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Ten of Schmitz

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James Schmitz

Short Stories

Contents

"Greenface"

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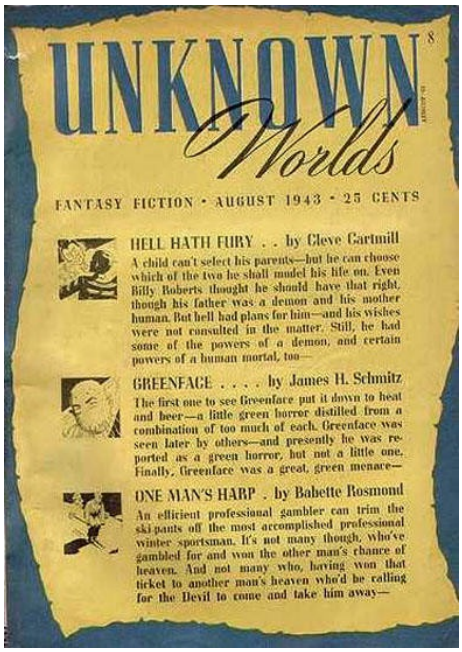

"What I don't like," the fat sport--his name was Freddie Something--said firmly, "is snakes! That was a whopping mean-looking snake that went across the path there, and I ain't going another step nearer the icehouse!"

Hogan Masters, boss and owner of Masters Fishing Camp on Thursday Lake, made no effort to conceal his indignation.

"What you don't like," he said, his voice a trifle thick, "is work! That little garter snake wasn't more than six inches long. What you want is for me to carry all the fish up there alone, while you go off to the cabin and take it easy--"

Freddie already was on his way to the cabin. "I'm on vacation!" he bellowed back happily. "Gotta save my strength! Gotta 'cuperate!"

Hogan glared after him, opened his mouth and shut it again. Then he picked up the day's catch of bass and walleyes and swayed on toward the icehouse. Usually a sober young man, he'd been guiding a party of fishermen from one of his light-housekeeping cabins over the lake's trolling grounds since early morning. It was hot work in June weather and now, at three in the afternoon, Hogan was tanked to the gills with iced beer.

He dropped the fish between chunks of ice under the sawdust, covered them up and started back to what he called the lodge--an old two-story log structure reserved for himself and a few campers too lazy even to do their own cooking.

When he came to the spot where the garter snake had given Freddie his excuse to quit, he saw it wriggling about spasmodically at the edge of a clump of weeds, as if something hidden in there had caught hold of it.

Hogan watched the tiny reptile's struggles for a moment, then squatted down carefully and spread the weeds apart. There was a sharp buzzing like the ghost of a rattler's challenge, and something slapped moistly across the back of his hand, leaving a stinging sensation as if he had reached into a cluster of nettles. At the same moment, the snake disappeared with a jerk under the plants.

The buzzing continued. It was hardly a real sound at all--more like a thin, quivering vibration inside his head, and decidedly unpleasant. Hogan shut his eyes tight and shook his head to drive it away. He opened his eyes again, and found himself looking at Greenface.

Nothing even faintly resembling Greenface had ever appeared before in any of Hogan's weed patches, but at the moment he wasn't greatly surprised. It hadn't, he decided at once, any real face. It was a shiny, dark-green lump, the size and shape of a goose egg standing on end among the weeds; it was pulsing regularly like a human heart; and across it ran a network of thin, dark lines that seemed to form two tightly shut eyes and a closed, faintly smiling mouth.

Like a fat little smiling idol in green jade--Greenface it became for

Hogan then and there.... With alcoholic detachment, he made a mental note of the cluster of fuzzy strands like hair roots about and below the thing. Then--somewhere underneath and blurred as though seen through milky glass--he discovered the snake, coiled up in a spiral and still turning with labored writhing motions as if trying to swim in a mass of gelatin.

Hogan put out his hand to investigate this phenomenon, and one of the rootlets lifted as if to ward off his touch. He hesitated, and it flicked down, withdrawing immediately and leaving another red line of nettle-burn across the back of his hand.

In a moment, Hogan was on his feet, several yards away. A belated sense of horrified outrage overcame him--he scooped up a handful of stones and hurled them wildly at the impossible little monstrosity. One thumped down near it; and with that, the buzzing sensation in his brain stopped.

Greenface began to slide slowly away through the weeds, all its rootlets wriggling about it, with an air of moving sideways and watching Hogan over a nonexistent shoulder. He found a chunk of wood in his hand and leaped in pursuit--and it promptly vanished.

He spent another minute or two poking around in the vegetation with his club raised, ready to finish it off wherever he found it lurking. Instead, he discovered the snake among the weeds and picked it up.

It was still moving, though quite dead, the scales peeling away from the wrinkled flabby body. Hogan stared at it, wondering. He held it by the head; and at the pressure of his finger and thumb, the skull within gave softly, like leather. It became suddenly horrible to feel and then the complete inexplicability of the grotesque affair broke in on him.

He flung the dead snake away with a wide sweep of his arm, went back of the icehouse and was briefly but thoroughly sick.

Julia Allison was leaning on her elbows over the kitchen table studying a mail-order catalogue when Hogan walked unsteadily into the lodge. Julia had dark-brown hair, calm gray eyes, and a wicked figure. She and Hogan had been engaged for half a year. Hogan didn't want to get married until he was sure he could make a success of Masters Fishing Camp, which was still in its first season.

Julia glanced up smiling. The smile became a stare. She closed the catalogue.

"Hogan," she stated, in the exact tone of her pa, Whitey Allison, refusing a last one to a customer in Whitey's bar and liquor store in town, "you're plain drunk! Don't shake your head--it'll slop out your ears."

"Julia--" Hogan began excitedly.

She stepped up to him and sniffed, wrinkling her nose. "*Pfaah!* Beer! Yes, darling?"

"Julia, I just saw something--a sort of crazy little green spook--"

Julia blinked twice.

"Look, infant," she said soothingly, "that's how people get talked about! Sit down and relax while I make up coffee, black. There's a couple came in this morning, and I put them in the end cabin. They want the stove tanked with kerosene, ice in the icebox, and coal for a barbecue--I fixed them up with linen."

"Julia," Hogan inquired hoarsely, "are you going to listen to me or not?"

Her smile vanished. "Now you're yelling!"

"I'm *not* yelling. And I don't need coffee. I'm trying to tell you--"

"Then do it without shouting!" Julia replaced the coffee can with a whack that showed her true state of mind, and gave Hogan an abused look which left him speechless.

"If you want to stand there and sulk," she continued immediately, "I might as well run along--I got to help Pa in the store tonight." That meant he wasn't to call her up.

She was gone before Hogan, struggling with a sudden desire to shake his Julia up and down like a cocktail for some time, could come to a decision. So he went instead to see to the couple in the end cabin. Afterwards he lay down bitterly and slept it off.

When he woke up, Greenface seemed no more than a vague and very uncertain memory, an unaccountable scrap of afternoon nightmare. Due to the heat, no doubt. *Not* to the beer--on that point Hogan and Julia remained in disagreement, however completely they became reconciled otherwise. Since neither wanted to bring the subject up again, it didn't really matter.

The next time Greenface was seen, it wasn't Hogan who saw it.

• • •

In mid-season, on the twenty-fifth of June, the success of Masters Fishing Camp looked pretty well assured. Whitey Allison was hinting

he'd be willing to advance money to have the old lodge rebuilt, as a wedding present. When Hogan came into camp for lunch, everything seemed peaceful and quiet; but before he got to the lodge steps, a series of piercing feminine shrieks from the direction of the north end cabin swung him around, running.

Charging up to the cabin with a number of startled camp guests strung out behind him, Hogan heard a babble of excited talk shushed suddenly and emphatically within. The man who was vacationing there with his wife appeared at the door.

"Old lady thinks she's seen a ghost, or something!" he apologized with an embarrassed laugh. "Nothing you can do. I ... I'll quiet her down, I guess...."

Hogan waved the others back, then ducked around behind the cabin, and listened shamelessly. Suddenly the babbling began again. He could hear every word.

"I did so see it! It was sort of blue and green and wet--and it had a green face, and it s-s-smiled at me! It f-floated up a tree and disappeared! Oh-G-G-Georgie!"

Georgie continued to make soothing sounds. But before nightfall, he came into the lodge to pay his bill.

"Sorry, old man," he said. He still seemed more embarrassed than upset. "I can't imagine what the little woman saw, but she's got her mind made up, and we gotta go home. You know how it is. I sure hate to leave, myself!"

Hogan saw them off with a sickly smile. Uppermost among his feelings was a sort of numbed vindication. A ghost that was blue and green and wet and floated up trees and disappeared was a far from exact description of the little monstrosity he'd persuaded himself he *hadn't* seen--but still too near it to be a coincidence. Julia, driving out from town to see him next day, didn't think it was a coincidence, either.

"You couldn't possibly have told that hysterical old goose about the funny little green thing you thought you saw? She got confidential in the liquor store last night, and her hubby couldn't hush her. Everybody was listening. That sort of stuff won't do the camp any good, Hogan!"

Hogan looked helpless. If he told her about the camp haunt again, she wouldn't believe him, anyhow. And if she did believe him, it might scare her silly.

"Well?" she urged suspiciously.

Hogan sighed. "Never spoke more than a dozen words with the woman...."

Julia seemed doubtful, but puzzled. There was a peculiar oily hothouse smell in the air when Hogan walked up to the road with her and watched her start back to town in her ancient car; but with a nearly sleepless night behind him, he wasn't as alert as he might have been. He was recrossing the long, narrow meadow between the road and the camp before the extraordinary quality of that odor struck him. And then, for the second time, he found himself looking at Greenface--at a bigger Greenface, and not a better one.

About sixty feet away, up in the birches at the end of the meadow, it was almost completely concealed: a vague oval of darker vegetable green in the foliage. Its markings were obscured by the leaf shadows among which it lay motionless except for that sluggish pulsing.

Hogan stared at it for long seconds while his scalp crawled and his heart hammered a thudding alarm into every fiber of his body. What scared him was its size--that oval was as big as a football! It had been growing at a crazy rate since he saw it last.

Swallowing hard, he mopped sweat off his forehead and walked on stiffly towards the lodge, careful to give no sign of being in a hurry. He didn't want to scare the thing away. There was an automatic shotgun slung above the kitchen door for emergencies; and a dose of No. 2 shot would turn this particular emergency into a museum specimen....

Around the corner of the lodge he went up the entrance steps four at a time. A few seconds later, with the gun in his hand and reaching for a box of shells, he shook his head to drive a queer soundless buzzing out of his ears. Instantly, he remembered where he'd experienced that sensation before, and wheeled towards the screened kitchen window.

The big birch trembled slightly as if horrified to see a huge spider with jade-green body and blurred cluster of threadlike legs flow down along its trunk. Twelve feet from the ground, it let go of the tree and dropped, the long bunched threads stretched straight down before it. Hogan grunted and blinked.

It had happened before his eyes: at the instant the bunched tips hit the ground, Greenface was jarred into what could only be called a higher stage of visibility. There was no change in the head, but the legs abruptly became flat, faintly greenish ribbons, flexible and semi-transparent. Each about six inches wide and perhaps six feet long, they seemed attached in a thick fringe all around the lower part of the head, like a Hawaiian dancer's grass skirt. They showed a bluish gloss wherever the sun struck them, but Greenface didn't wait for a

closer inspection.

Off it went, swaying and gliding swiftly on the ends of those foot ribbons into the woods beyond the meadow. And for all the world, it *did* look almost like a conventional ghost, the ribbons glistening in a luxurious winding sheet around the area where a body should have been, but wasn't! No wonder that poor woman--

Hogan found himself giggling helplessly. He laid the gun on the kitchen table, then tried to control the shaking of his hands long enough to get a cigarette going.

• • •

Long before the middle of July, every last tourist had left Masters Fishing Camp. Vaguely, Hogan sensed it was unfortunate that two of his attempts to dispose of Greenface had been observed while his quarry remained unseen. Of course, it wasn't his fault if the creature chose to exercise an uncanny ability to become almost completely invisible at will--nothing more than a tall glassy blur which flickered off through the woods and was gone. And it wasn't until he drove into town one evening that he realized just how unfortunate that little trick was, nevertheless, for him.

Whitey Allison's greeting was brief and chilly. Then Julia delayed putting in an appearance for almost half an hour. Hogan waited patiently enough.

"You might pour me a Scotch," he suggested at last.

Whitey passed him a significant look.

"Better lay off the stuff," he advised heavily. Hogan flushed.

"What do you mean by that?"

"There's plenty of funny stories going around about you right now!" Whitey told him, blinking belligerently. Then he looked past Hogan, and Hogan knew Julia had come into the store behind him; but he was too angry to drop the matter there.

"What do you expect me to do about them?" he demanded.

"That's no way to talk to Pa!"

Julia's voice was sharper than Hogan had ever heard it--he swallowed hard and tramped out of the store without looking at her. Down the street he had a couple of drinks; and coming past the store again on the way to his car, he saw Julia behind the bar counter,

laughing and chatting with a group of summer residents. She seemed to be having a grand time; her gray eyes sparkled and there was a fine high color in her cheeks.

Hogan snarled out the worst word he knew and went on home. It was true he'd grown accustomed to an impressive dose of whiskey at night, to put him to sleep. At night, Greenface wasn't abroad, and there was no sense in lying awake to wonder and worry about it. On warm clear days around noon was the time to be alert; twice Hogan caught it basking in the treetops in full sunlight and each time took a long shot at it, which had no effect beyond scaring it into complete visibility. It dropped out of the tree like a rotten fruit and scudded off into the bushes, its foot ribbons weaving and flapping all about it.

Well, it all added up. Was it surprising if he seemed constantly on the watch for something nobody else could see? When the camp cabins emptied one by one and stayed empty, Hogan told himself that he preferred it that way. Now he could devote all his time to tracking down that smiling haunt and finishing it off. Afterwards would have to be early enough to repair the damage it had done his good name and bank balance.

He tried to keep Julia out of these calculations. Julia hadn't been out to the camp for several weeks; and under the circumstances he didn't see how he could do anything at present to patch up their misunderstanding.

• • •

After being shot at the second time, Greenface stayed out of sight for so many days that Hogan almost gave up hunting for it. He was morosely cleaning out the lodge cellar one afternoon; and as he shook out a box he was going to convert to kindling, a small odd-looking object tumbled out to the floor. Hogan stared at the object a moment, then frowned and picked it up.

It was the mummified tiny body of a hummingbird, some tropical species with a long curved beak and long ornamental tail feathers. Except for beak and feathers, it would have been unrecognizable; bones, flesh, and skin were shriveled together into a small lump of doubtful consistency, like dried gum. Hogan, remembering the dead snake from which he had driven Greenface near the icehouse, turned it around in fingers that trembled a little, studying it carefully.

The origin of the camp spook seemed suddenly explained. Some two months ago, he'd carried the box in which the hummingbird's body had been lying into the lodge cellar. In it at the time had been a big cluster of green bananas he'd got from the wholesale grocer in

town....

Greenface, of course, was carnivorous, in some weird, out-of-the-ordinary fashion. Small game had become rare around the camp in recent weeks; even birds now seemed to avoid the area. When that banana cluster was shipped in from Brazil or some island in the Caribbean, Greenface--a seedling Greenface, very much smaller even than when Hogan first saw it--had come along concealed in it, clinging to its hummingbird prey.

And then something--perhaps simply the touch of the colder North--had acted to cancel the natural limits on its growth; for each time he'd seen it, it had been obvious that it still was growing rapidly. And though it apparently lacked solid parts that might resist decomposition after death, creatures of its present size, which conformed to no recognizable pattern of either the vegetable or the animal kingdom, couldn't very well exist anywhere without drawing human attention to themselves. While if they grew normally to be only a foot or two high, they seemed intelligent and alert enough to escape observation in some luxuriant tropical forest--even discounting that inexplicable knack of turning transparent from one second to the next.

His problem, meanwhile, was a purely practical one. The next time he grew aware of the elusive hothouse smell near the camp, he had a plan ready laid. His nearest neighbor, Pete Jeffries, who provided Hogan with most of his provisions from a farm two miles down the road to town, owned a hound by the name of Old Battler--a large, surly brute with a strong strain of Airedale in its make-up, and reputedly the best trailing nose in the county.

Hogan's excuse for borrowing Old Battler was a fat buck who'd made his headquarters in the marshy ground across the bay. Pete had no objection to out-of-season hunting; he and Old Battler were the slickest pair of poachers for a hundred miles around. He whistled the hound in and handed him over to Hogan with a parting admonition to keep an eye peeled for snooping game wardens.

The oily fragrance under the birches was so distinct that Hogan almost could have followed it himself. Unfortunately, it didn't mean a thing to the dog. Panting and rumbling as Hogan, cradling the shotgun, brought him up on a leash, Old Battler was ready for any type of quarry from rabbits to a pig-stealing bear; but he simply wouldn't or couldn't accept that he was to track that bloodless vegetable odor to its source. He walked off a few yards in the direction the thing had gone, nosing the grass; then, ignoring Hogan's commands, he returned to the birch, sniffed carefully around its base and paused to demonstrate in unmistakable fashion what he thought of the scent. Finally he sat on his haunches and regarded Hogan with a baleful, puzzled eye.

There was nothing to do but take him back and tell Pete Jeffries the poaching excursion was off because a warden had put in an appearance in the area. When Hogan got back to the lodge, he heard the telephone ringing above the cellar stairs and hurried towards it with an eagerness that surprised himself.

"Hello?" he said into the mouthpiece. "Hello? Julia? That you?"

There was no answer from the other end. Hogan, listening, heard voices, several of them, people laughing and talking. Then a door slammed faintly and someone called out: "Hi, Whitey! How's the old man?" She had phoned from the liquor store, perhaps just to see what he was doing. He thought he could even hear the faint fluttering of her breath.

"Julia," Hogan said softly, scared by the silence. "What's the matter, darling? Why don't you say something?"

Now he did hear her take a quick, deep breath. Then the receiver clicked down, and the line was dead.

The rest of the afternoon he managed to keep busy cleaning out the cabins which had been occupied. Counting back to the day the last of them had been vacated, he decided the reason nobody had arrived since was that a hostile Whitey Allison, in his strategic position at the town bus stop, was directing all tourist traffic to other camps. Not--Hogan assured himself again--that he wanted anyone around until he had solved his problem; it would only make matters more difficult.

But why had Julia called up? What did it mean?

• • •

That night, the moon was full. Near ten o'clock, with no more work to do, Hogan settled down wearily on the lodge steps. Presently he lit a cigarette. His intention was to think matters out to some conclusion in the quiet night air, but all he seemed able to do was to keep telling himself uselessly that there must be some way of trapping that elusive green horror.

He pulled the sides of his face down slowly with his fingertips. "I've got to do something!"--the futile whisper seemed to have been running through his head all day: "Got to *do* something! Got to...." He'd be having a mental breakdown if he didn't watch out.

The rumbling barks of Jeffries' Old Battler began to churn up the

night to the east--and suddenly Hogan caught the characteristic tinny stutter of Julia's little car as it turned down into the road from Jeffries' farm and came on in the direction of the camp.

The thrill that swung him to his feet was tempered at once by fresh doubts. Even if Julia was coming to tell him she'd forgiven him, he'd be expected to explain what was making him act like this. And there was no way of explaining it. She'd think he was crazy or lying. No, he couldn't do it, Hogan decided despairingly. He'd have to send her away again....

He took the big flashlight from its hook beside the door and started off forlornly to meet her when she would bring the car bumping along the path from the road. Then he realized that the car, still half a mile or so from the lodge, had stopped.

He waited, puzzled. From a distance he heard the creaky shift of its gears, a brief puttering of the motor--another shift and putter. Then silence. Old Battler was also quiet, probably listening suspiciously, though he, too, knew the sound of Julia's car. There was no one else to hear it. Jeffries had gone to the city with his wife that afternoon, and they wouldn't be back till late next morning.

Hogan frowned, flashing the light on and off against the moonlit side of the lodge. In the quiet, three or four whippoorwills were crying to each other with insane rapidity up and down the lake front. There was a subdued shrilling of crickets everywhere, and occasionally the threefold soft call of an owl dropped across the bay. He started reluctantly up the path towards the road.

The headlights were out, or he would have been able to see them from here. But the moon rode high, and the road was a narrow silver ribbon running straight down through the pines towards Jeffries' farmhouse.

Quite suddenly he discovered the car, pulled up beside the road and turned back towards town. It was Julia's car all right; and it was empty. Hogan walked slowly towards it, peering right and left, then jerked around with a start to a sudden crashing noise among the pines a hundred yards or so down off the road--a scrambling animal rush which seemed to be moving toward the lake. An instant later, Old Battler's angry roar told him the hound was running loose and had prowled into something it disapproved of down there.

He was still listening, trying to analyze the commotion, when a girl in a dark sweater and skirt stepped out quietly from the shadow of the roadside pines beyond him. Hogan didn't see her until she crossed the ditch to the road in a beautiful reaching leap. Then she was running like a rabbit for the car.

He shouted: "Julia!"

For just an instant, Julia looked back at him, her face a pale scared blur in the moonlight. Then the car door slammed shut behind her, and with a shiver and groan the old machine lurched into action. Hogan made no further attempt to stop her. Confused and unhappy, he watched the headlights sweep down the road until they swung out of sight around a bend.

Now what the devil had she been poking about here for?

Hogan sighed, shook his head and turned back to the camp. Old Battler's vicious snarling had stopped; the woods were quiet once more. Presently a draft of cool air came flowing up from the lake across the road, and Hogan's nostrils wrinkled. Some taint in the breeze--

He checked abruptly. Greenface! Greenface was down there among the pines somewhere. The hound had stirred it up, discovered it was alive and worth worrying, but lost it again, and was now casting about silently to find its hiding place.

Hogan crossed the ditch in a leap that bettered Julia's, blundered into the wood and ducked just in time to avoid being speared in the eye by a jagged branch of aspen. More cautiously, he worked his way in among the trees, went sliding down a moldy incline, swore in exasperation as he tripped over a rotten trunk and was reminded thereby of the flashlight in his hand. He walked slowly across a moonlit clearing, listening, then found himself confronted by a dense cluster of evergreens and switched on the light.

It stabbed into a dark-green oval, more than twice the size of a human head, fifteen feet away.

He stared in fascination at the thing, expecting it to vanish. But Greenface made no move beyond a slow writhing among the velvety foot ribbons that supported it. It had shot up again since he'd seen it last, stood taller than he now and was stooping slightly towards him. The lines on its pulsing head formed two tightly shut eyes and a wide, thin-lipped, insanely smiling mouth.

Gradually it was borne in on Hogan that the thing was asleep. Or had been asleep ...for now he became aware of a change in the situation through something like the buzzing escape of steam, a sound just too high to be audible that throbbed through his head. Then he noticed that Greenface, swaying slowly, quietly, had come a foot or two closer, and he saw the tips of the foot ribbons grow dim and transparent as they slid over the moss toward him. A sudden horror of this stealthy approach seized him. Without thinking of what he did, he switched off the light.

Almost instantly, the buzzing sensation died away, and before Hogan had backed off to the edge of the moonlit clearing, he realized that Greenface had stopped its advance. Suddenly he understood.

Unsteadily, he threw the beam on again and directed it full on the smiling face. For a moment, there was no result; then the faint buzzing began once more in his brain, and the foot ribbons writhed and dimmed as Greenface came sliding forward. He snapped it off; and the thing grew still, solidifying.

Hogan began to laugh in silent hysteria. He'd caught it now! Light brought Greenface alive, let it act, move, enabled it to pull off its unearthly vanishing stunt. At high noon, it was as vital as a cat or hawk. Lack of light made it still, dulled, though perhaps able to react automatically.

Greenface was trapped.

He began to play with it, savagely savoring his power over the horror, switching the light off and on. Perhaps it wouldn't even be necessary to kill the thing now. Its near-paralysis in darkness might make it possible to capture it, cage it securely alive, as a stunning justification of everything that had occurred these past weeks. He watched it come gliding toward him again, and seemed to sense a dim rising anger in the soundless buzzing. Confidently, he turned off the light. But this time Greenface didn't stop.

In an instant, Hogan realized he had permitted it to reach the edge of the little clearing. Under the full glare of the moon, it was still advancing on him, though slowly. Its outlines grew altogether blurred. Even the head started to fade.

He leaped back, with a new rush of the instinctive horror with which he had first detected it coming toward him. But he retreated only into the shadows on the other side of the clearing.

The ghostly outline of Greenface came rolling on, its nebulous leering head swaying slowly from side to side like the head of a hanged and half-rotted thing. It reached the fringe of shadows and stopped, while the foot ribbons darkened as they touched the darkness and writhed back. Dimly, it seemed to be debating this new situation.

Hogan swallowed hard. He had noticed a blurred shapeless something which churned about slowly within the jellylike shroud beneath the head; and he had a sudden conviction that he knew the reason for Old Battler's silence.... Greenface had become as dangerous as a tiger!

But he had no intention of leaving it in the moonlight's releasing spell. He threw the beam on the dim oval mask again, and slowly, stupidly,

moving along that rope of light, Greenface entered the shadows; and the light flicked out, and it was trapped once more.

• • •

Trembling and breathless after his half-mile run, Hogan stumbled into the lodge kitchen and began stuffing his pockets with as many shells as they would take. Then he took down the shotgun and started back toward the spot where he had left the thing, keeping his pace down to a fast walk. If he made no blunders now, his troubles would be over. But if he did blunder....Hogan shivered. He hadn't quite realized before that the time was bound to come when Greenface would be big enough to lose its fear of him. His notion of trying to capture it alive was out--he might wind up inside it with Old Battler....

Pushing down through the ditch and into the woods, he flashed the light ahead of him. In a few more minutes, he reached the place where he had left Greenface. And it wasn't there.

Hogan glared about, wondering wildly whether he had missed the right spot and knowing he hadn't. He looked up and saw the tops of the jack pines swaying against the pale blur of the sky; and as he stared at them, a ray of moonlight flickered through the broken canopy and touched him and was gone again, and then he understood. Greenface had crept up along such intermittent threads of light into the trees.

One of the pine tips appeared blurred and top-heavy. Hogan studied it carefully; then he depressed the safety button on the shotgun, cradled the weapon, and put the flashlight beam dead-center on that blur. In a moment, he felt the familiar mental irritation as the blur began to flow down through the branches toward him. Remembering that Greenface didn't mind a long drop to the ground, he switched off the light and watched it take shape among the shadows, and then begin a slow retreat toward the treetops and the moon.

Hogan took a deep breath and raised the gun.

The five reports came one on top of the other in a rolling roar, while the pine top jerked and splintered and flew. Greenface was plainly visible now, still clinging, twisting and lashing in spasms like a broken snake. Big branches, torn loose in those furious convulsions, crashed ponderously down toward Hogan. He backed off hurriedly, flicked in five new shells and raised the gun again.

And again.

And again....

Greenface and what seemed to be the whole top of the tree came down together. Dropping the gun, Hogan covered his head with his arms. He heard the sodden, splashy thump with which Greenface landed on the forest mold half a dozen yards away. Then something hard and solid slammed down across his shoulders and the back of his skull.

There was a brief sensation of diving headlong through a fire-streaked darkness. For many hours thereafter, no sort of sensation reached Hogan's mind at all.

• • •

"Haven't seen you around in a long time!" bellowed Pete Jeffries across the fifty feet of water between his boat and Hogan's. He pulled a flapping whitefish out of the illegal gill net he was emptying, plunked it down on the pile before him. "What you do with yourself--sleep up in the woods?"

"Times I do," Hogan admitted.

"Used to myself, your age. Out with a gun alla time!" Pete's face drew itself into mournful folds. "Not much fun now any more ... not since them damn game wardens got Old Battler."

Hogan shivered imperceptibly, remembering the ghastly thing he'd buried that July morning six weeks back, when he awoke, thinking his skull was caved in, and found Greenface had dragged itself away, with what should have been enough shot in it to lay out half a township. At least, it had felt sick enough to disgorge what was left of Old Battler, and to refrain from harming Hogan. And perhaps it had died later of its injuries. But he didn't really believe it was dead....

"Think the storm will hit before evening?" he asked out of his thoughts, not caring particularly whether it stormed or not. But Pete was sitting there, looking at him, and it was something to say.

"Hit the lake in half an hour," Pete replied matter-of-factly. "I know two guys who are going to get awful wet."

"Yeah?"

Pete jerked his head over his shoulder. "That little bay back where the Indian outfit used to live. Two of the drunkest mugs I seen on Thursday Lake this summer--fishing from off a little duck boat.... They come from across the lake somewhere."

"Maybe we should warn them."

"Not me!" Jeffries said emphatically. "They made some smart cracks at me when I passed there. Like to have rammed them!" He grunted, studied Hogan with an air of puzzled reflection. "Seems there was something I was going to tell you ... well, guess it was a lie." He sighed. "How's the walleyes hitting?"

"Pretty good." Hogan had picked up a stringerful trolling along the lake bars.

"Got it now!" Pete exclaimed. "Whitey told me last night. Julia got herself engaged with a guy in the city-place she's working at. Getting married next month."

Hogan bent over the side of his boat and began to unknot the fish stringer. He hadn't seen Julia since the night he last met Greenface. A week or so later he heard she'd left town and taken a job in the city.

"Seemed to me I ought to tell you," Pete continued with remorseless neighborliness. "Didn't you and she used to go around some?"

"Yeah, some," Hogan agreed. He held up the walleyes. "Want to take these home for the missis, Pete? I was just fishing for the fun of it."

"Sure will!" Pete was delighted. "Nothing beats walleyes for eating, 'less it's whitefish. But I'm going to smoke these. Say, how about me bringing you a ham of buck, smoked, for the walleyes? Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Hogan smiled.

"Can't be immediate. I went shooting the north side of the lake three nights back, and there wasn't a deer around. Something's scared 'em all out over there."

"Okay," Hogan said, not listening at all. He got the motor going, and cut away from Pete with a wave of his hand. "Be seeing you, Pete!"

Two miles down the lake, he got his mind off Julia long enough to find a possible significance in Pete's last words.

He cut the motor to idling speed, and then shut it off entirely, trying to get his thoughts into some kind of order. Since that chunk of pine slugged him in the head and robbed him of his chance of finishing off Greenface, he'd seen no more of the thing and heard nothing to justify his suspicion that it was still alive somewhere, perhaps still growing. But from Thursday Lake northward to the border of Canada stretched two hundred miles of bush-trees and water, with only the barest scattering of farms and tiny towns. Hogan sometimes pictured

Greenface prowling about back there, safe from human detection, and a ghastly new enemy for the harried small life of the bush, while it nourished its hatred for the man who had so nearly killed it.

It wasn't a pretty picture. It made him take the signs indicating Masters Fishing Camp from the roads, and made him turn away the occasional would-be guest who still found his way to the camp in spite of Whitey Allison's unrelenting vigilance in town. It also made it impossible for him even to try to get in touch with Julia and explain what couldn't have been explained, anyway.

A rumbling of thunder broke through his thoughts. The sky in the east hung black with clouds now; and the boat was drifting in steadily toward shore with the wind and waves behind it. Hogan started the motor and came around in a curve to take a direct line toward camp. As he did so, a pale object rose sluggishly on the waves not a hundred yards ahead of him. With a start, he realized it was the upturned bottom of a small boat, and remembered the two fishermen he'd intended warning against the approach of the storm.

The little bay Pete Jeffries had mentioned lay half a mile behind; in his preoccupation he'd passed it without becoming conscious of the fact. There was no immediate reason to assume the drunks had met with an accident; more likely they'd landed and neglected to draw the boat high enough out of the water, so that it drifted off into the lake again on the first eddy of wind. Circling the derelict to make sure it was what it appeared to be, Hogan turned back to pick up the stranded sportsmen and take them to his camp until the storm was over.

When he reached the relatively smooth water of the tree-ringed bay, he throttled the motor and moved in slowly because the bay was shallow and choked with pickerel grass and reeds. There was surprisingly little breeze here; the air seemed almost oppressively hot and still after the free race of wind across the lake. Hogan realized it was darkening rapidly.

He stood up in the boat and stared along the shoreline over the tops of the reeds, wondering where the two had gone--and whether they mightn't have been in their boat anyway when it overturned.

"Anyone around?" he yelled uncertainly.

His voice echoed back out of the creaking shore pines. From somewhere near the end of the bay sounded a series of splashes--probably a big fish flopping about in the reeds. When that stopped, the stillness turned almost tangible; and Hogan drew a quick, deep breath, as if he found breathing difficult here.

Again the splashing in the shallows--closer now. Hogan faced the

sound, frowning. The frown became a puzzled stare. That certainly was no fish, but some large animal--a deer, a bear, possibly a moose. The odd thing was that it should be coming *toward* him.... Craning his neck, he saw the reed tops bend and shake about a hundred yards away, as if a slow, heavy wave of air were passing through them in his direction. There was nothing else to be seen.

Then the truth flashed on him--a rush of horrified comprehension.

Hogan tumbled back into the stern and threw the motor on, full power. As the boat surged forwards, he swung it around to avoid an impenetrable wall of reeds ahead, and straightened out toward the mouth of the bay. Over the roar of the motor and the rush and hissing of water, he was aware of one other sensation: that shrilling vibration of the nerves, too high to be a sound, which had haunted him in memory all summer. Then there was a great splash behind the boat, shockingly close; another, a third. How near the thing actually came to catching him as he raced through the weedy traps of the bay, he never knew. Only after he was past the first broad patch of open water, did he risk darting a glance back over his shoulder--

He heard someone screaming. Raw, hoarse yells of animal terror.

Abruptly, he realized it was himself.

He was in no immediate danger at the time. Greenface had given up the pursuit. It stood, fully visible among the reeds, a hundred yards or so back. The smiling jade-green face was turned toward Hogan, lit up by strange reflections from the stormy sky, and mottled with red streaks and patches he didn't remember seeing there before. The glistening, flowing mass beneath it writhed like a cloak of translucent pythons. It towered in the bay, dwarfing even the trees behind it in its unearthly menace.

It *had* grown again. It stood all of thirty feet tall....

• • •

The storm broke before Hogan reached camp and raged on through the night and throughout the next day. Since he would never be able to find the thing in that torrential downpour, he didn't have to decide whether he must try to hunt Greenface down or not. In any case, he told himself, staring out of the lodge windows at the tormented chaos of water and wind, he wouldn't have to go looking for it. It had come back for him, and presently it was going to find its way to the familiar neighborhood of the camp.

There seemed to be a certain justice in that. He'd been the nemesis of the monster as much as it had been his. It had become time finally for the matter to end in one way or another.

Someone had told him--now he thought of it, it must have been Pete Jeffries, plodding up faithfully through the continuing storm one morning with supplies for Hogan--that the two lost sportsmen were considered drowned. Their boat had been discovered; and as soon as the weather made it possible, a search would be made for their bodies. Hogan nodded, saying nothing. Pete studied him as he talked, his broad face growing increasingly worried.

"You shouldn't drink so much, Hogan!" he blurted out suddenly. "It ain't doing you no good! The missis told me you were really keen on Julia. I should've kept my trap shut ... but you'd have found out, anyhow."

"Sure I would," Hogan said promptly. It hadn't occurred to him that Pete believed he'd shut himself up here to mourn for his lost Julia.

"Me, I didn't marry the girl I was after, neither," Pete told him confidentially. "Course the missis don't know that. Hit me just about like it's hit you. You just gotta snap outta it, see?"

Something moved, off in the grass back of the machine shed. Hogan watched it from the corner of his eye through the window until he was sure it was only a big bush shaking itself in the sleety wind.

"Eh?" he said. "Oh, sure! I'll snap out of it, Pete. Don't you worry."

"Okay." Pete sounded hearty but not quite convinced. "And drive over and see us one of these evenings. It don't do a guy no good to be sitting off here by himself all the time."

Hogan gave his promise. He might, in fact, have been thinking about Julia a good deal. But mostly his mind remained preoccupied with Greenface--and he wasn't touching his store of whiskey these nights. The crisis might come at any time; when it did, he intended to be as ready for it as he could be. Shotgun and deer rifle were loaded and close at hand. The road to town was swamped and impassable now, but as soon as he could use it again, he was going to lay in a stock of dynamite.

Meanwhile, the storm continued day and night, with only occasional brief lulls. Hogan couldn't quite remember finally how long it had been going on; he slept fitfully at night, and a growing bone-deep fatigue gradually blurred the days. But it certainly was as long and bad a wet blow as he'd ever got stuck in. The lake water rolled over the main dock with every wave, and the small dock down near the end cabins had been taken clean away. Trees were down within the confines of the camp, and the ground everywhere was littered with branches.

While this lasted, he didn't expect Greenface to put in an appearance. It, too, was weathering the storm, concealed somewhere in the dense forests along the lake front, in as much shelter as a thing of that size could find, its great head nodding and pulsing slowly as it waited.

• • •

By the eighth morning, the storm was ebbing out. In mid-afternoon the wind veered around to the south; shortly before sunset the cloud banks began to dissolve while mists steamed from the lake surface. A few hours earlier, Hogan had worked the car out on the road to see if he could make it to town. After a quarter of a mile, he turned back. The farther stretches of the road were a morass of mud, barricaded here and there by fallen trees. It would be days before anyone could get through.

Near sunset, he went out with an ax and hauled in a number of dead birches from a windfall over the hill to the south of the lodge. He felt chilled and heavy all through, unwilling to exert himself; but his

firewood was running low and had to be replenished. As he came back to the lodge dragging the last of the birches, he was startled into a burst of sweat by a pale, featureless face that stared at him out of the evening sky between the trees. The moon had grown nearly full in the week it was hidden from sight; and Hogan remembered then that Greenface was able to walk in the light of the full moon.

He cast an anxious look overhead. The clouds were melting toward the horizon in every direction; it probably would be an exceptionally clear night. He stacked the birch logs to dry in the cellar and piled the wood he had on hand beside the fireplace in the lodge's main room. Then he brewed up the last of his coffee and drank it black. A degree of alertness returned to him.

Afterwards he went about, closing the shutters over every window except those facing the south meadow. The tall cottonwoods on the other three sides of the house should afford a protective screen, but the meadow would be flooded with moonlight. He tried to calculate the time the moon should set, and decided it didn't matter--he'd watch till it had set and then sleep.

He pulled an armchair up to an open window, from where, across the sill, he controlled the whole expanse of open ground over which Greenface could approach. The rifle lay on the table beside him; the shotgun, in which he had more faith, lay across his knees. Open shell boxes and the flashlight were within reach on the table.

• • •

With the coming of night, all but the brightest of stars were dimmed in the gray gleaming sky. The moon itself stood out of Hogan's sight above the lodge roof, but he could look across the meadow as far as the machine shed and the icehouse.

He got up twice to replenish the fire which made a warm, reassuring glow on his left side. The second time, he considered replacing the armchair with something less comfortable. The effect of the coffee had begun to wear off; he was becoming thoroughly drowsy. Occasionally, a ripple of apprehension brought him bolt upright, pulses hammering; but the meadow always appeared quiet and unchanged and the night alive only with familiar, heartening sounds: the crickets, a single whippoorwill, and now and then the dark wail of a loon from the outer lake.

Each time, fear wore itself out again; and then, even thinking of Julia, it was hard to stay awake. She was in his mind tonight with almost physical vividness, sitting opposite him at the kitchen table, raking back her unruly hair while she leafed through the mail-order

catalogues; or diving off the float he'd anchored beyond the dock, a bathing cap tight around her head and the chin strap framing her beautiful stubborn little face like a picture.

Beautiful but terribly stubborn, Hogan thought, nodding drowsily. Like one evening, when they'd quarreled again and she hid among the empty cabins at the north end of the camp. She wouldn't answer when Hogan began looking for her, and by the time he discovered her, he was worried and angry. So he came walking through the half-dark toward her without a word; and that was one time Julia got a little scared of him. "Now wait, Hogan!" she cried breathlessly. "Listen, Hogan--"

He sat up with a jerky start, her voice still ringing in his mind.

The empty moonlit meadow lay like a great silver carpet before him, infinitely peaceful; even the shrilling of the tireless crickets was withdrawn in the distance. He must have slept for some while, for the shadow of the house formed an inky black square on the ground immediately below the window. The moon was sinking.

Hogan sighed, shifted the gun on his knees, and immediately grew still again. There'd been something ... and then he heard it clearly: a faint scratching on the outside of the bolted door behind him, and afterwards a long, breathless whimper like the gasp of a creature that has no strength to cry out.

Hogan moistened his lips and sat very quiet. In the next instant, the hair at the back of his neck rose hideously of its own accord.

"Hogan ... Hogan ... oh, please! Hogan!"

The toneless cry might have come out of the shadowy room behind him, or over miles of space, but there was no mistaking that voice. Hogan tried to say something, and his lips wouldn't move. His hands lay cold and paralyzed on the shotgun.

"Hogan ... *please!* Hogan!"

He heard the chair go over with a dim crash behind him. He was moving toward the door in a blundering, dreamlike rush, and then struggling with numb fingers against the stubborn resistance of the bolt.

• • •

"That awful thing! That awful thing! Standing there in the meadow! I thought it was a ... *tree!* I'm not crazy, am I, Hogan?"

The jerky, panicky whispering went on and on, until he stopped it with his mouth on hers and felt her relax in his arms. He'd bolted the door behind them, picked Julia up and carried her to the fireplace couch. But when he tried to put her on it, she clung to him hard, and he settled down with her, instead.

"Easy! Easy!" He murmured the words. "You're not crazy ... and we'd better not make much noise. How'd you get here? The road's--"

"By boat. I had to find out." Her voice was steadier. She stared up at his face, eyes huge and dark, jerked her head very slightly in the direction of the door. "Was that what--"

"Yes, the same thing. It's a lot bigger now." Greenface must be standing somewhere near the edge of the cottonwoods if she'd seen it in the meadow as she came up from the dock. He went on talking quickly, quietly, explaining it all. Now Julia was here, there was no question of trying to stop the thing with buckshot or rifle slugs. That idea had been some kind of suicidal craziness. But they could get away from it, if they were careful to keep to the shadows.

The look of nightmare grew again in Julia's eyes as she listened, fingers digging painfully into his shoulder. "Hogan," she interrupted, "it's so big--big as the trees, a lot of them!"

He frowned at her uncomprehendingly a moment. Then, as she watched him, Julia's expression changed. He knew it mirrored the change in his own face.

She whispered: "It could come right through the trees!"

Hogan swallowed.

"It could be right outside the house!" Julia's voice wasn't a whisper any more; and he put his hand over her mouth.

"Don't you smell it?" he murmured close to her ear.

• • •

It was Greenface, all right; the familiar oily odor was seeping into the air they breathed, growing stronger moment by moment, until it became the smell of some foul tropical swamp, a wet, rank rottenness. Hogan eased Julia off his knees.

"The cellar," he whispered. "Dark--completely dark. No moonlight; nothing. Understand? Get going, but quietly!"

"What are you--"

"I'm putting the fire out first."

"I'll help you!" All Julia's stubbornness seemed concentrated in the three words, and Hogan clenched his teeth against an impulse to slap her face hard. Like a magnified echo of that impulse was the vast soggy blow which smashed at the outer lodge wall above the entrance door.

They stared, motionless. The whole house had shaken. The log walls were strong, but a prolonged tinkling of glass announced that each of the shuttered windows on that side had broken simultaneously. The damn thing, Hogan thought. It's really come for me! If it hits the door--

The ability to move returned to them together. They left the couch in a clumsy, frenzied scramble and reached the head of the cellar stairs not a step apart. A second shattering crash--the telephone leaped from its stand beside Hogan. He checked, hand on the stair railing, looking back.

He couldn't see the entry door from there. The fire roared and danced in the hearth, as if it enjoyed being shaken up so roughly. The head of the eight-point buck had bounced from the wall and lay beside the fire, glass eyes fixed in a red baleful glare on Hogan. Nothing else seemed changed.

"Hogan!" Julia cried from the darkness at the bottom of the stone stairs. He heard her start up again, turned to tell her to wait there.

Then Greenface hit the door.

Wood, glass, metal flew inward together with an indescribable explosive sound. Minor noises followed; then there was stillness again. Hogan heard Julia's choked breathing from the foot of the stairs. Nothing else seemed to stir.

But a cool draft of air was flowing past his face. And now there came heavy scraping noises, a renewed shattering of glass.

"Hogan!" Julia sobbed. "Come down! It'll get in!"

"It can't!" Hogan breathed.

As if in answer, the lodge's foundation seemed to tremble beneath him. Wood splintered ponderously; there was the screech of parting timbers. The shaking continued and spread through the entire building. Just beyond the corner of the wall which shut off Hogan's view of the entry door, something smacked heavily and wetly against the floor. Laboriously, like a floundering whale, Greenface was coming into the lodge.

• • •

At the bottom of the stairs, Hogan caught his foot in a roll of wires, and nearly went headlong over Julia. She clung to him, shaking.

"Did you see it?"

"Just a glimpse of its head!" Hogan was steering her by the arm along the dark cellar passage, then around a corner. "Stay there...." He began fumbling with the lock of the cellar exit.

"What will we do?" she asked.

Timbers creaked and groaned overhead, cutting off his reply. For seconds, they stared up through the dark in frozen expectation, each sensing the other's thoughts. Then Julia gave a low, nervous giggle.

"Good thing the floor's double strength!"

"That's the fireplace right above us," Hogan said. "I wonder--" He opened the door an inch or two, peered out. "Look over there!"

The dim, shifting light of the fireplace outlined the torn front of the lodge. As they stared, a shadow, huge and formless, blotted out the light. They shrank back.

"Oh, Hogan! It's horrible!"

"All of that," he agreed, with dry lips. "You feel something funny?"

"Feel what?"

He put his fingertips to her temples. "Up there! Sort of buzzing? Like something you can almost hear."

"Oh! Yes, I do! What is it?"

"Something the thing does. But the feeling's usually stronger. It's been out in the cold and rain all week. No sun at all. I should have remembered. It *likes* that fire up there. And it's getting livelier now--that's why we feel the buzz."

"Let's run for it, Hogan! I'm scared to death here! We can make it to the boat."

"We might," Hogan said. "But it won't let us get far. If it hears the outboard start, it can cut us off easily before we're out of the bay."

"Oh, no!" she said, shocked. She hesitated. "But then what can we

do?"

Hogan said, "Right now it's busy soaking up heat. That gives us a little time. I have an idea. Julia, will you promise that--just once--you'll stay here, keep quiet, and not call after me or do anything else you shouldn't?"

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I won't leave the cellar," Hogan said soothingly. "Look, darling, there's no time to argue. That thing upstairs may decide at any moment to start looking around for us--and going by what it did to the front wall, it can pull the whole lodge apart.... Do you promise, or do I lay you out cold?"

"I promise," she said, after a sort of frosty gasp.

• • •

Hogan remained busy in the central areas of the cellar for several minutes. When he returned, Julia was still standing beside the exit door where he'd left her, looking out cautiously.

"The thing hasn't moved much," she reported, her tone somewhat subdued. She looked at him in the gloom. "What were you doing?"

"Letting out the kerosene tank--spreading it around."

"I smelled the kerosene." She was silent a moment. "Where are *we* going to be?"

Hogan opened the door a trifle wider, indicated the cabin immediately behind the cottonwood stand. "Over there. If the thing can tell we're around, and I think it can, we should be able to go that far without starting it after us."

Julia didn't answer; and he moved off into the dark again. Presently she saw a pale flare light up the chalked brick wall at the end of the passage, and realized Hogan was holding a match to papers. Kerosene fumes went off with a dim boo-room! and a glare of yellow light. Other muffled explosions followed in quick succession in various sections of the cellar. Then Hogan stepped out of a door on the passage, closed the door and turned toward her.

"Going up like pine shavings!" he said. "I guess we'd better leave quietly...."

• • •

"It looks almost like a man in there, doesn't it, Hogan? Like a huge, sick, horrible old man!"

Julia's whisper was thin and shaky, and Hogan tightened his arms reassuringly about her shoulders. The buzzing sensation in his brain was stronger, rising and falling, as if the energies of the thing that produced it were gathering and ebbing in waves. From the corner of the cabin window, past the trees, they could see the front of the lodge. The frame of the big entry door had been ripped out and timbers above twisted aside, so that a good part of the main room was visible in the dim glow of the fireplace. Greenface filled almost all of that space, a great hunched dark bulk, big head bending and nodding slowly at the fire. In that attitude, there was in fact something vaguely human about it, a nightmarish caricature.

But most of Hogan's attention was fixed on the two cellar windows of the lodge which he could see. Both were alight with the flickering glare of the fires he had set; and smoke curled up beyond the cottonwoods, rising from the far side of the lodge, where he had opened other windows to give draft to the flames. The fire had a voice, a soft growing roar, mingled in his mind with the soundless rasping that told of Greenface's returning vitality.

It was like a race between the two: whether the fire, so carefully placed beneath the supporting sections of the lodge floor, would trap the thing before the heat kindled by the fire increased its alertness to the point where it sensed the danger and escaped. If it did escape--

It happened then, with blinding suddenness.

The thing swung its head around from the fireplace and lunged hugely backward. In a flash, it turned nearly transparent. Julia gave a choked cry. Hogan had told her about that disconcerting ability; but seeing it was another matter.

And as Greenface blurred, the flooring of the main lodge room sagged, splintered, and broke through into the cellar, and the released flames leaped bellowing upwards. For seconds, the vibration in Hogan's mind became a ragged, piercing shriek--became pain, brief and intolerable.

They were out of the cabin by that time, running and stumbling down toward the lake.

• • •

A boat from the ranger station at the south end of Thursday Lake chugged into the bay forty minutes later, with fire-fighting equipment. Pete Jeffries, tramping through the muddy woods on foot, arrived at about the same time to find out what was happening at Hogan's camp. However, there wasn't really much to be done. The lodge was a raging bonfire, beyond salvage. Hogan pointed out that it wasn't insured, and that he'd intended to have it pulled down and replaced in the near future, anyway. Everything else in the vicinity of the camp was too sodden after a week of rain to be in the least endangered by flying sparks. The fire fighters stood about until the flames settled down to a sullen glow. Then they smothered the glow, and the boat and Pete left. Hogan and Julia had been unable to explain how the fire got started; but, under the circumstances, it hardly seemed to matter. If anybody had been surprised to find Julia Allison here, they didn't mention it. However, there undoubtedly would be a good many comments made in town.

"Your Pa isn't going to like it," Hogan observed, as the sounds of the boat engine faded away on the lake.

"Pa will have to learn to like it!" Julia replied, perhaps a trifle grimly. She studied Hogan a moment. "I thought I was through with you, Hogan!" she said. "But then I had to come back to find out."

"Find out whether I was batty? Can't blame you. There were times these weeks when I wondered myself."

Julia shook her head.

"Whether you were batty or not didn't seem the most important point," she said.

"Then what was?"

She smiled, moved into his arms, snuggled close. There was a lengthy pause.

"What about your engagement in the city?" Hogan asked finally.

Julia looked up at him. "I broke it when I knew I was coming back."

It was still about an hour before dawn. They walked back to the blackened, twisted mess that had been the lodge building, and stood staring at it in silence. Greenface's funeral pyre had been worthy of a Titan.

"Think there might be anything left of it?" Julia asked, in a low voice.

"After that? I doubt it. Anyway, we won't build again till spring. By then, there'll be nothing around we might have to explain, that's for sure. We can winter in town, if you like."

"One of the cabins here will do fine."

Hogan grinned. "Suits me!" He looked at the ruin again. "There was nothing very solid about it, you know. Just a big poisonous mass of jelly from the tropics. Winter would have killed it, anyway. Those red spots I saw on it--it was already beginning to rot. It never really had a chance here."

She glanced at him. "You aren't feeling sorry for the thing?"

"Well, in a way." Hogan kicked a cindered two-by-four apart, and stood there frowning. "It was just a big crazy freak, shooting up all alone in a world where it didn't fit in, and where it could only blunder around and do a lot of damage and die. I wonder how smart it really was and whether it ever understood the fix it was in."

"Quit worrying about it!" Julia ordered.

Hogan grinned down at her. "Okay," he said.

"And kiss me," said Julia.

"Rogue Psi"

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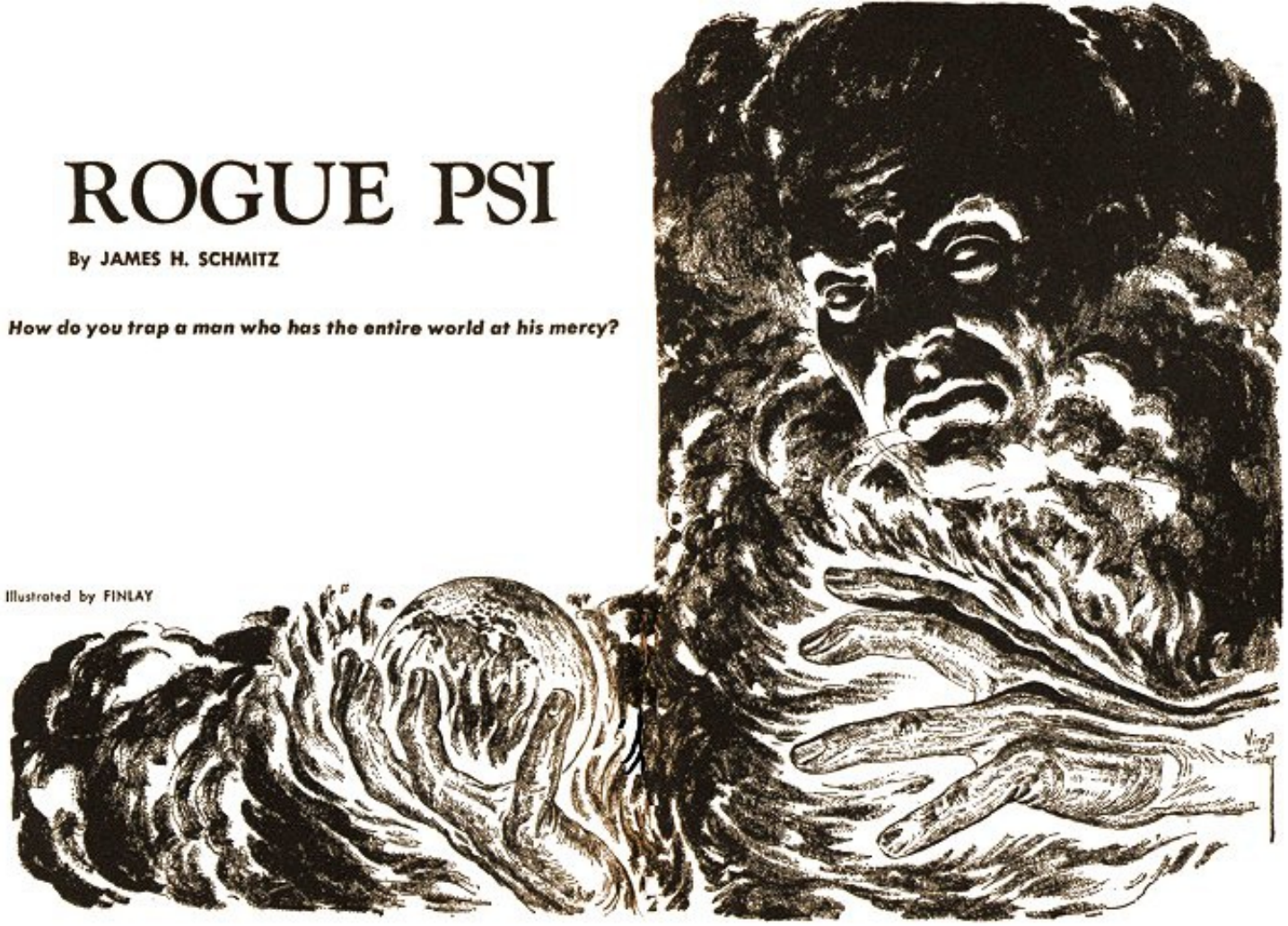
ROGUE PSI

By JAMES H. SCHMITZ

How do you trap a man who has the entire world at his mercy?

Illustrated by FINLAY



Shortly after noon, a small side door in the faculty restaurant of Cleaver University opened and a man and a woman stepped out into the sunlight of the wide, empty court between the building and the massive white wall opposite it which bordered Cleaver Spaceport. They came unhurriedly across the court towards a transparent gate sealing a tunnel passage in the wall.

As they reached the center of the court, a scanning device in the wall fastened its attention on them, simultaneously checking through a large store of previously registered human images and data associated with these. The image approaching it on the left was that of a slender girl above medium height, age twenty-six, with a burnished pile of hair which varied from chestnut-brown to copper in the sun, eyes which appeared to vary between blue and gray, and an air of composed self-reliance. Her name, the scanner noted among other details, was Arlene Marguerite Rolf. Her occupation: micromachinist. Her status: May Pass.

Miss Rolf's companion was in his mid-thirties, big, rawboned and red-haired, with a formidably bulging forehead, eyes set deep under rusty beetle-brows, and a slight but apparently habitual scowl. His

name was also on record: Dr. Frank Dean Harding. Occupation: marine geologist. Status--

At that point, there was an odd momentary hesitancy or blurring in the scanner's reactions, though not quite pronounced enough to alert its check-mechanisms. Then it decided: May Not Pass. A large sign appeared promptly in brilliant red light on the glassy surface of the wall door.

* * *

Warning--Somatic Barriers!
Passage Permitted to Listed Persons Only

* * *

The man looked at the sign, remarked dourly, "The welcome mat's out again! Wonder if the monitor in there can identify me as an individual."

"It probably can," Arlene said. "You've been here twice before--"

"Three times," Frank Harding corrected her. "The first occasion was just after I learned you'd taken the veil. Almost two years now, isn't it?" he asked.

"Very nearly. Anyway, you're registered in the university files, and that's the first place that would be checked for an unlisted person who showed up in this court."

Harding glanced over at her. "They're as careful as all that about Lowry's project?"

"You bet they are," Arlene said. "If you weren't in my company, a guard would have showed up by now to inform you you're approaching a restricted area and ask you very politely what your business here was."

Harding grunted. "Big deal. Is someone assigned to follow you around when you get off the project?"

She shrugged. "I doubt it. Why should they bother? I never leave the university grounds, and any secrets should be safe with me here. I'm not exactly the gabby type, and the people who know me seem to be careful not to ask me questions about Ben Lowry or myself anyway." She looked reflective. "You know, I do believe it's been almost six months since anyone has so much as mentioned diex energy in my presence!"

"Isn't the job beginning to look a little old after all this time?" Harding asked.

"Well," Arlene said, "working with Doctor Ben never gets to be boring, but it *is* a rather restrictive situation, of course. It'll come to an end by and by."

Harding glanced at his watch, said, "Drop me a line when that happens, Arlene. By that time, I might be able to afford an expert micromachinist myself."

"In a dome at the bottom of some ocean basin?" Arlene laughed. "Sounds cozy--but that wouldn't be much of an improvement on Cleaver Spaceport, would it? Will you start back to the coast today?"

"If I can still make the afternoon flight." He took her arm. "Come on. I'll see you through the somatic barrier first."

"Why? Do you think it might make a mistake about me and clamp down?"

"It's been known to happen," Harding said gloomily. "And from what I hear, it's one of the less pleasant ways to get killed."

Arlene said comfortably, "There hasn't been an accident of that kind in at least three or four years. The bugs have been very thoroughly worked out of the things. I go in and out here several times a week." She took a small key from her purse, fitted it into a lock at the side of the transparent door, twisted it and withdrew it. The door slid sideways for a distance of three feet and stopped. Arlene Rolf stepped through the opening and turned to face Harding.

"There you are!" she said. "Barely a tingle! If it didn't want to pass me, I'd be lying on the ground knotted up with cramps right now. 'Bye, Frank! See you again in two or three months, maybe?"

Harding nodded. "Sooner if I can arrange it. Goodbye, Arlene."

He stood watching the trim figure walk up the passage beyond the door. As she came to its end, the door slid silently shut again. Arlene looked back and waved at him, then disappeared around the corner.

Dr. Frank Harding thrust his hands into his pockets and started back across the court, scowling absently at nothing.

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The living room of the quarters assigned to Dr. Benjamin B. Lowry on Cleaver Spaceport's security island was large and almost luxuriously

furnished. In pronounced contrast to the adjoining office and workrooms, it was also as a rule in a state of comfortable disorder. An affinity appeared to exist between the complex and the man who had occupied it for the past two years. Dr. Lowry, leading authority in the rather new field of diex energy, was a large man of careless and comfortable, if not downright slovenly personal habits, while a fiendish precisionist at work.

He was slumped now in an armchair on the end of his spine, fingering his lower lip and staring moodily at the viewphone field which formed a pale-yellow rectangle across the living room's entire south wall, projecting a few inches out into the room. Now and then, his gaze shifted to a narrow, three-foot-long case of polished hardwood on the table beside him. When the phone field turned clear white, Dr. Lowry shoved a pair of rimless glasses back over his nose and sat up expectantly. Then he frowned.

"Now look here, Weldon--!" he began.

Colors had played for an instant over the luminous rectangle of the phone field, resolving themselves into a view of another room. A short, sturdily built man sat at a desk there, wearing a neat business suit. He smiled pleasantly out of the field at Dr. Lowry, said in a casual voice, "Relax, Ben! As far as I'm concerned, this is a command performance. Mr. Green just instructed me to let you know I'd be sitting in when he took your call."

"Mr. Green did *what*?"

The man in the business suit said quickly, "He's coming in now, Ben!" His hand moved on the desk, and he and the room about him faded to a pale, colorless outline in the field. Superimposed on it appeared a third room, from which a man who wore dark glasses looked out at Dr. Lowry.

He nodded, said in a briskly amiable manner, "Dr. Lowry, I received your message just a minute ago. As Colonel Weldon undoubtedly has informed you, I asked him to be present during this discussion. There are certain things to be told you, and the arrangement will save time all around.

"Now, doctor, as I understand it, the situation is this. Your work on the project has advanced satisfactorily up to what has been designated as the Fourth Stage. That is correct, isn't it?"

Dr. Lowry said stiffly, "That is correct, sir. Without the use of a trained telepath it is unlikely that further significant advances can be made. Colonel Weldon, however, has seen fit now to introduce certain new and astonishing conditions. I find these completely unacceptable as they stand and...."

"You're entirely justified, Dr. Lowry, in protesting against an apparently arbitrary act of interference with the work you've carried out so devotedly at the request of your government." One of Mr. Green's better-known characteristics was his ability to interrupt without leaving the impression of having done it. "Now, would it satisfy you to know that Colonel Weldon has been acting throughout as my personal deputy in connection with the project--and that I was aware of the conditions you mention before they were made?"

Dr. Lowry hesitated, said, "I'm afraid not. As a matter of fact, I do know Weldon well enough to take it for granted he wasn't simply being arbitrary. I...."

"You feel," said Mr. Green, "that there are certain extraneous considerations involved of which you should have been told?"

Lowry looked at him for a moment. "If the President of the United States," he said drily, "already has made a final decision in the matter, I shall have to accept it."

The image in the phone field said, "I haven't."

"Then," Lowry said, "I feel it would be desirable to let me judge personally whether any such considerations are quite as extraneous as they might appear to be to...."

"To anybody who didn't himself plan the diex thought projector, supervise its construction in every detail, and carry out an extensive series of preliminary experiments with it," Mr. Green concluded for him. "Well, yes--you may be right about that, doctor. You are necessarily more aware of the instrument's final potentialities than anyone else could be at present." The image's mouth quirked in the slightest of smiles. "In any event, we want to retain your ungrudging cooperation, so Colonel Weldon is authorized herewith to tell you in as much detail as you feel is necessary what the situation is. And he will do it before any other steps are taken. Perhaps I should warn you that what you learn may not add to your peace of mind. Now, does that settle the matter to your satisfaction, Dr. Lowry?"

Lowry nodded. "Yes, sir, it does. Except for one detail."

"Yes, I see. Weldon, will you kindly cut yourself out of this circuit. I'll call you back in a moment."

Colonel Weldon's room vanished from the phone field. Mr. Green went over to a wall safe, opened it with his back to Dr. Lowry, closed it again and turned holding up a small, brightly polished metal disk.

"I should appreciate it, incidentally," he remarked, "if you would find it convenient to supply me with several more of these devices."

"I'll be very glad to do it, sir," Dr. Lowry told him, "after I've been released from my present assignment."

"Yes ... you take no more chances than we do." Mr. Green raised his right hand, held the disk facing the phone field. After a moment, the light in Dr. Lowry's living room darkened, turned to a rich, deep purple, gradually lightened again.

Mr. Green took his hand down. "Are you convinced I'm the person I appear to be?"

Lowry nodded. "Yes, sir, I am. To the best of my knowledge, there is no way of duplicating that particular diex effect--as yet."

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Arlene Rolf walked rapidly along the passage between the thick inner and outer walls enclosing Cleaver Spaceport. There was no one in sight, and the staccato clicking of her high heels on the light-green marblite paving was the only sound. The area had the overall appearance of a sun-baked, deserted fortress. She reached a double flight of shallow stairs, went up and came out on a wide, bare platform, level with the top of the inner wall.

Cleaver Spaceport lay on her left, a twenty-mile rectangle of softly gleaming marblite absolutely empty except for the narrow white spire of a control tower near the far side. The spaceport's construction had been begun the year Arlene was born, as part of the interplanetary colonization program which a rash of disasters and chronically insufficient funds meanwhile had brought to an almost complete standstill. Cleaver Spaceport remained unfinished; no spaceship had yet lifted from its surface or settled down to it.

Ahead and to Arlene's right, a mile and a half of green lawn stretched away below the platform. Automatic tenders moved slowly across it, about half of them haloed by the rhythmically circling rainbow sprays of their sprinklers. In the two years since Arlene had first seen the lawn, no human being had set foot there. At its far end was a cluster of low, functional buildings. There were people in those buildings ... but not very many people. It was the security island where Dr. Lowry had built the diex projector.

Arlene crossed the platform, passed through the doorless entry of the building beyond it, feeling the tingle of another somatic barrier as she stepped into its shadow. At the end of the short hallway was a narrow door with the words Nonspace Conduit above it. Behind the door was a small, dimly lit cube of a room. Miss Rolf went inside and

sat down on one of the six chairs spaced along the walls. After a moment, the door slid quietly shut and the room went dark.

For a period of perhaps a dozen seconds, in complete blackness, Arlene Rolf appeared to herself to have become an awareness so entirely detached from her body that it could experience no physical sensation. Then light reappeared in the room and sensation returned. She stood up, smoothing down her skirt, and discovered, smiling, that she had been holding her breath again. It happened each time she went through the conduit, and no previous degree of determination to breathe normally had any effect at all on that automatic reaction. The door opened and she picked up her purse and went out into a hall which was large, well-lit and quite different in every respect from the one by which she had entered.

In the wall screen across the hall, the image of a uniformed man smiled at her and said, "Dr. Lowry has asked that you go directly to the laboratory on your return, Miss Rolf."

"Thank you, Max," she said. She had never seen Max or one of the other project guards in person, though they must be somewhere in the building. The screen went blank, and she went on down the long, windowless hall, the sound of her steps on the thick carpeting again the only break in the quiet. Now, she thought, it was a little like being in an immaculately clean, well-tended but utterly vacant hotel.

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Arlene pressed the buzzer beside the door to Dr. Lowry's quarters and stood waiting. When the door opened, she started forward, then stopped in surprise.

"Why, hello, Colonel Weldon," she said. "I didn't realize you would be on the project today." Her gaze went questioningly past him to Dr. Lowry, who stood in the center of the room, hands shoved deep into his trousers pockets.

Lowry said wryly, "Come in, Arlene. This has been a surprise to me, too, and not a pleasant one. On the basis of orders coming directly from the top--which I have just confirmed, by the way--our schedule here is to be subjected to drastic rearrangements. They include among other matters our suspension as the actual operators of the projector."

"But why that?" she asked startled.

Dr. Lowry shrugged. "Ask Ferris. He just arrived by his personal conduit. He's supposed to explain the matter to us."

Ferris Weldon, locking the door behind Arlene, said smilingly, "And please do give me a chance to do just that now, both of you! Let's sit down as a start. Naturally you're angry ... no one can blame you for it. But I promise to show you the absolute necessity behind this move."

He waited until they were seated, then added, "One reason--though not the only reason--for interrupting your work at this point is to avoid exposing both of you to serious personal danger."

Dr. Lowry stared at him. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Ben," Ferris Weldon asked, "what was the stated goal of this project when you undertook it?"

Lowry said stiffly, "To develop a diex-powered instrument which would provide a means of reliable mental communication with any specific individual on Earth."

Weldon shook his head. "No, it wasn't."

Arlene Rolf laughed shortly. "He's right, Ben." She looked at Weldon. "The hypothetical goal of the project was an instrument which would enable your department telepaths to make positive identification of a hypothetical Public Enemy Number One ... the same being described as a ‘rogue telepath' with assorted additional qualifications."

Weldon said, "That's a little different, isn't it? Do you recall the other qualifications?"

"Is that important at the moment?" Miss Rolf asked. "Oh, well ... this man is also a dangerous and improbably gifted hypnotist. Disturb him with an ordinary telepathic probe or get physically within a mile or so of him, and he can turn you mentally upside down, and will do it in a flash if it suits his purpose. He's quite ruthless, is supposed to have committed any number of murders. He might as easily be some unknown as a man constantly in the public eye who is keeping his abilities concealed.... He impersonates people.... He is largely responsible for the fact that in a quarter of a century the interplanetary colonization program literally hasn't got off the ground...."

She added, "That's as much as I remember. There will be further details in the files. Should I dig them out?"

"No," Ferris Weldon said. "You've covered most of it."

Dr. Lowry interrupted irritably, "What's the point of this rigmarole, Weldon? You aren't assuming that either of us has taken your rogue telepath seriously...."

"Why not?"

Lowry shrugged. "Because he is, of course, one of the government's blandly obvious fictions. I've no objection to such fictions when they serve to describe the essential nature of a problem without revealing in so many words what the problem actually is. In this case, the secrecy surrounding the project could have arisen largely from a concern about the reaction in various quarters to an instrument which might be turned into a thought-control device."

Weldon asked, "Do you believe that is the purpose of your projector?"

"If I'd believed it, I would have had nothing to do with it. I happen to have considerable confidence in the essential integrity of our government, if not always in its good sense. But not everyone shares that feeling."

Ferris Weldon lit a cigarette, flicked out the match, said after a moment, "But you didn't buy the fiction?"

"Of course not."

Weldon glanced at Miss Rolf. "You, Arlene?"

She looked uneasy. "I hadn't bought it, no. Perhaps I'm not so sure now--you must have some reason for bringing up the matter here. But several things wouldn't make sense. If...."

Dr. Lowry interrupted again. "Here's one question, Weldon. If there did happen to be a rogue telepath around, what interest would he have in sabotaging the colonization program?"

Weldon blew two perfect smoke rings, regarded their ascent with an air of judicious approval. "After you've heard a little more you should be able to answer that question yourself," he said. "It was precisely the problems connected with the program that put us on the rogue's trail. We didn't realize it at the time. Fourteen years ago... Have you had occasion to work with dedcom, Ben?"

Lowry made a snorting sound. "I've had a number of occasions ... and made a point of passing them up! If the government is now basing its conclusions on the fantastically unrealistic mishmash of suggestions it's likely to get from a deducting computer...."

"Well," Ferris Weldon said deprecatingly, "the government doesn't trust dedcom too far, of course. Still, the fact that it is strictly logical, encyclopedically informed and not hampered by common sense has produced surprisingly useful results from time to time.

"Now don't get indignant again, Ben! I assure you I'm not being

facetious. The fact is that sixteen years ago the charge that interplanetary colonization was being sabotaged was frequently enough raised. It had that appearance from the outside. Whatever could go wrong had gone wrong. There'd been an unbelievable amount of blundering.

"Nevertheless, all the available evidence indicated that no organized sabotage was involved. There was plenty of voluble opposition to the program, sometimes selfish, sometimes sincere. There were multiple incidents of forgetfulness, bad timing, simple stupidity. After years of false starts, the thing still appeared bogged down in a nightmare of--in the main--honest errors. But expensive ones. The month-by-month cost of continuing reached ridiculous proportions. Then came disasters which wiped out lives by the hundreds. The program's staunchest supporters began to get dubious, to change their minds.

"I couldn't say at the moment which genius in the Department of Special Activities had the notion to feed the colonization problem to dedcom. Anyway, it was done, and dedcom, after due checking and rumination, not only stated decisively that it *was* a matter of sabotage after all, it further provided us with a remarkably detailed description of the saboteur...."

Arlene Rolf interrupted. "There had been only one saboteur?"

"Only one who knew what he was doing, yes."

"The rogue telepath?" Dr. Lowry asked.

"Who else?"

"Then if the department has had his description...."

"Why is he still at large?" Ferris Weldon asked, with a suggestion of grim amusement. "Wait till you hear what it sounded like at the time, Ben! I'll give it to you from memory.

"Arlene has mentioned some of the points. The saboteur, dedcom informed us, was, first, a hypnotizing telepath. He could work on his victims from a distance, force them into the decisions and actions he wanted, leave them unaware that their minds had been tampered with, or that anything at all was wrong.

"Next, he was an impersonator, to an extent beyond any ordinary meaning of the word. dedcom concluded he must be able to match another human being's appearance so closely that it would deceive his model's most intimate associates. And with the use of these two talents our saboteur had, in ten years, virtually wrecked the colonization program.

"Without any further embellishments, dedcom's report of this malevolent superman at loose in our society would have raised official eyebrows everywhere...."

"In particular," Miss Rolf asked, "in the Department of Special Activities?"

"In particular there," Weldon agreed. "The department's experience made the emergence of any human super-talents worth worrying about seem highly improbable. In any event, dedcom crowded its luck. It didn't stop at that point. The problems besetting the colonization program were, it stated, by no means the earliest evidence of a rogue telepath in our midst. It listed a string of apparently somewhat comparable situations stretching back through the past three hundred years, and declared unequivocally that in each case the responsible agent had been the same--our present saboteur."

Weldon paused, watched their expressions changing. A sardonic smile touched the corners of his mouth.

"All right," Dr. Lowry said sourly after a moment, "to make the thing even more unlikely, you're saying now that the rogue is immortal."

Weldon shook his head. "I didn't say it ... and neither, you notice, did dedcom. The question of the rogue's actual life span, whatever it may be, was no part of the matter it had been given to investigate. It said only that in various ways he had been interfering with mankind's progress for at least three centuries. But added to the rest of it, that statement was quite enough."

"To accomplish what?"

"What do you think?" Weldon asked. "The report passed eventually through the proper hands, was properly initialed, then filed with dedcom's earlier abortions and forgotten. Special Activities continued, by its more realistic standard investigative procedures, to attempt to find out what had bogged down the colonization program. As you're aware, the department didn't make much headway. And neither has the program."

"The last is very apparent," Lowry said, looking puzzled.

"But the fact that you've failed to solve the problem seems a very poor reason to go back now to the theory of a rogue telepath."

Weldon blew out a puff of smoke, said thoughtfully, "That wouldn't have been too logical of us, I agree. But our failure wasn't the reason for reviving dedcom's theory."

"Then what was your reason?" Irritation edged Lowry's voice again.

"The unexpected death, five years ago, of one of the world's better-known political figures," Weldon said. "You would recognize the name immediately if I mentioned it. But you will not recognize the circumstances surrounding his death which I am about to relate to you, because the report published at the time was a complete falsehood and omitted everything which might have seemed out of the ordinary. The man actually was the victim of murder. His corpse was found floating in the Atlantic. That it should have been noticed at all was an unlikely coincidence, but the body was fished out and identified. At that point the matter acquired some very improbable aspects because it was well known that this man was still alive and in the best of health at his home in New York.

"It could have been a case of mistaken identification, but it wasn't. The corpse was the real thing. While this was being definitely established, the man in New York quietly disappeared ... and now a number of people began to take a different view of dedcom's long-buried report of a hypnotizing telepath who could assume the identity of another person convincingly enough to fool even close friends. It was not conclusive evidence, but it did justify a serious inquiry which was promptly attempted."

"Attempted?" Arlene Rolf asked. "What happened?"

"What happened," Weldon said, "was that the rogue declared war on us. A limited war on the human race. A quiet, undercover war for a specific purpose. And that was to choke off any kind of investigation that might endanger him or hamper his activities. The rogue knew he had betrayed himself; and if he hadn't known of it earlier, he learned now about the report dedcom had made. Those were matters he couldn't undo. But he could make it very clear that he wanted to be left undisturbed, and that he had methods to enforce his wishes."

Dr. Lowry blinked. "What could one...."

"Ben," Ferris Weldon said, "if you'll look back, you'll recall that a little less than five years ago we had ... packed into the space of a few months ... a series of the grimmest public disasters on record. These were not due to natural forces--to hurricanes, earthquakes, floods or the like. No, each and every one of them involved, or might have involved, a human agency. They were not inexplicable. Individually, each could be explained only too well by human incompetence, human lunacy or criminal purpose. But--a giant hotel exploded, a city's water supply was poisoned, a liner ... yes, you remember.

"Now, notice that the rogue did not strike directly at our investigators. He did that on a later occasion and under different circumstances, but not at the time. It indicated that in spite of his immense natural

advantages he did not regard himself as invulnerable. And, of course, he had no need to assume personal risks. By the public nonspace and air systems, he would move anywhere on earth within hours; and wherever he went, any human being within the range of his mind became a potential tool. He could order death at will and be at a safe distance when the order was executed. Within ten weeks, he had Special Activities on the ropes. The attempts to identify him were called off. And the abnormal series of disasters promptly ended. The rogue had made his point."

Arlene said soberly, "You say he attacked some of your investigators later on. What was that about?"

"That was a year later," Weldon said. "A kind of stalemate had developed. As you're aware, the few operating telepaths in the government's employment are a daintily handled property. They're never regarded as expendable. It was clear they weren't in the rogue's class, so no immediate attempt was made to use them against him. But meanwhile we'd assembled--almost entirely by inference--a much more detailed picture of this opponent of mankind than dedcom had been able to provide. He was a freak in every way. His ability to read other minds and to affect them--an apparent blend of telepathy and irresistible hypnosis--obviously was a much more powerful and definite tool than the unreliable gropings of any ordinary telepath. But there was the curious point that he appeared to be limited--very sharply limited--simply by distance, which to most of our trained telepaths is a meaningless factor, at least this side of interplanetary space. If one stayed beyond his range, the rogue was personally harmless. And if he could be identified from beyond his range, he also could be--and by that time almost immediately would have been--destroyed by mechanical means, without regard for any last-moment havoc he might cause.

"So the first security island was established, guarded against the rogue's approach by atmospheric blocks and sophisticated somatic barriers. Two government telepaths were brought to it and induced to locate him mentally.

"It turned out to be another mistake. If our unfortunate prodigies gained any information about the rogue, they didn't live long enough to tell us what it was. Both committed suicide within seconds of each other."

"The rogue had compelled them to do it?" Arlene asked.

"Of course."

"And was this followed," Dr. Lowry asked, "by another public disaster?"

"No," Weldon said. "The rogue may have considered that unnecessary. After all, he'd made his point again. Sending the best of our game telepaths after him was like setting spaniels on a tiger. Ordinarily, he could reach a telepath's mind only within his own range, like that of any other person. But if they were obliging enough to make contact with him, they would be instantly at his mercy, wherever he might be. We took the hint; the attempt wasn't repeated. Our other telepaths have remained in the seclusion of security islands, and so far the rogue has showed no interest in getting at them there."

Weldon stubbed his cigarette out carefully in the ashtray beside him, added, "You see now, I think, why we feel it is necessary to take extreme precautions in the further handling of your diex projector."

There was silence for some seconds. Then Dr. Lowry said, "Yes, that much has become obvious." He paused, pursing his lips doubtfully, his eyes absent. "All right," he went on. "This has been rather disturbing information, Ferris. But let's look at the thing now.

"We've found that diex energy can be employed to augment the effects of the class of processes commonly referred to as telepathic. The projector operates on that theory. By using it, ordinary mortals like Arlene and myself can duplicate some of the results reportedly achieved by the best-trained telepaths. However, we are restricted in several ways by our personal limitations. We need the location devices to direct the supporting energy to the points of the globe where the experiments are to be carried out. And so far we have not been able to ‘read the mind'--to use that very general term--of anyone with whom we are not at least casually acquainted."

Weldon nodded. "I'm aware of that."

"Very well," Lowry said. "The other advantage of the projector over unaided natural telepathy is its dependability. It works as well today as it did yesterday or last week. Until a natural telepath actually has been tested on these instruments, we can't be certain that the diex field will be equally useful to him. But let's assume that it is and that he employs the projector to locate the rogue. It should be very easy for him to do that. But won't that simply--in your phrasing--put him at the rogue's mercy again?"

Weldon hesitated, said, "We think not, Ben. A specialist in these matters could tell you in a good deal more detail about the functional organization in the mind of a natural telepath. But essentially they all retain unconscious safeguards and resistances which limit their telepathic ability but serve to protect them against negative effects. The difference between them and ourselves on that point appears to be mainly one of degree."

Lowry said, "I think I see. The theory is that such protective processes would be correspondingly strengthened by employing the diex field...."

"That's it," Weldon said. "To carry the analogue I was using a little farther, we might again be sending a spaniel against a tiger. But the spaniel--backed up by the projector--would now be approximately tiger size ... and tiger-strong. We must assume that the rogue would be far more skilled and deadly in an actual mental struggle, but there should be no struggle. Our telepath's business would be simply to locate his man, identify him, and break away again. During the very few seconds required for that, the diex field should permit him to hold off the rogue's assault."

Dr. Lowry shook his head. "You can't be sure of it, Ferris!" he said. "You can't be sure of it at all."

Weldon smiled. "No, we can't. We don't really know what would happen. But neither, you see, does the rogue."

Lowry said hesitantly, "I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Ben," Weldon said, "we don't expect your diex projector will ever be put to the use we've been discussing just now. That isn't its purpose."

Lowry looked dumfounded. "Then what is its purpose?"

Arlene Rolf's face had gone pale. "Doctor Ben," she said, "I believe Colonel Weldon is implying that the rogue already knows about the diex projector and what might be attempted with it."

Weldon nodded. "Of course, he knows about it. How many secrets do you think can be kept from a creature who can tap the minds of anybody he encounters? You can take it for granted that he's maintained information sources in every department of the government since the day we became aware of his existence. He knows we're out to get him. And he isn't stupid enough to allow things here to develop to the point where one of our telepaths is actually placed in front of that projector. He can't be sure of what the outcome would be. After all, it might ... very easily ... be fatal to him."

Lowry began, "Then I don't...." He checked himself, gave Arlene Rolf a bewildered look. "Are *you* still with this madman, Arlene?"

Her smile was twisted. "I'm afraid so! If I am, I don't like the situation at all. Colonel Weldon, have you people planned to use the diex projector as a trap for the rogue?"

"As bait for a trap," Weldon said. "Ben, put yourself in the rogue's place. He regards this entire planet as his property. But now the

livestock is aware of him and is restless. On the technological side it is also becoming more clever by the decade--dangerously clever. He can still keep us in our place here, and so far he's succeeded in blocking a major exodus into the solar system where his power would vanish. But can he continue indefinitely? And can he find any enjoyment in being the lord of all Earth when he has to be constantly on guard now against our efforts to get rid of him? He's blocked our first thrusts and showed us that he can make it a very costly business to harass him too seriously. But the situation is as unsatisfactory to him as to us. He needs much more effective methods of control than were required in the past to bring us back to heel."

Lowry said, "And the diex projector...."

Weldon nodded. "Of course! The diex projector is the perfect solution to the rogue's problems. The security islands which so far have been our principal form of defense would become meaningless. He could reach any human mind on Earth directly and immediately. Future plots to overthrow him would stand no chance of success.

"The rogue has shown no scientific ability of his own, and the handful of other men who might be capable at present of constructing a similar instrument have been placed beyond his reach. So he has permitted the development of the projector to continue here, though he could, of course, have put an abrupt stop to it in a number of ways. But you may be sure that he intends to bring the diex projector into his possession before it actually can be used against him."

Arlene said, "And he's assumed to know that the projector is now operational, aside from any faults that might still show up in the tests?"

"Yes," Weldon said.

She went on, "Does the fact that I was allowed to leave the project several times a week--actually whenever I felt like it--have something to do with that?"

Weldon said, "We believe that the rogue has taken advantage rather regularly of that arrangement. After all, there was no more dependable way of informing himself of the exact state of affairs on the project than...."

"Than by picking my mind?"

Weldon hesitated, said, "There's no denying that we have placed you both in danger, Arlene. Under the circumstances, we can offer no apology for that. It was a matter of simple necessity."

"I wasn't expecting an apology, Colonel Weldon." Her face was white. "But I'm wondering what the rogue is supposed to attempt now."

"To get possession of the projector?" Weldon hesitated again. "We don't know that exactly. We believe we have considered every possible approach, and whichever he selects, we're prepared to trap him in the process of carrying it out."

Dr. Lowry said, "But he must suspect that you intend to trap him!"

Weldon nodded. "He does, naturally. But he's under a parallel disadvantage there--he can't be certain what the traps are. You don't realize yet how elaborate our precautionary measures have been." Weldon indicated the small door in the wall beyond Dr. Lowry. "The reason I use only that private conduit to come here is that I haven't stepped off a security island for almost three years! The same has been true of anyone else who had information we had to keep from the rogue ... including incidentally Mr. Green, whose occasional 'public appearances' during this critical period have been elaborately staged fakes. We communicate only by viewphone; in fact, none of us even knows just where the others are. There is almost no chance that he can do more than guess at the exact nature of our plans."

"And with all that," Lowry said slowly, "you expect he will still go ahead and make a bid for the projector?"

"He will because he must!" Weldon said. "His only alternative would be to destroy this security island with everything on it at the last moment. And that is very unlikely. The rogue's actions show that in spite of his current troubles with us he has a vast contempt for ordinary human beings. Without that feeling, he would never have permitted the diex projector to be completed. So he will come for it--very warily, taking every precaution, but confident of outmaneuvering us at the end."

Arlene asked, "And isn't it possible that he will do just that?"

There was a barely perceptible pause before Weldon replied. "Yes," he said then, "it's possible. It's a small chance--perhaps only a theoretical one. But we're not omniscient, and we may not know quite as much about him as we think. It remains possible."

"Then why take even that risk?" Arlene asked. "Wouldn't it be better to destroy the projector now--to leave things as they are--rather than offer him a weapon which would reduce us all to helpless chattels again?"

Weldon shook his head. "Arlene, we can't leave things as they are!

Neither can the rogue. You know that really--even though you refuse to admit it to yourself at the moment."

"I ... what do you mean?"

"This year," Weldon said patiently, "we have the diex projector. What will we have five years from now when diex energy has been more fully explored? When the other fields of knowledge that have been opened in recent years begin to expand? We could, perhaps, slow down those processes. We can't stop them. And, at any point, other unpredictable weapons may emerge ... weapons we might use against the rogue, or that he might use against us.

"No, for both sides the time to act is now, unless we're willing to leave the future to chance. We aren't; and the rogue isn't. We've challenged him to determine whether he or mankind will control this planet, and he's accepted the challenge. It amounts to that. And it's very likely that the outcome will have become apparent not many hours from now."

Arlene shook her head but said nothing. Dr. Lowry asked, "Ferris, exactly what is *our* role in this situation supposed to be?"

"For the next few hours," Weldon said, "you'll be instructing me in the practical details of operating the projector. I've studied your reports very carefully, of course, and I could handle it after a fashion without such help. But that isn't good enough. Because--as the rogue knows very well--we aren't bluffing in the least in this. We're forcing him to take action. If he doesn't"--Weldon nodded at the polished hardwood box on the table before Dr. Lowry--"one of our telepaths presently will be placed before that instrument of yours, and the rogue will face the possibility of being flushed into view. And there is no point on the globe at this moment which is more than a few minutes' flight away from one of our strike groups.

"So he'll take action ... at the latest as soon as the order is given to move our telepath to the Cleaver Project. But you two won't be here when it happens. You're not needed for that part, and while we've been talking, the main project conduit has been shunted from our university exit here to a security island outside the area. You'll move there directly from the project as soon as you finish checking me out, and you will remain there until Operation Rogue is concluded.

"And now let's get busy! I think it would be best, Ben, if I assumed Arlene's usual role for a start ... secondary operator ... and let you go through the regular pattern of contacts while I look on. What do you say?"

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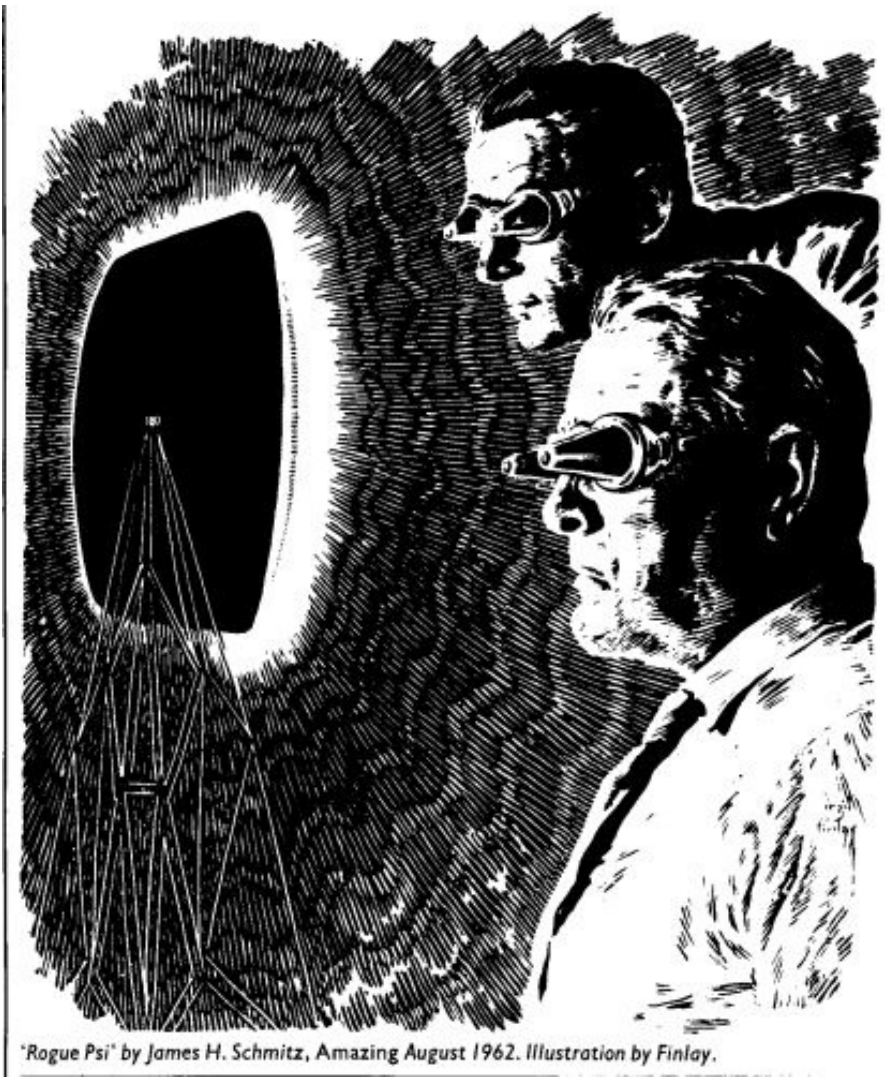
Arlene Rolf had taken a chair well back from the table where the two men sat before the diex projector. She realized it had been an attempt to dissociate herself--emotionally as well as physically--from what was being done there, and that the attempt hadn't been at all successful. Her usual composure, based on the awareness of being able to adjust herself efficiently to the necessities of any emergency, was simply gone. The story of the rogue had been sprung on them too abruptly at this last moment. Her mind accepted the concept but hadn't really assimilated it yet. Listening to what Weldon had said, wanting to remain judiciously skeptical but finding herself increasingly unable to disbelieve him--that had been like a slow, continuous shock. She wasn't yet over it. Her thoughts wouldn't follow the lines she set them on but veered off almost incoherently every minute or two. For the first time in her adult life she was badly frightened--made stupid with fear--and finding it something she seemed unable to control at will.



"Rogue Psi" by James H. Schmitz, Amazing August 1962. Illustration by Finlay.

Her gaze shifted back helplessly to the table and to the dull-blue concave viewplate which was the diex projector's central section. Unfolded from its case, the projector was a beautiful machine of

spider web angularities lifting from the flat silver slab of its generator to the plate. The blurred shiftings of color and light in the center of the plate were next to meaningless without the diex goggles Dr. Lowry and Weldon had fitted over their heads; but Arlene was familiar enough with the routine test patterns to follow their progress without listening closely to what was said....

She wanted the testing to stop. She felt it was dangerous. Hadn't Weldon said they still couldn't be sure of the actual extent of the rogue's abilities? And mightn't the projector be luring their minds out now into the enemy's territory, drawing his attention to what was being done in this room? There had been seconds when an uncanny certainty had come to her that she could sense the rogue's presence, that he already was cynically aware of what they were attempting, and only biding his time before he interfered. That might be--almost certainly was--superstitious imagining, but the conviction had been strong. Strong enough to leave her trembling.

But there was, of course, exactly nothing she could do or say now to keep them from going on. She remained silent.

So far it had been routine. A standard warm-up. They'd touched Vanderlin in Melbourne, Marie Faber in Seattle. The wash of colors in the viewplate was the reflection of individual sensory impressions riding the diex field. There had been no verbalizing or conscious response from the contacted subjects. That would come later. Dr. Lowry's face was turned momentarily sideways to her, the conical grey lenses of the goggles protruding from beneath his forehead like staring insect eyes.

She realized he must have said something to Weldon just now which she hadn't heard. Weldon's head was nodding in agreement. Dr. Lowry shifted back to the table, said, "Botucato, Brazil--an untried location. How the pinpointing of these random samplings is brought about is of course...." His voice dropped to an indistinct murmur as he reached out to the projector again.

Arlene roused herself with an effort partly out of her foggy fears. It was almost like trying to awake from a heavy, uncomfortable sleep. But now there was also some feeling of relief--and angry self-contempt--because obviously while she had been giving in to her emotional reactions, nothing disastrous had in fact occurred! At the table, they'd moved on several steps in the standard testing procedure. She hadn't even been aware of it. She was behaving like a fool!

The sensory color patterns were gone from the viewplate, and now as she looked, the green-patterned white field of the projector's location map appeared there instead. She watched Dr. Lowry's practiced fingers spin the coordinating dials, and layer after layer of

the map came surging into view, each a magnified section of the preceding one. There was a faint click. Lowry released the dials, murmured something again, ended more audibly, "... twenty-mile radius." The viewplate had gone blank, but Arlene continued to watch it.

The projector was directed now towards a twenty-mile circle at ground level somewhere in Brazil. None of their established contacts were in that area. Nevertheless, something quite definite was occurring. Dr. Lowry had not expected to learn much more about this particular process until a disciplined telepathic mind was operating through the instrument--and perhaps not too much more then. But in some manner the diex energy was now probing the area, and presently it would touch a human mind--sometimes a succession of them, sometimes only one. It was always the lightest of contacts. The subjects remained patently unaware of any unusual experience, and the only thing reflected from them was the familiar generalized flux of sensory impressions.

• • •

Arlene Rolf realized she was standing just inside the open records vault of Dr. Lowry's office, with a bundle of files in her arms. On the floor about her was a tumbled disorder of other files, of scattered papers, tapes. She dropped the bundle on the litter, turned back to the door. And only then, with a churning rush of hot terror, came the thought, *What am I doing here? What happened?*

She saw Dr. Lowry appear in the vault door with another pile of papers. He tossed them in carelessly, turned back into the office without glancing in her direction. Arlene found herself walking out after him, her legs carrying her along in dreamlike independence of her will. Lowry was now upending the contents of a drawer to the top of his desk. She tried to scream his name. There was no sound. She saw his face for an instant. He looked thoughtful, absorbed in what he was doing, nothing else....

Then she was walking through the living room, carrying something--the next instant, it seemed, she'd reentered Lowry's office. Nightmarishly, it continued. Blank lapses of awareness followed moments in which her mind swayed in wild terrors while her body moved about, machinelike and competent, piling material from workshop and file cabinets helter-skelter into the records vault. It might have been going on for only three or four minutes or for an hour; her memory was enclosed in splinters of time and reality. But there were moments, too, when her thoughts became lucid and memory returned.... Colonel Weldon's broad back as he

disappeared through the narrow door in the living room wall into the private conduit entry, the strap of the diex projector case in his right hand; then the door closing behind him. Before that had been an instant when something blazed red in the projector's viewplate on the table, and she'd wondered why neither of the two men sitting before it made any comment--

Then suddenly, in one of the lucid moments, there was time for the stunned thought to form: *So the rogue caught us all!* Weldon's self-confidence and courage, Dr. Lowry's dedicated skill, her own reluctance to be committed to this matter ... nothing had made the slightest difference. In his own time, the rogue had come quietly through every defense and seized their minds. Weldon was on his way to him now, carrying the diex projector.

And she and Dr. Lowry? They'd been ordered by the rogue to dispose of every scrap of information dealing with the projector's construction, of course! They were doing it. And after they had finished--then what?

Arlene thought she knew when she saw Dr. Lowry close the vault, and unlock and plunge the destruct button beside the door. Everything in there would be annihilated now in ravening white fire. But the two minds which knew the secrets of the projector--

• • •

She must have made a violent effort to escape, almost overriding the rogue's compulsions. For she found herself in the living room, not ten feet from the door that opened into the outer halls where help might still have been found. But it was as far as she could go; she was already turning away from the door, starting back across the room with the quick, graceful automaton stride over which she had no control. And terror surged up in her again.

As she approached the far wall, she saw Dr. Lowry come out of the passage from the office, smiling absently, blinking at the floor through his glasses. He turned without looking up and walked behind her towards the closed narrow door before Colonel Weldon's nonspace conduit entry.

So it wasn't to be death, Arlene thought, but personal slavery. The rogue still had use for them. They were to follow where Weldon had gone....

Her hand tugged at the door. It wouldn't open.

She wrenched at it violently, savagely, formless panic pounding

through her. After a moment, Dr. Lowry began to mutter uneasily, then reached out to help her.

The room seemed suddenly to explode; and for an instant Arlene Rolf felt her mind disintegrating in raging torrents of white light.

• • •

She had been looking drowsily for some moments at the lanky, red-headed man who stood, faced away, half across the room before any sort of conscious understanding returned. Then, immediately, everything was there. She went stiff with shock.

Dr. Lowry's living room ... she in this chair and Dr. Lowry stretched out on the couch. He'd seemed asleep. And standing above him, looking down at him, the familiar rawboned, big figure of Frank Harding. Dr. Frank Harding who had walked up to the Cleaver Spaceport entry with her today, told her he'd be flying back to the coast.

Frank Harding, the....

Arlene slipped quietly out of the chair, moved across the room behind Harding's back, watching him. When he began to turn, she darted off towards the open hall entry.

She heard him make a startled exclamation, come pounding after her. He caught her at the entry, swung her around, holding her wrists. He stared down at her from under the bristling red brows. "What the devil did you think you were doing?"

"You... !" Arlene gasped frantically. "You--" What checked her was first the surprise, then the dawning understanding in his face. She stammered, almost dizzy with relief, "I ... I thought you must be...."

Harding shook his head, relaxed his grip on her wrists.

"But I'm not, of course," he said quietly.

"No ... you're not! You wouldn't have had to ... chase me if you were, would you?" Her eyes went round in renewed dismay. "But I don't ... he has the diex projector now!"

Harding shook his head again and took her arm. "No, he doesn't! Now just try to relax a bit, Arlene. We did trap him, you know. It cost quite a few more lives at the end, but we did. So let's go over and sit down. I brought some whisky along ... figured you two should be able to use a little after everything you've been through."

Arlene sat on the edge of a chair, watching him pour out a glass. A reaction had set in; she felt very weak and shaky now, and she seemed unable to comprehend entirely that the rogue had been caught.

She said, "So you were in on this operation too?"

He glanced around. "Uh-huh.... Dome at the bottom of an ocean basin wasn't at all a bad headquarters under the circumstances. What put you and Dr. Ben to sleep was light-shock." He handed her the glass.

"Light-shock?" Arlene repeated.

"Something new," Harding said. "Developed--in another security island project--for the specific purpose of resolving hypnotic compulsions, including the very heavy type implanted by the rogue. He doesn't seem to have been aware of that project, or else he regarded it as one of our less important efforts which he could afford to ignore for the present. Anyway, light-shock does do the job, and very cleanly, though it knocks the patient out for a while in the process. That side effect isn't too desirable, but so far it's been impossible to avoid."

"I see," Arlene said. She took a cautious swallow of the whisky and set the glass down as her eyes began to water.

Frank Harding leaned back against the table and folded his arms. He scowled thoughtfully down at her.

"We managed to get two persons who were suspected of being the rogue's unconscious stooges to the island," he said, "and tried light-shock out on them. It worked and didn't harm them, so we decided to use it here. Lowry will wake up in another hour at the latest and be none the worse. Of course, neither of you will remember what happened while the rogue had you under control, but...."

"You're quite wrong about that," Arlene told him. "I don't remember all of it, but I'm still very much aware of perhaps half of what happened--though I'm not sure I wouldn't prefer to forget it. It was like an extremely unpleasant nightmare."

Harding looked surprised. "That's very curious! The other cases reported complete amnesia. Perhaps you...."

"You've been under a heavy strain yourself, haven't you, Frank?" she asked.

He hesitated. "I? What makes you think so?"

"You're being rather gabby. It isn't like you."

Harding grunted. "I suppose you're right. This thing's been tense enough. *He* may have enjoyed it--except naturally at the very end. Playing cat and mouse with the whole human race! Well, the mice turned out to be a little too much for him, after all. But of course nothing was certain until that last moment."

"Because none of you could be sure of anyone else?"

"That was it mainly. This was one operation where actually nobody *could* be in charge completely or completely trusted. There were overlaps for everything, and no one knew what all of them were. When Weldon came here today, he turned on a pocket transmitter so that everything that went on while he was being instructed in the use of the diex projector would be monitored outside.

"Outside was also a globescanner which duplicated the activities of the one attached to the projector. We could tell at any moment to which section of Earth the projector's diex field had been directed. That was one of the overlapping precautions. It sounded like a standard check run. There was a little more conversation between Lowry and Weldon than was normal when you were the assistant operator, but that could be expected. There were pauses while the projector was shut down and preparations for the next experiment were made. Normal again. Then, during one of the pauses, we got the signal that someone had just entered Weldon's private nonspace conduit over there from this end. That was *not* normal, and the conduit was immediately sealed off at both exits. One more overlapping precaution, you see ... and that just happened to be the one that paid off!"

Arlene frowned. "But what did...."

"Well," Harding said, "there were still a number of questions to be answered, of course. They had to be answered fast and correctly or the game could be lost. Nobody expected the rogue to show up in person at the Cleaver Project. The whole security island could have been destroyed in an instant; we knew he was aware of that. But he'd obviously made a move of some kind--and we had to assume that the diex projector was now suspended in the conduit.

"But who, or what, was in there with it? The project guards had been withdrawn. There'd been only the three of you on the island. The rogue could have had access to all three at some time or other; and his compulsions--until we found a way to treat them--were good for a lifetime. Any of you might have carried that projector into the conduit to deliver it to him. Or all three might be involved, acting together. If that was the case, the conduit would have to be reopened because the game had to continue. It was the rogue we wanted, not his tools....

"And there *was* the other possibility. You and Dr. Ben are among the rather few human beings on Earth we could be sure were not the rogue, not one of his impersonations. If he'd been capable of building a diex projector, he wouldn't have had to steal one. Colonel Weldon had been with Special Activities for a long time. But he could be an impersonation. In other words, the rogue."

Arlene felt her face go white. "He was!" she said.

"Eh? How do you know?"

"I didn't realize it, but ... no, go ahead. I'd rather tell you later."

"What didn't you realize?" Harding persisted.

Arlene said, "I experienced some of his feelings ... after he was inside the conduit. He knew he'd been trapped!" Her hands were shaking. "I thought they were my own ... that I...." Her voice began to falter.

"Let it go," Harding said, watching her. "It can't have been pleasant."

She shook her head. "I assure you it wasn't!"

"So he could reach you from nonspace!" Harding said. "That was something we didn't know. We suspected we still didn't have the whole picture about the rogue. But he didn't know everything either. He thought his escape route from the project and away through the conduit system was clear. It was a very bold move. If he'd reached any point on Earth where we weren't waiting to destroy him from a distance, he would have needed only a minute or two with the projector to win all the way. Well, that failed. And a very short time later, we knew we had the rogue in the conduit."

"How did you find that out?"

Harding said, "The duplicate global scanner I told you about. After all, the rogue *could* have been Weldon. Aside from you two, he could have been almost anyone involved in the operation. He might have been masquerading as one of our own telepaths! Every location point the diex field turned to during that ‘test run' came under instant investigation. We were looking for occurrences which might indicate the rogue had been handling the diex projector.

"The first reports didn't start to come in until after the Weldon imitation had taken the projector into the conduit. But then, in a few minutes, we had plenty! They showed the rogue had tested the projector, knew he could handle it, knew he'd reestablished himself as king of the world--and this time for good! And then he walked off into the conduit with his wonderful stolen weapon...."

Arlene said, "He was trying to get Dr. Ben and me to open the project exit for him again. We couldn't of course. I never imagined anyone could experience the terror he felt."

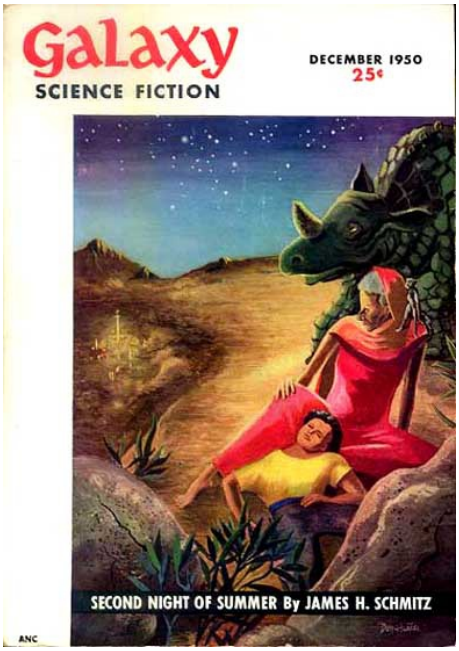
"There was some reason for it," Harding said. "Physical action is impossible in nonspace, so he couldn't use the projector. He was helpless while he was in the conduit. And he knew we couldn't compromise when we let him out.

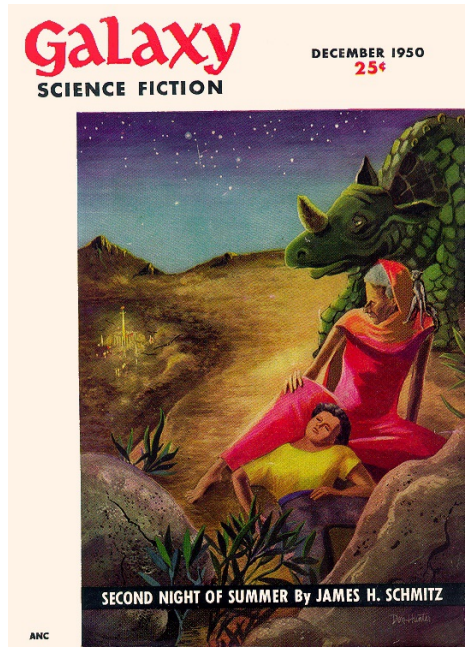
"We switched the conduit exit to a point eight hundred feet above the surface of Cleaver Interplanetary Spaceport--the project he's kept us from completing for the past twenty-odd years--and opened it there. We still weren't completely certain, you know, that the rogue mightn't turn out to be a genuine superman who would whisk himself away and out of our reach just before he hit the marblite paving.

"But he wasn't...."

"The Second Night of Summer"

Published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (December 1950), with cover and illustrations by Don Hunter, though this version is taken from *Agent of Vega and Other Stories* (2001) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.





Throwing a person to the wolves to save
the rest is never a pleasant solution.
In this case it was an entire world!

On the night after the day that brought summer officially to the land of Wend, on the planet of Noorhut, the shining lights were seen again in the big hollow at the east end of Grimp's father's farm.

Grimp watched them for more than an hour from his upstairs room. The house was dark, but an occasional murmur of voices floated up to him through the windows below. Everyone in the farmhouse was looking at the lights.

On the other farms around and in the village, which was over a hill and another two miles up the valley, every living soul who could get within view of the hollow was probably doing the same. For a time, the agitated yelling of the Village Guardian's big pank-hound had sounded clearly over the hill, but he had quieted down then very

suddenly--or had *been* quieted down, more likely, Grimp suspected. The Guardian was dead-set against anyone making a fuss about the lights--and that included the pank-hound, too.

There was some excuse for the pank-hound's excitement, though. From the window, Grimp could see there were a lot more lights tonight than had turned up in previous years--big, brilliant-blue bubbles, drifting and rising and falling silently all about the hollow. Sometimes one would lift straight up for several hundred feet, or move off over the edge of the hollow for about the same distance, and hang there suspended for a few minutes, before floating back to the others. That was as far as they ever went away from the hollow.

There was, in fact, no need for the Halpa detector-globes to go any farther than that to get the information wanted by those who had sent them out, and who were listening now to the steady flow of brief reports, in some Halpa equivalent of human speech-thought, coming back to them through the globes:

"No signs of hostile activity in the vicinity of the breakthrough point. No weapons or engines of power within range of detection. The area shows no significant alterations since the last investigation. Sharp curiosity among those who observe us consciously--traces of alarm and suspicion. But no overt hostility."

The reports streamed on without interruption, repeating the same bits of information automatically and incessantly, while the globes floated and dipped soundlessly above and about the hollow.

Grimp continued to watch them, blinking sleepily now and then, until a spreading glow over the edge of the valley announced that Noorhut's Big Moon was coming up slowly, like a Planetary Guardian, to make its own inspection of the lights. The globes began to dim out then, just as they always had done at moonrise in the preceding summers; and even before the top rim of the Big Moon's yellow disk edged over the hills, the hollow was completely dark.

Grimp heard his mother starting up the stairs. He got hurriedly into bed. The show was over for the night and he had a lot of pleasant things to think about before he went to sleep.

Now that the lights had showed up, his good friend Grandma Erisa Wannattel and her patent-medicine trailer were sure to arrive, too. Sometime late tomorrow afternoon, the big draft-trailer would come rolling up the valley road from the city. For that was what Grandma Wannattel had done the past four summers--ever since the lights first started appearing above the hollow for the few nights they were to be seen there each year. And since four years were exactly half of Grimp's whole life, that made Grandma's return a mathematical certainty for him.

Other people, of course, like the Village Guardian, might have a poor opinion of Grandma, but just hanging around her and the trailer and the gigantic, exotic-looking rhinocerine pony that pulled it was, in Grimp's opinion, a lot better even than going to the circus.

And vacations started the day after tomorrow! The whole future just now, in fact, looked like one good thing after another, extending through a vista of summery infinities.

Grimp went to sleep happily.

• • •

At about the same hour, though at a distance greater than Grimp's imagination had stretched as yet, eight large ships came individually out of the darkness between the stars that was their sea, and began to move about Noorhut in a carefully timed pattern of orbits. They stayed much too far out to permit any instrument of space-detection to suspect that Noorhut might be their common center of interest.

But that was what it was. Though the men who crewed the eight ships bore the people of Noorhut no ill will, hardly anything could have looked less promising for Noorhut than the cargo they had on board.

Seven of them were armed with a gas which was not often used any more. A highly volatile lethal catalyst, it sank to the solid surface of a world over which it was freed and spread out swiftly there to the point where its presence could no longer be detected by any chemical means. However, its effect of drawing the final breath almost imperceptibly out of all things that were oxygen-breathing was not noticeably reduced by diffusion.

The eighth ship was equipped with a brace of torpedoes, which were normally released some hours after the gas-carriers dispersed their invisible death. They were quite small torpedoes, since the only task remaining for them would be to ignite the surface of the planet that had been treated with the catalyst.

All those things might presently happen to Noorhut. But they would happen only if a specific message was flashed from it to the circling squadron--the message that Noorhut already was lost to a deadly foe who must, at any cost now, be prevented from spreading out from it to other inhabited worlds.

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Next afternoon, right after school, as Grimp came expectantly around the bend of the road at the edge of the farm, he found the village policeman sitting there on a rock, gazing tearfully down the road.

"Hello, Runny," said Grimp, disturbed. Considered in the light of gossip he'd overheard in the village that morning, this didn't look so good for Grandma. It just didn't look good.

The policeman blew his nose on a handkerchief he carried tucked into the front of his uniform, wiped his eyes, and gave Grimp an annoyed glance.

"Don't *you* call me Runny, Grimp!" he said, replacing the handkerchief. Like Grimp himself and most of the people on Noorhut, the policeman was brown-skinned and dark-eyed, normally a rather good looking young fellow. But his eyes were swollen and red-rimmed now; and his nose, which was a bit larger than average, anyway, was also red and swollen and undeniably runny. He had hay-fever bad.

Grimp apologized and sat down thoughtfully on the rock beside the policeman, who was one of his numerous cousins. He was about to mention that he had overheard Vellit using the expression when she and the policeman came through the big Leeth-flower orchard above the farm the other evening--at a much less leisurely rate than was their custom there. But he thought better of it. Vellit was the policeman's girl for most of the year, but she broke their engagement regularly during hay-fever season and called him cousin instead of dearest.

"What are you doing here?" Grimp asked bluntly instead.

"Waiting," said the policeman.

"For what?" said Grimp, with a sinking heart.

"Same individual you are, I guess," the policeman told him, hauling out the handkerchief again. He blew. "This year she's going to go right back where she came from or get pinched."

"Who says so?" scowled Grimp.

"The Guardian, that's who," said the policeman. "That good enough for you?"

"He can't do it!" Grimp said hotly. "It's our farm, and she's got all her licenses."

"He's had a whole year to think up a new list she's got to have," the

policeman informed him. He fished in the breast-pocket of his uniform, pulled out a folded paper, and opened it. "He put thirty-four items down here I got to check--she's bound to miss on one of them."

"It's a dirty trick!" said Grimp, rapidly scanning as much as he could see of the list.

"Let's us have more respect for the Village Guardian, Grimp!" the policeman said warningly.

"Uh-huh," muttered Grimp. "Sure...." If Runny would just move his big thumb out of the way. But what a list! Trailer; rhinocerine pony (beast, heavy draft, imported); patent medicines; household utensils; fortunetelling; pets; herbs; miracle-healing--

The policeman looked down, saw what Grimp was doing, and raised the paper out of his line of vision. "That's an official document," he said, warding Grimp off with one hand and tucking the paper away with the other. "Let's us not get our dirty hands on it."

Grimp was thinking fast. Grandma Wannattel did have framed licenses for some of the items he'd read hanging around inside the trailer, but certainly not thirty-four of them.

"Remember that big skinless werret I caught last season?" he asked.

The policeman gave him a quick glance, looked away again, and wiped his eyes thoughtfully. The season on werrets would open the following week and he was as ardent a fisherman as anyone in the village--and last summer Grimp's monster werret had broken a twelve-year record in the valley.

"Some people," Grimp said idly, staring down the valley road to the point where it turned into the woods, "would sneak after a person for days who's caught a big werret, hoping he'd be dumb enough to go back to that pool."

The policeman flushed and dabbed the handkerchief gingerly at his nose.

"Some people would even sit in a haystack and use spyglasses, even when the hay made them sneeze like crazy," continued Grimp quietly.

The policeman's flush deepened. He sneezed.

"But a person isn't that dumb," said Grimp. "Not when he knows there's anyway two werrets there six inches bigger than the one he caught."

"*Six inches?*" the policeman repeated a bit incredulously--eagerly.

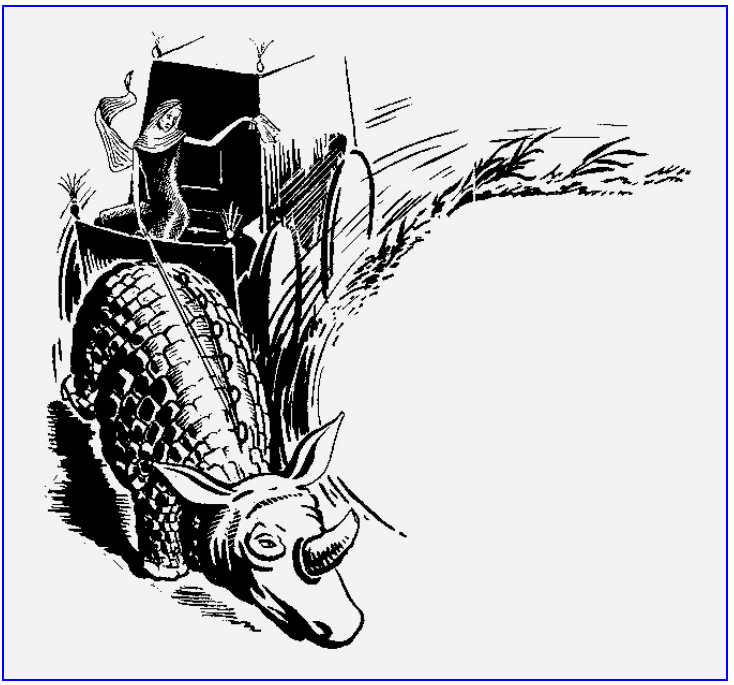
"Easy," nodded Grimp. "I had a look at them again last week."

It was the policeman's turn to think. Grimp idly hauled out his slingshot, fished a pebble out of his small-pebble pocket, and knocked the head off a flower twenty feet away. He yawned negligently.

"You're pretty good with that slingshot," the policeman remarked. "You must be just about as good as the culprit that used a slingshot to ring the fire-alarm signal on the defense unit bell from the top of the schoolhouse last week."

"That'd take a pretty good shot," Grimp admitted.

"And who then," continued the policeman, "dropped pepper in his trail, so the pank-hound near coughed off his head when we started to track him. The Guardian," he added significantly, "would like to have a clue about that culprit, all right."



"Sure, sure," said Grimp, bored. The policeman, the Guardian, and probably even the pank-hound, knew exactly who the culprit was; but they wouldn't be able to prove it in twenty thousand years. Runny just had to realize first that threats weren't going to get him anywhere near a record werret.

Apparently, he had; he was settling back for another bout of thinking. Grimp, interested in what he would produce next, decided just to leave him to it....

Then Grimp jumped up suddenly from the rock.

"There they are!" he yelled, waving the slingshot.

A half-mile down the road, Grandma Wannattel's big, silvery trailer had come swaying out of the woods behind the rhinocerine pony and turned up toward the farm. The pony saw Grimp, lifted its head, which was as long as a tall man, and bawled a thunderous greeting. Grandma Wannattel stood up on the driver's seat and waved a green silk handkerchief.

Grimp started sprinting down the road.

The werrets should turn the trick--but he'd better get Grandma informed, just the same, about recent developments here, before she ran into Runny.

• • •

Grandma Wannattel flicked the pony's horny rear with the reins just before they reached the policeman, who was waiting at the side of the road with the Guardian's check-list unfolded in his hand.

The pony broke into a lumbering trot, and the trailer swept past Runny and up around the bend of the road, where it stopped well within the boundaries of the farm. They climbed down and Grandma quickly unhitched the pony. It waddled, grunting, off the road and down into the long, marshy meadow above the hollow. It stood still there, cooling its feet.

Grimp felt a little better. Getting the trailer off community property gave Grandma a technical advantage. Grimp's people had a favorable opinion of her, and they were a sturdy lot who enjoyed telling off the Guardian any time he didn't actually have a law to back up his orders. But on the way to the farm, she had confessed to Grimp that, just as he'd feared, she didn't have anything like thirty-four licenses. And now the policeman was coming up around the bend of the road after them, blowing his nose and frowning.

"Just let me handle him alone," Grandma told Grimp out of the corner of her mouth.

He nodded and strolled off into the meadow to pass the time with the pony. She'd had a lot of experience in handling policemen.

"Well, well, young man," he heard her greeting his cousin behind him. "That looks like a bad cold you've got."

The policeman sneezed.

"Wish it were a cold," he said resignedly. "It's hay-fever. Can't do a

thing with it. Now I've got a list here--"

"Hay-fever?" said Grandma. "Step up into the trailer a moment. We'll fix that."

"About this list--" began Runny, and stopped. "You think you got something that would fix it?" he asked skeptically. "I've been to I don't know how many doctors and they didn't help any."

"Doctors!" said Grandma. Grimp heard her heels click up the metal steps that led into the back of the trailer. "Come right in, won't take a moment."

"Well--" said Runny doubtfully, but he followed her inside.

Grimp winked at the pony. The first round went to Grandma.

"Hello, pony," he said.

His worries couldn't reduce his appreciation of Grandma's fabulous draft-animal. Partly, of course, it was just that it was such an enormous beast. The long, round barrel of its body rested on short legs with wide, flat feet which were settled deep in the meadow's mud by now. At one end was a spiky tail and at the other a very big, wedge-shaped head, with a blunt, badly chipped horn set between nose and eyes. From nose to tail and all around, it was covered with thick, rectangular, horny plates, a mottled green-brown in color.

Grimp patted its rocky side affectionately. He loved the pony most for being the ugliest thing that had ever showed up on Noorhut. According to Grandma, she had bought it from a bankrupt circus which had imported it from a planet called Treebel; and Treebel was supposed to be a world full of hot swamps, inexhaustibly explosive volcanoes, and sulphurous stenches.

One might have thought that after wandering around melting lava and under rainfalls of glowing ashes for most of its life, the pony would have considered Noorhut pretty tame. But though there wasn't much room for expression around the solid slab of bone supporting the horn, which was the front of its face, Grimp thought it looked thoroughly contented with its feet sunk out of sight in Noorhut's cool mud.

"You're a big fat pig!" he told it fondly.

The pony slobbered out a long, purple tongue and carefully parted his hair.

"Cut it out!" said Grimp. "Ugh!"

The pony snorted, pleased, curled its tongue about a huge clump of

weeds, pulled them up, and flipped them into its mouth, roots, mud, and all. It began to chew.

Grimp glanced at the sun and turned anxiously to study the trailer. If she didn't get rid of Runny soon, they'd be calling him back to the house for supper before he and Grandma got around to having a good talk. And they weren't letting him out of doors these evenings, while the shining lights were here.

He gave the pony a parting whack, returned quietly to the road, and sat down out of sight near the back door of the trailer, where he could hear what was going on.

"... so about the only thing the Guardian could tack on you now," the policeman was saying, "would be a Public Menace charge. If there's any trouble about the lights this year, he's likely to try that. He's not a bad Guardian, you know, but he's got himself talked into thinking you're sort of to blame for the lights showing up here every year."

Grandma chuckled. "Well, I try to get here in time to see them every summer," she admitted. "I can see how that might give him the idea."

"And of course," said the policeman, "we're all trying to keep it quiet about them. If the news got out, we'd be having a lot of people coming here from the city, just to look. No one but the Guardian minds you being here, only you don't want a lot of city people tramping around your farms."

"Of course not," agreed Grandma. "And I certainly haven't told anyone about them myself."

"Last night," the policeman added, "everyone was saying there were twice as many lights this year as last summer. That's what got the Guardian so excited."

Chafing more every minute, Grimp had to listen then to an extended polite argument about how much Runny wanted to pay Grandma for her hay-fever medicines, while she insisted he didn't owe her anything at all. In the end, Grandma lost and the policeman paid up--much too much to take from any friend of Grimp's folks, Grandma protested to the last. And then, finally, that righteous minion of the law came climbing down the trailer steps again, with Grandma following him to the door.

"How do I look, Grimp?" he beamed cheerfully as Grimp stood up.

"Like you ought to wash your face sometime," Grimp said tactlessly, for he was fast losing patience with Runny. But then his eyes widened in surprise.

Under a coating of yellowish grease, Runny's nose seemed to have returned almost to the shape it had out of hay-fever season, and his eyelids were hardly puffed at all! Instead of flaming red, those features, furthermore, now were only a delicate pink in shade. Runny, in short, was almost handsome again.

"Pretty good, eh?" he said. "Just one shot did it. And I've only got to keep the salve on another hour. Isn't that right, Grandma?"

"That's right," smiled Grandma from the door, clinking Runny's money gently out of one hand into the other. "You'll be as good as new then."

"Permanent cure, too," said Runny. He patted Grimp benevolently on the head. "And next week we go werret-fishing, eh, Grimp?" he added greedily.

"I guess so," Grimp said, with a trace of coldness. It was his opinion that Runny could have been satisfied with the hay-fever cure and forgotten about the werrets.

"It's a date!" nodded Runny happily and took his greasy face whistling down the road. Grimp scowled after him, half-minded to reach for the slingshot then and there and let go with a medium stone at the lower rear of the uniform. But probably he'd better not.

"Well, that's that," Grandma said softly.

At that moment, up at the farmhouse, a cow horn went "Whoop-whoop!" across the valley.

"Darn," said Grimp. "I knew it was getting late, with him doing all that talking! Now they're calling me to supper." There were tears of disappointment in his eyes.

"Don't let it fuss you, Grimp," Grandma said consolingly. "Just jump up in here a moment and close your eyes."

Grimp jumped up into the trailer and closed his eyes expectantly.

"Put out your hands," Grandma's voice told him.

He put out his hands, and she pushed them together to form a cup.

Then something small and light and furry dropped into them, caught hold of one of Grimp's thumbs, with tiny, cool fingers, and chittered.

Grimp's eyes popped open.

"It's a lortel!" he whispered, overwhelmed.

"It's for you!" Grandma beamed.

Grimp couldn't speak. The lortel looked at him from a tiny, black, human face with large blue eyes set in it, wrapped a long, furry tail twice around his wrist, clung to his thumb with its fingers, and grinned and squeaked.

"It's wonderful!" gasped Grimp. "Can you really teach them to talk?"

"Hello," said the lortel.

"That's all it can say so far," Grandma said. "But if you're patient with it, it'll learn more."

"I'll be patient," Grimp promised, dazed. "I saw one at the circus this winter, down the valley at Laggand. They said it could talk, but it never said anything while I was there."

"Hello!" said the lortel.

"Hello!" gulped Grimp.

The cow horn whoop-whooped again.

"I guess you'd better run along to supper, or they might get mad," said Grandma.

"I know," said Grimp. "What does it eat?"

"Bugs and flowers and honey and fruit and eggs, when it's wild. But you just feed it whatever you eat yourself."

"Well, good-by," said Grimp. "And golly--thanks, Grandma."

He jumped out of the trailer. The lortel climbed out of his hand, ran up his arm, and sat on his shoulder, wrapping its tail around his neck.

"It knows you already," Grandma said. "It won't run away."

Grimp reached up carefully with his other hand and patted the lortel.

"I'll be back early tomorrow," he said. "No school.... They won't let me out after supper as long as those lights keep coming around."

The cow horn whooped for the third time, very loudly. This time it meant business.

"Well, good-by," Grimp repeated hastily. He ran off, the lortel hanging on to his shirt collar and squeaking.

Grandma looked after him and then at the sun, which had just touched the tops of the hills with its lower rim.

"Might as well have some supper myself," she remarked, apparently to no one in particular. "But after that I'll have to run out the go-buggy and create a diversion."

Lying on its armor-plated belly down in the meadow, the pony swung its big head around toward her. Its small yellow eyes blinked questioningly.

"What makes you think a diversion will be required?" its voice asked into her ear. The ability to produce such ventriloquial effects was one of the talents that made the pony well worth its considerable keep to Grandma.

"Weren't you listening?" she scolded. "That policeman told me the Guardian's planning to march the village's defense unit up to the hollow after supper, and start them shooting at the Halpa detector-globes as soon as they show up."

The pony swore an oath meaningless to anyone who hadn't been raised on the planet Treebel. It stood up, braced itself, and began pulling its feet out of the mud in a succession of loud, sucking noises.

"I haven't had an hour's straight rest since you talked me into tramping around with you eight years ago!" it complained.

"But you've certainly been seeing life, like I promised," Grandma smiled.

The pony slopped in a last, enormous tongueful of wet weeds. "That I have!" it said, with emphasis.

It came chewing up to the road.

"I'll keep a watch on things while you're having your supper," it told her.

• • •

As the uniformed twelve-man defense unit marched in good order out of the village, on its way to assume a strategic position around the hollow on Grimp's father's farm, there was a sudden, small explosion not very far off.

The Guardian, who was marching in the lead with a gun over his shoulder and the slavering pank-hound on a leash, stopped short. The unit broke ranks and crowded up behind him.

"What was that?" the Guardian inquired.

Everybody glanced questioningly around the rolling green slopes of the valley, already darkened with evening shadows. The pank-hound sat down before the Guardian, pointed its nose at the even darker shadows in the woods ahead of them, and growled.

"Look!" a man said, pointing in the same direction.

A spark of bright green light had appeared on their path, just where it entered the woods. The spark grew rapidly in size, became as big as a human head--then bigger! Smoky green streamers seemed to be pouring out of it....

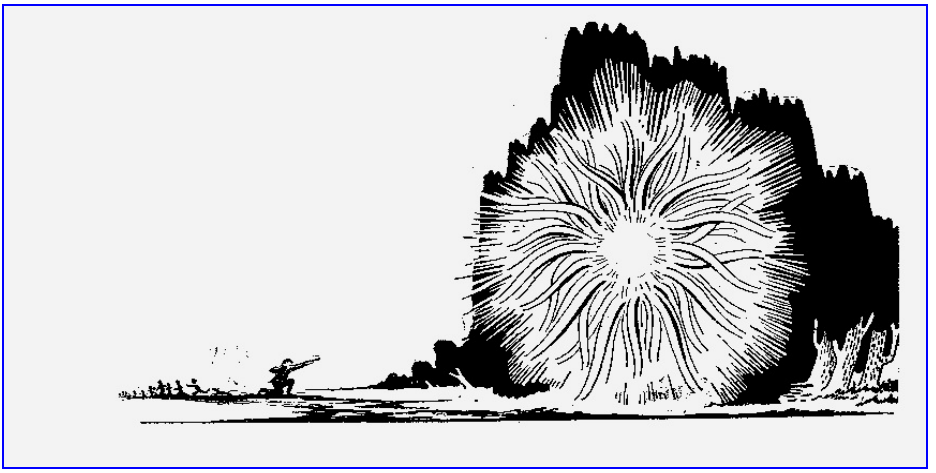
"I'm going home right now," someone announced at that point, sensibly enough.

"Stand your ground!" the Guardian ordered, conscious of the beginnings of a general withdrawal movement behind him. He was an old soldier. He unslung his gun, cocked it, and pointed it. The pank-hound got up on his six feet and bristled.

"Stop!" the Guardian shouted at the green light.

It expanded promptly to the size of a barrel, new streamers shooting out from it and fanning about like hungry tentacles.

He fired.



"*Run!*" everybody yelled then. The pank-hound slammed backward against the Guardian's legs, upsetting him, and streaked off after the retreating unit. The green light had spread outward jerkily into the shape of something like a many-armed, writhing starfish, almost the size of the trees about it. Deep, hooting sounds came out of it as it started drifting down the path toward the Guardian.

He got up on one knee and, in a single drumroll of sound, emptied all thirteen charges remaining in his gun into the middle of the starfish. It hooted more loudly, waved its arms more wildly, and continued to

advance.

He stood up quickly then, slung the gun over his shoulder, and joined the retreat. By the time the unit reached the first houses of the village, he was well up in the front ranks again. And a few minutes later, he was breathlessly organizing the local defenses, employing the tactics that had shown their worth in the raids of the Laggand Bandits nine years before.

The starfish, however, was making no attempt to follow up the valley people's rout. It was still on the path at the point where the Guardian had seen it last, waving its arms about and hooting menacingly at the silent trees.

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"That should do it, I guess," Grandma Wannattel said. "Before the first projection fizzles out, the next one in the chain will start up where they can see it from the village. It ought to be past midnight before anyone starts bothering about the globes again. Particularly since there aren't going to be any globes around tonight--that is, if the Halpa attack-schedule has been correctly estimated."

"I wish we were safely past midnight right now," the rhinocerine pony worriedly informed her. Its dark shape stood a little up the road from the trailer, outlined motionlessly like a ponderous statue against the red evening sky. Its head was up; it looked as if it were listening. Which it was, in its own way--listening for any signs of activity from the hollow.

"No sense getting anxious about it," Grandma remarked. She was perched on a rock at the side of the road, a short distance from the pony, with a small black bag slung over her shoulder. "We'll wait here another hour till it's good and dark and then go down to the hollow. The breakthrough might begin a couple of hours after that."

"It *would* have to be us again!" grumbled the pony. In spite of its size, its temperament was on the nervous side. And while any companion of Zone Agent Wannattel was bound to run regularly into situations that were far from soothing, the pony couldn't recall any previous experience that had looked as extremely un-soothing as the prospects of the night-hours ahead. On far-off Vega's world of Jeltad, in the planning offices of the Department of Galactic Zones, the decision to put Noorhut at stake to win one round in mankind's grim war with the alien and mysterious Halpa might have seemed as distressing as it was unavoidable. But the pony couldn't help feeling that the distress would have become a little more acute if Grandma's distant employers had happened to be standing right here with the

two of them while the critical hours approached.

"I'd feel a lot better myself if Headquarters hadn't picked us for this particular operation," Grandma admitted. "Us and Noorhut...."

Because, by what was a rather singular coincidence, considering how things stood there tonight, the valley was also Grandma's home. She had been born, quite some while before, a hundred and eighty miles farther inland, at the foot of the dam of the great river Wend, which had given its name to the land, and nowadays supplied it with almost all its required power.

Erisa Wannattel had done a great deal of traveling since she first became aware of the fact that her varied abilities and adventuresome nature needed a different sort of task to absorb them than could be found on Noorhut, which was progressing placidly up into the final stages of a rounded and balanced planetary civilization. But she still liked to consider the Valley of the Wend as her home and headquarters, to which she returned as often as her work would permit. Her exact understanding of the way people there thought about things and did things also made them easy for her to manipulate; and on occasion that could be very useful.

In most other places, the means she had employed to turn the Guardian and his troop back from the hollow probably would have started a panic or brought armed ships and radiation guns zooming up for the kill within minutes. But the valley people had considered it just another local emergency. The bronze alarm bell in the village had pronounced a state of siege, and cow horns passed the word up to the outlying farms. Within minutes, the farmers were pelting down the roads to the village with their families and guns; and, very soon afterward, everything quieted down again. Guard lines had been set up by then, with the women and children quartered in the central buildings, while the armed men had settled down to watching Grandma's illusion projections--directional video narrow beams--from the discreet distance marked by the village boundaries.

If nothing else happened, the people would just stay there till morning and then start a cautious investigation. After seeing mysterious blue lights dancing harmlessly over Grimp's farm for four summers, this section of Wend was pretty well conditioned to fiery apparitions. But even if they got too adventurous, they couldn't hurt themselves on the projections, which were designed to be nothing but very effective visual displays.

What it all came to was that Grandma had everybody in the neighborhood rounded up and immobilized where she wanted them.

• • •

In every other respect, the valley presented an exceptionally peaceful twilight scene to the eye. There was nothing to show that it was the only present point of contact between forces engaged in what was probably a war of intergalactic proportions--a war made wraith-like but doubly deadly by the circumstance that, in over a thousand years, neither side had found out much more about the other than the merciless and devastating finality of its forms of attack. There never had been any actual battles between Mankind and the Halpa, only alternate and very thorough massacres--all of them, from Mankind's point of view, on the wrong side of the fence.

The Halpa alone had the knowledge that enabled them to reach their human adversary. That was the trouble. But, apparently, they could launch their attacks only by a supreme effort, under conditions that existed for periods of less than a score of years, and about three hundred years apart as Mankind measured time.

It was hard to find any good in them, other than the virtue of persistence. Every three hundred years, they punctually utilized that brief period to execute one more thrust, carefully prepared and placed, and carried out with a dreadfully complete abruptness, against some new point of human civilization--and this time the attack was going to come through on Noorhut.

• • •

"Something's starting to move around in that hollow!" the pony announced suddenly. "It's not one of their globe-detectors."

"I know," murmured Grandma. "That's the first of the Halpa themselves. They're going to be right on schedule, it seems. But don't get nervous. They can't hurt anything until their transmitter comes through and revives them. We've got to be particularly careful now not to frighten them off. They seem to be even more sensitive to emotional tensions in their immediate surroundings than the globes."

The pony made no reply. It knew what was at stake and why eight big ships were circling Noorhut somewhere beyond space-detection tonight. It knew, too, that the ships would act only if it was discovered that Grandma had failed. But--

The pony shook its head uneasily. The people on Treebel had never become civilized to the point of considering the possibility of taking calculated risks on a planetary scale--not to mention the fact that the lives of the pony and of Grandma were included in the present calculation. In the eight years it had been accompanying her on her

travels, it had developed a tremendous respect for Erisa Wannattel's judgment and prowess. But, just the same, frightening the Halpa off, if it still could be done, seemed like a very sound idea right now to the pony.

As a matter of fact, as Grandma well knew, it probably could have been done at this stage by tossing a small firecracker into the hollow. Until they had established their planetary foothold, the Halpa took extreme precautions. They could spot things in the class of radiation weapons a hundred miles away, and either that or any suggestion of local aggressiveness or of long-range observation would check the invasion attempt on Noorhut then and there.

But one of the principal reasons she was here tonight was to see that nothing *did* happen to stop it. For this assault would only be diverted against some other world then, and quite probably against one where the significance of the spying detector-globes wouldn't be understood before it was too late. The best information system in the Galaxy couldn't keep more than an insignificant fraction of its populations on the alert for dangers like that--

She bounced suddenly to her feet and, at the same instant, the pony swung away from the hollow toward which it been staring. They both stood for a moment then, turning their heads about, like baffled hounds trying to fix a scent on the wind.

"It's Grimp!" Grandma exclaimed.

The rhinocerine pony snorted faintly. "Those are his thought images, all right," it agreed. "He seems to feel you need protection. Can you locate him?"

"Not yet," said Grandma anxiously. "Yes, I can. He's coming up through the woods on the other side of the hollow, off to the left. The little devil!" She was hustling back to the trailer. "Come on, I'll have to ride you there. I can't even dare use the go-buggy this late in the day."

The pony crouched beside the trailer while she quickly snapped on its saddle from the top of the back steps. Six metal rings had been welded into the horny plates of its back for this purpose, so it was a simple job. Grandma clambered aloft, hanging onto the saddle's hand-rails.

"Swing wide of the hollow!" she warned. "This could spoil everything. But make all the noise you want. The Halpa don't care about noise as such--it has to have emotional content before they get interested--and the quicker Grimp spots us, the easier it will be to find him."

The pony already was rushing down into the meadow at an amazing

rate of speed--it took a lot of very efficient muscle to drive as heavy a body as that through the gluey swamps of Treebel. It swung wide of the hollow and of what it contained, crossed a shallow bog farther down the meadow with a sound like a charging torpedo-boat, and reached the woods.

It had to slow down then, to avoid brushing off Grandma.

"Grimp's down that slope somewhere," Grandma said. "He's heard us."

"They're making a lot of noise!" Grimp's thought reached them suddenly and clearly. He seemed to be talking to someone. "But we're not scared of them, are we?"

"Bang-bang!" another thought-voice came excitedly.

"It's the lortel," Grandma and the pony said together.

"That's the stuff!" Grimp resumed approvingly. "We'll slingshot them all if they don't watch out. But we'd better find Grandma soon."

"Grimp!" shouted Grandma. The pony backed her up with a roaring call.

"Hello?" came the lortel's thought.

"Wasn't that the pony?" asked Grimp. "All right--let's go that way."

"Here we come, Grimp!" Grandma shouted as the pony descended the steep side of a ravine with the straightforward technique of a rockslide.

"That's Grandma!" thought Grimp. "Grandma!" he yelled. "Look out! There's monsters all around!"

• • •

"What you missed!" yelled Grimp, dancing around the pony as Grandma Wannattel scrambled down from the saddle. "There's monsters all around the village and the Guardian killed one and I slingshot another till he fizzled out and I was coming to find you--"

"Your mother will be worried!" began Grandma as they rushed into each other's arms.

"No," grinned Grimp. "All the kids are supposed to be sleeping in the school house, and she won't look there till morning, and the schoolteacher said the monsters were all"--he slowed down

cautiously--"ho-lucy-nations. But he wouldn't go look when the Guardian said they'd show him one. He stayed right in bed! But the Guardian's all right--he killed one and I slingshot another and the lortel learned a new word. Say ‘bang-bang', lortel!" he invited.

"Hello!" squeaked the lortel.

"Aw," said Grimp disappointedly. "He can say it, though. And I've come to take you to the village so the monsters don't get you. Hello, pony!"

"Bang-bang," said the lortel distinctly.

"See?" cried Grimp. "He isn't scared at all--he's a real brave lortel! If we see some monsters don't you get scared either, because I've got my slingshot," he said, waving it bloodthirstily, "and two back pockets still full of medium stones. The way to do it is to kill them all!"

"It sounds like a pretty good idea, Grimp," Grandma agreed. "But you're awfully tired now."

"No, I'm not!" Grimp said, surprised. His right eye sagged shut and then his left and he opened them both with an effort and looked at Grandma.

"That's right," he admitted. "I am...."

"In fact," said Grandma, "you're asleep!"

"No, I'm n--" objected Grimp. Then he sagged toward the ground, and Grandma caught him.

"In a way I hate to do it," she panted, wrestling him aboard the pony, which had lain down and flattened itself as much as it could to make it easier. "He'd probably enjoy it. But we can't take a chance. He's a husky little devil, too," she groaned, giving a final boost, "and those ammunition pockets don't make him any lighter!" She clambered up again herself and noticed that the lortel had transferred itself to her coat collar.

The pony stood up cautiously.

"Now what?" it said.

"Might as well go straight to the hollow," said Grandma, breathing hard. "We'll probably have to wait around there a few hours, but if we're careful it won't do any harm."

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"Did you find a good deep pond?" Grandma asked the pony a little later, as it came squishing up softly through the meadow behind her to join her at the edge of the hollow.

"Yes," said the pony. "About a hundred yards back. That should be close enough. How much more waiting do you think we'll have to do?"

Grandma shrugged carefully. She was sitting in the grass with what, by daylight, would have been a good view of the hollow below. Grimp was asleep with his head on her knees; and the lortel, after catching a few bugs in the grass and eating them, had settled down on her shoulder and dozed off too.

"I don't know," she said. "It's still three hours till Big Moonrise, and it's bound to be some time before then. Now you've found a waterhole, we'll just stay here together and wait. The one thing to remember is not to let yourself start getting excited about them."

The pony stood huge and chunky beside her, its forefeet on the edge of the hollow, staring down. Muddy water trickled from its knobby flanks. It had brought the warm mud-smells of a summer pond back with it to hang in a cloud about them.

There was vague, dark, continuous motion at the bottom of the hollow. A barely noticeable stirring in the single big pool of darkness that filled it.

"If I were alone," the pony said, "I'd get out of here! I know when I ought to be scared. But you've taken psychological control of my reactions, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Grandma. "It'll be easier for me, though, if you help along as much as you can. There's really no danger until their transmitter has come through."

"Unless," said the pony, "they've worked out some brand-new tricks in the past few hundred years."

"There's that," Grandma admitted. "But they've never tried changing their tricks on us yet. If it were us doing the attacking, we'd vary our methods each time, as much as we could. But the Halpa don't seem to think just like we do about anything. They wouldn't still be so careful if they didn't realize they were very vulnerable at this point."

"I hope they're right about that!" the pony said briefly.

Its head moved then, following the motion of something that sailed flutteringly out of the depths of the hollow, circled along its far rim, and descended again. The inhabitants of Treebel had a much

deeper range of dark-vision than Grandma Wannattel, but she was also aware of that shape.

"They're not much to look at," the pony remarked. "Like a big, dark rag of leather, mostly."

"Their physical structure is believed to be quite simple," Grandma agreed slowly. The pony was tensing up again, and it was best to go on talking to it, about almost anything at all. That always helped, even though the pony knew her much too well by now to be really fooled by such tricks.

"Many very efficient life-forms aren't physically complicated, you know," she went on, letting the sound of her voice ripple steadily into its mind. "Parasitical types, particularly. It's pretty certain, too, that the Halpa have the hive-mind class of intelligence, so what goes for the nerve-systems of most of the ones they send through to us might be nothing much more than secondary reflex-transmitters...."

Grimp stirred in his sleep at that point and grumbled. Grandma looked down at him. "You're sound asleep!" she told him severely, and he was again.

"You've got plans for that boy, haven't you?" the pony said, without shifting its gaze from the hollow.

"I've had my eye on him," Grandma admitted, "and I've already recommended him to Headquarters for observation. But I'm not going to make up my mind about Grimp till next summer, when we've had more time to study him. Meanwhile, we'll see what he picks up naturally from the lortel in the way of telepathic communication and sensory extensions. I think Grimp's the kind we can use."

"He's all right," the pony agreed absently. "A bit murderous, though, like most of you...."

"He'll grow out of it!" Grandma said, a little annoyedly, for the subject of human aggressiveness was one she and the pony argued about frequently. "You can't hurry developments like that along too much. All of Noorhut should grow out of that stage, as a people, in another few hundred years. They're about at the turning-point right now--"

Their heads came up together, then, as something very much like a big, dark rag of leather came fluttering up from the hollow and hung in the dark air above them. The representatives of the opposing powers that were meeting on Noorhut that night took quiet stock of one another for a moment.

The Halpa was about six feet long and two wide, and considerably less than an inch thick. It held its position in the air with a steady, rippling motion, like a bat the size of a man. Then, suddenly, it extended itself with a snap, growing taut as a curved sail.

The pony snorted involuntarily. The apparently featureless shape in the air turned towards it and drifted a few inches closer. When nothing more happened, it turned again and fluttered quietly back

down into the hollow.

"Could it tell I was scared?" the pony asked uneasily.

"You reacted just right," Grandma said soothingly. "Startled suspicion at first, and then just curiosity, and then another start when it made that jump. It's about what they'd expect from creatures that would be hanging around the hollow now. We're like cows to them. They can't tell what things are by their looks, like we do--"

But her tone was thoughtful, and she was more shaken than she would have cared to let the pony notice. There had been something indescribably menacing and self-assured in the Halpa's gesture. Almost certainly, it had only been trying to draw a reaction of hostile intelligence from them, probing, perhaps, for the presence of weapons that might be dangerous to its kind.

But there was a chance--a tiny but appalling chance--that the things *had* developed some drastically new form of attack since their last breakthrough, and that they already were in control of the situation....

In which case, neither Grimp nor anyone else on Noorhut would be doing any more growing-up after tomorrow.

Each of the eleven hundred and seventeen planets that had been lost to the Halpa so far still traced a fiery, forbidding orbit through space--torn back from the invaders only at the cost of depriving it, by humanity's own weapons, of the conditions any known form of life could tolerate.

The possibility that this might also be Noorhut's future had loomed as an ugly enormity before her for the past four years. But of the nearly half a hundred worlds which the Halpa were found to be investigating through their detector-globes as possible invasion points for this period, Noorhut finally had been selected by Headquarters as the one where local conditions were most suited to meet them successfully. And that meant in a manner which must include the destruction of their only real invasion weapon, the fabulous and mysterious Halpa transmitter. Capable as they undoubtedly were, they had shown in the past that they were able or willing to employ only one of those instruments for each period of attack. Destroying the transmitter meant therefore that humanity would gain a few more centuries to figure out a way to get back at the Halpa before a new attempt was made.

So on all planets but Noorhut the detector-globes had been encouraged carefully to send back reports of a dangerously alert and well-armed population. On Noorhut, however, they had been soothed along ... and just as her home-planet had been chosen as the most favorable point of encounter, so was Erisa Wannattel herself

selected as the agent most suited to represent humanity's forces under the conditions that existed there.

Grandma sighed gently and reminded herself again that Headquarters was as unlikely to miscalculate the overall probability of success as it was to select the wrong person to achieve it. There was only the tiniest, the most theoretical, of chances that something might go wrong and that she would end her long career with the blundering murder of her own homeworld.

But there was that chance.

• • •

"There seem to be more down there every minute!" the pony was saying.

Grandma drew a deep breath.

"Must be several thousand by now," she acknowledged. "It's getting near breakthrough time, all right, but those are only the advance forces." She added, "Do you notice anything like a glow of light down there, towards the center?"

The pony stared a moment. "Yes," it said. "But I would have thought that was way under the red for you. Can you see it?"

"No," said Grandma. "I get a kind of a feeling, like heat. That's the transmitter beginning to come through. I think we've got them!"

The pony shifted its bulk slowly from side to side.

"Yes," it said resignedly, "or they've got us."

"Don't think about that," Grandma ordered sharply and clamped one more mental lock shut on the foggy, dark terrors that were curling and writhing under her conscious thoughts, threatening to emerge at the last moment and paralyze her actions.

She had opened her black bag and was unhurriedly fitting together something composed of a few pieces of wood and wire, and a rather heavy, stiff spring....

"Just be ready," she added.

"I've been ready for an hour," said the pony, shuffling its feet unhappily.

They did no more talking after that. All the valley had become quiet

about them. But slowly the hollow below was filling up with a black, stirring, slithering tide. Bits of it fluttered up now and then like strips of black smoke, hovered a few yards above the mass, and settled again.

Suddenly, down in the center of the hollow, there was something else.

The pony had seen it first, Grandma Wannattel realized. It was staring in that direction for almost a minute before she grew able to distinguish something that might have been a group of graceful miniature spires. Semi-transparent in the darkness, four small domes showed at the corners, with a larger one in the center. The central one was about twenty feet high and very slender.

The whole structure began to solidify swiftly....

The Halpa Transmitter's appearance of crystalline slightness was perhaps the most mind-chilling thing about it. For it brought instantly a jarring sense of what must be black distance beyond all distances, reaching back unimaginably to its place of origin. In that unknown somewhere, a prodigiously talented and determined race of beings had labored for human centuries to prepare and point some stupendous gun ... and were able then to bridge the vast interval with nothing more substantial than this dark sliver of glass that had come to rest suddenly in the valley of the Wend.

But, of course, the Transmitter was all that was needed; its deadly poison lay in a sluggish, almost inert mass about it. Within minutes from now, it would waken to life, as similar transmitters had wakened on other nights on those lost and burning worlds. And in much less than minutes after that, the Halpa invaders would be hurled by their slender machine to every surface section of Noorhut--no longer inert, but quickened into a ravening, almost indestructible form of vampiric life, dividing and subdividing in its incredibly swift cycle of reproduction, fastening to feed anew, growing and dividing again--

Spreading, at that stage, much more swiftly than it could be exterminated by anything but the ultimate weapons!

The pony stirred suddenly, and she felt the wave of panic roll up in it.

"It's the Transmitter, all right," Grandma's thought reached it quickly. "We've had two descriptions of it before. But we can't be sure it's *here* until it begins to charge itself. Then it lights up--first at the edges, and then at the center. Five seconds after the central spire lights up, it will be energized too much to let them pull it back again. At least they couldn't pull it back after that, the last time they were observed. And then we'd better be ready--"

The pony had been told all that before. But as it listened it was quieting down again.

"And you're going to go on sleeping!" Grandma Wannattel's thought told Grimp next. "No matter what you hear or what happens, you'll sleep on and know nothing at all any more until I wake you up...."

• • •

Light surged up suddenly in the Transmitter--first into the four outer spires, and an instant later into the big central one, in a sullen red glow. It lit the hollow with a smoky glare. The pony took two startled steps backwards.

"Five seconds to go!" whispered Grandma's thought. She reached into her black bag again and took out a small plastic ball. It reflected the light from the hollow in dull crimson gleamings. She let it slip down carefully inside the shaftlike frame of the gadget she had put together of wood and wire. It clicked into place there against one end of the compressed spring.

Down below, they lay now in a blanket fifteen feet thick over the wet ground, like big, black, water-sogged leaves swept up in circular piles about the edges of the hollow. The tops and sides of the piles were stirring and shivering and beginning to slide down toward the Transmitter.

"... five, and go!" Grandma said aloud. She raised the wooden catapult to her shoulder.

The pony shook its blunt-horned head violently from side to side, made a strangled, bawling sound, surged forward, and plunged down the steep side of the hollow in a thundering rush.

Grandma aimed carefully and let go.

The blanket of dead-leaf things was lifting into the air ahead of the pony's ground-shaking approach in a weightless, silent swirl of darkness, which instantly blotted both the glowing Transmitter and the pony's shape from sight. The pony roared once as the blackness closed over it. A second later, there was a crash like the shattering of a hundred-foot mirror--and at approximately the same moment, Grandma's plastic ball exploded somewhere in the center of the swirling swarm.

Cascading fountains of white fire filled the whole of the hollow. Within the fire, a dense mass of shapes fluttered and writhed frenziedly like burning rags. From down where the fire boiled fiercest rose continued sounds of brittle substances suffering enormous violence. The pony was trampling the ruined Transmitter, making sure of its destruction.

"Better get out of it!" Grandma shouted anxiously. "What's left of that will all melt now anyway!"

She didn't know whether it heard her or not. But a few seconds later, it came pounding up the side of the hollow again. Blazing from nose to rump, it tramped past Grandma, plunged through the meadow behind her, shedding white sheets of fire that exploded the marsh grass in its tracks, and hurled itself headlong into the pond it had selected previously. There was a great splash accompanied by sharp hissing noises. Pond and pony vanished together under billowing clouds of steam.

"That was pretty hot!" its thought came to Grandma.

She drew a deep breath.

"Hot as anything that ever came out of a volcano!" she affirmed. "If you'd played around in it much longer, you'd have fixed up the village with roasts for a year."

"I'll just stay here for a while, till I've cooled off a bit," said the pony.

• • •

Grandma found something strangling her then, and discovered it was the lortel's tail. She unwound it carefully. But the lortel promptly re-anchored itself with all four hands in her hair. She decided to leave it there. It seemed badly upset.

Grimp, however, slept on. It was going to take a little maneuvering to get him back into the village undetected before morning, but she would figure that out by and by. A steady flow of cool night air was being drawn past them into the hollow now and rising out of it again in boiling, vertical columns of invisible heat. At the bottom of the deluxe blaze she'd lit down there, things still seemed to be moving about--but very slowly. The Halpa were tough organisms, all right, though not nearly so tough, when you heated them up with a really good incendiary, as were the natives of Treebel.

She would have to make a final check of the hollow around dawn, of course, when the ground should have cooled off enough to permit it--but her century's phase of the Halpa War did seem to be over. The defensive part of it, at any rate--

Wet, munching sounds from the pond indicated the pony felt comfortable enough by now to take an interest in the parboiled vegetation it found floating around it. Everything had turned out all right.

So she settled down carefully on her back in the long marsh grass without disturbing Grimp's position too much, and just let herself faint for a while.

• • •

By sunrise, Grandma Wannattel's patent-medicine trailer was nine miles from the village and rolling steadily southwards up the valley road through the woods. As usual, she was departing under a cloud.

Grimp and the policeman had showed up early to warn her. The Guardian was making use of the night's various unprecedented disturbances to press through a vote on a Public Menace charge against Grandma in the village; and since everybody still felt rather excited and upset, he had a good chance just now of getting a majority.

Grimp had accompanied her far enough to explain that this state of affairs wasn't going to be permanent. He had it all worked out.

Runny's new immunity to hay-fever had brought him and the pretty Vellit to a fresh understanding overnight; they were going to get married five weeks from now. As a married man, Runny would then be eligible for the post of Village Guardian at the harvest elections--and between Grimp's cousins and Vellit's cousins, Runny's backers would just about control the vote. So when Grandma got around to visiting the valley again next summer, she needn't worry any more about police interference or official disapproval....

Grandma had nodded approvingly. That was about the kind of neighborhood politics she'd begun to play herself at Grimp's age. She was pretty sure by now that Grimp was the one who eventually would become her successor, and the guardian not only of Noorhut and the star-system to which Noorhut belonged, but of a good many other star-systems besides. With careful schooling, he ought to be just about ready for the job by the time she was willing, finally, to retire.

An hour after he had started back to the farm, looking suddenly a little forlorn, the trailer swung off the valley road into a narrow forest path. Here the pony lengthened its stride, and less than five minutes later they entered a curving ravine, at the far end of which lay something that Grimp would have recognized instantly, from his one visit to the nearest port city, as a small spaceship.

A large round lock opened soundlessly in its side as they approached. The pony came to a stop. Grandma got down from the driver's seat and unhitched it. The pony walked into the lock, and the trailer picked its wheels off the ground and floated in after it. Grandma Wannattel walked in last, and the lock closed quietly on her heels.

The ship lay still a moment longer. Then it was suddenly gone. Dead leaves went dancing for a while about the ravine, disturbed by the breeze of its departure.

In a place very faraway--so far that neither Grimp nor his parents nor anyone in the village except the schoolteacher had ever heard of it--a set of instruments began signalling for attention. Somebody answered them.

Grandma's voice announced distinctly:

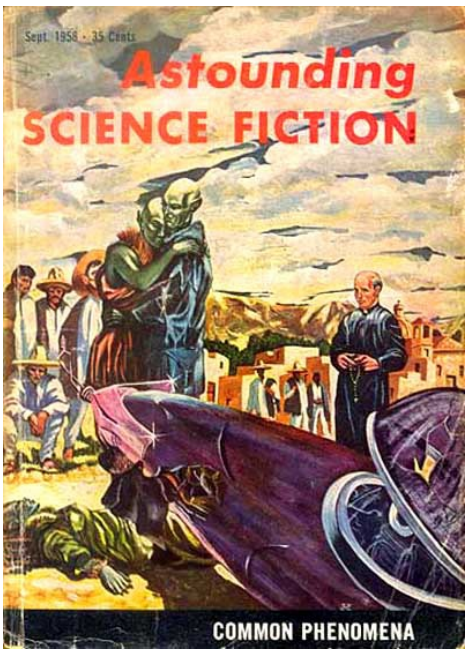
"This is Zone Agent Wannattel's report on the successful conclusion of the Halpa operation on Noorhut--"

High above Noorhut's skies, eight great ships swung instantly out of

their watchful orbits about the planet and flashed off again into the blackness of the boundless space that was their sea and their home.

"Harvest Time"

Published in *Astounding Science Fiction*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (September 1958), though this version is taken from *The Hub: Dangerous Territory* (2001) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.



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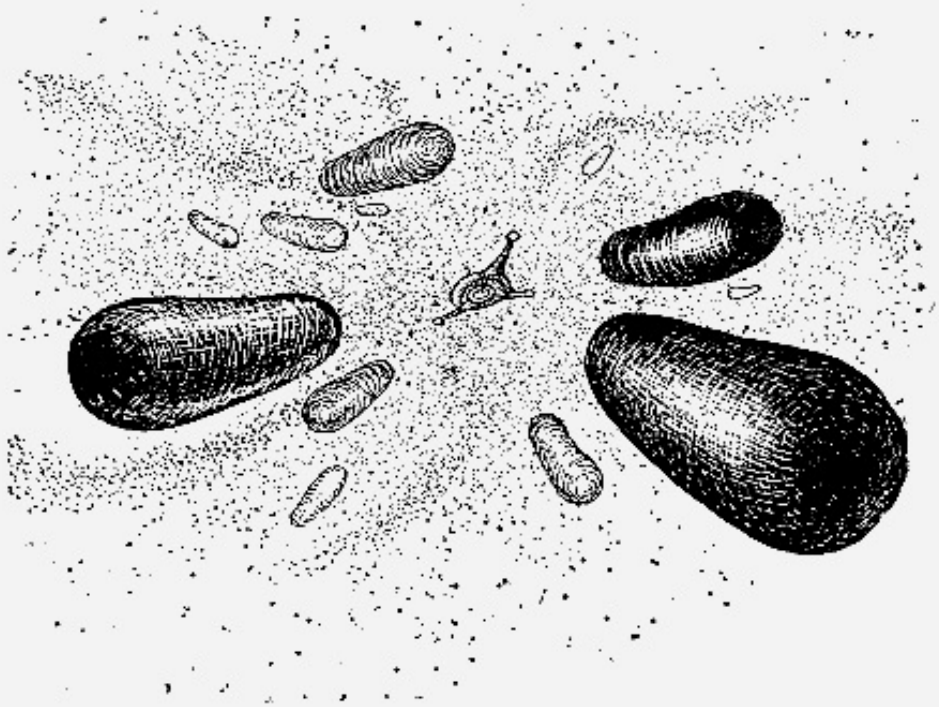

BY JAMES H. SCHMITZ

1

Senior Assistant Commissioner Holati Tate sat comfortably on a high green hill of the Precolonization world of Manon, and watched Communications Chief Trigger Argee coordinating the dials of a bio-signal pickup with those of a recorder. Trigger was a slim, tanned, red-haired girl, and watching her was a pleasure from which neither her moody expression nor Holati Tate's advanced years detracted much. She got her settings finally, swung around on her camp chair and faced him. She smiled faintly.

"How's it going?" the s.a.c. inquired.

"It's going. Those bio-patterns aren't easy to unscramble, though. That to be expected?"

He nodded. "They're a mess. That's why I had to borrow a

communications expert from Headquarters."

"Well," said Trigger, "if you just want to rebroadcast the strongest individual signal, we'll have a usable transcription in another ten minutes." She shielded her eyes and peered up at the late afternoon sky. "Can't see more than a green tinge from here. The Drift's about nine miles up, isn't it?"

"At nine miles you're barely scratching the bottom layer," Holati Tate told her. "The stuff floats high on this world."

Trigger looked at him and smiled again, more easily now. She liked Holati, a weather-beaten little Precol veteran who'd come in as a replacement on the Manon Project only six months before. Assistant commissioners were mostly Academy graduates nowadays; he was one of the old guard the Academy was not too gradually shoving out of the supervisory field ranks. Trigger had heard he'd been in the Space Scouts until he reached the early retirement age of that arduous service. "What's this beep pattern we're copying supposed to be?" she inquired. "Sort of a plankton love call?"

Holati admitted that was as good a guess as any. "At the Bio Station we figure each of the various species keeps broadcasting its own signal to help the swarms keep together. This signal is pretty strong because the Drift's mainly composed of a single species at the moment. When we set up the food-processing stations, we might be able to use signal patterns like that as a lure."

Trigger smoothed her red hair back and nodded. "Dirty trick!" she observed amiably.

"Can't be sentimental about it, Trigger girl. Processed plankton could turn out to be Manon's biggest export item by the time it's a colony. The Federation's appetite gets bigger every year." He added, "I'm also interested in the possibility it's the signals that attract those Harvester things we'd like to get rid of."

"They been giving you trouble again?" Trigger's duties kept her close to the Headquarters area as a rule, but she had heard the Harvesters were thoroughly dangerous creatures capable of producing a reasonable facsimile of a lightning bolt when disturbed.

"No," he said. "I won't let the boys fool with them. We'll have to figure a way to handle them before we start collecting the plankton, though. Put in a requisition for heavy guns last month." He studied her thoughtfully. "Something the matter? You don't seem happy today, Trigger."

Trigger's thin brown brows slanted in a scowl. "I'm not! It's that boss we've got, the Honorable Commissioner Ramog."

• • •

Holati looked startled. He jerked his head meaningfully at the recorder. Trigger wrinkled her nose.

"Don't worry. My instruments are probably the only thing that isn't bugged around the Manon Project Headquarters. I pull the snoopies out as quick as Ramog can get them stuck in."

"Hm-m-m!" he said dubiously. "What's the commissioner doing to bother you?"

"He slung Brule Inger into the brig yesterday morning." Brule was Trigger's young man, Holati recalled. "He'll be shipped home on the next supply ship. And I don't know," Trigger added, "whether Ramog wants Brule out of the way because of me, or because he really suspects Brule was out hunting Old Galactic artifacts on Project time. He wasn't, of course, but that's the charge. Either way I don't like it."

"People are getting mighty touchy about that Old Galactic business," Holati said. "Biggest first-discovery bonus the Federation's ever offered by now, just to start with."

Trigger shrugged impatiently. "It's a lot of nonsense. When the Project was moved out here last year, everyone was saying the Manon System looked like the hottest bet in the Cluster to make the big strike. For that matter, it's why Ramog got the Manon Project assigned to him, and he's been all over the planet with Essidy and those other stooges of his. They haven't found a thing."

Holati nodded. "I know. Wouldn't be at all surprised, though, if the strike were made right here on Manon eventually. It's in a pretty likely sector."

Trigger regarded him skeptically. "So you believe in those Old Galactic stories, too? Well, maybe--but I'll tell you one thing: it wouldn't be healthy for anyone but Commissioner Ramog to make that kind of discovery on Commissioner Ramog's Project!"

"Now, now, Trigger!" Holati began to look alarmed again. "There's a way in which those things are handled, you know!"

Trigger's lip curled. "A foolproof way?" she inquired.

"Well, practically," the s.a.c. told her defensively. He was beginning to sound like a man who wanted to convince himself; and for a moment she felt sorry for disturbing him. "You make a strike, and you verify and register it with the Federation over any long-range

communications transmitter. After that there isn't a thing anybody else can do about your claim! Even the ... well, even the Academy isn't going to try to tangle with Federation Law!"

"The point might be," Trigger said bleakly, "that you wouldn't necessarily get near the transmitters here with that kind of message. As a matter of fact, I've seen a couple of pretty funny accidents in the two years I've been working with Ramog." She shrugged. "Well, I'm heading back to the Colonial School when my hitch here is up--I'm fed up with the way the Academy boys are taking over in Precol. And I've noticed nobody seems to like to listen when I talk about it. Even Brule keeps hushing me up--" She turned her head to a rattling series of clicks from the recorder, reached out and shut it off. A flat plastic box popped halfway out of the recorder's side. Trigger removed it and stood up. "Here's your signal pattern duplicate. Hope it works--"

• • •

While Holati Tate was helping Trigger Argee load her equipment back into her little personal hopper, he maintained the uncomfortable look of a man who had just heard an attractive young woman imply with some reason that he was on the spineless side. After she had gone he quit looking uncomfortable, since it wasn't impressing anybody any more, and began to look worried instead.

He liked Trigger about as well as anyone he knew, and her position here might be getting more precarious than she thought. When it became obvious a while ago that Commissioner Ramog had developed a definite interest in Trigger's slim good looks, the bets of the more cynical elements at the Bio Station all went down on the commissioner. No one had tried to collect so far, but Brule Inger's enforced departure from the Project was likely to send the odds soaring. While Ramog probably wouldn't resort to anything very drastic at the moment, he was in a good position to become about as drastic as he liked, and if Trigger didn't soften up on her own there wasn't much doubt that Ramog eventually would help things along.

Frowning darkly, Holati climbed into his own service hopper and set it moving a bare fifty feet above the ground, headed at a leisurely rate down the slopes of a long green range of hills toward the local arm of Great Gruesome Swamp. Two hundred miles away, on the other side of this section of Great Gruesome, stood the domes of Manon's Biological Station of which he was the head.

He had a good deal of work still to get done that evening, but he wanted to do some thinking first. Nothing Trigger had told him was

exactly news. The Precol Academy group had been getting tougher to work with year after year, and Commissioner Ramog was unquestionably the toughest operator of them all. The grapevine of the Ancient and Honorable Society of Retired Space Scouts, which counted slightly more than twelve thousand members scattered through Precol, credited the commissioner with five probable direct murders of inconvenient Precol personnel, though none of these actions stood any chance of being proved after the event. Two of the victims, including an old-time commissioner, had been members of the Society. Ramog definitely was a bad boy to get involved with--

The hopper began moving out over the flat margins of Great Gruesome, a poisonous-looking wet tangle of purple and green and brown vegetation, gleaming like a seascape in the rays of Manon's setting sun. There were occasional vague motions and sudden loud splashings down there, and Holati cautiously took the vehicle up a couple of hundred feet. The great chains of swamp and marshy lakes that girdled two-thirds of the planet's equator contained numerous unclassified life-forms of a size and speed no sensible man would have cared to match himself against outside of full combat armor. Precol personnel avoided unnecessary encounters with such brutes; their control would be left to the colonists of a later year.

His immediate problem was the ticklish one of establishing the exact circumstances under which Commissioner Ramog was to murder Holati Tate. It was an undertaking which could only too easily be fumbled, and he still wasn't at all certain of a number of details. Brow furrowed with worried thought, he kicked the hopper at last into a moderately rapid vertical ascent and unpackaged the bio-signal record Trigger Argee had transcribed for him. He fed it carefully into the hopper's broadcast system.

Floating presently in the tinted evening air of the lower fringes of Manon's aerial plankton zone, Holati Tate sat a while scanning the area about and above him. A few hundred yards away a sluggishly moving stream of the Drift was passing overhead. A few stars had winked on; and hardly a thousand miles out, a ribbon of Moon Belt dust drew thin glittering bands of fire across the sky. Here and there, then, Holati began to spot the huge greenish images of mankind's established competitors for the protein of the Plankton Drift: the Harvesters of Manon.

• • •

In a couple of minutes he had counted thirty-six Harvesters within visual range. As he watched, two of them were rising until they dwindled and vanished in the darkening sky. The others continued to hover not far from the streams of the Drift, as sluggish at this hour as

their prey. The sausage-shaped, almost featureless giant forms hardly looked menacing, but three venturesome biologists had been electrocuted by a Harvester within a week after the Project was opened on the planet; and the usual hands-off policy had been established until Project work advanced to the point where the problem required a wholesale solution.

Holati tuned in the bio-receiver. Around midday both Harvesters and plankton were furiously active, but there was only the barest murmur of signal now. He eased down the broadcast button on the set and waited.

He'd counted off eight seconds before he could determine any reaction. The plankton stream nearest him was losing momentum, its component masses began curving down slowly from all directions towards the hopper. Holati was not sure that the nearest Harvesters had stirred at all; keeping a wary eye on them, he gradually stepped up the signal strength by some fifty per cent. The hopper was a solid little craft, spaceworthy at interplanetary ranges, but he was only slightly curious about what would happen if he allowed it to accompany a mass of plankton into a Harvester's interior. And he wasn't in the least interested in stimulating one of the giants into cutting loose with its defensive electronic blasts.

The Harvesters were definitely moving toward him when the first streamers of the plankton arrived, thumped squashily upon the hopper's viewplate receivers and generally proceeded to plaster themselves about the front part of the machine. Blinded for the moment, Holati switched on a mass-scope, spotted an oncoming Harvester at five hundred yards and promptly stopped the broadcast. Somewhat nervously, he watched the Harvester drift to a stop while the butterfly-sized plankton life, dropping away from what had become an uninteresting surface again, made languid motions at clustering into a new formation.

He hesitated, then eased the hopper backward out of the disturbed area. A mile off he stopped again and swept his glance once more over what he could see of the gliding clouds of the Drift. Then he jammed down the broadcast button, sending the bio-signal out with a bawling force the planet had never experienced before.

Throughout the area, the Drift practically exploded. Great banks of living matter came rolling down through the sky toward the hopper. Behind, through and ahead of the sentient tides, moving a hundred times faster than the plankton, rushed dozens of vast sausage shapes, their business ends opened into wide, black gapes.

Holati Tate hurriedly knocked off the hopper's thunderous Lorelei song and went fast and straight away from there. Far behind him, he watched the front lines of the plankton clouds breaking over a

converged mass of Harvesters. A minute later the giants were plowing methodically back and forth through the late evening snack with which he had provided them.

The experiment, he decided, had to be called a complete success. He got his bearings, turned the hopper and sent it arrowing silently down through the shadowy lower air, headed for Warehouse Center on the southern side of the local arm of Great Gruesome Swamp.

• • •

Supply Manager Essidy was a tall, handsome man with a small brown beard and a fine set of large white teeth, who was disliked by practically everybody on the Project because of his unfortunate reputation as Commissioner Ramog's Number One stooge. Perhaps to offset the lonely atmosphere of his main office at Warehouse Center, Essidy was industriously studying the finer points of a couple of girl clerks through his desk viewer when he was informed that Senior Assistant Commissioner Tate had just parked his hopper at Dome Two.

Essidy clicked his teeth together alertly, lifted one eyebrow, dropped it again, cleared the viewer, clipped a comm-button to his left ear and switched the comm-set to "record." Of the eight hundred and thirty-seven people on the Manon Project, there were nine on whom the commissioner wanted immediate reports concerning even routine supplies withdrawals. Holati Tate was one of the nine.

Essidy's viewer picked up the s.a.c. as he walked down the central corridor of Dome Two and followed him around a number of turns, into a large storeroom and up to a counter. Essidy adjusted the comm-button.

"... Not just for atmospheric use," Holati was saying. "Jet mobility, of course. But I might want to use it under water."

The counter clerk had recognized the s.a.c. and was being respectful. "Well, sir," he said hesitantly, "if it's a question of pressure, that would have to be a Moon-suit, wouldn't it?"

Holati nodded. "Uh-huh. That's what I had in mind."

Back in the office, Essidy lifted both eyebrows. He couldn't be sure of the Bio Station's current requirements, but a Moon-suit didn't sound routine. The clerk was dialing for the suit when Holati added, "By the way, got one of those things outfitted with a directional tracker?"

The clerk looked around. "I'm sure we don't, sir. It isn't standard equipment. We can install one for you."

Holati reflected, and shook his head. "Don't bother with it, son. I'll do that myself.... Uh, high selectivity, medium range, is the type I want."

• • •

"... That's all he ordered," Essidy was reporting to Commissioner Ramog fifteen minutes later, on the commissioner's private beam. "He checked the suit himself--seemed familiar with that--and took the stuff along."

The commissioner was silent for almost thirty seconds and Essidy waited respectfully. He admired the boss and envied him hopelessly. It wasn't just that Commissioner Ramog had Academy training and the authority of the Academy and the home office behind him; he also had three times Essidy's brains and ten times Essidy's guts and Essidy knew it.

When Ramog finally spoke he sounded almost absent-minded, and Essidy felt a little thrill because that could mean something very hot indeed was up. "Well, of course Tate's familiar with Moon-suits," Ramog said. "He put in a sixteen-year hitch with the Space Scouts before getting assigned to Precol."

"Oh?" said Essidy.

"Yes." Ramog was silent a few seconds again. "Thanks for the prompt report, Essidy." He added casually, "Keep the squad on alert status until further notice."

Essidy asked no foolish questions. The matter might be hot right now, and it might not. He'd hear all he needed to know in plenty of time. That was the way the boss worked; and if you worked the way he liked, another bonus would be coming along quietly a little later to be quietly stacked away with previously earned ones. Essidy looked forward to retiring from the service early.

• • •

Commissioner Ramog, in his private rooms at Headquarters, let the tiny beam-speaker slip back into a desk niche and shifted his gaze toward a slowly turning three-dimensional replica of Manon which filled the wall across the room. The commissioner was a slender man, not very big, with a wiry, hard-trained body, close-cropped

blond hair and calm gray eyes. At the moment he looked intrigued and a trifle puzzled.

The obvious first item here, he told himself, was that there simply wasn't any spot on the surface of this planet where the use of a Moon-suit was indicated. The tropical lakes were too shallow to present a pressure problem--and the fauna of those lakes was such that he wouldn't have cared to work there himself without both armor and armament. He could assume therefore that Senior Assistant Commissioner Tate, having checked out neither armor nor armament, wasn't contemplating such work either.

The second item: a directional tracker had a number of possible uses. However, it had been developed as a space gadget, and while it could be employed on a planet to keep a line on mobile targets, either alive or mechanical, it looked as if Tate's interest actually might be centered on something in space--

Nearby space, since the only vehicles available to personnel on Manon had a limited range.

Dropping that line for the moment, the commissioner's reflections ran on, one came to the really interesting third item--which was that Tate was an old-timer in Precol service. And as an old-timer, he knew that a requisition of this kind would not escape notice on an Academy-conducted Project. In fact, he could expect it to draw a rather prompt inquiry. One had to assume again that he intended to accomplish whatever he was out to accomplish with such equipment before an inquiry caught up with him--unless, of course, he had a legitimate explanation to offer when the check was made.

In any event, Commissioner Ramog concluded, no check was going to be made. At least, none of the kind that the senior assistant commissioner might be expecting.

Ramog stood up and walked over to the viewwall. There were two other planets in the system of Manon's great green sun. Giant planets both and impossible for a man in a hopper to approach. Neither of them had a moon. There would be stray chunks of matter sprinkled through the system that nobody knew about, but Tate didn't have the equipment for a planned prospecting trip. He had the experience: his record showed he'd taken leave of absence a half dozen times during his Precol service period to take part in private prospecting jaunts. But without equipment, and the time to use it, experience wouldn't help him much in sifting through the expanses of a planetary system.

• • •

And that left what really had been the most likely probability almost to start with. The commissioner switched off the image of Manon and replaced it with that of Manon's Moon Belt.

The planet had possessed a sizable satellite at one time; but the time lay far in Manon's geological past. What was left by now was debris, thick enough to provide both a minor navigational problem and an interesting night-time display, but not heavy enough to represent a noteworthy menace to future colonists. So far there had been no opportunity to survey the Belt thoroughly.

But anyone who was using a hopper regularly could have made an occasional unobserved trip up there.

He couldn't, however, have left his vehicle. Neither to make a closer investigation, nor to pick up something he thought he'd spotted. Not unless he had a Moon-suit.

The commissioner felt excitement growing up in him, and now he could allow it to come through. Because there was really only one reason why an old-timer like Tate would violate Precol regulations so obviously. Only one thing big enough! The thing that Commissioner Ramog had come to Manon to find. An Old Galactic artifact--

He noticed he was shaking a little when he switched on the communicator to the outer office of his quarters. But his tone was steady. "Mora?"

"Right here." A cool feminine voice.

"See what you got on Tate during the day."

"The s.a.c.? He was out with Argee for two hours this afternoon. No coverage on that period."

Ramog frowned a little, nodded. "I have her report here. A Project Five item. What else?"

"Afterwards--Warehouse Center...."

"Have that, too."

"I'm scanning the tapes," Mora said. And presently, "Seems to have been in his hopper alone since early morning. Location checks to his station. Nothing of interest, so far. Hm-m-m ... well, now!"

"What is it?"

"I think," Mora told him, "I should bring this in to you. He's going to be gone two or three days."

"I'll come out." Ramog already was on his feet. "Get me a current location check on that hopper of his."

Mora looked around as he came hurriedly into the office. "No luck, commissioner. Hopper can't be traced. He's gone off-planet."

• • •

Ramog's eyes narrowed very briefly as he dropped into a chair at her desk. "Start up the playback. And don't look so pleased!"

Mora smiled. She was a slender quick-moving, black-haired girl with

big eyes almost as dark as her hair. "That's my little blond tiger!" she murmured.

His face was flushed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," she said, "that I feel very, very sorry for the s.a.c." She started the playback. "The other one talking is Chelly. Ecologist. Tate's unofficial second-in-command at the station."

Ramog nodded impatiently. There weren't more than a dozen sentences to the conversation between Holati Tate and Chelly. Mora shut off the playback. "That's all there is to his tape." She waited.

Ramog had had a bad moment. The s.a.c. had simply put Chelly in charge of station operations for the next two or three days, until he returned. No explanation for his intended absence, and Chelly seemed only mildly surprised. But obviously he wasn't involved in what Tate was doing.

What had bothered Ramog was the sudden thought that Tate might have arranged for an off-planet rendezvous with an ftl. But a second or two later he knew it wasn't possible. The Precol patrol boat stationed off Manon would spot, report, and challenge anything equipped with a space drive before it got close enough to the system for a hopper to meet it. The patrol-boat's job was a legitimate one: a planet undergoing orderly processing became a Federation concern and closed to casual interlopers. But in this case it insured that wherever Holati Tate was heading, he would have to return to Manon eventually.

The commissioner had relaxed a little. He smiled at Mora, his mind reverting to something she'd said a minute or so ago. A thrill-greedy, sanguinary little devil, he thought, but it would be regrettable if he ever had to get rid of Mora. They understood each other so well.

"You know," he told her, "I seem to feel very sorry for the s.a.c., too!" He added, "Now."

She gurgled excitedly and came over to him. "Are you going to tell me what it's all about?"

"Don't be stupid," Commissioner Ramog said tolerantly. An operation like this was a game to Mora. But she wasn't stupid. She was the most valuable assistant he'd ever developed.

"How many possible lines of action?" she persisted.

Ramog already had considered that. "Three," he said. "And I don't think we'd better waste any time."

• • •

As it happened, it was Ramog's third line of action with which Holati Tate became involved when he dropped back into Manon's atmosphere two and a half planet days after his departure. Had he set the hopper down then in some wild section of the planet it would have been a different story. Ramog had been obliged to consider the possibility that the s.a.c. would be so lacking in human trustfulness that he might bury some item of value where it would never be found by anyone else.

An electronics specialist by the name of Gision was, therefore, on Holati's tail in an armed hopper as soon as he was spotted again, and he followed the s.a.c. around the curve of the planet as unobtrusively as one hopper could follow another. However, Holati Tate was merely heading by the shortest route for his Bio Station. When he settled down there, Gision took up a position halfway between Headquarters and the Bio domes and waited for developments.

At the Bio Station Essidy took over. For the past eighteen hours Essidy had been conducting an unhurried inventory of the station, assisted by a small crew of husky warehouse men. Holati locked his hopper when he got out, and it wasn't Essidy's job to do anything about that. He merely reported to Ramog that the s.a.c.--looking a little travel-worn and towing a bulky object by a gravity tube--had gone to his personal quarters. The object appeared to be, and probably was, the packaged Moon-suit. A few minutes later, Holati re-appeared at the hopper without the object, climbed in and took off. Gision reported from his aerial vantage point that the s.a.c. was going toward Headquarters now and was told by Ramog to precede him there.

Essidy was chattering over the private beam again before Gision signed off. Holati Tate had left his quarters sealed, but that had been no problem. "We got the thing unwrapped," Essidy said. "It's the Moon-suit, all right, and nothing else. He's got the directional tracker installed. It's activated. And that's the only interesting thing in these rooms."

"Go ahead," Ramog said quietly. "What's the reading on the tracker?"

Essidy checked again to make sure. "Locked on Object," he reported. "At two to twenty thousand miles."

And that was all Ramog had wanted to know. For a moment he was surprised to discover that his palms were slippery with sweat.

"All right, Essidy," he said. "Seal up his rooms and bring the suit over here, immediately." He added with no change in inflection, "If anyone has tampered with that reading before I see it, I'll burn him and you personally."

"Yes, sir," Essidy said meekly. "Shall I have the boys go ahead with the inventory to make it look right?"

Ramog said that would be fine and cut him off. The commissioner was actually enormously relieved. His third line of action was unreeling itself smoothly, and even if Tate got suspicious and panicked now it wouldn't present a serious problem, though it might still make the operation a little messy.

One could even hope for the s.a.c.'s own sake, Ramog thought, smiling very faintly now, that he wouldn't panic. The third line of action was not only the least risky, it was by far the most humane.

• • •

Holati Tate set the hopper down a hundred yards from the Headquarters vehicle shelter entrance. The service crew chief's voice said over the intercom, "Better bring her in, sir. We're on storm warning."

Holati obediently turned the hopper, slid her into the shelter and grounded her. The entrance door closed a hundred yards behind him.

"Want her serviced, sir?"

"No, no; she doesn't need it." Holati set the hatch on lock, got out and let it snap shut behind him. He looked at the crew chief. "I'll be taking her out again in thirty minutes or so," he said. Then he walked off up the dome tunnel toward the office sections.

The crew chief looked around and saw the hopper's hatch open. He frowned.

"Hey, you!" He went up to the hatch. "Who's that in there? She don't need servicing. How'd you get in?"

The man named Gision looked out. He was a large man with a round face and a sleepily ferocious expression.

"Little man," he said softly, "just keep the mouth shut and take off."

The crew chief stared at him. Gision was tagged with a very peculiar reputation among the best-informed Project personnel, but the crew

chief hadn't had much to do with him personally and he habitually ignored Project rumors. Rumors about this guy or that started up on almost any outworld operation; they could usually be put down to jumpy nerves.

He changed his mind completely about that in the few seconds he and Gision were looking at each other.

He turned on his heel and walked off, badly shaken. If something was going on, he didn't want to know about it. Not a thing. He wasn't an exceptionally timid man, but he had just realized clearly that he was a long way from the police of the Federation.

• • •

Mora was in temporary charge of the communications offices, though Holati Tate didn't see her at first. He walked up to a plump, giggly little clerk he'd talked to before. She was busy coding a section of the current Project reports which presently would perform some fantastic loops through time and space and present themselves briskly at the Precol Home Office in the Federation.

Holati looked around the big room. "Where's Trigger Argee?" he inquired.

The clerk giggled. "Visiting her boy friend--" She looked startled. "My ... I guess I shouldn't have said that!"

So Holati discovered Trigger had been offered a special four-day furlough from the commissioner to go console Brule Inger in the brig, which was stationed in the general area of Manon's southern pole. He could imagine Trigger had been a little suspicious of the commissioner's gesture, but naturally she'd accepted.

He pulled down worriedly on his left ear lobe and glanced over to the far end of the room where three other clerks were working. "Who's in charge here, now?"

"Mora Lune's in charge," said the little clerk. She giggled. "If there's something ... maybe I can help you?"

"Hm-m-m," Holati Tate said dubiously. As the little clerk told the others afterwards, he looked mighty nervous at that moment, hesitating as if he didn't know what to say. As a matter of fact, he felt rather nervous. "This Mora Lune," he went on at last. "Who's she?"

"The commissioner's secretary," explained the girl. "Mostly. She does all kinds of things, though. Sort of his assistant."

The s.a.c. stood stroking his chin and gnawing his lip. Finally he frowned.

"Well," he said with a sigh, "guess I'll go see Mora."

The little clerk giggled brightly and jumped up. "I'll show you to the office," she offered. Because, as she explained afterwards, she could just feel that something exciting was up.

That was all she had to tell. Mora sent her back to her work as soon as the two of them reached the door of the Central Communications Office. Mora didn't look excited except that her eyes had become nearly black. One would have had to know Mora to interpret that correctly, but Holati Tate made a fair guess. Like a man who's reached a decision, he explained his purpose almost curtly, "I want to send a personal message by long-range transmitter."

Mora indicated restrained surprise. "Oh ... you'll want privacy, I suppose?" She added, "And I'm sure you're aware of the expense factor?"

He nodded. Just getting the long transmitters started up came to around three months of his salary.

Mora looked arch. "Perhaps congratulations are in order? A registration?"

At that, Holati Tate chuckled nervously. "Well, I'll say this much ... I'll want to use the Notary!"

"Of course." Mora rose from behind the desk. "I'll attach it for you myself," she offered graciously. She floated ahead of him down a short hall and into the communications cabinet, dealt deftly there with switches and settings, connected the Notary machine with the transmitter, floated back to the door. "It's expensive, remember!" She smiled at him once more, almost tenderly, and closed the door behind her.

• • •

"How'd he take it?" Gision inquired a few minutes later.

Mora shrugged. They were in her own office and both were bent intently over a profile map of the area. On the map a small yellow dot moved out from the sprawl of Headquarters domes toward the southern swamps. Gision's large thumb rested lightly on a button at the side of the frame. Map and attachments were his own creation. "He just clammed up completely when he discovered it was to be a

canned message," she said. "Refused to make it, of course--said he'd be back tomorrow or whenever the transmitters were working again. But I'm not even certain he was suspicious."

Gision grunted. "You can bet he got suspicious! The transmitters don't cut out that often."

"Maybe. He'd already checked out positive on the Notary anyway. It was a registration, all right." Mora moved a fingertip toward the thumb that rested on the button. "If you let me do that, I'll tell you what he was going to register."

Gision shook his big head without looking up. "You're too eager. And I'm not interested in what he was going to register."

She smiled. "You're all scared of Ramog."

Gision nodded. "And so would you be," he said, "if you had any sense."

They sat quietly a few minutes; then Mora began to fidget. "Isn't that far enough? He'll get away!"

"He can't get away--and it's almost far enough. We want him right out over the middle of those swamps."

She looked at his face and laughed. "I can tell you're going to let me do it. Aren't you?"

Gision nodded again. "And now's about the time. Put the finger up here."

She slipped her finger over the button and wet her lips. "Like this?"

"Like that. Now push."

She pushed down. The yellow dot vanished.

"Is that all?" she said disappointed.

"What did you expect?" Gision said. "An explosion?"

"No," Mora said dreamily. "But there's not much to it. If the old boy had been a little sharper, we might have had a questioning."

He shrugged. Sometimes Mora gave him the chills. "Questionings are what you try when you can't figure it out," he explained. "In a setup like this they can get pretty risky. So the boss likes to figure it out." He added his own basic philosophy, "When they're dead, they're safe."

• • •

Holati Tate was sweating under his clothes when he slid the hopper back out of the vehicle shelter entrance and lifted into the air. Actually, as far as he could tell, everything was rolling along very smoothly, and he could reassure himself with the thought that he was dealing with a group of people who appeared to have proved their competence at this sort of business more than once in the past. If their thinking was up to par, he would be quite safe for the next eight

minutes.

But one couldn't be sure.

Somewhat shakily therefore, he gave the hopper its accustomed fix on the Bio Station and put it on automatic. Then taking a coil of wire out of his pocket, he slipped its looped end over the acceleration switch, secured the loop and gave the wire a tentative tug. The hopper responded with a surge of power.

Holati patted another pocket, which contained a package of emergency rations, and sat back to sweat out the remaining minutes. A persistent fluttering started up in the pit of his stomach. His gaze went wistfully once to the collapsed escape bubble on his left. He was getting a little old for field and track work, he thought; the bubble looked very attractive. But he had no way of knowing just how thorough Ramog's preparations had been, and no time to check. So the bubble was out, like the grav-tubes and the heavy rifle in the hopper's emergency locker. Field and track stuff, as if he were a downy cadet! He groaned.

Wooded stretches passed under him and Great Gruesome's lowlands moved into view ahead. Holati cut the hopper's speed to a crawl, dropped to twenty feet and opened the hatch. He edged out, breathing hard and hanging on to his wire with one hand, and as they passed over the first patch of marshy ground he gave the wire a firm tug and jumped. The hopper zoomed off, slanting upward again.

The ground was much wetter than Holati had estimated, but he floundered and waded out in three and a half minutes. A pair of hippopotamus-sized, apparently vegetarian, denizens of Great Gruesome followed him part of the way, bellowing annoyedly, but undertook no overt action.

As he sat down on the first piece of dry earth to pour the mud out of his boots, there was a moderately bright flash in the noonday sky over the approximate center of the swamp-arm behind him. Holati didn't look around but he grunted approvingly. Clean work! Even if someone had been interested in going hunting for fragments of the hopper, they weren't going to invade the center of Great Gruesome to do it. Not very long.

He worked his boots back on, stood up, sighed, and set out squishily on what was going to be a two-day hike back to the Headquarters Station.

When the long-awaited announcement of the first artifacts of the legendary Old Galactic civilization finally was flashed from Precol's Manon System to the Federation, the Precol home office and Academy showed an uncharacteristic lack of enthusiasm. The fact that one of their most able and respected field operators had just been lost off Manon in line of duty might have had something to do with it. In the wave of renewed high interest in space exploration which swept the Federation, this detail remained generally unnoticed.

For the discovery was a truly king-sized strike. The riches of robotic information alone which it provided for a dozen interested branches of human science might take a century to be fully utilized. The Old Galactic base on an obscure planetoid circling far beyond the previously established limits of the Manon System was no dead relic; it was a functioning though currently purposeless installation. The best guess was that approximately thirty-two thousand standard years had passed since the constructors of the base had last visited it. Automatically and efficiently since then the installation had continued to reap and process the cyclic abundance of plankton life from Manon's atmosphere.

When the ships which once had carried away its finished products no longer came and the limits of its storage facilities were reached, it piled up the accumulating excess on the little world's lightless surface. But its processing sections remained active, and back and forth between the planetoid and Manon moved the stream of Harvesters, biological robots themselves, and performed their function until a human discoverer set foot on the little world and human hands reached for the controlling switches in the installation that turned the Harvesters off.

So scientists, technicians and reporters came out by the shipload to the Manon System, and for a few months Manon's new Acting Commissioner was an extremely busy man. One day however he summoned his secretary, Trigger Argee, to his new office on what was now popularly though inaccurately known as Harvest Moon and said, "Trigger, we're going for a little trip."

"You're scheduled for three more interviews in the next six hours," Trigger informed him.

"Chelly or Inger can handle them," the Acting Commissioner said.

"Not these," said Trigger. "Reporters. They want more details on the Space Exploits of the Gallant Scout Commander Tate in His Younger Days."

"Hell," Acting Commissioner Tate said, reddening slightly, "I'm too old to enjoy being a hero now. They should have come around thirty years earlier. Let's go."

• • •

So they rose presently from the surface of the dark worldlet, with Trigger at the controls of a spacecraft not much bigger than a hopper but capable nevertheless of interstellar jumps, though Trigger hadn't yet been checked out on such maneuvers. It was, as a matter of fact, basically the ferocious little boat of the Space Scouts rebuilt for comfort, which made it a toy for the fabulously wealthy only. The Acting Commissioner, having observed recently that, on the basis of his first-discovery claims to Harvest Moon and its gadgetry, he was now in the fabulously wealthy class, had indulged himself in an old man's whim.

"Here's your course-tape, pilot," he said complacently and settled back into the very comfortable observer's seat on Trigger's right, equipped with its duplicate target screen.

Trigger fed in the tape and settled back also. "Runs itself," she said. "Practically." She was a girl who could appreciate a good ship. "What are you looking for, out in the middle of the Manon System?"

"You'll see when we get there." Trigger gave him a quick look. Then she glanced at the space-duty suit he had brought from the back of the ship and laid behind his seat. "I'm not so sure," she said carefully, "that I'm going to like what I see when we get there."

"Oho!" Holati Tate reached up and tugged down on his left ear lobe. He looked reflective. After a moment he inquired, "How much of this have you got figured out, Trigger girl?"

"Parts of it," Trigger said. "There're some missing pieces, too, though. I've been doing a little investigating on my own," she explained.

Manon's Acting Commissioner cleared his throat. He reached out and made an adjustment on his target screen, peered into the screen, muttered and made another adjustment. Then he said, "What got you going on an investigation?"

"The fact," said Trigger, "that Precol Academy seems willing to let you get away with murder."

"Murder?" He frowned.

"Yes. It didn't take much digging to find out about the Ancient and Honorable Society of Retired Space Scouts. First I'd heard of that outfit." She hesitated. "I suppose you don't mind my saying it doesn't sound like an organization anyone would take seriously?"

"Don't mind at all," said Holati Tate.

"I believe you. In fact, after I'd found there were around twelve thousand of those retired Scouts scattered through Precol--and that you happened to be their president--it occurred to me the Society might have selected that name so nobody *would* take it seriously."

"Hm-m-m." He nodded. "Yes. Bright girl!"

"There may be bright people at the Academy, too," Trigger said. "Bright enough to work out that Commissioner Ramog's departure from our midst was a well-planned execution."

"I'd say I like ‘execution' better than ‘murder'," Holati remarked judiciously. "But it's still not quite the right word, Trigger girl."

"You prefer ‘object lesson'?"

"Well ... that'll do for the moment. So what did you mean about it's being a well-planned object lesson?"

Trigger shrugged. "Wouldn't it have been a remarkable coincidence if you'd made the Old Galactic strike at just the right instant to help close out Ramog's account?"

"I see." Holati nodded again. "Yes, you're right about that. A few of us discovered Harvest Moon almost three years ago, on a private prospecting run--" He leaned forward suddenly. "Brake her down, pilot! There's a flock of those Harvester things ahead right now. I want to look them over."

• • •

She brought the ship to a stop in the middle of a widely scattered dozen of Harvesters, drifting idly through the system as they had been doing since Holati Tate had disconnected the switch that energized them, in an airless underground dome on Harvest Moon, three months before.

Peering out against the green glare of Manon's sun, Trigger eyed the nearest of the inert hulks with some feeling of physical discomfort. It was very considerably bigger than their ship, and it looked more like some ominously hovering dark monster of space than like an alien work-robot. She became aware that her companion's hands were

moving unhurriedly about an instrument panel on the other side of his target screen. Suddenly, first one and then another of the Harvesters was glowing throughout its length as if a greenish light had been switched on inside it. The glow darkened again, as the invisible beam that had been scanning them from the ship went on to others of the group.

"Looks like this bunch was about four weeks out from Manon when the power went off," Holati remarked conversationally. He cut the scanbeam off. "It would have taken them close to two months to make the run to Harvest Moon at the time."

Trigger nodded. "I've seen the figures. Shall I get us back on course?"

"Please do. There's nothing here."

• • •

Trigger remained silent until she had gone through the required operations. Then, feeling unaccountably relieved at being in motion again, she said, "I suppose it was your Society that started the rumors about the Manon System being the most likely place for an Old Galactic strike to be made."

"Uh-huh. Sound data back of the rumors, too. We felt that with a sharp operator like Ramog the situation we set up had better be genuine." After a moment, he added, "There really wasn't any way of doing it gently, Trigger girl. That Academy outfit was too cocksure of its position; it needed hard processing. One of the things they had to learn was that--away from civilization, anyway--the members of the Society can play rougher and dirtier than any commissioner they can send out. After all," he concluded mildly, "we've had the training for that. Years of it."

Trigger looked at him curiously. "What puzzles me is that they seem to have got the idea so quickly. I wouldn't have thought Precol Academy would let itself be impressed too much by just one object lesson."

"They might have missed some of the implications," Holati admitted. "However, we gave them a helpful hint."

"Oh?" she said. "What?"

"A formal complaint from our Society, signed by its president. It listed Society members and others who had been killed on Precol Projects in the last ten years, because of the inefficiency, let's say, of specific

Project commissioners. The commissioners in question--all members of the Academy--were also listed. Ramog's name happened to be at the head of that list ... and they got the complaint the day after Ramog was reported lost."

Trigger's eyes widened. "Well," she acknowledged, "that's as broad as a hint can get!"

"We weren't trying to be subtle. Murder gets to be hard to prove under Project conditions--there're too many possibilities. So the Academy group is safe enough that way; we aren't accusing anyone of anything worse than inefficiency. But the complaint suggested that the people we listed be withdrawn from active service, as they were obviously unfit for such work."

She smiled briefly. "And since the Society has taken the precaution of turning its president into an extremely famous man, the home office can't resort to obvious counteraction--like firing the whole twelve thousand of you from the various Projects?"

"That would raise a terrible stink, wouldn't it?" Holati said cheerfully. "And, who knows, we might even publish our complaint then. With additional data we could-- Slow her down again, will you? We should be pretty close to course end by now."

"A few minutes off," Trigger said reluctantly. "What is it--more Harvesters?"

He was fiddling with the target screen again. "Uh-huh," he said absently. "But we'll move on a little farther. Slow and easy now!"

• • •

Trigger kept it slow and easy, ignoring the dark shapes they slid past occasionally. After a while, she said, "There's one thing the Academy must have thought of trying, though--"

"To pin Ramog's disappearance on me?"

She glanced at him. "Perhaps not on you personally. There's evidence enough you'd just started walking back from the edge of the swamps when Ramog climbed into a jet suit, took off for the Moon Belt on an undisclosed mission, and vanished. But it wouldn't be too unreasonable for the Academy to assume that some retired, but not so decrepit Space Scouts, were waiting for him up there when he arrived."

"You know," Holati said with some satisfaction, "that's exactly how

they did figure it." He kept his eyes on the screen as he went on. "Naturally, they wouldn't expect us to leave a body floating around, but a really capable investigator doesn't need anything as crude as that in the line of evidence. The Academy had some very good boys combing over the Moon Belt and other parts of the system the past couple of months. There were times when we had to be careful not to trip over them."

"Oh?" said Trigger. "What did they find?"

"Nothing," Holati said. "Naturally. They gave up finally."

She frowned. "How do you know?"

"I get the word. The word I got last week was that the bad eggs in Precol we named on that list are resigning in droves and heading for the Federation. And the men that are being moved up are men we like. Just today," he added, "an Academy courier came in with an official notification for me. I'm confirmed in rank as commissioner now, in permanent charge of the Manon Project."

Trigger Argee sat thoughtfully silent for a while. "So there really wasn't anyone waiting up in the Moon Belt for Ramog?"

Holati shook his head. "No," he said almost casually. "We never laid a finger on him. Wouldn't have been quite ethical--we had no proof."

Her face began working curiously. "And there was that plankton signal you had me copying for you-- Did you ever find out whether it attracted the Harvesters, too?"

He nodded. "Chow call, pure and simple. Now, pilot, do you spot that singleton on your screen over there?"

Trigger's head was swimming for a moment; then she saw the distant dark blob. "Yes," she said faintly.

"Move in on it, adjust to the drift, and stop." She heard him stand up.

"Holati!" It wasn't much more than a gasp. "Are you going out?"

"Well, what else? It won't take long."

Trigger closed her eyes slowly, opened them again and grimly maneuvered the sluggishly gliding boat in on its dark target. From behind her came a series of vague metallic sounds, followed by the snaps of the magnetic suit clamps. She stopped the boat and stared out at the shadow shape swimming like a whale in the tides of space beside them. Soft heavy footsteps passed behind her, moving toward the lock. Waves of horror began crawling over her skin.

The lock hissed, and presently stopped hissing. She was alone. The boat turned slowly, and she found herself staring again at the green blaze of Manon's sun. But the dark thing still floated at the edge of her vision, and now and then it seemed to move slightly. She felt like screaming. Then the lock began hissing again, and stopped again.

• • •

He came in slowly and turned to the back of the ship. Something went dragging and bumping heavily across the floor behind him.

She nodded slowly, though he couldn't see that from the back of the ship.

Riding a directional beam, she thought--and the beam pre-set to cut out when he hit the altitude where the Plankton Drift is thickest. So there he hangs wondering what's happened, while the suit is broadcasting to those--*whew!*

"Holati," she said evenly, "I think I'm going to faint."

"Not you," his voice came from the back of the ship. "Or I wouldn't have picked you for the trip." He was breathing heavily. "You can start us back to base now."

Trigger didn't faint. The ship began to move and the thing outside vanished. The thing he had brought inside went with them. Holati made no stir for the moment; she guessed he was glad of a chance to rest.

The happy little monster is right, her thoughts ran on. It wasn't a murder; it wasn't even an execution. They couldn't prove Ramog was a killer, so they tested him. He couldn't climb into that suit until he'd got Holati Tate out of the way. And once he'd done that, he couldn't send anyone else because, with stakes that big there was never anyone else a man like Ramog could trust.

The Society had it set up, all right--

There was a loud metal clang from the back of the ship, and a pale purple glow grew in the dark behind Trigger. The little fuel converter door had been opened. At the same time, something seemed to shut off her breathing.

Holati said conversationally, "Precol Service was a pretty fair organization before the Academy took over, Trigger. Shouldn't be long before it's back in good shape again now--" He stopped and grunted with effort, and there was a sharp cracking sound like a stick

of dry wood being broken.

"The Academy's all right," he went on, breathing unevenly again, "for raising funds and things like that. We'll keep it around. But it's out in the field where the fun is, and we intend to keep the fun clean from now on."

The purple light faded; the converter door clanged shut. The little boat's interior lights came on. "All right," Holati said. "You can look around now."

Trigger looked around. There were dark streaks on the floor before the converter door, but the thing that had been brought in from outside was gone. Holati Tate was climbing out of his space-duty suit. He looked at her and closed one eye in a wink that was not, in the slightest degree, humorous.

"Processed!" he said.

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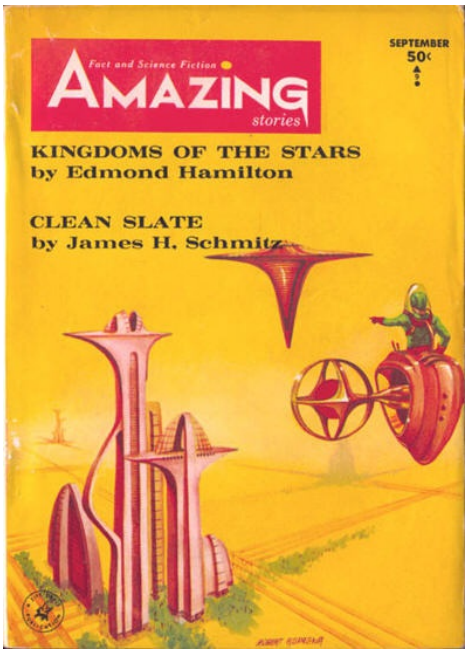
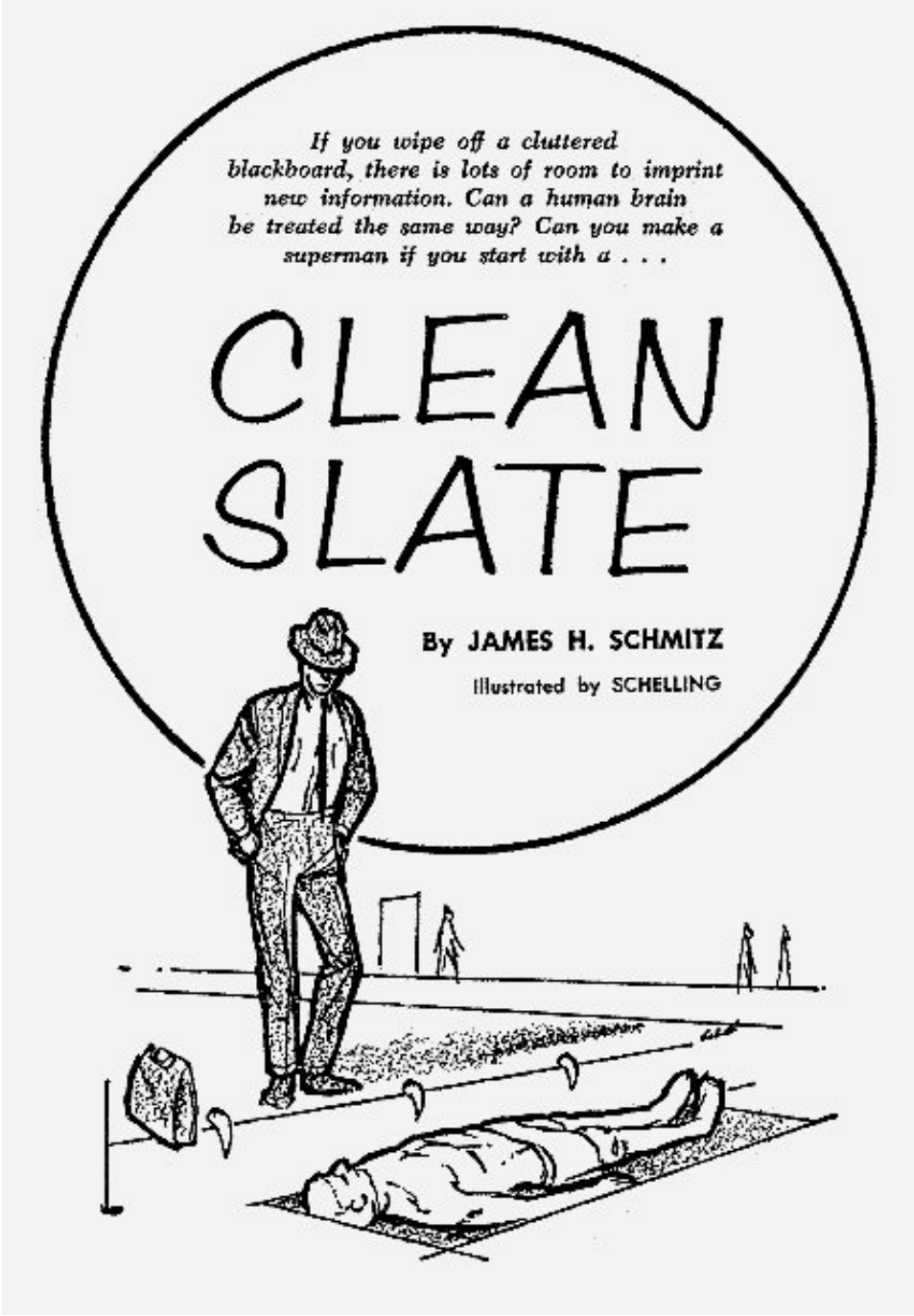
"Clean Slate"

Published in *Amazing Stories*, Vol. 38, No. 9 (September 1964), illustrated by Schelling, though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.





Dr. Eileen Randall put the telephone down, said to George Hair, "It will still be a few minutes, I'm afraid, Mr. Hair." She smiled ruefully. "It's very embarrassing that the Director of acced should have to let his own employer, the government's Administrator of Education, wait to see him! But Dr. Curtice didn't know you were coming until an hour ago, of course."

"I quite understand, Dr. Randall," George Hair said politely. Eileen Randall, he thought, was not in the least embarrassed by the situation; and it was not the first time he had waited here to see Curtice. But her attitude interested him. She was belligerently loyal to Curtice, and her manner toward himself, on the other occasions they

had met, had been one of cool hostility.

Today, there was an air of excitement about her, and something else which had drawn Hair's attention immediately. She was a lean, attractive, black-haired woman in her thirties, normally quiet, certainly not given to coy ruefulness with visitors. But he would have said that during the fifteen minutes he had been here, Dr. Randall had been playing a game with him, at least from her point of view. Back of it was a new level of self-assurance. She felt, he decided, somewhat contemptuous of him today.

It meant the acced group believed they had gained some very significant advantage against him....

"What did you think of the dog?" she asked, smiling.

"An amazing animal!" Hair said. "I would not have believed such a performance was possible. I'm taking it for granted, of course, that the uncanny intelligence it demonstrated in carrying out your instructions is again a result of combined selam and acced techniques.... Or perhaps Dr. Curtice has developed an entirely new educational approach?"

"New in the extent to which selective amnesia was carried in the dog, Mr. Hair," Dr. Randall told him. "In this case, the memory impressions of every experience it had had since its birth were deleted from its brain before retraining began. The training methods otherwise were exactly the ones we have used on dogs for the past six years. The results, as you saw, go far beyond anything we have accomplished with animals before, due to the preliminary complete amnesia."

"Indeed?" Hair said. "I'm sure I've had the impression from Dr. Curtice that it was impossible to induce a complete and permanent amnesia by the use of instruments without actually destroying brain tissue."

Dr. Randall gave him a look of gleeful malice. "It was impossible until early this year, Mr. Hair! That's when Dr. Curtice made the first full-scale tests of several new instruments he's had under development for some time. It's quite possible now." She put her hand out to the telephone. "Should I call the main laboratory again? Of course, they *will* let us know as soon as he...."

"Of course," George Hair said. "No, no need to call them again, Dr. Randall." He smiled. "And it isn't really necessary, you know, for you to entertain me while I'm waiting, although I appreciate your having taken the time for it. If there's something else you should be doing, please don't let the fact that I'm here interfere with your work."

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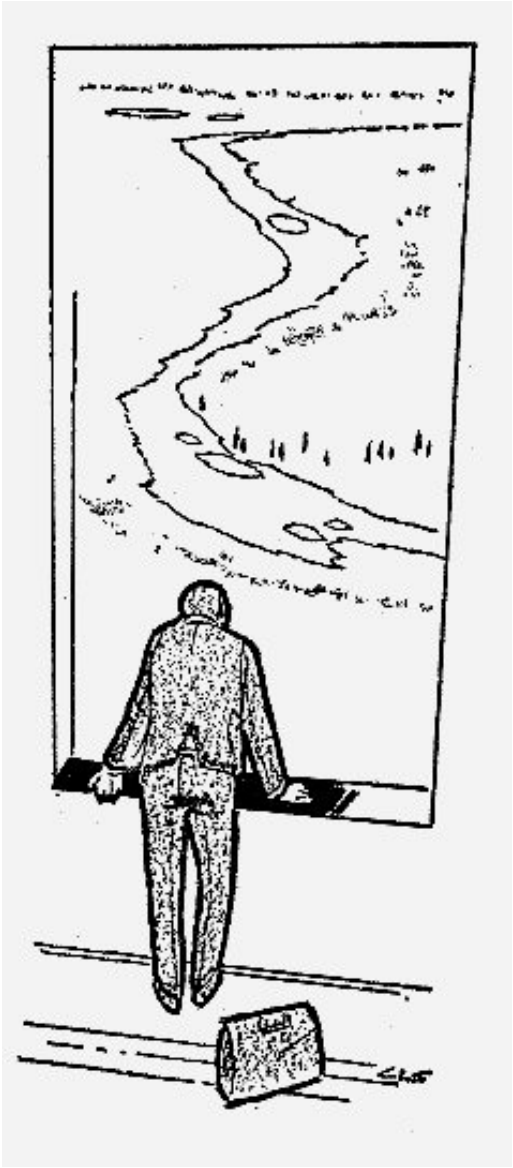

This was, George Hair told himself, looking out of the fourth-story window of the acced Building at the river below, a bad situation. A very bad situation.

It was clear that Curtice intended to use the complete amnesia approach on human subjects next, and Eileen Randall would not have spoken and behaved as she had if the acced group weren't already certain they had Wirt Sebert's backing for their plan--possibly even Mallory's.

And he would have to voice his unequivocal opposition to it. He could not do anything else. acced had never served any useful purpose but that of a political tool and the purpose had been achieved at an inexcusable expense in distorted lives. When applied to human beings, it was a failure, a complete failure. And now the fact could no longer be covered up by new developments and accomplishments with dogs.

Politically, of course, a promising new development in the program, if it could be presented in a convincing manner, was almost required now. It would be a very poor time to acknowledge failure openly. Governor Wingfield had been using rumors about acced as another means of weakening the Administration's position and creating a general demand for new elections; and this year, for the first time in the fifteen years since the Takeover, the demand might grow too strong to be ignored. A public admission that the acced program had not produced, and could not produce, the results which had been expected of it might make the difference, as Wingfield understood very well.

acced--accelerated education--had been Wirt Sebert's idea to begin with. Or rather, many ideas for it had been around, but they had never been systematized, coordinated, or applied on a large scale; and Sebert had ordered all that done. After the Takeover, the need for a major evolution of the educational system was obvious. The working details of Earth's civilization had become so complex that not enough people were able to understand them well enough to avoid continuous breakdowns. Immediate changes in simplifying organization, in centralizing communication had been made, which had helped. But they could not be expected to remedy matters indefinitely. What was needed in the long run was an army of highly trained men and women capable of grasping the multifactored problems of civilization as they arose, capable of intelligent interaction and of making the best possible use of one another's skills and knowledge.

acced was to have been the answer to that. Find the way, Wirt Sebert had said, to determine exactly what information was needed, what was essential, and then find the way to hammer it into young brains by the hundreds of thousands. Nothing less would do.

So acced came into being. It was a project that caught the public's imagination. For three years, a succession of people headed it. Then Richard Curtice was brought in, a man selected personally by Sebert; and Curtice quickly took charge.

At that time, indications of weakness in the overall acced approach already were apparent to those conducting the project. George Hair didn't know about them then. He was still Secretary of Finance--in his own mind and that of the public the second man of the Big Four, directly behind President Mallory. True, Wirt Sebert was Secretary of State, but Hair was the theorist, the man who had masterminded the Takeover which Mallory, Sebert, and Wingfield, men of action, had carried out. He was fully occupied with other matters, and acced was Sebert's concern.

Sebert, no doubt, had been aware of the difficulties. acced, in the

form which had been settled on for the project, was based on the principle of reward and punishment; but reward and punishment were expressed by subtle emotional conditions of which the subject was barely conscious. Combined with this was a repetitive cramming technique, continuing without interruptions through sleep and waking periods. With few exceptions, the subjects were college and high school students, and the acced process was expected to accomplish the purpose for which it had been devised in them within four to five years.

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Throughout the first two years, extraordinary results of the process were reported regularly. They were still being reported during the third year, but no mention was made of the severe personality problems which had begun to develop among the subjects first exposed to acced.

It was at this point that Dr. Curtice was brought into the project, on Wirt Sebert's instructions. Curtice was then in his late thirties, a man with a brilliant reputation as a psychiatric engineer. Within a year, he was acced's director, had selected his own staff, and was engaged in the series of modifications in the project which, for the following decade, would keep the fact that acced was essentially a failure from becoming general knowledge. selam was Curtice's development, had preceded his appointment to acced. He applied the selective amnesia machines immediately to the treatment of the waves of emotional problems arising among acced's first host of recruits. In this, as George Hair learned later, selam was fairly effective, but at the expense of erasing so much of the acced-impressed information that the purpose of the project was lost.

Dr. Curtice and his colleagues had decided meanwhile that the principal source of the troubles with acced was that the adolescent and post-adolescent subjects first chosen for it already had established their individual personality patterns to a degree which limited the type of information which could be imposed on them by enforced learning processes without creating a destructive conflict. The maximum age level for the initiation of the acced approach therefore was reduced to twelve years; and within six months, the new phase of the project was underway on that basis, and on a greatly extended scale.

Simultaneously, Curtice had introduced a third phase--the transfer of infants shortly after their birth to acced nurseries where training by selected technicians could be begun under conditions which were free of distorting influences of any kind. The last presently was

announced as the most promising aspect of the acced project, the one which eventually would produce an integrated class of specialists capable of conducting the world's economic affairs with the faultless dependability of a machine.

The implication that the earlier phases were to be regarded as preliminary experiments attracted little immediate attention and was absorbed gradually and almost unnoticed by the public.

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It was during the seventh year of the acced project that George Hair's personal and political fortunes took a turn for which he was not in the least prepared. There had been a period of sharp conflict within the Administration, President Mallory and the Secretary of State opposing Oliver Wingfield, the perennial Vice President. Hair recognized the situation as the power struggle it essentially was. While his sympathies were largely with Mallory, he had attempted to mediate between the two groups without taking sides. But the men of action were not listening to Hair, the theorist, now. Eventually Wingfield was ousted from the government, though he had too strong and well-organized a following to be ousted from public life.

And shortly afterwards, Mallory explained privately to George Hair that his failure to throw in his full influence against Wingfield had created so much hostility for him, particularly in Sebert's group, that it was impossible to retain him as Secretary of Finance. Mallory made it clear that he still liked Hair as a person but agreed with Sebert that he should play no further major role in the Administration.

It was a bad shock to Hair. Unlike Wingfield and the others, he had developed no personal organization to support him. He had, he realized now, taken it for granted that his continuing value as an overall planner was so obvious to Mallory and Wirt Sebert that nothing else could be needed to secure his position beside them. For a time, he considered retiring into private life; but in the end, he accepted the position of Administrator of Education offered him by Mallory, which included among other matters responsibility for the acced Project.

Hair's first encounter with Dr. Curtice left him more impressed by acced's director than he had expected to be. He was aware that the project had been much less successful than was generally assumed to be the case, and his mental image of Curtice had been that of a glib operator who was willing to use appearances in place of facts to strengthen his position. But Curtice obviously had an immense enthusiasm for what he was doing, radiated self-assurance and confidence in acced's final success to a degree which was difficult to

resist. There was nothing in his manner to suggest that he resented Hair's appointment as his superior; it was the attitude of Eileen Randall and, to a less extent, that of Dr. Longdon, Curtice's two chief assistants, which made it clear from the start that Hair was, in fact, resented.

There were also indications that Wirt Sebert was not pleased with the appointment; and Hair suspected there had been a touch of friendly malice in Mallory's move--a reminder to Sebert that Mallory, although he had agreed to Hair's ouster from Finance, was still the Big Man of the original Big Four. Hair himself had enough stubbornness in him to ignore Sebert's continuing antagonism and the lack of cooperation he could expect from Sebert's protégés in acced. He had been somewhat startled when his first survey of the new situation in which he found himself showed that other activities of the Department of Education were of no significance except as they pertained to the acced project. Dr. Curtice evidently had been running the Department very much as he pleased in recent years. It seemed time, George Hair thought, to establish whether acced was worth anywhere near the support it was getting from the government.

The Project was now in its seventh year. The initial experiment involving high school and college age groups was no longer mentioned and had almost dropped from the public mind. Hair's check brought him the information that a considerable number of the original subjects were still undergoing remedial psychiatric treatment a t acced institutions. The others had merged back into the population. It was clear that the acced process had not had a single lasting success in that group.

Hair visited a number of the acced-run schools next where the process had been in use for the past three years. The age level here varied between ten and thirteen. He was shown records which indicated the acced students were far in advance of those to whom standard educational methods had been applied. The technicians assured him that, unlike their older predecessors, the present subjects were showing no undesirable emotional reactions to the process. Hair did not attempt to argue with the data given by their instruments. But he saw the children and did not like what he saw. They looked and acted, he thought, like small, worried grown-ups.

His inspection of two of the nursery schools was made against Dr. Randall's coldly bitter opposition: the appearance of a stranger among acced's youngest experimental subjects was unscheduled and would therefore create a disturbance; nobody had been allowed there before. But Hair was quietly insistent. It turned into a somewhat eerie experience. The students were between two and four years old and physically looked healthy enough. They were, however, remarkably quiet. They seemed, Hair thought, slower than children at

that age should be, though as a bachelor he admittedly hadn't had much chance to study children that age.

Then one of the taciturn attendants conducting him through the school caught his eye and indicated a chubby three-year-old squatting in a cubicle by himself, apparently assembling a miniature television set. Hair watched in amazement until the assembly was completed, tested, and found satisfactory; whereupon the small mechanic lay down beside the instrument and went to sleep.

They had another trump card waiting for him. This was a girl, perhaps a year older, who informed Hair she understood he had been Secretary of Finance and wished to ask him some questions. The questions were extremely pertinent ones, and Hair found himself involved in a twenty-minute defense of the financial policies he had pursued during the twelve years he held the office. Then his inquisitor thanked him for his time and wandered off.

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One could not object to acced as an experiment, George Hair concluded. An approach capable of producing such remarkable results was worth pursuing, within sensible limitations. The trouble with acced was chiefly that it was neither regarded nor handled as a limited experiment. Curtice and his assistants seemed completely indifferent to the fact that by now the processes had been applied to well over fifty thousand cases, only a handful of which had been under their immediate supervision. The number was increasing annually; and if the second and third groups were to show delayed negative responses similar to those of the first, the damage might not become apparent for several more years but would then be enormously more significant than the development of a relatively few precocious geniuses.

Hair took his figures to Mallory, pointed out the political dangers of failure if acced was continued on its present scale, recommended cutting it back sharply to the level of a controlled experiment until Curtice's group was able to show that the current stages of their work would not bog down in the same type of problems as the first had done. This would release department funds for the investigation of other approaches to the educational problem which could be brought into development if it appeared eventually that acced had to be written off.

Mallory heard him out, then shook his head.

"I've been aware of what you've told me, George," he said. "The trouble is that neither you nor I have the background to understand

fully what Curtice is up to. But the man has a fantastic mind. There's nobody in his field to approach him today. He feels he needs the kind of wide, general experimentation he's getting through acced and his work with selam to produce the information he's after. I've seen some of the results of both, and I'm betting on him!"

He added thoughtfully, "If you're right in suspecting that the approach has an inherent weakness in it which will make it ultimately unusable, it'll show up within another few years. Time enough then to decide what to do. But until we do have proof that it isn't going to work, let's let the thing ride."

He grinned, added again, "Incidentally, I'll appreciate being kept informed on what's going on in the department. acced is Wirt's baby, of course, but there's no reason it should be his baby exclusively...."

Which made Hair's role clear. Mallory was curious about Sebert's interest in acced, had wanted a dependable observer who would be associated closely enough with the project to detect any significant developments there. Hair was now in a position to do just that. But he was not to interfere with Curtice because that would defeat Mallory's purpose.

Hair accepted the situation. He could not act against Sebert's wishes unless he had Mallory's authority behind him; and if Mallory had decided to wait until it was certain Curtice had failed, his role must remain that of an investigator. In time, the evidence would present itself. The reports he was receiving from the acced Building could not be considered reliable, but he was installing his own observers at key points in the project; and if that did not increase his popularity with Curtice and his colleagues, it would insure, Hair thought, that not too much of what was done escaped his attention. In addition, there was an obvious pattern to the manner in which the various project activities were stressed or underemphasized which should serve to guide him now.

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The emphasis during the next two years shifted increasingly to selam. After the first wave of acute psychoneurotic disturbances had subsided, Curtice's selective amnesia machines had played a limited role in the acced project itself; but they had been used experimentally in a variety of other ways. selam, when it was effective, produced a release of specific tensions by deleting related portions of the established neural circuitry and thereby modifying the overall pattern of the brain's activity. It had a record of successful applications in psychiatric work, the relief of psychosomatic problems, some forms of senility, in the rehabilitation of criminals,

and finally in animal experiments where the machines could be used to their fullest scope. The present limiting factor, according to Curtice, lay in the difficulty and the length of time required to train a sufficient number of operators up to the necessary level of understanding and skill in handling the machines. Most of selam's more spectacular successes had, in fact, been achieved by himself and a handful of his immediate associates.

The story was now that this problem was being overcome, that a corps of selam experts soon would be available to serve the public in various ways, and that the average citizen could expect a number of direct benefits for himself, including perhaps that of a virtual rejuvenation, in the foreseeable future. George Hair did not give much attention to these claims. They were, he thought, another distraction; meanwhile, acced could receive correspondingly less publicity. And acced, as a matter of fact, if it had not yet encountered a renewed serious setback, was, at least, being slowed down deliberately in order to avoid one. A number of the teen-age schools had quietly closed, the students having been transferred to country camps where the emphasis was on sports and recreation, while accelerated education had been reduced to a few hours a day. Curtice admitted privately that certain general danger signals had been noted and that a pause in the overall program was indicated until the difficulties had been analyzed and dealt with. He did not appear unduly concerned.

It was during the third year following Hair's attempt to persuade Mallory to have acced cut back at once to the level of experimental research that Oliver Wingfield launched his first public attacks on the project. Wingfield was then campaigning for the governorship he was to win with startling ease a few months later, while continuing his crusade for the general elections he hoped would move him into the top spot in the Administration. The detailed nature of his charges against acced made it evident that he had informants among the project personnel.

It put George Hair in a difficult position. If it was a choice between supporting Wingfield and supporting Mallory, he much preferred to support Mallory. This was due less to his remaining feelings of friendship for Mallory than to the fact that Oliver Wingfield's policies had always had an aspect of angry destructiveness about them. As one of the Big Four, he had been sufficiently held in check; his pugnacity and drive had made him extremely useful then. If he was allowed to supplant Mallory, however, he would be a dangerous man.

In all reason, Hair thought, they should have closed out acced before this. The political damage would have been insignificant if the matter was handled carefully. To do it now, under Wingfield's savage criticism, would be a much more serious matter. The government

would appear to have retreated under pressure, and Wingfield's cause would be advanced. But he was not sure the step could be delayed much longer.

Then he had his first reports of six-year-old and seven-year-old psychotics in several of the nursery schools. They were unofficial reports coming from his own observers; and the observers were not entirely certain of their facts; the local school staffs had acted immediately to remove the affected children, so that the seriousness of their condition could not be ascertained. It looked bad enough; it was, in fact, what Hair had expected and, recently, had feared. But he told himself that these might be isolated cases, that there might not be many more of them. If that turned out to be true, the matter conceivably could be ignored until the political climate again became more favorable to the government.

Unless, of course, Oliver Wingfield heard of it....

Wingfield apparently didn't hear of it. His attacks during the next few weeks were directed primarily at the camps for acced's teen-age subjects. Curtice's group had volunteered no information on the incidents to Hair; and Hair did not press them for it. For a while, there was a lull in the reports of his observers.

Then the reports began to come in again; and suddenly it was no longer a question of isolated incidents. An epidemic of insanity was erupting in the acced nursery schools, and Hair knew he could wait no longer.

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He had come to the acced Building expecting to find Curtice and his associates evasive, defensive, perhaps attempting to explain away what could no longer be explained away. That they might have the gall even now to think that giving the project another shift would avert the storm of public criticism due to burst over acced as soon as Wingfield's informants learned of the swiftly rising number of psychotic children in the nursery schools would never have occurred to him if he had not been warned by Eileen Randall's manner. Even so, he felt shocked and amazed.

The acced group might delude itself to that extent, he thought. But Wirt Sebert must be standing behind them in this. And how could Sebert show such incredibly bad judgment? Further, at so critical a time, Sebert would have conferred with Mallory before committing himself to giving Curtice further support, and Mallory must have agreed to it.

He could not believe that of Philip Mallory. Unless....

George Hair stood frowning out of the window of the acced Building at the river curving through the valley below. Unless, he thought, Curtice had, this time, come up with a genuine breakthrough, something indisputable and of great and exciting significance, something that could not be challenged. Because that might still do it, stifle Wingfield's declamations and dim the picture of lunatic children in the public's mind. The public forgot so easily again.

"Mr. Hair," Eileen Randall's voice purred from the doorway.

Hair turned. Her mouth curved into a condescending smile.

"Will you come with me, please? They're waiting to see you now...."

A hundred feet down the hallway, she opened the door to Curtice's big office for him. As Hair stepped inside, he was barely able to suppress a start of surprise. Beside Curtice and Dr. Longdon, there was a third man in the office whose presence, for a moment, seemed completely incongruous.

"Good morning, Felix," Hair said. "I didn't expect to find you here."

Felix Austin, Chief Justice and President Mallory's right-hand man for the past five years, smiled briefly. He was tall and sparse, in his late fifties, almost exactly Hair's age.

"As a matter of fact, George," he said, "I hadn't expected to meet you today either. But I happened to be in the building, and when I heard you wanted to speak to Dr. Curtice, I thought I might sit in on the discussion. If you'd rather I'd leave, I shall do it at once, of course."

Hair shook his head. "No, you're quite welcome to stay." He took a seat, laid the briefcase he had brought with him on his knees. Eileen Randall sat down across the room from him, not far from Curtice.

Hair's fingers were trembling, though not enough to be noticed by anyone but himself, as he opened the briefcase and drew out three copies of a resume made up from the reports of his acced observers during the past six weeks. Austin's presence, of course, was not a coincidence; and he wasn't expected to believe that it was. He was being told that he should not count on Mallory backing him against Curtice today. He had suspected it, but the fact still dumbfounded him because he could not see Mallory's motive. He looked at Eileen Randall.

"Dr. Randall," he said, "I have here three copies of a paper I should like the group to see. Please give one each to Dr. Curtice and the Chief Justice. Perhaps you and Dr. Longdon will be willing to share

the third."

Eileen Randall hesitated an instant, then stood up, came over and took the papers from him. Austin cleared his throat.

"We're to read this immediately, George?" he asked.

"Please do," Hair said.

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He watched them while they read. Austin frowned thoughtfully; Curtice seemed completely uninterested. Longdon and Eileen Randall exchanged occasional glances. Curtice finished first, waited until the others put down their copies.

He said then, "These figures are remarkably accurate, Mr. Hair. Of course, we've known you had good men working for you. The current incidence is perhaps a trifle higher than shown." He looked over at Dr. Longdon. "About eight per cent, wouldn't you say, Bill?"

"Approximately," Longdon agreed.

"We understand and appreciate your concern, Mr. Hair," Curtice went on with apparent sincerity. "But as it happens"--his forefinger tapped the resume--"this is not a matter which need give any of us concern, although you were not in a position to know it. The situation was anticipated. We have been sure almost from the beginning that immature brains would not be able to absorb the vast volume of information forced on them by acced indefinitely, and that the final result would be the acute stress and confusion expressed in these figures."

"You were sure of it almost from the beginning?" Hair repeated.

"I became convinced of it personally within a few months after I was brought into the project," Curtice said.

George Hair stared at him. "Then, in Heaven's name, why--if you were certain of eventual failure--did you continue with these monstrous experiments for years?"

"Because," Curtice said patiently, "they were producing a great deal of information--information we absolutely needed to have, absolutely needed to test in practice."

"For what purpose?" Hair demanded. He looked over at Austin. "Felix, you're informed of what these people have been doing?"

Austin nodded. "Yes, I am, George." His voice and face were expressionless.

"Then supposing you...."

"No, let Dr. Curtice tell it, George. He can answer your questions better than I can."

It appeared, Hair thought, that Austin was deferring deliberately to Curtice, to make it clear that Curtice was now to be considered the equal of either of them.

"We needed the information," Curtice continued, as if there had been no interruption, "for a purpose it would not have been advisable to make public at the time. It would have made much of the research we were planning virtually impossible, particularly since we had no way of proving, even to ourselves, that what we wanted to do could be accomplished. Even today, less than two dozen people are fully informed of the plan.

"Our purpose, Mr. Hair, was and is the creation of a genuine superman--a man who will be physically and mentally as fully developed as his genetic structure permits. I have had this goal in mind for many years--it has been the aim of all my experiments with selam. When acced was formed, I saw the possibilities of incorporating its methods into my own projects. I went to Secretary Sebert and informed him of my plans. That was why I was made Director of the acced project. All acced's activities since that day have been designed solely to supply us with further information."

"And how," Hair asked, making no attempt to keep the incredulous distaste he felt out of his voice, "do you propose to go about creating your superman?"

Curtice said, "An adult brain, and only an adult brain, has the structural capacity to assimilate the information supplied by the accelerated educational processes as it streams in. A child's brain is not yet structured to store more than a limited amount of information at a time. It is developing too slowly to meet our purpose.

"But, as the first experiments with acced showed, an adult brain, even the brain of a young adult, already has accumulated so much distorted information that the swift, orderly inflow of acced data again produces disastrous conflicts and disturbances. Hence the work with selam techniques during these years. We know now that a brain fully developed and mature, but with all memory, all residual traces of the life experiences which brought about its development removed from it, can be taught everything acced can teach, perhaps vastly more it will be able to absorb and utilize the new information completely."

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There was a long pause. Then Hair said, "And that is the story you will tell the public? That you can delete all a man's present memories, subject him to the acced processes, and finally emerge with a new man, an acced-trained superman--who happens to have been the goal of the project all along?"

"Essentially that," Curtice said.

Hair shook his head. "Dr. Curtice," he said, "I don't believe that story! Oliver Wingfield won't believe it. And, this time finally, the public won't believe it. You're just looking for another lease of time to continue your experiments."

Curtice smiled without rancor, glanced at Austin.

"Felix," he said, "perhaps you'd better talk to him, after all."

Austin cleared his throat.

"It's true enough, George," he said. "Dr. Curtice has proof that he can do exactly as he says."

Hair looked back at Curtice.

"Does that mean," he asked, "that you actually have produced such a superman?"

"No," Curtice said. He laughed, apparently with genuine amusement now. "And with very good reason! We know we can remove all memory traces from a human brain and leave that brain in undamaged condition and in extremely good working order. We have done it with subjects in their seventieth year of life as well as with subjects in their fifth year of life, and with no greater basic difficulty. We also have applied modified acced methods to the five-year-old subjects and found they absorbed information at the normal rate of a newly born infant--much too slowly, as I have explained, for our purpose, but we have not applied acced methods of instruction to the adult memoryless subjects. We want supermen, but we want them to be supermen of our selection. That's the next and the all-important stage of the project."

"Then," George Hair said flatly, "I still do not believe you, and the public will not believe you. Your story will be put down as another bluff."

Curtice smiled faintly again.

"Will it?" he asked. "If the Director of acced becomes the first subject to undergo the total process?"

Hair's mouth dropped open. "You are to be...."

"And if," Curtice went on, "Chief Justice Felix Austin has volunteered to be the second subject?"

Hair looked in bewilderment from one to the other of them.

"Felix, is this true?"

"I fully intend to be the second subject," Austin told him seriously. "This is a big thing, George--a very big thing! The third and fourth subjects, incidentally, following Dr. Curtice and myself by approximately two years, will be President Mallory and Secretary Sebert...."

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George Hair sat in his study, watching the public reaction indicator edge up above the seventy-two mark on the positive side of the scale. Two hours before, just after the official announcement of the government's Rejuvenation Program was made, the indicator had hovered around forty. The response had been a swift and favorable one, though no more favorable than Hair had expected.

It was a little over five weeks since his meeting with Curtice and Felix Austin in the acced Building. Mallory's and Sebert's publicity staffs had been in full action throughout that time, operating indirectly except for an occasional, carefully vague release which no more than hinted at a momentous development to come. The planted rumors were far more direct. "Rejuvenation" was a fully established concept in the public mind days before the actual announcement; the missing details, however, were the sensational and unexpected ones--precisely the explosive touch required to swing the skeptical and merely curious over to instant support of the official program.

Curtice's goal of the acced-trained mental superman was being played down at present; it was less tangible, of far less direct interest, than the observable response of an aging body to the complete selam process. Hair had seen the seventy-year-old subjects of whom Curtice had told him. They were old men still, but old men from whom the physical and emotional tensions of a lifetime had been drained together with the memory traces of a lifetime. The relaxed, sleeping bodies had fleshed out again, become strong and smooth-skinned, presenting the appearance of young maturity. They gave credibility to Curtice's claim, based on comparable work with

animals, that selam now offered humanity a life extension of at least sixty healthy years.

The public had seen those same rejuvenated bodies in the tridi screens today. It had listened while Curtice explained the developments in his selam machines which had brought about the miracle, and watched him walk smiling into the laboratory where he was to become the first human being to whom the combined selam and acced techniques would be fully applied.

Those were compelling arguments. The superman theme had been barely introduced but would grow in significance as the implications of Felix Austin following Curtice within a few months, and Mallory and Sebert following Austin within two years, were considered. What the leaders wanted for themselves, the public wanted. Unofficially, the word already was out that when the President and Secretary received the Rejuvenation treatment, a hundred deserving citizens would receive it with them, that selam and acced would become available to all whose personal records qualified them for the processes as quickly as Dr. Curtice's intricate machines could be duplicated and technicians trained in their use.

There was no question, George Hair thought, that the bait was being swallowed. And the thought appalled him. On the one occasion he'd spoken with Philip Mallory during the past weeks, he had brought up the subject of loss of individuality, of personality, by the selam process and in the subsequent period when, within a year and a half, a new mentality would be created by machines in the emptied, receptive brain, perhaps a vastly more efficient mentality but nevertheless....

And Mallory had looked at him shrewdly, and laughed.

"The old Phil will be there again, George--don't worry!" he'd said. "I'm not suddenly rushing into this thing, you know. We can't talk about everything Dick Curtice has done with selam, but I've seen enough of his half-way jobs to go ahead." He gave Hair a conspiratorial dig with his elbow. "If Curtice weren't as far along as he is, Wingfield would have had our skins before summer! That's part of it. The other part of it is that I'm sixty-four and Sebert's sixty-six. You're fifty-eight yourself. We can all use some freshening up if we're to stay on top of the pile...."

That had been the lure for Mallory. If it hadn't been for the pressures being built up by Wingfield, Hair thought, Mallory need have felt no concern about remaining on top for another twenty years. But he'd seen the developing threat and prepared quietly to more than match it with a bold, overwhelming move of his own. A new Big Four was in the making, a Big Four of supermen, with Curtice in Hair's position as thinker and theorist, Felix Austin in Wingfield's, while Mallory and

Sebert remained the central two, the leaders. Hair had no illusions about his own prospects in the new era. As Administrator of Education, he had remained a popular, almost legendary figure; but it was clear now that it had been a popularity skillfully maintained by Mallory's publicity machine to give acced additional respectability in the transition period ahead. Thereafter, the legend would be allowed to fade away, and he with it.

He didn't, Hair decided, really want it otherwise. He did not share Mallory's will to stay on top at all costs ... definitely not at the cost of allowing his personality to be dissolved in Curtice's Rejuvenation process, even if the opportunity were offered him, although he was already quite certain it would not be offered. The new ruling group would have no further need of him.

He could resign now; but it would be awkward and change nothing. The psychotic children in acced's nursery schools were no longer an issue. They had been mentioned, casually, as a detail of the experiments, now concluded, which had been required to produce Rejuvenation, with the additional note that their rehabilitation would be undertaken promptly. The statement had aroused few comments.... He might as well, George Hair told himself finally, watch the thing through to the end.

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During the next three months, he found himself involved frequently in the publicity connected with the Rejuvenation program, although he refused interviews and maintained the role of a detached spectator. Oliver Wingfield, stunned into silence no more than a few days, shifted his attack from acced to the new government program, lashed out savagely at Hair from time to time as one of the planners of what he described as an attempt to foist the rule of robot minds on normal men. Hair, not too sure he wasn't in some agreement with Wingfield on the latter point, held his peace; but Mallory's publicity experts happily took up the battle.

Despite Wingfield's best efforts, the Rejuvenation program retained its high level of popularity. The successful conclusion of the selam phase of the process on Richard Curtice was announced by Dr. Langdon. For the next sixty days, Curtice would be kept asleep to permit physical regeneration to be well advanced before acced was introduced by degrees to the case. Tridi strips taken at ten-day intervals showed the gradual transformation of a middle-aged scientist in moderately good condition to a firm-muscled athlete apparently in his early twenties. Attention began to shift to Felix Austin as the next to take the step, six weeks after Curtice's acced training had begun; and the continuing denunciations by Wingfield

and his followers acquired a note of raging hysteria.

Three months and ten days after Curtice had submitted himself to his selam machines, George Hair came back to the acced Building, now the center of the new Rejuvenation complex. He was not at all sure why he should be there, but Longdon had called him that morning, told him there had been a very important development and asked him to come as soon as he possibly could. There had been a degree of urgency in the man's voice which had made it difficult to refuse. Hair was conducted to a part of the building he had not seen before and into a room where Longdon was waiting for him.

Longdon's appearance underlined the urgency Hair had sensed in his voice when he called. His eyes were anxious; his face looked drawn and tired. He said, "Mr. Hair, thank you very much for coming so promptly! Dr. Randall and I are faced with a very serious problem here which I could not discuss on the telephone. It's possible that you will be able--and willing--to help us. Let me show you what the trouble is."

He opened a door to another room, motioned to Hair to enter, and followed him inside, leaving the door open.

Hair recognized this room immediately. He had seen it several times in the tridi screen during demonstrations of the changes being brought about in Curtice's physical condition by selam. As he had been then, Curtice was lying now on a sunken bed in a twelve by twelve foot depression in the floor, his tanned, muscular body clothed only in white trunks. His face was turned toward the door by which they had entered and his eyes were half opened. Then, as they came toward him, his right hand lifted, made a slow, waving motion through the air, dropped to his side again.

"Our subject is exceptionally responsive today!" Dr. Longdon commented, an odd note of savage irony in his voice.

Hair looked quickly at him, frowning, asked, "What is the problem you wanted to discuss?"

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Longdon nodded at the figure sprawled across the sunken bed.

"There is the problem!" he said. "Mr. Hair, as you know, our calculations show that an adult brain, freed completely by selam techniques of the clutter of memories it has stored away, can absorb the entire volume of acced information within a period of less than two years. At the end of that time, in other words, we again would

have a functioning adult, and one functioning in a far more integrated manner, far more efficiently, than is possible to the normally educated human being, and on the basis now of a vastly greater fund of accurate information than a normal human mind can acquire in a lifetime...."

"I know, of course, that that was your goal," Hair said. "Apparently, something has gone wrong with it."

"Very decidedly!" Longdon said. "This is the forty-third day since we began to use acced training methods on Curtice. In child subjects--children whose memories were completely erased by selam at the age of five--forty-three days of modified acced produced a vocabulary equivalent to that of an average two-year-old. Curtice, in the same length of time, has acquired no vocabulary at all. Spoken words have no more meaning to him today than when we started."

A door had opened and closed quietly behind Hair while Longdon was speaking. He guessed that Eileen Randall had come into the room but did not look around. He was increasingly puzzled by Longdon's attitude. Curtice's failure to develop speech might be a very serious problem--might, in fact, be threatening the entire Rejuvenation program. But he did not see what it had to do with him, or how they expected him to help them.

He asked, "Have you discovered what the difficulty is?"

"Yes," Longdon said, "we know now what the difficulty is." He hesitated, scowling absently down at Curtice for a few seconds, went on. "A child, Mr. Hair, a young child, wants to learn. Not long after birth, it enters a phase where learning might appear to be almost its primary motivation. Later in life, it may retain the drive to learn or it may lose it. It has been assumed that this depended on whether its life experiences were of a nature to encourage the learning urge, or to suppress and eventually to stifle it.

"Now it appears that this is only partly true. Later life experiences may indeed foster and even create a learning urge of their own. But the natural drive, the innate drive, apparently is present only for a comparatively short time in childhood. It is not, in itself, a permanent motivation in man.

"Dr. Curtice's biological age is nearly fifty years. Before selam wiped the effects of his life experiences from him, he was, of course, a man intensely interested in learning, intensely curious. But his curiosity and interest were based on the experiences he has lost, and were lost with them. And he is decades past the age where the innate drive to learn could still motivate him.

"We can teach him almost nothing because he is inherently

uninterested in learning anything. We have used every conceivable method to stimulate interest and curiosity in him. Intense pleasure or severe pain will produce corresponding reactions, but when the sensations end, he appears to forget them quickly again.

"There is, however, a barely detachable learning curve, which can be projected. In twenty years, by the consistent use of brutally drastic methods, we should be able to train Dr. Curtice's brain to the point where he could comprehend very simple instructions. By that time, of course, the training process itself would have produced such severe physical and emotional stresses that the rejuvenating effect of selam would have been lost, and he would be showing--at the very least--his actual physical age."

Dr. Longdon shrugged, spread his hands, concluded, "So at best, Mr. Hair, we might wind up eventually with a very stupid, very dull old man of seventy."

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Eileen Randall's voice said harshly behind Hair, "Mr. Hair, it is not nearly as hopeless as that! Not nearly!"

She went on vehemently, as he turned to look at her. "We simply need time! Time to understand what really has happened here ... to decide what must be done about it. If Richard weren't helpless, he would tell us what to do! He would never--" Her voice broke suddenly.

Longdon said patiently, giving Hair an apologetic glance, "Eileen,

you know we've gone endlessly over all calculations, tried everything! We...."

"We have not!" Eileen Randall began to weep.

George Hair looked in something like irritated amazement from one to the other of them. He said carefully, "This is, of course, a very serious matter, but I am hardly qualified to assist you in it. It's no secret to you that my connection with the program has been and is a purely figurative one. The only suggestion I can make is that President Mallory should be informed immediately of the problems you've encountered here."

Longdon said tonelessly, "President Mallory is aware of the problem, Mr. Hair."

"What?" Hair said sharply. "When was he told?"

"Over a month ago. As soon as it became evident that Dr. Curtice was not responding normally to the acced approach for dememorized subjects." Longdon cleared his throat. "President Mallory's instructions were to maintain absolute secrecy while we looked for a solution. Now, however...." He shrugged.

Over a month ago.... Hair's mind seemed to check for an instant at the words; then his thoughts were racing as Longdon went on. For more than a month after Mallory and Sebert had realized that the Rejuvenation program might end in humiliating public failure before it had well begun, the build-up had continued, Oliver Wingfield and his adherents were being scientifically needled into a crescendo of baffled rage, and Felix Austin--yes, only five days from now, Chief Justice Austin was scheduled to undergo the selam techniques which evidently had destroyed Curtice! Hair felt a sudden chill prickling the back of his neck....

"Mr. Hair, you *must* help us!" Eileen Randall was staring desperately at him, tears streaming down her face.

"There's no way I could help you, Dr. Randall."

"But you can--you must! They'll murder Richard if you don't! They've said so! You--your influence with President Mallory--his old friend...." The words drowned in a choked wailing.

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Hair felt his breath shorten. Curtice had to die, of course--die plausibly and conveniently so that his condition need never be

revealed. But Mallory and Sebert weren't stupid enough to think that Curtice's death alone would be sufficient.

"It isn't necessary!" Eileen Randall was babbling shrilly again. "Even--even if the program has to end, we could take him away quietly, take care of him somewhere. They could say he was dead--no one would ever know! We...." She clapped her hands to her face, turned and ran from the room, making muffled, squalling sounds.

"I should see she's taken care of, Mr. Hair," Longdon said shakily. "If you'll excuse me a minute...." He started for the door.

"Dr. Longdon!"

Longdon stopped, looked back. "Yes?"

"Who suggested to you that I should use my influence with President Mallory on Curtice's behalf?"

Longdon's eyes flickered. "Chief Justice Austin."

"I see," Hair said. "When did he suggest it?"

"This morning," Longdon told him, with a brief, frightened grimace. "He was here shortly before I called you. I could not avoid acknowledging that Dr. Curtice's case was hopeless. The Chief Justice advised us then that only your personal appeal to President Mallory could save Curtice's life, that we should attempt to get in touch with you immediately...."

He hurried out of the room. Hair stood staring after him a moment, then turned, glanced at the mindless thing on the sunken bed, went quickly over to the other door through which he and Longdon had entered. There had been, he recalled, a telephone in the outer room.

He dialed the number of his office, waited, listening to the soft purr on the line. Then, suddenly, the line went dead.

That was that, Hair told himself. He replaced the receiver, went over to the window and looked out at the newly erected buildings of the Rejuvenation complex. His thoughts seemed to be moving sluggishly. Perhaps it was fear; but perhaps it simply had been too long a time since he had been involved in an operation of this kind. After the Takeover, it no longer had seemed necessary; and he had a feeling that what was going on now was somehow unreal.

But it was real enough. Mallory, the man of action, the practical man who intended to remain on top, hadn't forgotten the lessons of the past. He might have been betting on Curtice's genius, but he had been preparing for years to hedge on the bet if necessary. Perhaps he'd never expected acced or the Rejuvenation program to come to

anything. Either way, he could turn the projects to his advantage in the end.

Hair's gaze shifted for a moment to the sky above the buildings. It would come from there in all likelihood, and in an instant of ravening fury the Rejuvenation complex would be obliterated. The buildings, the personnel, the machines, the records, anything that would have left the slightest possibility of beginning the program again ... and George Hair, the thinker, the theorist, the living legend, whom Mallory had not forgiven for failing to throw in his influence openly against Wingfield in their first struggle for control.

Wingfield would be blamed for it, and they could make it stick. Wingfield was finished....

Hair turned at a sound behind him. Longdon had come into the room.

"Mr. Hair," he said, grinning apologetically, "you must forgive Eileen! She has always been in love with Curtice, of course. If she is only allowed to take care of him, she will be satisfied. I hope you can persuade President Mallory to leave her that much...."

Hair looked at Longdon's anxious eyes. Longdon hadn't grasped everything, of course, but he had grasped enough to be aware that not only Curtice's life was in danger.

For an instant, Hair wondered how Longdon would react if he were told that communications from the building to the world outside already were being intercepted, and that therefore neither of them--nor anyone else within half a mile of where they stood--could have more than a very few minutes still to live.

But although he had never liked Longdon in the least, that seemed a pointless cruelty now.

"I'll see what I can do, Dr. Longdon," he agreed.

"Ham Sandwich"

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It gets difficult to handle the problem of a man who has a real talent that you need badly--and he cannot use it if he knows it's honest!

There was no one standing or sitting around the tastefully furnished entry hall of the Institute of Insight when Wallace Cavender walked into it. He was almost half an hour late for the regular Sunday night meeting of advanced students; and even Mavis Greenfield, Dr. Ormond's secretary, who always stayed for a while at her desk in the hall to sign in the stragglers, had disappeared. However, she had left the attendance book lying open on the desk with a pen placed invitingly beside it.

Wallace Cavender dutifully entered his name in the book. The distant deep voice of Dr. Aloys Ormond was dimly audible, coming from the direction of the lecture room, and Cavender followed its faint reverberations down a narrow corridor until he reached a closed door. He eased the door open and slipped unobtrusively into the

back of the lecture room.

As usual, most of the thirty-odd advanced students present had seated themselves on the right side of the room where they were somewhat closer to the speaker. Cavender started towards the almost vacant rows of chairs on the left, smiling apologetically at Dr. Ormond who, as the door opened, had glanced up without interrupting his talk. Three other faces turned towards Cavender from across the room. Reuben Jeffries, a heavyset man with a thin fringe of black hair circling an otherwise bald scalp, nodded soberly and looked away again. Mavis Greenfield, a few rows further up, produced a smile and a reproachful little headshake; during the coffee break she would carefully explain to Cavender once more that students too tardy to take in Dr. Al's introductory lecture missed the most valuable part of these meetings.

From old Mrs. Folsom, in the front row on the right, Cavender's belated arrival drew a more definite rebuke. She stared at him for half a dozen seconds with a coldly severe frown, mouth puckered in disapproval, before returning her attention to Dr. Ormond.

Cavender sat down in the first chair he came to and let himself go comfortably limp. He was dead-tired, had even hesitated over coming to the Institute of Insight tonight. But it wouldn't do to skip the meeting. A number of his fellow students, notably Mrs. Folsom, already regarded him as a black sheep; and if enough of them complained to Dr. Ormond that Cavender's laxness threatened to retard the overall advance of the group towards the goal of Total Insight, Ormond might decide to exclude him from further study. At a guess, Cavender thought cynically, it would have happened by now if the confidential report the Institute had obtained on his financial status had been less impressive. A healthy bank balance wasn't an absolute requirement for membership, but it helped ... it helped! All but a handful of the advanced students were in the upper income brackets.

Cavender let his gaze shift unobtrusively about the group while some almost automatic part of his mind began to pick up the thread of Dr. Al's discourse. After a dozen or so sentences, he realized that the evening's theme was the relationship between subjective and objective reality, as understood in the light of Total Insight. It was a well-worn subject; Dr. Al repeated himself a great deal. Most of the audience nevertheless was following his words with intent interest, many taking notes and frowning in concentration. As Mavis Greenfield liked to express it, quoting the doctor himself, the idea you didn't pick up when it was first presented might come clear to you the fifth or sixth time around. Cavender suspected, however, that as far as he was concerned much of the theory of Total Insight was doomed to remain forever obscure.

He settled his attention on the only two students on this side of the room with him. Dexter Jones and Perrie Rochelle were sitting side by side in front-row chairs--the same chairs they usually occupied during these meetings. They were exceptions to the general run of the group in a number of ways. Younger, for one thing; Dexter was twenty-nine and Perrie twenty-three while the group averaged out at around forty-five which happened to be Cavender's age. Neither was blessed with worldly riches; in fact, it was questionable whether the Rochelle girl, who described herself as a commercial artist, even had a bank account. Dexter Jones, a grade-school teacher, did have one but was able to keep it barely high enough to cover his rent and car payment checks. Their value to the Institute was of a different kind. Both possessed esoteric mental talents, rather modest ones, to be sure, but still very interesting, so that on occasion they could state accurately what was contained in a sealed envelope, or give a recognizable description of the photograph of a loved one hidden in another student's wallet. This provided the group with encouraging evidence that such abilities were, indeed, no fable and somewhere along the difficult road to Total Insight might be attained by all.

In addition, Perrie and Dexter were volunteers for what Dr. Aloys Ormond referred to cryptically as "very advanced experimentation." The group at large had not been told the exact nature of these experiments, but the implication was that they were mental exercises of such power that Dr. Al did not wish other advanced students to try them, until the brave pioneer work being done by Perrie and Dexter was concluded and he had evaluated the results....

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"Headaches, Dr. Al," said Perrie Rochelle. "Sometimes quite bad headaches--" She hesitated. She was a thin, pale girl with untidy arranged brown hair who vacillated between periods of vivacious alertness and activity and somewhat shorter periods of blank-faced withdrawal. "And then," she went on, "there are times during the day when I get to feeling sort of confused and not quite sure whether I'm asleep or awake ... you know?"

Dr. Ormond nodded, gazing at her reflectively from the little lectern on which he leaned. His composed smile indicated that he was not in the least surprised or disturbed by her report on the results of the week's experiments--that they were, in fact, precisely the results he had expected. "I'll speak to you about it later, Perrie," he told her gently. "Dexter ... what experiences have you had?"

Dexter Jones cleared his throat. He was a serious young man who appeared at meetings conservatively and neatly dressed and

shaved to the quick, and rarely spoke unless spoken to.

"Well, nothing very dramatic, Dr. Al," he said diffidently. "I did have a few nightmares during the week. But I'm not sure there's any connection between them and, uh, what you were having us do."

Dr. Ormond stroked his chin and regarded Dexter with benevolence. "A connection seems quite possible, Dexter. Let's assume it exists. What can you tell us about those nightmares?"

Dexter said he was afraid he couldn't actually tell them anything. By the time he was fully awake he'd had only a very vague impression of what the nightmares were about, and the only part he could remember clearly now was that they had been quite alarming.

Old Mrs. Folsom, who was more than a little jealous of the special attention enjoyed by Dexter and Perrie, broke in eagerly at that point to tell about a nightmare *she'd* had during the week and which *she* could remember fully; and Cavender's attention drifted away from the talk. Mrs. Folsom was an old bore at best, but a very wealthy old bore, which was why Dr. Ormond usually let her ramble on a while before steering the conversation back to the business of the meeting. But Cavender didn't have to pretend to listen.

From his vantage point behind most of the group, he let his gaze and thoughts wander from one to the other of them again. For the majority of the advanced students, he reflected, the Institute of Insight wasn't really too healthy a place. But it offered compensations. Middle-aged or past it on the average, financially secure, vaguely disappointed in life, they'd found in Dr. Al a friendly and eloquent guide to lead them into the fascinating worlds of their own minds. And Dr. Al was good at it. He had borrowed as heavily from yoga and western mysticism as from various orthodox and unorthodox psychological disciplines, and composed his own system, almost his own cosmology. His exercises would have made conservative psychiatrists shudder, but he was clever enough to avoid getting his flock into too serious mental difficulties. If some of them suffered a bit now and then, it made the quest of Total Insight and the thought that they were progressing towards that goal more real and convincing. And meeting after meeting Dr. Al came up with some intriguing new twist or device, some fresh experience to keep their interest level high.

"Always bear in mind," he was saying earnestly at the moment, "that an advance made by any member of the group benefits the group as a whole. Thus, because of the work done by our young pioneers this week I see indications tonight that the group is ready to attempt a new experiment ... an experiment at a level I frankly admit I hadn't anticipated you would achieve for at least another two months."

Dr. Ormond paused significantly, the pause underlining his words.

There was an expectant stirring among the students.

"But I must caution you!" he went on. "We cannot, of course, be certain that the experiment will succeed ... in fact, it would be a very remarkable thing if it did succeed at a first attempt. But if it should, you will have had a rather startling experience! You will have seen a thing generally considered to be impossible!"

He smile reassuringly, stepping down from the lectern. "Naturally, there will be no danger. You know me well enough to realize that I never permit the group or individuals to attempt what lies beyond their capability."

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Cavender stifled a yawn, blinked water from his eyes, watching Ormond walk over to a small polished table on the left side of the room in front of the rows of chairs. On it Mavis Greenfield had placed a number of enigmatic articles, some of which would be employed as props in one manner or another during the evening's work. The most prominent item was a small suitcase in red alligator hide. Dr. Ormond, however, passed up the suitcase, took a small flat wooden plate from the table and returned to the center of the room.

"On this," he said, holding up the plate, "there rests at this moment the air of this planet and nothing else. But in a minute or two--for each of you, in his or her world of subjective reality--something else *will* appear on it."

The students nodded comprehendingly. So far, the experiment was on familiar ground. Dr. Ormond gave them all a good-humored wink.

"To emphasize," he went on, "that we deal here with practical, down-to-earth, *real* matters ... not some mystical nonsense ... to emphasize that, let us say that the object each of you will visualize on this plate will be--a ham sandwich!"

There were appreciative chuckles. But Cavender felt a twinge of annoyance. At the moment, when along with fighting off fatigue he'd been trying to forget that he hadn't eaten since noon, Dr. Al's choice looked like an unfortunate one. Cavender happened to be very fond of ham.

"Now here," Ormond continued, putting the plate down, "is where this experiment begins to differ from anything we have done before. For all of us will try to imagine--to visualize as being on this plate--*the same ham sandwich*. And so there will be no conflict in our projections, let's decide first on just what ingredients we want to put

on it." He smiled. "We'll make this the finest ham sandwich our collective imagination can produce!"

There were more chuckles. Cavender cursed under his breath, his mouth beginning to water. Suggestions came promptly.

"Mustard?" Dr. Ormond said, "Of course-- Not too sharp though, Eleanor?" He smiled at Mrs. Folsom. "I agree! A light touch of delicate salad mustard. Crisp lettuce ... finely chopped gherkins. Very well!"

"Put it all on rye," Cavender said helplessly. "Toasted rye."

"Toasted rye?" Ormond smiled at him, looked around. "Any objections? No? Toasted rye it shall be, Wally. And I believe that completes our selection."

He paused, his face turning serious. "Now as to that word of caution I gave you. For three minutes each of you will visualize the object we have chosen on the plate I will be holding up before me. You will do this with your eyes open, and to each of you, in your own subjective reality, the object will become, as you know, more or less clearly discernible.

"But let me tell you this. Do not be too surprised if at the end of that time, when the exercise is over, the object *remains visible to* you ... does not disappear!"

There was silence for a moment. Then renewed chuckles, but slightly nervous ones, and not too many.

Dr. Ormond said sternly, "I am serious about that! The possibility, though it may be small tonight, is there. You have learned that, by the laws of Insight, any image of subjective reality, if it can be endowed with *all* the attributes of objective reality by its human creator, *must* spontaneously become an image in objective reality!

"In this case, our collective ham sandwich, if it were perfectly visualized, could not only be seen by you but felt, its weight and the texture of each of its ingredients perceived, their appetizing fragrance savored"--Cavender groaned mentally--"and more: if one of you were to eat this sandwich, he would find it exactly as nourishing as any produced by the more ordinary methods of objective reality.

"There are people in the world today," Dr. Ormond concluded, speaking very earnestly now, "who can do this! There always have been people who could do this. And you are following in their footsteps, being trained in even more advanced skills. I am aware to a greater extent than any of you of the latent power that is

developing--has developed--in this group. Tonight, for the first time, that power will be focused, drawn down to a pinpoint, to accomplish one task.

"Again, I do not say that at the end of our exercise a ham sandwich will lie on this plate. Frankly, I don't expect it. But I suggest very strongly that you don't let it surprise or startle you too much if we find it here!"

There was dead stillness when he finished speaking. Cavender had a sense that the lecture room had come alive with eerie little chills. Dr. Ormond lifted the plate solemnly up before him, holding it between the fingertips of both hands.

"Now, if you will direct your attention here ... no, Eleanor, with your eyes open!

"Let us begin...."

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Cavender sighed, straightened up in his chair, eyes fixed obediently on the wooden plate, and banned ham sandwiches and every other kind of food firmly from his thoughts. There was no point in working

his appetite up any further when he couldn't satisfy it, and he would have to be on guard a little against simply falling asleep during the next three minutes. The cloudiness of complete fatigue wasn't too far away. At the edge of his vision, he was aware of his fellow students across the room, arranged in suddenly motionless rows like staring zombies. His eyelids began to feel leaden.

The three minutes dragged on, came to an end. Ormond slowly lowered his hands. Cavender drew a long breath of relief. The wooden plate, he noted, with no surprise, was still empty.

"You may stop visualizing," Ormond announced.

There was a concerted sighing, a creaking of chairs. The students came out of their semitrances, blinked, smiled, settled into more comfortable positions, waiting for Dr. Al's comments.

"No miracles this time!" Ormond began briskly. He smiled.

Mrs. Folsom said, "Dr. Al--"

He looked over at her. "Yes, Eleanor?"

Eleanor Folsom hesitated, shook her head. "No," she said. "Go on. I'm sorry I interrupted."

"That's all right." Dr. Al gave her a warm smile. It had been, he continued, a successful exercise, a very promising first attempt, in spite of the lack of an immediate materialization, which, of course, had been only a remote possibility to start with. He had no fault to find with the quality of the group's effort. He had sensed it ... as they, too, presently would be able to sense it ... as a smooth flow of directed energy. With a little more practice ... one of these days....

Cavender stifled one yawn, concealed another which didn't allow itself to be stifled behind a casually raised hand. He watched Ormond move over to the prop table, put the wooden plate down beside the red suitcase without interrupting his encouraging summary of the exercise, hesitate, then pick up something else, something which looked like a flexible copper trident, and start back to the center of the room with it.

Mrs. Folsom's voice said shrilly, "*Dr. Al--!*"

"Yes, Eleanor? What is it?"

"Just now," Mrs. Folsom said, her voice still holding the shrill note, "just a moment ago, on the plate over there, I'm certain ... I'm almost certain I saw the ham sandwich!"

She added breathlessly, "And that's what I was going to say before,

Dr. Al! Right after you told us to stop visualizing I thought I saw the sandwich on the plate! But it was only for a moment and I wasn't sure. But now I'm sure, almost sure, that I saw it again on the plate on the table!"

The old woman was pointing a trembling finger towards the table. Her cheeks showed spots of hectic red. In the rows behind her, the students looked at one another, shook their heads in resignation, some obviously suppressing amusement. Others looked annoyed. They were all familiar with Eleanor Folsom's tendency to produce such little sensations during the meetings. If the evening didn't promise to bring enough excitement, Eleanor always could be counted on to take a hand in events.

Cavender felt less certain about it. This time, Mrs. Folsom sounded genuinely excited. And if she actually believed she'd seen something materialize, she might be fairly close to getting one of those little heart attacks she kept everyone informed about.

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Dr. Al could have had the same thought. He glanced back at the prop table, asked gravely, "You don't see it there now, do you, Eleanor?"

Mrs. Folsom shook her head. "No. No, of course not! It disappeared again. It was only there for a second. But I'm sure I saw it!"

"Now this is very interesting," Ormond said seriously. "Has anyone else observed anything at all unusual during the last few minutes?"

There was a murmured chorus of dissent, but Cavender noticed that the expressions of amusement and annoyance had vanished. Dr. Al had changed the tune, and the students were listening intently. He turned back to Mrs. Folsom.

"Let us consider the possibilities here, Eleanor," he said. "For one thing, you should be congratulated in any case, because your experience shows that your visualization was clear and true throughout our exercise. If it hadn't been, nothing like this could have occurred.

"But precisely what was the experience? There we are, as of this moment, on uncertain ground. You saw something. That no one else saw the same thing might mean simply that no one else happened to be looking at the plate at those particular instances in time. I, for example, certainly gave it no further attention after the exercise was over. You *may* then have observed a genuine materialization!"

Mrs. Folsom nodded vigorously. "Yes, I--"

"But," Ormond went on, "under the circumstances, the scientific attitude we maintain at this Institute demands that we leave the question open. For now. Because you might also, you understand, have projected--for yourself only--a vivid momentary impression of the image you had created during our exercise and were still holding in your mind."

Mrs. Folsom looked doubtful. The flush of excitement began to leave her face.

"Why ... well, yes, I suppose so," she acknowledged unwillingly.

"Of course," Ormond said. "So tonight we shall leave it at that. The next time we engage in a similar exercise ... well, who knows?" He gave her a reassuring smile. "I must say, Eleanor, that this is a very encouraging indication of the progress you have made!" He glanced over the group, gathering their attention, and raised the trident-like device he had taken from the table.

"And now for our second experiment this evening--"

Looking disappointed and somewhat confused, Eleanor Folsom settled back in her chair. Cavender also settled back, his gaze shifting sleepily to the remaining items on the prop table. He was frowning a little. It wasn't his business, but if the old woman had started to hypnotize herself into having hallucinations, Dr. Al had better turn to a different type of meeting exercises. And that probably was exactly what Ormond would do; he seemed very much aware of danger signals. Cavender wondered vaguely what the red suitcase on the table contained.

There was a blurry shimmer on the wooden plate beside the suitcase. Then something thickened there suddenly as if drawing itself together out of the air. Perrie Rochelle, sitting only ten feet back from the table, uttered a yelp--somewhere between surprise and alarm. Dexter Jones, beside her, abruptly pushed back his chair, made a loud, incoherent exclamation of some kind.

Cavender had started upright, heart hammering. The thing that had appeared on the wooden plate vanished again.

But it had remained visible there for a two full seconds. And there was no question at all of what it had been.

For several minutes, something resembling pandemonium swirled about the walls of the lecture room of the Institute of Insight. The red suitcase had concealed the wooden plate on the prop table from the eyes of most of the students sitting on the right side of the room, but

a number of those who could see it felt they had caught a glimpse of something. Of just what they weren't sure at first, or perhaps they preferred not to say.

Perrie and Dexter, however, after getting over their first shock, had no such doubts. Perrie, voice vibrant with excitement, answered the questions flung at her from across the room, giving a detailed description of the ham sandwich which had appeared out of nowhere on the polished little table and stayed there for an incredible instant before it vanished. Dexter Jones, his usually impassive face glowing and animated, laughing, confirmed the description on every point.

On the opposite side of the room, Eleanor Folsom, surrounded by her own group of questioners, was also having her hour of triumph, in the warmth of which a trace of bitterness that her first report of the phenomenon had been shrugged off by everyone--even, in a way, by Dr. Al--gradually dissolved.

Dr. Al himself, Cavender thought, remained remarkably quiet at first, though in the excitement this wasn't generally noticed. He might even have turned a little pale. However, before things began to slow down he had himself well in hand again. Calling the group to a semblance of order, he began smilingly to ask specific questions. The witnesses on the right side of the room seemed somewhat more certain now of what they had observed.

Dr. Ormond looked over at Cavender.

"And you, Wally?" he asked. "You were sitting rather far back, to be sure--"

Cavender smiled and shrugged.

"Sorry, Dr. Al. I just wasn't looking in that direction at the moment. The first suggestion I had that anything unusual was going on was when Perrie let out that wild squawk."

There was general laughter. Perrie grinned and flushed.

"Well, I'd have liked to hear *your* squawk," she told Cavender, "if you'd seen a miracle happen right before your nose!"

"Not a miracle, Perrie," Ormond said gently. "We must remember that. We are working here with natural forces which produce natural phenomena. Insufficiently understood phenomena, perhaps, but never miraculous ones. Now, how closely did this materialization appear to conform to the subjective group image we had decided on for our exercise?"

"Well, I could only see it, of course, Dr. Al. But as far as I saw it, it

was exactly what we'd ... no, wait!" Perrie frowned, wrinkling her nose. "There was something added!" She giggled. "At least, I don't remember anyone saying we should imagine the sandwich wrapped in a paper napkin!"

Across the room, a woman's voice said breathlessly, "Oh! A *green* paper napkin, Perrie?"

Perrie looked around, surprised. "Yes, it was, Mavis."

Mavis Greenfield hesitated, said with a nervous little laugh, "I suppose I did that. I added a green napkin after we started the exercise." Her voice quavered for an instant. "I thought the image looked neater that way." She looked appealingly at the students around her. "This is really incredible, isn't it."

They gave her vague smiles. They were plainly still floating on a cloud of collective achievement--if they hadn't created that sandwich, there could have been nothing to see!

It seemed to Cavender that Dr. Ormond's face showed a flicker of strain when he heard Mavis' explanation. But he couldn't be sure because the expression--if it had been there--was smoothed away at once. Ormond cleared his throat, said firmly and somewhat chidingly. "No, not incredible, Mavis! Although--"

He turned on his smile. "My friends, I must admit that you *have* surprised me! Very pleasantly, of course. But what happened here is something I considered to be only a very remote possibility tonight. You are truly more advanced than I'd realized.

"For note this. If even one of you had been lagging behind the others, if there had been any unevenness in the concentration each gave to the exercise tonight, this materialization simply could not have occurred! And that fact forces me now to a very important decision."

He went over to the prop table, took the suitcase from it. "Mavis," he said gravely, "you may put away these other devices. We will have no further need for them in this group! Dexter, move the table to the center of the room for me, please."

He waited while his instructions were hastily carried out, then laid the suitcase on the table, drew up a chair and sat down. The buzz of excited conversation among the students hushed. They stared at him in anticipatory silence. It appeared that the evening's surprises were not yet over--and they were ready for *anything* now!

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"There is a point," Dr. Ormond began in a solemn voice, riveting their eager attention on him, "a point in the orderly advance towards Total Insight at which further progress becomes greatly simplified and accelerated, because the student has now developed the capability to augment his personal efforts by the use of certain instruments."

Cavender thoughtfully reached inside his coat, brought out a cigarette case, opened it and slowly put a cigarette to his lips. About to flick on a lighter, he saw Reuben Jeffries watching him with an expression of disapproval from across the aisle. Jeffries shook his head, indicated the no smoking sign on the wall. Cavender nodded, smiling a rueful apology for his absent-mindedness, and returned the cigarette to its case. He shoved his hands into his trousers pockets,

slouched back in the chair.

"I have told you," Ormond was saying, "that the contributions many of you so generously made to the Institute were needed for and being absorbed by vital research. Tonight I had intended to give you a first inkling of what that research was accomplishing." He tapped the suitcase on the table before him. "In there is an instrument of the kind I have mentioned. The beneficial forces of the Cosmos are harnessed by it, flow through it. And I believe I can say that my efforts in recent months have produced the most effective such device ever seen...."

"Dr. Al," Mrs. Folsom interrupted firmly, "I think you should let them know how the instrument cured my heart condition."

Faces shifted toward her, then back to Dr. Al. The middle-aged majority of the students pricked their ears. For each of them, conscious of the years of increasingly uncertain health to come, Mrs. Folsom's words contained a personal implication, one that hit home. But in spite of the vindication of her claim to have seen a materialized ham sandwich, they weren't quite ready to trust her about this.

Dr. Ormond's face was grave.

"Eleanor," he said reprovingly, "that was letting the cat out of the bag, wasn't it? I hadn't intended to discuss that part of the matter just yet."

He hesitated, frowning, tapping the table top lightly with his knuckles. Mrs. Folsom looked unabashed. She had produced another sensation and knew it.

"Since it was mentioned," Ormond said with deliberation at last, "it would be unfair not to tell you, at least in brief, the facts to which Eleanor was alluding. Very well then--Eleanor has served during the past several weeks as the subject of certain experiments connected with this instrument. She reports that after her first use of it, her periodically recurring heart problem ceased to trouble her."

Mrs. Folsom smiled, nodded vigorously. "I have not," she announced, "had one single touch of pain or dizziness in all this time!"

"But one should, of course," Dr. Ormond added objectively, "hesitate to use the word ‘cure' under such circumstances."

In the front row someone asked, "Dr. Al, will the instrument heal ... well, other physical conditions?"

Ormond looked at the speaker with dignity. "John, the instrument does, and is supposed to do, one thing. Providing, as I've said, that

the student working with it has attained a certain minimum level of Insight, it greatly accelerates his progress towards Total Insight. Very greatly!

"Now, as I have implied before: as one approaches the goal of Total Insight, the ailments and diseases which commonly afflict humanity simply disappear. Unfortunately, I am not yet free to show you proof for this, although I have the proof and believe it will not be long before it can be revealed at least to the members of this group. For this reason, I have preferred not to say too much on the point.... Yes, Reuben? You have a question?"

"Two questions, Dr. Al," Reuben Jeffries said. "First, is it your opinion that our group has now reached the minimum level of Insight that makes it possible to work with those instruments?"

Ormond nodded emphatically. "Yes, it has. After tonight's occurrence there is no further question about that."

"Then," Jeffries said, "my second question is simply--*when do we start?*"

There was laughter, a scattering of applause. Ormond smiled, said, "An excellent question, Reuben! The answer is that a number of you will start immediately.

"A limited quantity of the instruments--fifteen, I believe--are available now on the premises, stored in my office. Within a few weeks I will have enough on hand to supply as many of you as wish to speed up their progress by this method. Since the group's contributions paid my research expenses, I cannot in justice ask more from you individually now than the actual cost in material and labor for each instrument. The figure ... I have it somewhere ... oh, yes!" Ormond pulled a notebook from his pocket, consulted it, looked up and said, mildly, "Twelve hundred dollars will be adequate, I think."

Cavender's lips twitched sardonically. Three or four of the group might have flinched inwardly at the price tag, but on the whole they were simply too well heeled to give such a detail another thought. Checkbooks were coming hurriedly into sight all around the lecture room. Reuben Jeffries, unfolding his, announced, "Dr. Al, I'm taking one of the fifteen."

Half the students turned indignantly to stare at him. "Now wait a minute, Reuben!" someone said. "That isn't fair! It's obvious there aren't enough to go around."

Jeffries smiled at him. "That's why I spoke up, Warren!" He appealed to Ormond. "How about it, Dr. Al?"

Ormond observed judiciously, "It seems fair enough to me. Eleanor, of course, is retaining the instrument with which she has been working. As for the rest of you--first come, first served, you know! If others would like to have Mavis put down their names...."

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There was a brief hubbub as this suggestion was acted on. Mavis, Dexter Jones and Perrie Rochelle then went to the office to get the instruments, while Dr. Ormond consoled the students who had found themselves left out. It would be merely a matter of days before the new instruments began to come in ... and yes, they could leave their checks in advance. When he suggested tactfully that financial arrangements could be made if necessary, the less affluent also brightened up.

Fifteen identical red alligator-hide suitcases appeared and were lined up beside Ormond's table. He announced that a preliminary demonstration with the instrument would be made as soon as those on hand had been distributed. Mavis Greenfield, standing beside him, began to read off the names she had taken down.

Reuben Jeffries was the fifth to come up to the table, hand Ormond his check and receive a suitcase from the secretary. Then Cavender got unhurriedly to his feet.

"Dr. Ormond," he said, loudly enough to center the attention of everyone in the room on him, "may I have the floor for a moment?"

Ormond appeared surprised, then startled. His glance went up to Reuben Jeffries, still standing stolidly beside him, and his face slowly whitened.

"Why ... well, yes, Wally." His voice seemed unsteady. "What's on your mind?"

Cavender faced the right side of the room and the questioning faces turned towards him.

"My name, as you know," he told the advanced students, "is Wallace Cavender. What you haven't known so far is that I am a police detective, rank of lieutenant, currently attached to the police force of this city and in temporary charge of its bunco squad."

He shifted his gaze towards the front of the room. Ormond's eyes met his for a moment, then dropped.

"Dr. Ormond," Cavender said, "you're under arrest. The immediate

charge, let's say, is practicing medicine without a license. Don't worry about whether we can make it stick or not. We'll have three or four others worked up by the time we get you downtown."

For a moment, there was a shocked, frozen stillness in the lecture room. Dr. Ormond's hand began to move out quietly towards the checks lying on the table before him. Reuben Jeffries' big hand got there first.

"I'll take care of these for now, Dr. Al," Jeffries said with a friendly smile. "The lieutenant thinks he wants them."

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Not much more than thirty minutes later, Cavender unlocked the door to Dr. Ormond's private office, went inside, leaving the door open behind him, and sat down at Ormond's desk. He rubbed his aching eyes, yawned, lit a cigarette, looked about in vain for an ashtray, finally emptied a small dish of paper clips on the desk and placed the dish conveniently close to him.

There had been an indignant uproar about Dr. Al's arrest for a while, but it ended abruptly when uniformed policemen appeared in the two exit doors and the sobering thought struck the students that any publicity given the matter could make them look personally ridiculous and do damage to their business and social standing.

Cavender had calmed their fears. It was conceivable, he said, that the district attorney's office would wish to confer with some of them privately, in connection with charges to be brought against William Fitzgerald Grady--which, so far as the police had been able to establish, was Dr. Ormond's real name. However, their association with the Institute of Insight would not be made public, and any proceedings would be carried out with the discretion that could be fully expected by blameless citizens of their status in the community.

They were fortunate, Cavender went on, in another respect. Probably none of them had been aware of just how much Grady had milked from the group chiefly through quiet private contributions and donations during the two years he was running the Institute. The sum came to better than two hundred thousand dollars. Grady naturally had wasted none of this in "research" and he was not a spendthrift in other ways. Cavender was, therefore, happy to say that around two thirds of this money was known to be still intact in various bank accounts, and that it would be restored eventually to the generous but misled donors.

Dr. Al's ex-students were beginning to look both chastened and very

much relieved. Cavender briefly covered a few more points to eliminate remaining doubts. He touched on Grady's early record as a confidence man and blackmailer, mentioned the two terms he had spent in prison and the fact that for the last eighteen years he had confined himself to operations like the Institute of Insight where risks were less. The profits, if anything, had been higher because Grady had learned that it paid off, in the long run, to deal exclusively with wealthy citizens and he was endowed with the kind of personality needed to overcome the caution natural to that class. As for the unusual experiences about which some of them might be now thinking, these, Cavender concluded, should be considered in the light of the fact that Grady had made his living at one time as a stage magician and hypnotist, working effectively both with and without trained accomplices.

The lecture had gone over very well, as he'd known it would. The ex-students left for their homes, a subdued and shaken group, grateful for having been rescued from an evil man's toils. Even Mrs. Folsom, who had announced at one point that she believed she had a heart attack coming on, recovered sufficiently to thank Cavender and assure him that in future she would take her problems only to a reliable physician.

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Footsteps were coming down the short hall from the back of the building. Then Reuben Jeffries' voice said, "Go into the office. The lieutenant's waiting for you there."

Cavender stubbed out his cigarette as Dexter Jones, Perrie Rochelle and Mavis Greenfield filed into the office. Jeffries closed the door behind them from the hall and went off.

"Sit down," Cavender said, lighting a fresh cigarette.

They selected chairs and settled down stiffly, facing him. All three looked anxious and pale; and Perrie's face was tear-stained.

Cavender said, "I suppose you've been wondering why I had Sergeant Jeffries tell you three to stay behind."

Perrie began, her eyes and voice rather wild, "Mr. Cavender ... Lieutenant Cavender...."

"Either will do," Cavender said.

"Mr. Cavender, I swear you're wrong! We didn't have anything to do with Dr. Al's ... Mr. Grady's cheating those people! At least, I didn't. I

swear it!"

"I didn't say you had anything to do with it, Perrie," Cavender remarked. "Personally I think none of you had anything to do with it. Not voluntarily, at any rate."

He could almost feel them go limp with relief. He waited. After a second or two, Perrie's eyes got the wild look back. "But...."

"Yes?" Cavender asked.

Perrie glanced at Dexter Jones, at Mavis.

"But then what *did* happen?" she asked bewilderedly, of the other two as much as of Cavender. "Mr. Cavender, I saw something appear on that plate! I know it did. It was a sandwich. It looked perfectly natural. I don't think it could have possibly been something Mr. Grady did with mirrors. And how could it have had the paper napkin Mavis had just been thinking about wrapped around it, unless...."

"Unless it actually was a materialization of a mental image you'd created between you?" Cavender said. "Now settle back and relax, Perrie. There's a more reasonable explanation for what happened tonight than that."

He waited a moment, went on. "Grady's one real interest is money and since none of you have any to speak of, his interest in you was that you could help him get it. Perrie and Dexter showed some genuine talent to start with, in the line of guessing what card somebody was thinking about and the like. It's not too unusual an ability, and in itself it wasn't too useful to Grady.

"But he worked on your interest in the subject. All the other students, the paying students, had to lose was a sizable amount of cash ... with the exception of Mrs. Folsom who's been the next thing to a flip for years anyway. She was in danger. And you three stood a good chance of letting Grady wreck your lives. I said he's a competent hypnotist. He is. Also a completely ruthless one."

He looked at Mavis. "As far as I know, Mavis, you haven't ever demonstrated that you have any interesting extrasensory talents like Dexter's and Perrie's. Rather the contrary. Right?"

She nodded, her eyes huge.

"I've always tested negative. Way down negative. That's why I was really rather shocked when that.... Of course, I've always been fascinated by such things. And he insisted it would show up in me sometime."

"And," Cavender said, "several times a week you had special little training sessions with him, just as his two star pupils here did, to help it show up. You were another perfect stooge, from Grady's point of view. Well, what it amounts to is that Grady was preparing to make his big final killing off this group before he disappeared from the city. He would have collected close to thirty thousand dollars tonight, and probably twice as much again within the next month or so before any of the students began to suspect seriously that Dr. Al's instruments could be the meaningless contraptions they are.

"You three have been hypnotically conditioned to a fare-you-well in those little private sessions you've had with him. During the past week you were set up for the role you were to play tonight. When you got your cue--at a guess it was Mrs. Folsom's claim that she'd seen the ham sandwich materialize--you started seeing, saying, acting, and thinking exactly as you'd been told to see, say, act, and think. There's no more mystery about it than that. And in my opinion you're three extremely fortunate young people in that we were ready to move in on Grady when we were."

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There was silence for a moment. Then Perrie Rochelle said hesitantly, "Then Mrs. Folsom...."

"Mrs. Folsom," Cavender said, "has also enjoyed the benefits of many private sessions with Grady. She, of course, was additionally paying very handsomely for them. Tonight, she reported seeing what she'd been told to report seeing, to set off the hypnotic chain reaction."

"But," Perrie said, "she said her heart attacks stopped after she started using the instrument. I really don't see how that could have been just her imagination?"

"Very easily," Cavender said. "I've talked with her physician. Mrs. Folsom belongs to a not uncommon type of people whose tickers are as sound as yours or mine, but who are convinced they have a serious heart ailment and can dish up symptoms impressive enough to fool anyone but an informed professional. They can stop dishing them up just as readily if they think they've been cured." He smiled faintly. "You look as if you might be finally convinced, Perrie."

She nodded. "I ... yes, I guess so. I guess I am."

"All right," Cavender said. He stood up. "You three can run along then. You won't be officially involved in this matter, and no one's going to bother you. If you want to go on playing around with e.s.p.

and so forth, that's your business. But I trust that in future you'll have the good sense to keep away from characters like Grady. Periods of confusion, chronic nightmares--even chronic headaches--are a good sign you're asking for bad trouble in that area."

They thanked him, started out of the office in obvious relief. At the door, Perrie Rochelle hesitated, looked back.

"Mr. Cavender...."

"Yes?"

"You don't think I ... I need...."

"Psychiatric help? No. But I understand," Cavender said, "that you have a sister in Maine who's been wanting you to spend the summer with her. I think that's a fine idea! A month or two of sun and salt water is exactly what you can use to drive the last of this nonsense out of your mind again. So good night to the three of you, and good luck!"

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Cavender snapped the top of the squat little thermos flask back in place and restored it to the glove compartment of Jeffries' car. He brushed a few crumbs from the knees of his trousers and settled back in the seat, discovering he no longer felt nearly as tired and washed out as he had been an hour ago in the lecture room. A few cups of coffee and a little nourishment could do wonders for a man, even at the tail end of a week of hard work.

The last light in the Institute building across the street went out and Cavender heard the click of the front door. The bulky figure of Detective Sergeant Reuben Jeffries stood silhouetted for a moment in the street lights on the entrance steps. Then Jeffries came down the steps and crossed the street to the car.

"All done?" Cavender asked.

"All done," Jeffries said through the window. He opened the door, eased himself in behind the wheel and closed the door.

"They took Grady away by the back entrance," he told Cavender. "The records in his files ... he wasn't keeping much, of course ... and the stuff in the safe and those instruments went along with him. He was very co-operative. He's had a real scare."

Cavender grunted. "He'll get over it."

Jeffries hesitated, said, "I'm something of a Johnny-come-lately in this line of work, you know. I'd be interested in hearing how it's handled from here on."

"In this case it will be pretty well standard procedure," Cavender said. "Tomorrow around noon I'll have Grady brought in to see me. I'll be in a curt and bitter mood--the frustrated honest cop. I'll tell him he's in luck. The d. a.'s office has informed me that because of the important names involved in this fraud case, and because all but around forty thousand dollars of the money he collected in this town have been recovered, they've decided not to prosecute. He'll have till midnight to clear out. If he ever shows up again, he gets the book."

"Why leave him the forty thousand?" Jeffries asked. "I understood they know darn well where it's stashed."

Cavender shrugged. "The man's put in two years of work, Reuben. If we clean him, he might get discouraged enough to get out of the racket and try something else. As it is, he'll have something like the Institute of Insight going again in another city three months from now. In an area that hasn't been cropped over recently. He's good in that line ... one of the best, in fact."

Jeffries thoughtfully started the car, pulled out from the curb. Halfway down the block, he remarked, "You gave me the go-ahead sign with the cigarette right after the Greenfield girl claimed she'd put the paper napkin into that image. Does that mean you finally came to a decision about her?"

"Uh-huh."

Jeffries glanced over at him, asked, "Is there any secret about how you're able to spot them?"

"No ... except that I don't know. If I could describe to anyone how to go about it, we might have our work cut in half. But I can't, and neither can any other spotter. It's simply a long, tedious process of staying in contact with people you have some reason to suspect of being the genuine article. If they are, you know it eventually. But if it weren't that men with Grady's type of personality attract them somehow from ten miles around, we'd have no practical means at present of screening prospects out of the general population. You can't distinguish one of them from anyone else if he's just walking past you on the street."

Jeffries brought the car to a halt at a stop light.

"That's about the way I'd heard it," he acknowledged. "What about negative spotting? Is there a chance there might be an undiscovered latent left among our recent fellow students?"

"No chance at all," Cavender said. "The process works both ways. If they aren't, you also know it eventually--and I was sure of everyone but Greenfield over three weeks ago. She's got as tough a set of obscuring defenses as I've ever worked against. But after the jolt she got tonight, she came through clear immediately."

The light changed and the car started up. Jeffries asked, "You feel both of them can be rehabilitated?"

"Definitely," Cavender said. "Another three months of Grady's pseudoyoga might have ruined them for good. But give them around a year to settle out and they'll be all right. Then they'll get the call. It's been worth the trouble. Jones is good medium grade--and that Greenfield! She'll be a powerhouse before she's half developed. Easily the most promising prospect I've come across in six years."

"You're just as certain about Perrie Rochelle?"

"Uh-huh. Protopsi--fairly typical. She's developed as far as she ever will. It would be a complete waste of time to call her. You can't train something that just isn't there."

Jeffries grunted. "Never make a mistake, eh?"

Cavender yawned, smiled. "Never have yet, Reuben! Not in that area."

"How did you explain the sandwich to them--and Greenfield's napkin? They couldn't have bought your stage magic idea."

"No. Told them those were Dr. Al's posthypnotic suggestions. It's the other standard rationalization."

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They drove on in silence for a while. Then Jeffries cleared his throat.

"Incidentally," he said. "I should apologize for the slip with the sandwich, even though it turned out to our advantage. I can't quite explain it. I was thinking of other matters at the moment, and I suppose I...."

Cavender, who had been gazing drowsily through the windshield, shook his head.

"As you say, it turned out very well, Reuben. Aside from putting the first crack in Mavis Greenfield's defenses, it shook up Dr. Al to the point where he decided to collect as much as he could tonight, cash the checks, and clear out. So he set himself up for the pinch. We

probably gained as much as three or four weeks on both counts."

Jeffries nodded. "I realize that. But...."

"Well, you'd have no reason to blame yourself for the slip in any case," Cavender went on. "The fact is I'd been so confoundedly busy all afternoon and evening, I forgot to take time out for dinner. When that sandwich was being described in those mouth-watering terms, I realized I was really ravenous. At the same time I was fighting off sleep. Between the two, I went completely off guard for a moment, and it simply happened!"

He grinned. "As described, by the way, it was a terrific sandwich. That group had real imagination!" He hesitated, then put out his hand, palm up, before him. "As a matter of fact, just talking about it again seems to be putting me in a mood for seconds...."

Something shimmered for an instant in the dim air. Wrapped in its green tissue napkin, a second ham sandwich appeared.

"Spacemaster"

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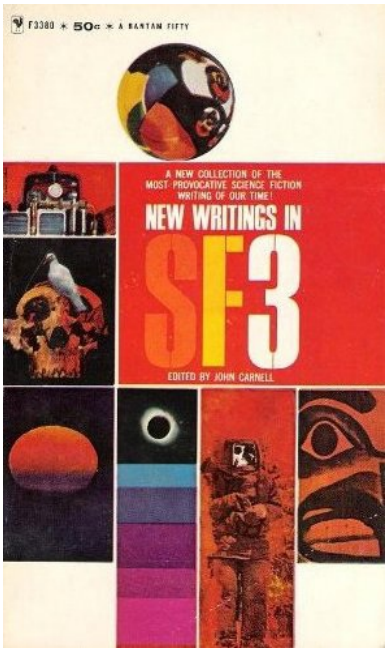

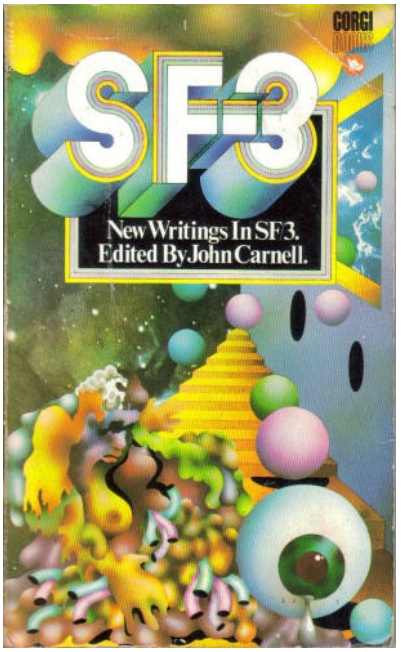

The dream was receding.

Haddan knew it was receding because he had insisted to himself it was a dream, a very vivid experience but untrue--a delusion which he should not attempt to retain. And he was forgetting the dream now as he woke up. There was a final memory of rain-swept greenery, long peals of thunder and then, at the very end, the sound of Auris weeping wildly nearby. For a moment, Haddan hesitated, wanting to return to her. But she was part of the delusion....

He came awake.

He was sitting alone in a room, at a table which projected like a wide shelf out of the blank wall before him. The wall was of some faintly gleaming material and in it Haddan could see his own dim reflection.

His mind seemed to recoil for an instant at that point, unwilling to acknowledge the bitter reality of being on the Spacemaster ship, of having become again a prisoner of the cynical overlords and debasers of mankind. And Auris and the others with him--detected in

the act of violating the basic Spacemaster law.

He should find out soon enough what the penalty was for that. It seemed very improbable that he had simply fallen asleep and escaped into dreams immediately after the capture; he must have been drugged. And now Spacemaster had brought him awake. They intended to question him, of course. He had identified himself as the leader of the group, the man responsible for the construction of the spaceship which had secretly left the City of Liot two years before. It was the truth, and his statement might make things easier for the others.

But why was he sitting here alone? Was he being watched? The table on which his hands rested was bare and of the same material as the wall, satiny to the touch. Aside from the table and his chair, the room was unfurnished. Behind him, perhaps twenty feet away, was another blank wall. To right and left, at approximately the same distance where the walls began to curve smoothly towards each other, the space between ceiling and floor was filled by curtains of curling haze through which light and color moved in restless ripples. The stuff looked almost completely insubstantial, but Haddan realized he could not see into it. In spite of its lack of furnishing, the room gave the impression of cool elegance. And it was silent. There was not a whisper of sound except his own breathing.

They might be testing him, his nerve, his reactions. But he was gaining nothing by continuing to sit here.

Haddan attempted to shift the chair back and found it immovable, attempted to get out of it and instantly felt his body grow impossibly heavy. Some trick of gravity ... they intended him to stay where he was. He settled back into the chair, felt his normal weight gradually return.

Perhaps two minutes later, a wave of light came gliding through the section of wall before him, suddenly enough to be startling. Then the wall vanished at that point. The table at which Haddan sat now extended on without visible support beyond the partition, a flat, square slab of dull-gleaming grey material, at the other side of which, with his eyes on Haddan, sat a man in a green and red uniform.

Haddan looked back without speaking. In his lifetime he had seen only a few dozen members of Spacemaster--all the others in the City of Liot, and most of those on various occasions before he became an adult. They showed a pronounced racial similarity: stocky, strong figures and broad, heavy-boned faces with slightly tilted grey eyes. This one, whose name was Vinence, had asked Haddan a half-dozen questions in an emotionless voice when they had been taken aboard the capturing Spacemaster vessel. What happened afterwards Haddan did not remember clearly, but it seemed to him

now that it couldn't have been many more minutes before he had fallen asleep. Nor could he remember what the questions had been or how he had answered them. There was no reason to doubt that the Spacemaster had used some drug on him.

Vinence appeared in no hurry to speak at the moment. He continued to study Haddan thoughtfully. Haddan let his gaze shift about the other section of the partly divided big room. It was almost a mirror image of this one; but the wall on the far side was lined from floor to ceiling with what night have been individual cabinets, and the table section before the Spacemaster was covered with rows of small colored geometrical figures.

Vinence's flat voice asked suddenly, "What did you dream about, Haddan?"

That might not be as pointless a question as it seemed--and there was no immediate reason to be too truthful. Haddan shook his head. "I don't remember any dreams."

"I think you lie," Vinence told him after a pause, but almost as if he didn't care greatly whether Haddan was lying or not. The grey eyes retained their look of cool speculation. "There were certain records on your ship," he went on, "which you destroyed with other material when we paralyzed the drive and halted the ship. Those records--I refer now to the ones dealing with the sins of Spacemaster--have since been restored. I found them interesting reading."

Haddan felt the blood drain slowly from his face. To have been caught while escaping from Spacemaster bondage might be one thing. To have planned, as he and Auris had, to provide proof of the evil Spacemaster was for human beings wherever they could be found, and to work towards Spacemaster's destruction--perhaps not in their own lifetimes or even in the next century or two, but in time--that was quite another. He did not know whether Spacemaster actually was capable of restoring material objects which had been recently destroyed; but it seemed at least possible. They knew many things they had kept their subject cities from learning. Vinence might also have gained the knowledge of the records from Auris or himself while they were drugged. It would come, Haddan thought, to much the same thing in the end.

He said nothing. He watched Vinence's tanned hand move just above the table on his right and saw a rectangle of pale light appear in the surface of the table with the motion. Vinence's eyes shifted to the lighted area and remained there for some seconds. Haddan gained the impression that the Spacemaster was reading. Then Vinence looked back at him.

"Do you happen to know," Vinence asked, "when the City of Liot was

built and stationed in orbit around the Liot Sun?"

"No," Haddan said. "There were no records of that period available."

Vinence said, "The records should still be in the city, though they would be difficult to find by now. Liot was built almost three thousand years ago. It was partly destroyed a number of times in inter-city wars, but the structure remains essentially intact today ... one of the largest cities ever to be set into space."

Liot's inhabitants, Haddan thought, had not done as well with the passing of time as their city. And for that Spacemaster must be charged.

"The treaty between Spacemaster and the Eighty-two Cities," Vinence continued, almost as if he had caught the thought, "has been in effect a little less than four centuries. Under its terms the cities engaged themselves not to build space vessels either for war or peace, and to destroy the ones they had. Spacemaster in turn assumed the responsibility of providing means of transit and trade among the cities and elsewhere as required."

"I've seen a copy of the treaty," Haddan said drily. "It didn't look like one of the cities would have signed too willingly."

Vinence nodded. "Spacemaster encountered very considerable opposition to the terms during the first few decades. Nevertheless, the terms were enforced, and opposition eventually died away. But not entirely. From time to time during the next generations some group or other would attempt to regain the means of independent space travel, either openly or furtively. The necessary measures would then be taken, and the attempt would subside.

"Of late, matters have been very quiet. Prior to the current case--yours--it had been nearly a hundred and fifty years since the construction of spacecraft was last initiated in the City of Liot. On that occasion it was also a secret action and was partly successful. One small ship was completed and was launched unobserved from the city, carrying two members of the conspiracy. They had old star charts in their possession which were to guide them to the one world in this section of our galaxy reported to have natural conditions suitable for human life without the elaborate precautions of doming. Human settlers were, in fact, supposed to have lived there in that manner during one period of the distant past.

"In spite of their lack of experience, the two travelers succeeded in reaching their goal. They returned to the City of Liot several years later with the word that there was such a planet and that human beings still existed on it, though their number was small and they had retrogressed to a condition of almost unbelievably primitive

savagery.

"The conspirators ... several hundred in number ... now hurried through their plans to complete the construction of a ship large enough to carry them and the equipment they would need to establish the nucleus of a new human civilization on this world. In that, they did not succeed. Spacemaster got wind of the affair, and the group committed mass suicide by barricading itself in a deserted building complex in Liot and detonating a bomb which disintegrated the complex. It was falsely assumed at the time that the ship they had been building and the material they had accumulated was destroyed with them. The ship and the other items actually were sealed away in another section of the city and remained undiscovered until a few years ago.

"Which brings us to you, Haddan.... The manner in which you became aware of the existence of this ship and of its original purpose is not important at the moment. You did learn of these things. You banded together with other malcontents, secretly finished the construction of the ship and eventually set forth on the voyage your predecessors failed to make. And you were apprehended two years later in the process of preparing for planetfall...."

Vinence paused, glanced again at the glowing rectangle in the table surface and waved his hand across it. As the light faded out, he went on, "That, I believe, is essentially the picture presented by this case. Do you agree?" His voice and expression were still impassive.

Haddan remained silent for some seconds. There was a thickness of rage in his throat which would have made it almost impossible for him to speak. In its factual details, Vinence's account of what had occurred was correct. But it was very far from complete. And it was the Spacemaster's cynical omission of the circumstances which had driven two groups of people a century and a half apart to make the same desperate effort to escape from Liot that seemed appalling. Vinence and his kind were fully aware of what had been done to the cities. It had been a deliberate, completely planned thing. Long ago, Spacemaster must have suspected a competitor for power in Liot and her sister giants in this area of space. It had isolated them from one another first, then proceeded to break them down individually. In Liot, Spacemaster had assumed control step by step, over the decades, of all the great city's functions. In Haddan's lifetime, the process had long been completed. Only Spacemaster had any understanding now even of the vast machine complexes which powered and sustained Liot; and only it retained access to the city sections where the machinery was housed. When one began to look about and check, as Haddan had done, it became clear that not even the shadow of self-government had been left.

But that was not the real crime. The crime had been committed in a

much more immediate manner against the city's inhabitants ... but so quietly that it became noticeable only when one obtained, as Haddan again had done, an understanding of the differences between the population now and that of five or six generations ago--

He told Vinence, his voice held carefully even, "I can't agree that you've presented the significant part of the picture."

"No?" Variance said. "You believe that the emphasis should be placed on Spacemaster's misdeeds?"

Haddan looked at him, feeling the thickening in his throat again and his hands hungry to close on the throat of the unreachable man across the table. Misdeeds! When in a city, which could be calculated to have been built to contain fifteen million people, twenty thousand remained--twenty thousand at the most; more accurate figures were simply no longer available. And when the life-span average in Liot now did not appear to be even eighteen years.... When three out of four of the lingering descendants of the city's builders slouched past with slack-jawed, foolish faces and empty eyes--

Of what specific "misdeed" had Spacemaster been guilty there? He hadn't been able to find out; and neither--much better informed in such matters than Haddan--had Auris. They had wanted to know, to complete the record of humanity's case against Spacemaster. But too few others had been capable of giving any assistance. Whole fields of knowledge had faded from men's minds; and, in any event, that one area of knowledge might always have been Spacemaster's secret. There had not been enough time to make sure. But the condition of the people of Liot showed in itself that an enormity of some kind had been practiced on them, and Haddan and Auris had corroborating evidence for that.

Vinence's voice reached Haddan again. "I was referring to the fact that the restored records contain a number of interesting speculations about Spacemaster and its activities. These records were, I believe, compiled by yourself?"

Haddan nodded. "They were."

"They were designed to be brought eventually to the attention of galactic humanity?"

Haddan hesitated, said, "Yes, that was their purpose."

The tilted cool eyes considered him for a moment. "I should like," Vinence said slowly, "to hear by what reasoning you arrived at your conclusions. I might say that nothing you tell me now could affect in any way the measures that will be taken in regard to yourself and

your companions. That is a settled thing." He paused, shrugged, added almost casually. "Some of you will lose all memory of the past. The others will live out the rest of their lives without ever quite awakening again from a not too unpleasant dream. We are not inhumane, you see. We simply do what is necessary. As these measures are."

Haddan stared at him helplessly. He felt cold. He had expected death for himself, though perhaps not for the others. He had, after all, been the ringleader. Without him, none of them would have left Liot. He had tried not to think of Auris.

But this was Spacemaster's way. Not outright death, but the slow quenching of the mind, the slow decay of the body. As they had done, in a somewhat different manner, in Liot.

"You must," Vinence said, "have made certain observations. Or perhaps Dr. Auris...."

Haddan, suddenly, found himself speaking. The words came out quietly, icily, though there was fury behind them. It was, of course, quite pointless. Vinence knew what had happened, and he was not a man to be ruffled by a victim's accusations. But there was some satisfaction still in letting him know that Spacemaster had not been as successful as it believed in concealing the fact that it was engaged in systematic genetic destruction.

Some came to suspect it, though by that time there was very little they could do--except to avoid for themselves such obvious traps as the marvelous automatic medical centers Spacemaster began to install throughout the city--

Vinence interrupted almost irritably. "Nearly two hundred years ago the number of capable human physicians in Liot dropped to the point where those installations became necessary, Haddan. It was only one of the many steps taken during the period of the treaty to maintain life in the cities as well as was possible."

Only one of the many steps, no doubt, Haddan agreed. But hardly with the purpose of maintaining life. Accurate records must have been difficult to find in Liot even then, but there was some reason to speculate whether it mightn't be often the strongest and most intelligent who were reported to have succumbed in the Spacemaster centers....

"You think they were killed there?" Vinence said.

"Or removed from the city."

"To further weaken the strain ... yes, I see." Vinence spoke

thoughtfully, as if this were a possibility he had considered for the first time. "How did you learn about things which happened so long ago, Haddan?"

"From a message left by one of the original designers of the ship we used," Haddan said.

"You discovered this message in what way?"

Haddan said, "Not by accident. The man committed suicide with the others so that Spacemaster would not learn that the ship hadn't been destroyed. I'm his lineal descendant. He arranged to make the information about the ship available again, provided the message eventually came into the hands of somebody who could understand it. The supposition was that such a person would then also be capable of acting on the information."

"The message was coded?"

"Of course."

"I find it curious," Vinence said, "that you didn't come to our attention before this."

Haddan shrugged. "My more immediate ancestors have followed the family tradition of staying out of your medical centers. I assume that's why the strain continued as long as it did. I've also observed that tradition ... and the other one of not applying for passage out of Liot on a Spacemaster ship."

"You feel that's another of our traps?"

"I've discovered no evidence," Haddan said, "that anyone who met the physical requirements for space flight and was accepted for passage later returned to Liot."

"I see. It appears that you were remarkably busy in a number of areas during the years before you left the city. And I suppose you formed an acquaintance with Dr. Auris in order to confirm your ancestor's suspicions about procedures in our medical centers?"

Haddan had hoped to keep Spacemaster's interest away from Auris, but the records revealed very clearly the role she had played. He said, "Yes, I obtained some additional information in that manner."

Vinence nodded. "She is another unusual member of your generation," he said. "She applied for medical training while still almost a child--the first volunteer to appear in the centers for that purpose in a decade. She wanted to help the city ... but you know about that. She was given instruction--"

"Carefully limited instruction," Haddan said.

"Yes, carefully limited. We were making a study of Dr. Auris. It seems that on your instigation she began to study us as well. When she disappeared, it was assumed she had died somewhere in the city. Haddan, you accuse us of the genetic destruction of the space civilization of the Eighty-two Cities. What benefit do you think Spacemaster derived from the act?"

It was a question Haddan had often asked himself, and he believed he knew the answer. But there was an undefinable vague uneasiness in his mind now when he said, "The cities were threatening to dispute that space mastery of yours. At the time they were forced to accept your treaty terms, they may not have been too far away from being your equals. But you still had certain technological advantages, so you broke them first. Then, not feeling strong enough to control them indefinitely simply by forbidding them to practice space flight, you decided on a program of deliberate, gradual extermination."

"And why," Vinence asked, "select that slow, almost interminable method? The effortless solution to such a problem would have been to open the cities to space."

"It would not have been a safe solution for Spacemaster," Haddan said, "if galactic mankind learned of the outrage." He hesitated, the sense of uneasiness stronger. For a moment, he seemed on the verge of recalling some very disturbing thing he had known once and forgotten about, and he felt sweat suddenly in the palms of his hands. Then those sensations faded. Vinence was still watching him, expression unchanged; and Haddan continued uncertainly, "You preferred to murder the cities in a manner which might, if necessary, be attributed to a natural process ... something for which you could not be held responsible. You...."

He did not see Vinence move, but with that he was suddenly plunged into complete darkness. The Spacemaster and everything else had vanished. Haddan attempted automatically to surge up out of his chair but felt intolerable heaviness dragging him back. He waited, breathing with difficulty as the heaviness eased off again, for what would happen next.

Vinence spoke then, the voice coming now out of the dark above Haddan perhaps twenty feet off and a little to his right.

"The ship is moving, Haddan. We're returning to the planet at which you were intercepted--"

And abruptly there was light.

Not the light which previously had been in the room, but the rich,

bright glow of a living world swimming under its sun. All the walls of the double room, the floor and ceiling, seemed to form a single continuous window through which the brightness poured. Haddan couldn't see Vinence, but there was a blurred, greyish area up towards the right which might be an energy block behind which the Spacemaster sat. And this, Haddan thought, could very well be--it hadn't occurred to him before--the control room of the ship.

The ship was stationary in atmosphere, well down. They must have been just off the planet to have arrived here in that nearly instantaneous manner, but the maneuver was still one which would have been flatly impossible to the space vessel so painstakingly completed in Liot. Haddan could make out forested hills below, lush dark-green rises about which three broad rivers curved, rain clouds scudding above them. Far to the left was the hazy expanse of a sea. The area seemed to be in the tropical zone, very similar in appearance to the one where he and Auris had come down in a small boat to decide where their ship should land. As it had done then, the scene brought a sudden, almost unbearable hunger to Haddan's throat, a sense of homecoming which, for an instant, drove out everything else.

"Rather different from the parks of the City of Liot," Vinence's voice commented. "More so than you knew, Haddan. Our tests of those you had on board show that the majority would not have lived long on an undomed world. You and Dr. Auris are fortunate in that respect. Many of the others are fortunate that Spacemaster found them before they could be seriously attacked by the infections you brought back to the ship with you...."

Not so fortunate, Haddan thought; otherwise the statement might be true. It was one of the incalculable risks everyone in the group had taken knowingly and willingly. They had not been able to foretell either, what the impact of spaceflight on genetically weakened bodies might be; and nine men and four women of the eighty-five who left Liot died during the first quarter of the two-year voyage. And the irony was that they had taken such chances not knowing that Spacemaster regarded the world towards which they were fleeing as another of its possessions. If they had been able to land, and enough survived, it was still unlikely they would have escaped detection long enough to even begin to carry out their further plans.

"And now we shall look through the instruments at what might have been your new neighbors here," Vinence's voice went on. "An exceptionally large troop remains as a rule in this immediate area.... Yes, down at the bend in the northern river.... You see the cluster of golden sparks above the trees, Haddan? Its density indicates the presence of the troop, each spark representing one living human being."

Haddan's glance moved up the largest of the rivers, stopped at a firefly pattern of tiny, brilliant lights in the air on both sides of one of the bends. They would be invisible of course to the naked eye--a convenient method for Spacemaster to keep check on the scattered inhabitants of this planet and, if desired, even to conduct a head count. No, Haddan thought, he and the others from Liot couldn't have remained undiscovered here long.

The fireflies vanished; then the scene outside the ship darkened suddenly, becoming a blur of green and gold. As the blur cleared, Haddan saw that the devices Vinence was operating had produced a close-up view of the area of the river bend at ground level, and of fifty or sixty of the human "troop." It was a convincing illusion--he might have been sitting among them--and more than a view. His ears recorded babble of shrill calls from a group of children at the edge of the water; two women were shouting back and forth across the river. After a few seconds, Haddan realized there were also tactile sensations ... a sense of warmth, of moving air; and, very faintly, odors of vegetation and water.

His gaze shifted about the group. They were not, he thought, remarkably handsome people, though there was a great deal of individual variance in that. All--even the bathing children--looked dirty; almost all were naked. They appeared to be chiefly engaged in grubbing around in reeds and thickets for edible substances, vegetable and animal. Only a few of the faces nearest him gave the impression of calculating intelligence. But there was, with very few exceptions, an air of alertness and robust energy about them which no group of corresponding size in Liot would have suggested. And the number of both grizzled oldsters and small children was startling. There had been *no* healthy old people in Liot.

It was a group which could have been retaught many things long forgotten here, Haddan thought, and which should have learned them quickly. The plan had not been a hopeless one in that respect; the possibility of developing a new civilization on this world had existed. And that made it the more strange that no civilization did exist here, that the descendants of the old-time settlers had regressed instead to this manner of living ... almost exactly, except for the dexterous use of pieces of wood and rock in their varied pursuit of meals, the manner of a troop of animals. Vinence might have used the term contemptuously; but it was a correct one.

Spacemaster's work again? It very easily might be, Haddan decided, and it probably was. Why else should there be so *few* of these people on a world which obviously could have supported a far denser human population--even one which had lost every scrap of technological understanding. Yes, Spacemaster, almost certainly. A somewhat different form of degradation here, perhaps brought about

for an entirely different purpose. But it had been done deliberately--

"Galactic humanity," Vinence's voice said from above him. "You're looking at a part of it here, you know, Haddan! As large a part, as a matter of fact, as you're likely to find in any one place on this world ... and studying them at close range now, do you think Spacemaster would be really concerned about anything you could tell these people? It might be interesting to watch you trying to describe the City of Liot to them in the vocabulary of grunts which their use of speech amounts to.

"But, of course, you knew that. You understood it would take generations to bring about any significant change here, and that you and your companions could only begin the process. But this is one small, badly stunted twig on the great tree of mankind. You were planning to get word to the others. The number of them alone would make them unconquerable now. Only fourteen thousand years ago, they were still confined to a single planet not very different from this one. But then they drove out into the galaxy, established great civilizations on a thousand new worlds, scattered the self-sustaining giant cities through space.... *That's* the humanity Spacemaster would have to fear, isn't it, if it learned what we did to the Eighty-two Cities?"

"Or," Haddan said, "if it learned what you've done to this world! That alone would damn you--and in the end it will. You won't escape mankind's judgment for ever."

There was silence for some seconds, even the muted sounds of human activity at the river dwindling into nothing. Then Vinence spoke again.

"There's a very curious fact here, Haddan. You--and you're far from unique in it--have hypnotized yourself into believing certain facts about Spacemaster. By doing it, you were able to ignore another possible explanation for the way things have gone in Liot, though there are indications that it has never been very far from your awareness. Perhaps one can't blame you for the continuous self-deception, but it must end now. And I think that essentially you do want to know the true reason for what will be done with you and your friends."

The words seemed to just miss making sense. A queer, sharp surge of panic began to arise in Haddan. He heard himself blurt out thickly, "What are you talking about?"

There was no answer. Instead, complete darkness closed about him again. Haddan waited, his thoughts whirling, shifting drunkenly as if in shock. What *had* Vinence just said? He seemed unable to remember it clearly. What self-deception?

He realized that Vinence was speaking again.

"It took two years to cover the distance between Liot and the world we just left," the voice said. "But we are not called Spacemaster for nothing, so don't be too surprised now. What you will see is as real as it appears."

The thick darkness was lifting from the double room as he spoke, and through the surrounding endless window of walls and ceiling and floor the stars of space shone in. On Haddan's left was the harsh yellow-white glare of a nearby sun; and dead ahead, reflecting the glare like a blazing jewel, were the faceted walls of Liot. He recognized the city instantly, though he had seen this outside view before only in the instant after a long unused small lock opened to let out their ship. Then the drive immediately had hurled them away from the Liot Sun with almost the speed of light.

The city blurred now, reshaped itself, closer. The Spacemaster ship was gliding in towards a huge opened entry lock. Another blur, and it hung in the lock's mouth.

"What do you see, Haddan?"

He stared down the brilliantly lit, starkly empty lock. At the far end, a mile away, was another vast, gaping circle. Beyond it, more light....

The thought came suddenly, numbing as death:

"The city is empty!"

Haddan didn't know he had said it. But he heard Vinence reply.

"Yes, empty ... open to space. Liot was the last of the Eighty-two. It's been lifeless for nearly a year. And now"--the voice was flat and expressionless again--"we'll go to the worlds and cities of the galactic mankind on which you based your hopes. I think you've begun to understand consciously what we will find there."

And, in that instant, he had.

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Perhaps only hours later, Haddan stood at a window of a great globular structure floating less than half a mile above the surface of a world called Clell. A sense of heavy, almost paralyzing physical shock hadn't yet drained completely from his body. But his thoughts were clear again.

He had seen the dead worlds, the dead space cities of galactic mankind--enough of them; too many. Clell still lived, in a fashion. The glassy roofs of the flat, wide buildings stretching towards the horizon across the pleasant plain below Haddan sheltered eighty thousand human beings ... the greater part of what was left of the proud species of Man. Clell was the next to last world he would see, and the last he would see while he still retained the knowledge of who and what he was.

Spacemaster's plans for his personal future in themselves were not distressing. They would take away his memories, but he would be living on the green world far away from Clell where there was thunder and rain, perhaps as a member of the band he had watched on the river's banks--not the most handsome of people on the whole, and somewhat soiled, but not unhappy. In Vinence's phrasing, he would have become a neoprimitive, one tiny, temporary, individual factor in Spacemaster's gigantic, centuries-spanning plan to obtain survival for the human race. And Auris would be there, though Haddan wouldn't be able to remember her, or she him. He recalled his feelings when he had looked down on that world and during the few hours he walked about on it, and he knew the other Haddan would be contented enough in his new existence. He certainly preferred that prospect to the drugged, comforting fantasies which would be the final life experience of the human majority on Clell ... the majority which could not be employed in the plan.

But it was not what he wanted. And the immediate question was how far Spacemaster could be trusted.

Haddan's gaze shifted back to the table behind him. It was littered with maps, charts, masses of other informative material, much of it incomprehensible. But, added to what he had been shown from Vinence's incredible ship, there had been enough he understood to present the story of the genetic collapse of Man--or Spacemaster's version of it.

It was not too implausible. The death seed of multitudinous abnormal genes had been planted in the race before it set out to explore and inhabit the galaxy, and with the expansion their rate of development increased. For another long time, improving medical skills maintained the appearance of a balance; it had become very much less easy for civilized Man to die even under a heavy genetic burden. But since he continued to give short shrift to any government audacious enough to make the attempt of regulating his breeding preferences, that burden also continued to grow.

A point regularly came where medical knowledge, great as it might be, was suddenly shown to be no longer capable of the human repair work needed now to keep some specific civilization on its feet. The lethal genes, the innumerable minor mutations, had established at

last a subnormal population, chronically sick and beginning to decrease rapidly in numbers. Spacemaster's charts indicated that this period, once entered, was not prolonged. When there were simply not enough healthy minds and bodies left to attend to the requirements of existence, the final descent became catastrophically swift and was irreversible. On Liot, Haddan had been living through the last years of such a period, modified only by Spacemaster's intervention.

Spacemaster, with its supermachines and superscience, had come into existence as an organization almost too late to act as more than humanity's undertakers. Liot had been the last of all islands of galactic civilization. In less than fifteen centuries, the race had gone everywhere from its peak of achievement and expansion to near-extinction. Spacemaster believed it could still be rebuilt from its remnants, but that the rebuilding required surgical ruthlessness and long-continued supervision.

That was the story Haddan had been given ... and why, he thought, should they bother to lie to him? But there were puzzling features, and questions left unanswered. What was Spacemaster? Some superior genetic strain which had possessed the self-discipline and foresight to eliminate any threatening weaknesses in its ranks and to remain apart from deteriorated groups? Then why should they have undertaken the stupendous task of attempting to recreate the human race from the survivors of the foundering civilizations? They themselves, at an incomparable level of technological achievement, were the new humanity.

The reflection had raised eerie possibilities. There was the fact that he found it impossible to feel at ease in Vinence's presence. Something in the Spacemaster's appearance, the manner in which he moved, sent constant alert signals to Haddan's brain ... a difference there, not too obvious but profoundly disturbing. It was as if his senses would not accept that Vinence was another human being, and the thought had come that perhaps on one of the dying worlds a race of robots had been brought into existence and given the task of saving mankind--that Vinence and his fellows were still attempting to carry out the task, with mechanical perseverance, mechanical lack of real interest and, actually, without too much intelligence.

Because Spacemaster's plan ... or as much of it as Haddan had been allowed to see ... contained obvious elements of sheer, senseless futility....

Or Vinence might be, if not a robot, a member of a genuine alien species, one masquerading as human beings, and with very different designs on the survivors of humanity than Haddan had been told.

There was the world Tayun to which he and Auris and such others of the Liot group as would not be retained on Clell were destined to go. It would be the last group Spacemaster could add to its sparse human breeding stock on Tayun. It had kept the City of Liot functioning for a year after Haddan's departure. Then it became obvious that there would be no more viable births in the city, that the last drop of genetic usefulness had been drained from the shrunken population. The survivors were transferred to Clell, and the city left open to space but intact ... because eventually human beings should return to lay claim to it again.

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That, Vinence said, was Spacemaster's purpose. For centuries it had drawn those who still seemed sufficiently sound out of the subnormal groups under its attention and moved them to Tayun, which of all known worlds came closest to matching the conditions which had existed on primitive Earth. Not too easy a world for human beings to live on without the tools and conveniences of civilization, and not too difficult. Which was exactly as it should be for Spacemaster's purpose. Tayun was the laboratory in which, over the course of generations, any concealed inherited weaknesses were to be worked very thoroughly out of the transplanted human strains. Throughout the long probationary period, they were therefore to have only their natural endowment to see them through the problems they encountered. This was the reason that transferred adults were not allowed to retain the memories of their previous life. Haddan, Auris and the rest would be left in the vicinity of some large group which could be counted on not to take too unamiable an attitude towards befuddled strangers. Since they were physically and mentally well above the present average on Tayun, it should not take them long to overcome their initial handicaps among the group's members. If their memories were left intact, it would be too difficult for them to avoid the temptation of introducing minor innovations to make life more easy for themselves and the others.

"It isn't intended that life should become more easy there for quite a few centuries," Vinence said, "except as the strain improves its natural ability to meet the conditions around it...."

He acknowledged that for a while it had appeared that the Spacemaster experiment on Tayun was too drastic and would fail. Diseases, shifts of climate, animal enemies, and their own latent genetic liabilities seemed to be killing the "neoprimitives" off faster than they could be brought in. But during the past sixty years, their number had first stabilized, and then had begun to increase detectably. The first crisis was over.

It all looked quite logical, so far. Haddan knew little of genetics as Spacemaster understood it; it had been among Liot's "lost" sciences. He was willing to accept that there were no effective gentler alternatives to letting a species cleanse itself in a world-wide natural framework of the individuals who lacked essential qualifications to survive. And having seen the neoprimitives of Tayun for himself, he had not been greatly surprised by Vinence's explanation.

But the further steps of Spacemaster's plan were--when one stopped to give them any thought at all--completely and unbelievably insane....

Hearing a door open and close behind him, Haddan turned and saw Vinence come across the room.

He stood silently, watching the stocky, strong-looking figure, the bland, impassive face with the tilted grey eyes. Every Spacemaster he had seen so far looked very much like Vinence. What *was* the wrongness about them? He couldn't have said exactly. Perhaps it was a hint of unevenness in the motion, the suggestion of a marionette propelled along by expert hands holding invisible strings. The smooth features and coolly calculating eyes ... was this a robot? Haddan felt aversion, the concealed ripple of horror, crawl again over his skin.

Vinence stopped at the other side of the table, glancing at the materials scattered about it. He pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Did you get much out of this?" he asked Haddan.

"Not too much."

"It's a large subject," Vinence acknowledged. He stared thoughtfully at Haddan, added, "Our business on Clell has been concluded. Besides Dr. Auris and yourself, four of your group chose Tayun. The others will remain here."

Haddan said incredulously, "Only four preferred Tayun?"

Vinence shrugged. "That's a very high average, Haddan. I did not expect so many. In the terminal generations of a culture like Liot almost nothing is left of the motivation to survive as a species. There were three of you of whom we felt nearly certain; but the majority of your group were intellectual rebels who faced the risks of leaving Liot without undue qualms largely because they have always been a little detached from living realities. For them there could be no compensation in beginning life again as a memoryless savage. The dreams of Clell held much more interest."

He added, "There was a time when Spacemaster might have taken

another dozen from that particular group for Tayun, without their consent. The tests rate at least that many as qualified. But no combination of tests shows every essential. We learned that when we went only by them and our own judgment, and nothing else, we ended almost invariably by having weakened the Tayun strain."

"And what," Haddan asked, "are you going to accomplish finally by strengthening it?"

Something flickered for an instant in the Spacemaster's eyes. Then his expression changed slowly, became mocking, watchful, perhaps menacing; and the certainty grew in Haddan that his question had not come as a surprise.

Vinence said, "That is a curious thing to ask at this late moment." He nodded at the table before him. "Are you disagreeing with some of the conclusions you found there?"

Haddan looked at him. Why argue really? He would not change Spacemaster's plans ... except perhaps unfavorably as regards to himself. Vinence's attitude of expectancy suggested he might be on the verge of entering a prepared trap. His reaction to the information allowed him, to the things he had been shown and told--without apparent good reason so far--could be the factor which determined what they did in his case. And it was quite possible that they preferred to exclude too questioning an attitude from man's new genetic pattern.

Why not accept Tayun? For him as an entity, there certainly would be compensations for becoming absorbed by the living racial strain. At the very least, it was better than to spend the rest of his days in the sterile dream-halls of Clell--

He heard himself say, "It was a logical question. The charts show what you've told me. Eventually Tayun Man is to be allowed to develop his own civilization. During that period, he should be a trifle hardier physically, a trifle more mentally competent, than the species was perhaps twenty thousand years ago. Serious genetic defects will have been burned out. But in every essential it will be the same species. Spacemaster will have provided mankind with a fresh start. That's what it amounts to, isn't it?"

Vinence nodded. "Very nearly."

Haddan said "Your helpfulness does go a little further, of course. The redevelopment of civilization when it begins will not be haphazard. Man will automatically come across prepared information in some concealed form or other at the moment he can best put it to use. So this second time he should advance very rapidly. But will some super-organization like Spacemaster still be in control of him then?"

"Hardly," Vinence said. "And not at all after they begin to spread through the galaxy again. That would be not only undesirable but impossible. We've learned that much."

"Then it seems," Haddan said, "that Spacemaster is committing an act of lunacy. If there's to be nothing but a fresh start, the whole cycle should be repeating itself a few thousand years from now. They'll have made the same mistakes and again be well advanced in the process of self-destruction. There's no reason to expect anything else--and of course you're aware of that. But unless you already know how to keep it from occurring...."

Vinence shook his head. "We don't." He hesitated. "There is a vast difference between restoring the health of a species and attempting to change its natural attitudes in any significant manner. The last is an enormously complex process which contains a much greater likelihood of doing harm than good. I'm engaged myself in Spacemaster's investigations of possible means to prevent renewed racial suicide, and have been for a long time. We are not at all certain that even a theoretical solution can be found." The tone was bland, the grey eyes still fixed unblinkingly on Haddan.

Haddan said doggedly, "A solution will have to be found, or the plan is almost meaningless. And until it is found, Spacemaster is wasting anyone like Dr. Auris or myself on Tayun ... anyone capable of independent abstract thinking, which certainly isn't a vital requirement in Tayun Man at present. The strain can get along without our kind for a while. You should be putting every functioning mind you can reach to use in looking for the answers you don't have. That should be our assignment in Spacemaster's plan. Anything else is indefensible."

Vinence was silent for some moments. Then he shrugged, said, "There is one thing wrong with that assumption, Haddan. I mentioned that there are complexities in such a project. They are much greater than you realize. Certainly neither you nor Dr. Auris are stupid--but your individual remaining life expectancies are less than fifty years. You would be dead before you could learn half of what you would need to know to begin to be useful to us in such work. There is simply too much to be understood."

Haddan stared at him. "But you were capable of understanding it?"

"Yes, I was."

"Then what--"

Haddan's voice died in his throat. Vinence had raised his hands to his face, cupping the sides of his jaw in his palms, fingers pressed

vertically along the cheeks. The hands seemed to make a slight tugging motion; then they lifted the Spacemaster's head from the sturdy neck and placed it unhurriedly upright on the table, a little to one side.

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Haddan felt incapable of breathing or moving. He stared in a fascination of repugnance at the head, at the eyes--still fixed on him--at the grey, glistening, jellylike surface of the sectioned neck. Then the head's mouth moved.

"The Spacemaster's body," Vinence's voice said, with no change in tone or inflection--it seemed to be still coming out of the head--"is an interesting biological machine, Haddan. As a matter of fact, it represents a partial solution to the problem we were discussing, though not a very satisfactory one. There are pronounced disadvantages. This body, for example, couldn't exist for minutes if exposed to the open air of even so gentle a world as Clell. If you happened to touch me, I would die almost at once. And if you hadn't been enclosed in a screen of filtering energies since the instant we met, there would have been the same regrettable result. The 'Spacemasters' you may have seen in the City of Liot were manipulated automatons--displayed occasionally to produce some specific effect on the population. A Spacemaster body can tolerate very few of the realities of life as you know them. It experiences almost everything through instruments, at second hand. It uses no food, cannot sleep, cannot reproduce its kind.

"But we are human, and have had wholly human bodies. What you see is the result of a fusion with something which is nearly, but not quite, another form of life, and with the non-living instrumentation which allows us to move, see, sustain normal gravity and--as you notice--to speak at considerable length. Nevertheless, we remember what human realities were like, and at times we miss them excruciatingly. We experience remorse, frustration, the sense of failure; and we are often too vividly aware of the artificial monstrosities we have become. As I said, there are disadvantages to this kind of living.

"The other side of the matter is that the Spacemaster body lives for a very long while, though eventually it does wear out along with its human component. So there's time to learn and understand some of those very complicated matters one must know in order to do what is necessary ... which is what Spacemaster has been doing for the past two thousand years."

Haddan said hoarsely, "How long have you...."

"Not quite half that period. It was roughly nine hundred years ago that I faced the same choice as you do today. I'm a little shopworn by now, though it hardly shows yet."

Vinence's hands reached down, lifted the head, replaced it on the neck, twisted deftly, quickly and withdrew. "This may seem an overly dramatic demonstration," the Spacemaster went on, "but it has its uses. More than one apparent candidate has lost all interest in further discussion around this point."

Haddan drew in a deep breath, asked, "You're offering me a body of that kind?"

"Why else would we be talking about it?"

Something stirred in the back of Haddan's mind--a soft confusion of light and color, whispering rain, and Auris's sweetly intelligent face. Then it all faded.

He said, "I accept, of course."

"Of course you do," Vinence agreed. "There's been almost no question of that. But we've learned to wait until a potential recruit sees the need for membership and demands it, as his right, before we reveal the conditions. In the past, too many who were persuaded to become Spacemasters on the basis of our judgment of their qualifications eventually found it was a burden they no longer wanted to carry. And it's so very easy for any of us to step out on a pleasant planet, and breathe its air and die.

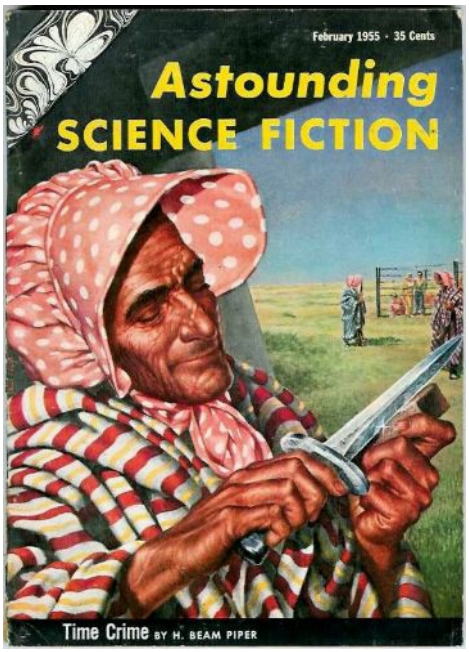
"But you've made your choice. We won't lose you. Neither are we afraid of losing Dr. Auris, who made the same decisions some hours before you."

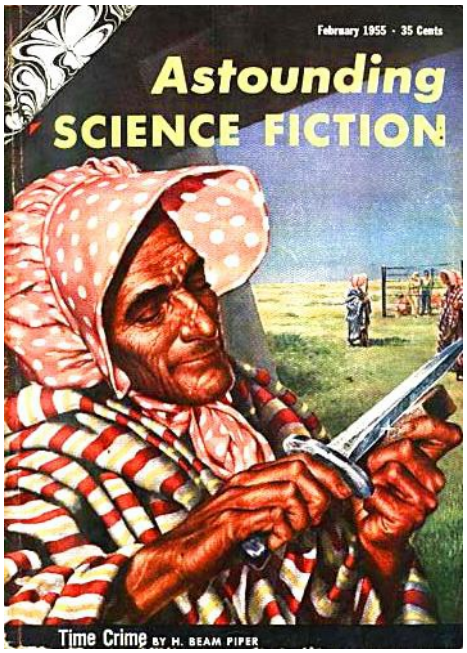
In spite of everything, that came as a shock. After a moment, Haddan asked, "Then when ... do we begin?"

Vinence said, "There are no formalities. You'll be inoculated at once. There will be a few uncomfortable months then until the fusion is complete. But afterwards ... we build better bodies now than this one of mine ... you should both have a full twelve hundred years ahead of you to work on Spacemaster's great problem, and Man's. And who knows? That may be the period in which the answer is finally found."

"Grandpa"

Published in *Astounding Science Fiction*, Vol. 54, No. 6 (February 1955), though this version is taken from *The Hub: Dangerous Territory* (2001) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.





Two slightly different versions, just for comparison.

A green-winged, downy thing as big as a hen fluttered along the hillside to a point directly above Cord's head and hovered there, twenty feet above him. Cord, a fifteen-year-old human being, leaned back against a skipboat parked on the equator of a world that had known human beings for only the past four Earth years, and eyed the thing speculatively. The thing was, in the free and easy terminology of the Sutang Colonial Team, a swamp bug. Concealed in the downy fur back of the bug's head was a second, smaller, semiparasitical thing, classed as a bug rider.

The bug itself looked like a new species to Cord. Its parasite might or might not turn out to be another unknown. Cord was a natural research man; his first glimpse of the odd flying team had sent endless curiosities thrilling through him. How did that particular phenomenon tick, and why? What fascinating things, once you'd learned about it, could you get it to do?

Normally, he was hampered by circumstances in carrying out any such investigation. The Colonial Team was a practical, hardworking

outfit--two thousand people who'd been given twenty years to size up and tame down the brand-new world of Sutang to the point where a hundred thousand colonists could be settled on it, in reasonable safety and comfort. Even junior colonial students like Cord were expected to confine their curiosity to the pattern of research set up by the station to which they were attached. Cord's inclination toward independent experiments had got him into disfavor with his immediate superiors before this.

He sent a casual glance in the direction of the Yoger Bay Colonial Station behind him. No signs of human activity about that low, fortresslike bulk in the hill. Its central lock was still closed. In fifteen minutes, it was scheduled to be opened to let out the Planetary Regent, who was inspecting the Yoger Bay Station and its principal activities today.

Fifteen minutes was time enough to find out something about the new bug, Cord decided.

But he'd have to collect it first.

He slid out one of the two handguns holstered at his side. This one was his own property: a Vanadian projectile weapon. Cord thumbed it to position for anesthetic small-game missiles and brought the hovering swamp bug down, drilled neatly and microscopically through the head.

As the bug hit the ground, the rider left its back. A tiny scarlet demon, round and bouncy as a rubber ball, it shot toward Cord in three long hops, mouth wide to sink home inch-long, venom-dripping fangs. Rather breathlessly, Cord triggered the gun again and knocked it out in mid-leap. A new species, all right! Most bug riders were harmless plant-eaters, mere suckers of vegetable juice--

"*Cord!*" A feminine voice.

Cord swore softly. He hadn't heard the central lock click open. She must have come around from the other side of the station.

"Hi, Grayan!" he shouted innocently without looking around. "Come see what I got! New species!"

Grayan Mahoney, a slender, black-haired girl two years older than himself, came trotting down the hillside toward him. She was Sutang's star colonial student, and the station manager, Nirmond, indicated from time to time that she was a fine example for Cord to pattern his own behavior on. In spite of that, she and Cord were good friends, but she bossed him around considerably.

"Cord, you dope!" she scowled as she came up. "Quit acting like a collector! If the Regent came out now, you'd be sunk. Nirmond's been telling her about you!"

"Telling her what?" Cord asked, startled.

"For one," Grayan reported, "that you don't keep up on your assigned work. Two, that you sneak off on one-man expeditions of your own at least once a month and have to be rescued--"

"Nobody," Cord interrupted hotly, "has had to rescue me yet!"

"How's Nirmond to know you're alive and healthy when you just drop out of sight for a week?" Grayan countered. "Three," she resumed checking the items off on slim fingertips, "he complained that you keep private zoological gardens of unidentified and possibly deadly vermin in the woods back of the station. And four ... well, Nirmond simply doesn't want the responsibility for you any more!" She held up the four fingers significantly.

"Golly!" gulped Cord, dismayed. Summed up tersely like that, his record *didn't* look too good.

"Golly is right! I keep warning you! Now Nirmond wants the Regent to send you back to Vanadia--and there's a starship coming in to New Venus forty-eight hours from now!" New Venus was the Colonial Team's main settlement on the opposite side of Sutang.

"What'll I do?"

"Start acting like you had good sense mainly." Grayan grinned suddenly. "I talked to the Regent, too--Nirmond isn't rid of you yet! But if you louse up on our tour of the Bay Farms today, you'll be off the Team for good!"

She turned to go. "You might as well put the skipboat back; we're not using it. Nirmond's driving us down to the edge of the Bay in a treadcar, and we'll take a raft from there. Don't let them know I warned you!"

Cord looked after her, slightly stunned. He hadn't realized his reputation had become as bad as all that! To Grayan, whose family had served on Colonial Teams for the past four generations, nothing worse was imaginable than to be dismissed and sent back ignominiously to one's own homeworld. Much to his surprise, Cord was discovering now that he felt exactly the same way about it!

Leaving his newly bagged specimens to revive by themselves and flutter off again, he hurriedly flew the skipboat around the station and rolled it back into its stall.

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Three rafts lay moored just offshore in the marshy cove, at the edge of which Nirmond had stopped the treadcar. They looked somewhat like exceptionally broad-brimmed, well-worn sugarloaf hats floating out there, green and leathery. Or like lily pads twenty-five feet across, with the upper section of a big, gray-green pineapple growing from the center of each. Plant animals of some sort. Sutang was too new to have had its phyla sorted out into anything remotely like an orderly classification. The rafts were a local oddity which had been investigated and could be regarded as harmless and moderately useful. Their usefulness lay in the fact that they were employed as a rather slow means of transportation about the shallow, swampy waters of the Yoger Bay. That was as far as the Team's interest in them went at present.

The Regent had stood up from the back seat of the car, where she was sitting next to Cord. There were only four in the party; Grayan was up front with Nirmond.

"Are those our vehicles?" The Regent sounded amused.

Nirmond grinned, a little sourly. "Don't underestimate them, Dane! They could become an important economic factor in this region in time. But, as a matter of fact, these three are smaller than I like to use." He was peering about the reedy edges of the cove. "There's a regular monster parked here usually--"

Grayan turned to Cord. "Maybe Cord knows where Grandpa is hiding."

It was well-meant, but Cord had been hoping nobody would ask him

about Grandpa. Now they all looked at him.

"Oh, you want Grandpa?" he said, somewhat flustered. "Well, I left him ... I mean I saw him a couple of weeks ago about a mile south from here--"

Grayan sighed. Nirmond grunted and told the Regent, "The rafts tend to stay wherever they're left, providing it's shallow and muddy. They use a hair-root system to draw chemicals and microscopic nourishment directly from the bottom of the bay. Well--Grayan, would you like to drive us there?"

Cord settled back unhappily as the treadcar lurched into motion. Nirmond suspected he'd used Grandpa for one of his unauthorized tours of the area, and Nirmond was quite right.

"I understand you're an expert with these rafts, Cord," Dane said from beside him. "Grayan told me we couldn't find a better steersman, or pilot, or whatever you call it, for our trip today."

"I can handle them," Cord said, perspiring. "They don't give you any trouble!" He didn't feel he'd made a good impression on the Regent so far. Dane was a young, handsome-looking woman with an easy way of talking and laughing, but she wasn't the head of the Sutang Colonial Team for nothing. She looked quite capable of shipping out anybody whose record wasn't up to par.

"There's one big advantage our beasties have over a skipboat, too," Nirmond remarked from the front seat. "You don't have to worry about a snapper trying to climb on board with you!" He went on to describe the stinging ribbon-tentacles the rafts spread around them under water to discourage creatures that might make a meal off their tender underparts. The snappers and two or three other active and aggressive species of the Bay hadn't yet learned it was foolish to attack armed human beings in a boat, but they would skitter hurriedly out of the path of a leisurely perambulating raft.

Cord was happy to be ignored for the moment. The Regent, Nirmond, and Grayan were all Earth people, which was true of most of the members of the Team; and Earth people made him uncomfortable, particularly in groups. Vanadia, his own homeworld, had barely graduated from the status of Earth colony itself, which might explain the difference. All the Earth people he'd met so far seemed dedicated to what Grayan Mahoney called the Big Picture, while Nirmond usually spoke of it as "Our Purpose Here." They acted strictly in accordance with their Team Regulations--sometimes, in Cord's opinion, quite insanely. Because now and then the Regulations didn't quite cover a new situation and then somebody was likely to get killed. In which case, the Regulations would be modified promptly, but Earth people didn't seem otherwise disturbed

by such events.

Grayan had tried to explain it to Cord:

"We can't really ever *know* in advance what a new world is going to be like! And once we're there, there's too much to do, in the time we've got, to study it inch by inch. You get your job done, and you take a chance. But if you stick by the Regulations you've got the best chances of surviving anybody's been able to figure out for you--"

Cord felt he preferred to just use good sense and not let Regulations or the job get him into a situation he couldn't figure out for himself.

To which Grayan replied impatiently that he hadn't yet got the Big Picture--

The treadcar swung around and stopped, and Grayan stood up in the front seat, pointing. "That's Grandpa, over there!"

Dane also stood up and whistled softly, apparently impressed by Grandpa's fifty-foot spread. Cord looked around in surprise. He was pretty sure this was several hundred yards from the spot where he'd left the big raft two weeks ago; and as Nirmond said, they didn't usually move about by themselves.

Puzzled, he followed the others down a narrow path to the water, hemmed in by tree-sized reeds. Now and then he got a glimpse of Grandpa's swimming platform, the rim of which just touched the shore. Then the path opened out, and he saw the whole raft lying in sunlit, shallow water; and he stopped short, startled.

Nirmond was about to step up on the platform, ahead of Dane.

"Wait!" Cord shouted. His voice sounded squeaky with alarm. "Stop!"

He came running forward.

They had frozen where they stood, looked around swiftly. Then glanced back at Cord coming up. They were well trained.

"What's the matter, Cord?" Nirmond's voice was quiet and urgent.

"Don't get on that raft--it's changed!" Cord's voice sounded wobbly, even to himself. "Maybe it's not even Grandpa--"

He saw he was wrong on the last point before he'd finished the sentence. Scattered along the rim of the raft were discolored spots left by a variety of heat-guns, one of which had been his own. It was the way you goaded the sluggish and mindless things into motion. Cord pointed at the cone-shaped central projection. "There--his

head! He's sprouting!"

"Sprouting?" the station manager repeated uncomprehendingly. Grandpa's head, as befitted his girth, was almost twelve feet high and equally wide. It was armor-plated like the back of a saurian to keep off plant-suckers, but two weeks ago it had been an otherwise featureless knob, like those on all other rafts. Now scores of long, kinky, leafless vines had grown out from all surfaces of the cone, like green wires. Some were drawn up like tightly coiled springs, others trailed limply to the platform and over it. The top of the cone was dotted with angry red buds, rather like pimples, which hadn't been there before either. Grandpa looked unhealthy.

"Well," Nirmond said, "so it is. Sprouting!" Grayan made a choked sound. Nirmond glanced at Cord as if puzzled. "Is that all that was bothering you, Cord?"

"Well, sure!" Cord began excitedly. He hadn't caught the significance of the word "all"; his hackles were still up, and he was shaking. "None of them ever--"

Then he stopped. He could tell by their faces that they hadn't got it. Or rather, that they'd got it all right but simply weren't going to let it change their plans. The rafts were classified as harmless, according to the Regulations. Until proved otherwise, they would continue to be regarded as harmless. You didn't waste time quibbling with the Regulations--apparently even if you were the Planetary Regent. You didn't feel you had the time to waste.

He tried again. "Look--" he began. What he wanted to tell them was that Grandpa with one unknown factor added wasn't Grandpa any more. He was an unpredictable, oversized lifeform, to be investigated with cautious thoroughness till you knew what the unknown factor meant.

But it was no use. They knew all that. He stared at them helplessly. "I--"

Dane turned to Nirmond. "Perhaps you'd better check," she said. She didn't add,--"to reassure the boy!" but that was what she meant.

Cord felt himself flushing terribly. They thought he was scared--which he was--and they were feeling sorry for him, which they had no right to do. But there was nothing he could say or do now except watch Nirmond walk steadily across the platform. Grandpa shivered slightly a few times, but the rafts always did that when someone first stepped on them. The station manager stopped before one of the kinky sprouts, touched it, and then gave it a tug. He reached up and poked at the lowest of the budlike growths. "Odd-looking things!" he called back. He gave Cord another glance. "Well, everything seems

harmless enough, Cord. Coming aboard, everyone?"

It was like dreaming a dream in which you yelled and yelled at people and couldn't make them hear you! Cord stepped up stiff-legged on the platform behind Dane and Grayan. He knew exactly what would have happened if he'd hesitated even a moment. One of them would have said in a friendly voice, careful not to let it sound too contemptuous: "You don't have to come along if you don't want to, Cord!"

Grayan had unholstered her heat-gun and was ready to start Grandpa moving out into the channels of the Yoger Bay.

Cord hauled out his own heat-gun and said roughly, "I was to do that!"

"All right, Cord." She gave him a brief, impersonal smile, as if he were someone she'd met for the first time that day, and stood aside.

They were so infuriatingly polite! He was, Cord decided, as good as on his way back to Vanadia right now.

For a while, Cord almost hoped that something awesome and catastrophic would happen promptly to teach the Team people a lesson. But nothing did. As always, Grandpa shook himself vaguely and experimentally when he felt the heat on one edge of the platform and then decided to withdraw from it, all of which was standard procedure. Under the water, out of sight, were the raft's working sections: short, thick leaf-structures shaped like paddles and designed to work as such, along with the slimy nettle-streamers which kept the vegetarians of the Yoger Bay away, and a jungle of hair roots through which Grandpa sucked nourishments from the mud and the sluggish waters of the Bay, and with which he also anchored himself.

The paddles started churning, the platform quivered, the hair roots were hauled out of the mud; and Grandpa was on his ponderous way.

Cord switched off the heat, reholstered his gun, and stood up. Once in motion, the rafts tended to keep traveling unhurriedly for quite a while. To stop them, you gave them a touch of heat along their leading edge; and they could be turned in any direction by using the gun lightly on the opposite side of the platform.

It was simple enough. Cord didn't look at the others. He was still burning inside. He watched the reed beds move past and open out, giving him glimpses of the misty, yellow and green and blue expanse of the brackish Bay ahead. Behind the mist, to the west, were the Yoger Straits, tricky and ugly water when the tides were running; and

beyond the Straits lay the open sea, the great Zlanti Deep, which was another world entirely and one of which he hadn't seen much as yet.

Suddenly he was sick with the full realization that he wasn't likely to see any more of it now! Vanadia was a pleasant enough planet; but the wildness and strangeness were long gone from it. It wasn't Sutang.

Grayan called from beside Dane, "What's the best route from here into the farms, Cord?"

"The big channel to the right," he answered. He added somewhat sullenly, "We're headed for it!"

Grayan came over to him. "The Regent doesn't want to see all of it," she said, lowering her voice. "The algae and plankton beds first. Then as much of the mutated grains as we can show her in about three hours. Steer for the ones that have been doing best, and you'll keep Nirmond happy!"

She gave him a conspiratorial wink. Cord looked after her uncertainly. You couldn't tell from her behavior that anything was wrong. Maybe--

He had a flare of hope. It was hard not to like the Team people, even when they were being rock-headed about their Regulations. Perhaps it was that purpose that gave them their vitality and drive, even though it made them remorseless about themselves and everyone else. Anyway, the day wasn't over yet. He might still redeem himself in the Regent's opinion. Something might happen--

Cord had a sudden cheerful, if improbable, vision of some Bay monster plunging up on the raft with snapping jaws, and of himself alertly blowing out what passed for the monster's brains before anyone else--Nirmond, in particular--was even aware of the threat. The Bay monsters shunned Grandpa, of course, but there might be ways of tempting one of them.

So far, Cord realized, he'd been letting his feelings control him. It was time to start thinking!

Grandpa first. So he'd sprouted--green vines and red buds, purpose unknown, but with no change observable in his behavior-patterns otherwise. He was the biggest raft in this end of the Bay, though all of them had been growing steadily in the two years since Cord had first seen one. Sutang's seasons changed slowly; its year was somewhat more than five Earth years long. The first Team members to land here hadn't yet seen a full year pass.

Grandpa then was showing a seasonal change. The other rafts, not quite so far developed, would be reacting similarly a little later. Plant animals--they might be blossoming, preparing to propagate.

"Grayan," he called, "how do the rafts get started? When they're small, I mean."

Grayan looked pleased; and Cord's hopes went up a little more. Grayan was on his side again anyway!

"Nobody knows yet," she said. "We were just talking about it. About half of the coastal marsh-fauna of the continent seems to go through a preliminary larval stage in the sea." She nodded at the red buds on the raft's cone. "It looks as if Grandpa is going to produce flowers and let the wind or tide take the seeds out through the Straits."

It made sense. It also knocked out Cord's still half-held hope that the change in Grandpa might turn out to be drastic enough, in some way, to justify his reluctance to get on board. Cord studied Grandpa's armored head carefully once more--unwilling to give up that hope entirely. There were a series of vertical gummy black slits between the armor plates, which hadn't been in evidence two weeks ago either. It looked as if Grandpa were beginning to come apart at the seams. Which might indicate that the rafts, big as they grew to be, didn't outlive a full seasonal cycle, but came to flower at about this time of Sutang's year and died. However, it was a safe bet that Grandpa wasn't going to collapse into senile decay before they completed their trip today.

Cord gave up on Grandpa. The other notion returned to him--Perhaps he *could* coax an obliging Bay monster into action that would show the Regent he was no sissy!

Because the monsters were there, all right.

Kneeling at the edge of the platform and peering down into the wine-colored, clear water of the deep channel they were moving through, Cord could see a fair selection of them at almost any moment.

Some five or six snappers, for one thing. Like big, flattened crayfish, chocolate-brown mostly, with green and red spots on their carapaced backs. In some areas they were so thick you'd wonder what they found to live on, except that they ate almost anything, down to chewing up the mud in which they squatted. However, they preferred their food in large chunks and alive, which was one reason you didn't go swimming in the Bay. They would attack a boat on occasion; but the excited manner in which the ones he saw were scuttling off toward the edges of the channel showed they wanted to have nothing to do with a big moving raft.

Dotted across the bottom were two-foot round holes which looked vacant at the moment. Normally, Cord knew, there would be a head filling each of those holes. The heads consisted mainly of triple sets of jaws, held open patiently like so many traps to grab at anything that came within range of the long, wormlike bodies behind the heads. But Grandpa's passage, waving his stingers like transparent pennants through the water, had scared the worms out of sight, too.

Otherwise, mostly schools of small stuff--and then a flash of wicked scarlet, off to the left behind the raft, darting out from the reeds! Turning its needle-nose into their wake.

Cord watched it without moving. He knew that creature, though it was rare in the Bay and hadn't been classified. Swift, vicious--alert enough to snap swamp bugs out of the air as they fluttered across the surface. And he'd tantalized one with fishing tackle once into leaping up on a moored raft, where it had flung itself about furiously until he was able to shoot it.

No fishing tackle. A handkerchief might just do it, if he cared to risk an arm--

"What fantastic creatures!" Dane's voice just behind him.

"Yellowheads," said Nirmond. "They've got a high utility rating. Keep down the bugs."

Cord stood up casually. It was no time for tricks! The reed bed to their right was thick with yellowheads, a colony of them. Vaguely froggy things, man-sized and better. Of all the creatures he'd discovered in the Bay, Cord liked them least. The flabby, sacklike bodies clung with four thin limbs to the upper sections of the twenty-foot reeds that lined the channel. They hardly ever moved, but their huge, bulging eyes seemed to take in everything that went on about them. Every so often, a downy swamp bug came close enough; and a yellowhead would open its vertical, enormous, tooth-lined slash of a mouth, extend the whole front of its face like a bellows in a flashing strike; and the bug would be gone. They might be useful, but Cord hated them.

"Ten years from now we should know what the cycle of coastal life is like," Nirmond said. "When we set up the Yoger Bay Station there were no yellowheads here. They came the following year. Still with traces of the oceanic larval form; but the metamorphosis was almost complete. About twelve inches long--"

Dane remarked that the same pattern was duplicated endlessly elsewhere. The Regent was inspecting the yellowhead colony with field glasses; she put them down now, looked at Cord, and smiled. "How far to the farms?"

"About twenty minutes."

"The key," Nirmond said, "seems to be the Zlanti Basin. It must be almost a soup of life in spring."

"It is," nodded Dane, who had been here in Sutang's spring, four Earth years ago. "It's beginning to look as if the Basin alone might justify colonization. The question is still--" she gestured towards the yellowheads-- "how do creatures like that get there?"

They walked off toward the other side of the raft, arguing about ocean currents. Cord might have followed. But something splashed back of them, off to the left and not too far back. He stayed, watching.

After a moment, he saw the big yellowhead. It had slipped down from its reedy perch, which was what had caused the splash. Almost submerged at the water line, it stared after the raft with huge pale-green eyes. To Cord, it seemed to look directly at him. In that moment, he knew for the first time why he didn't like yellowheads. There was something very like intelligence in that look, an alien calculation. In creatures like that, intelligence seemed out of place. What use could they have for it?

A little shiver went over him when it sank completely under the water and he realized it intended to swim after the raft. But it was mostly excitement. He had never seen a yellowhead come down out of the reeds before. The obliging monster he'd been looking for might be presenting itself in an unexpected way.

Half a minute later, he watched it again, swimming awkwardly far down. It had no immediate intention of boarding, at any rate. Cord saw it come into the area of the raft's trailing stingers. It maneuvered its way between them with curiously human swimming motions, and went out of sight under the platform.

He stood up, wondering what it meant. The yellowhead had appeared to know about the stingers; there had been an air of purpose in every move of its approach. He was tempted to tell the others about it, but there was the moment of triumph he could have if it suddenly came slobbering up over the edge of the platform and he nailed it before their eyes.

It was almost time anyway to turn the raft in toward the farms. If nothing happened before then--

He watched. Almost five minutes, but no sign of the yellowhead. Still wondering, a little uneasy, he gave Grandpa a calculated needling of heat.

After a moment, he repeated it. Then he drew a deep breath and

forgot all about the yellowhead.

"Nirmond!" he called sharply.

The three of them were standing near the center of the platform, next to the big armored cone, looking ahead at the farms. They glanced around.

"What's the matter now, Cord?"

Cord couldn't say it for a moment. He was suddenly, terribly scared again. Something *had* gone wrong!

"The raft won't turn!" he told them.

"Give it a real burn this time!" Nirmond said.

Cord glanced up at him. Nirmond, standing a few steps in front of Dane and Grayan as if he wanted to protect them, had begun to look a little strained, and no wonder. Cord already had pressed the gun to three different points on the platform; but Grandpa appeared to have developed a sudden anesthesia for heat. They kept moving out steadily toward the center of the Bay.

Now Cord held his breath, switched the heat on full, and let Grandpa have it. A six-inch patch on the platform blistered up instantly, turned brown, then black--

Grandpa stopped dead. Just like that.

"That's right! Keep burn--" Nirmond didn't finish his order.

A giant shudder. Cord staggered back toward the water. Then the whole edge of the raft came curling up behind him and went down again, smacking the Bay with a sound like a cannon shot. He flew forward off his feet, hit the platform face down, and flattened himself against it. It swelled up beneath him. Two more enormous slaps and joltings. Then quiet. He looked round for the others.

He lay within twelve feet of the central cone. Some twenty or thirty of the mysterious new vines the cone had sprouted were stretched out stiffly toward him now, like so many thin green fingers. They couldn't quite reach him. The nearest tip was still ten inches from his shoes.

But Grandpa had caught the others, all three of them. They were tumbled together at the foot of the cone, wrapped in a stiff network of green vegetable ropes, and they didn't move.

Cord drew his feet up cautiously, prepared for another earthquake reaction. But nothing happened. Then he discovered that Grandpa was back in motion on his previous course. The heat-gun had

vanished. Gently, he took out the Vanadian gun.

A voice, thin and pain-filled, spoke to him from one of the three huddled bodies.

"Cord? It didn't get you?" It was the Regent.

"No," he said, keeping his voice low. He realized suddenly he'd simply assumed they were all dead. Now he felt sick and shaky.

"What are you doing?"

Cord looked at Grandpa's big armor-plated head with a certain hunger. The cones were hollowed out inside; the station's lab had decided their chief function was to keep enough air trapped under the rafts to float them. But in that central section was also the organ that controlled Grandpa's overall reactions.

He said softly, "I've got a gun and twelve heavy-duty explosive bullets. Two of them will blow that cone apart."

"No good, Cord!" the pain-racked voice told him. "If the thing sinks, we'll die anyway. You have anesthetic charges for that gun of yours?"

He stared at her back. "Yes."

"Give Nirmond and the girl a shot each, before you do anything else. Directly into the spine, if you can. But don't come any closer--"

Somehow, Cord couldn't argue with that voice. He stood up carefully. The gun made two soft spitting sounds.

"All right," he said hoarsely. "What do I do now?"

Dane was silent a moment. "I'm sorry, Cord. I can't tell you that. I'll tell you what I can--"

She paused for some seconds again. "This thing didn't try to kill us, Cord. It could have easily. It's incredibly strong. I saw it break Nirmond's legs. But as soon as we stopped moving, it just held us. They were both unconscious then--

"You've got that to go on. It was trying to pitch you within reach of its vines or tendrils, or whatever they are, too, wasn't it?"

"I think so," Cord said shakily. That was what had happened, of course; and at any moment Grandpa might try again.

"Now it's feeding us some sort of anesthetic of its own through those vines. Tiny thorns. A sort of numbness--" Dane's voice trailed off a moment. Then she said clearly, "Look, Cord--it seems we're food it's

storing up! You get that?"

"Yes," he said.

"Seeding time for the rafts. There are analogues. Live food for its seed probably; not for the raft. One couldn't have counted on that. Cord?"

"Yes. I'm here."

"I want," said Dane, "to stay awake as long as I can. But there's really just one other thing--this raft's going somewhere. To some particularly favorable location. And that might be very near shore. You might make it in then; otherwise it's up to you. But keep your head and wait for a chance. No heroics, understand?"

"Sure, I understand," Cord told her. He realized then that he was talking reassuringly, as if it weren't the Planetary Regent but someone like Grayan.

"Nirmond's the worst," Dane said. "The girl was knocked unconscious at once. If it weren't for my arm-- But, if we can get help in five hours or so, everything should be all right. Let me know if anything happens, Cord."

"I will," Cord said gently again. Then he sighted his gun carefully at a point between Dane's shoulder blades, and the anesthetic chamber made its soft, spitting sound once more. Dane's taut body relaxed slowly, and that was all.

There was no point Cord could see in letting her stay awake; because they weren't going anywhere near shore. The reed beds and the channels were already behind them, and Grandpa hadn't changed direction by the fraction of a degree. He was moving out into the open Bay--and he was picking up company!

So far, Cord could count seven big rafts within two miles of them; and on the three that were closest he could make out a sprouting of new green vines. All of them were traveling in a straight direction; and the common point they were all headed for appeared to be the roaring center of the Yoger Straits, now some three miles away!

Behind the Straits, the cold Zlanti Deep--the rolling fogs, and the open sea! It might be seeding time for the rafts, but it looked as if they weren't going to distribute their seeds in the Bay--

For a human being, Cord was a fine swimmer. He had a gun and he had a knife; in spite of what Dane had said, he might have stood a chance among the killers of the Bay. But it would be a very small chance, at best. And it wasn't, he thought, as if there weren't still

other possibilities. He was going to keep his head.

Except by accident, of course, nobody was going to come looking for them in time to do any good. If anyone did look, it would be around the Bay Farms. There were a number of rafts moored there; and it would be assumed they'd used one of them. Now and then something unexpected happened and somebody simply vanished--by the time it was figured out just what had happened on this occasion, it would be much too late.

Neither was anybody likely to notice within the next few hours that the rafts had started migrating out of the swamps through the Yoger Straits. There was a small weather station a little inland, on the north side of the Straits, which used a helicopter occasionally. It was about as improbable, Cord decided dismally, that they'd use it in the right spot just now as it would be for a jet transport to happen to come in low enough to spot them.

The fact that it was up to him, as the Regent had said, sank in a little more after that! Cord had never felt so lonely.

Simply because he was going to try it sooner or later, he carried out an experiment next that he knew couldn't work. He opened the gun's anesthetic chamber and counted out fifty pellets--rather hurriedly because he didn't particularly want to think of what he might be using them for eventually. There were around three hundred charges left in the chamber then; and in the next few minutes Cord carefully planted a third of them in Grandpa's head.

He stopped after that. A whale might have showed signs of somnolence under a lesser load. Grandpa paddled on undisturbed. Perhaps he had become a little numb in spots, but his cells weren't equipped to distribute the soporific effect of that type of drug.

There wasn't anything else Cord could think of doing before they reached the Straits. At the rate they were moving, he calculated that would happen in something less than an hour; and if they did pass through the Straits, he was going to risk a swim. He didn't think Dane would have disapproved, under the circumstances. If the raft simply carried them all out into the foggy vastness of the Zlanti Deep, there would be no practical chance of survival left at all.

Meanwhile, Grandpa was definitely picking up speed. And there were other changes going on--minor ones, but still a little awe-inspiring to Cord. The pimply-looking red buds that dotted the upper part of the cone were opening out gradually. From the center of most of them protruded now something like a thin, wet, scarlet worm: a worm that twisted weakly, extended itself by an inch or so, rested and twisted again, and stretched up a little farther, groping into the air. The vertical black slits between the armor plates looked

somehow deeper and wider than they had been even some minutes ago; a dark, thick liquid dripped slowly from several of them.

Under other circumstances Cord knew he would have been fascinated by these developments in Grandpa. As it was, they drew his suspicious attention only because he didn't know what they meant.

Then something quite horrible happened suddenly. Grayan started moaning loudly and terribly and twisted almost completely around. Afterwards, Cord knew it hadn't been a second before he stopped her struggles and the sounds together with another anesthetic pellet; but the vines had tightened their grip on her first, not flexibly but like the digging, bony green talons of some monstrous bird of prey. If Dane hadn't warned him--

White and sweating, Cord put his gun down slowly while the vines relaxed again. Grayan didn't seem to have suffered any additional harm; and she would certainly have been the first to point out that his murderous rage might have been as intelligently directed against a machine. But for some moments Cord continued to luxuriate furiously in the thought that, at any instant he chose, he could still turn the raft very quickly into a ripped and exploded mess of sinking vegetation.

Instead, and more sensibly, he gave both Dane and Nirmond another shot, to prevent a similar occurrence with them. The contents of two such pellets, he knew, would keep any human being torpid for at least four hours. Five shots--

Cord withdrew his mind hastily from the direction it was turning into; but it wouldn't stay withdrawn. The thought kept coming up again, until at last he had to recognize it:

Five shots would leave the three of them completely unconscious, whatever else might happen to them, until they either died from other causes or were given a counteracting agent.

Shocked, he told himself he couldn't do it. It was exactly like killing them.

But then, quite steadily, he found himself raising the gun once more, to bring the total charge for each of the three Team people up to five. And if it was the first time in the last four years Cord had felt like crying, it also seemed to him that he had begun to understand what was meant by using your head--along with other things.

Barely thirty minutes later, he watched a raft as big as the one he rode go sliding into the foaming white waters of the Straits a few hundred yards ahead, and dart off abruptly at an angle, caught by one of the swirling currents. It pitched and spun, made some

headway, and was swept aside again. And then it righted itself once more. Not like some blindly animated vegetable, Cord thought, but like a creature that struggled with intelligent purpose to maintain its chosen direction.

At least, they seemed practically unsinkable--

Knife in hand, he flattened himself against the platform as the Straits roared just ahead. When the platform jolted and tilted up beneath him, he rammed the knife all the way into it and hung on. Cold water rushed suddenly over him, and Grandpa shuddered like a laboring engine. In the middle of it all, Cord had the horrified notion that the raft might release its unconscious human prisoners in its struggle with the Straits. But he underestimated Grandpa in that. Grandpa also hung on.

Abruptly, it was over. They were riding a long swell, and there were three other rafts not far away. The Straits had swept them together, but they seemed to have no interest in one another's company. As Cord stood up shakily and began to strip off his clothes, they were visibly drawing apart again. The platform of one of them was half-submerged; it must have lost too much of the air that held it afloat and, like a small ship, it was foundering.

From this point, it was only a two-mile swim to the shore north of the Straits, and another mile inland from there to the Straits Head Station. He didn't know about the current; but the distance didn't seem too much, and he couldn't bring himself to leave knife and gun behind. The Bay creatures loved warmth and mud, they didn't venture beyond the Straits. But Zlanti Deep bred its own killers, though they weren't often observed so close to shore.

Things were beginning to look rather hopeful.

Thin, crying voices drifted overhead, like the voices of curious cats, as Cord knotted his clothes into a tight bundle, shoes inside. He looked up. There were four of them circling there; magnified seagoing swamp bugs, each carrying an unseen rider. Probably harmless scavengers--but the ten-foot wingspread was impressive. Uneasily, Cord remembered the venomously carnivorous rider he'd left lying beside the station.

One of them dipped lazily and came sliding down toward him. It soared overhead and came back, to hover about the raft's cone.

The bug rider that directed the mindless flier hadn't been interested in him at all! Grandpa was baiting it!

Cord stared in fascination. The top of the cone was alive now with a softly wriggling mass of the scarlet, wormlike extrusions that had

started sprouting before the raft left the Bay. Presumably, they looked enticingly edible to the bug rider.

The flier settled with an airy fluttering and touched the cone. Like a trap springing shut, the green vines flashed up and around it, crumpling the brittle wings, almost vanishing into the long soft body--

Barely a second later, Grandpa made another catch, this one from the sea itself. Cord had a fleeting glimpse of something like a small, rubbery seal that flung itself out of the water upon the edge of the raft, with a suggestion of desperate haste--and was flipped on instantly against the cone, where the vines clamped it down beside the flier's body.

It wasn't the enormous ease with which the unexpected kill was accomplished that left Cord standing there, completely shocked. It was the shattering of his hopes to swim to shore from here. Fifty yards away, the creature from which the rubbery thing had been fleeing showed briefly on the surface, as it turned away from the raft; and the glance was all he needed. The ivory-white body and gaping jaws were similar enough to those of the shark of Earth to indicate the pursuer's nature. The important difference was that, wherever the white hunters of the Zlanti Deep went, they went by the thousands.

Stunned by that incredible piece of bad luck, still clutching his bundled clothes, Cord stared toward shore. Knowing what to look for, he could spot the telltale roilings of the surface now--the long, ivory gleams that flashed through the swells and vanished again. Shoals of smaller things burst into the air in sprays of glittering desperation and fell back.

He would have been snapped up like a drowning fly before he'd covered a twentieth of that distance!

But almost another full minute passed before the realization of the finality of his defeat really sank in.

Grandpa was beginning to eat!

Each of the dark slits down the sides of the cone was a mouth. So far only one of them was in operating condition, and the raft wasn't able to open that one very wide as yet. The first morsel had been fed into it, however: the bug rider the vines had plucked out of the flier's downy neck fur. It took Grandpa several minutes to work it out of sight, small as it was. But it was a start.

Cord didn't feel quite sane any more. He sat there, clutching his bundle of clothes and only vaguely aware of the fact that he was shivering steadily under the cold spray that touched him now and then, while he followed Grandpa's activities attentively. He decided it

would be at least some hours before one of that black set of mouths grew flexible and vigorous enough to dispose of a human being. Under the circumstances, it couldn't make much difference to the other human beings here; but the moment Grandpa reached for the first of them would also be the moment he finally blew the raft to pieces. The white hunters were cleaner eaters, at any rate; and that was about the extent to which he could still control what was going to happen.

Meanwhile, there was the very faint chance that the weather station's helicopter might spot them--

Meanwhile also, in a weary and horrified fascination, he kept debating the mystery of what could have produced such a nightmarish change in the rafts. He could guess where they were going by now; there were scattered strings of them stretching back to the Straits or roughly parallel to their own course, and the direction was that of the plankton-swarming pool of the Zlanti Basin, a thousand miles to the north. Given time, even mobile lily pads like the rafts had been could make that trip for the benefit of their seedlings. But nothing in their structure explained the sudden change into alert and capable carnivores.

He watched the rubbery little seal-thing being hauled up to a mouth next. The vines broke its neck; and the mouth took it in up to the shoulders and then went on working patiently at what was still a trifle too large a bite. Meanwhile, there were more thin cat-cries overhead; and a few minutes later, two more sea bugs were trapped almost simultaneously and added to the larder. Grandpa dropped the dead seal-thing and fed himself another bug rider. The second rider left its mount with a sudden hop, sank its teeth viciously into one of the vines that caught it again, and was promptly battered to death against the platform.

Cord felt a resurge of unreasoning hatred against Grandpa. Killing a bug was about equal to cutting a branch from a tree; they had almost no life-awareness. But the rider had aroused his partisanship because of its appearance of intelligent action--and it was in fact closer to the human scale in that feature than to the monstrous life-form that had, mechanically, but quite successfully, trapped both it and the human beings. Then his thoughts had drifted again; and he found himself speculating vaguely on the curious symbiosis in which the nerve systems of two creatures as dissimilar as the bugs and their riders could be linked so closely that they functioned as one organism.

Suddenly an expression of vast and stunned surprise appeared on his face.

Why--now he knew!

Cord stood up hurriedly, shaking with excitement, the whole plan complete in his mind. And a dozen long vines snaked instantly in the direction of his sudden motion, and groped for him, taut and stretching. They couldn't reach him, but their savagely alert reaction froze Cord briefly where he was. The platform was shuddering under his feet, as if in irritation at his inaccessibility; but it couldn't be tilted up suddenly here to throw him within the grasp of the vines, as it could around the edges.

Still, it was a warning! Cord sidled gingerly around the cone till he had gained the position he wanted, which was on the forward half of the raft. And then he waited. Waited long minutes, quite motionless, until his heart stopped pounding and the irregular angry shivering of the surface of the raft-thing died away, and the last vine tendril had stopped its blind groping. It might help a lot if, for a second or two after he next started moving, Grandpa wasn't too aware of his exact whereabouts!

He looked back once to check how far they had gone by now beyond the Straits Head Station. It couldn't, he decided, be even an hour behind them. Which was close enough, by the most pessimistic count--if everything else worked out all right! He didn't try to think out in detail what that "everything else" could include, because there were factors that simply couldn't be calculated in advance. And he had an uneasy feeling that speculating too vividly about them might make him almost incapable of carrying out his plan.

At last, moving carefully, Cord took the knife in his left hand but left the gun holstered. He raised the tightly knotted bundle of clothes slowly over his head, balanced in his right hand. With a long, smooth motion he tossed the bundle back across the cone, almost to the opposite edge of the platform.

It hit with a soggy thump. Almost immediately, the whole far edge of the raft buckled and flapped up to toss the strange object to the reaching vines.

Simultaneously, Cord was racing forward. For a moment, his attempt to divert Grandpa's attention seemed completely successful--then he was pitched to his knees as the platform came up.

He was within eight feet of the edge. As it slapped down again, he threw himself desperately forward.

An instant later, he was knifing down through cold, clear water, just ahead of the raft, then twisting and coming up again.

The raft was passing over him. Clouds of tiny sea creatures scattered through its dark jungle of feeding roots. Cord jerked back

from a broad, wavering streak of glassy greenness, which was a stinger, and felt a burning jolt on his side, which meant he'd been touched lightly by another. He bumped on blindly through the slimy black tangles of hair roots that covered the bottom of the raft; then green half-light passed over him, and he burst up into the central bubble under the cone.

Half-light and foul, hot air. Water slapped around him, dragging him away again--nothing to hang on to here! Then above him, to his right, molded against the interior curve of the cone as if it had grown there from the start, the froglike, man-sized shape of the yellowhead.

The raft rider--

Cord reached up and caught Grandpa's symbiotic partner and guide by a flabby hind leg, pulled himself half out of the water, and struck twice with the knife, fast while the pale-green eyes were still opening.

He'd thought the yellowhead might need a second or so to detach itself from its host, as the bug riders usually did, before it tried to defend itself. This one merely turned its head; the mouth slashed down and clamped on Cord's left arm above the elbow. His right hand sank the knife through one staring eye, and the yellowhead jerked away, pulling the knife from his grasp.

Sliding down, he wrapped both hands around the slimy leg and hauled with all his weight. For a moment more, the yellowhead hung on. Then the countless neural extensions that connected it now with the raft came free in a succession of sucking, tearing sounds; and Cord and the yellowhead splashed into the water together.

Black tangle of roots again--and two more electric burns suddenly across his back and legs! Strangling, Cord let go. Below him, for a moment, a body was turning over and over with oddly human motions; then a solid wall of water thrust him up and aside, as something big and white struck the turning body and went on.

Cord broke the surface twelve feet behind the raft. And that would have been that, if Grandpa hadn't already been slowing down.

After two tries, he floundered back up on the platform and lay there gasping and coughing a while. There were no indications that his presence was resented now. A few vine tips twitched uneasily, as if trying to remember previous functions, when he came limping up presently to make sure his three companions were still breathing; but Cord never noticed that.

They were still breathing; and he knew better than to waste time trying to help them himself. He took Grayan's heat-gun from its holster. Grandpa had come to a full stop.

Cord hadn't had time to become completely sane again, or he might have worried now whether Grandpa, violently sundered from his controlling partner, was still capable of motion on his own. Instead, he determined the approximate direction of the Straits Head Station, selected a corresponding spot on the platform, and gave Grandpa a light tap of heat.

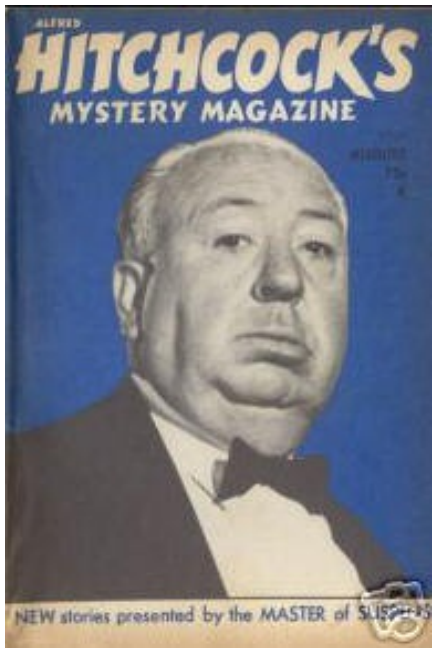
Nothing happened immediately. Cord sighed patiently and stepped up the heat a little.

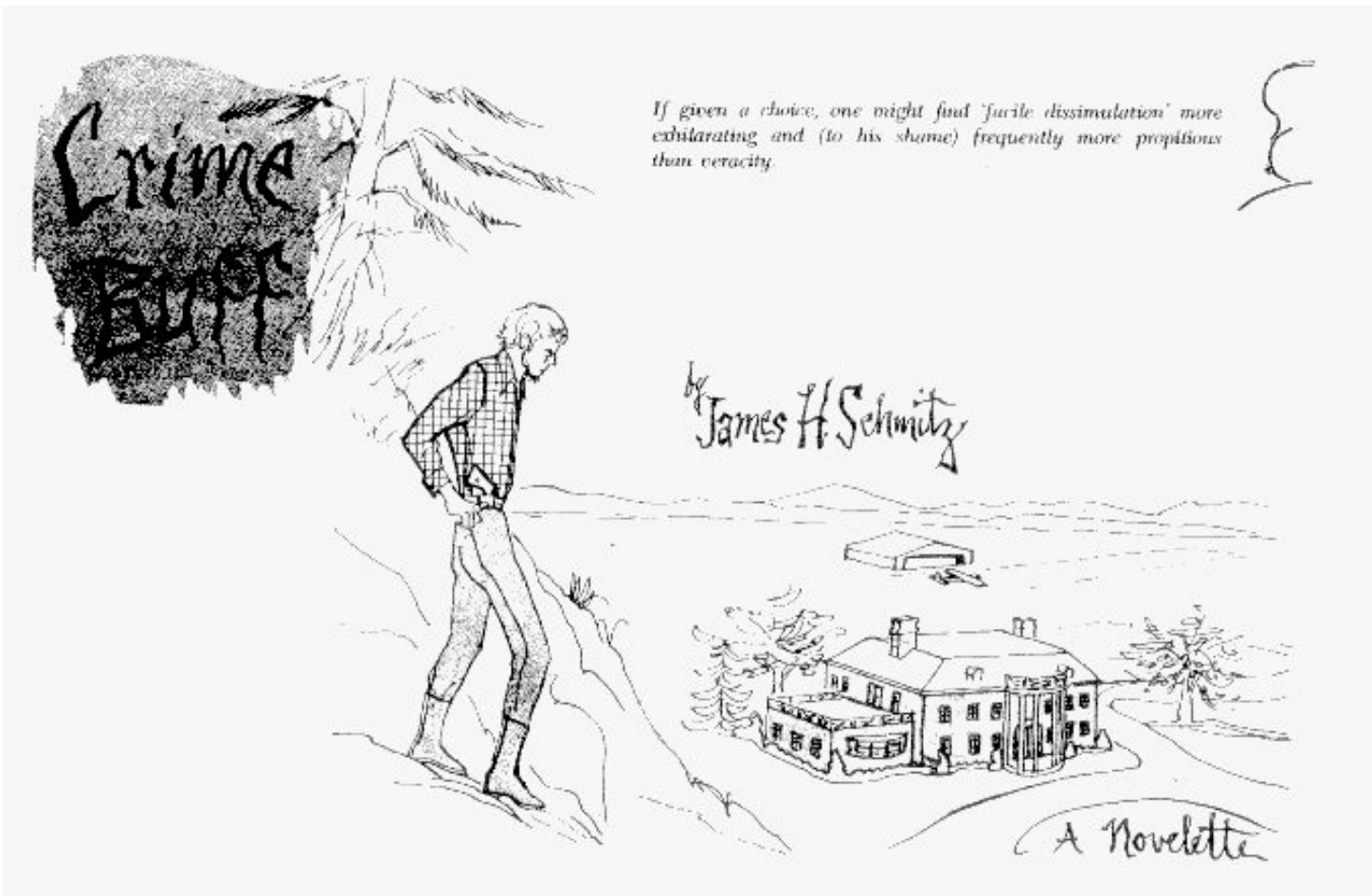
Grandpa shuddered gently. Cord stood up.

Slowly and hesitatingly at first, then with steadfast--though now again brainless--purpose, Grandpa began paddling back toward the Straits Head Station.

"Crime Buff"

Published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 8 (August 1973), though this version is taken from *Eternal Frontier* (2002) and has suffered unknown amounts of editing.





Jeff Clary stood halfway down the forested hillside at the edge of a short drop-off, studying the house on the cleared land below. It was a large two-story house with a wing; Jeff thought it might contain as many as twenty-five to thirty rooms. There was an old-fashioned, moneyed look about it, and the lawns around it seemed well-tended. It could have been an exclusive sanitarium as easily as a private residence. So far, there'd been no way to decide what, exactly, it was. In the time he'd been watching it, Jeff hadn't caught sight of a human being or noticed indications of current human activity.

What had riveted his attention at first glimpse wasn't so much the house itself as the gleaming blue and white airplane which stood some two hundred yards to the left of it. A small white structure next to the plane should be its hangar. The plane was pointed up a closely mowed field. It seemed a rather short runway even for so small a plane, but he didn't know much about airplanes. Specifically--importantly at the moment--he didn't know how to fly one.

That summed up the situation.

A large number of people were engaged today in searching for Jeff Clary, but the blue and white plane could take him where he wanted to go in a few hours, safely, unnoticeably. He needed someone to handle it.

That someone might be in the house. If not, there should be one or more cars in the garage adjoining the house on the right. A car would be less desirable than the plane, but vastly superior to hiking on foot into the open countryside. If he could get to the city without being stopped, he'd have gained a new head start on the searchers. If he got there with a substantial stake as well, his chances of shaking them off for good would be considerably better than even.

Jeff scratched the dense bristles on his chin. There was a gun tucked into his belt, but he'd used the last bullet in it eight hours ago. A hunting knife was fastened to the belt's other side. A knife and a gun--even an empty gun could get him a hostage to start with. He'd take it from there.

Shade trees and shrubbery grew up close to the sides of the building. It shouldn't be difficult to get inside before he was noticed. If it turned out there were dogs around, he'd come up openly--a footsore sportsman who'd got lost and spent half the night stumbling around in the rain-wet hills. As soon as anyone let him get close enough to start talking, he'd be as close as he needed to be.

He sent a last sweeping look around and started downhill, keeping to the cover of the trees. His feet hurt. The boots he wore were too

small for him, as were the rest of his fishing clothes. Those items had belonged recently to another man who had no present use for them.

He reached the side of the house minutes later. No dogs had bayed an alarm, and he'd been only momentarily in sight of a few front windows of the building. He'd begun to doubt seriously that there was anybody home, but two of the upper-floor windows were open. If all the occupants had left, they should have remembered to close the windows on a day of uncertain weather like this.

He moved quickly over to a side door. Taking the empty gun from his belt, he turned the heavy brass doorknob cautiously. The door was unlocked. Jeff pushed it open a few inches, peering into the short passage beyond.

A moment later, he was inside with the door closed again. He walked softly along the tiled passageway, listening. Still no sound. The passage ended at a large, dimly lit central hall across from a stairwell. There were several rooms on either side of the hall, and most of the doors were open. What he could see of the furnishings seemed to match the outer appearance of the house--old-fashioned, expensive, well cared for.

As he stood, briefly undecided, he heard sounds at last, from upstairs. Jeff slipped back into the passage, watching the head of the stairway. Nobody went by there, but after a few seconds the footsteps stopped. Then music suddenly was audible. A tv or radio set had been switched on.

That simplified matters.

Jeff moved across the hall and up the stairs, then followed the music along a second-floor passage to the right. Daylight and the music spilled into the passage through an open doorway. He stopped beside the door a moment, listening. He heard only the music. Cautiously he looked in.

A girl stood at one of the bedroom's two windows, looking out, back turned to Jeff; a dark-haired slender girl of medium height, wearing candy-striped jeans with a white blouse. A portable tv set stood on a side table.

Jeff came soundlessly into the room, gun pointed at the girl, and drew the door shut behind him. There was a faint click as it closed. The girl turned.

"Don't make a sound," Jeff said softly. "I'd rather not hurt you. Understand?"

She stood motionless at sight of him. Now she swallowed, nodded,

blue eyes wide. She looked younger than he'd expected, a smooth-featured teenager. There shouldn't be any trouble with her. He went to the tv, keeping the gun pointed at the girl, turned the set off.

"Come over here," he told her. "Away from the window. I want to talk to you."

She nodded again, came warily toward him, eyes shifting between his face and the gun.

"Be very good, and I won't have to use it," Jeff said. "Who else is in the house?"

"Nobody right now." Her voice was unexpectedly steady. "They'll be coming in later, during the afternoon."

"Who'll be coming in?"

She shrugged. "Some of my family. There's to be a meeting tonight. I don't know just who it'll be this time--probably seven or eight of them." She glanced at the watch on her wrist, added, "Tracy should be back in around an hour and a half--about two o'clock. The others won't begin to show up before five."

"So Tracy should be back by two, eh? Who's Tracy?"

"Tracy Nichols. Sort of my cousin by marriage."

"You and she live here?"

The girl shook her head. "Nobody lives here permanently now. My Uncle George owns the place. At least, I think it's his property. It's used for meetings and so on."

"Who looks after it?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Wells are the caretakers. They left yesterday after they got everything set up, and they won't be back till tomorrow night when we're gone again."

"Why did they clear out?"

"They always do. The family doesn't want other people around when they have a meeting."

Jeff grunted. "You got secrets?"

The girl smiled. "Oh, there's a lot of talk about business and so on. You never know what's going to come up."

"Uh-huh. What's your name?"

"Brooke Cameron."

"Where do you live?"

"Place called Renfrew College. Two hundred miles from here. You're Jeff Clary, aren't you?"

She'd added the question with no slightest change in inflection, and Jeff was jolted into momentary silence. Watching him, she nodded slowly, as if satisfied.

"Take away the beard--yes, that's who you are, of course!" Interest was kindling in her face. "Pictures of you were shown in the newscasts, you know. But you were supposed to be heading north."

Jeff had heard as much on a car radio ten hours ago.

"Pretty sharp, the way you walked out of that maximum security spot," Brooke Cameron went on. "They said it's only happened once before there."

"Maybe you talk a little too much," he told her. "If you know who I am, you should have sense enough not to play games."

Brooke shrugged. "I'm not playing a game. Of course, you *might* kill me, but I wouldn't be any use to you then. I'd like to help you."

"I bet you would."

"Really! I'm a sort of crime buff, and you're a very interesting criminal. That's not all, either!" Brooke smiled engagingly. "So, first, what do you need here? The plane's your best chance out, and it got a full tank this morning. Can you handle it?"

"No," Jeff said after a moment. "Can you?"

"Afraid not. They didn't want to let me learn how for another two years. But Tracy's flown it sometimes. She took it out today to get it gassed. You'll have to wait till she gets back."

"I could take your car," Jeff remarked, watching her.

"No car here now, Jeff. Tracy brought me in with her early this morning and went on to the city to pick up some stuff she ordered. Either way you want to go, you'll have to stay till she gets back. The only thing you'd find in the garage is an old bicycle, and that's probably got flat tires. You can go look for yourself."

"I might do that." Jeff studied her curiously. "You'd like to help me, eh?" She nodded. "Well, let's try you. This should be good hunting country. Any guns in the house?"

"Not sporting guns," Brooke said promptly. "But there could be a loaded revolver in Uncle George's desk. He usually keeps one there. His room's down the hall." Her gaze flicked over the gun in Jeff's hand. "Ammunition, too," she said. "But it won't fit the gun you have."

Jeff grunted. "You're wondering whether this one's empty?"

"Well, it might be." Her blue eyes regarded him steadily. "You put two bullets in the guard you shot, and you wouldn't have found any spare shells on him. There was more shooting, and then they must have been pushing you pretty hard for a time. If this isn't a gun the couple you kidnapped happened to have in their car, it could very well be empty."

Jeff grinned briefly. "Are you wondering now where that couple is?"

Brooke shook her head. "No, not much. I mean you're here by yourself, and I don't think you'd let them get away from you." She shrugged. "Let's go look in Uncle George's desk."

The revolver was in a desk drawer, a beautiful shop-new .38. Brooke looked on silently while Jeff checked it and dropped half a dozen spare shells into a jacket pocket.

"So now you have that," she remarked. "You want to shave and clean up next, or eat? A ham was sent in for dinner."

"What makes you think I want to do either?" Jeff asked dryly.

She shrugged. "We can go sit in a south room upstairs, of course," she said. "You can watch the road from there and wait for Tracy to drive up. But that'll be a while. She'll call, anyway, to let me know when she's ready to start back."

Jeff laughed. "That's convenient, isn't it? I'll try the ham."

He hadn't realized until he began to eat how ravenous he was. Then he concentrated savagely on the food, almost forgetting Brooke sitting across from him at the kitchen table. When he'd finished and looked over at her, he saw the worn brown wallet she'd laid on the table. Jeff stared at it, eyes widening.

"How--"

"I'm quite a good pickpocket," Brooke said absently. She frowned at the wallet. "Told you I'm a crime buff--and I don't just read about it." She touched one of three irregular dark stains on the wallet with a finger, looked at Jeff and pushed the wallet across the table to him. "I got it while we were going to Uncle George's room. So Mr. and Mrs. Rambow didn't get away, did they?"

"No, they didn't get away," Jeff said harshly. He hadn't noticed her brushing against him or touching him in any manner as they went along the passage, and the thought of her doing it without letting him catch her made him uneasy. "And they shouldn't have tried," he went on. "Their car got smashed up enough while they were about it that I couldn't use it anymore. It's down in a nice deep gully back in the hills where it isn't likely to be found very soon, and they're inside. Now you know."

Brooke brushed back her hair. "I really knew anyway," she said. "You have a sort of record, Jeff."

Anger faded into curiosity. "Aren't you scared?"

"Oh, yes, a little. But I'm useful to you--and I'm *not* trying to get away."

"I'd like to know what you are trying to do," Jeff admitted. "Whatever it is, there'd better be no more tricks like that."

"There won't be," Brooke said.

"All right." Jeff tugged at the shoulder of his jacket. "Are there clothes in this spooky house that could fit me?"

Brooke nodded. "Uncle Jason's just about your build. He's got a room upstairs, too. Let's go see."

Jeff stood up. "What kind of place is this?" be asked irritably. "A home away from home for any of you who happens to feel like it?"

"I guess it's used like that sometimes," Brooke said. "I don't know everything the family does."

Uncle Jason's room was at the south end of the house. It was equipped sparsely and with the neat impersonality of a hotel room. Several suits hung in plastic sheaths in the closet and two pairs of shoes stood in a plastic box on the closet shelf. The shoes would be a bit large for Jeff, but a relief after the cramping boots he'd been wearing. He decided any of the suits should fit well enough, and he found an electric shaver. He peered out a window. No vehicle was in sight, and anyone coming could be spotted minutes away. All good enough.

He hauled a straight-backed chair away from a table, turned it facing the window. "Come here and sit down," he told Brooke. She'd been watching him silently as he moved about, not stirring herself from the position she'd taken up near the passage door.

She came over now. "You want me to watch the road?"

"Just sit down."

She settled herself in the chair. Jeff said, "Now put your arms behind you." He fished a piece of rope out of a pocket.

"You don't have to do that," she said quickly.

"I'll be busy for a while," Jeff said. "I don't want to worry about you."

Brooke sighed, clasped her hands together behind the chair. Jeff looked down at her a moment. Brooke Cameron bothered him. The way she was acting didn't make sense. It wasn't just the matter of the wallet, though that had been startling. He'd suspected at first that she was trying to set a trap for him while pretending to be helpful, but he didn't see what she could attempt to do, and it didn't seem to fit in with telling him where he could find a loaded gun. Perhaps she was hoping help would arrive. He didn't feel too concerned about that possibility. He'd be ready for them.

He could put an abrupt end to anything she might have in mind by slipping the rope around her slender neck; but that would be stupid. If some unexpected trouble arose before he got out of here, a live hostage would be an immediate advantage, and he might still find her useful in other ways.

He fastened her wrists together, drawing the rope tight enough to make it hurt. She wriggled her shoulders a little but didn't complain. He knotted the end of the rope about a chair rung below the seat, grinned at her. "That'll keep you safe!"

He washed his hands and face, shaved carefully and put on Uncle Jason's suit and shoes, interrupting what he was doing several times to come back to the window and study the empty road. When he'd finished, he went downstairs and found a door that opened into the garage. There was a bicycle there, as she'd said, and no car, though the garage had space enough for three of them. Jeff returned to the top floor.

Brooke looked around as he came into the room.

"I suppose you'll be going to Mexico," she remarked.

His eyes narrowed. At it again--and she happened to be right. "Sounds like a good first stop, doesn't it?" he said.

She studied him. "You'll need a good paper man to fix you up once you're down there."

Jeff laughed shortly. "I know where to find a good paper man down there."

"You do? Got the kind of money he's going to want?"

"Not yet." There wasn't much more than a hundred dollars in the stained brown wallet. "Any suggestions?" he asked.

"Twenty-eight thousand in cash," Brooke said. "I keep telling you I want to help."

He stiffened. "*Twenty-eight*--where?"

She jerked her elbows impatiently. "Get me untied and I'll show you. It's downstairs." He didn't believe her. He felt an angry flush rising in his cheeks. If it was a lie, she'd be sorry! But he released her.

She got up from the chair, rubbing her bruised wrists, said, "Come along. Have to get keys from my room," and went ahead of him into the passage.

Jeff followed watchfully, close on her heels, looked on as she took two keys from a purse. They went back to the stairway, down it to the central hall on the ground floor. Brooke used the larger of the keys to open a closet behind a section of the hall's polished oak paneling. A sizable black suitcase stood inside. Brooke nodded at the suitcase.

"The money's in there." She offered Jeff the other key. "You'll have to unlock it."

Jeff shook his head.

"We'll take it to your Uncle Jason's room before we look at the money," he told her. "I'll let you carry it."

"Sure," Brooke said agreeably. "I carried it in here."

She picked up the suitcase, shut the closet, and walked ahead of Jeff to the stairs. The way she handled the suitcase indicated there was something inside, but something that wasn't very heavy. It could be twenty-eight thousand dollars, but a variety of rather improbable speculations kept crossing Jeff's mind as he followed her upstairs. Was the thing rigged? Would something unpleasant have happened if he'd unlocked it just now? He shook his head. It wasn't at all like him to engage in nervous fantasies.

Nevertheless, he found himself moving a few steps back from the suitcase when he told Brooke to put it on the carpet and open it. She knelt beside it and unlocked it, and nothing remarkable occurred. She opened the suitcase and Jeff saw folds of furry green material. "What's that?" he asked.

"My cape. Dyed muskrat. The money's under the clothes." Brooke took out the green cape, laid it on the floor, added several other

items while Jeff watched her motions closely.

"There's the money," she said finally.

Jeff nodded. "All right. Take it out and put it on the table."

Brooke glanced over at him with a quick grin. "Don't trust me yet, do you?"

"Not much," Jeff agreed.

"You should. That's my money I'm letting you have."

"Your money, eh?"

"Well--sort of. I stole it."

"That I can believe," Jeff said. "Get it up on the table."

Brooke took six slender stacks of bills from the suitcase, laid them side by side on the table and moved back. "Count it!" she invited, then looked on as Jeff riffled slowly through the stacks.

"Where did you steal it?" he asked.

"Man named Harold Brownlee--city councilman. He has a home in the suburbs. The money was in his den safe. I picked it up two nights ago."

"Just like that, huh?"

"No, not just like that," she said. "It was worked out pretty carefully. Twenty-five thousand was bribe money on a land development racket. I don't know about the rest--probably just a little something Brownlee wanted to have on hand, like people do. We knew when the bribe payoff was to be and where he keeps that kind of cash between his trips out of town to get it deposited."

"How did you know?" Jeff put the last bundle down. It was twenty-eight thousand dollars and a little more.

She shrugged. "Family intelligence. How? They don't let me in on that kind of thing yet. But they did let me do the Brownlee job by myself--well, almost by myself. Tracy insisted on being a lookout at the country club where the Brownlees were that night. She'd have let me know if they started home before I finished." Brooke added with a trace of resentment, "It wasn't necessary. If they had come back early, they wouldn't have seen me."

Jeff was staring at her. An hour ago, he would have considered it a crazy story. Now he simply wasn't so sure. He was about to speak

when he heard a tiny sound, like the tinkle of distant fairy chimes. "What was that?" he asked sharply.

"Just Tracy," said Brooke. "She wants to talk. I guess she's ready to start home." She tapped her wristwatch. "Two-way transmitter," she explained. "Tracy has one just like it. You want me to talk to her?"

Startled, Jeff hesitated. The chimes tinkled faintly again. Now it was clear that Brooke's little watch was producing the sound.

"Go ahead," he told her. He added, "You'd better remember what not to say."

Brooke smiled. "Don't worry! You'll have to stand close if you want to hear Tracy. They're made so you can talk privately." She slid a fingernail under a jeweled knob of the watch, lifting it a scant millimeter, gave it a twist. "Tracy?" she said, holding the watch a few inches from her ear. Jeff moved over to her.

"I'll be on my way back in just a few minutes," the watch whispered. "Have there been any calls?"

"No," Brooke said. "Didn't know you were expecting any." Her own voice was low but not a whisper.

"I'm not really expecting one," the ghostly little voice said from the watch. "But I remembered Ricardo wasn't sure he could make it tonight. He said he'd phone the house early if he couldn't come, so we'd be able to get someone else to give us a quorum."

Brooke winked at Jeff, said, "Well, he hasn't called yet, so he'll probably show up."

"Right. See you soon. 'Bye."

" 'Bye," said Brooke. She pushed down the knob, told Jeff, "That switches it off again."

"Uh-huh." Jeff scratched his chin. "How long will it take Tracy to get here now?"

"Forty minutes probably. Not much more. It's a good road most of the way, and she drives fast."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-four. Seven years eight months older than I am. Why?"

"Just wondering." Jeff held out his hand, "Let's see that thing."

"The two-way? Sure." Brooke slipped the instrument off her wrist,

gave it to him. "Be careful with it," she cautioned. "It's mighty expensive."

"It should be!" Jeff turned it about in his fingers, studying it. A stylish little woman's wristwatch, and it was running. There was nothing at all to indicate it could be anything other than that, but he'd heard it in action. "Yes, very expensive!" he said thoughtfully. He placed the watch on the table beside the bills. "That sounds like a peculiar family you've got," he remarked. "You really weren't lying about the Brownlee job?"

Brooke smiled. "Take a look at what's inside the cape," she said. "That's my prowling outfit, or most of it."

Jeff laid the dyed muskrat cape on one end of the table, opened it, fur side down. There were a number of zippered pockets in the lining. Jeff located variously shaped objects in some of the pockets by touch, took them out and regarded them.

"Earphone," he said. "So this matchbox-sized gadget it's connected to should be another radio?"

Brooke nodded. "Local police calls."

"Yes, handy. And a fancy glass cutter. The two keys?"

"Duplicates of the ones Brownlee had for his den safe."

"Which made that part of it simple, didn't it?" Jeff remarked. "And a pocket flash could be useful, of course. Why the cigarette case, if that's what it is?"

"Open it," Brooke told him.

He pressed the snap of the case, looked at the long-tipped narrow cigarettes clasped inside, a brand he didn't know. "Imports?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

Jeff sniffed at the cigarettes. "Anything special about them?"

"Just their length. They taste lousy." Brooke put out her hand. "There's a back section, you see. Let me--"

"Just tell me what to do," Jeff said.

Opening the hidden inner section of the case turned out to be a more complicated operation than switching the wristwatch over to its transmitter function, even under Brooke's guidance, but after some fumbling Jeff accomplished it. He pursed his lips, considered a silk-

packed row of thin metal rods, in silence for a moment.

"Picks," he said then. "You any good at using them?"

"Pretty good, I think," Brooke said. "I should be able to open almost any ordinary lock with one or another of those."

"Look kind of light."

"Not too light, Jeff. That's beryllium--harder than steel."

"I suppose you know it can be worth ten years just to be found with a set of picks like those on you?"

"That's why it's a cigarette case," Brooke told him.

Jeff shook his head. "Where did you get all these things?"

"They were custom-made. For me."

Jeff snapped both sections of the cigarette case shut and put it down. "None of it really makes any sense!" he remarked. "Your people must have money."

"Plenty," Brooke agreed.

"Then why do you play around with stuff like this? Are you nuts who do it for kicks?"

"It's not for kicks," Brooke said. "It's training. The Brownlee job the other night was a test. It's a way of finding out if I can qualify for the fancy things the family does--that some of them do, anyway."

"And what do they do?" Jeff asked.

"I don't know that yet, so I can't tell you. The family operates on a theory."

"Okay. Let's hear the theory--"

"If you decide to stay legal," Brooke said, "you give away too much advantage to people who don't care whether they do or not. But if you do things that aren't legal, you can get yourself and others into trouble. It takes a knack to be able to do it and keep on getting away with it. So it's only those who show they have the knack who get into the nonlegal side of the family. The others don't break laws and don't ask questions, so there's nothing they can spill. The family keeps getting richer, but everything looks legitimate. And most of it is."

Jeff shook his head again. "Just who is this family?"

"Oh, the Camerons and the Achtels and some Wylers and a few on

the Nichols side. There could be others I don't know about." Brooke added, "The Wylers and Nichols are kind of new, but the Camerons and Achtels have been working together a long time."

Jeff grunted. "Supposing you'd got caught at the Brownlee house?"

She shrugged. "That would have been *it* for me. Nothing much would have happened. The family's got pull here and there, and I'd have been a fool rich kid playing cops and robbers. But I'd never have got near a nonlegal operation after that. I'd have proved I didn't have the knack."

"What if it was just bad luck?"

"They've got no use for someone who has bad luck. It's too risky."

Jeff nodded. He watched her a moment, head tipped quizzically to the side. "Now, something else." He smiled. "Why are you pretending you want to help me?"

"I do want to help you." Brooke frowned. "After all, how likely is it you'd have come across the cash if I hadn't told you?"

"Then what do you figure on getting out of it?"

"You're to take me to Mexico with you."

"You're out of your mind!" Jeff was honestly startled. "From what you've been telling me, you have it made here."

"You think so." Brooke turned to the suitcase. "There's something you haven't seen yet."

"Hold it right there," Jeff said. "What's that something?"

"You can keep your gun pointed at me while I'm getting it out," she told him, half scornfully. "I picked up more than money at the Brownlee place."

He made no further move to check her then but kept close watch as she opened a side section of the suitcase and brought out a small leather bag. She loosened the bag's drawstrings and shook its contents out on the table. "What do you think of those?" she demanded.

Jeff looked at the tumbled, shining little pile and moistened his lips. "Nice stuff--if it's genuine."

"*If* it's genuine!" Brooke's eyes flashed. She reached for a string of pearls, swung it back and forth before his face. "If you knew pearls, you wouldn't be calling that just ‘nice stuff!' You need someone like

me, Jeff. For one thing, I do know pearls. They were in the safe with the money, and there was a very good reason for that."

She dropped the pearls back on the other jewelry. "But you know what would have happened if you hadn't come along today? The meeting at the house tonight was supposed to be about me. A quorum of the active side of the family was going to review the Brownlee job and decide if I was maybe good enough to go on to something a little bigger than I've been allowed to do so far. The job wasn't much for sure--I just went in and did what I was supposed to do--but I did everything *right*; there's nothing they can fault me on.

"So probably I'd pass. And then?" She waved her hand at the table. "I wouldn't see any of that again! Oh, sure, a third of what the haul's worth would be credited to my family account. When I'm twenty-one, I'll finally have a little something to say about that account. The rings and the watch and those lovely pearls and the rest of it would leave the house with Ricardo Achtel--he runs a jewelry firm for the family, imports, exports, manufacture. And they'd decide I could move up a notch. You know what that would mean?" She laughed. "I'd be working out with a lousy circus for a couple of years at least!"

Jeff blinked. "A circus?"

Brooke nodded. "Right! We've got one in Europe. It's a small circus, but putting in a hitch there while you're young is family tradition for active members. It goes back for generations." She grimaced. "There're all *kinds* of things you can learn at the circus that will be useful later on, they tell you."

Jeff grinned warily. "Well, there might be."

Brooke tossed her head. "I don't need all that discipline. I don't want to be thinking about the family in everything I do. They're so cautious! Now, you're somebody who doesn't mind cutting corners fast when it's necessary. We'd be a team, Jeff!"

Jeff felt a touch of amazed merriment. "What about Tracy?" he asked.

"What about her? She takes us there; we ditch her. I sort of like Tracy, but she's sold on the family. She won't make trouble for us afterward, and neither will the others. They're too careful for that. They know the kind of trouble I could make for them. You have a place to go to down there?"

Jeff nodded. "Uh-huh. Friendly old pot rancher, fifty miles from the border. Nice quiet place. You know, I've been thinking, Brooke."

"Yes?" she said eagerly.

"You've got these cute miniaturized gadgets. A cigarette case that isn't really one, and a watch that's something else besides." Jeff picked up the pencil flash he'd discovered in Brooke's cape. "This looks custom-built, too."

Her eyes might have flickered for an instant. "It is," she said. "It's the best."

"The best what, aside from being a light?"

"Well--nothing. I want a light I can rely on, naturally."

"Uh-huh. But it's thicker at this end than it really needs to be, isn't it? As if something might be built in there." Jeff fingered the pencil flash. "And this little hole, you'll notice, points wherever you point the light. I don't see how the thing can be opened either."

"Opening it is a little tricky," Brooke said. "If you'll let--"

"No, don't bother." Jeff smiled. "Here's where you switch on the light--fine! So it is a flashlight. What does this ring do?" He turned the flash up, pointing it at Brooke's face.

"Twist it to the left, and it dims the beam," Brooke said, watching him.

"To the right?"

"That brightens it, of course. And--" Her breath caught. "Don't twist it too far, Jeff."

"Why not?"

"Well, don't point it at me then." She smiled quickly. "I'll explain."

"Sure, explain." Jeff lowered the flashlight.

Brooke was still smiling. "I didn't really know about you. You can see that."

"Uh-huh. I understand."

"So I didn't want to tell you about it yet. It's a tranquilizer gun."

Jeff raised his brows. "Doesn't look much like one."

"Family specialty. You couldn't buy that kind of tranquilizer anywhere. I don't know what it is, of course, but we might be able to have it analyzed."

"Maybe we could," Jeff said. "What's its range?"

"You're not supposed to try to use it over thirty feet. Indoors, that's likely to be as much range as you'll want."

"You've used it?"

"No," Brooke said. "I saw it used once, but it's only for a real emergency. The family doesn't want it to get out that someone makes a gun like that."

"What was the effect?"

Brooke grimaced. "Worked so fast it scared me! The man didn't even know he'd been hit, and he didn't move for another two hours. But it won't kill anyone, and there isn't supposed to be much aftereffect. It's a little hollow needle."

Jeff nodded thoughtfully. "Very interesting. It seems we now have the explanation for your generous offer to finance me."

Brooke looked startled. "I told you--"

"You told me a lot of things. I'll even believe some of them--that this is a gun, for example. It's what you were working to get your hand on right from the start, wasn't it?"

Brooke said reluctantly, "I would have felt better if I'd had it. You see--
"

"I know. You just weren't sure you could trust me. All right, obviously I can't be sure I can trust you either." Jeff raised the pencil flash, pointing it at her. "So why don't I see for myself what that little hollow needle does after it hits?"

Brooke shook her head. "You don't want to do that, Jeff."

"Why not?"

"Tracy's sort of slippery. If I'm awake and in the plane with you two, she'll be a lot easier to handle. I can keep her conned. Whether you believe it or not, I do want to go to Mexico with you."

Jeff grinned and dropped the pencil flash into a coat pocket.

"And you're getting your wish!" he told her. "Go sit down in your chair."

He tied Brooke's hands behind the chair back, secured the rope to a rung, testing all knots carefully. Then he checked the time and said, "Keep your month shut from now on unless I ask you something."

Brooke nodded silently. Her expression indicated she might be

frightened at last, and she might have reason for it. Jeff went to the window, studied the valley road. Nothing to be seen there yet. Rain clouds drifted over the lower countryside though the sky remained clear above the house. There was a distant roll of thunder. Jeff left the room, returned with a silk scarf. He laid the scarf on the table, restored the bundled bills, the jewelry and Brooke's burglary equipment to the suitcase, except for the pencil flash, which stayed in his pocket along with the two-way watch. He covered the assortment in the suitcase with Brooke's cape, thinking there still might be stuff concealed in it that he hadn't discovered. If so, it could wait. He closed and locked the suitcase, pocketed the key. The clothes and boots he'd been wearing went into the closet from which he'd taken Uncle Jason's suit and shoes.

He returned to the window, stood looking out. He felt a little tense, just enough to keep him keyed up, which he didn't mind. He was always at his best when keyed up. He knew exactly what he was going to do, and it was unlikely that anything could go wrong. Even if Brooke happened to have lied about Tracy's ability to fly a plane, it wouldn't affect his plans seriously. He'd leave the two of them here, dead and stowed away where they shouldn't be found at once, and go off in Tracy's car. A few hours' start was all he needed now. The plane would be preferable, of course. If the two disappeared with him, he could work out a way to put heat on their precious family.

He'd been tempted to wait, to let that crew of cautious wealthy practitioners of crime start drifting in during the afternoon, nail them down as they arrived, and then see what he could make out of the overall situation, but that might be crowding his luck. He'd got a great deal more than he'd expected to get at the house, and he liked the way the setup looked now.

He inquired presently, "What color is Tracy's car?"

Brooke's tongue tip moistened her lips. "Red," she said. "Cherry red. Sports car. Is she coming?"

"In sight," Jeff said. "Still a few minutes away." He went to the table, picked up the silk scarf. "Let's make sure everything stays very quiet in here when she shows up!" He wrapped the scarf tightly around Brooke's mouth and jaw, knotted it behind her head and came back to the window.

He stood away from it a little, though there was no real chance the sharpest of eyes could have spotted him from the road. Tracy, he decided, did drive fast--and expertly. The little red car was flicked around curves, accelerated again on the straight stretches. By the time the sound of the engine grew audible on the breeze, he could make out a few details about the driver: a woman, all right--goggled, bright green scarf covering her head, strands of blonde hair whipping

out back of the scarf. She was coming to the house because there was nowhere else to go; the road stopped here. Satisfied, Jeff left the room, went unhurriedly downstairs.

He'd made up his mind a while ago about the place where he'd wait for Tracy, and he was there a minute later. A side door opened on the garden near the angle formed by the house with the garage. The angle was landscaped with thick dark-green bushes, providing perfect cover. For the moment, he remained near the door. The chances were that Tracy would come directly to the garage; and if she did, he'd have the gun on her as soon as she stepped out of the car. If, instead, she drove around to the front entrance of the building, he'd slip back into the house through the side door and catch her inside. The rest would be simple. It shouldn't take long to make her realize what she had to do for her own sake and Brooke's, that Jeff didn't really need either of them, and that if she didn't follow his orders, exactly, he'd shoot them both and leave with her car.

From his point of concealment, he watched the car turn up the driveway from the road. The section of driveway leading to the garage curved out of sight behind a stand of ornamental pines sixty yards away. The car swung into it, vanished behind the trees. There was a momentary squeal of brakes.

Jeff frowned, listening, Uncle George's .38 in his hand. He heard the purring throb of the engine, but the car obviously had stopped. It shouldn't make much difference if Tracy left it there; she still had to come to the house. But it wasn't the way Jeff had planned it, and he didn't like that.

He gauged the distance to the pines. He could reach them in a quick sprint and find out what she was doing. However, he didn't favor that idea either. If she had the car in motion again before he got there and caught sight of him in the open, he could have a real problem. Undecided, Jeff began to edge through the bushes toward the front of the garage.

He heard a sound then, a slight creaking, which he might have missed if his ears hadn't been straining for indications of what was delaying Tracy. He turned his head, and something stung the side of his neck. He swung around, startled, felt himself stumbling oddly as his gaze swept up along the side of the house.

A window screen in a second-floor room above him was being quietly closed. Jeff jerked up the revolver. He was falling backward by then, and he fired two shots, wildly, spitefully, at the blurring blue of the sky before he was lying on the ground, the gun somehow no longer in his hand. He had a stunned thought: that Brooke couldn't possibly have done it, that he had her tranquilizing gadget in his coat. And besides--

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He didn't finish the second thought. Tracy was standing next to him, holding a gun of her own, when Brooke came out through the side door.

"Well!" Tracy said. "So now I know why you were giving me the high sign from the window." She glanced down at Jeff's face, back at Brooke. "Tranquilizer?"

"No," Brooke said reluctantly. "He spotted that while we were talking and took it."

"So it was Last Resort, eh?"

"Yes."

Tracy grimaced. "Suspected it, by the way he looks." She shook her head. "Well, Brooke--curare. You know, the rules. You may have quite a bit of explaining to do."

"I *can* explain it."

"Yes? Start with me!" Tracy invited. "A sort of rehearsal. Let's see how it will stand up."

"You know who that is? Was, I guess."

Tracy looked at Jeff again. "No. I should?"

"Jeff Clary."

Tracy blinked. "Clary? The escaped convict they're hunting for? You're sure?"

"I'm sure," Brooke said. "They've been broadcasting his picture and I recognized him as soon as he turned up in the house. Anyway, he admitted it. He's killed three people in the past twenty-four hours, and he had plans for you and me after you'd flown him across the border."

"Now, that doesn't start the explanation off too badly," Tracy conceded. "Still--"

Brooke said, "He had to go anyway."

"Probably. But not at your discretion. If you had to let him take your sleepy-bye kit, what about mine? You know where I keep it. The

bag's upstairs in my closet at present."

"I thought of that," Brooke said, "but I didn't think I'd have time to hunt around for the bag. He had me gagged and tied to a chair, and he stayed right there in the room with me until you were almost driving in. Last Resort was quicker. I grabbed it."

"Um!" Tracy tapped her nose tip reflectively. "Well, that really should do it! They can't give you too much of an argument." She smiled. "So the big bad convict ties you to a chair? Angelique the Eleven-Year-Old Escape Artist. Remember the howl you raised when they sent you off to the circus that summer?" She looked at the gun in her hand. "Might as well put this away, and we'll start tidying up."

"Hadn't you better use the gun first?" Brooke said.

"Huh?" Tracy looked thoughtful. "Yes!" she said then. "Good thinking, Brooke! They should prefer to let Clary be found if the coroner doesn't have reason to poke around too closely. We'll take away the reason."

She pointed the gun at a spot between Jeff's eyebrows.

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There had been assorted activities in the house in the latter part of the afternoon and the early part of the evening, but around ten o'clock things were quiet again. The rain, after holding off to the south most of the day, had moved in finally, and there was a gentle steady pattering against the closed windows in Tracy's room. For the past half hour, Brooke and Tracy had been playing double slap solitaire at a small table. Neither was displaying her usual fierce concentration on the game.

Tracy lifted her head suddenly, glanced at Brooke. "I think the reporting committee's coming!"

Brooke listened. Footsteps were audible in the passage. "Well, it's a relief," she muttered. "They've been discussing it long enough."

She put down her card pack and went to the door.

"Here we are, George!" she called. "Tracy's room."

She came back and looked on as the tuxedoed committee filed in. George Cameron, president of Renfrew College and scholarly authority on the Punic Wars, entered first; then Ricardo Achtel, who handled Baldwin Gems, Imports and Exports, among other things. Finally came Jason Cameron, best known in some circles as big-

game hunter and mountaineer. Three big guns of the family. All gave her reassuring smiles, which struck Brooke as a bad sign. She drew a deep breath.

"What's the verdict?" she asked.

"Let's not look on it as a verdict, Brooke," said George Cameron. "Sit down; we'll have to talk about it." He glanced around, noted the absence of free chairs. "Mind if we use your bed, Tracy?"

"Not at all," Tracy told him.

George and Jason sat down on the bed. Ricardo Achtel leaned against the wall, hands shoved into his trousers pockets. "There was a special news report some ten minutes ago," George remarked. "I don't believe you caught it?"

Brooke shook her head.

George said, "They've found the unfortunate Rambow couple in their car. Each had been shot from behind almost at contact range--a deliberate execution. Clary afterward ran the damaged vehicle off the road, as he told you. A highway patrol happened to notice smashed bushes, investigated and discovered the wreck and the bodies in a ravine."

"How far from where Clary was found?" Tracy asked.

"Less than four miles. We worked out his probable backtrail closely enough," George said. "And that should wind it up. The theory that Clary tried to kidnap another motorist, who was lucky or alert enough to shoot first, and may have sufficient reason for not wanting to identify himself, is regarded as substantiated. Either of the two bullets found in Clary's body should have caused almost instant death. Police will try to trace the gun. The usual thing."

There was a short pause. "All right, and now what about me?" Brooke asked. "I've flunked?"

"Not at all," George said. "On the whole, you did very well. You were dealing with a killer and stalled him off until you could create an opportunity to end the threat to yourself and Tracy. Naturally, we approve."

"Naturally," Tracy agreed dryly.

"However," said Jason Cameron, "there was a rather serious breach of secrecy."

"I've tried to explain that," Brooke told him. "I had to do something to keep Clary working to outfigure me. I couldn't think of a good enough

set of lies on the spot. He didn't seem exactly stupid. So I told him the truth, or mostly the truth, which made it easy."

George scratched his jaw. "Yes, but there you are, Brooke! In doing it, you took a chance. Mind you, no one's blaming you. If there's any fault, it's in those responsible for your progress--which certainly must include myself. But as far as you knew, there was a possibility, however slight, that the police would trace Clary to the house and take him alive. We could have handled the resulting problem, but some harm might have been done. Further, in being frank with Clary, you made killing him almost a necessity--thus reducing your options, which is never desirable."

Jason nodded. "There's a definite streak of candor in you, Brooke. It's been noticed. Your immediate inclination is to tell the truth."

"Not," observed Ricardo Achtel, "that there's anything essentially wrong with that."

"No, of course not," George agreed. "However, one can also argue in favor of facile dissimulation. Those who don't seem born with the ability--I had a good deal of early difficulty in the area myself--must acquire it by practice. It's felt you fall short on that point, Brooke."

"In other words," Brooke said, "I didn't flunk out, but I didn't get upgraded tonight either?"

"Not formally," George told her. "We believe you need more time. The matter will be brought up again at your next birthday."

"Seven months," said Brooke. She looked discouraged.

"They'll pass quickly enough for you," George assured her.

"In a sense, you see," Jason remarked, "circumstances did upgrade you today by presenting you with a difficult and serious problem, which you solved satisfactorily though in a less than optimum manner. It seems mainly a question of letting your experience catch up."

George nodded. "Exactly! So you'll continue your formal education at Renfrew, but you'll also start going to drama school."

"Drama school?" Brooke said, surprised.

"Ours. The training you receive there won't precisely parallel that given other students, but you should find it interesting. Tracy went through the process a few years ago."

Brooke looked over at Tracy.

"Uh-huh, so I did," Tracy said slowly. She shook her head. "Poor Brooke!"

"Watch the Sky"

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It's one thing to try to get away with what you believe to be a lie and be caught at it--
and something different, and far worse
sometimes, to find it isn't a lie....

Uncle William Boles' war-battered old Geest gun gave the impression that at some stage of its construction it had been pulled out of shape and then hardened in that form. What remained of it was all of one piece. The scarred and pitted twin barrels were stubby and thick, and the vacant oblong in the frame behind them might have contained standard energy magazines. It was the stock which gave the alien weapon its curious appearance. Almost eighteen inches long, it curved abruptly to the right and was too thin, knobbed and indented to fit comfortably at any point in a human hand. Over half a century had passed since, with the webbed, boneless fingers of its original owner closed about it, it last spat deadly radiation at human foemen. Now it hung among Uncle William's other collected oddities on the wall above the living room fireplace.

And today, Phil Boles thought, squinting at the gun with reflectively narrowed eyes, some eight years after Uncle William's death, the old war souvenir would quietly become a key factor in the solution of a colonial planet's problems. He ran a finger over the dull, roughened frame, bent closer to study the neatly lettered inscription: Gunderland Battle Trophy, Anno 2172, Sgt. William G. Boles . Then, catching a familiar series of clicking noises from the hall, he straightened quickly and turned away. When Aunt Beulah's go-chair came rolling back into the room, Phil was sitting at the low tea table, his back to the fireplace.

The go-chair's wide flexible treads carried it smoothly down the three steps to the sunken section of the living room, Beulah sitting jauntily erect in it, for all the ninety-six years which had left her the last survivor of the original group of Earth settlers on the world of Roye. She tapped her fingers here and there on the chair's armrests, swinging it deftly about, and brought it to a stop beside the tea table.

"That was Susan Feeney calling," she reported. "And *there* is somebody else for you who thinks I have to be taken care of! Go ahead and finish the pie, Phil. Can't hurt a husky man like you. Got a couple more baking for you to take along."

Phil grinned. "That'd be worth the trip up from Fort Roye all by itself."

Beulah looked pleased. "Not much else I can do for my great-grand nephew nowadays, is there?"

Phil said, after a moment, "Have you given any further thought to--"

"Moving down to Fort Roye?" Beulah pursed her thin lips. "Goodness, Phil, I do hate to disappoint you again, but I'd be completely out of place in a town apartment."

"Dr. Fitzsimmons would be pleased," Phil remarked.

"Oh, him! Fitz is another old worry wart. What he wants is to get me into the hospital. Nothing doing!"

Phil shook his head helplessly, laughed. "After all, working a tupa ranch--"

"Nonsense. The ranch is just enough bother to be interesting. The appliances do everything anyway, and Susan is down here every morning for a chat and to make sure I'm still all right. She won't admit that, of course, but if she thinks something should be taken care of, the whole Feeney family shows up an hour later to do it. There's really no reason for you to be sending a dozen men up from Fort Roye every two months to harvest the tupa."

Phil shrugged. "No one's ever yet invented an easy way to dig up those roots. And the clu's glad to furnish the men."

"Because you're its president?"

"Uh-huh."

"It really doesn't cost you anything?" Beulah asked doubtfully.

"Not a cent."

"Hm-m-m. Been meaning to ask you. What made you set up that ... Colonial Labor Union?"

Phil nodded. "That's the official name."

"Why did you set it up in the first place?"

"That's easy to answer," Phil said. "On the day the planetary population here touched the forty thousand mark, Roye became legally entitled to its labor union. Why not take advantage of it?"

"What's the advantage?"

"More Earth money coming in, for one thing. Of the twelve hundred clu members we've got in Fort Roye now, seventy-six per cent were unemployed this month. We'll have a compensation check from the Territorial Office with the next ship coming in." He smiled at her expression. "Sure, the boys *could* go back to the tupa ranches. But not everyone likes that life as well as you and the Feeneys."

"Earth government lets you get away with it?" Beulah asked curiously. "They used to be pretty tight-fisted."

"They still are--but it's the law. The Territorial Office also pays any clu president's salary, incidentally. I don't draw too much at the moment, but that will go up automatically with the membership and my responsibilities."

"What responsibilities?"

"We've set up a skeleton organization," Phil explained. "Now, when Earth government decides eventually to establish a big military base here, they can run in a hundred thousand civilians in a couple of months and everyone will be fitted into the pattern on Roye without trouble or confusion. That's really the reason for all the generosity."

Beulah sniffed. "Big base, my eye! There hasn't been six months since I set foot here that somebody wasn't talking about Fort Roye being turned into a Class a military base pretty soon. It'll never happen, Phil. Roye's a farm planet, and that's what it's going to stay."

Phil's lips twitched. "Well, don't give up hope."

"*I'm* not anxious for any changes," Beulah said. "I like Roye the way it is."

She peered at a button on the go-chair's armrest which had just begun to put out small bright-blue flashes of light. "Pies are done," she announced. "Phil, are you sure you can't stay for dinner?"

Phil looked at his watch, shook his head. "I'd love to, but I really have to get back."

"Then I'll go wrap up the pies for you."

Beulah swung the go-chair around, sent it slithering up the stairs and out the door. Phil stood up quickly. He stepped over to the fireplace, opened his coat and detached a flexible, box-shaped object from the inner lining. He laid this object on the mantle, and turned one of three small knobs about its front edge to the right. The box promptly extruded a supporting leg from each of its four corners, pushed itself up from the mantle and became a miniature table. Phil glanced at the door through which Beulah had vanished, listened a moment, then took the Geest gun from the wall, laid it carefully on top of the device and twisted the second dial.

The odd-looking gun began to sink slowly down through the surface of Phil's instrument, like a rock disappearing in mud. Within seconds it vanished completely; then, a moment later, it began to emerge from the box's underside. Phil let the Geest gun drop into his hand, replaced it on the wall, turned the third knob. The box withdrew its supports and sank down to the mantle. Phil clipped it back inside his coat, closed the coat, and strolled over to the center of the room to wait for Aunt Beulah to return with the pies.

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It was curious, Phil Boles reflected as his aircar moved out over the craggy, plunging coastline to the north some while later, that a few bold minds could be all that was needed to change the fate of a world. A few minds with imagination enough to see how circumstances about them might be altered.

On his left, far below, was now the flat ribbon of the peninsula, almost at sea level, its tip widening and lifting into the broad, rocky promontory on which stood Fort Roye--the only thing on the planet bigger and of more significance than the shabby backwoods settlements. And Fort Roye was neither very big nor very significant. A Class f military base around which, over the years, a straggling

town had come into existence, Fort Roye was a space-age trading post linking Roye's population to the mighty mother planet, and a station from which the otherwise vacant and utterly unimportant 132nd Segment of the Space Territories was periodically and uneventfully patrolled. It was no more than that. Twice a month, an Earth ship settled down to the tiny port, bringing supplies, purchases, occasional groups of reassigned military and civilians--the latter suspected of being drawn as a rule from Earth's Undesirable classification. The ship would take off some days later, with a return load of the few local products for which there was outside demand, primarily the medically valuable tupa roots; and Fort Roye lay quiet again.

The planet was not at fault. Essentially, it had what was needed to become a thriving colony in every sense. At fault was the Geest War. The war had periods of flare-up and periods in which it seemed to be subsiding. During the past decade it had been subsiding again. One of the early flare-ups, one of the worst, and the one which brought the war closest to Earth itself, was the Gunderland Battle in which Uncle William Boles' trophy gun had been acquired. But the war never came near Roye. The action was all in the opposite section of the giant sphere of the Space Territories, and over the years the war drew steadily farther away.

And Earth's vast wealth--its manpower, materials and money--was pouring into space in the direction the Geest War was moving. Worlds not a tenth as naturally attractive as Roye, worlds where the basic conditions for human life were just above the unbearable point, were settled and held, equipped with everything needed and wanted to turn them into independent giant fortresses, with a population not too dissatisfied with its lot. When Earth government didn't count the expense, life could be made considerably better than bearable almost anywhere.

Those were the circumstances which condemned Roye to insignificance. Not everyone minded. Phil Boles, native son, did mind. His inclinations were those of an operator, and he was not being given an adequate opportunity to exercise them. Therefore, the circumstances would have to be changed, and the precise time to make the change was at hand. Phil himself was not aware of every factor involved, but he was aware of enough of them. Back on Earth, a certain political situation was edging towards a specific point of instability. As a result, an Earth ship which was not one of the regular freighters had put down at Fort Roye some days before. Among its passengers were Commissioner Sanford of the Territorial Office, a well-known politician, and a Mr. Ronald Black, the popular and enterprising owner of Earth's second largest news outlet system. They were on a joint fact-finding tour of the thinly scattered colonies in this remote section of the Territories, and had wound up eventually

at the most remote of all--the 132nd Segment and Roye.

That was one factor. Just visible twenty thousand feet below Phil--almost directly beneath him now as the aircar made its third leisurely crossing of the central belt of the peninsula--was another. From here it looked like an irregular brown circle against the peninsula's nearly white ground. Lower down, it would have resembled nothing so much as the broken and half-decayed spirals of a gigantic snail shell, its base sunk deep in the ground and its shattered point rearing twelve stories above it. This structure, known popularly as "the ruins" in Fort Roye, was supposed to have been the last stronghold of a semi-intelligent race native to Roye, which might have become extinct barely a century before the Earthmen arrived. A factor associated with the ruins again was that their investigation was the passionately pursued hobby of First Lieutenant Norman Vaughn, Fort Roye's Science Officer.

Add to such things the reason Roye was not considered in need of a serious defensive effort by Earth's strategists--the vast distances between it and any troubled area, and so the utter improbability that a Geest ship might come close enough to discover that here was another world as well suited for its race as for human beings. And then a final factor: the instrument attached to the lining of Phil's coat--a very special "camera" which now carried the contact impressions made on it by Uncle William's souvenir gun. Put 'em all together, Phil thought cheerily, and they spelled out interesting developments on Roye in the very near future.

He glanced at his watch again, swung the aircar about and started back inland. He passed presently high above Aunt Beulah's tupa ranch and that of the Feeney family two miles farther up the mountain, turned gradually to the east and twenty minutes later was edging back down the ranges to the coast. Here in a wild, unfarmed region, perched at the edge of a cliff dropping nearly nine hundred feet to the swirling tide, was a small, trim cabin which was the property of a small, trim Fort Roye lady named Celia Adams. Celia had been shipped out from Earth six years before, almost certainly as an Undesirable, though only the Territorial Office and Celia herself knew about that, the Botany Bay aspect of worlds like Roye being handled with some tact by Earth.

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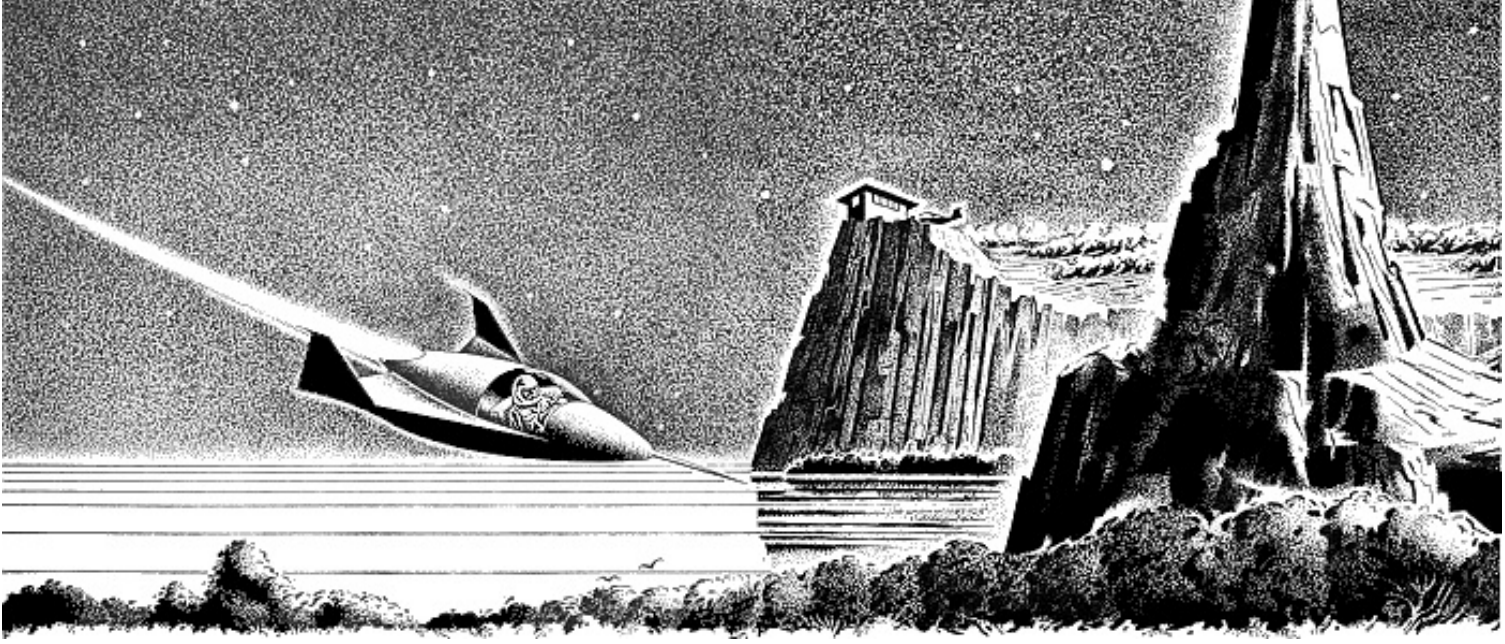

Phil approached the cabin only as far as was necessary to make sure that the dark-green aircar parked before it was one belonging to Major Wayne Jackson, the Administration Officer and second in command at Fort Roye--another native son and an old acquaintance. He then turned away, dropped to the woods ten miles south and made a second inconspicuous approach under cover of the trees. There might be casual observers in the area, and while his meeting with Jackson and Celia Adams today revealed nothing in itself, it would be better if no one knew about it.

He grounded the car in the forest a few hundred yards from the Adams cabin, slung a rifle over his shoulder and set off along a game path. It was good hunting territory, and the rifle would explain his presence if he ran into somebody. When he came within view of the cabin, he discovered Celia and her visitor on the covered back patio, drinks standing before them. Jackson was in hunting clothes. Phil remained quietly back among the trees for some seconds watching the two, aware of something like a last-minute hesitancy. A number of things passed slowly through his mind.

What they planned to do was no small matter. It was a hoax which should have far-reaching results, on a gigantic scale. And if Earth government realized it had been hoaxed, the thing could become very unpleasant. That tough-minded central bureaucracy did not ordinarily bother to obtain proof against those it suspected. The suspicion was enough. Individuals and groups whom the shadow of doubt touched found themselves shunted unobtrusively into some backwater of existence and kept there. It was supposed to be very difficult to emerge from such a position again.

In the back of his mind, Phil had been conscious of that, but it had seemed an insignificant threat against the excitement arising from

the grandiose impudence of the plan, the perhaps rather small-boyish delight at being able to put something over, profitably, on the greatest power of all. Even now it might have been only a natural wariness that brought the threat up for a final moment of reflection. He didn't, of course, want to incur Earth government's disapproval. But why believe that he might? On all Roye there would be only three who knew--Wayne Jackson, Celia Adams, and himself. All three would benefit, each in a different way, and all would be equally responsible for the hoax. No chance of indiscretion or belated qualms there. Their own interest ruled it out in each case.

And from the other men now involved there was as little danger of betrayal. Their gain would be vastly greater, but they had correspondingly more to lose. They would take every step required to insure their protection, and in doing that they would necessarily take the best of care of Phil Boles.

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"How did you ever get such a thing smuggled in to Roye?" Phil asked. He'd swallowed half the drink Celia offered him at a gulp and now, a few minutes later, he was experiencing what might have been under different circumstances a comfortable glow, but which didn't entirely erase the awareness of having committed himself at this hour to an irrevocable line of action.

Celia stroked a fluffy lock of red-brown hair back from her forehead and glanced over at him. She had a narrow, pretty face, marred only by a suggestion of hardness about the mouth--which was a little more than ordinarily noticeable just now. Phil decided she felt something like his own tensions, for identical reasons. He was less certain about Major Wayne Jackson, a big, loose-jointed man with an easy-going smile and a pleasantly self-assured voice. The voice might be veering a trifle too far to the hearty side; but that was all.

"I didn't," Celia said. "It belonged to Frank. How he got it shipped in with him--or after him--from Earth I don't know. He never told me. When he died a couple of years ago, I took it over."

Phil gazed reflectively at the row of unfamiliar instruments covering half the table beside her. The "camera" which had taken an imprint of the Geest gun in Aunt Beulah's living room went with that equipment and had become an interior section of the largest of the instruments. "What do you call it?" he asked.

Celia looked irritated. Jackson laughed, said, "Why not tell him? Phil's feeling like we do--this is the last chance to look everything over, make sure nobody's slipped up, that nothing can go wrong.

Right, Phil?"

Phil nodded. "Something like that."

Celia chewed her lip. "All right," she said. "It doesn't matter, I suppose--compared with the other." She tapped one of the instruments. "The set's called a duplicator. This one's around sixty years old. They're classified as a forgery device, and it's decidedly illegal for a private person to build one, own one, or use one."

"Why that?"

"Because forgery is ordinarily all they're good for. Frank was one of the best of the boys in that line before he found he'd been put on an outtransfer list."

Phil frowned. "But if it can duplicate any manufactured object--"

"It can. At an average expense around fifty times higher than it would take to make an ordinary reproduction without it. A duplicator's no use unless you want a reproduction that's absolutely indistinguishable from the model."

"I see." Phil was silent a moment. "After sixty years--"

"Don't worry, Phil," Jackson said. "It's in perfect working condition. We checked that on a number of samples."

"How do you know the copies were really indistinguishable?"

Celia said impatiently, "Because that's the way the thing works. When the Geest gun passed through the model plate, it was analyzed down to its last little molecule. The duplicate is now being built up from that analysis. Every fraction of every element used in the original will show up again exactly. Why do you think the stuff's so expensive?"

Phil grinned. "All right, I'm convinced. How do we get rid of the inscription?"

"The gadget will handle that," Jackson said. "Crack that edge off, treat the cracked surface to match the wear of the rest." He smiled. "Makes an Earth forger's life look easy, doesn't it?"

"It is till they hook you," Celia said shortly. She finished her drink, set it on the table, added, "We've a few questions, too, Phil."

"The original gun," Jackson said. "Mind you, there's no slightest reason to expect an investigation. But after this starts rolling, our necks will be out just a little until we've got rid of that particular bit of incriminating evidence."

Phil pursed his lips. "I wouldn't worry about it. Nobody but Beulah ever looks at Uncle William's collection of oddities. Most of it's complete trash. And probably only she and you and I know there's a Geest gun among the things--William's cronies all passed away before he did. But if the gun disappeared now, Beulah would miss it. And that--since Earth government's made it illegal to possess Geest artifacts--*might* create attention."

Jackson fingered his chin thoughtfully, said, "Of course, there's always a way to make sure Beulah didn't kick up a fuss."

Phil hesitated. "Dr. Fitzsimmons gives Beulah another three months at the most," he said. "If she can stay out of the hospital for even the next eight weeks, he'll consider it some kind of miracle. That should be early enough to take care of the gun."

"It should be," Jackson said. "However, if there does happen to be an investigation before that time--"

Phil looked at him, said evenly, "We'd do whatever was necessary. It wouldn't be very agreeable, but my neck's out just as far as yours."

Celia laughed. "That's the reason we can all feel pretty safe," she observed. "Every last one of us is completely selfish--and there's no more dependable kind of person than that."

Jackson flushed a little, glanced at Phil, smiled. Phil shrugged. Major Wayne Jackson, native son, Fort Roye's second in command, was scheduled for the number one spot and a string of promotions via the transfer of the current commander, Colonel Thayer. Their Earthside associates would arrange for that as soon as the decision to turn Fort Roye into a Class a military base was reached. Phil himself could get by with the guaranteed retention of the clu presidency, and a membership moving up year by year to the half million mark and beyond--he could get by very, very comfortably, in fact. While Celia Adams would develop a discreetly firm hold on every upcoming minor racket, facilitated by iron-clad protection and an enforced lack of all competitors.

"We're all thinking of Roye's future, Celia," Phil said amiably, "each in his own way. And the future looks pretty bright. In fact, the only possible stumbling block I can still see is right here on Roye, and it's Honest Silas Thayer. If our colonel covers up the Geest gun find tomorrow--"

Jackson grinned, shook his head. "Leave that to me, my boy--and to our very distinguished visitors from Earth. Commissioner Sanford has arranged to be in Thayer's company on Territorial Office business all day tomorrow. Science Officer Vaughn is dizzy with

delight because Ronald Black and most of the newsgathering troop will inspect his diggings in the ruins in the morning, with the promise of giving his theories about the vanished natives of Roye a nice spread on Earth. Black will happen to ask me to accompany the party. Between Black and Sanford--and myself--Colonel Silas Thayer won't have a chance to suppress the discovery of a Geest gun on Roye until the military has had a chance to look into it fully. And the only one he can possibly blame for that will be Science Officer Norm Vaughn--for whom, I'll admit, I feel just a little bit sorry!"

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First Lieutenant Norman Vaughn was an intense and frustrated young man whose unusually thick contact lenses and wide mouth gave him some resemblance to a melancholy frog. He suspected, correctly, that a good Science Officer would not have been transferred from Earth to Roye which was a planet deficient in scientific problems of any magnitude, and where requisitions for research purposes were infrequently and grudgingly granted.

The great spiraled ruin on the peninsula of Fort Roye had been Vaughn's one solace. Several similar deserted structures were known to be on the planet, but this was by far in the best condition and no doubt the most recently built. To him, if to no one else, it became clear that the construction had been carried out with conscious plan and purpose, and he gradually amassed great piles of notes to back up his theory that the vanished builders were of near-human intelligence. Unfortunately, their bodies appeared to have lacked hard and durable parts, since nothing that could be construed as their remains was found; and what Lieutenant Vaughn regarded as undeniable artifacts, on the level of very early Man's work, looked to others like chance shards and lumps of the tough, shell-like material of which the ruins were composed.

Therefore, while Vaughn was--as Jackson had pointed out--really dizzy with delight when Ronald Black, that giant of Earth's news media, first indicated an interest in the ruins and his theories about them, this feeling soon became mixed with acute anxiety. For such a chance surely would not come again if the visitors remained unconvinced by what he showed them, and what--actually--did he have to show? In the morning, when the party set out, Vaughn was in a noticeably nervous frame of mind.

Two hours later, he burst into the anteroom of the base commander's office in Fort Roye, where the warrant on duty almost failed to recognize him. Lieutenant Vaughn's eyes glittered through their thick lenses; his face was red and he was grinning from ear to ear. He pounded past the startled warrant, pulled open the door to the inner

office where Colonel Thayer sat with the visiting Territorial Commissioner, and plunged inside.

"Sir," the warrant heard him quaver breathlessly, "I have the proof--the undeniable proof! They *were* intelligent beings. They did *not* die of disease. They were exterminated in war! They were ... but see for yourself!" There was a thud as he dropped something on the polished table top between the commissioner and Colonel Thayer. "*That* was dug up just now--among their own artifacts!"

Silas Thayer was on his feet, sucking in his breath for the blast that would hurl his blundering Science Officer back out of the office. What halted him was an odd, choked exclamation from Commissioner Sanford. The colonel's gaze flicked over to the visitor, then followed Sanford's stare to the object on the table.

For an instant, Colonel Thayer froze.

Vaughn was bubbling on. "And, sir, I...."

"Shut up!" Thayer snapped. He continued immediately, "You say this was found in the diggings in the ruins?"

"Yes, sir--just now! It's...."

Lieutenant Vaughn checked himself under the colonel's stare, some dawning comprehension of the enormous irregularities he'd committed showing in his flushed face. He licked his lips uncertainly.

"You will excuse me for a moment, sir," Thayer said to Commissioner Sanford. He picked the Geest gun up gingerly by its unmistakably curved shaft, took it over to the office safe, laid it inside and relocked the safe. He then left the office.

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In an adjoining room, Thayer rapped out Major Wayne Jackson's code number on a communicator. He heard a faint click as Jackson's wrist speaker switched on, and said quickly, "Wayne, are you in a position to speak?"

"I am at the moment," Jackson's voice replied cautiously.

Colonel Thayer said, "Norm Vaughn just crashed in here with something he claims was found in the diggings. Sanford saw it, and obviously recognized it. We might be able to keep him quiet. But now some questions. Was that item actually dug up just now?"

"Apparently it was," Jackson said. "I didn't see it happen--I was

talking to Black at the moment. But there are over a dozen witnesses who claim they did see it happen, including five or six of the news agency men."

"And they knew what it was?"

"Enough of them did."

Thayer cursed softly. "No chance that one of them pitched the thing into the diggings for an Earthside sensation?"

"I'm afraid not," Jackson said. "It was lying in the sifter after most of the sand and dust had been blown away."

"Why didn't you call me at once?"

"I've been holding down something like a mutiny here, Silas. Vaughn got away before I could stop him, but I grounded the other aircars till you could decide what to do. Our visitors don't like that. Neither do they like the fact that I've put a guard over the section where the find was made, and haven't let them talk to Norm's work crew.

"Ronald Black and his staff have been fairly reasonable, but there's been considerable mention of military highhandedness made by the others. This is the first moment I've been free."

"You did the right thing," Thayer said, "but I doubt it will help much now. Can you get hold of Ronald Black?"

"Yes, he's over there...."

"Colonel Thayer?" another voice inquired pleasantly a few seconds later.

"Mr. Black," the colonel said carefully, "what occurred in the diggings a short while ago may turn out to be a matter of great importance."

"That's quite obvious, sir."

"And that being the case," the colonel went on, "do you believe it would be possible to obtain a gentleman's agreement from all witnesses to make no mention of this apparent discovery until the information is released through the proper channels? I'm asking for your opinion."

"Colonel Thayer," Ronald Black's voice said, still pleasantly, "my opinion is that the only way you could keep the matter quiet is to arrest every civilian present, including myself, and hold us incommunicado. You have your duty, and we have ours. Ours does not include withholding information from the public which may signal the greatest shift in the conduct of the Geest War in the past two

decades."

"I understand," Thayer said. He was silent for some seconds, and perhaps he, too, was gazing during that time at a Fort Roye of the future--a Class a military base under his command, with Earth's great war vessels lined up along the length of the peninsula.

"Mr. Black," he said, "please be so good as to give your colleagues this word from me. I shall make the most thorough possible investigation of what has occurred and forward a prompt report, along with any material evidence obtained, to my superiors on Earth. None of you will receive any other statement from me or from anyone under my command. An attempt to obtain such a statement will, in fact, result in the arrest of the person or persons involved. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear, Colonel Thayer," Ronald Black said softly. "And entirely satisfactory."

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"We have known for the past eight weeks," the man named Cranehart said, "that this was not what it appears to be ... that is, a section of a Geest weapon."

He shoved the object in question across the desk towards Commissioner Sanford and Ronald Black. Neither of the two attempted to pick it up; they glanced at it, then returned their eyes attentively to Cranehart's face.

"It is, of course, an excellent copy," Cranehart went on, "produced with a professional forger's equipment. As I imagine you're aware, that should have made it impossible to distinguish from the original weapon. However ... there's no real harm in telling you this now ... Geest technology has taken somewhat different turns than our own. In their weapons they employ traces of certain elements which we are only beginning to learn to maintain in stable form. That is a matter your government has kept from public knowledge because we don't wish the Geests to learn from human prisoners how much information we are gaining from them.

"The instrument which made this copy naturally did not have such elements at its disposal. So it employed their lower homologues and in that manner successfully produced an almost identical model. In fact, the only significant difference is that such a gun, if it had been a complete model, could not possibly have been fired." He smiled briefly. "But that, I think you will agree, *is* a significant difference! We knew as soon as the so-called Geest gun was examined that it could

only have been made by human beings."

"Then," Commissioner Sanford said soberly, "its apparent discovery on Roye during our visit was a deliberate hoax--"

Cranehart nodded. "Of course."

Ronald Black said, "I fail to see why you've kept this quiet. You needn't have given away any secrets. Meanwhile the wave of public criticism at the government's seeming hesitancy to take action on the discovery--that is, to rush protection to the threatened Territorial Segments--has reached almost alarming proportions. You could have stopped it before it began two months ago with a single announcement."

"Well, yes," Cranehart said. "There were other considerations. Incidentally, Mr. Black, we are not unappreciative of the fact that the news media under your own control exercised a generous restraint in the matter."

"For which," Black said dryly, "I am now very thankful."

"As for the others," Cranehart went on, "the government has survived periods of criticism before. That is not important. The important thing is that the Geest War has been with us for more than a human life span now ... and it becomes difficult for many to bear in mind that until its conclusion no acts that might reduce our ability to prosecute it can be tolerated."

Ronald Black said slowly, "So you've been delaying the announcement until you could find out who was responsible for the hoax."

"We were interested," Cranehart said, "only in the important men--the dangerous men. We don't care much who else is guilty of what. This, you see, is a matter of expediency, not of justice." He looked for a moment at the politely questioning, somewhat puzzled faces across the desk, went on, "When you leave this room, each of you will be conducted to an office where you will be given certain papers to sign. That is the first step."

There was silence for some seconds. Ronald Black took a cigarette from a platinum case, tapped it gently on the desk, put it to his mouth and lit it. Cranehart went on, "It would have been impossible to unravel this particular conspiracy if the forgery had been immediately exposed. At that time, no one had taken any obvious action. Then, within a few days--with the discovery apparently confirmed by our silence--normal maneuverings in industry and finance were observed to be under way. If a major shift in war policy was pending, if one or more key bases were to be established in Territorial Segments

previously considered beyond the range of Geest reconnaissance and therefore secure from attack, this would be to somebody's benefit on Earth."

"Isn't it always?" Black murmured.

"Of course. It's a normal procedure, ordinarily of no concern to government. It can be predicted with considerable accuracy to what group or groups the ultimate advantage in such a situation will go. But in these past weeks, it became apparent that somebody else was winning out ... somebody who could have won out only on the basis of careful and extensive preparation for this very situation.

"That was abnormal, and it was the appearance of an abnormal pattern for which we had been waiting. We find there are seven men involved. These men will be deprived of the advantage they have gained."

Ronald Black shook his head, said, "You're making a mistake, Cranehart. I'm signing no papers."

"Nor I," Sanford said thickly.

Cranehart rubbed the side of his nose with a fingertip, said meditatively, "You won't be forced to. Not directly." He nodded at the window. "On the landing flange out there is an aircar. It is possible that this aircar will be found wrecked in the mountains some four hundred miles north of here early tomorrow morning. Naturally, we have a satisfactory story prepared to cover such an eventuality."

Sanford whitened slowly. He said, "So you'd resort to murder!"

Cranehart was silent for a few seconds. "Mr. Sanford," he said then, "you, as a member of the Territorial Office, know very well that the Geest War has consumed over four hundred million human lives to date. That is the circumstance which obliges your government to insist on your co-operation. I advise you to give it."

"But you have no proof! You have nothing but surmises--"

"Consider this," Cranehart said. "A conspiracy of the type I have described constitutes a capital offense under present conditions. Are you certain that you would prefer us to continue to look for proof?"

Ronald Black said in a harsh voice, "And what would the outcome be if we did choose to co-operate?"

"Well, we can't afford to leave men of your type in a position of influence, Mr. Black," Cranehart said amiably. "And you understand, I'm sure, that it would be entirely too difficult to keep you under proper

surveillance on Earth--"

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Celia Adams said from outside the cabin door, "I think it is them, Phil. Both cars have started to circle."

Phil Boles came to the door behind her and looked up. It was early evening--Roye's sun just down, and a few stars out. The sky above the sea was still light. After a moment, he made out the two aircars moving in a wide, slow arc far overhead. He glanced at his watch.

"Twenty minutes late," he remarked. "But it couldn't be anyone else. And if they hadn't all come along, they wouldn't have needed two cars." He hesitated. "We can't tell how they're going to take this, Celia, but they may have decided already that they could make out better without us." He nodded towards the edge of the cliff. "Short way over there, and a long drop to the water! So don't let them surprise you."

She said coldly, "I won't. And I've used guns before this."

"Wouldn't doubt it." Phil reached back behind the door, picked up a flarelight standing beside a heavy machine rifle, and came outside. He pointed the light at the cars and touched the flash button briefly three times. After a moment, there were two answering flashes from the leading car.

"So Wayne Jackson's in the front car," Phil said. "Now let's see what they do." He returned the light to its place behind the door and came out again, standing about twelve feet to one side of Celia. The aircars vanished inland, came back at treetop level a few minutes later. One settled down quietly between the cabin and the edge of the cliff, the other following but dropping to the ground a hundred yards away, where it stopped. Phil glanced over at Celia, said softly, "Watch that one!" She nodded almost imperceptibly, right hand buried in her jacket pocket.

The near door of the car before them opened. Major Wayne Jackson, hatless and in hunting clothes, climbed out, staring at them. He said, "Anyone else here?"

"Just Celia and myself," Phil said.

Jackson turned, spoke into the car and two men, similarly dressed, came out behind him. Phil recognized Ronald Black and Sanford. The three started over to the cabin, stopped a dozen feet away.

Jackson said sardonically, "Our five other previous Earthside partners are in the second car. In spite of your insistence to meet the whole group, they don't want you and Celia to see their faces. They don't wish to be identifiable." He touched his coat lapel. "They'll hear what we're saying over this communicator and they could talk to you, but won't unless they feel it's necessary. You'll have to take my word for it that we're all present."

"That's good enough," Phil said.

"All right," Jackson went on, "now what did you mean by forcing us to take this chance? Let me make it plain. Colonel Thayer hasn't been accused of collaborating in the Roye gun hoax, but he got a black eye out of the affair just the same. And don't forget that a planet with colonial status is technically under martial law, which includes the civilians. If Silas Thayer can get his hands on the guilty persons, the situation will become a lot more unpleasant than it already is."

Phil addressed Ronald Black, "Then how about you two? When you showed up here again on a transfer list, Thayer must have guessed why."

Black shook his head. "Both of us exercised the privilege of changing our names just prior to the outtransfer. He doesn't know we're on Roye. We don't intend to let him find out."

Phil asked, "Did you make any arrangements to get out of Roye again?"

"Before leaving Earth?" Black showed his teeth in a humorless smile. "Boles, you have no idea of how abruptly and completely the government men cut us off from our every resource! We were given no opportunity to draw up plans to escape from exile, believe me."

Phil glanced over at Celia. "In that case," he said, a little thickly, "we'd better see if we can't draw some up together immediately."

Jackson asked, staring, "What are you talking about, Phil? Don't think for a moment Silas Thayer isn't doing what he can to find out who put that trick over on him. I'm not at all sure he doesn't suspect me. And if he can tie it to us, it's our neck. If you have some crazy idea of getting off the planet now, let me tell you that for the next few years we can't risk making a single move! If we stay quiet, we're safe. We--"

"I don't think we'd be safe," Phil said.

On his right, Celia Adams added sharply, "The gentleman in the other car who's just started to lower that window had better raise it again! If he's got good eyesight, he'll see I have a gun pointed at him.

Yes, that's much better! Go on, Phil."

"Have you both gone out of your minds?" Jackson demanded.

"No," Celia said. She laughed with a sudden shakiness in her tone, added, "Though I don't know why we haven't! We've thought of the possibility that the rest of you might feel it would be better if Phil and I weren't around any more, Wayne."

"That's nonsense!" Jackson said.

"Maybe. Anyway, don't try it. You wouldn't be doing yourselves a favor even if it worked. Better listen now."

"Listen to what?" Jackson demanded exasperatedly. "I'm telling you it will be all right, if we just don't make any mistakes. The only real pieces of evidence were your duplicator and the original gun. Since we're rid of those--"

"We're not rid of the gun, Wayne," Phil said. "I still have it. I haven't dared get rid of it."

"You ... what do you mean?"

"I was with Beulah in the Fort Roye hospital when she died," Phil said. He added to Ronald Black, "That was two days after the ship brought the seven of you in."

Black nodded, his eyes alert. "Major Jackson informed me."

"She was very weak, of course, but quite lucid," Phil went on. "She talked a good deal--reminiscing, and in a rather happy vein. She finally mentioned the Geest gun, and how Uncle William used to keep us boys ... Wayne and me ... spell-bound with stories about the Gunderland Battle, and how he'd picked the gun up there."

Jackson began, "And what does--"

"He didn't get the gun there," Phil said. "Beulah said Uncle William came in from Earth with the first shipment of settlers and was never off Roye again in his life."

"He ... then--"

Phil said, "Don't you get it? He found the gun right here on Roye. Beulah thought it was awfully funny. William was an old fool, she said, but the best liar she'd ever known. He came in with the thing one day after he'd been traipsing around the back country, and said it looked ‘sort of' like pictures of Geest guns he'd seen, and that he was going to put the inscription on it and have some fun now and then." Phil took a deep breath. "Uncle William found it lying in a pile of ashes

where someone had made camp a few days before. He figured it would have been a planetary speedster some rich sportsmen from Earth had brought in for a taste of outworld hunting on Roye, and that one of them had dumped the broken oddball gun into the fire to get rid of it.

"That was thirty-six years ago. Beulah remembered it happened a year before I was born."

There was silence for some seconds. Then Ronald Black said evenly, "And what do you conclude, Boles?"

Phil looked at him. "I'd conclude that Norm Vaughn was right about there having been some fairly intelligent creatures here once. The Geests ran into them and exterminated them as they usually do. That might have been a couple of centuries back. Then, thirty-six years ago, one of their scouts slipped in here without being spotted, found human beings on the planet, looked around a little and left again."

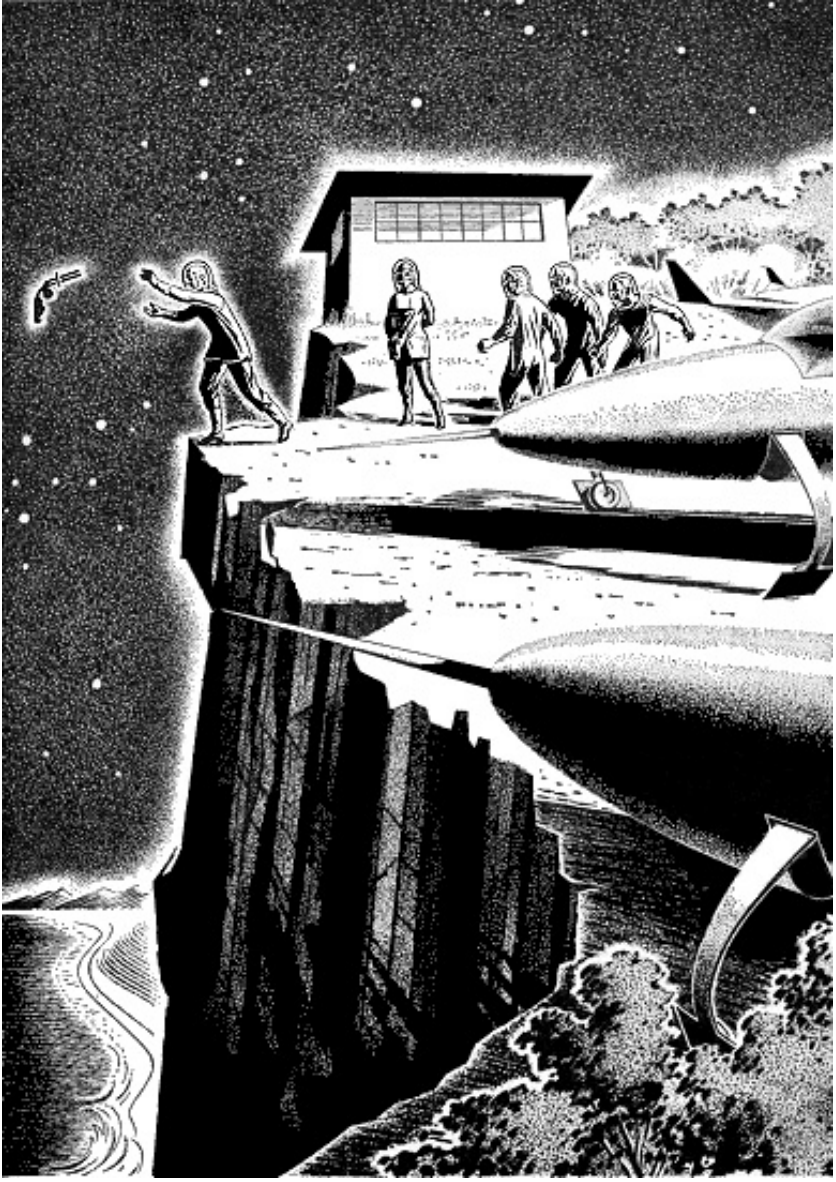
He took the Geest gun from his pocket, hefted it in his hand. "We have the evidence here," he said. "We had it all the time and didn't know it."

Ronald Black said dryly, "We may have the evidence. But we have no slightest proof at all now that that's what it is."

"I know it," Phil said. "Now Beulah's gone ... well, we couldn't even prove that William Boles never left the planet, for that matter. There weren't any records to speak of being kept in the early days." He was silent a moment. "Supposing," he said, "we went ahead anyway. We hand the gun in, with the story I just told you--"

Jackson made a harsh, laughing sound. "That would hang us fast, Phil!"

"And nothing else?"



"Nothing else," Black said with finality. "Why should anyone believe the story now? There are a hundred more likely ways in which a Geest gun could have got to Roye. The gun is tangible evidence of the hoax, but that's all."

Phil asked, "Does anybody ... including the cautious gentlemen in the car over there ... disagree with that?"

There was silence again. Phil shrugged, turned towards the cliff edge, drew his arm back and hurled the Geest gun far up and out above the sea. Still without speaking, the others turned their heads to watch it fall towards the water, then looked back at him.

"I didn't think very much of that possibility myself," Phil said unsteadily. "But one of you might have. All right--*we* know the Geests know we're here. But we won't be able to convince anyone else of it. And, these last few years, the war seems to have been slowing down again. In the past, that's always meant the Geests were preparing a big new surprise operation.

"So the other thing now--the business of getting off Roye. It can't be done unless some of you have made prior arrangements for it Earthside. If it had been possible in any other way, I'd have been out of this place ten years ago."

Ronald Black said carefully, "Very unfortunately, Boles, no such arrangements have been made."

"Then there it is," Phil said. "I suppose you see now why I thought this group should get together. The ten masterminds! Well, we've hoaxed ourselves into a massive jam. Now let's find out if there's any possible way--*any possibility at all!*--of getting out of it again."

A voice spoke tinnily from Jackson's lapel communicator. "Major Jackson?"

"Yes?" Jackson said.

"Please persuade Miss Adams that it is no longer necessary to point her gun at this car. In view of the stated emergency, we feel we had better come out now--and join the conference."

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From the Records of the Territorial Office, 2345 a.d.

... It is generally acknowledged that the Campaign of the 132nd Segment marked the turning point of the Geest War. Following the retransfer of Colonel Silas Thayer to Earth, the inspired leadership of Major Wayne Jackson and his indefatigable and exceptionally able assistants, notably clu President Boles, transformed the technically unfortified and thinly settled key world of Roye within twelve years into a virtual death trap for any invading force. Almost half of the Geest fleet which eventually arrived there was destroyed in the first week subsequent to the landing, and few of the remaining ships were sufficiently undamaged to be able to lift again. The enemy relief fleet, comprising an estimated forty per cent of the surviving Geest space power, was intercepted in the 134th Segment by the combined Earth forces under Admiral McKenna's command and virtually annihilated.

In the following two years....