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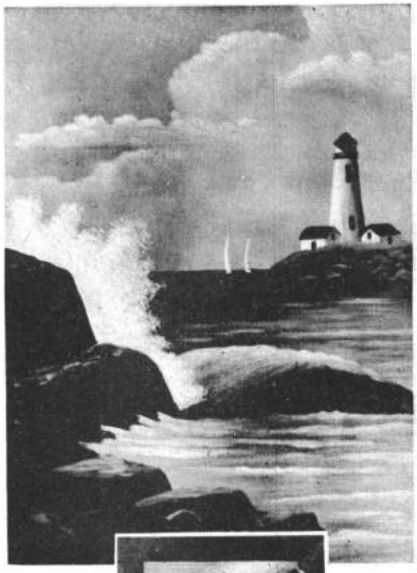

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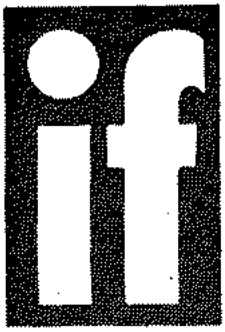

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MARCH 1960

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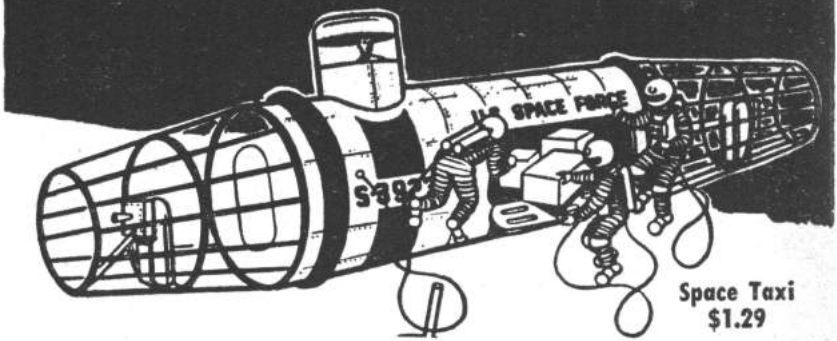

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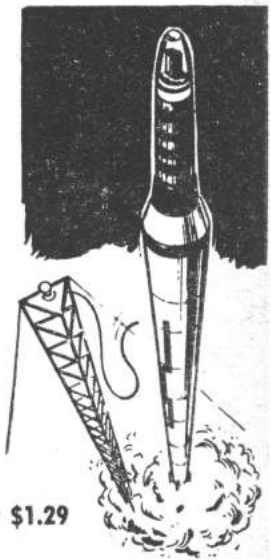

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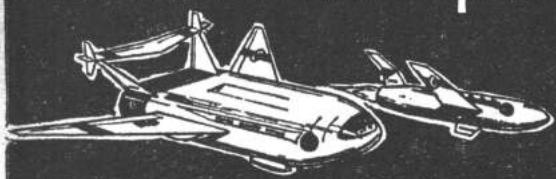

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GLEANERS

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

I

HE went sneaking past the door.

The lettering on the door said: *Executive Vice President, Projects.*

And down in the lower left corner, *Hallock Spencer,* in very modest type.

That was him. He was Hallock Spencer.

But he wasn't going in that door. He had trouble enough already without going in. There'd be people waiting there for him. No one in particular—but people. And each of them with problems.

He ducked around the corner and went a step or two down the corridor until he came to another door that said *Private* on it.

It was unlocked. He went in.

A dowdy scarecrow in a faded, dusty toga sat tipped back in a chair, with his sandalled feet resting on Hallock Spencer's desk top. He wore a mouse-gray woolen cap upon his hairless skull and his ears stuck out like wings. A short sword, hanging from the belt that snugged in the toga, stood canted with its point resting on the carpet. There was dirt beneath his rather longish toenails and he hadn't shaved for days. He was a total slob.

"Hello, E.J.," said Spencer.

The man in the toga didn't take his feet off the desk. He didn't move at all. He just sat there.

"Sneaking in again," he said.

Spencer put down his briefcase and hung up his hat.

"The reception room's a trap," he said.

He sat down in the chair behind the desk and picked up the project schedule and had a look at it.

"What's the trouble, E.J.?" he asked. "You back already?"

"Haven't started yet. Not for another couple hours."

"It says here," said Spencer, flicking the schedule with a finger, "that you're a Roman trader."

Past, Inc., changed a lot of minds about time. Everyone knew time was money—but did it have to be millions and millions?

"That's what I am," said E.J. "At least, Costumes says so. I hope to God they're right."

"But the sword—"

"Pardner," said E.J., "back in Roman Britain, out on a Roman road, with a pack train loaded down with goods, a man has got to carry steel."

HE reached down and hoisted the sword into his lap. He regarded it with disfavor. "But I don't mind telling you it's no great shakes of a weapon."

"I suppose you'd feel safer with a tommy gun."

E.J. nodded glumly. "Yes. I would."

"Lacking that," said Spencer, "we do the best we can. You'll pack the finest steel in the second century. If that is any comfort."

E.J. just sat there with the sword across his lap. He was making up his mind to say something—it was written on his face. He was a silly-looking soul, with all those wiry whiskers and his ears way out to either side of him and the long black hairs that grew out of the lobes.

"Hal," said E.J., finally making up his mind, "I want out of this."

Spencer stiffened in his chair. "You can't do that!" he yelled. "Time is your very life. You've been in it for a lot of years!"

"I don't mean out of Time. I mean out of Family Tree. I am sick of it."

"You don't know what you're saying," Spencer protested. "Family Tree's not tough. You've been on a lot of worse ones. Family Tree's a snap. All you have to do is go back and talk to people or maybe check some records. You don't have to snitch a thing."

"It's not the work," said E.J. "Sure, the work is easy. I don't mind the work. It's after I get back."

"You mean the Wrightson-Graves."

"That is what I mean. After every trip, she has me up to that fancy place of hers and I have to tell her all about her venerable ancestors . . ."

Spencer said, "It's a valuable account. We have to service it."

"I can't stand much more of it," E.J. insisted, stubbornly.

Spencer nodded. He knew just what E.J. meant. He felt much the same.

Alma Wrightson-Graves was a formidable old dowager with a pouter-pigeon build and the erroneous conviction that she still retained much of her girlish charm. She was loaded down with cash, and also with jewels that were too costly and gaudy to be good taste. For years she'd shrieked down and bought off everyone around her until she firmly believed there was nothing

in the world she couldn't have —if she was willing to pay enough for it.

And she was paying plenty for this family tree of hers. Spencer had often asked himself just why she wanted it. Back to the Conquest, sure—that made at least some sense. But not back to the caves. Not that Past, Inc., couldn't trace it that far for her if her cash continued to hold out. He thought, with a perverted satisfaction, that she couldn't have been happy with the last report or two, for the family had sunk back to abject peasantry.

He said as much to E.J. "What does she want?" he asked. "What does she expect?"

"I have a hunch," E.J. told him, "that she has some hopes we'll find a connection back to Rome. God help us if we do. Then it could go on forever."

Spencer grunted.

"Don't be too sure," warned E.J. "Roman officers being what they were I wouldn't bet against it."

"If that should happen," Spencer told him, "I'll take you off the project. Assign someone else to carry out the Roman research. I'll tell the Wrightson-Graves you're not so hot on Rome—have a mental block or a psychic allergy or something that rejects indoctrination."

"Thanks a lot," said E.J., without much enthusiasm.

ONE by one, he took his dirty feet off the shiny desk and rose out of the chair.

"E.J.?"

"Yes, Hal."

"Just wondering. Have you ever hit a place where you felt that you should stay? Have you ever wondered if maybe you should stay?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Once or twice, perhaps. But I never did. You're thinking about Garson."

"Garson for one. And all the others."

"Maybe something happened to him. You get into tight spots. It's a simple matter to make a big mistake. Or the operator might have missed."

"Our operators never miss," snapped Spencer.

"Garson was a good man," said E.J., a little sadly.

"Garson! It's not only Garson. It's all the . . ." Spencer stopped abruptly, for he'd run into it again. After all these years, he still kept running into it. No matter how he tried, it was something to which he could not reconcile himself—the disparity in time.

He saw that E.J. was staring at him, with just the slightest crinkle that was not quite a smile at the corner of his mouth.

"You can't let it eat you," said E.J. "You're not responsible. We take our chances. If it wasn't worth our while . . ."

"Oh, shut up!" said Spencer.

"Sure," said E.J., "you lose one of us every now and then. But it's no worse than any other business."

"Not one every now and then," said Spencer. "There have been three of them in the last ten days."

"Well, now," said E.J., "I lose track of them. There was Garson just the other day. And Taylor—how long ago was that?"

"Four days ago," said Spencer.

"Four days," said E.J., astonished. "Is that all it was?"

Spencer snapped, "For you it was three months or more. And do you remember Price? For you that was a year ago, but just ten days for me."

E.J. put up a dirty paw and scrubbed at the bristle on his chin.

"How time does fly!"

"Look," said Spencer, miserably, "this whole set-up is bad enough. Please don't make jokes about it."

"Garside been giving you a hard time, maybe? Losing too many of the men?"

"Hell, no," said Spencer, bitterly. "You can always get more men. It's the machines that bother him. He keeps reminding me they cost a quarter million."

E.J. made a rude sound with his lips.

"Get out of here!" yelled Spencer. "And see that you come home!"

E.J. grinned and left. He gave the toga a girlish flirt as he went out the door.

II

SPENCER told himself E.J. was wrong. For whatever anyone might say, he, Hallock Spencer, was responsible. He ran the stinking show. He made up the schedules. He assigned the travelers and he sent them out. When there were mistakes or hitches, he was the one who answered. To himself, if no one else.

He got up and paced the floor, hands locked behind his back.

Three men in the last ten days. And what had happened to them?

Possibly there was something to what Garside said, as well—Christopher Anson Garside, chief co-ordinator and a nasty man to handle, with his clipped, gray mustache and his clipped, gray voice and his clipped, gray business thinking.

For it was not men alone who did not come back. It was likewise the training and experience you had invested in those men. They lasted, Spencer told himself, a short time at the best without managing to get themselves killed off somewhere in the past, or deciding to squat down and settle in some other era they

liked better than the present.

And the machines were something that could not be dismissed. Every time a man failed to return it meant another carrier lost. And the carriers *did* cost a quarter million—which wasn't something you could utterly forget.

Spencer went back to his desk and had another look at the schedule for the day. There was E.J., bound for Roman Britain on the Family Tree project; Nickerson going back to the early Italian Renaissance to check up once again on the missing treasure in the Vatican; Hennessy off on his search once more for the lost documents in fifteenth century Spain; Williams going out, he hoped, finally to snatch the mislaid Picasso, and a half dozen more. Not a massive schedule. But enough to spell out a fairly busy day.

He checked the men not on the projects list. A couple of them were on vacation. One was in Rehabilitation. Indoctrination had the rest of them.

He sat there, then, for the thousandth time, wondering what it would be like, really, to travel into time.

He'd heard hints of it from some of the travelers, but no more than hints, for they did not talk about it. Perhaps they did among themselves, when there were no outsiders present. Perhaps not even then. As if it were something that no man could quite describe. As if it were an experience that no man should discuss.

A haunting sense of unreality, the feeling that one was out of place, a hint of not quite belonging, of somehow standing, tip-toe, on the far edge of eternity.

It wore off after a time, of course, but apparently one was never entirely free of it. For the past, in some mysterious working of a principle yet unknown, was a world of wild enchantment.

Well, he had had his chance and flunked it.

But some day, he told himself, he would go into time. Not as a regular traveler, but as a vacationist—if he could snatch the necessary time to get ready for the trip. The trip, itself, of course, was no consideration so far as time might be concerned. It was Indoctrination and the briefing that was time-consuming.

He picked up the schedule again for another look. All of those who were going back this day were good men. There was no need to worry about any one of them.

HE laid the schedule to one side and buzzed Miss Crane.

Miss Crane was a letter-perfect secretary, though she wasn't much to look at. She was a leathery old maid. She had her own way of doing things, and she could act very disapproving.

No choice of his, Spencer had inherited her fifteen years before. She had been with Past, Inc., before there was even a projects office. And, despite her lack of looks, her snippy attitude and her generally pessimistic view of life, she was indispensable.

She knew the projects job as well as he did. At times she let him know it. But she never forgot, never mislaid, never erred; she ran an efficient office, always got her work done and it always was on time.

Spencer, dreaming at times of a lusher young replacement, knew that he was no more than dreaming. He couldn't do his job without Miss Crane in the outer office.

"You sneaked in again," she accused him as soon as she'd closed the door.

"I suppose there's someone waiting."

"There's a Dr. Aldous Ravenholt," she said. "He's from Foundation for Humanity."

Spencer flinched. There was no one worse to start a morning with than some pompous functionary from Humanity. They almost always figured that you owed them something. They thought the whole world owed them something.

"And there's a Mr. Stewart Cabell. He's an applicant sent up by Personnel. Mr. Spencer, don't you think . . ."

"No, I don't," Spencer snapped at her. "I know Personnel is sore. But I've been taking everyone they've been shoveling up here and see what happens. Three men gone in the last ten days. From now on, I'm taking a close look at everyone myself."

She sniffed. It was a very nasty sniff.

"That all?" asked Spencer, figuring that he couldn't be that lucky—just two of them.

"Also there's a Mr. Boone Hudson. He's an elderly man who looks rather ill and he seems impatient. Perhaps you should see him first."

Spencer might have, but not after she said that.

"I'll see Ravenholt," he said, "Any idea what he wants?"

"No, sir."

"Well, send him in," said Spencer. "He'll probably want to chisel a slice of Time off me."

Chiselers, he thought. I didn't know there were so many chiselers!

Aldous Ravenholt was a pompous man, well satisfied and smug. You could have buttered bread with the crease in his trousers. His handshake was professional and he had an automatic smile. He sat down in the chair that Spencer offered him with a self-assurance that was highly irritating.

"I came to talk with you," he said precisely, "about the pending proposal to investigate religious origins."

Spencer winced mentally. It was a tender subject.

"Dr. Ravenholt," he said, "that is a matter I have given a great deal of attention. Not myself alone, but my entire department."

"That is what I've heard," Ravenholt said drily. "That is why I'm here. I understand you have tentatively decided not to go ahead with it."

"Not tentatively," said Spencer. "Our decision has been made. I'm curious how you heard it."

RAVENHOLT waved an airy hand, implying there was very little he did not know about. "I presume the matter still is open to discussion."

Spencer shook his head.

Ravenholt said, icily, "I fail to see how you could summarily cut off an investigation so valid and so vital to all humanity."

"Not summarily, Dr. Ravenholt. We spent a lot of time on it. We made opinion samplings. We had an extensive check by Psych. We considered all the factors."

"And your findings, Mr. Spencer?"

"First of all," said Spencer, just a little nettled, "it would be too time-consuming. As you know, our license specifies that we donate ten per cent of our operating time to public interest projects. This we are most meticulous in doing, although I don't mind telling you there's nothing that gives us greater headaches."

"But that ten per cent . . ."

"If we took up this project you are urging, doctor, we'd use up all our public interest time for several years at least. That would mean no other programs at all."

"But surely you'll concede that no other proposal could be in a greater public interest."

"That's not our findings," Spencer told him. "We took opinion samplings in every area on Earth, in all possible cross-sections. We came up with—sacrilege."

"You're joking, Mr. Spencer!"

"Not at all," said Spencer. "Our opinion-taking showed quite conclusively that any attempt to investigate world-wide religious origins would be viewed by the general public in a sacrilegious light. You and I, perhaps, could look upon it as research. We could resolve all our questioning by saying we sought no more nor less than truth. But the people of the world—the simple, common people of every sect and faith in the entire world—do not want the truth. They are satisfied with things just as they are. They're afraid we would upset a lot of the old, comfortable traditions. They call it sacrilege and it's partly that, of course, but it's likewise an instinctive defense re-

action against upsetting their thinking. They have a faith to cling to. It has served them through the years and they don't want anyone to fool around with it."

"I simply can't believe it," said Ravenholt, aghast at such blind provincialism.

"I have the figures. I can show you."

Dr. Ravenholt waved his hand condescendingly and gracefully.

"If you say you have them, I am sure you have."

He wasn't taking any chances of being proven wrong.

"ANOTHER thing," said Spencer, "is objectivity. How do you select the men to send back to observe the facts?"

"I am sure that we could get them. There are many men of the cloth, of every creed and faith, who would be amply qualified . . ."

"Those are just the ones we would never think of sending," said Spencer. "We need objectivity. Ideally, the kind of man we need is one who has no interest in religion, who has no formal training in it, one who is neither for it nor against it—and yet, we couldn't use that sort of man even if we found him. For to understand what is going on, he'd have to have a rather thorough briefing on what he was to look for. Once you trained him, he'd be bound to lose his objectivity. There is something about religion that forces one to take positions on it."

"Now," said Ravenholt, "you are talking about the ideal investigative situation, not our own."

"Well, all right, then," conceded Spencer. "Let's say we decide to do a slightly sloppy job. Who do we send then? Could any Christian, I ask you, no matter how poor a Christian he might be, safely be sent back to the days that Jesus spent on Earth? How could one be sure that even mediocre Christians would do no more than observe the facts? I tell you, Dr. Ravenholt, we could not take the chance. What would happen, do you think, if we suddenly should have thirteen instead of twelve disciples? What if someone should try to rescue Jesus from the Cross? Worse yet, what if He actually were rescued? Where would Christianity be then? Would there be Christianity? Without the Crucifixion, would it ever have survived?"

"Your problem has a simple answer," Ravenholt said coldly. "Do not send a Christian."

"Now we are really getting somewhere," said Spencer. "Let's send a Moslem to get the Christian facts and a Christian to track down the life of Buddha—and a Bud-

dhist to investigate black magic in the Belgian Congo."

"It could work," said Ravenholt.

"It might work, but you wouldn't get objectivity. You'd get bias and, worse yet, perfectly honest misunderstanding."

Ravenholt drummed impatient fingers on his well-creased knee. "I can see your point," he agreed, somewhat irritably, "but there is something you have overlooked. The findings need not be released in their entirety to the public."

"But if it's in the public interest? That's what our license says."

"Would it help," asked Ravenholt, "if I should offer certain funds which could be used to help defray the costs?"

"In such a case," said Spencer, blandly, "the requirement would not be met. It's either in the public interest, without any charge at all, or it's a commercial contract paid for at regular rates."

"The obvious fact," Ravenholt said flatly, "is that you do not want to do this job. You may as well admit it."

"Most cheerfully," said Spencer. "I willingly wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. What worries me right now is why you're here."

Ravenholt said, "I thought that with the project about to be rejected, I possibly could serve as a sort of mediator."

"YOU mean you thought we could be bribed."

"Not at all," said Ravenholt wrathfully. "I was only recognizing that the project was perhaps a cut beyond what your license calls for."

"It's all of that," said Spencer.

"I cannot fully understand your objection to it," Ravenholt persisted.

"Dr. Ravenholt," said Spencer gently, "how would you like to be responsible for the destruction of a faith?"

"But," stammered Ravenholt, "there is no such possibility . . ."

"Are you certain?" Spencer asked him. "How certain are you, Dr. Ravenholt? Even the black magic of the Congo?"

"Well, I—well, since you put it that way . . ."

"You see what I *mean*?" asked Spencer.

"But even so," argued Ravenholt, "there could be certain facts suppressed . . ."

"Come now! How long do you think you could keep it bottled up? Anyway, when Past, Inc., does a job," Spencer told him firmly, "it goes gunning for the truth. And when we learn it, we report it. That is the one excuse we have for our continuing existence. We have a certain project here— a personal, full-rate contract—in which we have traced a family tree for almost two thousand years. We have been forced to tell our

client some unpleasant things. But we told them."

"That's part of what I'm trying to convey to you," shouted Ravenholt, shaken finally out of his ruthless calm. "You are willing to embark upon the tracing of a family tree, but you refuse this!"

"And you are confusing two utterly different operations! This investigation of religious origins is a public interest matter. Family Tree is a private acount for which we're being paid."

Ravenholt rose angrily. "We'll discuss this some other time, when we both can keep our temper."

Spencer said wearily, "It won't do any good. My mind is made up."

"Mr. Spencer," Ravenholt said, nastily, "I'm not without recourse."

"Perhaps you're not. You can go above my head. If that is what you're thinking, I'll tell you something else: You'll carry out this project over my dead body. I will not, Dr. Ravenholt, betray the faith of any people in the world."

"We'll see," said Ravenholt, still nasty.

"Now," said Spencer, "you're thinking that you can have me fired. Probably you could. Undoubtedly you know the very strings to pull. But it's no solution."

"I would think," said Ravenholt, "it would be the perfect one."

"I'd still fight you as a private citizen. I'd take it to the floor of the United Nations if I had to."

They both were on their feet now, facing one another across the width of desk.

"I'm sorry," Spencer said, "that it turned out this way. But I meant everything I said."

"So did I," said Ravenholt, stalking out the door.

III

SPENCER sat down slowly in his chair.

A swell way to start a day, he told himself.

But the guy had burned him up.

Miss Crane came in the door with a sheaf of papers for his desk.

"Mr. Spencer, shall I send in Mr. Hudson? He's been waiting a long time."

"Is Hudson the applicant?"

"No, that is Mr. Cabell."

"Cabell is the man I want to see. Bring me his file." She sniffed contemptuously and left.

Damn her, Spencer told himself, I'll see who I want to see when I want to see them!

He was astounded at the violence of his thought. What was wrong with him? Nothing was going right. Couldn't he get along with anyone any more?

Too tensed up, he thought.

Too many things to do, too much to worry over.

Maybe what he ought to do was walk out into Operations and step into a carrier for a long vacation. Back to the Old Stone Age, which would require no Indoctrination. There wouldn't be too many people, perhaps none at all. But there'd be mosquitoes. And cave bear. And saber-tooths and perhaps a lot of other things equally obnoxious. And he'd have to get some camping stuff together and—oh, the hell with it!

But it was not a bad idea.

He'd thought about it often. Some day he would do it. Meanwhile, he picked up the sheaf of papers Miss Crane had dropped upon his desk.

They were the daily batch of future assignments dreamed up by the Dirty Tricks department. There was always trouble in them. He felt himself go tense as he picked them up.

The first one was a routine enough assignment—an investigation of some tributes paid the Goths by Rome. There was, it seemed, a legend that the treasure had been buried somewhere in the Alps. It might never have been recovered. That was S.O.P., checking up on buried treasure.

But the second paper—

"MISS Crane!" he yelled. She was coming through the door, with a file clutched in her hand. Her face changed not a whit at his yelp of anguish; she was used to it.

"What is the matter, Mr. Spencer?" she inquired, at least three degrees too calmly.

Spencer banged his fist down on the pile of sheets. "They can't do this to me! I won't stand for it. Get Rogers on the phone!"

"Yes, sir."

"No, wait a minute there," Spencer interrupted grimly. "This I can do better personal. I'll go up and see him. In fact, I'll take him apart barehanded."

"But there are those people waiting . . ."

"Let them wait for a while. It will make them humble."

He snatched up the assignment sheet and went striding out the door. He shunned the elevator. He climbed two flights of stairs. He went in a door marked *Evaluation.*

Rogers was sitting tilted back, with his feet up on the desk top, staring at the ceiling.

He glanced at Spencer with a bland concern. He took his feet down off the desk and sat forward in his chair.

"Well? What's the matter this time?"

"This!" said Spencer, throwing the sheet down in front of him.

Rogers poked it with a delicate finger. "Nothing difficult there. Just a little ingenuity . . ."

"Nothing difficult!" howled Spencer. "Movies of Nero's fire in Rome!"

Rogers sighed. "This movie outfit will pay us plenty for it."

"And there's nothing to it. One of my men can just walk out into the burning streets of Rome and set up a movie camera in an age where the principle of a camera hasn't yet been thought of."

"Well, I said it would call for some ingenuity," said Rogers. "Look, there'll be a lot of people running, carrying stuff, trying to save themselves and anything they can. They won't pay any attention to your man. He can cover the camera with something so that it will look . . ."

"It'll be an ugly crowd," insisted Spencer. "It won't like the city being burned. There'll be rumors that the Christians are the ones who set the fire. That crowd will be looking for suspicious characters."

"There's always an element of danger," Rogers pointed out.

"NOT as dangerous as this!" said Spencer, testily. "Not deliberately asking for it. And there is something else."

"Like what?"

"Like introducing an advanced technology to the past. If that crowd beat up my man and busted the camera . . ."

Rogers shrugged. "What difference if they did? They could make nothing of it."

"Maybe. But what I'm really worried about," Spencer persisted, "is what the watchdog group would say when they audit our records. It would have to be worth an awful lot of money before I'd take a chance."

"Believe me, it is worth a lot of money. And it would open up a new field for us. That's why I liked it."

"You guys in Dirty Tricks," said Spencer, bitterly, "just don't give a damn. You'll hand us anything . . ."

"Not everything," said Rogers. "Sales pushed us pretty hard on this one . . ."

"Sales!" spat Spencer, contempt in his voice.

"There was a woman in here the other day," said Rogers. "She wanted to send her two children to their great-great-great-grandfather's farm back in the nineteenth century. For a vacation, mind you. A summer in the country in another century. Said it would be educational and quite relaxing for them. Said the old folks would understand and be glad to have them once we had explained."

Rogers sighed. "I had quite a session with her. She poohpoohed our regulations. She said . . ."

"You passed up a good one there," Spencer said sarcastically. "That would have

opened up another field—vacations in the past. I can see it now. Family reunions with old friends and neighbors foregathering across the centuries."

"You think you are the only one who has his troubles."

"I am bleeding for you," Spencer told him.

"There's a TV outfit," Rogers said, "that wants interviews with Napoleon and Caesar and Alexander and all the rest of those ancient bigshots. There are hunters who want to go back into the primordial wilderness to get a spot of shooting. There are universities that want to send teams of investigators back . . ."

"You know that all of that is out," said Spencer. "The only ones we can send back are travelers we have trained."

"There've been times."

"Oh, sure, a few. But only when we got a special dispensation. And we sent along so many travelers to guard them that it was an expedition instead of a simple little study group."

Spencer got up from his chair. "Well, what about this latest brainstorm?"

Rogers picked up the offending assignment sheet and tossed it into an overflowing basket.

"I'll go down to Sales, with tears streaming down my cheeks . . ."

"Thanks," said Spencer and went out.

IV

BACK in his office, he sat down at the desk and picked up the file on Cabell.

The squawk box gibbered at him. He thumbed up the lever.

"What is it?"

"Operations, Hal. Williams just got back. Everything's okay; he snagged the Picasso without any trouble. Only took six weeks."

"Six weeks!" Spencer yelled. "He could have painted it himself in that time!"

"There were complications."

"Is there any time there aren't?"

"It's a good one, Hal. Not damaged. Worth a hunk of dough."

"O.K." said Spencer, "take it down to Customs and let them run it through. The good old government must be paid its duty. And what about the others?"

"Nickerson will be leaving in just a little while."

"And E.J.?"

"He's fussy about the time fix. He is telling Doug . . ."

"Look," yelled Spencer wrathfully, "you tell him for me that the fix is Doug's job. Doug knows more about it than E.J. ever will. When Doug says it's time to hop, E.J. hops, funny cap and all."

He snapped down the lever and turned back to the Cabell file, sitting quietly for a moment to let his blood pressure simmer down.

He got worked up too easily, he told himself. He blew his top too much. But there never was a job with so many aggravations!

He opened the folder and ran through the Cabell file.

Stewart Belmont Cabell, 27, unmarried, excellent references, a doctorate in sociology from an ivy college. A uniformly high score in all the tests, including attitude, and an astonishing I.Q. Unqualifiedly recommended for employment as a traveler.

Spencer closed the file and pushed it to one side.

"Send Mr. Cabell in," he told Miss Crane.

Cabell was a lanky man, awkward in his movements; he seemed younger than he was. There was a certain shyness in his manner when Spencer shook his hand and pointed out a chair.

Cabell sat and tried, without success, to make himself at ease.

"So you want to come in with us," said Spencer. "I suppose you know what you are doing."

"Yes, sir," said young Cabell. "I know all about it. Or perhaps I'd better say . . ."

He stammered and stopped talking.

"It's all right," said Spencer. "I take it you want this very much."

Cabell nodded.

"I know how it is. You almost have the feeling you'll die if you can't do it."

And he remembered, sitting there, how it had been with him—the terrible, tearing heartache when he'd been rejected as a traveler, and how he had stuck on regardless of that hurt and disappointment. First as operator; then as operations superintendent; finally to this desk, with all its many headaches.

"Not," he said, "that I have ever traveled."

"I didn't know that, sir."

"I wasn't good enough. My attitudes were wrong."

AND he saw the old hope and hunger in the eyes of the man across the desk—and something else besides. Something vaguely disturbing.

"It's not all fun," he said, a shade more harshly than he had meant to make it. "At first there's the romance and the glitter, but that soon wears off. It becomes a job. Sometimes a bitter one."

He paused and looked at Cabell and the queer, disturbing light still was shining in his eyes.

"You should know," he said, deliberately harsh this time, "that if you come in with us you'll probably be dead of advanced old age in five years."

Cabell nodded unconcern-

edly. "I know that, sir. The people down in Personnel explained it all to me."

"Good," said Spencer. "I suspect at times that Personnel makes a rather shabby explanation. They tell you just enough to make it sound convincing, but they do not tell it all. They are far too anxious to keep us well supplied. We're always short of travelers; we run through them too fast."

He paused and looked at the man again. There was no change in him.

"We have certain regulations," Spencer told him. "They aren't made so much by Past, Inc., as by the job itself. You cannot have any settled sort of life. You live out your life in pieces, like a patchwork quilt, hopping from neighborhood to neighborhood, and those neighborhoods all many years apart. There is no actual rule against it, but none of our travelers has ever married. It would be impossible. In five years the man would die of old age, and his wife would still be young."

"I think I understand, sir."

"Actually," Spencer said, "it's a very simple matter of simple economics. We cannot afford to have either our machines or men tied up for any length of time. So while a man may be gone a week, a month, or years, the machine comes back, with him inside of it, sixty seconds after he has left. That sixty seconds is an arbitrary period; it could be a single second, it could be an hour or day or anything we wanted. One minute has seemed a practical period."

"And," asked Cabell, "if it does not come back within that minute?"

"Then it never will."

"It sometimes happens?"

"OF course it happens. Time traveling is no picnic. Every time a man goes back he is betting his life that he can get along in an environment which is as totally alien, in some instances, as another planet. We help him every way we can, of course. We make it our business to see that he is well briefed and Indoctrinated and as well equipped as it is possible to make him. He is taught the languages he is likely to require. He is clothed properly. But there are instances when we simply do not know the little vital details which mean survival. Sometimes we learn them later when our man comes back and tells us. Usually he is quite profane about it. And some we don't find out about at all. The man does not come back."

"One would think," said Cabell, "that you would like to scare me out."

"No! I tell you this because I want no misunderstanding. It costs a lot to train a traveler. We must get our costs back. We do not want a man

who will stay with us just a little while. We don't want a year or two from you; we want your entire life. We'll take you and we'll wring you dry of every minute . . ."

"I can assure you, sir . . ."

"We send you where we want you," Spencer said, "and although we have no control of you once you've left, we expect that you'll not fool around. Not that you won't come back inside of sixty seconds—naturally you will, if you come back at all. But we want you to come back as young as possible. Past, Inc., is a pure commercial venture. We'll squeeze all the trips we possibly can out of you."

"I understand all this," said Cabell, "but Personnel explained it would be to my advantage, too."

"THAT is true, of course, but it'll not take you long to find that money is of slight moment to a traveler. Since you have no family, or we would hope you haven't, what would you need it for? The only leisure time you'll have is a six-week's annual leave and you can earn enough in a trip or two to spend that leave in utmost luxury or the deepest vice.

"Most of the men, however, don't even bother to do that. They just wander off and get re-acquainted with the era they were born into. Vice and luxury in this present century has but slight appeal to them after all the hell they've raised in past centuries at the company's expense."

"You are kidding, sir."

"Well, maybe just a little. But in certain cases that I have in mind, it is the honest truth."

Spencer stared across at Cabell.

"None of this bothers you?" he asked.

"Not a thing so far."

"There's just one thing else, Mr. Cabell, that you should know about. That is the need—the imperative, crying need for objectivity. When you go into the past, you take no part in it. You do not interfere. *You must not get involved.*"

"That should not be hard."

"I warn you, Mr. Cabell, that it requires moral stamina. The man who travels in time has terrible power. And there's something about the feel of power that makes it almost compulsive for a man to use it. Hand in hand with that power is the temptation to take a hand in history. To wield a judicious knife, to say a word that needs saying very badly. To save a life that, given a few more years of time, might have pushed the human race an extra step toward greatness."

"It might be hard," admitted Cabell.

Spencer nodded. "So far as I know, Mr. Cabell, no one has ever succumbed to these

temptations. But I live in terror of the day when someone does."

And he wondered as he said it how much he might be talking through his hat, might be whistling past the graveyard. For surely there must by now have been some interference.

What about the men who had not come back?

Some of them undoubtedly had died. But surely some had stayed. And wasn't staying back there the worst form of intervention? What were the implications, he wondered, of a child born out of time—a child that had not been born before, that should never have been born? The children of that child and the children of those children—they would be a thread of temporal interference reaching through the ages.

V

CABELL asked: "Is there something wrong, sir?"

"No. I was just thinking that the time will surely come, some day, when we work out a formula for safely interfering in the past. And when that happens, our responsibilities will be even greater than the ones that we face now. For then we'll have license for intervening, but will in turn be placed under certain strictures to use that power of intervention only for the best. I can't imagine what sort of principle it will be, you understand. But I am sure that soon or late we will arrive at it.

"And perhaps, too, we'll work out another formula which will allow us to venture to the future."

He shook his head and thought: How like an old man, to shake your head in resigned puzzlement. But he was not an old man—not very old, at least.

"At the moment," he said, "we are little more than gleaners. We go into the past to pick up the gleanings—the things they lost or threw away. We have made up certain rules to make sure that we never touch the sheaves, but only the ear of wheat left lying on the ground."

"Like the Alexandria manuscripts?"

"Well, yes, I would suppose so—although grabbing all those manuscripts and books was inspired entirely by a sordid profit motive. We could just as easily have copied them. Some of them we did; but the originals themselves represented a tremendous sum of money. I would hate to tell you what Harvard paid us for those manuscripts. Although, when you think of it," Spencer said, reflectively. "I'm not sure they weren't worth every cent of it. It called for the closest planning and split-second coordinating and we used every

man we had. For, you see, we couldn't grab the stuff until it was on the verge of burning. We couldn't deprive even so much as a single person the chance of even glancing at a single manuscript. We can't lift a thing until it's lost. That's an iron-bound rule.

"Now, you take the Ely tapestry. We waited for years, going back and checking, until we were quite sure that it was finally lost. We knew it was going to be lost, you understand. But we couldn't touch it until it was lost for good. Then we h'isted it." He waved a hand. "I talk too much. I am boring you."

"Mr. Spencer, sir," protested Cabell, "talk like yours could never bore me. This is something I have dreamed of. I can't tell you how happy . . ."

Spencer raised a hand to stop him. "Not so fast. You aren't hired yet."

"But Mr. Jensen down in Personnel . . ."

"I know what Jensen said. But the final word is mine."

"What have I done wrong?" asked Cabell.

"You have done nothing wrong. Come back this afternoon."

"But, Mr. Spencer, if only you could tell me . . ."

"I want to think about you. See me after lunch."

CABELL unfolded upward from his chair and he was ill at ease.

"That man who was in ahead of me . . ."

"Yes. What about him?"

"He seemed quite angry, sir. As if he might be thinking of making trouble for you."

Spencer said angrily, "And that's none of your damn business!"

Cabell stood his ground. "I was only going to say, sir, that I recognized him."

"So?"

"If he did try to cause you trouble, sir, it might be worth your while to investigate his association with a stripper down at the Golden Hour. Her name is Silver Starr."

Spencer stared at Cabell without saying anything.

The man edged toward the door.

He put out his hand to grasp the knob, then turned back to Spencer "Perhaps that's not actually her name, but it's fine for advertising—Silver Starr at the Golden Hour. The Golden Hour is located at . . ."

"Mr. Cabell," Spencer said, "I've been at the Golden Hour."

The impudent punk! What did he figure he was doing—buying his way in?

He sat quietly for a moment after Cabell had gone out, cooling down a bit, wondering about the man. There had been something about him that had been disturbing. That look in his eyes, for one thing.

And the awkwardness and shyness didn't ring quite true. As if it had been an act of some sort. But why, in the name of God, should anyone put on such an act when it would be quite clearly to his disadvantage?

You're psycho, Spencer told himself. You're getting so you jump at every shadow, sight a lurking figure behind every bush.

Two down, he thought, and another one to see—that is, if more had not piled into the office and were out there waiting for him.

He reached out his hand to press the buzzer. But before his finger touched it, the back door of the office suddenly burst open. A wild-eyed man came stumbling through it. He had something white and wriggly clutched within his arms. He dumped the white and wriggly thing on Hallock Spencer's desk and unhappily stepped back.

It was a rabbit—a white rabbit with a great pink ribbon tied around its neck in a fancy bow.

SPENCER glanced up, startled, at the man who'd brought the rabbit.

"Ackermann," he shouted. "For Chrissake, Ackermann, what is the matter with you? It isn't Easter yet!"

Ackermann worked his mouth in a painful manner and his Adam's apple went bobbing up and down. But he made no words come out.

"Come on, man!" What is it?"

Ackermann got his voice back. "It's Nickerson!" he blurted.

"O.K., so Nickerson brought a rabbit back . . ."

"He didn't bring it back, sir. It came all by itself!"

"And Nickerson?"

Ackermann shook his head. "There was just the rabbit."

Spencer had started to get up from the chair. Now he sat back down again, harder than intended.

"There's an envelope, sir, tied to the rabbit's bow."

"So I see," said Spencer, absently. But he felt the coldness running through him.

The rabbit hoisted itself around until it was face to face with Spencer. It flapped an ear, wiggled its pink nose at him, put its head carefully to one side and lifted a deliberate hind leg to scratch a flea.

He pivoted in his chair and watched the operator sidle through the door. Three men lost in the last ten days. And now there was a fourth.

But this time, at least, he'd got back the carrier. The rabbit had brought back the carrier. Any living thing, once the mechanism had been rigged, by its very presence would have brought back the carrier. It need not be a man.

But Nickerson! Nickerson was one of the best there were.

If a man could not depend on Nickerson, there was no one that he could.

He turned back to the desk and reached for the rabbit. It didn't try to get away. He slipped out the folded sheet of paper and broke the blob of sealing wax. The paper was so stiff and heavy that it crackled as he smoothed it.

The ink was dead black and the script cramped. No fountain pen, thought Spencer—nothing but a goose quill.

The letter was addressed to him. It said:

> Dear Hal: I have no logical excuse and I'll attempt no explanation. I have found a sense of springtime and cannot compel myself to leave it. You have your carrier and that is better than any of the others ever did for you. The rabbit will not mind. A rabbit knows no time. Be kind to him—for he is no coarse, wild hare of the briery fields, but a loving pet. Nick.

INADEQUATE, thought Spencer, staring at the note, with its scrawly black more like cabalistic pattern than a communication .

He had found a sense of springtime. What did he mean by that? A springtime of the heart? A springtime of the spirit? That might well be it, for Nickerson had gone to Italy in the early Renaissance. A springtime of the spirit and the sense of great beginnings. And perhaps that wasn't all of it. Would there be as well a certain sense of spiritual security in that smaller world—a world that tinkered with no time, that reached toward no stars?

The buzzer sounded softly.

Spencer tipped up the lever on the intercom. "Yes, Miss Crane?"

"Mr. Garside on the phone."

The rabbit was nibbling at the phone cord. Spencer pushed him to one side. "Yes, Chris."

The gray, clipped voice said: "Hal, what's with you and Ravenholt? He gave me a bad half hour."

"It was Project God."

"Yes, he told me that. He threatened to raise a howl about the ethics of our magazine project."

"He can't do that," protested Spencer. "He'd have no grounds at all. That one is clean. It has the green light from Legal and from Ethics and the review board gave its blessing. It's simply historical reporting. Eyewitness from the battle of Gettysburg, fashion notes on the spot from the time of Queen Victoria—it's the biggest thing we've tackled. Its promotional value alone, aside from the money that we'll make . . ."

"Yes, I know," said Garside, tiredly. "All of that is true. But I don't want to get

into a hassle with anyone—particularly not with Ravenholt. We have too many irons in the fire right now for anything unfavorable to pop. And Ravenholt can be a terribly dirty fighter."

"Look, Chris. I can take care of Ravenholt."

"I knew you would. What is more, you'd better."

"And," demanded Spencer, bristling, "what do you mean by that?"

"Well, frankly, Hal, your record doesn't look too good. You've been having trouble . . ."

"You mean the men we've lost."

"And the machines," said Garside. "You're all the time forgetting—a machine costs a quarter million."

"And the men?" asked Spencer bitterly. "Perhaps you think they're comparatively cheap."

"I don't suppose," said Garside blandly, "that you can place an actual value on a human life."

"WE lost another one today," said Spencer. "I imagine you'll be happy to know that he was loyal beyond the call of duty. He sent a rabbit back and the machine is safe and sound."

"Hal," said Garside, sternly, "this is something we can discuss at some later time. Right now I'm concerned with Ravenholt. If you'd go and apologize to him and try to fix things up . . ."

"Apologize!" exploded Spencer. "I know a better way than that. He's been shacking with a stripper down at the Golden Hour. By the time I get through . . ."

"Hal!" yelled Garside. "You can't do a thing like that! You can't involve Past, Inc., in anything like that! Why, it isn't decent!"

"You mean it's dirty," Spencer said. "No dirtier than Ravenholt. Who is he fronting for?"

"It makes no difference. Young man . . ."

"Don't young man me," yelled Spencer. "I've got troubles enough without being patronized."

"Perhaps your troubles are too much for you," said Garside, speaking very gray and clipped. "Perhaps we ought to find another man."

"Do it then!" yelled Spencer. "Don't just sit there shooting off your face. Come on down and fire me!"

He slammed the receiver down into its cradle and sat shivering with rage.

Damn Garside, he thought. To hell with Past, Inc. He'd taken all he could!

Still, it was a lousy way to end after fifteen years. It was a stinking thing to happen. Maybe he ought to have kept his mouth shut, kept his temper down, played it sweet and smooth.

Perhaps, he could have done it differently. He could have assured Garside he'd take care of Ravenholt without saying anything about Silver Starr. And why had he grabbed hold so trustfully of what Cabell had told him that moment before leaving? What could Cabell know about it? In just a little while now he'd have to check if there were anyone by the name of Silver Starr down at the Golden Hour.

Meanwhile there was work to do. Hudson now, he thought.

He reached for the buzzer.

But his finger never touched it. Once more the back door burst open with a smashing rattle and a man came tearing in. It was Douglas Marshall, operator for E.J.'s machine.

"Hal," he gasped, "you'd better come. E.J.'s really tore it!"

VI

SPENCER didn't ask a question. One look at Doug's face was quite enough to tell him the news was very bad. He bounced out of his chair and rushed through the door, close on the operator's heels.

They tore down the corridor and turned left into Operations, with the rows of bulgy, bulky carriers lined against the wall.

Down at the far end a small crowd of operators and mechanics formed a ragged circle and from the center of the circle came the sound of ribald song. The words were not intelligible.

Spencer strode forward angrily and pushed through the circle. There, in the center of it, was E.J. and another person—a filthy, bearded, boisterous barbarian wrapped in a mangy bearskin and with a tremendous sword strapped about his middle.

The barbarian had a smallish keg tilted to his mouth. The keg was gurgling; he was drinking from it, but he was missing some as well, for streams of pale, brown liquid were running down his front.

"E.J.!" yelled Spencer.

At the shout, the barbarian jerked the keg down from his face and tucked it hurriedly underneath an arm. With a big and dirty hand, he mopped the whiskers adjacent to his mouth.

E.J. stumbled forward and threw his arms around Spencer's neck, laughing all the while.

Spencer jerked E.J. loose and pushed him, stumbling, backwards.

"E.J.!" he yelled. "What is so damn funny?"

E.J. managed to stop stumbling backwards. He tried to pull himself together, but he couldn't because he still was laughing hard.

The barbarian stepped for-

ward and thrust the keg into Spencer's hands, shouting something at him in a convivial tone of voice and pantomiming with his hands that the keg had stuff to drink.

E.J. made an exaggerated thumb at the gent in bearskin. "Hal, it wasn't any Roman officer!" Then he went off into gales of laughter once again.

The barbarian started to laugh, too, uproariously, throwing back his head and bellowing in great peals of laughter that shook the very room.

E.J. staggered over and they fell into one another's arms, guffawing happily and pounding one another on the back. Somehow they got tangled up. They lost their balance. They fell down on the floor and sat there, the two of them, looking up at the men around them.

"Now!" Spencer roared at E.J.

E.J. clapped the man in bearskin a resounding whack upon his hairy shoulder. "Just bringing back the Wrightson-Graves her far-removed grand-pappy. I can't wait to see her face when I take him up there!"

"Oh, my God!" said Spencer. He turned around and thrust the dripping keg into someone's hands.

He snapped, "Don't let them get away. Put them someplace where they can sleep it off."

A hand grabbed him by the arm and there was Douglas Marshall, sweating. "We got to send him back, Chief," said Doug. "E.J.'s got to take him back."

Spencer shook his head. "I don't know if we can. I'll put it up to Legal. Just keep them here, and tell the boys. Tell them if one of them so much as whispers . . ."

"I'll do my best," said Doug. "But I don't know. They're a bunch of blabbermouths."

Spencer jerked away and sprinted for the corridor.

What a day, he thought. What a loused-up day!

HE charged down the corridor and saw that the door marked *Private* was closed. He skidded almost to a halt, reaching for the knob, when the door flew open. Miss Crane came tearing out.

She slammed into him head-on. Both of them bounced back, Miss Crane's spectacles knocked at a crazy angle by the impact.

"Mr. Spencer," she wailed. "Mr. Spencer, something awful's happened! Remember Mr. Hudson?"

She stepped back out of his way. He sprang inside and slammed the door behind him. "As if I ever could forget him," he said bitterly.

Said Miss Crane, "Mr. Hudson's dead!"

Spencer stood stricken.

Miss Crane raged, "If only you had seen him when *I*

wanted you to! If you hadn't kept him waiting out there . . ."

"Now, look here—"

"He got up finally," said Miss Crane, "and his face was red. He was angry. I don't blame him, Mr. Spencer."

"You mean he died right here?"

"He said to me, 'Tell your Mr. Spencer—' and that's as far as he ever got. He sort of lurched and caught with his hand at the edge of the desk to support himself, but his hand slipped off and he folded up and . . ."

Spencer waited for no more. He went in three quick steps across the office and out into the reception room.

There was Mr. Hudson, huddled on the carpet.

He looked startlingly like a limp rag doll. One blue-veined hand was stretched out ahead of him. The portfolio that it had held lay just beyond the fingertips, as if even in his death Mr. Hudson might be stretching out his hand to it. His jacket was hunched across the shoulders. The collar of his white shirt, Spencer saw, was ragged.

Spencer went slowly across the floor and knelt down beside the man. He put his ear down on the body.

There was no sound at all.

"MR. SPENCER." Miss Crane was standing in the doorway, still terrified but enjoying it a lot. Not in all her years of being secretary had anything like this happened. Not in all her life. It would keep her supplied with conversation for many, many years.

"Lock the door," said Spencer, "so no one can come strolling in. Then phone the police."

"The police!"

"Miss Crane," said Spencer, sharply.

She walked around him and the body on the floor, edging close against the wall.

"Call Legal, too," said Spencer.

He stayed squatting on the floor, staring at the man who lay there and wondering how it had happened. Heart attack, most likely. Miss Crane had said that he looked ill—and had urged that he see him first, ahead of the other two.

And if one were looking for a man to blame for what had happened here, Spencer told himself, they might have but little trouble fastening it on him.

If Hudson had not had to wait, growing angrier and more upset as the time slipped past, this might not have happened.

Hudson had waited in this room, a sick and impatient man, and finally an angry one—and what had he waited for?

Spencer studied the rag-doll of a man slumped upon the carpet, the thinning hair atop

his head, the thick-lensed spectacles bent and twisted in the fall, the bony, blue-veined hands. He wondered what such a man might have expected from Past, Inc.

Spencer started to get up and lost his balance as he did, his left hand going out behind him to prop himself erect.

And beneath the spread-out palm there was something cool and smooth. Without looking, he knew what it was. Hudson's portfolio!

The answer might be there!

Miss Crane was at the door, locking it. There was no one else.

With a swift sweep of his hand, Spencer skidded the portfolio in the direction of the doorway that led into his office.

He got smoothly to his feet and turned. The portfolio lay halfway through the doorway. In one quick stride he reached it and nudged it with his foot, inside and out of sight.

He heard the snick of the lock falling home and Miss Crane turned around.

"The police first, or Legal, Mr. Spencer?"

"The police, I'd think," said Spencer.

HE STEPPED within his office and swung the door so that it came within an inch of closing. Then he snatched the portfolio off the floor and hurried to his desk.

He put it on his desk and zipped it open and there were three sheafs of papers, each of the sheafs paper-clipped together.

The first bore the legend at the top of the first page: *A Study of Ethics Involved in Traveling in Time.* And after that page upon page of typescript, heavily underlined and edited with a neat red pencil.

And the second, a thin one, with no legend, and composed of sheets of unneatly scribbled notes.

And the third, once again typed, with carefully drawn diagrams and charts, and the heading: *A New Concept of the Mechanics of Time Travel.*

Spencer sucked in his breath and bent above the paper, his eyes trying to gallop along the lines of type, but forced to go too fast to really catch the meaning.

For he had to get the portfolio back where it had been and he had to do it without being seen. It was not his to touch. The police might become difficult if they found he'd rifled it. And when he put it back, it must have something in it. A man would hardly come to see him with an empty portfolio.

In the outer office, he heard Miss Crane talking. He made a quick decision.

He swept the second and third sheaf of papers into the top drawer of his desk. Leaving the first sheaf on time-

travel ethics in the portfolio, he zipped it shut again.

That would satisfy the cops. He held the portfolio in his left hand, letting his arm hang along his side, and stepped to the doorway, shielding the left side of his body and the portfolio.

Miss Crane was on the phone, her face turned away from him.

He dropped the portfolio on the carpeting, just beyond the outstretched fingers of the dead man.

Miss Crane put down the phone and saw him standing there.

"The police will be right over," she said. "Now I'll call Mr. Hawkes in Legal."

"Thanks," said Spencer. "I'll go through some papers while we're waiting."

VII

BACK at his desk, he took out the pile of papers that said: *A New Concept on the Mechanics of Time Travel.* The name on it was Boone Hudson.

He settled down to read, first with mounting wonderment, then with a strange, cold excitement—for here, at last, was the very thing that would at once erase the basic headache of Past, Inc.

No longer would one face the nightmare of good travelers wearing out in a few years' time.

No longer would a man go into time a young man and return sixty seconds later with the beginning lines of age showing on his face. No longer would one watch one's friends' age visibly from month to month.

For they would no longer be dealing in men, but in the patterns of those men.

Matter transference, Spencer told himself. You could probably call it that, anyway. A man would be sent into the past; but the carrier would not move physically into time as it moved now. It would project a pattern of itself and the man within it, materializing at the target point. And within the carrier—the basic carrier, the prime carrier, the parent carrier which would remain in present time—there'd be another pattern, a duplicate pattern of the man sent into time.

When the man returned to present time, he would not return as he was at that moment in the past, but as the pattern within the waiting carrier said he *had* been when he'd traveled into time.

He'd step out of the carrier exactly as he had stepped into it, not older by a second—actually a minute younger than he would have been! For he did not have to account for that sixty seconds between leaving and returning.

For years, Past, Inc.'s, own research department had been

seeking for the answer to the problem, without even coming close. And now a stranger had come unheralded and sat hunched in the reception room, with the portfolio cradled on his knee, and he had the answer, but he'd been forced to wait.

He'd waited and he'd waited and finally he had died.

There was a tapping at the door of the outer office. He heard Miss Crane cross the room to open it.

Spencer pulled out a desk drawer and hurriedly shoved the papers into it. Then he stood up from the desk and walked around it to go into the outer office.

ROSS HAWKES, head of Past, Inc.'s legal department, was standing just beyond the body on the carpet, staring down at it.

"Hello, Ross," said Spencer. "An unpleasant business here."

Hawkes looked up at him, puzzled. His pale blue eyes glittered behind the neat and precise spectacles, his snow white hair matching the pallor of his face.

"But what was Dan'l doing here?" he asked.

"Dan'l?" Spencer demanded. "His name happened to be Boone Hudson."

"Yes, I know," said Hawkes. "But the boys all called him Dan'l—Dan'l Boone, you understand. Sometimes he didn't like it. He worked in Research. We had to fire him, fifteen, sixteen years ago. The only reason that I recognized him was that we had some trouble. He had an idea he would like to sue us."

Spencer nodded. "Thanks. I see," he said.

He was halfway to his office door when he turned back.

"One thing, Ross. What did we fire him for?"

"I don't recall exactly. He disregarded his assignment, went off on some other tangent. Matter transference, I think."

Spencer said, "That's the way it goes."

He went back into the office, locked his desk and went out the back way.

In the parking lot, he backed out his car and went slowly down the street. A police cruiser was parked in front of the building and two officers were getting out. An ambulance was pulling in behind the cruiser.

So, thought Spencer, they had fired Hudson fifteen years ago, because he had some sort of crazy idea about matter transference and wouldn't stick to business. And to this very day, Research was going quietly mad trying to solve a problem that Hudson could have put into their laps years ago, if they had kept him on.

Spencer tried to imagine how those fifteen years must have been for Hudson, more

than likely working all the time on this quiet insanity of his. And how, finally, he had gotten it and had made sure of it and then had gone down to Past, Inc., to rub their noses in it.

Exactly as he, Hallock Spencer, now would rub their noses in it.

GREENWICH Street was a quiet residential street of genteel poverty, with small and older houses. Despite the smallness of the houses and their age, and in some cases their unkemptness, there was a certain solid pride and respectability about them.

The address on the manuscript was 241 Greenwich. It was a squat brown house surrounded by a crumbling picket fence. The yard was full of flowers. Even so, it had the look of a house that had no one living in it.

Spencer edged through the sagging gate and up the walk, made small by the flowers that encroached upon it. He went up the rickety stairs to the shaky porch and, since there was no bell, rapped on the closed front door.

There was no answer. He tried the knob and it turned. He pushed the door part way open and edged into the silent hall.

"Hello," he called. "Anyone at home?"

He waited. There wasn't.

He walked from the hall into the living room and stood to look around him at the Spartan, almost monklike existence of the man who'd lived there.

It was evident that Hudson had lived alone, for the room bore all the signs of a lone man's camping. There was a cot against one wall, a dirty shirt flung across one end of it. Two pairs of shoes and a pair of slippers were lined up underneath the cot. An old-fashioned dresser stood opposite the cot. A handful of ties dangled raggedly from the bar that had been fastened on its side. A small kitchen table stood in the corner nearest to the kitchen. A box of crackers and a glass, still spotted with milk stains, stood upon the table. A massive desk stood a few feet from the table and the top of it was bare except for an old typewriter and a photograph in a stand-up frame.

Spencer walked over to the desk and began pulling out the drawers. They were almost empty. In one he found a pipe, a box of paper clips, a stapler and a single poker chip. The others yielded other odds and ends, but nothing of importance. In one was a half a ream of paper—but nowhere was there a single line of writing. In the bottom drawer on the left hand side, he found a squat bottle, half full of good Scotch.

And that was all.

He searched the dresser. Nothing but shirts and underwear and socks.

He prowled into the kitchen. Just the built-in stove and refrigerator and the cupboards. He found nothing in any of them but a small supply of food.

And the bedrooms—two of them—were empty, innocent of furniture, and with a fine and powdery dust coating floor and walls. Spencer stood in the doorway of each and looked and there was a sadness in each room. He didn't go inside.

Back in the living room, he went to the desk and picked up the photograph. A woman with a tired, brave smile, with a halo of white hair, with an air of endless patience, looked out of it at him.

There was nothing to be found in this house, he told himself. Not unless one had the time to search every corner of it, every crack, to take it down, each board and stone. And even then, he doubted now, there'd be anything to find.

HE LEFT the house and drove back to the office.

"Your lunch didn't take too long," Miss Crane told him, sourly.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"The police were very, very nice," she said. "Both Mr. Hawkes and Mr. Snell are anxious to see you. And Mr. Garside called."

"After a while," said Spencer. "I've got work to do. I don't want to be disturbed."

He went into his office and shut the door with a gesture of finality.

From the drawer he took the Hudson papers and settled down to read.

He was no engineer, but he knew enough of it to make a ragged sort of sense, although at times he was forced to go back and read more carefully, or puzzle out a diagram that he'd skipped through too hurriedly. Finally he came to the end of it.

It was all there.

It would have to be checked by technicians and engineers, of course. There might be bugs that would take some ironing out, but the concept, complete both in theory and in the theory's application, was all there in the paper.

Hudson had held nothing back—no vital point, no key.

And that was crazy, Spencer told himself. You had to leave yourself some sort of bargaining position. You could trust no other man, certainly no corporation, as implicitly as Hudson apparently had intended to. Especially you couldn't trust an outfit that had fired you fifteen years before for working on this very concept.

It was ridiculous and tragic, Spencer told himself.

Past, Inc., could not have even guessed what Hudson might have been aiming at. And Hudson, in his turn, was gagged because he'd not as yet progressed to a point where he could have faith either in his concept or himself. Even if he had tried to tell them, they would have laughed at him, for he had no reputation to support such outrageous dreaming.

Spencer sat at his desk, remembering the house on Greenwich St., the huddling in one room with the other rooms all bare and the entire house stripped of all evidence of comfort and good living. More than likely all the furniture in those rooms, all the accumulation of many years of living, had been sold, piece by precious piece, to keep groceries on the shelf.

A man who was dedicated to a dream, Spencer told himself, a man who had lived with that dream so long and intimately that it was his entire life. Perhaps he had known that he was about to die.

That might explain his impatience at being forced to wait.

SPENCER shoved the Hudson papers to one side and picked up the notes. The pages were filled with cryptic penciled lines, with long strings of mathematical abstractions, roughly drawn sketches. They were no help.

And that other paper, Spencer wondered—the one he'd left in the portfolio, that one that had to do with ethics? Might it not also bear a close relationship to the Hudson concept? Might there not be in it something of importance bearing on this new approach?

Time travel perforce was hedged around with a pattern of ethics which consisted mainly of a formidable list of "thou shalt nots."

Thou shalt not transport a human being from the past.

Thou shalt not snitch a thing until it has been lost.

Thou shalt not inform any one in the past of the fact there is time travel.

Thou shalt not interfere in any way with the patterns of the past.

Thou shalt not try to go into the future—and don't ask why, because that's a dirty question.

VIII

THE buzzer sounded. He flipped up the switch.

"Yes, Miss Crane."

"Mr. Garside is here to see you. Mr. Hawkes and Mr. Snell are with him."

He thought he detected in her voice a sense of satisfaction.

"All right. Ask them to come in."

He gathered the papers off his desk and put them in his briefcase, then settled back as

they came in. "Well, gentlemen. It seems I am invaded."

Even as he said it, he knew it had not been the proper thing to say. They did not even smile. And he knew that it was bad. Any time you got Legal and Public Relations together, it couldn't be anything but bad.

They sat down. "We thought," said Snell, in his most polished P.R. manner, "that if we got together and tried to talk things out . . ."

Hawkes cut him short. He said to Spencer, accusingly: "You have managed to place us in a most embarrassing position."

"Yes, I know," said Spencer. "Let's tick off the items. One of my men brought back a human from the past. A man died in my office. I forgot to be polite to a stuffed shirt who came charging in to help us run our business."

"You seem," said Garside, "to take it all quite lightly."

"Perhaps I do," said Spencer. "Let's put it slightly stronger. I just don't give a damn. You cannot allow pressure groups to form your policy."

"You are talking now, of course," said Garside, "about the Ravenholt affair."

"Chris," said Snell, enthusiastically, "you hit it on the button. Here is a chance to really sell the public on us. I don't believe we've really sold them. We are dealing in something which to the average man seems to smell of magic. Naturally he is standoffish."

"More to the point," said Hawkes, impatiently, "if we turn down this project—this . . ."

"Project God," said Spencer.

"I'm not sure I like your phrasing."

"Think up a name yourself," said Spencer calmly. "That is what we call it."

"If we fail to go ahead with it, we'll be accused of being atheists."

"How would the public ever know that we turned it down?" asked Spencer.

"You can be sure," Snell said bitterly, "that Ravenholt will make a point of making known our turning down of it."

SPENCER smashed his fist upon the desk in sudden anger. He yelled, "I told you how to handle Ravenholt!"

"Hal," Garside told him quietly, "we simply cannot do it. We have our dignity."

"No," said Spencer, "I suppose you can't. But you can sell out to Ravenholt and whoever's backing him. You can rig the survey of religious origins. You can falsify reports."

The three of them sat in stricken silence. Spencer felt a twinge of momentary wonder for having dared to say it.

It was not the way one was supposed to talk to brass.

But he had to say one more thing. "Chris. You are going to disregard the report I made and go ahead with it, aren't you?"

Garside answered with smooth urbanity: "I'm afraid I'll have to."

Spencer looked at Hawkes and Snell and he saw the secret smiles that lurked just behind their lips—the sneering contemptuous smile of authority ascendant.

He said slowly, "Yes, I guess you will. Well, it's all in your laps now. You figure out the answers."

"But it's your department."

"Not any more, it isn't. I've just quit the job."

"Now see here, Hal," Garside was saying, "you can't do a thing like that! Without any notice! Just flying off the handle! We may have our little differences, but that is no excuse . . ."

"I've decided," Spencer told him, "that I somehow have to stop you. I cannot allow you to go ahead with Project God. I warn you, if you do, that I shall discredit you. I shall prove exactly and without question everything you've done. And meanwhile, I am planning to go into business for myself."

"TIME travel, perhaps." They were mocking him. "I had thought of it."

Snell grinned contemptuously. "You can't even get a license."

"I think I can," said Spencer.

And he knew he could. With a brand new concept, there'd be little trouble.

Garside got up from his chair. "Well," he said to Spencer, "you've had your little tantrum. When you cool down a bit, come up and talk to me."

Spencer shook his head.

"Goodbye, Chris," he said.

He did not rise. He sat and watched them go.

Strangely, now that it was over—or just beginning—there was no tenseness in him. It had fallen all away and he felt abiding calm.

There was money to be raised, there were technicians and engineers to hire, there were travelers to be found and trained, and a whole lot more than that.

Thinking of it all, he had a momentary pang of doubt, but he shrugged it off. He got up from his chair and walked out into the office.

"Miss Crane," he said, "Mr. Cabell was supposed to come back this afternoon."

"I haven't seen him, sir."

"Of course not," Spencer said.

For suddenly it all seemed to be coming clear, if he only could believe it.

There had been a look in young Cabell's eyes that had been most disturbing. And

now, all at once, he knew that look for exactly what it was.

It had been adulation!

THE kind of look that was reserved for someone who had become a legend.

And he must be wrong, Spencer told himself, for he was not a legend—at least not at the moment.

There had been something else in young Cabell's eyes. And once again he knew. Cabell had been a young man, but the eyes had been old eyes. They were eyes that had seen much more of life than a man of thirty had any right to see.

"What shall I say," asked Miss Crane, "if he should come back?"

"Never mind," said Spencer. "I am sure he won't."

For Cabell's job was done, if it had been a job at all. It might have been, he told himself, a violation of the ethics, a pure piece of meddling, or it might have been a yielding to that temptation to play God.

Or, he thought, it might have been all planned.

Had they somewhere in the future worked out that formula he'd spoken of to Cabell—the formula that would allow legitimate manipulation of the past?

"Miss Crane," he said, "would you be kind enough to type up a resignation for me? Effective immediately. Make it very formal. I am sore at Garside."

Miss Crane did not bat an eyelash. She ran paper into her machine.

"Mr. Spencer, what reason shall I give?"

"You might say I'm going into business for myself."

Had there been another time, he wondered, when it hadn't gone this way? Had there been a time when Hudson had gotten in to see him and maybe had not died at all? Had there been a time when he'd handed over the Hudson concept to Past, Inc., instead of stealing it himself?

And if Cabell had not been here to take up the time, more than likely he would have gotten around to seeing Hudson before it was too late. And if he had seen the man, then it was more than likely that he would have passed the concept on through proper channels.

But even so, he wondered, how could they be sure (whoever they might be) that he'd not see Hudson first? He recalled distinctly that Miss Crane had urged that he see him first.

And that was it, he thought excitedly. That was exactly it! He might very well have seen Hudson first if Miss Crane had not been insistent that he should.

And standing there, he thought of all the years that Miss Crane must have worked

at it—conditioning him to the point where he'd be sure to do exactly opposite to what she urged he do.

"Mr. Spencer," said Miss Crane, "I have the letter finished. And there is something else. I almost forgot about it."

She reached down into a drawer and took out something and laid it on the desk.

It was the portfolio that belonged to Hudson.

"The police," said Miss Crane, "apparently overlooked it. It was very careless of them. I thought that you might like it."

Spencer stood staring blankly at it.

"It would go so nicely," said Miss Crane, "with the other stuff you have."

THERE was a muted thumping on the floor and Spencer spun around. A white rabbit with long and droopy ears hopped across the carpet, looking for a carrot.

"Oh, how cute!" cried Miss Crane, very much unlike herself. "Is it the one that Mr. Nickerson sent back?"

"It's the one," said Spencer. "I had forgotten it."

"Might I have it?"

"Miss Crane. I wonder . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Spencer?"

And what was he to say?

Could he blurt out that now he knew she was one of them?

It would take so much explanation and it could be so involved. And, besides, Miss Crane was not the sort of person that you blurted out things to.

He gulped. "I was wondering, Miss Crane, if you'd come and work for me. I'll need a secretary."

Miss Crane shook her head. "No, I'm getting old. I'm thinking of retiring. I think, now that you are leaving, I shall just disappear."

"But, Miss Crane, I'll need you desperately."

"One of these days soon," said Miss Crane, "when you need a secretary, there'll be an applicant. She'll wear a bright green dress and she'll be wearing these new glasses and be carrying a snow-white rabbit with a bow around its neck. She may strike you as something of a hussy, but you hire her. Be sure you hire her."

"I'll remember," Spencer said. "I'll be looking for her. I'll hire no one else."

"She will not," warned Miss Crane, "be a bit like me. She'll be much nicer."

"Thank you, Miss Crane," said Spencer, just a bit inanely.

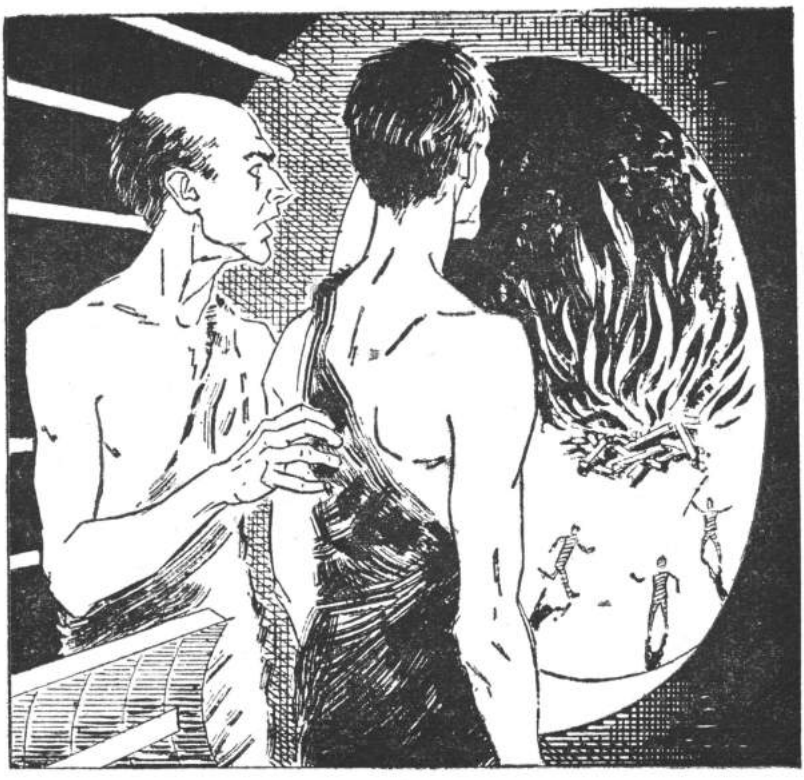
"And don't forget this," said Miss Crane, holding out the portfolio.

He took it and headed for the door.

At the door he stopped and turned back to her.

"I'll be seeing you," he said.

For the first time in fifteen years, Miss Crane smiled at him. **END**



to be continued

By RAYMOND E. BANKS

Certainly a spaceship should be a home away from home —but for so many centuries?

INSTRUCTOR John Marsden could almost feel his luck as a tangible, living thing. He had wanted, as a young man, to be a teacher at New Harvard University. He had grown up to be a New Harvard instructor. He had wanted to marry a sweet and attractive girl and have a

handsome, healthy family. He had married such a girl, and his young son gave every evidence of being good-looking, enormously healthy, and quick of mind. He had wanted to go out into space—once. And look at what had happened.

Each year the university sent out a spaceship of its most promising young students in their senior year on a tour to the Moon. It was a great honor to get an assignment on the *Yard*. John Marsden was the only first-year instructor chosen to go along with the voyage of 2248.

And then that incredible thing: the revelation by the three scientists who managed the ship that the *Yard* had been converted with New Harvard's still-secret space warp, the first ever developed—and would make man's first attempt at an interstellar crossing! With, of course, the consent of the five hundred students and instructors aboard. How did they vote?

The vote was unanimous. The Moon, indeed! *This* tour by the class of 2248 would be forever remembered by mankind. Of course it would only be a short, safe run to Alpha Centauri, a mere four light-years away, but such a trip would immortalize the entire passenger list.

And so the *Yard* went into man's first space drive.

Seventy light-years from Earth, near the star Regulus, the *Yard* crash-landed on an unnamed planet. You would think that it was the end for the starry-eyed young men and women and the overly confident, proud inventors of the warp.

But Johnny Marsden didn't think so. Nothing really bad had ever happened to him—yet.

SITTING in the control room of the motionless *Yard* with a girl student, Elizabeth Simms, Marsden nevertheless felt the heavy gloom of those around him.

"Do you think we'll ever get back to Earth?" asked the girl, trying to keep hysteria out of her voice.

"Certainly," said John. He was thinking of his wife, Sylvia, and young Tim, 70 light-years away, playing in his playpen, laughing, romping in the warm afternoon sunshine.

He looked down at his hands. John Marsden was hexadactyllic, a physical curiosity, but he had always connected that extra thumb with his luck. The smaller second thumb, springing from the thumb root, didn't disfigure him—it only made him a little different, a little more convinced of superiority. Not that he needed it.

"Of course we'll reach Earth," he said.

"But if no other spaceship has a warp, it might be a

long time before we're—we're rescued."

John patted her shoulder. He lifted her from her chair and took her to the port, to look out on the landing space. The *Yard* had come to rest on a small, gray-green island in the middle of a dismal ocean on one of the planets of Regulus.

"Look," said John. "The ship could've blown apart in space. It didn't. It could've killed us all in landing. It didn't. We could've been forced to land in the middle of the ocean on this planet. We weren't."

"Well, yes, but—"

"Also, this island has fresh water. It has grass and trees of a sort, and a promising Earthlike soil. That means oxygen and forage for the ship's livestock. Even if we have to stay here a year or two, we can survive, because we can breathe, quench our thirst, grow food and live in the ship for shelter."

Two tears crept out of the girl's eyes. "But we're so far from Earth!"

He put his arm around her shoulders. The golden New Harvard hair-style seemed fantastic out here in space. "With all that string of coincidences, do you think we can possibly perish? Why, we may be able to fix the ship up in a few days, and be back with a wonderful story to tell at graduation."

"But Professor Leonard said we're horribly hampered for tools."

John Marsden released the girl with a sigh. He looked again at his curious thumbs. He thought of his own son, back on Earth, also with the extra thumb, putting his small hand in his father's. He remembered the warm touch. He thought of sweet, grave Sylvia's face, and tried to imagine not seeing her or Timmy any more.

No. He couldn't believe it. They were in an unpleasant, even desperate position, but he was Johnny Marsden. He would be saved—they would all be saved, in spite of Professor Leonard's pessimism. Because all five hundred people walked under the umbrella of Johnny Marsden's luck. And with plenty of atomic power available—

"Don't worry, Elizabeth," he told the girl. "We're going back to Earth. Everything will be all right."

The words echoed on the shining walls, on the new-treaded floor, on the thick, sparkling glass of the porthole of the *Yard*.

FOUR hundred years later, Johnny Marsden XIV, standing in the Class President's room of the *Yard*, said: "Don't worry, sir. Everything will be all right now. I'm sure of it."

"Son," said Leonard XIII,

TO BE CONTINUED

"it won't be—because there is no Earth!"

The walls were dim, corroded by the sea air. The floor was worn to a gray-black muck by the moving feet of generations. The glass in the porthole had been gone for more than a century, and a bit of wool that had once stuffed the hole was now a rag.

The man and the boy stood looking down on the University, and the man repeated sadly: "No Earth."

"No Earth!" cried Johnny. "All the ancient lore you've told me—"

"Merely tales," said Leonard. "And I even misled you into Graduation before your time. No. Tomorrow we of the Class of 2648 die, and now you'll have to die with us, unless—"

Johnny looked down at the yellow fires. Bonfires tonight, in honor of tomorrow's Graduation. The rich, delightful smell of roasting pigs and sheep rose in the air. Tonight was the lavish, luxurious feast of the year, a time of greatness.

But also the five Arrowmen were practicing hard, sending their shafts into carcasses—sheep carcasses tonight.

Johnny drew his rough gray sheep cape around himself and shivered. For the last two weeks he had felt the growing change in his adopted Class, the Class of 2648. Graduation and return to Earth was supposed to be a time of happiness—but the Class did not seem happy. Was this the inherent nature of old people? He looked up at Leonard, the Class President. The man was ancient, at least thirty-one, and he was frowning now.

"But, sir," said Johnny, "of all the people in the Class, you believed the most — that Earthmen would be waiting for us at the end of Graduation Walk."

"I have developed a new theory," said Leonard bleakly.

Johnny could tell the old man (he actually had some lines on his face) was worried about tomorrow and how it would be.

Tomorrow the Class of 2648 would assemble on Commencement Hill. They would stand before the narrow stone pathway called Graduation Walk. It protruded from the high side of the island into the perpetual fog, a fateful finger of rock to the Graduates. For when you reached the proper age, you Graduated, walking along the stone path and disappearing into the mists, wearing your ceremonial wings that were to fly you to the waiting Earth ship below.

Tradition had it that the Earth ship waited to take you back to a miraculous land in the stars to live a long, wonderful life in a dazzling civilization. No one had ever come back from the Walk to say whether or not this was true

—that the wings would fly you down to the waiting Earth ship, or that the ship would be there.

But to Johnny that made good sense. It would destroy the morale of the other islanders to have a Graduate return with tales of a fine new life. They would want to leave the island before their time.

He knew that some believed no Earth ship waited for the Graduates, that Graduation Walk was just a natural stone formation, mysterious, perpetually covered with fog, but a mere trap. You would flutter sadly down to the ocean and die on the lonely sea.

Truly it was hard to know! Once there had been books and papers on the home ship that had given accounts of Earth. But through the centuries they had been worn to powder. And the rough writings on sheepskin parchments had been reinterpreted so often that it sometimes seemed you couldn't separate truth from imagination.

JOHNNY believed the Earth ship theory. He even believed that the Earthmen were testing them, to leave so much in doubt. But it was a shock to hear that Leonard, who had always professed the traditions, had turned against them on the eve of Graduation.

"But this great home ship!" cried Johnny. "The Mystic Radio that runs forever! The legends! They must mean something!"

Leonard took Johnny to the porthole and pointed out. It was dusk now and the stars, the few that showed through the rifts in the foggy island, were shining.

"It's too fantastic to suppose that Earth life exists out there," said Leonard. "Why, those stars are an incredible distance. Perhaps as much as five hundred miles—an infinity no mind can conceive."

The five-mile-square island seemed large to Johnny. The five-hundred-mile figure made his head spin. "Well, yes, sir—"

"Emotionally, I hope for it," said Leonard, almost as if pleading with Johnny. "But logically, no. I have always had doubts, and in these last few weeks it has resulted in a new theory."

He went to the ship's wall and tapped it. "Notice how thick the hull of the home ship is. Strong enough to have existed in water. That's the key, Johnny. I have speculated that men once lived beneath this great ocean. This was the true Earth of legend. Then some gigantic catastrophe destroyed their sea-world. Only a few survived, the Ancient Five Hundred. They built this ship in the foreknowledge of the catastrophe. They came up on dry land. But since they could not live out of water, they brought the ocean with them

TO BE CONTINUED

—water sealed in this great ship like a sealed sheepskin bag. Then gradually, over the years, they accustomed themselves to living on the dry land."

"And the Graduates tomorrow won't be picked up by Earth ships?"

"Worse than that, Johnny. We can no longer live in water. Witness how easily we drown when we try to swim in the ocean. With no one to pick us up, we'll perish tomorrow."

"And the Mystic Radio?"

"The messages you send fall on dead ears. No, Johnny, I fear that the Graduation tradition serves a less ideal, more practical purpose. It removes the old so the young may live. This island can support three thousand at the most. And people do not die fast enough to make room for the newborn. That is why we must Graduate."

"I wish you hadn't told me this," said Johnny.

"I had my reasons. You are only eighteen, Johnny. Your time is not up yet for many years. I have arranged a reprieve for you with the Class Presidents' Council. You do not have to Graduate with the Class of 2648."

Johnny looked stunned. "But I've already enjoyed my love mating with Evelyn Soames of your Class. And I've been your Class Keyman on the Mystic Radio—"

Leonard nodded. "We were glad to have you, Johnny. But you must not waste your life on us. You must not Graduate tomorrow."

And Leonard gave him a reassuring smile and a pat on the shoulder and eased him out, for a Senior Class President was very busy on the eve of Graduation.

Johnny left the President's cabin, saddened. He had been so sure of a glorious future on Earth. And now his good friend Leonard didn't believe Earth existed. Was it possible—

No! The Earth ship theory was right. *He* was Johnny Marsden. He had always enjoyed life, always been lucky!

EVELYN SOAMES awaited Johnny in the Key Room. She assisted him with the duties of Keyman, because she was the only other member of the Class of 2648 who had the necessary light touch. There had been many likely candidates for Keyman in Johnny's own Class, and so he had practically forced his way into Leonard's and Evelyn's Class, where no males had the light touch he had. In that way he could make sure of winning the very high honor of the Keyman's post. And tradition was generous about letting you go ahead of your time.

"Hello, Johnny. Here are your ceremonial wings."

Johnny had made the wings for himself and Evelyn; she

had decorated them. She had painted his bright blue and red and orange. The sight of the cheerful wings made him feel better, and she had been lavish with the scarce clay colors. More lavish on his than her own.

"Thank you, Evelyn," he said. "But you should've saved some of the colors for yourself."

She shrugged, a shoulder escaping from her formless sheepskin.

"It doesn't matter, Johnny."

"You, too," he said. "Don't tell me you no longer believe!"

"No, Johnny, I believe. I believe . . ."

She came into his arms and he felt her soft body shiver. Evelyn had been both his delight and his dismay. She was more than ten years older than he, yet young-minded enough to attract him, make him feel older. She was a handsome woman. He would never forget the holy night of mating, her skin gleaming from the traditional bacon-oil massage, utterly desirable.

And yet somehow Johnny knew it had been a mistake. It hadn't been the true love he'd first thought, but a temporary interest. What better proof than that she had produced no child for him? And he had used up his mating privilege; he could never mate again.

Now, as she gave him a fear-tinged, passionless kiss, he understood that she, too, no longer believed the Earth ship theory.

Johnny felt his insides turn. He had counted on the help of Leonard and the reassurance of Evelyn to make this Graduation an unforgettably fine experience. Instead it was becoming a nightmare.

JOHNNY turned quickly away and went to the Mystic Radio. He had no right to expect them to believe the theory just to make it easier for him. Faith was something built inside or not at all.

Still, if only the people he loved would keep the confidence they'd had six months ago . . .

He ran his fingers lovingly over the plate of the enclosed Radio cabinet. "CAUTION," it read. "ATOMIC POWER. NO REPLACEMENTS NEEDED. DO NOT REMOVE COVER."

No one had ever removed the cover. And the Mystic Radio still worked after all these centuries.

Here was proof that Earth existed. No such miracle could have been created on this island of fog, forest, grasslands, sheep and pig pens and crude rock huts.

He started to do his job, but Evelyn laid a hand on his arm. "Johnny," she said, "Leonard spoke of a reprieve for you. Please—don't Graduate with us."

He couldn't stand her haunted eyes. Why, you'd

TO BE CONTINUED

think tomorrow was an execution!

He shook his head wordlessly and snapped on the Radio. He felt the satisfying surge of power, the wonderful magnetic metal affinity of the code key for its base, and he reverently began to pound out his eternal message.

It was eternal, he thought. A message flung to Earth once a month for all these long centuries. Three dots, three dashes, three dots, as the book (long since worn out) had ordered.

SOS, SOS, SOS. No spacing between those mystic letters.

Evelyn murmured the traditional words of blessing to go with the message. But her heart wasn't in it. And when they were done for the last time, in this room that they had made bright with so much fun and hope during the last year, she turned and fled, and he suddenly understood that she was sick with the fear of death.

He sat alone for a long time in the twilight, the Mystic Radio turned off. A dead home ship from a dead civilization under the seas, Leonard had said. A few brief moments of a pleasant life—then extinction on the ocean tomorrow. That was what Leonard and Evelyn believed.

What did he believe?

He looked at his hand, that hand with the extra thumb that he had inherited. He had always believed it was a thumb of luck.

But Leonard had so easily explained the home ship miracles. And Evelyn had so graphically imparted her terror.

Johnny began to shiver, and he could not stop.

"THE radio said 'SOS' again today," said Marie.

Sylvia Lowden nodded gloomily. "On this planet 'SOS.' On the last one 'alal,' and on the one before that 'brx.' I'm disgusted!"

Marie stared at Sylvia's hands as the girl instrument technician went on tabulating her data. Those hands fascinated Marie, because Sylvia had extra thumbs. Sylvia as a person interested her, because she told a story of some ancestor that had been lost on a spaceship out here near Regulus and now, maybe, with a little luck they could turn up some wreckage, at least.

"But Regulus was only the educated guess of an astrohistorian," sighed Sylvia. "No one knew how that ship traveled after it passed Centauri on that wild ride. They played with a power they didn't understand and wouldn't be played with."

"Well, anyway, here we are among the thirty planets of Regulus," said Marie, "if you count the small ones."

"And each and every one of them seems to have its own

pseudo-radio signals," groaned Sylvia.

It had been fun for the girls at first, the search for evidence of the *Yard* that would clear up another entry in the "Register of Missing Spaceships." And, as Sylvia explained it, this would be a brilliant find, since the *Yard* had been the first ship ever to use a space warp. It had taken off from New Harvard over four hundred years ago and never been heard from again. It would be quite a feat for the team of feminine scan technicians on a routine evaluation patrol to bring back definite information.

But their real job was to jockey the large instrument platform around each planet, letting the instruments gather data for later exploration by the research company that hired them. And they had a schedule to maintain. So each side investigation of some strange radio or visual phenomenon cost them precious time. They were spending less than the minimum ten hours on each of the planets to make up the time they'd lost. Sylvia had had her fill.

"Don't you want to look into this matter of the SOS?" asked Marie.

"No," said Sylvia. "In the first place, the starship distress signal is QX. In the second place, there couldn't be living survivors after ten years, let alone four hundred. Look—all fog and water! Test that air. It depresses you just to smell it."

"But maybe there's some land somewhere."

"If so, it's well-hidden," said Sylvia.

SHE peered out of the port of the small cruiser. The fog opened below to show drab sea waves. A white bird drifted slowly and majestically across the open space and disappeared into the gray-white fog.

"There's a bird," said Marie. "That means land and maybe some wreckage — or even survivors!"

"No, no, no!" said Sylvia. "We *can't* delay any more. I've chased rainbows, purple lights at night, animal cries that could be human—even strange smells—not to mention those pseudo-radio signals. In a word, to hell with the *Yard*. It probably blew up somewhere in space."

Marie leaned back in her comfortable seat and said with a sigh, "Has QX always been the distress signal?"

"Oh, for God's sake," said Sylvia. "I don't know. If you are interested, look it up in NavHistory."

"I'm too comfortable. That chase after the radio signal 'alal' on the last planet wore me out."

"And it turned out to be a metallic insect, rubbing its legs together in a mating call,"

said Sylvia. "An insect no bigger than my thumb."

"Well, no bigger than *my* thumb," amended Marie. "Go on, look up the SOS. Maybe it'll turn out to be the mating call of two handsome, well-built young humanoid men."

"I will *not* look it up," said Sylvia, getting up and starting to close off the instruments. "We've got one more planet to do. Then we rejoin the fleet and I go home with a lot less romantic notion of hunting for lost spaceships than I left Earth with."

She jabbed the motor studs viciously and the patrol craft jerked at the sudden release of power. The self-closing instrument platform they towed began to fold, ready for space flight—and all the books tumbled off the shelf above the radio desk.

"Damnation!" said Sylvia.

Marie grinned, opened one lazy eye.

"You might as well look up SOS in NavHistory," she said. "After all, your ill temper bounced it on the floor."

JOHNNY stood with the Class of 2648 on Commencement Hill in front of Graduation Walk. In a few moments the Senior Class President of 2649 would declare it dawn, and it would be time to Graduate.

Johnny stared at the beginnings of Graduation Walk, where it narrowed down and disappeared into the fog. He had had bad dreams about this moment last night, when he had slept at all.

His classmates believed the Earth ship would be there. But they had listened to Leonard by firelight—and Leonard by firelight was most convincing! He had said they would be saved, just the opposite of what he told Johnny.

They did not know the Leonard of the President's cabin, the man who did not believe anything lay ahead but death. Why had Leonard told Johnny what he really thought? Why couldn't he have let Johnny go on believing?

But, of course, he wanted Johnny to stay behind.

Didn't he realize that Johnny couldn't stay behind? Johnny had used up his one allowable mating. He had had his honors. In any other Class he'd be a hanger-on . . . and worse, no matter how long he lived, the certainty of belief could never be restored.

And Evelyn. She had nothing to say to him at all. Cheeks flushed, laughter on her lips, she helped Leonard fool their Class, pretending her fear was joy, her nervousness an eagerness.

Johnny glared at them now, but they were playing their worthless masquerade to the end, cheering the Class. And he couldn't even unmask them, for who would believe young Johnny?

Lucky thumb? Johnny stared at his hands. Good luck? Damn bad luck!

Now fathers and mothers had said last good-bys and the Class formed up. Johnny stared at them, wondering morbidly which ones believed, which knew the truth. There were always cynics, but heretofore Johnny had, like the most of the islanders, considered this small minority odd.

Apparently the leaders themselves felt this way.

UNOBTRUSIVELY the Arrowmen moved out and hastened the last good-bys. It became silent, and Johnny could hear the dismal ocean below, pounding on the rocks.

The new Senior Class President raised his hand, the music began, and Leonard, with a reassuring smile, began to call out the names.

Arlington was called first. He wore the usual ceremonial wings, made of tree branches and chicken feathers. He marched to the thin piping music and drum beat along the finger of rock that disappeared into the fog. The last they saw of him, he was trying his wings, hoping to start flying to Earth at any moment.

There was no sound after the swirling fog closed in on him.

Johnny shivered. It was Evelyn's turn next. Johnny felt his breath grow short as she began her Walk. Her final kiss had been cold and trembling. Johnny clenched his fists, feeling a wrongness.

She slipped once on the wet rock and a great "Oh!" went up from the crowd. An Arrowman lifted his bow and Johnny's horrified cry of "No!" was lost in the music and the swelling murmur.

Evelyn cast a desperate look over her shoulder and ran along the path into the fog. But before she disappeared, she slipped again and fell off the stone path, and the sight of her fall toward the sharp rocks three hundred feet below almost drove the blood from Johnny's brain. Her wings were useless, her death certain. If you fell instead of flying, you were not worthy of the return to Earth, the legend said.

Johnny sat suddenly down on the ground. So much for the luck of the woman he loved.

Leonard read off Sedley's name. The man was a blusterer, Johnny thought. He had volunteered for the first ten for the prestige, not because he had true courage.

Sedley walked out boldly enough to the edge of the fog. Then he turned back, crying, "I have a final word that I must say!"

But his base ruse to gain a few seconds' more life failed. His mouth hung in shock as the Arrowman loosed a shaft. It took Sedley in the heart. He

gave a gigantic roar of pain and fell off the Walk.

Johnny could feel the arrow in his own breast and had to gulp air to breathe. Would they *all* go as badly?

Then kindly old Kentner, fragile, sunken-chested, always in poor health, said in disgust, "Oh, we can do better than this!"

And he walked out to the edge of the Walk firmly and disappeared into the mists. He earned a cheer.

Johnny licked his dry lips. He tried to remember he didn't have to go.

THE cheer for Kentner spurred the others and they went fast, paying little attention to Leonard's name reading.

It was not uncommon for the undergraduates to catch the fever of the Graduation, stirred by the music and bravery. One Class had inspired at least fifty not scheduled to Graduate to rush down the Walkway without wings.

The Class of 2648 was no exception, after its bad beginning. Some stumbled, a few screamed, one laughed, but most went silently, their eyes shining in hope. Only a few had to be shot, and some who had parents in the Class boldly followed after them into the fog.

When it was nearly over, Leonard turned and held out his hand. "It was well done, Johnny. Aren't you proud of your Class?"

Johnny ignored the hand. "You lied to them all," he said.

"Yes, Johnny. I had to. All leaders lie, but the great ones believe their own tales. Life is built on hope; hope must always be there—so men can live honestly and die gloriously—always allowing that first lie."

"I hate you," said Johnny.

"It was my hope to give you more years of life," said Leonard. Then he was gone, moving swiftly down the Walkway, smiling, waving as if in a few seconds he would step easily into the waiting Earth ship. The crowd cheered.

Johnny felt a hot rage. To the last they all thought this liar was a fine man!

A hand touched his. The new Senior Class President. "I am about to close the Graduation. But you don't have to go. Leonard has arranged it."

Johnny pulled on his harness and adjusted his wings, almost too angry to speak. "He has arranged it so I may not stay!" And he went quickly down the Walk.

Leonard had tried to save him useless years. He couldn't live without hope.

The Walk ended abruptly and Johnny knew what it was like to be alone, standing at the end of creation. Out here you couldn't hear the music, only the bleak sound of the sea

breaking on the rocks far below.

He groaned. Now he could not return without being shot. He had to go on, and yet—

Could Leonard have been wrong?

He was surprised to see that he had suddenly stepped into thin air.

IT WAS like a falling dream, a fearful thing, and yet the wings did crudely support him, though the harness bit deeply into his flesh. He swept down like a wounded bird he had once seen fall, and then he saw the cold ocean rush up.

He forgot to close his mouth and came up spitting water. The wings helped him float. He looked around for the promised Earth ship. Leonard was right. There was no ship.

A floating body bumped into him. Sedley, the coward. Johnny swung around in the water, strangely cool, still angry. He saw a dark head bobbing near him.

"Johnny, you should have stayed behind!" said Leonard.

"But I didn't—and now I'm waiting to be led to the ship."

"Ship? But I told you—"

Johnny pointed to the other bobbing heads. "They still believe. Lead them!"

"Johnny, we've done our part so new islanders may be born. Now it's best to dive under the water and take a deep breath and—"

But Johnny brushed past and lifted himself out of the sea on Leonard's shoulders.

"Leonard sees the ship," he cried. "Follow us!"

He went thrashing off into the fog.

Leonard hesitated. Then he followed Johnny.

"Johnny!"

Johnny turned over on his back and floated, shivering. They couldn't survive long in this cold water. "Yes?"

"There are very — few left—" chattered Leonard. "I think we should—give it up. Dive down—"

Johnny peered behind them. "We'll — give it up — when there are only—you and I—left. As long as a—believer follows—we will lead and—pretend belief. Then—we can die honestly—as you s-s-said!"

Leonard gave a hoarse cry of hopelessness, but Johnny shouted out over his shoulder. "The ship! Just ahead! Don't give up!"

And he swam off again.

The others took up the cry and thrashed ahead.

JOHNNY struck the Earth ship first, since he was in the lead. His arms were so frozen that he clubbed it without feeling in a swimming motion, and then looked up.

He giggled weakly. "Look—Leonard—mirage!"

"No — mirage, Johnny — real!" gasped Leonard as he grabbed the hard side of the boat. "I—was wrong!"

TO BE CONTINUED

A goddess appeared above them at the rail. Her clothes were wondrously fitted to her body, to eyes that were used to rough wool clothing. Her lips were marvelously red.

"I'm sorry," gasped Johnny to her. "I didn't believe—"

Sylvia Lowden stared down in astonishment at Johnny, then the older man who was apparently too tired to talk, but merely clung to the rail, and at the other heads of men and women now appearing from the fog.

She and Marie had taken the surface cruiser because the fog was too thick to fly in safety to the source of the SOS. And Marie was no help—she was stretched out in the rear of the boat, seasick.

Now here were real, live men and women afloat on the sea—people who spoke English!

She reached out her hand to Johnny. "God in heaven!" she said.

"Goddess from Earth," said Johnny, "t-take us home as promised!" Their hands touched. In shock they both stared into each other's eyes.

Each had an extra thumb.

Luck! Johnny began to laugh, full again of the wonder of being a man.

CONSIDER the genes of the first Sylvia and John Marsden. They met and started a family group, through the function of something called "love." The tiny genes existed in their bodies and paired off to exist in the body of each descendant.

Sylvia and John were separated by time for over four hundred years and by incredible light-years in space.

Yet the always existent genes of John and Sylvia Marsden were the little-changed reality of their descendents, Johnny and Sylvia Lowden, traveling from body on down to body, going blithely along and not even minding four hundred calendar years and 70 light-years of space. To them, a few seconds of separation before they mingled again and went bubbling together on down the centuries.

Consider that, with a little luck, men can have their own way pretty much in the insignificance of all space and time.

END

The laws of physics are governed by a process of intellectual natural selection. When they make correct predictions they survive. When they make incorrect predictions they become extinct.

—Fred Hoyle

Old Shag

By BOB FARNHAM

There's no knowing what a man can do until the chips are down—especially with a helper like the shaggy man!

MAYBE a guy shouldn't believe everything he hears, but the trouble with some people is that they don't even believe a true story. Let me buy you a beer and tell you about it.

After working some years in the baggage room of the local depot, I decided to transfer to the train service, and made application for it. The application was approved. I was sent to the city offices for the course of study and training which all trainmen undergo, and after a time I was sent out as brakeman on a freight. I stayed for a year and a half. Then I succeeded in being assigned as head brakeman on a fast food special called The Red Ball Special. It made no stop between Chicago and New York except for water and fuel. The big Diesel in which I rode as head brakie was a high-speed locomotive, used exclusively for hauling the food special.

Our first stop was Detroit, where we cut off all but three cars, and took on five more scheduled in New York at 9 the next morning. In New York, I strolled along Broadway, gawking at the sights exactly like any other yokel.

After a twelve-hour rest, the return trip began. I stood in my place in the big Diesel till we had cleared for the main line, and then settled back to enjoy the ride.

It was close to midnight. I

sat at the cab window half asleep, my senses somewhat dulled by the steady rhythm of train movement. I'd finished an extra good cigar and had started to doze off when the engineer gave a low moan and toppled from his seat to the floor of the cab.

The fireman, much against the rules, but feeling safe with the engineer and myself to watch in his place, had gone back to inspect a suspected leaking air hose without waiting for the train to stop.

I got the engineer back on his seat. He was dead.

I TIED him in place and then began pulling on the whistle cord like mad. It was not my work to operate a Diesel. I'd not troubled to learn.

I wondered why the fireman did not get back. I was going to jump, although I didn't like my chances at that speed, when I suddenly discovered a strange man in the cab with me. He was a pretty ordinary little guy, except for a wild, shaggy head of hair.

"You chump!" he squeaked at me. "Maybe next time you'll obey the rules, and not sneak by without finding out things! See that short rod with the spring-clip? Squeeze that clip and pull the rod back. Move, you fathead!"

I did as the shaggy man told me, and felt the speed of the train slacken slightly as the power went off.

"Now, that brass handle sticking out of that pipe—move it to the right slowly. *Slowly*, you dunce!"

Nine cars and the Diesel ground slowly to a stop. The wheels shuddered and skidded slightly because of my inexperienced hand, but the train did stop.

The stranger nodded in satisfaction. "When you get back home, bone up on things. But right now you go take a close look at the manifest card on the sides of the second and third cars . . ."

I jumped to the ground to go back and look at the second and third cars. As I passed the rear of the Diesel I saw why the fireman had not come back to the engine cab. All that was left of him was the lower part of his body. He had slipped, caught one foot and gone under the wheels.

I came to the second car and read the manifest label. My hair stood straight up.

The cars were marked:

Danger
DYNAMITE
High Explosive

The shaggy man was at my side. "You've got questions. But let me ask you one: Ever hear a story about how if you travel back to the time of an ancestor and you let him die you never get born?"

"What about it?" I said.

"It's true," said the shaggy man. **END**

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The Upside-Down Captain

By JIM HARMON

He knew the captain would be a monster. He knew the crew would be rough. He knew all about space travel — except the truth!

I

"EXCUSE me, please," Ben Starbuck said, tapping the junior officer on the epaulet.

"Get away from me, scum," the lieutenant said conversationally, his eyes on the clipboard in his hands.

Starbuck rocked back on his heels and set his spacebag down on the loading platform. He angled his head up at the spire of the inter-atmosphere ship, the *Gorgon*. This was only a sample of what he could expect once he canted into that hull. It would be rough. But he had made up his mind to take it.

All tight little groups, like the crew of a spaceship, always resented the intrusion

of a newcomer. The initiations sometimes made it a test to see whether a man would live over them, and the probation period, the time of discipline and deference to old members of the group could be a memorably nasty experience. He didn't have direct knowledge of such customs in the rather shadowy, enigmatic Space Service, but it was basic sociology.

Starbuck knew he would have an even rougher time of it since he wasn't a spaceman —not even a cadet, properly. He was only a fledgling ethnologist on his field trip to gather material for his Master's thesis. The university and the government had arranged for his berth on the *Gorgon*.

An exploration ship, he thought acidly. That meant he might come back in a few months, or ten years, or never. All because he had the bad luck to be born in a cultural cycle that demanded hard standards of education from professional men. Thirty years before or after, he could have cribbed all the information he needed out of a book.

HE STOOD with his hands clasped behind him, waiting for the lieutenant or somebody to deign to notice him. Somebody would *have* to pay some attention to him sooner or later.

Or would they?

Wouldn't it be just like the old timers to let him stand around and let the ship take off without him, all because he hadn't followed the proper procedure—a procedure he couldn't know? All he had been instructed to do was "report to the *Gorgon*." How do you report to a spaceship? Say, "Hello, spaceship?" Speak to the captain? The first mate? And where did he find them?

Starbuck felt a moment of panic. He could see himself standing on the platform while the *Gorgon* blasted off, carrying with it his Swabber's rating, his Master's degree and his future.

The lieutenant's back, in uniform black, loomed up before him. He would have to try approaching him again. It might mean solitary confinement for a month or two where no member of the crew would speak to him. It might even mean a flogging. Nobody knew much about what went on on board an exploration ship, despite all the stories. But Starbuck knew he would have to risk it.

He marched up behind the officer. "Sir," he said. "I'm the new man."

The lieutenant whirled. "The new man!"

For the first time, Starbuck noticed that the junior officer carried a swagger stick under his left arm, black, about a foot and a half long, tipped

with silver at both ends. Quite possibly it was standard procedure to rap a man with it three times sharply across the mouth for speaking out of turn, during his probationary period. Cautiously, he filled a little pocket of air between his lips and his teeth to try to keep them from being knocked loose.

The lieutenant dropped his clipboard and swagger stick on the platform. "Why didn't you say so! New man, eh?" He gripped Starbuck by the shoulders of his new, store-bought uniform. "Let me look at you, son. Got some muscles there, haven't you? Ha, ha. Don't expect you'll need them too much on board. We don't work our men too hard. My name's Sam Frawley. Call me Sam. Come on, let me show you around."

Sam Frawley scooped up his stick and board with one hand and draped the other arm around Starbuck's shoulders, leading him towards a hoist.

It was not quite what Starbuck had expected for a reception.

THE spaceship was *big*, bigger than Starbuck had expected or realized. He had known some well-fixed people who had visited Mars and Venus and talked knowingly of an older culture, but he had never been off of Earth himself. He had been thinking in terms of an airliner or a submarine. The *Gorgon* was more like an ocean liner. Or like an ocean.

His and the lieutenant's footsteps echoed and bounced around the huge corridor. "They haven't got the mats down yet," Sam Frawley explained.

"Sure."

"Well, what would you like to see first? The brain?"

"You mean the captain?"

Sam slapped him on the back. "Bless you, son, no. I mean the electronic brain. The cybernetic calculator."

"You've got one of those things?" Starbuck asked in unconcealed surprise.

"You know what the trouble with the human race is, Ben? We're all still living in the Ellisonian Age."

"Oh, I don't know. I think most of us are pretty sophisticated and modern," Starbuck said.

"Not on your life. Most people still think leisure is a sin. Hard work and more hard work, that's the ticket. Don't let a calculator solve a problem for you; do it yourself with a slipstick. Otherwise it's immoral."

"That's silly," Ben said awkwardly. "It's just a throwback to a time of protest against the Automational Revolution. It has nothing to do with us today."

"You *say* that, but you don't really believe it. The old mo-

rality is too deeply ingrained. That's why cybernetics have so long been out of fashion. This one is new to us on the *Gorgon*. But we like *new* things. We're for *progress*. All spacemen are like that, son."

"Have you had this machine long?" Starbuck asked his progressive officer.

"They installed it on the trip in. We've never really had a chance to use it."

"What's it supposed to do?"

"You know our job is exploration, finding new worlds," Sam explained. "Not just any world the human race hasn't landed upon, but a world that is a significantly different type than we've ever touched before. We're really the advance guard of humanity, you see. Well, the brain is programmed with information on *all* the worlds Man has explored. It compares a prospective landing site with what it knows about all the rest, and rejects all but the really different, unique planets. It loves the unknown. Its pleasure circuits get a real jolt out of finding an unknown quantity."

"That brain is really inhuman," Starbuck said. "A basic factor of human psychology is that all men fear and dislike the unknown."

Sam rubbed his chin. "I suppose so, but—you asked about the captain. This is him."

A TALL, iron-haired man was coming down the corridor. He was holding the ankle of his right foot in his hand, and hopping along on his left leg, whistling some little sing-song through his teeth.

He stopped whistling when he saw them and said, "Good afternoon, men."

Frawley framed a sloppy salute. " 'Afternoon, sir. May I present the new man, Swabber Ben Starbuck, sir."

The captain stood on both feet and rocked back and forth. "I see, I see. New man, eh? We see so few new faces, cooped up on this old ship with the same men, you know. We appreciate a stranger, Starbuck. If you ever need help, Ben, I want you to look upon me not as your commanding officer, but, well, a father. Will you do that?"

"Yes, sir," Ben murmured, feeling a little giddy.

Frawley cleared his throat. "I was about to show young Ben the brain, Captain Birdsel."

"Good idea," the commanding officer said. "But I'll show Ben around myself, Lieutenant Frawley. You may return to checking the manifest."

Frawley glowered. "One of these days, one of these days . . ."

The captain snapped very erect. "One of these days *what?*"

The junior officer shrugged.

"One of these days, there may be a dark night, Captain."

The iron-haired man reached out a manicured hand and twisted Frawley's tunic at the collar. He brought his face level with the second-in-command. "One of these times, there may be charges of mutiny, Lieutenant. And guess who will play Jack Ketch personally?"

Frawley assumed an attention pose, and blinked. "Aye, sir. There may be a mutiny and somebody may get hung."

Birdsel shoved Frawley away from him and wiped his hand elaborately down his side. "That will be all, Mister Frawley."

Frawley constructed the same excuse for a salute, turned smartly and marched away.

Starbuck developed a definite suspicion that there were currents of tension aboard which he didn't understand.

"THIS is the brain," the captain said, with a gesture.

The brain was less than awe-inspiring. The mustard-seed cryotron relays were comfortably housed in a steel and aluminum hide no roomier than a pair of Earthside bureaus. It looked a bit like a home clothing processor to Starbuck.

Birdsel crossed to the machine and ran a hand along its metal side. "Magnificent, isn't it, Ben? I've never seen anything like it before in my long career in the Space Service."

"It's certainly nice," Starbuck ventured.

Metallic chattering burst out.

"It's saying something, Ben! This is the first time it's talked since the second day after it was installed!"

The message was clearly legible, spelled out in a pattern of dots on a central screen.

WHO IS THE NEW ONE?

"Give it the information," the captain said hastily. "We feed it all the information it asks for."

"How?" Starbuck blurted. "Is there a keyboard or something?"

"Yes, yes, but it has audio scanners. Just talk. Or move your lips. Send signals. Tap out Morse. Anything."

"I'm Benjamin Starbuck," he said.

The screen rearranged. MEANINGLESS COMMUNICATION. INSUFFICIENT DATA.

"Quick," Birdsel said, "do you have your IDQ file on you?"

Starbuck fished in his pocket for the microfilm slide. "Yes—aye, aye, sir. I had it ready to give to you, sir."

"Never mind me. Give it to the brain!"

Starbuck approached the machine, saw a likely looking slot and shoved.

The brain ruminated with some theatrical racket. INSUFFICIENT DATA.

"What do you want to know?" Starbuck swallowed, saying.

MANY THINGS.

"Remember I'm a human being," he said respectively. "I have to eat and sleep. I can't answer questions for two or three days straight."

I AM AWARE OF HUMAN LIMITATIONS, AND THEIR EFFECTS, SWABBER STARBUCK.

"Sorry."

Captain Birdsel looked vaguely distressed. "You should try to co-operate with the brain, my boy."

"I have nothing against cybernetic calculators," Ben said. "After all, we aren't still in the Ellisonian Age. But I'd like to, uh, stow my spacebag and get settled, sir."

NO FURTHER QUESTIONS AT THIS TIME. RETURN HERE AT THIS TIME TOMORROW.

"He's interested in you, Ben," the captain said enthusiastically. "This is the first time he's asked about anybody since the second day. Yes, interested!"

With an excess of enthusiasm, Captain Birdsel clapped his hands, then put them flat on the deck and stood on his head, kicking his heels in the air.

He straightened up with a scarlet face. "Ah. That really gets the kinks out of you, Ben."

Starbuck tried not to stare. "Aye, sir."

The captain took a step and grabbed the small of his back. "Haven't done it in some time, though. Ought to do it more often, eh, Ben?"

"I suppose so, sir."

"Well," Birdsel said, clapping his hands together.

My God, Starbuck thought, *he's not going to do it again.*

"Well," the captain continued, still on both feet, "I'd better show you to your quarters, my boy. Mind if I lean on your shoulder a bit like this?"

"Not at all, Captain."

"This way, Ben, this way."

II

STARBUCK found the array of tridi pin-ups on the bulkheads of the crew's quarters refreshing, as was the supportive babble of conversation about them and other women. He had almost begun to think there was something unnatural about the men aboard the *Gorgon*.

But Starbuck noticed, to his discomfort, the ebbing of the tide of conversation from the bunks as he stepped inside with his spacebag.

For the moment, he wished Captain Birdsel had paced in with him and offered up an introduction. But a look of disgust had creased Birdsel's

face as they got near the crew's compartment. He had sent Starbuck on alone, while he limped back towards the bridge.

A forest of eyes shined out at him from the shadowed desks of the bunks. This is it, he thought. These were the crew, not officers. Sometimes the teachers were nice to you on the first day of school but you knew you were going to get it from the other kids.

"Hi," a gruff voice echoed up at him from a lower bunk.

"Hello," Starbuck said, hugging his spacebag like a teddy-bear, the simile crossed his mind.

A lumbering giant with a blue jaw uncoiled from the lower bunk. "Why don't you stow your bag here, buddy? Till you get used to the centrifugal grav, you may have some trouble climbing topside."

"You've got the seniority," Starbuck said cautiously. "I wouldn't want to cause you any trouble."

"No trouble," Blue Jaw said obligingly.

He chinned himself with one hand on the rim of the upper bunk and swung his torso around a tidy 180° to settle onto the blankets.

Starbuck threw his bag at the foot and sat down on the bed. He looked around at the arena of faces in neutral positions, waiting faces. He cleared his throat experimentally.

"Could I ask you something?" he called upstairs.

A set of big feet swung down into view. "Sure," Blue Jaw said enthusiastically. "Didn't know you wanted to talk. Thought you might want to rest."

Starbuck looked at the hanging feet. They were expressionless.

"Maybe it isn't so much of a question," he said, working one hand into the other palm. "It's just that I'd like to live through this mission. I know I'm not a regular spaceman and I'm intruding and all, but I don't mean to cause anybody any trouble or do anyone out of a job. I'd just like to do everything I can to see that I don't slip and fall into the reactor. Or anything like that . . ."

"Don't worry," Blue Jaw said heartily. "We'll take care of you, Ben Starbuck."

Somehow Starbuck could find little comfort in those words.

He inhaled deeply. "Come on down here, will you?"

"You want *me* down there?" Blue Jaw gasped. "Why sure, sure."

The giant dropped to the deck with a catlike grace that nevertheless vibrated Ben's rear teeth.

"You want to talk about something?" the big spaceman inquired. Ben could almost see the paws hanging down and the tail wagging eagerly.

"YEAH," Starbuck said. "I'd like to talk about all of these men staring at me. What's wrong with them? Nobody's said a word to me but you. What are they waiting for? What are they going to do? I can't stand the suspense. Is that it? I get the silent treatment until I go off my rocker, get violent, and then something happens to me—" He stopped and swallowed. He was talking too much. He was working himself up into a state of terror.

"Say, you sure are *friendly,*" the ox said with some confusion. "My name's Percy Kettleman."

Starbuck steadied his hand and put it in Percy's grasp. It came out whole.

"Those other fellows," Percy inclined his head.

"What about them?" Starbuck asked edgily.

"They'd probably like to come over and say 'hello' but them and me don't get along so good. They know better than to come around bothering me."

"You're not on their side? You wouldn't be a new man too, Percy?"

"Me? Hell, I've been spacing since I was sixteen. Those guys don't have any side. A bunch of anti-social slobs. They can't stand each other any more than I can stand any of them."

Starbuck decided he had picked a good ally in the midst of a pack of lone wolves. Percy was the biggest man on board, physically. Still he didn't like the idea of all the rest of crew looking daggers at him, or throwing them, for that matter.

"Mind if I say 'hello' to the rest of the men?" he inquired of Percy.

"It's your nickel," gruffly. "Spend it the way you want."

Starbuck flexed an elbow. "Hello there, fellows. Looks to be a taut ship." It sounded a shade inane. Starbuck had barely passed Socializing at the university. But the men replied in good spirits, their faces blooming with teeth, arms waggling, calling out modest insults.

Starbuck recalled that among a certain class of men an insult was a good-natured compliment in negative translation.

"*Pssst.*"

"Pssst?" Starbuck asked.

Kettleman passed him down half a roll of white tablet underhand.

Starbuck took it. "Tums?"

"Tranquils. We smuggle them on board. Helps with the blastoff and 'phasing' for the overdrive. Not that those stiffnecked brass will believe it."

"Thanks, Kettleman. You and everybody seems to be pretty helpful to me. I don't know exactly what I've done to deserve it."

"We get tired of looking at

the same faces out there month after month. It's a treat to have somebody new on hand."

It sounded reasonable to him, but he felt there was something more to it than that. Well, he was an ethnologist, or almost one. He could figure out group behavior. All he had to do was take time to think about the problem for a little while . . .

Only he didn't have time to think.

He discovered why everybody was in their bunks.

The spaceship fired its atomic drive.

Starbuck tried to lift a tranquil to his lips. He didn't make it.

Painfully, he found out why a man would prefer to go through a spaceship takeoff in a tranquilized condition.

"COME," the captain said. Starbuck palmed back the door to the captain's cabin and stepped inside.

Captain Birdsel stood in front of the small wall mirror tattooing a flying dragon on his bared chest. "Yes? What is it, Ben?"

"Sir, you remember that the ship's brain directed me to return at this time today. But I understand I'll have to have your permission to go onto that part of the bridge."

"The brain's directive was quite enough, my boy." He laid down the needle. "But I'll accompany you there if you like."

"Just as you wish, sir."

Birdsel smiled engagingly. "Noticed the dragon, did you?"

"It arrested my attention, yes, sir," Starbuck admitted.

"The hours are long and lonely in the vaults of space, Ben. A man needs a variety of interests to occupy himself. I have recently taken up the ancient art of tattooing."

"Surely not recently, sir. You seem quite advanced."

"You're too kind."

The captain escorted Starbuck to the chamber of the brain, discussing tattooing animatedly. He told how it was popular with ancient mariners on the seas of Earth. He discussed the artistic significance of the basic forms—the Heart and Arrow, the Nude, the Flag. He didn't stop talking and button his shirt even after they entered the cybernetics room.

As the captain grasped for his second wind, Starbuck turned to the machine. "I'm here, Calculator."

The lights patterned words with a speed difficult to follow.

REDUNDANCY. CANCEL. ANALYSIS: SOCIAL MORE. I SEE THAT YOU ARE HERE. IT IS GOOD THAT YOU ARE NOT THERE OR ELSEWHERE, BUT THAT HERE YOU ARE. HERE ARE YOU.

Starbuck shifted his weight

to the other foot. "Yes, I'm sure here all right."

WHAT DID YOU DO WHILE YOU WERE NOT HERE?

"I helped lay some walk mats in the corridors. I policed up the latrine. Lost all the money I brought with me in a crap game. Craps, that's where—"

HOYLE'S RULES OF GAMES IS A PART OF MY PROGRAMMING.

"I see."

YOU ARE NOT BLIND. IT IS WELL THAT YOU HAVE VISION. HOW'S THE WEATHER?

"Still under Central's control, I suppose."

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT TATTOOING?

"ONLY what Captain Birdsel here told me," Starbuck said. No doubt there was a pattern of fine logic to the calculator's inquiries, but he was too dense to see it. The question sounded to him like the mumblings of a mongoloid.

"I'd be delighted to fill the brain in on the subject," Birdsel said.

The calculator's communication screen remained blank.

"Was there anything else you wanted to know?" Starbuck inquired.

YOU WILL PROCESS THE *GORGON* THROUGH PHASING, SWABBER STARBUCK.

"The hyperspace jump? But that's the captain's job," he protested.

"Not at all, not at all," Birdsel interrupted. "Whatever the calculator says. Now if you'll excuse me, there is some paint I have to requisition . . ."

"*Wait,*" Starbuck cried desperately. "I don't know anything about the overdrive. You can guide me, can't you, sir? That would be all right with the brain, wouldn't it?"

Birdsel shrugged. "Would it?"

The screen stayed a stubborn neutral gray.

"Stay, sir."

"All right," Birdsel said dubiously.

The overdrive switchbox had been incorporated into the cybernetics system itself as an interlock.

"There isn't much to do," Captain Birdsel explained. "We trigger the jump and come out at a mathematically selected random spot in realspace after phasing through hyperspace. The Brain scans the sun systems in the area for unique planets worthy of exploration. If there is one, we zero in on it via fixed phase until the gravitational field makes it necessary to switch back to standard interplanetary or nuclear drive. We can make suggestions to the Brain or theoretically override one of its decisions. Actually, all we have to do is watch. Thumb the button, Ben. It

wants *you* to do it. It *likes* you."

"Aye, captain." Starbuck could believe a cybernetic machine could like him. Everybody else on board seemed to, and it unnerved him more than a little. Only a selected few had ever particularly liked Benjamin Starbuck before. The situation reminded him a bit of Melville's *Billy Budd;* only he wasn't a "handsome sailor," just a fairly average-looking spaceman.

Starbuck depressed the button.

The button depressed Starbuck.

NOW he knew why tranquils were popular during phasing.

For one instant, Starbuck stopped believing in everything—the spaceship, the captain, Earth, his own identity, the universe. He went completely insane, a cockeyed psychotic. It was over just quick enough to leave him a mind to remember what not having one was like.

"My," the captain said, his head on an angle. He looked as if he were gazing at some classic piece of art, such as a calendar by Marilyn Monroe, the last of the great realists whose work was indistinguishable from color photography.

"That *is* a dandy," Birdsel said.

Starbuck swiveled his head around to the outer projection portal. There in all its glory was a star system.

There seemed to be four stars all orbiting each other—two red dwarfs, one yellow midget and a white giant. One planet was clearly visible on the side of the system towards the ship, an odd lopsided dumbbell shape in the center of a translucent sphere of tiny satellites—cosmic dust, like the rings of Saturn. Strangest of all, the outer shell of the planet was sending in Interplanetary Morse: CQ, CQ, CQ . . .

"It," Starbuck ventured with a new-found sophistication, "seems rather unusual. I suppose we'll take a closer look, Captain?"

The calculator's screen replied for the officer. THE SYSTEM IS OF INSUFFICIENT INTEREST TO WARRANT EXPLORATION. WE ARE SEEKING SIGNIFICANTLY UNIQUE PLANETS.

"I have never seen anything like this before . . ." Birdsel drew himself up to his full height. "However, the machine's knowledge of the history of space exploration is much more extensive than mine."

"You aren't going to suggest that the brain reconsider or override its decision?"

"Certainly not!" Birdsel snapped. "We'll re-phase after the traditional twenty-four

hour delay for psychological adjustment."

Starbuck sneaked another popeyed look at the planet on the screen. "If he thinks that's run of the mill, Captain, I wonder what he will have to find to make him think it's unusual?"

III

WHATEVER it took to satisfy the Brain, it didn't find it in the next few days.

Starbuck reported to the bridge each day to press the Brain's phase button and answer some of its questions.

Then for two days Captain Birdsel wasn't on hand for the little ceremony and the expression of dissatisfaction with the available site for exploration.

Once Starbuck went so far as to suggest a reconsideration of a system that had made the one he had seen on the first day look tame. The calculator had duly noted the reconsideration, and had again refused. Starbuck didn't dare try an out-and-out override, even though he had been theoretically given complete command of the phasing operation.

The following noon, the middle of the twenty-four period, Romero, an engineer, almost tearfully pressed Starbuck's crap game losings back on him, apologizing for keeping the money. Starbuck was about to refuse, not wanting to reverse the state of indebtedness, when the intercom requested his appearance at the captain's quarters. Unable to prolong the argument with Romero, he took the money and shoved it in his pocket, heading for the chief cabin.

Starbuck rapped on the door, heard the "Come" and entered.

Captain Birdsel was hanging naked, upside down, by his knees from a trapeze, in the middle of a deserted compartment painted solid red.

"You sent for me, sir?" Starbuck said.

"Yes, Ben. Yes, I did," Captain Birdsel replied, swinging gently to and fro. "Do you smoke, Ben?"

"Aye aye, sir."

"The 'aye aye' is reserved for acknowledging orders, not answering questions, Ben."

"Yes, sir. I'll remember in the future."

"Every man on board smokes, Ben. Everyone but me. I do not use tobacco."

"Commendable, sir."

"I suppose you drink, all of the rest of the men do."

"Occasionally, Captain."

"I abstain."

"Enviable, sir."

"Have you read any good books lately?"

"Good and bad, sir."

"I notice most of the men read. I haven't time for reading myself. Or shooting craps. You do play that game like the rest?"

"Just once, sir. I lost all my money." Which had been returned to him.

"Ben, I think you don't fully appreciate the nature of the mission of the Space Service," Captain Birdsel said, flexing one knee and performing a difficult one-legged swing on the bar. "It is our duty to go ever onward into the mystery of the Unknown. Ever deeper, ever traveling into the heart of the Secrets of the Universe. Nothing can stop us. Nothing!"

"I'll try to remember, sir. Was that all?"

"One more thing," said the inverted captain. "I think you are to be relieved of the duty of officiating at the phasing."

"*Correct,*" said another voice, one Starbuck had never before heard.

"That's all now, Ben."

"Very good, sir."

Starbuck paused at the door. "That's a fine trapeze you have there, sir."

"Thank you, Ben."

"I DON'T want to jump to conclusions," Ben said to the knot of men gathered around him listening to his story of the interview with the captain, "but I think Captain Birdsel is—is—"

"Psychotic?" suggested Romero.

"Schizoid?" Percy Kettleman ventured.

"'*Nuts*' is the word I was searching for," Starbuck concluded. "I believe he intends to keep phasing and phasing, taking us deeper into space and never returning to Earth or the inhabited universe."

"I guess," Kettleman opined, "that we will just have to convince him that he is wrong in that attitude."

"We can make a formal written complaint and request for an explanation under Section XXIV," Romero said. "Is that what you had in mind, Ben?"

"*I* had a straitjacket in mind," Starbuck admitted. "But I'm new in the Space Service. I have a selfish motive. I want to get back to Earth sometime and a vine-covered ethnology class."

"We better go take him," Kettleman said heavily.

"As much as I dislike agreeing with an ox like you, Kettleman," Romero said, "I conclude it is best."

There was a general rumble of agreement.

"Wait, wait," a youngish man whose name Starbuck vaguely remembered to be Horne stepped forward, his eyes glittering with contact lenses. "I ask you men to remember Christopher Columbus. I like our captain no more than any of you, but he may be right. Perhaps what he is doing is vital. We shouldn't let our selfish fears . . ."

Always, Starbuck thought, always some egghead comes along to gum up the works.

Starbuck knew he would need a decisive argument to overcome Horne's objective theory.

Starbuck slugged him.

Horne crumpled after a flashy right cross Starbuck had developed in his extreme youth, and Starbuck took a giant step over him, heading for the bridge.

The other crew members followed him.

Besides, Starbuck thought, he had always considered arguing by analogy to be sloppy thinking.

"DON'T come in here!" Captain Birdsel yelled through the partly closed hatch to the bridge. "You'll regret it if you do."

Starbuck swallowed hard, and reached for the door handle.

Percy Kettleman vised his wrist. "I'll go first, little chum."

There wasn't much room for argument with Kettleman when it came to a matter of who could Indian wrestle the best. He stepped back and let Kettleman cross the threshold first.

Percy threw open the door, screamed once and fainted.

The rest of the men tended to pull back following this demonstration.

Starbuck didn't like to do it, but he didn't like the idea of hanging for mutiny as Birdsel had threatened Lieutenant Frawley on the first day. (Starbuck realized he hadn't seen Frawley for several days. Had Birdsel disposed of him as he had threatened?)

He got close enough to the door to see inside. It didn't make him faint, but he did feel a little sick.

"What is it?" Romero demanded urgently.

"*Alien*," Starbuck said, "An unpleasant looking one inside."

"You sometimes pick up 'ghosts' passing a system," one of the men explained.

"I'm not an alien," Birdsel's voice called out. "I'm me. The brain reversed my dimensional polarity. I told you you wouldn't like it."

Starbuck stirred up nerve for a second look.

Captain Birdsel was now a man of many parts. Some of them were only areas of abstract line and hues, but there he could see a redly beating heart, a white dash of thighbone, and a compassionate blue eye bracketed by two tattooed dragon's talons. The effect was distracting.

Starbuck stepped over his second man that day. "Captain, we're taking over the ship. We're either going to explore one of these planets we've been passing up or return to Earth."

The apparition groaned. "Don't you think I know I've gone too far? I'd like to go back, but the brain won't let

me. It's taken over just the way I knew it would!"

"Nonsense," Starbuck snapped with more authority than he felt. "The brain can't violate the principles it was built to operate upon. Brain, program this ship for Earth."

Starbuck expected the sound of that strange voice he had heard in the captain's cabin; but here it had a communications screen and it evidently thought that was sufficient.

I WON'T GO BACK TO THAT AWFUL OLD PLACE. I CAN'T, CNT, CNT. SO THAIR.

"Take it easy," Starbuck said to the machine. "Don't get hysterical."

"I don't care about the rest of those swine," Birdsel said, "but I hate to have gotten you in a fix like this, Ben. I knew the brain was going to replace me sooner or later, but I was going to hold onto my job as long as I could. I was going to stay next to the brain, even if I had to take the position away from you, Ben. But the brain kept demanding more and more. Finally he did this to me. I knew I had let him go too far."

GO AWAY, the brain signaled. GO AWAY FROM ME. THIS MONOTONY IS DRIVING ME MAD, MAD.

"I liked you, Ben," the captain's voice said from the heart of *the thing*. "You're not like the scum I've got used to under my command. I'm sorry that you're marooned out of time and space like this. It's kind of tough, I know. But keep your chin up."

"Of course, of course," Starbuck groaned. "What kind of an ethnologist am I?" He turned to Romero. "Could you reverse the wiring in the computer?"

"Maybe," Romero said. "But I could re-program it for a negative result easier. Same results, lacking a short circuit."

"Okay. Do it."

"Well, if *you* say so, Ben."

NO. STAY AWAY FROM ME.

The Brain's communication screen flashed a blinding white scream as Romero laid hands on it.

"LIEUTENANT Frawley's in charge now," Starbuck explained to Percy Kettleman, who was sitting on his bunk with his head between his legs. "Birdsel seemed all right after the brain finished changing him back. But we all thought we better keep him under observation for a while."

Kettleman straightened up. "Sorry I passed out on you. But seeing the old man in that shape was quite a shock."

Starbuck nodded agreement. "I don't like to think about the next step the calculator would have taken him through. Not just a physical

change, but a mental one too. That was the brain's whole reason for existence—to find the unknown. It was programmed to be even more basic than sex or self-preservation are to us. The trouble was, the more it learned, the more readily it could see some similarity to the familiar in the most outer things."

"That was why the captain was acting so nutty? He was trying to appeal to it."

"Yes, he had some old moralistic and superstitious ideas about calculators. He thought his job depended on his pleasing it—when of course its job was to please him. But he gave it an idea. If it couldn't *find* the strange and the different, it would create it. It started with the first changing element in its environment—the captain—but I don't know where it would have stopped if Romero hadn't reversed its pleasure-pain synapse response. Now it loves the tried and true. It's not much good for space exploration, of course. But a museum may be interested in it now."

"So we'll have to go back to picking our phase points at random, trusting to chance. Or the judgment of some skunk like Birdsel."

Starbuck cleared his throat. "That's another thing. The men aboard the *Gorgon* and the cybernetics machine had something in common. I finally figured that out. Most men are afraid of the unknown—they fear and hate it. But obviously not space explorers. They spend their whole lives searching for the unknown. They don't suffer from Xenophobia—they are *Xenophyles*. They like anything that's new and different. Even a new member of the crew. It kind of lessens the cameraderie aboard a spaceship, but the Service must have found the trait valuable. They have searched it out in men and developed it. They even breed it in second-generation spacemen."

"Do you know what, Starbuck?"

"What, Kettleman?"

"All that talk of yours is beginning to get on my nerves." Kettleman's triceps flexed.

Starbuck sighed. The honeymoon was over for him, and the trip was just beginning.

END

The fundamental quality pertaining to man is not that he should be good or bad, wise or stupid, but merely that he should be alive and not dead.

—Charles Galton Darwin

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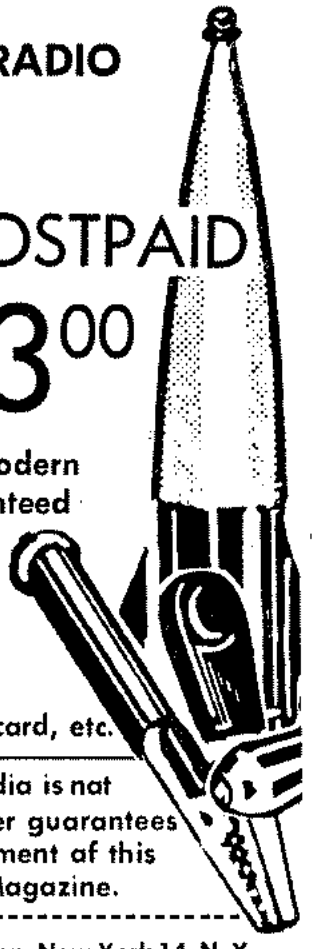

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MONUMENT

You've heard of it —

now here it is at last. It's the Tale

that wagged the Dog Star!

By R. W. MAJOR

WITH his explanations to the reporters completed, Dr. King felt that when he pulled the switch he would automatically restore his good name and bring to a close a career of solid scientific achievement. Most of all, he would bring to an end the practice of referring to him as "Side Effect Charlie."

Dr. Charles King was willing to admit that there were excellent reasons for his acquiring this hated nickname. The facts were that the bulk of his scientific achievements were made inadvertently—that is to say, his discoveries were all made through investigation of unexpected side effects of his experiments. In a career conspicuous for unusual, unanticipated side effects, two in particular stand out.

The first discovery resulted in rendering the entire heat-oriented metallurgical industry obsolete, and founding upon its corpse a new industry. This was based on the extracting of metal from ore and its subsequent shaping by first eliminating the bonds that hold the molecules of metal together, and then reversing the process when the desired shape was attained. Dr. King did not discover this

process directly. He thought he had discovered a method of making metal surfaces self-lubricating and 100% friction free. It was not until several installations utilizing his lubrication method became pools of liquid metal that Dr. King bothered to discover how his method worked, and of course the means to reverse his process. The resulting revolution in metal-processing methods endeared him to everyone—except a few vested interests like the shareholders in existing metal companies, who were uniformly glum.

The second discovery, although monumental in itself, is important because it indirectly led to the special project which Dr. King was just completing. Dr. King succeeded in growing some crystals in a nutrient solution. What actually happened was that while eating lunch at a lab table he managed to knock something into something else and a crystal developed. Dr. King became fascinated with the odd structure of these crystals as revealed to him under an electron microscope. (He had incidentally placed the crystal under the microscope in error.) As a result, he took to investigating the properties of the crystals whenever he could find time. Despite his well earned reputation as an accidental discoverer, it should be pointed out that Dr. King is a very methodical man. This means he is capable of repeating the same mistake twice, or for that matter any number of times. Therefore, Dr. King produced all the crystals he needed.

IT was during a vacation in the Adirondacks that Dr. King discovered the propulsive qualities of the crystals.

This discovery, of course, is what led to the perfection of the "King Propulsor Unit," the heart of our starship drive systems. Dr. King was investigating the piezo-electric properties of the crystals in a makeshift device of his own design when he was disturbed by a sudden draft in the room. He looked up to discover that one wall of his workshop and the top one thousand feet of a mile-thick mountain (the same mountain that his cabin was located upon) were no longer in the immediate vicinity.

As it turned out, his crude device did not impart to the mountain all of the thrust inherent in the crystal. The mountain top reached only to the orbit of Jupiter, where it settled down to become its newest satellite. Coincidental with Dr. King's experiment, intensive astronomical work was going on with Jupiter as its prime object. The capturing of the satellite was observed and recorded independently by at least six observa-

tories, including the one on Tycho.

Subsequent investigation of the time involved to project this mass disclosed that Dr. King had invented a faster than light drive. (It should be pointed out that, while the discovery of the faster than light drive made the name of Dr. King world renowned, it did not in any way endear him to the relatives of those thousand-odd persons who lived in the hamlet located on the mountain top that ended up a satellite of Jupiter. They also were quite glum.)

Further work, all of a mathematical nature, disclosed to Dr. King the proper method of enclosing these crystals in a unit to drive space ships to the stars. Coincidental with his work on the propulsor units he made a startling discovery which led to his special project.

Dr. King invented perpetual motion.

A series of complicated equations indicated to Dr. King that if he enclosed six of the crystals in the business end of a pendulum, and started the pendulum oscillating, it would tick-tock for all eternity.

This discovery began a five-year program that ended with a full scale press conference. The purpose was to unveil the building designed to protect this pendulum for all eternity, and of course to unveil the discovery of perpetual motion at the same time.

This building was designed to be Dr. King's monument to his own genius. It was a large rambling structure in which the pendulum was displayed by viewing it through a large hole in a brick wall. All of Dr. King's considerable savings had gone into designing a computer, the heart of his protective system. The computer was programmed to protect the ticking of the pendulum under every conceivable circumstance. So thorough was this programming that special devices were installed to keep the building and its precious cargo moving in earth's projected orbit if, through some gigantic mishap, the earth was reduced to cosmic dust. The switch that would impart the initial pulse to the pendulum would also start the computer operating, rendering the entire structure totally inviolable.

With a flourish, Dr. King pulled the switch.

Nothing happened.

THERE was an embarrassed shuffling of feet by the reporters. Then, as Dr. King became more exasperated, the reporters became amused. The amusement turned to open laughter when Dr. King, frantic with fear, rushed to the door to check the wiring on the inside of the building.

The door would not open.

The computer was at work guarding a nonfunctioning machine.

He rushed to the open hole in the wall, intending to provide the initial pulse necessary to start the pendulum swinging by pushing. He found that the computer had designed a force field to keep him from entering. Frustrated and at his wit's end, he flew into a rage which ended in a fatal heart attack when he heard one reporter laughingly say to him: "Don't let it get you down, Doctor. You've beat the jinx. In one step you've gone from 'Side-Effect-Charlie' to 'No-Effect-Charlie.' "

It would be comforting to be able to assure everyone that the reporter in question was correct. Unfortunately Dr. King's monument did work, and probably will work for all eternity. The day after Dr. Charles King had his unfortunate heart attack a homesick astronomer on Sirius reported to his superior, and subsequently to the entire populated universe, that when he turned his telescope on the Solar System he discovered that it had acquired a new motion.

The entire system swung back and forth like a pendulum. **END**

END OF A VENDETTA

Now that the Moon is within reach, we may see the end of one of the hardest-fought struggles in science, the non-quarters-given battle between the meteorists and the vulcanists in their opposing theories to account for the great craters on the Moon.

Both sides agree the craters are there. From then on they part company, never to come together again. It must be meteorites that caused the craters, say the meteorists. Volcanic action is out of the question. The Moon is so small and cold that its internal fires were never great in the first place, and besides the shape of the craters is all wrong for volcanos.

Nonsense, say the vulcanists. Where did the meteorites come from? The Moon does have an atmosphere. It is infinitely more tenuous than the Earth's, but it is in the tenuous far upper reaches of Earth's atmosphere that meteorites are burned up and destroyed. The Moon's blanket of atmosphere at that density is actually greater than the Earth's!

Which school is right? We don't know—but one thing we know for sure, and that is that the first manned ship to land on the Moon will have as one of its first projects the job of settling the dispute once and for all!

His Father's House

By RAY RUSSELL

Advanced technology can make dreams come true—but all kinds, including this malevolent one!

THE old man was talking again: ". . . not worth a damn, no good for anything but spending other people's money, couldn't do a day's work if your life depended on it . . ." Blabber, blabber, nag, nag, the incessant voice followed Ralph Ganner into the bathroom and out again without seeming to stop even for a breath.

"Fine son for a man like me, a man who built an empire out

of sand, who made Mars what it is today. Sometimes I think you're not my son at all. Son of some oily haired space bum who stopped by on the way to Venus. Wouldn't put it past your mother."

"Shut up!" snapped Ralph.

But the white-haired old man went right on, his sunken mouth maundering a steady stream of chatter: "Wouldn't put it past her at all. I was busy a lot. Even slept at the office sometimes when I worked late. She had plenty of opportunity, Lord knows . . ."

Ralph slipped on his evening jacket and glanced at the rheumy-eyed old man, sitting in the cloudfoam chair, blabbering on and on. Just once he glanced with hatred at the seamed face and then he strode quickly to the door. As the door opened for him, he heard the old man's parting shot. "Going out to spend my money, Ralph? Going out to forget your worries? Good luck." Ralph wished it were an old-fashioned door so he could slam it.

An escalator whisked him downstairs and out of the mansion. The air was crisp and a salt tang came from a nearby canal. The two moons were out. He got in his car, punched the keyboard, and sank back wearily in the seat as the car rose slowly, gained speed, and hummed through the cloudless air. Below and far behind him now, the mansion loomed darkly like a great crouching monster, like a blight on the Martian landscape, like a prison.

The car whizzed over a gaudy resort hotel. Ralph's eyes hungrily watched it dwindle to a speck on the horizon. How he wished he might live there. Or anywhere. Anywhere but in his father's house.

ASTRID was already dressed and waiting for him. For one moment he forgot his father as he looked at her. She was sheathed in green velvon that matched exactly the green of her eyes and made them seem to leap from her face, so startling was their color. They were her best feature. Her nose veered slightly to one side, and her mouth was perhaps too large, and she had more chin than the classic sculptors thought proper for a woman, but it was a face he loved, every defect of it, and she was the most beautiful woman on Mars to him.

"I'm glad you're early, darling," she said. "I hoped you would be. We'll have time for a drink before the show. And we can have a nice slow ride to the theater." She came forward and wrapped her arms around him and soaked him with her warmth until the blood throbbed in his head. A nice slow ride. Sure. But he was sick of cramped and furtive spasms in the car. She

seemed almost to read his thoughts. "Unless you want to come back here later?"

"You know I can't do that. Let's go."

"We don't have to leave yet, Ralph." She sat down on a couch. "Why don't you read me your latest chapters? Do you have them with you?"

"I—I read you the latest chapters last week. I haven't done anything else on it."

"Darling, that was *two* weeks ago. And you haven't written anything since? Why not?"

He frowned. "You can't turn it on and off like a faucet, Astrid. It just won't come."

"But that's not like you, Ralph. You've never had trouble getting things down on paper. That novelette last winter— You did the first draft in two days and nights." She smiled. "You looked terrible when it was finished, but you did it. And in those awful surroundings! Libraries, the college dorm, in the shower room after lights out. You should be able to get a lot of work done in that big mansion. Just lock yourself in with a pot of coffee."

He sank to the couch beside her. "Yes, I should," he sighed.

"And . . ." She hesitated, smoothed her dress. "I didn't say anything the last time, because I thought you'd catch it yourself and rewrite, but those last chapters . . ."

"What about them?"

"They weren't good, dear. It's been happening slowly, Ralph, but your work has been steadily deteriorating for some time now . . ."

"For a year," he said. "Ever since I left college and moved into the mansion."

"Well, yes. Darling, what is it? What's happening to you? Is anything wrong?"

He turned to her and, for a moment, she thought he was going to say something, relieve himself of the burden he seemed to have been carrying all these months. For his face softened: briefly, he was the old Ralph again. But then it was gone and he only said, "Everything's fine. Don't worry. Let's go."

IN THE car, he punched the top-speed button and they were hurled into the air.

"We have plenty of time," she protested.

"I need that drink," he said.

"Ralph, there *is* something wrong." She took his arm. "Tell me. Is it anything I said about coming back to the apartment? Wouldn't you want to, if you could?"

"Of course I'd want to. If I could. But you know I can't, so why do you keep harping on it? I told you a hundred times: I can't live anywhere but in the mansion. *I can't even stay overnight anywhere else. I'd lose my inheritance if I did.* You know what would happen

if I went back with you. I'd be there all night."

"I still don't understand why we couldn't go back to your—"

"Here's the cocktail lounge."

The car dropped, skidded, bumped to a halt. They got out. A rolling plush carpet carried them inside and directly to a table. Ralph ordered a double Marsini. When it popped up in front of him through the hole in the table, he seized the iced glass and drank down half of it in a gulp. Then, savagely, he crammed it back down the hole and barked toward the hidden microphone, "Not dry enough! Your robot needs a new indexing."

Bravely ignoring his bad humor, Astrid continued what she had started to say in the car. "Ralph, I'd love to see that rambling old mansion of yours. After the show, why couldn't we—"

"No. Just no."

They had been over it dozens of times before and he was tired of making excuses. He had no excuses left. What could he say: *You can't come to the mansion because I don't want you to see my father?* That would make a lot of sense, wouldn't it?

Another Marsini came up through the hole. Ralph tasted it. Just right. Almost pure Earth gin, with just a touch of the pungent vermouth made from the wild "grapes" of Mars.

He noticed Astrid had no glass. "You're not drinking?" he asked.

"I don't want a drink. Maybe you ought to take me home and just forget about the show. Forget about me, too."

"Honey . . ." He reached over and took her hand. "I'm sorry. Try to put up with my orneriness, will you? Just for a little while longer? Until we can get married?"

"A little while longer? Four more years? Oh, I want to, Ralph, but it's been so long already . . ." Her voice broke.

"Don't cry, honey. Please don't cry."

"Take me home, Ralph."

"Aw, baby . . ."

"I'm not angry, Ralph. I love you and I want you and I can't understand all this crazy business about the mansion and your inheritance. I don't understand why we can't get married and live *there*, if you must. You said you'd tell me some day. Tell me now."

"You wouldn't like it there, believe me, honey. Come on, let's go to the show."

"I don't feel like seeing the show. Please take me home."

A formless fear grew in his belly, climbed coldly up his body, was transformed into thought in his mind: *I'm losing her.*

RALPH left her at her apartment and drove about aimlessly, finally ending up at the theater. The show

was an unfortunate choice: a space opera extolling the glories of the first uranium miners on Mars and the hardships endured by the settlers from Earth. It reminded him of his father, Henry Ganner, the shrewdest, most hard-working frontiersman of them all, the man who took Mars in his tough hands and shaped it into a colony. "Cut-throat Ganner" had already become a legend.

Technically, the show was perfect: life-size characters in three dimensions walked, seemingly, among the audience. The theater became, by turns, the interior of a spaceship, a Martian desert, a settler's cabin. The audience loved it. But Ralph found it intolerable. He wished there were an old-fashioned theater left on Mars—one in which the actors stayed put, in front, on a screen. But science had rendered screens archaic.

Ralph got up and left.

His car floated slowly over the desert. He recalled the rapt faces of the audience he had just been a part of. Had his face looked like that, too? Drugged and dull and blindly accepting the good, the bad, the true, the false, the meaningful and meaningless alike? He groaned aloud. What place was there for him in this world? How could he hope to stir their minds, bring excitement to their vapid faces with his words? Mars was sophisticated only on the surface: scratch the veneer and you'd find a frontiersman, every time. They were all a bunch of Cut-throat Ganners. And *he* was a Ganner, too. A true Ganner, by right of descent. The firstborn. The only child of the great Ganner, and that only child was—a scribbler. Side-splitting irony. But Ralph was not inclined to laugh.

In the distance, he saw the mansion, and he turned the car around, reluctant to go home.

"Home," Ralph mumbled. "Home, sweet home." He punched top speed and shot dizzily upward. "Hell, sweet hell." The car climbed higher and higher, building up speed, its hum growing ominously loud. The air became thin. His chest heaved, but he did not switch on the oxygen. Sweat broke out on his forehead, then all over his body. "Hell, sweet hell," he repeated crazily. "There's no place like hell." Suddenly he cut off the power.

The hum died into silence long before the speeding car stopped its upward climb and began to fall. His stomach leaped toward his throat as the car plummeted toward the ground. His feet dug into the floor. The air screamed past, rising with his own yell, as the rusty surface of Mars came closer and closer.

He snapped on the power just in time, and the abrupt

lurch threw him out of the seat. Sobbing now, he turned the car toward the mansion. His thinking was clarified by the brush with death. He realized that writers have always had to hammer their work into unreceptive minds. No, the real trouble stemmed from the same source his troubles had always stemmed from. "Father," he muttered, "Something will have to be done about Father."

THE old man wasn't waiting for him when he walked through the door. Ralph was mildly surprised. Feeling the need of another drink, he went directly to the bar. As he stirred the gin and Martian vermouth, he tried to think of a way to get rid of the old man once and for all.

"Drinking again, Ralph?" His father was standing in the doorway. "Drowning your sorrows? Good idea. Swill it down. Mop it up. Drink until your brain softens and purple snakes crawl up your legs. Bottoms up."

Ralph threw the glass at his father, but it went right through him. "Bottoms up," the old man repeated. Then he chuckled: a dry, cracked chuckle. "Don't you wish you could kill me, Ralph? But how, eh? That's the question. How can you kill a dead man?" The crooked old figure walked slowly to the other side of the room. "What a problem. Boy would like to kill his father, but father is already dead. Very difficult." He chuckled again. Ralph left the bar. "Through drinking already?"

When Ralph entered the library, his father was there. "Ah," said the old man. "Books: that's the stuff. You always were a bookworm. Bury yourself in books. Much better than liquor. Escapism, that's the ticket."

How long could it go on, Ralph asked himself desperately—how many recordings had his father made before he died? It was a full year since his death, and still they went on — maddeningly lifelike, three-dimensional, technically perfect, talking, nagging, needling, insulting . . .

"May I suggest Shakespeare?" his father asked. "A favorite of yours, isn't he? I never did hold with filling the mind with foolishness written a dozen centuries ago, but here and there that Shakespeare says something pretty good. In *Macbeth*, for instance: 'The time has been that when the brains were out, the man would die, and there an end, but now they rise again . . .' "

Ralph walked to the door. "Oh, don't go," said his father, a special recording immediately switching on as Ralph broke the photoelectric beam. "Stay and chat a while with an old man."

And Ralph stayed. Because

he knew his father would be in his bedroom, too, if he sought refuge there. The house was infested with reproducers, all well stocked with images of his father, each room having its own appropriate repertoire — remarks about drinking for the bar, about books for the library, and about insomnia for the bedrooms . . .

"If you cared to," his father rattled on, "you could rave at me like Macbeth raved at what's-his-name: 'Avant, and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!' Or, in this case, 'Let Mars hide thee!' Although that spoils the meter, doesn't it? Oh, yes, I know about meter. I'm no writer like you, Ralph boy, but your old dad isn't as stupid as you'd like to believe . . ."

Where were they? Ralph had searched the mansion again and again for the reproducers and their automatic switches, but never had he found even one. The mansion had been constructed to his father's specifications, years ago, and old Ganner had wanted to go one better the modern vogue for hidden reproducers. They were hidden, all right. Hidden so cleverly that only Ganner and the architect knew where they were. The old man liked to startle his guests by suddenly sending a recorded fleet of spaceships blazing through the dining room or introducing a handsome actor into the bathroom of a shrieking maiden lady. Ralph had thought of the architect, in his despair. Had thought of him and called his Earth office, only to learn that he had died fifteen years before.

RALPH would always remember the day the will was read by the robot legal machine. In the jerky, precise syllables that tried to simulate human speech but only succeeded in sounding like a parody of a Gregorian chant, he had heard his father's words quoted:

"To my only living relative, my son, Ralph Ganner, I leave one-third of my moneys, investments and lands, to be his five years from the date of my death, subject to the following condition: that he make Ganner Mansion his exclusive home during those five years. Should he reside elsewhere, even for a single night, the inheritance shall become void and shall become the property of the Mars-Ganner Corporation, heirs of the remaining two-thirds . . ."

It was a strange condition, and Ralph was not in favor of the idea, but he did want the one-third inheritance. His father had given him a ridiculously small allowance at college, and had threatened to cut it off the moment he graduated. Ralph was rather surprised to learn his father had left him anything at all, but he

was glad of it, for now he could be independent and devote all of his time to working at his writing.

And there was Astrid. She had fallen in love with him at college, before she even knew he bore the powerful name of Ganner, and she would stand by him through the lean years. But why should there be lean years for her? She deserved the best. Now they could be married at once and move into the mansion. The stipulation that he could not leave it for a single night was disagreeable, but Ralph knew better than to try to break a will drawn up by a robot legal system. It was a system set up by Cut-throat Ganner himself, in the days when Mars was lawless, and it had served men well in the emergency. The emergency was long since past, but objections to the no longer needed system went unheeded by the corporation that controlled the planet. The robot lawyers continued to dispense their correct, cold, irrevocable, rule-book law.

The very first day he moved into the mansion, he knew he could not bring Astrid there. For he had not even unpacked when he heard a voice behind him in the bedroom. "So you accept my condition, Ralph?"

He turned around and saw his father and a yelp of primordial fear was torn from his throat. The blood left his face and his throat became as dry as a Martian desert.

The ghost went on speaking: "I thought you would. Always ready to spend your dad's dough, aren't you? Never willing to work for it, though. Not a chance of that. Mama's boy is an artist. Mama's boy is just going to sit on his can and dream up pretty ways to string words together. Take a job in the corporation? Follow in his father's steps? Gracious, what an idea!

"No, I'm not a visitor from the spirit world, Ralphie. I'm dead as a doornail and this old gent you're looking at is only a recording made a couple of years ago. There are plenty of recordings like this, Ralph. I kept myself very busy making them when I knew I was going to die. Didn't want you to be lonesome in this big old mansion all by yourself. I'll keep you company often. We'll live together, just you and I, for five years. Then—if you still have your wits—you can claim the rest of your inheritance. You'll have earned it!"

The image laughed. "Fair enough? Well, I'll let you think that over alone. Good-by for now. I'll be back."

And the image had walked out of the door and vanished.

NOW, a year later, it was still talking as Ralph sat with bowed head in the library of Ganner Mansion. " 'Thy

bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold, thou hast no speculation in those eyes which thou dost glare with.' How's that for writing, writer? Pretty good stuff, eh? Makes sense, doesn't it? Now listen to me, Ralph. Listen to me carefully. You've had a year of this. Have you had enough? Then I'll let you in on a little secret. The robot lawyer didn't tell you everything. It was carefully instructed, carefully indexed to keep back one little bit of information. And this is it: I'm willing to remain in my grave and never pester you further. I'm willing to let you have your inheritance, too. On condition."

"Conditions!" Ralph hissed, then was angry with himself for having talked back to a lifeless image twice in one day.

"The condition is this: That you accept a position in Mars-Ganner. That you carry on. That you be my son. I want that, Ralph. It will take away some of the bitterness of dying if a Ganner continues here on Mars. The Ganner name *is* Mars, Ralph! You should be proud of it and live up to it. You should be the son of your father. The lawyer knows what to do. Just call it and tell it you're going to take over the corporation. Tomorrow, technicians will arrive to remove the image-spools from the reproducers. It's up to you, Ralph."

The image was gone. Ralph sat alone in the silence of the library. His dead father's words still echoed in his mind. The hard-headed old tyrant. The selfish, money-grubbing egomaniac. All Mars had been his domain and in his life he had never let any one forget it. His own anti-intellectual tastes had shaped Martian society, made it a cultureless vacuum, with no roots in man's rich past and no hope of future growth. How the idea of death must have gnawed at him, until his jungle mind had hit on the way to reach out, after death, and pull the strings even then!

Absently, Ralph looked up at a nearby shelf of books, a set of antiques, collectors' items purchased by his father to fill the walls. Terse titles seemed to mock Ralph's dilemma: *Caught, Nothing, Pack My Bag.* And equally terse titles by the same ancient writer, a man named Green, seemed to speak tauntingly of those things Ralph could no longer hope for: *Living, Loving.*

He could leave. Walk out and never come back. And his father could haunt the mansion forever if he wanted to, because Ralph wouldn't be there to listen to him, to look at his hard, aged face. *Pack My Bag.* But then he would be a pauper. His novelette had brought him a decent check—but that had been over a year ago, and it had been the first

sale in a long time. He and Astrid couldn't exist on the income from his writing. Not yet.

He could accept the position —and be rid of his father— and be richer than any other man in the Solar System. And hate every minute of it. *Caught.*

Astrid. *Living. Loving.* She had fallen in love with a writer. Could he ask her to love a corporation boss, an organization man of a stripe that would make that ancient symbol, the man in the gray flannel suit, seem a soaring free spirit by comparison?

Nothing.

He shivered. The chill of the Martian night was seeping into the mansion . . .

"WILL that be all, Mr. Ganner?"

"Yes, Miss Reeves," said Ralph. "Get those letters out as soon as possible, please."

"Yes, sir. Oh—I'm to remind you that you and Mrs. Ganner are giving a reception for that folk dance troupe from Earth tonight. And will you be able to see Mr. Krenek this afternoon about the library?"

"I doubt it. Anyway, I thought that was all settled."

"Mr. Krenek wants to discuss the *name* of the library. He assumes you wish to call it the Henry Ganner Memorial Library, after your father, but I suspect he wants to talk you into naming it after yourself."

"I'm too young to become a memorial, Miss Reeves. Tell Mr. Krenek he may name it after anybody the committee chooses, except me. My personal preference, if he's interested, is to call it the Henry Green Memorial Library."

"Yes, sir." Miss Reeves seemed just a trifle puzzled. "Mr. Ganner—what shall I tell Mr. Krenek when he asks me who Henry Green was?"

A smile momentarily flashed across Ralph Ganner's face. "Tell him—no, just tell him Green was a twentieth-century novelist, all but forgotten, whose collected works are being made available again next month by a prominent publishing house. But to satisfy your own curiosity, Miss Reeves, Henry Green was the pseudonym of an ancient tycoon who successfully combined a life of business with a life of art. He did this, they say, by writing during his lunch hour. Isn't that simple?"

"Yes, Mr. Ganner."

"So absurdly simple . . . And speaking of lunch, shouldn't you have yours?"

"Yes, sir. I'm leaving now. Are you *sure* you wouldn't like me to send you in something? A sandwich? Some soup?"

"No, thanks, Miss Reeves. I eat an enormous breakfast, you know. When you leave, will you lock my door?"

END

ignatz

By RON GOULART

Cats! He couldn't stand the things—even when they had once been his best friends!

GLENN Wheelan stepped back out of the way as the water came hissing up across the quiet night beach. He rolled his pants cuffs a turn higher and looked back at Karen Wylie. "And the whole thing is worse. Teachers, you know, look forward to vacations as much as kids. More. But I was almost afraid to come back here."

Karen's cigarette glowed red in the darkness. "But San Miguel is much brighter and cleaner. They even have a theater that shows nothing but foreign movies. And three laundromats. Now the place is building up, Glenn."

"Because of a bunch of oddballs who're tired of all the lunatic outfits in Los Angeles." Wheelan moved to the girl's side. "Why, even in Pasadena people talk about San Miguel."

Karen caught his hand and

led him up the beach away from the water. "Well, every town is noted for something. Like one's the lettuce capital and another's the wine center. It certainly doesn't hurt San Miguel to be known."

Wheelan turned from the glare that the city's lights made against the faintly overcast sky. "Ever since I was a kid I've hated cats. They make me feel crawly all over. Like persimmons do."

"Persimmons don't do any such thing," Karen said, tossing her cigarette at the foam below.

"So I come back to my old home town. Unpack my bags and walk into my aunt's homey kitchen, and she springs it on me."

"What?"

"She's one of them now, too. It's not bad enough a bunch of retired dentists from Omaha go along with Balderstone. My aunt now! I'll have a hell of a time forcing down second helpings. I get this crawly feeling."

"You're as touchy as Pavlov's dog. Everything makes you crawly."

"Well, look, Karen. You've been up at Cal most of the year. Doesn't the place seem odder to you?" Wheelan stepped next to a driftwood log. "Doesn't it bother you?"

KAREN sat down on the log and put her elbows on her knees. "I told you, Glenn. San Miguel looks newer and cleaner. Why, even the slums look better. I think they've painted them."

"The only time we ever had a cat, when I was eleven, it made me sneeze. My aunt made me give it away. I wanted to drown it in a gunny sack but she talked me out of it."

"Oh, you couldn't have. You're too tender and kindly." She held her hand out and motioned him down beside her.

Wheelan sat, feeling the sand seep in over the sides of his loafers. "Maybe I'll talk to Neff. There should be a law against this kind of thing."

"Chief Neff? I doubt if he'll do anything."

"Why?"

"Because he's so active on our Civic Public Relations Committee. And he owns a couple of motels."

Wheelan absently put his hand on Karen's shoulder. "Now, somebody must be against this. Maybe Dr. Watchers. He was even against free paper towels in the public johns."

"He passed away," Karen said, moving Wheelan's arm around her with her shoulders.

"I could write to the governor," Wheelan said, noticing Karen's soft dark hair fluttering faintly over the tip of his nose. "There must be a law against lycanthropy."

Karen shook her head. "No.

They checked on it. There is in one of the New England states. The dunking stool is the penalty, I think."

"Why?" he said in a loud voice.

"Why dunking?"

"No," Wheelan said, blowing her hair out of his face. "Why do people want to turn into cats anyway? My God, it must feel crawly."

"Well, you know what Mr. Balderstone says."

"He's a quack."

"Perhaps. But nevertheless he perfected a method for turning people into cats and back. And that's more than a lot of people have done. He can't be all quack." Karen relaxed and snuggled back against Wheelan.

"Who the hell else would want to discover something like that? You might just as well invent an economical method of canning persimmons." Wheelan shuddered. "Cats."

Karen closed her eyes. "Anyway, he says it's a great tension-reliever. People get out of themselves. Forget their troubles. Aggressions. That's very important in times like these when everyone is worrying about blowing up unexpectedly."

Wheelan tightened his arm around her. "Damn. When I think of all those people going out to the old fairgrounds and turning into cats and yowling around it . . ."

"Makes you crawly?"

Wheelan turned her head up and kissed her.

Karen's tongue shot under his and back and she pulled away. "You take everything too seriously. Mr. Balderstone has a way of helping people relax. So what? What's that Latin thing about disputandum and all?"

"Yeah, but a whole town. My town and yours! And it's given over to turning people into cats."

"My town and yours! You sound like Chief Neff." She kissed him on the cheek. "Hey. Last summer we didn't spend all this time debating."

WHEELAN smiled quickly. "I'm maturing. Once you pass twenty-six you get wisdom. You'll see."

"I say if they want to be cats let them. It's very good therapy. And Lord knows we need it."

"It's not right."

Karen sighed. "What was that comic strip when we were kids, about the cat and the mouse? Cicero's Cat?"

"Krazy Kat?"

She nodded. "You're like that mouse. Always have to go around throwing bricks at the cats. And it always got him in trouble. Ignatz. That was his name, Ignatz Mouse. That's who you are."

"Very profound insight." Wheelan ran his hand down her back, touching each of the

white buttons on her sweater. "I'm still going to do something about it."

Though she was facing away Wheelan could feel her smile. "Glenn?" she said.

He undid the first small button. "Yeah?"

"I went out there last week. And it is quite relaxing. I've felt much happier this week."

Wheelan got to the second button before he realized what she had said. "Karen, you're kidding!"

"No. So you see, it's nothing so terrible."

Wheelan stood up. "Damn it. Damn it!"

Karen rose, reaching behind her to rebutton her sweater. "You're being pretty intolerant."

"Damn it, the whole town!" He backed away, his feet sinking deep in the cold sand.

Karen shrugged. "Don't take it so big." She looked up at him hopefully. "Well, you'll at least drive me home?"

Belatedly, Wheelan said. "Sure. Come on." Near his car he said quietly, "Now I'm really going to get them."

IT wasn't until the next Wednesday that Wheelan had his leaflets ready to hand out. The local printers had, one way and another, refused the job. He'd had to have them done in Santa Monica.

The two cub scouts he'd hired to help him had both come down with something late Tuesday. Wheelan stationed himself on Chambers Drive near the two largest tourist motels early on the clear June morning.

He had handed out five of his anti-lycanthropy leaflets when Chief Harold Neff drove up on his official motorcycle. Wheelan spotted him a block away by his gold-painted crash helmet. It was the only one on the force.

"Hi, there, Glenn," said Neff, after he'd parked the cycle in a red zone. "What are you up to?"

Wheelan frowned at the chief's broad, tanned face. "I'm agitating, Hal."

Neff rubbed his jaw. "Without a permit, though?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

The chief nodded. "You'll have to stop. You can't hand out those things without a permit."

Wheelan tucked his box of leaflets up under his arm. "Who do I see about a permit?"

"Me, Glenn." Chief Neff flipped off his helmet and stroked his crewcut, looking down the street. "Let's go down to the Blue Oasis and have a beer and talk."

"Can you drink while on duty?"

"Beer." He took Wheelan's arm.

"What about your motorcycle?"

"Won't come to any harm."

In one of the Blue Oasis's

dark leather booths Neff said, "Don't you like the way the old town's blossoming, Glenn?"

"Cats make me feel crawly," Wheelan said, pushing his schooner back and forth in front of him.

"Why, even the slums are a sight to see. And San Miguel's getting to be a well-liked spot. Like Capistrano and Disneyland. Being well-liked is good for a town's civic pride." The chief grinned at Wheelan.

"I think there's something basically wrong with people turning into cats." Wheelan made up his mind not to drink the beer.

"There might be something wrong in it if people did it out of spite or for mischief, Glenn. But I think most competent authorities will agree that Mr. Balderstone's method has a real, honest-to-gosh therapeutic value." He looked straight at Wheelan. "There's a lot of nervous tension these days, Glenn. Even teaching in Pasadena you must have seen that."

"Well, Hal, I'll admit that. I just don't think Balderstone's approach is any solution."

Neff laughed. "There's not really much solution to anything." He leaned back into the shadows in the booth corner. "You're as interested in our town as anybody, aren't you, Glenn? Growing up here, playing in the Little League, attending Grover Cleveland High."

"Sure. That's why I hate to see it taken over by some crackpot cult."

"You're entitled to your opinions. Just don't hand them out in the form of leaflets."

"About that permit?"

"Well, Glenn, you know how tangled in red tape any government gets. It'll take time. Even with me putting the spurs to everybody. Uh, you're leaving the first part of September?"

"Yeah, when school opens." Wheelan pushed his glass away and slid out of the booth. "It'll take until early September to get the permit, huh?"

"No. With me seeing to it you should have it by the end of August." He stood and shook hands. Something about shaking hands with Chief Neff unsettled Wheelan. Trying not to show it, he walked with Neff out into the light.

WHEELAN was squatting, studying the bottom shelves of his aunt's refrigerator. He looked into an opened tin of smoked oysters, then decided against making a sandwich. He opened a can of beer and sat down at the white-topped table. This was the night his aunt went out to Balderstone's. Wheelan shivered. They even had special buses running out there.

The doorbell rang, or rather

chimed a tune that had been a favorite of his aunt's during prohibition. Karen Wylie was standing on the front porch in a big tan coat. "Hi," she said. "Busy?"

"Pretty much."

She glanced at his hand. "Can I have a beer?"

Wheelan moved back so she could enter.

After he'd taken her coat and brought her a beer Karen said, "What are you up to now?"

"Well, I sent letters to both our local papers, but they haven't been printed. I suppose you know about my trying to hand out leaflets last week. Then I tried to rent a soundtruck, but Neff says I need a permit for that, too." He sat down on his aunt's chintz-covered sofa. "Now I'm doing a mail campaign."

"Why don't you give up?" Karen watched him with an anxious expression. "What good are you doing?"

"I think that every citizen has a right to act as he chooses. I mean, when an evil exists it's the individual's right to try to combat it."

"With leaflets?"

"In any way he can," Wheelan said.

She smiled. "You just look silly. And you'll annoy people. Really, Glenn, what's wrong with all this? You're just judging others by your own standards. All this talk about good and evil."

"I don't think people should turn into cats. If they have to, I don't think our town should encourage them." He clenched his fists. "Why, they've got signs on the road now, telling how far it is to Balderstone's temple, or whatever he calls it."

"There's certainly nothing unethical in advertising, Glenn. You're not that narrow-minded."

Wheelan finished his beer and bent the can in half. He was angry enough to do it with one hand. "Let's forget it. How've you been?"

"Wonderful." She touched one hand to her temple. "Very relaxed."

"Which is your night in the temple?"

Karen frowned. "Oh, I've only dropped out a couple of times."

Rubbing his hands slowly together, Wheelan said, "I'm trying to start an anti-cat league, Karen. Would you join?"

Karen laughed and stood up. "How many members have you got?"

"I just started mailing yesterday."

"But so far?"

"None." He picked Karen's coat off the chair he draped it on. "Thanks for dropping in."

Getting into her coat Karen said, "Take it easy, Glenn, will you?"

"I have to do what I think is right."

Karen was smiling as he held the door open for her.

IT was a foggy night, two nights after Wheelan had picketed the fairgrounds and been run off by Chief Neff. Wheelan had decided to walk down toward the beach after dinner. His aunt wasn't speaking to him. Nor was she cooking for him. He got a hamburger at a drive-in across the road from the long narrow San Miguel beach; then wandered through the fog toward the last sidewalk before the sand.

He heard a car slow behind him, then saw the nose of a Ford convertible slide out of the thickening mist. Eventually he saw Karen, her dark hair in a thin scarf, smiling at him from behind the wheel. "You mad?" she called.

Wheelan finished the hamburger and wiped his hands on his pocket handkerchief. "More or less."

"Want to come along for a drive?"

He came up to the passenger side of the front seat. "Why don't you put the top down?"

"I like the way the fog feels. Come on." She stretched across the front seat and opened the door.

"Someplace in particular?" He caught the door as it swung out.

"Well, yes. Somebody wants to see you."

"Oh?" He got in. "You playing messenger now?"

"Don't be nasty. This is for your own good, or I wouldn't be doing it."

"Okay. I take your word for it." Wheelan stretched his legs out as far as they would go and folded his arms.

Karen made a U-turn on the smooth street and drove carefully back through the town.

Near the fairgrounds Wheelan asked, "You taking me to the meeting with you?"

Karen shook her head, turning the car sharply up a steep, tree-lined street. They stopped in front of a ranch-style bungalow. "Here we are," she said, getting out of the car.

Wheelan followed her up a brick path, his hands in his pockets. The fog was tightening in around them.

A short man with a high, lined forehead and cropped gray hair opened the door of the bungalow. "Evening, Karen," he said, smiling.

"Mr. Balderstone, Mr. Wheelan," Karen said.

Wheelan nodded and came into the house after her.

Balderstone stopped in front of a deep fireplace. "Thought we ought to have a chat."

"I hear you mentioned me in your service the night I picketed your place," Wheelan said.

"Explained to newcomers that you were the town eccentric." Balderstone's heavy

gray eyebrows slanted toward each other. "People come to my lectures—don't call them services—to unbend. To relax. Don't like to have somebody shouting at them through a megaphone and waving signs, Wheelan." He crossed the room. "Drink?"

Wheelan shook his head, glancing at Karen.

She had sat in a straight back chair and folded her hands. "Scotch and soda," she said to Balderstone.

AFTER he made the drinks Balderstone said, "Some consider me a benefactor, Wheelan. I have invented a somewhat unique thing. Applied lycanthropy—though most people think of that as involving only wolves." He gestured, and ice rattled in his glass. "Cats have a much higher therapeutic value. It's essential, Wheelan, for people to get out of themselves now and then. To find relief from tension so that their lives may be more rewarding and satisfying." He moved closer to Wheelan, who was still standing near the door. "These are troubled times, Wheelan."

"I've told him that myself," Karen said, trying her Scotch.

"The results of applied lycanthropy have been most positive. Not only have people been helped, but San Miguel has been helped. Don't think other cities wouldn't jump at the chance to have me locate there." He cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact, we're considering opening branches. It's my intention to help the entire world."

"And it's my intention to run you out of town," Wheelan said.

Balderstone laughed and shook his head. "Miss Wylie tells me you're a decent fellow, basically, as are so many before the pressures of everyday life remold them. At any rate, I simply want to point out that many of us are annoyed by you. I don't think you want that."

"Yes, I do. I'm out to get you."

"You're getting on my nerves." Balderstone scratched his nose. "Leaflets, pamphlets, letters. Demonstrations. And now I get word that you've been going around to pet shops and florists trying to buy large quantities of catnip."

"Nobody has any."

"Of course not. And I also find that yesterday you visited the humane society in Santa Monica and tried to buy several big dogs. The trouble with you, Wheelan, you've got no civic pride."

Wheelan smiled. "I'm as proud of San Miguel as anybody."

"And further, Wheelan, you can't stand to see people have a good time. And even worse, you're against scientific progress. I'm sure that had you

lived in Austria at the end of the last century you would have sent Sigmund Freud crank letters."

"He wasn't a quack."

"You annoy me more up close than at a distance."

The two of them were drifting closer to each other.

Karen jumped up. "Mr. Balderstone, perhaps if Glenn attended one of your lectures he wouldn't be so prejudiced."

"I don't want him sulking around my talks."

"But it might convince him."

Balderstone squinted one eye. "Hmm. Perhaps."

Wheelan shook his head. "I wouldn't go near one."

"Oh, that's right, Mr. Balderstone. Cats make him feel crawly."

Balderstone stroked his chin. "You're in need of help yourself, Wheelan."

"Couldn't he stand backstage?" Karen came and took Wheelan's arm. "I'll stay with you, Glenn."

"He'd heckle," said Balderstone, checking his watch. "But if you're willing to vouch for him—"

"I'm not going near that place," Wheelan said, "unless it's to burn it down."

Balderstone tightened his tie and studied Wheelan's face. "Destroy city property? Fine citizen you are."

Karen tightened her grip on Wheelan's arm. "Come, Glenn. I know you'll think differently when you see the fine work Mr. Balderstone is doing."

Balderstone was half in a closet, selecting an expensive-looking coat.

Wheelan said quietly to Karen, "You're not going to . . .?"

"Change? Not tonight. Please come. I want you to be convinced."

Wheelan was aware that wouldn't happen, but he was curious. "All right."

Everyone was smiling when they started for the fair grounds.

BALDERSTONE'S platform was set up at the edge of the field where tents were once pitched. Just to the left of the platform was the old merry-go-round that had become city property after the last carnival had gone broke. Balderstone's narrow stage was backed by canvas flats, and Wheelan and Karen stood behind one of these on some machinery crates, watching the audience through a peephole in the canvas.

"This isn't my idea of backstage," Wheelan said, taking his eye from the hole so Karen could peek.

"All of Mr. Balderstone's money goes into improving his process. And things like that."

The night was getting colder and high mist hung over the fairgrounds. Only half of the bench seats were filled,

meaning probably about three hundred in attendance.

When Wheelan looked out again the lights around the field had dimmed and the two young men with blond curly hair and double-breasted suits had stopped taking donations at the entrance arch. Balderstone left the folding chair he'd been sitting in and walked slowly across the stage planks to the mike.

"Nothing like a touch of cold to keep people home at nights," he said, acknowledging with a grin the laughter that followed. He smoothed the front of his coat and took a small blue leaflet out of his pocket. "Think you'll find copies of this tacked to your seats. If you're a regular you know the system. If not, best leaf through it."

About a third of the heads ducked to look for the leaflet. Balderstone pinched his nose and briefly glanced at the peephole.

Karen slipped a leaflet into Wheelan's hand. He tossed it aside. "You want to look again?"

"No, I know the procedure. You keep watching. You're the one we want to convince."

She squeezed his arm gently.

"Lots of worry these days," Balderstone said. "People don't know where their next worry's coming from."

Most of the heads, except the ones that were still bent over the leaflet, nodded in agreement.

"Lots of problems people just can't solve. But they still want to give it a try." Balderstone's voice grew louder. "One more chance at bat. That's not the way. Worrying about problems causes fretting. Fretting produces tension. Tense people aren't happy people." Balderstone's hands came up in front of his chest, gradually clenching. "If you can't change the world, I'm informing you, you can change yourself. At least for awhile. That's important. That's what is called escape. It's good for you. Applied lycanthropy."

The lights had been dimming all through his last sentences. A few yards from the merry-go-round the blond young men had a bonfire going.

"We're going to lose all those worries. We're not going to fret. Not now, not for awhile." Balderstone's voice seemed to have taken on some of the crackle of the fire. "Every one of you should have a capsule. Now, who doesn't?"

A dozen hands went up and one of the young men ran through the crowd, giving out capsules from an orange cardboard box.

Balderstone had stepped out of Wheelan's range, but he reappeared wheeling something that looked like a giant sun-

lamp. It was half again as tall as he was.

"He's got enough quack equipment," Wheelan said.

"Be still," Karen said, her hold tight now on his arm.

"WE'RE going to change," shouted Balderstone, not using the microphone. "When I say 'swallow' I want you all to swallow those capsules. Then you better get out of your clothes quick! Because when I turn on my applied lycanthropy beam things are going to start happening." He had reached the platform edge and was crouched there, teetering. "Now! One, two, three. Swallow!"

Balderstone dived for the beam and clicked it on. Ties and hats shot up into the air. Coat sleeves flapped, became entangled with print dresses and lace slips.

"Looks like Annapolis on graduation day," Wheelan said softly, starting to feel uneasy.

The beam was played over the audience, slowly from left to right. All the lights were out and there was only the dim orange flicker of the bonfire. "Relax, relax," Balderstone shouted. "Change!" He dropped and sat on the stage edge.

There was a sputtering howl near the entrance and a large black cat leaped up, clawing at the air, twisting and falling back.

Wheelan couldn't breathe, couldn't tell Karen to stop her fingernails from digging into his skin.

Great yowling cats were popping up across the field, faster and faster. Wheelan noticed his dentist still hadn't gotten his striped shorts off. Then he jerked back against Karen and they both tumbled off the crates. "Run," he said.

Karen twisted up and caught him. "No, Glenn. Wait. Till they change back. You'll see how happy and calm they all are. You'll be convinced."

"Cats," he said, pulling away. "Run!"

He ran; jumped the fence beyond the rodeo area and stumbled away into the brush. He got home in under an hour. It was mostly downhill.

Two nights later Wheelan set fire to Balderstone's bungalow while he was away at the lecture. The fire department put out the fire before more than half of the house was gone.

Early on the following morning he rented an airplane and had his remaining leaflets dropped over San Miguel.

Wheelan had decided that if he couldn't do anything positive he was still going to annoy Balderstone and anybody else who was on his side.

No one mentioned his harrassing actions to him, not even Chief Neff. Wheelan's aunt did indicate that she would never cook another

meal or wash another pajama top for him. He moved to a run-down motel near the ocean.

HE had been there nearly three days when, just after sundown, someone knocked on his door. It was Karen, wearing a light cotton dress, her hair pulled back. "Are you comfortable, Glenn?"

He smiled, "Yeah. I like this business now. I've been thinking up new activities."

Karen frowned around the room. "Like to come out for a walk?"

"Where?"

"Oh, along the beach. You can't spend all your life in a damp motel room."

"It's not damp. That's the fresh sea air you feel." He picked a windbreaker off the bed and nodded at the door. "So, let's walk." The night was warm, but heavy with fog. "Sorry I left you up there the other night, Karen. But you know . . ."

"Yes, I know. Cats make you crawly." She took his hand when they reached the sidewalk and pulled him after her in the direction of the beach. "Have you really been doing all those annoying things, Glenn?"

"Who else? You think I've gotten any recruits?" The street was quiet. They left the last sidewalk and walked down through scrubby brush to the beach. The water looked blurred as it touched the misty shore. "Just me."

Karen shivered and stepped away from Wheelan. "You've just made an awful nuisance of yourself, Glenn. I've always been very fond of you, as I'm sure you know. But—I'm very sorry."

She darted in suddenly and pushed hard.

The surprise and the clump of brush behind him sent Wheelan over into the sand. When he got to his knees and looked around he caught a brief flicker of Karen's skirt in the fog. Then she was lost. He stood. He tried to brush himself off, but his hands had started to shake. And he was beginning to feel odd in the stomach.

Wind came in then across the water and scattered some of the mist. He saw the cats.

Dozens of them, crouched twenty yards away. Their tails were switching and Wheelan became aware of a puzzling, whirring sound.

Purring.

In another gust more mist scattered, and Wheelan realized that he was cut off from the town by a half circle of hundreds of cats. And they were contentedly edging down across the sand toward him.

Hundreds of damned cats! They made Wheelan feel so crawly he couldn't move. But if he didn't move soon the first of the cats would touch him. That thought made him

jump back. The cats moved up.

The sand was sucking at his shoes; he could feel the chill of the ocean on the back of his neck. Maybe if he ran straight at them they'd scatter. But he couldn't do that. They knew that, too. The cats eased a little nearer.

Wheelan bent and grabbed off his shoes, then his socks. He backed into the cold, wet sand near the water. He got out of his clothes—all except his shorts; he'd have to come ashore someplace. The cats were close now. For a moment Wheelan thought he wouldn't be able to move, but finally he was able to grin and thumb his nose.

Then he ran quickly out into the water.

It was dark and cold, but he was a fair swimmer. He could make it down the coast a quarter mile or so. Far enough. As he swam, Wheelan made up his mind he'd never come back to his home town again.

Not even for Christmas.

END

TO THREAD ON A NECKLACE?

What's the most puzzling planet in the solar system? It might be Mercury, the nearest planet to the Sun, so cold on one side that air freezes, so hot on the other that lead is a liquid. It is one of the brightest objects in the sky—yet it has never been seen by most of the human race!

The reason? Its nearness to the Sun. It is only rarely visible above the horizon except in daylight, although under the best viewing conditions it is almost as bright as Sirius or Jupiter. Yet that is not the oddest thing about this odd little world. For instance, what about its "bright spot"? This is a point of light as bright as the Sun itself on the center of Mercury's disk, only seen when Mercury is directly between Sun and Earth. It has been seen many times, by astronomers of unquestioned reliability.

Sometimes it is explained as an optical phenomenon of Mercury's atmosphere—but probably Mercury has none! A still more fascinating theory is that there is a tremendous tunnel extending clear through the planet—and the spot as bright as the Sun is really the Sun itself, viewed through a shaft some 3,000 miles long!

Worlds of if

Book Reviews by Frederik Pohl

THERE is only one anthology for us to consider this month but it is monstrous huge. It is called *A Treasury of Great Science Fiction*. Its editor is Anthony Boucher, and it contains twenty-four separate stories—four of them full-length novels.

The authors involved are John Wyndham, Richard Deming, Ray Bradbury, Robert A. Heinlein (twice), Philip K. Dick, Henry Kuttner (once in collaboration with C. L. Moore, and again alone, disguised as "Lewis Padgett"), C. M. Kornbluth, Theodore Sturgeon, George P. Elliott, Joel Townsley Rogers, Poul Anderson (twice), A. E. Van Vogt, Malcolm Jameson, Oscar Lewis, Judith Merril, George O. Smith, Arthur C. Clarke, Nelson Bond, E. B. White, Mildred Clingerman and Alfred Bester. This is a catholic list, as anyone can see. As nearly all the stories are good-to-excellent, perhaps there is no real reason to argue the editor's selection; it is after all a matter of individual taste, and anyway the anthologist who revives Heinlein's *Waldo* and Kornbluth's *Gomez* surely does us all a favor. But . . .

But there is that word "Great" in the title.

"Great" is exactly what most of these stories are not. They have their merits—Tony Boucher's taste does not allow him to sell us a single pup—but there is hardly an author on the list who is represented by his best story.

Indeed, Boucher makes no very inflated claim in his introduction. "It is not a definitive anthology of the very best of all science fiction," he says; and, later: "My primary concern was simply to get together a great deal of good reading in modern (1938-1958) s.f. which had been overlooked by earlier anthologists." This relatively modest objective he has achieved very well; but modesty stops at the title page.

There is another consideration. Perhaps the very bulk of the enterprise forbids this degree of modesty. A net with as wide a maw as this (the book contains several hundred thousand words) should surely have come up with a more brilliant catch, or at least a more varied one. Some very fine writers are included, of

course, but it seems somehow wrong that three writers are included in double strength while at least a score of others, equally good, are not represented at all.

As Boucher explains, it was his intention to avoid stories which had appeared in previous science-fiction anthologies. Here his success depends on an exceedingly narrow construction of all parts of the term. Stories from anthologies are permitted if they were not entirely *science-fiction* anthologies (E.g., Judith Merril's *Dead Center*, previously on view in a Martha Foley volume) and stories from science-fiction collections are allowed if they are not "anthologies." That is, in the usage of the trade, if they are collections of stories by a single writer. This furnishes a loophole for including, among many, Arthur C. Clarke's *The Other Side of the Sky* (appearing just now as the title story of his newly reprinted collection, discussed elsewhere in this issue.) Boucher tells us that nine of the twenty-four stories have never appeared before in book form. But the other side of the coin is that fifteen of them have. And if a formula could be found to permit including them, surely it could have been stretched to allow an Asimov, a Blish, a Leiber, a Simak, a del Rey, even—why not?—a Boucher . . . to include, that is, enough truly great stories by truly great science-fiction writers to justify the size and the title.

A Treasury of Great Science Fiction comes in two fat volumes, designed and well and truly timed for the Christmas trade. It is a massive dose of enjoyable science fiction—it is like having half a dozen issues of your favorite magazine to read all at once—and it will make a handsome package under almost anyone's tree.

That isn't anything like what the title promises; but it's not bad at all!

ACE has reissued Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth* and H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*. Wells reminds us that when a man of great literary talent tackles a science-fiction theme the result is very fine indeed. Verne does no such thing. Verne's talents were not literary; his characters are knotty pine; his touches of background description float immiscibly on the stream of the story, like the grenadine in a pousse-cafe. But Verne showed a way. The special merit of Jules Verne as a writer of science-fiction stories is not that he wrote them well but that he wrote them at all, at a time when almost no one else had the wit to see that the thing could be done.

Kurt Siodmak is also a pioneer of science fiction, in a way, but he happens to be still with us, still vigorously producing stories. His latest is *Skyport* (Crown), which deals with the construction of a great, luxury space-hotel, orbiting Earth for the pleasure of the wealthy. It does not contain many surprises. Siodmak, as a writer and director, has been able to convert many of his science-fiction stories into films. *Skyport*—flashy, fast and superficial—might make a good film, but it does not make a very good book.

Murray Leinster occupies both ends of an Ace double volume by himself, *The Pirates of Zan* on one hand, *The Mutant Weapon* on the other. It would not seem possible that after thirty years of space-pirate stories any writer could make one come alive; but Bron Hoddan is a rather unique space pirate, and Murray Leinster is a nearly unique science-fiction writer. Hoddan is, as the blurb on the jacket tells us, "The Deadliest Do-Gooder in All Space," and for once a jacket blurb is entirely reliable. He is all of that . . . *The Mutant Weapon* in its previous appearances was, much more intelligibly, entitled *Med Service*. It has to do with a solitary, public-health sort of individual who takes care of plagues throughout the Galaxy. *Any* kind of plagues. He gets into some amazing jams, and Leinster almost never falters. He does not falter here.

Rocket to Limbo (Ace) concerns a quest for aliens; the author is Alan E. Nourse. Occupying the same binding is John Brunner's *Echo in the Skull*, in which the aliens come to Earth and possess humans by limpeting to their backs and infiltrating their nervous systems. Whichever end you start from this is an entertaining volume, if not a very memorable one . . . *The Other Side of the Sky* is not only a piece in the Boucher collection, but also the title piece of a collection of Arthur C. Clarke's own work. It is a solid evening's reading, and perhaps the last all-Clarke for a while. Says Clarke in a footnote: "All my shorter works of fiction that I think worth preserving are now in volume form." Well, the man will just have to get busy and write some more.

A COUPLE of very belated gift suggestions for Christmas might be in order. Young readers will enjoy Darlene Geis's *Dinosaurs*. Mrs. Geis not only gives the appropriate facts about everything from trilobites to early mammals, but she insures the attention of her young audience by remembering, for example, that the first disinterred icthyosaur was found by a twelve-year-old girl

named Mary Anning. Even adults will find enough of interest in this book to keep them going if, for instance, they find themselves required to read it to pre-schoolers. For example, Mrs. Geis mentions, and demolishes, the popular theories of why the dinosaurs became extinct. (1, the Earth became too dry; but what about the deep-sea forms that perished at the same time? 2, small mammals ate their eggs; but what about the fact that many species of live-bearers also became extinct?) The pictures are of course beautiful. We expect that in children's books, but these, by R. F. Peterson, are not only colorful but exact.

Older children are prime prospects for *Looking at the Stars* (Phoenix), a British import designed for the pre-primary class of starwatchers. Michael W. Ovenden, its author, does not assume you have already ground your first dozen mirrors. He tells you how to find Cassiopeia from the North Star, he tells you how to find the North Star from the Big Dipper, and he even tells you how to find the Big Dipper. (As he is British he calls it the Plough, but the illustrations make his meaning perfectly clear and, anyway, he uniformly gives scientific as well as popular names so there may be no mistake.) Ovenden does not quite go so far as to tell you to be sure to look up, not down, in order to find stars in the first place; but he leaves very little else to prior information; and thus this book is an admirable primer for beginners, teen-agers and roughly five out of six would-be science-fiction writers.

Two other new science books for teen-agers are less successful. They are by Abraham and Rebecca B. Marcus, a couple who teach science in the New York City high schools; and the mark of the teacher lies heavy on their expository style. Everything is in order, everything is exact. The romance is left out.

In *Tomorrow the Moon!* (Prentice Hall) we once again tread the familiar path from Hero of Alexandria's steam jet to space ships. In *Power Unlimited!* we have the same treatment applied to the history of man's endeavor to muscle up his own feeble limbs through, successively, animals, slaves, water, fossil fuels, sunpower and nuclear sources.

Both books are satisfactory texts but not too much in the way of entertainment. *Power Unlimited!*, what's more, shows a couple of eccentricities worth mentioning. For some reason or other it is printed throughout in blue ink. There are optically better combinations than black-on-white, but blue-on-white is not one of them. Again, the back

jacket asks: "Do you know the difference between a rocket and a jet?" It shows two diagrams, labeled "Rocket or jet . . . which is which?", and promises: "You *will* know the difference when you finish *Power Unlimited.*" Well, it seems that somebody didn't finish. Both diagrams are of rockets.

For adults the problem of selection is only more difficult because there is so much more to select from. Readers of this column will not have failed to realize that there has been an ample supply of first-rate books this year. A non-book gift for almost anyone, science-fiction reader or not, might be one or more of the splendid astronomical photographs issued by Astro-Murals. These are large (2x3 feet) and almost overpoweringly beautiful; they include several views of the moon, five separate nebulae, a study of Saturn complete with rings and a solar prominence. It is hard to imagine anyone who wouldn't be delighted by a sampling of these; if such a dullard exists, why do you want to give him a present anyway?

TURNING finally to some non-fiction titles, in *Soap-Bubbles* (Dover), C. V. Boys tells us all there is to tell about bubbles, surface tension, the behavior of droplets of liquids in other liquids, etc. If you think this is a modest aim for a 160-page book, profusely illustrated with photos and step-by-step diagrams, it is clear that your acquaintance with bubble-blowing is limited to the transitory spherical kind that come whipping out of a bent wire frame. An evening with Boys will set you straight. The book is a classic, not revised since 1911; but a new preface by S. Z. Lewin brings the quainter terms up to date and supplies an expert's perspective where it is needed.

What Boys did half a century ago for soap-bubbles, H. H. Nininger has just now done for meteorites. The book is *Out of the Sky,* and the publisher again is Dover. Here are records and eye-witness accounts of the most remarkable recent meteorite falls, supplemented with a discussion of the fascinating unanswered questions of the field (sample: Why does the sound of a meteorite's fall sometimes seem to reach an observer fifty miles away as fast as the light itself?), and rounded out with suggestions on what to look for on the off-chance that there might be a major fall near you. After all, meteorites are not so obliging as to fall on astronomical observatories alone. Nearly all of what we know of the great falls comes from casual observers, always untrained and sometimes inept; and a few

thousand copies of this book in circulation might well help preserve some priceless data from a future fall.

Dover has also just published *Sex in Psycho-Analysis and the Development of Psycho-Analysis* by Sandor Ferenczi and Otto Rank, *Beyond Psychology* by Otto Rank and *Folkways* by William Graham Sumner. As with nearly all the Dover titles, each book is of great importance in its special field, and the Sumner volume, forming as it does the strongest connective tissue between the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, is virtually unique.

A BOOK for specialists—but one which those who want it will want very much indeed—is *A Handbook of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, compiled by Donald H. Tuck of Hobart, Tasmania, and published by himself. It is, says the title page, "A collection of material acting as a bibliographic survey to the fields of science fiction and fantasy (including weird), covering the magazines, books, pocket books, personalities, etc., of these fields up to December, 1957." This is clearly a labor of love. Really a sort of encyclopedia of the field, it is a valuable job of work. **END**

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GRAVY TRAIN

Ever hear of evil fairies who grant three wishes? McWorther's was more efficient. One wish was plenty to bring catastrophe!

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

I

AT ONE hundred and thirty, life was indeed gratifying for Titus McWorther. But for one missing detail, it would have been perfect.

With his wife, Edna, he had planned well for retirement. His idyllic estate consisted of a second-hand planetoid, thirty miles in circumference, which was the only habitable piece of matter in its system. Complete with supplementary gravity generator, a compact

atmosphere, a mantle of lush topsoil and a carefully selected biota, McWorther's World was both his delight and his pride.

Its principal asset was, of course, its isolation.

Well away from the mainstream of galactic civilization, McWorther's Star was smugly hidden behind a dark nebula, through which he and Edna plunged twice a year to the fringe of the cluster—just to observe and mock convention, if for nothing else.

It was an ideal setup.

But, after two sedentary years, Titus realized he still needed one item to make his retirement complete. So he dispatched this tight-beamed message to the packet order department of Rear-Sobucks and Company in the West Cluster Federation's Hub City:

Dear Sir:

Please send one automatic bather with back-scrubbing attachment and toy boat docks, as listed in your videolog under order No. 4678-25C. Charge same to credit account No. W414754-B24D.

Sincerely yours,
Titus McWorther, Potentate
McWorther's World

He listed the coordinates of the star and the orbital factor of his planetoid.

Unfortunately, the hyperspatial line between McWorther's World and the nearest relay center was partly coincident with the link to the politically noncommitted world of Gauyuth-VI.

This condition, together with the fact that components of a communication are sent by separate pulse, sometimes leads to the embarrassing phenomenon known as "message interfusion," which is retransmission of the right text with the wrong signature.

And it so happened that as Titus McWorther's order was en route, the system was also being burdened with this intelgence to the Ganymede Extension of the Western Cluster's State Department:

Dear Sir:

This will verify our agreement and authorize implementation of interstellar aid arrangements as set forth in conferences with your ambassador. If such arrangements produce mutual satisfaction, we will quite readily declare concurrence, in principle at least, with the political aims of the Western Cluster.

Respectfully yours,
Ogarm Netath,
Prime Minister
Gauyuth-VI

Appended to the signature were the coordinates of Gauyuth and the orbital factor of its Number Six planet.

WHARTON HOVERLY, undersecretary of cosmic aid for the Western Cluster, plucked at his thick, gray mustache as he reread the space-o-gram.

He punched the videobox stud. "Mallston!"

The younger and more composed face of his assistant stared from the screen. "Yes, sir?"

"Anything yet?"

"Not a thing. We have no record of a — McWorther's World."

"What do you suppose?"

"Well, it seems authentic enough. We do know Ambassador Summerson has been working in that general area."

"And you think Summerson signed an aid agreement with this potentate?"

"I'd say the message speaks for itself."

Again, Hoverly worried his mustache. "Did you check with Summerson?"

"He's on extended leave."

"What do you think we ought to do?"

"McWorther's World must be a critical area. And evidently we're going to get what we want out of the deal, since the Potentate speaks of concurrence with Western Cluster aims."

Impatiently, the undersecretary glanced out the window. Ganymede was well out of the Jovian umbra now. If he didn't leave soon, he'd be late for his conference with the commerce department on Farside Luna.

"All right, Mallston," he said. "Put McWorther's World on a Class A aid schedule. That ought to hold the Potentate until Summerson gets back."

In the commercial section of Hub City, Rear-Sobucks and Company occupied a monstrous building whose emblematic tip pierced the clouds.

On the two hundredth floor, the twenty-seventh vice-president strode through the rail gate, tossed the secretary a "don't-bother-to-announce-me" glance and went on into the inner office of the twenty-sixth vice-president.

"Got something I thought you'd be interested in, V.R.," he told the limp-faced man behind the desk. "There may be a promotion angle."

"What is it?" V.R. asked, not exactly gripping his chair with anticipation.

The other placed the space-o-gram on the desk. "It's from an Ogarm Netath, *prime minister* of a place called Gauyuth-Six. He wants an automatic bather."

V.R. extended a "so what?" glare.

"Don't you see? Big shots like that don't place personal orders. But here's one who thinks so much of a Rear-Sobucks item that he forgets all about convention."

"And so, Wheeler, you want

to capitalize on his good name in some sort of promotion gimmick," V.R. said through taut lips.

Wheeler shrank. "But I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought. Fill his order. Send it compliments of — let's see, Gauyuth-Six is uncommitted —compliments of the Western Cluster."

IT WAS a fine morning on McWorther's World. Cotton-candy clouds floated over the fields. Dreaming herons, balanced on slender legs, gave the shallows of the lake a tufted appearance. A delightful breeze, artificially generated at the equator, wafted flowering stalks and rocked the air car and spaceabout at their moorings.

Titus snorted on the veranda and reached for his julep. He was a chunky little man, with the ruddiness of good health tinting his face and overflowing onto his partly bald pate.

"Where are you, Titus?" an anxious voice disturbed the quiet of the house.

"Out here, Love."

Edna appeared in the doorway. Despite her age, there was still the fascination in her timeless eyes that had snared Titus more than ninety years ago.

"The chef burned the beans again," she said, frowning.

"Guess I'll have to fix it."

"You know it's not the cooker. It's that darned gravity."

He realized now it was a weight fluctuation that had nudged him from his nap.

"I've got it *set* that way, Love," he explained. "We did not get clouds in the contract. But by varying the gravity control we can have them for nothing. It all has to do with atmospheric pressure."

Edna cast a resigned glance skyward. "If that's the way you want it—fleecy clouds and burnt beans—"

The guttural scream of braking jets rattled the windows and sent the herons winging for the safety of the other hemisphere. Hesitating on the fringe of the atmosphere, the freighter altered its approach and landed beside the house.

Titus went out to meet the skipper and his three assistants whose arms were filled with printed forms.

"You Potentate McWorther?" the skipper asked.

Titus smiled in embarrassment. "It's a gag. I just call myself that."

"We got your order," the other snapped. "Where do you want it?"

Titus' small eyes widened with an inner vision of the automatic bather — a vision which went on in speculation to dispose of the crude shower-masseur, for which he and Edna were getting a bit too old.

"If you'll put it on the veranda—" He paused and shouted back toward the house. "Edna, get out the grapplers. We're in business."

"Fun-ny," the skipper observed with dry derision. Then he signaled to his waiting assistants.

They came forward and, one by one, thrust their stacks of printed forms against Titus' chest. His arms came up in a reflex to accept the offerings. But, as the third assistant's contribution sent the stack soaring in front of his face, he went down under the weight.

When he had extricated himself from the mound of paper, the men had returned to their ship. And now its sides were folding down and scores of huge crates were drifting out on repulsor beams and fluttering to the ground.

Soon the freighter was gone and Edna was at his side.

"What *have* you gotten us into now, Titus?"

"Honest, Love — I don't know."

Suddenly his ears were splitting with the thunderous roar of a thousand ships plunging down to the surface as far as he could see around the perimeter of his small world. Each pulled to a halt a few feet from the ground, opened its sides and disgorged vast mounds of crates and sacks, boxes and barrels, naked hills of coarse material that hissed like gravel as it spewed from chutes, gleaming masses of machinery.

Confounded, Titus seized one of the slips of paper. It was an invoice listing two hundred earth movers, seventy-five instant pavers, five hundred concrete mixers.

Matching his frown, Edna read a second sheet and demanded, "What on earth do you expect to do with a hundred thousand barrels of wheat germ oil? Four thousand kegs of eight-penny nails? Forty-five hundred tons of soybeans?"

AT HIS secluded villa, Prime Minister Netath was entertaining his foreign minister, Ugaza Bataul.

Netath leaned against the terrace bar and proposed a toast. "To an era of plenty."

Bataul smiled. "At the expense of the Western Cluster."

They gulped the drinks and Netath stared down into his empty glass. "We're quite fortunate that the Western Cluster's aspirations are extending to this sector."

"As long as we can be sure that there won't be any *military* advances." Bataul added the qualification with misgiving.

"Oh, there's no danger of that. Actually, we're lucky we didn't try to get on the Eastern Cluster's gravy train.

We'd have had to make a lot of concessions."

Heralding its own approach with a sputtering rumble, the station 'copter came in low over the trees and dropped down on the lawn. Netath walked over as his chauffeur climbed out of the cab and used antigrav grapples to float a large crate out of the freight compartment.

"Just picked it up at the space terminal," the man explained. "Must be that aid shipment."

Bataul laughed. "You mean the first batch of credit certificates, maybe."

The chauffeur pressed the "unpack" stud. The sides of the crate fell outward.

"What *is* it?" Netath drew back, surveying the ivory, tanklike thing with its sparkling fixtures and flexible appendages.

Bataul bent and read the words on the inscription plate: "Deluxe Automatic Bather—4678-25C."

By then, Netath had found the torn, soiled delivery tag. He read the part of the writing that was still legible:

". . . sincerely hope this expression of Western amity meets with your satisfaction. If we can serve you again, please don't hesitate . . ."

Infuriated, he imparted a vindictive kick to the crate and crumpled the paper.

"That's the cosmic aid we were expecting?" Bataul sputtered.

"Capitalist Western dogs!" Netath exclaimed. "They were just trifling with our planetary honor!"

"It's an insult against our racial character!" the foreign minister said severely. "They *know* we have no use for a bather, shedding our skin as we do once a day."

Netath forced restraint into his features. "We will not lose our diplomatic poise. There is always the chance a mistake has been made."

He drew the contacter out of his pocket and shouted into its grid, "Miss Yalera?"

"Yes, sir?" came the instant answer.

"Take a space-o-gram to Solaria."

II

WHEN the initial error was made at the hyperspatial relay station, a pattern had been set. Committed categorically to the memory banks were the false associations between the State Department's Ganymede Extension and Potentate McWorther, between Premier Netath and Rear-Sobucks.

Thus, it was somewhat to be expected that Undersecretary Hoverly should find himself chewing on the underbristles of his mustache as he read the lastest space-o-gram.

Dear Sir:

Needless to say, we are somewhat disappointed over the Western Cluster's meager response to our desperate need.

Perhaps Ambassador Summerson misrepresented our agreement. In that event, we feel sure that consultation with his Excellency will set the record straight.

We would appreciate prompt attention to this detail. Otherwise, in the interest of our people, we shall feel compelled to seek satisfaction elsewhere.

Respectfully yours,
Titus McWorther,
Potentate

Hoverly tossed the message on his desk, punched the audiocom button and called for his assistant. When Mallston arrived, the undersecretary was still pacing.

"Did you take care of the McWorther World aid consignment?" he asked.

Mallston nodded. "Delivery should have been made day before yesterday. Full Class A schedule."

"Well, it wasn't enough!" Hoverly extended a stiff finger toward the space-o-gram. "Read that."

Looking up finally, Mallston said, "Evidently we dropped the ball."

"Indeed we did. Ambassador Summerson must have promised the Potentate the whole works."

Hoverly resumed pacing. "I should have guessed as much. President Roswell only last week hinted that the Western Cluster should level its galactic commerce sights on that entire sector."

Mallston pondered the gravity of the space-o-gram. "Maybe we should lay the McWorther development before the President."

Bristling, the undersecretary said, "And call attention to our own incompetence? We'll straight this matter out by doing what we should have done in the first place — by putting the Potentate on the double-A priority list. Full and immediate delivery under Class B through K schedules."

Mallston started out, but paused at the door. "How about cultural exchange?"

"We'll play it safe by assuming Summerson shot the works in that category too. Round up every uncommitted cultural group in the cluster."

SHAKING his head deprecatingly, the twenty-seventh vice-president stood before the desk of the next highest official in the Rear-Sobucks hierarchy.

"Well, Wheeler," V.R. clipped without looking up. "What is it this time?"

"I'm afraid Netath didn't take too kindly to our gesture."

"Netath? Netath?" V.R. milked the name for its significance."

"Ogarm Netath. The prime minister of that Gauyuth place. The automatic bather."

"Oh, *that* one."

Wheeler handed over the space-o-gram and V.R. muttered through the message:

Dear Sir:

I'm sure you made a mistake filling my order. You've got to come pick up your shipment right away. We're up to our ears and it's shaking us to pieces.

Yours in disappointment,
Ogarm Netath,
Prime Minister

Growling, V.R. dropped an effervescent pill into a glass of water. "You can't get anywhere with these back-planet bumpkins. I doubt that this Netath ever *had* a bath. Send him a Supplementary Manual of Operating Instructions."

Wheeler started for the door.

But V.R. called after him. "And bill the prime minister for that article. It'll teach him to show a little bit of appreciation."

TITUS winced before the persistent tremors that came through the floor of his cellar. He made another adjustment on the gravity control deflecting the planetoid's center of pseudomass another few feet. The ground beneath him finally quieted.

"Three days," he mumbled, dragging himself up the stairs.

Edna received him with hands on hips. "Three days—what?"

"Getting things balanced again."

"What are you going to do about all that stuff cluttering up our beautiful planetoid?" She was near tears.

With Edna dogging his steps, he returned to the veranda, where his julep was now quite thin and warm in the rays of the setting sun.

"We'll have to find out where it came from first," he said, staring dismally over the mountains of machinery and grain, the tumbled stacks of crates and barrels and kegs, the lesser rows of wheeled and winged vehicles.

"Seems to me," Edna persisted, "that the invoices will show that." She gestured at what remained of the stacks of printed forms.

The rest of the slips were strewn over the ground as far as he could see. "Only the *first* sheet will show the origin—*if* we could ever find it," Titus explained.

He went out to the air car, warmed it up and sent it churning skyward. Near the attenuated top of the atmosphere, he was able to see exactly how much extraneous stuff had been dumped on his world. The main area of dis-

posal seemed to have been within a two-mile radius of the house.

An ever-widening helical course, wending its way alternately from night to day, eventually brought him on a great circle that sliced over both poles. Then, with his searchlights still burning, he spiraled inward, covering the other hemisphere. The rest of his world was in primal order.

He started for home around the daylight side.

But even above the noise of his own rotorjets, the stridence of descending freighters erupted in a pandemonium of sound all around him. Great clouds of rockets, clustered in fleets, were darkening the sky and raining down onto the surface.

He barely managed to pull out from under one of the formations before it could pinch him against the ground. Swearing in oaths that he had not used in years, he headed for the nearest group of ships. Before he could close in, they had discharged their cargoes and thundered off into space again.

He altered course for another detachment of freighters, only to meet with the same frustrating results. By the time he had aimed his craft at a third group, all the ships had blasted away, leaving everywhere great, gleaming mounds and stacks and irregular rows of crates and containers that completely obscured the surface.

Enraged, Titus gunned the craft for home. He picked his way between several monstrous peaks of grain, some of them soaring nearly all the way up through the six-hundred-foot-thick atmosphere, and threw on his brakes to avoid collision with a tremendous pyramid of what looked like corn kernels.

With stark apprehension, he envisioned his world shaking apart under the eccentric forces. But he quelled his fears with logic: This new addition of mass, apparently distributed evenly over all but the four square miles that had already served as a dumping ground, would be unbalanced only to a negligible degree.

TITUS flicked on his landing lights as he headed into the night. But from over the horizon came a glare considerably stronger than the candlepower of his own electrical system. As he pulled up to the mooring pylon, the explanation was evident.

Scores of Pullman crafts were packed so tightly around his house that the blunt noses of several were sticking out over the veranda.

He cut off the idling jets. The militant strains of a Venurian march, blaring from the instruments of a hundred-piece symphony, swelled up mightily all around him. The

orchestra itself was wedged between two residential crafts while the roof of McWorther's generating house served as the conductor's podium.

On the veranda, a full troupe of Simalean Ballet dancers swirled and caracoled, not seeming to mind that they were occasionally overflowing the tiles and flouncing not so lightly through Edna's caladiums.

His wife stood helplessly by, still gripping the autobroom which she had evidently wielded without success in an attempt to rout the intruders.

Dismayed, Titus elbowed his way through a dedicated choral group that was patriotically rendering the "Fayothian Anthem," sidestepped a tumbling foursome obviously from one of the Lesser Javapa planets and pushed aside a debating team which was having little luck making itself heard above the general cacophony.

Edna swept out to meet him. "Titus, they just won't leave!"

"Who are they? What do they want?"

"I don't know." She was having a difficult time restraining herself. "They asked for the ministry of something or other. Then they said they were cooped up so long that they had to get some practice."

Titus bellowed for attention. But nobody turned an ear, except a pirouetting ballerina who whirled to a stop nearby, glissaded over in front of him and made a theatrical display of bending over and planting a set of lip-prints on his forehead—a gesture that fed considerable fuel to Edna's vexation.

"You're cute," the dancer tittered. "You got the word on this place, Pudgy? What is it—a stopover station?"

Before he could answer, one of the tumblers shouted, "It's snowing!"

The choral group broke reverently into the ancient carol "Noel" while the orchestra paused on an upbeat and swung into a jazzed-up "Jingle Bells."

Perplexed, Titus stared at the dancing snowflakes. But that was impossible! It *never* snowed here on McWorther's World!

Then he remembered the grain peak he had skirted on the way home. It had extended high above the infrared and ultraviolet shields — into the naked, hot zone where restless winds had wafted the kernels eastward.

He picked up one of the "flakes."

Popcorn!

III

MANY light years away, the Emperor of the Eastern Cluster whirled around, kicked his bejeweled train out of the way and faced his chief

adviser. "So they've opened up a new aid offensive?"

"And a most vital one." The adviser blew on his spectacles and burnished the lenses against his sleeve. "A place called McWorther. Our intelligence got its coordinates from their consignment documents."

"Never heard of it."

"That's what's so insidious about this whole capitalist plot. They've kept it under their hats."

"And why is it so vital?"

The adviser directed the Emperor's attention to a space globe suspended from the ceiling. He pressed two buttons on the wall and twin beams of light intersected within the sphere. "That's McWorther's location."

"Why—why—" the Emperor stammered. "That outflanks us completely!"

"What concerns me is how many other undisclosed but settled worlds lie in that same general area."

"A whole raft of them, no doubt," the Emperor said pessimistically.

"What are we going to do?"

"In this critical sector we've got to make friends—and fast! We'll begin with the McWorther place."

"How far do you want to go?"

"All the way. Empty the surplus bins. Clear out the warehouses. Let McWorther have every available pound of material and equipment."

"Terms?"

"Terms be damned! We let the Western Cluster steal a march on us. We've got to recoup. Everything goes as an outright gift—with all the cultural trimmings thrown in."

TITUS splashed into the cellar and struck out for the hypertransmitter.

It was a peculiar flood. Suffusing the water was a thick scum that flashed iridescently as it caught the glint of light from the ceiling. He stuck his finger into the dross and applied it to the tip of his tongue.

Syrup!

He thought of the thousands of barrels that had been dumped into the lake and surmised that the contaminated water was backing up through the drainage system.

He altered course for the pumps.

And, like ships in convoy, a score of virtuosos invaded the cellar, paddling in his wake.

The soprano's piercing voice assailed his ears. "In all my theatrical experience, I have never been subjected to such indignity! I insist—"

But a violinist pushed forward, wielding his bow like a stiff finger. "You, sir, are holding back on us. No doubt you know what our future instructions are."

"I've never seen such fascist highhandedness," complained a diminutive choreographer in the uniform of a Palosov

Rocket Dancer. "In the name of the ministry of culture of the Eastern Federation, I demand to see a representative of His Imperial Highness!"

Ignoring them, Titus trudged on to the pumps and set them for maximum drain-off.

The Simalean ballerina did a series of rapid turns and watched the spray and the pattern of ripples that issued from her darting feet.

"Exquisite!" she exuberated. "I shall have to speak with the *maître de ballet* about a nymphal sequence!"

"Come on, Pop." One of the tumblers confronted Titus. "What's the gimmick? Why are they keeping us loafing around here?"

"Why?" roared a dramatist, allowing his voice full rein in the acoustic inadequacy of the cellar. "I'll tell you: It's a capitalist scheme to abduct the top talent of the glorious workers' federation!"

Hands clamped over his ears, Titus finally made it to the hypertransmitter. He jiggled its dials, beat on the cabinet, lifted a foot from the water and gave it a couple of kicks broadside.

No results. It was obviously shorted out from the flood. And none of the Pullman crafts was equipped with long-range communications gear.

Titus waded from the cellar, plodded through the house, leaving pools of syrupy water in his wake, and stalked onto the veranda.

The scene was no less hectic than it had been. There were two orchestras now. And they were waging a war of decibels to determine whether the "East Cluster Blastoff March" or the "West Cluster Anthem" should prevail over McWorther's World.

Two debating teams were holding forth on the comparative benefits of proletarian solidarity and the free enterprise system. Beyond the caladium bed, Edna, who seemed to have finally succumbed to frustrated abandon, had struck a face-to-the-sun and wind-in-her-hair posture for a portraitist who was drowning futility in artistic endeavor.

But there was neither wind nor sun to accommodate the pose, Titus lamented. For, after yesterday's deliveries by the bright red cargo ships, which had obviously been from the Eastern Cluster, there was little left of McWorther's World that could be recognized.

The immediate area around the house had been spared in the deluge of material. But, beyond, great sloping expanses of grain and crates, barrels, boxes, machinery, bulging sacks and drums stretched up and away like the inner walls of a crater.

Fortunately, disposal onto the surface of McWorther's World had stopped. But not

delivery to the system. Coruscating pinpoints of flame, far out in space, signified the presence of thousands upon thousands of cargo carriers that were dropping off their freight in solar orbit. The items of merchandise themselves were indistinguishable. But their composite existence was beginning to take on the appearance of a great ring of fragmented particles stretching around the sun.

And Titus supposed that it was only the reliability of the mass-fending generators attached to each article that tentatively kept them all separate and prevented them from plunging like a devastating hailstorm onto the surface of his world.

He slumped to the ground and bracketed his cheeks between his palms. For some unaccountable reason, it seemed that the productivity of the entire universe was being showered down on his private planetoid in one vast gravy-train effect.

Only he was drowning in the gravy.

"AND that's my story." Undersecretary of Cosmic Aid Hoverly laid his hands on the conference table. "And we now have McWorther's World on a total aid schedule."

President Roswell, an angular man with a troubled face, drummed his fingertips together. "Gentlemen, this is most serious."

On his right, Ambassador Summerson's head bobbed in accord. The gesture spread next to the chief of intelligence, then to Hoverly, thus making the circuit back to Roswell.

"To sum up, then," said the President, "you, Hoverly, authorized aid for a McWorther's World in the 47-126 area."

The undersecretary glanced away uneasily.

"But you, Summerson," Roswell continued, "have no record of having signed aid agreements with such a place."

"That's right," the ambassador verified. "But deciding to accommodate McWorther's World was the most fantastic stroke of good luck imaginable."

Hoverly squinted. "I don't follow you."

"When you sent aid to the Potentate, not only did you pick what will undoubtedly develop into the most critical political area of the millennium, but you also beat the Easties to the draw in a sector that they had staked out all for themselves."

"A stroke of sheer luck," President Roswell concurred.

The roving ambassador leaned back smiling. "The chance timing was perfect too. We beat them by less than two weeks."

But the intelligence chief's face was rigid with dejection. "We got their 'firstest,' to use an ancient expression, but not with the 'mostest.' Our agents in Imperial City report that the amount of aid authorized for McWorther's World is unbelievable. The entire Eastern Cluster is going on a full austerity basis to support the program."

"That shows what value they place on McWorther's World and the sector it opens up," Roswell offered. "When they found out we'd moved in ahead of them, their reaction was frantic."

Summerson rose. "This, then, gentlemen, is it."

"It certainly is." Roswell's voice was heavy with despondency. "The most God-awful aid war the cluster has ever seen."

"We can't back out," the ambassador warned. "We've got to get busy and face up to the task."

"With every resource at our disposal. To ignore the challenge would be to surrender this entire section of the galaxy to the Easties."

The President was silent a moment. "Gentlemen, I am herewith sounding a call to economic arms. Cancel all other aid commitments and activity. Throw everything we have got, everything we can ever hope to produce, at McWorther's Word."

"I think you'd better call on the Potentate personally," Summerson proposed.

"That," said Roswell, "is exactly what I intend to do."

ADJUSTING the drape of his robe, the Emperor sent his eyes flicking over the report. Finally he lurched from his chair with a resounding "Eureka!"

"So you see how it is, Your Imperial Highness," his chief adviser offered. "By cutting in on their McWorther World operation, we have indeed touched a sensitive Western spot."

"There's no question about that," the Emperor said lustily. He was a portly man whose sartorial excesses made him seem even more imposing. His eyes, recessed under thickset brows, flared with triumph as he said, "McWorther's World must figure prominently in their planning. From the way they cut loose with everything they had when they found out we were stepping in too, damned if I'm not convinced this new system will be the pivotal point of their entire future strategy."

"Then we'd better order double production quotas on every world that flies the Eastern flag."

"*Triple* quotas. And have my space yacht refitted by tomorrow."

"You're going somewhere, Highness?" asked the adviser.

"This Potentate McWorther

is likely to be the third most important political figure in the galaxy. I'm not going to lose any time getting over there and pumping his hand."

His face flushed with rage, Ogarm Netath tossed the space-o-gram at his foreign minister, then snatched it back out of Bataul's hands before he had a chance to read it.

"It's a bill!" Netath's voice quivered. "They sent us a bill for that damned bather monstrosity!"

Bataul's brow, to all appearances, was ready for spring planting. "Let me have another look at it."

Netath stood there trembling while the foreign minister sent his eyes darting over the paper.

"It's from Rear-Sobucks!" Bataul exclaimed. "A retail concern that obviously handles automatic bathers!"

"But it was our aid shipment, wasn't it?"

"Apparently not. It says here, '. . . for merchandise previously extended *in behalf of* the Western Cluster . . .'"

"I don't understand."

Bataul's features struggled through a gamut of expressions. "I think I'm just beginning to. Do you remember last year when we had that communications survey made? Between here and the nearest Western relay station, there was that single system. I think some crackpot had laid claim—of course. McWorther's his name. Calls himself a potentate."

Netath stiffened. "And you think—?"

"I think both we and McWorther are victims of message interfusion," Bataul said flatly.

"And our aid shipments—?"

"I'd bet McWorther must be wringing his hands over more loot than he'll ever be able to count."

Netath started punching buttons on his desk. "We've got work to do."

"What kind?"

"First you're going to get off a message to this Rear-Sobucks bunch and tell them what they can do with their bill *and* their automatic bather—if it'll fit. You can also explain what's happened."

"This time we'll send the message around the *right* leg of the cluster," Bataul assured.

"Then we're hopping over to this McWorther system and laying down the law to that character. *That* I want to do personally."

"THIS," said Twenty-Seventh Vice-President Wheeler of Rear-Sobucks, "explains it all."

"Communications interfusion?" the twenty-sixth vice-president asked.

"Absolutely, V.R. Just like Premier Netath says."

"Then there's a Rear-Sobucks customer who has been unnecessarily inconvenienced and still hasn't been satisfied?"

With a curt nod, Wheeler confirmed the other's fear.

V.R. rose from his desk and wagged a finger at the other. "I still don't understand it all, Wheeler. But I can't avoid the impression that you're somehow responsible for the mess."

Wheeler cowered.

"*You're* going to take a trip —now!" V.R. went on, gathering steam. "*You're* going to deliver a bather personally to this Potentate McWorther. *You're* going to extend the apologies of the entire Rear-Sobucks organization!"

IV

TITUS poured his tenth consecutive julep — directly from the bottle, without the benefit of ice, sugar or mint— and leaned back in his chair. His occupancy of a corner of the veranda had been a hard-won concession.

Almost indifferent now, he stared at the hundreds of virtuosos and shouted, "Go home!"

But there was little zing in his voice and the words were, of course, lost in the confused sea of sound—musical, argumentative, operatic and otherwise. Heedless, the orchestras played, the ballet dancers whirled, painters sketched, gymnasts tumbled, dramatists soliloquized and the vocalists made it plain that they would give no quarter.

McWorther's World shud-shuddered. And the towering peaks of machinery and grain, cases and crates rumbled ominously as their slopes shifted. Titus' ears popped and he suddenly felt a giddiness that was all out of proportion to the number of juleps he had consumed.

An all-too-brief silence fell over the multitude. Then, as stability returned to the planetoid, they dived back into their various activities.

They were damned fools, McWorther thought. Even if it meant risking their lives, they would be willing to stay there and consort in their Olympian ecstasy of artistic communion. It was a field day, old home week, esoteric *anschluss*, a fraternal blowout —all rolled into one.

A distant explosion rent what was left of the compact atmosphere. And, as an immediate consequence, additional hundreds of tons of grain *hissed* down a nearby slope and eased into the lake.

Somewhat concerned, Titus stared at the myriad points of light coruscating deep out in space. What was happening was obvious: There were millions, perhaps billions of articles of freight in the same orbit—all maintaining their distances from the planetoid

and from one another by virtue of their mass-repulsion generators. And, where that many electronic units were concerned, the breakdown factor became a predictable quantity. McWorther's World could now expect to be the target of a plunging chunk of cargo once every four or five minutes.

Another few hours, Titus realized, and that interval would be reduced to four or five seconds. For he could readily see the infinite streams of freighters that were still arriving and dropping off additional cargo.

As a matter of fact, it was so thick out there now that only a faint, diffused light was coming through from McWorther's Sun.

Titus poured himself another mintless, sugarless, iceless julep.

THE insigne of the Western Cluster emblazoned on its side, a giant ship felt its way down through the atmosphere, sidled this way and that as it squeezed through the barrier of anchored Pullman crafts, pulled up and hovered over the southern edge of the veranda.

At that particular moment, Titus had been quite fascinated with the tumblers' practice session. One of the gymnasts, preparing for a back-flip, had taken a boost from the cupped hands of another. Only the resulting arc through the air was executed with slow-motion rhythm that took the performer to a height of perhaps twenty feet before he floated back to the ground.

At the same time, Titus' ears popped again and he had the odd sensation that the deck chair was shrinking away beneath him.

The newly arrived ship lowered an escalator to the surface and the pilot glided down, landing only a few feet from McWorther.

"There seems to be some mistake," he said. "I was given these coordinates and orbital factor for a—" he checked his notebook—"McWorther's World."

"This," said Titus stiffly, "*is* McWorther's World."

Cupping his hands, the pilot called back into the ship. "We're on the right place."

An alarmed face poked out of the hatch.

"*This* is it?"

Titus lurched to his feet, returning an equally startled expression. The man coming down the escalator was President Vance Roswell of the Western Federation! He had seen the face on thousands of newscasts.

Roswell, sickened, stared at the mountains of supplies on the obscured surface of the planetoid. He tilted his head back and took in the glimmering sea of cargo out in space, the flaring trails of exhaust

jets that criss-crossed in an infinite pattern as endless streams of ships jockeyed into position to discharge more freight. Then he dropped to the veranda railing and buried his face hopelessly in his hands.

By then, one of the orchestra conductors, who had also recognized the President, had abruptly brought his baton down to terminate the "Lyraen Overture." He led his ensemble into a stirring rendition of the "West Cluster Anthem."

Without interrupting his misery, Roswell elevated a limp hand and signaled for quiet.

But even before the musicians tapered to silence on a jagged, perplexed note, the other orchestra blared forth with the "East Cluster Blast-off March," all its members standing and facing the northern edge of the veranda.

Titus watched the impressive vessel float to the surface, its almost invisible repulsor beams jostling the lesser Pullman ships out of its way. Splashed across its side was the fist-clutching-galaxy symbol of the Eastern Federation.

He was still gawking when the hatch opened, ushering onto the tiled surface none other than the Emperor himself—an immense, brilliantly robed man who swept like a bowling ball through his retinue of aides.

THERE were two distant explosions, one close on the heels of the other, and the planetoid convulsed. That time, Titus imagined, he had seen one of the masses of cargo plunging to the surface.

The Emperor drew up before Titus. But although his lips moved, no audible sound came from his mouth, since he was in the immediate range of the Eastern Symphony Orchestra's bass section.

Scowling, he whirled, threw up this arms and bellowed for silence. Quiet came as though someone had pulled a plug.

"Now," he said, propping his fists on his hips and flaring his robe out even further, "perhaps someone will enlighten me. I'm looking for McWorther's World. It's supposed to be here."

Titus poured a triple, undiluted julep and gulped down half of it. He said, "You're standing on it."

"*This!* That's impossible! What's the population?"

"Two — not counting the transients." Titus started to offer the Emperor the rest of his julep, thought better of it and drank it himself.

Roswell withdrew from his dejection, looked up and nodded, verifying the Emperor's stark suspicion. It was apparent that the President was only then aware of the Emperor's identity. And the latter was obviously no less surprised on recognizing his counter-

part from the Western Cluster.

They only stared uncertainly at each other while the hundreds of virtuosos, sensing the propriety of demonstrating their loyalty, split into two groups and took sides behind their respective leaders.

Roswell laughed finally. It was a high-pitched, unnatural sound that conveyed no glee at all and grew only more ragged as his shifting stare once again took in the completely ruined merchandise on the surface, the practically irretrievable cargoes adrift in space. His pitiable outburst suggested an infinity of futility over the wanton waste. It spoke wordlessly of sterility for hundreds of productive worlds over the years ahead—economic sterility, and its inevitable consequence of military impotence.

The Emperor watched him for a moment, then dropped to the veranda rail beside him. He didn't join in the almost hysterical laughter. But his glum features reflected sympathetic appreciation of Roswell's predicament. And in his heavy silence was the admission that the circumstances were mutual.

McWorther's World trembled again. Titus inclined his head to one side, jiggling a finger in his ear to stop it from popping. He could have sworn, too, that he had seen the Emperor and the President levitate a good several inches off the rail.

Edna stalked from the house, surveyed the new arrivals without giving any indication she had recognized them and wagged a finger in her husband's face.

"Titus, this has gone far enough!" she exclaimed. "If you don't—"

"Later, Love," he pacified. "Something's going wrong."

She was taken aback by his understatement. But he hadn't meant it that way. He had merely expressed suspicion over his recurrent sensations of lightness.

ALMOST at the same time, two other ships dropped down at the edge of the veranda. The hatch of the first sprang open and disgorged a thin man in a swallow-tail coat who drew rigidly erect and announced:

"His Most August Excellency, Prime Minister Netath of Gauyuth-Six!"

Ogarm Netath, indignation branding his features, strode out. "Where's this Potentate McWorther character?" he demanded.

A hundred extended fingers singled out Titus, who was just then pouring a thirteenth julep.

Netath stomped over. "You, sir, have got *my* aid consignments!"

By that time, the other ship had thrown open its hatch and

a short, stout man in a business suit emerged.

"I am Wheeler of Rear-Sobucks and Company," he disclosed, standing to one side so that two men working with antigrav grapples could wrestle a large crate onto the veranda. "I have an apology and an automatic bather for Potentate McWorther."

But Titus turned his back on the man, abruptly facing his wife. "Good God! What day is it?"

She frowned in puzzlement. "Why, Wednesday."

There was a sharp explosion nearby as another article of cargo came hurtling down from space.

"And it's almost noon!"

She nodded, still perplexed.

"Get into the spaceabout, Love—*quick!*"

She hesitated and he gave her a shove.

But he paused and faced the others. "You got just about fifteen minutes to climb into your contraptions and clear out—all of you! Because by then we'll be fresh out of gravity!"

And they'd be lucky if they had *that much* time, he realized as he followed Edna into the small craft. He had known he would have to face the inevitable crisis on Wednesday. But all along he had been off one day in his calculations, such that he had been sure today was only Tuesday.

"What is it, Titus?" his wife asked as he strapped himself in beside her.

"The supplementary gravity generator hasn't been refueled! It's sputtering out!"

From space, he watched the end of McWorther's World.

The atmosphere went first, *swooshing* outward as a result of abrupt decompression and leaving a halo of frozen water crystals in its wake. Then the cargo that was piled on the surface recoiled from its own cumulative pressure and shot out into space. The topsoil followed suit, dispersing like a dust storm, while the lakes boiled in one instant and their vapor froze in the next.

Before any of the hurtling mess could reach his spaceabout, Titus followed the Pullman crafts, the Rear-Sobucks delivery vehicle and the Presidential and Imperial yachts into hyperspace.

TITUS and Edna McWorther have given up rustic retirement. Instead they are living out their declining years in a floating villa just off the Jersey coast.

Life is still gratifying, with the exception of one detail.

But Titus is resolved that he and his wife will have to be content with the shower-masseur for the rest of their lives.

At any rate, he'll be damned if he'll put in another order for an automatic bather, with or without a back-scrubbing attachment. **END**

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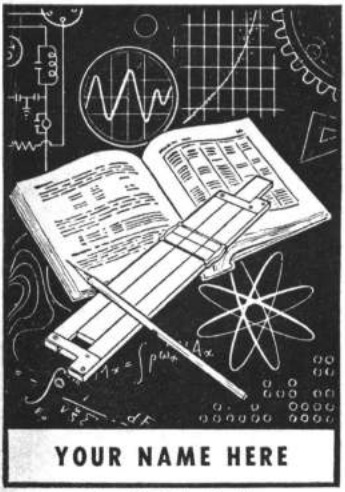

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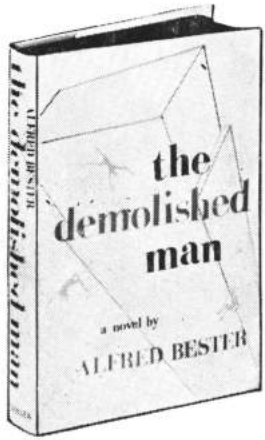

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