

The Drop

By JOHN CHRISTOPHER

Certainly the cheapest way to get where you want to go is to be deported. And there are times when it proves the only possible way!

Illustrated by EMSH

WATER was always short between planets, even on a ship like the *Ironrod*, so my first goal in Forbeston on Mars was always the pool. I stripped down to trunks, ultraviolet checked, and plunged out into the green-tinted water. After blowing around a while, I lay back and floated. Above, beyond the almost invisible protective dome, there was the purple velvet of the Martian sky, flecked, nova that the Sun was low on the horizon, with the larger stars. One of them, unwinking and tremendous, was green—Earth, of course.

From the pool to the club; the usual routine. The Senior Officers' Club was on the corner of 49th and X, just across from the Department of Commerce building. I had belonged to it two years now, and at 34 was no longer the youngest member. A prodigy of 31 had got his master's ticket two or three months before.

I checked in, and from his little cubbyhole Steve recognized me which was certainly an honor. He brought my mail down from it: box: half a dozen bills, two vocoletters from a distant cousin, and a pile of advertising voco-flips.

Steve said: "Where've you been, Captain Newsam?"

The individual naming was another part of his technique. I had noticed that people he really had known for years he just called "Captain," "Commodore," or whatever it was.

"Venus to Mercury run," I told him. "Clarke's Point, Karsville, Mordecai—the usual."

"You get around," he said. "I stick here."

I'd heard the complaint from him before, and also from others in Forbeston and at other landfalls. They mostly looked contented enough, though.

"One place is like another," I told him tiredly.

"Yes," he said. "I've heard that. What you're used to, I figure. Going in to eat?"

"Directly." I dropped the vocofflips in a disposal chute. "Do something for me, Steve."

"Any old thing. What is it?"

"Check me Captain Gains."

He didn't hesitate long, but I'm used to observing small actions and probing them—I did a thesis on behavior for my diploma. I saw Steve's eyes flicker, and the involuntary movement of his hands.

He said: "I'll check him, Captain. I haven't seen him around much lately."

"How lately?" I asked quietly.

He was smooth again now. "Well, you know how it is. With serving officers, you don't always know whether they're here or away. Even when they're at Forbeston, they don't always come into the club. Hunting trips and such."

"Your memory's not bad, Steve. Just when did you last see him?"

He pretended to consider. "Might be two months. How long you been gone?"

"Just over two months."

"Yes, I'd say that's about it." "Thanks. Check him for me all the same. Check him all over. I'm going in to eat."

I FOUND an empty table by the window, and ordered. This part of the club overlooked the

playground of the Forbeston Junior School. I sat eating and watching the generation that would be prepared to take over when I had completed my twenty years in space and was ready to retire to that plantation up in the hills. I didn't notice when someone came up to the table. He tapped the back of my chair.

"Mind if I join you?"

It was Matthews, from the *Firelike*. I had run into him at various times, in various places, and liked him well enough. I nodded, and he sat down.

"Just in?"

"Three hours."

He nodded. "Been in over a week myself. We're on the Uranus trip now. That's a rough job I'll be glad to see the end of. We lost the *Steelback* on our last run. It's a God-forsaken stretch of sky."

"One place is like another," I said. It was the conventional phrase.

Matthews glanced at me. "Glad you think so."

"What else?"

"People get ideas," he said vaguely. "Do you go near the Earth at all on your present run?"

"The Moon. Clarke's Point. Why?"

"We used to hit Tycho. They've got a telescope there that's pretty good. I used to get into the observatory. You can make out some small groups of buildings on Earth when the weather's right."

The conversation was becoming embarrassing. To mention Earth at all was bad enough; to speak of "weather" was something worse. I looked at Matthews. He seemed normal, but I thought I detected a watchfulness behind the placidity of his expression.

I said deliberately: "I've never given it a thought."

"Sometimes people get to acting peculiar. We had a second officer with us three or four years back. He got an idea in his head that the Earth was raising a battle fleet. He used to spend his off-duty time at the lookout screen watching for the enemy cruisers approaching."

I laughed. "What did they do with him?"

"Gave him the drop. I guess he knows better by now."

"If he's still alive."

Matthews paused for a moment. "Have you ever wondered why we drop the misfits back to Earth?"

I looked at him again. "What is there to think about? The reason's obvious enough. Since the ruling was made against prefrontal leucotomy, it's the only alternative to snuffing them out, unless they are kept in institutions at our expense."

He drained his coffee. "I've known some to say that we should never have abandoned Earth. It's richer in natural resources than all the planets together."

I added: "And populated to the tune of around a billion savages. We couldn't dispose of that lot, and we couldn't avoid being contaminated if we had to live among them. The reason our kind came to the planets was to get away from them, to be able to develop our superior civilization in peace and without interruption. We've got the Sirius project under way. In a couple of centuries we may be in a different solar system altogether."

"Or we may not," Matthews corrected. "There have been quite a few earlier projects, starting with the Proxima Centauri project. That was two hundred years ago."

"You sound pessimistic."

"It's the Uranus trip," he said. He grinned. "Forget it. One place is like another. Doing anything tonight?"

"Nothing much. Looking a friend up."

"Yes," he said. "I thought you might be."

The remark was, I felt, an enigmatic one. He left without waiting for me to ask him to clarify it.

I PASSED Steve on the way out.

"Any luck with Captain Gains?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"Forget it then. I'm going along to his place. There'll be a message, even if he isn't there."

Steve nodded. As I went out, he flicked the vidiphone switch in front of him.

Larry's bubble was seven or eight kilometers outside the city. I took my own car to the West Lock and picked up a sand tracker there. The Sun had set when I got outside the city bubble, but Phobos was up and I didn't need to use the main lights to see my way. I made a good twenty and in about a quarter hour was under the ridge on which the bubble that surrounded Larry's place was fixed. I could see it shimmering in the full moonlight, but there was no sign of a light within.

I parked the tracker outside and went in. The lock was automatic; as it closed behind me, the main lights inside went on. Larry's shack was in front of me. I pushed the door open. The living room looked reasonably tidy, but there was dust 'that showed no one had been in it for some weeks, at least. I went straight across to the vidiphone and pressed the message button. The screen stayed blank.

This was unusual. There should have been some kind of message. I set out to hunt through the shack for some kind of clue, but there was nothing.

Larry Gains and I had gone through college at Tycho together, and we graduated together. Our first four years in space we were on the same boat—the *Graylance* on the Asteroid Circuit — and after the inevitable split came with my posting to the *Ironrod*, we still saw as much of each other as our wanderings permitted. Fortunately, both boats were based on Forbeston.

Six months before, the old *Graylance* had made its last loop round the Belt; a chunk of rock weighing twenty tons or more had torn her open. Larry had been one of the survivors, but with injuries enough to ground him for at least a year. It was then he had had this shack put up. It was a handy base from which to hunt rocktrotters. I had stayed out there with him on a couple of leaves. Now the place was deserted.

Might he have been seconded back into space on a special board? But there would have been a message, either at the club or here. An extended trip, up onto the Kayser Plateau? Then again there should have been a message; but he might not have expected to be away for long. That seemed the only possible solution.

But there was the thick dust, and there had been that funny look in Steve's eye when I had mentioned Larry.

I began hunting aimlessly around the hut again. A tape of the Forbeston edition of the *Tycho Capsule*. I clipped it into the screen. 24-7. That made it just over two months old.

I heard the door open behind me and turned around, half expecting to see Larry himself there. But instead there were two men in Medical uniform. One of them stepped forward.

"Captain Newsam?" He framed it as a question, but it was a statement. I knew that and nodded.

"Just a checkup," he said.

"I had a checkup. This afternoon. When I got in with the *Ironrod*."

"That's all right," the Medic said. "We won't keep you long."

"You won't keep me at all, I've had my checkup. You can reach me through Venus Base, if you're interested."

I moved to pass them. The one who had been talking didn't do anything. The other raised his left hand and shook it gently. Venusian arodote, of course, and they themselves immunized against it. I saw the golden dust shake out toward me and had time to run two or three paces before my muscles locked and everything went black.

WHEN I awoke, I was in the Medical building, back in Forbeston. My muscles were still rigid. I was on a stretcher underneath the Verifier. The two Medics were there, and a Medic Captain. He was a little tubby man with ginger whiskers and a toothy grin.

He said: "Sorry about the informality. Just a routine. We did have a warrant, incidentally, in case you should feel like registering a complaint against us."

Being underneath the Verifier explained the arodate, but it didn't explain why. I thought of saying something and then decided to keep my mouth shut. The electrodes were clamped neatly behind my ears. The globe of the Verifier glowed its normal pink.

The Captain said: "My name's Pinski. Now, Captain Newsam, you are Chief Navigator of the *Ironrod*, on the Venus-Mercury run?"

"Yes."

"Landfall five hours back?"

"If I've been out half an hour, yes."

The questions continued. For the most part, they were routine.

Pinski kept one eye on the Verifier globe. Then he started tossing in a few more unusual ones.

"Ever been among the outer planets?"

"Beyond the Asteroids? No."

"Do you know Commander Leopold?"

"No."

"Commander Stark?"

"No."

"What are your views on prefrontal leucotomy?"

"Never thought about it. It's not used now, is it? They give them the drop."

"What do you think of the Sirius project?"

"Not much interested."

"Do you ever dream of wide stretches of water?"

"Not since I was a boy."

I had no reason to fear anything from the Verifier, so it didn't make me nervous. The globe stayed pink as the questions went on.

Pinski said: "What were you doing at the place where the Medics found you?"

"I was looking for Captain Gains. Perhaps you'll tell me where I can get hold of him."

Pinski grinned. "I'm not under the Verifier, Captain Newsam." He stepped back. "I think that's all okay. Sorry to have bothered, you. In two or three minutes you'll be able to get around again. Call in the Bar on your way out. Third on the right along the corridor. I'll be in there. The drinks are on Medical."

I found him all right. He was sitting at a table with two drinks in front of him. Someone must have told him I drank sloe gin. I sat down at the empty chair.

"Glad to make your acquaintance in a more formal manner, Captain Newsam," Pinski said. "Have a drink."

I took it. "Now just why—"

He lifted one hand. "To get things quite straight, I can give you no information as to the reason for your being picked up and verified."

"Right," I said. "Then do you know where I can find Gains?"

He hesitated briefly. "The answer must be no."

I swallowed the drink. "Thank you very much for all the hospitality. Good night, Captain Pinski."

"A piece of strictly medical advice," he said. "Go back to bed and have a good night's sleep."

I called back, "Thanks!" I was halfway to the door.

VORBESTON, like all landfalls on the interplanetary routes, has its less respectable side. I drove down to the East side and parked the car at the corner of 90th and J. The Persepolis is a small club at the far end of 90th. I'm known there, but every time I go I feel less and less like boasting of it. I had a couple of sloe gins at the Bar and then went up to the Saturn Room. Cynthia came at me from behind.

"Hello! Long time."

"Seems longer," I said. "Tell me, when was Larry in last?"

"Larry? I haven't seen him since you were both up here — nine, ten weeks ago. But I've been away on a trip up the Long Canal. Tell you what, I'll ask Sue."

"That'll be fine," I said.

She was gone two or three minutes. When she came back, she said: "No. He doesn't seem to have been around since then."

But she wasn't being spontaneous any longer; she was weighing her words. And she didn't seem at all curious as to what might have happened to him.

"I thought we were friends, Cynth," I said. "Come on, what is it?"

"What's what? I could do with a drink."

I dropped a note on the table. "Have this one on Larry. See you, Cynthia."

She caught me before I reached the door.

"I don't know, Jake. I honestly don't know. All I was told was that it was best not to inquire."

She was telling the truth now.

"Thanks," I said. "Good night, anyway."

"Where are you going?"

"There's only one place where I stand a chance of finding things out."

I was thinking about that as I went outside. The Terminal Office had tabs on all officers on the space routes. If Larry had not been reporting for his fortnightly medical boards, they would know, and they would certainly have checked to see what was happening. If there was something else wrong, they would know that, too.

I jumped into the car without thinking and released power.

Behind me, a familiar voice said: "You don't seem to have had any luck in finding your friend, Captain Newsam."

It was Matthews. His tall body was cramped into the back of the car.

"Good of you to join me," I said.

"I'd like you to drop in at my place. It's on 72nd."

"Is there anything at the end of it? Information?"

"A drink. Maybe information."

"Suits me," I told him, and headed there.

IT was a more luxurious apartment than I thought Matthews could have afforded. Four rooms, all well furnished. He set me down in a long chair in front of a glow-fire and brought me the drink. He had it right, too—sloe gin—but the fact that everyone knew my taste in liquor had ceased to worry me.

"Now," I said, "I want to know where Larry Gains is."

Matthews raised his eyebrows. "Gains? Ah, he must be this friend you didn't find."

I said wearily: "What information do you think I came here for?"

"I thought you came for the drink. No, don't go. If you try the Terminal Office at this time of night, you'll only get the clerk, who will tell you to come back in the morning. Finish your drink and have another. I understand you got picked up for verification earlier this evening."

"Yes."

"What sort of questions did they ask you?" I told him and he nodded. "Leopold . . . Stark . . . That's interesting."

"Just what is it all about?"

He paused. "That little talk we had this afternoon. Remember it?"

"More or less. You were talking about misfits."

Matthews looked straight at me. "Captain Larry Gains was classified as a misfit three weeks ago. He was dropped to Earth over a week ago. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"You're off your rocker yourself. Larry was perfectly sane when I saw him just over two months ago. It takes two boards three months apart for misfit classification."

"Not," Matthews said softly, "for classification 3-K."

"3-K? What in hell is that?"

"Organized activities against the State!"

"Larry? Don't be funny!"

"Tell me," Matthews said, "what do you know about the Earth?"

"Ordinary general knowledge. That when the Third Atomic War broke out on Earth, the colonies on the Moon and here on Mars declared their neutrality. The technical staffs on the Earth bases for the most part pulled out to join them; those that didn't presumably got submerged in the holocaust. The state of the war was followed by wireless until the last transmitter went off the air, marking the breakdown. The colonies concentrated on their own expansion — first, on the Moon and Mars; later, on Venus and with the outposts in the Asteroids, and on the moons of Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus. There was no point in going back to an Earth poisoned with radioactive gases, with a savage population rotted by radiation diseases. The obvious thing was to expand outward, toward other solar systems."

"And, of course," Matthews said, "there was the Protocol."

THE Protocol, I suppose, could be called the basis of our education—that the old and outworn should be put behind; that Man should go on to greater things, never turning back to the world of misery and wretchedness to which he had for so long been confined. There was a lot more, but that was the gist of it. Children learned it by heart.

"Yes, the Protocol," I said. "The Protocol rose naturally enough out of the circumstances."

"Out of the circumstances," Matthews agreed. "But circumstances change. The Protocol remains the same."

"Why shouldn't it?"

"Well, grubbing around from one artificial environment to another do you think that's the best existence men can have? Turning our backs on an unbelievably fruitful planet?"

"It's only a temporary phase. The Sirius project—"

"—is a failure," Matthews cut in. "We won't be told about that officially until a new project has been got going—another carrot in front of the donkey. But it's a failure. Two planets, neither one habitable or capable of being made habitable."

I said slowly: "Now perhaps you will tell me just what all this has to do with Larry Gains."

Matthews got up and walked across to the telescreen. He touched a small switch on the left-hand side, and the screen moved into patterns of whorls spreading out from the center. I recognized it for a watcher-alarm: if anyone were tapping the room, the whorls would be irregular and broken. Matthews came back and sat down again.

"Gains had a lot of time on his hands after his crackup. He got to thinking things over. He happened to meet someone in our group. To put it shortly, he joined us."

"Your group? Joined *you*? Who are *you*?"

"We represent a party whose objective is to overthrow the Protocol. We want to get back to Earth, to recolonize it and reclaim it from savagery. Gains came in with us."

"You're crazy! What makes I you think you know better than the Directorate? We're improving conditions on the planets every year. Why, the new bubble up the Long Canal takes in over forty square kilometers!"

"Bigger bubbles," Matthews said, "but always bubbles. Never the chance to live a natural life in natural surroundings."

"And Larry? You let him get caught?"

"It was bad luck."

"Bad luck?"

"He and another of our group had their conversation tapped. They were both taken. Fortunately, neither of them knew more than a couple of other people in the group, and those two people got away. We couldn't do anything for Gains and Bessemer. They were held strictly incommunicado."

"So he's really gone. You're sure they're not still holding him somewhere?"

"On some points our information is definite. They've been dropped all right. On the North American continent — that's the usual place they drop misfits."

SOMETHING had been worrying me all along, and suddenly I knew what it was.

I said warily: "Well, I've got the information I came in search of. Now I'm beginning to wonder why I

got it. I don't imagine you thought I would be a cinch for your organization just because Larry had been in it, did you? And yet you've told me a lot which you can't be in the habit of passing out casually. What's behind it?"

"Well, we haven't told you anything the Directorate doesn't know," Matthews said evenly. "Except that I'm in it, and I have my means of getting away; in any case, I'm expendable. But you're correct in thinking there was a reason. Gains was a good friend of yours."

"The best."

"He was a good man. We didn't want to lose him, and we'd like to get him back."

"Back? From *Earth*?"

"We have a small cruiser at our disposal—that is confidential and I've burned both your boats and ours by telling you—and we can get down to the Earth and back again. It isn't easy, and of course there can be no question of organizing search parties. But if someone else were dropped, with instructions for Gains and Bessemer as to a spot to go to to be picked up, all three could be taken off. We're lucky that misfits are always dropped in more or less the same area. It means finding them is made easier for us. It might be possible."

"What's known about conditions in that part of the planet?"

Matthews looked at me levelly. "Not a thing."

I paused. "All right, I'll go. How?"

Matthews smiled. "I thought you would. As for going—that's easy. You intended to drop in at the Terminal Office. Do that. If you are persistent, they'll inform you about Gains. After that, it's easy. You will be under automatic examination at the Office, and the shot of adrenalin you will take before you go over there will register. You will be pulled in on suspicion. Certain papers will have been planted in your things at the Club. From that point on, things will be straightforward. All we have to do is just hope that when they verify you again, they keep a reasonable distance from suspicion of what's really happening. I think they will. Verifiers aren't very good nowadays."

"Thanks," I said. "You seem to have everything well worked out. Just as a matter of interest, that remark about burning both my boats and yours—if I hadn't volunteered for this, what would you have done?"

"We were fairly sure of you," Matthews said. "But if we had been wrong . . ."

He turned his thumb down very regretfully.

I WAS surprised how quickly the proceedings were rushed through. The papers Matthews had had planted in my gear must have been very incriminating. I was transferred to the Moon, to Archimedes Crater, for the final decision, but it was cut-and-dried beforehand. Within a week of my conversation with Matthews, I was standing in front of the Board, listening to myself being pronounced a misfit and condemned to the drop back to Earth. I was marched out.

Someone was waiting for me in an anteroom. It was Pinski.

I said: "I've been verified three times in a week. I'd never have thought you would have needed any more."

Pinski smiled. "This time it's different. You have a compulsory total recall to go through."

"You can't do that. Regulation 75 states that no one can be put under a form of interrogation that his conscious mind cannot observe. The Verifier is the limit."

"You know the regulation," Pinski said, "ex-Captain Newsam. Unfortunately, they don't apply to you any longer. The State has cast you out. This won't take very long."

So much, I thought grimly, for Matthews' sources of information. There was nothing I could do now. I could resist, but that would only mean being put into an arodote paralysis.

"Sit down," Pinski said.

The little silver balls began to revolve; the mirrors gleamed with strange lights. I heard Pinski's voice, close at first, and then from greater and greater echoing distances.

After an indefinite space of time, Pinski's voice again:

"Wake up, Newsam. Wake up."

I raised my head, my mind clear. Pinski was looking at me commiseratingly.

"You've had tough luck," he observed. "They certainly roped you in."

I wasn't sure how much they had got from me, though I guessed it would be everything.

"I'm not complaining," I said.

"There's no provision for reclassifying misfits, I'm sorry to say. If there were, we might have saved you. As it is . . . you can take the drop in the satisfaction that you've done the Directorate a final service. We didn't know about that cruiser." He paused. "The boat's outside. Good luck, Newsam."

We shook hands. The guards took me outside, through the lock to the Main Ramp. I had a last look at Archimedes, spread squatly around under its glistening bubble, and went through into the boat — a light coracle.

During the takeoff and the three-hour journey toward Earth, I had time to consider things. Matthews' little scheme had been nicely blown up. When the cruiser arrived at the rendezvous that had been arranged, there would be a handy battle fleet waiting for it. What fools they were, anyway, to attempt to outwit the Directorate! As for resettling the Earth . . . I had the job of doing it on my own now, with the aid of Larry and this fellow Bessemer—if I could find them at all.

THE coracle dropped into an orbit, and they made the final arrangements for the drop. Matthews had been right, at least, in saying that they didn't drop misfits at random. The whole thing was meticulously calculated. When they finished, I was fitted up in the dropsuit.

The captain of the coracle, a small, morose fellow, gave me instructions.

"The five retard jets will fire automatically. After the fifth, the first parachute comes into action, and ten seconds later the second." He grinned sadly. "If nothing has happened after fifteen seconds, you'll know something has gone wrong in the packing. You'll smash flat in that case, killed outright. You'll feel no pain whatever."

"Thanks," I said.

"We've never had any complaints before, but then I suppose we wouldn't. The spot you are to hit is the place we always send misfits. Out of the generosity of the Directorate, it's good hunting ground and, if you survive long enough, you can probably even farm it. Within easy reach of the ocean, too. Used to be called New Hampshire."

"Any provisions?"

"Concentrated food for a week. And a Klaberg pistol with a hundred rounds. I'd look after them if I were you—which I'm glad I'm not, incidentally."

They eased me out of the lock with stopwatch timing. I didn't wait for the airblast to push me clear; I sprang off myself. As I did so, the clearance jet pushed behind me. Tumbling over and over in space, I saw the coracle shrink behind me like a deflating balloon. I was on my own now with a vengeance.

Just after the fifth retard jet, a thought struck me and sent a prickling apprehension down my spine. Matthews had failed to anticipate the compulsory total recall. What if he and his group were wrong in another minor detail? There might have been more than a gruesome jest in the Captain's remark about the second parachute not opening.

Who would know if the drop ended in death? Might not the Directorate feel that so swift an end was only merciful?

The first parachute opened with a jerk, and I began counting, slowly, in my head.

At fifteen, I knew I was right. I was plunging down faster and faster through the thin air. Death was below me.

At twenty, with a heaving jerk, the main parachute opened. The Captain's sense of humor had been even more gruesome than I imagined.

Still, untrained as I was for this kind of thing, I hit the ground hard. Rolling over, I hit my head against something and I went out, thinking, just as I blanked, that I was getting tired of being unconscious.

BEFORE my eyes opened again, I heard Larry's voice. I thought of it as a hallucination, but it was a remarkably persistent one.

"Come on, Jake, you're all right now."

I opened my eyes. It *was* Larry. Stranger yet, there were half a dozen people behind him. And two of them were women.

"I was to have found you and taken you to a place up on the coast, for a cruiser to take us off," I told him miserably. "But the Directorate knows about it. The whole thing's a trap."

Larry laughed. "It's a trap, sure enough, but the Directorate hasn't got it quite right."

"I'm serious," I insisted. "They got it from me under total recall."

"We knew that," Larry said. "Matthews couldn't warn you of it, of course, or the warning itself would have shown up. So there had to be another story—one that would convince you, and throw the Directorate off the scent at the same time."

"How do you know all this?"

"We haven't got a cruiser," Larry said. "We haven't even got a coracle. But we do have wireless communication. We were waiting for you. We always are waiting for misfits."

"We?" I asked.

"We have a nice little colony here. Fifty-eight of us, and still growing."

They had been helping me out of the dropsuit. I felt a breeze on my face, and the smell, the indescribable smell, of natural air laden with a dozen different scents of flowers and grass and trees. Larry was watching me.

"It's really something, isn't it?"

"What about the savages?"

He shrugged. "There may be some to the west. We haven't had time to look properly. But this country's clear."

There was soft turf beneath my feet.

"But *why*?" I asked. "The Directorate must know what this planet is like. Why don't they move back, instead of fumbling around with interstellar projects that never get anywhere?"

"The Directorate is an organization designed to rule a set of neatly controlled artificial cities—a state spread out over nearly a dozen planets and satellites, but an entirely urban state. If men came back to Earth, came back to farm the land, living in villages as we do now, the Directorate's power would be broken. If you want any more reasons, you just don't know enough about human nature."

"And can we beat them?" I asked him. "Can we defy them under their very noses? With the Tycho telescope trained on the Earth, inspecting everything?"

"We don't want to beat anybody," Larry said. "We're satisfied to escape notice. The village is made of small, scattered buildings, and even then they are camouflaged to make them harder to spot. We farm our land, and our agents on the planets pick our recruits."

"Matthews," I exclaimed suddenly. "Poor devil—he's still at Forbeston!"

"You'll see him shortly. He's due to be arrested within three months."

He laughed and the rest of the small party with him. I saw the joke myself, and began laughing almost uncontrollably. Larry put an arm on my shoulder.

"Take a look at that," he said. "Take a good look."

I looked and saw the sunset. It was glowing through clean, pure air instead of a bubble or a viewport.

—JOHN CHRISTOPHER