

THE WAITABITS

Eric Frank Russell

Science-fiction authors, however various their output, are not chameleons. To be sure, in a good cause they can alter certain parts of their basic colouration with marvellous flexibility and skill; but the essentials are unchanging - and recurrently we find in their work a whole-hearted reversion to whatever their true blue may happen to be. With Eric Frank Russell this hue is a hatred of bullying, of brass-hats, of bureaucrats and of do-gooders who somehow always seem to end up doing more good to themselves than to anyone else; and he has added enormously to the gaiety of nations by envisaging sundry forms of natural immunity to such plagues. At first sight, Russell's antibodies to the eternal take-over bid may seem irrelevant for the reason that they are fanciful, and therefore not, for us-here-now, by any stretch of the imagination practical politics; we, after all, are not the fortunate inhabitants of Eterna. Jet we can, and do, delight with Russell in their oblivious bloodless victory; and in doing so we adopt, or confirm, a moral attitude which would like to believe in the indefeasibility of all harmless underdogs, always and everywhere.

He strode toward the Assignment Office with quiet confidence born of long service, much experience and high rank. Once upon a time a peremptory call to this department had made him slightly edgy exactly as it unnerved the fresh-faced juniors today. But that had been long, long ago. He was grey-haired now, with wrinkles around the corners of his eyes, silver oak-leaves on his epaulettes. He had heard enough, seen enough and learned enough to have lost the capacity for surprise.

Markham was going to hand him a tough one. That was Markham's job: to rake through a mess of laconic, garbled, distorted or eccentric reports, pick out the obvious problems and dump them squarely in the laps of whoever happened to be hanging around and was considered suitable to solve them. One thing could be said in favour of this technique: its victims often were bothered, bedevilled or busted but at least they were never bored. The problems were not commonplace, the solutions sometimes fantastic.

The door detected his body-heat as he approached, swung open with

silent efficiency. He went through, took a chair, gazed phlegmatically at the heavy man behind the desk.

"Ah, Commodore Leigh," said Markham pleasantly. He shuffled some papers, got them in order, surveyed the top one. "I am informed that the *Thunderer's* overhaul is complete, the crew has been recalled and everything is ready for flight."

"That is correct."

"Well now, I have a task for you." Markham put on the sinister smile that invariably accompanied such an announcement. After years of reading what had followed in due course, he had conceived the notion that all tasks were funny except when they involved a massacre. "You are ready and eager for another trip, I trust?"

"I am always ready," said Commodore Leigh. He had outgrown the eagerness two decades back.

"I have here the latest consignment of scout reports," Markham went on. He made a disparaging gesture. "You know what they're like. Condensed to the minimum and in some instances slightly mad. Happy the day when we receive a report detailed with scientific thoroughness."

"You'll get that only from a trained mind," Leigh commented. "Scouts are not scientists. They are oddities who like roaming the loneliest reaches of space with no company but their own. Pilot-trained hoboes willing to wander at large, take brief looks and tell what they've seen. Such men are useful and necessary. Their shortcomings can be made up by those who follow them."

"Precisely," agreed Markham with suspicious promptness. "So this is where we want you to do some following."

"What is it this time?"

"We have Boydell's latest report beamed through several relay stations. He is way out in the wilds." Markham tapped the paper irritably. "This particular scout is known as Gabby Boydell because he is anything but that. He uses words as if they cost him fifty dollars apiece."

"Meaning he hasn't said enough?" asked Leigh smiling.

"Enough? He's told us next to nothing!" He let go an emphatic snort. "Eighteen planets scattered all over the shop and not a dozen words about each. He discovers a grand total of eighteen planets in seven previously unexplored systems and the result doesn't occupy half a page."

"Going at that speed, he'd not have time for much more," Leigh

ventured. "You can't write a book about a world without taking up residence for a while."

"That may be. But these crackpot scouts could do better and it's time they were told as much." He pointed an accusative finger. "Look at this item. The eleventh planet he visited. He has named it Pulok for some reason that is probably crazy. His report employs exactly four words: 'Take it and welcome.' What do you make of that?"

Leigh thought it over carefully. "It is inhabitable by humankind. There is no native opposition, nothing to prevent us grabbing it. But in his opinion it isn't worth possessing."

"Why, man, why?"

"I don't know, not having been there."

"Boydell knows the reason." Markham fumed a bit and went on, "And he ought to state it in precise, understandable terms. He shouldn't leave a mystery hanging in mid-air like a bad smell from nowhere."

"He will explain it when he returns to his sector headquarters, surely?"

"That may be months hence, perhaps years, especially if he manages to pick up fuel and replacement tubes from distant outposts. Those scouts keep to no schedule. They get there when they arrive, return when they come back. Galactic gypsies, that's how they like to think of themselves."

"They've chosen freedom," Leigh offered.

Ignoring that remark, Markham continued, "Anyway, the problem of Pulok is a relatively minor one to be handled by somebody else. Ill give it to one of the juniors; it will do something for his education. The more complicated and possibly dangerous tangles are for older ones such as yourself."

"Tell me the worst."

"Planet fourteen on Boydell's list. He has given it the name of Eterna and don't ask me why. The code formula he's registered against it reads O/1.1/D.7. That means we can live on it without special equipment, it's an Earth-type planet of one-tenth greater mass and is inhabited by an intelligent life form of different but theoretically equal mental power. He calls this life form the Waitabits. Apparently he tags every thing and everybody with the first name that pops into his mind."

"What information does he offer concerning them?"

"Hah!" said Markham, pulling a face. "One word. Just one word." He paused, then voiced it. "Unconquerable."

"Eh?"

"Unconquerable," repeated Markham. "A word that should not exist in scout-language." At that point he became riled, jerked open a drawer, extracted a notebook and consulted it. "Up to last survey, four hundred and twenty-one planets had been discovered, charted, recorded. One hundred and thirty-seven found suitable for human life and large or small groups of settlers placed thereon. Sixty-two alien life forms mastered during the process." He shoved the book back. "And out there in the dark a wandering tramp picks a word like unconquerable."

"I can think of only one reason that makes sense," suggested Leigh.

"What is that?"

"Perhaps they really are unconquerable."

Markham refused to credit his ears. "If that is a joke, commodore, it's in bad taste. Some might think it seditious."

"Well, can you think up another and better reason?"

"I don't have to. I'm sending you there to find out. The Grand Council asked specifically that you be given this task. They feel that if any yet unknown aliens have enough to put the wind up one of our own scouts then we must learn more about them. And the sooner the better."

"There's nothing to show that they actually frightened Boy-dell. If they had done so he'd have said more, much more. A genuine first-class menace is the one thing that would make him talk his head off."

"That's purely hypothetical," said Markham. "We don't want guesses. We want facts."

"All right."

"Consider a few other facts," Markham added. "So far no other life form has been able to resist us. I don't see how any can. Any creatures with an atom of sense soon see which side their bread is buttered, if they eat bread and like butter. If we step in and provide the brains while they furnish the labour, with mutual benefit to both parties, the aliens are soon doing too well for themselves to complain. If a bunch of Sirian Wimpots slave all day in our mines, then fly in their own helicopters back to homes such as their forefathers never owned, what have they got to cry about?"

"I fail to see the purpose of the lecture," said Leigh, dryly.

"I'm emphasizing that by force, ruthlessness, argument, persuasion, precept and example, appeal to common sense or any other tactic appropriate to the circumstances we can master and exploit any life-form

in the cosmos. That's the theory we've been using for a thousand years-and it works. We've proved that it works. We have *made* it work. The first time we let go of it and admit defeat we're finished. We go down and disappear along with all the other vanished hordes." He swept his papers to one side. "A scout has admitted defeat. He must be a lunatic. But lunatics can create alarm. The Grand Council is alarmed."

"So I am required to seek soothing syrup?"

"Yes. See Parrish in the charting department. He'll give you the co-ordinates of this Eterna dump." Standing up, he offered a plump hand. "A smooth trip and a safe landing, commodore."

"Thanks."

The *Thunderer* hung in a balanced orbit while its officers examined the new world floating below. This was Eterna, second planet of a sun very much like Sol. Altogether there were four planets in this particular family but only the second harboured life in any detectable form.

Eterna was a pretty sight, a great blue-green ball shining in the blaze of full day. Its land masses were larger than Earth's, its oceans smaller. No vast mountain ranges were visible, no snow-caps either, yet lakes and rivers were numerous. Watersheds lay in heavily forested hills that crinkled much of the surface and left few flat areas. Cloud-banks lay over the land like scatterings of cotton-wool, small in area, widely dispersed, but thick, heavy and great in number.

Through powerful glasses towns and villages could be seen, most of them placed in clearings around which armies of trees marched down to the rivers. There were also narrow, winding roads and thin, spidery bridges. Between the larger towns ran vague lines that might be railroad tracks but lacked sufficient detail at such a distance to reveal their true purpose.

Pascoe, the sociologist, put down his binoculars and said, "Assuming that the night side is very similar, I estimate their total strength at no more than one hundred millions. I base that on other planetary surveys. When you've counted the number of peas per bottle in a large and varied collection of them you develop the ability to make reasonably accurate guesses. One hundred millions at most."

"That's low for a planet of this size and fertility, isn't it?" asked Commodore Leigh.

"Not necessarily. There were no more of us in the far past. Look at us

now."

"The implication is that these Waitabits are comparatively a young species?"

"Could be. On the other hand they may be old and senile and dying out fast. Or perhaps they're slow breeders and their natural increase isn't much."

"I don't go for the dying out theory," put in Walterson, the geophysicist. "If once they were far bigger than they are today, the planet should still show signs of it. A huge inheritance leaves its mark for centuries. Remember that city-site we found on Hercules? Even the natives didn't know of it, the markings being visible only from a considerable altitude."

They used their glasses again, sought for faint lines of orderliness in wide tracts of forest. There were none to be seen.

"Short in history or slow to breed," declared Pascoe. "That's my opinion for what it's worth."

Frowning down at the blue-green ball, Leigh said heavily. "By our space-experienced standards a world of one hundred millions is weak. It's certainly not sufficiently formidable to turn a hair on a minor bureaucrat, much less worry the Council itself." He turned, lifted a questioning eyebrow as a signals-runner came up to him. "Well?"

"Relay from Sector Nine, sir."

Unfolding the message, he found it duly decoded, read it aloud.

19.12. ex Terra. Defence H.Q. to C.O. battleship Thunderer. Light cruiser Flame, Lieut. Mallory commanding, assigned your area for Pulok check. Twentieth heavy cruiser squadron readied Arlington port, Sector Nine. This authorizes you to call upon and assume command of said forces in emergency only. Rathbone. Com. Op. Dep. D.H.Q. Terra.

He filed the message, shrugged and said, "Seems they're taking few chances."

"Yes," agreed Pascoe, a trifle sardonically. "So they've assembled reinforcements near enough to be summoned but too far away to do us any good. The *Flame* could not get here in less than seven weeks. The ships at Arlington couldn't make it in under nineteen or twenty weeks even at super-drive. By then we could be cooked, eaten, burped and forgotten."

"I don't see what all this jumpiness is about," complained Walterson. "That scout Boydell went in and came out without losing his edible parts, didn't he? Where one can go a million can follow."

Pascoe regarded him with pity. "A solitary invader rarely frightens anyone. That's where scouts have an advantage. Consider Remy 11. Fellow name of James finds it, lands, makes friends, becomes a blood brother, finally takes off amid a huzzah of fond farewells. Next, down comes three shiploads of men, uniforms and guns. That's too much for the locals to stomach. In Remitan psychology the number represents critical mass. Result: the Remy war which - if you remember your history-was long, costly and bitter."

"I remember history well enough to recall that in those primitive days they used blockheaded space-troopers and had no specially trained contact-men," Walterson retorted.

"Nevertheless, what has happened before can happen again."

"That's my problem right now," Leigh interjected. "Will the sight of a battleship a mile in length cause them to start something that can't be finished without considerable slaughter? Had I better risk the crew of a lifeboat in an effort to smooth the introduction? I wish Boydell had been a little more informative." He chewed his bottom lip with vexation, picked up the intercom phone, flipped the signals-room switch. "Any word from Boydell yet?"

"No, commodore," responded a voice. "Sector Nine doesn't think there will be any, either. They've just been through saying he doesn't answer their calls. They believe he's now out of range. Last trace they got of him showed him to be running beyond effective communication limits."

"All right." He dumped the phone, gazed through the port. "Seven hours we've waited. Nothing has come up to take a look at us. We can detect no signs of excitement down there. Therefore it's a safe bet that they have no ships, perhaps not even rudimentary aircraft. Neither do they keep organized watch on the sky. They're not advanced in our sense of the term."

"But they may be in some other sense," Pascoe observed.

"That is what I implied." Leigh made an impatient gesture. "We've hung within telescopic view long enough. If they are capable of formidable reaction, we should be grimly aware of it by now. I don't feel inclined to test the Waitabits at the expense of a few men in an unarmed lifeboat. We'll take the *Thunderer* itself down and hope they're sane enough not to go nuts."

Hastening forward to the main control-cabin he issued the necessary orders.

The landing place was atop a treeless bluff nine miles south of a large town. It was as good a site as any that could have been chosen. The settling of great tonnage over a mile-long area damaged nobody's property or crops, the ground was solid enough not to furrow under the ship's weight, the slight elevation gave a strategic advantage to the *Thunderer's* guns.

Despite its nearness the town was out of sight, being hidden by intervening hills. A narrow road ran through the valley but nothing moved thereon. Between the road and the base of the bluff lay double railroad tracks of about twenty-inch gauge with flat-topped rails of silvery metal. The rails had no spikes or ties and appeared to be held firmly in position by being sunk into long, unbroken ridges of concrete or some similar rock-like substance.

The *Thunderer* reposed, a long, black, ominous shape with all locks closed and gun-turrets open, while Leigh stared speculatively at the railroad and waited for the usual call from the metering lab. It came within short time. The phone rang, he answered it, heard Shallom speaking:

"The air is breathable, commodore."

"We knew that in advance. A scout sniffed it without dropping dead."

"Yes, commodore," agreed Shallom, patiently. "But you asked for an analysis."

"Of course. Because we don't know how long Boydell was here. Perhaps a day, perhaps a week. Whatever it was, it wasn't enough. He might have curled up his toes after a month or two. In his brief visit he'd have avoided any long-term accumulative effect. What we want to know is whether this atmosphere is safe for keeps."

"Quite safe, commodore. It's rather rich in ozone and argon but otherwise much like Earth's."

"Good. We'll open up and let the men stretch their legs."

"There's something else of interest," Shallom went on. "Preliminary observation time occupied seven hours and twenty-two minutes. Over that period the longitudinal shift of a selected equatorial point amounted to approximately three-tenths of a degree. That means this planet's period of axial rotation is roughly equivalent to an Earth-year. Its days and nights are each about six months long."

"Thanks, Shallom." He cut off without surprise, switched the intercom, gave orders to Bentley in the main engine room to operate the power

locks. Then he switched again to Lieutenant Harding, officer commanding ground forces, gave permission for one-quarter of his men to be let out for exercise providing they bore arms and did not stray beyond direct cover of the ship's guns.

That done, he swivelled his pneumatic chair to face the port, put his feet up with heels resting on a wall-ridge and quietly contemplated the alien landscape. Walterson and Pascoe mooched around the room in the restless manner of men waiting for a possibly burning fuse to reach a hypothetical gunpowder barrel.

Shallom phoned again, recited gravitational and magnetic field readings, went off. A few minutes later he came through once more with details of atmospheric humidity, barometric variations and radioactivity. Apparently he cared nothing for what might be brewing beyond the hills so long as it failed to register on his meters and screens. To his mind no real danger could exist without advertising itself through a needle-wagging or a fluorescent blip.

Outside, two hundred men scrambled noisily down the edge of the bluff, reached soft green sward that was not grass but something resembling short, heavily matted clover. There they kicked a ball around, wrestled, leapfrogged or were content to lie full length on the turf, look at the sky, enjoy the sun. A small group strolled half a mile to the silent railroad, inspected it, trod precariously along its rails with extended arms jerking and swaying in imitation of tightrope walkers.

Four of Shallom's staff went down, two of them carrying buckets and spades like kids making for the seashore. A third bore a bug-trap. The fourth had a scintilloscope. The first pair dug clover and dirt, hauled it up to the ship for analysis and bacteria-count. Bug-trap dumped his box, went to sleep beside it. Scintilloscope marched in a careful *zigzag* around the base of the bluff.

After two hours Harding's whistle recalled the outside lotus-eaters who responded with reluctance. They slouched back into the gigantic bottle that already had contained them so long. Another two hundred went out, played all the same tricks including the tightrope act on the rails.

By the time that gang had enjoyed its ration of liberty the mess bells announced a main meal ready. The crew ate, after which Number One Watch took to its berths and the deepest sleep within memory. A third freedom party cavorted on the turf. The indefatigable Shallom passed along the news that nine varieties of flea-sized bugs were awaiting

introduction to Garside, the entomologist, whenever that worthy gentleman deigned to crawl out of bed.

By the time the fourth and last section of the crew returned from its two-hour spree, Pascoe had had enough. He was baggy-eyed from lack of slumber, disappointed with having curiosity left unsatisfied.

"More than seven hours waiting in the sky," he complained to Leigh, "and another eight down here. That's over fifteen hours all told. Where has it got us?"

"It has given the men a badly-needed break," Leigh reproved. "The first rule of captaincy is to consider the men before considering an exterior problem. There is no real solution to any predicament unless there is also the means to apply it. The men are the means and more so than is the ship or any part of it. Men can build ships but ships cannot manufacture men."

"All right. They've had their outing. They are refreshed and their morale is boosted, all in accordance with the best psychological advice. What next?"

"If nothing turns up it will enable them to catch up on their sleep. The first watch is snoring its collective head off right now. The other two watches are entitled to their turn."

"But that means sitting idle for another eighteen hours," Pascoe protested.

"Not necessarily. The Waitabits may arrive at any time, in unguessable number, with unknown intentions and with unknown means of enforcing them. If so, everyone will have a rude awakening and you may get enough action to last you a lifetime," Leigh jerked a thumb toward the door. "Meanwhile, take to bed while the going is good. If trouble starts, it's likely to be days before you get another chance. Exhausted men are crippled men in a situation such as this."

"What about you?"

"I intend to slump into sweet dreams myself as soon as Harding is ready to take over."

Pascoe snorted with impatience, glanced at Walterson, gained no support from that quarter. Walterson was dozing on his feet at mere mention of bed. Pascoe snorted again, more loudly this time, departed with the other following.

They returned within ten hours, found Leigh freshly shaved and

spruced. A look through the port revealed the same landscape as before. Some two dozen of the crew were fooling around outside, beneath a sun that had not visibly changed position in the sky. The road still wound through the valley and over the hills without a soul upon it. The railroad track still reposed with all the impassive silence of a long abandoned spur.

Pascoe said, thoughtfully, "This is a good example of how one can deduce something from nothing."

"Meaning what?" inquired Leigh, showing interest.

"The town is nine miles away. We could walk there in about two hours. They've had several times that long in which to sound the alarm, summon the troops, launch an assault." He gestured toward the peaceful scene. "Where are they?"

"You tell us," Walterson prompted.

"Any life form capable of constructing roads and rails obviously must have eyes and brains. Therefore it is pretty certain that they've seen us either hanging above or coming down. I don't believe that they remain unaware of our existence." He studied his listeners, went on, "They haven't shown up because they're deliberately keeping away from us. That means they're afraid of us. And that in turn means they consider themselves far weaker, either as result of what they've seen of us so far or maybe as result of what they learned from contact with Boydell."

"I don't agree with that last bit," opined Leigh.

"Why not?"

"If they saw us either up above or coming down, what did they actually see? A ship and nothing more. They observed nothing to indicate that we are of Boydell's own kind though it would be reasonable to assume it. Factually, we're still a bunch of unknowns to them."

"That doesn't make hay of my reasoning."

"It spoils it on two counts," Leigh insisted. "Firstly, not having weighed and measured us, how can they tell that they're weaker? Secondly, Boydell himself called them unconquerable. That suggests strength. And strength of a redoubtable order."

"Look," said Pascoe, "it doesn't really matter whether they're stronger or weaker in their own estimation. In the long run they can't buck the power of the human race. The cogent point right now is that of whether they are friendly or antagonistic."

"Well?"

"If friendly, they'd have been around dickering with us hours ago. There's no sign of them, not a spit or a button. Ergo, they don't like us. They've crawled into a hole because they lack the muscle to do something effective. They've ducked under cover hoping we'll go away and play some place else."

"An alternative theory," put in Walterson, "is that they're tough and formidable just as Boydell implied. They have kept their distance because they're wise enough to fight on ground of their own choosing and not on ours. If they refuse to come here, we've got to go there or accept stalemate. So they are making ready for us to walk into their parlour, after which" - he wiped a forefinger across his throat - "*skzzt!*"

"Bunk!" said Pascoe.

"We'll soon learn where we stand one way or the other," Leigh informed. "I've ordered Williams to get the helicopter out. The Waitabits can't avoid seeing that thing whooshing around. We'll learn plenty if they don't shoot it down."

"And if they do shoot it down?" inquired Pascoe.

"That question will be answered if and when it arises," Leigh assured. "You know as well as I do the law that hostility must not be accepted until demonstrated."

He went to the port, gazed across the scene to the tree-swathed hills beyond. After a while he reached for his binoculars, focussed them upon the mid-distance.

"Holy smoke!" he said.

Pascoe ran to his side. "What's the matter?"

"Something's coming at last. And it's a train, no less." He handed over the glasses. "Take a look for yourself."

A dozen crewmen were on the track industriously filing from a rail sufficient metallic powder to be analysed in the lab. They straightened up as the line conducted sounds of the newcomer's approach. Shading their eyes, they stood like men paralysed while they gaped toward the east.

A couple of miles away the streamlined express came tearing around the base of a hill at nothing less than one and a half miles per hour. The men remained staring incredulously for ten minutes during which time the phenomenon covered a full quarter mile.

The *Thunderer's* siren wailed a warning, the sample-takers recovered

their wits and without undue exertion made more speed up the forty-degree bluff than the possible menace was doing on the flat. The last of them had sufficient presence of mind to bring with him an ounce of dust that Shallom later defined as titanium alloy.

Monstrous and imposing, the *Thunderer* sat waiting for first official contact. Every port held at least three expectant faces watching the track and the train. Every mind took it for granted that the oncoming machine would halt at the base of the bluff and things weird in shape emerge therefrom in readiness to parley. Nobody thought for a moment that it might pass on.

It did pass on.

The train consisted of four linked metal coaches and no locomotive, the source of power not being evident. The tiny cars, less than the height of a man, rolled by holding a score of crimson-faced, owl-eyed creatures some of whom were looking absently at the floor, some at each other, out the sides, anywhere but directly at the great invader atop the bluff.

From the time the train was first observed until realisation dawned that it was not going to stop occupied precisely one hour and twenty-four minutes. That was its speed record from the eastward hill to the bluff.

Lowering his binoculars, Commodore Leigh said in baffled tones to Pascoe, "Did you get a clear, sharp view of them?"

"Yes. Red-faced with beak noses and blinkless eyes. One had his hand resting on a window ledge and I noticed it was five-fingered like ours but with digits more slender."

"Far less than walking pace," commented Leigh. "That's what it's doing. I can amble faster even with corns on both feet." He had another puzzled look outside. The train had gained forty yards in the interval. "I wonder whether the power Boydell attributed to them is based on some obscure form of cunning."

"How do you mean?"

"If they cannot cope with us while we hold the ship in force, they've got to entice us out of it."

"Well, we aren't out of it, are we?" Pascoe countered. "Nobody has developed a mad desire to catch that train. And, if anybody did, he'd overtake it so fast he'd get wherever it's going before he had time to pull up. I don't see how they can bait us into being foolhardy merely by crawling around."

"The tactic would be according to their own logic, not ours," Leigh

pointed out. "Perhaps on this world to crawl is to invite attack. A wild-dog pack reacts that way: the animal that limps gets torn to pieces." He thought it over, continued, "I'm suspicious of this episode. I don't like the ostentatious way in which they all kept their eyes fixed on something else as they went past. It isn't natural."

"Hah!" said Pascoe, prepared to argue.

Leigh waved him down. "I know it's a childish blunder to judge any species by the standards of our own, but I still say it isn't natural to have eyes and not use them."

"On Terra," chipped in Walterson, seriously, "some folk have arms, legs, eyes and even brains that they don't use. That's because they have the misfortune to be incurably afflicted, as you know." He went on, encouraged by the other's silence. "What if this track is a connecting link between the town and a sanatorium or hospital? Maybe its sole purpose is to carry sick people."

"We'll soon find out." Leigh resorted to the intercom. "Williams, is the 'copter ready yet?"

"Assembled and now being fuelled, commodore. It can take off in ten minutes' time."

"Who is duty pilot?"

"Ogilvy."

"Tell him to fly ahead of that train and report what's at the other end of the tracks. He's to do that before taking a look at the town." He turned to the others, added, "Shallom should have a panorama of the whole area taken on the way down, but it won't provide the details Ogilvy can get us."

Pascoe, again standing at the port, asked, "How much slower is slower?"

"Eh?"

"When a thing is already creeping as though next year will do, how can you tell that it has decided to apply the brakes?" He elucidated further, "It may be my imagination but I fancy that train has reduced velocity by a few yards per hour. I hope none of its passengers suffered injury by being slung from one end to the other."

Leigh had a look. The train had now gone something less than half a mile from his observation point. The tedious speed and slight foreshortening made it impossible to decide whether or not Pascoe was correct. He had to keep watch a full fifteen minutes before he too agreed

that the train was slowing down.

During that time the helicopter took off with a superfast *whoosh-whoosh* from whirling vanes. Soaring over the track, it fled ahead of the train, shrank into the hills until its plastic-egg cabin resembled a dewdrop dangling from a spinning sycamore seed.

Contacting the signals room, Leigh said, "Put Ogilvy's reports through the speaker here." He returned to the port, continued watching the train. All the crew not asleep or on duty were similarly watching.

"Village six miles along line," blared the speaker. "A second four miles farther on. A third five miles beyond that. Eight thousand feet. Climbing."

Five minutes later, "Six-coach train on tracks, headed eastward. Appears stalled from this height, but may be moving."

"Coming the other way and at a similar crawl," remarked Pascoe, glancing at Walterson. "Bang goes your sick people theory if that one also holds a bunch of zombies."

"Altitude twelve thousand," announced the loud-speaker. "Terminal city visible beyond hills. Distance from base twenty-seven miles. Will investigate unless recalled."

Leigh made no move to summon him back. There followed a long silence. By now the train was still less than a mile away and had cut progress down to about one yard per minute. Finally it stopped, remained motionless for a quarter of an hour, began to back so gradually that it had inched twenty yards before watchers became certain that it had reversed direction. Leigh levelled powerful glasses upon it. Definitely it was returning to the base of the bluff.

"Funny thing here," bawled Ogilvy from the wall. "Streets full of people all struck stiff. It was the same in those villages now that I come to think of it. I went over them too fast for the fact to register."

"That's crazy," said Pascoe. "How can he tell from that height?"

"I'm hovering right over the main stem, a tree-lined avenue with crowded sidewalks," Ogilvy continued. "If anyone is moving, I can't detect it. Request permission to examine from five hundred."

Using the auxiliary mike linked through the signals room, Leigh asked, "Is there any evidence of opposition such as aircraft, gun emplacements or rocket pits?"

"No, commodore, not that I can see."

"Then you can go down but don't drop too fast. Sheer out immediately

if fired upon."

Silence during which Leigh had another look outside. The train was continuing to come back at velocity definable as chronic. He estimated that it would take most of an hour to reach the nearest point.

"Now at five hundred," the loud-speaker declared. "Great Jupiter, I've never seen anything like it. They're moving all right. But they're so sluggish I have to look twice to make sure they really are alive and in action." A pause, then, "Believe it or not, there's a sort of street-car system in operation. A baby eighteen months old could toddle after one of those vehicles and catch it."

"Come back," Leigh ordered sharply. "Come back and report on the nearby town."

"As you wish, commodore." Ogilvy sounded as if he were obeying with reluctance.

"Where's the point of withdrawing him from there?" asked Pascoe, irritated by this abrupt cutting-off of data. "He's in no great danger. What will he learn from one place that he cannot get from another?"

"He can confirm or deny the thing that is all-important, namely, that conditions are the same elsewhere and are not restricted to one locale. When he's had a look at the town I'll send him a thousand miles away for a third and final check." His grey eyes were thoughtful as he went on, "In olden times a Martian visitor could have made a major blunder if he'd judged Earth by one of its last remaining leper colonies. Today we'd make precisely the same mistake if this happens to be a quarantined area full of native paralytics."

"Don't say it," put in Walterson, displaying some nervousness. "If we've sat down in a reservation for the diseased, we'd better get out mighty fast. I don't want to be smitten by any alien plague to which I've no natural resistance. I had a narrow enough escape when I missed that Hermes expedition six years ago. Remember it? Within three days of landing the entire complement was dead, their bodies growing bundles of stinking strings later defined as a fungus."

"We'll see what Ogilvy says," Leigh decided. "If he reports what we consider more normal conditions elsewhere, we'll move there. If they prove the same, well stay."

"Stay," echoed Pascoe, his features expressing disgust. "Something tells me you picked the right *word-stay*." He gestured toward the port beyond which the train was a long time coming. "If what we've seen and what

we've heard has any meaning at all, it means we're in a prize fix."

"Such as what?" prompted Walterson.

"We can stay a million years or go back home. For once in our triumphant history we're well and truly thwarted. We'll gain nothing whatever from this world for a good and un-defeatable reason, namely, life's too short."

"I'm jumping to no hasty conclusions," said Leigh. "We'll wait for Ogilvy."

In a short time the loud-speaker informed with incredulity: "This town is full of creepers, too. And trolleys making the same speed, if you can call it speed. Want me to go down and tell you more?"

"No," said Leigh into the mike. "Make a full-range sweep eastward. Loop out as far as you can go with safety. Watch especially for any radical variation in phenomena and, if you find it, report at once." He racked the microphone, turned to the others. "All we can do now is wait a bit."

"You said it!" observed Pascoe pointedly. "I'll lay odds of a thousand to one that Boydell did no more than sit futilely around picking his teeth until he got tired of it."

Walterson let go a sudden laugh that startled them.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Pascoe, staring at him.

"One develops the strangest ideas sometimes," said Walter-son apologetically. "It just occurred to me that if horses were snails they'd never be compelled to wear harness. There's a moral somewhere but I can't be bothered to dig it out."

"City forty-two miles eastward from base," called Ogilvy. "Same as before. Two speeds: dead slow and slower than dead."

Pascoe glanced through the port. "That train is doing less than bug-rate. I reckon it intends to stop when it gets here." He thought a bit, finished, "If so, we know one thing in advance: they aren't frightened of us."

Making up his mind, Leigh phoned through to Shallom. "We're going outside. Make a record of Ogilvy's remarks while we're gone. Sound a brief yelp on the alarm-siren if he reports rapid movement any place." Then he switched to Nolan, Hoffnagle and Romero, the three communications experts. "Bring your Keen charts along in readiness for contact."

"It's conventional," reminded Pascoe, "for the ship's commander to remain in control of his vessel until contact has been made and the aliens

found friendly or, at least, not hostile."

"This is where convention gets dumped overboard for once," Leigh snapped. "I'm going to pick on the load in that train. It's high time we made some progress. Please yourselves whether or not you come along."

"Fourteen villages so far," chipped in Ogilvy from far away over the hills. "Everyone in them hustling around at the pace that kills—with boredom. Am heading for city visible on horizon."

The communicators arrived bearing sheafs of coloured charts. They were unarmed, being the only personnel forbidden to wear guns. The theory behind this edict was that obvious helplessness established confidence. In most circumstances the notion proved correct and communicators survived. Once in a while it flopped and the victims gained no more than decent burial.

"What about us?" inquired Walterson, eyeing the newcomers. "Do we take weapons or don't we?"

"We'll chance it without any," Leigh decided. "A life form sufficiently intelligent to trundle around in trains should be plenty smart enough to guess what will happen if they try to take us. They'll be right under the ship's guns while we're parleying."

"I've no faith in their ability to see reason as we understand it," Pascoe put in. "For all their civilized veneer they may be the most treacherous characters this side of Sirius." Then he grinned and added, "But I've faith in my legs. By the way these aliens get into action I'd be a small cloud of dust in the sunset before one of them could take aim."

Leigh smiled, led them through the main lock. Every port was filled with watching faces as they made their way down to the track.

Gun-teams stood ready in their turrets grimly aware that they could not beat off an attempted snatch except at risk of killing friends along with foes. But if necessary they could thwart it by wrecking the rails behind and ahead of the train, isolating it in readiness for further treatment. For the time being their role was the static one of intimidation. Despite this world's apparent lack of danger there was a certain amount of apprehension among the older hands in the ship. A pacific atmosphere had fooled humans before and they were wary of it.

The six reached the railroad a couple of hundred yards in advance of the train, walked toward it. They could see the driver sat behind a glasslike panel in front. His big yellow eyes were staring straight ahead, his crimson face was without expression. Both his hands rested on

knobbed levers and the sight of half-a-dozen other-worlders on the lines did not make him so much as twitch a finger.

Leigh was first to reach the cab door and stretch out a hand to grasp incurable difficulty number one. He took hold of the handle, swung the door open, put a pleasant smile upon his face and uttered a cordial "Hello!"

The driver did not answer. Instead, his eyeballs began to edge round sidewise while the train continued to pelt along at such a rate that it started pulling away from Leigh's hand. Perforce, Leigh had to take a step to keep level. The eyes reached their corners by which time Leigh was compelled to take another step.

Then the driver's head started turning. Leigh took a step. More turn. Another step. Behind Leigh his five companions strove to stay with them. It wasn't easy. In fact it was tough going. They could not stand still and let the train creep away. They could not walk without getting ahead of it. The result was a ludicrous march based on a hop-pause rhythm with the hops short and the pauses long.

By the time the driver's head was halfway round, the long fingers of his right hand had started uncurling from the knob it was holding. At the same overstretched instant the knob commenced to rise on its lever. He was doing something, no doubt of that. He was bursting into action to meet a sudden emergency.

Still gripping the door, Leigh edged along with it. The others went hop-pause in unison. Pascoe wore the pained reverence of one attending the tedious funeral of a rich uncle who has just cut him out of his will. Imagination told Leigh what ribald remarks were being tossed around among the audience in the ship.

He solved the problem of reclaiming official dignity by the simple process of stepping into the cab. That wasn't much better, though. He had avoided the limping procession but now had the choice of standing half-bent or kneeling on the floor.

Now the driver's head was right round, his eyes looking straight at the visitor. The knob had projected to its limit. Something that made hissing noises under the floor went silent and the train's progress was only that of its forward momentum against the brakes. A creep measurable in inches or fractions of an inch.

"Hello!" repeated Leigh, feeling that he had never voiced a sillier word.

The driver's mouth opened to a pink oval, revealed long, narrow teeth

but no tongue. He shaped the mouth and by the time he'd got it to his satisfaction the listener could have smoked half a cigarette. Leigh perked his ears for the expected greeting. Nothing came out, not a sound, a note, a decibel. He waited a while, hoping that the first word might emerge before next Thursday. The mouth made a couple of slight changes in form while pink palps at the back of it writhed like nearly-dead worms. And that was all.

Walterson ceased ultra-slow mooching on the tangled clover and called, "It has stopped, commodore."

Stepping backward from the cab, Leigh shoved hands deep into pockets and gazed defeatedly at the driver whose formerly blank face was now acquiring an expression of surprised interest. He could watch the features registering with all the lackadaisical air of a chameleon changing colour, and at about the same rate.

"This is a hell of a note," complained Pascoe, nudging Leigh. He pointed at the row of door handles projecting from the four cars. Most of them had tilted out of the horizontal and were moving a degree at a time toward the vertical. "They're falling over themselves to get out."

"Open up for them," Leigh suggested.

Hoffnagle, who happened to be standing right by an exit, obligingly twisted a handle and lugged the door. Out it swung complete with a clinging passenger who hadn't been able to let go. Dropping his contact charts, Hoffnagle dexterously caught the victim, planted him on his feet. It took forty-eight seconds by Romero's watch for this one to register facial reaction which was that of bafflement.

After this, doors had to be opened with all the caution of a tax collector coping with a mysterious parcel that ticks. Pascoe, impatient as usual, hastened the dismounting process by lifting aliens from open doorways and standing them on the green sward. The quickest-witted one among the lot required a mere twenty-eight seconds to start mulling the problem of how he had passed from one point to another without crossing intervening space. He would solve that problem - given time.

With the train empty there were twenty-three Waitabits hanging around. None exceeded four feet in height or sixty pounds Eterna-weight. All were well-clothed in manner that gave no clue to sex. Presumably all were adults, there being no tiny specimens among them. Not one bore anything remotely resembling a weapon.

Looking them over Leigh readily conceded that no matter how sluggish they might be they were not dopey. Their outlandishly coloured features

held intelligence of a fairly high order. That was already self-evident from the tools they made and used, such as this train, but it showed in their faces, too.

The Grand Council, he decided, had good cause for alarm in a way not yet thought of by its members. If the bunch standing before him were truly representative of their planet, then they were completely innocuous. They embodied no danger whatsoever to Terran interests anywhere in the cosmos. Yet, at the same time, they *implied* a major menace of which he hated to think.

With their easily comprehensive charts laid out on the ground the three communicators prepared to explain their origin, presence and purposes by an effective sign-and-gesture technique basic for all first contacts. The fidgety Pascoe speeded up the job by arranging Waitabits in a circle around the charts, picking them up like so many lethargic dolls and placing them in position.

Leigh and Walterson went to have a look at the train. If any of its owners objected to this inspection, they didn't have enough minutes in which to do something about it.

The roofs of all four cars were of pale yellow, transparent plastic extending down the sides to a line flush with the door-tops. Beneath the plastic lay countless numbers of carefully-arranged silicon wafers. Inside the cars, beneath plates forming the centre aisles, were arrays of tiny cylinders rather like nickel-alloy cells. The motors could not be seen, they were hidden beneath small driving-cabs of which there was one to each car.

"Sun power," said Leigh. "The prime motive force is derived from those solar batteries built into the roofs." He paced out the length of a car, made an estimate. "Four feet by twenty apiece. Including the side-strips, that's six-forty square feet of pickup area."

"Nothing marvellous about it," ventured Walterson, unimpressed. "They use better ones in the tropical zones of Earth and have similar gadgets on Dramonia and Werth."

"I know. But here the night-time lasts six months. What sort of storage batteries will last that long without draining? How do they manage to get around on the night-side? Or does all transport cease while they snore in bed?"

"Pascoe could make a better guess at their boudoir habits. For what it's worth, I'd say they sleep, six months being to them no more than a night is to us. Anyway, why should we speculate about the matter? We'll be

exploring the night-side sooner or later, won't we?"

"Yes, sure. But I'd like to know whether this contraption is more advanced in any single respect than anything we've got."

"To discover that much we'd have to pull it to pieces," Walterson objected. "Putting Shallom and his boys on a wrecking job would be a lousy way of maintaining friendship. These Waitabits wouldn't like it even though they can't stop us."

"I'm not that hamhanded," Leigh reproved. "Apart from the fact that destruction of property belonging to non-hostile aliens could gain me a court-martial, why should I invite trouble if we can get the information from them in exchange for other data? Did you ever hear of a genuinely intelligent Me form that refused to swap knowledge?"

"No," said Walterson. "And neither did I ever hear of one that took ten years to pay for what it got in ten minutes." He grinned with malicious satisfaction, added, "We're finding out what Boydell discovered, namely, that you've got to give in order to receive-and in order to receive you've got to wait a bit."

"Something inside of me insists that you're dead right." Leigh shrugged and went on, "Anyway, that's the Council's worry. Right now we can do no more until the contact men make their report. Let's get back to the ship."

They mounted the bluff. Seeing them go, Pascoe hastened after them, leaving the trio of communicators to play with Keen charts and make snakes of their arms.

"How's it going?" Leigh inquired as they went through the lock.

"Not so good," said Pascoe. "You ought to try it yourself. It would make you whirly."

"What's the trouble?"

"How can you synchronize two values when one of them is unknown? How can you make rhythm to a prolonged and completely silent beat? Every time Hoffnagle uses the orbit-sign he is merely demonstrating that the quickness of the hand deceives the eye so far as the audience is concerned. So he slows, does it again and it still fools them. He slows more." Pascoe sniffed with disgust. "It's going to take those three luckless characters all of today and maybe most of a week to find, practise and perfect the quickest gestures that register effectively. They aren't teaching anybody any thing - they're learning themselves. It's time-and-motion study with a vengeance."

"It has to be done," Leigh remarked quietly. "Even if it takes a lifetime."

"Whose lifetime?" asked Pascoe, pointedly.

Leigh winced, sought a satisfactory retort, failed to find one.

At the corner of the passageway Garside met them. He was a small, excitable man whose eyes looked huge behind thick spectacles. The great love of his life was bugs, any size, shape, colour or origin so long as they were bugs.

"Ah, commodore," he exclaimed, bubbling with enthusiasm, "a most remarkable discovery, most remarkable! Nine species of insect life, none really extraordinary in structure, but all afflicted with an amazing lassitude. If this phenomenon is common to all native insects, it would appear that local metabolism is——"

"Write it down for the record," advised Leigh, patting him on the shoulder. He hastened to the signals room. "Anything special from Ogilvy?"

"No, commodore. All his messages have been repeats of his first ones. He is now most of the way back and due to arrive here in about an hour."

"Send him to me immediately he returns."

"As you order, sir."

Ogilvy appeared in the promised time. He was a lanky, lean-faced individual given to irritating grins. Entering the room he held hands behind his back, hung his head and spoke with mock shame.

"Commodore, I have a confession to make."

"So I see from the act you're putting on. What is it?"

"I landed, without permission, right in the main square of the biggest city I could find."

Leigh raised his eyebrows. "And what happened?"

"They gathered around and stared at me."

"Is that all?"

"Well, sir, it took them twenty minutes to see me and assemble, by which time the ones farther away were still coming. I couldn't wait any longer to discover what they'd do next. I estimated that if they fetched some rope and tied down my landing gear they'd have the job finished about a year next Christmas."

"Humph! Were things the same everywhere else?"

"Yes, sir. I passed over more than two hundred towns and villages, reached extreme range of twelve-fifty miles. Conditions remained consistent." He gave his grin, continued, "I noticed a couple of items that might interest you."

"What were those?"

"The Waitabits converse with their mouths but make no detectable noises. The 'copter has a supersonic converter known as Bat-ears which is used for blind flying. I tuned its receiver across its full range when in the middle of that crowd but didn't pick up a squeak. So they're not talking high above us. I don't see how they can be subsonic either. It must be something else."

"I've had a one-sided conversation with them myself," Leigh informed. "It may be that we're overlooking the obvious while seeking the obscure."

Ogilvy blinked and asked, "How d'you mean, sir?"

"They're not necessarily employing some unique faculty such as we cannot imagine. It is quite possible that they communicate visually. They gaze into each other's gullets and read the wagging palps. Something like you semaphoring with your tonsils." He dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. "And what's your other item?"

"No birds," replied Ogilvy. "You'd think that where insects exist there would also be birds or at least things somewhat birdlike. The only airborne creature I saw was a kind of membrane-winged lizard that flaps just enough to launch itself, then glides to wherever it's going. On Earth it couldn't catch a weary gnat."

"Did you make a record of it?"

"No, sir. The last magazine was in the camera and I didn't want to waste strip. I didn't know if anything more important might turn up later."

"All right."

Leigh watched the other depart, picked up the phone, said to Shallom, "If those 'copter reels prove sharp enough for long-range beaming, you'd better run off an extra copy for the signals room. Have them boost it to Sector Nine for relay to Earth."

As he put down the phone Romero entered looking desperate. "Commodore, could you get the instrument mechs to concoct a phenakistoscope with a revolution-counter attached?"

"We can make anything, positively anything," chimed in Pascoe from

near the port. "Given enough centuries in which to do it."

Ignoring the interruption, Leigh asked, "What do you want it for?"

"Hoffnagle and Nolan think we could use it to measure the precise optical register of those sluggards outside. If we can find out at what minimum speed they see pictures merge into motion it would be a great help."

"Wouldn't the ship's movie projector serve the same purpose?"

"It isn't sufficiently variable," Romero objected. "Besides, we can't operate it independently of our own power supply. A phenakistoscope can be carried around and cranked by hand."

"This becomes more fascinating every moment," Pascoe interjected. "It can be cranked. Add a few more details and I'll start to get a hazy idea of what the darned thing is."

Taking no notice of that either, Leigh got through to Shallom again, put the matter to him.

"Holy Moses!" ejaculated Shallom. "The things we get asked for! Who thought up that one?" A pause, followed by, "It will take two days."

"Two days," Leigh repeated to Romero.

The other looked aghast.

"What's eating you?" asked Pascoe. "Two days to get started on measuring visual retention is mighty fast in this world. You're on Eterna now. Adapt, boy, adapt!"

Leigh eyed Pascoe carefully and said, "Becoming rather pernicky this last hour or two, aren't you?"

"Not yet. I have several dregs of patience left. When the last of them has trickled away you can lock me in the brig because I'll be nuts."

"Don't worry. We're about to have some action."

"Haha!" said Pascoe disrespectfully.

"We'll drag out the patrol wagon, go to town and have a look around in the middle of them."

"About time, too," Pascoe endorsed.

The armoured, eight-seater car rumbled down the ramp on heavy caterpillars, squatted in the clover. Only a short, flared nozzle in its bonnet and another in its tail revealed the presence of button-controlled

snort-guns. The boxed lens on its roof belonged to an automatic camera. The metal whip atop the box was a radio antenna.

They could have used the helicopter which was capable of carrying four men with equipment but, once landed, that machine would be of little good for touring the streets.

Leigh shared the front seat with Lieutenant Harding and the duty driver. Behind him were two of Harding's troop and Pascoe. At back sat the radio operator and the snort gunner.

Walterson, Garside and all the other specialists remained with the ship.

Rolling forward, they passed the circle of Waitabits who were now sitting cross-legged on the turf and staring at a Keen chart which Nolan was exhibiting with an air of complete frustration. Nearby, Hoffnagle was masticating his nails while trying to decide how much of the lesson was being absorbed and how much missed. Not one of this bunch showed the slightest surprise when the car charged down the steep bluff and clattered by them.

With jerks and heaves the car crossed the lines behind the stalled train, gained the road. Here the surface proved excellent, the running smooth. The artery would have done justice to a Terran racing-track. Before they had gone five miles they encountered an alien using it for exactly that.

This one half-sat, half-reclined in a long, narrow, low-slung single-seater that had "hot-rod" written all over it. He came along like a maniac, face strained, eyes popping, hands clinging firmly to the wheel. According to the photoelectric telltale on the patrol wagon's instrument board he roared past them at fifty-two and a quarter miles per hour. Since the speedometer on the same board recorded precisely fifty, it meant that the other was going all out at a harrowing two and a quarter.

Twisting his head to gaze through the rear window, Pascoe said, "As a sociologist I'll tell you something authoritatively; some of this crowd are downright reckless. If that lunatic is headed for the city now about thirty miles away he'll make it in as little as twelve hours." Then he frowned, became serious as he added, "Seeing that their reactions are in keeping with their motions, one being as tedious as the other, it wouldn't surprise me if they have traffic problems comparable with those of any other world."

Nobody got a chance to comment on that. The entire eight bowed in unison as the brakes went on. They were entering the suburbs with pedestrians, cars and trolleys littering the streets. After that it was strictly bottom-gear work; the driver had to learn a completely new technique and

it wasn't easy.

Crimson-faced people in the same sexless attire ambled across the roads in a manner suggesting that for two pins they'd lie down and go to sleep. Some moved faster than others but the most nimble ones among the lot were an obstacle for an inordinate while. Not one halted and gaped at the invading vehicle as it trundled by, but most of them stopped and took on a baffled expression by the time they'd been left a mile behind.

To Leigh and his companions there was a strong temptation to correlate slowness with stupidity. They resisted it. Evidence to the contrary was strong enough not to be denied.

The streets were level, straight and well-made, complete with sidewalks, gulleys and drains. No buildings rose higher than sixty feet but all were solidly built and far from primitive. Cars were not numerous by Terran standards but had the appearance of engineering jobs of no mean order. The street-trolleys were small, sun-powered, languidly efficient and bore two dozen passengers apiece.

For a few minutes they halted near a building in course of construction, maintained attention upon a worker laying a brick, estimated that the job required twenty minutes. Three bricks per hour.

Doing some fast figuring, Leigh said, "Taking their days and nights as six months apiece and assuming they put in the equivalent of an eight-hour day, that fellow is laying something over a thousand bricks per hour." He pursed his lips, gave a brief whistle. "I know of no life form capable of building half as fast. Even on Earth it takes a robot to equal it."

The others considered that aspect of the matter in silence. The patrol wagon moved on, reached a square in which was a civic car-park containing some forty machines. The sight was irresistible. Driving straight in past two uniformed attendants they lined their vehicle neatly at the end of a row. The attendants' eyeballs started edging around.

Leigh spoke to the driver, radioman and gunner. "You three stay here. If anyone interferes, pick him up, put him down a hundred yards away and leave him to try all over again. If they show signs of getting organized to blow you sky-high, just move the wagon to the other end of the park. When they catch you up, move back here."

"Where are you going?" inquired Harding.

"Over there." He pointed toward an official-looking building. "To save time I'd like you, your men and Pascoe to try the other places. Take one apiece, go inside, see if you can learn anything worth picking up." He

glanced at his watch. "Be back promptly at three. No dallying. The laggard will be left to take a nine-mile walk."

Starting off, he found an attendant twenty yards away and moving toward him with owl-eyes wide. Going boldly up to him, he took the book of tickets from an unresisting hand, tore one off, pressed the book back into crimson fingers, added a silver button by way of payment and passed on. He derived amused satisfaction from that honest gesture. By the time he'd crossed the square and entered the building the recipient had got around to examining the button.

At three they returned to find chaos in the square and no sign of the patrol wagon in the park. A series of brief wails on its siren drew them to a side street where it was waiting by the kerb.

"Slow as they may be, they can get places given long enough," said the driver. "They started creeping around us in such numbers that we looked like being hemmed in for keeps. We wouldn't have been able to get out without running over fifty of them. I beat it while there was still a gap to drive through." He pointed through the windshield. "Now they're making for here. The tortoise chasing the hare."

One of Harding's men, a grizzled veteran of several space-campaigns, remarked, "It's easier to cope when you're up against guppies that are hostile and fighting mad. You just shoot your way out." He grunted a few times. "Here, if you sit around too long you've got to let yourself be trapped or else run over them in cold blood. That's not my idea of how to do things." Another grunt. "Hell of a planet. The fellow who found it ought to be made to live here."

"Find anything in your building?" Leigh asked him.

"Yes, a dozen cops."

"What?"

"Cops," repeated the other. "It was a police station. I could tell because they all had the same uniforms, all carried duralumin bludgeons. And there were faces on the wall with queer printing beneath. I can't recognize one face from another. They are all alike to me. But something told me those features hadn't been stuck to the wall to commemorate saintliness."

"Did they show any antagonism toward you?"

"They didn't get the chance," he said with open contempt. "I just kept shifting around looking at things and that had them foxed."

"My building was a honey," informed Pascoe. "A telephone exchange."

Leigh twisted around to stare at him. "So they are supersonic speakers after all?"

"No. They use scanners and three-inch visiscreens. If I've looked down one squirming gizzard, I've looked down twenty. What's more, a speaker sometimes removes his palps from the screen and substitutes a sort of slow-motion display of deaf-and-dumb talk with his fingers. I have a vague idea that some of those digital acrobatics represent vitriolic cussing."

The driver put in nervously, "If we squat here much longer the road will be blocked both ends."

"Then let's get out while there's time."

"Back to the ship, sir?"

"Not yet. Wander around and see if you can find an industrial area."

The car rolled forward, went cautiously past a bunch of oncoming pedestrians, avoided the crowded square by trundling down another side street.

Lying back in comfort, Pascoe held hands together over his stomach and inquired interestedly, "I suppose none of you happened to find himself in a fire station?" Nobody had.

"That's what I'd give a thousand credits to see," he said. "A couple of pumps and a hook-and-ladder squad bursting out to deal with a conflagration a mile away. The speed of combustion is no less on this world than on our own. It's a wonder to me the town hasn't burned down a dozen times."

"Perhaps it has," offered Harding. "Perhaps they're used to it. You can get accustomed to anything in the long run."

"In the long run," agreed Pascoe. "Here it's long enough to vanish into the mists of time. And it's anything but a run."

He glanced at Leigh. "What did you walk into?"

"A public library."

"That's the place to dig up information. How much did you get?"

"One item only," Leigh admitted with reluctance. "Their printed language is ideographic and employs at least three thousand characters."

"There's a big help," said Pascoe, casting an appealing glance heavenward. "Any competent linguist or trained communicator should be able to learn it from them. Put Hoffnagle on the job. He's the youngest

among us and all he needs is a couple of thousand years."

The radio burped, winked its red eye, and the operator switched it on. Shallom's voice came through.

"Commodore, an important-looking specimen has just arrived in what he probably thinks of as a racing car. It may be that he's a bigwig appointed to make contact with us. That's only our guess but we're trying to get confirmation of it. I thought you'd like to know."

"How's progress with him?"

"No better than with the others. Possibly he's the smartest boy in college. Nevertheless, Nolan estimates it will take most of a month to convince him that Mary had a little lamb."

"Well, keep trying. We'll be returning shortly." The receiver cut off and Leigh added to the others, "That sounds like the road-hog we passed on the way here." He nudged the driver, pointed leftward. "That looks like a sizeable factory. Stop outside while I inspect it."

He entered unopposed, came out after a few minutes, told them, "It's a combined flour-mill, processing and packaging plant. They're grinding up a mountain of nut-kernels, probably from surrounding forests. They've a pair of big engines down in the basement that beat me. Never seen anything like them. I think I'll get Bentley to come and look them over. He's the expert on power supplies."

"Big place for a mill, isn't it?" ventured Harding.

"They're converting the flour into about twenty forms. I took a lick at some of it."

"What did it taste like?"

"Bill-sticker's paste." He nudged the driver again. "There's another joint." Then to Harding, "You come with me."

Five minutes later they returned and said, "Boots, shoes and slippers. And they're making them fast."

"Fast?" echoed Pascoe, twitching his eyebrows.

"Faster than they can follow the process themselves. The whole layout is fully automatic and self-arresting if anything goes wrong. Not quite as good as we've got on Earth but not so far behind, either." Leigh sat with pursed lips, musing as he gazed through the windshield. "I'm going back to the ship. You fellows can come for further exploration if you wish."

None of them registered enthusiasm.

There was a signal waiting on the desk, decoded and typed.

C.O. Flame to C.O. Thunderer. Atmosphere Pulok analysed good in fact healthy. So instruments insist. Noses say has abominable stench beyond bearing. Should be named Puke. Proceeding Arlington Port 88.137 unless summoned by you. Mallory.

Reading it over Leigh's shoulder, Pascoe commented, "That Boydell character has a flair for picking ugly ones right out of the sky. Why doesn't someone choke him to death?"

"Four hundred twenty-one recorded in there," reminded Leigh, tapping his big chart book. "And about two-thirds of them come under the heading of ugly ones."

"It would save a lot of grief if the scouts ignored those and reported only the dumps worth having."

"Grief is the price of progress, you know that." Leigh hurriedly left his desk, went to the port as something whirred outside. He picked up the phone. "Where's the 'copter going?"

"Taking Garside and Walterson some place," replied a voice.

"The former wants more bugs and the latter wants rock-samples."

"All right. Has that film been finished yet?"

"Yes, commodore. It has come out good and clear. Want me to set it up in the projection room?"

"You might as well. I'll be there right away. Have somebody get to work on the magazine in the patrol wagon. About half of it has been exposed."

"As you order, sir."

Summoning the rest of the specialist staff, of whom there were more than sixty, he accompanied them to the projection room, studied the record of Ogilvy's survey. When it had finished the audience sat in glum silence. Nobody had anything to say. No comment was adequate.

"A nice mess," griped Pascoe after they had returned to the main cabin. "In the last one thousand years the human race has become wholly technological. Even the lowest ranking space-marine is considerably a technician, especially by standards of olden times."

"I know." Leigh frowned futilely at the wall.

"We are the brains," Pascoe went on, determining to rub salt into the wounds. "And because we're the brains we naturally dislike providing the

muscle as well. We're a cut above the mere hewing of wood and drawing of water."

"You're telling me nothing."

Down to telling it anyway, Pascoe continued, "So we've planted settlers on umpteen planets. And what sort of settlers are they? Bosses, overseers, boys who inform, advise, point and tell while the less advanced do the doing."

Leigh offered no remark.

"Suppose Walterson and the others find this lousy world rich in the things we need," he persisted. "How are we going to get at the stuff short of excavating it ourselves? The Waitabits form a big and probably willing labour force but what's the use of them if the most rudimentary job gets completed ten, twenty or fifty years hence? Who's going to settle here and become a beast of burden as the only way of getting things done in jig time?"

"Ogilvy went over a big dam and what looked like a hydroelectric plant," observed Leigh, thoughtfully. "On Earth the entire project might have cost two years at most. How long it required here is anyone's guess. Two hundred years perhaps. Or four hundred. Or more." He tapped fidgety fingers on his desk. "It worries me."

"We're not worried. We're frustrated. It's not the same thing."

"I tell you I'm worried. This planet is like a lighted fuse long ignored but now noticed. I don't know where it leads or how big a bang is waiting at the other end."

"That's frustration," insisted Pascoe, completely missing the point because he hadn't thought of it yet. "We're thwarted and don't like it. We're the irresistible force at long last meeting the immovable object. The bang is within our own minds. No *real* explosion big enough to shake us can ever come from this world's life forms. They're too slow to catch cold."

"I'm not bothered about them in that respect. They worry me by their very existence."

"There always have been sluggards, even on our own world."

"Precisely!" indorsed Leigh with emphasis. "And that is what's raising my hackles right now."

The loud-speaker interrupted with a polite cough and said, "Ogilvy here, sir. We've picked up granite chippings, quartz samples and other stuff. At the moment I'm at sixteen thousand feet and can see the ship in

the distance. I don't like the looks of things."

"What's the matter?"

"The town is emptying itself. So are nearby villages. They've taken to the road in huge numbers and started heading your way. The vanguard should reach you in about three hours." A brief silence, then, "There's nothing to indicate hostile intentions, no sign of an organized advance. Just a rabble motivated by plain curiosity as far as I can tell. But if you get that mob gaping around the ship you won't be able to move without incinerating thousands of them."

Leigh thought it over. The ship was a mile long. Its lifting blasts caromed half a mile each side and its tail blast was equally long. He needed about two square miles of clear ground from which to take off without injury to others.

There were eleven hundred men aboard the *Thunderer*, Six hundred were needed to attend the boost. That left five hundred to stay grounded and keep the mob at bay around the perimeter of two square miles. And they'd have to be transferred by 'copter, a few at a time, to the new landing place. Could it be done? It could-but it was hopelessly inefficient.

"We'll move a hundred miles before they get here," he informed Ogilvy. "That should hold them for a couple of days."

"Want me to come in, sir?"

"Please yourself."

"The passengers aren't satisfied and want to add to their collections. So I'll stay out. If you drop out of sight I'll home on your beacon."

"Very well." Leigh turned to the intercom. "Sound the siren and bring in those yaps outside. Check crew all present and correct. Prepare to lift."

"Rule Seven," said Pascoe, smirking. "Any action causing unnecessary suffering to non-hostile life will be deemed a major offence under the Contact Code." He made a derisive gesture. "So they amble toward us like a great army of sloths and we have to tuck in our tails and run."

"Any better solution?" Leigh asked, irritably.

"No. Not one. That's the devil of it."

The siren yowled. Soon afterward the *Thunderer* began a faint but steady shuddering as combustion chambers and Venturis wanned up. Hoffnagle rushed into the cabin. He had a roll of crumpled Keen charts in one fist and a wild look in his eyes.

"What's the idea?" he shouted, flourishing the charts and forgetting to

say "sir."

"Two successive watches we've spent on this, given up our off-duty time into the bargain and have just got one of them to make the orbit-sign. Then you recall us." He waited, fuming.

"We're moving."

"Moving?" He looked as if he'd never heard of such a thing. "Where?"

"A hundred miles off."

Hoffnagle stared incredulously, swallowed hard, opened his mouth, closed it, opened it once more. "But that means we'll have to start over again with some other bunch."

"I'm afraid so," agreed Leigh. "The ones you've been trying to talk to could come with us but it would take far too long to make them understand what's wanted. There's nothing for it but to make a new start."

"No!" bawled Hoffnagle, becoming frenzied. "Oh, no! Anything but that!"

Behind him, Romero barged in and said, "Anything but what?" He was breathing heavily and near the end of his tether.

Trying to tell him the evil news, Hoffnagle found himself lost for words, managed no more than a few feeble gestures.

"A communicator unable to communicate with another communicator," observed Pascoe, showing academic interest.

"They're shifting the ship," Hoffnagle got out with considerable effort. He made it sound dastardly.

Releasing a violent, "*What?*" Romero went two shades redder than the Waitabits. In fact, for a moment he looked like one as he stood there pop-eyed and half-paralysed.

"Get out," snapped Leigh. "Get out before Nolan comes in and makes it three to two. Go some place where you can cool down. Remember, you're not the only ones caught in this fix."

"No, maybe we aren't," said Hoffnagle, bitterly. "But we're the only ones carrying the entire onus of——"

"Everybody's carrying onuses of one sort or another," Leigh retorted. "And everybody's well and truly bollixed by them. Beat it before I lose my own temper and summon an escort for you."

They departed with unconcealed bad grace. Leigh sat at his desk, chewed his bottom lip while he tended to official papers. Twenty minutes

went by. Finally, he glanced at the wall chronometer, switched the intercom, spoke to Bentley. "What's holding us up?"

"No signal from control room, sir." He re-switched to control room. "What are we waiting for?"

"That bunch from the train is still lounging within burning distance, commodore. Either nobody's told them to go back or, if they have been told, they haven't got around to it yet."

Leigh seldom swore but he did it this time, one potent word uttered with vigour. He switched a third time, got Harding.

"Lieutenant, rush out two platoons of your men. They are to return all those alien passengers to their train. Pick them up, carry them there, tuck them into it and return as quickly as possible."

He resumed with his papers while Pascoe sat in a corner nibbling his fingers and grinning to himself. After half an hour Leigh voiced the word again and resorted to the intercom.

"What is it now?"

"Still no signal, commodore," said Bentley in tones of complete resignation.

On to the control room. "I gave the order to lift immediately there's clearance. Why haven't we done so?"

"One alien is still within the danger area, sir."

Next to Harding. "Didn't I tell you to get those aliens on to their train?"

"Yes, sir, you did. All passengers were restored to their seats fifteen minutes ago."

"Nonsense, man! They've left one of them hanging around and he's holding up the entire vessel."

"That one is not from the train, sir," said Harding, patiently. "He arrived in a car. You gave no order concerning him."

Leigh used both hands to scrabble the desk, then roared, "Get him out of it. Plant him in his contraption and shove it down the road. At once." Then he lay back in his chair and muttered to himself.

"How'd you like to resign and buy a farm?" Pascoe asked.

The new landing-point was along the crest of the only bald hill for miles around. Charred stumps provided evidence of a by-gone forest fire which

had started on the top, spread down the sides until halted, probably by heavy rain.

Thickly wooded hills rolled away in every direction. No railroad tracks ran nearby but there was a road in the valley and a winding river beyond it. Two villages were visible within four miles' distance and a medium-sized town lay eleven miles to the north.

Experience of local conditions enabled a considerable speedup in investigation. Earnshaw, the relief pilot, took out the "copter with Walterson and four other experts crowded inside. The patrol wagon set off to town bearing a load of specialists including Pascoe. Three botanists and an arboriculturalist took to the woods accompanied by a dozen of Harding's men who were to bear their spoils.

Hoffnagle, Romero and Nolan traipsed cross-country to the nearest village, spread their explanatory charts in the small square and prayed for a rural genius able to grasp the meaning of a basic gesture in less than a week. A bunch of ship's engineers set forth to examine lines strung on lattice masts across hills to the west and south.

A piscatorial expert, said to have been conditioned from birth by the cognomen of Fish, sat for hours on the river bank dangling his lines without knowing what bait to use, what he might catch, or whether it could be caught in less than a lifetime.

Leigh stayed by the ship during this brief orgy of data-gathering. He had a gloomy foreboding concerning the shape of things to come. Time proved him right. Within thirty hours Earnshaw had handed over to Ogilvy twice and was flying for the third time. He was at fifteen thousand above the *Thunderer* when he called.

"Commodore, I hate to tell you this, but they're coming again. They seem to have caught on quicker. Maybe they were warned over that visi-screen system they've got."

"How long do you give them?"

"The villagers will take about two hours. The mob from the town want five or six. I can see the patrol wagon heading back in front of them."

"You'd better bring in whoever you're carrying and go fetch those three communicators right away," said Leigh. "Then pick up anyone else on the loose."

"All right, sir."

The siren moaned eerily across the valleys. Over in the village Hofnagle suddenly ceased his slow-motion gesturing and launched into an

impassioned tirade that astonished the Wait-abits two days later. Down in the woods the arboriculturalist fell off a tree and flattened a Marine who also became vocal.

It was like the ripple effect of a stone cast into a pond. Somebody pressed an alarm-stud and a resulting wave of adjectives spread halfway to the horizon.

They moved yet again, this time to within short range of the terminator. At least it served to shift the sun which had hung stubbornly in mid-sky and changed position by no more than one degree per Earth-day.

The third watch took to bed, dog-tired and made more than ready for slumber by semblance of twilight. Data-hunters went out feeling that paradoxically time was proving all too short on a planet with far too much of it. Ogilvy whirred away for first look at the night-side, discovered half a world buried in deep sleep with nothing stirring, not a soul, not a vehicle.

This situation lasted twenty-one hours at the end of which all natives for miles around had set out for the circus. Once more the siren stimulated enrichment of Earth-language. The *Thunderer* went up, came down four hundred miles within the night-side.

That tactic, decided Leigh, represented a right smart piece of figuring. Aroused aliens on the day-side would now require about twelve days to reach them. And they'd make it only if some insomniac had spotted and phoned the ship's present location. Such betrayal was likely enough because the *Thunderers* long rows of ports poured a brilliant blaze into the darkness and caused a great glow in the sky.

It wasn't long before he gained assurance that there was little danger of a give-away. Nolan entered the cabin and stood with fingers twitching as if he yearned to strangle someone very, very slowly, much as Waitabit would do it. His attitude was accentuated by possession of unfortunate features. Of all the personnel aboard the *Thunderer* nobody better resembled the popular notion of a murderer.

"You will appreciate, commodore," he began, speaking with great restraint, "the extreme difficulty of knocking sense into or getting sense out of creatures that think in hours rather than split-seconds."

"I know it's tough going," Leigh sympathized. He eyed the other carefully. "What's on your mind?"

"What is on my mind," informed Nolan in rising tones, "is the fact that there's one thing to be said in favour of previous subjects." He worked the fingers around. "At least they were awake."

"That is why we had to move," Leigh pointed out. "They're no nuisance to us while dead abed."

"Then," Nolan burst forth, "how do you expect us to make contact with them?"

"I don't. I've given it up. If you wish to continue trying, that's your affair. But you're under no compulsion to do so." Crossing the room, he said more gently, "I've sent a long signal to Earth giving full details of what we're against. The next move is up to them. Their reply should come in a few days' time. Meanwhile, we'll sit tight, dig out whatever information we can, leave what we can't."

Nolan said morbidly, "Hoff and I went to a hamlet far down the road. Not only is everyone asleep but they can't be wakened. They can be handled like dolls without stirring in their dreams. The medics came and had a look at them after we'd told them about this wholesale catalepsy."

"What did they say?"

"They're of the opinion that the Waitabits are active only under stimulus of sunlight. When the sun goes down they go down with it." He scowled at his predicament, suggested hopefully, "But if you could run us a power line out there and lend us a couple of sunray lamps, we could rouse a few of them and get to work."

"It isn't worth it," said Leigh.

"Why not?"

"Chances are that we'll be ordered home before you can show any real progress."

"Look, sir," pleaded Nolan making a final effort. "Everyone else is raking in results. Measurements, meterings and so forth.

They've got bugs, nuts, fruits, plants, barks, timber-sections, rocks, pebbles, soil-samples, photographs, everything but shrunken heads. The communicators are the only ones asked to accept defeat and that's because we've not had a fair chance."

"All right," Leigh said, taking up the challenge. "You fellows are best placed to make an accurate estimate. So tell me: how long would a fair chance be?"

That had him tangled. He shuffled around, glowered at the wall, examined his fingers.

"Five years?" prompted Leigh.

No answer.

"Ten maybe?"

No reply.

"Perhaps twenty?"

Nolan growled, "You win," and walked out. His face still hankered to create a corpse.

You win, thought Leigh. Like heck he did. The winners were the Waitabits. They had a formidable weapon in the simple, incontrovertible fact that life can be too short.

Four days later Sector Nine relayed the message from Earth.

37.14 ex Terra. Defence H.Q. to C.O. battleship Thunderer. Return route D9 calling Sector Four H.Q. Leave ambassador if suitable candidate available. Position in perpetuity. Rathbone. Com. Op. Dep. D.H.Q. Terra.

He called a conference in the longroom amidships. Considerable time was spent co-ordinating data ranging from Walterson's findings on radioactive life to Mr. Fish's remarks about creeping shrimps. In the end three conclusions stood out clearly.

Eterna was very old as compared with Earth. Its people were equally old as compared with humankind, estimates of life-duration ranging from eight hundred to twelve hundred for the average Waitabit. Despite their chronic sluggishness the Waitabits were intelligent, progressive and had advanced to about the same stage as humankind had reached a century before the first jump into space.

There was considerable argument about whether the Wait-abits would ever be capable of a short rocket-flight even with the aid of automatic, fast-functioning controls. Majority opinion was against it but all agreed that in any event none would live to see it.

Then Leigh announced, "An Earth Ambassador is to be left here if anyone wants the job." He looked them over, seeking signs of interest.

"There's little point in planting anybody on this planet," someone objected.

"Like most alien people, the Waitabits have not developed along paths identical with our own," Leigh explained. "We're way ahead of them, know thousands of things that they don't, including many they'll never learn. By the same token they've picked up a few secrets we've missed. For instance, they've types of engines and batteries we'd like to know more about. They

may have further items not apparent in this first superficial look-over. And there's no telling what they've got worked out theoretically. If there's one lesson we've learned in the cosmos it's that of never despising an alien culture. A species too big to learn soon goes small."

"So?"

"So somebody's got to take on the formidable task of systematically milking them of everything worth a hoot. That's why we are where we are: the knowledge of creation is all around and we get it and apply it."

"It's been done time and again on other worlds," agreed the objector. "But this is Eterna, a zombie-inhabited sphere where the clock ticks about once an hour. Any Earthman marooned in this place wouldn't have enough time if he lived to be a hundred."

"You're right," Leigh told him. "Therefore this ambassadorial post will be strictly an hereditary one. Whoever takes it will have to import a bride, marry, raise kids, hand the grief to them upon his deathbed. It may last through six generations or more. There is no other way." He let them stew that a while before he asked, "Any takers?"

Silence.

"You'll be lonely except for company provided by occasional ships but contact will be maintained and the power and strength of Terra will be behind you. Speak up!"

Nobody responded.

Leigh consulted his watch. "I'll give you two hours to think it over. After that, we blow. Any candidate will find me in the cabin."

At zero-hour the *Thunderer* flamed free leaving no representative on the world. Some day there would be one, no doubt of that. Some day a willing hermit would take up residence for keeps. Among the men of Terra an oddity or a martyr could always be found.

But the time wasn't yet.

On Eterna the time never was quite yet.

The pale pink planet that held Sector Four H.Q. had grown to a large disc before Pascoe saw fit to remark on Leigh's meditative attitude.

"Seven weeks along the return run and you're still broody. Anyone would think you hated to leave that place. What's the matter with you?"

"I told you before. They make me feel apprehensive."

"That's illogical," Pascoe declared. "Admittedly we cannot handle the slowest crawlers in existence. But what of it? All we need do is drop them and forget them."

"We can drop them, as you say. Forgetting them is something else. They have a special meaning that I don't like."

"Be more explicit," Pascoe suggested.

"All right, I will. Earth has had dozens of major wars in the far past. Some were caused by greed, ambition, fear, envy, desire to save face or downright stupidity. But there were some caused by sheer altruism."

"Huh?"

"Some," Leigh went doggedly on, "were brought about by the unhappy fact that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Big, fast-moving nations tried to lug small, slower-moving ones up to their own superior pace. Sometimes the slow-movers couldn't make it, resented being forced to try, started shooting to defend their right to mooch. See what I mean?"

"I see the lesson but not the point of it," said Pascoe. "The Waitabits couldn't kill a lame dog. Besides, nobody is chivvying them."

"I'm not considering that aspect at all."

"Which one then?"

"Earth had a problem never properly recognized. If it had been recognized, it wouldn't have caused wars."

"What problem?"

"That of pace-rate," said Leigh. "Previously it has never loomed large enough for us to see it as it really is. The difference between fast and slow was always sufficiently small to escape us." He pointed through the port at the reef of stars lying like sparkling dust against the dark. "And now we know that out there is the same thing enormously magnified. We know that included among the numberless and everlasting problems of the cosmos is that of pace-rate boosted to formidable proportions."

Pascoe thought it over. "I'll give you that. I couldn't argue it because it has become self-evident. Sooner or later we'll encounter it again and again. It's bound to happen somewhere else eventually."

"Hence my heebies," said Leigh.

"You scare yourself to your heart's content," Pascoe advised. "I'm not worrying. It's no hair off my chest. Why should I care if some loony scout discovers life forms even slower than the Waitabits? They mean nothing whatever in my young life."

"Does he have to find them slower?" Leigh inquired.

Pascoe stared at him. "What are you getting at?"

"There's a pace-rate problem, as you've agreed. Turn it upside-down and take another look at it. What's going to happen if we come up against a life form twenty times *faster* than ourselves? A life form that views us much as we viewed the Waitabits?"

Giving it a couple of minutes, Pascoe wiped his forehead and said, unconvincingly, "Impossible!"

"Is it? Why?"

"Because we'd have met them long before now. They'd have got to us first."

"What, if they've a hundred times farther to come? Or if they're a young species one-tenth our age but already nearly level with us?"

"Look here," said Pascoe, taking on the same expression as the other had worn for weeks, "there are troubles enough without you going out of your way to invent more."

Nevertheless, when the ship landed he was still mulling every possible aspect of the matter and liking it less every minute.

A Sector Four official entered the cabin bearing a wad of documents.

"Lieutenant Vaughan, at your service, commodore," he enthused. "I trust you have had a pleasant and profitable run."

"It could have been worse," Leigh responded.

Radiating good will, Vaughan went on, "We've had a signal from Markham at Assignment Office on Terra. He wants you to check equipment, refuel and go take a look at Binty."

"What name?" interjected Pascoe.

"Binty."

"Heaven preserve us! Binty!" He sat down hard, stared at the wall. "Binty!" He played with his fingers, voiced it a third time. For some reason best known to himself he was hypnotized by Binty. Then in tones of deep suspicion he asked, "Who reported it?"

"Really, I don't know. But it ought to say here." Vaughan obligingly sought through his papers. "Yes, it does say. Fellow named Archibald Boydell."

"I knew it," yelled Pascoe. "I resign. I resign forthwith."

"You've resigned forthwith at least twenty times in the last eight years," Leigh reminded.

"I mean it this time."

"You've said that, too." Leigh sighed.

Pascoe waved his hands around. "Now try to calm yourself and look at this sensibly. What space-outfit which is sane and wearing brown boots would take off for a dump with a name like Binty?"

"We would," said Leigh. He waited for blood pressure to lower, then finished, "Wouldn't we?"

Slumping into his seat Pascoe glowered at him for five minutes before he said, "I suppose so. God help me, I must be weak." A little glassy-eyed, he shifted attention to Vaughan. "Name it again in case I didn't hear right."

"Binty," said Vaughan, unctuously apologetic. "He has coded it o/o.9/E5 which indicates the presence of an intelligent but backward me form."

"Does he make any remark about the place?"

"One word," informed Vaughan, consulting the papers again. "Ugh!"

Pascoe shuddered.