

THE MAN WHO COULD NOT STOP

THEY AREN'T particular about settlers in the Rim Worlds.

They can't afford to be. The night sky, at those seasons of the year when the sun is in conjunction with the great lens of the Galaxy, is frightening, even to those who were born and reared there, on the planets of the last, the ultimate frontier. It is the emptiness of the firmament that is so shocking, the emptiness made even worse by the dim, incredibly distant nebulosities that are other galaxies, that are island universes. Many a man has come to Thule, or Faraway, or Ultimo to carve out a new career and, after a stay of only a few months, has taken ship for some planet in towards the Galactic center, for some world where at night the sky is ablaze with stars, with the beckoning, comradely lights of far-flung colonies and kingdoms.

There is a continual drain of population from the Rim Worlds. Their imports are, literally, everything, and their exports are young men and women. Without Federation aid the colonies would have to be abandoned; but they are lookout posts on the frontier of the endless dark, and as such must be maintained.

They are also the worlds from which a man on the run can run no further.

Clavering was on the run, and he ran to Faraway. Clavering was wanted, originally, on Earth, but during his flight he had contrived to make himself interesting to the police forces of at least a dozen other planets. His original crime had been robbery with violence—and what made it worse, from the viewpoint of the Terran authorities, was that the victims of the crime had been non-human, and highly important non-humans at that. It was unthinkable, of course, that the Shaara Empire should go to war with the Federation over the theft of the imperial regalia; even so, the High Queen cut short her visit to Washington and her farewell to Terran dignitaries was rather less than warm.

Clavering was on the run, and he bribed and hid and forged and stowed away, and somehow he stayed free and somehow kept moving. Plastic surgeons on four planets helped him with changes of identity. Somewhere along the line he added murder to his crimes—although it was really self defense; Clavering's spirit was restless, driving, self-torturing . . . but it was not wholly evil. There were other thefts—mainly of money. The larger items of the High Queen's regalia, even when broken up, were not easy to dispose of.

He had known for a long time, as do all who live on the wrong side of the Law, that there is no extradition from the Rim Worlds. It was on Van Diemen's Planet that he made his decision. A friendly police officer had warned him, for a consideration, that Terran agents would be arriving on the next in-bound liner, and the tramp freighter *Jolly Swagman*, owned by the Faraway Line and homeward bound, was almost ready to blast off from Port Tasman. Her captain was ready and willing to supplement his salary by arranging a passage at very short notice.

It is a long run from Van Diemen's Planet to Faraway, all of twelve weeks, subjective time, and the queer, dimension warping fields of the Drive have time to build up so that the last half of the voyage is made through an utterly unreal continuum. Through the wide viewports are seen not the usual swirls of light, but star upon star, stretching, apparently, to infinity. Some captains making the run to the Rim warn their passengers what to expect when the Inter stellar Drive is shut off. Others don't—and the Captain of *Jolly Swagman* was one of their number.

It was a shock like a physical blow—that sudden emptiness where, a split second before, all the hosts of heaven had blazed. The one lonely sun, and beyond it the few dim nebulosities, made it worse than complete emptiness would have been.

Clavering looked, and gulped, and decided that he would not like Faraway.

He did not revise his opinion when, two days later, he faced the Immigration officials at Port Remote. He had looked at the mirror in his cabin before going down to the ship's Lounge, had decided that the very ordinary looking Mr. Jones—face-shaped face, hair-colored hair, eye-colored eyes—bore no resemblance to the rather striking James Clavering who had run from Earth. He had checked his papers. They were good papers, as they should have been. He had certainly paid enough for them.

The senior Immigration inspector sat at one of the Lounge tables, the Purser beside him. He looked up as Clavering approached, bleak, grey eyes belying the almost infantile chubbiness of his rosy face.

"This is Mr. Jones," said the Purser.

The Inspector ignored him.

"Your name," he said, "is Clavering. You are wanted for robbery with violence on Earth, murder on Carribea, forgery on Nova Caledon . . ."

"My name," said Clavering, "is Jones. I have papers ..."

"Of course you have. Who did you get 'em from, by the way? Lazarus on Nova Caledon, or Macdonald on Van Diemen's Planet?"

"My name," repeated Clavering, "is Jones."

"Mr. Jones," said the Inspector, "I'm sure you know that there's no extradition here. But—and bear this in mind—we can, in extreme cases, deport. Furthermore, we have an efficient police force and our prisons are not the luxury hotels that they are elsewhere in the Galaxy. As I suspect you will learn. I hope I'm wrong—I rarely am."

The bleak eyes moved on.

After his passport had been stamped Clavering said a few farewells aboard the ship, then took a taxi from the spaceport to Faraway City. The city was what he had expected it to be, a slightly overgrown town. Dwarfing it were the snow capped mountains of the Last Range—named, as Clavering knew from his reading in the ship's library, after Commodore Last who had made the initial landing on Faraway.

He booked in at the hotel—Rimrock House—that had been recommended to him by the Purser. After his baggage had been brought up he locked the door and made sure that what remained of the Shaara jewels was safe. Then he sat on the bed to think things over.

He had had plenty of time for reading on the voyage from Port Tasman. He had discovered that the laws of the Rim Worlds protected criminals from the consequences of crimes committed elsewhere in the Galaxy but, at the same time, were designed to rob them of the proceeds of such crimes. For example, he could take the Shaara High Queen's diamond encrusted belt to any of the city jewellers without fear of arrest. But—the jeweller could take possession of it, turn it in and share in any reward money.

"They're a bunch of crooks," Clavering growled.

There must, he thought, be fences on Faraway. The problem was how to find them. Another possible problem was that the news might already have spread that Clavering, the man who stole the Shaara imperial regalia, was on Faraway. In which case Clavering could expect a visit from the local underworld.

Clavering inspected the contents of his wallet. His Federation currency was legal tender, but he had enough only for a week's board and lodging. He looked at his watch, which he had adjusted to local time and length of day. It was mid-afternoon. By evening, he hoped, he would be well on his way to finding his feet in this new world.

The jewels he stowed in a large briefcase, which he chained and locked to his wrist. He had noticed, on the way in from the spaceport, that the building next door to the hotel was the First National Bank of Faraway, and his first move was to deposit the briefcase in the bank's strong room.

He sauntered away from the bank, towards the center of the city. There were, he noted approvingly, plenty of policemen, very smart and efficient looking in their neat uniforms of white shirt and blue kilt. He had already decided what crime he would commit; he did not think that shop-lifting would be a sufficiently heinous offense to merit deportation rather than jail. He hoped that the jails would not be as bad as the Immigration inspector had implied.

He walked into a large store, took the escalator to the Men's Clothing department, sauntered casually along the aisles until he saw a display—of Altairan crystal silk belts—that took his fancy. He picked up one of the belts, admired the way that it clung to his hands in an almost sentient manner. With elaborate unconcern he rolled it up, slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket. He walked slowly towards the *Down* escalator.

Five yards before he got to it, he felt a firm hand on his elbow . . .

The Magistrate before whom Clavering appeared was suitably censorious, with reference to abuse of the open-handed hospitality of Faraway. He regretted that the penalty of deportation did not apply to the crime of which Clavering had been found guilty. He passed sentence.

"Six months," he said happily. "Six months hard labor."

"But, Your Worship," said Clavering. "This is my first offense."

"On this world, perhaps," replied the Magistrate. Then, to the policemen, "Take him away."

They took him away.

Clavering sat on his cot in the bare cell.

I'll have to make the best of it, he thought. Six months is longer than I need to find the name of a reliable fence—but I should be able to find out plenty more. When I leave here I'll have all my contacts lined up. I'll know just how far I can go without getting deported . . .

He stood up as the small shutter at the top of the door slammed open, and took the tray of food that was passed in to him. He looked at the soggy bread, the beans swimming in water gravy, the jug of water. He carried the tray to the cot, sat down and began to eat.

He passed out the tray when the shutter opened again. He lay down on the cot. He slept.

He slept surprisingly well. He was ready for his breakfast—although it was no more palatable than his supper had been—when it was passed in to him. When the door was unlocked, he joined a procession of shaven headed figures in glaringly striped uniforms. The guards, he noted, were well armed and looked as though they would stand no nonsense. He sighed. This was his third spell in jail, but his two previous experiences had been in establishments where the accent was on humanitarianism.

The hard labor was something about which he had read in historical novels but which he had thought no longer existed. It was stone breaking in the prison quarry—monotonous, back-breaking toil. He had hoped to be able to engage in conversations with fellow inmates during the outdoor activity, but the noise of hammers crashing on rock and the vigilance of the guards made this almost impossible.

The little, wizened man on his right did manage to ask, out of the corner of his mouth, "Are you a Rimmer?" and Clavering managed a hasty negative reply, and that was all.

The midday meal was eaten in the open—bread, beans and some unidentifiable meat that was all fat and gristle—but there were no opportunities for conversation. The afternoon passed in monotonous toil. Clavering was glad when he was locked in his cell for the night. . . .

Six months. One hundred and eighty days. Do they work a seven day week? These damned guards must be recruited from a Trappist monastery, and they expect the rest of us to be Trappists, too . . . At this rate I shall be no wiser when I come out than when I went in. Well, tomorrow I'm going to talk whether they like it or not. After all, they can't shoot me . . .

Or can they?

The following day his resolve was unshaken. He noticed that the little, wizened man was walking ahead of him in the procession.

"You!" he said, in ordinary conversational tones. "You! Shorty! Are you a Rimmer?"

The huge fist of the nearest guard drove, without warning, into his face. He staggered and fell. More intense than the pain was the feeling of consuming rage. He was on his feet again with a catlike agility, his own fists pounding into the bloated belly of the guard. Again he fell, this time under a rain of blows from behind. He was sufficiently in control of himself to roll into a ball, protecting his face with his arms from the heavy boots. It seemed far too long a time before he lost consciousness.

Gradually he became aware of a grey ceiling. He became aware, too, of pain—a dull ache over his legs and arms and most of his body, sharper pangs in his chest as he breathed. He turned his head so that the right side of his face lay on the pillow, groaning as the muscles of his neck protested. He could not, he discovered, see too well with his left eye. He saw a grey wall and the blurry figure of a man in convict stripes.

"Welcome back, Clavering," said the man.

"Who're you?" Clavering grunted with an effort.

"I'm the Doctor. Doctor and inmate both. I'm too useful to them ever to be turned loose. Besides, I

know too much. . . . Here, drink this!"

Clavering managed to struggle to a half-sitting position in the bed. He brought his good eye to bear on the doctor, saw an old man with scanty white hair, a deeply lined, grey face. With an effort he took the glass from him.

It was good brandy, even though it did cause the lacerations inside his mouth to sting painfully. After a few seconds Clavering felt stronger. He looked down at his body, from which the sheet had fallen, saw the taped ribs, the huge, blotchy bruises.

He said, without passion, "The bastards."

"You asked for it," said the doctor. "You asked for it, and you got it. I'd have thought that a man with your wide experience would have had more sense than to behave the way you did. I'd have thought that a man with your experience would have had more sense than to have landed in this hell hole in the first place."

"There were reasons," said Clavering.

"There always are," said the old man. "But go on."

"Can I trust you?" asked Clavering.

"Everybody trusts me—even the guards, even the Governor. They have to."

"Why don't they release you?"

"There's a limit to their trust. Besides . . . Do you know, I've no desire to get out into the world again. In many ways I have more freedom here than outside. Of course, I can't dress as I please—but, in compensation, I have no tailor's bills."

"All right," said Clavering abruptly. "I can trust you. But is this place bugged? It seems to be the one spot where a man can talk . . ."

"This isn't what you'd call a modern jail," said the Doctor. "As you've found out for yourself. None of *them* would ever have the intelligence to plant microphones."

As he spoke, he was scribbling on a pad. He held it so that Clavering could see the crabbed writing. *Of course, it's bugged. But carry on talking. Use the pad for anything important.*

"I've a little money," said Clavering. "Or I had. It was in my wallet in my jacket pocket. I suppose it's in the Governor's safe now ..."

He wrote: *I'm a stranger here—I thought jail would be the best place to make contacts . . .*

"It may still be there, if you're very lucky," said the Doctor.

What I want, wrote Clavering, is the name of a good fence.

He said, "I was hoping that you might be able to get the money out for me. On other worlds prisoners can arrange to buy stuff from the outside—this jail diet needs some help."

"On other worlds," said the Doctor, "they pamper their convicts."

He wrote, *I can hear them coming. I must flush these pages away.*

"After all," said Clavering to the retreating back, "we are human beings."

"Are we?" asked the Doctor. There was the sound of running water. "Are we?"

"A pig couldn't stomach the muck they feed us here," said Clavering.

A door opened. A tall man in plain black clothing walked in, escorted by two uniformed guards. He nodded curtly to the old Doctor, who replied with a nod of equal curtness. He stood by Clavering's bed, looking coldly down on him.

Clavering returned the stare. He wondered, as he had wondered when he had first met the Governor in his office, what an ex-spaceman was doing in such a position. In the other jails that he had known, the Governors had been either retired military men or high ranking police officers.

"No permanent damage, I trust?" said the Governor to the Doctor.

"No thanks to your bullies. But he'll live."

"This," said the Governor to Clavering, "is not a Rest Home. On this world, on any of the Rim Worlds, we do not believe in pampering criminals. Criminals may come here, as you have done, to avoid the consequences of their crimes elsewhere in the Galaxy. If they make good citizens they are welcome. If they don't . . ."

"I'm beginning to regret having come here," said Clavering through swollen lips.

"No doubt you are. No doubt you have become used to being treated as a hospital patient rather than as a convict, as an interesting case to be studied by gentle and considerate psychiatrists. Here, on Faraway, we recognize only one school of psychology."

"Which is?" asked Clavering, feeling that it was expected of him.

"Pavlov's," replied the Governor.

"It is hard," said the Doctor, "to build up a conditioned reflex against wrongdoing in an adult human being."

"We can try," said the Governor.

At last, with no remission for good conduct, the six months were over. Clavering had his last interview with the Governor, handed in his prison uniform and received in exchange his civilian clothing, found that his watch, his wallet and his money were missing. His protests were laughed at.

He was met at the gate of the jail by a ground car with *Prisoners' Aid Society* emblazoned on its sides in huge white letters. He had no option but to accept the proffered help. He rode back to Faraway City seated beside the driver, a huge man who, to judge by his appearance, was an ex-policeman. Poverty, thought Clavering, makes strange bedfellows.

On the outskirts of the city the truck pulled up alongside a drab, barracks-like building which obviously—its occupants being lavish in their use of neon signs—was the headquarters of the Society. The driver of the car took Clavering into the office where a repellently fat woman took down his particulars. He was then told that the Society would find him work and would house and feed him—his board and lodging being deducted by his employer from his weekly pay—until such time as he could fend for himself. A job, it appeared, was already waiting for him—one of the firms of importers had a vacancy for a junior clerk. He was to start the following morning.

Clavering thanked the woman with more politeness than sincerity, was led by a skinny girl to a sparsely furnished cubicle. The girl turned to leave.

"Wait!" said Clavering. "Please . . ."

The girl said sullenly, "Old blubber-guts will throw a fit if I'm not back in the office in two seconds flat."

"Let her," said Clavering. "What's the set-up here?"

"You make your own bed and sweep your own floor," said the girl. "You eat at ought seven thirty and eighteen hundred hours. On Saturdays and Sundays the hostel gives you a noon meal too. It ain't any good."

"What I meant was—what are the chances of getting out of here?"

She laughed. "None. By the time the cost of your board and lodging have been taken out of your pay you'll have enough left for a couple of shots and a deck of smokes. And with your record you won't get a job anywhere except through the Society."

"This," said Clavering, "is worse than jails I've been in on more civilized planets."

"Nobody," she pointed out, "asked you to come here."

She left him. Clavering went to the blotchy mirror, looked at himself. His suit was still a fair fit, although it tended to be a little tight across the chest and shoulders, more than a little slack across the belly. Clavering shrugged. It didn't much matter. He would soon have money enough—even though the fence in Faraway City would be no more honest than fences are anywhere—to buy a new suit, to set himself up in some sort of business.

In some sort of business? He asked himself with a certain amazement. What's come over me? Was Pavlov right after all? But I don't want to risk another spell in that jail. . . .

He left the hostel.

He had no money, so he had to walk into the city, feeling thankful that it was no more than an overgrown town. He went first to Rimrock House, and found that his baggage had been stored and that there were storage charges to pay. He said that he would pick it up later.

He went into the First National Bank. The official in charge of safe deposits remembered Mr. Jones. Even so, there were certain formalities to be observed—finger print and retinal patterns to check, five

months' storage charges to pay . . .

He was sorry, but rules were made for the protection of customers as well as for the protection of the bank and, furthermore, were not made to be broken ...

Clavering left the bank. It was past noon, and he had had nothing to eat since his prison breakfast. He hadn't had a drink for six months, and had had nothing to smoke in that period but the vile, acrid prison tobacco.

He considered walking to the address that the Doctor had given him, but it was on the other side of the city and there was, too, the possibility that the fence would refuse to advance him the money for his immediate requirements. Anyhow, Clavering had his pride, and he didn't like fences, and hated to place himself under any obligation to one.

It was lucky, thought Clavering, that he had never become a specialist. He could crack a safe or forge a signature or pick a pocket—not, of course, with the best practitioners of these various arts but with, he prided himself, the second best. The present situation called for pocket picking. He began to look around him for a likely mark.

A prosperous-looking fat man was window shopping nearby. Clavering ran a trained eye over his clothing. The shirt was Altairan crystal silk, and Altairan crystal silk is not among the cheaper textiles. The jacket was one of the finer, more expensive tweeds from Nova Caledon, and the kilt and stockings obviously came from Scotland itself. (Clavering wondered if the fat man had any right to wear the Clan Graeme tartan.) The shoes had that sheen peculiar to leather made from the hides of the great fish lizards of the Markara swamps. The bulge under the jacket was almost certainly a well-filled wallet.

Clavering waited until the fat man was staring into the window of a delicatessen, well stocked with gastronomical temptation from a score of worlds, before making his approach. He sauntered up to him and said, "Pardon me, have you the time? My watch is being repaired . . ."

"Twelve after thirteen," replied the other, affably enough.

"Quite a fine display, isn't it?" said Clavering, nodding towards the window. "Of course some of these things don't travel too well. The only way to eat witchety grubs, for example, is to pick them straight from the hot ashes on to which they've been dropped alive and squirming ..."

"I've never been to Earth," said the fat man. "Next year, perhaps. But I always say that I can have a cruise of the Galaxy whenever I feel like it, in my own kitchen."

"What's that stuff there?" asked Clavering. "That opalescent jelly in the fancy jar?"

"It comes from Windhover. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

"Neither have I—but, thanks to my hobby, I know plenty about it. At certain seasons of the year—and seasons there are rather complicated, as they're bound to be in a binary system—the big sea spiders come ashore and build nests among the rocks with secretions from their bodies . . ."

When he had heard enough to make him resolve that no foodstuff from Windhover would ever find its way on to his table, Clavering asked the time again. He excused himself, saying that he had an appointment. He walked away—not too fast and not too slow, putting several corners between himself and the fat man. He arrived eventually in a small park. He found a vacant seat—the day was fine and warm and most of the office workers there were eating their lunches on the grass.

He pulled his prize, the precious wallet, out of his pocket. It wasn't a wallet.

It was a cigar case.

Anyhow, thought Clavering, he would have a quiet smoke before doing anything further. He took one of the fat cigars, held it appreciatively under his nose, then lit it with the lighter that was part of the case.

It tasted . . . odd.

It wasn't unpleasant, it was, most definitely, *good*. Its oddness was probably the result of having his palate ruined by the chopped straw and horse droppings that went by the name of tobacco in the Central Jail.

Horse droppings?

Insult to horse—man's best friend.

Without horses—what to bet on?

Dogs?

Hell with dogs!

Hate dogs.

One there, taking fat woman for walk.

Coming this way.

Hel wif'm.

Going to kick me.

Kick'm first.

Madam, I refuse to be kicked by your mangy cur. I have refused to be kicked by mangy curs on every civilized planet of Galaxy. Matter of principle, tha's wha'. Man of principle, tha' me.

'Scuse . . . Not well . . . Must be fish or something . . .

It was not the fish, fish being a luxury of which Clavering had not partaken for months. It was the cigar. It was a very expensive cigar—being rolled from a mixture of Terran tobacco and the Lyran *kaleph* weed. The fumes from their joint burning produce an effect very like that of alcohol, and when taken on an empty stomach and after half a year of abstinence from strong drink, intoxication is the inevitable result.

The Magistrate before whom Clavering appeared on his drunk and disorderly charge greeted him as an old enemy. He repeated his remarks about the abuse of Rim World hospitality. He even went so far as to repeat the sentence. The sentence might have been less had it not been discovered that the cigar case did not bear Clavering's name.

He was in a bitter mood when he was taken to the Central Jail.

He stood sullenly before the Governor.

"I thought," said that official, "that you would be a repeater, but I did not expect you back so soon."

"I did not expect to be back at all."

"But you are," said the Governor tiredly. "However, I have decided to be lenient. You are a man of intelligence, and that intelligence is wasted on the rock pile. We have, strange though it may seem, some machinery in this establishment, and it has to be maintained . . ."

"And will the better job bring better food?" asked Clavering bluntly.

"The food will be the same. Really it should be inferior, as you will be expending far less physical energy."

"Sir," said Clavering earnestly, "may I ask you a question?"

"You may."

"Then tell me—just what crime must one commit to get oneself deported from the Rim Worlds?"

"Not murder," replied the Governor, smiling bleakly. "We hang people for that. We're very old fashioned here, as you may have noticed. As a matter of fact three convictions running, for any crime or crimes, is usually sufficient. That's the Law."

"Thank you," said Clavering.

His second sentence dragged as slowly as his first one had.

This time he managed to avoid any serious physical maltreatment and his only visit to the hospital was when he was suffering from a slightly infected hand. Guards were present while it was being dressed and he was unable to tell his story to the old Doctor.

The time dragged—yet, in spite of himself, he found himself developing a very real interest in machinery. When at last the day came for him to leave the prison he had to fight down the feeling that he should say goodbye to his old, well polished, smoothly working charges.

The same ground car took him to Faraway City, the same fat woman admitted him to the Prisoners' Aid Society Hostel. He found, as before, that there was a job waiting for him, but this time it was in one of the smaller garages in the city.

Clavering decided not to rush things this time. He did not go near either the hotel or the bank on his first day of freedom, but stayed in the hostel, reading. The following morning he reported for work in the garage and spent the forenoon cleaning and polishing one ground car and two helicopters. The boss

advanced him enough money for his lunch, which he bought at a snack bar close to the garage. In the afternoon he was allowed, under supervision, to overhaul an engine.

He had his evening meal at the hostel. It was not much of an improvement over the prison food. When it had settled, he decided to walk out to the address that he had been given during his first spell in jail.

It was a clear night, and it was the first time that Clavering had seen the night sky for a year. It was autumn in Faraway's northern hemisphere, and the Galactic lens was almost in conjunction with the sun. As Clavering walked slowly out along the road with its sparse lining of houses he looked upwards. The emptiness that he saw was as shocking as it had been the first time that he had seen it from *Jolly Swagman's* observation lounge. He understood now the stories he had heard to the effect that everybody who could afford to leave Faraway finished up in the Cluster Planets.

He reached, at last, the house where he had been told that he would find the fence. He hesitated for a while at the gate to the long drive, feeling an unwonted nervousness. What, he wondered, would go wrong this time? And the worst of it was that there was no place to run if things did go wrong. He had been running all his life and had come at the last to the very edge of the dark, the frontier of utter negation.

He shrugged.

These crazy Rim Worlds, he told himself, did things to you.

He pressed the button set in one of the posts of the wrought iron gate. There was a faint whirring sound that told him he was being scanned. From a hidden speaker came a metallic voice.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I am John Clavering. I wish to speak with your master, with Mr. Konradis."

"What is your business?"

"I will tell that to Mr. Konradis."

"I repeat: What is your business?"

"Damn nosy robot. . . . My business is private."

A new voice broke in, a human voice.

"What do you want?"

"Are you Mr. Konradis?"

"Yes."

"Then my business concerns the Shaara imperial regalia."

There was a sharp intake of breath, distinctly audible to Clavering. There was a click as the lock of the gate was released. It swung silently open.

Clavering walked slowly up the drive, his boots crunching on the yellow gravel. He looked at the house that was more of a fortress than a dwelling place. The front door opened at his approach. Clavering stepped into a hall—bare, unfurnished, ablaze with harsh, blue-white light.

"Take the door to your right," ordered a voice.

Clavering did so. He found himself in a room that was as large as the one that he had just left but, if anything, over-furnished, over-decorated. Behind a huge, polished desk sat a little man, the lamp light reflected gleamingly from his bald skull.

He said, "Sit, Mr. Clavering."

Clavering sat.

He said, "I suppose you have come to see if I wish to take the Shaara jewels off your hands."

Clavering said yes.

"I will be honest with you, Mr. Clavering. I will let you have five per cent of the value of the jewels. After all, if it had not been for you I should never have been able to engage in one of the more profitable deals in my career."

"Five per cent! I promise you I will drop them in the sea before I will sell them for five percent."

"Mr. Clavering, almost six months ago I was approached by the Queen-Captain of a Shaara vessel, and, much as I dislike dealing with non-humans, the arthropoda especially, I let her persuade me to use what little influence I have to recover the regalia from the bank."

He paused. He put both hands into the drawer under the desk top. His right hand came up holding a bundle of banknotes, his left hand grasping a deadly little Minetti automatic. He said, "Don't get ideas, Mr. Clavering. I am left handed. Catch!"

Clavering caught the money. He counted it. It would be enough to buy him a new suit and perhaps a used ground car or helicopter. It would not be enough to buy passage to another planet, even to one of the other Rim Worlds.

He said, "The Shaara Captain wasn't very generous."

"She gave me all the Federation money she had in her ship's safe," said Konradis.

"So there is more to come," said Clavering.

"Maybe. But there is no more for you."

Clavering choked down his rage. He put the money in an inside pocket. He got to his feet, walked slowly to the door. The muzzle of the little automatic in Konradis' hand swung to follow him as he walked. Clavering ignored it. His photographic memory was hard at work, noting and filing details of windows and their fastenings, doors and their locks. He had met men of the receiver's type before and knew that they relied far more heavily upon robot guards than upon fallible humans.

He knew, as Konradis obviously didn't, that robots can be fallible too.

He left the house, left the grounds, walked slowly back to the city.

Back in the hostel Clavering went to his cubicle, lay on the bed and marshalled facts.

(a) What remained of the Shaara regalia when he had come to Faraway was by this time once again in the possession of the High Queen.

(b) Twenty times Cr. 1,000, which was what Konradis had given him, was Cr. 20,000. The fence must have made at least five times that amount on the deal, to judge by the reward that had been advertised after the theft had taken place.

(c) A passage to, say, Van Diemen's Planet would cost at least Cr. 2,500.

(d) A man like Konradis almost always kept a large sum of ready money in the house, usually in a bedroom safe.

(e) The doorkeeping robot was a Parrar-Blenkinsop, model Mark IV. Clavering knew things about the Mark IV, expertly extracted from a drunken Farrar-Blenkinsop technician.

(f) Konradis undoubtedly had friends on the police force, therefore his mouth must be shut for at least six hours after the burglary. There was a little somno gun in Clavering's baggage which would take care of that angle.

(g) Clavering's baggage was, presumably, still in the Rimrock House storage rooms—but the Cr. 1,000 he had received from Konradis would be more than enough to cover the charges.

(h) Clavering's papers, made out in the name of Jones, were still in his baggage. A few Cr. 10 bills, wisely used, would get them stamped in the right places by the right people.

(i) The Interstellar Transport Commission's *Delta Serpens* was standing at Port Remote, scheduled to blast off for Mitylene at 2400 hours the following night. . . .

"So," said Clavering to himself, "if I catch her I run the slight risk of winding up in a Terran jail. It's only a slight risk—and, after all, Terran jails are luxury hotels compared with the one here. In any case, the Shaara High Queen's got her tomfoolery back by now so the heat must be off.

"If I stay here, I shall almost certainly wind up in jail again. Then I shall be deported. And that way it is *certain* that the police, local as well as Federal, will be waiting for me on whatever planet I'm sent to.

"It's worth the risk."

He undressed, got into bed. Within seconds he was sleeping like a happy child.

The following morning he rang the garage, said that he was ill and would not be coming in to work. He went straight to the Rimrock House, where he had to wait for his baggage to be brought up from the storerooms. He took a taxi Lack to the hostel, took his baggage up to his room, locked the door and unpacked. He checked the little somno gun, testing it on one of the tiny flying lizards that were common pests on Faraway. It worked. He found the sheet of specially treated paper. Lacking infra-red scanning equipment he couldn't test that, but he had no reason to doubt that it would work. He repacked his

baggage, putting all his papers in his brief case, the somno gun in the side pocket of his kilt, the sheet of paper in the inside breast pocket of his jacket.

He went back to the job at the garage for what was left of the forenoon and all the afternoon. During the lunch break—he was left in charge while the other employees went out for their meal—he was able to take a good wax impression of the key to the main door. He decided which car he would use—a big, old-fashioned Ferranti monowheel.

He finished his day's work and returned to the hostel. Back in his cubicle he found signs that his baggage had been tampered with. The maid? The superintendent? One of the other ex-convict guests? It didn't matter. He was relieved to find that his tools and key blanks had not been stolen; replacements could be purchased easily in any hardware store, but all the shops were now shut until the following morning.

After dinner downstairs, he returned to his room. Behind the locked door he worked on one of his blanks, whistling to cover the rasping of his file.

When he was finished, he put the key and one of the files in his kilt pocket, and his papers into his briefcase. Into a small suitcase he packed bare necessities—the *Delta* class liners, he knew, ran to a small ship's shop where he would be able to purchase anything further required during the voyage.

Carrying the two cases he went downstairs. He met only the skinny maid. She looked at him curiously.

He said, "I should be able to get a fair price for these. I was talking to one of our customers in the garage today and he said that he wanted to buy some good, secondhand baggage. I'm taking them out to him."

She said, not really interested, that she hoped he got a good price.

He walked slowly into the city, to the office of the Interstellar Transport Commission's agents. It was still open, and would remain open until *Delta Serpens* had blasted off.

To the bored young man behind the counter Clavering said, "Are there any berths left aboard the Earth ship?"

"Yes, sir. Not the best—they're all taken. There's a cabin on F Level if you don't mind the heat and the noise."

"I'll take it."

"To Mitylene, or beyond?"

"What's the fare to Mitylene?"

"Two thousand."

"I haven't that much with me right now," said Clavering. "I have to collect the balance from a friend this evening."

"Two thousand," said the clerk.

"It's rather important that I catch the ship," said Clavering. "I'm willing to make it worth your while. Suppose I make a deposit of Cr. 500 on my ticket . . . Suppose I leave my papers with you, and this suitcase . . . You could get the papers fixed up for me, and I meet you at the spaceport at, say, 2330 hours. You give me my ticket, and I give you the balance of Cr. 2,500 . . ."

This was the sort of arithmetic that the clerk understood. He looked at the papers, riffled through them, and nodded. "Yes, Mr. Jones," he said. "It can be arranged. I'm sure that it can be arranged."

Clavering paid the initial five hundred credits, walked briskly out of the office. He looked up and down the street, his lip lifting in a sneer. A hick town on a hick planet. He looked up at the black, empty sky, thought how good it would be when he saw the great, blazing lens of the Galaxy fill *Delta Serpens'* viewpoints as she swung round to the course that would take her to Mitylene and to the thriving, bustling worlds of the Inner Systems.

Clavering looked at his watch. He had time to kill. He went into a Newsreel Theatre, watched events that were history rather than news. When he found himself watching, for a second time, the coronation of King James XIV of Waverly he left.

He strolled casually from the theatre to the garage. There were only a few passers-by, and there were no policemen in sight.

His new key was a good fit, opening the big doors with no delay. The big Ferranti was where he had left it, near the door. The gyroscope reached maximum revolutions inside three minutes and Clavering retracted the parking props, rolled slowly out into the street. He left the car briefly while he shut and locked the garage doors.

He made the run to Konradis' house without incident. He stopped the car just short of the ornamental gates and got out, leaving the gyroscope running. He started as a sudden, raucous sound broke the silence. So Konradis kept fowls, and one of his roosters had an odd sense of time . . . He remembered the night that he had got Fredericks, the Farrar-Blenkinsop roboticist, drunk.

"Thing to 'member," Fredericks had said, "is this. All our robots have brains. But not human brains. Not anything like. Take Mark IV. Same I.Q. as domestic fowl . . . Funny thing—bunch of us talking 'bout it, 'membered 'bout hypnotizin' chickens. Fantastic. Works on Mark IV too . . ."

"And how do you hypnotize a chicken?" Clavering had asked.

"Easy. Draw line on floor. Hold her beak down to it." "But the Mark IV hasn't got a beak . . ."

"Special paper, hold up to scanner. Shows, in infra-red, very straight, very dark line . . ."

So Clavering had carried out his own experiments, but had been careful never to carry out a robbery by making use of the doorkeeping robot's weakness. He had decided to keep the knowledge in reserve until such time as its use would be justified.

This was the time.

He saw, on the nearer gatepost, the dim glow of the button. He took the specially prepared paper out of his pocket, unfolded it. He stood before the gatepost, the paper held over his face. With his right forefinger he found the button, pressed it. He heard the whirring noise as the scanner went into action.

"Who are you?" asked the metallic voice, then stopped. "You know me," said Clavering.

"Yes."

"I am a friend."

"Yes."

"Let me in."

"Yes."

The lock clicked, the gate swung open. Clavering got back into the car—he would need it both as a means of transportation and as a temporary prison for Konradis—and drove up the drive. At his approach the front door of the house opened. He transferred the somno gun to the side pocket of his jacket. He got out of the car, walked to the door, into the house.

The muzzle of the gun was trained on the door to Konradis' study. As it opened. Clavering fired. He felt rather than heard the whine of the thing. He saw Konradis stagger inside the doorway, the automatic dropping from his hand. He saw Konradis fall, not unconscious, only partially paralyzed.

Clavering dragged him into the study, propped him up in one of the chairs.

"I could have used full power," said the thief, "but I didn't. You're no use to me fast asleep. I want you to talk."

"I . . ." the words came with painful slowness . . . "refuse."

"Where is your safe?"

Konradis was silent.

"The trouble with somno guns," remarked Clavering, "is that the victim is quite insensitive to pain, so more extreme measures are required than would be the case otherwise." He unbuckled Konradis' right shoe, pulled it off. He pulled off the stocking. "You will be able to feel nothing, but you will be able to watch me build a fire in that ornamental but doubtless quite efficient fireplace of yours . . . You have kindling and coals all ready—thoughtful of you. You will, as I have said, feel nothing—but it will be a rather trying experience for you to watch your foot being slowly consumed by the flames."

"You . . . daren't . . ." said Konradis.

"Daren't I?" asked Clavering, lighting the fire.

"Bedroom," said Konradis when his foot was an inch from the fire. "Behind . . . picture . . ."

"And the combination? Hurry, now—I might get tired and drop this foot."

Konradis told him. Konradis told him too, reluctantly, of the concealed switch that would start the

pump to evacuate the anaesthetic gas from the safe—this was after Clavering had placed a short stub of ornamental candle from the dining room in a box of highly inflammable material, telling Konradis that unless he was down from the bedroom in a reasonably short time he, Konradis, would suffer at least very severe burns before the fire extinguishing equipment came into action.

Clavering found the bedroom, and wished that he could have stolen its furniture and decorations—he had a sound, professional knowledge of antiques. He found the safe behind a genuine Picasso. He found the switch for the pump, concealed in the right nipple of a platinum nude by Kirschwasser. He waited until the whining of the little machine had stopped before he opened the safe.

There was currency—good, honest, Federation currency—ample for all his needs. Clavering stuffed it into a silken pillowslip from the bed. He went downstairs, blew out the candle under Konradis' chair.

"Now, he said, "you're coming with me."

"Why?"

"Because I say so. The effects of a somno gun last only so long, and as soon as they wear off you'll be giving the alarm. If I tie you up and leave you here you might wriggle free. In the boot of the car you'll be quite safe—all that I have to do is give you an occasional jolt. Actually, I'm being very considerate."

And, he thought, I can afford to be. I haven't lost the old touch. Tonight's operation went like clockwork.

It would have continued to go like clockwork had it not been for the drunken driver roaring out of a side street at excessive speed. The boot of Clavering's car was burst open in the crash and the police officer who was on the spot before

Clavering could collect his scattered senses regarded its contents with interest.

Clavering would have used his somno gun, but the little weapon had been broken in the accident. Clavering grabbed his briefcase, into which he had transferred the stolen money, and tried to run. He was brought down by a flying tackle from a meddling passer-by.

The Governor looked across his desk at Clavering almost with approval.

"You're back," he said.

"I'm back," admitted the prisoner. "How soon are they going to deport me? And where to?"

"Not so fast, Clavering. Not so fast. There is still the prison sentence to be served. We have some new machinery for you to look after—the pumps for our experimental hydroponics farm. We intend to make sure that you're well trained for your new life."

"Very decent of you, I'm sure."

"Oh, another point, Clavering—and your observance of it will save you a deal of trouble in the future. Just call me `sir,' will you?"

"All right," said Clavering. "Sir."

He found his new work interesting. He found, too, that conditions were a lot easier, that the food was better and that the guards did not go to such extreme lengths to dis. courage conversation among the prisoners.

He soon realized that his workmates were men like himself, intelligent, but habitual criminals, incurable except by the personality-destroying brain surgery abhorred by all civilized worlds. He asked questions, but none of them knew to which planet or planets they were to be deported, or when. He discovered that a large number of convicts were being trained in other branches of engineering.

Then, at last, he was aroused one morning by the guard hammering at his door. He got up, began groping for his clothes. "Not those," barked the official. "Put these on!" He thrust a bundle through the open trap.

There was underwear, clean and new. There was a black coverall. There was a pair of highly polished black boots. On each sleeve of the coverall was a green fern leaf superimposed upon a golden gear wheel.

The new clothing was comfortable, and it fitted. Clavering left his cell when the door was unlocked, joined a procession of similarly garbed prisoners. At the prison gates, where the vans were waiting, he

stopped to ask one of the guards, "What's wrong with the Governor? He usually says goodbye to his departing guests."

"You'll be seeing Captain Christopher again," said the guard.

Clavering could see nothing from inside the van, but he was not surprised when the door opened to reveal the environs of the spaceport. He looked with interest at the other vans that were drawn up in an orderly line, at the black-clad men who were tumbling out of each one. It was cheaper, he supposed, to arrange a mass deportation every so often.

He stiffened with surprise as he turned to look at the ship. She was big, far bigger than any vessel that he had ever seen. She dwarfed the spaceport administration buildings, the cranes and gantries. Her tail fins were flying buttresses and she was a huge, improbable tower built of gleaming metal.

"We're travelling in style," said the man on Clavering's left, "They've sent an Alpha Class liner to pick us up."

"That's no Alpha Class liner," said Clavering. "It's at least twice the size!"

A voice was booming from loudspeakers: "Attention, all! Attention, all! Personnel will board the ship forthwith!"

The long lines of men shuffled forward, with alert guards in close attendance as they passed up the ramps into the airlocks. There was an elderly man, in Purser's uniform, on duty at the head of the ramp by which Clavering boarded. He was ticking off names on a sheet.

"Clavering, John— Hydroponics."

The insignia on Clavering's sleeves, the work that he had been doing during his last prison sentence, added up to make sense.

"Making us work our passages?" he remarked.

The Purser ignored him.

"Cowden, Peter— Air Circulation. . . . Davis, David—Air Circulation. . . ."

"Hydroponics men, this way!" a voice was shouting.

Clavering, with the other men of his department, followed the Master at Arms through alleyways and up ladders, found himself with eleven more deportees in a sparsely furnished dormitory. The petty officer ignored all questions. The steel door shut with a decisive click.

The time dragged. The men talked in a desultory way. They were grateful when the wall speaker came to life and ordered them to their bunks for blast-off. They resented not being told what was happening—all their past experience of space travel had been as fare-paying passengers. They were relieved when the thunders died and the crushing weight was lifted from their chests. There was a little horseplay as they tumbled about the compartment in free fall.

"Attention!" barked the wall speaker. The bulkhead below it had come alive, had become a huge video screen. It depicted what was obviously the control room of a spaceship. It showed a tall man in black uniform who wore on his sleeves the four gold bands of captaincy.

"The Governor!" whispered somebody. "I thought he was just an ex-Captain!"

"And there's the old Quack with him!" muttered one of the other men.

"Men," said Captain Christopher quietly. "I do you the honor of calling you men, because it is a man's job that lies before you. A job so dangerous and uncertain that free men, who are willing to do it are hard to find. . . ."

"History," he said after a pause, "repeats itself. Centuries ago there was another Christopher—although that was his given name—who knew that the Earth was round, and this in an age when the majority of seamen feared that if they sailed too far to the westward their ships, and themselves with them, would fall over the edge. This other Christopher, this Christopher Columbus, found that he could sail his ships only by impressing men from the jails.

"All of you who have come to the Rim Worlds have had your chances. All of you discovered, with your first experience of jail, that crime does not pay. And yet, although you knew that the penalty for habitual crime was deportation, you persisted in your ways. You are here, all of you, as the direct consequence of your own actions. The rest of us—myself, the officers and the petty officers—are here because we want to be. And I wish to make it clear that we do not intend to be thwarted in our purpose.

I wish to make it clear that we, the professional spacemen, will be able to work the ship after a fashion should you be so unwise as to stage a mutiny. I wish to make it clear that under my command the rule is: He who does not work does not eat.

"I cannot say how long our voyage will take in terms of objective time—that is one of the things we have to find out. I cannot say, even, how long it will take measured by subjective time—but I think that we shall return before much more than a half century has passed.

"This I can say—there is no turning back. None of you know enough to handle a spaceship. You might, in time, learn enough so that you think you will be able to seize the ship and force my navigators and engineers to do your bidding. I will tell you only that the ship has defenses built-in with such an emergency in mind. In the extremely unlikely event of a successful mutiny there will be, I promise you, no return . . ."

Frantically, Clavering racked his mind for some legality in the name of which he could protest. There was none. By running to the Rim Worlds he had made himself subject to their laws, and one of those laws made deportation the punishment for the third conviction. He could not help but admire the cunning of the Federation—to make the Rim the haven for the criminal and to offer the criminal, on paper at least, the chance of reformation. It seemed that all who were potential space-crew material were given very little chance to reform.

With the others he watched as the control room scanner swung away from the Captain and his officers, watched as it showed that part of Space towards which the ship was heading. He heard the unique whine of a Mannschenn Drive starting up, knew that the screen would, in a few seconds, show only meaningless whorls of light.

And they would be better than the cold emptiness—the infinite nothingness interrupted only by the dim, distant nebulosity to which the ship was headed—the tiny, luminous cloud that was, perhaps, another Galaxy.

He had spent his life running, and he had run as far as he could, to the very edge of the night.

And he had not been able to stop.