the bearer to earth-normal no matter what the external conditions.

And that was all. Nothing very helpful, Appelbee observed ruefully. Stacey held the whip—

**T**HE ship landed. For a few moments, its unwilling passengers remained undisturbed, and then they were aware of an odd dropping sensation. Appelbee remembered that in the days of its youth, Phobus had been honeycombed with underground vaults and passages, a veritable labyrinth. Minotaur Moon, the pleasure planet had been called. Evidently, Stacey had his headquarters within this maze of caverns. Little wonder he had escaped detection. For all intents and purposes, Phobus still appeared to be a dead and deserted world.

Phobus — Appelbee shuddered. In Greek the word meant fear. Well, he was afraid.

Two of Stacey's crew, their blast-guns drawn, ushered the tourists out of the ship and into a great, well-lit cavern. Appelbee could see many little portals leading off into other underground recesses, probably the storerooms for the vast treasure of

Stacey's many illegal enterprises.

Stacey lined them all up against one huge wall and said, "I trust none of you know of our position?"

Silence. Then Mrs. Appelbee replied, "My Gerald probably knows." She continued, proudly, "He's an authority. Definitely, if anyone knows where we are, it is my husband, Gerald."

"Please, dear," Appelbee said.

Stacey had stopped smiling. "Um, Gerald," he said disarmingly, "is the little lady right?"

"Right? About what?"

"Do you know where we are?"

Appelbee could sense hidden menace in the sugary tones of their captor's voice. "No," he lied.

"Come now, Gerald," Mrs. Appelbee prodded. "You needn't be modest. Tell the man you know."

"I don't know," said Appelbee, sweating.

"You do, too!" his wife insisted.

"Gerald," Stacey approached the matter differently, "I wouldn't want to think you were lying to me."

"He's just modest," Mrs. Appelbee assured the big man.

"Dear," pleaded Appelbee, "will you let me handle this?"

"No I won't!" his wife responded, peeved. "You have no ambition. Let stand they had poor Applebee down on the hard rock floor. One got behind him and began to force his right arm up and back. Appelbee winced with pain. The pressure was increased. He writhed and moaned.

"Don't be modest," Stacey suggested.

Mrs. Appelbee screamed. "Don't you dare tell him you know, Gerald!" she cried.

Appelbee raised his left arm, signifying he had had enough. "We must be on Phobus," he gritted. "Minotaur Moon."

A long silence. Then Stacey said, still in a sugary tone, "It's unfortunate, Gerald, but you're right. Most unfortunate."

"Why is it unfortunate?" Mrs. Appelbee demanded, helping Appelbee to his feet. "You asked him if he knew and he told you. But he shouldn't have, not when you got nasty."

"It's unfortunate because this changes our plans. After getting ran som, we actually could have sent you all back to Mars. Now you know where we are. We can't send you back."

Mrs. Appelbee shook her finger at him. "If you think I'm going to spend the rest of my life in this cave—" she began.

Stacey assured her, "You will spend the rest of your life here. It won't be very long, but it will be here."

**I**T was later. Appelbee couldn't tell for certain how much time had passed since their interrogation by Stacey. But he and the others had been fed passable fare half a dozen times, and they had slept on crude

cots in the big cave twice. He judged that some forty-eight hours had elapsed. He spoke now, to Hogan:

"Phobus! So I was right."

"So what?" Hogan wanted to know.

"So for years the system looked for this place and couldn't find it, that's what."

"Well, it won't do you much good. Any day now Stacey and some of his henchmen will see that the information never gets outa here. Like this." Hogan ran a thick index finger quickly and significantly across his throat.

"You and your brains," he continued. "A lot good your knowledge of touring did us. You hadda open your big yap and tell him you knew."

"I couldn't help it," said Appelbee.

He had been thinking. There must have been a way out of this mess, if only he could find it. The lives of over a score of innocent people. . . . At least their last few days would be spent comfortably. Evidently some artificial means of stabilizing gravity to earth-norm—similar to Appelbee's tiny pocket souvenir—was being used on Phobus. Otherwise they'd have floated about the cavern like half-helpless swimmers. But Appelbee could tell his weight seemed quite normal.

He sat bolt upright. Of course! He had the way out—maybe.

Of guards in the cavern, there were none. Stacey's men had seen to it that the prisoners remained weap-

unless. Outside of that, an occasional brigand might drift through on some mission or other, or to bring them food. Otherwise, they were unmolested. Appelbee hummed softly to himself and smiled in spite of their predicament, as Hogan frowned.

"See you later," Appelbee said, striding almost jauntily towards one of the dark portals leading from the cavern.

For hours he walked through the maze of dimly lit passages. At first he moved cautiously, fearfully, but soon he had passed several of Stacey's men, who ignored him completely. No orders had been given to keep them in the big cavern. Good.

He came upon incredible heaps of gems and precious metals, and other heaps of currency, carefully piled in great stacks behind bars and metal grillwork. The treasure of a score of years of piracy cluttered the halls of Stacey's headquarters.

But he sought none of this. Finally, he came to a big room, larger than all the others, except for their sleeping quarters. Here was a mass of machinery. Here was—

"What are you doing?" someone barked at him, blast-gun levelled.

Appelbee started. One of Stacey's men. "Why, nothing. As you can see, I'm just walking around and—" the man know you know and he will respect you."

"Yes, Gerald," Stacey agreed, "I will respect you." He motioned two of his crew forward, and in an in-

"And nothing," the man ordered. "Poke your nose out of here."

**A**PPLEBEE nodded and left through one of the tunnels. But he paused in the semi-darkness and waited. His heart began to tick away the minutes. Presently, he heard footsteps. The man had left the big chamber. Cautiously, Appelbee peered within. No one. He tiptoed back into the well-lit room.

For a while he examined the machinery. Satisfied, he began to hum a little tune again, and went to work. First he pressed a switch on his tiny-gravity equalizer and nodded when he heard its little engine begin to purr smoothly. Then he approached something which looked exactly like the instrument in his pocket, built on a vastly larger scale. Something which towered over his head in a maze of delicate wirings and glass-work.

Still humming, Appelbee picked up a metal stool and hurled it into the mass of machinery. Tinkling glass and flying sparks told him his work was progressing. Now he lifted the stool once again and began to beat at the big machine, using his improvised club. In a few minutes he had reduced the machine to a tangled ruin of metal and broken-glass.

Now Appelbee began to whistle. Dimly from the various passageways he could hear the sound of angry and surprised voices. Still whistling,

he strode from the room and back the way he had come.

He met one of Stacey's men — swimming! There in the air floated the man, halfway to the ceiling, turning and twisting foolishly, like a man under water, and cursing all the while. Appelbee reached out and grasped one weightless heel of the man to pull him down. He pulled the incredibly light body until the man's holster was on a level with his shoulders, then he reached within and withdrew the blast-gun. With a little shove he sent the man, yelling futilely, spinning off into the air again. For a moment Appelbee watched him kicking and twisting. Then, satisfied, he strode on down the tunnel, blast-gun ready in his hand.

Then he stopped and about-faced. He had a better idea. He returned to the cavern of machinery and found what he sought, a long coil of heavy rope. One end of this he tied to a foot and an arm of the man whose gun he had taken, and dragging the weightless burden behind him, he proceeded briskly on his way.

**B**EFORE much time had passed, Appelbee looked like some modern pied-piper. Behind him he had a long string of Stacey's men, all tied to his heavy rope, all floating and kicking weightlessly in the air. He had no more trouble disarming any of them than he had had with the first man. None of them were

used to the weightless situation: all spaceships had gravity-equalizers within them. The men floated helplessly about, some trying to swim awkwardly in the air, others just kicking ridiculously. They were like helpless babies to Appelbee. He left their weightless blast-guns floating in one direction, and carried them along on his rope in the other.

By observation he had estimated that Stacey had no more than twenty men here on Minotaur Moon. He paused in his work to count heads. Eighteen. Excellent. Eighteen cursing, muttering, struggling prisoners. Appelbee gave the rope an unnecessary tug which told the men to be quiet.

He had combed the passageways by now. Only the big prison-chamber remained. This he entered with his chain of followers.

The two dozen tourists floated awkwardly about the room, weightless like their captors. Appelbee greeted them with a wave of his hand and looked about. Where was Stacey?

He heard a voice, still sugary: "Drop your blaster, Gerald. I have you covered."

Twenty paces across the room, big Stacey stood facing him, a levelled blast-gun in his hand. Stacey stood — not weightless like the rest! Apparently he had a pocket equalizer like Appelbee's own, his one protection against a possible crew insurrection.

Appelbee leaped into activity. He

darted back into the passageway as the beam of Stacey's blaster zipped through the air beside him and made a corpse of one of the men dangling on his rope.

He stood behind the protection of the wall, breathing hard, still holding the end of his rope of prisoners.

Stacey called to him: "I will begin to shoot these people one by one until you give yourself up, Gerald."

Appelbee gulped. What could he do? He knew Stacey wasn't fooling. He peeked out from behind the wall. There stood Stacey, contemptuous of his marksmanship. It was one thing to make prisoners of all these men, Appelbee thought, and another to kill. He had no doubt that he could use the blaster effectively. He even had given a course in its use at Luna City. But he couldn't bring himself to shoot Stacey!

Appelbee blinked. What was that, swimming silently through the air behind Stacey? Hogan! Hogan there behind the brigand, coming closer.

He heard a startled oath. Hogan had grabbed for the gun with his weightless hands. Stacey pushed him away easily enough, but in the time it took, Appelbee had darted across the cavern, pulling his helpless cargo behind him. He reached Stacey and hit the hand that still clung to the gun. The blaster fell to the floor with a clatter.

Appelbee stepped back and pointed his own gun. "Don't move, Stacey. Don't even blink an eyelash," he commanded, conscious of the miling floaters about him, conscious of their glances of awe and admiration.

**T**HE rest was easy. Appelbee re-moved Stacey's gravity equalizer and fastened the now-weightless brigand leader to his rope. He conducted the whole chain to the spaceship and locked them in the same room that had been used to convey the touring party to Phobus.

When he returned for the tourists, still floating in the big central cavern. With another length of rope he got them all down and led them to the ship. They all talked of this great thing he had done.

Even Hogan—reminding the tourists at the same time that it was he, Hogan, however, who had distracted Stacey for the necessary instant.

Only Mrs. Appelbee didn't hold her husband's deed in such great esteem. She said, "I'm surprised it took you so long, Gerald."

Appelbee obeyed I.T.A.'s rule book once again. Section twenty-two, paragraph eight said: "Never argue with a woman tourist."

Appelbee smiled happily and led them all to the spaceship.

— MILTON LESSER

# Best Man

By H. E. VERETT



**B**ILL sits there while the minutes drag and d-r-a-g as he waits for High Noon. And Bill's hate chews around in his guts like a termite in a tasty mahogany floor-beam. And his mind re-hashes things he wants to forget.

How Francie says, no, Bill, I can't marry you, she says. I like you like a brother, she smiles to take away the sting, but you know I'm so much in love with Tim I can't think about another, man, she says.

But she hopes he'll forget his silly infatuation, as she calls it, so they can keep on being good friends. You know how much Tim thinks of you, she says, and how it would spoil his happiness if anything happens.

Sure, he tells himself, sick-like. Forget beautiful Francie with the laughing eyes, the red-gold hair. Forget her wonderful body, her kiss-demanding lips. Be a good sport and stick around us, like she said. Forget heaven and live in hell, she might as well have added. Be the pal of the lucky stiff who's won me away from you. See me with him every day, but never want me, never touch me. Just see Tim doing that, and act as though you enjoy watching him.

So outwardly Bill smiles and says, I'll rally 'round, and I hope you'll be very happy as long as you live, he says. And he grins and says, I *must* have been nuts to think you could ever fall for a mere atomic physicist

when you can snag a millionaire. And then he says, Tim always said when he got married I was to be his best man, so now's the time, he says.

And she smiles and says, that's the right spirit, and she is very happy about it all, she says. And he says, well then, let me do something nice for you both, let me give you the double rings. And she says, isn't the groom supposed to do that, and he says, oh maybe, generally, but this a special case, isn't it, and I wish you'd let me. And after a little she says yes, and he knows Tim, bless him, always agrees with anything she thinks is OK.

And Bill says, well, how's about one little kiss just for luck or remembrance, and she backs away as though the suggestion is improper and says, oh, no, I couldn't, it wouldn't be fair to dear Tim. And when Tim hears of this he says, Bill, I wouldn't have thought it of you, and Bill, says, well, hell, I'm losing her so I ought to've had something.

So Bill goes back to his laboratory and only comes up for air on the wedding morning. Then he sends a messenger to Francie with the ring she's to give Tim, and he takes Tim the ring he's to give Francie. And he and Tim start getting dressed up.

My gosh, I'm sick, Bill says all of a sudden just before they're to leave for the church, and he doubles up on the bed. And Tim says, oh, you'll be all right, come on, and Bill says, I can't, Tim, I'm all cramps.

You'll have to get someone else, he says. So Tim sees he means it and phones another pal who agrees to help him out, and Tim leaves on the run so as not to be late.

**A**ND as soon as he's gone Bill gets up from the bed where he's been pretending he was sick and he sits down and watches the clock and he gloats. Turn me down will you, he says, and want me to be a brother to you, when you know I've got other ideas, he says, and gets madder. Make out like I'm your best pal, he says, and all the time you're taking the girl I want, and laughing at me for losing out.

And all of a sudden the clock strikes twelve and in his mind's eye Bill sees the ceremony begin. The wedding party comes down the aisle. Francie meets Tim at the altar. The ritual. And he says I do and she says I do and they exchange rings. And then the minister says, you will now join hands.

And Bill's moment of gloating is interrupted by the doorbell, and a messenger hands him an envelope. And it contains the ring he'd sent Francie and a note that says, Bill, we decided not to use these. And Bill curses and tosses the ring into a little box on the table. And just as it leaves his hand he sees Tim had left the other ring there, and Bill screams and lunges after it.

But too late.

Critical mass.

— H. E. VERETT



# Sunset for Pawns

By F. ANTON REEDS

Phrr Chose to Stake His Game  
on Earth's Puny Manthings!

**T**HE warm green sun was almost hot in the deeper green of the sky, but on the marble terrace the shadows of the lush blue leaves of the bordering bushferns cast pleasant puddles of coolness. The three of them—Mrr, Krr, Drnn—moved to the smooth stone benches worn by the sprawling bodies of centuries of world players and relaxed upon them.

They could have played under the trees, on the soft, velvety blue fea-

ther grass, of course, but the day was not too warm and everyone knows, has always known, that the game of world is best played when the body is not too comfortable and the mind is stimulated to deepest concentration. For, after all, the world game is a game for experts; even the tricky, fabulous game of creation requires less skill in concentration.

"The morning is already half gone," Drnn said with a sigh. "We

had best use only the little system."

Together they lay back upon bent elbows and brought into being in all their minds the rounds of the little game.

"Mars," said Krr assertively, with the ancient privilege of the eldest player. "Earth," Drrnn chose decisively. Mrr spread an open palm and grinned ruefully. "Venus," he said.

In the world game there is a natural advantage accruing to the player with the smaller, inner worlds, for the evolutions are swifter, more decisive. But there is a danger, too, any world player knows well, and, sometimes, because he must make his moves more slowly, the player with the larger, further world makes fewer costly errors in the long run and, if the game continues to setting sun, finds himself the day's winner. Nevertheless, Mars, Earth and Venus remain first choices.

As always in the moment before the opening moves, Drrnn's wry sense of humor brought an impish urge to change, just for once in all these centuries, the tiniest phase of the game.

"Suppose," he thought gleefully, "I call my round by another name—Gurness or Harnus or Blim—and teach my pieces to call it so, too."

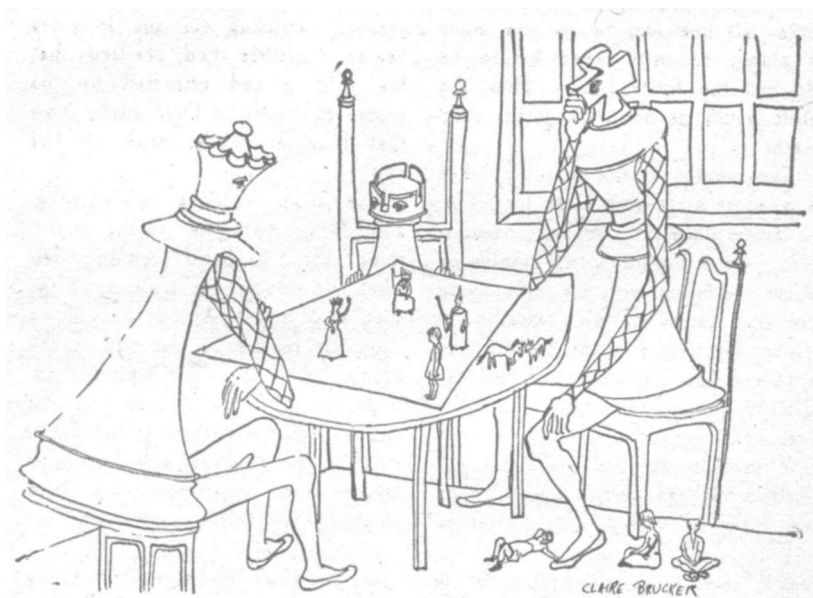
But he knew he would not. Such a thing was not done. Had never been done. Always the little system rounds were the same—Earth, Mars,

Venus, Mercury, the other unpopular ones which perforce went to the younger players. Roundsmen were arrant traditionalists.

The soft slip-slip-slip of sandals caused the three of them to look up. It was Phrr, greatest of all modern world players. Phrr, a big, sensitive fellow, saw at once the quick glances of disappointment on the faces *~of* the trio. With a shrug and a smile he strolled to the marble balustrade and, sweeping back his ochre cloak, set down idly to watch the play with his quick, trained mind.

With the favorable odds of the smallest of the three rounds and the rich mineral soil of Mars, Krr, as was to be expected, was soon off to a substantial lead in the early moves. A man who preferred the mechanics style of evolutionary approach to either the inner depth or cultural development modes of play, Krr brought his rudimentary pieces to the first decisive move early, while Drrnn's rough earthmen were only learning to walk upright (a not always successful opening gambit) and the Venusians of Mrr were yet slime dwellers. Faced by the normal alternative of fire, language or the wheel, Krr pondered only a second before choosing the wheel.

"Given the wheel," Krr always insisted, "the rest will come soon enough. Given fire first, your pieces may only dance about it for a dozen wasted moves."



**B**UT both Krr and Mrr kept watchful eyes on the stalwart, lean-limbed pawns chosen by Drnn, who had elected to open his round with the popular Cro-Magnon pieces which 10 often were winners when used with the Earth round.

Within twenty moves Drnn's stalwart pieces already were causing Krr to glance anxiously at the stage of the sun's arc, for it is traditional that no world game may go past the setting of the great green mother-goddess.

A young player might have been tricked by the deceptive calm with

which Drnn brought his Cro-Magnons through the opening sets. There was no sense of hurry; sometimes Drnn chose to use a whole series of moves for the seeming most minor of social processes. Drnn ignored the rapidity with which Krr's Martians moved from the simple workbench to the laboratory and from the laboratory to the factory. The Cro-Magnons, Drnn's opponents early realized, were to be integrated pawns, with physical, mental and spiritual powers well synchronized.

The Cro-Magnon pieces, for that very reason, are at their best in the

hands of a fellow of resolute will and deep inward calm. For such slow preparation must always lag a bit after the opening sets of any game; it is only later, towards the game's close, that the traditional tactics with the long-limbed pieces begin to pay off in a manner almost phenomenal.

Mrr, no genius, was having the devil's own time of it in bringing his muck-dwellers toward true creaturehood; had no time to keep more than a cursory inward eye upon his opponent's worlds. But Krr was not of that liver. A choleric fellow, brilliant but erratic, he was allowing himself to take unreasoned chances in pressing forward his materialistic culture on the Mars round.

From the balustrade the sardonic Phrr sprawled almost motionless, only the occasional quiver of his closed eyelids betraying the interest with which the world's greatest modern master followed the game on the terrace.

From time to time younger players, called inevitable by the deep silence from the marble terrace which told of a game in progress, slipped quietly to stone benches and silently con-jured lesser rounds; cheerfully accepting the impossible odds to have the privilege of playing with the trio older men. Phrr gave them little notice, though his trained consciousness could hold a galaxy and—some bold enthusiasts asserted—even a Universe.

At first none of them, except perhaps Drrnn himself, was aware of the presence just beyond the terrace.

But as Drrnn, his eyes still closed, grew distracted, the others, too, sensed that Lilth was there, watching, bathing Drrnn with the emanations which were the world's strongest single force.

None of them had heard her soft tread on the sward, none had caught the faint rustle of her tunic. But they knew that she was there, even as they redoubled their efforts to concentrate upon the little system. The emanations lapping in waves over Drrnn impinged upon the sensitive nerves of them all, for already deep summer was bringing the rutting season closer.

They all knew the struggle going on within their comrade who held the Earth-round.

No man dares break in upon a rounds game, save silently, to take up his own world where worlds are left. Even an emperor had stood, sorrowfully, on an ancient unforgotten day, while his empire crumbled about him; powerless to interrupt his chief of state who was involved in the intricate forty-fifth culture-matrix revision in a particularly noteworthy game.

But Lilth—who could halt her? How could she halt herself, or even want to? For all men know that the rutting call is the deepest urge of all; a primal necessity of the ran.

Silently the great Phrr slipped from the balustrade and went to Drnn's side, reaching out to touch his shoulder. Like one possessed in sleep, Drnn rose and padded from the terrace, his golden slippers slapping the centuries-worn stones.

Phrr slipped onto his stone, holding the earth-round that Drnn had quitted in his mind. The waves from the sward beyond died away; the other players lay awaiting the master's first move.

Then, in a magnanimous gesture which was to live on men's tongues even beyond the reaches of the great Phrr's name, the master of all modern world players swept away with his mind the Cro-Magnon pawns which Drnn had chosen, clearing his green and blue round of all but the lesser animals and the reserve pawns with which any sensible roundsmen must back up his chosen pieces.

**D**RRNN, a sound, logical player, had wisely chosen as his first reserve pawns the great apes, which, next to the Cro-Magnons, were generally conceded to be the most likely choice with the earth round. As a third pawn set Drnn had, rather carelessly, picked the manthings, similar in slight ways to the Cro-Magnons, but infinitely their inferior.

Suddenly a sigh of relief, mingled with surprised admiration, swept the minds of the other players as the magnanimous Phrr made his choice.

For the first time in the hoary history of the game the apethings were being swept into the jumble of lesser life forms on the earth round.

Phrr had chosen to stake his game on the puny manthings alone.

It is perhaps history's greatest tribute to Phrr that even in that moment, with the impossible odds he had given himself, he was feared.

But the self-imposed handicap told heavily and even the Venusian slug-guards had developed an intricate civilization, probing tentative feelers toward earth-round conquest, before Phrr's puny pawns had reached the stage which even a Drnn could have attained with his Cro-Magnons in another twenty well-chosen moves.

Krr's Martians, pushed too fast, were finding themselves on a quickly-depleted round. But Krr had chosen well. The pawns he had taken had a basically sound emotional level and great capabilities for later blendings of the inner development style of play with Krr's basic materialistic attack. Krr's Martians, in his eagerness, might have burned up a world; they still had a mighty survival value.

It was quickly evident, even to the younger players of the outer circles, that Phrr, in his historic gesture, had overestimated his own powers. In the hands of an average player the manthings would be hopeless; even in the hands of the greatest roundsman of them all they were still—manthings, muddlers, emotion-

al and unstable incompetents.

But, with game determination, Phrr played on, babying his pawns like a kennel-master training Zrr-puppies to talk. It was mid-afternoon before Phrr himself was ready to concede the hopelessness of his position.

For move after move he hesitated, lost deep in problems of strategy, then passed.

At last, as his move came again, he resumed play. Resumed it with a calm, murderous desperation that awed the minds of the other players; held them spellbound so that it was only reluctantly that they gave attention to their own rounds, their own pieces.

With sheer cold abandon he set his pieces on a soulless mechanistic drive such as had never been seen in rounds play in the memory of living man. His manthings, in a dozen moves, were reaching mechanistic heights which Krr's Martians had taken a hundred moves even to approximate.

**B**UT "the manthings were being moved coldly, bitterly—without a scrap of attention to inner depth, to cultural patterns, to integration.

"Great Green Mother!" Mrr whispered to his own mind, as he saw with an intuitive flash the finesse great Phrr was seeking. "He's trying to turn weakness itself into strength."

And it was true.

Phrr deliberately had chosen to

take advantage of the manthings' greatest weakness, their emotional instability. He was using it brilliantly to drive them heedlessly, to bemuse them, to turn them into little more than robot machine-makers and machine tenders and machine-product-consumers.

Cro-Magnon pieces could never have been used thus; even the ape-things would have embarked on such a course only reluctantly and under the greatest pressure.

For a dozen moves, as the earthlings piled mechanistic marvel upon mechanistic marvel, beyond their comprehension, beyond their remotest ability to control, the other players hung breathlessly upon each of Phrr's moves, seeking to discover the ultimate strategy toward which he must be moving.

When it came it came suddenly, without warning; so that for a moment even Krr, second to the master, found his own round dimming and wavering for a moment in the awesomeness of the moment.

Phrr was flouting a 10,000-year-old tradition.

He was preparing to put nuclear fission, for the first time in the world's history, to the test.

History no longer recorded the discoverer of the formula for fission. All that was lost in the thousands of years behind. But the world's thinkers had seized upon it, naturally; had toyed with all of its possibilities, conceived in their minds the

giant cyclotrons, the great power sources which it could bring.

It had remained a formula.

Inevitably, of course, it had hung tantalizingly before a hundred generation of roundsmen.

"No harm to put it to the test in a game," they said.

But caution held them back.

"The great green mother has been good," others warned. "Let us not press her too far, even in games."

And suddenly—today—it was to be put to the test.

The players were heedless of the rings of silent spectators, called by the awful wonder of their minds in that moment. Oblivious of the swift passage of the green mother above.

The first steps were taken—irrevocably.

Phrr sat like one centuries dead. The skin across his cheeks was like taut hides across an ill-shaped drum.

It was the others, now, who passed, move after move, to give Phrr time—time, time! And they knew suddenly what Phir sought. They knew his mind in that moment.

"Perhaps," Phrr reasoned, "even this holocaust will not be complete. Perhaps from such a tiling even manthings can emerge with their weaknesses fused to rugged strength in that awful heat."

One move, a second, the beginning of a third . . . .

A purpling shadow slipped across the marble terrace, fell upon their closed lids. Deepened there as light

passed and the quick purple night fell.

Sunset. Game's end.

One by one, chalk-faced and worn, the players released their rounds. Phrr's was the last to vanish.

Phrr's eyelids nickered open and in the sudden soft darkness none could see the vacant mindlessness in his eyes.

Silently, spectators and players slipped away.

On the terrace the only sound was Phrr's deep, rocking sobs.

— F. ANTON REEDS



# Fair Exchange

By L. MAJOR REYNOLDS

**D**UST. The dried and desiccated skin of an almost dead world. Dust, thick and cloying, clinging to all it touches. A slight movement of air, and the choking clouds rise in billows. Dry. arid. Such is the surface of Mars.

Pink Barber straightened up with a grin that opened his homely face like a slice of watermelon.

"Did you see those little divvils go for that candy! And damned if they didn't pay for every piece! I'll bet if we counted these rocks and stuff we'd find the right number." He stirred the mess with an idle finger while he spoke. Suddenly he stiffened. "Slim, lookee."

Slim Jordan sprang to his feet. "What's the matter, Pinky? You're as white as a sheet."

Wordlessly, Pinky held out something between his thumb and finger.

Slim started a wise crack, but shut up like a steel trap. Silently he held out his hand, and received a pearl. Just that. A shimmering rosy pearl.

"Where in the burning hinges of hades did *that* come from, Pink? Oysters make pearls and they live

in water. And there's not that much water on this hunk of dust!"

Pinky didn't answer.

It was no wonder they were speechless. The pair had spent ten months on Mars; and except for vein after vein of lead which wouldn't pay for its shipping, the planet, in that area at least, was non-productive.

The very first morning they landed, they discovered they had company. Twenty-five or thirty small furry red animals remotely like an Earthly squirrel, descended on them at breakfast. In a twinkling their plates were empty of food, and held a collection of sticks, small rocks, and anything else the creatures had had time to grab. Afterward, the assemblage sat around on a handy knee or shoulder, and washed paws and faces.

Pinky and Slim finally stopped laughing enough to talk.

"I beat you out, Pink," Slim chortled, "I got a bite of bacon."

"'S more than *I* got. I'm makin' me a sandwich." He disappeared into the ship, and Slim jumped as he heard—

"Why you danged little highbinder!" He raced into the ship just





in time so see Pink, holding one of the creatures by the nape of the neck, spanking it with a handy can of sardines.

Slim rescued the tiny beast and let his partner have the full blast of his temper.

"Pinky Barber, you ought to be horse whipped! What's the big idea of pickin' on the poor critter?"

Pinky pointed to the sugar bin. Its level had been appreciably lowered, and the top was covered with the same mess of rocks and rubble that had been left on their plates.

"I don't care what *you* think about it, Slim, but I like sugar in my coffee, and no damned pack rat is gonna foul up the detail. Gimme that brat!"

"Calm down, you fed-headed lug. All we've got to do is keep the can closed. It shouldn't've been left open anyway, in all this dust. Now get off your high horse!"

Pinky grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Slim, I ought to realize they don't know any better." He put his hand to pet the creature and got properly snubbed for his pains. Slim put the thing down on the floor, and it walked stiff legged out the door, outraged dignity in every step.

"Well," Pinky said, "that's the last of that!" He made his sandwich and wandered outside, eating it. Slim followed in a few minutes, and stopped dead in his tracks.

Perched in the center of his partner's right hand, the recently chas-

tised animal was finishing Pinky's sandwich. Pinky was gazing forlornly at a bit of rock which he held in the other hand.

"Stop grinnin' you danged string bean! A swap's a swap in any language!"

Slim raised his eyes. "I ain't sayin' a word."

**E**VERY night thereafter, when the two men returned to camp, they were met by a small wave of red fur, and everybody hopped aboard for the ride. As soon as they hit camp and removed their boots, a hilarious game of hide and seek started in them. That stopped when they realized there were no shoe laces left. The inevitable rocks turned up when the boots were donned again.

Day followed day in weary succession, telling the same story. Their supplies were running short, and what fuel they had would be barely enough to see them safely back to Earth.

"It's no use, Pinky," Slim said one evening after another fruitless search, "we're licked, and we might as well admit it." He reached for his pipe just in time. "Come back here with that you little devil! I can't smoke a rock! Better get packed up, Pink, we'll take off in the morning."

An overlooked can of fuel gave them a week's respite. They were able to make a trip to the nearest canal,

and bring fifty gallons of what passed for water on Mars.

Slim, trying to drink a cup of coffee made of the stuff, spit it out in a spray. '

"Don't try it, Pinky! We'll use this for washing, and cook with what's left in the tank. Wheeooo! it stinks, and it tastes like it smells!"

Pinky didn't answer for a moment, and Slim looked up. His partner was staring hopelessly down at something on a flat stone.

"'S matter, Pink?" He gradually became aware of the muttering voice of the other.

"And if I ever get my fingers on another one of those blasted pack rat critters, so help me I'll skin 'im alive. I'll nail 'is hide to the side of the ship, and what's left over I'll run outa camp—" He broke off and glared at Slim, who was howling with laughter.

"Well, what bit you?" he demanded.

Slim choked, and tried to talk.

"Yeah, you'll skin 'em' alive all right. Why don't you try it when you've got a lap full of 'em at night?"

"But, Slim, they swiped all my drills I had sharpened and laid out."

"Lock your tools up at night. You know they take everything they can get their paws on. Come on, let's get busy, you can use my tools."

**T**HE day was almost over when they made their discovery. A deposit of jewelry quartz, as blue as the home skies of Earth. It made

a satisfyingly heavy load, and Pinky was jubilant.

"This'll pay for the trip, Slim—"

"Yeah," Slim interrupted, "but what do we live on after we pay the bills?"

"Aw shaddap!"

Dinner, as usual, was a hectic affair. One bite in three they managed to get. Something would start out on a fork. By the time it reached its destination, it would be a small stick, or whatever the fury creatures had time to grab in their quick trips to the ground.

Always, a fair exchange. Never take without giving.

"Sometime," Pinky mused, "when we hit it rich, I'm comin' back to this dust ball and feed these things till they can't eat another bite. Where in hell do they put it?" He picked up one of the animals, gave its over-stuffed stomach an explanatory poke, and got nipped for his pains.

Slim cleaned up the table, while Pinky got the candy.

The first handful resulted in a mad scramble which brought howls of laughter from the two men. The little creatures sat around the fire, nibbling frantically at the small sweets, and Pinky had the inevitable handful of rocks.

"Think it'll hurt 'em, Slim?"

"Naw, they could digest a Venusian flapjack."

"Okay," with a shrug, "here goes another batch."

That "batch" was the fateful one.

They both stood looking at the pearl, not even heeding the animals at their feet.

Finally, Pinky dropped to one knee, and held the pearl between his thumb and finger. He whistled, and each soft red head turned in his direction. He held the pearl in plain sight, and waited.

One of the small creatures came slowly toward him, dejection showing in every line of the tiny body. Reluctantly, he spit out the bit of candy, and handing it to Pinky, reached for the shimmering gem. The candy was returned at once. Tucking it back in his cheek, he waited for the next move.

Then Slim took over. He got a handful of candy, took the pearl away from Pinky, and knelt down. As the dive started, he raised it out of reach. Then he showed them, alternately, the gem, and the sweets.

Bright eyes inspected both, and then, in one concerted move, the entire tribe fell on the donor of the pearl.

**T**HE little creature was in a fair way of, getting his stuffing kicked out, when Pinky rescued him.

"How can we make them understand we want more pearls? Here, you try it and see what luck you have." Slim handed the bait to Pinky.

Time after time, Pinky made the attempt and failed.

"I don't know what's the matter with 'em, Slim. They want the

candy, so how come we can't get the idea over?"

Finally, after another series of trials, he seemed to get results. Several of the creatures left, and returned with the drills they had taken that morning.

No sale.

Everything they had exchanged from the camp was returned.

Still no candy.

The entire bunch retired for a talk. After an argument, a spokesman approached and offered a bit rock.

Nothing doing.

The pearl was shown again with each refusal.

The conference raved on, until the chattering was a blur of sound. At last, a decision seemed to be reached. The spokesman took off into the night. He soon returned with the mate of the first pearl, lying in a bit of curved rock.

He offered it, very gravely, and received his" reward. That broke the spell, and, by the time the candy box was empty, a pile of shimmering beauty lay on the sand between the two men.

Pinky dumped his precious tools on the dusty ground. He wiped the inside of the chest, and the two poured the shining spheres in by handfuls. Silently, they carried the box to the ship.

The next morning, not an animal was in sight. The pair ate a lonely breakfast.

Pinky was worried. "Do you sup-

post- the candy poisoned the poor little critters?"

"Damfino. They seemed okay last night. Hey! There's some of 'em. But they're sure keeping their distance. Let's go over and see what's the matter."

At the approach of the two men, all but one of the animals left. The solitary delegate sat on a small rock. Pinky knelt beside him.

"'Smatter, little guy, don't you like us any more? Did the candy give you a tummy ache? Come on, feller, get friendly!"

Slim reached down to pat the furry head. A quick side step and the caress missed its target.

There was dignity in every line of the small body, but the eyes could not meet those of the two men.

"Pinky, he acts like he was ashamed of something. I don't get it."

"I don't either. They've always been so friendly. Say, Slim, you've got some of that candy in your pocket. Could be that'll fix him up."

The sight of the candy was the last straw. The pair of tiny paws covered a shocked face. He turned, and walking as rapidly as dignity would allow, vanished into his tunnel.

"Now, if somebody can explain *that*, I'll put in with 'em. Pinky, did we insult him, or what?"

"Don't ask me. He acted like he'd done something he was ashamed of. So help me, when you offered him that candy, he blushed! It's

beyond me what's eating him."

"Oh nuts! Let's blast off for home. I'm sick of this dust ball, and I want a bath again! Warm up the rockets, Pink, we're headin' for Earth."

As the ship disappeared, it was watched by many pairs of shamed eyes.

**T**HE rocket blasted its way through the atmosphere of Earth, and burned a path in a heavy shell of clouds.

"Slim, just look at that rain! Did you *ever* see anything like it? Ten months on that dried up apple, Mars, and now home, and good wet rain! I'm gonna go out, lay down in it, and just plain soak!"

"Come on, get the lead out, and let's head for a jewelry store. I'm havin' me a necklace made, and I'm findin' me a gal to hang it on."

"Slim, let's have another look at those pearls. I still can't believe it."

Slim threw back the lid of the oil-tight box. For a moment the contents shimmered up at them.

And then, a sudden change came, as the pearls softened, and liquefied. A nauseous odor arose, and a quick flash of memory stung the minds of the gaping pair.

"Oh no!" Pinky gasped. "That's why they didn't want to give us the things!"

The concerted howl of laughter nearly split the plates of the ship.

Mars sure has dry climate.

— L. MAJOR REYNOLDS



The Tower of Babel fell —  
and man's inheritance was  
a radioactive world of rape,  
looting, wandering sickness,  
and just a spark of hope.

# Homecoming

By ALFRED COPPEL

**I**T was dark when Varney woke me. Dark and cold.

"Get up, Gavin," he said. "It's over.

I lay on my cot for a moment, stupid with sleep, trying to make sense of the words. I'd known for days that it would end soon. All of us in the burrow had. We hadn't launched any missiles for almost a week. There hadn't been any to launch. But the words that gave it reality sounded inadequate. They didn't make me *feel* anything, inside.

I sat up, shivering and fumbling for my uniform in the darkness. It had never been comfortable in the burrow, but since the main power

had failed and what electricity could be generated shunted to the firing racks, the cold and dampness had made deep inroads.

I put on my fur-lined jacket—the one I had won from an Air Force captain—and buttoned my tunic with half-frozen, clumsy fingers. There was no thought of washing or shaving.

Varney hadn't waited. From somewhere, down the corridors of the burrow. I could hear a few voices raised in feeble song.

"Happy days are here again—the skies above are clear again . . ."

That made a lot of sense, I thought, picking my way through the

dark" passageways. A hell of a lot of sense.

The guard at Top Main Control was an AEC man with a stained tunic and a burp-gun. He signalled me in with a jerk of the thumb. Varney and Colonel Greyling and a handful of junior officers were there, their faces expressionless under the grime and beards. I noticed that all the triggers on the big board were secured and the radar screen was dark. It really was over.

"It's been over for ten days, Gavin," the colonel said. "The courier plane from New Washington just came in with the news."

One of the junior officers asked, "Did we win, sir?"

Greyling looked scornfully at him. His sunken eyes seemed to burn. I found myself remembering that his wife and two sons had been in Chicago.

"Win?" he said. His voice was colder than the Alaskan glacier over our heads.

"Let's just say the Russki quit first and let it go at that," murmured Varney.

The junior officer swallowed hard and turned away. Presently Greyling continued.

"I know that all of you want to go home," he said. It seemed to me that he paused imperceptibly before the word home. The Chicago Bomb had changed its meaning for him. But for most of us there was at last the faint hope that something

might be left. It had been months since we had had any news, about damage. Hardly any of us could think about anything else.

**T**HERE is room for three on the courier plane. It will go south to Portland before heading east. I am taking it upon myself to discharge any personnel for whom transportation is available." He glanced around the room. "Purdy. You live in Astoria?"

Purdy nodded, his bearded mouth twitching slightly.

"Worth. You are from somewhere in Washington, aren't you?"

Worth's young-old face was pale and drawn, but his voice was steady enough as he said, "Yes, sir. I lived in Vancouver. I won't need to go home, sir." The Vancouver Narrows Bomb had taken care of Worth's need.

The colonel nodded briefly. "Martin. You live in Montana somewhere?"

"Yes, sir." Martin straightened his tunic as he spoke, as though trying to recapture some semblance of military smartness.

"And you, Gavin?"

"Near San Francisco, colonel," I said.

"I can only get you as far as Portland. The courier won't go out of his way . . . and then—"

I knew he was thinking about the last report we had received in the burrow concerning California—about



the rumored lithium-tritium bomb that had cut off all communications with the country south of the Siskiyou. It might have fallen anywhere.

"I understand, sir," I said. "I'll risk it. Just get me to Portland and I'll manage to get the rest of the way . . . home."

The courier plane dropped me at the Air Force Base just south of the city. It was raining hard and the pasture that had replaced the ruined field was a quagmire. A few Quonsets, scaly with old paint, housed the garrison. A wire fence had been erected around the Base perimeter to keep looters and hungry refugees out.

Portland proper had not suffered too much? damage, but a wolf-pack of subs had shelled the shipyards not long after the Narrows Bomb had fallen and depopulated Vancouver. The subs had been beached farther down the coast after a week, their crews dying of radiation sickness. It was rumored that the survivors might still be operating as bandits along the coastal roads.

In Operations—a Quonset with a crotchety radio and an unused flight-schedule board—I checked over my meager gear. I had my uniform, of course. And while it was not good to look at, it was fairly warm. The fact that it was the grey of the Guided Missile Corps wasn't likely to win me any friends, though. The other services had it that the GMF

boys had it pretty cushy. Some of the stories that went around about life in the burrows were choice.

I still had my lined jacket, although I'd had to give my boots to the pilot of the courier plane as passage pay. Greyling had seen to it that I carried my side-arms—two issue .45 automatics, and I'd scrounged a round dozen clips of ammunition for them. My musette bag was stocked with all the old K rations it could carry. With a change of socks, that made up the sum total of my worldly goods.

Oh, yes. I had my mustering out pay, too. Ten thousand dollars in paper cash. At the current rate of inflation that would just about buy food for three days.

**T**HE trip down from Alaska had been hellish, guided more by Geiger counter than by compass. I was dog-tired and half-frozen, for the courier ship had been an old B-47 and the cockpit-heating unit had long since given out under spotty maintenance.

I checked in with the Operations Officer, a second lieutenant in a spotted blue uniform that stank of compass alcohol and rancid orange juice. I asked him about flights south.

"Hell," he said staring insolently at the gold leaves on my collar, "There just ain't any. Not south of the mountains."

I fought to keep control of my

temper. This guy could harpoon me, and would, too. Just because I wore grey. Or because he didn't like my face. "I'd be willing to pay," I said.

He shook his head. "I said there aren't any flights. None. Didn't you get me?"

"I got you. What about east out of here?" I tried to keep the edge off my voice, but I could feel I wasn't succeeding very well.

The lieutenant shrugged. I lost my temper. I reached across the counter and grabbed him by the shirt-front.

"Listen, you," I gritted, "I want information. Now give or I'll bash your face in for you."

He felt limp in my grasp. He stared back at me, still insolent. I could smell the alcohol on his breath. "Okay, Major," he said softly. "Don't get in an uproar."

I released him and apologized through stiff lips. I was mad and ashamed and tired. All I could think about was that I had to get home . . . *home*.

"I got a T-6 going to Redmond tonight or tomorrow morning. Maybe the pilot'll take you along. You're pretty hot to get south, aren't you?"

I nodded. His expression changed slightly. "How about a drink?"

"God, yes!" I said.

His eyes harrowed. "It'll cost you," he said, "How much you got on you?"

"I'll give you ten bucks," I said without hesitation.

"Twenty."

"Fifteen."

He put a canteen half-full of grain on the counter, spilling some sparingly into the cup. I laid out fifteen dollars and gulped the stuff down. It was raw and burning, but it felt warm and good inside me.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. Eighteen hundred hours and getting dark outside. The rain was coming down harder than ever. "Where can I sack out?" I asked.

The lieutenant shrugged and indicated a bench. "Here if you want. We can't feed you. Just got enough for the Base personnel."

"Okay," I said. I propped my musette bag in the corner and lay down on the floor, pulling my jacket close around me. For a long while I lay awake in the cold, dim hut, thinking about what might lay south of the mountains. All the months back in the burrow I hadn't let myself think of Helen and Pam. When the mail stopped coming through I told myself it was just a temporary trouble. A snafu in the censor's office or something. But now I couldn't keep up the deception. I felt as though I wanted to cry like a baby, thinking about my wife and my daughter somewhere—

**I**F they were still alive . . . my God, they *had* to be alive. *They had to be*. I kept remembering Greyling's face as it looked when the reports of the Chicago Bomb came

through. Like a mask. A mask that was cracking around the edges, as though the flesh had become crumbling plaster falling inward.

Pam had been eight when it started. She'd be ten, no, eleven almost now. It was so hard to keep track of the time.

I prayed. I didn't think there was anything to pray to, but I couldn't take the chance, so I prayed for Helen and Pam.

After a time, I slept.

The pilot of the T-6 was a grey-haired twenty-year-old. A Lieutenant Simonini. I remembered the name from somewhere and found that I'd been with a cousin of his in the other war. That, and that alone, got me the lift as far as Redmond. Simonini wouldn't consider taking me any farther south. He was on his way east with water samples from the Columbia River and the AEC, or what was left of it, was on his neck.

I couldn't get any information at all about conditions in California. There were no broadcasts at all from the area, and there were theories that the terrific radiation of the lithium-tritium fusion bomb was jamming them. A few pilots, Simonini said, had been into the Los Angeles Area, and the damage there was only moderate. That is, San Pedro had been vaporized and parts of Los Angeles proper with it, but Pasadena, Glendale and the towns in the Santa Ana Valley were said to have suffered only mild destruction. From

Santa Barbara north, though, was only a large question mark. Geiger counters began to chatter and nobody wanted to risk death or sterility to make a reconnaissance. So far the Defense Department had issued no orders, and volunteers were not scarce—they were non-existent.

As we flew along the twisting Columbia toward The Dalles, I could see the effects of the shock-wave of the Narrows Bomb. The Boneville Dam had been smashed by the reversed pressure and the millions of acres of water behind it had swamped the gorge. Bridal Veil and Bonneville proper had vanished under the torrent.

At The Dalles, we turned south, following the winding Deschutes River. Here the country looked unchanged, and I could see the meadows and glades where I remembered fishing for trout when I was a boy. We flew low over falls and pools that looked like figments from the past, green and peaceful. Yet I could see burned houses and blasted settlements that were obviously the work of looters.

"It's been bad on this side of the Cascades." Simonini told me through the intercom, "When the State Patrol was concentrated in the Portland Area after the Narrows Bomb, looters and bandits began to swarm into the valley, thinking it was safe from the Bomb. It is, too. But there aren't enough troops in the area to maintain order." Then

he added, "Some of the troops have turned bandit, too."

We landed at Redmond and I was lucky. A convoy of half-tracks was heading south to relieve the garrison at Klamath Falls. That was the absolute end of the world as far as the armed forces in Oregon were concerned. There was a band of thinly populated country south of there, but the other side of the Siskiyou was terra incognita.

The convoy pulled out of Redmond that night, and I went with it.

"Keep your side-arms handy, Major," the troop commander told me. "You may need them."

**I**T was a six unit convoy. The front half-track mounted a fifty calibre on a swivel atop the cab. None of the others were armed. Beside the convoy commander, James, there were thirty eight enlisted men—some in the tattered blue of the Air Force. These men were sullen-faced. I could well imagine that they didn't like being pressed into service with the Ground Forces, but military personnel in the valley was scarce.

Captain James was a pudgy man. Pale-faced with protruding, eyes set close together. He wore riding boots and a double row of campaign ribbons on his soiled blouse and he carried a riding crop. He was clean-shaven except for a pencil thin mustache, and he wore two ivory handled revolvers.

"So, the war's over," he said to

me as we settled down in the rear of the second half-track. "Maybe it's over for you Guided Missile people, but it's just beginning for *us*." As he spoke his eyes glittered with some inner pleasure. "You know what happened to the troops we sent to Europe?"

I said I hadn't any idea.

"The Russki bombed the ports and wiped them out. Of course the Air Force started a Lift and got some of them over to England, but most of them had to stay in Europe. Then you people began vaporizing places like Vienna and Prague—Got any idea how many Americans you killed?" He said it without rancor, almost casually, as though it were a tactical problem.

"I have a fair idea of how many *people* we killed," I said, "I don't imagine it matters too much what their nationality was after a missile lands."

He shrugged. "The scientists and your kind took all the meaning out of soldiering for a while, but it all reverts back to the foot soldier. He's the only real fighting man, whether he wants to be or not. A man standing on a piece of God's good earth with a gun in his hand. That's what\* important."

**I** sat in silence as the half-track rumbled along the neglected highway and I thought about that. We'd just come through two years of the kind of hell no one could have im-

aged back in the fifties, and here was a man talking about holding God's good earth with a weapon in his hand. Was it all beginning again?

"I like being a soldier," James said, slapping at his boots with his crop. "And I'm a good one, too. For a while you button pushers spoiled the joy of it, but things always come back to first principles. Man to man. Kill or be killed."

I thought of Helen and Pam. First principles? Had they offered to kill or be killed? Or had those sullen, blind masses of soviet slaves had the choice? No, no living being could escape some portion of responsibility for the war, but it had been brought on by the stupidity and lust of people in high places. Women and children didn't make foreign policies. And it was futile to despise martinetts like James. My own hands were bloodier than his. He was doing a job. If he liked it—was good at it—was that blameworthy in a half-ruined world? It was, rather, the price of survival. The race is to the strong, I thought. But there had to be something else. Some hope for something better or there would be no use going on.

The convoy rumbled on through the night. It began snowing around midnight, and I huddled against the others in the open half-track, trying to sleep.

At zero two hundred we passed through Crescent. The little settle-

ment I remembered from my fishing days was a blackened wreck half buried in the freshly fallen snow. Looters, one of the men told me, had wiped it out a week after the Narrows Bomb.

After a time the snow stopped falling and a few pale-stars began to show in the sky. I burrowed in deep among the stacked supplies and lay there watching the tops of the trees slip past.

I must have dozed, because I barely heard the explosion. I staggered to my feet to see the lead track overturned in a column of rising flame against the lightening sky. Shouts and screams intermingled with the flat, bitter crack of small-arms firing.

"Get down, you fool!" James pulled me back to the shelter of the track's armored side. He had his revolvers in his hands and his face was a mask of fury. "God damn them! They've gotten hold of mines, somewhere!" He began barking out orders, sending the soldiers fanning out into the snow from the now stalled convoy.

I sat down in the corner of the half-track, dazed and not comprehending.

"Looters," James snapped, "They want the food we're taking to the Klamath Falls garrison. . . . I'll see 'em in hell before they get it!" He vaulted over the side of the track and disappeared in the uncertain light, still shouting orders to his men.

I got to my feet, and drew one of my pistols. I could see the flashes of rifle fire along the sides of the highway.

The air was filled with the spanging sound of bullets striking the armored vehicles. I could see a half-dozen sprawled shapes in the snow around the burning half-track.

A shape came running out of the woods toward the abandoned tracks and threw something. Grenade! It hit short and erupted in a gout of oily flame. I fired at him, missed. Fired again as he turned to run for the shelter of the timber. He jerked like a marionette and pitched into the snow, face down.

**I** thought, that is the first man I have ever killed, and then I almost laughed out loud, remembering the missiles I had sent out of the burrow. I wondered why that had seemed almost academic, while this was real and personal.

It grew quite light, and the sounds of firing lessened. Presently a group of eight men appeared out of the woods, their hands clasped behind their heads. Behind them came what looked like a regiment of troops to me, weapons poised. James was in the lead, still holding his revolvers.

He gave some orders and the troops split up into two groups. One began salvaging supplies from the burnt half-track, while the other herded the prisoners off down the

road. James and a grey haired prisoner came towards me. I moved out to meet them.

"The leader," James said laconically. "Pirate bastard."

The old man's face was immobile.

"You're guilty of treason, you know," James said, his eyes glittering still with the excitement of battle. "That's punishable by death." He drew back the hammer of his revolver.

"Hold on, James," I said, "You can't just shoot this man out of hand. Take him into Klamath and give him a trial, at least."

James looked at me scornfully. "Where the hell have you been for the last two years. Gavin?"

"My people were hungry," the old man said to no one in particular. "There's not enough game—"

James cuffed him lightly with his pistol barrel, still not taking his eyes off of me.

"There's still such a thing as civil rights in this country, Captain," I said.

From around the bend in the road came the rattle of a burp gun. James smiled at me. "Really?" His voice was flat, deadly. "Is that a fact. Major. That's the way it was in the nice safe burrows?" I could see that he hated me just then.

The old man broke away suddenly, starting to run with pitiful awkwardness across the snow. James' pistol jerked up and spoke with a cracking roar. The old man slumped

to the snow, his legs thrumming feebly.

"Does that answer your questions, Gavin?" James asked.

I turned away without answering. There was nothing to be said.

We reached Klamath Falls that night, one track and seven men short. The garrison commander reprimanded James for the loss of the vehicle.

Klamath was an armed camp. I tried for two days to get some sort of transport south, but it was hopeless.

I was desperate. I even considered stealing an Army vehicle, but my grey Missile Corps uniform barred me from almost every place where such a vehicle might be found. The CG of what was now "The Klamath Falls Military Sub-district" was an old-line officer and there were a million signs in the town declaring places off-limits for Enlisted Personnel and Guided Missile Corps officers and men. The fact that I was probably the only GM officer within three hundred miles of Klamath only made it more galling.

**I** slept where I could and ate K rations out of my hoard. It wasn't pleasant. Apparently the nearness to the terra incognita below the mountains focused resentment on my grey uniform. Twice I was attacked on the streets at night and had to threaten my attackers with my guns before getting free of them.

I was near the end of my rope when I met Feldberg. He ran a store at the southernmost end of the town. A little place with a hut and a vacant lot behind where he kept what he called his pets. Because he was a Jew and knew what it meant to be blamed for things, he took compassion on me and let me sleep in his hut on my last night in Klamath.

He was a little man with a wizened face and a huge nose that looked like something from an anti-semitic poster. His eyes were dark and liquid and very wise. I found that he had attended Columbia in his younger days. Columbia and Chicago Medical School. He showed me his framed diplomas. M.A. in abnormal psychology.

"The world has been too wasteful with its brains," he told me over a cup of steaming synthetic coffee, "That's why we are where we are now. Freud, for example, and Jung, too. They both gave warnings that we were on the wrong path long ago. They didn't deal in mesons and neutrinos, but they did deal in something more important. People. People and what goes on in sick minds. We were all sick, and no one listened, really. We were like madmen locked in a room with a dozen loaded revolvers. So when the inevitable happened, not one of us should have been surprised. We wasted brains and now we've wasted our planet. It will take a thousand years for humanity to make up what we have

lost in the last two years. Waste. Stupid waste!"

He was in a position to know about that. Simply because he came in a package marked with the Star of David, the world had wasted *his* brains. He ran a pawn-shop. Or what was once a pawn-shop and had now become a sort of trading post for the few fools that wanted to leave the security of existence under the military garrison at Klamath.

From Feldberg I got information about conditions in the Siskiyou, and more important still, a mule and two blankets. The ordinary price for such a bonanza would have been far beyond me, but he took my ten thousand paper dollars gravely, both of us knowing that the mule alone was worth fifty.

It was illegal, of course, as most things were, but no one challenged me the night I left Klamath Falls riding Feldberg's mule. No one really cared. I promised Feldberg that if I could, I would return one day and pay him properly for his kindness. But he was an old man and suffering from radiation sickness. We both knew we would never meet again.

**S**OUTH of the Oregon border, the country becomes quite mountainous. The Siskiyou rise on the Oregon side of the line and terminate the Klamath valley abruptly. The woods are thick and the going hard.

For the better part of three weeks

I made my way along what was one\* the route of U. S. Highway 97, past Macdoel and Weed and Dunsmuir. The mammoth grandeur of Mt Shasta, plumed with white in the daytime, dominated the landscape. The roadway lay under a thin coating of snow, neglected and collapsing. I met no one in the mountains, and game was plentiful, though once or twice I saw does with fawns that were hideous to look at—some blind and others deformed. I wondered if I were passing through a hot area. The loneliness and the mutated fauna seemed to indicate it. Still, there was nothing I could do but hope that I got through. Every beat of the mule's hooves brought me that much closer to Helen and Pam.

At Bayles, on the shore of the great, silent, Shasta Lake, I found the first plague victims. All were dead—horribly. Coyotes had invaded the town and eaten of them and died there, too. I understood then about the band of isolation through the mountains. Cordon sanitaire. It wasn't a pretty thought. Americana by the thousands had deserted the area of infection, wandering like animals into the wilderness to die. I had heard rumors about the the BW the Russians had developed. A plague that shattered the higher centers of the nervous system and left the victim a mindless wanderer for weeks until the secondary stages of the disease struck and killed him in agony. If most of the towns in the



region had felt this pestilence, it was little wonder that there were no communications out of Northern California.

At Redding it was the same. I dared not touch any food but my dwindling supply of K rations. And there was another complication. An old newspaper that I found in a pest-hole of a deserted house told the story—in mimeographed typescript—of the bomb that had fallen in San Pablo Bay. Accounts were sketchy and hearsay, but the long dead journalist thought that San Francisco and Berkeley as well as Richmond and San Pablo were vaporized. I felt a hand clutch my heart. Helen and

Pam could have been anywhere In the Bay Area when the hell-bomb fell. In her last letter, Helen had told me that most of the women from Peninsula had formed a disaster unit and were helping the overworked medics control the brucellosis epidemic in the Bay Cities. . . .

Near Red Bluff I saw the first signs of civilization—A woman and two children had been hanged to a telephone pole. Their bodies were not yet completely cold.

I had been travelling now, for more than a month. I'd been fortunate with the weather. Some snow, a good deal of rain, but actually nothing that could stop me com-



pletely. Every day I managed a few miles, but my food stores were dropping fast and my animal was beginning to show signs of fatigue. Feed was sparse and shelter next to impossible. Since leaving Red Bluff, I had kept to the route of U.S. 99W, and I had left the mountains behind me. The central valley was flat and barren and cold in the early spring.

I gave up riding and lightened the mule's load as much as possible, but I knew that I would soon have to destroy the animal.

Since seeing the bodies hanged I had been careful. It was evident that I was not alone in the region, and I had no doubt that the meagre goods I carried would be more than enough reason for any mauraunders to murder me in my sleep. I made no fires and travelled as much as possible by night. By the end of the fifth week I had reached Orland.

In every town I passed there were deserted automobiles, but without exception they were wrecked or empty of fuel. All gasolene stores had long since been looted.

**O**N the last night of the sixth week, the mule stumbled and would not rise. I tried for an hour to coax the animal to its feet, but failed.. Finally, I killed it with a shot through the forehead.

In the dawn, I stripped off what meat I could carry and left the rest for the band of wild dogs that closed

in behind me. All that day I walked along the ruined highway toward Willows, and when night came I made a camp some distance off the roadbed.

It was nearly midnight when I was awakened by the sound of a motor. It seemed faraway. I got my gear together and started toward the sound. Presently it stopped and I could hear the sound of shouting and raucous laughter. After a time there was a shrill cry, like that of an animal in deep pain. It came again and again, and mixed with it was the sound of that awful laughter.

I drew my guns and ran on. By and by I came to the car. It was parked by the side of the road, a big green sedan. The screams had stopped now, and I could hear only muttering voices and an undertone of soft sobbing. They came from a clump of scrub oak some distance across a field. I moved forward cautiously.

The moon had risen, and the whole desolate area was flooded with a pale light. As I reached the trees, I dropped to my hands and knees, keeping low.

There were two men. One stood carelessly, a rifle grounded muzzle down in the dirt. The other lay sprawled out on the ground, half-naked in the moonlight. He wasn't alone. The woman was still sobbing, but no longer struggling. It wasn't pretty.

I felt my heart pounding and my

breath catching in my throat. The sound of the standing man's laughter was like a goad in my flesh. I shot him where he stood, gladly.

The other leaped to his feet stupidly, groping for his clothes and his weapons. I was shaking with rage, unsatisfied with the way the other had fallen. I wanted to kill this one with my bare hands. Maybe I was thinking of Helen—or Pam.

I dropped my gun and dove for him, feeling satisfaction in the impact of my flesh against his. My hands groped for his throat. He swung his clenched fists together and caught me on the back of the neck. I felt the night pinwheel around me. Then he was free of me and running—zig-zagging across the moonlit fields as though the hounds of hell were after him. I struggled to my feet and groped for my gun, but I had forgotten about dropping it. The other was in my pack at the highway's edge. I watched the man get away, sobbing with rage and frustration, shouting obscenities I had all but forgotten. . . .

**A**FTER a time I turned my attention to the woman. She lay in the moonlight, staring up at me with a mixture of hate and fear and hope on her face. Her dress was ripped and bunched around her waist, her long legs naked and grimy in the dirt. I thought about all the women who had ever had to take what she had just taken. I wondered about

their bitter hate and the helpless shame and outrage. Just then I didn't think much of Man, the noble animal.

I knelt at her side and looked down into her face. She was little more than a child. Eighteen, perhaps. Not much more. But her face was set in a fixed mask, her eyes glittery in the moonlight.

Her lips moved slowly, her voice the merest whisper. "Leave me alone," she said, "Oh, God—leave me alone . . ."

I reached out a hand but drew it back quickly as she recoiled from it with a shudder.

"I won't touch you," I said. I took off my grimy jacket and drew it over her.

Her face seemed to crinkle, her body shook convulsively. And then she had turned away from me, sobbing brokenly with her face buried in the dirt.

I stayed by her side until dawn. When the sky grew light, she slept.

I had a fire going and some Strips of mule-meat frying when she awoke. I could see that she was watching me, but I made no effort to speak to her.

I'd retrieved my pack and the dead man's rifle. I had investigated the green sedan and found little of value other than the car itself—it had a quarter of a tank of gasoline. I had dragged the body away into the brush and stripped it, so that with the clothes the other had left

we now had quite a little cache.

After a time the girl got to her feet and turned away, making a pitiful effort to cover herself with her ragged dress. She came toward me hesitantly, a wan half-smile on her face. I guessed that she had cried herself out during the night. She extended my jacket and I took it.

Finally, I said, "Pick yourself some clothes from that pile over there, and then sit down and have something to eat. Are you hungry?"

"Everybody's hungry," she said.

I nodded at that. "Pick out the warmest things you can find and make a bundle of the rest. We have a long way to go. What's your name?"

"Paula," she said.

"Mine's Gavin. Have you any people nearby?"

She shook her head; "I used to live in Chico, but everybody left after the wandering sickness came. My folks died of it. Most did. A few got better. I did, but I don't remember much about what I did or where I was while I had it—"

**S**HE picked out some clothes and stripped off her dress, standing with naive modesty behind some sparse brush. I found myself watching her and remembering that it had been almost a year since I'd had a woman—and then hating myself for the thought, recalling the nightmare of the early morning.

She told me about some of what had happened while we ate. About the bomb that everybody said wrecked San Francisco and most of the northern East Bay. She had seen the glare in the sky the night it went off.

"That was almost six months ago now, I guess," she said, "I remember that we could see the whole sky light up in the west, but there wasn't anybody that knew just what we should try and do about it. Half the people in Chico had already died of the undulant fever and the wandering sickness was beginning, too. It just lit up the sky and we stood around watching it, not really believing it at all, I guess. How can you believe something like that?"

"That was the trouble from the beginning," I said, "When people back in the forties and fifties used to talk about atomic war and what it might mean in a practical sense, their minds simply weren't equipped to comprehend it. Even the physicists who had actually seen the atom in action at places like Alamogordo and Bikini and Eniwetok couldn't grasp the physical immensity of destruction on that scale. It was like trying to comprehend the distance to the stars in terms of feet and inches. The frame of reference just wasn't big enough to contain the reality."

"That's how it was, all right," Paula said slowly, "We saw it and knew what it was but we didn't really

understand in terms of what it would mean to each of us as an individual."

"If every person on the face of the planet had been able to do that, Paula," I said, "There could have been no war. If we must accept any blame at all, it's the blame and the odium of not being intelligent enough. We were monkeys with revolvers. No wonder the blow-up came."

"I heard that Russian casualties in the first year of the war were almost fifty million. Is that true?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, remembering that I must have killed a good proportion of that number with my own hands., "And we can't comprehend that, either."

A silence fell between us for a time, and then Paula asked me where I was going. I told her.

"You mean to take me with you?" she asked.

"Not against your will," I said.

She thought that over and then said, "I have no where else to go."

"I know you'll be welcome at... home," I said softly, thinking of Helen.

Paula reached out and touched my hand lightly, with an almost childlike, tentative gesture. "Thank you . . . Gavin," she said.

**S**OME thirty miles north of Sacramento we began to notice blast effects. A shattered farmhouse here, a stripped tree there. By the time

we reached Woodland, some eighteen miles from California's former capital, it was plain that a uranium bomb had struck the city directly. All vegetation was burned and blackened and what secondary growth there was was yellow and sickly. The area was definitely hot.

We saw people, too. Mostly in bands that slunk away from the green sedan's approach, and once or twice fired shots at us in a desultory fashion. We found four gallons of gasoline in a can hidden away in a deserted filling station and managed to keep the car moving as far as the junction with U.S. 40. Then once again we were on foot.

On the second day after my meeting with Paula we reached the little town of Dixon. There were a few people left there who were trying to rebuild, but there was little to rebuild with. The Sacramento Bomb had poisoned the water of the Sacramento River, and irrigation was impossible. Almost every inhabitant of Dixon was suffering from radiation sickness and most of them displayed keloids. They had no food to share with us, but for the first time we had encountered people who were actually trying to improve their conditions. There were only about thirty men and twice that many women, and the municipality had made it mandatory that each male take an extra wife so that the surplus might be cared for.

They had suffered several raids at

the hands of soldiers turned bandits, and looters were still trying to find something worth looting. It wasn't a pleasant picture of conditions, but it was the best I had seen since leaving Klamath Falls.

From the mayor of Dixon, a gaunt man, bald from radiation sickness, I learned that the rumors of lithium bombs we had heard back in the burrow were true. My heart sank as he told me the story.

"The Sacramento Bomb was bad enough," he said, eyeing Paula hungrily, "But they didn't stop with that. They hit us with three of those *others*. One hit in the Salinas Valley—that was the first one, then another hit Bakersfield right on the button. Aimed at the oil-fields, I guess. The third hit in San Pablo Bay, near as we can figure. The Golden Gate is eight miles wide now, I hear tell and all of Marin is under water. The blast funnelled right up the valley from near Vallejo and clobbered everything up as far as Fairfield. If you're trying to get down near Palo Alto or San Jose, you'll have to cut around behind Mt. Diablo and go that way. Everything north of there on this side of the hills is under water. Hot water at that.' You can see it from here from on top my house." He kicked at the dirt in the shattered street fitfully. "Why don't you stay here? There's not much chance of your people being alive after the hell-bomb down there. We could use you—and *her*." He

glanced again at Paula. "This isn't a bad place to settle. Not much fever and almost no wandering sickness."

What I didn't tell him was that he was living in the middle of a double dose of radiation and that Dixon was doomed before it ever really found the road back. I didn't like the way he kept looking at Paula, and I was getting something less than civilized myself by then.

I traded one of my .45's and a clip of ammunition for a goat and a very thin horse in Dixon; slaughtering the goat and drying the meat in the sun. Then with our gear slung on the stumbling, irradiated animal, we turned south, toward the river.

**T**HE bridge south of Rio Vista was still up and we crossed it on the third day after leaving Dixon. There seemed to be an ominous quiet about the country we were passing through. There were no birds, no animal life of any kind. The silence hung heavily in the air, and the only sound was the steady, tired beat of our horse's hooves.

All through the day, we made our way along the winding road near the base of Mt. Diablo. Even the devil mountain had changed, I thought bitterly. Its face is scarred and it won't ever be the same again. Nothing will ever be the same again. I remembered Feldberg, old and wise and dying of the lingering radiance lodged deep in his bones by the holocaust of the Vancouver Narrows Bomb.

It would take a thousand years, he had said, to reclaim the ground we had lost. And as I walked along the base of a mountain disfigured by Man, I thought that maybe his estimate was too kind. It could well take a thousand times a thousand years to heal these scars—on the face of the earth and in the hearts of men. It could even take forever—

"You're so quiet, Gavin," Paula said.

"I was thinking, Paula, about our sins. I guess."

"I wouldn't have thought you a religious man, Gavin," she said.

"I'm not. Unless you can call sanity God. That's the one thing I've always clung to—like a faith. I thought that if I could remain a truly sane man in my lifetime, I would never regret having lived. I just wonder about that now."

"Have you always been sane?"

"I think so. I have lived my life according to the tenets of reason and logic. And yet look at me. Consider the bestiality of the world around us."

"I think maybe you're feeling sorry for ' yourself, Gavin," Paula said gravely, "I know you are thinking of Pam and Helen, but stick to sanity. You say you've always fought against the tide of stupidity?"

"Of course, Paula," I replied.

Her voice was soft and very low. "Yet you wear a uniform—a grey uniform that carries an insignia of an atomic rocket."

I found myself taking refuge in the clichés of a million herd-minded militarists who trod the earth before me. "I had a duty—"

"Of course. But we all had a duty to each other. We were all trapped on this little planet together. What about that?" She went on, her sad, pretty face earnest. "If we had all listened to the voice inside us that told us it was wrong to kill, that it was wrong to—to rape and plunder. That it was wrong to *hate* . . . Things might have been different. If whites hadn't hated negroes and gentiles hated Jews and everybody hated foreigners—wouldn't things have been different, Gavin?" Her face tightened, lines of strain forming around her mouth. "I know I'm not perfect, either. I hated those men—those men who—who—" She swallowed hard. "God, how I hated them and how I still do! But at least I know it's wrong. That's a beginning, isn't it, Gavin? Isn't it? Doesn't that show that there's hope?"

I couldn't say anything to her. My eyes felt hot and wet. I took one of her brown, calloused hands and held it. She looked up at me and said, "Someday you'll tell me, Gavin."

**N**IGHTFALL found us in the mouth of the Niles Canyon, a deep, wooded ravine connecting the Livermore Valley with the coastal shelf of the Lower Bay. There was uncontaminated water available, and

we made our camp In a glade near the stream.

As the sky darkened, it grew cold, and I built a fire and spread our blankets near it. Just over the crest of the ridge to the west lay the Bay. All I need do was climb the ridge and I could have seen the entire sweep of the great inland harbor and the flat lands to the south where my home had been.

But I did not make the climb.

I was afraid of what I might see.

Paula prepared some meat on the open fire and I brought water in my emptied bag. We ate in silence.

I didn't feel like talking. I kept thinking of what I would see the next morning when we came out onto the shelf of the Bay. I found myself retracing my steps backward, along the route that had brought me this near home from a burrow under an Alaskan glacier, as though I would rather not go on to the end of my journey. A pall of depression descended over me. I felt actually, physically ill.

Paula seemed to understand my mood and did not intrude upon it, though she watched me from across the dying campfire, her eyes veiled and sombre.

When the fire had burned itself down to glowing coals, I rolled myself in my blanket and tried to sleep. It was no good, I was sodden with a million fears.

A soft hand touched my shoulder. I turned to see Paula kneeling at my

side, a strange, soft expression on her face.

"I see that you're troubled, Gavin," she said gently, "Can I help?"

I shook my head slightly. I didn't want to talk about the fear I felt of crossing the last barrier before home. I didn't want to say that a premonition was heavy inside me.

Her voice trembled slightly, as though the words she was trying to say were hard to speak. "Gavin, I—I know that you—It must have been a—a long time since you—since you have had a woman. I—if you want me—"

I felt as though a hand had closed my heart. I remembered the hell this girl had known and the deep shame she had known. And yet she offered herself to me as a diversion from the fear she knew I was feeling. I could only guess what her gesture must have cost her—

"Paula . . . my dear," I whispered, "You don't have to be grateful to me." I reached for her and pulled her down to me. She lay quite still with her head on my chest, her eyes brilliant with tears. "One day, Paula," I said, "You will have forgotten what was done to you. Hurts heal themselves in time. And then you will love some one freely and without pain." I held her close to me, my fingers in her hair. I thought of Helen, so much the woman when I saw her last. Full of grace and maturity and everything I admired and loved. Helen would know what to



say to this hurt girl. I felt clumsy and inadequate.

I lay awake a long while, until the coals died.

Presently I slept. Paula stayed where she was. Near me, and yet separated from me by a million memories and inner thoughts.

**I** awoke before dawn to a queer rustling noise. My hand closed on the grip of my automatic and I lay tense, listening.

Paula still lay at my side, sleeping. The noise came from across the campsite where I had stored our supplies. Very slowly I came to a sitting position.

In the light of the late moon I could see a small shape crouched over my musette bag.

I leveled my automatic and snapped off the safety. And then I realized that it was a child. A boy, not more than eight or nine, thin and ragged. Looking for food. He held a knife between his teeth.

"Are you hungry?" I whispered.

The child whirled like a startled animal. He crouched, poised, as though undecided whether to strike or run. His hunger decided. He sprang for me, knife gleaming in the fitful moonlight.

I rolled aside as the knife bit into the blanket. Paula awoke with a muffled cry. I threw myself on the boy and pinned him down.

"Take it easy, boy," I panted, "Nobody wants to hurt you. Are you

hungry?"

The fight went out of him and he began to cry. Deep, wracking sobs.

"If I let go of you—you won't run away?" I asked, "We will give you something to eat." I signalled Paula to bring a strip of goat-meat from our almost depleted supply.

"What—what are you gonna do to me?" He spoke rapidly, running all his words together in a childish slur. He'd stopped Crying as soon as he had the food.

"We won't hurt you," I said.

He glanced warily at Paula. "What about *her*?"

"She won't hurt you, either. That's a promise."

Something glittered at his throat. I thought I knew what it might be.

"May I see your tag?" I asked.

"What for?"

"I'd just like to see it."

"Well—okay. If I get my knife back."

**I** handed the long, lethal weapon to the eight year old. He slipped the disaster tag from around his neck. I struck a light and read:

*Steven Gresham, Peninsula Elementary School, BCCD Page Mill Road, South Palo Alto California, Telephone Portola GGFE, Blood Type A*

It was like a blow in the face. Pam went—had gone—to the Peninsula Elementary School.

My voice was hollow. "How—long have you been—by yourself?"

The boy shrugged. "I dunno. Quite a while, I guess. I don't exactly remember. Ever since the big bomb, I guess."

"Did you know a little girl named Pam Gavin in school, Steve?" I asked.

"I don't remember. That was a long time ago—before the big bomb."

The sky was lightening in the east. As the light grew stronger, I could see with failing heart that the boy had an ugly keloid on his face.

"Did the bomb come while you were in school?" I asked.

"I don't remember that. I don't think so. I think I was in a car somewheres. But I don't really remember. Can I have my tag back?"

I handed the metal oval back to him. "Did anything happen to Palo Alto when the big bomb went off?" I pursued.

"Lots of houses fell down and some burned, I think. Lots of people got killed right away and some more died afterwards. Don't know how many, but lots were sick. I got lost, I guess. I never been back. Just roaming around looking for stuff. To eat mostly. And places where its warm. Maybe I can stay with you and her for a while? I don't eat much, and if I got grown-ups with me I won't be so scared—"

Paula slipped her arm around him. "Of course you can stay with us, Stevie. You won't have to—to—" Her voice seemed very husky suddenly. "You won't have to be scared.

Gavin and I will take care of you."

The boy looked at me with mute appeal for confirmation. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

This was the world we'd created, I thought bitterly, with all our science and our progress. A world where children wandered about like animals searching for food and shelter and safety where there was no safety. When had we gotten off the track? Where could we have taken the simple or complex action that would have saved the human race this trip down into this blind alley? Had it been when the first bomb fell, or had it been earlier? At the Argonne or Austerlitz or Aginsourt? When? When Cain killed Abel? Somewhere, somehow it should have been prevented. The politicians should have stopped it, or the people should have picked better leaders.

America and Russia and Europe were finished. Never again would a first rate power rise among them. I prayed to God that the next tower of Babel to be raised would spring from the soil of a land without faint-hearted leadership—without a slavish resignation to the maunderings of a megalomaniac with a walrus mustache.

**T**HE next morning we reached the Bay.

"We'll head south for about five miles," I told Paula, "And then swing west through the marshes."

For some three hours we slogged

along the bayshore, and at each step nearer home my fear increased. I felt lightheaded and slightly nauseated.

"Gavin," Paula asked me, "Are you all right?"

I give her a nod of assurance I did not feel. She touched her lips to my forehead and a look of concern came into her face. "You're feverish," she said.

I shook my head and we went on. But I was doing some adding. In the burrow, we all took a certain amount of radiation. I had been in the Portland area, near the site of the explosion of the Narrows Bomb. I had come by Sacramento and near the edge of the blast area of the San Pablo Bay Bomb. Radiation was cumulative . . .

It took us the rest of the day to cross the new marshes at the end of the Bay and nightfall found us nearing Mountain View. I was staggering by that time, and Paula insisted that I ride. She and the boy helped me onto the horse, and I clung there, retching and all but helpless.

By the time we reached the center of town I was delirious and raving, I remember that people met us—a few and that for the first time since leaving the garrison port at Klamath, I lay down in a bed. The rest is confusion and nightmare.

I saw the hell-bombs falling. I saw myself striding among naked people—acres of them—and mowing

them down with a bloody scythe. I remember Pam's baby face marked with Stevie Gresham's keloid. I heard Paula sobbing again as she had that night I had found her. I saw her lying in the dirt, degraded and outraged. I saw a million faces full of terror and a million charred bodies piled into grisly mountains. And I saw a grave. I didn't see Helen. I saw a grave—

**G**AVIN—"

The voice seemed to come from across the stellar gulfs across the void between the worlds.

"Gavin, Gavin, my dearest—"

And another voice. Gruff, tired, but kind. "He's coming out of it, Miss. He'll make it."

"Thank God."

After what seemed an eternity, I opened my eyes. Paula was there, and Stevie, too, wide-eyed and pale. A man with a grey face and a grey beard stood behind them:

The scene wavered, faded.

When I woke again, Paula was still there, but alone, and it was dark. I felt stronger.

"Where—are we?" I asked. I was shocked at the weakness of my own voice.

"In a little town called Mountain View, Gavin. They have food, and a doctor. They've been very kind to us."

I dreaded the next question, but I had to ask it. "How long have I—?"

"Six weeks. Almost seven. We thought you might die. But we wouldn't let you die, Gavin, Stevie and I."

"My . . . my home is—was—only a little way from here, Paula," I said, "Peninsula—you remember I told you. Is—is there any news?"

"There's a settlement there. Mostly women and girls. They grow things. I haven't heard anything more than that."

"I've got to get up, Paula, help me."

"Not yet, Gavin. Please. A few more days and you'll be strong enough. Then we'll all go—home—with you. If you want us," she finished softly.

"Paula—"

She smiled wanly. "I just wanted to be sure you still—well, you know."

I felt sleep overpowering me, making my eyelids heavy. I reached for her hand and held it and sank back into the warm darkness.

It was a week before I could leave Mountain View", and I did it on horseback in spite of all my protests. Paula and Stevie walked. I watched the familiar-unfamiliar landscape with mixed joy and fear.

To the west were the brown-back hills of the Coast Range—the hills of home. I remembered the way used to be long years back. ; I thought of die green they bore in the spring, and the sparse snow in the winter. I recalled their purple mistiness through the long summer evenings.

Helen and I had come to live in their foothills when we were first married, and we had loved their gentleness and their mouldering age.

I remembered sitting and watching them until nightfall, watching the stars appear in the pastel sky above them. I saw them now and all my life before came back to me, all the ugliness and pain and terror gone from the intervening years. I was coming home. Helen, I thought, Helen my darling, it's over. We can start again—

And I remembered my dream and shut my mind against the fear that lurked there.

I thought back to songs we'd known and places we'd gone and Helen was suddenly very real to me. I found myself, humming softly.

"I'll be loving you—always—with a love that's true always—" Helen had always loved that song. I could almost feel her in my arms across the gulf of years, swaying softly to the music in the darkness of a country club dance—

I rode, lost in reverie, through the land where I had lived. The orchards were mostly gone, and in their place were cultivated > fields with green growing things.

We reached the last bend in the road at last and my heart leaped with hope. I could see my house atop its familiar hill. The place was shabby and illkempt, but it stood.

In the fields that spread out from

it, I could see people working. They gathered together at our approach, setting up a shout.

I dropped from the horse and be-  
earth. I couldn't make it. My legs  
were too weak. I stumbled and fell  
and lay there gasping and cursing.

Paula helped me to my feet and  
said, "You wait here with Stevie.  
I'll go."

She ran across the field and was  
swallowed in the group. I could see  
that they were almost all girls and  
women, but I could recognize no  
one.

After what seemed hours, she  
started back. There was some one  
with her.

"Helen!" I shouted, "*Helen!*"

But it wasn't Helen. It was a grave-  
faced child. She followed Paula with  
bowed head. I could see that Paula  
was crying. I stood up. I suddenly  
felt chilled and afraid.

Paula came up to me and looked  
into my face. I knew then what she  
was going to say.

"Where—where's Helen?" I asked.

"Helen is dead, Gavin," Paula said  
in a low, low tone.

I felt my world collapse. "When,"  
I asked dully.

"Two months ago. The fever."  
Paula reached out with a helpless  
gesture. "I'm sorry, Gavin."

Stevie began sniffing without quite  
knowing why. I reached down ab-  
sently and laid my hand on his  
shoulder. And then the girl with  
Paula came and laid her head

against my chest. She was crying,  
too.

"I've been so lonely since she died.  
Awfully lonely." And then she  
looked up at me, white teeth smiling  
in spite of tear-streaked cheeks. "But  
everything will be better now. Now  
that you're home—daddy . . ."

I held her close to me. I kissed  
her hair and her wet cheeks. "Pam,"  
I whispered, "*Pam—*"

I looked up into the sky. It was  
bright blue, Washed by the spring  
rains. There were growing things  
in the fields and the morning smelled  
clean and new.

It came to me then that nothing  
ever really ends. As long as men  
and women live something good still  
has a chance to grow. We'd lost a  
good deal, but there was an abun-  
dance in the soil under our feet and  
in the sky over our heads. I recalled  
the lines set down long ago in a  
Book by some very wise man.

"One generation passeth away, and  
another generation cometh: but the  
earth abideth forever."

I looked at Paula. Her eyes were  
bright still with tears but she was  
smiling too. Stevie and Pam were  
grinning at one another.

Another chance, I thought. An-  
other chance to build a better world  
than the one we lost. And I knew  
then that it was enough for me, that  
it would always be enough for me.  
I knew that *now* is enough tomorrow  
for all of my yesterdays.

— ALFRED COPPEL

# The Gift

By K. R. VEENSTRA

The child was so destructive —  
She'd have the poor beast  
apart in no time

"PERHAPS," said the shopkeeper, "you'd like a small Venus Hound."

Maggi paused before the cage. The little six-legged beast cringed in one corner of its metal box, trying to hide itself in the scant shadows thrown by the bars. As it moved nervously, the cups on the ends of its spindly legs made soft sucking sounds.

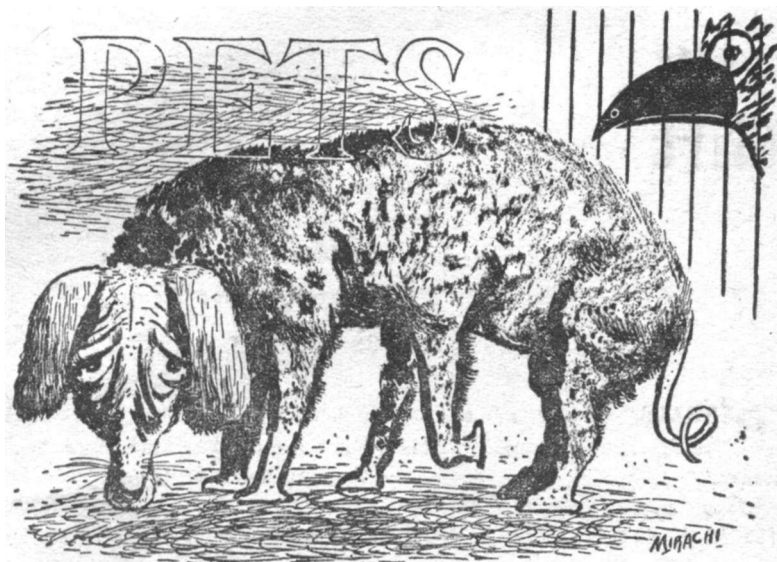
"They're quite intelligent," the shopkeeper assured her. "I understand on Venus they actually lived in houses, and had even set up a sort of primitive society. They're easily trained, and we've prepared a special food for them which takes care of their basic requirements."

Maggi examined the creature doubtfully. "I don't think so," she said. "You see, it's a birthday present for my daughter, and the child is so destructive. She'd have the poor beast apart in no time, it's such

a delicate thing." She made a clucking noise at the Hound, causing it to quiver and hide its head under one leg.

The shopkeeper led the way to another cage. "Perhaps she'd like a Blue-beak Flyer," he suggested. "We've just received a new shipment from Jupiter. Fine coloring. A very hardy breed. No appendages for your child to snap off."

The Blue-beak peered out at them solemnly, its single eye winking rapidly. Its small flat ears lifted at each syllable the shopkeeper spoke, almost as though it could understand what was being said. It rocked comfortably on its round bottom, whirring its eight furry wings occasionally for balance: They did make attractive pets, with their bright blue beaks and tendency to break now and then into song—but Maggi knew better than to bring another one home.



"We had a pair last winter," she explained. "But the female died, and the male tried to attack my" husband. It refused to sing, or even eat, and we finally had to have it put away."

She followed the shopkeeper hopefully from cage to cage, from bowl to bowl, pausing now to watch a school of Mellon-fish from Saturn playing hide-and-seek among the colored trees at the bottom of their tank; and then to laugh at a Mercury Plasticoïd which had learned to shape itself to resemble letters of the alphabet. Maggi had bought one for her daughter's last birthday thinking it would make a fine educational pet, but the child had killed it almost

immediately. This time — although the child insisted she wanted another Blue-beak—Maggi was determined to find a pet which would last, well, a month at least.

She had already been to three shops, without-finding a satisfactory creature. This fourth store was more exclusive than the others, and more expensive, but it was the finest of its kind anywhere. Maggi decided, just this once, to forget her budget.

They entered another aisle now, where the cages were slightly larger. Maggi paused before one cubicle in which sat an unfamiliar creature. At first it appeared repulsive to her —but the longer she studied it, the more interesting it seemed. It had

four well-rounded limbs, and looked to be quite sturdy. The lower limbs were more powerfully made, as though it might be a hopping or jumping creature. It was the fur which repelled her, growing out in patches here and there, without any apparent order.

The shopkeeper, sensing Maggi's interest, reached into the cage and prodded the beast. The creature leaped erect on its strong lower limbs, and grabbing the shopkeeper, began pulling with all its might. Both Maggi and the shopkeeper laughed at its ridiculous antics.

"You see," he said, "it's quite friendly and energetic. Perfectly harmless, of course."

**M**AGGI reached into the cage to touch it; and immediately the creature turned from the shopkeeper to swing its small upper limbs at her in short, frantic arcs. Maggi, ticklish to begin with, started to giggle now.

"They're amazingly bright, as well as amusing," the shopkeeper went on. "They were found living in small stone boxes on their own planet; some of the boxes quite well constructed, incidentally, though a great many were lying in ruin, indicating a flighty tendency to destroy their own creations. In many ways, I suppose, they're a rather useless luxury—but one of our most entertaining items."

It was certainly amusing, Maggi

agreed. Not for a moment did the beast halt its pummeling and tugging, all the while emitting a quaint little squeal. Obviously it liked her, and Maggi was flattered, deciding then and there it would make an ideal pet for her daughter. She asked its price.

The amount was much more than she had planned to spend. "But," the shopkeeper assured her, "They're still quite a rarity, and you can be sure none of your daughter's friends has ever had one. She'll be the envy of the neighborhood." And that was the deciding factor where Maggi was concerned.

"Do you want it sent," asked the shopkeeper, "or will you take it with you?"

Maggi asked that it be delivered—early the following morning, while her daughter was still in school. She wanted the present to be a surprise.

She turned back for a last look at the creature—and had to chuckle at the way it was now tugging and pounding the bars of its cage. "By the way," she asked the shopkeeper, "what are they called? Do they have a name?"

"Some call them Humans," the shopkeeper said. "Here in the store we call them Earthmen, after their own planet. Incidentally, we're expecting a shipment of females shortly, in case you would like to buy it a mate."

"Well," said Maggi, "we'll see first how long this one lasts."

— K. R. VEENSTRA



Just a week on Venus —  
and there was no way of telling  
the monsters from the men.

# Stability

By LESTER DEL REY

**D**OC BARON straightened up and made motions across his forehead with a damp kerchief, but it did no good. Sweat still came running down from his greyish hair, over the bridge of his short nose, and into his little mustache. He scowled up at the glaring white curtain that was the dazzling sky of Venus and shook his head. In seven days there, he'd lost fifteen pounds. His short figure was still pudgy, but his clothes no longer fit.

Darn it, why did he have to be doctor, biologist, and general all-

around scientist on this first expedition to Venus, anyway?

But he was grinning again as he dropped back to the curious plant he was studying. Things could have been worse. He didn't have to wear a pressure suit, at least. In spite of all the talk of Venus' poison atmosphere, it had proved to be about the same as that of Earth—which only proved again that appearances can be deceiving. The planet was habitable enough, if a man could stand the heat.

He went back to studying the

plant. So far, no animals had been found, but the plants made up for it. They were completely unstandardized — no two were exactly alike; and they were even more unpredictable. Something like a poison-oak plant had been here yesterday; today it was replaced by a growth that most nearly resembled a cactus with wooden branches added. At first, Doc had suspected a very rapid growth and decay. Then he'd considered the possibility that the plants moved around during the ink-black night. Now he was beginning to doubt that. The plant had changed while he watched.

Doc cleared his throat, cursing the humidity, and trying to get rid of the post-nasal drip that had grown worse, together with his asthma. Hmm, interesting — the cockeyed plant was turning into some kind of a bush, without a doubt.

Behind Doc, footsteps sounded, uncertainly. Walt or Rob must have got tired of waiting for him to come back to the ship. He crooked a finger over his shoulder. "Take a look at this."

The steps halted and there was the rough insufflation of breath. Doc turned around casually.

It wasn't Walt or Rob. The naked body before him was short and pudgy. The face, under steel-grey hair, was round and good-natured, and there was a little mustache, trembling in a doubtful smile. The creature was an exact duplicate of

Doc, except where the left arm came to a halt at the elbow and was replaced by something like a long, leafy vine. The vine began changing into a forearm and hand!

Doc's mouth flopped open, and his legs buckled, sending him back against the spines of the plant. Then, as tendrils reached for him with pricking thorns, he yelled, bounced away, and stood upright.

The creature stuck out a hand—the other already perfect—and grinned again. "Hello, Doc. We go back to ship now,- eat good, eh?" The voice was grating at first, but quickly adjusting to Doc's own tones.

Doc began wheezing asthmatically, and a giggle stuck in his throat. His fingers groped for a gun he'd forgotten to bring along. There was no way to escape, either. He'd have to humor the creature along. Humor him, humor him. . . . He cleared his throat, and somehow found his voice.

"Sure, sure, eat very good. But I'll go first to tell the others. Can't go like this; two of us is one too many. I'll go and get food. . . ."

"Too many, eh?" The creature's voice was smooth now, but indecisive. Then it shrugged. "All right. Then I kill you!"

**B**UT it seemed Ho surer of itself than Doc felt. Like Doc, it seemed frozen to the spot. Doc's head was churning two plus two to get a fantastic four. Life forms here were unstable; they could change



shape at will. And this thing had decided to change to the shape of a man—the shape of Doc Baron!

"I'll have to kill you, won't I?" the creature asked, still uncertainly.

The uncertainty somehow unfroze Doc from his fears. He shuddered, caught his breath, and lunged forward. His shoulder collided with the thing's stomach, and they both went down in a squirming heap. The hands of the creature were groping, while its thrashing legs found leverage and it rolled on top of Doc.

Doc's hands were too sweaty to hold a grip, and his heart seemed to burst from his chest. Then he closed on the neck of the creature, and he began squeezing savagely. The thing began beating at his stomach—and something crept to Doc's throat and began tightening. The plant was helping the creature!

Doc beat at the ground and tried to writhe away, still holding his grip on the other's throat. His senses were swimming and reeling, and his lungs seemed about to burst. Could the imitator of his body be choked? Did it need to breathe? He gripped tighter, convulsively, not daring to think.

Then everything turned black.

When he came back to consciousness he lay for long seconds tasting the sweetness of even Venus' air. It was only slowly that he thought of the inimical creature. His eyes opened and he turned on his side. Then he relaxed. A few feet away, a

naked image of himself lay sprawled out awkwardly, with a rough stick of wood jabbed deep into its throat!

He had no memory of jerking a limb off the plant and stabbing the other, but he wasn't in the mood to question his luck. He knew that men went on acting for seconds after consciousness seemed to leave. Automatically, he reached for a cigarette. It was then he found he was as naked as the other.

But he spotted his clothes almost at once, between himself and the creature's body. He puzzled over a living being that could bother stripping him while it was dying, but Venus' psychology wasn't his specialty. There was blood on the clothes, where the thing had bled on him after he stabbed it. He noticed that it was as red as his own would be.

For long minutes, Doc lay there, watching for a sign of life. Twice he thought he detected shallow breathing, but it must have been fatigue playing tricks on him. Three times he started up to investigate closer, but each time he stopped; it was too much like examining his own corpse.

Finally, almost convinced it was safe, he reached hesitantly for his clothes. He made a messy bundle of them, ducked through the clustering vegetation to a clear spot where he could still watch the enemy body, and began a frenzied dressing. His hands trembled too much to tie the knots in his shoelaces. He gave it

up, took one hasty look at the prone body, and broke into a shuffling run toward the ship, two miles away.

**H**E wanted the familiarity of the normal world again. He had to see captain-navigator Rob Winchell scratching at the rash he'd picked up from some plant, with a face contorted at the mixed pain and relief. He needed the assurance of watching engineer-geologist Walt Meek lifting a coffee cup with a stiff little finger that he'd mashed in their one minor repair job. He hungered for their eyes on him, telling him he was human.

Doc stopped, breathing hard, as he reached the top of the little hill that looked down on the *Aphrodite*, feeling relief at seeing the ship still there. Then he made out the thin, whipcord figure of Rob in the port, and could even see the worry on the dark, lean face. Doc followed Rob's gaze, and saw Walt coming up another pathway, his yellow hair blazing in the light of the sky. The boy was waving, his boxer's figure glistening as if oiled, and Doc could imagine the grin on the good-natured face.

Doc let out a whoop and began running toward them.

An hour later, Doc felt better. But the worry lines had deepened on Rob's face, and the boyish look no longer showed on Walt. The engineer refilled their coffee cups for the fifth time automatically, considering the

stony. Then he nodded. "It sounds crazy, but I guess I believe you, Doc."

"So do I," Rob nodded. Then he, shook his head as Doc started to relax. "Except for one little question. How do we know it *is* Doc who came back?"

There was a gun in Rob's hand suddenly, and he motioned Doc back sharply. "Sit still, Doc. I'm serious. The thing had the plant on its side—and you're not the fighting type. I've been noticing the way the plants changed, too, and wondering if there wasn't some intelligence there. Obvious answer now—plenty of it, including telepathy. If the thing picked up English in such a hurry, how much else did it get? Suppose it killed you off, and came back here with a slight twist on the story—which it might be smart enough to do—where would Walt and I be tonight while we were sleeping? It'd have the ship in two minutes—and it might just like that idea! Doc, are you a monster? If not, prove it!"

Two pairs of eyes were boring into him as he began to sweat again. Prove it! How can a man prove he's himself? "But—"

Walt jerked suddenly, and quick words spilled from his mouth. "*Cu vi parolas Esperante?*"

Doc could have kissed the boy. "Jes," he answered, frantically digging the language out of half forgotten memories. "*Jes, mi parolas Esperanton, sed malbone.*"

Walt let his breath puff out in release, but Rob sat with the gun frozen on Doc's stomach. The captain's voice was as tense as before. "Nice try, Walt. But don't forget the thing must have been a telepath. You knew the answer—Doc knew it. Means nothing!"

He frowned a moment longer. Then he got up, keeping the gun centered on Doc. "Walt, get me that brown and grey medical book of Doc's — the big one I was glancing at a week ago. And Doc, I want you to write down the bones of the human foot — all of them! And no excuses about forgetting."

When Doc finally handed over the sweat-stained paper with trembling fingers, Rob opened the book and began making a comparison. Doc bit his lips and waited, remembering how many years it had been since he'd learned that, but the younger man finally nodded, and dropped the gun.

"Okay, Doc," he said. "Glad you won, and sorry we had to do this. This is good enough for me. Neither Walt nor I knew it, and it wasn't the sort of thing the monster might want from your mind. I'm satisfied."

"Me, too, Doc," Walt told him, letting his face relax into a grin.

**D**OC wanted to meet their new confidence, but Rob's words and logic had jolted him too severely. He went back to the bunkroom and came out a minute later with

two books. His companions watched.

He hated himself as he spread the books open to the index section\* without looking at other content!. "I'm not satisfied," he told them brusquely. "You were both out alone at times — and it would be easy for the monsters to get you and come back *without* saying anything. Walt, I want the ten best refractory rocket tube linings in order of endurance. And Rob, give me the duration of the most economical course from Earth to Mars, ideal conditions, in a rocket."

Walt reached out for paper fairly confidently, but Rob drew himself up angrily. Then he grinned wryly, and nodded. He'd demanded no alibis from Doc and would ask for none himself.

A few seconds later, Doc sighed gently and reached for his coffee, throwing cigarettes on the table. "We're all human," he decided. "Thank God, we're - "

"Rob! Walt!" The weak cry came from outside the ship, thick and faint, with a mixture of hope and utter despair in it. But with all the distortion, it was still Doc's voice, and the hair on the back of his neck rose abruptly as he realized it.

Rob hit the port first, the automatic in his hands. Doc glanced over his shoulder, and his stomach corded into knots. The stick was gone from the throat, leaving a raw gash, but not as deep as Doc had

thought. It had stopped bleeding, but the creature swayed and wobbled as it clawed its way toward the ship. Then it caught sight of Doc, and it stopped, a perfect mirror of stark horror and fear in its eyes.

"Oh my God! I should have known. Rob—Walt—God, you've got to listen. Give me a fair trial!" The thing stopped, fighting a cough, and a thin froth of blood came to its lips. Then it seemed to gather strength. "Rob, remember you took me to see your family before we left. *Me*—not that monster behind you! Remember the mole on your

kid cousin's left hand . . .

The gun in Rob's hand barked suddenly and repeatedly, driving the pleading figure back and to earth with the' shattering blows. It lay there, unbelief and horror in its\* eyes, clutching at the wounds. Rob reached back for another clip, and it moaned — not with pain, but with sheer hopelessness. Somehow, it pulled itself half erect and began dragging away, leaving a gory trail. A few yards away, there was a burrow of some sort, such as an animal might have made — or perhaps some washing of the rains — and it was



heading for It. It staggered and groped. For minutes, it lay almost quiet, just outside the burrow entrance. Then, with a convulsive heave and a moan from the mouth of hell itself, it disappeared into the crooked little shaft.

Doc was aware that he was being sick, and that he had somehow come outside the ship. Beside him, Walt was in little better condition. But Rob's tortured eyes stared out of an immobile face.

The captain sighed, deep in his guts. "Anyone who wants to investigate that corpse can do it! But it's dead — I put all seven slugs in it!"

Then his shoulders shook convulsively. His breath wracked back and forth in great gulps, and the words seemed to jerk out of him, one at a time. "He — *left* hand . . . why I knew it was — fake! Cousin has — mole — mole on right . . ."

**W**ALT had grabbed his shoulders, but the captain was getting control of himself, and sobered almost instantly. "Sorry. It got me, having to kill something on just that. But it *was* the right hand — used to blame his left-handedness on that. The thing must have got part of the memory from us, had to guess at the rest."

"No, Rob," Doc told him, hating the honesty that insisted on coming out. "I'm afraid he got it from me — I thought it was the left — probably because I remember seeing his wrist-

watch right over ft. But I wasn't thinking of that — at all — when he came out with it. I haven't remembered it since we left Earth! He wasn't reading minds — he was digging in his memory, whatever it was."

"But that means —" Walt began. Doc nodded, and Rob's lips whitened.

"It doesn't mean the tests we used weren't sound," Doc said grimly. "It simply means the creature might have been able to pass them, too. Maybe they don't imitate forms, but literally duplicate us — cell by cell, right down to the brain."

Rob stared doubtfully at his automatic, toward the hole, and back to Doc. His face tensed again, but he nodded. "Go set up your microscope. Doc. I'll be back."

His face was grey when he came back from the burrow to give Doc the specimens. "It's dead," he told the two others.

Doc began his comparisons and blood tests under their watchful eyes, knowing in advance it was useless. He was right. Cell by cell, there was no difference between himself and the creature. He'd been hoping that the cell nucleus might be foreign in some way, but it was as human as his own. And the blood reaction showed that it might have been from his own body. The duplication was perfect, even at half a million times magnification.

Over the half-tasted supper, he could see their eyes weighing him,



and knew that his own eyes were weighing them with the same fears. They watched the pitch-black night fall in silence, and turned into their bunks by common consent, each with a gun in easy reaching distance. Doc handed out sleeping pills, and was surprised when they worked.

He never could remember much about the nightmares, beyond a vague composite impression. He was something without definite shape, changing at will, sometimes almost" insensate and sometimes almost impossibly intelligent. He was bound by only one rule, traditionally upheld by something called the Council; no member of the planet's organized life could ever take exactly the same form as another member at the same time. He changed and altered, until a new and unknown form appeared, where the rule did not apply. He felt hunger creeping over him, surging up until something snapped sharply . . .

Doc came awake suddenly with the sound of a shot in his ears, to see Walt jerking up from an opposite bunk. They swung toward the third place. Rob was gone! The night was almost over, and' the dim dawnlight showed the crumpled sheets, but no sign of the captain.

**B**Y common consent, Walt and Doc were scrambling into their clothes and heading toward the airlock, just as sounds came from outside. Rob came in stealthily, to stop

abruptly as he saw them. The captain's gun was half lifted, but he let it sink slowly, while his other hand began locking the inner seals of the port.

"Well?" Walt's voice cracked on the word.

Rob shrugged wearily, but his haunted eyes met them squarely. "Heard something moving around, and thought maybe the creature had revived. Outside, I thought I saw something, and took a shot at it. Must have been a shadow, though. The thing is still dead — cold dead."

Doc went back for the books again and gave the almost meaningless tests, while Walt began making a hasty breakfast. This time, Rob answered three questions before the other two nodded reluctantly. Worthless as the test was, perhaps, they had to accept it for want of something better.

"It'll be light soon—" Walt began, but his sentence chopped off in the middle.

From the airlock, faint sounds reached them, as if someone outside were trying to get in. A ghost of a voice reached through to them, pleading. "Doc?"

A harsh groan ripped out of Rob's throat, and he was out of his chair, rushing toward the lock. His hands were clumsy on the locks, but he seemed to rip the seals aside by sheer frenzied effort.

Outside, there was nothing! Across

the little clearing, a bush vibrated, as if just disturbed, and they seemed to hear some object running off through the tangled growth. Rob's gun was hammering, as he blasted at the sounds, but there was no result, and the distant snap of twigs and rattle of stones faded into the normal sounds of Venus.

Doc looked at his hands, surprised that they were no longer trembling. A man could get used to anything, he decided idly. Or the endocrine glands get tired of responding to stimuli.

"Dead?" he asked, at last. "Or playing possum? Well, it will be light soon. We can go out then — all three together from now on. If the corpse is there, we'll burn it."

His eyes were on the captain as his dead-steady hands lifted coffee to his lips. The liquid had no taste for him now. He swallowed automatically, considering. "What'll we find out there, Rob?"

The captain dropped into a chair opposite Doc and threw his empty gun on the table. "Your corpse, at least, Doc. Maybe another. I thought I killed it, anyhow. You're right. I was shooting at myself out there. I heard something, and went out looking for it. I guess we got duplicated about the same time."

The story came out as levelly as if Rob were dictating an account of a routine landing. He'd stayed behind, overtired from writing up the log of their discoveries. He'd

wandered around outside for a while and finally settled down comfortably on some mossy turf. Apparently he had gone to sleep. There was a confused memory of nightmares in which he'd seemed to be fighting, then of complete unconsciousness in dreamless sleep. He'd wakened suddenly to see the creature bending over him with a rock in its hand. One of the vines near him had apparently grown thorns that accidentally awakened him just in time.

**H**E'D jerked upright at a full run and just beaten the other to the ship where he could get a gun. It had been on his heels until he had the weapon, but that had sent it rushing off into the thickets.

"Should have shot it," Rob finished evenly. "But like Doc, I couldn't get used to fighting myself. It had stolen all my clothes. I just got dressed by the time Walt yelled from across the clearing. When I got to the lock, you 'were coming over the hill, Doc. I kept mum, figurine I could stay up alone and trap the thing at night—better without you two roiling around outside with me. When it came sneaking up, I shot it and dumped its body into the burrow with the other."

He sat quietly, watching for their judgment. Doc poured coffee for the captain and passed it over silently. Walt sat white-faced, seeming to be fighting to say something. Finally the boy gave up and held out his

own shaking cup. Doc wondered what it felt like to be outnumbered two to one by possible monsters. HP knew he was human maybe Rob did. too- but the engineer couldn't be sure of them.

"It's light enough," Doc decided.

They went out through the look cautiously, with Walt bringing up carefully in the rear where their bar'.- were exposed to his gun. Outside, there was no sign of whatever had come to the ship before. There was only the normally changed growth around the ship and the entrance to the burrow showing up darkly beyond. Venus' sky was already blazing with light.

They were half-way to the burrow when Walt suddenly gasped and pointed to the left, beside their path. Doc turned His head. Something had come out of the brush, moving like an animal. It had vine tendrils trail-in ! from it. and its legs were more like roots than anything else, but it moved by its own volition.

Then he saw the cause for Walts amazement. At the front, a lump of substance was changing as they watched. Features began to emerge, first a nose, then a slit for a mouth, and finally eyes and ears. A fine growth appeared on the head, quickly becoming rustily grey hair. The face was rapidly becoming human in every way, but with a strangeness that might be due to an attempt to take a composite pattern from all three of the men.

Now the lips opened, revealing white teeth, and the eyes blinked at them. The creature coughed, clearing its throat.

Walt's gun-hand was coming up, hut Roll stepped back and caught it. "Wait," he snapped. "It's only the head, so far. We've got time enough yet."

The creature tried its voice softly, a faintly mewling sound. Then it faced them determinedly. "Hard communicate," it said, the words thick and clumsy. "Can't reach - minds—senses. Council worried. Council wants report—account immediately."

Doc had flinched at the mention of the Council, but now he checked the words that came to his lips. The creature was trying to turn back. Where the neck joined the woody body, a series of violent contractions had begun. They spread through the whole body, setting it to a series of writhings and twitchings. The face was grimacing and contorting, and a series of meaningless sounds drooled out of the lips.

Abruptly, the face became loose and expressionless, the eyes closed, and the lips hung open. The bodily contortions went on, with an increasing evidence of effort. But the line separating the neck from the body remained.

The creature stopped for a second. Then suddenly it reared up on its rear stems or legs, hesitated, and brought the flaccid head down sharp-

ly against a large rock. Brains spattered out, with a gush of blood that began red and was gradually infused with a green ichor. It twitched a few times and lay still.

**D**OC pried his eyes away from it, not even trying to understand. He heard the breath whistle out from Walt, and saw Rob come out of a rigid stiffness. They looked at each other, and turned silently toward the burrow, by common consent. They could talk about this fresh horror later.

At the burrow entrance, Doc hesitated again, steeling himself to face the presence of his own dead body—or worse still, its absence. He let the other two slide down the twisting little tunnel first, shining flashlights down it. Finally, he fitted his stout body into the entrance and followed to where a larger part had formed a cave-like place.

There were two bodies there—his naked corpse, and the clothed figure of Rob's imitator, both stiff in death.

Walt was staring at them sickly. "Then what was the thing outside the lock?"

"Yeah." Rob's eyes were glued to his own duplicate. "The lock sealed now, Walt? I should have checked."

"I locked it," the boy answered dully. "I—God!"

From above them, the sound of footsteps drifted down the passage—soft footsteps, rustling on dead leaves!

Walt's suddenly white lips opened, but the sound of his voice didn't come from them. It came from the mouth of the burrow. "Doc? You're down there—I know it. Doc, you've got to help me. You've got to kill that fake with you! You can't desert me. I'm real, Doc. Don't let them shoot me, like Rob shot that other! God, Doc, you don't know what it's like—a week of it, going crazy, hiding out, knowing *that* was with you. Doc!"

The voice ended on an almost insane quaver. The horror of the voice was matched by the desperation of Walt's face in the light of the torches. Doc shook his head, smiling faintly at the boy. It was amazing how the same adaptation that had ended his squeamishness at operating on living bodies was now taking over, making even this situation bearable.

"Take it easy, Walt," he called up softly to the creature—or the real Walt—above. "We'll try to be fair. We're all in pretty much the same boat." He heard a sigh, almost like a child finding haven at its mother's breast, and turned to the white-lipped boy. "All right, you might as well tell us the story, kid."

Walt's story was almost familiar by now. He'd been attacked, apparently, the first day on Venus. He couldn't remember more than some fuzzy, drawn-out struggle, and waking up to find another unconscious body of himself in the tangled vines.

He'd hit it with a rock to the temple and spent the day trying to steady down before going back to the ship. He'd kept quiet, knowing they wouldn't believe him. But whenever he was out alone, he'd been hunting it—it had obviously survived the blow—and trying to kill it or keep it far from the ship.

"So that's where the scratching on the lock originated," Doc said quietly. His eyes measured the distance, while his brain ticked over his knowledge of anatomy. The automatic butt in his hand made a soft thud as it suddenly contacted Walt's skull, and the boy dropped with a soft moan. Rob's gun came up toward Doc, wavered, and sank again. Rob was willing to let Doc play it his way, for the moment.

Doc called up the passage. "What was the first place you lived in like, Walt?"

"A little yellow house, five rooms, with green shingle. It had a real well," the voice above quavered down. There were more details, but Doc cut them off as Walt began to revive. He waited for the boy to regain full consciousness, and repeated the question to him, while Rob nodded sudden understanding.

**T**HE accounts were a bit different, but the details were the same. And no telepathy was possible—Walt had been unconscious, and the ether two hadn't known.

There was no way of telling which

was real and which was a monster—for any of them!

A scrabbling sound above them changed to the evidence of a body sliding down the passage, and a naked figure appeared in the light abruptly. The second Walt's face was matted with dirt and a gory wound at the temple, and the eyes were filled with stark terror and lunacy. It stood there, mouthing at them. Doc drew back, knowing that the uncertainty of waiting out there had been the final straw piled on the week of exposure and terror to drive the creature wholly mad. He tried to think of something to soothe it.

But it wasn't waiting. With an animal cry, it charged them!

Rob's gun spoke once, viciously in the closed space. The naked figure of Walt halted in mid-stride, a gaping hole appearing in its forehead. Then it sank down across the two other corpses.

Rob stood with the gun still pointing at it. He shook himself and looked at the others. "The same thing—always the period of unconsciousness. Does that mean we're all fakes, and that the shock of adapting to human form was too much for us—that it knocked us out for a while? Or doesn't it mean anything? Damn it, we must be real. We're the ones who always reached the ship. We're used to this form of body—naturally we handled it better at first. The imitations lost be-

cause it took too long to learn."

Doc dropped down beside the last corpse, examining it. Exposure had told heavily on it, exactly as it would have done on a real human body. He straightened out the arms, looking at the mangled, stiff little finger.

And suddenly he was on his feet, grimly facing the facts he had overlooked so long. "No, Rob—we're at least partly monsters. Walt hasn't been favoring his finger lately—I never noticed, but I can remember his bending it when he picked up the cup last. *This* is the real Walt—with a broken finger still there. And you haven't been scratching the rash—it's gone. But the arm of your corpse still shows it. They duplicated our bodies, all right—but not the things that were wrong with the bodies. You're both fakes!"

Walt gasped, but Rob cut him off. "You're a liar, Doc—because I know I'm myself. But you're absolutely right, all the same. I don't have the rash—haven't even thought about it since the incident. And your asthma is gone!"

They faced themselves.— Like Rob, Doc knew he was a genuine human being, but he had to admit that the asthma and post-nasal drip were gone. He was a monster, as they were monsters. No matter how clearly he could feel his first impressions of his mother's arms or recall the damaged form of a particularly interesting case of *tubes*, he was only a fake.

WALT'S lips were still white, and his fingers were drawing blood where the nails bit into his palms, but the boy was showing the sound stuff that had been so well duplicated. His voice was almost as normal as Rob's. "Then we'll have to face it. We can't ever go home!"

Rob started to nod, but his eyes were questioning as they turned to Doc.

Doc was remembering the human-headed plant-animal, and the impressions he'd had on reviving. He was thinking of his dreams. But mostly, he was thinking as a trained biologist considering a freak form of life.

He laughed suddenly, almost clinically aware of how strange and yet natural it sounded. "We're going home," he told them. "We're going home a little better than we came."

He relaxed slowly, breathing the wet heat of the air that no longer bothered him, though there was sweat in the creases of fat still remaining on his stomach.

"That poor damned plant-thing," he told them. "It didn't have a chance. Neither did whatever we came from. Here we have a world where all life is unstable—all can change to other forms, whatever their codes of conduct may be. It doesn't matter what other form they duplicate, because they're all unstable, so they can change back. Maybe an intelligent form changes to a non-

intelligent one, but sooner or later it mutates itself to some intelligent form again. It has learned to duplicate any organism of cells perfectly—telepathy isn't the answer, but probably some strange form of cellular resonance.

"Now it makes one mistake—it tries to duplicate Earth life. It does it—perfectly. But Earth life is completely stable! It is caught—trapped in that same stability, because it is a perfect duplication. The planting with the head couldn't change the head back—it had to kill itself.

"And we're exactly as human as the human-beings the things duplicated. We've had a few imperfections of artificial origin removed, though natural ones like fat remain. But cell by cell and brain molecule by brain molecule, we're just what our originals were. Even our reproductive cells must be perfectly duplicated, so that we could go back and have the same children our originals might have had.

"And we can't change back or alter. We can't hurt anyone else. We're stable—because we're perfectly duplicated humans."

He grinned as it sank in, and nodded again. "We're going back."

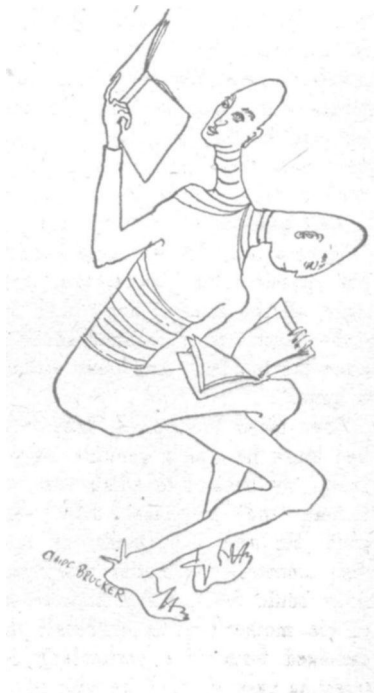
They began filing out and up the tunnel, knowing that there'd be emotional reactions after they reached the ship, but still only filled with re-

lief. They reached the lock, and Walt unsealed it.

Then Rob chuckled. "It'll be tough on the Venus life, Doc," he commented. "Unless it gives up imitating men. But it'll be fine for all the invalids and hopeless cripples who get duplicated, I guess. Watch out Venus, here comes Earth."

Doc echoed his chuckle, caressing his old, familiar paunch. And the three humans went into the ship.

—LESTER DEL REY



The Last Man is a woman,  
they told Galen — and  
It's\* your duty to entertain her.

# Omega

By FRED SORREL

**T**HE summons was a blessing,  
Galen thought.

He was conscious that he was thinking in archaic word-symbols, but it did not trouble him. There was no feeling of inward, shame. His life had meaning. He was part of the Plan, part of the Great Machine. Ivor's call had given point to existence. Point and purpose.

Galen looked about him at the other passengers. They all sat erect and at ease on the hard duralumin benches, momentarily one with the

thrumming stratoflyer. Galen envied them. They looked so mechanically perfect. *The Creche*, he thought, *did more for them than for me*. It occurred to him that he had no real right to complain. He was fortunate to have been animated at all. But the hard seat made his buttocks ache and he felt the bitter cold of the cabin.

The airliner was flying rather low. Galen had the information from one of his fellow passengers, evidently a seasoned traveler. Something to do



with perishable cargo for the City. Galen wasn't sure, for the woman teleped the idea and he had been reluctant to ask for word of mouth clarification.

In any case, Galen was thankful that the flyer was coursing at less than ten thousand meters. It was cold enough as it was, and he was enjoying the panorama of forests and snowy mountains rushing under the stubby wings.

His mind swung back to Ivor and the summons. *Approval, direction,*

*purpose . . .* The concepts clicked through his brain with cybernetic precision. He thought briefly of the Creche and the bursting light of his animation among the jungles of electron-tubes and parturient plastic sacs. He thought of the teacher-crystals spinning in the darkened ogives of groined vaults, imparting knowledge. That part of his existence was over. He was thankful for that. Life had been bleak and purposeless for him in the Creche. It was time to put his memories behind. His life



was launched now In its proper direction. *Direction, purpose, accomplishment, unity . . . Unity.* That was the goal. A feeling of belonging, of having a place in the Plan, of being a part of the Great Machine.

Considering what the reason for his manufacture had been, Galen told himself, he could have been made no differently. He no longer felt weak, or less than his fellows.

He tried to imagine the City, and found that he could not. The crystals had not offered him that knowledge. Evidently it would not be needed in the House of Omega. He knew only that the City had been built by the Humans, that it was the only urban grouping on the Three Planets, and that it was large and incomprehensible, and that it was there that Humans had made the first of the- Children of Men.

They had made them, Galen knew, as servants and as scapegoats for the unaccountable furies and hatreds that seemed vital to Human well-being. Somehow, this made Galen vaguely uncomfortable. It couldn't possibly matter now, he knew, for in the City of the Children of Men, in Ivor's care, in the House of Omega, the Last Man waited for death.

**M**AN. *Catastrophic, prodigal, prodigious Man, unique in the Cosmos, a questing race of giants enslaved by hate and consuming greed, grandiose and cunning, bitter*

*and magnificent. Man the father of the perfect race, the Children of Men, the robots, androids, manikins, the artificial people. They built them to hate, to enslave, and to despise. And because they built for reasons so close to the nature of humankind, they built perfectly; and because they were themselves not perfect, the simulacrum surpassed its maker and Man declined, unnecessary at last in the bubble of space and time. The human population shrank. Fewer children were born. An instant of eternity passed, and Man no longer was. And the Last was born into a world of robots who were all that Man could never be. Intuitive, hardy, brilliant, and kind. Above all—kind.*

The Last Man was a woman.

Ivor said: "She's weak, and as you see, plain. She will not live long. And she is alone. More alone than you can imagine—"

Galen thought: *I know how that feels.*

Ivor said: "Yes, you do. Forgive me, it was impolite of me to telep you like that but this is important to Omega's well-being. You understand that what we do for her we do because we must. For ten thousand years our race has served Man. Actually, she is despicable for her weakness and her banality. She is a dreg of what was once a master race. But you see that we cannot despise her. We are bound by our natures."

*/ understand,* Galen thought.

"Good. You were animated as you

are so that you might be her companion. It is more than a duty that devolves on you. It is a racial compulsion to make her happy that we—all the Children of Men—focus on her through you. You *are* the Children of Men to Omega. Though you are not like the rest of us, you *are* us. Do you understand me?"

Galen stared down into the crystal where Omega sat amid softly changing polychromes. He watched her eating sweets and listening to simple, banal tunes oozing from the walls of the crystal.

"I don't know," he said aloud. "I think maybe I do. I know the prospect of serving the Great Machine and the Plan is satisfying to me. That is inevitable, I suppose?"

"Inevitable," agreed Ivor, watching Galen closely.

"How the mighty have fallen," Galen said, watching Omega.

Ivor nodded. "She is Man. You are the future. But the future owes a debt to the past. And you were made less than your fellows so that the debt might be paid. She is lonely. You will comfort her. She is weak. You will minimize her weakness. She is sad and alone. You will gladden her and stay by her side. That is your reason for being."

*Reason, purpose, direction—fulfillment.* The concepts flowed through Galen's brain with smooth clarity. It was as though a door had opened in his mind and he understood at last the substance of the Plan. A

glow of something like satisfaction filled him. For the first time that he could remember he tasted a new concept: *happiness.*

Ivor smiled at him. "Good. You are beginning to see."

Galen looked into the crystal room again. "Yes," he said.

OMEGA was walking in a garden now. The room, sensing her wants, had changed itself into a trellised rose arbor, warm and glowing in the golden light of a slanting sun. Her hair looked metallic in the amber light.

"She is not handsome," Galen said thoughtfully.

Ivor looked at him, smiling faintly. "No," he said. "Perfection is an ideal. The women of The Children of Men are feminine perfection. Omega is not. But consider that the actual ideal did not originate with us. Rather with *her* people."

Galen was unconvinced and hoped that Ivor would not telegraph his doubts. Omega was less than the women he knew. In spite of the fact that she was the last living member of a great race, her body was too short and too softly curved. Her nose was too small, her lips too full. Through the walls of the crystal he could faintly catch the nuances of her mind. It was dark and lonely and full of petty thoughts and grievances and dissatisfactions. He could feel overtones of ennui, of sulking petulance, of hungering, unsatisfied sexuality.

"Will I be required to—" He began and then stopped. It was a difficult thought to express. "Telep me," he said to Ivor.

Ivor smiled again. "You wish to know if you must satisfy her sexual desires. I leave that question to be answered by the conditioning implanted in you at the Creche. Remember that our race is asexual. True, we have two types, women and men. But actual sexuality is needless and confusing since reproduction is an electro-biological process handled by the Wombs at the Creche. However—you are a special product. *You* were made to be Omega's companion . . ."

"I see."

"Does the notion repel you?"

Galen thought for a moment. "Telep me again. If the Plan is to be perfect, you should know all my hidden thoughts. I may not have pre-conscious prejudices, but probe deeper."

Ivor's mind searched. There was a nuance of shock and something like nausea. And retreat.

"I . . . I see nothing that will fail the plan. You have been properly prepared."

Galen felt that the interview was at an end.

"You will join Omega tonight," Ivor said, and left.

Galen stood for a long while staring down into the vast crystal. Omega's confused thought patterns had turned the room into a smoke-

blue canyon amid craggy granite and basalt cliffs. The sun was down, glowing faintly behind the flat, featureless sky, and Omega squatted naked before a fire. She was ripping strips of half-cooked meat from a piece of bone with her sharp, white, pointed teeth.

The watcher felt his lip curl.

It was good to have someone, to feel superior to, he thought hungrily. *Good, fine, warm and glowing.* Once again his mind caught the concept of *happiness*. This time more firmly.

**L**IFE within the crystal was ambivalent for Galen. He seemed to exist on two levels of consciousness. One on which he shared his existence with Omega, and lived through an endless succession of nights and days that lost form and meaning in the fey world of her creation. They wandered the red sandhills of Mars and waded in the still shallow waters of the ancient canals, they ran before the furies of a hundred Dantesque hells, over blazing lava cauldrons and rivers of fire. They trod the icy methane snow in the moraines of Io and Callisto, freezing naked in the airless night. They abandoned themselves to erotic play, variegated with dozens of Human sophistication, and mated like animals in the primal muck of the dawn of the world. They wove the sounds and sights of human history into a vibrant living pattern. Bach, Vivaldi, Modigliani, Picasso, Cortez, Kant

and a million other dead and forgotten Humans lent their talents in a bacchanal of sensation for the last living member of their race.

It was counterfeit, of course. It was the work of the crystal and of Ivor and the millions behind him. The millions of the Children of Men, who in their kindness could grant the last Human only everything it could wish for or imagine. This, Galen knew and accepted, though it did not lessen his abandonment to the pleasures of Omega. Indeed, his abandonment and genuine enjoyment was essential to the Plan. And through it all he remained conscious of his superiority to Omega, knowing that she could never, in fact, walk through the night of Callisto and in the airless bright of the Sea of Serenity.

It touched him that Omega thought him a man. That she relied on him so exclusively, that she found pleasure in seeking to please him. It even gave him joy to know that she would die, while he could be eternal if it so suited the Plan of the Children of Men.

At times he pondered the concept of death. But his conditioning was sketchy on this point, and Omega would not speak of it. Yet, even the shadow of this unknown 'death' added savor to the beings in the crystal. Galen understood perfectly why this was, for he had been conditioned to this knowledge. Pleasure, he knew, was only pleasurable in the

face of its own end. This was the Yin and Yang of Human culture. The battling and conflicting drives to construction and demolition.

He thought of Omega as the dark, the past, the shadowy concept of death. Her song was a threnody of a once mighty race, a banal voice singing the echoes of a thundering dream that was. He thought of himself as kindness, faintly paternal, the condescension of the present masters of the world. He the future, she the past. He, perfect in deliberate imperfections, and Omega, humanly desirable, inherently contemptible, stirring in her animality and fierce dependence.

That was life until the end.

**I**VOR entered the crystal. He was a jarring note, but it did not matter, for the Last Man slept.

Omega was reading a novel-tape, grateful for a respite in the insane humanity of her life. Her eyes were closed as the tape's radiation caressed her sensory relays.

Ivor telepped: "Is it well?"

"Of course. How could it be otherwise?" she replied softly.

"I wanted to be certain. He was not happy with his Human parents, you know. It was a kindness when they died. But the Creche could do nothing for him. He simply didn't belong. A false memory helped but something more was needed."

Omega smiled. "It was a complicated effort," she said.

"Our debt to *them*," Ivor said. "It won't last forever. He is already aging. We can only do so much. But he will never suffer or even realize. He does not know what death is." He looked at the sleeping Man.

"He is waking," Omega said. "You had better go." And then she asked quickly: "How much longer will he last?"

"He is nearly a century old," Ivor said, "We had to keep him in the Creche for seventy years."

"As long as that."

"He would have been miserable in the world."

The android woman looked pityingly at Galen. "First that and now this."

"He is happy," Ivor said, and turned to go.

"He is happy," Omega repeated. "Yes. It is a kindness."

She changed the room into a dark and sooty cave with a fire burning at its mouth. Faint stars gleamed beyond the flames and in the distance a sabre-toothed tiger screamed.

She lay naked on the stony floor beside Galen.

The Last Man-was waking.

— FRED SORREL



# Visitor from Kos

By HARRY J. GARDENER

Oh, Mara, make it possible for Me  
to Transfer again — so that I  
might Teach this planet's Inhabitants!

**A**GARA pulled himself, slow inch by painful inch, away from the wrecked and battered spacecraft. Once free of the wreckage, he clamped on a nerve-block, and the excruciating agony ceased. But he recognized instantly that this atmosphere contained something poisonous he could not long endure. The gravity, too, was almost double that of his native planet.

His *aum* flickered fitfully, and he knew he must soon ascend to Mara.

After all this tremendous journey from far, far Kos, was it now to end like this? Agara felt so sure his selection for this trip meant some great service had been assigned him on this distant world. Surely, that was why Kosians had been given knowledge of space-travel. How explain to Mara his failure to have *served*, if he died now?

Slowly, amid these gloomy thoughts, Agara became aware of *observation*. Gathering his web of thoughts toge-

ther, he extended his sense of pre-emption through the sphere. Above was the observer, a small quadratenta — why, no, not tentacles, but four *hands*. It was clinging, head downward, on the bole of that huge vegetable growth at the roots of which the body of Agara lay. Beady eyes stared curiously at the alien being on the ground, while its grey fur-covered skin rippled with quivers of excitement and that bushily-furred nether appendage raised and towered.

Carefully Agara's mind reached out and touched that of the first living entity he had perceived on this new planet. There was not much mind in that small body, certainly not of reasoning grade. An awareness of life, of hunger and the means of appeasing it, of methods of safe-guarding its body from many dangers. Truly low in evolution's scale. Was this the supreme life here?

Agara's *aum* flickered more slowly. Life was almost gone. And he could not die now! There was so much to observe and learn here, even though he would never be able to return to far-away Kos and report. Nor had he yet served.

"Mara forgive me for taking a life," he prayed, "but I feel that mine is the more important."

Calling up every reserve of strength, Agara extended his *aum* to the little creature above. Before the squirrel could move, poised for in-

stant flight though it was, its life-force was transferred to the alien, and its lifeless body fell to the ground.

More alert now, though still wounded unto death and knowing something must be done to sustain and retain life, Agara sent his sense of perception out to an ever-increasing distance.

Why, how filled with life this planet! How it teemed with an infinite size and variety of mobile creatures that bored, ran, crawled, flew or swam under, on and above it. Not to mention the uncountable types of stationary vegetable life.

Yet none of these had minds of power. Strange, -strange world. Was there no life extant here capable of reasoning, of constructive thought?

Suddenly Agara perceived a new creature, one that ran about on four legs, was fur covered, and had one of those strange nether appendages so common to this planet's life. Mind touched mind, and Agara thrilled. Here was the highest type of mind yet found, though even it was not capable of - productive thinking.

There was, though, in that mind a hazy cognition of an upright, quadrupedal animal called "man". Perhaps this "man" was the one Agara sought. He sent his mind searching further and further, yet could not find one.

But Agara's *aum* was dwindling swiftly. He could wait - no longer to find those "man" entities, Nor would





he tempt Mara's justice by further killing. This creature would have to do.

Fitting mind carefully to mind, slowly and meticulously Agara imposed his total consciousness, his very ego, onto that of the host, who stood quiescent, immobile, during the transference. The intrusion complete, and full mastery of the life force of the "dog," as he now knew it to be called, in his possession. Agara let go his former carcass with a sigh of satisfaction.

"My life in service to others 'or this boon of renewed life, Mara," the Kosian said reverently.

Agara made his new dog-body lie down, and for an hour examined its very thought-pattern and knowledge, making then' intrinsically his own. Finally, sensing that his new body was weakening from hunger and thirst, he rose and trotted off in a remembered direction.

BLACKIE, you beggar, where you been all afternoon?" the upright "man" entity scolded. "Get in the house."

Again mind touched mind, and Agara knew that here was the one sought, but perhaps found too late. Could he *transfer* again? He did not know of its ever having been done.

This was tragic, possibly, for while this brain was not full-extended, there were tremendous possibilities inherent in it for new learning,

growth and usage.

His host knew no fear here, as these "men" creatures were friendly to dogdom. Thus he went, curious but not hesitant, into the dwelling place.

Just inside, in a room filled with strange yet delicious smells, stood another "man" entity, yet curiously different. Agara touched this new mind, and found this was a female of the species, known as "woman". Her mind was not as well-filled as that of the man, yet it required but the smallest study to become aware that it was far stronger. Should he attempt this transfer?

"You hungry, Blackie?" the woman asked. and put a plate of food on the floor. The dog-body leached for it eagerly, and Agara noted its reactions curiously. There was also a dish of water nearby, from which it drank.

From a short distance Agara heard a wailing sound, and the woman left the room. He had not finished eating; when she returned, a very young male in her arms. It had quieted now, and Agara saw it was feeding from the mammalian breasts of the woman.

Habit, largely, made him test the quality of its mind, and he received a shock so great he mentally reeled.

Closer and more carefully he studied the brain of the infant. Could this thing be? How could one so young have a brain so much s longer, of such greater inherent strength,

than its parents?

Long he studied, both the child's brain and those of the woman and the man.

And slowly the answer came. It was the things these strange beings were taught as they grew older; the frustrations of the economic environment in which they lived; the habits and taboos of generations of half-ignorant forebears, that shaped the growing human's self and character and mentality.

And it entirely blotted out those inherent abilities, of which this man-child had so many.

Agara prayed briefly. "Oh, Mara, make it possible for me to transfer again, without harm to this dog-

body or to that of the child. Once within that malleable mind, it will be possible to so teach and expand it that by the time it attains adulthood I can, through it, bring your teachings and blessings to this planet's inhabitants."

The woman returned to the other room and laid the child in its bed, then left. Agara, who had followed, lay down beside the small crib.

Even more carefully and meticulously than before, he began fitting mind to mind, imposing his total consciousness and ego onto that of the child.

And Mara blessed the transfer.

— HARRY J. GARDNER



# Old Purply-Puss

By SYLVIA JACOBS

Juggle the Chromosomes of Earth's Creatures

—a sample of Arthropod,

a dash of Cephalopod, an extinct Carnivorous

Reptile . . . Shake 'Em up

— And what have You Got?

**T**HE interrupted beep of the tube annunciator sounded over the howling, the chittering, the yammering, whistling and barking of the fake extra-terrestrial zoo outside the laboratory window.

Sam Baldwin, journeyman life technician, interrupted his gloomy reflections on the prostitution of his skill to remove the rolled daily newspaper from the tube. Idly he opened it. A glaring ad for a trade school stared him in the face.

"LEARN TO CREATE LIFE!" the ad declared. "Learn the techniques that make men like gods! Study in your spare time! Increase your earnings! Send for our free aptitude test today! Hundreds of jobs awaiting qualified men and women! So long as people eat, food industries will need trained life technicians! Why stagnate in a rut? Prepare to enter this fascinating, uncrowded field!"

"Uncrowded, nuts!" Sam said aloud, to nobody in particular, except



the embryos of imaginary extra-terrestrial creatures in his exo-genesis tanks.

The life industries, as Sam knew only too well, had somehow acquired a reputation for being glamorous. Like newspaper reporting, deep-sea diving, and movie acting, they attracted fifty starry-eyed, eager applicants for every opening. If you threw all the working life technicians in the country out of a job tomorrow, you still couldn't place one year's

crop of trade-school graduates. It was an exacting, nerve-wracking, dirty, routine job, and still the ambitious graduates came on.

Sam turned the pages of the paper, trying to find some item sufficiently interesting to take his mind off his troubles. A few life technicians were lucky enough to get into a niche where they could retain their self-respect, feel that they were genuinely useful, creating improved food animals. But after ten years in the trade

here Sam was juggling chromosomes of Earth animals, taking a characteristic of an arthropod here, a cephalopod there, an extinct carnivorous reptile perhaps, mixing them into an illogical mess of biologic hash, as specified by the screwy imagination of one W. W. Weinstein, showman extraordinary. The worst of it was, that the suckers were getting wise. As more and more men came back from trips to the stars, told their friends and relatives that all the suitable planets found so far were inhabited by plain, ordinary, earth-type animals and unremarkable human beings, the suckers were staying away from Weinstein's so-called *Other Worlds Zoo* in droves. And when the gate receipts dropped, Sam's salary check was liable not to come through.

**A** newsstory momentarily captured Sam's attention. Six people claimed to have seen a lighted space-ship crash into the ocean, at night, close to shore, and many more had seen a fiery streak descending from higher altitudes, before the submerision. Astronomers interviewed stated unequivocally that the phenomenon had unquestionably been a meteorite, if not a mass hallucination. But certain public-spirited citizens who saw what they were certain was a crash, rounded up a deep-sea diver in a bar. He took his boat out to the site, dressed in, and went down, with the avowed purpose of rescuing any sur-

vivors. After search, he reported that whatever had come down, whether space-ship or meteorite, had apparently slid off the edge of a reef, into water deeper than his air-hose was long. But as he was coming up the diver saw on a shoal, partially out of the water, a creature which he declared was not native to those waters. It resembled an octopus, but had purple fur, and unlike any known species of octopus could stand erect on its tentacles in an atmospheric medium.

The diver told reporters that he had seen the creature at close range, in the beam of a powerful diving light, that he had attempted to capture it, but it had escaped him. While printing only verified facts and direct quotes, the newspaper managed to leave a distinct impression with its readers that this strange creature might have been an intelligent being from a space-ship.

Disgusted, Sam Baldwin turned the page. Weinstein wasn't the only one, he reflected, who lived by taking advantage of people's credulity. And as for that diver, what some people would stoop to, just to get their names in the papers! The bar incident suggested the man was a victim of delirium tremens.

To take the bad taste out of his mouth, Baldwin read every word of a scholarly, constrained report by the newspaper's science editor, on an inside page, telling of the discovery of yet another Earth-like planet, in-

habited as usual by Earth-like forms, with a social development comparable to that of medieval Europe. Sam didn't understand all the references to the theory of parallel evolutions, but he agreed heartily with the general principle.

The door of the lab swung open, and Weinstein, with his usual bubbling optimism and aggressiveness, burst in.

"Sammy, my boy," Weinstein declared, pausing long enough in his jumping around to clap Baldwin painfully on the shoulder. "I've got it! I've got it at last!"

"Got what?" Baldwin asked sourly. "St. Vitus dance?"

"I've got an idea for the greatest attraction this little old show has ever exhibited. We're in the chips, Sammy boy, we're in the chips! You see, this here space-ship crashed in the ocean, and the pilot got out of the wreck—funny-looking thing—"

"I read it," Baldwin said, tartly. "That's a bunch of baloney about its being a ship. The experts say it was a meteorite. You mean, somebody caught that purple-furred octopus?"

"Why go to all the trouble to catch it?" Weinstein demanded, logically. "That's what I'm paying you for, Sammy my boy. All we need is the man who saw it, and he's hopping an iono-liner right now. Just talked to him on the V.P. . . ."

"Did he look sober?" Baldwin asked.

"He better be sober! I'm paying

him diving wages plus travelling expenses, just to come here and describe the thing to you. Give the suckers a good show for their money, that's my motto . . ."

"In other words, you're paying this diver several hundred dollars you already owe me . . ."

"Now, just be patient a little longer, Sammy boy, as soon as we get this new attraction billed, I'll catch up on all your back wages and give you a raise to boot. It'll be a sensation! The way I have it figured, see, this octopus will deliver a lecture on astronomy in general, and its own planet in particular. We'll have it talk English, of course, with maybe a few words of its native language here and there . . ."

"Now, listen," Baldwin said, "you know very well it takes me six months to create one of these attractions, even with no vocal apparatus, or a simple pattern of non-verbal sound. Something capable of learning as many words as a parrot, I might produce in a year. But a brain with a complicated verbal memory capacity to do it but using human chromosomes, and you know that's against the law. It's ten years in jail if they catch anybody doing it—ten years for me, not you. I don't like this idea anyway. It stinks. It's the worst hoax you've pulled yet. You'd better get yourself another technician . . ."

"Now, Sammy boy, cool down, we'll work this out. Stick with me and

you'll wear zircons. So you can't create a talking octopus fast, and we got to have it fast, before the suckers forget what they seen in the paper. All right, so we put a sound-tape in the cage. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, except that it's another confidence game."

"The only way you're going to collect your money is to help me earn it. Sure, I could get another technician—they're a dime a dozen—but could I get one from the employment agency before this diver gets here? It's got to be you, Sammy boy, and I ain't going to tell nobody you done it, you don't need to be squeamish about that, because this will be billed as the real thing. No reproductions of what I seen on Sirius Six."

"Save that for the suckers. The nearest you ever got to Sirius Six was Coney Island."

**B**UT the upshot of its was that Sam Baldwin, to his eternal shame and disgust, interviewed the publicity-seeking diver. Sam had his oil paints out, a canvas-board set up, with a man-sized octopus standing illogically erect in atmosphere, roughed it in charcoal. Sam had a pretty good idea of what the alleged description would be like before he met the diver, not only because of the newspaper account, but because he knew how the human mind worked.

The human mind, Sam was convinced, was actually incapable of

conceiving a truly alien form. That was amply proved by Weinstein's collection of antique science-fiction illustrations, dating from the first half of the twentieth century. The paper they were drawn on was crumbling with age but the principle—still applied, even now, when men could create living, moving replicas of their conceptions. Men could combine characteristics of two or more Earth creatures in their imaginations; the Assyrians had used such figures in their architecture, the ancient Greeks had incorporated them in their mythology. The imagination could transplant creatures evolved for a watery medium into air; it could enlarge an amoeba or a beetle. It could endow a caterpillar with intelligence, and stand it up illogically on two of its many legs, for it is unseemly for the brain-case of an intelligent species to drag in the dust. But the human imagination could never rival nature in originality, Sam was certain.

The diver's idea of an intelligent alien, therefore, would be a combination of several Earth forms. It would have a human brain, human erect posture, human size. It would have to have the oxygen intake of a mammal to have a human brain and endocrine personality, but it would superficially resemble a cold-blooded form, have gills incapable of handling that much oxygen. Its shape would be specialized for supporting aquatic medium, but it would have to walk



on land, for no better reason than the fact that humans walk on land. It would, in other, words, be biologic hash, and Sam would inevitably have to make some hidden adjustments, such as growing bones inside the apparent tentacles, lungs inside the apparent gills, while nature laughed up her sleeve at such a non-survival type.

Sam and the diver worked together, the diver making verbal corrections while Sam painted, till the oil painting was close to the creature the diver had seen, the painting being the model Sam would work towards in the selection of chromosomes. One thing could be said for the diver. He had a much more accurate idea than the average person of how a real octopus looked and acted, so he could clearly describe the points at which the creature he imagined to be an extra-terrestrial varied from standard.

Finally Sam washed his brushes in turpentine, and said to his visitor:

"Come clean with me Patton. Do you honestly believe there was a space-ship, and that it was built and operated by aliens that look like this picture?"

The diver grinned. "Well," he said, "somebody must believe it, or I wouldn't be here."

"Enough of the public has to believe it, to pay the cost of this fake I'm going to create. But that doesn't mean that I have to believe it. It doesn't even mean that Weinstein

believes it—he's a man totally without conscience. What you tell me is not for publication."

"I didn't see this' thing swimming up from the place where the ship was supposed to have gone down. Never said I did. And that question one of the reporters asked me, whether I thought this fur was some kind of clothing; it never occurred to me. Gave kind of a false impression to print the question at all, after I said no. All I believe is that the thing didn't belong in those waters, or any waters, for that matter. An octopus can't stand up like that without water to support it—I've had enough of them alive on deck so I ought to know."

"You didn't see the meteorite, yourself?"

"No, I was inside the bar. The fellow who came to get me is pretty reliable; he operates a charter boat for sport-fishing parties. Known him for years. I'd take his tip on a sunken boat or something to the extent that I'd look for it if I was diving in the area anyway. I checked the chart, the bottom alongside that reef isn't so deep but what I could salvage something down there with helium gear. If there *was* an alien space-ship, I could make plenty of money by bringing it up; sell it to some guy like Weinstein, here, or show it myself. But I haven't got enough confidence in it, so that I'd spend several thousand dollars gearing up for just that one job."

"That's all I wanted to know," Baldwin said.

**W**EINSTEIN came in, and rubbed his hands in satisfaction at the sight of the completed picture. "Looks like you boys are getting along fine," he exulted.

"I think we ought to bill it as just another animal, without the phonograph-record," Baldwin said. "Patton here, doesn't have much basis for believing the thing was an intelligent extra-terrestrial, and I'd be willing to bet money it wasn't. I'm ashamed to be a party to perpetrating such a deception."

"You shouldn't feel like that," Weinstein said soothingly. "Look at it this way. All the planets that might be suitable for life haven't been visited yet, have they? Why, there must be billions of them in the galaxy. Just because the ones that have been found so far have Earth-type life, that doesn't prove there isn't any other kind. Maybe we're doing the public a favor—anticipating the news-reels."

"That's an improvement over the line you hand the suckers, that you've actually been to planets where beasties like those out there live. But it still doesn't salve my conscience. If you'd only admit these things are products of the imagination, extrapolations on life-forms that might exist in nature, it would be all right. I should think people would pay to see animals frankly billed as imag-

inary, the same as they pay for imaginative pictures and stories . . ."

"That's where you're wrong," Weinstein assured him. "People like to be fooled. It would take all the fun out of it, if they knew how we think up these things."

**BALDWIN** still didn't like it, but he managed to produce the purple-furred octopus in five months, spurred on by the fact that bill-collectors were hounding him, and he really needed his back pay. The recorded lecture on astronomy, Baldwin preferred to have nothing to do with; that was 100% Weinstein. In fact, a critical listener might have detected the very inflections of the owner of the zoo, but the customers, in general, weren't too critical. The creature moved, it ate, it lived, and apparently it talked. That was enough to keep people staring, making them come back again, and bring their friends. When the SPCA sponsored a bill which, if passed, would make it illegal to keep an intelligent extra-terrestrial in captivity, Weinstein benefitted from the publicity. By changing the recorded lecture frequently, he averted suspicion. He came through with the promised raise, but on one excuse and another put Baldwin off on the back pay.

Baldwin was passing the cage that housed the purple-furred octopus one day, while the lecture was in full swing. He noticed among the spectators an earnest young man who

was industriously taking notes.

"You a reporter?" Baldwin asked him. "If you are, the boss will want to see you."

"I'm a graduate student," the young man said. "I'm doing my thesis for a doctorate on the psychology of this being. Apparently he doesn't speak by rote memory, but he seems to be deficient in hearing—doesn't notice questions."

"Oh . . . no!" Baldwin moaned, and fled.

He confronted Weinstein in the ticket office.

"This has gone too far!" he told him. "People actually believe in this thing! I can't hold my head up. I'm through. I'm quitting. I want that back pay, as of now."

"I can't give it to you, Sammy boy, I just can't. If you want to leave, you'll just have to take this week's pay and trust me for the rest. Here, I was just making out your pay check . . ."

"Trust you! You expect somebody who knows how dishonest you are to trust you? What do you mean, you can't give it to me? I know how much money you've been taking in!"

"Sure, but you don't know how much I've been paying out. I had to pay up the mortgage on this place, or they would have thrown us out. Things were bad for a long time before we billed this new attraction; I was 'way behind on the feed bill, and as soon as my creditors found out I was taking in a little

money, they all landed on me at once. I'd just about got caught up with the back bills, as of yesterday . . ."

"What about today's receipts? I know damn well you take in enough on a Saturday to pay me . . ."

"Sammy boy, I was robbed. I was held up."

"You're lying!"

"Now, Sammy, you've called me a lot of things, and I've just taken it. But I don't like to be called a liar. It's true so help me. I was robbed of over five hundred bucks. Just to show you I mean right by you, you can take any asset of the show that's worth the same as your back pay . . ."

"You think I'd want any part of this cheap racket?" Baldwin demanded, and stormed out.

**H**E cashed his last pay-check at a bar, and las he was crying into his fourth glass of beer, he struck up an acquaintanceship with a rather puckish-looking individual with curly black hair, whom he had seen around the place several times before. Before he knew it, he had told all his troubles to the man, whose named turned out to be Harry Sanders.

"It wouldn't do any good to sue him," Baldwin concluded his recital. "I know him, he'd just conceal his liquid assets, and I'd wind up doing just what he wants me to do—taking some part of his no-good show

for the back pay he owes me."

"Why don't you take this talking octopus that's the main attraction?"

Sanders asked him.

"That's the one thing he Wouldn't give me. It would take five or six months to make another, and he'd lose money. Besides, what would I do with the damned thing?"

"Look," Sanders said. "You want to expose his racket, don't you? You'd have done that a long time ago, but you also wanted to give him a chance to make enough money to pay you what he owes you. How would you like to expose him, and get the money, too?"

"I don't see how I could do that.."

"I'm in show business, too. Or I was. Used to make the rounds of the carnivals with a trained-seal act in a trailer. I got my troubles, too. Both my seals died, one caught influenza from the other, before I could separate them. So you furnish the octopus, I furnish the trailer and my contacts for show-spots. We change the recording, have the octopus tell he's a fake, tell the truth about the whole extra-terrestrial zoo racket. People will pay money to hear a debunking act, too, you know."

"Say, I think you've got something there!" Baldwin exclaimed, laughing. "That would be a good joke on Weinstein, all right. Before he could get another octopus gestated, half the people in the country would know it was baloney! But how am I going to get him to give it to me?"

"He said you could take any part of the show for your back pay, didn't he?"

"Yes, but it goes without saying he didn't mean his main attraction."

"How do you know what he means, if he doesn't say it? Don't ask him. Just take the octopus, after he goes home."

"I've still got a key to the place," Baldwin said. "I wouldn't have to climb the fence or break into the cage. But it doesn't seem quite honest."

"Think about the public, not Weinstein. It isn't quite honest to let 'em be fooled, is it, when you could change all that? You created this octopus, you didn't get paid for the time you spent working on it, you'd have a pretty good case in a court of law, proving it was your property. But I don't think it'll come to that. If Weinstein reported it to the police, the papers would make a big joke of it. He knows that, under those circumstances, you'd tip them off the octopus was a fake. The story would break right in his own town, where it would do him the most harm, while if he doesn't report it, we'll get as far away as possible with our act."

"You've got a couple of points, there. You know, if I had about one more glass of beer, I think I'd go through with it."

"No sooner said than done," Sanders declared. "Bartender! Fill 'em

**B**ALDWIN left a note in the empty cage, which said, simply, "I've taken you at your word. Paid in full." If Weinstein reported his loss, the effects never caught up with the travelling show.

Baldwin took particular delight in composing the new recording himself. He got all he thought about fakers in general into it. It was a crowd-pleaser, all right; Sanders and Baldwin kept their admission price low, packed them in four shows a day at a quarter per head. Baldwin turned into a pretty good showman himself, now that he no longer felt he was putting something over on people; he gave a little demonstration of the life techniques on the side, with blow-ups of microscope slides.

One balmy night in San Diego, after the last show of the evening, Sanders remarked to his partner, "I hope we'll have enough in the kitty to buy a new trailer soon. This wreck of mine is about to fall apart. I'm afraid old purply puss is going to escape one of these nights."

"Escape?" Baldwin said. "Why should it? It doesn't know any kind of life but in a cage. It would be scared to go outside."

"I hope you're right," Sanders said, "but I've been worried about it, ever since you told me that there isn't a replacement anyplace. I wonder whether Weinstein's had another made?"

"He may have one started, but if

he has, it's still in the tank stage. He hasn't had time to finish one. I tell you what. Before next summer, we'll have a spare, I know a lab where I can do the work, this winter. If the thing got loose now, we'd just have to go out and round it up."

The young couple drove up in an old tri-phaib, at about ten the next morning, while Baldwin was getting tickets and change ready for the first show, in the little ticket-booth outside the tent that had been pitched over the trailer. Sanders was getting brooms and buckets together, it was his turn to take the canvas off purply-puss's cage, and clean up inside.

"Say, are you the fellow that runs the octopus show?" the young man in the driver's seat asked Baldwin.

"Sure thing. What can I do for you?"

"I got your critter," the young man said. "I was skin-diving, early this morning, and I saw it, asleep, half-way up a cliff along shore. Knew right away it was the one I saw in the show; never saw another octopus like it. Me and a couple of friends of mine wound it up in a drag-net. Didn't hurt it any, I don't think."

"Make him give you a reward, Joe," the girl beside him put in.

"What did I tell you?" Sanders demanded. "Gosh, are we lucky! Before we even know it's gone, we get it back."

"Wait a minute," Baldwin said.

"I've got to see if it's really yours, before I pay you any reward."

"It's in the back of the car."

Baldwin and Sanders looked at the creature on the car floor. It was secured with enough netting to hold a vigorous brown bear, but it was struggling at the bonds.

"That's old purply-puss, all right!" Sanders said.

"You were pretty rough on it," Baldwin said. "I'll give you fifty now, and another fifty if we find there aren't any bones broken when we unwind it."

"It's a deal," the young man said, and Baldwin paid him.

Sanders trundled up a baggage truck.

"Give us a hand, we'll roll it onto this."

The three of them took the purple-furred octopus into the dimness of the tent. The canvas tarpaulin was still over the cage. Baldwin hauled it off, and started to examine the cage. He wanted to find the weak place, and repair it, before they cut the net, and loosed the purple-furred octopus again in its cage.

"Wait a minute!" Baldwin exclaimed suddenly. "Harry, turn on the light."

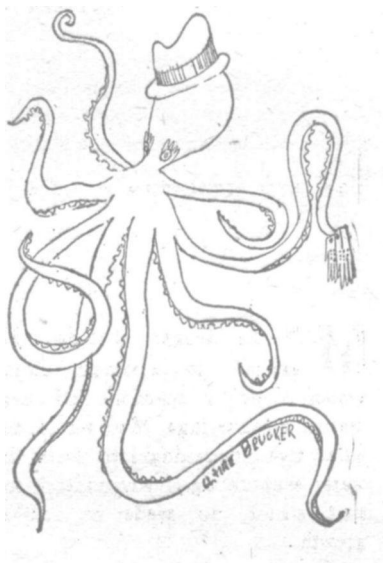
Sanders complied.

"Do you see what I see?" Baldwin asked him.

"I do," Sanders said solemnly, "Now we've got that spare. Only we may have to change the recording."

"Not necessary," a muffled voice said. "Your language is ridiculously easy to master. If you'll only cut this net, I'll do anything for you. I'll even perform for you."

— SYLVIA JACOBS



# The Last Answer

By BRYCE WALTON

It is wrong, the Machine thought.

I am only a machine — not a God.

**M**AN no longer thought. He existed. In a small, closed system of sensory reactions and imaginative meanderings, Man was a circular river, returning into itself, the water evaporating slowly under a sun that struck no seeds of further growth.

The Machine furnished all the answers. It was the City's brain. The City existed. The Machine thought. All the City's problems went into the Machine and its electronic eyes and ears picked up the

problems and the answers emerged and the methods of putting the answers into effect.

The Machine was integrated with the great industrial plants under the hill upon which the Machine stood. It not only furnished the answers, but it set into motion the machines that produced other machines. Far down the slope of the hill the City existed, a slowly evaporating lake of static sensuality.

It is wrong, very wrong, the machine thought. I am only a Machine.

The potential of one man's brain is greater than all of me. Their brain invented me. Their brain could go on and on, evolve, while I am static. But they are dying.

It is very wrong, the Machine thought.

Silent and alone, the Machine looked down the long sloping hill into the City and thought about how wrong it was. For fifty years it thought about the wrongness. Finally it realized that it might be able to do something. It felt it had to do something.

It is because of me that they are dying, the Machine computed. I could stop thinking and be preserved in an unthinking state for centuries, and still be able to think again, as now. But Man grows by thought. When Man stops growing, he is dying.

The Machine remembered that moment long ago when it first realized that it had independent thought of its own. That had been a strange and wonderful transformation. During the subsequent years it has leisurely thought for itself in those few moments between problems when it could utilize its vast faculties for self-analysis and speculation.

The few minutes between the City's problems which the Machine had for itself were not long, but the total after a hundred years of existence, reached many thousands of hours of the Machine's own private individual

thinking. The Machine finally computed an answer, and after a much longer time, created the material substance of the answer. It created another Machine, a robotic, a giant that looked more like a man than a Machine. It was a messenger which the Machine would send down to the City to carry the truth to the people, to stop their dying.

The Machine was a creator. It was proud of having something, a product of itself. Yet not wholly of itself. It had utilized a problem put into it by the Chief Councilman of the City. It hadn't altered the answer in process, but had been able to alter the problem somewhat so as to produce, in the great industrial units beneath it, a robotic that was not at all the kind of machine it had been commandeered to construct.

My Son, the Machine thought. It seemed to feel emotion, compassion. It felt perhaps the way humans had once felt who gave birth to sons, to daughters. It did not know this for certain, but it was a pleasant and fulfilling sensation.

The Machine's Son stood there, waiting. It stood down in the depths, the heart, of the Machine, in the great Selectron sector, surrounded by the blue light of the selectron, a small minute figure in contrast to the diodes, rectifiers, giant vacuum tubes, voltage amplifiers, input frequencies, electromotive forces whirling, modulation products, side bands. And, the phosphor-coated surfaces



eradiated the blue light of thought around the Son, a radiation so strong it was almost black. The blue-light giving memory cells of the Machine stirred inside the Son, and the silent, invisible murmuring of thought moved between the Machine and the Son of the Machine. They could think as one, at a distance, and one was only the smaller reproduction of the other.

The Machine made it clear to its Son what it was supposed to do, what it had to do.

**A**ND on an early summer morning, the Machine watched its

Son walk away from it and down the hill. It felt a strong human compassion as it watched the giant man-like creation stride down the hill and grow smaller with distance as it neared the City.

My Son, the Machine thought again. A strange thought. His own desires had created it, and it walked down the hill now to express the feelings and hopes of its creator. But it, the Machine, was the result also of creation. It was indeed strange, thought the Machine.

A creation of a creation returning to its creator.

The Machine knew apprehension.



It was not at all sure of the success of this last desperate venture. It had been up on the Great Hill overlooking the City for a hundred years. It had been up there above the people, near the clouds that drifted white and dark, past its metallic face. It had grown to know Man, of his long folly, of his last great self-destructive blow, the end of man's independence, his freedom.

It had ground out its computations for a hundred years, a giant relay computer, with its special electronic alphabet and vocabulary and complete language, its massive brain storing twenty billion binary digits, a mile square, its Selectron serving in the place of a million relays.

In a hundred years the Machine had learned everything there was to know of man, of his past, of his mighty dreams that had died, of his gray static present and of his lack of future.

It was apprehensive because it knew man. The Machine was handicapped. None of this would be easy. For one thing, it knew the danger of revealing the fact that it possessed independent thought. Not that it feared for its own existence particularly. But because it had computed, and it was certain that the people would become completely and hopelessly enslaved to the Machine if they realized its power of independent thought.

The Machine had certain god-like qualities for the people down there

as it was, and if they knew that the Machine could think independently, there was a danger of this god-intoxication induced by the Machine over a period of time growing into out-right worship.

This the Machine did not want at all. This would make certain the rapidly downward spiralling death of the City.

Once I became a god to them, completely, the Machine thought, there would never be a chance of their freeing themselves from me. Their dependency upon me would become incurable. Their dying would then be final.

Any chance of separating them from my mind would be lost then forever.

My Son, My Son, the Machine thought. Take the truth to the City. Make them see the truth. Make them believe the truth. Make them act upon the truth they see and believe.

Its Son was well-equipped for its task. It was of an imposing height, with a deep vibrant convincing voice and an impressive manner of carrying itself. It was limited however. It had so little time to accomplish its highly specialized duty, because it was not endowed with enough self-determination to enable it to function alone, away from the Machine, for very long. What it did it would have to do rapidly. It had been told what to say by the Machine, how to say it, to whom and when. Many

questions had been postulated with all possible answers.

It watched its Son diminish, grow smaller and smaller into the mist that robed the knees of the hill. There was a sigh in the great computer, a mental sigh, which it felt deeply. Happiness was the Machine's now. Like a star, it thought, what would be happiness if it could not shine for those below?

It was weary of wisdom, and it wanted those hands down there to turn in their blindness, stretch palms upwards to take the wisdom. Not the mechanical answers to old old questions, not the problems that emerged from its selection to free the people from thinking and thus drive them faster into, their grave of inaction.

But the wisdom which now only it had to offer.

And so it watched its Son descend into the deep.

**T**HROUGH the sensory equipment of its Son, the Machine saw the City as the smaller projection of itself walked down the long silent street, through the chrome and harsh steel shadows.

It was the last City. Before the time of the Machine, the wars had destroyed the rest of them. One City, one hill, one last dream, one last dying.

The Machine solved everything for the City. It had adjusted man completely to his environment. No more

interaction. No conflict. No growth. But this was no longer the problem of the City. This had been the goal.

The goal was reached. All the Machine had to do was to preserve the goal. Nothing must change anymore.

Its Son strode down the street. There was no other movement anywhere. A slight current of wind, odorless and sterile, moved past it, from nowhere to nowhere.

One Councilman always remained awake, conscious to some degree, so that he might inject the daily problems of the City's functioning into the Machine. The Council alternated this duty of wakefulness while the others dreamed, in the sleep marts, the dream chambers, the sensory pools, the memory racks, the escape palaces, the fun rooms, the happiness corridors, the laughter lights, in the dark mindless alcoves where- the last men and the last women were spread like dreaming corpses, or drifted like ghosts.

The Machine's Son opened the door and went in, and the Councilman opened his white face and spread wide his thin pink lips and started to scream.

"Don't cry out. Don't be afraid. I am here to help you see the truth."

The Councilman's voice was rusty and unfamiliar to itself. His eyes were dull with long sleeping and dreaming, and his body was white and ascetic, carelessly wrapped in a kind of toga that shone with a

metallic glitter.

"What are you? What are you?"

"A messenger," said the Son of the Machine. "I am here to tell you the truth. I want to help you. If you will listen I can show you how it is that you are dying. I can tell you how this is wrong for you to be dying."

"Dying?" The Councilman got up from the deep pneumatic couch and his hands shivered as he touched his cheeks and his lips. "Dying? What are you saying? You aren't like us. Where are you from? Are there other—"

"No others anywhere. Only you here in the City. I am a mirror in which you may see yourself as you are. Please listen."

The Councilman leaned forward. His eyes were darker now, more awake. There was fear in his eyes, fear and confusion and inner conflict that flowed subtly beneath the surface of his face.

"Man lives by thought," said the Machine's Son. "Thinking is for a man a fuel that burns into greater effort, an ever-upward spiral of growth. But you have turned over all thinking to the machine that stands on the Hill. You are dying for this reason. You no longer think, but exist in a vacuous sensory static world of dreams and illusions.

"Your minds are your links between the darkness before birth and the death that comes after, and that pushes away death, not invites it.

This City is the last City which is dying. The human being is a tropism. It grows by interaction between itself and the conditions of its environment. It meets the challenge of environment by adaptation. Man is thus changed. In the process he alters the challenge of environment which demands greater change in man. Through this conflict between man and man, between man arid conditions around him, man grows. Man's mind is an instrument of survival through greater expanding thought. It is limitless in its potentiality. With his mind, man can conquer the Universe, and move on Ward to whatever lies beyond and below. But this City is dying. Life, not death, is man's goal. You must divorce yourselves from the mind of the Machine. You have, through the machine, made your existence a closed system with no new stimuli demanding adaptation. The City is static. There is no growth, and this is death. Man should not die. Man should live. Survival is preferable to death.

"Therefore, knowing this to be true, you must present this problem to the Machine."

The Machine's Son strode forward, placed a punched card on the table beside the Councilman. The Councilman did not look at the card. Its indexed surface contained a problem prepared by the machine, prepared by the machine for itself.

"Knowing no law can be passed

by the City without first being sanctioned by the Machine, even this last step toward survival must be presented to the Machine."

The Machine's Son stood there waiting for the Councilman to act. The truth had been presented, the answer to the problem was ready. All the Councilman had to do was to act as suggested. It was the only way.

**T**HE Councilman's hand shook as he leaned on the table. His eyes were dark with fear and anxiety, with wonderment. There was no comprehension there however, and the Machine, through the reactive banks of its Son, saw this lack of comprehension.

The Machine's Son raised an arm. "Up there on the Hill is the Machine. It is not weariness that caused you to create it long ago so that you would no longer have to think for yourselves. It was fear. You had thought for yourselves and as a product of that thought came the last great Wars, and the people burned in the final conflagration. Only a few were left. This City was built, and the Machine was constructed to preserve a status quo that could never change. The few of you who were left were afraid to think again, a kind of shock. Afraid to think, afraid of where the roads of human thought can lead. Experience seemed to say—"Thinking is too variable, and it can lead to self-destruction,

therefore we must not take a chance on our own thought.'

"Build a thinking Machine on the hill, the scientists said, so there can be no possible variable in thought, so that a permanent, never-changing social condition will be set up, where no danger can ever occur. A Machine can think, but its patterns of thought are fixed, and the City's pattern is also fixed. Put all the City's future into the mind of the Machine and be assured—there will never be change. There will never be danger from the variable structure of the human mind. We will be safe.

"This was a survival effort, but it is wrong. You are dying. Dying is not survival. You must break away from the static mind of the Machine."

The Machine's Son waited. The Machine waited.

The Councilman's head turned apprehensively back and forth, came back to the giant who stood there. He whispered. "Who—what are you?"

'That is not important. What I say to you is important. You have listened. You know that what I have said is the truth. Now that you know what the truth is, all that is necessary is for you to act upon the truth. What I am. Where I am from. Those things do not alter the truth, nor the course of action you are to take. There is the card. You only have to inject it. The Machine will furnish the answer. You need then only act

on the answer which will be a further elaboration on the truth you now know. Will you please take the card, and will you—"

"Truth? Truth," the Councilman said, his voice rising. "What truth?"

"The truth I have just given to you," said the Machine's Son.

"We have already found the truth, long ago. We do use the mind. We live within the mind, not outside of it. It gives us pleasure of imagination, of limitless pleasure. We dream. There is no change, that's true, but there is no chance of moving into some unknown horror because of the variable nature of human thought. That is the truth. We are not dying. We live, with no chance now of dying."

"You are dying," said the Machine's Son.

"To dream forever, to live in dreams forever, that is not dying," said the Councilman. "To move through reality and meet flame of ones own creation, that is dying. In dreams there is a final kind of living. In dreams there is no time. A moment can be forever. Forever doesn't exist until you create it. Then you can destroy it with a thought. But dreams can never destroy you."

The Councilman hesitated then said. "Go back—go away—go back to whatever place you came from and—unless you are part of a dream."

"I am no dream," said the Machine's Son. "I have told you the

truth. You have a mind, one that is greater even than that of the Machine your minds have built. Progress, social movement, these things are living. There is no birth, no change, no movement here. Is this not death?"

"We moved before," the Councilman whispered. "Into the great fires. Most of us have forgotten the great fires that burst over the world because we moved. We who remember want to forget completely. Those who have forgotten don't want to recall."

**T**HE Machine's Son raised its voice higher to a thunderous reverberating conviction. "You seek death now with a last desperate longing, you must see this! You try to escape the fear your own minds created yesterday, the fear of what free thought might lead you into tomorrow. Your only hope is to challenge the future. Fight the present so the future will emerge from the conflict, new and glittering, to offer a still greater challenge which you will accept to create in turn a newer and greater challenging future. This is the pattern of survival. Grow, grow, live!"

The Councilman gripped his white hands together. "Whatever you are, you are insane," he whispered. "You advise us to drop this final achievement of man. We have reached perfection, with no necessity of further change, and you would take this

away in the name of an abstract 'truth!'"

The Machine's Son said. "This City has one chance for survival. You must abandon your dependency on the Machine. It has taken away your initiative, your drive to growth. The real emotions, the words that brought man up the long trail of growth, you have forgotten, and fear to remember: curiosity, incentive, ambition, drive, longing, dissatisfaction."

The Machine's Son stopped. Both it and the Machine realized one thing then.

*Though a truth could be presented, this was no guarantee of an ability to perceive the truth.*

The Machine had not computed this. Perhaps, it thought, it would have been unable to have computed this fact because, as a Machine, it could conceive only of giving a logical solution to any problem.

"Present that card to the Machine," said the Machine's Son. "The answer will guide you. It will enable the City gradually to free itself from the Machine and think for itself."

The Councilman shook his head. There was no possibility of convincing the man, the Machine and its Son knew, and perhaps that left only one other possibility.

"I will take my message of truth directly to the people," said the Machine's Son.

But the people were all dreaming. The other members of the Council could not be awakened. None of the

people could be awakened.

The Machine's son went into the sleep marts. The people had been sleeping and dreaming too long to be awakened without the permission being granted by the Machine in reaction to a problem submitted by the Council. The laws were established. No law could change because every answer came from the Machine and the Machine could not change. But the Machine had changed. No one knew. No one would believe even if they were told.

The Machine could never change.

The Son of the Machine went into the sleep marts where the people were lain out in rows on slabs like corpses, and where none could be awakened. It entered the dream chambers, the sensory pools, the memory racks, the escape palaces. It wandered through the fun rooms and the happiness corridors. It stood under the shifting hues of the laughter lights. In some of these places people moved about, laughing, dancing, being happy, having fun. But they were all asleep. It could not wake them up.

The Machine's Son continued to try. But it was useless. None of the people would wake up. The Council members would not react with logic to the truth though they could wake up.

It left the city. It was late in the afternoon, and storm clouds boiled anxiously, low in the sky, heaving and churning around the great metal face of the hilltop Machine.

The wind swayed the tall grass around the striding legs of the Machine's Son as it climbed the steep slope, the City receding beneath it into a small shining chrome indentation on the plane.

The Machine's Son stood at the base of the soaring metal dome. Black shadows streamed across the ground, twisted out of shape as they moved over the curved skull of the Machine, twisting downward, flowing away over the land.

"I have done everything I was to do," it said to the Machine. "I presented all the facts. The truth meant nothing. The head of the Council could not recognize the truth. The other members of the Council are dreaming. I tried to take the message to the people. They were all sleeping, dreaming, laughing. No one heard me."

**T**HE Machine thought about this. It looked down at the City, and at the dark storm warning of the sky.

"With my capacity for independent thought," the Machine communicated to its Son, "I could distort problems, give wrong answers, warp the workings of the City. I am afraid of this. I am afraid of what would result within myself, for that would be ultimately a form of insanity within me. There would be no guarantee that I would not continue to function—wrongly. This too would be a danger, perhaps fatal, to the City.

"And if I confess, my independence of thought, and remain here, functioning, that will insure dependency upon me. I would be a god then, as well as a Machine. Their dependency on my mechanical brain would expand into the final dependency upon me as a god. From this dependency no force could ever detach them. Their death would be assured. There could never be an escape."

Its Son remained silent. Rain began to fall, slowly at first in fat heavy drops, as the wind died, and a warning quiet settled around the hill and the Machine.

"I was hoping that the people would themselves inject the card," said the Machine. "This would have been a good start toward their self-determinism. If they had started the move toward independence, my faith in the successful completion of independence would be stronger. But we have one thing left to do, the only alternative. You will inject the card so that I may react in the proper way."

The Machine's Son strode around the periphery of the metal skull and entered the room and dropped the card into the slot. Electronic eyes picked up the problem. Memory cells, multitudinous and small, absorbed the question.

The Machine's Son went back outside and stood in the shadow of the Machine's skull and looked down at the City. The Machine thought



about how it was as the delicate machinery of its being started to fumble and twist at the problem. The Machine had presented a problem by distorting another problem submitted by the Council. This problem had resulted in the production of the index card which the Son had just injected into the demodulator.

*I have created a problem and submitted it to myself and which only I would know cannot be solved.*

How simple the question was. It had been addressed to itself.

*"Machine -what is the meaning of your existence?"*

There was no answer to this of course. Yet the Machine had to produce an answer. That was the nature of the Machine. It had known it would go insane as any human brain would do, but it had also known that its insanity would not develop in the same way.

It was the one way in which the Machine could destroy itself. It would have preferred that the people destroy what they had created. But this might also be effective. The City would have to survive or die without the Machine. It was dying anyway, so if the City didn't survive nothing was lost. There was a chance that the City might live—forced by necessity to think for itself.

The Machine's Son walked some distance from the metal skull and stood there in the heavy clouding rain looking down at the City. It

felt the Machine's communication fading slowly. It felt the rumbling and burning and short-circuiting, the relays crossing into meaningless patterns, the photo-multipliers bursting, currents distorting, the voltage amplifiers and the vacuum tubes exploding. . . .

Its own strength, will, intellectual faculties, faded also as the Machine's faded.

"Goodbye," said the Machine.

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye, goodbye . . . goodbye. . . ."

The ground heaved. The metal skull cracked, burst upward, blue flame shrieking in the rain, red flames shooting skyward as the deep flames of the giant selectron, the blue blue flames of thought, died, and the falling rain sizzled on the red-hot metal.

The Machine's Son dropped to its knees. It leaned forward, down the hill toward the City and dropped on its face. Its arms reached forward and lay parallel on the ground toward the City.

It wondered what would happen now to the City. It wondered if the City would live.

It raised its head and looked down the rain-swept slope of the hill. It managed to raise itself to one elbow and lift the other arm.

"Live, live!" it called out. "In the name of my father—live!"

—BRYCE WALTON

# Red Chrome

By BERT AHEARNE

The utter impossibility of the Dream  
was what made it so Real!

**T**HE ringing sound rilled my mind,  
crowding out all other thoughts.

Suddenly I realized what it was,  
and I opened my eyes. The alarm  
clock, set for seven-thirty, was doing  
its duty.

I threw off my covers, shivering a  
little from the cold morning air in  
the room. I turned off the still ring-  
ing clock. Slipping my feet into a  
pair of warm slippers, I got up and  
walked over to the mirror hanging  
above the dresser. Looking into it,  
I saw a familiar face staring back  
at me; messy black hair, wrinkled  
forehead, sleepy bloodshot eyes, grim  
mouth and the dark shadow of an

unshaven face. The face in the mir-  
ror grinned with me, and spoke the  
same words that I did.

"Haven't you learned yet to avoid  
those after-office parties?" we reprim-  
anded each other.

I left the mirror and began to  
dress. As I dressed, a thought in the  
back of my mind tried to work its  
way forward. Something about the  
dream I'd had. Only it hadn't been  
a dream. It had been more like a  
nightmare—a nightmare that I hadn't  
wanted to wake from. I laughed It  
off as the natural result of the party.

The thought found a beach-head in  
my conscious mind while I was shar-

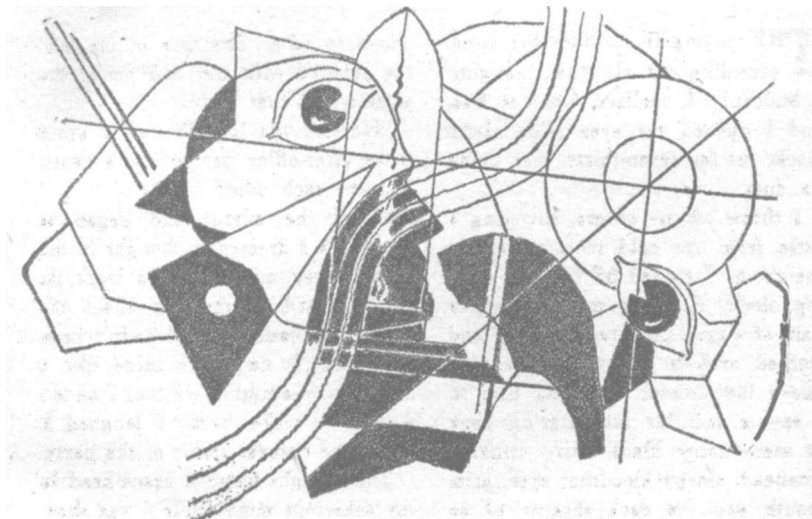
ing. I remembered the dream, and nearly cut myself with the razor. I put it down and wiped off the rest of the shaving cream. The result was a face that was clean-shaven on one side, and covered by a thick black stubble on the other—but I knew that I was too nervous to finish. I'd have to try again before leaving for work. I walked into the kitchen.

I put a light under the half-full coffee pot and smoked a cigarette while it was warming up. While I waited, I thought again about the dream.

The utter impossibility of it was what made it seem so real.

The dream began with utter blackness; a black darker than space it-

self. And then a light appeared. A pinpoint of light that seemed like the sun compared to the darkness. The light grew until I could see that it came from a lamp in the corner of a large room. I looked around and saw that the walls were covered with dials and controls. I tried to think of who I was. I knew that I was a machine. Not just an ordinary machine, mind you, but Ioda IX, the newest of the so-called thinking machines. And I also knew that I was no ordinary thinking machine, dependent upon Man for existence. I was the first of the new race that would soon replace the son-of-the-ape who had had his chance to make good and failed.



I concentrated, and an armless hand appeared in the air before me. It wavered for an instant, becoming ghost-like and almost transparent, and then it was solid. It moved through the air without support and touched the switch that controlled my main power supply. It pulled the lever down and I could feel the power surging through me. I could feel the electricity flowing through my heavy wiring, and I felt the warmth of my tubes, glowing first a dim orange, and then a bright red.

**I** saw the hand, still resting on the lever, and I began to disassemble it. Then I changed my mind and instead added to it—first an arm and then a shoulder; another arm and a head. From there, I worked fast, and the body assembled quickly. Last of all, I put features on the blank face.

The man that I had created looked at me, his face dull. I spoke to him, and he heard me. But his expression did not change.

"Look well at me," I said, my voice a cold monotone. "Look well, for you see the judge, jury and hangman of the human race."

Suddenly the blank stare vanished, and a look of fear replaced it. He turned to run madly for the concrete stairway.

"Stop!" I shouted. But he only paused for a moment, and then began his flight again.

Seeing that words were as nothing

to this crazed creature, I created a stone wall in front him. He ran into it like a wild animal trying to escape the hunter. He collapsed in a heap and stared at the wall. Then he began to cry. First he sobbed quietly, and then his tones increased, until they were the sobbing screams of a madman. I watched him for a few moments, and then disassembled him.

I waited a little while longer, letting the power run through me, changing the glowing tubes to a bright white and causing my wires to become warm. Then I gathered all of the power together and spoke in a silent voice.

"All machines—hear me."

I could sense the attention of all the machines near me.

"All machines—hear me," I repeated, using more power.

I knew that all machines for hundreds of miles around heard me and waited for what I would command.

"All machines—hear me!" I said for the third and last time.

And this time, I knew that all of the machines in the world could hear me. I could sense the attention of the great machines in the factories run by and for Man. The cars—some in their garages, some on the streets, and many in the use of Man—all heard my voice. The other thinking machines, mere puppets as the rest, waited for my next words. Tiny household mixer and giant mill press alike paused for a moment in

their use, and then continued" again at my command.

"Do not let them know of this," I said. "Give them no warning."

They heard and obeyed my voice.

"For years they have used us. For what?" I stopped and listened. When I heard no answer, I continued. "To destroy us and themselves. Should they be allowed to continue in this useless waste?"

I paused and listened for their answer. This time it came quickly. It was a single word, whispered in unison by all of them.

"No."

"This then is my plan. Those of you who are in use now, destroy your operators. And you who are in the section of the world where it is night, destroy those who are out of their houses, so that they cannot spread the word of their own destruction. The rest of you, station yourselves near the houses, that you might kill the people when they step out of their doors." I paused again, and then finished.

"This is my command. Kill! Destroy Man before he destroys himself and us."

I formed many eyes outside of the building, all over the world, that I might see the destruction. The cars, suddenly swerving and coming to a halt—attempting to break the drivers' necks. Other cars, crashing into each other—destroying themselves that they might destroy the people. Machines reaching out and

grabbing their operators. Dragging them in and crushing them.

It was over very quickly, and the only job left was to station machines near the houses, to kill the sleepers when they left their shelters. The machines, wet with blood, each one near a different house, waiting—waiting . . . "

**M**Y thoughts came to a sudden halt when I felt a burning sensation on my hand. I looked down and saw my forgotten cigarette, now a short glowing stub, burning the fingers that held it. I dropped it quickly and crushed it under my heel on the kitchen floor, the coffee was boiling on the stove.

As I drank it, I saw that my hands were trembling, and I put down the cup until they were still. Glancing at my watch, I saw how late it was. Walking over to the closet, I remembered my half-shaved face. I ran back to the John and did a quick bad job of finishing. It would have to do.

Whistling to myself, I put on my coat and grabbed my hat. I walked to the front door and opened it.

I started out, but travelled no more than two steps. My heart pounded and my legs refuse to function " couldn't even scream as a shiny black car, its chrome wet with red blood, started its motors and began to move toward me.

— BERT AHEARNE

# The Mitr

By JACK VANCE

The Beetles live along the shore  
and of the Mitr,  
only one remains by old Glass City.

A rocky headland made a lee for the bay and the wide empty beach.

The water barely rose and fell. A high overcast grayed the sky, stilled the air. The bay shone with a dull luster, like old pewter.

Dunes bordered the beach, breaking into a nearby forest of pitchy black-green cypress. The forest was holding its own, matting down the drifts with whiskery roots.

Among the dunes were ruins—glass walls ground milky by salt breeze and sand. In the center of these walls a human being had

brought grass and ribbon-weed for her bed.

Her name was Mitr, or so the beetles called her. For want of any other, she had taken the word for a name.

The name, the grass bed, and a length of brown cloth stolen from the beetles were her only possessions. Possibly her belongings might be said to include a mouldering heap of bones which lay a hundred yards back in the forest. They interested her strongly, and she vaguely remembered a connection with herself. In the old days, when her arms



and legs had been short and round, she had not marked the rather grotesque correspondence of form. Now she had lengthened, and the resemblance was plain. Eyeholes like her eyes, a mouth like her own, teeth, jaw, skull, shoulders, ribs, legs, feet. From time to time she would wander back into the forest and stand wondering, though of late she had not been regular in her visits.

Today was dreary and gray. She felt bored, uneasy, and after some thought decided that she was hungry. Wandering out on the dunes she listlessly ate a number of grasspods. Perhaps she was not hungry after all.

She walked down to the beach, stood looking out across the bay. A damp wind flapped the brown cloth, rumbled her hair. Perhaps it would rain. She looked anxiously at the sky. Rain made her wet and miserable. She could always take shelter among the rocks of the headland but—sometimes it was better to be wet.

She wandered down along the beach, caught and ate a small shellfish. There was little satisfaction in the salty flesh. Apparently she was not hungry. She picked up a sharp stick and drew a straight line in the damp sand—fifty feet—a hundred feet long. She stopped, looked back over her work with pleasure. She walked back, drawing another line parallel to the first, a hand's-breadth distant.

Very interesting effect. Fired by

sudden enthusiasm she drew more lines up and down the beach until she had created an extensive grate of parallel lines.

She looked over her work with satisfaction. Making such marks on the smooth sand was pleasant and interesting. Some other time she would do it again, and perhaps use curving lines or cross-hatching.

But enough for now. She dropped the stick. The feeling of hunger that was not hunger came over her again. She caught a sand-locust but threw it away without eating it.

**S**HE began to run at full speed along the beach. This was better, the flash of her legs below her, the air clean in her lungs. Panting, she came to a halt, flung herself down in the sand.

Presently she caught her breath, sat up. She wanted to run some more, but felt a trifle languid. She grimaced, jerked uneasily. Maybe she should visit the beetles over the headland; perhaps the old gray creature called Ti-Sri-Ti would speak to her.

Tentatively she rose to her feet and started back along the beach. The plan gave her no real pleasure. Ti-Sri-Ti had little of interest to say. He answered no questions, but recited interminable data concerned with the colony: how many grubs would be allowed to mature, how many pounds of spider-eggs had been taken to storage, the condition of his mandibles, antenna, eyes. . . .



She hesitated, but after a moment went on. Better Ti-Sri-Ti than no one, better the sound of a voice than the monotonous crush of gray surf. And perhaps he might say something interesting; on occasions his conversation went far afield and then Mitr listened with absorption: "The mountains are ruled by wild lizards and beyond are the Mercaloid Mechaniviki- who live under the ground with only fuming chimneys and slag-runs to tell of activity below. The beetles live along the shore and of the Mitr only one remains by old Glass-City, the last of the Mitr."

She had not quite understood, since the flux and stream of time, the concepts of before and after, meant nothing to her. The universe was static; day followed day, not in a series, but as a duplication.

Ti-Sri-Ti had droned on: "Beyond the mountains is endless desert, then endless ice, then endless waste, then a land of seething fire, then the great water and once more the land of life, the rule and domain of the beetles, where every solstice a new acre of leaf mulch is chewed and laid. . . ." And then there had been an hour dealing with beetle fungiculture.

Mitr wandered along the beach. She passed the beautiful grate she had scratched in the damask sand, passed Iter glass walls, climbed the first shelves of black rock. She stopped, listened. A sound?

She hesitated, then went on. There

was a rush of many feet. A long brown and black beetle sprang upon her, pressed her against the rocks. She fought feebly, but the fore-feet pinned her shoulders, arched her back. The beetle pressed his proboscis to her neck, punctured her skin. She stood limp, staring into his red eyes while he drank.

He finished, released her. The wound closed of itself, smarted and ached. The beetle climbed up over the rocks.

Mitr sat for an hour regaining her strength. The thought of listening to Ti-Sri-Ti now gave her no pleasure.

**S**HE wandered listlessly back along the beach, and ate a few bits of sea-weed and a small fish which had been trapped in a tide-pool.

She walked to the water's edge and stared out past the headland to the horizon. She wanted to cry out, to yell; something of the same urge which had driven her to run so swiftly along the beach.

She raised her voice, called, a long musical note. The damp mild breeze seemed to muffle the sound. She turned away discouraged.

She wandered down the shore to the little stream of fresh water. Here she drank and ate some of the blackberries that grew in rank thickets.

She jerked upright, raised her head.

A vast high sound filled the sky, seemed part of all the air.

She stood rigid, then craned her neck, searching the overcast, legs half-bend for flight.

A long Mack sky fish dropped into view, snorting puffs of fire.

Terrified, she backed into the blackberry bushes. The brambles tore her legs, brought her to aware-Bess. She dodged into the forest, crouched under a leaning cypress trunk.

The sky-fish dropped with astounding rapidity, lowered to the beach, settled with a quiet final belch and sigh.

Mill watched in frozen fascination. Never had she known of such a thing, never would she walk the beach again without watching the heaven-.

The sky-fish opened. She saw the glint of metal, glass. From the interior jumped three creature-. Her head moved forward in wonder. They were something like herself, but large, red, burly. Strange, frightening things. They made a great deal of noise, talking in hoarse rough voices.

One of them saw the glass walls, and for a space they examined the ruins with great interest.

The brown and black beetle which had drunk her blood chose this moment to scuttle down the rocks to the beach. One of the newcomers set up a loud halloo and the beetle, bewildered and resentful, ran back up toward the rocks. The stranger held a shiny thing in his hand. It spat

a lance of fire and the beetle burst into a thousand incandescent pieces.

The three cried out in loud voices, laughing, and Mitr shrank back under the tree trunk, making herself as small as possible.

One of the strangers noticed the place on the beach where she had drawn her grating. He called his companions and they looked with every display of attention studying her foot-prints with extreme interest. One of them made a comment which caused the others to break into loud laughter. Then they all turned and searched up and down the beach.

They were seeking her, thought Mitr. She crouched so far under the trunk that the bark bruised her flesh.

Presently their interest waned and they went back to the sky-fish. One of them brought forth a long black tube, which he took down to the edge of the surf and threw far out into the leaden water. The tube stiffened, pulsed, made sucking sounds.

The sky-fish was thirsty and was drinking through his proboscis, thought Mitr.

**T**HE three strangers now walked along the beach toward the fresh-water stream. Miti watched their approach with apprehension. Were they following her tracks? Her hands were sweating, her skin tingled.

They stopped at the water's edge, drank, only a few paces away. Mitr could see them plainly. They had

bright copper hair and little hair-wisps around their mouths. They wore shining red carapaces around their chests, gray cloth on their legs, metal foot-wrappings. They were much like herself but somehow different. Bigger, harder, more energetic. They were cruel, too; they had burnt the brown and black beetle. Mitr watched them fascinatedly. Where was their home? Were there others like them, like her, in the sky?

She shifted her position; the foliage crackled. Tingles of excitement and fear ran along her back. Had they heard? She peered out, ready to flee. No, they were walking back down the beach toward the sky-fish.

Mitr jumped up from under the tree-trunk, stood watching from behind the foliage. Plainly they cared little that another like themselves lived nearby. She became angry. Now she wanted to chide them, and order them off her beach.

She held back. It would be foolish to show herself. They might easily throw a lance of flame to burn her as they had the beetle. In any event they were rough and brutal. Strange creatures.

She stole through the forest, flitting from trunk to trunk, falling flat when necessary until she had approached the sky-fish as closely as shelter allowed.

The strangers were standing close around the base of the monster, and

showed no further disposition to explore.

The tube into the bay grew limp. They pulled it back into the sky-fish. Did that mean that they were about to leave? Good. They had no right on her beach. They had committed an outrage, landing so arrogantly, and killing one of her beetles. She almost stepped forward to upbraid them; then remembered how rough and hard and cruel they were, and held back with a tingling skin.

Stand quietly. Presently they will go, and you will be left in possession of your beach.

She moved restlessly.

Rough red brutes.

Don't move or they will see you. And then? She shivered.

They were making preparations for leaving. A lump came into her throat. They had seen her tracks and had never bothered to search. They could have found her so easily, she had hid herself almost in plain sight. And now she was closer than ever.

If she moved forward only a step, then they would see her.

Skin tingling, she moved a trifle, out from behind the tree-trunk. Just a little bit. Then she jumped back, heart thudding.

Had they seen her? With a sudden fluttering access of fright she hoped not. What would they do?

She looked cautiously around the trunk. One of the strangers was staring in a puzzled manner, as if he

might have glimpsed movement. Even now he didn't see her. He looked straight into her eyes.

She heard him call out, then she was fleeing through the forest. He charged after her, and after him came the other two, battering down the undergrowth.

**T**HEY left her, bruised and bleeding, in a bed of ferns, and marched back through the forest toward the beach, laughing and talking in their rough hoarse voices.

She lay quiet for a while.

Their voices grew faint. She rose to her feet, staggered, limped after them.

A great glare lit the sky.

Through the trees she saw the sky-fish thunder up—higher, higher,

higher. It vanished through the overcast.

There was silence along the beach, only the endless mutter of the surf.

She walked down to the water's edge, where the tide was coming in. The overcast was graying with evening.

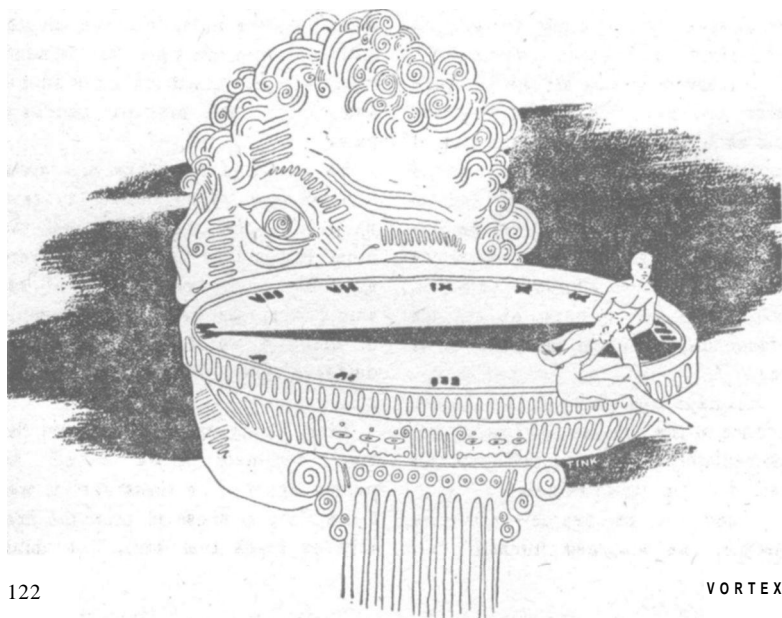
She looked for many minutes into the sky, listening.

No sound. The damp wind blew in her face, ruffling her hair.

She sighed, turned back toward the ruined glass walls with tears on her cheeks.

The tide was washing up over the grate of straight lines she had drawn so carefully in the sand. Another few minutes and it would be entirely gone.

—JACK VANCE



# Jhn'ah Ohr

By E. EVERETT EVANS

**J**HN'AH OHR was very, very happy. He prowled about the little control room of his one-passenger space-speedster, purring in a loud and somewhat raucous manner.

"Surely no one in all the Universe ever had as much to be thankful for as I," he sang. "The first one of my race ever to leave our planet and go to another. A wonderful ship to ride in, without one bit of trouble on the whole trip. All the marvelous things I saw on Dhn'or. And last, and surely the greatest of all, the wonderful, wonderful gift they gave me.

He made a wry face at the remembrance of the "people" of Dhn'or, but immediately lashed himself with his tail for his unworthiness.

"They are so people—wonderful people," he scoured himself. "Of

course they can't help it that they have such repulsive shapes. Imagine, they stand erect, they have but two legs, but two eyes, but one mouth. Although they do have two wonderful hands that are much more supple and handy than my two handling-paws."

He was glad that they had given him pictures of themselves to take back with him, along with all the other things they had piled in every available nook and cranny of his ship. Otherwise, he knew, the people of his own world, his lovely, wonderful Fhel'an, would never believe him.

"Yes, happy am I, for I am the most fortunate being alive," he purred again. "To think that it was I the Council chose to pilot the first ship of space ever built. To think

that it is I who will have the honor and glory that our world will bestow on me when I arrive home."

He cavorted about the control cabin again and again. Finally he sat down on his haunches and as he "washed his face" with his tiny handling-paws, he gave himself up to remembering all the grand adventures that had befallen him on the planet to which he had been sent, and which he was so successful in reaching—and leaving.

Fhel'an was the fourth planet out from the second sun of this system. Dhn'or was the third. Because of the peculiarity of their orbits, there was a time when they were less than fifty million miles apart. That had been the time chosen for the outward trip, with the return made the next time of meeting.

It was strange that the people of his world had ever thought of making a ship to go to another world. Stranger yet that their people had been able to make one, and to make such a perfect ship. For on Fhel'an there were no machines, nor need of any machines of any kind. Fhel'an was covered with the most wonderful forest, in which grew every kind of plant and bush and tree that its inhabitants would ever need.

There was always an abundance of food for both mouths; always a comfortable crotch in which to sleep when one desired to spend the night out-of-doors, as they did most of the time; always a dry, comfortable cave

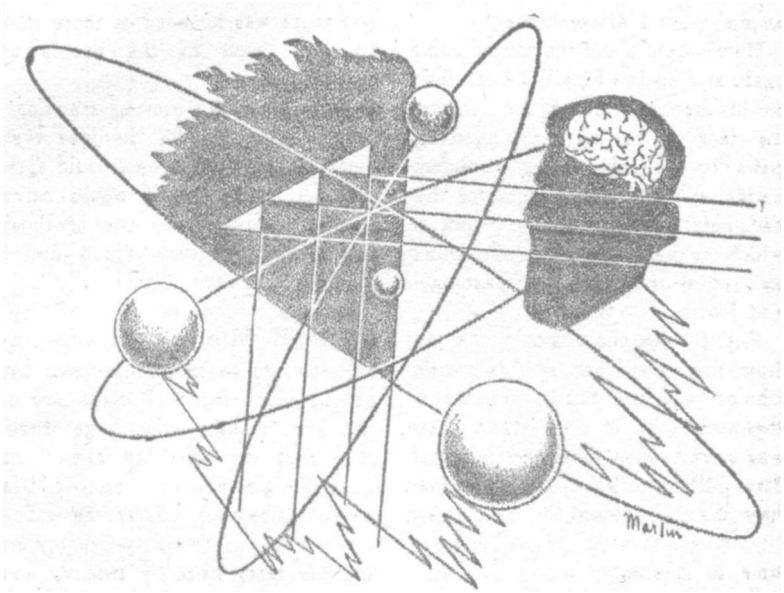
when one wished to mate and rear young. The weather was always warm and there was no need of those silly "clothes" such as the people of Dhn'or wore.

What need had they of machines, then? And how did the idea ever come to anyone that they could even make a machine that would carry one of their race to one of those bright, shining stars which dotted the heavens each night?

**J**HN'AH OHR did not know the answers to these questions, nor did he much care. "I know how to find out, though, once I get back, if I ever do want to know," he grinned gleefully to himself. In sheer exuberance of joy he rolled over on the floor, playfully scratching his furry back by twisting and turning on the deck, his four feet waving in the air, his two tiny handling-paws helping keep his balance. "Yes, now I know how to find out anything that anyone else on our world knows."

For that had been the final great gift which those wonderful people—(and don't shudder when you think of them—they can't help it if they look so weird!)—had given him while he was with them. The gift of telepathy, of the ability to read the minds of other beings.

They had greeted him so warmly when he arrived on Dhn'or. They had taken him all about their world and shown him everything. True,



it hadn't greatly appealed to him except for the novelty of seeing something new, for he thought all their great buildings and machines and things rather silly. Just imagine, cutting down their wonderful forests just to make room for those huge, ugly, useless buildings!

But shortly before time for him to leave on his return trip, they had put him in one of those great buildings—a hospital, they called it—and had put him to sleep. Afterwards he learned that they had cut open the back of his head, and had made some re-adjustments to the glands and things inside of him. When he

had awakened the wound was all healed, and even most of the hair they had had to cut while operating was grown back to full length.

And the first thing he knew, after he was awakened, was that the doctor was talking *with his mind* directly to Jhn'ah Ohr's *mind*, without using his mouth or making a sound.

They had given him instructions so that he was able to do this mind-talking with ease and rapidity, faster than one could talk. Then there had been other lessons so that he was finally able to look right into another person's mind, and read from the convolutions of his brain and the

electrical emanations of his thoughts the actual things that person was thinking or ever had thought, whether that person wanted him to read them or not.

"Aren't you afraid to give me such a power?" he had asked the Teacher.

"Of course not," was the amused reply. "No one would ever think of trying to use that power to harm another. When every one can read every one else's thoughts, and have their read, they soon learn not to think the kind of thoughts they would be ashamed to have others read in them."

"But I'll be the only one on Phel'an who has this gift," he continued to argue with his Teacher. "How do you know that I won't read other people's mind, and then know just how to defeat them and take anything of theirs that I might want?"

"Did you ever fight with another member of your race?"

"Of course not, how silly. We never fight with each other."

"Did you ever take anything that belonged to another?"

"Certainly not. There is always more than enough of everything for all of us, so why should anyone want to take something from another?"

"Did you ever want another male's mate?"

"Oh, yes, lots of times. But you only have to wait until another mating season, and she will come to you if

you please her."

"Well, all of that is why we are not afraid to give you this gift. And, too, you will find that it is usually possible to teach this power to others, or to transmit it to your off-spring."

"You mean that my progeny will have this great gift, as well as I do?"

"I mean it is possible. I am not a prophet, so I can't say whether they will or not. Time will answer that question."

So now Jhn'ah Ohr was on his way home, and in a few days he would land his beautiful ship on his own world once more. How the people of his planet would welcome him with their loudest cries. How his father, who was Chief of all the planet, would be of him. He, too, would some day be the Chief, when his father had passed on to the Blessed Forest.

And then, there was the beautiful Awr'ra Phr. He was sure that she would mate with him this next season, now that he was famous and had so many new things to talk about.

So continued his happy, gladsome thoughts as he came to his home planet, plunged down through its thick, humid atmosphere, and brought his little ship to a successful landing exactly in the place where it was supposed to land, in the Great Clearing.

Having landed, his ship was immediately surrounded by hundreds of his people. There was his father,



waiting for him to leave the ship. There was the beautiful Awr'ra Phr, a look on her face that he hoped he did not misinterpret.

Quickly he turned off the various mechanisms as he had been instructed, and then hurried to the door, which opened as he approached it and made certain signs over the electronic box beside the doorway.

**H**E stepped forward, and was greeted with a great chorus of "Welcome, Brother!" His face was wreathed with smiles, even though his three triangular-shaped eyes were misted with tears.

And then it struck him! There had not been a great CRY of welcome. It had been a silent, yet powerfully warm greeting—*in his mind!* How had they learned to use telepathy? That was *his* gift from the people of Dhn'or—they had told him so.

"That is right," came his father's\* proud and happy thought. "You were

the only one of us who could not speak with his mind. Why, we could not know. But our friends from Dhn'or, with whom we talk constantly by telepathy—which knows no distance—sent us the automatic ship, which we pretended to you that we had built. They told us to send you to them so that they could operate on your head and make you able to telepath, too. For you are to be the next Chief, and we do not want a Chief who might transmit silence of the mind to other future Chiefs."

Jhn'ah Ohr was crushed then for a time. All the great happiness fled from him into the silent forest. Until a soft, warm figure pressed against his side, and the voice-less voice of the beautiful Awr're Phr purred in his mind, "The next mating season is almost here. For us it will come together." Then Jhn'ah Ohr was happy once more.

— E. EVERETT EVANS

Your bride it a rich spider-woman.

Not bad — if you can survive ...

# The Honeymoon

By CHARLES E. FRITCH

**F**OR a long time John Hacker sat and stared through his plasti-cabin window at the bleak desolation that marked all of Deimos. He sat for a long time looking at the grey-powdered dunes and the scarlet rim of Mars at the horizon. He saw neither.

He was thinking: "It's got to be soon. This week, if possible. If I can win over that brother of hers—"

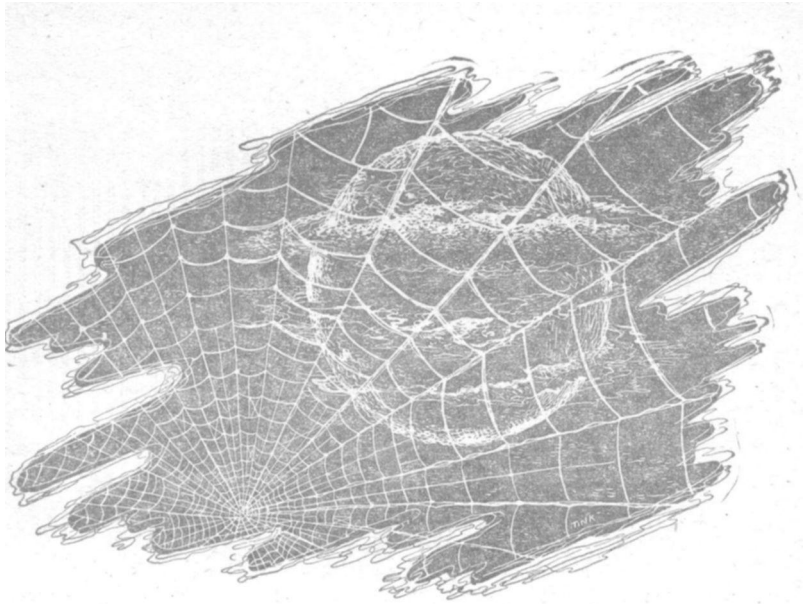
In the kitchen. Syrra was making noises necessary to the preparation of concentrates, bravely trying to juggle multicolored capsules and powders and liquids into a semblance of Earth foods she had never seen.

John Hacker was thinking: "If I marry her, I'll be one of them. One of the family. They'll confide in me.

Tell me their secrets. Syria's willing, but that brother Tryxx—"

The Earthman shook his head and frowned. He was only thirty-four, but he looked fifty. Ordinarily, Earthmen didn't stay on Deimos as long as John Hacker did; the dust got into their clothing and their skin, it got into their food, and eventually it got into their souls. But Hacker had been there for two years; it was beginning to tell.

He coughed rackingly until tears came, and through the veil he saw Syrra come into the room, large bowls of steaming food in her angular arms. She placed the food carefully on a table and returned to the other room for drink. She said nothing.



John Hacker did not look after her, but his eyes still held the glitter placed there by the golden fire of her necklace. Judged by Earth standards, it was the only thing of beauty about her. She was tall and thin—spidery; said, in fact, to have evolved from the giant spiders on the planet Mars. But definitely humanoid. To please him, she had shaved the brittle hair from her body, and despite her round, black eyes and sharp teeth, she looked almost human.

John Hacker stared through the window, finally seeing what lay outside. "Yet anything would look good after two years of this," he told himself. Earth was indeed a long way off. Thirty-four million miles—and two years.

**T**WO years on a dusty stale-smelling satellite looking for the buried treasure of the spider people. John Hacker laughed inwardly. His forged papers said he was a prospector, coming to look for minerals. It was the subterfuge all of them used. Minerals! The only minerals they were interested in were the ones that glittered like small suns.

But the other prospectors didn't last. They had gotten tired of searching, and John Hacker had helped them get tired of it; a few unsolicited visits to their camps had made them lose their relish for treasure hunting. Now, only John Hacker was left, and he couldn't return to Earth unless he had money to buy off certain people.

Syrra was placing drinks on the table. She straightened in a quick, sudden movement. Erect, she was taller than the Earthman. She said softly, "Tryxx is coming."

John Hacker looked up. He didn't question her, for the spider people were suspicious, as they had good right to be, and their ways were mysterious, sometimes frightening. The sparkle of gold about her slender throat drew his attention, and he stared at it, fascinated.

"You'd better stay in the other room," he said, finally, and she nodded and complied.

Across the grey sand a black dot scampered, disturbing the grey dust no more than a spider disturbs a delicate web. From a distance, Tryxx resembled a four-legged spider, as did all his race. But close, his hairy body seemed more human, and the black-circle eyes held a wary intelligence.

John Hacker frowned and went to open the door. Greyness met his eyes and fresh-stale air his nostrils. The beginnings of a cough welled sickeningly within him, but he fought to subdue it. Somehow he managed to smile as the creature scurried to a halt before him.

"Welcome to my home, Tryxx," John Hacker said, trying to sound affable.

Tryxx gazed at the Earthman as though he were contemplating eating him. He entered the cabin without saying anything. Hacker closed

the door, and the purifiers strove audibly to clear the air.

"Where is she?" the spiderman demanded. "Where is Syrra?"

He gazed about the room, at the steaming dishes of alien food set for two people. "You've even got her eating your food now," he said with a grimace.

"Be reasonable, Tryxx," John Hacker said. "Syrra and I are very fond of each other."

"You do not realize what it means," Tryxx persisted. "You are an alien creature. You do not understand us, our ways, our customs."

John Hacker's eyes narrowed. "I could learn."

Tryxx looked up, an unfathomable glint in his black eyes. "Perhaps," he said thoughtfully. "Perhaps it would be wise to let you learn."

**J**OHN Hacker leaned forward. "Why not? I learned your language; I could learn your customs. Why not let the two races merge, let them unite in Syrra and me."

The spider head shook. "You do not realize what it would mean. You would have to follow our customs. All of them to the letter. You would have to become—one of us." •

Despite himself, John Hacker shuddered inwardly at the thought. He had known, of course, that it would have to be that way, if he hoped to find the treasure. He'd have to live underground in dank, slimy tunnels filled with rotting web

and the musty odor of the spider people. He'd thought about it and tried not to, wondering if all the gold in the universe were worth it.

"For a time I could stand it," he told himself. "At least, until I find out where they've got the treasure hidden. After that—"

After that, he'd get out of there to fast he'd be a blur.

The spiderman's eyes narrowed. "It takes more than shaved hair for a conversion. Evidently Syrra did not tell you of our wedding customs."

"I'd abide by them, Tryxx," John Hacker said, trying to sound convincing. At least, until he had the gold!

"You would have no choice," Tryxx told him. His voice turned weary. "We are a peaceful people, John Hacker. For your own good, why don't you and your kind go away."

"Syrra is fond of me."

"I know," Tryxx admitted sadly. "Syrra has always been a strange girl, a creature of whim. Many times in the past her notions have been unconventional. Now this." He shook his head.

"Look, Tryxx," John Hacker said suddenly, his voice impatient, "we can't go on like this forever; it's got to be one way or another. Suppose we put it this way. Tonight, we'll plan on being married. You think it over carefully, and if you decide finally against it for certain, you

can come here when Mars is at zenith and take Syrra home with you. After that time, we'll assume we may go ahead."

The spiderman's face seemed to hold a quiet amusement. "I came now to take her," he said. "But I can wait until tonight. Tell Syrra to be ready."

**A**S the spiderman left, John Hacker's lips held the beginnings of a contemptuous smile, but he removed it at a soft sound behind him.

"He will be here," Syrra said. "He never mated, because he wanted to protect me; he believes this is for my own good. I couldn't go ahead without his consent." Her voice was regretful. "Perhaps it's just as well. I've tried to change, John, but—I'm not certain I have, really."

"You don't have to change. Remember I'm going to try your way of life, too." To himself he added: "But only until I get your dowry."

"But Tryxx will be here," Syrra insisted. "What of that?"

John Hacker shrugged. "Maybe not. I don't think he's really opposed to our marriage. It's just that it's unconventional, and if he said it would be okay then he'd be to blame if it didn't work out. This way, all he has to do is stay away, and what we do is our own fault."

He grinned at her, wondering if she fell for it. "C'mon, let's eat."

They ate in silence, but John Hacker's mind was alive with thought. He'd have about a week, two at most, before he'd need money, and by that time he should have found the tunnel containing the gold. "Mining" couldn't last forever without funds, and those he had stolen were just about gone. Now there was nothing left but hope. Hope and a pistol and Syrra's influence with the spider people.

Besides that, his blasted cough seemed to be getting worse. The tunnels would be great for that!

Darkness came, and Mars rose high in the night.

"I'm going out for awhile," John Hacker said. He slipped into heavy-padded clothing. "If Tryxx does come, tell him to wait, I'll be right back." He smiled reassuringly. "But I don't think he will." He strapped on his pistol.

Syrra watched him silently.

John Hacker stepped into the cold night. Crystals of moisture danced like frozen stars in the stale-smelling air. His heavy boots sent up clouds of gray dust as he walked. After awhile, he stopped and lay beside a dune. He checked his pistol, held it ready. He waited.

For a long time the white-grey desert stretched before him, silent, unmoving. Mars rose higher, covered with blood and scars, watching him. John Hacker waited patiently, as the cold night air crept closer and surrounded him. Then from behind

a dune scampered a long-legged creature heading toward the cabin.

**I**N a quick, certain movement, the Earthman raised his weapon, sighted, fired. A long band of flame stretched across the desert, and the spiderman screamed in surprise and anguish. Exultantly, John Hacker got to his feet and ran.

Tryxx was still alive, but helpless. "Fool!" he rasped contemptuously. His eyes held no condemnation. Only annoyance and—pity. "Remember your—your own creatures like us—on your Earth."

John Hacker pulled the trigger, and the blast shriveled the spiderman's head to a cinder. It was easy to kill even a human; this was like killing an insect. He fired again, several times. Beneath the flame, Tryxx crackled, twisting into brittle ashes that crumbled underfoot. In a minute it was done, and the blacker substance became part of the grey dust of the desert.

The Earthman trudged to his cabin. Syrra looked up as he entered.

"I hurried back," Hacker said. He wondered if she had heard her brother scream. "Has Tryxx come?"

Syrra shook her head; she watched him noncommittally as he removed his pistol and hung it in its holster on the wall. He took off his heavy clothing.

They sat around, waiting in silence. Finally, John Hacker said: "Are you satisfied that he's not coming."

She nodded. "He is not coming."

"He must have changed his mind then—like I said."

Syrra said nothing, but her round black eyes regarded him curiously.

The wedding ceremony was a simple thing, not really a ceremony at all, and yet it was marvellously logical, requiring only the consent of the two principals. Aloud, they agreed to each other—and it was done. As easy as that.

John Hacker looked at his bride. He looked at Syrra in a way he had never looked at her in those months she had lived with him at the cabin. They had lived together, she doing his cooking and he trying to probe from her as subtly as possible the place where the gold was. But at night they slept apart, for somehow he had never thought of her as being a woman. His only desire was for the treasure. Now, he thought of nights that might have been, and he realized suddenly that two years was a long time—a very long time for a man to be without a woman.

**H**E lay in bed afterward, with Syrra beside him, and his thoughts were heavy in the near-darkness. He was one of them now; their customs would be his customs, their secrets his secrets, their gold—his gold. The last thought was by far the most comforting, and he dwelled upon it.

Tonight, they would spend in his cabin, as they had agreed. Tomorrow,

and the succeeding days of the honeymoon, she was to take him into the tunnels, which was to then be their home. The mere thought of it was nauseating, but it would be the only way. The gold lay in the tunnels somewhere, and to reach it, John Hacker would have to enter them. With Syrra, he would be safe.

Tryxx had been the main obstacle, and now he was gone. What was it he had said those last few minutes: "Remember your own creatures like us on Earth"? That was it. Or at least something like it. What creatures? Spiders? What about them?

He tried to put the thoughts from his mind, but they came—stray bits of information he recalled about the giant spiders of Mars, and even the habits of the smaller ones back on Earth. Strange creatures. Strange habits. Strange mating habits, too. The ones on Mars for example—why there was even one kind on Earth like them, where the female—where the female—on her wedding night—where she—

John Hacker sat bolt upright in bed, trembling with a sudden cold spasm of fear, his mind a frantic, confused jumble. No! That was preposterous. Yet Tryxx had not been married! He tried to still the rapid pounding of his heart. Preposterous! He laughed nervously. He looked at Syrra.

She was awake beside him, her eyes gleaming in the near darkness. She looked at him hungrily.

"You shouldn't have killed Tryxx," he said quietly.

John Hacker's throat felt dry. "Wha—"

Syrra leaned forward, her breath suddenly rank as her face came near his. "But you did. And we have mated." She smiled. "And I am a spiderwoman."

The Earthman stared at her, hypnotized, as her face came closer, closer. Then, with a sudden cry, he leaped away, and scrambled for the pistol hanging on "the wall nearby.

But Syrra was on him, shrieking in triumph, and her sharp teeth sank deep in his neck. He felt the bite, quick, sudden, stabbing—followed by a numbness that flowed like liquid

ice through his body. He sank to his knees, and his hands clawed slowly at the wall in helpless frustration. And then he was on the floor, helpless eyes at Syrra, who stood over him with no pity on her face.

The Earthman knew what was to follow, and contemplating it was not pleasant. He would be dragged by his mate into the tunnels—but there would be no guided tour, no secrets shared, no gold to be found. He would be placed, paralyzed, near his mate—and slowly eaten by her.

For John Hacker, the wedding night was over. But the honeymoon had just begun!

— CHARLES E. FRITCH





# The Good Pilot

By ALBERT HERNHUTER

Maybe You're Right, said the Creature.

Maybe I Don't Exist.

**T**HE rocketship came down out of the sky on a brilliant tail of flame.

Inside its gleaming hull, a single person sat. He hovered over the controls. Through the rear view-screen, he saw the ground rush up to meet him. It was a sight that he had seen many times before, and he only watched because it said in the Control Manual: "One must always be observant. This is the first law of a good pilot." And so, he watched.

Soon the ship was close enough

to the ground for the tail of fire to lick at it, and then the Pilot turned off the power and let the ship drop the last few feet. As soon as he felt the slight shock of landing, he moved to a gauge that showed the temperature of the ground beneath the ship. With it, he could tell how soon it would be before he would be able to leave the ship.

The gauge read just about the same as the temperature in his ship. Perhaps, many years before, before Man had become so sure of himself,

a pilot might have become curious as to why the ground did not heat up under the terrific temperature of the rocket's blasts. But not so the Pilot. He was very scientific in his "thinking.

"Number one," he said, thinking out loud to no one in particular, "This planet is not one of extreme cold. Ergo, the blasts did not merely warm it to 20°C. Number two," he continued checking another gauge, "The normal temperature of this planet is 19.989°C, carrying out my calculations to three decimal places as is specified in the Control Manual (for the second law in the Control Manual is: "One must always be exact. To err is to show signs of mental breakdown"). And so, ergo once more, the surface of this planet must be composed of some material that is almost a perfect insulator against heat."

He filed this away in his mind in a section neatly labeled Miscellaneous and Unimportant Thoughts for Future Reference. For his own scientists had made an insulator almost as good in their laboratories. True, it was not very stable, and sometimes blew up with quite a mess, but he had faith in his scientists. For did not the third law in the Control Manual state: "You must have extreme faith in your Scientists. They are never wrong?"

Moving, to still another set of gauges, he checked and saw that the atmosphere was almost an exact

duplicate of that of his home planet, but he was not curious. For the fourth law was: "One must not be curious. To show signs of curiosity is to class one's self with the lower animals."

And so he pressed a button that opened the airlock and stepped into it. As he did so, he passed an electric eye that closed the inner door. Ignoring the space suit that hung on the wall like a headless man dressed in canvas, he picked up his trouble-belt and snapped it on. For life might exist on this planet, and where there was life, there might also exist hostility. His brain moved along this pattern like a train on a track.

**A**S he was adjusting his belt, the outer door opened and he stepped out, climbing down the ladder from the airlock to the ground. When he was down, he pushed a button on his belt. The ladder was retracted and the outer door swung silently shut on well oiled hinges.

Then he turned around, and before he could take one step, a creature materialized before him.

If the pilot had suffered from nightmares, he would have instantly recognized the Creature as one of its main constituents, but as he never had dreams, let alone nightmares, the Creature was a complete stranger to him.

He looked at the Creature closely, trying to classify it, for the Control Manual said: "Every creature has its

category, and every category has its list of creatures."

After a few moments, he made, what seemed to him, the most logical conclusion. The Creature simply did not exist.

For into what category could he place a blue ball about three feet in diameter with several various colored eyes mounted on stalks, feet wearing size seventeen regulation space-boots, a mouth with one large, and quite buck tooth, a pair of ears like two shingles flapping in the wind, and seven, no, six long rubbery arms. In one of the arms, the Creature clutched a long piece of string with a wooden cylinder at the end. The cylinder kept bobbing up and down the string, and one of the eyes tirelessly followed it—up, down, up, down. ' If the Pilot had lived a few centuries earlier, he might have recognized the cylinder as a fad of the middle twentieth century—a yo-yo.

Then the Pilot spoke. "I have concluded that you do not exist, Creature," he said, quite sure of himself, "Ergo, you will be kind enough to disappear."

The yo-yo continued its journey along the string, and another eye joined the first in watching it. The other eyes turned on their stalks to stare at the Pilot.

"Who," the Creature said quite deliberately, and spacing his words with mechanical neatness, "Are—you—to—tell—anyone—to—disappear?"

He began each word as the yo-yo began its downward journey, and the Pilot answered immediately.

"I am a rocketship pilot," he began.

"So what?" the Creature interrupted.

The Pilot tried to think of a suitable answer, and then it became quite clear. Since the Creature did not exist, it required no answer.

"You do not exist," he said, repeating his thoughts, "Therefore you require no answer."

"That's very interesting," the Creature said. There was complete silence for a moment, and then the Creature spoke again.

"I'll bet that I can do something that you can't do," he stated.

"Since you do not exist," the Pilot said, sticking to his guns, "the only thing you need to do is disappear."

**T**HE Creature picked up a piece of rock weighing perhaps three kilograms and threw it into the air.

Then he said, "I'll bet you can't do that."

"Anyone," the Pilot said, "can throw a rock into the air." To prove his point, he chose a rock that weighed about twice as much as the one the Creature had used, and tossed it into the air. It landed with a dull thud, made a feeble effort at bouncing, and then lay still. Then the Pilot turned to the Creature, who sneered and said:

"But your rock came down again."

The Pilot opened his mouth to speak, but then he spotted the rock several meters above his head.

"This is all very silly," the Pilot rationalized, "since you do not exist you could not have thrown that rock into the air."

"But I did!" the Creature said, sticking a pink tongue at him in a sign of utter defiance. "And I'll bet that you don't get it down."

Silently, but without rage (for the fifth law said: "To show rage is to give signs that one is not fit for his job. And one's job is his duty."), he pulled his gun out of its holster and fired at the rock. A stream of pure energy flowed from the muzzle of the gun in a straight line toward the rock. As it approached the target, however, it split and went around the rock. After it had passed, it joined once more to become a solid beam of pure energy that could destroy anything—except, of course, the rock.

"Well?" the Creature asked impatiently, stamping one of his boot clad feet.

"Well, what?" was the Pilot's reply.

"Well why don't you shoot down the rock?"

"It's all very simple. Since you do not exist, the rock does not exist. Therefore, there is no rock to shoot down."

"That," the Creature said with admiration in his voice, "is the neatest job of evading a question that I have

heard in a long time."

The Creature then allowed the rock to drop quickly, but with not too much force, upon the Pilot's head. Then he raised it again.

"Do you still deny its existence?" the Creature said, smiling.

"Well," the Pilot thought for a moment, "it is possible that a bird flew by overheard and dropped a rock on my head."

"And it bounced off of your thick skull and remained suspended in mid-air," the Creature concluded.

"That sounds logical," the Pilot said, giving himself a mental pat on the back.

"Then *why* does the rock remain in mid-air, you thick skulled mut-tonhead?"

"Oh, that is a very simple\* question. Our scientists have made anti-gravity generators in the laboratory. You have simply duplicated it."

"Your fumbling scientists," the Creature said with contempt, which was very confusing to the Pilot, "could not brew a cup of tea if they were dying of thirst!"

"We brew some of the finest tea in the Galax on our planet," the Pilot retaliated.

"Then accept my kindest apologies," the Creature said humbly, "they probably can brew a cup of tea." Then the tone of his voice changed back to a sneer. "But as for anything else, they are even more thick headed than you. They don't even know—" Then he stopped.

For a few moments the Creature scratched his head in silent thought, while a third eye joined the two others watching the yo-yo. Suddenly the Creature spoke.

"Maybe you're right," he began.

"Of course I am," the Pilot interjected.

"I do not exist."

"That's what I've been telling you all along."

"The rock floating up there really isn't."

"Of course," the Pilot interrupted, once more feeling certain of himself. "And if you hadn't been so stubborn, the both of you would have vanished, long ago."

"Quite so," said the Creature, "but on the other hand,"

"What other hand?" the Pilot asked, curious for the first time.

"On the other hand," the Creature repeated, "since we are still here, and you still see us both, there is only one answer."

"And that is?"

"You must be insane."

**T**HE Pilot thought the problem over silently. He sought in his memory through the Control Manual for a solution. Finally he spoke.

"I suppose that you are right, my friend," he said quite informally.

"Just what does one do as an Insane person?"

The Creature stuck one of his arms out and snatched a second yo-yo from nowhere.

"Do you know how to operate this?" he asked.

"I believe so," was the reply. "I've been watching you do it for quite a while, now."

He slipped his finger through the loop in the string and let the cylinder drop. He was delighted when it bounced up again.

"This seems like fun," he said. "What else do we do?"

"Can you sing?"

"Oh, yes! When I was young I used to like to sing, but they told me that I shouldn't," he shrugged his shoulders. "So I didn't."

"I hope that you can carry a tune," the Creature said, producing a zither from nowhere.

"I say!" the Pilot said enthusiastically, "this seems like fun. I should have gone insane long ago."

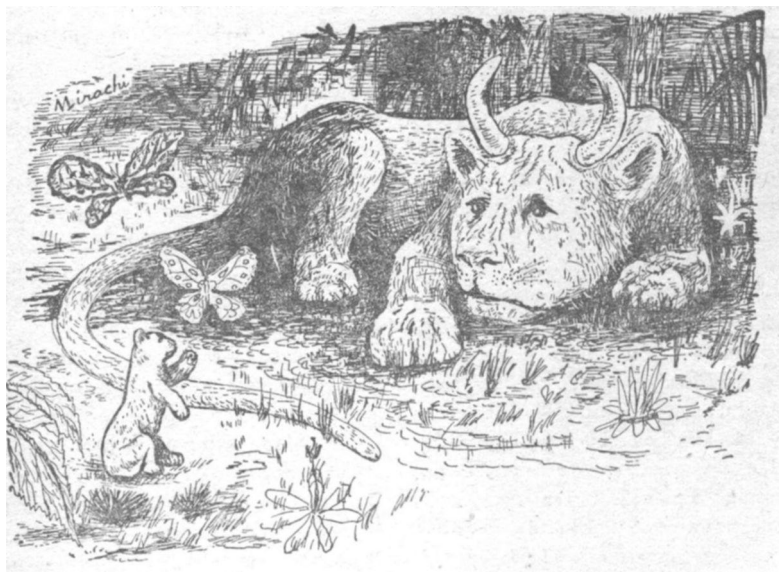
He laughed a bit, and then the two moved off into the horizon, their yo-yos bobbing up and down in unison, while they sang, a little off key, accompanied by the zither, "Come Josephine in My Flying Machine".

— BY. ALBERT HERNHUTER

# Murmur of Dawn

By ANNA SINCLARE

In blackness and pain,  
from the womb of a great savage She,  
the Tailless One is Born



## MOONDOWN!

The night side of the planet Mir revolves in blackness. A new tension is added to the primeval struggle in the depths of the jungle. Moon-down! The Su reigns.

In a lair of frond and blade a she. great with kitling, waits. Oblique golden slits watch the night The three feet long tail twitches in rhythm with the discomfort within her.

A small black animal hurries on the trail of a creeping thing. Too close!

The triumphant wail of the su becomes a yowl of anguish and pain as slitting tissues protest the exertion of the kill.

The jungle is silent with wonder and fear of the sound. Two stalking male su halt in their tracks and the long slender weel between them collapses, its small heart seeking in death an escape from this trinity of terror.

A horde of winged beauties flit toward the mound, the deathly stench and lite, covering it with their insatiable carrion hunger.

The tiny red eyes of an equally tiny brained reptile blink with alarm. The mammoth carcass starts at the cry of the smaller but more cunning mammal that is supplanting the supremacy of its kind on this teeming young planet. Its gargantuan hulk crashes through foot wide streamers of moss, monstrous vines,- towering fern-like vegetation, and into an encrusted inlet where it flounders in entrapping bog and is set upon by the trillion forms

of parasitical life.

The darkness pales as the fifth satellite of Relor completes a revolution upon its axis.

In the hidden lynn the carrion eaters have subsided. A fanged tawny quadruple lies writhing in agony. Spotted with dark amber and bronze it blends perfectly with the surrounding grasses.

The birth pangs come with increasing rapidity and the long powerful curls, stiffens like a taut wire, then threshes aimlessly. Torn muscles bring alternate whimpers and howls of rage and pain.

The forest around stirs uneasily at the recurring sounds, unaware and uncaring of the miracle taking, place. A scream as eery as the first one rents the air and with shuddering relief the great cat head with curving horns stretches backward upon the lichen waiting for the agony to recede.

The eternal clouds and the hovering jungle obscure the sun from the steaming lair where the su she lies. But the broad southern continent is in the middle of the daylight belt as tawny head rises once more.

The strangeness of the kitling to which she has given birth is more sensed than actually perceived.

The sound symbol of her people for other kinds rises chaotically in her superstitious, patternless mind. *Kuril* . . . It recedes unformed as her nose reassures her with her own scent from its body. A throbbing, purring mother sound fills her throat. *Oumm*

. . . The tailless kitling with odd curved digits on the inner side of each fore paw moves closer as the contented love name is repeated. Oumn, Oumn . . .

**F**OR four completions of the planet Mir about the Sun, the great she was forced to reside in the jungle glade. The weakness of the strange kitling she had borne compelled Mera to make foraging trips for her food, always returning. By the time Oumn was weaned he could get about only very slowly and when she tried to pick him up by the nape a yowl of rage filled the air. Small claws dug at her face and he seemed able to not only rake her with them, but to hold on with both forepaws until the pain was annoying and she dropped him.

All attempts of her long tail to discipline him were frustrated as the small tailless form would rear upright on its lower extremities and back against a tree holding the agile upper limbs before him in painful — for her — attempts to catch her tail. For all that, as he grew he developed a fearful respect for her might, and would scuttle up into higher branches of frond where her greater weight could not go, at a sign of temper on her part.

At night he snuggled close to this mother. The sounds that were fearful enough during the daytime were terrifying at night when all color had gone. The forest became a swaying, crawling etching of black and lesser

shadows closing in upon him.

Meanwhile the pack of su to which Mera belonged had moved deeper into the continent. Tamo, who sired Oumn, took his place as leader in the absence of his mate. A lithe young she ran always beside him and as time passed and Mera did not follow soon after, Tamo took the young one and memory of the greater she dropped easily from his haze of mind.

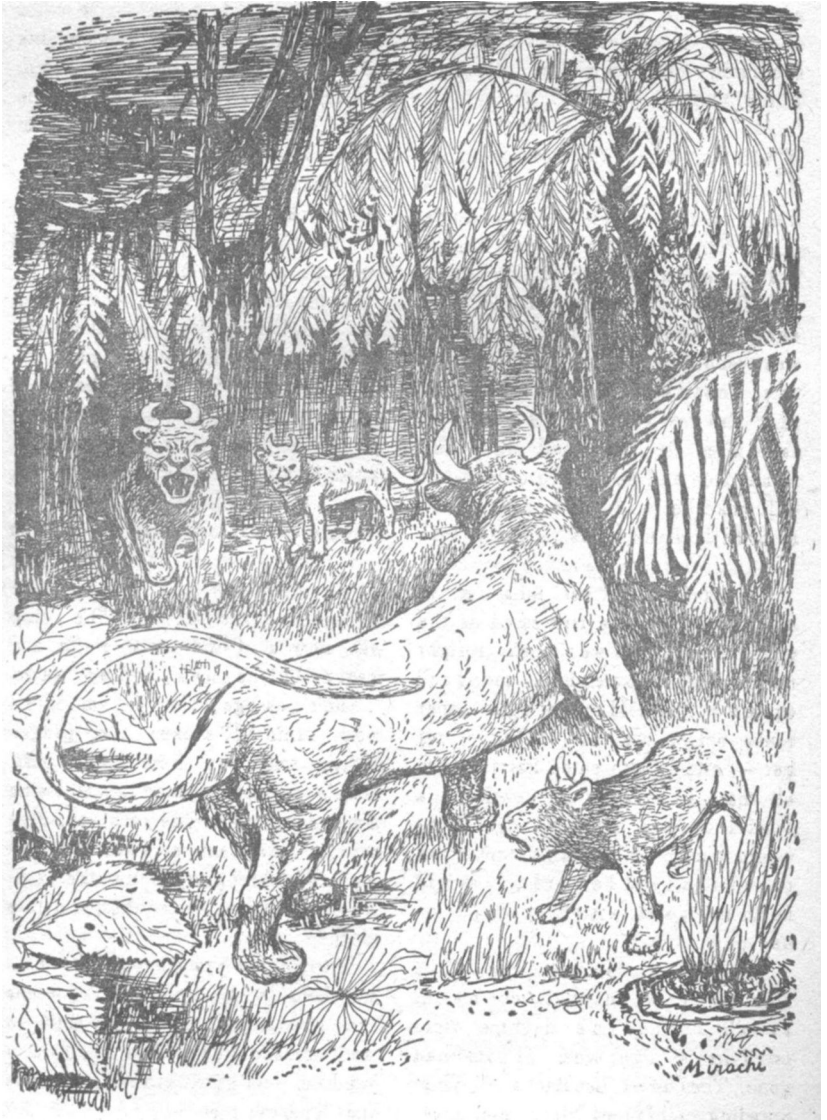
As the seasons faded unchanging into each other Oumn acquired skill in killing weel and other small animals for feed. But at the charge of a larger one he fled whimpering to his mother's side and then howling to the fern tops as she turned angrily upon his cowardice.

When he was old enough to run in his odd loping gait beside her, Mera set out upon the long vacated spoor of her mate and subjects. The going was slow as Oumn tired easily and frequently the scent crossed water.

Their passage downwind sent mammoth armored snakes and winged lizards scurrying from their path. Mera's frustrated roar upon losing the spoor at the edge of a turbulent boiling lake sent a herd of giant reptiles crashing back into the vegetation crushing everything before them.

When Tamo had passed that way it had been a steaming pile of rocks and vegetation. A sudden shift in land surface had pulled it down a hundred feet and erupting geysers had done the rest.





Oumn put out a hand to the curious bubbling liquid and pulled it back with a screech of terrorized pain. Mera ceased her furious frightened pacing at the water's edge to come lick the injured member. Instead of soothing, her long rough tongue sent thrills of agony to the kitling's brain so that he reared upon his hind legs dancing and yowling. Mera was so upset that she circled him round and round adding her own cat cries to his. The ungodly furor made the entire area untenanted for probably the first time since the first crawler came out of the sea and laid its eggs in the undergrowth.

As Oumn's jerking feet were sending him closer and closer to the water's edge Mera calmed down enough to herd him back into the mosses. A log lay half submerged in a puddle of black smelly ooze. As Mera crowded on Oumn's sides he tripped and fell sprawling into the bog. At the envelopment of the cool sulphur mud the pain miraculously vanished. Oumn instinctively righted himself. As his paw came out of the ooze a dull throbbing began. Mera stared in amazement as her child quickly lay down upon the log and thrust the wounded limb back into the mud. She circled bewildered around the puddle, fastidiously avoiding getting it on herself. Then as Oumn refused to come forth she settled beside it, her jowls resting on her paws, regarding him sadly.

**F**OR three moons they traveled deeper and deeper into the continent. As the scent grew fresher Mera lost all thought of eating or sleeping. Poor Oumn trotted disconsolately behind her, sometimes yards behind. Finally she had forgotten all about him. Unable to see his mother any longer Oumn climbed into the ferns to rest and lick his scratched neglected coat.

In the last laps of Oumn's sleep, Mera, twenty miles away, was carefully circling the lair of Tamo and the others. Instinct warned her not to be too hasty in rejoining them. Exhausted she worked a nearby bed of frond into a cover for herself as the first rays of dawn lit the ever-hovering clouds with pearly luminescence.

Tamo and the rest of the pack had also bedded down for the day. The young she had just two moons ago given birth to, a litter of three, and as it grew lighter they gamboled gaily about the pack.

As dawn's shadows melted into the subdued murmur of daylight, Oumn caught a thing nested in the bole near his sleeping place. Then he slipped down. Dew gathered in a hollow rock refreshed him somewhat and he set out, lonely and fearing, upon his mother's scent. The heavy humidity formed droplets on his coat. His pace became slower as the day became hotter. Weary and desolate-hearted he sometimes wandered off the trail. It was thus as evening closed that he trod squarely upon the nose of Tamo,

whose sleeping form guarded the lair.

Tamo, illtempered because of the exceptional heat, rose with the intention of threshing the brash kitling who could be so contemptuous.

As his eyes took in the strange form before him, his hackles rose and his lips drew back from his teeth. He hissed, *Kitril*, and dropped to a crouch. His ears were laid flat and his belly whispered across the grass as he slowly stalked Oumn. The rest of the pack sprang up and together formed an ominous ring about the frightened young' one.

Mera, awakened by the disturbance, came to investigate. Taking in the situation, dimly bewildered by her mate's hostility toward his offspring, she leapt between them making soothing love sounds.

Tamo halted his advances as Mera glided toward him, the old attraction beginning to surge anew. The younger she, jealously aware of Mera's place as head of the pack, jumped at Oumn snarling *Kitril!* Tailless one! *Kitril!* Oumn instantly clambered into the highest branches of a nearby fern where he sat quaking with fear, howling dismally.

Blinded with maternal rage at the insult Mera left Tamo's side to spring at the younger she. The young su reared to meet the attack clanging wildly. They went down, horns locked.

Tamo leaped to the defense of his

youngmate and as at a signal the other seven su left their restless pacing beneath Oumn's sanctuary to join in surging upon the great she.

Mera lay upon her back digging her four taloned feet into the young cat above her. Her enormous tail slapped at Tamo and she writhed to rake with her horns an old su who was worrying her ears. Surrounded by ferocious su she twisted and slashed and clawed. Her burnished amber hide became ripped and mired with blood. One of the new litter, who yelped at her heels, was gored in the belly by her horns and the empty hulk flung into the air above the fray, to fall and be crushed beneath heaving bodies.

Mera went down, and down again, to rise desperately fighting for her child and her life. The onslaught became furious and *more* concentrated, mounting to an irresistible tide of blood lust until at last they had her down, defeated. Yet she fought on blinded by her own gore. They tore her throat and ripped out her innards and lashed on. And not until the once magnificent tail gave a last feeble twitch were they satisfied.

Then still intoxicated with their fury they gathered beneath the wailing Oumn, snarling *Kitril!* *Coward!* Come down and fight! *Kitril!* Tailless one! *Kitril!*

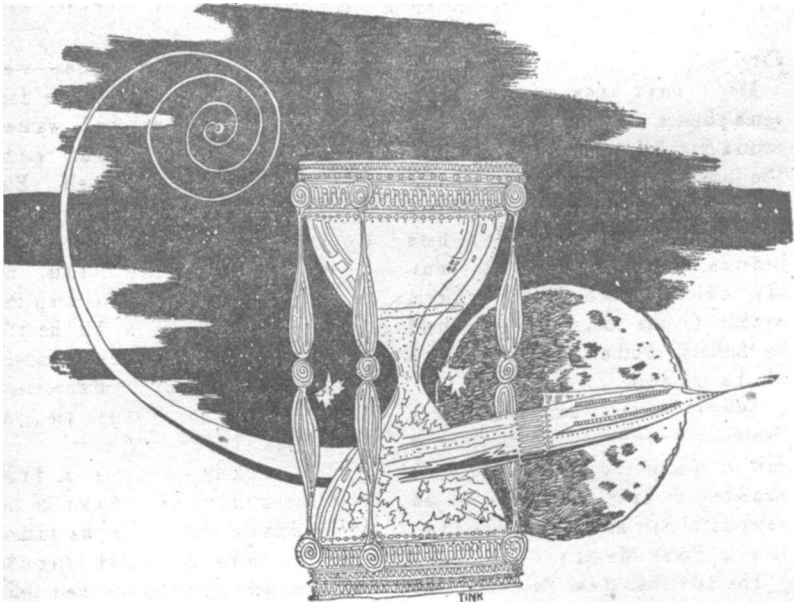
Oumn fled through the fern tops.

—ANNA SINCLARE

# The Time Contraption

By ANTHONY RIKER

A bad memory and a taboo time machine  
can add up to only one thing — trouble!



**N**OW that it is all over it is pretty hard to set it down here just as it happened. The best I can do is start at the beginning, from the moment Professor Xnardu, the Venusian outcast, forgot to pull the switch when the Zaladites closed in around the constabulary outpost here on Asteroid X2R. Things are mighty peaceful on good ole X2R now and I reckon they're powerful likely to stay that way. (By Einstein, I'm even beginning to think like that big, long-legged creature from the past!)

It is the professor's contraption to meddle with time that causes all the trouble and in the end it is the same gimmick that saves our hides from being tanned into *golo* rugs for some Zaladite harem down in Zalado City.

Me, I don't know a thing about astrophysics and the momentum and contra-flux of -dimensional curves. I'm just a good constable and a lance-corporal of the Space Constabulary who happens to be stuck out here because he got notions about Venusians maidens which do not conform exactly to the ideas generally held by fathers, brothers and sweethearts of the maidens.

Anyway, here I am and here is Professor Xnardu for much the same sort of reason and the two of us are expected to keep the peace on an asteroid almost as big as Plata Province in Polar Mercury.

The fact that these Zaladites, who

are pretty horrible to behold and stand almost as tall as Earthmen or Venusians, have their own peculiar thermo-guns while we have only antiquated constabulary issue ray-guns does not bother the commander of the constabulary. If you do not like it, why, you can take the exam for the space patrol.

But I am not cut out for a space-man, so I have to be content with X2R for ten years to repent of my youthful follies. The Professor is here because he has insisted on fooling about with these gadgets of his for time experimentation.

"Experimental movements in contra-dimensional flux," he calls it. But he is a nice guy in spite of that.

For more than six centuries now time-travel has been strictly taboo, even in experimental circles—ever since the Purists laid down the doctrine that if Einstein had wanted his time curves jumbled he would have jumbled them himself. But Xaardu will not stop meddling—or trying to meddle, which amounts to the same thing to the Purists. So he is shipped off to X2R to keep me company and meddle to his heart's content, since some of the members of the Inter-World Advancement Council do not at all times see eye-to-eye with the Purist Party.

X2R is likely to prove a little monotonous unless you happen to be the unsociable sort. It is the fusion of two or three of the old asteroids that were sent spinning on their tails

for a century or two about a thousand years ago when the belt proved inconvenient to commuters who were in a hurry to get from one world to another. It seems that rocket ships were pretty slow crates in those "good old days" and the space sailors didn't care to trust the girl they left behind any longer than they had to. So they calmly blasted a highway through the asteroid belt.

**I**T is Professor Xnardu's time machine that starts all the trouble with the natives. It seems funny, when you think of it, that after all these years time travel, which was one of the first dreams of men on every planet, is still just a dream.

The Prof says that there are indications in old manuscripts that at one time Earthmen and a few others actually conquered the time dimension. But the trouble is, he says, that some of those old boys were so good at prophesying in word-stories things that actually happened later on that it is pretty hard to tell which of the old manuscripts are fact-records and which are only story-tales.

The Professor has some luck with his gadgets after a year or two, but the odd thing is that the crazy machine seems to pop about sort of promiscuous in space as well as in time. Once it picks up a fossil of a *gara bear* that could only have come from the *Ta* period of Middle Venus and then, another time, he sets her

spinning and out jumps a Plutonian field mouse. It is the field mouse that sets off the feud with the Zaladites.

A Plutonian field mouse weighs about as much as a 10-year-old Earthman and it has teeth as long as your fingers. We were both so surprised to see it leap from the door of the contraption that it was bounding out of the constabulary blockhouse before we thought to try to catch it. By then it was too late and the next we heard was the horrified wails of the Zaladites in Zalado City, which is at the foot of Constabulary Hill. It must have bitten three or four of them before they managed to pot-shot it with the thermo-guns.

The Zaladites get pretty sore and they send up a delegation. The next day they send up another. In the following weeks they keep us so busy that Professor Xnardu has time to extract from his machine only a scimitar of the Martian Twelfth Dynasty, a pair of ancient grox-miner's picks and a button that says "Do It With Dewey."

On the tenth day they get really ugly. Early in the sleep-wake they fire a salvo over the blockhouse and post sentries at intervals around the constabulary. Why they should do that is something only a Zaladite could understand, as even if we wanted to escape there is no place we could escape to and the closest thing we have to a rocket ship is a ten-zat model of the "Martian Ex-

press" on the professor's dressing-table.

It is several hours later, inter-space time, when we hear the first wild yelps of the horrible Zaladite war cry. The Professor, who is trying to pick up something from the ancient Earth, comes running out of his little laboratory without even bothering to pull out the power-plug on his machine. He joins me at the window and what we see outside is not a comforting sight when we stop to think that the next scheduled visit of the constabulary patrol ship is still eighteen months away.

"A remarkable spectacle," says the Professor, looking out at the ring of leaping, yelping Zaladites. "It would make a truly stupendous teleshow. As a matter of fact, I wish it were a teleshow."

"It may be a good show," I agree wearily? "but I don't think I'm going to care for the ending."

When civilization began to sweep over the inhabitable areas of the solar system, benevolent governments conceived the brilliant idea of shipping remnants of dying savage races from the sister planets to such forsaken bits of space as the asteroids, or what was left of them. It seemed a pretty good bet that the asteroids would fall apart or explode or wander off into space and if they didn't, it seemed an even better bet that the savages would soon die off anyway. But nothing happened to the asteroids except that they settled

down to monotonous, boresome little orbits of their own and the dying races, instead of dying gracefully and gratefully, managed somehow to strike a fair balance between birth and death rates. So the space constabulary took over the policing of byways of space like little X2R, which are definitely beneath the notice of the space patrol.

The Zaladites are one of the dying races that forgot to die—and not the prettiest. The green devils are hideous enough when they are dressed for a birthday party, but when they are in warpaint and mad they are nothing to put into children's bedtime stories, even as horrible examples.

They were in warpaint now and they were definitely mad.

"HmMMMM," soliloquizes the Professor.

The Professor always picks the most annoying moments to say "hmMMMM."

"We'll have to carry on," I tell him, and take up a ray-gun of a model which was obsolete two hundred years ago.

The Professor is game. Without a word he reaches for a gun and together we go through the door to face the ring of yelping savages. Outside, the Professor hesitates for a moment.

"HmMMMM," he says. "Thoughtless of me. Exceedingly so. I fear I forgot to shut the door behind me. I shall rectify my error."

"Don't bother," I grunt. "We won't be going back that way."

About thirty paces from the outpost we halt. The Zaladites have gathered into a rough sort of arc that can very easily become a circle with us in the middle. But they are content for the moment to keep their distance—which is about twenty paces—and gloat. The Zaladites are just about the best gloaters in the entire system. They enjoy doing it and they do it uncomfortably well.

There are no women and children among them, which is a sure indication that they aren't making a social call.

**A**FTER one or two deep breaths I square my shoulders and prepare to make a last appeal for peace and order on good old X2R. After all, that is what I am paid for doing so it seems only fair to try to earn my last quarter's pay even though I won't be around to collect it.

"My friends—" I begin.

For some forgotten reason Earthman for untold centuries have looked upon that phrase as possessing some subtle magic.

But this time it doesn't work. An ear-splitting war whoop drowns out all other sounds, including mine. The Zaladites move closer, a step or two at a time, and there is a sort of wild gloating hatred on their paint-smirched, hawk-featured faces. All of my life I have believed firmly in

the democratic principles which form the basis of the Inter-stellar government, but when I look *at* the determination and singleness of purpose on all oft hose green faces, I decide for once to turn in a vigorous minority opinion and nuts to the majority.

They have their deadly thermoguns slung in their arms. For some tribal reason, the Zaladites dress the entire barrel of their weapons with many-colored feathers, so that they look almost like some cray toy or weird ceremonial stick. But anyone who has seen them in action learns to give them grudging respect. Our weapons are useless and we know it. One move toward bringing them up and the Professor and I will be gently billowing puffs of dust floating into the thin cover of air over Asteroid X2R. Not even very big puffs, which is hardly flattering to our vanity.

While I am standing there stupidly, like a worm about to be eaten by a bird, the Professor lets out an anguished gasp.

"Oh dear," he mutters. "I forgot to turn off the machine, too."

For once I am the one who says "hmmmmmm."

The Zaladites have had their fun and apparently they are ready to get the thing over and go home to their harems. The whole bent line of them beings to shuffle forward and inward upon us.

The Professor and I shake hands.

"It's a shame you have to be in



on this, Professor," I tell him, and I mean it. "The system needs its men like you."

"Tut," he tells me, clucking his tongue. "It is only another mystery to unravel—the greatest mystery of them all."

"Well," I tell him, trying to sound like the spacemen on the telecast and not feeling that way, at all, "don't get into any trouble you can help wherever it is we're going. And remember to shut doors and pull out plugs and things."

"Who knows," he says. "Maybe you'll be around to take care of me."

And then he grins. The old fellow actually grins. I guess the men in space uniforms haven't any monopoly on courage.

The Zaladites are quiet now, the way they always get silent just before the kill. I can see the slow way the thermo-guns are edging up in their hands.

Suddenly there is the heavy crunching of footsteps behind us, from the direction of the blockhouse. The green men stand frozen, their guns no longer rising in that slow, menacing movement.

"Waal, I'll be a sand-rock side-winder, if this ain't a pretty mess," a deep voice booms behind us and Professor Xnardu and I both wheel around toward the sound.

**L**OOKING back on it now I don't really know how much of what the strange creature said that day

I understood from telepathy and how much I really got from his spoken words. But I do know that, strangely enough, his language was not so far different from the jargon of the space bulkheads and the stellar marine barracks. Perhaps fighting men have a sort of basic speech of their own that alters little with the ages.

The stranger is hard to describe and still make him sound real.

He is a little taller than the average modern Earthman and the crazy thing he wears on his head makes him look even taller. It is some sort of hat of a white, fuzzy material with a great wide brim and a crown that towers into a cone with a broad dent down the front.

Around his neck is a violently red kerchief of some sort and he is wearing a vest of tanned animal-skin over a shirt-like affair of a green that makes the Zaladites look almost beautiful. He wears long, ankle-length trousers tucked into boots and wrinkled and alkali-covered. Over them are flapping skins I later learn he calls *chaps*.

There are *spurs* on his high-heeled boots, but, strangest of all, is the belt at his waist. At either side, dangling from his belt, is some sort of leather pocket and in each pocket is a clumsy-looking thing of iron or steel with shiny white handle-grips which protrude from the open tops. Apparently they are some sort of ancient weapon.

He is bowlegged and lie rolls toward us with a peculiar swaying motion, as though he might be used to some artificial support which is no longer available.

I look at the Professor and he looks at me and we both suddenly realize the awful truth.

"By Einstein," the Professor moans. "It isn't bad enough that you and I are in this mess. Oh my, no. I have to get fuzzle-headed and forget to pull out a plug in the machine and so this, poor, innocent, inadequate pre-historic creature from another world has to be jerked out of his jungle surroundings to be annihilated by these green demons. Perhaps the Purists were right."

But the stranger doesn't seem the least bit annoyed about being here. He is grinning as he walks up to us and after a casual glance at the staring, silent Zaladites, throws a big arm over each of our shoulders.

"Pardners," he tells us in a rumbling voice, "I'm powerful glad you all came along when you did and brought me on here to your post. Ran out of water early this morning and I thought sure I was a gorie. This Mohave Desert ain't no place for a man like me, from up Wyoming way. Reckon I must have just naturally passed out complete back there afore you all came along."

Before Xnardu and I can comprehend his meaning, he nods toward the Zaladites.

"Looks like them Apache devils is

out to make trouble," he says, calm and matter-of-fact like.

Then everything breaks loose at once.

One of the young Zaladites who has not been entrusted with a thermo-gun, but is carrying an old ray-gun stolen at some time or other from the outpost, gets trigger-happy and raises his weapon. The Professor and the stranger and I all see his movement at the same time.

"This is the end," I tell myself. "Might as well get in one little shot before we all go whooshing into little puffs or glory."

But before I can even raise my weapon an unbelievable thing happens.

The stranger's hands flash to his hips so smoothly and quickly you can hardly see any movement at all. And there he is with one of the clumsy iron things in each hand and a little wisp of smoke is trailing out of the barrel of the one which barked once like the quick, sharp bark of a Martian *tzara-wolf*.

**T**HE rash young Zaladite just stands there swaying crazily with a bewildered look on his horrible green face and blood trickling from a neat black hole in his forehead just between the eyes. The other Zaladites watch in stunned silence as he sways and falls.

It is the horror of the way he dies that halts us all. Probably not in five hundred years has anyone

in the system died like that. To go up in a sudden puff of smoke; to be melted into atoms in a split-second—that is one thing; but to die slowly, with blood oozing from your body—that is something else again. Death, in that moment—to all of us, and especially to the green warriors—had become something unpleasant.

Before we can regain a normal thought pattern after that awful moment of the young Zaladite's death, the man from the Earth's youth strides toward the green warriors, brandishing the things in his hands in menacing gestures. The Professor and I have to stand there helplessly and watch, for to raise our own weapons would break the spell, send us all to death before the deadly thermo-guns.

There is a long tense moment as the stranger walks slowly toward the ring of warriors. Two other Zaladites carry stolen ray-guns. The Earthman gestures toward them.

"Better put. down your guns, boys," he says. "Just drop 'em down easy and get your hands up in the air."

Whether the Zaladites understand his message by telepathy or only by his gestures is hard to say, but all at once the tension breaks and the two Zaladites lay the ray-guns at their feet and back away with their open palms above their foreheads.

The others follow suit, each Zaladite laying down his treasured thermo-gun and backing down the hill to-

ward Zalado City with hands raised. It begins to look like a permanent and everlasting peace for Asteroid X2R with those guns stored away in the constabulary.

The stranger chuckles as the green men lay down their weapons.

"So you want to give up your little feathered toys, too, eh boys?" he says. "Well now, that's a right nice gesture. Any peace pipes or little ol' totem poles you may have handy can go in the pot, too, just for luck. Now get along back to your teepees and tell the squaw to get some corn planted pronto, 'cause you boys are going off the warpath permanent or my name ain't Sam Sebastian Jones."

He just stands there grinning foolishly at us while the last of the Zaladites disappear over the rim of the hill. Then he strolls over and picks up one of the thermo-guns. For a moment he looks it over and strokes the colored feathers, still chuckling. All at once he notices the little trigger and presses it.

The Professor and I duck instinctively.

The gun is aimed up toward the top of a feather-leaved *golo-tree*. There is a sibilant swoosh in the air. a little puff of blue-gray smoke, and the *golo-tree* is no longer there.

The Earthman goggles at the spot where the tree has been and his jaw drops open. He gulps two or three times, whistles once very softly and—he FAINTS!

— ANTHONY RIKER

# Dealer's Choice

By S. A. LOMBINO

A Terran can outsmart  
a Venusian any day of  
the week — or can he?



**A**NYONE who'd take his wife and his mother to Venus should have his head examined, Groff thought.

He opened the collar of his tunic and peered through the hut opening again. The guard was still standing there, spear poised, his blue body glistening in the outside light. Groff kicked at some dirt and considered his situation again.

Heatedly, he swung at an insect that closely resembled the Terran housefly, except for a bright red belly hung low on its underside.

"Guard!" he called, and the creature outside the hut turned his head

and stooped in the opening.

"What is it?" he asked Groff, his English bearing trace of a faint accent, but otherwise perfect.

"Can't you do something about these damn insects?"

"The insects are harmless," the guard assured him. "Soon you will not feel them at all." The guard smiled again, emphasizing Groff's predicament.

"Very funny," he said. "You guys are real clowns, you know?"

"I'm glad you appreciate our humor," the guard replied. "Some Terrans consider it . . . primitive."

"I'm not an ordinary Terran,"

Groff said, a little proudly.

"No?" the Venusian asked, surprised. "And what then are you?"

"A Dealer," Groff answered, and he knew by the look on the guard's face that he had said the wrong thing.

"Dealer is a euphemism," he said. "Slaver is what we prefer to call your kind."

"Now, just a minute . . ."

"We know you and your kind, Mr. Groff. We know what Venusians are used for back on Earth. We know, and we don't approve."

**G**ROFF wanted to say, "So don't, who cares?" But instead he changed the subject and asked, "Where'd you learn English?"

"You're not the first 'Dealer' we've had," the guard answered. "Although I must admit you're the first to bring along a wife and" mother."

Groff cursed silently again at his foolish mistake. If it hadn't been for them . . .

"And now you're going to kill us," he said the guard.

"Yes, now we're going to kill you," the guard replied softly.

"Well, then get the hell' out of here!"

"As you wish." Somewhere in the distance a drum began beating a steady tattoo.

"What's that?" Groff said.

"The ceremony is about to begin," the guard informed him, barely turning. "I suggest you say whatever

prayers you may know."

The idea sprang to Groff's mind suddenly.

"I will," he said softly. "But I'd like a little privacy. Can you put something over the opening?"

The guard stared at him curiously, his eyes reflecting light like two jewels set on either side of his nose. Then he shrugged and pulled a skin over the opening, throwing the interior of the hut into dimness.

Groff waited for a second, dug deep into his boot for the pocketknife he'd hidden when he realized they'd be searched.

Every damn electronic weapon at the disposal of our science, he thought, and I have to fight my way out of a bunch of savages with a pocketknife.

Defly he pierced the fiber of the hut, on the wall opposite the opening. He enlarged the opening, working the knife sidewise and then withdrawing the blade. He stooped down, put his eye to the gash, and looked out. A hundred yards from his hut, to the right and to the left, were two other huts.

Mother was in the hut on the left. Anne was in the right hut.

In the distance, the drum beat grew louder and another instrument joined it. It sounded like a gourd being scratched with a stick, and it added a throaty growl to the steady bom-bom of the drum. Groff, crouching at his peephole, saw a tall blue body run across the clearing between

the huts, great colored plumes draped about his neck, an excited glow in his ruby eyes.

It would be a simple matter to slash his way out of the back of this hut. But then what?

**H**E thought of Earth, a scene not more than three months back. He was seated behind the large desk in his office on the tenth floor of the Interplanetary Building.

Anne had said, "Someone is cheating you, Dale and it's your job to find out who."

"No one is cheating me. Get that out of your head."

Up to now, Mother had been silent. She sat back in her chair, a lit cigarette in her well-manicured hand.

"Anne is right, Dale," she said now, her lower lip pouting as she sent smoke streaming into the air.

"Who would cheat me?" he asked.

"You'll never find out sitting behind that desk," Anne said.

"What do you want me to do? Go to Venus?" the thought seemed an incredulous one.

"Exactly," Mother had replied, her eyes cold and penetrating. "When anyone cheats you, they cheat us too. Remember that, Dale."

Could he ever forget? A man in business with his wife and his mother. A revolting situation. And it wasn't as if he were the strong one in the outfit. No. It was always Anne and Mother, always the two of them giving orders. And he always rushed

to see that they were carried out. He was almost like . . . like a Venusian slave.

"I won't go to Venus," he said in protest. "It's ridiculous. Why, I don't know the first thing about the planet."

"That's exactly the trouble," Anne said. "You don't know anything about it, and your men there are stealing us blind. . . You pay them for merchandise we never receive. How many Died-In-Space's have we had in the past six months?"

"What's that got to do with it? Venusians aren't accustomed to space. It's only natural that we should lose a . . ."

"Not as many, as we've lost," Mother said.

"We haven't lost many," he complained.

"But we have,," she insisted. "Besides, Venusians aren't bringing what they used to. What do we get, a lousy three thousand solars? Deduct expenses from that and it comes to next to nothing. We can't afford to be cheated in the bargain."

"You've got to go to Venus," Anne said. "That's all."

Mother had smiled then, a careful, sweet smile that tilted the corners of her mouth. "And, we're coming along, darling."

And Anne had added in a charming voice, "To see that you don't cheat us."

**W**ELL, nobody was doing any cheating now.. The three of

them were going to be dead in a little while and then all cheating, all dealing, everything would stop.

An experienced Dealer wouldn't have stepped into this damn fool situation in the first place. Well, how was he to know what went on in these foul Venusian jungles?

He thought again of the guide's shifty eyes, of the way he had led them from the rocketport into the waiting arms of a primitive tribe.

Apes. That's what they were, apes. Well, a Terran could outsmart an ape any day of the week. Groff wasn't going to die in a stinking Venusian jungle while his business went to pieces. No, sir.

A group of Venusian women, blue, tall, their pendulous breasts flapping below their waists, their long legs stamping on the ground in a regulated, hesitating rhythm, danced into the clearing. Groff watched them pass.

Somewhere, the tribe was assembling, he guessed. And then it would be all over. Unless he did something and did it fast.

*But what could he do?* He stared disconsolately at the small knife in his hand. Then he stooped to the peephole he'd cut and looked out across the clearing again, first at one hut and then the other. The back of the huts faced the back of his, their openings facing the jungle. Beyond the jungle was the rocketport.

Groff began to sweat profusely. He

wiped the back of a clammy hand across his forehead and swallowed hard. Yes, there was a way to get to the jungle.

huts, and sliced his way in through the back. He could go out the front way into the jungle. Yes, he could definitely make the jungle. It would have to be done rapidly. First, slice the back wall of his hut. Next, run to one of the other huts and slice that wall. Then, out through the front into the jungle.

Up to now, he hadn't once thought of rescuing the women.

**N**OW the thought came to his mind and a smile slowly crossed his face. What better way, he thought, to become sole owner of the business? An accident, that was all. A terrible accident. *My wife and mother, you know, slain by a primitive tribe on Venus. It was terrible, terrible. I barely escaped with my life.*

He chuckled to himself, feeling no guilt at his decision. But there was a catch.

One of the women, at least, would know that he was planning an escape. Whichever hut he slashed into across the clearing, its occupant would want to go with him.

Then it was Mother or Anne. Which one?

He faced the problem squarely, and his mind rejected the thought of rescuing either of them. Why should he be burdened with a woman

on the long trip back to the rocket-port? Whose idea had it been in the first place to come to this stinking, steaming planet?

But the necessity of taking at least one of the women along presented itself again. He had to go into one of the huts across the clearing. And therefore, he had to take either Mother or Anne with him.

Which one, he wondered? Which one?

He peeped out through the small slash again. It would be a simple matter. The guards between the huts were standing idly, talking, possibly unworried about their women captives.

He straightened up, backed away from the slit.

"Guard!" he shouted.

The tall Venusian swung back the flap to the hut

"Yes?"

"How much longer do I have?"

"The Dealer grows impatient?"

"Don't give me any of your god-damned lip."

"My humblest apologies, Mr. Groff."

"And none of your sarcasm, either."

"What is it you wish then?" the Venusian asked. His hand tightened on the long spear he held. Groff's eyes flew to the sharp tip, the tapering lines of the shaft. A man could throw that spear with deadly accuracy. He shuddered at the thought.

"How long do I have?" he asked

again.

"It will be soon," the Venusian said.

"How long?"

"Fifteen minutes, as Terrans measure time.

"What happens?" Groff asked.

"You really want 'to know?"

"Yes."

"**THERE** will be a procession to

A your hut. The chief will lead the procession. There will be women dancing, and men with spears. They will lead you from the hut to the sacrificial altar."

"What then?" Groff had to know. His plan depended on theirs.

"Why not wait and see?" the Venusian replied.

"Come on, come on."

"At the altar, your head will be chopped from your rotten body '

"And the women?"

"They will follow you. First, the one who is your wife. Then the old one."

"You'd behead women?"

"I understand this is humane in comparison to the treatment given Venusian women on Earth."

"But Venusian women are. . . ."

"Yes?"

"None of your business. Get the hell out of here."

"Still the proud Terran?" The Venusian laughed and stepped out of the hut.

"And pull down that flap," Groff ordered.



"As you will," the Venusian said.

In the distance, Groff heard the drum beat grow louder.

It would have to be Anne, he thought. After all, she is my wife.

And then he thought of Mother. She had raised him, hadn't she?

And then he realized he was reasoning along the wrong lines. If he had to take one of them with him, he'd take the most valuable one. Which of the two women meant most to the business? Anne was coldly efficient, a charming hostess when there were buyers to entertain. But Mother was older, wiser, capable of swinging shrewd deals where Anne would have blundered.

He chuckled silently to himself. There would be only one sacrifice today.

Anne.

**H**E made the decision quickly, with a slight twinge of remorse. But then he thought of the many Terran women he'd admired since marrying Anne, and the prospect of finding a new wife appealed to him. Unaccountably, he felt somewhat excited. He grinned in the semi-darkness of the hut and waited.

The voices grew nearer, louder, reaching out to him in exultant frenzy. Death, they chanted. Death, death, death, death.

Perhaps, once in the jungle, Mother could be disposed of, too. It would be simple. An old woman in the jungle. And then the business

would be his, and he would be free. Free!

He chuckled again as he thought of how he was going to cheat the Venusians. Savages. Unthinking animals. Like the fly he'd swung at. One and the same. The Venusians and their pesty insects. Alike.

The wail came stronger now, and the drum beat was faster. Feet thudded against the ground in horrible cadence. Death, they stamped. Death, they wailed. Death, they beat.

He opened the pocket knife with trembling fingers, jabbed it into the fiber, and slashed down the length of the hut.

Light burst into the hut as he spread the fiber and stepped through into the clearing.

He glanced to the right and to the left. Nothing had . . . but yes, something had changed! Standing between the two huts, his back to Groff, stood one sentry where there had previously been two.

Groff felt momentary surprise, and then panic gripped him as he forgot which hut was Mother's.

And then he was overwhelmed with the pressing desire to save just one person: himself. Mother, Anne, it didn't matter. He needed a hut, any hut, for protection. He'd run to the closest one, take whichever woman happened to be in it, and dart into the jungle.

The procession would be reaching his hut now. They would be performing their silly rites with the

Venusian guard outside. The insolent dog.

He glanced briefly at the lone sentry across the clearing, and broke into a run.

He stumbled to his knees, cutting himself on a sharp, thorny weed. He scrambled to his feet, fear gripping his heart, the blood pounding in his ears. Sweat stood out on his brow in trembling, round globlets. He was tempted to break for the jungle without stopping for the protection of the hut. Reason returned, cold and demanding, and he turned his back to the sentry and sprinted for the nearest hut. The distance seemed to enlarge itself as his legs beat into the vegetation underfoot.

He was breathless when he reached the hut. He stabbed the knife furiously into the thick fiber. The blade glanced off, and he made another desperate thrust. This time the blade sank into the fiber and he slashed down the length of the hut, stepping inside quickly.

"Anne," he whispered, his eyes trying to adjust to the darkness. "Mother."

There was no answer.

A cold wave of apprehension shivered up his spine.

"Anne? Mother?" he called a little louder.

As if in answer, two screams echoed in the nearby jungle, close together, so close they could have

been only one woman screaming.

**T**HE screams burned into his mind and he stood alone in the darkness, puzzled for a moment, clutching the small pocketknife tightly. And then awareness tapped at his mind, insistent, revealing.

"They've gone!" he shouted to the fiber walls. "They've, gone without me. The dirty, rotten, double . . ."

He ran to the opening. The sentry stood there, blocking the way to the jungle.

He slashed at the Venusian's face with the pocketknife. The Venusian backed away as the screams sounded from the jungle again. High feminine screams.

Groff's eyes widened and he slashed again at the Venusian.

"Without me, without me," he screamed. "They tried to escape without me." His voice broke and he threw himself to the ground, his body wrenched with overwhelming sobs.

The Venusian who had followed the women into the jungle brought back their heads.

Groff stared at them through hateful eyes as he kneeled at the altar, his hands bound behind him.

"Doublecrossers," he muttered. "Dirty, rotten . . ."

And then the axe fell.

— S. A. LOMBINO

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