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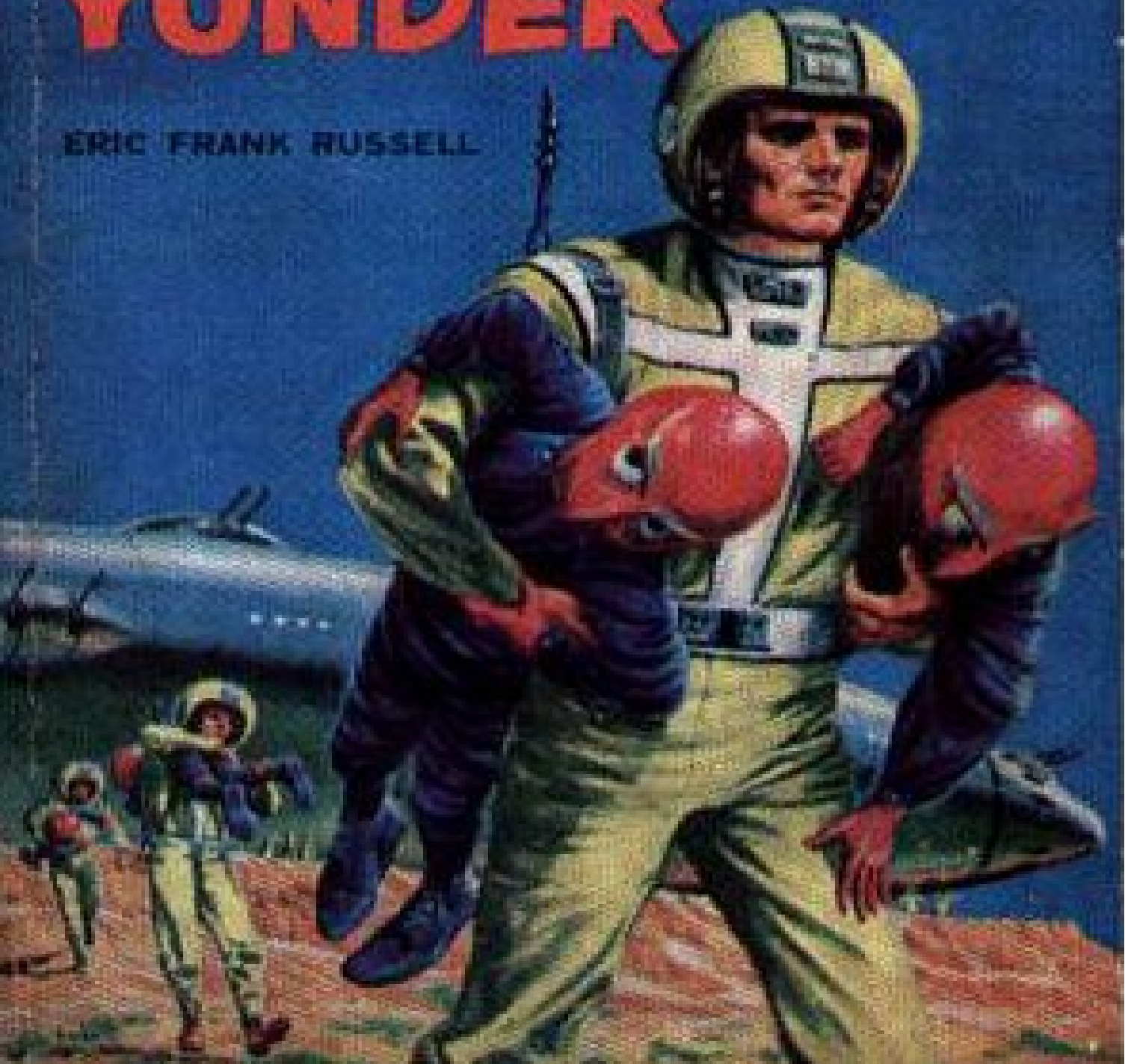
Stories of first landings on far planets

SIX WORLDS YONDER

ERIC FRANK RUSSELL



Six Worlds Yonder

by Eric Frank Russell

THE PLANET MAPPERS

One thing's certain about the exploration of outer space--there's not going to be two worlds alike! In this new collection of interstellar explorers, the fertile and original mind of Eric Frank Russell presents a half-dozen of the more extraordinary possibilities.

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Eric Frank Russell is one of the leading names in science-fiction today. A writer of unusual ability, his stories are marked by a lightness of touch combined with an out-of-the-rut imagination that have made each of them stand out in whatever format they are published. An Englishman, his tales have appeared in all the leading science-fiction magazines both here and abroad and have been extensively translated, as well as rendered into Braille for the blind.

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The Waitabits

THE WAITABITS

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 gray-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 favor of this technique: its victims often were bothered, bedeviled 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 out-grown 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 hobos 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 wouldn't 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 accusing 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."

"Won't he explain it when he returns to his sector headquarters?"

"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. Galac-tic 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. I'll 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 it's inhabited by an intelligent lifeform of different but theoretically equal mental power. He calls this lifeform the Waitabits. Apparently he tags everything 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 twenty-one planets had been discovered, charted, recorded. One hundred thirty-seven found suitable for human life and large or small groups of settlers placed thereon. Sixty-two alien lifeforms 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's a joke, Commodore, it's in bad taste. Some might think it seditious."

"Well, can you think up a 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 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 Boydell. 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 lifeform has been able to resist us. I don't see how any can. Any creatures with an atom of sense soon see on 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 labor, 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 lifeform 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've 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 coordinates 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 harbored 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, 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, 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 a comparatively young species?"

"Could be. On the other hand, they may be old and se-nile 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 inheri-tance 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:

"'Nineteen-twelve, ex Terra. Defense H.Q. to C.O. battleship Thunderer. Light cruiser Flame, Lt. 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 forgot-ten."

"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 II. Fellow name of James finds it, lands, makes friends, becomes a blood brother, finally takes off amid a burst of fond farewells. Next, down come 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 slaugh-ter? Had I better risk the crew of a lifeboat in 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 contacted us to say 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 intercom buzzed, 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. 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 ar-gon, but otherwise much like Earth's."

"Good. Well 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 swiveled 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 burning fuse to reach a 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, as 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 waggling or a fluourescent 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, or were just 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 the main meal. 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 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 the ship or any part of it. Men can build ships, but ships cannot man-ufacture 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 on our idle behinds 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, go to bed while the going is good. If trouble starts it's likely to be days before you get another

chance. Ex-hausted 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 lifeform 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 a result of what they've seen of us so far or maybe as a 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 re-doubtable 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 well 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've 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're making ready for us to walk into their parlor, after which" -

he wiped a forefinger across his throat--"skzzt!"

"Bunk!" said Pascoe.

"Well soon learn where we stand one way or the other,"

Leigh stated. "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, focused 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 analyzed in the lab. They straightened up as the line conducted sounds of the newcomer's approach. Shading their eyes, they stood like men paralyzed 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, anywhere but directly at the great invader atop the bluff.

From the time the train was first observed until realization 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 thinner digits."

"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 can't 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," Walterson chipped in 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 others'

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. "Wil-liams, is the 'copter ready yet?"

"Assembled and now being fueled, 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." Turning to the others, he added, "Shallom has some aerial shots that were taken before we landed, but Ogilvy will be able to provide us with

more details."

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

"What?"

"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 up so gradually that it had inched twenty yards before watchers became certain that it had reversed direction. Leigh leveled 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 aven-ue 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."

There was 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, "Be-lieve it or not, there's a sort of street-car system in operation.

A baby 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 wtih 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 can't get from another?"

"He can confirm or deny the one thing that is all-impor-tant 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 gray 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 para-lytics."

"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, we'll 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 unde-featable reason, namely, life's too short."

"I'm jumping to no hasty conclusions," said Leigh. "We'l1 wait for Ogilvy."

In 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 Walterson 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 with digging 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 while, 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 check on the load in that train, It's high time we made some progress, Please your-selves 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 colored charts, They were unarmed, being the only personnel for-bidden 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 lifeform sufficiently intelligent to ride 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 time these aliens got into action, I'd be a small cloud of dust in the sunset,"

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 sitting behind a glass-like 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 around 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 him. 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 around, 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 un-cle 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 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 around, 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 mo-mentum 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 awhile, 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 his hop-pause routine and called, "It has stopped, Commodore."

Stepping backward from the cab, Leigh shoved his hands deep into his 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 color 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 all 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 dex-terously 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 puzzle - 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 a 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 dopy. Their outlandishly colored 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 on their faces, too.

The Grand Council, he decided, had good cause for alarm --although for a reason 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 em-bodied 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 the 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 center 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 marvelous 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 nighttime 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 transportation 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 on 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 than anything we've got, in any single respect."

"To discover that much we'd have to pull it to pieces,"

Walterson objected. "Putting Shallom and his boys on that job would be a lousy way of fending off hostility. The Waitabits won't like it even if they can't stop us."

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

"No," said Walterson. "And neither did I ever hear of one that took five years to pay for what it got in five minutes."

He grinned with malicious satisfaction, added, "We're finding out what Boydell discovered, namely, you've got to give in order to receive--and in order to receive you've got to wait a bit."

"I won't argue with you because something inside of me insists that you're dead right." Leigh made a gesture of dismissal. "Anyway, that's the Council's worry. Let's get back to the ship. We can do no more until the contact men have made their report."

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 drive you crazy."

"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, practice, and perfect the quickest gestures that register effectively. They aren't teaching anybody anything -

they're learning themselves. It's time-and-motion study with a vengeance."

"It has to be done," Leigh remarked. "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 lenses. The great love of his life was bugs, any size, shape, color or origin, as 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 exuaordinary 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 in about an hour."

"Send him to me as soon as 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 his hands behind his back, hung his head and spoke with mock shame.

"Commodore; I have a confesson 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 while I was in the middle of that crowd, but it didn't pick up a sqeak. 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 do 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 others' gullets and read the waggling 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 roll of film was in the camera and I didn't want to waste any of it. I didn't know what else more important might turn up."

"All right."

Leigh watched the other depart, picked up the intercom, 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 at-tached?"

"We can make anything, positively anything," chimed 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," Romera objected. "Besides, we can't operate it independently of our own power supply.

A phenakistoscope can be carried 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 requests 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 snappy 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."

"Ha-ha!" 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 armored, 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 have been 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 in the turf and staring at a Keen chart which Nolan was exhibiting with an air of complete frustration. Nearby, Hoffnagle was chewing his nails while trying to decide how much of the lesson was being absorbed and how much missed. Not one of this bunch showed 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 race-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: some of this crowd are downright reckless. If that lunatic is headed for the city 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 ob-stacle 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, gullies 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 those that were in evidence 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 the process 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 lifeform capable of building half as fast. Even on Earth it would take 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 up with you, 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 coin 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 coin.

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 curb.

"Slow as they may be, they can get places given long enough," said the driver. "They started creeping around us in such numbers that it seemed like we were 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 when you're up against gup-pies 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 dura-lumin 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 saint-liness."

"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. If any of those poor slouches had reached for me, I could have got behind him and jerked down his pants before his arm was halfway out."

"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 represented 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 clasped his 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, "Sounds like the road-hog we passed on the way here." He nudged the driver, pointed leftward. "That looks like a sizable 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 sampled some of it."

"What did it taste like?"

"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 windshiled. "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 analyzed 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 came 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 considered a technician, especially by standards of olden times."

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

"We are the brains," Pascoe went on, determined 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."

Determined to tell 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, and order 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 labor 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 hy-droelectric 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 lifeform. 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 in our own world."

"Precisely!" endorsed Leigh with emphasis. "And that's 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-thou-sand 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 though it over. The ship was a mile long. Its lifting blasts caromed half a mile on 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 in-efficient.

"We'11 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'1l stay out. If you drop out of sight, I'l1 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 offense 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 warmed 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-paralyzed.

"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 the control room, sir."

He re-switched to the 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 vigor. 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 his paperwork while Pascoe sat in a corner nibbling his fingers and grinning to himself. After half an hour Leigh voiced the word again and restorted 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 onto 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 the heck out of here. 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 bygone 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 with local conditions enabled a considerable speed-up in investigation. Earnshaw, the relief pilot, took out the 'copter with Walterson and four other experts crowded inside. The patrol wagon set off for town bearing a load of specialists, including Pascoe. Three botanists and an arbori-culturalist 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 the 'copter 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 visiscreen system they've got."

"How long do you give them?"

"The villages will take about two hours. The mob from the town need

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 communciators 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 Hoffnagle suddenly ceased his slow-motion gesturing and launched into an impassioned tirade that astonished the Waitabits two days later. Down in the woods the arboricul-turalist fell out of a tree and flattened a marine who also become vocal.

It was like the ripple effect of a stone cast into a pond.

Somebody pressed an alarm-stud and a resulting wave of ad-jectives 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. 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 Thunderer's 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 giveaway. Nolan entered the cabin and stood with fingers twitching as if he yearned to strangle someone very, very slowly, much as a Waitabit would do it.

His attitude was accentuated by possession of unfortunate features. Nobody aboard the Thunderer better resembled the popular notion of a murderer.

"You will appreciate, Commodore," he began, speaking with great restraint, "the extreme difficulty involved in making contact with 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 favor 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 the blue blazes 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, well 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 stimulous of sunlight. When the sun goes down they go down with it." He scowled at his predicament, suggested hopefuly, "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 well 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 in the best position to make an accurate estimate.

So tell me: how long would a fair chance be?"

That had him stumped. 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. Defense 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. Gp. Dep. D.H.Q. Terra.'

He called a conference in the long room amidships. Considerable time was spent coordinating 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 Waitabits 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 have 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 sys-tematically 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 ma-rooned in this place wouldn't have enough time if he lived to be a hundred."

"You're right," Leigh told him. "Therefore this ambassa-dorial post will be strictly a 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 over that awhile 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! The first applicant gets it."

Nobody responded.

Leigh consulted his watch. "I'11 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. Someday there would be one, no doubt of that. Someday 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 brooding. Anyone would think you hated to leave that lousy place.

What's the matter with you?"

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

"That's illogical," Pascoe declared. "Admittedly, we can't 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 bothering 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 starts lying like sparkling dust against the darkness. "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 though it over. I'11 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 lifeforms 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 lifeform twenty times faster than ourselves? A lifeform 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. He was a plump specimen exuding artificial cordiality.

"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. I've brought the coordinates with me."

"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 be here." Vaughan obligingly sought through his papers. "Yes, it does say. Fellow named Archibald Boydell."

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

"You've resigned forthwith at least twenty times in the last eight years," Leigh reminded him. "It's getting monotonous."

"I mean it this time."

"You've said that, too." Leigh sighed, added, "And if you run true to form, you'll soon invite me to go to hell."

Pascoe waved his hands around. "Now try to calm yourself and look at this sensibly. What space-outfit which is sane 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 his 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 lifeform."

"Does he make any remark about the place?"

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

Pascoe shuddered from head to feet.

TIELINE

HE WATCHED the needle of the output meter jump, wiggle and fall back. Thirty seconds later the same again, a rise, quiver and fall. Thirty seconds later the same again. It had been going on for weeks, months, years.

Outside the fused-stone building a lattice mast rose high into the air and pointed a huge cup at the stars. And from the cup, at half-minute intervals, there squirted a soundless, long-range voice.

"Bunda One. Eep-eep-bop! Bunda One. Eep-eep-bop!"

From eight synchronized repeater-stations on lonely islands around the planet's belly the same call went forth, radiating like the spokes of a wheel as slowly the world turned on its axis.

Out there, in the inter-nebular chasm where dark bodies lurked unaccompanied by revealing suns, an occasional ship would hear the voice, change course in its own horizontal or vertical plane and thunder steadily onward.

How often that happened, he'd no way of telling. He remained in awful solitude, pointing the way to those who never said, "Thanks!" Too small and fleeting ever to be seen, their flame-trails flickered briefly in the gap between star-whorls and then were gone. The ships that pass in the night.

Bunda One. A lighthouse of space. A world with Earthlike atmosphere but little land. A sphere of vast oceans dotted with craggy islands on which lived nothing that was company and comfort for anything in human form.

This very island was the largest solid foothold on a world of watery wastes. Twenty-two miles long by seven wide--a veritable continent in Bunda terms. No trees, no animals, no birds, no flowers. There were low, twisted shrubs, lichens and tiny fungi. There were fifty species of amphibious insects that maintained balance by warring upon each other. And nothing else.

Over all the planet lay a dreadful silence. That was the horror of it: the silence. The winds were gentle, consistent, never descending to a sigh or raising to a howl. The seas swelled lazily, crawled ten sluggish inches up the rocks, slid ten inches down without a thump, a splash, a rattle of flung spray. The insects were noiseless, without a chirp or squeak among the lot. The pale lichens and distorted shrubs stood unmoving, like bizarre entities paralyzed by eternal quiet.

Behind the building lay a garden. When the beacon con-structors first set up the place they had dessicated half an acre of hard rock, turning it into cultivatable dirt, planting Earthborn roots and seeds therein. No flowers had come up but some vegetables flourished. Beets, spinach and broccoli --he had fifty rows of those. And he had onions the size of footballs.

At no time did he eat an onion. He detested the things.

But he kept them along with the rest, tending them carefully for the sake of varying routine and for the pleasure of hearing the gritty thrust of a spade, the steady chink of a hoe.

The needle jumped, wiggled, fell back. If watched too often and too long it became hypnotic. There were times when he developed an insane desire to change its characteristic wiggle into something idiotic but refreshingly new, to tear out the great transmitter's key-code and substitute an imbecility that the cup would squirt at astounded stars.

"Wossop na bullwacka. Bammer-bam-whop! Wossop na bullwacka. Bammer-bam-whop!"

It had happened before and someday would happen again.

Wasn't so long since a light cruiser had bolted to a Wolf-group station after its beacon had lapsed into incoherencies.

One man's madness had endangered a liner bearing two thousand. Put out the light and there is stumbling in the dark.

To join the Beacon Service was to accept ten years of solitary confinement for very high pay and the satisfaction of fulfilling a public need. The prospect looked enticing when young, adaptable and still standing four-square upon good old Earth. The reality, was grim, forbidding, and had proved too much for some. Man was not meant to live alone.

'So you're from the Western Isles, eh? Just the sort of man we want! We've a station called Bunda One that's made to measure for you. You'll be able to tolerate it far better than most. City fellows aren't much use in a place like that; no matter how excellent their technical qualifications, sooner or later they tend to crack up from sheer lack of the bright lights. Yes, a man from the Western Isles is cut to size for Bunda One. You don't miss what you've never had. Bunda One's got all you're used to: rocky islands and great seas, just like home. . . .'

Just like home.

Home.

Down there on the waveless beach were pebbles and pretty shells and creeping things like tiny crabs. In the ocean swayed acres of seaweed through which darted vast shoals of fish, big and small,

exactly like the fish of Earth. He knew, for he had cast lines from the shore, caught them, unhooked them and thrown them back to the freedom that he lacked.

But no worn stone jetty projected into the green waters, no rusty little steamers rolled across the bay, nobody on the beach busied themselves with tar-pots or mended nets. No barrels rolled and clattered from the cooperage, no shining blocks slithered out of the ice plant, no silver horde flopped and jerked under the hatches of full holds. And at eventide no voices in the chapel prayed for those in peril on the sea.

Back there on Earth the scientific big-brains were top notch when it came to dealing with purely technical problems. The Bunda One master-station was semiautomatic, its eight slave-beacons fully automatic, and they drew power from atomic generators that could run untended for a century or more. The strength of the warning voice was enough to boost it across a mighty chasm between clusters of uncount-able suns. All that was needed to create one hundred percent efficiency was a watching eye backed by knowledge, ability and initiative, an emergency mechanism that would make the beacon a self-servicing unit. In other words, one man.

That's where their ingenuity fell short. One man. A man is not a gadget. He cannot be assessed as a gadget, be treated like one, be made to function like one.

Somewhat belatedly they'd recognized the fact after the third lunatic had been removed from his post. Three mental breakdowns in an organization numbering four hundred isolated stations is not a large proportion. Less than one percent.

But it was three too many. And the number might grow larger as time caught up with those slower to break. They'd cogi-tated the problem.

Ah, they'd exclaimed, preconditioning is the answer.

So the next candidates had been put through a scientifi-cally designed mill, a formidable, long-term course calculated to break the breakable and leave a tough residue suitable for service. It hadn't worked out. The need for men was too great, the number of candidates too few, and they'd broken too many.

After that they'd tried half a dozen other theories with no better luck. Precept and practice don't always accord.

The big-brains could have done with a taste of reality themselves.

Their latest fad was the tieline theory. Man, they asserted, is born of Earth and needs a tieline to Earth. Give him that and he's fastened to sanity. He can hang on through ten years of solitary confinement.

What's a tieline?

Cherchez la femme, suggested one, looking worldly-wise over his spectacles. They'd discussed it, dismissed it on a dozen counts. Imaginable complications ranged all the way from murder to babies. Besides, it would mean the periodic haul of supplies doubled in mass for the sake of a nontech-nical entity.

A dog, then? All right for those few worlds on which a dog can fend for itself. But what about other worlds, such as Bunda? Space-loads are estimated in ounces; not tons, and the time is not yet for shipping dog-food around the cosmos for the benefit of single, widely-scattered mutts.

The first attempted tieline was makeshift and wholly me-chanical and did have the virtue of countering the silence that was the curse of Bunda. The annual supply-ship dropped its load of food along with a recorder and a dozen tapes.

For the next month he had noise, not only words and music, but also characteristic Earth-sounds: the roar of holi-day traffic along a turnpike, the rumble of trains, the chimes of Sunday morning bells, the high-pitched chatter of children pouring out of school. The aural evidence of life far, far away. At the first hearing he was delighted. At the twentieth he was bored. There was no thirtieth time.

The output needle jumped, wiggled, fell back. The recorder stood abandoned in a comer. Out there in the star-mists were his lonely brothers. He could not talk even to them, or listen to them. They were out of radio-reach and their worlds turned like his. He sat and watched the needle and felt Bunda's awful hush.

Eight months ago, Earth-time, the supply-ship had brought evidence that they were still fooling with the tieline theory.

Along with the annual stores it had dropped a little box and a small book.

Detaching the box from its 'chute, he'd opened it, found himself confronted by a bug-eyed monster. The thing had turned its triangular head and stared at him with horrid coldness. Then it had moved long, awkward limbs to clamber out. He'd shut the box hurriedly and consulted the book.

This informed him that the new arrival's name was Jason, that it was a praying mantis, tame, harmless and fully capable of looking after itself on Bunda. Jason, they said, had been diet-tested on several species of Bunda insects and had eaten them avidly. In some parts of Earth the mantis was a pet of children.

That showed how their stubbornly objective minds worked.

They'd now decided that the tieline must be a living creature, a natural-born Terran. Also that it must be capable of sustaining itself on an alien planet. But, being in armchairs and not lost in the starfield, they'd overlooked the essential quality of familiarity. They'd have done better to have sent him an alley cat. He didn't like cats and there was no milk, but at least the seas were full of fish. Moreover, cats make noises. They purr and yowl. The thing in the box was menacing and silent.

Who in the Western Isles had ever encountered a praying mantis? He'd never seen one in his life before. It resembled the nightmare idea of a Martian.

He never once handled it. He kept it in its box where it stood on long legs, eerily turning its head, watching him icy-eyed and never uttering a sound. The first day he gave it a Bunda hopper caught among the lichens, and was sickened by the way it bit off the victim's head and chewed. A couple of times he dreamed of a gigantic Jason towering over him, mouth opening like a big, hungry trap.

After a couple of weeks he'd had enough. Taking the box six miles to the north, he opened it, tilted it, watched Jason scuttle into the shrubs and lichens. It favored him with one basilisk stare before it disappeared. There were two Terrans on Bunda and they were lost to each other.

"Bunda One. Eep-eep-bop!"

Jump, wiggle, fall. No word of acknowledgment from an assisted ship fleeing through the distant dark. No sounds of life save those impressed on a magnetic tape. No reality within an alien reality daily growing more dreamlike and elusive.

Might be worth sabotaging the station for the sake of repairing it and

getting it back into action, thus creating pretended justification for one's own existence. But a thousand lifeforms on one ship might pay for it with death. The price of monotony-busting amusement was too dear.

Or he could spend off-duty hours making a northward search for the tiny monster, calling, calling and hoping not to find it.

Jason! Jason!

And somewhere among the crags and crevices a pointed, bulgy-eyed head turning toward his voice--and no reply coming back. If Jason had been capable of chirruping like a cricket, maybe he could have endured the creature, grown to love it, known that the squeaks were mantis-talk. But Jason was as grim and silent as the hushed, forbidding world of Bunda.

He made a final check of the transmitter, monitored its eight slaves calling in the distance, went to bed, lay there wondering for the thousandth time whether he would see the ten years through, or whether he was doomed to crack before the end.

If ever he did go nuts the scientists on Earth would promptly use him as a guinea pig, a test case for them to work on in their efforts to determine cause and cure. Yes, they were clever, very clever. But there were some things about which they weren't so smart. With that thought he fell into uneasy sleep.

Seeming stupidity sometimes proves to be cleverness compelled to take its time. All problems can be worked out given weeks, months or years instead of seconds or minutes. The time for this one was now.

The tramp-ship Henderson rolled out of the starfield, descended on

wheezy antigravs, hung momentarily two thousand feet above the beacon. It lacked power reserves to land, take off and still make its appointed rounds. It merely paused, dropped the latest tieline thought up by the big-brains and beat it back into the dark. The cargo swirled down into the Bunda-night like a flurry of big gray snowflakes.

At dawn he awoke unconscious of the visit. The supply ship was not due for another four months. He glanced bleary-eyed at his clock, frowned with baffiement over what had caused him to wake so early. Something, a vague something that had intruded in his dreams.

What was it? A sound.

A noise!

He sat up, listened. There again, outside, muffied by distance. The wail of an abandoned cat. No, not that. More like the cry of a lost baby.

Imagination. The cracking process must be starting already. He'd lasted four years. Some other hermit would put in the remaining six. He was hearing things and that was a sure sign of mental unbalance.

Again the sound.

Getting out of bed, he dressed himself, examined himself in the mirror. It wasn't an idiot face that looked back at him.

A little strained, perhaps, but otherwise normal. He went to the control room, studied the instrument board. Jump, wiggle, fall.

"Bunda One. Eep-eep-bop!"

Everything all right there. He returned to his own room, stretched his ears, listened. Somebody--some thing--was out there wailing in the

dawnlight by the swelling waters. What?

Unfastening the door with nervous fingers, he looked out.

The sound boosted, poured around him, all over him, flooded through his soul. He stood there a long time, trembling.

Then gathering himself together he raced to the storeroom, stuffed his pockets with biscuits, filled both hands.

He stumbled with sheer speed as he bolted out the door.

He ran headlong down to the shingly beach, loaded hands held out, his breath coming in glad gasps.

And there at the lazy ocean's edge he stood with shining eyes, arms held wide as seven-hundred sea gulls swirled around him, took biscuit from his fingers, strutted between his feet.

All the time they screamed the hymn of the islands, the song of the everlasting sea, the wild, wild music that was truly Earth's.

TOP SECRET

ASHMORE said, with irritating phlegmaticism, "The Zengs have everything to gain and nothing to lose by remaining friendly with us. I'm not worried about them."

"But I am," rasped General Railton. "I'm paid to worry.

It's my job. If the Zeng empire launches a treacherous attack upon ours and gains some initial successes, who'll get the blame? Who'll be accused of military unpreparedness?" He tapped his two rows of medal ribbons. "I will!"

"Understanding your position, I cannot share your alarm," maintained Ashmore, refusing to budge. "The Zeng empire is less than half the size of ours. The Zengs are an amiable and cooperative form of life and we've been on excellent terms with them since the first day of contact."

"I'11 grant you all that." General Railton tugged furiously at his large and luxuriant mustache while he examined the great star-map that covered an entire wall. "But I have to consider things purely from the military viewpoint. It's my task to look to the future and expect the worst."

"Well, what's worrying you in particular?" Ashmore invited.

"Two things." Railton placed an authoritative finger on the star-map. "Right here we hold a fairly new planet called Motan. You can see where it is--out in the wilds, far beyond our long-established frontiers. It's located in the middle of a close-packed group of solar systems, a stellar array that represents an important junction in space."

"I know all that."

"At Motan we've got a foothold of immense strategic value. We're in ambush on the crossroads, so to speak.

Twenty thousand Terrans are there, complete with two spaceports and twenty-four light cruisers," He glanced at the other. "And what happens?"

Ashmore offered no comment.

"The Zengs," said Railton, making a personal grievance of it, "move in and take over two nearby planets in the same group."

"With our agreement," Ashmore reminded. "We did not need those two planets. The Zengs did want them. They put in a polite and correct request for permission to take over.

Greenwood told them to help themselves."

"Greenwood," exploded Railton, "is someone I could describe in detail were it not for my oath of loyalty."

"Let it pass," suggested Ashmore, wearily. "If he blundered, he did so with the full approval of the World Council."

"The World Council," Railton snorted. "All they're interested in is exploration, discovery trade. All they can think of is culture and cash. They're completely devoid of any sense of peril."

"Not being military officers," Ashmore pointed out, "they can hardly be expected to exist in a state of perpetual apprehension."

"Mine's not without cause." Railton had another go at up-rooting his mustache. "The Zengs craftily position themselves adjacent to

Motan." He swept spread fingers across the map in a wide arc. "And all over here are Zeng outposts mixed up with ours. No orderliness about it, no system. A mob, sir, a scattered mob."

"That's natural when two empires overlap," informed Ashmore. "And, after all, the mighty cosmos isn't a parade ground."

Ignoring that, Railton said pointedly, "Then a cipher book disappears."

"It was shipped back on the Laura Lindsay. She blew apart and was a total loss. You know that."

"I know only what they see fit to tell me. I don't know that the book was actually on the ship. If it was not, where is it? Who's got it? What's he doing with it?" He waited for comment that did not come; finished, "So I had to move heaven and earth to get that cipher canceled and have copies of a new one sent out."

"Accidents happen," said Ashmore.

"Today,"--continued Railton, "I discover that Commander Hunter, on Motan, has been given the usual fat-headed emergency order. If war breaks out, he must fight a defensive action and hold the planet at all costs."

"What's wrong with that?"

Staring at him incredulously, Railton growled, "And him with twenty-four light cruisers. Not to mention two new battleships soon to follow."

"I don't quite understand."

"Wars," explained Railton, as one would to a child, "cannot be fought without armed ships. Ships cannot function usefully without

instructions based on careful appraisal of tactical necessities. Somebody has to plan and give orders. The orders have to be received by those appointed to carry them out."

"So?"

"How can Zeng warships receive and obey orders if their planetary beam-stations have been destroyed?"

"You think that immediately war breaks out the forces on Motan should bomb every beam-station within reach?"

"Most certainly, man!" Railton looked pleased at long last.

"The instant the Zengs attack we've got to retaliate against their beam-stations. That's tantamount to depriving them of their eyes and ears. Motan must be fully prepared to do its share. Commander Hunter's orders are out of date, behind the times, in fact plain stupid. The sooner they're rectified, the better."

"You're the boss," Ashmore reminded. "You've the authority to have them changed."

"That's exactly what I intend to do. I am sending Hunter appropriate instructions at once. And not by direct-beam either." He indicated the map again. "In this messy muddle there are fifty or more Zeng beam-stations lying on the straight line between here and there. How do we know how much stuff they're picking up and deciphering?"

"The only alternative is the tight-beam," Ashmore said.

"And that takes ten times as long. It zigzags all over the starfield from one station to another."

"But it's a thousand times safer and surer," Railton retorted. "Motan's

station has just been completed and now's the time to make use of the fact. I'll send new instructions by tight-beam, in straight language, and leave no room for misunderstanding."

He spent twenty minutes composing a suitable message, finally got it to his satisfaction. Ashmore read it, could suggest no improvements. In due course it flashed out to Centauri, the first staging-post across the galaxy.

'In event of hostile action in your sector the war must be fought to oustretch and rive all enemy's chief lines of communication.'

"That," said Railton, "expresses it broadly enough to show Hunter what's wanted but still leave him with some initiative."

At Centauri the message was unscrambled, read off in clear, read into another beam of different frequency, and boosted to the next nearest station. There it was sorted out, read off in clear, repeated into another beam and squirted onward.

It went leftward, rightward, upward, downward, and was dutifully recited eighteen times by voices ranging from Terran-American deep-South-suh to Bootean-Ansanite far-North-yezzah. But it got there just the same.

Yes, it got there.

Lounging behind his desk, Commander Hunter glanced idly at the Motan thirty-hour clock, gave a wide yawn, wondered for the hundredth time whether it was something in the alien atmosphere that gave him the gapes. A knock sounded on his office door.

"Come in!"

Tyler entered, red-nosed and sniffy as usual. He saluted, dumped a

signal-form on the desk. "Message from Terra, sir." He saluted again and marched out, sniffing as he went.

Picking it up, Hunter yawned again as he looked at it.

Then his mouth clapped shut with an audible crack of jaw-bones. He sat bolt upright, eyes popping, read it a second time.

'Ex Terra Space Control. Tight-Beam, Straight. Top Secret. To Motan. An event of hospitality your section the fore-most when forty-two ostriches arrive on any cheap line of communication.'

Holding it in one hand he walked three times round the room, but it made no difference. The message still said what it said.

So he reseated himself, reached for the phone and bawled,

"Maxwell? Is Maxwell there? Send him in at once!"

Maxwell appeared within a couple of minutes. He was a long, lean character who constantly maintained an expression of chronic disillusionment. Sighing deeply, he sat down.

"What's it this time, Felix?"

"Now," said Hunter, in the manner of a dentist about to reach for the big one at the back, "you're this planet's chief equipment officer. What you don't know about stores, supplies, and equipment isn't worth knowing, eh?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that. I-"

"You know 'everything' about equipment," insisted Hunter,

"else you've no right being here and taking money for it.

You're skinning the Terran taxpayers by false pretenses."

"Calm down, Felix," urged Maxwell. "I've enough troubles of my own." His questing eyes found the paper in the other's hand. "I take it that something's been requisitioned of which you don't approve. What is it?"

"Forty-two ostriches," informed Hunter.

Maxwell gave a violent jerk, fell off his chair, regained it and said, "Ha-ha! That's good. Best I've heard in years."

"You can see the joke all right?" asked Hunter, with artificial pleasantness. "You think it a winner?" .

"Sure," enthused Maxwell. "It's really rich." He added another ha-ha by way of support.

"Then," said Hunter, a trifle viciously, "maybe you'll explain it to me; I'm too dumb to get it on my own." He leaned forward, arms akimbo. "Why do we require forty-two ostriches, eh? Tell me that!"

"Are you serious?" asked Maxwell, a little dazed.

For answer, Hunter shoved the signal-form at him. Maxwell read it, stood up, sat down, read it again, turned it over and carefully examined the blank back.

"Well?" prompted Hunter.

"I've had nothing to do with this," assured Maxwell, hurriedly. He handed back the signal-form as though anxious to be rid of it. "It's a Terran-authorized shipment made without demand from this end."

"My limited intelligence enabled me to deduce that much," said

Hunter. "But as I have pointed out, you know all about equipment required for given conditions on any given world. All I want from you is information on why Motan needs forty-two ostriches--and what we're supposed to do with them when they come."

"I don't know," Maxwell admitted.

"You don't know?"

"No."

"That's a help." Hunter glowered at the signal. "A very big help."

"How about it being in code?" inquired Maxwell, desperate enough to fish around.

"It says here it's in straight."

"That could be an error."

"All right. We can soon check." Unlocking a big wall safe, Hunter extracted a brass-bound book, scrabbled through its pages. Then he gave it to Maxwell. "See if you can find a reference to ostriches or any reasonable resemblance thereto."

After five minutes Maxwell voiced a dismal, "No."

"Well," persisted Hunter, "have you sent a demand for forty-two of anything that might be misread as ostriches?"

"Not a thing." He meditated a bit, added glumly, "I did order a one-pint blowtorch."

Taking a tight grip on the rim of the desk, Hunter said,

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking. That's what I ordered. You ought to see what I got." He gestured toward the door. "It's right out there in the yard. I had it dragged there for your benefit."

"Let's have a look at it."

Hunter followed him outside, inspected the object of the other's discontent. It had a body slightly bigger than a gar-bage can, and a nozzle five inches in diameter by three feet in length. Though empty, it was as much as the two could manage to lift it.

"What the deuce is it, anyway?" demanded Hunter, scowling.

"A one-pint blowtorch. The consignment note says so."

"Never seen anything like it. We'd better check the stores catalogue." Returning to the office, he dug the tome out of the safe, thumbed through it rapidly, found what he wanted somewhere among the middle pages.

19112. Blowtorch, butane, 0.5 pint capacity.

19112A. Blowtorch, butane, 1 pint capacity.

19112B. Blowtorch (tar-boiler pattern), kerosene, 15 gal-lons capacity.

19112B(a). Portable trolley for 1912B.

"You've got B in lieu of A," Hunter diagnosed.

"That's right. I order A and I get B."

"Without the trolley?"

"Correct."

"Some moron is doing his best." He returned the catalogue to the safe. "You'll have to ship it back. It's a fat lot of use to us without the trolley even if we do find need to boil some tar."

"Oh, I don't know," Maxwell said. "We can handle it by sheer muscle when the two hundred left-legged men get here."

Hunter plonked himself in his chair, gave the other the hard eye. "Quit beating about the bush. What's on your mind?"

"The last ship," said Maxwell, moodily, "brought two hundred pairs of left-legged rubber thigh-boots."

"The next ship may bring two hundred pairs of right-legged ones to match up," said Hunter. "Plus forty-two ostriches. When that's done we'll be ready for anything. We can defy the cosmos." He suddenly went purple in the face, snatched up the phone and yelled, "Tyler! Tyler."

When that worthy appeared he said, "Blow your nose and tight-beam this message: 'Why forty-two ostriches?'"

It went out, scrambled and unscrambled and rescrambled, upward, downward, rightward, leftward, recited in Sirian-Kham lowlands accents and Terran-Scottish highlands accents and many more. But it got there just the same.

Yes, it got there.

General Railton glanced up from a thick wad of documents and rapped impatiently. "What is it?"

"Top secret message from Motan, sir."

Taking it. Railton looked it over.

'We've fought two ostriches.'

"Ashmore!" he yelled. "Pennington! Whittaker!"

They came on the run, lined up before his desk, assumed habitual expressions of innocence. He eyed them as though each was personally responsible for something dastardly.

"What," he demanded, "is the meaning of this?"

He tossed the signal-form at Pennington, who gave it the glassy eye and passed it to Whittaker, who examined it fear-fully and got rid of it on Ashmore. The latter scanned it, dumped it back on the desk. Nobody said anything.

"Well," said Railton, "isn't there a useful thought among the three of you?"

Picking up courage, Pennington ventured, "It must be in code, sir."

"It is clearly and plainly captioned as being in straight."

"That may be so, sir. But it doesn't make sense in straight."

"Do you think I'd have summoned you here if it did?"

Railton let go a snort that quivered his mustaches. "Bring me the current code-book. Well see if we can get to the bottom of this."

They fetched him the volume then in use, the sixth of Series B. He sought through it at length. So did they, each in turn. No ostriches.

"Try the earlier books," Railton ordered. "Some fool on Motan may have picked up an obsolete issue."

So they staggered in with a stack of thirty volumes, worked back to BA. No ostriches. After that, they commenced on AZ and laboriously headed toward AA.

Pennington, thumbing through AK, let go a yelp of triumph. "Here it is, sir. An ostrich is a food supply and rationing code-word located in the quartermaster section."

"What does it mean?" inquired Railton, raising expectant eyebrows.

"One gross of fresh eggs," said Pennington, in the manner of one who sweeps aside the veil of mystery.

"Ah!" said Railton, in tones of exaggerated satisfaction.

"So at last we know where we stand, don't we? Everything has become clear. On Motan they've beaten off an attack by three hundred fresh eggs, eh?"

Pennington looked crushed.

"Fresh eggs," echoed Ashmore. "That may be a clue!"

"What sort of clue?" demanded Railton, turning attention his way.

"In olden times," explained Ashmore, "the word fresh meant impudent, bold, brazen. And an egg was a person.

Also, a hoodlum or thug was known as a hard egg or a tough egg."

"If you're right, that means Motan has resisted a raid by three

hundred impertinent crooks."

"Offhand, I just can't think of any more plausible solution," Ashmore confessed.

"It's not credible," decided Railton. "There are no pirates out that way. The only potential menace is the Zengs. If a new and previously unsuspected lifeform has appeared out there, the message would have said so."

"Maybe they meant they've had trouble with Zengs," suggested Whittaker.

"I doubt it," Railton said. "In the first place, the Zengs would not be so dopy as to start a war by launching a futile attack with a force a mere three hundred strong. In the second place, if the culprits were Zengs the fact could have been stated. On the tight-beam system there's no need for Motan to be obscure."

"That's reasonable enough," Ashmore agreed.

Railton thought things over, said at last, "The message looks like a routine report. It doesn't call for aid or demand fast action. I think we'd better check back. Beam them asking which book they're quoting."

Out it went, up, down and around, via a mixture of voices.

'Which code-book are you using?'

Tyler sniffed, handed it over, saluted, sniffed again and ambled out. Commander Hunter picked it up.

'Which goad-hook are you using?'

"Maxwell! Maxwell!" When the other arrived, he said,

"There'll never be an end to this. What's a goad-hook?"

"I'd have to look it up in the catalogue."

"Meaning that you don't know?"

"There's about fifty kinds of hooks," informed Maxwell, defensively. "And for many of them there are technical names considerably different from space-navy names or even stores equipment names. A tension-hook, for instance, is better known as a tightener."

"Then let's consult the book." Getting it from the safe, Hunter opened it on the desk while Maxwell positioned himself to look over the other's shoulder. "What'll it be listed under?" Hunter asked. "Goad-hooks or hooks, goad? G or H?"

"Might be either."

They sought through both. After checking item by item over half a dozen pages, Maxwell stabbed a finger at a middle column.

"There it is."

Hunter looked closer. "That's guard-hooks: things for fixing wire fence to steel posts. Where's goad-hooks?"

"Doesn't seem to be any," Maxwell admitted. Sudden suspicion flooded his features and he went on, "Say, do you suppose this has anything to do with those ostriches?"

"Darned if I know. But it's highly probable."

"Then," announced Maxwell, "I know what a goad-hook is. And you

won't find it in that catalogue."

Slamming the book shut, Hunter said wearily, "All right.

Proceed to enlighten me."

"I saw a couple of them in use," informed Maxwell. "Years ago, in the movies."

"The movies?"

"Yes. They were showing an ostrich farm in South Africa.

When the farmer wanted to extract a particular bird from the flock, he used a pole about eight to ten feet long. It had a sort of metal prod on one end and a wide hook at the other.

He'd use the sharp end to poke other birds out of the way, then use the hook end to snake the bird he wanted around the bottom of its neck and drag it out."

"Oh," said Hunter, staring at him.

"It's a thing like bishops carry for lugging sinners into the path of righteousness," Maxwell finished.

"Is it really?" said Hunter, blinking a couple of times.

"Well, it checks up with that signal about the ostriches." He brooded a bit, went on, "But it implies that there is more than one kind of goad-hook. Also, that we are presumed to have one particular pattern in stores here. They want to know which one we've got. What are we going to tell them?"

"We haven't got any," Maxwell pointed out. "What do we need goad-

hooks for?"

"Ostriches," said Hunter. "Forty-two of them."

Maxwell thought it over: "We've no goad-hooks, not one.

But they think we have. What's the answer to that?"

"You tell me," Hunter invited.

"That first message warned us that the ostriches were coming on any cheap line of communication, obviously meaning a chartered tramp-ship. So they won't get here for quite a time. Meanwhile, somebody has realized that we'll need goad-hooks to handle them and shipped a consignment by fast service-boat. Then he's discovered that he can't remember which pattern he's sent us. He can't fill out the necessary forms until he knows. He's asking you to give with the information."

"If that's so," commented Hunter, "some folk have a nerve to tight-beam such a request and mark it top secret."

"Back at Terran H.Q.," said Maxwell, "one is not shot at dawn for sabotage, treachery, assassination or any other equally trifling misdeed. One is blindfolded and stood against the wall for not filling out forms, or for filling out the wrong ones, or for filling out the right ones with the wrong details."

"Nuts to that!" snapped Hunter, fed up. "I'm wasting no time getting a headquarters dope out of a jam. We're supposed to have a consignment of goad-hooks. We haven't got it. I'm going to say so--in plan language." He boosted his voice a few decibels. "Tyler! Tyler!"

Half an hour later the signal squirted out, brief, to the point, lacking only its original note of indignation.

'No goad hyphen hooks. Motan.'

Holding it near the light, Railton examined it right way up and upside down. His mustache jittered. His eyes squinted slightly. His complexion assumed a touch of magenta.

"Pennington!" he bellowed. "Saunders! Ashmore! Whittaker!"

Lining up, they looked at the signal form. They shifted edgily around, eyed each other, the floor, the ceiling, the walls. Finally they settled for the uninteresting scene outside the window.

'Oh God how I hate mutton.'

"Well?" prompted Railton, poking this beamed revelation around his desk.

Nobody responded.

"First," Railton pointed out, "they're fighting it out with a pair of ostriches. Now they've developed an aversion to mutton. If there's a connection, I fail to see it. There's got to be an explanation somewhere. What is it?"

Nobody knew.

"We might as well invite the Zengs to accept everything as a gift," said Railton. "It'll save a lot of bloodshed."

Stung by that, Whittaker protested, "Motan is trying to tell us something, sir. They must have cause to express themselves the way they are doing."

"Perhaps they have good reason to think that the tight-beam is no

longer tight. Maybe a Zeng interceptor station has opened right on one of the lines. So Motan is hinting that it's time to stop beaming in straight."

"They could have said so in code, clearly and unmistakably. There's no need to afflict us with all this mysterious stuff about ostriches and mutton."

Up spoke Saunders, upon whom the gift of tongues had descended. "Isn't it possible, sir, that ostrich flesh is referred to as mutton by those who eat it? Or that, perhaps, it bears close resemblance to mutton?"

"Anything is possible," shouted Railton, "including the likelihood that everyone on Motan is a few cents short in his mental cash." He fumed a bit, added acidly, "Let us assume that ostrich flesh is identical with mutton. Where does that get us?"

"It could be, sir," persisted Saunders, temporarily drunk with words, "that thev've discovered a new and valuable source of food supply in the form of some large, birdlike creature which they call ostriches. Its flesh tastes like mutton.

So they've signaled us a broad hint that they're less dependent upon supplementary supplies from here. Maybe in a pinch they can feed themselves for months or years. That, in turn, means the Zengs can't starve them into submission by blasting all supply ships to Motan. So-"

"Shut up!" Railton bawled, slightly frenzied. He snorted hard enough to make the signal form float off his desk. Then he reached for the phone. "Get me the Zoological Department. . . . Yes, that's what I said." He waited a while, growled into the mouthpiece, "Is ostrich flesh edible and, if so, what does it taste like?" Then he listened,

slammed the phone down and glowered at his audience. "Leather," he said.

"That doesn't necessarily apply to the Motan breed,"

Saunders pointed out. "You can't judge an alien species by-"

"For the last time, keep quiet!" He shifted his glare to Ashmore. "We can't go any further until we know which code they're using out there."

"It should be the current one, sir. They had strict orders to destroy each preceding copy."

"I know what it should be. But is it? We've asked them about this and they haven't replied. Ask them again, by direct-beam. I don't care if the Zengs do pick up the question and answer. They can't make use of the information. They've known for years that we use code as an elementary precaution."

"I'11 have it beamed right away, sir."

"Do that. And let me have the reply the minute it arrives."

Then, to the four of them, "Get out of my sight."

The signal shot straight to Motan without any juggling around.

'Identify your code forthwith. Urgent.'

Two days later the answer squirted back and got placed on Railton's desk pending his return from lunch. In due course he paraded along the corridor and into his office. His thoughts were actively occupied with the manpower crisis in the Sirian sector and nothing was further from his mind than the antics of Motan. Sitting at his desk, he glanced at the paper.

All it said was, BF.

He went straight up and came down hard.

"Ashmore!" he roared. "Pennington! Saunders! Whittaker!"

'Ex Terra Space Control. Direct-Beam, Straight. To Motan.

Commander Hunter recalled forthwith. Captain Maxwell succeeds with rank of commander as from date of receipt.'

Putting on a broad grin of satisfaction, Hunter reached for the phone. "Send Maxwell here at once." When the other arrived, he announced, "A direct-beam recall has just come in. I'm going home."

"Oh," said Maxwell without enthusiasm. He looked more disillusioned than ever.

"I'm going back to H.Q. You know what that means."

"Yes," agreed Maxwell, a mite enviously. "A nice, soft job, better conditions, high pay, quicker promotion."

"Dead right. It is only proper that virtue should be rewarded." He eyed the other, holding back the rest of the news.

"Well, aren't you happy about it?"

"No," said Maxwell flatly.

"Why not?"

"I've become hardened to you. Now I'll have to start all over again and adjust myself to some other nut."

"No you won't, chum. You're taking charge." He poked the signal form across the desk. "Congratulations, Commander!"

"Thanks," said Maxwell. "For nothing. Now I'll have to handle your grief. Ostriches. Forty-two of them."

At midnight Hunter stepped aboard the destroyer D1O and waved good-by. He did it with all the gratified assurance of one who's going to get what's coming to him. The prospect lay many weeks away but was worth waiting for.

The ship snored into the night until its flame trail faded out to the left of Motan's fourth moon. High above the oppo-site horizon glowed the Zeng's two planets of Korima and Koroma, one blue, the other green. Maxwell eyed the shining firmament, felt the weight of new responsibility pressing hard upon his shoulders.

He spent the next two weeks checking back on his prede-cessor's correspondence, familiarizing himself with all the various problems of planetary governorship. At the end of that time he was still baffied and bothered.

"Tyler!" Then when the other came in, "Man, can't you stop perpetually snuffling? Send this message out at once."

Taking it, Tyler asked, "Tight--or straight-beam, sir?"

"Don't send it direct-beam. It had better go by tight. The subject is tagged top secret by H.Q. and we've got to accept their definition."

"Very well, sir." Giving an unusually loud sniff, Tyler departed and squirted the query to the first repeater station.

'Why are we getting ostriches?'

It never reached Railton or any other brass hat. It fell into the hands of a new Terran operator who'd become the victim of three successive technical gags. He had no intention whatsoever of being made a chump a fourth time. So he read it with eyebrows waggling.

'When are we getting ostriches?'

With no hesitation he destroyed the signal and smacked back at the smarty on Motan.

'Will emus do?'

In due course Maxwell got it, read it twice, walked around the room with it and found himself right back where he'd started.

'Will amuse you.'

For the thirtieth time in four months Maxwell went to meet a ship at the spaceport. So far there had arrived not a goad-hook, not a feather, not even a caged parrot.

It was a distasteful task because every time he asked a captain whether he'd brought the ostriches, he got a look that pronounced him definitely teched in the head.

Anyway, this one was not a tramp-boat. He recognized its type even before it sat down and cut power--a four-man Zeng scout. He also recognized the first Zeng to scramble down the ladder. It was Tormin, the chief military officer on Koroma.

"Ah, Mr. Maxwell," said Tormin, his yellow eyes worried.

"I wish to see the commander at once."

"Hunter's gone home. I'm the commander now. What's your trouble?"

"Plenty," Tormin informed. "As you know, we placed ordinary settlers on Korima. But on the sister planet of Koroma we placed settlers and a large number of criminals. The criminals have broken out and seized arms. Civil war is raging on Koroma. We need help."

"Sorry, but I can't give it," said Maxwell. "We have strict orders that in no circumstances whatever may we interfere in Zeng affairs."

"I know, I know," Tormin gestured excitedly with long, skinny arms. "We do not ask for your ships and guns. We are only too willing to do our own dirty work. Besides, the matter is serious but not urgent. Even if the criminals conquer the planet they cannot escape from it. We have removed all ships to Korima."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"Send a call for help. We can't do it--our beam-station is only half built."

"I am not permitted to make direct contact with the Zeng authorities," said Maxwell.

"You can tell your own H.Q. on Terra. They'll inform our ambassador there. He'll inform our nearest forces."

"That'll mean some delay."

"Right now there's no other way," urged Tormin. "Will you please oblige us? In the same circumstances we'd do as much for you."

"All right" agreed Maxwell, unable to resist this appeal.

"The responsibility for getting action will rest with H.Q., anyway." Bolting to his office, he gave Tyler the message, adding, "Better

send it tight-beam, just in case some Zeng stickler for regulations picks it up and accuses us of poking our noses in."

Out it went, to and fro, up and down, in one tone or another, this accent or that.

'Civil war is taking place among local Zengs. They are asking for assistance.'

It got there a few minutes behind Hunter, who walked into Railton's office, reached the desk, came smartly to attention.

"Commander Hunter, sir, reporting from Motan."

"About time, too," snapped Railton, obviously in no mood to give with a couple of medals. "As commander of Motan you accepted full responsibility for the text of all messages beamed therefrom, did you not?"

"Yes, sir," agreed Hunter, sensing a queer coldness in his back hairs.

Jerking open a drawer, Railton extracted a bunch of signal forms, slapped them on the desk.

"This," he informed, mustache quivering, "is the appalling twaddle with which I have been afflicted since Motan's station came into operation. I can find only one explanation for all this incoherent rubbish about ostriches and mutton, that being that you're overdue for mental treatment. After all, it is not unknown for men on alien planets to go off the rails."

"Permit me to say, sir-" began Hunter.

"I don't permit you," shouted Railton. "Wait until I have finished. And

don't flare your nostrils at me. I have replaced you with Maxwell. The proof of your imbecility will be the nature of the next signals from Motan."

"But, sir-"

"Shut up! I will let you see Maxwell's messages and compare them with your own irrational nonsense. If that doesn't convince-"

He ceased his tirade as Ashmore appeared and dumped a signal-form on his desk.

"Urgent message from Motan, sir."

Railton snatched it up and read it while Ashmore watched and Hunter fidgeted uneasily.

'Sibyl Ward is making faces among local Zengs. They are asking for her sister.'

The resulting explosion will remain a space legend for all time.

NOTHING NEW

THE SHIP fled through sparkling darkness. There were orbs of flame and whorls of light and glittering spirals that told of multimillion suns and hidden planets stretching onward, ever onward through infinity. And through these streaked the ship, a superfast mote smaller in the vastness than a bulleting speck of dust, a speck that none the less bore its full quota of life.

At such pace went the vessel that nearer stars in its line of flight appeared gradually to drift apart hour by hour rather than month by month. It was a mote with a new power undreamed of in long bygone days when one dead satellite had been claimed with a triumphant shout. A mote whose years were less than days and whose space-reach was enormously long.

The man in its nose was not amazed by the near-visible phenomenon of star-drift. It was a normal feature of his day and age, an accepted marvel often depicted on the telere-ceivers of stodgy stay-at-homes.

Olaf Redfern, the pilot, sat at his controls and gazed into the shining heavens with the calm, phlegmatic air of one to whom is given the task of finding very small pinheads in very large haystacks. With the aid of charts, instruments, calculating machines the size of cigarette packs, the abilities of Navigator Paul Gildea and the luck of a Terran garnet in his finger ring, he had done it fifty times in the past, was confident of doing it a hundred times in the future.

Readjusting the controls, which were complicated enough to make a major chore of creating a minor shift in flight-angle, he locked them on the fractionally altered course, remained staring broodingly into expanding space. In short time Simkin, the archaeologist, joined him,

took the adjacent seat and studied the view.

"Someone once said," he remarked, "that it is better to trav-el than to arrive. I don't agree. One can become tired of living one jump ahead of a low-pitched whistle while a multi-tude of candles float around in the night."

"That's because you have little to do before you get there,"

Redfern offered. "Try piloting for a change. You'll find it more interesting."

"I'm too old to start afresh, too much in love with my chosen field." He threw Redfern an apologetic smile. "The kick you get out of finding a new world is no greater than the kick I get out of digging up an ancient artifact, whole and unscratched."

"Frankly, I don't see the fascination of your job," said Redfern. "It's rooted in the far past, which is finished and done with, whereas mine probes the future into which we're moving every minute. The future is controllable within limits.

You can't do a darned thing about the past."

"I agree. Nevertheless, we have our surprises and our triumphs. After all, it was a bunch of hole-diggers who proved conclusively that highly intelligent life once existed on those twin worlds near Arcturus."

"But they're still dead worlds to me," Redfern commented.

"Maybe so. They're digging deeper, all the same. They want to know why life departed. Did it die out and, if so, of what cause? Or did it depart elsewhere and, if so, by what means and whence? Answers to those questions may tell us things well worth knowing. We're never too big to learn."

"There's that about it," Redfern conceded.

Falderson, the mass-sociologist, lumbered into the room, flopped on a seat. He was a paunchy man with a nervous twitch in his left eyebrow. The twitch often served to fasci-nate alien lifeforms while under cross-examination.

"We should land in about fourteen hours' time, according to Gildea's latest estimate," he announced. "And I hope to goodness they won't prove to be a gang of howling barbarians who'll throw things at us on sight. I hate to admit it, but this incarceration has loaded me with too much fat for primitive battles."

"You'll lose the grease," promised Redfern. "It'll all boil out in the cooking pot."

"I can't imagine immortals being unlettered savages," Simkin replied.

"Immortals?" Redfern eyed him incredulously. "What are you talking about?"

Simkin registered equal surprise. "Didn't you know that the planet we're seeking is rumored to be populated by immortals?"

"First I've heard of it. I get flight instructions, same as Gildea. We lug loads of experts all over space, but we seldom know or ask the reason why." He frowned to himself, added, "I just can't believe that anyone has discovered the secret of eternal life. I take that idea with a heavy cargo of salt."

"So do we," Simkin gave back. "But legends often prove to be grossly distorted versions of original truths. Our present purpose is to determine the degree of distortion by discovering how much truth

existed and, with luck, still exists."

"Where do legends come into this?"

"You tell him--it's your pet subject," Simkin suggested to Falderson.

The mass-sociologist said, "You've heard of the Alpedes, that seven-planet group beyond Rigel?"

"I ought to. I've been there twice. Come to that, we're not so far from them right now."

"Then you'll know that all are populated by intelligent lifeforms more or less civilized but not sufficiently advanced to be capable of constructing even an antiquated rocketship.

Therefore, they could not have had any contact with each other until some Terrans arrived two centuries ago and set up a small inter-system mail service."

"Yes, a friend of mine is piloting for that outfit."

"Well," continued Falderson heavily, "what with political, strategical and commercial considerations coming first--not to mention the strong pull of other more urgent interests in a thousand other directions--it was quite a time before anyone got down to serious study of the seven-fold Alpedian cultural mores. A certain Professor Wade eventually buried himself in that task and after a couple of years came up with a hair-raiser."

"I view that as an understatement," put in Simkin.

Taking no notice, Falderson continued, "All seven planets had recorded histories available for study. And before the histories all seven had the usual mess of legends. Naturally, since they lacked

contact the histories and legends had nothing in common other than minor items explainable by for-tuitous circumstance. But there was one most remarkable exception: all seven planets nursed a fairy tale about a world of immortals."

"But that suggests contact of some sort," Redfern objected.

"Precisely! Nevertheless, their histories make no mention of it. Therefore, if ever contact was made it was by proxy, it was done by others exactly as it is today. It was done in the far past before history began to be written and in the misty days when legends were born. The logical guess is that they were visited by these immortals and now remember little more than their most striking attribute, namely, immortality."

"Hm-m-m," mused Redfern. "Twice can be coincidence, three times can be coincidence--but seven times needs explaining."

"That's what Professor Wade thought. He dug deeper into the seven mythologies, came up with a couple more items.

First, the immortals had never visited the Alpedes themselves. That plays havoc with our logical guess, and the only alternative we can think up is that the yarn originated with some third party, some other visitors from space who picked it up and passed it along. Second, all seven legends agreed that the immortals lived on a very big world, while four versions asserted that this world is the only planet of a blue sun."

"So?"

"So Wade shot his findings back to Terra without delay.

The cosmographologists and other big-brains. were immediately interested, seeing that several times we've extracted information

from new finds that has led us straight to others."

"Thanks in part to archaeology," Simkin put in, nudging Redfern.

"The Rigel sector is only a quarter explored to date," Falderson went on. "All the same, we've got some pretty good spectra charts of that locality. Analysis of them revealed a definite blue-type sun not a devil of a long way from the Alpedes group. Astrophysicists agreed that it's by far the like-liest primary in the whole area, and calculated that it could have one large planet of rather low mass."

"And that's where we're making for right now?" said Redfern.

"Yes, my boy." Falderson stood up, ruefully patted his paunch. "If we're lucky enough to lay our hands on the secret of life eternal, you may be roaming the spaceways forever and ever, amen. As for me, I'll have to get rid of this meaty front before it holds me flat on my face."

He departed, leaving them to their thoughts while the ship sped on and the starfield widened. After a bit Simkin spoke.

"Well, now do you see the fascination of probing the past?"

"Yes, I think I do," Redfern admitted.

"It holds good for any one world without ever seeing another," assured Simkin. "Take Terra, for example. We know more about our own planet than any in Creation. Yet there's an appalling amount we don't know."

"Such as?"

"Terra's most widespread and well-established legend is that of a Great Flood. Without doubt it has real basis. Something happened

to the planet, something of catastrophic proportions. It knocked humanity an unknown distance down the ladder--but from what height?"

"We couldn't have dropped far," Redfern opined. "Before the Flood we were scratching in trees."

"If ever we scratched in trees, which is highly debatable, it was umpteen millennia before the Flood. How far have we climbed in our present recorded history, which covers no more than a fragment of time? Where were we and what were we doing when the oceans roared over the land and brought us to near-extinction?"

"Darned if I know. It's sheer guesswork."

"Olaf, maybe we've been around longer than we think," said Simkin seriously "And for that reason I'd give my right hand to achieve the impossible."

"Meaning what?"

"I'd give it for a good long look at whatever may be lying whole and undamaged beneath hundreds of fathoms of salt water and great layers of ooze. I'd give it to see what, if anything, was in existence before the valleys were raised and the hills made low, before small, hungry, bewildered bands of semi-savage survivors roamed the water-wrecked land."

"Well," commented Redfern, grinning, "it would be nice to see your face if you dug out of the slime a ship twice as good as this one."

"And it would be equally nice to see yours," answered Simkin, "when you realized that we have not yet regained the heights from which we fell."

Redfern let that pass without argument. He was a pilot, a practical man trained to cope with immediate problems, and not much given to long-term speculation.

The astrophysicists proved one hundred percent correct.

The blue sun had one large planet of relatively low mass. It was not gaseous, it was not liquid. Thick vegetation covered its surface of loamy earth in which lurked sparse deposits of light metals, none whatever of heavy ones.

Everything favored a landing. Tests proved the primary's radiations to be innocuous so far as humankind was concerned. The atmosphere was on the thin side but had adequate oxygen content. Finally, the world most obviously was inhabited.

One low-altitude circumnavigation revealed much about its dominant lifeform before a specimen had been encountered.

Intelligence and vegetarianism were outstanding characteristics of the planetary scene. Sprawling towns of size and substance showed the former; great cultivated areas devoid of herds evidenced the latter.

Lying awkwardly in the nose and peering down, Falderson said after a while, "Wholly agrarian. Note the lack of heavy industry. And the cities are small from the population viewpoint. They look big merely because of their lavish spread.

Every house has a two-acre garden or bigger."

"Not a lot of traffic either," remarked Gildea. "No railroads, no airplanes, no crowded auto-tracks."

"Even if you have the brains to theorize locomotives, planes and

autos, you cannot do a thing about them if there's a complete lack of natural resources," said Falderson. "It's a safe bet that this crowd has never boosted into space and never will. They're earthbound because the stuff isn't there.

Hm-m-m! It's going to be mighty interesting to see how many social problems have been created and how many solved by sheer lack of what most inhabitable planets have got."

"Take her down, Olaf," ordered Gildea, pointing. "Plant her by that city near the river. The place looks as important as any we've seen."

"I'll go wake Taylor," said Simkin, hurrying out.

Entering the mid-cabin he roused the linguist from his drug-induced slumber. Taylor, a chronic sufferer from space-migrain, emerged from unconsciousness, sat up, felt himself, blinked blearily.

"Mean to say we're there already?"

"We are. Your time-sense is cockeyed with sleep. Get busy sharpening your wits because you'll have to pick up new words, gestures, smoke-signals or whatever mighty fast."

"I'll manage. That's my job, isn't it?" Taylor yawned, stretched his arms, relaxed again and sighed deeply. "Let's hope this isn't another Comina. It took me eight weeks to pick up that jaw-cracking speech and then I still limped at it. One soft, wet tongue can't reproduce the rhythmic smacking of horn-tipped palps."

He reeled sidewise on his bunk as the room tilted. Simkin staggered, snatched a handgrip on the wall and hung on.

They stayed that way until the ship leveled again and slowed with grinding noises on its belly-skids. It stopped.

"Thank the Lord," said Taylor, fervently. "Solid earth at last."

Leaving him, Simkin hastened to the nose. Falderson, Gildea and Redfern were there staring silently through the armor-glass. An approaching native was the object of their united attention.

The oncomer had emerged from the nearest house which was long, low, and built of ornamentally carved stone-blocks.

He was making along his garden path toward the ship. His thoroughly alien appearance was nothing startling to space-sophisticated eyes long accustomed to forms far more bizarre.

The surprising thing about him was his manner.

He made for the ship without awe, alarm, curiosity or any other visible symptom usually accompanying first meetings on new-found worlds. On the contrary, he had only the stolidly helpful air of a rural farmer about to see whether a stalled motorist needed hauling out of a hole.

If assistance was in his mind, it would be a long time coming because the best pace he could muster approximated to a crawl. He was a biped a fraction under man-height but wide and bulky. Two brilliant yellow eyes shone deep amid the lavish wrinkles covering his gray-skinned face. He wore neat clothing from which protruded a pair of columnar, flexible legs as gray and wrinkled as his face. The legs terminated in feet-pads resembling those of an elephant.

"Superficially humanoid," decided Falderson. "Notice his hands, just like mine only longer and narrower. But I'll bet that basically he's reptilian. A lizard-type that learned to walk on its hind legs and battle the enviromnent with its brains and forepaws."

"He hasn't got a tail," Redfern objected.

"Neither have you--today," Gildea pointed out.

"He makes me think of someone I read about once," mused Simkin. He racked his brains for the memory, found it. "An ancient character named Chief Taumoto or something similar.

He was revered in the Tonga Islands for a couple of centuries. Geratologists took a great interest in him because he was Terra's oldest living creature."

"How old?" asked Redfern.

"Nobody knew for certain. He'd gone well past two hundred when he died. He was a giant turtle holding a chieftain's rank."

"This fellow has a turtle's neck if ever I saw one," Redfern said, continuing to watch the visitor's laborious progress.

"And the mad velocity to go with it."

"Where's Taylor?" inquired Falderson. "Open the trap and drop the ladder, Olaf. If we don't go to meet this character, we'll sit here most of a month before he arrives."

Scrambling down the metal rungs they made toward the native. Seeing this, he promptly conserved energy by halting and waiting for them. Close up he looked decidedly less human-like. The two parties stood and examined each other, the Terrans' attitude being one of frank and friendly interest while the gray-skinned one showed no more than patient submission to it.

Pointing to his own mouth, Taylor voiced a few random words with careful pronunciation and on a rising note of inquiry. The other

responded with three or four liquid sylla-bles spoken in little more than a whisper.

"Well, they communicate vocally," said Taylor with satisfaction. "And I can pick it up without rupturing my epi-glottis. Give me two or three days and I1l have enough of the local lingo to get us by."

Listening to this without change of expression the native waited until he had finished, then made a sluggish gesture toward the house and spoke invitingly.

"Varm!"

"Word number one," Taylor remarked. Varm--come!"

They went. The going was the most difficult task with which they had to cope in many years. The stupendous problem of how to annihilate distance by some means even faster than light now seemed less than that of how to walk at the steady pace of half a mile per hour.

With the other in the lead they mooched around the end of the house, stopped before a pair of wooden doors hand-carved from top to bottom. Opening these, Grayface revealed a machine lurking within.

"Blazing suns!" snorted Redfern.

His exclamation was understandable. The contraption was a light framework of aluminum tubes mounted on four can-vas-tired wheels and propelled by six sets of pedals. Three pairs of seats topped the assembly and provided accommodation for the source of motive power.

Drawing this out of its garage they got it onto a narrow road which had the smooth hardness of frosted glass. Grayface got into the right-hand front seat, put an expert hand on the steering wheel. With

the other hand he signed the Terrans to climb aboard.

"You take the other front seat," Gildea suggested to Redfern.

Settling themselves in the seats, they put feet on pedals which were shaped like small plates and located a couple of inches too high. Grayface raised an authoritative hand to signal readiness to boost.

The multicycle moved, gathered speed and shot down the road at a splendid twelve miles per hour while a dozen legs pumped in perfect rhythm. Reaching a small crossroad, the captain of the crew jerked a thin cord alongside his steering wheel and something in a box at the back let go with a shrill

"Wee-e-eek! Wee-e-eek!"

An answering "Wee-e-eek!" came from a side road where a similar machine slowed for them to pass.

Falderson, puffing in a rear seat beside Simkin, said, "This will remove some of the adipose tissue from my midriff."

"I'm baffled," confessed Simkin, gazing around. "Look at those richly decorated houses and well-tended gardens. Every one a picture. You'd think people capable of building high-grade homes could do better for themselves in the matter of transportation."

"With what?" asked Falderson. "You can't make pies without pastry. You can't build cars of soft metals or run them without gas. By the looks of it they don't have electric power either." He breathed heavily, wiped his forehead, added, "I'll bet they're a thoroughly frustrated species."

"Why?"

"They're no more immortal than Mrs. Murphy's dog--but the myth of immortality was born of something. Probably they're exceptionally long-lived. If so, they've time on their hands as is suggested by the way they've dolled-up everything in sight. That in turn means time to accumulate wisdom, much of which cannot be applied. Maybe they've invented half the things we've thought up, but in blueprint form only. It's as far as they can go."

"I'd like to stay a year and dig into their past," said Simkin.

"If there's another ten miles to go," informed Falderson,

"I'll stay for keeps by reason of having dropped dead."

At that point the machine turned to the right, trundled across a great square in which half a dozen fountains sent feathery sprays skyward. Braking to a stop before the ornate doors of a large, important building, Grayface dismounted, led them inside, signaled to them to wait outside an inner room. He entered the room, leaving them to examine the murals on the corridor walls.

Elder Citizen Karfin attended to the papers on his desk with the slow, meticulous care of the aged. He was feeling the immense weight of his fourteen thousand years, knew that he was becoming a little feeble and had no more than two centuries to go. He looked up as someone opened the door and came in. His yellow eyes remained fixed upon the newcomer, steady and unwinking like those of a basking lizard.

In due time the other arrested his crawl and whispered respectfully, "Honored Elder, I am named Balaine."

"Yes, Balaine, what is it that you wish?"

"Honored Elder, at a little past hour nine a sky-ship of the pink-faced

bipeds landed beyond my garden. There were five therein. I have brought them hither knowing that you would wish to meet them."

Karfin sighed and said, "They came in my extreme youth.

If I remember aright, they remained for two or three orbits.

I cannot be sure because my memory is fading fast."

"Yes, Honored Elder," said Balaine.

"They were so clever and had so much. I thought perhaps they found us beneath their notice." He sighed again. "Oh, well, it cannot be said that they pester us. Please show them in."

"Very well, Honored Elder." Balaine crawled away, brought them back.

The five Terrans stood before him, eyed him with the bold, far-ranging adventurousness of their kind.

And not one of them knew that this was the second time.

INTO YOUR TENT I'LL CREEP

MORFAD sat in the midship cabin and gloomed at the wall.

He was worried and couldn't conceal the fact. The present situation had the frustrating qualities of a gigantic rattrap.

One could escape it only with the combined help of all the other rats.

But the others weren't likely to lift a finger either on his or their own behalf. He felt sure of that. How can you per-suade people to try to escape a jam when you can't convince them that they're in it, right up

to the neck?

A rat runs around a trap only because he is grimly aware of its existence. So long as he remains blissfully ignorant of it, he does nothing. On this very world a horde of intelligent aliens had done nothing about it through the whole of their history. Fifty skeptical Altairans weren't likely to step in where three thousand million Terrans had failed.

He was still sitting there when Haraka came in and announced, "We leave at sunset."

Morfad said nothing.

"I'll be sorry to go," added Haraka. He was the ship's captain, a big, burly sample of Altairan life. Rubbing flexible fingers together, he went on, "We've been lucky to discover this planet, exceedingly lucky. We've become blood brothers of a lifeform fully up to our own standard of intelligence, space-traversing like ourselves, friendly and cooperative."

Morfad said nothing.

"Their reception of us has been most cordial," Haraka continued enthusiastically. "Our people will be greatly heartened when they hear our report. A great future lies before us, no doubt of that. A Terran-Altairan combine will be invincible.

Between us we can explore and exploit the entire galaxy."

Morfad said nothing.

Cooling down, Haraka frowned at him. "What's the matter with you, Misery?"

"I am not overjoyed."

"I can see that much. Your face resembles a very sour shamsid on an aged and withered bush. And at a time of triumph, too! Are you ill?"

"No." Turning slowly, Morfad looked him straight in the eyes. "Do you believe in psionic faculties?"

Haraka reacted as if caught on one foot. "Well, I don't know. I am a captain, a trained engineer-navigator, and as such I cannot pretend to be an expert upon extraordinary abilities. You ask me something I am not qualified to answer.

How about you? Do you believe in them?"

"I do--now."

"Now? Why now?"

"The belief has been thrust upon me." Morfad hesitated, went on with a touch of desperation. "I have discovered that I am telepathic."

Surveying him with slight incredulity, Haraka said, "You've discovered it? You mean it has come upon you recently?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Since we arrived on Terra."

"I don't understand this at all," confessed Haraka, baffled.

"Do you assert that some peculiarity in Terra's conditions has suddenly enabled you to read my thoughts?"

"No, I cannot read your thoughts."

"But you've just said that you have become telepathic."

"So I have. I can hear thoughts as clearly as if the words were being shouted aloud. But not your thoughts nor those of any member of our crew."

Haraka leaned forward, his features intent. "Ah, you have been hearing Terran thoughts, eh? And what you've heard has got you bothered? Morfad, I am your captain, your commander. It is your bounden duty to tell me of anything suspicious about these Terrans." He waited a bit, urged impatiently,

"Come on, speak up!"

"I know no more about these humanoids than you do,"

said Morfad. "I have every reason to believe them genuinely friendly, but I don't know what they think."

"But by the stars, man, you-"

"We are talking at cross-purposes," Morfad interrupted.

"Whether I do or do not overhear Terran thoughts depends upon what one means by Terran."

"Look," said Haraka, "whose thoughts do you hear?"

Steeling himself, Morfad said flatly, "Those of Terran dogs."

"Dogs?" Haraka lay back and stared at him. "Dogs? Are you serious?"

"I have never been more so. I can hear dogs and no others.

Don't ask me why because I don't know. It is a freak of circumstance."

"And you have listened to their minds ever since we jumped to Earth?"

"Yes."

"What sort of things have you heard?"

"I have had pearls of alien wisdom cast before me," declared Morfad, "and the longer I look at them the more they scare the hell out of me."

"Get busy frightening me with a few examples," invited Haraka, suppressing a smile.

"Quote: the supreme test of intelligence is the ability to live as one pleases without working," recited Morfad. "Quote: the art of retribution is that of concealing it beyond all suspicion. Quote: the sharpest, most subtle, most effective weapon in the cosmos is flattery."

"Huh?"

"Quote: if a thing can think, it likes to think that it is God; treat it as God and it becomes your willing slave."

"Oh, no!" denied Haraka.

"Oh, yes," insisted Morfad. He waved a hand toward the nearest port. "Out there are three thousand million petty gods.

They are eagerly panted after, fawned upon, gazed upon with worshiping eyes. Gods are very gracious toward those who love them." He made a spitting sound that lent emphasis to what followed. "The lovers know it--and love comes cheap,"

Haraka said, uneasily, "I think you're crazy."

"Quote: to rule successfully the ruled must be unconscious of it," Again the spitting sound. "Is that crazy? I don't think so. It makes sense. It works. It's working out there right now."

"But-"

"Take a look at this." He tossed a small object into Haraka's lap. "Recognize it?"

"Yes, it's what they call a cracker."

"Correct. To make it some Terrans plowed fields in all kinds of weather, rain, wind and sunshine, sowed wheat, reaped it with the aid of machinery other Terrans had sweated to build. They transported the wheat, stored it, milled it, enriched the flour by various processes, baked it, packaged it, shipped it all over the world. When humanoid Terrans want crackers, they've got to put in man-hours to get them."

"So?"

"When a dog wants one he sits up, waves his forepaws and admires his god. That's all. Just that."

"But, darn it, man, dogs are relatively stupid."

"So it seems," said Morfad, dryly.

"They can't really do anything effective."

"They haven't got hands."

"And don't need them--having brains."

"Now see here," declaimed Haraka, openly irritated, "we Altairans invented and constructed ships capable of roaming the spaces between the stars. The Terrans have done the same. Terran dogs have not done it and won't do it in the next million years. When one dog has the brains and ability to get to another planet, I'll eat my cap."

"You can do that right now," Morfad suggested. "We have two dogs on board."

Haraka let go a grunt of disdain. "The Terrans have given us those as a memento."

"Sure they gave them to us--but at whose behest?"

"It was wholly a spontaneous gesture."

"Was it?"

"Are you suggesting that dogs put the idea into their heads?" Haraka demanded.

"I know they did," retorted Morfad, looking grim. "And we've not been given two males or two females. Oh no, sir, not on your life. One male and one female. The givers said we could breed them. Thus in due course our own worlds can become illuminated with the undying love of man's best friend."

"Nuts!" said Haraka.

Morfad gave back, "You're obsessed with the old, out-of-date idea that conquest must be preceded by aggression.

Can't you understand that a wholly alien species just naturally uses wholly alien methods? Dogs employ their own tactics, not ours. It isn't within their nature or abilities to take us over with the aid of ships, guns and a great hullabaloo.

It is within their nature and abilities to creep in upon us, their eyes shining with hero worship. If we don't watch out, we'll be mastered by a horde of loving creepers."

"I can invent a word for your mental condition," said Haraka. "You're suffering from caniphobia."

"With good reasons."

"Imaginary ones."

"Yesterday I looked into a dogs' beauty shop. Who was doing the bathing, scenting, powdering, primping? Other dogs? Hah! Humanoid females were busy dolling 'em up.

Was that imaginary?"

"You can call it a Terran eccentricity. It means nothing whatever. Besides, we've quite a few funny habits of our own."

"You're dead right there," Morfad agreed. "And I know one of yours. So does the entire crew."

Haraka narrowed his eyes. "You might as well name it. I am not afraid to see myself as others see me."

"All right. You've asked for it. You think a lot of Kashim.

He always has your ear; you will listen to nobody else.

Everything he says makes sound sense--to you."

"So you're jealous of Kashim, eh?"

"Not in the least," assured Morfad, making a disparaging gesture. "I merely despise him for the same reason that everyone else holds him in contempt. He is a professional toady.

He spends most of his time fawning upon you, flattering you, pandering to your ego. He is a natural-born creeper who gives you the Terradog treatment. You like it. You bask in it. It affects you like an irresistible drug. It works--and don't tell me that it doesn't because all of us know that it does."

"I am not a fool. I have Kashim sized up. He does not influence me to the extent you believe."

"Three thousand million Terrans have four hundred million dogs sized up and are equally convinced that no dog has a say in anything worth a hoot."

"I don't believe it."

"Of course you don't. I had little hope that you would.

Morfad is telling you these things and Morfad is either crazy or a liar. But if Kashim were to tell you while prostrate at the foot of your throne, you would swallow his story hook, line and sinker. Kashim has a Terradog mind and uses Terradog logic, see?"

"My disbelief has better basis than that."

"For instance?" Morfad invited.

"Some Terrans are telepathic. Therefore, if this myth of subtle mastery by dogs were a fact, they'd know of it. Not a dog would be left alive on this world." Haraka paused, finished pointedly, "They don't know of it."

"Terran telepaths hear the minds of their own kind but not those of dogs. I hear the minds of dogs but not those of any other kind. As I said before, I don't know why this should be. I know only that it is."

"It seems nonsensical to me."

"It would. I suppose you can't be blamed for taking that viewpoint. My position is difficult; I'm like the only one with ears in a world that is stone-deaf."

Haraka thought it over, said after a while, "Suppose I were to accept everything you've said at face value--what do you think I should do about it?"

"Refuse to take the dogs," responded Morfad, promptly.

"That's more easily said than done. Good relations with the Terrans are vitally important. How can I reject a warm-hearted gift without offending the givers?"

"All right, don't reject it. Modify it instead. Ask for two male or two female dogs. Make it plausible by quoting an Altairan law against the importation of alien animals that are capable of natural increase."

"I can't do that. It's far too late. We've already accepted the animals and expressed our gratitude for them. Besides, their ability to breed is an essential part of the gift, the basic intention of the givers.

They've presented us with a new species, an entire race of dogs."

"You said it!" confirmed Morfad.

"For the same reason we can't very well prevent them from breeding when we get back home," Haraka pointed out.

"From now on we and the Terrans are going to do a lot of visiting. As soon as they discovered that our dogs failed to multiply, they'd become generous and sentimental and dump another dozen on us. Or maybe a hundred. We'd then be worse off than we were before."

"All right, all right," Morfad shrugged with weary resignation. "If you're going to concoct a major objection to every possible solution, we may as well surrender without a fight.

Let's abandon ourselves to becoming yet another dog-domi-nated species. Requote: to rule successfully the ruled must be unconscious of it." He gave Haraka the sour eye. "If I had my way, I'd wait until we were far out in free space and then give those two dogs the hearty heave-ho out the hatch."

Haraka grinned in the manner of one about to nail down a cockeyed tale once and for all. "And if you did that it would be proof positive beyond all argument that you're afflicted with a delusion."

Emitting a deep sigh, Morfad asked, "Why would it?"

"You'd be slinging out two prime members of the master race. Some domination, eh?" Haraka grinned again. "Listen, Morfad, according to your own story you know something never before known or suspected and you're the only one who does know it. That should make you a mighty menace to the entire species of dogs. They wouldn't let you live long enough to thwart them or even to go around advertising the truth. You'd soon be deader than a low-strata fossil."

He walked to the door, held it open while he made his parting shot. "You look healthy enough to me."

Morfad shouted at the closing door, "It doesn't follow that because I can hear their thoughts they must necessarily hear mine. I doubt that they can because it's just a freakish-"

The door clicked shut. He scowled at it, walked twenty times up and down the cabin, finally resumed his chair and sat in silence while he beat his brains around in search of a satisfactory solution.

'The sharpest, most subtle, most effective weapon in the cosmos is flattery.'

Yes, he was seeking a means of coping with four-footed warriors incredibly skilled in the use of Creation's sharpest weapon. Professional fawners, creepers, worshipers, man-lovers, ego-boosters, trained to near-perfection through countless generations in an art against which there seemed no decisive defense.

How to beat off the coming attack, contain it, counter it?

'Yes, God!'

'Certainly, God!'

'Anything you say, God!'

How to protect oneself against this insidious technique, how quarantine it or-By the stars! that was it--quarantine them! On Pladamine, the useless world, the planet nobody wanted. They could breed there to their limits and meanwhile dominate the herbs and bugs. And a soothing reply would be ready for any nosy Terran tourist.

'The dogs? Oh, sure, we've still got them, lots of them.

They're doing fine. Got a nice world of their very own. Place called Pladamine. If you wish to go see them, it can be arranged.'

A wonderful idea. It would solve the problem while creating no hard feelings among the Terrans. It would prove useful in the future and to the end of time. Once planted on Pladamine no dog could ever escape by its own efforts. Any tourists from Terra who brought dogs along could be per-suaded to leave them in the canine heaven specially created by Altair. There the dogs would find themselves unable to boss anything higher than other dogs, and, if they didn't like it, they could lump it.

No use putting the scheme to Haraka, who was obviously prejudiced. He'd save it for the authorities back home. Even if they found it hard to credit his story, they'd still take the necessary action on the principle that it is better to be safe than sorry. Yes, they'd play it safe and give Pladamine to the dogs.

Standing on a cabin seat, he gazed out and down through the port. A great mob of Terrans, far below, waited to witness the coming take-off and cheer them on their way. He noticed beyond the back of the crowd a small, absurdly groomed dog dragging a Terran female at the end of a thin, light chain.

Poor girl, he thought. The dog leads, she follows yet believes she is taking it some place.

Finding his color camera, he checked its controls, walked along the corridor and into the open air lock. It would be nice to have a picture of the big send-off audience. Reaching the rim of the lock he tripped headlong over something four-legged and stubby-tailed that suddenly intruded itself between his feet. He dived outward, the

camera still in his grip, and went down fast through the whistling wind while shrill feminine screams came from among the watching crowd.

Haraka said, "The funeral has delayed us two days. We'll have to make up the time as best we can." He brooded a moment, added, "I'm very sorry about Morfad. He had a brilliant mind but it was breaking up toward the end. Oh well, it's a comfort that the expedition has suffered only one fatality"

"It could have been worse, sir," responded Kashim. "It could have been you. Praise the heavens that it was not."

"Yes, it could have been me." Haraka regarded him curiously. "And would it have grieved you, Kashim?"

"Very much indeed, sir. I don't think anyone aboard would feel the loss more deeply. My respect and admiration are such that-"

He ceased as something padded softly into the cabin, laid its head in Haraka's lap, gazed soulfully up at the captain.

Kashim frowned with annoyance.

"Good boy!" approved Haraka, scratching the newcomer's ears.

"My respect and admiration," repeated Kashim in louder tones, "are such that-"

"Good boy!" said Haraka again. He gently pulled one ear, then the other, observed with pleasure the vibrating tail.

"As I was saying, sir, my respect-"

"Good boy!" Deaf to all else, Haraka slid a hand down from the ears and massaged under the jaw.

Kashim favored Good Boy with a glare of inutterable ha-tred. The dog rolled a brown eye sidewise and looked at him without expression. From that moment, Kashim's fate was sealed.

DIABOLOGIC

HE MADE one circumnavigation to put the matter beyond doubt. That was, standard space-scout technique; look once on the approach, look again all the way around. It often happened that second and closer impressions contradicted first and more distant ones. Some perverse factor in the probability sequence frequently caused the laugh to appear on the other side of a planetary face.

Not this time, though. What he'd observed coming in remained visible right around the belly. This world was occupied by intelligent life of a high order. The unmistakable markings were there in the form of dockyards, railroad mar-shaling grids, power stations, spaceports, quarries, factories, mines, housing projects, bridges, canals, and a hundred and one other signs of a life that spawns fast and vigorously.

The spaceports in particular were highly significant. He counted three of them. None held a flightworthy ship at the moment he flamed high above them, but in one was a tube-less vessel undergoing repair. A long, black, snouty thing about the size and shape of an Earth-Mars tramp. Certainly not as big and racy-looking as a Sol-Sirius liner.

As he gazed down through his tiny control-cabin's armor-glass, he knew that this was to be contact with a vengeance.

During long, long centuries of human expansion, more than seven hundred inhabitable worlds had been found, charted, explored and, in some cases, exploited. All contained life. A minority held intelligent life. But up to this moment nobody had found one other lifeform sufficiently advanced to cavort among the stars.

Of course, such a discovery had been theorized. Human adventuring created an exploratory sphere that swelled into the cosmos. Sooner or later, it was assumed, that sphere must touch another one at some point within the heavenly host.

What would happen then was anybody's guess. Perhaps they'd fuse, making a bigger, shinier biform bubble. Or perhaps both bubbles would burst. Anyway, by the looks of it the touching-time was now.

If he'd been within reach of a frontier listening-post, he'd have beamed a signal detailing this find. Even now it wasn't too late to drive back for seventeen weeks and get within receptive range. But that would mean seeking a refueling dump while he was at it. The ship just hadn't enough for such a double run plus the return trip home. Down there they had fuel. Maybe they'd give him some and maybe it would suit his engines. And just as possibly it would prove useless.

Right now he had adequate power reserves to land here and eventually get back to base. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. So he tilted the vessel and plunged into the alien atmosphere, heading for the largest spaceport of the three.

What might be awaiting him at ground level did not bother him at all. The Terrans of today were not the nervy, apprehensive Terrans of the earthbound and lurid past. They had become space-sophisticated. They had learned to lounge around with a carefree smile and let the other lifeforms do the worrying. It lent an air of authority and always worked.

Nothing is more intimidating than an idiotic grin worn by a manifest non-idiot.

Quite a useful weapon in the diabological armory was the knowing

smirk.

His landing created a most satisfactory sensation. The planet's point-nine Earth-mass permitted a little extra dex-terity in handling the ship. He swooped it down, curved it up, dropped tail-first, stood straddle-legged on the tail-fins, cut the braking blast and would not have missed centering on a spread handkerchief by more than ten inches.

They seemed to spring out of the ground the way people do when cars collide on a deserted road. Dozens of them, hundreds. They were on the short side, the tallest not exceeding five feet. Otherwise they differed from his own pink faced, blue-eyed type no more than would a Chinese covered in fine gray fur.

Massing in a circle beyond range of his jet-rebound, they stared at the ship, gabbled, gesticulated, nudged each other, argued, and generally behaved in the manner of a curious mob that has discovered a deep, dark hole with strange noises issuing therefrom. The noteworthy feature about their be-havior was that none were scared, none attempted to get out of reach, either openly or surreptitiously. The only thing about which they were wary was the chance of a sudden blast from the silent jets.

He did not emerge at once. That would have been an error --and blunderers are not chosen to pilot scout-vessels. Pre-exit rule number one is that air must be tested. What suited that crowd outside would not necessarily agree with him.

Anyway, he'd have checked air even if his own mother had been smoking a cigar in the front row of the audience.

The Schrieber analyzer required four minutes in which to suck a sample through the Pitot tube, take it apart, sneer at the bits, make a

bacteria count and say whether its lord and master could condescend to breathe the stuff.

He sat patiently while it made up its mind. Finally the needle on its half-red, half-white dial crawled reluctantly to mid-white. A fast shift would have pronounced the atmosphere socially acceptable. Slowness was the Schrieber's way of saying that his lungs were about to go slumming. The analyzer was and always had been a robotic snob that graded alien atmospheres on the caste system. The best and cleanest air was Brahman, pure Brahman. The worst was Untouch-able.

Switching it off, he opened the inner and outer air-lock doors, sat in the rim with his feet dangling eighty yards above ground level. From this vantage-point he calmly surveyed the mob, his expression that of one who can spit but not be spat upon. The sixth diabological law states that the higher, the fewer. Proof: the sea gull's tactical advantage over man.

Being intelligent, those placed by unfortunate circumstances eighty yards deeper in the gravitational field soon appreciated their state of vertical disadvantage. Short of top-pling the ship or climbing a polished surface, they were impotent to get at him. Not that any wanted to in any inimical way. But desire grows strongest when there is the least possibility of satisfaction. So they wanted him down there, face to face, merely because he was out of reach.

To make matters worse, he turned sidewise and lay within the rim, one leg hitched up and hands linked around the knee, then continued looking at them in obvious comfort.

They had to stand. And they had to stare upward at the cost of a crick in the neck. Alternatively, they could adjust their heads and eyes to a crickless level and endure being looked at while not looking.

Altogether, it was a hell of a situation.

The longer it lasted the less pleasing it became. Some of them shouted at him in squeaky voices. Upon those he bestowed a benign smile. Others gesticulated. He gestured back and the sharpest among them weren't happy about it. For some strange reason that no scientist had ever bothered to investigate, certain digital motions stimulate especial glands in any part of the cosmos. Basic diabological training included a course in what was known as signal-deflation, whereby the yolk could be removed from an alien ego with one wave of the hand.

For a while the crowd surged restlessly around, nibbling the gray fur on the backs of their fingers, muttering to each other, and occasionally throwing sour looks upward. They still kept clear of the danger zone, apparently assuming that the specimen reclining in the lock-rim might have a companion at the controls. Next, they became moody, content to do no more than scowl futilely at the tail-fins.

That state of affairs lasted until a convoy of heavy vehicles arrived and unloaded troops. The newcomers bore riot sticks and handguns, and wore uniforms the color of the stuff hogs roll in. Forming themselves into three ranks, they turned right at a barked command, marched forward. The crowd opened to make way.

Expertly, they stationed themselves in an armed circle separating the ship from the horde of onlookers. A trio of officers paraded around and examined the tail-fins without going nearer than was necessary. Then they backed off, stared up at the air-lock rim. The subject of their attention gazed back with academic interest.

The senior of the three officers patted his chest where his heart was located, bent and patted the ground, forced pacific innocence into his face as again he stared at the arrival high above. The tilt of his

head made his hat fall off, and in turning to pick it up he trod on it.

This petty incident seemed to gratify the one eighty yards higher because he chuckled, let go the leg he was nursing, leaned out for a better look at the victim. Red-faced under his furry complexion, the officer once more performed the belly and ground massage. The other understood this time.

He gave a nod of gracious assent, disappeared into the lock.

A few seconds later a nylon ladder snaked down the ship's side and the invader descended with monkey-like agility.

Three things struck the troops and the audience immediately he stood before them, namely, the nakedness of his face and hands, his greater size and weight, and the fact that he carried no visible weapons. Strangeness of shape and form was to be expected. After all, they had done some space-roaming themselves and knew of lifeforms more outlandish.

But what sort of creature has the brains to build a ship and not the sense to carry means of defense?

They were essentially a logical people.

The poor saps.

The officers made no attempt to converse with this specimen from the great unknown. They were not telepathic, and space-experience had taught them that mere mouth-noises are useless until one side or the other has learned the meanings thereof. So by signs they conveyed to him their wish to take him to town where he would meet others of their kind more competent to establish contact. They were pretty good at explaining with their hands, as was natural for the only other lifeform that had found new worlds.

He agreed to this with the same air of a lord consorting with the lower orders that had been apparent from the start.

Perhaps he had been unduly influenced by the Schrieber.

Again the crowd made way while the guard conducted him to the trucks. He passed through under a thousand eyes, favored them with deflatory gesture number seventeen, this being a nod that acknowledged their existence and tolerated their vulgar interest in him.

The trucks trundled away leaving the ship with air-lock open, ladder dangling and the rest of the troops still standing guard around the fins. Nobody failed to notice that touch, either. He hadn't bothered to prevent access to the vessel.

There was nothing to prevent experts looking through it and stealing ideas from another space-going race.

Nobody of that caliber could be so criminally careless.

Therefore, it would not be carelessness. Pure logic said the ship's designs were not worth protecting from the stranger's viewpoint because they were long out of date. Or else they were unstealable because they were beyond the comprehension of a lesser people. Who the heck did he think they were?

By the Black World of Khas, they'd show him!

A junior officer climbed the ladder, explored the ship's interior, came down, reported no more aliens within, not even a pet lansim, not a pretzel. The stranger had come alone.

This item of information circulated through the crowd. They didn't

care for it too much. A visit by a fleet of battleships bearing ten thousand they could understand. It would be a show of force worthy of their stature. But the casual arrival of one, and only one, smacked somewhat of the dumping of a missionary among the heathens of the twin worlds of Mo-rantia.

Meanwhile, the trucks rolled clear of the spaceport, speeded up through twenty miles of country, entered a city. Here, the leading vehicle parted company from the rest, made for the western suburbs, arrived at a fortress surrounded by huge walls. The stranger dismounted and promptly got tossed into the clink.

The result of that was odd, too. He should have resented incarceration, seeing that nobody had yet explained the purpose of it. But he didn't. Treating the well-clothed bed in his cell as if it were a luxury provided as recognition of his rights, he sprawled on it full length, boots and all, gave a sigh of deep satisfaction and went to sleep. His watch hung close by his ear and compensated for the constant ticking of the auto-pilot, without which slumber in space was never complete.

During the next few hours guards came frequently to look at him and make sure that he wasn't finagling the locks or disintegrating the bars by means of some alien technique.

They had not searched him and accordingly were cautious.

But he snored on, dead to the world, oblivious to the ripples of alarm spread through a spatial empire.

He was still asleep when Parmith arrived bearing a load of picture books. Parmith, elderly and myopic, sat by the bed-side and waited until his own eyes became heavy in sym-pathy and he found himself considering the comfort of the carpet. At that point he decided he

must either get to work or lie flat. He prodded the other into wakefulness.

They started on the books. Ah is for ahmud that plays in the grass. Ay is for aysid that's kept under glass. Oom is for Oom-tuck that's found in the moon. Uhm is for uhmlak, a clown or buffoon. And so on.

Stopping only for meals, they were at it the full day and progress was fast. Parmith was a first-class tutor, the other an excellent pupil able to learn with remarkable speed. At the end of the first long session they were able to indulge in a brief and simple conversation.

"I am called Parmith. What are you called?"

"Wayne Hillder."

"Two callings?"

"Yes."

"What are many of you called?"

"Terrans."

"We are called Vards."

Talk ceased for lack of enough words and Parmith left.

Within nine hours he was back accompanied by Gerka, a younger specimen who specialized in reciting words and phrases again and again until the listener could echo them to perfection. They carried on for another four days, working into late evening.

"You are not a prisoner."

"I know," said Wayne Hillder, blandly self-assured.

Parmith looked uncertain. "How do you know?"

"You would not dare to make me one."

"Why not?"

"You do not know enough. Therefore you seek common speech. You must learn from me--and quickly."

This being too obvious to contradict, Parmith let it go by and said, "I estimated it would take about ninety days to make you fluent. It looks as if twenty will be sufficient."

"I wouldn't be here if my kind weren't smart," Hillder pointed out.

Gerka registered uneasiness; Parmith was disconcerted.

"No Vard is being taught by us," he added for good measure. "Not having got to us yet."

Parmith said hurriedly, "We must get on with this task.

An important commission is waiting to interview you as soon as you can converse with ease and clarity. Well try again this fth-prefix that you haven't got quite right. Here's a tongue-twister to practice on. Listen to Gerka."

"Fthon deas fthleman fathangafth," recited Gerka, punishing his bottom lip.

"Futhong deas-"

"Fthon," corrected Gerka. "Fthon deas fthleman fthan-gafth."

"It's better in a civilized tongue. Wet evenings are gnat-less futhong-"

"Fthon!" insisted Gerka, playing catapults with his mouth.

The commission sat in an ornate hall containing semi-circular rows of seats rising in ten tiers. There were four hundred present. The way in which attendants and minor officials fawned around them showed that this was an assembly of great importance.

It was, too. The four hundred represented the political and military power of a world that had created a space-empire extending through a score of solar systems and controlling twice as many planets. Up to a short time ago they had been, to the best of their knowledge and belief, the lords of creation. Now there was some doubt about it. They had a serious problem to settle, one that a later Terran historian irreverently described as 'a moot point.'

They ceased talking among themselves when a pair of guards arrived in charge of Hillder, led him to a seat facing the tiers. Four hundred pairs of eyes examined the stranger, some curiously, some doubtfully, some challengingly, many with unconcealed antagonism.

Sitting down, Hillder looked them over much as one looks into one of the more odorous cages at the zoo. That is to say, with faint distaste. Gently, he rubbed the side of his nose with a forefinger and sniffed. Deflatory gesture number twenty-two, suitable for use in the presence of massed authority. It brought its carefully calculated reward. Half a dozen of the most bellicose characters glared at him.

A frowning, furry-faced oldster stood up, spoke to Hillder as if reciting a well-rehearsed speech. "None but a highly intelligent and completely logical species can conquer space.

It being self-evident that you are of suoh a kind, you will appreciate

our position. Your very presence compels us to consider the ultimate alternatives of cooperation or competition, peace or war."

"There are no two alternatives to anything," Hillder asserted. "There is black and white and a thousand intermediate shades. There is yes and no and a thousand ifs, buts or maybes. For example: you could move farther out of reach."

Being tidy-minded, they didn't enjoy watching the thread of their logic being tangled. Neither did they like the resul-tant knot in the shape of the final suggestion. The oldster's frown grew deeper, his voice sharper.

"You should also appreciate your own position. You are one among countless millions. Regardless of whatever may be the strength of your kind, you, personally, are helpless.

Therefore, it is for us to question and for you to answer. If our respective positions were reversed, the contrary would be true. That is logical. Are you ready to answer our questions?"

"I am ready."

Some showed surprise at that. Others looked resigned, taking it for granted that he would give all the information he saw fit and suppress the rest.

Resuming his seat, the oldster signaled to the Vard on his left, who stood. up and asked, "Where is your base-world?"

"At the moment I don't know."

"You don't know?" His expression showed that he had expected awkwardness from the start. "How can you return to it if you don't know where it is?"

"When within its radio-sweep I pick up its beacon. I follow that." .

"Aren't your space-charts sufficient to enable you to find it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because," said Hillder, "it isn't tied to a primary. It wanders around."

Registering incredulity, the other said, "Do you mean that it is a planet broken loose from a solar system?"

"Not at all. It's a scout-base. Surely you know what that is?"

"I do not," snapped the interrogator. "What is it?"

"A tiny, compact world equipped with all the necessary contraptions. An artificial sphere that functions as a frontier outpost."

There was a deal of fidgeting and murmuring among the audience as individuals tried to weigh the implications of this news.

Hiding his thoughts, the questioner continued, "You define it as a frontier outpost. That does not tell us where your home-world is located."

"You did not ask about my home-world. You asked about my base-world. I heard you with my own two ears."

"Then where is your home-world?"

"I cannot show you without a chart. Do you have charts of unknown regions?"

"Yes." The other smiled like a satisfied cat. With a dra-matic flourish he produced them, unrolled them. "We ob-tained them from your ship."

"That was thoughtful of you," said Hillder, disappointingly pleased. Leaving his seat he placed a fingertip on the top-most chart and said, "There! Good old Earth!" Then he returned and sat down.

The Vard stared at the designated point, glanced around at his fellows as if about to make some remark, changed his mind and said nothing. Producing a pen he marked the chart, rolled it up with the others.

"This world you call Earth is the origin and center of your empire?"

"Yes."

"The mother-planet of your species?"

"Yes."

"Now," he went on, firmly, "how many of your kind are there?"

"Nobody knows."

"Don't you check your own numbers?"

"We did once upon a time. These days we're too scattered around," Hillder pondered a moment, added helpfully, "I can tell you that there are four billions of us spread over three planets in our own solar system. Outside of those the number is a guess. We can be divided into the rooted and the rootless and the latter can't be counted. They won't let themselves be counted because somebody might want to tax them.

Take the grand total as four billions plus."

"That tells us nothing," the other objected. "We don't know the size of the plus."

"Neither do we," said Hillder, visibly awed at the thought of it. "Sometimes it frightens us," He surveyed the audience.

"If nobody's ever been scared by a plus, now's the time."

Scowling, the questioner tried to get at it another way.

"You say you are scattered. Over how many worlds?"

"Seven hundred fourteen at last report. That's already out of date. Every report is eight to ten planets behind the times."

"And you have mastery of that huge number?"

"Whoever mastered a planet? Why, we haven't yet dug into the heart of our own, and I doubt that we ever shall." He shrugged, finished, "No, we just amble around and maul them a bit. Same as you do."

"You mean you exploit them?"

"Put it that way if it makes you happy."

"Have you encountered no opposition at any time?"

"Feeble, friend, feeble," said Hillder.

"What did you do about it?"

"That depended upon circumstances. Some folk we ignored, some we smacked, some we led toward the light."

"What light?" asked the other, baffled.

"That of seemg things our way."

It was too much for a paunchy specimen in the third row.

Coming to his feet he spoke in acidulated tones. "Do you expect us to see things your way?"

"Not immediately," Hillder said.

"Perhaps you consider us incapable of-"

The oldster who had first spoken now arose and interjected, "We must proceed with this inquisition logically or not at all. That means one line of questioning at a time and one questioner at a time." He gestured authoritatively toward the Vard with the charts. "Carry on, Thormin."

Thormin carried on for two solid hours. Apparently he was an astronomical expert, because all his questions bore more or less on that subject. He wanted details of distances, velocities, solar classifications, planetary conditions, and a host of similar items. Willingly, Hillder answered all that he could, pleaded ignorance with regard to the rest.

Eventually Thormin sat down and concentrated on his notes in the manner of one absorbed in fundamental truth. He was succeeded by a hard-eyed individual named Grasud, who for the last half-hour had been fidgeting with impatience.

"Is your vessel the most recent example of its type?"

"No."

"There are better models?"

"Yes," agreed Hillder.

"Very much better?"

"I wouldn't know, not having been assigned one yet."

"Strange, is it not," said Grasud pointedly, "that an old-type ship should discover us while superior ones have failed to do so?"

"Not at all. It was sheer luck. I happened to head this way. Other scouts, in old or new ships, boosted other ways.

How many directions are there in deep space? How many radii can be extended from a sphere?"

"Not being a mathematician, I-"

"If you were a mathematician," Hillder interrupted, "you would know that the number works out at 2n." He glanced over the audience, added in tutorial manner, "The factor of two being determined by the demonstrable fact that a radius is half a diameter and 2n being defined as the smallest number that makes one boggle."

Grasud boggled as he tried to conceive it, gave it up, said,

"Therefore, tbe total number of your exploring vessels is of equal magnitude?"

"No. We don't have to probe in every direction. It is necessary only to make for visible stars."

"Well, aren't there stars in every direction?"

"If distance is disregarded, yes. But one does not disregard distance. One makes for the nearest yet-unexplored solar systems and thus cuts down repeated jaunts to a reasonable number."

"You are evading the issue," said Grasud. "How many ships of your type are in actual operation?"

"Twenty."

"Twenty?" He made it sound anticlimactic. "Is that all?"

"It's enough, isn't it. How long do you expect us to keep antiquated models in service?"

"I am not asking about out-of-date vessels. How many scout-ships of all types are functioning?"

"I don't really know. I doubt whether anyone knows. In addition to Earth's fleets, some of the most advanced colonies are running expeditions of their own. What's more, a couple of allied lifeforms have learned things from us, caught the fever and started poking around. We can no more take a complete census of ships than we can of people."

Accepting that without argument, Grasud went on, "Your vessel is not large by our standards. Doubtless you have others of greater mass." He leaned forward, gazed fixedly.

"What is the comparative size of your biggest ship?"

"The largest I've seen was the battleship Lance. Forty times the mass of my boat."

"How many people does it carry?"

"It has a crew numbering more than six hundred but in a pinch it can transport three times that."

"So you know of at least one ship with an emergency capacity of about two thousands?"

"Yes."

More murmurings and fidgetings among the audience. Disregarding them, Grasud carried on with the air of one determined to learn the worst.

"You have other battleships of equal size?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"I don't know. If I did, I'd tell you. Sorry."

"You may have some even bigger?"

"That is quite possible," Hillder conceded. "If so, I haven't seen one yet. But that means nothing. One can go through a lifetime and not see everything. If you calculate the number of seeable things in existence, deduct the number already viewed, the remainder represents the number yet to be seen. And if you study them at the rate of one per second it would require-"

"I am not interested," snapped Grasud, refusing to be bollixed by alien argument.

"You should be," said Hillder. "Because infinity minus umpteen millions leaves infinity. Which means that you can take the part from the whole and leave the whole still intact. You can eat your cake and

have it. Can't you?"

Grasud flopped into his seat, spoke moodily to the oldster.

"I seek information, not a blatant denial of logic. His talk confuses me. Let Shahding have him."

Coming up warily, Shahding started on the subject of weapons, their design, mode of operation, range and effectiveness. He stuck with determination to this single line of inquiry and avoided all temptations to be side-tracked. His questions were astute and penetrating. Hillder answered all he could, freely, without hesitation.

"So," commented Shahding, toward the finish, "it seems that you put your trust in force-fields, certain rays that paralyze the nervous system, bacteriological techniques, demonstrations of number and strength, and a good deal of per-suasiveness. Your science of ballistics cannot be advanced after so much neglect."

"It could never advance," said Hillder. "That's why we abandoned it. We dropped fiddling around with bows and arrows for the same reason. No initial thrust can outpace a continuous and prolonged one. Thus far and no farther shalt thou go." Then he added by way of speculative afterthought,

"Anyway, it can be shown that no bullet can overtake a running man!."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Shahding, having once ducked a couple of slugs himself.

"By the time the bullet has reached the man's point of de-parture, the man has retreated," said Hillder. "The bullet then has to cover that extra distance but finds the man has retreated farther. It covers that, too, only to find that again the man is not there. And so on and so

on."

"The lead is reduced each successive time until it ceases to exist," Shahding scoffed.

"Each successive advance occupies a finite length of time, no matter how small," Hillder pointed out. "You cannot divide and subdivide a fraction to produce zero. The series is infinite. An infinite series of finite time-periods totals an infinite time. Work it out for yourself. The bullet does not hit the man because it cannot get to him."

The reaction showed that the audience had never encountered this argument before or concocted anything like it of their own accord. None were stupid enough to accept it as serious assertion of fact. All were sufficiently intelligent to recognize it as logical or pseudo-logical denial of something self-evident and demonstrably true.

Forthwith they started hunting for the flaw in this alien reasoning, discussing it between themselves so noisily that Shahding stood in silence waiting for a break. He posed like a dummy for ten minutes while the clamor rose to a cre-scendo. A group in the front semicircle left their seats, knelt and commenced drawing diagrams on the floor while arguing vociferously and with some heat. A couple of Vards in the back tier showed signs of coming to blows.

Finally the oldster, Shahding and two others bellowed a united, "Quiet!"

The investigatory commission settled down with reluctance, still muttering, gesturing, showing each other sketches on pieces of paper. Shahding fixed ireful attention on Hillder, opened his mouth in readiness to resume.

Beating him to it, Hillder said casually, "It sounds silly, doesn't it? But

anything is possible, anything at all. A man can marry his widow's sister."

"Impossible," declared Shahding, able to dispose of that without abstruse calculations. "He must be dead for her to have the status of a widow."

"A man married a woman who died. He then married her sister. He died. Wasn't his first wife his widow's sister?"

Shahding shouted, "I am not here to be tricked by the tor-tuous squirmings of an alien mind." He sat down hard, fumed a bit, said to his neighbor, "All right, Kadina, you can have him and welcome."

Confident and self-assured, Kadina stood up, gazed authoritatively around. He was tall for a Vard, and wore a well-cut uniform with crimson epaulettes and crimson-banded sleeves. For the first time in a while there was silence. Satisfied with the effect he had produced, he faced Hillder, spoke in tones deeper, less squeaky than any heard so far.

"Apart from the petty problems with which it has amused you to baffle my compatriots," he began in an oily manner,

"you have given candid, unhesitating answers to our questions. You have provided much information that is useful from the military viewpoint."

"I am glad you appreciate it," said Hillder.

"We do. Very much so," Kadina bestowed a craggy smile that looked sinister. "However, there is one matter that needs clarifying."

"What is that?"

"If the present situation were reversed, if a lone Vard-scout was subject to intensive cross-examination by an assembly of your lifeform, and if he surrendered information as willingly as you have done. . ." He let it die out while his eyes hardened, then growled, "We would consider him a trai-tor to his kind! The penalty would be death."

"How fortunate I am not to be a Vard," said Hillder.

"Do not congratulate yourself too early," Kadina retorted.

"A death sentence is meaningless only to those already under such a sentence."

"What are you getting at?"

"I am wondering whether you are a major criminal seeking sanctuary among us. There may be some other reason.

Whatever it is, you do not hesitate to betray your own kind."

He put on the same smile again. "It would be nice to know why you have been so cooperative."

"That's an easy one," Hillder said, smiling back in a way that Kadina did not like. "I am a consistent liar."

With that, he left his seat and walked boldly to the exit.

The guards led him to his cell.

He was there three days, eating regular meals and enjoying them with irritating gusto, amusing himself writing figures in a little notebook, as happy as a legendary space-scout named Larry. At the end of that time a ruminative Vard paid a visit.

"I am Bulak. Perhaps you remember me. I was seated at the end of the second row when you were before the commission."

"Four hundred were there," Hillder reminded. "I cannot recall all of them. Only the ones who suffered." He pushed forward a chair. "But never mind. Sit down and put your feet up--if you do have feet inside those funny-looking boots.

What can I do for you?"

"I don't know."

"You must have come for some reason, surely?"

Bulak looked mournful. "I'm a refugee from the fog."

"What fog?"

"The one you've spread all over the place." He rubbed a fur-coated ear, examined his fingers, stared at the wall. "The commission's main purpose was to determine relative standards of intelligence, to settle the prime question of whether your kind's cleverness is less than, greater than, or equal to our own. Upon that and that alone depends our reaction to contact with another space-conqueror."

"I did my best to help, didn't I?"

"Help?" echoed Bulak as if it were a new and strange word. "Help? Do you call it that? The true test should be that of whether your logic has been extended farther than has ours, whether your premises have been developed to more advanced conclusions."

"Well?"

"You ended up by trampling all over the laws of logic. A bullet cannot kill anybody. After three days fifty of them are still arguing about it, and this morning one of them proved that a person cannot climb a ladder. Friends have fallen out, relatives are starting to hate the sight of each other. The remaining three hundred fifty are in little better state."

"What's troubling them?" inquired Hillder with interest.

"They are debating veracity with everything but brick-bats," Bulak informed, somewhat as if compelled to mention an obscene subject. "You are a consistent liar. Therefore the statement itself must be a lie. Therefore you are not a consistent liar. The conclusion is that you can be a consistent liar only by not being a consistent liar. Yet you cannot be a consistent liar without being consistent."

"That's bad," Hillder sympathized.

"It's worse," Bulak gave back. "Because if you really are a consistent liar--which logically is a self-contradiction--none of your evidence is worth a sack of rotten muna-seeds. If you have told us the truth all the way through, then your final claim to be a liar must also be true. But if you are a consistent liar then none of it is true."

"Take a deep breath," advised Hillder.

"But," continued Bulak, taking a deep breath, "since that final statement must be untrue, all the rest may be true."

A wild look came into his eyes and he started waving his arms around. "But the claim to consistency makes it impossible for any statement to be assessed as either true or untrue because, on analysis, there is an unresolvable contradiction that-"

"Now, now," said Hillder, patting his shoulder. "It is only natural that

the lower should be confused by the higher.

The trouble is that you've not yet advanced for enough. Your thinking remains a little primitive." He hesitated, added with the air of making a daring guess, "In fact it wouldn't surprise me if you still think logically."

"In the name of the Big Sun," exclaimed Bulak, "how else can we think?"

"Like us," said Hillder. "But only when you're mentally developed." He strolled twice around the cell, said by way of musing afterthought, "Right now you couldn't cope with the problem of why a mouse when it spins."

"Why a mouse when it spins?" parroted Bulak, letting his jaw hang down.

"Or let's try an easier one, a problem any Earth-child could tackle."

"Such as what?"

"By definition an island is a body of land entirely surrounded by water?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"Then let us suppose that the whole of this planet's northern hemisphere is land and all the southern hemisphere is water. Is the northern half an island? Or is the southern half a lake?"

Bulak gave it five minutes' thought. Then he drew a circle on a sheet of paper, divided it, shaded the top half and contemplated the result. In the end he pocketed the paper and got to his feet.

"Some of them would gladly cut your throat but for the possibility that your kind may have a shrewd idea where you are and be capable of retribution. Others would send you home with honors but for the risk of bowing to inferiors."

"Theyll have to make up their minds someday," Hillder commented, refusing to show concern about which way it went.

"Meanwhile," Bulak continued morbidly, "we've had a look over your ship, which may be old or new according to whether or not you have lied about it. We can see everything but the engines and remote controls, everything but the things that matter. To determine whether they're superior to ours we'd have to pull the vessel apart, ruining it and making you a prisoner."

"Well, what's stopping you?"

"The fact that you may be bait. If your kind has great power and is looking for trouble, theyll need a pretext. Our victimization of you would provide it. The spark that fires the powder-barrel." He made a gesture of futility. "What can one do when working utterly in the dark?"

"One could try settling the question of whether a green leaf remains a green leaf in complete absence of light."

"I have had enough," declared Bulak, making for the door.

"I have had more than enough. An island or a lake? Who cares? I am going to see Mordafa."

With that he departed, working his fingers around while the fur quivered on his face. A couple of guards peered through the bars in the uneasy manner of those assigned to keep watch upon a dangerous maniac.

Mordafa turned up next day in the mid-afternoon. He was a thin, elderly, and somewhat wizened specimen with in-congruously youthful eyes. Accepting a seat, he studied Hillder, spoke with smooth deliberation.

"From what I have heard, from all that I have been told, I deduce a basic rule applying to lifeforms deemed intelligent."

"You deduce it?"

"I have to. There is no choice about the matter. All the lifeforms we have discovered so far have not been truly intelligent. Some have been superficially so, but not genuinely so. It is obvious that you have had experiences that may come to us sooner or later but have not arrived yet. In that respect we may have been fortunate seeing that the results of such contact are highly speculative. There's just no way of telling."

"And what is this rule?"

"That the governing body of any lifeform such as ours will be composed of power-lovers rather than of specialists."

"Well, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately, it is. Government falls into the hands of those who desire authority and escapes those with other interests." He paused, went on, "That is not to say that those who govern us are stupid. They are quite clever in their own particular field of mass-organization. But by the same token they are pathetically ignorant of other fields. Knowing this, your tactic is to take advantage of their ignorance. The weakness of authority is that it cannot be diminished and retain strength. To play upon ignorance is to dull the voice of command."

"Hm!" Hillder surveyed him with mounting respect.

"You're the first one I've encountered who can see beyond the end of his nose."

"Thank you," said Mordafa. "Now the very fact that you have taken the risk of landing here alone, and followed it up by confusing our leaders, proves that your kind has developed a technique for a given set of conditions and, in all probability, a series of techniques for various conditions."

"Go on," urged Hillder.

"Such techniques must be created empirically rather than theoretically," Mordafa continued. "In other words, they result from many experiences, the correcting of many errors, the search for workability, the effort to gain maximum results from minimum output." He glanced at the other. "Am I correct so far?"

"You're doing fine."

"To date we have established foothold on forty-two planets without ever having to combat other than primitive life. We may find foes worthy of our strength on the forty-third world, whenever that is discovered. Who knows? Let us assume for the sake of argument that intelligent life exists on one in every forty-three inhabitable planets."

"Where does that get us?" Hillder prompted.

"I would imagine," said Mordafa thoughtfully, "that the experience of making contact with at least six intelligent lifeforms would be necessary to enable you to evolve techniques for dealing with their like eleswhere. Therefore your kind must have discovered and

explored not less than two hundred fifty worlds. That is an estimate in minimum terms. The correct figure may well be that stated by you."

"And I am not a consistent liar?" asked Hillder, grinning.

"That is beside the point, if only our leaders would hold on to their sanity long enough to see it. You may have distorted or exaggerated for purposes of your own. If so, there is nothing we can do about it. The prime fact holds fast, namely, that your space-venturings must be far more extensive than ours. Hence you must be older, more advanced, and numerically stronger."

"That's logical enough," conceded Hillder, broadening his grin.

"Now don't start on me," pleaded Mordafa. "If you fool me with an intriguing fallacy I won't rest until I get it straight.

And that will do neither of us any good."

"Ah, so your intention is to do me good?"

"Somebody has to make a decision, seeing that the top brass is no longer capable of it. I am going to suggest that they set you free with our best wishes and assurances of friendship."

"Think they'll take any notice?"

"You know quite well they will. You've been counting on it all along." Mordafa eyed him shrewdly. "They'll grab at the advice to restore their self-esteem. If it works, they'll take the credit. If it doesn't, I'1l get the blame." He brooded a few seconds, asked with open curiosity, "Do you find it the same elsewhere, among other peoples?"

"Exactly the same," Hillder assured him. "And there is always a Mordafa to settle the issue in the same way. Power and scapegoats

go together like husband and wife."

"I'd like to meet my alien counterparts someday." Getting up, he moved to the door. "If I had not come along, how long would you have waited for your psychological mixture to congeal?"

"Until another of your type chipped in. If one doesn't arrive of his own accord, the powers-that-be lose patience and drag one in. The catalyst mined from its own kind. Authority lives by eating its vitals."

"That is putting it paradoxically," Mordafa observed, making it sound like a mild reproof. He went away.

Hillder stood behind the door and gazed through the bars in its top half. The pair of guards leaned against the oppo-site wall and stared back.

With amiable pleasantness, he said to them, "No cat has eight tails. Every cat has one tail more than no cat. Therefore every cat has nine tails."

They screwed up their eyes and scowled.

Quite an impressive deputation took him back to the ship.

All the four hundred were there, about a quarter of them resplendent in uniforms, the rest in their Sunday best. An armed guard juggled guns at barked command. Kadina made an unctuous speech full of brotherly love and the glorious shape of things to come. Somebody presented a bouquet of evil-smelling weeds and Hillder made mental note of the difference in olfactory senses.

Climbing eighty yards to the lock, Hillder looked down.

Kadina waved an officious farewell. The crowd chanted,

"Hurrah!"in conducted rhythm. He blew his nose on a handkerchief, that being deflatory gesture number nine, closed the lock, sat at the control board.

The tubes fired into a low roar. A cloud of vapor climbed around and sprinkled ground-dirt over the mob. That touch was involuntary and not recorded in the book. A pity, he thought. Everything ought to be listed. We should be syste-matic about such things. The showering of dirt should be duly noted under the heading of the spaceman's farewell.

The ship snored into the sky, left the Vard-world far behind. Hillder remained at the controls until free of the entire system's gravitational field. Then he headed for the beacon area and locked the auto-pilot on that course.

For a while he sat gazing meditatively into star-spangled darkness. After a while he sighed, made notes in his log-book.

'Cube K49, Sector 10, solar-grade D7, third planet. Name: Vard. Lifeform named Vards, cosmic intelligence rating BB, space-going, forty-two colonies. Comment: softened up.'

He glanced over his tiny library fastened to a steel bulk-head. Two tomes were missing. They had swiped the two that were replete with diagrams and illustrations. They had left the rest, having no Rosetta Stone with which to translate cold print. They hadn't touched the nearest volume titled:

'Diabologic, the Science of Driving People Nuts.'

Sighing again, he took paper from a drawer, commenced his hundredth, two hundredth or maybe three-hundredth try at concocting an Aleph number higher than A, but lower than C. He mauled his hair

until it stuck out in spikes, and although he didn't know it, he did not look especially well-balanced himself.