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THE ORDEAL OF DOCTOR TRIFULGAS

By

JULES VERNE

GORDON DICKSON . AUGUST DERLETH . IRVING COX

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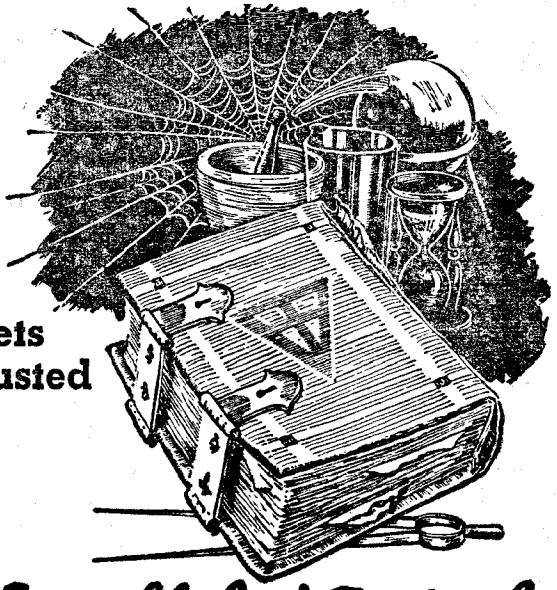

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THERE are some things that **cannot** be generally told—*things you ought to know.* Great **truths are dangerous** to some—but factors for *personal power* and *accomplishment* in the hands of **those who understand them.** Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws—their amazing discoveries of *the hidden processes of man's mind,* and *the mastery of life's problems.* Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today.

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MX KNOWS BEST

It is said the trouble with the world is people... they're so prone to hasty, hot-headed judgements. So what could be better than to leave the big decisions to the cool, electronic calculations of a logical machine? Only how can emotional and imperfect beings feed unemotional and perfect data to any machine?

by GORDON R. DICKSON

THE BARROOM seemed to tilt a little as he walked in.

"Let's get drunk, Dugie," said Allen Morg, climbing onto a bar stool.

"This time in the morning?" Dugie peered at him from behind the bar, his smooth, round, young-looking face seeming to bob like a balloon in the dimness. "At ten a. m.? What kind of a bad decision did you get?"

"Give me a drink, Dugie," said Allen. The round face advanced and peered at him.

"You been drinking it up already. Maybe I should punch for a decision on eighty-sixing you."

"Give me a drink," said Allen. And then the whole room swung crazily, the ceiling came down in front of his eyes and there was a blank space for a while.

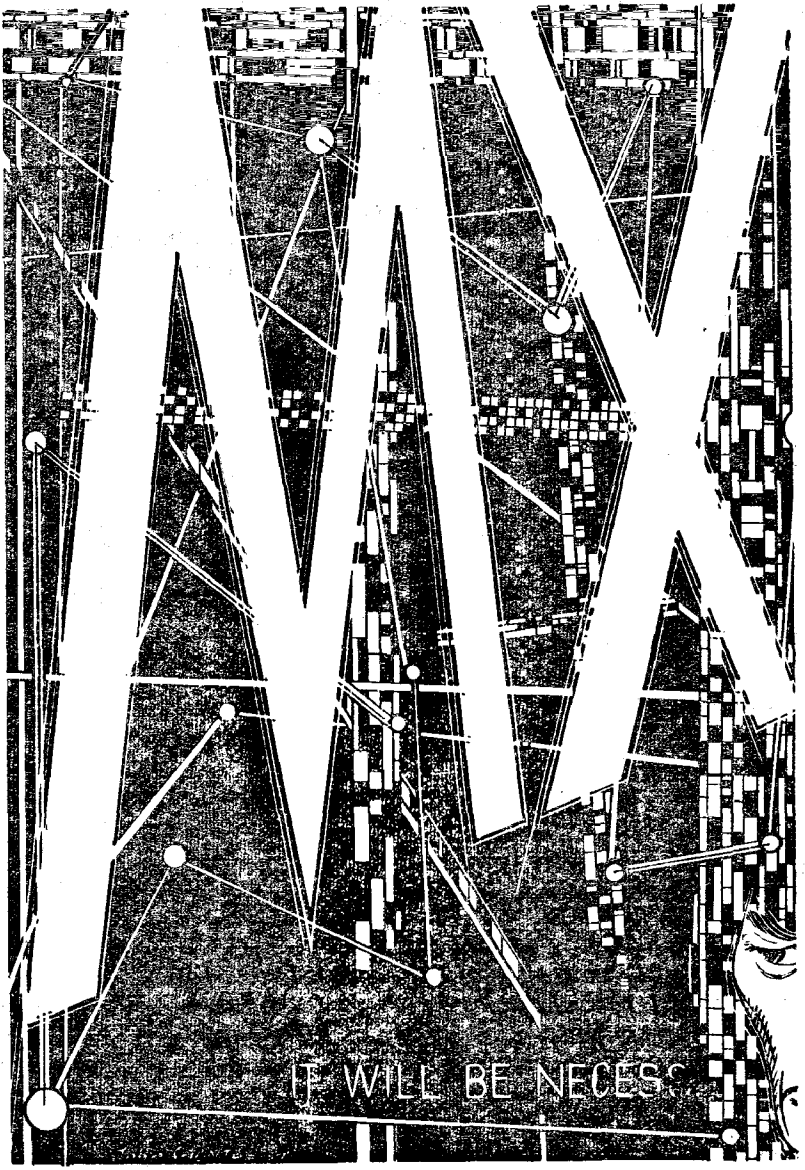
HE CAME to in one of the private lounges, and Galt Bolver was there.

"Feel better now?" Galt asked.

"Where'd you come from?" asked Allen.

"Dugie called me. He'd have sent you home, but he didn't know where your apartment is. What's all this business about an ax?"

"Ax?" With great effort, Allen raised his head and looked past Galt's long, friendly horse face to the rest of the lounge. There was no ax in sight. He let his head drop back wearily. "I must have lost it, someplace."


IT WILL BE NECESS

"You're lucky. Dugie's been checking. One place you were in last night almost put in a riot call. You said you were going to chop up MX."

"Did I?"

"You did."

Silence descended on the lounge. After a while, Allen said, "Connie took off."

"Oh?" said Galt. He had been sitting still, shaggy and gaunt, just waiting by the side of the couch on which Allen was stretched out.

"We were kidding one night. I said we ought to punch for a decision before getting married. She took me up on it."

"Well?" asked Galt, after a minute.

"Negative. She took off. No forwarding address."

"When was this?" asked Galt.

Allen shrugged, gazing at the ceiling of the lounge with the bitter taste of anti-alcohol in his mouth..

"Yesterday," he said, "...or the night before."

"Your law office says you haven't been down in a week."

"Then it's a week," said Allen, expressionlessly.

Galt considered him.

"Want to do some more drinking?"

"No," said Allen. "I want my ax back."

"The man says it when he's sober."

"That's right," agreed Allen, "the man says it when he's sober."

Galt reached out and gripped his shoulder.

"Hang on a little while, buddy," he said. "I've got something better for you than an ax."

IT TOOK some twenty-eight hours to rebuild Allen Morg into a fair specimen of a sober human being again. Four o'clock of the following afternoon found him and Galt on Galt's airfoil platform, flying north out of the city to see some people.

"How far is it?" asked Allen, fitting his lean body comfortably into one of the soft chairs of the platform.

"About forty miles," answered Galt, squinting at the horizon with the balance wheel between his big hands. Allen looked at him.

"How come you never told me about these people before?"

"Before," said Galt, "you may not have liked MX, and you may have disliked people

taking its decisions for gospel —but were you ready to do something about it?"

"No, I guess not," said Allen.

"There you are."

The platform tilted and slid off in a slightly new, more northwesterly direction.

"Who are they, anyway? Can you tell me that now?" asked Allen.

"You know them. It's Jasper Aneurine, his sister Leta ...and someone else."

Allen frowned, his thin, rather good-looking face becoming even more intense than usually. He remembered the Aneurines. They had cropped up more than once at parties with Galt, several years back. He had not seen them since. Jasper was a silver-haired, upright man of the sort that seems to become abruptly handsome in late middle age. Leta, who must be a good twenty years or more her brother's junior, had not been unusually good-looking, but rather striking in her own way. Allen had been engaged to some other girl—not Connie—at that time, but he remembered being strangely and almost compulsively attracted to Leta, on the few occasions of their meetings. There was a sort of lonely, destined air about her.

"How long," asked Allen, "have you belonged to this bunch?"

"Oh," said Galt. "Almost ten years."

"I've known you fifteen."

Galt nodded. "But it wasn't just my secret."

"No," agreed Allen. "Still, ten years—all the while you've been hacking away as a trial lawyer, just like me at my contracts, and I never took you for a revolutionary."

"I'm not," said Galt.

"Aren't you?" said Allen, and laughed a little bitterly. "Try to take MX from the people who've given up making up their own minds, and see. The dope addict loves his drugs; the drinker loves his booze."

"Say instead," said Galt, "they can't do without them."

"Easy," said Galt, soothingly. "Easy. It's a big problem, but just a problem. That's all."

"Just a problem? How does that thing go?" demanded Allen. *"Our fathers' in their time sowed dragon's teeth...*

"...Our children know and suffer armed men. finished Galt.

THEY FLEW north and a little bit west past Scarbor-

ough, Tendale, and Cooper's City. They passed New Berlin and veered west again toward a little suburb called Kingsdale. There they came down on the parking pad of a private living area.

The drapes were pulled back on the living room beside the pad and a tall young woman with brown hair and a slim, intelligent face was waiting for them. The whispering air current of the wall cooled Allen's face for a moment as he stepped through the wall; then he was face to face with Leta Aneurine once more.

"Leta," said Galt. "You remember Allen."

"Very well," she said. She gave him a slim, firm hand and Allen found himself holding on to it for a short second with real thankfulness. After the desert heat and sun of Connie, this was cool water.

"I remember too," he said.

"Then I'm flattered," she answered, and turned to Galt. "Jasper and Frank are in the den."

"I'll go talk to them," said Galt. "You stay here with Leta, will you Allen?" And he stalked off, disappearing through a wall of screen light in the back of the room.

"And what makes Galt bring you out at last to see us?" asked Leta, turning back to Allen.

"Well..." He hesitated, but her perception was quick.

"Oh, I see," she said. "You're one of our sudden converts and I shouldn't ask. Would you like a drink—even if it's just to balance politely in your hand?"

He smiled, and found his old liking for her coming back.

"Thanks," he said, and trailed her across the room to a dispenser cabinet.

"What'll it be, now?" She opened the cabinet. A concealed rainbow of light played across the interior and a miniature, three-dimensional representation of his host's liquor supply revolved slowly for his inspection. Allen thought of the week just past with something like a shudder.

"Beer," he said. "light and cold."

"And in a stein," she said. She pressed appropriate buttons and handed it to him, taking a small glass of sherry for herself.

"Who's Frank?" he asked.

She led the way back to some easy chairs across the room. "Frank Campanelli. He's our technical expert."

"Technical expert?"

She smiled at him. "Jasper'll tell you. And how's business in court these days?"

"You've got me confused with Galt. I just write contracts—a sort of glorified clerk." He gazed at her curiously. "You know, I never did know what you do."

"I write poetry. Don't laugh," she added gravely, "I make a great deal of money at it. I do graded stories in poetic imagery for the school-age child. How are contracts, then?"

"Fine."

"Then it's woman trouble."

He started. "How do you know?"

"Why, I was born an expert, being female. And received the normal twenty years or so of postgraduate instruction customary for girls." She bit her lip. "Including the instincts and habit of poking my nose into what's probably none of my business. I'm sorry."

"It's nothing." He shrugged. "We punched for a decision on getting married. MX said no ...and she took it to heart."

Leta did not answer for a second. She seemed to be thinking,

"You know," she said, suddenly. "If I were Frank, or Jasper—or Galt, even, I wouldn't trust you."

He was both shocked and wounded. He stared at her in astonishment.

"Why not?" he challenged.

"You might change back, just as suddenly as you changed to." But she looked at him almost appealingly as she said it, as if begging him not to blame her for a judgement she couldn't help.

"What do you mean, suddenly?" he said. "Why, I've felt this way for years."

"But you've never done anything about it until now."

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

She made a defensive, apologetic gesture with one hand, as if warding off a blow.

"Well, perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps you're just not a leader."

"And you, I see," he said harshly, "are one of those women with a high IQ and nothing else, who justify themselves by taking jabs at every man they come in contact with."

The sudden storm of their antagonism blew itself out into silence. She had turned her head away, and it was not until he got up and went around to

face her that he saw there were tears on her cheeks.

"You started it," he said.

"Yes," she said. "It's my fault."

He would have taken the one step that would have brought him to her, but at that moment Galt stuck his head through the light wall.

"Come on," he ordered, briefly; and disappeared again. Allen turned back to Leta and saw her using a handkerchief to repair damages.

"Go ahead," she said. "I'll be along in a minute."

A LITTLE reluctantly, Allen turned and went. Stepping through the light wall, he found himself in a narrow hallway that led to a miniature garden and fishpond. Beyond the garden, three men sat about a table in a room.

"Oh, here he is," Galt said as Allen came in. "Allen, you know Jasper. This is Frank Campanelli."

Frank was a dark little rubber ball of a man, about Jasper's age, or possibly younger; Leta's brother did not look his years. Now he nodded his silver hair at Allen. "Hello, Allen."

"Hello," answered Allen. He shook hands with Frank Campanelli, who had risen from his seat and extended a hand as stubby and firm as the rest of his body.

"Sit down," said Jasper. "Allen, Galt knows you well and of course I've met you a number of times. But you're a complete stranger to Frank. Mind if he asks a few questions?"

"Charge ahead," said Allen.

"What're you after?" asked Frank.

The question was so abrupt as to be discourteous, and the short man made no attempt to soften it, either by manner or phrasing. Allen took his time about lighting a cigaret.

"I'd like to put MX out of business," he said.

"How long do you think you'll feel that way?"

"Until MX is out of business," said Allen. "Look here—"

"Why do you think it ought to be put out of business?"

"Because ninety percent of the human race has lost the guts to make up their own minds for themselves," said Allen. "Why do *you* think it ought to be put out of business?"

"Well get to me later," said Frank. "How do you think we ought to go about doing it?"

"Well," said Allen, "I was going to try it with an ax.

Maybe you've got a better idea. Have you?"

Frank didn't answer him. He turned to Jasper.

"I don't like it," he said. "I don't like anything about it. People who heat up fast can cool off fast."

"Frank," replied Jasper, calmly, "Galt tells us Allen here's been ten years coming to this."

"Why didn't he come sooner?"

"You can't have it both ways, Frank," said Jasper. "Either Allen's too fast to anger, or too slow, but not both. For my part"—he gave Allen a friendly smile—"I think he's just about right in matter of speed."

"Why," asked Allen softly, "all the fuss?"

"Because," snapped Frank, turning on him, "this is no game. This is serious business—"

"OH, THERE you are, Leta," interrupted Jasper. "Come in and sit down with us. You remember Allen Morg, don't you?"

"I've just been talking to him," she said, taking one of the chairs at the table. "And I see Frank's been talking *at* him."

"Seriously, though," went on Jasper, quickly, before Frank could open his mouth again. "Frank is quite right. Most people have no idea what's been done to MX and what it's done to people."

"I can see what it's done to people," said Allen, unable to keep his eyes from straying to Leta. She sat with her eyes on her brother, a little abstracted, as if listening partially to her own inner thought, and did not glance at Allen.

"But do you realize the degree of it?" asked Jasper, leaning a little forward across the table. "Do you realize how it's become something that strikes at the very heart of the concept of individual freedom? The very thing that makes an individual in our society is his ability and preference for making his own decisions."

The silver-haired man's tone of voice was demanding in its claim upon Allen's attention. Reluctantly, he withdrew his eyes from Leta and looked at her brother.

"I know that," he said. "Doesn't everybody? It's obvious."

"Obvious, but how many people take it for granted just because of that? You know, the theory behind MX was a fine

one. Remember reading about it in school? A master device, a joining of the census records with the economic integration computer and the new—they were new then—psychologic computation methods. All in one machine. A public service. Code your name and what other personal information MX requested and ask your question. 'Should I buy myself a new living area now, or next year?' MX integrated the problem and came up with an answer to the best of its ability."

"To the best of its ability!" echoed Allen, a little bitterly.

"Exactly—to the best of its ability." Jasper's eyes gleamed darkly in his face under the silver hair. "That was the theory; ninety percent correct, ninety percent of the time, for ninety percent of the cases concerned. There, you see, was the illusion of freedom. No one, of course, would commit his life to the decisions of a machine which was only ninety percent accurate. Or so they thought. They forgot the perniciousness of habit—of the habit of having decisions made for you."

"The point is," said Galt, "people have been comforting themselves with a sense of freedom from MX that doesn't actually exist. As a practical matter, Allen, not ninety, but almost a hundred percent of the people use and obey MX a hundred percent of the time."

"Is it really that much?" asked Allen.

"That much."

"But the bad decisions—"

"They're explained away," said Jasper. "What does a man say when a decision turns out bad—say MX decides in favor of a man buying a platform now, instead of later? And the next day, with the new platform, he has an accident."

Allen nodded.

"I know," he said. "He says that maybe the computation figured a more serious accident if the machine was gotten later, or some such excuse."

"That's it!" The eyes in Galt's long face seemed to pounce like a hawk. *"Maybe MX knows best!"*

There was a little silence.

"A new god," said Allen, thoughtfully.

"A new god," said Galt. "And a jealous god."

Leta got up from her chair. Outside, in the garden, the light was fading.

"Time for dinner," she said. "I'll go see about it." She looked across the table into Al-

len's eyes. "You'll be staying for the evening."

"Thank you," said Allen, and watched her leave the room.

AFTER DINNER, he managed to corner her on a little balcony overlooking that same garden with the fishpond. He felt a strange necessity to talk to her further, to understand her. It was as if an entirely new sort of curiosity had laid hold of him, and grew with the mounting intimacy of their talk.

"Tell me one thing," he asked, after a while. "Are you in this because of your brother, or because you feel strongly about MX, yourself?"

She looked up at his face in the dim light of the shadowed balcony.

"Because I feel strongly about MX," she said.

"I see," he answered. He was oddly disappointed and she sensed it.

"You don't like fanatic females, is that it?" The tone was light, but it quavered betrayingly on the last word. He looked down at her, and all at once her helplessness, reached through to him; here, he felt flooded with tenderness toward her.

"You're not a fanatic female," he said.

Suddenly, like someone who at last surrenders completely, she leaned against him. He put his arms around her. She murmured against him and he felt the warmth of her breath through his shirt.

"I don't know...I don't know..." she whispered. "I know this is right, but I want to live a normal life, too."

He put his head down to kiss her, but she avoided him.

"No. Please don't," she murmured. "Please."

"Why not?"

"It's just that it's too soon yet. I couldn't help thinking of you as on the rebound."

"You don't trust me," he said, bitterly.

She didn't answer. He put a finger under her chin and forced it upward so that she had to look at him.

"You don't trust me," he repeated.

Her face showed the pain in her.

"Oh, Allen!" she said, miserably. Brutally, he let her go and stepped away.

"Wait, Allen!" she cried behind him. "I don't care about me. It's Jasper and the others."

"Why," he demanded, turn-

ing back, "what do you think I'd do to them? Snitch to MX on them?"

She did not answer. With a sudden sense of fury and shock, he stared at her.

"You *do* think that!"

"Oh, Allen! Allen, darling" —she reached out to him, but he stepped back from her— "it's just that you aren't settled, you aren't stable..."

But he was burning with anger and determined to punish her.

"Thanks for letting me know about it," he said, and left her.

HE MANAGED to cool down as he returned through the several rooms and hallways that separated him from the sitting room where the others were having their after-dinner coffee. But it seemed he came in on an argument here, too; the voices of Galt and Frank ceased abruptly as he entered; and all three men looked up at him from their chairs with the afterwash of strained emotion on their faces.

"What's up?" he asked, taking a cup of coffee from the dispenser and sitting down in a chair that was grouped with theirs.

"Nothing," said Galt, tightly. "Frank thinks we're going a little too fast with you, that's all."

Allen met the other man's dark, hard eyes.

"That's his privilege," he said, lightly.

"Perhaps," said Galt, his tone smoothing out. "At any rate, it's beside the point, because Jasper and I outvoted him. Now, Allen I want you to listen with an open mind to what Jasper and Frank have to tell you, because it's the result of years of work."

Allen looked at him a little curiously, but Galt's long face was heavy with seriousness.

"Go ahead," said Allen, nodding.

Jasper cleared his throat, and Allen turned to look at him. The tension, the very feverishness that had been in the silver-haired man was gone. He spoke with the easiness of an experienced professor addressing his seminar.

"I'm the social expert in this business, Allen," he said. "It's been my job to study and understand all the change and effect which MX has caused in our human society during the last fifty years." He put his coffee cup down on the arm of his chair and leaned forward.

"You know," he tapped with one slim finger on the arm of the chair, "after the last shouting and drum-playing was over that celebrated the uniting of this world into a single social unit, the problems really came along. Personal problems, Allen. People were unsure of how they were supposed to act and react in this new world they suddenly had. And that's what MX grew out of—a sort of super-advisory service that was set up at that time."

Allen frowned.

"It's a fact." Jasper nodded emphatically. "There actually was a bureau with branches in every community to answer questions; you can look it up for yourself in the history books if you want to. Anyway, of course it got more and more mechanized, or automationized, if you like that word better, until they finally conceived of MX as a final answer to the problem. You know the rest of it—how people became more and more dependent on it. But what most people don't realize is the logical basis for the development."

"Logic?" echoed Allen "I don't see any logic in it at all. It's just plain mental laziness."

"No, no," said Jasper, quite earnestly. "There's the habit angle, to be sure, but there had to be something beneath and before that. There's a strong, original, logical reason for a man trusting MX's decisions instead of his own. It's this same business of percentages. MX, a man knows, is right ninety percent of the time, on the average. And he asks himself if he can do as well on his own. Usually, he believes he can't."

Allen frowned again. "But it's a gamble," he said. "Anyone knows that. You might believe that and still happen to fall into the ten percent bad answer section regularly."

Jasper nodded.

"Yes," he said. "But still, that's the logic we're up against. And on its own ground it's unbeatable, because it presupposes infallibility on MX's part. In other words, that ninety percent is something everybody thinks they can count on. But if we can destroy that faith, and replace it with a healthy attitude of doubt, we'll have people regaining their emotional integrity and their emotional balance."

"Clear enough," Allen looked across at him. "How do we go about it?"

JASPER smiled calmly.

"We're going to gimmick MX," he said. "We're going to cheat most outrageously in a good cause to remind people that a machine—even a machine like MX—can be taken advantage of by a human being. People are going to start getting some surprising answers to their questions, answers that will turn out to be dead wrong. And sometime after that our gimmicks will be discovered."

Allen was slightly puzzled.

"Sorry," he said, "but I don't see—"

"Why," said Galt, "a man who has been awakened to the possibility that MX can be gimmicked, will have a job on his hands recovering his blind faith in it. He'll say to himself, sure, they found *that* gimmick, but suppose there's others they haven't found? Suppose somebody's r i g g e d it somehow, someplace else, for his own advantage?"

"Ah," said Allen, slowly. "I see."

"Yes," Jasper nodded at him. "Simple, crude, and *effective.*"

"How's it to be done?"

Jasper did not answer. He turned his head to look at the short man, his friend.

"Frank..." he said.

Frank looked back at him stonily.

"He could be the death of all of us," Frank said.

"We settled that," said Galt, a little sharply.

Allen felt anger stir in him.

"Just what do you mean?" he demanded. "I could be the death of all of you?"

"Allen, no offense meant." Jasper spoke quickly, soothingly. "You just don't know MX as well as we do."

"What's MX got to do with my giving you away?"

"I'll tell you!" Frank broke in with sudden savagery. "MX has the necessary parts to kill us off if it finds out about us!"

Allen stared at him.

"What kind of a bogeyman tale is this?"

"Bogeyman!" said Frank, and all but turned his back on them in disgust.

"No, Allen, it's true," said Galt. "Tell him, Frank."

"Listen," said Frank, turning back, "this is my field; I know. What the men who set up MX wanted in the first place was a device to reckon the probability of one human action succeeding over another. Just that. They couldn't build an actual predicting machine for two reasons. One, nothing

human hands could build and human mind conceive, could possibly take *all* the factors into account. Two, there was always the possibility that some of the factors supplied to their device would be false, or falsely stated."

"All right." Allen was determined he would not back down an inch. He faced the shorter man. "What of it?"

"What of it? That's what MX *was*—just a probability computer. But then the human factor came into it. The more people leaned on MX decisions in their daily life, the more they wanted it to be more accurate, more omnipotent, more godlike. And then the changes began."

"What changes?"

"There've been a lot of them," growled Frank. "But there's only two that did real damage. Twenty-three years ago, what was called a *balance factor* got added. And nine years ago something called an *implementation circuit.*"

He glared at Allen.

"The balance factor was an element added that allowed MX to compensate for the psychological profile of the person asking the question. It could compensate in the direction of what it assessed to be the *real* desire and good of the questioner. The implementation circuit—I suppose even you know that most of our transportation devices, large production units and automatic machinery are directed by MX?"

"I knew some were..." said Allen.

"Almost all. All right, this implementation circuit allows MX to make use of the mechanical facilities it controls to implement its own decisions. And finally, in order to make this addition workable, it was necessary to add one thing that should never have been built into MX."

"What?"

"A desire circuit." Frank looked at him with grim triumph. "MX was furnished with the need to try and make its decisions work out."

FOR SOME reason this statement was apparently expected to be a bombshell. Allen was merely puzzled.

"I don't get it," he said.

"You should," replied Frank. "It means we're all living under the thumb of a machine whose prime purpose is to have the world run in ac-

cordance with its own decisions."

Allen stared.

"What it means for us," added Galt, leaning forward, "is that MX will fight back at any attempts to damage it, or its prestige."

Allen sat back. Slowly he relaxed, and smiled a little, in spite of himself.

"Oh, now I—" he began.

"It's the truth," interrupted Galt.

"A machine can't be inimical." Allen looked at Galt. "It can't deliberately try to hurt you."

"How about an aerial torpedo with a seeker circuit that hunts down it's target?"

"But the initial impulse had to come from a human decision—"

"So," broke in Frank, "did the implementation factor, with it's desire circuit. That was MX's original impulse."

"Believe us, Allen," said Galt. "This is fact."

"How do you know it all?" demanded Allen. There was a little silence.

At last, Frank said harshly, " designed the implementation circuit."

Allen looked at him. But the short man's face was a mask of anger that blocked off any urge to sympathy. Allen sighed.

"All right," he said. "I believe you. Now what? How do you keep safe from it?"

"A mechanical device," said Jasper, "has its limitations. It may be able to respond to an actual threat, but it can't respond to a threat that's unexpressed."

"And the sense organs of MX are the coder panels," said Galt. "Unless information reaches it through that—about us, or example—it hasn't any way of knowing we're dangerous to it."

"Then it's simple," said Allen. "Don't use the panels."

"Exactly," said Jasper. "I haven't used them for fourteen years, Frank for just about as long, and Galt for eleven. And you mustn't either, Allen."

"I?" Allen smiled. MX doesn't know I know you, or anything about this."

Jasper shook his head.

"Have you any idea how many factors it's possible for MX to take into account in making a decision?" he asked.

"No idea," replied Allen, cheerfully.

"Well, it's something over half a million. All the years we've been keeping scrupulous-

ly away from the coder panels, we've still had to report on the census, pay our taxes, make purchases in the food and shopping centers, and maintain bank accounts. MX has years of information on us, lying like unfused dynamite in the code punches on our cards and waiting for the one pertinent fact that will show us up for the threat we are to its own existence."

"But what could it tell from me?" asked Allen.

"We don't know," said Galt. "But the chance is too risky to take. Leave the panels alone, Allen. You don't need them, anyway."

"No," Allen sighed. "That's true." He brightened up. "Well, how about the rest of this? How about the gimmick?"

The other two men turned to Frank, who looked at them for a second, his dark eyes unmoving.

"No!" he said.

The word dropped like a stone into the pool of waiting silence, sending little rings of emotion rippling through the others.

"No!" echoed Jasper. "Why not?"

"Because it's too soon," said Frank. "I just met this man today. Let him wait for the details."

"I told you," said Galt, in the patient tones of a man who is repeating what he had already repeated many times before, "that I know him. That I trust him. That I vouch for him. Also, we need him—not in a few days, but right now. Things are almost finished."

"No," repeated Frank.

"Frank—J a s p e r 's voice brought the short man's head a r o u n d— "you're wrong. You're usually right to be cautious, but this time you're wrong. If you won't tell him, *I will.*"

"Then I wash my hands of it." Frank stood up abruptly and, turning his back, strode across the room to rip back the drape hanging in front of the air wall. Beyond, the night sky and a full yellow moon, early and enormous just above the treetops, looked in on them. Frank stood, legs spread a little apart, staring out at it and not moving.

"ALLEN..." said Jasper, gently, and Allen turned his attention back to the silver-haired man, who opened a drawer in the arm of his chair and took out a tiny, dark object, like a miniature condens-

er, which he handed to Allen. Allen took it curiously, examining the small, black central body from which two short wires sprouted.

"There's only one part of itself where MX wouldn't be aware of someone working on it," said Jasper, "and that's the coder panels themselves. They're easily opened with a repairman's key, and in about forty seconds a trained man can open one, attach that little object you're holding, and reclose the panel. The spot where it attaches and its design make it almost indistinguishable from the ordinary factory assembly of a coder's innards. Even a trained repairman would have to be looking for it, to find it once it was attached.

"That's what you want me for?" asked Allen.

"We're about ready to start adding these things to the coder panels—not just here, but the world over. We've been making them by hand for eight years now, in thousands of little groups like this one. Now, we need every pair of hands we can get."

"What does it do?" asked Allen.

"It distorts the information coded on the panel. MX will receive false information from anyone using the coder; as a result, it will hand out a false decision."

Allen nodded.

"I see," he said, slowly. "Yes, I see." His hand closed tightly over the little object, and slowly, he nodded.

THERE WAS a chance before Galt and Allen left that evening, for Allen to snatch a few free minutes. Once more he went in search of Leta, and discovered her, finally, in her own room. She was dressed for bed and sitting on the railing of a small terrace outside her room, gazing at the same moon that had provided a focus for Frank's attention a short while earlier in the sitting room. Against the moonlight, in the filmy nightdress, she looked like some sad figure out of an old painting, all black and silvery gray. With a rush, all the hard emotions flowed out of Allen, like water from a broken cup, and he almost groped his way across the room toward her.

"Leta..." he said.

She rose and clung to him. For a minute, they said nothing, just held on to each other. After a little while, he begged her to come away with him.

"...you don't want this. It isn't *your* life."

She pressed herself tightly against him.

"But it is," she said. "You can't live with something for fifteen years like this and not have it be your life."

"That's not true," he answered "It was Jasper's choice, but not yours. You didn't pick this."

"That doesn't make any difference."

"You *want* to come with me, don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she cried. "I don't know!"

"Yes, you do."

She raised her face to look at him.

"Would you run out, Allen?"

"I?" he said, surprised. "But I don't mean that you should run out. All I mean is for you to come away from here to where you can lead your own life. I'm going through with this, of course. I want to."

"But you want me, too," she said.

"Well, why not?" he demanded. "Is there any reason why I can't have both?"

There was a noise from the doorway of the bedroom. They turned. Frank stood just inside the shadow of the aperture, his face in shadow.

"Jasper wants to see you, Leta," he said. His voice was perfectly even.

"Oh—" she gasped. "Excuse me." She turned and went swiftly out the door. Frank stepped aisde to let her pass. Then he walked toward Allen.

"You needn't apologize," Allen said grimly.

"I wasn't going to." Frank had emerged into the moonlight on the terrace. He looked upward at Allen's face. "Leave Leta alone," he said.

Allen considered him. "Why?"

"A number of reasons." Frank's moonlight-pale face had no expression. "The best is that I know you by reputation—from Galt and others. You can't be trusted."

Allen felt the familiar stir of anger, boiling like some slow, heavy liquid inside him.

"Can't be trusted...how?" he asked, softly.

"In any way," answered Frank, quite calmly. "That was why I didn't want to tell you about the gimmicks downstairs. You're not the man to belong to an organization, Morg. You're an egoist; and you'll put yourself first. You'd betray any of us—all of us—if the choice was right."

"And you," replied Allen, brutally, "are in love with Leta."

Frank did not stir, or change his unmoving countenance.

"Of course," he said. "But that doesn't come into it."

"I think it does."

"What you think," went on Frank, easily, "is of no importance whatsoever. I've been forced into risking my life and my work on you. I won't risk the lives of the people I love. And if you keep after Leta, the time'll come when you'll put the rest of us on the auction block to buy what you want with her."

Allen grinned with rage. He was seething up inside into boiling fury.

"So what?" he asked.

"So stay away from her," continued Frank. "If you don't, I'll kill you." He reached into his shirt, took his hand out again, and there was a small, snapping sound. The long, thin blade of a knife displayed itself in the moonlight. Allen made an involuntary little sound and took a step backward. "Oh, not with this ...and not now," said Frank. "I just wanted to show you I meant what I said. I will kill you, one way or another, even if it costs me my own life for doing it." He folded the knife and put it back into his shirt.

"Galt's waiting for you at the pad," he said.

He turned and left. Allen stared after his small, blocky figure as it disappeared down the hall. After a moment, he followed.

Galt *was* waiting for him, at the landing pad.

"Oh, here you are," he said, a little impatiently, as if he had been waiting for some time. "Come on. It's late enough already, and I have to be in court early tomorrow.

He led the way to the platform, and they took off.

IT WAS A quiet ride back to the city. Allen was thinking, and Galt evidently had his mind on the case he was to plead the next day. When they reached the city transportation center and left the platform for separate cabs, Allen, instead of going directly home to his apartment, rode to a little neighborhood bar for a cup of coffee.

He was in an incredibly disturbed state of mind. Great rewards and great penalties juggled themselves in his mind. On the surface, it was fantastic that he should feel this deeply about a situation into which he had rather unwillingly fallen. But there was Leta, who had so strangely and so quickly reached through to him, and for whom he felt what he was

convinced was, for the first time, a real and actual love.

The short, thick-bodied Frank Campanelli, on the other hand... The sharp crystals of a genuine hatred were growing in the nutrient solution of Allen's resentment toward the man. The two emotions built on each other, even while Allen cautioned himself to go slowly, go carefully, so as not to be swept away by the swift current of his own turbulent feelings.

In his mind he resolved a cold, analytical appraisal of the situation. Leta was the product of her environment. Fifteen years of devotion to a common purpose had bonded their two lives together. There seemed no way to destroy that bond without destroying at least one of the parties to it, and Allen—he thought to himself with a touch of self-righteousness—unlike Frank, could not seriously consider murdering another man.

Allen shoved his coffee cup angrily from him. He was furious at the particularly self-defeating structure of the problem. On the one hand, Leta; on the other, Frank. And over all, the looming greatness of the job of sabotage they were all committed to, to, together.

Like a sharp breaking-in of light on some dark place, the answer dissolved the obscurity of the situation. Of course! Once the sabotage had been committed, once their work had been discovered in millions of coder panels and the general population had begun to wonder how long they had been there, had begun to question and doubt MX, speculating on whether there might still be other, more secret gimmicks concealed in it—then there would be no more work to link Frank and Leta together. Then Allen would face no more problem.

Or would he? The sudden doubt sprang thornily upright in his mind. Fifteen years were a great many years to live and work together. How strong could the habit of association grow, nourished by the winters, springs, and summers of all those years? After the job was done, would the ghost of it still stand in the moonlight, a knife in its hand, barring Allen's way to Leta?

THERE WAS a coder panel in a booth across the room. Allen half-rose before he remembered, and sat down with a curse on his tongue. Of course, he couldn't use it now. But this was exactly the kind

of question that MX was set up so beautifully to render a decision on. Disgustedly, Allen reached for his coffee cup, saw what he was about to do, and changed the motion of his hand to punch for a drink.

Yesterday he had thought that he would never be able to look at an alcoholic beverage with enjoyment again. But the Scotch and soda he punched for tasted clean and comforting when it came. And the quick glow, following shortly after it was down, took the unyielding edge off his disappointment.

He ordered another and sipped it. Already his mind was bouncing back from the block of the prohibition he had agreed to. To be sure, only a fool would do what he had almost done—go up, punch out the problem, giving his own name, Leta's and Frank's, and request a decision on the possibility of what he wished. But MX had been set up to handle theoretical problems, too. And what could be dangerous about a theoretical problem posed by an anonymous questioner?

How to phrase it? Allen revolved ideas in his mind, finished his drink and punched another. Then, with this half-completed, he got up and went over to the booth housing the coder panel.

Theoretical, he coded on the simple keyboard all children learned in school nowadays. Then he stated the problem in general terms, giving fictitious names for himself, Leta, and Frank.

MX was slow answering, slower than he ever remembered it being. And then, when the panel above the keyboard did light up, the words upon it were not what he had expected.

tioner to furnish additional tioner to furnish additional data on these two additional points.

1. *What is the nature of the work on which the older man and the girl have been engaged for the fifteen years stated?*
2. *Did the younger man referred to cease relationships recently with another girl or woman not mentioned, as a result of a decision by MX?*

For a few seconds, Allen did not move. Then, very quietly, leaving the questions still on the screen, he stepped back and out of the booth. Quietly, he closed the door, and quietly, he

walked out of the bar. Instinctively, his legs took him at a fast pace away down the nighttime street.

So, MX perhaps had been able to guess his identity from the situation in his question. Who would have thought its knowledge and its system to be so fantastically extensive? But that would be the most it could do. There had been no clue to Leta or Frank in what he said. As far as MX could know, they might be any two people, any two people anywhere in the world. Certainly there could be no record of them among the list of people MX would have of those whom he had had dealings with before.

As he went homeward, his spirits started to rise and after awhile he found himself whistling. What he needed, he told himself firmly, was a good night's sleep. In the morning, things would be different.

BUT MX WAS a tireless creature, and under the desire circuit it was not created to leave a problem unsolved. *Click, click, click,* went MX. In the endless cells and banks of its structure, little lights glowed, little impulses of current shot through. The problem was investigated, a picture built, an answer found.

From a slot in a panel overlooking a desk where a light glowed, five cards shot out to a wire basket. The bottom one glanced off an edge of the basket and all five slid out to lie under the soft glow of the light above.

In a couple of widely separated apartments in the city outside, wiring shorted and slow fires began to smolder behind bedroom walls. And north west of the city, a great automatic freight transport subtly altered it's blind, obedient course through the skies, so aiming itself toward a living area in a small suburb called Kingsdale. It's speed when it hit would be upwards of eight hundred miles an hour.

And under the light, the first five cards lay together on the table in a little heap.

Morg, James Allen. CANCELLED

Bolver, Galt Winton Harvey. CANCELLED

Aneurine, Jasper Renee. CANCELLED

Aneurine, Leta Marie. CANCELLED

Campanelli, Frank Thomas. CANCELLED

THE END

THE ORDEAL OF DOCTOR TRIFULGAS

Here is an astonishing discovery—a Jules Verne story never seen before in American books or magazines. It's a weird story, a real spooky tale, and, true to the master's imaginative genius, different from the standard patterns of fantasy. It was specially translated for SATURN by Willis T. Bradley.

by JULES VERNE

(translated by Willis T. Bradley)

WHOO-OO-OO... The wind is on the rampage. SH-SH-SH... The rain is falling in torrents.

The roaring gale bends the trees of the Volsinian coast and smashes against the slopes of the mountains of Crimma. Along the shore, the rocks are ceaselessly battered by the waves of the vast Megalocride Sea.

Whoo-oo-oo... Sh-sh-sh...

At the inner end of the harbor snuggles the little town of Luktrop. A few hundred houses, with weathered balconies that provide indifferent shelter against the winds from the sea. Four or five steep streets, gullies rather than streets, paved with cobblestones, cluttered with dross thrown out by the eruptive cones of Mount Vanglor in the background. The volcano is not far distant. During the day, interior pressure escapes in the form of sulfurous vapors; during the night, at one minute intervals, there are great belching flames. Mount Vanglor is the beacon, with a range of a hundred and fifty *kertses,* that marks the harbor of Luktrop for the coasting vessels—the *felzanes, verliches,* and *balanzes* whose stems cleave the waters of the Megalocride.

Behind the town huddle

ruins of the Crimmarian era. Beyond these is a shabby district of Arabian aspect, a *casbah,* with white walls, domed roofs, and sun-parched terraces. A heap of stone cubes tossed at a venture, like so-many dice with spots covered by the patina of time.

Conspicuous in the town is the so-called "Four-and-Six," a strange corner building with square roof and four windows on one facade and six on the other.

A belfry dominates the town, the square belfry of Saint Philfilene, with bells hanging in slits in the walls. These are sometimes set to ringing by the wind. A bad omen; when this happens, fear spreads through the countryside.

Such is Luktrop. In the outskirts are random dwellings, wretched hovels, scattered amidst the broom and the heather, as in Brittany. But we are not in Brittany. Are we in France? I do not know. In Europe? I cannot say.

And it is useless to search for Luktrop on any map.

TAP! A TIMID knock has sounded on the narrow, arched door of the house called Four-and-Six, on the corner of Messagliere Street. It is one of the most comfortable houses (if this word should ever have currency in Luktrop), and one of the wealthiest (if, year in, year out, to reap a few thousands of *fretzers* constitutes wealth).

The knock has been answered by frenzied barking, with baying overtones that suggest the howling of a wolf. And now a window above the entrance to the Four-and-Six is raised.

"The devil take all nuisances!" calls out an irritated and disagreeable voice.

A young girl, wrapped in a tattered cloak, is shivering in the rain. She asks if Doctor Trifulgas is at home.

"Whether he is or is not—that depends."

"I have come in behalf of my father. He is dying."

"Where is he dying?"

"Up in Karniou Valley, four *kertses* from here."

"And his name?"

"Vort Kartif."

A HARD MAN, this Doctor Trifulgas. Almost devoid of compassion, he never takes a case unless solid coin is handed over in advance. His dog Hurzof—half bulldog, half spaniel—would prove to have more heart than he. The house

of the Four-and-Six does not receive poor folk kindly; it is opened only for the rich. And there is a fixed price list: so much for typhoid, so much for congestion, so much for pericarditis and other ailments that doctors devise by the dozens. Now Vort Kartif, the biscuit maker, is a poor man, a man of miserable circumstance. Why should Doctor Trifulgas trouble to visit him, especially on a night like this?

"The mere fact of having got me out of bed," he growls as he lies down, "should be worth ten *fretzers!*"

Scarcely twenty minutes later the iron knocker of the Four-and-Six clanks again.

Fretting and fuming, the doctor leaves his bed and leans out the window.

"Who is there?" he cries.

"I am the wife of Vort Kartif."

"The biscuit maker of Karniou Valley?"

"Yes. And if you refuse to come, he will die!"

"Very well, then you will be a widow!"

"Here are twenty *fretzers*—"

"Twenty *fretzers* to go four *kertses* up into Karniou Valley!"

"In the name of mercy..."

"Go to the devil!"

And the window is closed again. Twenty *fretzers!* What a fine windfall! To risk a rheum or lumbago for twenty *fretzers*—particularly when next day he must go to Kiltreno to treat wealthy old Edzingov, whose gout can be exploited at fifty *fretzers* a visit.

With this agreeable prospect, Doctor Trifulgas falls asleep more deeply than before.

WHOO-OO-OO...! Sh-sh-sh... And then, *knock, knock, knock.*

Three blows of the knocker, struck this time by a more determined hand, are cutting through the fury of the storm. The doctor has been asleep. He wakes, and in what a humor! The window opens, and the storm comes in like a burst of grapeshot.

"I am here for the biscuit maker—"

"That wretch again!"

"I am his mother."

"Let his mother, his wife, and his daughter be buried with him!"

"He has had an attack—"

"Then let him defend himself!"

"We have collected some money," persists the grandmother, "an advance on our home, which we have sold to

Camondeur Dontrup of Messagliere Street. If you do not come, my granddaughter shall have no father, my daughter-in-law shall have no husband, and I shall no longer have a son!"

It is pitiful, terrible, to hear the voice of this old woman, to think that the wind is freezing the blood in her veins and that the rain is soaking the bones under her wrinkled skin.

"A stroke is two hundred *fretzers*." replies the heartless Trifulgas.

"We have only a hundred and twenty."

"Good night."

And again the window is closed.

But, upon reflection, a hundred and twenty *fretzers*, for a round trip of an hour and a half, plus a half-hour visit, means all of sixty *fretzers* an hour—a *fretzer* a minute. Small profit, but still not to be despised.

Instead of going back to bed, the doctor dons his corduroy suit, draws on his huge hip boots, struggles into his heavy wool greatcoat, and, with an oilskin hat on his head and mittens on his hands, goes down, leaving the lighted lamp near his pharmacopoeia, which lies open at page 197. Unlatching the door, he stands on the threshold of the Four-and-Six.

The old woman is waiting there, leaning on her staff, emaciated by her eighty years of deprivation.

"The hundred and twenty *fretzers?*"

"Here, and may God reward you a hundredfold!"

Without replying, the doctor whistles for Hurzof, offers him a tiny lantern, which he grips with his jaws, and sets out along the road by the sea.

The old woman follows.

WHAT ROARING wind! What driving rain! The bells of Saint Philfilene are set swinging by the gale. Bad omen, bah! Doctor Trifulgas is not superstitious. He believes in nothing, not even in his own science. . . except for the profit it yields him.

What weather indeed! But likewise what a road! Pebbles and dross; the pebbles slippery with sea wrack, the dross crackling under foot like clinkers. No other light but that of the lantern carried by dog, uncertain and flickering. Periodically a burst of flames from Vanglor, in the midst of which grotesque silhouettes seem to be writhing. No one knows for sure what might be found at

the bottom of its unfathomed craters. Perhaps souls of the Underworld, which volatilize as they emerge.

The doctor and the old woman follow the indentations of the shore. The sea is a leaden white, a mourner's white. It sparkles as it tosses off the phosphorescent crests of the surf, and it spills glittering streamers over the strand.

The two proceed in this way to the turn of the road into the dune country, where the broom and rushes knock together with the clatter of bayonets.

Now the dog draws near his master and seems to say:

"Well, not so bad! A hundred and twenty *fretzers* to put in the strongbox! This is the way to make a fortune! This is the way to enlarge our vineyard! One more dish at the evening meal. More scraps for faithful Hurzof. Let's take care of the wealthy sick, and bleed their purses!"

At this point the old woman stops. With a palsied finger she indicates a reddish glow in the darkness. It is the house of Vort Kartif, the biscuit maker.

"Over there?" says the doctor.

"Yes," replies the old woman.

"Harraouah!" howls the dog.

An unexpected explosion rocks Mount Vanglor, and a shudder runs down through its buttresses. A sheaf of smoky flames mounts into the sky, boring through the clouds. Doctor Trifulgas is toppled over by the blast.

With an oath he gets up and looks around.

The old woman is no longer behind him. Has she disappeared into some cleft in the ground, or has she flown off like a witch on a wisp of fog?

As for the dog, he is still there, rearing on his hind legs, his jaws agape, his lantern extinguished.

"Let's keep on!" mutters Doctor Trifulgas.

The honest man has accepted his hundred and twenty *fretzers*. Now he must earn them.

ONLY ONE point of light, half a *kertse* away. It is the lamp of the dying—perhaps of the dead. For that is surely the house of the biscuit maker. The grandmother has pointed it out. It cannot be anything else.

Through the whistling wind, the splashing rain, all the hubbub of the tempest, Doctor Trifulgas hurries forward.

As he approaches the house, it more and more clearly takes

shape. It is isolated in the middle of the heath. And it is singular to observe how much it resembles the doctor's own house, the Four-and-Six in Luktrop. Same distribution of windows in the facade, same little arched doorway.

Doctor Trifulgas moves as rapidly as the gale will permit. The door is ajar, and he has only to push it open. He enters, and the draught rudely slams it shut behind him.

Left outside, the dog Hurzof howls, with intervals of silence, like those observed by choristers between verses of a Psalm during the Forty Hours.

This is very odd. You would say that Doctor Trifulgas has returned home. But he has not lost his way. He has not wandered in a circle. Surely he is in the Karniou Valley, not back in Luktrop. And yet here is the same passageway, low and vaulted, the same winding wooden staircase, with a wide bannister worn down by the friction of many hands.

He mounts the stairs and reaches the landing. A feeble light filters beneath the door, as in the Four-and-Six.

Is this a hallucination? In the vague light he recognizes his own bedroom. There is the yellow sofa, the old pear-wood dresser, the ironbound strongbox in which he has intended to deposit his hundred and twenty *fretzers*. Here is his armchair, with leather headrest; here is his table with spiral legs, and on it, near the failing lamp, his pharmacopoeia, open at page 197.

"What is the matter with me?" he whispers.

What is the matter with him? He is afraid. His pupils are dilated. His body feels drawn in, shrunken. A cold sweat chills his skin, and he is covered with gooseflesh.

But come now! Hurry! For lack of oil, the lamp is going out—and with it the dying man.

Yes, there is the bed—his own bed, four-posted, canopied, as wide as it is long, drawn with flowered curtains. Could this possibly be the pallet of a miserable biscuit maker?

With trembling hand, Doctor Trifulgas grasps the curtain. He draws it aside and looks within.

The dying man, his head free of the coverlet, is motionless, as if he has just drawn his last breath.

The doctor leans over him. Ah, what a cry! And it is answered from without by the dismal baying of the dog.

The dying man is not the biscuit maker Vort Kartif—he is Doctor Trifulgas! It is he who has suffered a stroke, he himself!

Yes, it is for his own sake that they came to summon him, and in whose behalf they paid a hundred and twenty *fretzers!* He who, by his hardness of heart, refused to go out to care for the poor biscuit maker. It is he himself who is going to die!

Doctor Trifulgas is like a man possessed. He knows that he is lost. The symptoms are growing more exaggerated from moment to moment. Not only is all coordination failing him, but the beating of his heart and his breathing are slow.

What ought he to do? Lower his blood pressure by letting some blood? (Yes, blood is still let these days, and, as always, doctors can cure of apoplexy all who are not doomed to die of it.) If he hesitates, Doctor Trifulgas is a dead man....

The doctor seizes his instrument case, snatches his lancet, and cuts a vein in the arm of his other self. But blood does not flow from the arm. He desperately massages the other's chest; his own is no longer throbbing. He warms the feet with hot stones; his own are cold.

Then his other self sits up, struggles, utters a final death rattle....

And Doctor Trifulgas, in spite of all his learning and experience, *dies under his own hands.*

Whoo-oo-oo....
Sh-sh-sh....

NEXT MORNING, in the house of the Four-and-Six, only one body was found—that of Doctor Trifulgas. It was put in a coffin, and it was conducted with great ceremony to the Luktrop cemetery, in the wake of so many others that, as the people whispered, he had sent on ahead.

As for old Hurzof, it is said that ever since that day he has been running about the countryside, with his lantern relit, baying like a moonstruck dog.

I do not know whether this is true; but so many strange things happen in Volsinia, and especially in the vicinity of Luktrop....

At any rate, I repeat, do not look for this town on the map. Since its latitude, and even its longitude, continue to remain a matter of dispute among the best cartographers, it simply is not there.

THE END

THE SINGLE SHIP

How could Earth fight a war against an enemy whose base was unknown, who resources were unknown, and whose very physical appearance was unknown? Another thrilling episode of the Jacko War.

by ALAN BARCLAY

IN THE COMMITTEE room at United Nations Military Headquarters on Moon Base a meeting was reaching its conclusion. There were empty coffee cups on the table and ash trays piled with cigarette stubs. Men in the uniforms of several nations, civilians mostly wearing spectacles, and neatly dressed, self-possessed stenographers were beginning to fold documents back into brief cases and button up uniforms or jackets and glance at wrist watches.

"Finally," the chairman said, "it remains for Admiral Dickenson to select the man for the job."

Everyone turned to look at Admiral Dickenson. So far this had been a technical discussion, and he was representing Advanced Fighter Group. He had therefore not said much up till this moment.

Dickenson was a gray-haired American officer, with a face someone had once described as having been carved out of teak with a dull ax.

"What sort of man do you want?" he growled.

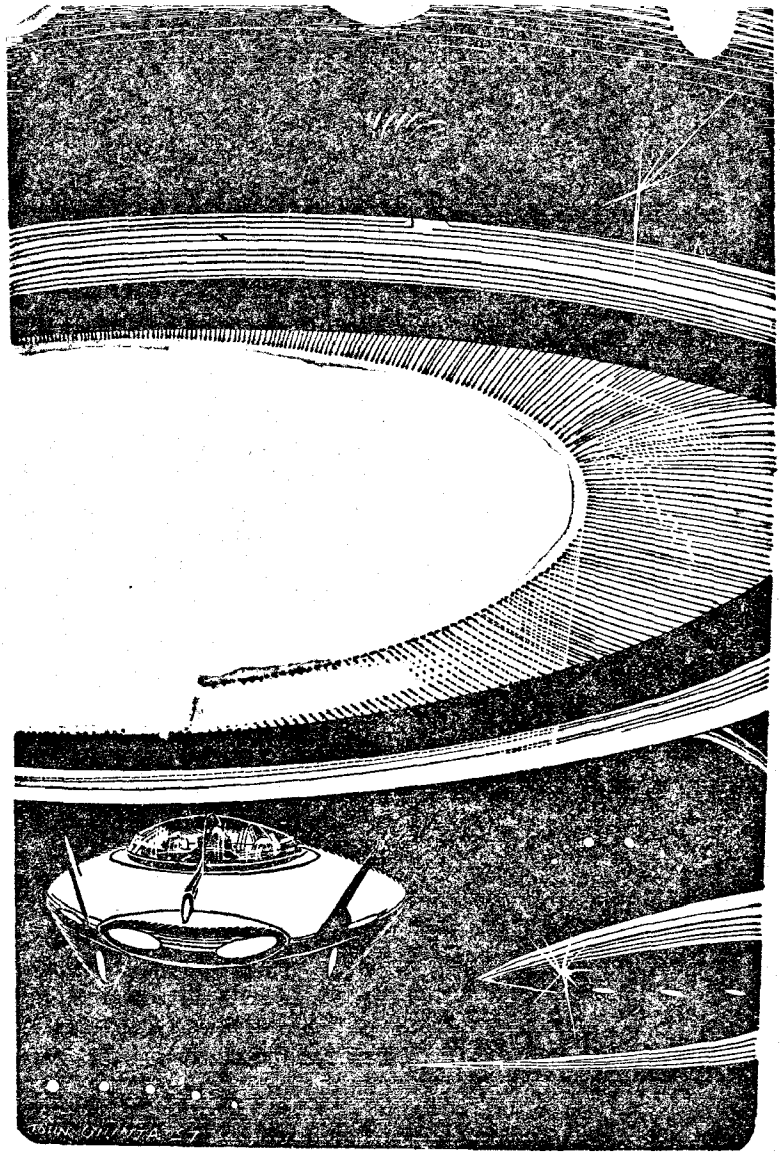
"You know what we want, Admiral," the chairman said. "The best you've got."

Dickenson began flipping through the pages of a typed document.

"Our men are all good," he said. "To get out into Fighter Group, stay there and continue to remain alive, they've got to be good."

"The best, Admiral," the chairman insisted.

Dickenson continued to turn the pages for a moment longer, then suddenly tossed the catalogue on the table. "I don't



have to look," he told them with a sigh, "I know the man you want... I'll give you Jason."

"Jason?" someone asked. "Never heard of him... What's his record?"

"Aged twenty-two—five kills to date."

"Only five? But we want your top-line man!"

"He's obviously inexperienced," another officer protested.

"If you refuse him for this mission nobody will be better pleased than me," Dickenson snapped. "He's one of the most likeable boys we've got. But you ask me for the most suitable man to do this job, and I say Jason. I stick to that."

"It's Admiral Dickenson's task to select the man," the chairman interposed. "And he tells us Jason. Let us send for Jason."

The committee picked up caps and files and papers, and dispersed. Some of them took the train across the plateau from Base into the lights and civilization of Moon City; others returned to their offices nearby.

ADMIRAL DICKENSON wrote an order and tossed it into his tray. It was picked up by a messenger, delivered to another office, recorded, and passed on to signals. Two hours later a radio man hammered it out with a host of other messages, orders, advice and information, all crammed together on the high-speed transmitter. It went out on a tight beam from a parabolic aerial carefully aimed towards a point many millions of miles out in space. The receiving aerial of Advanced Fighter Base picked up the whole stream of messages, drew them down into the interior of the rock and sorted them out.

Here the order hung fire for a week, for Lieutenant Jason was out on patrol. At the end of that time he returned, received his instructions, and soon found himself traveling back to Moon Base as passenger in a supply ship. When the transport touched down he got a lift in the ground-car over to Base, passed through the lock and was let loose among the maze of corridors and passages which burrowed into the side of the mountain.

He got a lift on a trolley along one of the main passages down as far as stores, and here he drew his kit, and changed

from operational rig into uniform—a neat, almost-new, well-pressed black uniform, with the scarlet and yellow rocket flare above the breast pocket.

The stores N.C.O. watched him pull on his cap and give it a tilt to one side.

"All set to give the girls a treat, sir?" he asked.

"I don't know, Sergeant. I've got to report to one of the big shots. This visit is business."

"Whatever it is, I expect you'll get a couple of days over at Moon City, sir," the sergeant opined.

"I hope so. Meantime, I must find Admiral Dickenson, I.C. Fighter Personnel. How do I get to him?"

"He'll be at Staff Headquarters. Go into the main corridor and thumb a lift on any trolley with a red circle on its front. Don't take a yellow circle, else you'll find yourself down in the dungeons among maintenance and we'll have to send out search parties for you."

Jason did as advised, and presently found himself at Staff Headquarters. He slid open a door marked *Admiral Dickenson — Personnel,* and came face to face with a young woman operating a typewriter —one of these good-looking, impeccably groomed, self-assured young women who invariably get jobs as personnel assistants to staff officers.

She for her part saw a medium-sized, rather thin, blue-eyed young man with fair wavy hair. For almost the first time in her life she had the experience of meeting a junior officer who looked neither bold nor shy, who neither called her Gorgeous nor Sis nor Babe. As a matter of fact, all Jason said was, "I'm reporting to Admiral Dickenson—the name's Jason."

"Yes, Lieutenant," she said, with more warmth than she generally extended to junior officers. "Go right in."

Jason went through the inner door and saluted the man at the desk. "Lieutenant Jason, sir," he announced.

Dickenson put down his pen and leaned back in his chair.

"Take a seat, Jason," he said, watching the young man appraisingly.

Jason sat down. He crossed one leg over the other and clasped his hands round his knee. Dickenson noted that he remained in that position without changing, entirely at his ease; no fidgeting, no twiddling

of fingers or twitching of uniform. He looked the grim, hard-faced old admiral straight in the eye.

"Ha!" the old man grunted. "I've been looking up your record, Jason. I've selected you as a suitable officer to carry out a special task." He paused to lift a questioning eyebrow at Jason.

"Thank you, sir," Jason said. "I'll try not to disappoint you."

"Don't thank me," Dickenson barked. "This isn't the sort of thing one says thank you for. The first thing to be said about this job is that it's strictly a matter of volunteering. You don't have to take it if you feel disinclined. If you refuse, the fact won't be noted in your records. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir." His hands were still lightly clasped over his knee.

"The second thing is this—a whole lot of time, money and thought has been spent preparing this project and, therefore, if you know any reason why you might be unsuited to carry out your part, you must refuse the job. That's an order. It's the only order I shall give you in connection with this business. Now," he continued, lifting the desk phone, "not to prolong the mystery, I'll take you to see the project, rather than just talk about it—Hello!" he barked into the telephone, "Get me Admiral Hayes... Hello, Hayes, I've got Jason here. I'm taking him down to the hangar to show him round. Like to meet me there?... Good!"

He cradled the phone. "Come along," he said.

The old man loped out of the room like a tiger. Jason, less acclimatised to Moon gravity, followed him more cautiously.

THEY WENT a good way along the main corridor then descended to a lower level by sliding down a pole. They passed into a huge ship-servicing hangar. Row upon row of scout ships, types Jason had come to know out in space, stood in lines. Mechanics swarmed over them. The place was full of the noise of riveting and the sizzle and snap of electric welding arcs. As Jason looked around an overalled man pushed past, carrying on his shoulder a complete motor assembly, a load which back on Earth he could never have lifted off the ground.

"Atomics and fuel tanks are

installed elsewhere," Dickenson explained. "That job has to be carried out under safety precautions. This way."

He led the way diagonally across the hangar, ducking under a fuselage, and stepping over stacks of rods and girders. They passed through a door into a smaller room.

"T h e r e ! " Dickenson exclaimed, "What'd you make of that?" A single ship occupied the center of the room, set high up in the trestles. The ship was short and stubby, and it was colored a deep scarlet.

"A Jacko ship!" Jason exclaimed. "So we've captured a Jacko ship at last!"

Dickenson shook his head. "This was made right here in these workshops. Look there!"

He waved a hand to draw attention to the array of drawings, diagrams and blown-up photographs on the walls.

"As near as we can manage it, however," he went on, "this is a Jacko ship. Perhaps it's a little better than a Jacko ship; it'll accelerate h a r d e r , and carry more fuel. We've been working on this for more than a year, and a lot of thought and time and money has been put into it. Can you guess what we mean to do with it, Jason?"

"No, sir. Had it been just a mock-up. I'd have guessed it was intended for training, for familiarization, but you say it's a real ship."

"It's certainly no mock-up." The admiral clicked open his cigarette case. "Smoke?" he invited. He himself lit up and perched on the end of a work bench.

"D'you know where the Jackoes come from, Jason?"

"No, sir. All I know is the usual theories; that they come across from Alpha Centauri; or that they come from one of the big planets, Jupiter or Neptune or Saturn; or there's the theory about the big mother ship hanging around outside the orbit of Neptune. According to this all the little scouts we don't manage to kill go back to the mother ship to get themselves patched up and rearmed."

"What d'you think of these notions?"

"I can see serious objections to each one of them, sir. The trip across from Alpha Centauri is no afternoon excursion; it's feasible only if the little beasts have a much longer life-span than ourselves, or can put themselves into a state of suspended animation. And even if one of these things is true, why do they bother?

What do they hope to get out of it?"

"What about the Neptune or Saturn theory?"

"Their ships aren't able to lift off a high-gravity planet, that's certain—of course our own scouts can't take off from Earth either, I know, but even so in our case the gravitational difficulties are not insuperable."

"And what d'you think of the mother ship idea?"

"Well, I see it this way—there's a whole race of Jackoes somewhere, living and eating and sleeping and breeding. They build a lot of ships, or at any rate they service and repair and maintain a lot of ships; all that amount of life and activity can't possibly be explained by the mother ship theory. No ship, however large, could carry that amount of life."

"All quite sound reasoning," Admiral Dickenson agreed. "And to tell you the truth, not one of us has any better ideas on the subject than you have. But we're going to find out."

"Yes, sir?" Jason asked politely.

"Here's how we're going to do it. Somebody, yourself if you choose to volunteer, is going to take this ship out to the asteroids in company with a squadron of our own ships. Sooner or later out there you'll meet up with a pack of Jackoes—do I have to tell you any more?"

"I get the idea now all right," Jason agreed. "In the mix-up our imitation Jacko ship attaches itself to the Jacko squadron and goes along home with them. But I can see a lot of difficulties."

"I'd like to know what difficulties you see."

Jason had no inhibitions, no shyness; he was able to speak calmly and frankly even to high senior officers.

"First," he said, "the difficulty of killing an enemy ship and substituting this one unnoticed. It's a trick we can only try once."

"That's a problem of maneuvers—it's got to be worked out between yourself and the squadron detailed to act with you."

"Very well," Jason nodded, accepting the point. "Next difficulty—the Jackoes have radio; I've heard them often enough chattering to each other. Now I'm to join their formation and ride this ship back home with them. Some Jacko might possibly think it odd if one of their pals stayed

speechless for maybe so long as a week."

"As to that," Dickenson said, "here's Admiral Hayes, who's responsible for the technical side of this project. Hayes, this is Lieutenant Jason. He's being considered as a possible pilot for the ship. Show him our answer to the problem of radio conversations between our man and the Jacko squadron."

"It hasn't taken you long to spot the snags," Hayes commented. "Come up on top and I'll show you our answer to that one."

HAYES LEAPT the twenty feet up onto a platform which extended above the ship. Jason followed.

"That projection there," the former explained, "that's the root of the radio antenna. Now see that dirty long groove across the hull? What would you say had been the cause of that?"

"A solid projectile from one of our guns grazed across the hull, made this diagonal groove, and clipped off the radio mast at the root. I see what you're getting at," Jason nodded.

"Any objections?" Hayes asked, smiling.

"A few small ones," Jason told him. "Perhaps their ships have two independent radio systems—perhaps they have other nonelectronic means of communicating—perhaps their radio is effective after a fashion even with the antenna clipped off. All the same sir, I think these are small chances, well worth taking."

They jumped back down on to the floor.

"Well, Jason," Dickenson asked, "what d'you think of our project now?"

"Frankly, sir, I don't think much of it as yet. I agree the ship has a considerable chance of joining up with the Jackoes and of going along with them undetected, but the chance of ever getting back with any information is smallish."

"We have an answer to that too," Hayes told him, stepping over to a bench. "This gadget here is a special camera which carries nearly a mile of film. Whenever the destination is reached, our pilot starts up the camera motor and films everything in sight."

"But the information, whether it's stored on this film or merely in the pilot's brain, has got to be brought back," Jason pointed out.

"Ah!" Hayes exclaimed en-

thusiastically. "But wait—whenever the filming's done, as soon as the pilot thinks he's collected every possible item of information, he moves this big switch here. A television eye then begins to scan the film and broadcast it back to us. We'll have a ring of ships waiting to pick the stuff up. In addition, this scanning and broadcast can be done at high speed, so that what takes half an hour to film will be sent back to us in five minutes. What d'you think of that, eh?"

"So far as the success of the project is concerned, it's the perfect answer," Jason agreed dryly. "I can see one objection still, but it's so minor that it's hardly worth mentioning."

Hayes' enthusiasm was so open and childlike that Jason's remark merely puzzled him. Admiral Dickenson, however, stepped into the breach.

"When the film's been shot back, the pilot's job is done and he can blast for home."

"With every Jacko in every squadron of every Jacko fleet hot on his tail," Jason added. "And how many millions of miles will he be from home?"

"Quite true," Dickenson admitted. "I said it was a dangerous job...But there are one or two factors which favor the pilot. This is a very special, ship. It carries twice the usual load of fuel and it can accelerate a little harder and a little longer than any Jacko. Therefore, given even a small start you should be able to show them a clean pair of heels."

"It's unarmed?" Jason asked.

Dickenson hesitated. "Yes. Remember the ship will be riding in close formation with an enemy squadron for some days. If we mounted a pair of Sandbatch cannon they'd give our game away at once."

"There's something up there, looks like D-ray bellmouth," Jason remarked, looking up at the bows of the ship.

"A dummy," Hayes explained. "You know the D-ray gives out a backlash of hard radiation; that's a problem we haven't managed to lick yet. Anyone using an unscreened D-ray is going to make himself a very sick man indeed. We calculate the pilot gets a better chance if we give him all possible speed and fuel."

Jason was introduced to other details of the project, then Admiral Dickenson concluded: "I don't want your decision now, Jason. What I want you to do is to draw some of your back pay from the

accountant, take the train over to Moon City and have a little amusement. Give yourself time to think. Report back in twenty-four hours, with your decision."

Jason saluted and went off.

"Better start looking for another volunteer," Hayes told Dickenson ironically.

"Why so?" the other asked.

"You know the chances of getting back from this little expedition are about twenty to one against, and Jason has worked out the odds already. He spotted all the difficulties immediately and he's sane and balanced, not a suicidal fanatic. You must look for someone less intelligent and more fanatical, Admiral."

Admiral Dickenson scowled. "Sure the boy's intelligent. This is no job for brute force or ignorance or fanaticism. Not only is he intelligent, but he's calm, level-headed. Did you notice how still he stood—no twiddling his fingers or puffing nervously at cigarettes? He's got no complexes; he's polite all right, but not over-anxious to win my approval. No false humility either, no protesting he's unfit for the job."

"All of which seems to add up to just what I said. He's intelligent, he's no fanatic, he's got no complexes—he'll turn the job down."

Next day, precisely twenty-four hours later, Jason reported to Admiral Dickenson and agreed to undertake the job. Dickenson looked at the fair-haired youngster, the sensitive features, the slender hands and thin fingers. The ancient warrior nearly burst into tears.

"Very well, Jason," he said gruffly. "Any comments on the scheme as a whole?"

"Yes, sir. I'd like to have that dummy D-ray removed and one of the genuine articles fitted instead. I understand that with a bit of luck one may survive a short squirt of radiation and a short squirt might be just the one thing necessary to insure my safe return home."

"Very well, Jason. I'll get Hayes to fix it."

EVEN IN these modern times, and even though the United Nations had been managing human affairs for several hundred years, human nature was still human nature; Italians, Russians, Germans, Spaniards, Americans and even Eskimos each considred themselves to be finer, braver, handsomer, more intelligent, or per-

haps merely cleaner than other races. This oddity of human thinking had its consequences even out at Advanced Fighter Base, where the squadrons of one-man scouts were organized on a national basis. The Spanish Squadron was captained by a large individual named Louis A l v a r e z—or Lucho to his friends—and was entirely S p a n i s h speaking, although only one member besides Alvarez was actually S p a n i s h. There were two Peruvians with traces of Indian blood in them, a Mexican, a Chilean and a character called Don Miguel MacDonald, whose existence was due to the Scotsman's prospensity for leaving his native land, settling down elsewhere, and marrying a local girl.

The Spanish Squadron monopolized one corner of the mess hall where it habitually talked S p a n i s h with much gesticulation. It had recently been ordered to stand by to undertake a special and particularly difficult task; it thought it quite proper to be given the most difficult and dangerous work, but this opinion did not hinder its members from grumbling and complaining about the matter.

They were so much occupied with this job of grumbling that they scarcely noticed a newcomer who came into the mess. He asked a question of someone near the door, then drifted over in their direction. Captain Alvarez gave him a cold and haughty look, and went on talking. The newcomer went to sit down in the empty chair. Alvarez put out a large hand to restrain him.

"Your p a r d o n, *hijo,*" he said, "here we are all Spaniards together; this corner is exclusive to us. And in addition, that seat is reserved for one whom we expect here presently."

The newcomer did not make any objection to being called sonny. He said in an extremely casual sort of way: "Sorry, pal, *I* hadn't the slightest intention of intruding. What's the name of the man you're keeping the chair for?"

Alvaez paused dramatically, gesticulating hand still in mid-air. He gave an imitation of a man interrupted in some serious business by an ill-mannered child. He looked the questioner up and down.

"Boy," he said, "you are new here so I excuse you. When you have been with this group for some time, and if we think well of you, we may then

invite you among us, but for the present you do not interest us."

"This'll surprise you," the other told him calmly. "I'm the fellow you're expecting. My name's Jason—I've just got here. We're to carry out an operation t o g e t h e r." He twitched the chair round and sat down on it, smiling round the group.

Alvarez recovered himself swiftly. "But, *senor,*" he exclaimed, "A thousand apologies. For this project we expected a seasoned f i g h t e r, some grandfather of forty with a hundred kills to his credit. I do you no insult when I say you are almost a child."

"Don't blame me, Captain," Jason smiled. "I was asked to do this job and said yes. That's the whole story from my end."

They looked at him—young, fair-headed, boyish, smiling. Alvarez was forty; MacDonald just a little younger. The youngest of the S p a n i s h Squadron was twenty-eight. J a s o n was twenty-two and looked eighteen.

Alvarez swore rapidly in Spanish, and muttered his opinion of Headquarters, who chose to send children on dangerous tasks.

"No d o u b t Headquarters knows its business," he said, "and one does not of course question your courage or determination. But, have you encountered these Jackoes before, *senor?*"

Jason told him. They settled down to discuss the maneuver which they had to perform together.

JASON WENT out several times during the next week with the squadron to rehearse. After a number of trials, Alvarez asked to have two additional men attached to his squadron.

"I see it like this," he explained. "The Jackoes know we operate in squadrons of seven. If they see less than this number, they will begin to be suspicious. Therefore we will have seven operating together, plus two in hiding. We will engage a Jacko squadron, we will allow ourselves to be split up, and we will turn and run. Out of seven it is certain that one of us will have a Jacko on his tail. Let the Jacko think his guns are jammed, or what he will. In any event, our man runs, the Jacko pursues. Our man makes for the rocks. Nothing surprising in this. Quite usual under the circumstances. Behind one rock

there is lurking," he paused and looked round the group, "...there is lurking our two additional ships, and Senor Jason also. As our man approaches the hiding place he signals 'I come.' He sweeps behind the rock—following him comes the Jacko—the two in ambush leap upon him. Before he can turn, before he can signal his companions, pam!—he is gone. Then a moment later, an apparent Jacko ship emerges from cover and joins his companions—our job is done." done."

Alvarez was an able and determined commander. Using another squadron to take the place of Jackoes, the maneuver he had d e s c r i b e d was rehearsed again and again until they felt themselves ready to try it in earnest.

Five days later the maneuver went off without a hitch. Behind a screen of rock Jason saw a Jacko ship pounced on by those two ancient and skillfull killers, Alvarez and MacDonald, and destroyed in an instant. Immediately, he fired his jets and slid out into the open. The Jacko Squadron had been scattered by the engagement, but as it began to reform he moved in and took position in it.

The Jacko ships accepted him without question. They turned and headed—outwards.

Alvarez sent off a signal which in due course reached Dickenson and Hayes at Moon Base.

"Well," the old w a r r i o r sighed, "the boy's on his way. Good luck to him. Now let's make sure they're g e t t i n g a screen of ships out to pick up his television broadcast when he sends it, and I think we'll have some patrols well forward in case he comes back with a hoard of Jackoes swarming on his heels."

"D'you really think he'll get back?"

"There are times when I think his chances are good. He hasn't been s p o t t e d at the start, so why should he be spotted later? He need only keep along with them, spend ten or fifteen minutes filming, then blast for home, and his ship's faster than theirs. Nevertheless, playing war is not like playing chess. Unknown factors invariably crop up—plans begin to go wrong and get out of hand."

THE JACKO squadron accelerated hard for half an hour, then cut its jets. The ships lay about half a mile

apart. Though their actual speed relative to the sun was now several thousands of miles an hour they appeared to be quite motionless. Jason's ship had a radio receiver and for a little while he was able to hear his strange companions communicating with each other in their rattling, chattering tongue. No doubt they made attempts to call him, but to any fighter pilot his silence would be immediately explained by the sight of the long groove in his hull and the ruined aerial. No move was made to investigate him closely.

The chattering stopped after a while. Perhaps like human pilots they were accustomed to sleeping during periods of coasting. At any rate, Jason had a chance to relax from his first state of anxious vigilance. After several hours of silence, a sudden babble of chattering woke him to alertness. He deduced that some object had been sighted, but as he had no radar detector he was blind to everything outside visual range.

Watching anxiously he saw flickers of flame from nose-jets. Imitating the maneuvers of his neighbors, he managed to keep in formation while the ships turned through ninety degrees. Immediately after this turnabout the squadron formed itself into line astern. Jason did not need to wonder what was happening; some group of earth ships must have come into range, some squadron which had no business to be so far out, which ought not to be operating in this sector at all. Thus he found himself in the middle of an enemy formation rushing to attack his fellow humans.

There was nothing he could do about it without spoiling the plan; he must stay with the Jackoes, and hope that none of his friends got in position to take a shot at him.

Things began to happen with bewildering speed. In a moment seven familiar-looking shapes were in sight, rushing towards him. Jason knew the Jackoes always tried to maintain their line-astern formation so he kept his eye on the ship ahead of him. The two formations met. Jason's field of vision was filled with wheeling ships and flaring jets, and the stabbing blue flame of D-rays. He saw the Jacko leader blow up. He saw—a thing he had often heard of but never seen before —a Jacko turn out of line and destroy one of his own com-

panions who had been seriously damaged by gunfire. Then, how it came about he could not say, but he found himself pursuing an earth ship.

Admiral Dickenson knew that any military plan, however good, will inevitably show signs of breaking down during its evolution under the impact of chance factors. He knew that nothing but resourcefulness, decisiveness and intelligence could repair such breakdowns and keep the plan in being. He understood human nature and had picked Jason for this job because he believed the young man had the necessary qualities. He had picked him in preference to other more experienced and more dashing and picturesque pilots.

Jason marked time while the problem revolved swiftly in his mind. From the point of view of a Jacko pilot, he had a sitting target just ahead. Behind him, watching him closely, were a couple of real Jackoes. They were waiting to see him do his job. The ship ahead jerked back and forth on its lateral jets but there was no excuse for holding fire, and very little excuse for missing.

If Jason refrained from firing, would the Jackoes suppose that his D-ray was out of action? If so, would they refrain from investigating him closely? Jason concluded that he could not hope to get away with it. He would be examined, discovered, and destroyed, and the project which had taken so much time and effort to plan would be destroyed also—and destroyed finally, for it could not be made to succeed at a second attempt once the enemy had discovered the ruse.

His problem was clear. Either spare the unknown young man in the ship ahead, and lose his own life and ruin the plan, or kill him and save the plan.

At this moment Jason demonstrated that Admiral Dickenson had made no mistake in selecting him. His fresh young face was calm as he sighted along the tube of the unfamiliar weapon. His finger pressed the button without hesitation. A long thin ray lanced out ahead of him and licked the rear end of the ship in front. A brief instant, and then it blew up.

As Jason maneuverd his ship into line again, a sudden wave of heat poured through him. This hot sensation passed quickly, but the unpleasant prickling continued. He realized that he had been subjected

to a backlash of hard radiation from the D-ray apparatus.

The fighting broke off. There were only four Jacko ships left, counting Jason's ship as one. They re-formed and resumed their journey—outwards.

The ships coasted forward, outwards, away from the sun. Jason had no doubt that his Jacko companions lay half-asleep as did all pilots in such circumstances. But Jason was not asleep. Although he had acted without hesitation, although his brain still assured him that he had made the right decision, he was filled with horror at what he had just done. He would be court-martialed, of course. For a moment he contemplated the fact that no one need ever know, but he knew he would have to confess and take the consequences—if he got back. A wave of prickling discomfort assailed him again and he began to wonder whether a man could really survive such a dose of hard radiation as he had experienced. If he did not, he reflected, his fate would have a flavor of classic justice.

As the ships slid forward through the velvet dark these thoughts went round and round in his mind.

JASON MUST have slept finally. He was awakened after what seemed like a long interval by bursts of Jacko chatter coming over the radio. He looked out around and ahead. His three companions' ships were still in position beside him. A vast area ahead was filled with points of light. Not the haphazard, many-colored, variable brilliance of stars, but uniform reddish points of light lying in orderly rows. He was unable to attach any meaning to what he saw, but he pressed the button of the camera and let the machine take this in for three seconds.

He continued to watch. Passing like ghosts above him a squadron of Jacko ships accelerated inward. He heard further bursts of chatter, presumably from one of his companion ships. There was no impression of motion, but nevertheless the rows of lights ahead slid swiftly nearer. The pattern of them across the sky swelled till it filled his view.

A flicker of flame from the nose of the ship alongside, and for a few moments he was occupied matching speed and changing course. When he had time to look again, the picture had clarified. He saw that each

point of light marked the position of a ship. The glow of starlight pouring through the emptyness of space shone dimly on their flanks, while each ship's bulk made a patch of dark against the curtain of the stars. He pressed the button of the camera, and swept it slowly round the array. The supersensitive film would record this scene better than his eyes could see it.

So this was the answer to the problem of the Jackoes' origin. They came not from one ship, but from many—from hundreds. And what ships! Immense fat cylinders lying in orderly rows and ranks and files.

Another change of direction. Some ships of a shape he had never seen before slid past below.

The group of four ships of which he was one slid in among the mother fleet. Like fishes in dim clear water they glided underneath a monstrous belly. Jason scanned it with his camera. Another lay ahead. A patch of its surface was brightly illuminated and three round objects were crawling upon it. Another shot of that.

The four scouts slid among these monsters, with only an occasional short flick of jets to change direction. Mounted on top of one of the monsters he saw some unfamiliar object which had the appearance of being a weapon. A long shot of that. Underneath another a huge brightly illuminated hatch hung open; as he watched a Jacko scout of standard appearance emerged from it.

A staccato burst of chatter on his radio, and a flicker of jets. The four scouts began to maneuver underneath the belly of one of the big ships.

A section of the hull swung ponderously outwards disclosing a brightly lit interior. Jason had the camera running all the time now. On a ledge round the open hatch he saw spherical objects moving purposefully, slinging out grapples; further inside he caught a glimpse of rows of scout ships stacked closely side by side and one above each other.

One of his companion ships edged forward underneath the open hatch. Grapples seized it and pulled it into the hold where it was maneuverd out of sight.

AND NOW Jason knew that his time was nearly up. Once inside that hold his chance of escape would be negligible. As he reached this

conclusion, and as he began to consider the moves he must make to escape, he had an inspiration, a wonderful and terrible inspiration.

A second ship was drawn into the hold. He heard a brief staccato rattle of Jacko speech. Just as certainly as if the words had been spoken in English, he knew this was an order to him to move forward.

He took a quick look round to determine the position of the fourth ship which still remained, then gave a touch to his jets, to send the ship forward into the hold. He checked that the camera was running, and grasped the controls of his D-ray. He was sweating and trembling with excitement; his teeth ground together and his mouth was clamped tight shut in a sort of grimace of concentration.

One of the row of stacked scout ships came into the line of his sights—he aimed at its stern, at the motors and fuel tanks, and flicked the firing button. Instantly he swung the weapon and did the same to the next ship—then the next. Then he swung the ray round and about and up and down, slashing like a sword.

At the final instant he pushed the nose-jet lever hard over, his ship shot backwards as if kicked out of the hold by a giant. When a ship has its fuel tanks hit by a D-ray, there is an interval of a second or so before it explodes. The scout he had hit first blew up just as Jason finished his backward run. He paid no attention to the chaos of bursting ships he had created, for there remained the fourth Jacko ship just behind him. He slid past underneath and gave it a short stab with the ray in the region of its motors, then he spun his ship round, glanced at his gyro to verify direction, and began to weave his way back among the big ships, accelerating hard.

Behind him, reflected in the mirror, he saw flash after flash as the scouts exploded one after another in their racks. Finally there was a much bigger flash, as if a number of them had exploded simultaneously.

He set a mechanism running in the camera which caused the film to undergo a developing process, and wound out his concealed transmitting aerial.

A sudden awful wave of nausea overwhelmed him. For a moment he could do nothing but dig his fingers into his palms and try to master it.

He switched on his radio and

called, "Jason here! Jason here! Stand by! Stand by!"

He was still sweeping in among the big ships. As he passed by the rear end of one of them he shot a long dose of D-ray at the bulge on its stern which he took to be a motor. After he passed something exploded.

Just as he passed out clear of the fleet he was violently sick.

Then he saw that the developing process had been completed and the film was ready for transmission.

"Stand by! Stand by!" he called thickly. "Ready to transmit. Ready to transmit."

He was feeling sick in a way he had never known in all his life, but he continued to do his job carefully and thoroughly. He checked that his sending aerial was aligned correctly, that the film had engaged itself in the sending mechanism, and that the transmitter was live.

He moved the lever. Things inside the machine clicked and purred.

He laid his head on the cushion and was sick again. When he had recovered a little he tried to look around. He had no radar and so was unable to tell what ships might be converging upon him, but he reckoned that by this time something must have been organized against him.

In between waves of nausea he kept a watch out rearwards, but at one point when he looked ahead he saw a squadron of Jackoes across his path. They were some distance away, and judging by the flare of their jets, were changing course.

The film completed its run-through; he rewound it and set it to run a second time.

"Jason calling," he transmitted. "Setting film for second run-through. Stand by."

His stomach heaved dreadfully in an effort to be sick. This time nothing came up but blood.

The Jacko squadron ahead completed its turn-round, but did not appear to have spotted him. He continued on a straight course towards them while the film had its second run-through.

By the time this was completed he was almost among them. No doubt they had already been receiving instructions from some central control, but it was doubtful whether any of the Jacko community knew exactly what was occurring. Perhaps they thought

that there had been an accidental series of explosions, or more likely, that one of their own scouts had run amok. At any rate, this squadron let him approach without taking any action.

His head was swimming, and his eyes streaming with tears. He passed right among them and chopped the three foremost with quick stabs of the ray. They blew up one after another in rapid succession after he had passed.

Looking behind him again he saw a considerable number of the enemy streaming after him in no particular formation.

At this stage he was out ahead of his pursuers, and so far as he knew there was nothing between him and home except whatever outlying Jacko patrols could be brought onto his line of retreat. There was no reason why he should not make a run for it—except he knew he would never live to reach home now. Except that since he had killed one of his own comrades on the way out he had known he would never return, he had ceased to want to return.

HIS HEAD cleared momentarily. He fumbled for levers, fired jets, and changed course back towards the Jacko mother ships. While pursuing scouts were still uncertain about what was happening, before they could react to this change, Jason was speeding back through their midst. None of them attempted to hit him, but he hit two more.

Then he was in among the big ships once more. He made no attempt to damage them, for he thought his ray would merely overheat part of their massive structure and cause only local damage. But there was plenty of game for the hunter. Jacko scouts, and other types of ship he had never seen before were wheeling about in every direction. He slid among them. Many paid no attention to him. At every opportunity he chopped one. Every couple of minutes there was the blinding flash of a detonation.

But at every pressure of the button he received another dose of radiation; every instant he became more dreadfully ill. When he tried to spit some of the foulness from his mouth, two of his teeth came out.

The Jackoes identified him at last. They managed to bring their forces into order. Their ships drew off so that for a short while he drifted alone among the big ships.

Jason, whose mind and intelligence was flickering and dying, was still conscious of his duty; he must not allow himself to collapse and die and leave his ship floating for the Jackoes to examine.

He raised his head from the cushions and looked around out of bleary eyes. The dark looming hulls of the big ships were around him. Beneath one he saw an open hatch with light streaming from it. The Jacko scouts had withdrawn, but soon they would be reorganized and ready to deal with him.

He set his ship on a slant, upwards towards the open hatch of the big ship. He pushed the power lever forward to maximum acceleration and placed his finger on a red button marked *Detonate.* Precisely as the nose of his ship passed inside the hatch, he pressed this button.

THE END

THE MARTIAN ARTIFACT

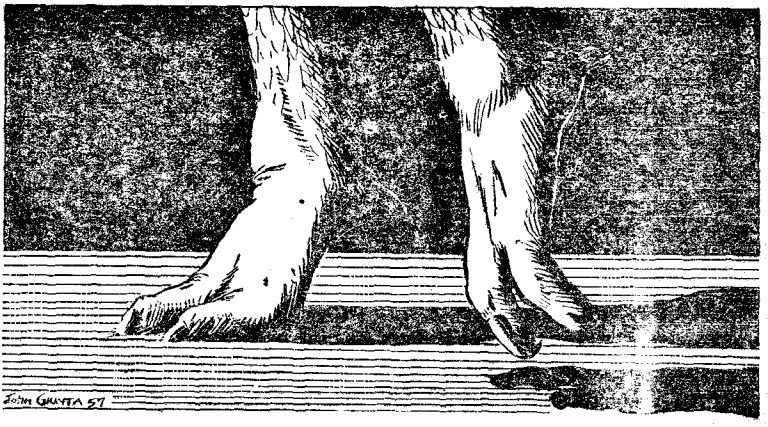
The thing in the auction gallery may have been a musical instrument, a child's toy, or a piece of surrealist sculpture, but whatever it was those two collectors were determined to have it. But there was another collector around town who knew how to outbid them without spending a cent.

by AUGUST DERLETH

TEX HARRIGAN looked into the clubroom. Seeing me, he came in.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said. "Got something to show you." He dropped a Parke-Bernet priced book catalog before me and opened it. "Take a look at that."

No. 77, I read. *Curiosa. Unidentified musical instrument. Believed to be an ancient lute. Fine condition. From the collection of Gregory Saunders.*



NB: One telephone bid to Saunders home at $10,000. Bidding starts at $12,000.

I knew Parke-Bernet as one of the greatest auction houses, specializing in rare books, works of art, and related pieces. It did not seem to be Harrigan's usual field. I looked up.

"Are you on an assignment?"

"I'm always looking for something to go into my file of queer people. You must recall Saunders—a gray little old fellow who always insisted he was in communication with Mars. Died last month. Parke-Bernet got hold of some of his things and have them on sale. I talked to Mason—he's my editor on the *World*—and he gave me the green light to go out and get what I could. I found this."

"What is it?"

"I meant to find out. I asked myself what kind of 'unidentified musical instrument' is worth a bid of ten thousand out of hand. I went down, but I got there a little too late. It had been sold. Parke-Bernet wouldn't reveal the sale price, of course, but I gathered it was more than twice that bid. Ever hear of Samuel Millerand? Or Herman Schliemann?"

The names sounded familiar. Harrigan said, "The fact is, they're brothers-in-law who've been associated in business for years. They rank with the top bibliophiles in the world. They live together over on Central Park West."

"But the item's listed as a musical instrument. What would a couple of book collectors want with a musical instrument?"

"That's what I'm curious to learn. There may be a story in it. In any case, a pair of rich eccentrics will make copy of some sort. Are you game?"

SAMUEL MILLERAND was a thin wisp of a man, neither tall nor short, with closely clipped graying hair, and bird-bright eyes behind his golden pince-nez. His brother-in-law was corpulent and generously bearded.

Millerand fingered the card his butler had brought in. "Gentlemen from the *World*," he murmured. "What can we do for you?"

Harrigan came straight to the point. "We understand you've bought something from the Saunders sale at Parke-Bernet. Specifically, an unidentified musical instrument said to be a lute. We're interested in

knowing whether two widely reputed bibliophiles have branched out into another field."

A wintry smile crossed Millerand's face; it did not linger. "No, sir," he replied shortly. "Would you care to see it?"

"I would, sir."

Millerand got up and went into an adjoining room. Returning, he beckoned us over to a little table which stood under a green-shaded lamp.

"This is the Saunders piece, Mr. Harrigan."

It did resemble an ancient lute, except for two things; it was angular and it was flat. The whole thing was flat, in what seemed to be three layers or parts. It showed some evidence of use, but far from being the replica of an ancient instrument, it looked like something which would not be out of place in an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art.

It looked complex. Its base was of some kind of material I could not identify. Attached to this base from the top was a sheet of some kind of material which was neither plastic nor celluloid, but looked somewhat like both; actually, it suggested a sheet of silicon. To this was affixed a series of fine, scintillant wires—not connected, but in little sequences—some scarcely an inch long, some merely straight, some very intricate in design. Each of these groups of wires was set beside what looked like musical keys, capable of being slightly depressed, as in any wind instrument.

Over all this lay a protective sheet of some transparent material, perforated with sizable triangular openings over the wires. There was neither note nor letter printed on the body of the instrument, but across the top in a straight line lay five meticulous round designs, which I recognized at once as representations of the five major planets; Saturn's rings were unmistakable, as were Earth's continents. This row of planets was surmounted by a small orb.

"I'm afraid my knowledge of music has been neglected," said Harrigan. "What kind of instrument is this?"

Schliemann growled. "It doesn't happen to be a musical instrument in the accepted sense of such an artifact."

"I take it you've never seen anything like it?" asked Millerand, with a faint smile.

"Never," said Harrigan.

Millerand glanced at me.

I shook my head.

"Schliemann—the comparative piece," murmured Millerand.

SCHLIEMANN got to his feet with some effort and moved in a rolling gait into the adjoining room. He came out with "the comparative piece" and put it down beside the Saunders "lute."

"But this, surely, is not entirely unfamiliar to you," pressed Millerand.

I could see what he meant by "comparative." The new curiosity was paddle-shaped, similarly hooked, and made for the most part of well-worn wood. The secondary sheet corresponding to what looked like silicon in the Saunders piece was of vellum. On it were imprinted a large cross, in place of the planets on the "lute," and the alphabet in large and small letters. These were followed by the vowels in a single line, and the consonants in tabular form. Beneath this primary information were the Lord's Prayer, and, at the bottom of the paddle-shaped sheet of vellum, the Roman numerals. The vellum was protected by a stiff sheet of transparent horn. The whole thing looked very old and bore the signs of long use.

"I'm afraid I have to admit I'm not familiar with this, either," said Harrigan. "It's a little out of my line."

"What does it suggest to you, Mr. Harrigan?"

"If I had to guess—a primer of some kind."

"Very good, sir. This is a hornbook, one of the earliest forms of the primer. In some places, the hornbook was also called the christcross row, or crisscross row, because of the cross which you see here. It was attached to the child's girdle, hence the hook."

"Ah, then the Saunders piece is a musical primer!"

"Say, rather, a sound hornbook. When depressed, the little keys cause a small bow, or, in some cases, a claw-like appendage, to scrape the wires—or what would appear to be wires. We're not quite sure what their composition is." He took up the Saunders hornbook. "Let me show you."

He pressed one of the little keys. Immediately, an almost invisible tiny claw came up out of the key itself and plucked the wires, being evidently sheathed in the stem of the key. A faint, faraway sound flowered into the room. It was not

so much a musical note, as the birdlike enunciation of a vowel. I could not distinguish which vowel it was, though, for it didn't seem to reproduce exactly any one of the familiar vowels, and it was not a sound I had ever heard before.

MILLERAND pressed another key. Again a faint sound, different from the first.

"Why are the sounds so faint?" Harrigan asked.

"Well, just suppose, Mr. Harrigan, that the book was designed for use in some place of more rarified atmosphere."

"Mountain country?"

"Even more rarified than that. I'm afraid you're woefully limited to the terrestrial."

Harrigan skipped that. "How would such a thing be used, Mr. Millerand?"

"We can only conjecture. Given a child whose circumstances are more conducive to learning by vocal study, and who may need help to sound his words—"

"Do you mean to say those sounds we heard were words?"

"Words, or parts of words; the equivalent of our vowels and consonants, perhaps. It's a fascinating speculation. We don't know very much about the place where this hornbook was commonly used. We don't even know the special quality—and we suspect there may be more than one—of the material out of which the sound hornbook is made."

"You can have it analyzed."

"We've tried, Mr. Harrigan. Part of it would appear to be silicon. But that is as far as we can go. The base material has so far not been identified by science."

Harrigan flashed him a dubious glance. "I'm afraid you're way out ahead of me, Mr. Millerand."

Millerand sighed. "I feared so. The caliber of newspapermen isn't what it used to be. I'm trying to suggest that this hornbook may not be used quite as our ancestors used theirs—that is, not in a collective school, but in solitude. Each hornbook may have qualities for sending and receiving messages. They may be capable of use in a school, and I use the term loosely, whose pupils are widely separated, one from another, perhaps by many miles, and who study very much as children of today do by television. I'm trying to make this as simple as possible for you, Mr. Harrigan."

"THE QUESTION is, where would such a place be?" Harrigan challenged him.

"Well, there are certain inferences to be made. Take a look at this row of planets depicted across the top of the hornbook. Does it suggest anything to you?"

"Not particularly."

"I submit there's something especially tantalizing about it. The row of planets is surmounted by a small, rayed orb, which must certainly stand for the sun. The arrangement of the planets below it is most interesting. In any representation of planets made here, wouldn't you expect Earth to occupy the central position?"

"I suppose so."

"But here, you see, Earth is on the left of the central planet, and, like all the others, inferior in representational size to that central planet. It's easy to identify Saturn, and Jupiter's moons leave us in no doubt about it. Venus also seems quite clear. Mercury is absent. All the planets shown here are quite remarkably detailed insofar as land masses and water areas are concerned, when these occur. The two moons of the central planet identify it plainly, even if the surface map is unknown to us—as are all the other surfaces, save that of Earth. That planet is Mars. Can you think of any reason why Mars should occupy the central position on the hornbook other than that it is the center of the manufacturer's universe?"

Harrigan could certainly see as well as I in what direction Millerand was leading us, but he preferred to pretend he did not understand. He shook his head.

"Ah, well," said Millerand, shrugging his shoulders, "I suppose it's too much to ask of the press. Mr. Harrigan, we believe this artifact comes from Mars, purely on the basis of the *prima facie* evidence: the unknown materials out of which it is made, the quality of the sounds it emits, suggesting that the hornbook was intended for an atmosphere as rarified as that of Mars, and the position of Mars as central planet on the face of the hornbook. The first book from another planet to appear on Earth, Mr. Harrigan—and how fitting that it should be a child's book!"

Harrigan did not blink an eye. "Supposing we accept that premise," he said, "would this be an ancient hornbook or a modern one?"

Schliemann chuckled. "An iconoclast, Sam."

"Presumably one now in use, if its condition is any indication," answered Millerand seriously. "But we don't know anything about the durability of the materials, though they seem indestructible, nor can we tell, of course, how long Saunders had it."

"I hope it isn't impertinent to ask how much you paid for it?"

Millerand flashed a glance at Schliemann, who shrugged.

"Twenty-four thousand," said Millerand.

"A bargain," put in Schliemann. "We were quite certain what it was. We would never have got it if Dr. Rosenbach had been alive."

"What would he have bid for it, I wonder," mused Millerand. "Fifty thousand? A hundred thousand?"

"I take it you gentlemen aren't averse to being quoted," ventured Harrigan.

"Not at all," Millerand replied.

"Hold on!" cried Schliemann. "Quoted in what way?"

"As claiming to be in possession of a sound hornbook from Mars."

"We can't offer anything but presumptive p r o o f," said Schliemann. "If you'll make that clear, please. And we'd prefer that the price we paid remain unknown to the press. We don't particularly care for publicity—but it has had its value in bringing to our attention various items here and there on the globe."

"Could I send a man around to take a photograph of it—say, beside the genuine hornbook?"

Millerand and Schliemann agreed, although reluctantly.

DOWN ON the street again, Harrigan smiled wryly. "That's what comes of reading too much science-fiction." He stopped to light a cigarette. "I've known a good many characters like that, though most of them weren't as rich. But the possession of money isn't any guarantee of practicality or common sense."

"It doesn't seem likely that two men as canny as Millerand and Schliemann could readily be persuaded to subscribe to anything too wildly incredible," I protested.

"Oh, it's as easy to hoodwink an intelligent man as a moron," retorted Harrigan. "All things are relative, and in a case like this the willingness to suspend the critical faculty in favor of

the will to believe is all that's necessary.

"The circumstances were right. In the background was Saunders, who had the reputation as a crank on the subject of Mars. The artifact was found among his effects. How easy it is to link the two! Would you have me believe that the unidentified bidder soon after Saunders' death was a Martian anxious to retrieve the hornbook?

"Go on from there to the *prima facie* evidence they mentioned. It needn't be somebody from Mars to put Mars in central and enlarged position among the planets, and we have artisans in the out-of-the-way places of this planet who can and do perform wonders of skill with their hands, equivalent to those strings or wires, or whatever they are."

"But that metallic material out of which it was made!" I cried.

"I admit I can't name it. Grant them that point for the time being, and forget that it's presumptively possible to turn out in a laboratory something not readily identifiable. Besides, we have only their word that it can't be named. All the remaining points yield to other explanation as well."

"How'll you do the story?"

"Straight—with tongue in cheek."

Harrigan's story broke two days later, together with a reasonably clear photograph of the two hornbooks side by side. He had painted a not unkind picture of the two eccentric bibliophiles and blown up the idea of the sound hornbook from Mars, adding a colorful biographical sketch of its late owner, Gregory Saunders. He had drawn liberally on his imagination to suggest that Saunders might actually have been in communication with Mars, as he had always claimed, and that the sound hornbook might have been acquired by him from Martian visitors. He had even dropped some pointed hints about the possible extraterrestriality of the mysterious bidder prior to the Parke-Bernet sale.

Harrigan's story was compelling, dramatic, and completely incredible. He had not failed to stress, at the last, the basic absence of any real proof to support vivid conjecture, and he had slyly added his own prosaic explanations.

I SAW HIM ten days later, early one morning, at a bar

we both frequented. He hailed me.

"Any reaction on that story about the Martian hornbook?" I asked.

"Plenty. The news services picked it up, and other papers copied it pretty liberally. I'll wager the story's had as many readers as any major news break in the last two weeks."

"What about Millerand and Schliemann?"

"Nothing from them. By this time, they'll have heard from half a hundred crackpots, a dozen different reporters, and two or three people who might have something geuine to offer them. And those two or three will make the whole thing worthwhile for them. I know collectors. I've got enough of them in my file."

We were still talking about Harrigan's file of queer people when Harrigan was called to the telephone.

"Talk about coincidences," he said, coming back. "That was Millerand. The office told him he might find me here. Says he has something for me. Got time to come along?"

MILLERAND looked pale and troubled. He was capable of nothing more than a quiet greeting.

Schliemann, like Millerand still in his pajamas and dressing gown, did the talking.

"You were so good at suggesting possible explanations other than the one so manifest to us, Mr. Harrigan," he said sardonically, "we naturally thought of you when this happened. It seems like proof to us. But to you—who knows? We priced the hornbook at a million. Thanks to your story, which was so widely circulated, the attention of certain outsiders must have been drawn to it...."

He and Millerand had been crossing toward the inner room from which they had taken their hornbooks on our previous visit. The door of that room stood open, and from the threshold we saw what was doubtless an inestimably valuable collection of books in glassed-in and locked cases—vellum-bound folios, books bound in gleaming calf, books showing the marks of perhaps centuries of use, ancient manuscripts....

And we saw something else. Opposite the door was a window which had once been secured by steel shutters. It was now wide open. Window and shutters—a p a r t from just enough of the remains to show

that they had once been there —were gone.

Harrigan would have crossed the bare floor directly to it, but Schliemann barred his way.

"Come around here, Mr. Harrigan," said Millerand, leading the way along one wall in a circuitous route to the window.

"Melted away!" exclaimed Harrigan, examining the frame.

"What we found particularly interesting, Mr. Harrigan," said Schliemann in a rasping voice, "is that not only do the glass and steel seem to have been melted, but the brick and wood of part of the frame. Not burned—*melted!*"

"The Martian hornbook, of course, is gone," said Millerand, and sighed.

"And now perhaps Mr. Harrigan would like to look at the prints on the floor. They lead from the window to this table here where we kept the hornbook," continued Schliemann. "The floor is highly waxed, so they are really quite clear. Careful, don't walk on them."

I bent over Harrigan's shoulder to look.

The prints on the floor seemed to have been made by a clawed foot with scaley paws —neither quite bird nor beast, and of considerable weight, for the prints, which led straight from the window to the table and back, were cut deep into the floor.

"Perhaps Mr. Harrigan has an explanation for that," suggested Schliemann.

"An imaginative and ingenious burglar," said Harrigan.

"One who was able to scale the outside wall for a height of seven stories and leave no mark. Armed with a weapon unknown to any scientist of my acquaintance, which will melt wood, steel, glass and brick simultaneously and with equal ease," added Schliemann with a bitter laugh.

"I suppose," said Millerand, "Mr. Saunders' Martian friends disliked the thought of their hornbook in possibly unfriendly or unappreciative hands."

"And, being subscribers to the *World,* came back for it," added Harrigan with a broad smile. "Call the police, gentlemen. This isn't my department."

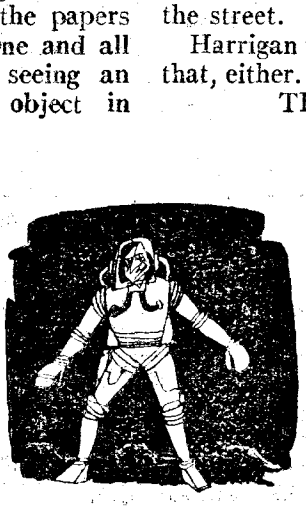
"I don't know how they did it," Harrigan said in the elevator going down, "but it's as clever a way out of the position my story put them in as anything I could imagine."

WHAT TROUBLED me most about the matter of

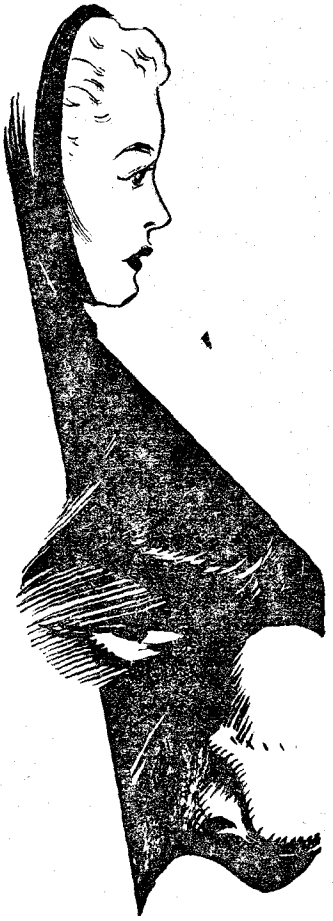
the Martian hornbook was the testimony of seven people who had quite possibly never heard of it. A policeman, two chorus girls, a playboy, a cab driver, and a scrub woman on her way home late that night. Their stories appeared in the papers on the same day. One and all swore solemnly to seeing an unidentified flying object in the vicinity of Central Park West the night before. The policeman insisted that he had, in fact, seen it lying up against a building in the early hours of the morning, hovering in the air about seven stories from the street.

Harrigan couldn't explain that, either.

THE END



PURPLE WITH RAGE



He knew there was something wrong with the school system; he saw it coming. And what he overheard in the purple light, when he tracked those errant teachers into the hills, proved it.

by IRVING COX, JR.

IT WAS MY fourth transfer-out in less than two weeks, but I didn't expect any sympathy from Ed Hollwell. He's just a toothy, dim-witted public relations man, not a real educator.

"Just why is Beth leaving my class, Ed?" I asked. If I insisted on an explanation, it might put Hollwell on the spot.

"An elective conflict, Mr. Stratten. Beth wants to take art and—"

"There's a first period art class; put her in that."

"The class is full." Hollwell was lying, of course, and we both knew it. These new men do that so skillfully.

I tried another angle. "Beth's a V.I.P. They're supposed to be scheduled into my classes; you know that, Ed." The V.I.P.'s are kids with I Q's over one hundred twenty—potential leaders for tomorrow. It's our responsibility to give them the best education we can, which they certainly won't get in a new teacher's class.

"Miss Venter is doing a magnificent job, Mr. Stratten."

"Oh? I'm no administrator, Ed, but it occurs to me that the confusion in her class is a very inadequate sort of discipline."

"We each have our own standards. Miss Venter believes in the friendly, informal approach. The kids love it. They're learning a lot from her."

"The kids? Since when have we been running the schools to please them, Hollwell?" The words tasted like a bitter acid in my mouth. "As for Venter's classroom standards—well, there's only one standard worth talking about, and—"

"And you have it, naturally, Mr. Stratten?"

"I try to. My experience should count for something."

I signed Beth's transfer and walked out of Hollwell's office.

He was typical of the administrators who have taken over public education in the past few years. Soft-spoken half-wits. It was no local phenomenon, but a national trend. Everywhere the old time principals were resigning, as Dr. Lynn had at Hollybeach High. Ed Hollwell stepped into Lynn's job last September, and in three months the school had degenerated into a undisciplined madhouse.

It was three minutes before the bell would ring and my class in first-year general science would file in from the hall. Slovenly, sloppy, sleepy-eyed kids, without the smallest interest in science. What brains they had were crammed with juke box jingles and television banalities. Teaching them had become a kind of glorified baby-sitting.

I opened my roll book and crossed off Beth's name. My fourth transfer to Venter's class, and all of them V.I.P's. Hollwell had left me nothing but the dregs.

THE BELL RANG and my class came in. I had the mob whipped into line in three

or four minutes; you learn the technique after twenty years of teaching. They all had their books open, looking up the answers to the questions I had written on the blackboard. The room was quiet.

I had intended to use my class time to grade the papers from my morning physics class. But I couldn't concentrate. The papers were shoddy work; Hollwell had been raiding my physics classes, too, transferring all the V.I.P.'s to Miss Venter.

A conspiracy. The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. If Venter and her kind weren't outright subversives, they were unwitting morons playing the subversive game.

I'm a science teacher. I'm trained to think like a scientist and I'm accustomed to facing facts. I have absolutely no sympathy for our current witch hunt among intellectuals. But Miss Venter certainly did not fall into that category.

She consistently disregarded the academic standards of a good science teacher. I had many times offered to help her, but she always ignored my suggestions. She openly made fun of our textbooks. Furthermore, she made no attempt to teach her classes the basic learnings, a list of the fundamentals of science which I had written up myself. Every kid enrolled in any science class was expected to know the basic learnings before he could receive credit for the course; yet Venter disregarded them entirely.

Because of my deeply ingrained sense of professional ethics, I had tried not to point out Venter's shortcomings to the adminisration. She was a teacher in my school and my department. It was my professional duty to accept her as an equal. But I realized, suddenly, that doing so was a form of cowardice. I had a higher duty to the kids themselves.

For the first time since Venter came to Hollybeach, I made myself weigh all the evidence against her. Morally, the truth was inescapable. Yet I needed details before I could make it clear to the administration.

I spent the next four weeks observing Miss Venter's classroom methods. That was quite easy for me to do.

Mr. Hollwell ignored my first report when I put it on his desk at the end of September

"Really, Mr. Stratten," he said, "I'm not concerned with what my teachers talk about at

lunch."

"Dr. Lynn always wanted a full report."

"That kind of spying smells of thought control."

"Thought control, Mr. Hollwell, is a catch phrase the left-wingers use to justify a lack of personal discipline."

Without reading it through, Hollwell tore up my report on Venter. But he had not in so many words said I wasn't to submit another. Therefore, during my free periods, I began to drop in unexpectedly on Venter's classes.

ONE DAY I found her describing atomic structure to the kids. There was nothing really wrong about that, of course, although I never cover the atom until the second semester. Miss Venter had somehow made working models of half a dozen structures—all very inaccurate. Her models, sealed in glass cubes about a foot square, were remarkably ingenious. I never did understand how she made the little, colored electrons spin in free orbits around the nucleous, which had a tiny, functioning internal mechanism of its own. Her toys naturally fascinated the kids. They were all clustered around her demonstration table. Not a child was in his seat reading his book—where he would have been in my classroom.

I cleared my throat. Miss Venter smiled at me warmly, as if she were really pleased I had come to see her toys.

"Move back a little, children," she said. "Mr. Stratten wants to watch, too."

That crack was hitting below the belt, viciously. Granted, I am a little overweight. I have too many school responsibilities. I don't have the time to exercise as much as I should. But I certainly wasn't too large to squeeze past the kids behind her table.

"You're doing the atom early in the course, Miss Venter," I reminded her coldly.

She smiled again. "It seemed to me that was where we should begin, Mr. Stratten."

"I hope you aren't neglecting the basic learnings." I knew she was, of course. To prove my point, I turned to the kids and snapped out a few simple questions, which any moron in my classes could have answered. Her kids stared at me open-mouthed, as if I were talkng Sanskrit. That exhibition should at least have disturbed her, but so far as I could see she was totally un-

impressed.

Two days later I visited her class again. At that time she was discussing what she chose to call "the limited planetary phenomenon of gravity." In spite of the fact that she saw me standing at the back of the room, she had the gall to say to a classroom full of impressionable kids that there was no such thing as a law of gravity. "Or, for that matter," she added, "a law of science. A truth which works for us under some conditions may not work at all under others. We must build that point of view into all our thinking. There can be no scientific absolutes. We use gravity in mechanics, but use must not be confused with philosophy. When we speak of a law, we begin to deify it; we tend to forget that it is only a group of words summarizing an observation which appears to be true. Time always introduces contradictory data. What about the force of magnetism? Doesn't that suggest that we might develop an equally valid law of antigravity?"

At that point I turned on my heel and walked out. To hear a teacher of science preaching such nonsense to a high school class! If people like the Venter woman continued to masquerade as scientists, they would make chemistry and physics as vague and insubstantial as the social sciences. I had only one consolation. Although Venter's class had for once been sitting quietly and listening to her lecture, I was sure it went completely over their heads. Even the V.I.P.'s wouldn't understand her. You have to talk down to kids these days. They don't have the background for real education—too much television, I suppose. Venter was doing her best to warp their minds, but she wouldn't succeed. The only really important loss was that her classes weren't being taught the basic learnings.

THE FOLLOWING day I visited Venter's room again and I found her reading them a story from a science-fantasy magazine. It sounds improbable, but that's precisely what she was doing. For twenty years I've fought that insidious filth, and here it was in my own school! I went directly to Mr. Hollwell; there was nothing else I could do, under the circumstances.

"Six years ago," I reminded him, "I caught one of our teachers actually writing for a

fantasy magazine."

"And you wanted him fired," Hollwell replied. "I've seen the file on it, Mr. Stratten."

"At least Dr. Lynn agreed to transfer him to Central High. The slum kids down there aren't college material."

"I don't understand your objection, Mr. Stratten."

"No teacher has the moral right to betray what he teaches."

"But how is it a betrayal?"

"Science-fantasy is neurotic escapism written for fools and morons."

"So Plato and Thomas More wrote for idiots?"

"I'm not here to argue, Ed. I want you to do something—"

"Miss Venter's boys and girls are tremendously enthusiastic about science. She's making it come alive for them. Next semester we should triple the number of pupils who are electing a course in science. You should be pleased with such an increase in your department."

"I take it, you refuse to do anything about this Venter situation?"

"I don't consider it a situation, Mr. Stratten."

It was entirely clear to me that Hollwell was playing on Venter's team. The fact that I was in the fight alone didn't disturb me. All the eminent scientists have faced that same sort of blind opposition.

Mr. Hollwell's secretary was an older woman, a holdover from Dr. Lynn's administration. She and I were good friends. I dropped the hint, and she slipped me Venter's folder out of the principal's file.

Venter, I discovered with some surprise, had graduated from State with a B.S. and M.S. Her transcript was unusual: top grades in every subject. It was evidence of scientific genius. State doesn't dish out a record like that very often. Then why hadn't Venter gone into research or taken a university fellowship? Why was she satisfied to be a high school teacher? And why had she made such gross errors in her atomic models?

I was acquainted with Dr. Jennings, the Dean of the Graduate School at State. I telephoned him that evening. I said I was making a routine check up on Miss Venter's qualifications. That satisfied Jennings. He spoke enthusiastically of her scholarship, and Jennings was not a man who readily praised a student.

While she was at State, Miss

Venter had never questioned the authority of science; that Jennings would never have forgiven. Her personal life at the university had been utterly innocuous.

"As a matter of fact," Jennings remarked, "the teacher-training coordinator from the School of Education was afraid she wouldn't make the grade in a public school. He thought she didn't have enough of an outgoing personality."

"What organizations did she belong to, Dr. Jennings?"

"None. She lived alone. She always had her face buried in a textbook—never took part in any social activities. I hope she isn't in trouble at Hollybeach, Stratten. She ought to be an inspiration to the b r i g h t e r kids."

"She has all the V.I.P.'s Dr. Jennings." I tried to conceal the bitterness I felt.

"Then you understand her superior qualifications." After that remark, I knew Jennings was a naive old fool. The universities are full of them—well-meaning half-wits hiding in their ivory towers.

I asked Jennings who Venter's close friends had been. He gave me five names. "It was like a closed corporation, Stratten. All of them excellent scholars, you understand; wonderful kids to have in class. They were always together. If I remember it correctly, they bought a mountain cabin somewhere; they used to spend their week ends there. On the campus they were always with an older man who had a fellowship in the School of Education. Ed Hollwell. But you must know him, Stratten. Didn't he take the principal's job at Hollybeach?"

"Yes." I could have added that the six good friends were at Hollybeach, too—all of them new teachers hired in September, and all of them hired by Mr. Hollwell. Conspiracy? Could anything have been more obvious? Our new teachers pretended to be strangers. None of them had ever admitted knowing Hollwell at State.

I SHOULD HAVE stopped there. I had enough evidence then to turn the whole filthy mess over to the board of education. But I wanted to dig out the rest of it, too. There was a conspiracy; that much I was sure of. But what were they really after? And, more important, who was behind them? Who was pulling the strings?

The day after my call to Jennings, I made another visit to Venter's room. She was demonstrating the electromagnet and she had rigged up another of her ingenious toys, like her functioning atom models. This time it was a small, flat disk which she pretended to suspend in mid-air without any visible support. She said the disk was powered by a "build-in magnetic force field"—some of the ridiculous double talk she picked up from her science-fantasy magazines.

The kids were watching her, fascinated and eager to build their own disks, which Venter had been foolish enough to promise they could do. I clenched my fists and said nothing. The harm she was doing was not permanent. After Venter was out, it wouldn't take me long to get her classes back on the right track again.

The bell rang and her class filed out; they seemed to be sorry the period was over. But what kid wouldn't be in such a circus-like atmosphere? Miss Venter caught her floating disk and snapped a switch on it before she pushed it into a drawer of her demonstration table.

"I have to be so careful, Mr. Stratten," she explained. "If I left it on, this might pull the whole desk loose from the floor."

That remark was an insult to my intelligence, but I let it pass. I asked, "Are you planning on staying in town this weekend?"

"I usually go away, Mr. Stratten, but of course if there's something you want me to do—"

"Oh, no. A change is good for all of us." Then, very casually, I slipped in the jackpot question, "Do you ever go up to the mountains, Miss Venter?"

She looked at me steadily and, for a split second, I thought she knew why I had asked her that. But she gave me an empty smile and said, "I love the mountains, Mr. Stratten."

"Some of our teachers have built their own cabins."

"I have—" She hesitated imperceptibly. "I have access to one."

"Is it near Pinecrest by any chance?"

After a long pause, she snatched a piece of foolscap from her desk and scrawled out an address for me. "It's in Snow Hill, Mr. Stratten; very easy to find. Drop in and see us when you're up there."

I got it so easily. Venter, like every conspirator, was

overconfident; she was so sure of herself, so unaware of her own carelessness. As I turned toward the door, she put her hand on my arm and looked into my eyes.

"Mr. Stratten, I want to ask you about—about a problem child."

"Classroom discipline?" I suppressed a grin of satisfaction; at last she was beginning to recognize her complete lack of control—although a good teacher would have come to me for help weeks ago.

"A hypothetical case," she replied evasively.

"I always say, Miss Venter, if you don't beat them down first, you'll never have their respect."

"I mean the isolated case, the one disturbing influence in a class."

Only one bad apple, I thought, in the sort of class she conducted? That was a laugh. I had never listened to a more thorough going understatement. An incompetent needs such illusions, I suppose, to protect his ego.

"At our first department meeting last September," Venter went on, "you told us, Mr. Stratten, that the teacher is justified in contriving a situation that will lead to the child's suspension."

"Absolutely. Provoke the child to make an outright violation of the school code. It's not difficult to do. Remember, you're an adult dealing with the unstable emotions of adolescence."

"You really believe it's ethical to take such advantage—"

"The ethics of the profession are something they talk about in the School of Education. When you teach high school kids, Miss Venter, you're dealing with utter savages. Figuratively speaking, you crack them in the teeth before they have a chance to take a crack at you. If you don't, you won't survive as a teacher."

"The law of the jungle." She pursed her lips unhappily. "Thank you, Mr. Stratten. You've made it very clear to me what I must do."

Venter's question about discipline puzzled me; she seemed to have dragged it out of the void. But then I saw that it was a halfbaked sort of flattery. She certainly knew, after three months of teaching, that her own classroom methods created chaos; and she wanted me to believe she would take my advice.

THE FOLLOWING Saturday I went to Snow Hill. I didn't get an early start, because I wanted to make sure that all six of our new teachers had gone out of town for the weekend. If my hunch was right, they would all be at the cabin together. Whatever they were up to, I would catch them red-handed. It didn't occur to me that I might be in any danger. I'm a scientist; I don't believe in emotional melodramatics.

It had snowed during the week, and traffic on the mountain roads was slowed to a walk. I hadn't counted on that, nor on the hundreds of cars headed toward the resorts for the weekend. It was four in the afternoon before I finally found a motel in Snow Hill where there was a vacancy. Twenty-five dollars I paid for one night in a plasterboard cubicle so poorly put together that the wind screamed through open cracks in the walls!

I put on my coat and walked to the village. Snow was piled four feet high along the road. The sun was setting and the wind was ice cold. In the village the walks, relatively clear of snow, were thronged; most of the mob were young kids. They sniggered when I slipped on the ice. But what else could I expect? Kids these days have no concept of courtesy.

Miss Venter's cabin was east of the village, beyond the ski lift. It stood by itself on a point of land jutting out over the canyon. I counted six automobiles parked in a rectangular clearing dug out of the snow. And I recognized the cars as belonging to our new teachers at Hollybeach. So my hunch was right; they were all here.

I could have walked up the drive and knocked on the cabin door, but I wanted to take them by surprise. A few trees, heavy with snow, grew in a row back of the cabin; they offered the only possible shelter.

I circled the parking area and began to wade up the hill through the deep drifts. I could only go a few feet at a time before I had to stop to get my breath. My legs became wet and painfully numb. It took me more than an hour to climb less than four hundred feet. It was dark when I reached the cabin.

A window was open a few inches at the bottom and I could hear them talking inside. I worked my way cautiously toward the window. Their

voices became more distinct; they were not speaking English, but a gutteral foreign language I couldn't identify.

When I was able to see them, my heart hammered with excitement. All six of the new teachers were grouped around a radio transmitter-receiver, hidden behind an open wall panel. Mr. Hollwell was using the tiny microphone, speaking in that harsh, foreign tongue. The others were listening to a high-pitched, rasping voice that came occasionally from the grid of a speaker.

I saw Miss Venter nod her head. In English she remarked, "I think he's right. We should start changing the social studies curriculum at once."

One of the other teachers added, "We can't make real progress if we confine ourselves exclusively to science."

"But it means more risk," another put in. "The general public doesn't care what happens in science, but every pressure group in the country dabbles in history. The fanatics always want the kids taught their pet biases."

"Leave it to Hollwell. He can keep them pacified."

I turned away. The transmitter was evidence enough. Hollybeach High had been dangerously infiltered by subversives who took their orders from a foreign nation. I would have known more if I could have identified the language, but that was of no real importance. It was foreign, and that was all that counted.

The conspiracy was too big for me to handle alone. I went back to the highway. Three times I slipped and fell in the deep snow. My damp clothing began to freeze, but I was hardly conscious of my own discomfort. I had a duty to do; everything else was secondary.

I HAD SOME difficulty locating the sheriff of Snow Hill, and considerably more explaining to him what I wanted. I finally got his cooperation by reminding him how the FBI a year or so ago had rounded up a mob of fugitive communists hiding out in a Sierra cabin. The possibility of national publicity appealed to the sheriff—an attitude typical of the ethical standards of public servants nowadays.

The sheriff called two deputies and the four of us drove back to the cabin. I was surprised to find the six cars gone from the parking area; the drift of snow had been cleverly swept back into place. I think

I knew then what had happened, but I couldn't believe it.

When we knocked on the door, we had no response. The lock was open. I persuaded the sheriff to search the empty cabin. Even if the conspirators had run out, we could still find the transmitter. The panel which had concealed it was closed. I pried it open—and there was nothing behind it, not even a space large enough to hold the transmitter I had seen.

I was utterly confused. It was an impossible situation. How could they possibly have guessed I had seen them? How could they have disposed of the evidence so completely?

"I've heard about crackpots," the sheriff sneered, "who pull deals like this. Never thought I'd run into one in Snow Hill."

I clenched my fists. "Sheriff, I'm a science teacher. I know precisely—"

"Next thing you'll be telling us you've seen little men from Mars."

"I was here. I saw them using the transmitter!"

"Take my advice, friend." He tapped my chest with his dirty forefinger. "Keep off the bottle for a while."

The sheriff didn't have the decency to offer me a ride back to the village, not that I would have taken it. When he and his deputies were gone, I stood in the highway, shivering and staring up at the dark cabin.

I examined the place where their cars had been parked. The teachers had put the drift back very carefully; it looked entirely natural. The thin, surface crust of ice was continuous and unbroken.

I heard a faint, whistling sound in the night air and I saw a metal sphere settling toward the cabin. It stopped in mid-air, like the disk Venter had used to demonstrate the electromagnet. A panel slid open. A shaft of purple light spilled out on the snow. Hollwell and Venter, followed by the five other teachers from Hollybeach, began to descent a swinging ladder.

The sphere was not a machine produced by human technology. That much was obvious, and I knew what it implied. I knew why I could not identify the language they used; I knew why I had caught Venter reading science-fantasy to her class; I knew why her gadgets had seemed so ingenious. This was conspiracy, yes;

this was subversion. But the danger was far greater than I had supposed. It was not a human enemy, but an alien who had come to destroy our process of education. It was a plot to make our children morons, to keep them ignorant of science and teach them disrespect for authority. What could have been better calculated to soften us up for conquest?

Whatever I did I had to do alone. I knew that, too. What chance did I have of explaining this to the sheriff of Snow Hill? He obviously believed I was a crackpot; this would only prove the point.

I RAN UP the drive toward the cabin. I was not frightened. It was logical to believe that the aliens were afraid of men. Otherwise they would not have tried to subvert our education before the conquest.

Yet I desperately wished I was armed and, by a miracle, my wish was granted. I saw a revolver lying in the snow, where the sheriff or one of his men must have dropped it. I snatched it up as I ran.

The teachers were all on the ground, but the sphere still hung above the cabin. Hollwell crossed the rectangle of purple light and flung open the door. From inside the sphere I heard a voice speak that shrill, alien tongue. Hollwell replied, waving his hand cheerfully.

I sprang toward him. At the same time I heard footsteps in the snow behind me. I whirled and saw Miss Venter holding a tube of some sort in her hand. I had no doubt it was a weapon. I raised my revolver and fired, instinctively, in self-protection. She screamed as she fell. I saw her blood spill across the snow, black in the purple light.

I heard footsteps all around me. I tried to use the gun again, but a thick haze closed over my mind. My muscles were slowly paralyzed. I remember thinking that they must have drugged me in some way. I fought desperately, but the haze thickened and I slid down into an endless blackness.

I remember the trial only in disjointed fragments. Whenever I tried to fit the pieces together into a coherent pattern, the haze came again. I was the only man on earth who knew the truth; I was the only person capable of saving humanity. But I couldn't make anyone understand. When I tried to speak, the haze confused my words and made them

gibberish.

I watched helpless while they paraded their witnesses to the stand. Schizophrenia with a persecution mania: that's what the nitwit court psychiatrist said it was. Blind, ignorant fools! Every little thing I had done since September was used against me. Hollwell testified that I had wanted Venter fired because she was more popular with the kids than I was. As if that mattered! Hollwell put on a good show. He pretended to be reluctant about giving his testimony; he made them think he was so sympathetic toward me. "I told Mr. Stratten he was overworked," Hollwell repeated again and again. "I wanted him to take a leave of absence and relax—forget about school problems."

A stranger testified that the gun I used was registered in my name. As a matter of fact, I did recognize it; I'd bought it years ago, when we were having a siege of juvenile delinquency. But I had not taken that gun to Snow Hill. I had no idea how it got on the drive outside Venter's cabin.

The prosecution even dragged in Dr. Jennings from State, to show that I had tried to dig into Venter's past; and the sheriff of Snow Hill, who told how I had taken him to an empty cabin looking for what he described as "a nonexistent radio transmitter."

Throughout the trial Miss Venter sat in the audience, always on the front row and always keeping her beady eyes on me. Her arm was still bandaged where my bullet had struck her. That affected the jury considerably on the one occasion when the state put her on the stand. She spoke in a soft, quiet voice; like Hollwell, she pretended the whole thing was very unpleasant to her.

"I did everything possible to cooperate with Mr. Stratten," she said. "I was new at Hollybeach, green at teaching. Naturally I wanted his advice." I wanted to interrupt and tell them about the alien gadgets she had used in her classroom, but I wasn't able to get the words out.

"I don't know why Mr. Stratten followed me to Snow Hill," Venter went on. "He came to my cabin Saturday night with a gun. He called me all sorts of names. I tried to reason with him, but it did no good."

AFTER HER testimony, the verdict was a foregone

conclusion. She went back to her front row seat. There was a faint smile on her face. I saw it, but of course none of the others did. I sat glaring at her, with my fists clenched, and gradually the fury of my hate drove the paralyzing haze out of my mind. My eyes met Venter's.

I remembered our conversation in her classroom before I went to Snow Hill. She had asked about a problem child. I heard her voice clearly, as if she were speaking to me again, "You told us, Mr. Stratten, that the teacher is justified in contriving a situation that will lead to the child's suspension."

She had done exactly that—to me! I was a stumbling block in what they intended to do at Hollybeach, so they had set up a situation to drive me out—to send me to the madhouse. Very clearly, like the tinkling of a distant bell, I heard her voice, an intense whisper deep inside my mind,

"Man is worth saving, Mr. Stratten, but not the conventions of thinking which the past has clamped on his mind as absolute truth. If he can be freed of those, man will find his own magnificent potential —the dignity of maturity. Some of you, unfortunately, will have to be sacrificed along the way."

That was the end of it. I have not been foolish enough to think I can make the psychiatrists here at the asylum understand. In the courtroom, Venter had admitted the truth to me. Naturally, so the psychiatrists say, since no one else heard her, it is simply another detail I invented to support my basic delusion.

I'm not trying to convince them any more. They're all dimwitted fools; most people are. It rather amuses me to know that I'm the only person who knows the real truth. One of these days, when the aliens take over, they'll all be sorry they didn't listen to me.

And I'll just sit here in the asylum and laugh. But I mustn't laugh yet. Sometimes I forget about that, and they increase my treatments. I hate the therapy. It's very painful, and I find it so difficult to think clearly afterward; sometimes I even forget what happened.

I don't want to do that. It's the only revenge I'll ever have —to laugh at these fools when all this is over.

THE END

BRIGHT SENTINELS

If you're fortune-hunter, never, never marry a Limquat!

by CHARLES A. STEARNS

IT WAS RUTHIE MAY'S misfortune that her fifth, the last husband, turned out to be a Limquat.

Had it not been for the peculiar habits of that species, Ruthie might have gone her merry way forever; but perhaps the law of averages was against her. There are more Limquats upon the face of the earth than most people realize. They look, speak and act like humans; their flesh is soft and viable. Limquats, however, have one definitive characteristic that is shared in common only with high-fashion models and Indian statesmen.

They do not eat.

Limquats claim to be direct descendants of Apollo; however it is considered more likely that they are the degenerate spawn of some ancient, pre-Cambrian star race which once settled on Earth. They also claim immortality, but, as a matter of fact, Limquats breed and reproduce by fission once every five hundred years or so, and as often as not the adventure kills them just as dead as it would you or me. You may be sure that any trafficking with human beings is just for fun.

None of this would have been intelligible to Ruthie May, even if she had known, for she was all too human, and played the lonely hearts columns the way some people play the horses — single-mindedly, but with more success.

At forty-five, Ruthie May still managed to be a svelte blonde of thirty-six. A perfect thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-five-and-a-half.

Her technique was not complex. She placed her little advertisements in the proper magazines — demure, ladylike ads which could end in the most torrid sort of personal correspondence. And each time, it was love.

Not, as sister Lavinia said, "a wicked, sinful and mercenary business." Poor Lavinia lived in a chaste, spinster cottage and was incredibly fatuous. Her life, intellect and libido were sublimated to the efforts of raising hollyhocks and the moral standards of the community.

Actually, Ruthie May had given a great deal to each of her husbands, and asked only a little in return. She was an excellent cook. She never scolded or complained about cigar ashes on her rugs. She insisted only upon marital fidelity and prompt payment of the insurance premiums.

Bride's white pointed up her w o n d e r f u l complexion while widow's black flattered a figure that needed no accentuation. And since she was almost always wearing one or the other, it was no wonder, people said, that Ruthie May could attract men like Arnold Bassett.

AS FOR RUTHIE, she had fallen deeply in love with Arnold the moment she set eyes upon him at the railway station. He had proposed by mail, and she, lonely since her fourth husband's death six months ago, had accepted.

He had stepped down from the Pullman, a tall, ascetic-looking man in a long, black cloak of foreign cut. The gray hair, stern, aquiline visage and dark eyes were more striking, even, than they had seemed in the picture. And from the moment those restless, black eyes met and rested on hers, there could no longer be any doubt that they were meant for each other.

He had taken both her hands in his own, and looked

at her so intensely that she thought that she might drown in the bottomless depths of those strange eyes.

"You are more beautiful than I had dreamed," he said. "My Ruth, my dear Ruthie! Believe me, when I say that DuBarry could not hold a candle to your beauty." He had a curious, lisping accent, cultured and compelling, yet faintly suggestive of the alien.

"You're just saying that!" Ruthie whispered.

"Indeed not," Arnold said a bit morosely. "I happen to know. Well, well! This is the sort of quiet village that I had hoped for, my dear. I should not be surprised if it makes a new man of me. Possibly even two of them. But we won't go into that. Are you willing to go through with the ceremony at once."

"Tonight!" she said, and laid her head upon his lapel.

"You poor, young creature!"

"I'm not young, Arnold. Truly, I'm over thirty-six."

"Pah!" he said. "In my day I have had quite enough of ingenues. It wants half a century, at the very least, for a woman's character to develop."

"You're so right," Ruthie May simpered. "And do you know what, Arnold? I feel as if we'd known each other that long, instead of two weeks."

They had gotten into the station wagon, and he leaned over to put his arms around her. "My darling," he said simply, "we have known each other forever. In whatever age, in whatever station your essence may have lived in the past, I was there too. And you may be sure that we found each other."

Arnold Bassett—that was not his real name, of course—was counting upon a phenomenon well known to Limquats. One may make the most bald revelation of fact to a human being without giving away any secrets. They never listen anyway.

Ruthie May took the wedding license and two other papers from the glove compartment.

"What are those?" he said.

"Our insurance policies," Ruthie May said. "When I accepted you, Arnold, I got to thinking. My father left sister Lavinia and me with very little more than the houses over our heads. I got to thinking. One ought to leave something to one's dear husband if

she should happen to die. So I took out these policies on both of us."

Arnold laughed shortly. It was almost a bark. "That was thoughtful," he said, "but *I* shall live a long time. A long, long time."

"We never know," Ruthie said piously. "We truly never know."

THE MORNING came, and it was a bright, peaceful June morning. Ruthie arose and dressed leisurely. Her husband was still asleep, and she kissed him quietly and went out into the yard to lean on the back fence and watch the sun come up over the hollow.

Lavinia was already at work in her flower garden. Her head and shoulders were covered with a shawl and she moved slowly with her sprinkling can, up and down the rows. Lavinia had to move slowly. She had a very bad heart. A heart so timorous and weak that travel, excitement or amorous adventure were impossible for poor Lavinia.

And so she had remained at home with her flowers and become, with the passing years, a little strange. Just now she was gently chiding a hollyhock for failing to stand at attention.

Ruthie May opened the garden gate and went in, stepping on a snapdragon in the process.

The creaking gate gave her presence away. Lavinia turned with a cry. She dropped to her knees beside the snapdragon and tried to straighten it. But it was discouraged, and would not respond.

"Oh, it'll be all right," Ruthie May said.

"It will die," Lavinia said. She always spoke in hollow, impressive tones, like a medium.

"I'm married," Ruthie May stated.

"I always fancy that I hear a supersonic scream of anguish when they die," Lavinia whispered. "Mandrakes scream. Why not snapdragons?" Lavinia was an ardent spiritualist and had frequent contact with the Other Side.

"His name is Arnold—Arnold Bassett."

Lavinia got to her feet. In her face there dwelt a classicality of features, and in her lovely blue eyes, a serenity that Ruthie May long had secretly envied.

"Poor, poor George," Lavinia said.

George had been Ruthie May's fourth husband. He had been kind to Lavinia. Too kind.

Ruthie May smiled without a sign of humor. "You liked George, didn't you, Lavinia?"

Lavinia's eyes were large. She seemed to be in a trance. "I saw George's spirit last evening," she said. "He was crossing the garden toward the churchyard on the hill. I often see him there. *He* never steps on my snapdragons."

"George was always careful," Ruthie May said. "But he snored something terrible. You'll never know how he used to snore, Lavinia."

"Sometimes Roger passes this way, too," Lavinia said. "But not often. Roger usually takes the back way, back of the chicken house."

Roger had been Ruthie May's second husband.

Lavinia suddenly fixed her with a terrible stare. "Desecration of the spirits is a wicked, wicked thing," she said. "Even the pastoral spirits that hang around gardens and woodlots. They are mischievous, but not really bad. You must not laugh at them."

"Oh, I don't want to hear any more of your nonsense about spirits," Ruthie May said, her good humour suddenly gone.

"What nonsense?" said a voice directly behind her.

IT WAS ARNOLD. He was wearing an old figured wrapper and a quaint skullcap which would have looked ridiculous on a human being.

Still, he was impressively handsome for seven o'clock in the morning, and Ruthie May's heart swelled with pride.

"Arnold dear," Ruthie May said, "this is my sister, Lavinia. She believes in pastoral spirits."

Arnold positively jumped. "Who told her about them?" he demanded.

"Whatever is the matter with you, Arnold?" Ruthie May said.

"Nothing — nothing," he said. His smoldering black eyes were boring into Lavinia. Some hidden, terrible question was in those eyes. But Lavinia's own guileless, blue-eyed mien seemed to present no answer.

"The pastoral spirits cannot harm you," Lavinia said gently. "Except for the dryads, I mean. You have to keep your eye on *them.*"

"Yes, I know," Arnold said.

"Is it possible—it *is* barely possible that we have met—but no, I suppose not." The way he was looking through Lavinia made Ruthie May uncomfortable, even though it did not appear to bother Lavinia in the slightest degree.

"Come on, Arnold," she said rather petulantly. "Let's go have breakfast."

"A hack that I once knew, said, 'There are more things in heaven and earth...' You go ahead, my dear. I'll be along later."

"But your eggs will be ready in three minutes," Ruthie May protested.

"I shall want no breakfast."

"Nonsense," Ruthie said, and her lower lip quivered. "You need breakfast. It's the most important meal of the day." She tugged at his arm a little. "Lavinia, stop staring that way. It's very rude."

With a sudden movement, Arnold pulled loose from her. "There is one thing, my dear," he said, "which must be understood. I will not be bullied or nagged by a woman. I am a nervous, temperamental being, and nagging affects my basal metabolism. I go to pieces. Now run along and do not wait for me. I never eat anything at all. For breakfast, I mean."

Ruthie May stared at him, speechless with indignation. *Well, I never!* she thought. And she never had. Not even Linus, her first husband who had delirium tremens, had talked to her in this way. At least, not on their honeymoon.

She started back to the house, with tight-pressed lips and a steadily growing refrigeration of her sympathy cells.

"Please don't forget to close the gate," Lavinia called after her. "We must not let the dryads in."

"Oh shut up!" Ruthie May yelled, and fled, tears streaming down her cheeks.

RUTHIE MAY was essentially a woman of action, however, and she did not brood for more than two or three minutes.

Instead, she came to the quiet, sane realization that Arnold must be dispatched at once. He had goaded her beyond endurance and, indeed, had proved to be no better than all the others.

And it hurt desperately, because she loved him so!

Not knowing that Arnold was a Limquat, she was able to set to the task with a better

heart than would have been possible had she known of the difficulties that lay ahead.

As it was, she made coffee in the percolator. Percolator coffee was one of her specialties, and she invariably made it good and strong.

There was a small, brown bottle in the medicine cabinet, labeled Paregoric. It contained something a good deal more interesting than harmless paregoric. It contained a powerful barbiturate.

The barbital, however, produced merely an instant, painless narcosis, and Ruthie May desired something with more character this time.

After all, she was a woman scorned, and the expression of her vengeance could not be effected merely by causing Arnold's extinction. He must suffer. It was just and proper that he suffer as she was suffering.

And so, after some deliberation, she chose the prussic acid. The symtoms of prussic acid she knew well enough, and they were gratifying. Fixed, staring eyes with dilated pupils, frothing at the mouth, lockjaw, bright red and purple spots on various parts of the body, particularly under the fingernails. Intense agony.

And good strong coffee could mask the taste of bitter almonds.

She seasoned the coffee with a generous teaspoonful, and met Arnold at the door with a kiss.

He was contrite.

"My darling Ruthie," he said, "forgive me for being harsh with you."

"Oh, don't let it bother you," Ruthie said. "What's done is done, anyway. I suppose Lavinia has been boring you with those silly witch stories of hers."

He stiffened abruptly. "Lavinia is psychic," he said. "Only human, perhaps, but psychic, and even *we* do not sneeze at such powers in human beings."

"Of course you're right," Ruthie May said. "I have made you some nice hot coffee, Arnold dear."

"I really do not—" began Arnold.

"Just one cup!" pleaded Ruthie May sweetly. "And you don't *ever* have to eat breakfast if you don't want to."

"Well, I never *have*," he said, and picked up the cup and saucer. He started to put

it to his lips and stopped. "What about lunch and dinner?"

"My goodness," Ruthie May said, "everyone has to eat sometime."

"I do not," he said, and set the cup down.

"Very well, dear," Ruthie May said hastily. "No lunch, no dinner. Not until you want it. Now will you drink your coffee?"

"I can't do it. I am sure that it would upset my metabolism.

"Milk then?"

"No, I think not. Listen carefully, my dear, to what I am about to say. I shall try to make our marriage work, but you must make two concessions. The first is that I must not be prevailed upon to eat breakfast, lunch or dinner. It would not be good for me. I should be ill, and I know you wouldn't want that."

"And the other thing?"

"I have left a small, black box beneath the dressing table in our bedroom. You are not to touch it or disturb it. It would be dangerous for you. You must trust me, and perhaps some day I shall be able to explain to you. Indeed, I may introduce you to a life and a knowledge far older and more profound than anything of which you have ever dreamed."

Ruthie May took the coffee pot into the kitchen and emptied it down the drain. There is nothing more unpalatable than cold coffee.

BY THE END of the week, Arnold still had not eaten anything, and she thought she had begun to see a glimmer of the truth. Arnold Bassett was either a detective set upon her trail by one of her disgruntled former in-laws, or else he had become suspicious, and was raiding the icebox while she slept.

She made up her mind that she would not go mad. Instead, she would set a closer watch for another week.

On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nothing happened, but on Thursday night, shortly before midnight, Arnold got out of bed and went over to the black box.

She slitted her eyes and continued to snore softly, but her heart was beating so furiously that it seemed he would surely hear it.

Arnold looked very old in the subdued light of the night lamp. He opened the box and

took out a flask that glowed with a golden-white life of its own. He uncorked it and held it up so that a single, radiant drop fell upon his tongue.

The change which occurred in him was subtle, but pronounced. He became straighter, his carriage at once youthful and springy. The agelines in his face seemed to diminish. He replaced the stopper and flash, hiccupped, and came back to bed.

Ruthie May fell asleep, dreaming of wedding marches, marching hollyhocks and chemical formulae.

In the days that followed she observed no signs of actual profligacy between Arnold and Lavinia.

However, Lavinia had begun to leave her shawl in the house when she worked in her garden, and Arnold and she often could be found leaning on the back fence, talking in low tones.

The old fool.

The die was cast, however. Her mind was made up, and only the opportunity was wanting.

It came one day when Arnold drove into the city to hear an Indian diplomat give a speech at the Grange Hall. Arnold seemed to believe that the Indian might be someone that he had known a long time ago.

Ruthie May went at once to get the black box. It was harder to open than she had expected, but eventually she was able to release its ingenious locking mechanism and get at the flask inside.

The luminosity was not from the flask, but from its contents, which shone through the transparent container. It was a white-fire liquid, warm to the touch, and it tingled on the tongue. She was careful not to swallow any of it.

She decided that it must be a potent vitamin concentrate. Its usefulness in her plan, however, derived from its appearance. She knew of one other substance which looked exactly like this concentrate, and that substance was far from being succulent.

When Arnold Bassett returned that afternoon his decline, though he did not yet know it, had already begun, and it was gradual and relentless.

In three weeks he took to his bed, and could not get up.

Ruthie had called a doctor, and was sitting at Arnold's bedside. "How do you feel now, Arnold dear?" she asked.

"I can't move my arms or

legs," he gasped. "I can't breathe. I do not understand what is happening to me. At first I thought it might be a fission, but now it seems that I am getting vastly older instead. My dear, I am afraid that I shall not be with you much longer."

"I'll try to be brave," Ruthie May said, and reached for a chocolate.

"There is only one chance. Go and get the flask from the black box."

"But you told me not to touch it."

"Hurry!"

She went and got it, and poured a liberal portion down his throat. He gasped weakly for a moment, then lay pale and limp upon his pillow. She thought that he was gone.

Presently he revived, however, and opened his eyes.

She gave him a little more. "Is that better?" Ruthie May said.

"Strange...doesn't seem to help...bit..."

"Did you think it would?"

"Should have told you, my dear. I am...nonhuman... must have life-prolonging ambrosia. P o t e n t elixir...in flask."

"Not now, there isn't," Ruthie May said.

DOCTOR LUCAS came an hour later, and though he was somewhat drunker than usual, he was still able to walk from his car to the house and sign the death certificate.

Arnold had waited until he arrived to die, and Ruthie May was very grateful, for a post mortem might have revealed that Arnold was so saturated with white phosphorus that it was a positive wonder he didn't glow in the dark.

Actually, although she did not know it, the effect of the poison had been practically negligible. It was only the deprivation of the elixir, coupled with that continued and frantic dosage, which had taken its toll.

The undertaker came and got Arnold and brought him back the same afternoon in a plush coffin. Ruthie was old-fashioned and sentimental; she believed in wakes.

A few neighbors came late in the afternoon, eyed Ruthie May's tears and black lace cynically, and left again. Only Lavinia came for a moment to shed a tear over the remains of Arnold Bassett, and then the lid was shut and fastened forever.

The undertaker presented his bill and left. It was very quiet and very oppressive.

Ruthie May left Arnold to his dreamless sleep, went out and got into her station wagon, and drove to town to see the insurance agent.

Having retired for the night he was not happy to see her.

"I am calling about my husband's insurance. Arnold Bassett. He passed away this morning. I thought you might like to know."

"I was dying to hear about it," the agent, an irritable, bald-head man, said. "Are you Lavinia?"

"No, of course not. You remember me—Ruthie May. I was his wife."

"Then I'm sorry to inform you, Mrs. Bassett, that your husband changed his beneficiary a week ago. He was planning divorce, he said. The new beneficiary is your sister, Lavinia."

Looking back, Ruthie May could see that the affair had been going on right under her nose all of the time.

Twice, when she had returned from the village, Arnold had been coming through the gate from the garden, but she had not guessed that it could have progressed so far in this short time. Now she was doubly glad of what she had done.

The funeral expenses must be met, however, and there was not much money in the cookie jar in the pantry. She had lived high after George's death, and since her tastes were discriminating, she had spent a lot of money. Now she must be dependent upon the largesse of Lavinia.

Lavinia was fussy and would demand an exact accounting for every cent that Ruthie May spent. There was always the possibility of putting Lavinia away in an asylum, of course, but she had already tried this two or three times, and it had never come to much.

Ruthie May had a few bleak moments before she rallied. Something had to be done with Lavinia. That was the problem. With her out of the way, the insurance would revert to nearest kin.

And presently the plan was born, slowly, deliberately, horrifyingly, in her mind.

She toyed with it awhile, speculatively. It seemed sound. She went over it, step by step, developing the details, and each detail, in its turn, was deemed plausible and safe. There could be no slip-up. It must be perfectly executed.

When she arrived home she lost no time in finding a screw-

driver and setting to work on the casket. She removed three dozens brass screws and lifted the lid.

Arnold was lying there, splendid as life.

"I could spit in your face," Ruthie May said, "but I've got a better idea."

IT WAS ALREADY quite dark when Ruthie May went to the woodshed. It was after nine o'clock, and she knew that Lavinia would be long since sound asleep. Nothing less than a tornado could awaken Lavinia.

She found a wheelbarrow, a piece of oilcloth and a spade. These she took to the back door and left them there while she went in to get Arnold out of the casket.

He was not very heavy, but it took her ten minutes to get him out of the door and into the wheelbarrow. His feet dragged along the ground unceremoniously, but that was nothing.

She covered him with the oilcloth, put the spade on top, and wheeled her burden along the stone walk until she came to Lavinia's garden fence. She opened the gate.

The wheelbarrow scraped through narrowly, and she pushed it between rows of hollyhocks until she reached the southwest end of the garden. Here was the corner which Lavinia always reserved for her annual planting of Chinese flags. For some reason, Lavinia always planted the flags in this exact spot, on the same day of the year—Flag Day—and the flags responded in identical manner each time by refusing to come up.

Flag Day was day after tomorrow.

Ruthie May dumped Arnold on the ground, spread the oilcloth out beside him, and went to work.

First she carefully removed the sod from a two-by-six foot area. These squares of sod were carefully placed upon the oilcloth, and then she began to dig in earnest. Soon the wheelbarrow was filled with soft loam, and she had excavated a trench two feet in depth at one end, and a little over a foot at the other. At the upper end she had excavated a trench two feet in depth at one end, and a little over a foot at the other. At the upper end she struck an ancient tile and chipped it, but that did not matter.

She placed Arnold in the trench, feet downhill, replaced

a little dirt, and began to fit the sod back in place. At last only a single square of raw earth was left, and here Arnold's pale face looked up, like chiseled marble, at the moon. She replaced the last piece of sod.

Lavinia's first shovelful of earth would be certain to turn up this very bit of sod, and though Ruthie May, personally, was not squeamish, she was aware that the effect on Lavinia would be profound. Lavinia's weak heart would have its rest at last.

Afterward, it would only remain to replace the sod on Arnold, and call Doctor Lucas, who would be too late as usual.

So considering, Ruthie May took her wheelbarrow-load of dirt, her oilcloth and spade, and went home. And the rows of hollyhocks, like impotent sentinels of Lavinia, seemed to watch her in grudging admiration as she went through the gate.

Ruthie May deposited the dirt behind the garage, restored the tools, and went into the house.

SHE TURNED on the lamp in the front room, but the house still seemed dark and cheerless. It was a curious thing, a maddening thing, but she still had the feeling that there was something more that must be done. Something she had forgotten. Some slight evidence that she had overlooked, perhaps. But there was nothing.

She got her box of chocolates and a copy of *Wide Screen Movie Monthly* and sat down to read.

She could not concentrate. The house was stuffy and too empty; it seemed to be closing in upon her. She knew what she would do.

She would go away from here—at once. Right after the funeral. Right after it happened. The magazine had given her the idea; she would go to Hollywood. There must be enough money for a bus ticket, and to last her until the insurance came through.

But she remembered the look in Arnold's eyes just before he died. It was as though he had sworn his undying vengeance with those terrible, bottomless, black orbs.

"You are just being a silly girl, Ruthie May," she said aloud.

She went into the pantry and got down the cookie jar. It amounted to a hundred and seventy-three dollars. Enough.

Then she saw the elixir. It was sitting on the top shelf in a fruit jar. She had put it there and forgotten it.

She could not leave it there. Then she emptied the flask.

Thoughtlessly, she poured it into the sink.

The elixir flowed down the drain to the sewer tile. Then it trickled along the tile until it came to a place where someone had inadvertently broken the tile, and allowed it to become clogged with dirt. At this point it began to soak into the earth, and upward by capillary action. It is amazing how far a half-pint of ambrosia will go.

Ruthie had begun to pack her suitcase. It did not take her ten minutes, but that was too long. While she was packing, the kitchen door seemed to blow open and a cold wind swept through the house.

Investigation revealed that the kitchen door was indeed open. She closed it.

The kitchen was dark, but she felt, somehow, that she was not alone. She stood very still for half a minute, listening.

"Is that you, Lavinia?" she said.

Someone said, "*You left the gate open.*"

And she turned to look, but there was something very black and very tall, and smelling of damp earth, standing between her and the window. There was really no place to run.

"Not *that* gate, my dear," he said.

THE END

PSI FOR PSURVIVAL

Seranimu wanted to be a Mental Giant—in fact it was the only way he could impress his nagging wife. Then he spotted that ad on a pack of Earth-made matches: Clip the coupon—first easy lesson free. He clipped the coupon—and the psychic chain reaction was on!

by MANLY BANNISTER

SERANIMU fingered the book of matches and reflected upon its advertising message. Naturally, the matches bore advertising. They had come from Earth.

Everybody in the galaxy made matches, but only the Earthmen made matches like these. Frail paper things, you could strike them under water. If you brought the match out quickly enough, it would continue to burn. Remarkable people, the Earthmen, and the artifacts of their culture were remarkable.

The message, though, was even more remarkable than the matches. It was printed neatly, briefly, in the cramped space, in Morforese, the principal idiom of Zingu, Seranimu's home world in the Galactic Federation.

You can become a Mental Giant! Study at home for only 7 shrilr *a month. Study, Learn the powers of Mind. Free sample Lesson; No cost, No obligation. Fill out coupon inside and return to Home Study Mind Power, Inc. Earth. (Send Cover Only—Not Matches!)*

Earth, a fabled place, thought Seranimu. If the galaxy weren't so overpopulated that everyone's place of residence was irrevocably fixed, he would change his to the planet Earth. There, better things were made in better ways, of better materials, by better workmen. Was it not all true, just as it said in the Earthmen's ads? Of course it was. Just look at the refrigerator in

his own kitchen—a Frigitemp from Earth. It was far and away superior to that fright Korisu had had reprofaxed in from Bolangus. Seranimu sneered.

But that was Korisu. A trifle blunt, mentally. Could Korisu become a mental giant? Not likely. *He* would not be interested. Korisu was an ideal example of the devitalized culture of the Federation. He was happy on Zingu...happier than he should be, at any rate, even with such a lovely, personable wife as Anisel.

Well, let Korisu be happy, poor fellow. He had not read and studied like Seranimu. He knew nothing about what life might be like if there were not so many people in the galaxy.

Seranimu looked back at the matches in his hand. *Free Yourself From the Shackles of Boredom*, it said there. Well, he would. With a firm hand, he filled in the coupon, slipped it into an envelope and addressed it to the Earth corporation.

Stepping across the room to the self-powered, apartment model reprofax, he dropped the envelope into the slot for mail and twisted a dial. There, it was gone. At this instant, within or without the province of Einsteinian simultaneity of events in the space-time continuum, the envelope and its contents were materializing on the planet Earth, three thousand light-years away. There would be an extra charge on his reprofax bill at the end of the month, in view of the long distance transmission.

Reprofax was basic to galactic culture. It provided instantaneous communication between far-flung worlds; even allowed personal travel, if a man could afford it. Local transportation, however, was cheaply had by reprofax, and all Seranimu had to do was stand on the platform on the other side to be whisked to his job in the government offices of Morfors, or to the market, or the theater, or wherever it was, locally, he desired to go.

"There," said Seranimu. "I have taken the first step toward becoming a Mental Giant!"

"Becoming a what?" asked Pimo, Seranimu's pretty wife, stepping in from the kitchen.

"A Mental Giant," said Seranimu, unconsciously capitalizing the words in imitation of the matchbook ad. "I have answered an ad of the Earthmen. They teach you, like school, but at home."

"If Earthmen are behind it," sniffed Pimo, "it costs money. What do they teach you at home?"

"How to become a mental giant," repeated Seranimu. Furthermore, they do it very cheaply—only seven *shrilr* a month."

"Seven *shrilr!* My God and Zingu, Seranimu, are you made of money?"

"It does not become a lady to curse," said Seranimu firmly. He gazed fondly into Pimo's dark, tip-tilted eyes from his eight-foot height. "Wouldn't you like to have a mental giant for a husband?"

"I certainly would," she agreed, "except I already have you, lover."

"And soon," replied Seranimu, "you shall also have the other!"

A CULTURE, roughly speaking, is an agglomeration of social groups, each with its own little ax to grind. Galactic culture fitted the definition, but all the axes were the same size, shape, and degree of temper. And the edges of all were dull. Earth, that remarkable planet, was the only exception. It was not a member of the Federation. It retained freedom and independence for its people. If anything *big* came to pass, you knew it had originated on Earth.

To Seranimu, galactic culture, outside of Earth, represented a vast, wriggling blob of protoplasm, rather than a civilization. There was nothing attractive in being jammed nose-to-tail as they were in cramped living quarters, in swarming so thickly in their city streets that you *brushed* your way through traffic. There was nothing inspiring in being chained to a government job, a mere occupation designed to keep you out of mischief and nothing else.

Take Seranimu's job, for instance. He was a looker. That is, his job consisted purely and simply of looking. Every day, from eight to four-thirty, Seranimu looked, with that detached interest of a government employee out of love with his job. Once a week, he turned over to his superiors a written report on his looking. That is all there was to it. The theory behind the job was simple. If a man looked long enough and hard enough, you never could tell what he might see. And *why* did he look, day after day, year in and year out? Well, the government had a corps of experts who did nothing but

look into *that,* and so far, they had come up with neither the head nor the tail of it. Seranimu suspected that they never would.

Now, he thought, things would be different. Becoming a mental giant opened up a totally new kind of life, that might lead to...what?

The free sample lesson, when it came, was a little disappointing. But what could you expect for nothing?

"What is that, now?" asked Pimo, over his shoulder. She had responded as soon as he to the buzz of the reprofax and the lighted screen announcing, *Incoming Transmission.*

"It is my free lesson from Home Study Mind Power," said Seranimu.

"I know that, silly. I can read the return address on the envelope. Open it and see what's inside."

Seranimu opened it and shook assorted papers into his broad palm.

"A half a gram of iron filings, a magnet and a booklet of instructions," he said, irritated with Pimo. "Also, an application for enrollment and an easy payment plan prospectus. What more do you want?"

"Seven *shrilr* a month should buy more than that, Seranimu!"

"I haven't paid any seven *shrilr!* I haven't even decided to take the course."

"Seven *shrilr* a month for how many months?" harped Pimo.

"It doesn't say."

"You had better find out," Pimo warned darkly. "You know about the Earthmen!"

"We Zinguans can still learn from them," Seranimu returned loftily.

"Such as how to become a mental giant," encouraged Pimo, baiting him.

"Exactly. What I shall do depends on the outcome of the experiment outlined here. So please stop bothering me."

"What are you supposed to do with that—if you don't mind my saying so—junk?" asked Pimo.

"Sprinkle the iron filings on a sheet of clean paper,'" read Seranimu. "'Hold the magnet under the paper and watch the filings arrange themselves along the lines of magnetic force as the paper is shaken lightly.'"

"That's kid stuff," scoffed Pimo. "Why don't you do it?"

"Because it says here that the magnet loses its magnetism going through the reprofax. I have to remagnetize it first."

He followed directions, remagnetized the magnet and held it under the paper, on which he had sprinkled the filings.

"There," he said. "Isn't that pretty? Elementary, of course, but it illustrates quite well how a force can control matter."

"I hope," sniffed Pimo, "you aren't going to pay seven *shrilr* a month for *that!*"

"Certainly not. There is more. It says, 'As soon as the filings are arranged along the lines of magnetic flux, remove the magnet, straight downward.' There, I've removed the magnet. See how the filings stay in place?"

"Shake the paper," sneered Pimo, "and they will not stay long."

"That is just what I shall do. First, though, I have to look at the pattern and memorize it."

He did so, looking with the accomplished verve of a professional. When he had the location of every last particle firmly in mind, he shook the paper.

"IT SAYS to lay the paper on a table." He frowned. "They should know we don't have tables on Zingu."

He moved over to his "desk," which was a cleared space in a corner, with slots in the floor for paper, pencil and other bits of bookkeeping paraphernalia. He laid the paper carefully down and squatted beside it. Pimo watched without audible comment, but her expression needed no words.

"So what do you do now, you mental giant, you?"

"Now," said Seranimu with a trace of annoyance, "I rearrange the particles with the power of mind into exactly the same pattern the magnet produced."

He read the instructions twice, carefully. Then he fixed his glance on the particles and concentrated. His head felt unaccustomedly queer. With a barely audible rustle, the particles moved, hurrying like so many microscopic black bugs, and arranged themselves exactly—or nearly so—as they had been.

"You did that very well, lover," Pimo observed with satisfaction. "Now that you have had your trouble's worth, forget the whole business."

"Forget it? Why, this is *marvelous!* You saw what I did! I didn't touch it or anything!"

"Yes," said Pimo. "I saw. It was interesting, but not seven *shrilr* a month interesting, if

you understand me. I need a new dress, and our percolator hasn't worked right in ages, and—"

"Telekinesis," Seranimu interrupted gravely, "is *worth* seven *shrilr* a month. It is *worth* going without a new dress and living with a malfunctioning percolator."

"*I* go without! *I* live with!" complained Pimo bitterly.

"This is only a free sample lesson," he said severely. "This they teach me for nothing. How much more for seven *shrilr* a month? Use your imagination! Listen to what it says here. 'If you do not at first succeed in making the particles move, do not worry. Further lessons in this course contain valuable information that will make the feat easy for you.' They don't expect me to do it right off, like I did. Wait till I tell them. I'll write..."

"Seven *shrilr*," murmured Pimo sadly. "Seven *shrilr* a *month*!"

Home Study Mind Power, Inc., Earth, in the person of Mr. Flanagan, Seranimu's correspondence instructor, seemed unimpressed by the claim of success. Flanagan replied, writing with a note of weariness, urging Seranimu to study, to become *adept*, to let no amount of failure dismay him. He sounded, Seranimu thought, as if he had not even read the letter Seranimu wrote. He had noticed the seven *shrilr*, though. The reply also brought Lesson Two.

Months went by, and seven *shrilr* with each of them. Lesson followed lesson. Telepathy was the one that bothered Seranimu. Not that it was hard. It was very easy, but the course warned against using it. *A good way to keep your friends*, said the text, *is not to practice this ability on them*. In spite of the warning, Seranimu dared to read Pimo's mind. After that, he kept his mindreading to himself, feeling somewhat injured. Pimo's opinion of his investigations was bad enough when tempered with verbal expression.

There were lessons in precognition, dowsing, crystal gazing, transmutation of elements, levitation and teleportation. Some were complex, tricky subjects, and had several lessons devoted to them.

Seranimu not only studied, he *learned*. His studies opened up a whole new plane of existence. Flanagan of Home Study Mind Power, Inc., Earth, remained unimpressed, showered him with exhortations to *study*,

learn, become *adept* in spite of all apparent failure.

SERANIMU'S friend Korisu lived across the hall in the communal *pletsch* that was home to thousands of their kind. Sometimes, S e r a n i m u asked himself what he saw in Korisu. The man kept his eyes shut and his mind absolutely closed. Of course, he played a good hand of *prej,* and Anisel, Korisu's wife, was no mean antagonist in the game, either. Moreover, Seranimu thought Anisel quite pretty. He enjoyed having her in their *prej* games.

They played this time in Seranimu's apartment. Korisu dealt out the plastic disks while Pimo marked up the preceding hand on the score sheet.

"I think," said Korisu with typical stolidity, "that you often let yourself be carried away by the Earthmen's advertising, Seranimu. You have let those people work on your mind until you *think* you are doing the things they claim they can teach you. Rot, I say."

"Have it y o u r way," shrugged Seranimu. "I tried to prove it to you. I teleported a book in your own apartment, and you just laughed. You said either I had hypnotized you, or your eyes showed you the impossible and therefore lied."

"I would rather believe my good sense than my eyes any day," murmured Korisu. The *prej* halted their clicking round. Seranimu leaned f o r w a r d, scooped his from the floor.

"You have a closed mind," he said. "You will not believe the Earthmen have developed psi powers any more than you will believe that Earth-made refrigerators are better than that piece of junk you bought on Bolangus. You would rather lie with a broken leg than admit a physician might heal it for you."

"I know about broken legs," said Korisu serenely. "The treatment for them is accomplished fact. You forget, Seranimu, that I am a temperament analyzer. I know my job well. Even without resort to laboratory paraphernalia, I can a n a l y z e your temperament without difficulty. You are a self-centered dreamer with overtones of exhibitionism."

"Thank you," said Seranimu, coldly polite. "Consider your fee my next loss at *prej.*"

"Korisu!" said Aniself. "If Seranimu believes, it is *his* business. Remember that you are a guest."

"Thank you, Anisel," said

Seranimu gratefully. "When you tire of that stupid oaf for a husband, you may come live with Pimo and me."

Pimo, sitting tailor-fashion beside him, pinched him.

Later, when Korisu and Anisel had gone, Seranimu said to Pimo, "Korisu is an idiot. That is all I can say for him."

"*I* know you are accomplished, lover," said Pimo graciously. "Why seek admiration outside our family circle?"

Seranimu felt that Pimo had put a double meaning there, but he ignored it.

"Korisu is my friend," he said crossly. "I should like to convince him."

"Friend," s n i f f e d Pimo. "Well, all right as a friend, I suppose. But don't take too much for granted, lover. He was in the other day, while you were gone. He suggested analyzing my temperament."

"Korisu thinks of nothing but his job."

"And your job is looking. Do you spend your free time looking at Korisu's wife? I should hope not. Anisel would slap you to sleep."

"You misjudge Korisu. He has zeal."

"Not to mention a few other things, more apparent to a woman's eyes. Still, I would not shatter your illusions about the fellow. I can take care of myself."

"You doubtless have dishes waiting in the kitchen," Seranimu said coldly. "Go attend to them. I have some writing to do before going to bed."

Invoking husbandly prerogative was the best Seranimu could do to defend himself. He had slipped, he admitted, in bragging to Korisu. The lessons had warned him. How about Korisu, now? He sighed. Women sometimes imagine men are chasing them. Again, didn't Korisu often act a little odd around Pimo, making with a sort of simpering attitude, having a little of bowing and scraping in it? He tried to wash his mind of the implication.

"DON'T COMPLAIN to me," said Pimo, when Seranimu protested that not even Flanagan, of Home Study Mind Power, Inc., Earth, paid any attention to his claims of success.

"It would seem," grumbled Seranimu, "that my own instructor thinks I'm lying to him. He just writes back, recommending *more* study, *more* hard work. He never pats me on the back, saying, 'You have

done very well, Seranimu.' I like recognition for my work."

"Aren't you getting your seven *shrilr* a month worth?" asked Pimo drily.

Exasperated, Seranimu teleported a vase of flowers across the room and smashed it against the wall.

"Shame!" said Pimo, picking up the pieces. "Not satisfied with your accomplishments, you must have recognition, too. Well, why don't you *show* this Flanagan you can do as you say?"

Seranimu gave her a contemptuous look. "I should have to go to Earth to do that. Three thousand light-years, woman! Have you any idea what it would cost to reprofax a man of my bulk that far?"

"You are a mental giant," said Pimo. "Why depend on reprofax? Teleport yourself!"

The import of her words dazed Seranimu. He staggered. Why hadn't *he* thought of that? He knew why he hadn't. The very thought made sweat break out all over him in stinging little globules. Teleport himself three thousand light-years? Hit exactly a tiny grain of sand at the other end of the trajectory? He shuddered. The possibility was fraught with error.

"Well, it's your problem," said Pimo airily. "All I did was suggest. Do as you please, but don't bother me with your gripes. As you are fond of noting, I have dishes to do—why can't *I* get a government stipend as a dishwasher?"

"Woman's place is in the home," rebuked Seranimu. "You may thank God it has not yet been turned into a government job!"

"If it were," said Pimo slyly, "it would undoubtedly be departmented, with a rate of pay for each department. In some departments, Seranimu, I could get rich off you!"

She went out, slamming the door.

As little as any man wants to admit it, his wife occasionally has an idea almost as good as one he could think up himself. Seranimu wrote to Flanagan, baring his abused state of mind and concluding, *Furthermore, Mr. Flanagan, since you do not believe I tell the truth, I shall visit you on Earth three days from now and prove it. Shame on you. You should have more faith in me. Respectfully, Seranimu; Morfors, Zingu.*

He sealed the letter and reprofaxed it.

First, he had to wangle a leave from his job. He had va-

cation time coming. That disposed of, he went about the other preparations. Three days later, he kissed Pimo goodby, settled himself and tried to concentrate. He could not at all seem to get into the proper frame of mind, until he realized what it was that worried him.

He got up from his squat, crossed the hall and knocked at Korisu's door.

Anisel answered, smiling at him. She's very p r e t t y, thought Seranimu, daring to think so as he looked at her. Doubtless, she secretly admires me.

He said, fawning, "Is Korisu at home?"

"Yes," she said, with a trace of what seemed like reluctant assent. Was she disappointed, then, that he came when Korisu was at home?

Seranimu expanded with a fine humor. "A time for the beast," he said, "a time later for beauty." He beamed and winked at her.

Anisel laughed, appreciating the compliment.

"I heard that," said Korisu, coming to the door. "By what right do you comment on my wife's beauty?" He turned to Anisel. "Go into the kitchen and do your dishes dear."

It came as a shock to Seranimu to realize that Anisel soiled her pretty hands in dishwater, just like Pimo. What a brute Korisu must be to make her do it!

He said, as soon as the door closed behind Anisel, "I am going away for a brief time, Korisu."

"Good!" grunted Korisu. "We shall be spared the look of your ugly face." He laughed to show he didn't mean it. "Vacation Center, eh?"

"That government stewpot?" Seranimu f r o w n e d. "Much farther, Korisu. I won't say how far. I want to tell you I am leaving Pimo here. I am asking you to stay out of my apartment while I am gone, and refrain from trying to analyze Pimo's temperament."

"I wouldn't think of it," said Korisu innocently.

Seranimu broke the rules and took a peep into Korisu's mind. What he saw there convinced him Korisu was a liar of the worst.

"I know a few things," Seranimu said darkly. "I just thought a warning proper, that is all."

SERANIMU looked dazedly at his surroundings. The

intense concentration required for teleportation had left him groggy. The place was definitely alien. Was it Earth? Spacious lawns, t r e e-d o t t e d, shrubbed and flowered, undulated gently to the horizon. Low buildings, set here and there among clumps of trees, had an aspect of serene relaxation. He had certainly left Zingu, no doubt about it. Overpopulated Zingu was nowhere like this.

He looked at the building before him, his sight clearing. Over the door was a sign. *Home Study Mind Power, Inc.* He started, surprised. Why, he had done it! With a little finer direction, he might have landed in Flanagan's own office!

So this was Earth—where people did as they pleased, where there was room to move about... Seranimu let his glance roam again across the grand width of open area. If only it were like this on Zingu!

He turned his attention back to the building, realizing that the sign on it was in Morforese. Smaller letters informed him that this was the Zinguan Division of Home Study Mind Power. To reach the Bolangus Division, follow the arrow. Other arrows pointed in other directions, with other names beside them. The building gleamed in the light of a mellow sun. Fleecy clouds drifted above it. The air was warm and sweet with the unaccustomed smell of growing things.

Seranimu squared his shoulders and went inside.

"Hello," said a busty young woman at a desk just within the door. "You must be Seranimu."

She spoke passable Morforese with a peculiar, lilting accent which he thought charming and quite in keeping with her doll-like size. His eight-foot height towered over her in the foyer. She had to bend her head far back to look up and smile at him.

"Mr. Flanagan is expecting you. Since you did not come r e p r o f a x transmission from through on the last regular Zingu, we decided you must be coming by special. I'll tell Mr. Flanagan you're here."

She went away, adjusting her already meticulous coiffure with darting motions of hands that seemed to Seranimu unbelievably tiny.

Of course, he had known that Earthmen seldom reach a stature much above six feet,

but this girl was even smaller. Seranimu found it simply difficult to adjust immediately to a world of "little people."

Flanagan turned out to be short, balding, paunchy, anachronistically inclined to the wearing of spectacles. His attitude was cold.

"You may go, Clarissa," he said, waving a hand at his doll-like secretary.

He spoke idiomatic Morforese with an excellent inflection. Clarissa smiled daintily at Seranimu and withdrew. Seranimu smiled politely at the closed door in return. Cute, he thought, but not up to Pimo ...or Anisel. Not enough body.

"Sit down," said Flanagan, not looking directly at him. "That is..."

He s e e m e d embarrassed. There wasn't a chair in the office that would have held Seranimu's bulk or weight. Seranimu smiled and seated himself cross-legged on the floor. The building shook as he settled himself.

Flanagan, behind his desk, took off his glasses and polished them nervously.

"If it is a question of asking for your money back," he said, "I am prepared to give you a draft at once. Clarissa is drawing it up now. It will take care of the amount you have paid for tuition, plus the expense you have been out on reprofax."

What was Flanagan thinking about? Seranimu dared break the rules for a momentary peep into the Earthman's mind, but w i t h o u t result. Failure jolted Seranimu. Did his psi powers fail him here on Earth, among these psi conscious Earth-folk?

"I want to show you how well I can do the lessons," he said aggressively, "and I didn't come by reprofax. I teleported myself."

"Naturally," sneered Flanagan. "You didn't come by starship, of course. There's limiting velocity, and all that. I know reprofax is expensive, but we are prepared to reimburse—"

"Perhaps you did not hear," said Seranimu. "I teleported myself, as in Lesson Twenty-Six!"

Flanagan stabbed at him with his glittering spectacles.

"If you came here to pull my leg, Seranimu, forget it! I was not born yesterday." He fumbled on his desk, picked

up a memo. "It says here you came in by reprofax, special transmission from Zingu, at two-fifty-two. p.m. I guess the Reprofax Company knows who its customers are!"

Seranimu shook his head. Was his mind slipping! Or was Flanagan simply crazy?

"We've had people like you around here before," Flanagan continued flatly. "You come in, raise a fuss, then holler for your money back. Well, I'm saving you some trouble. You can have your money back."

"I don't *want* my money back!" cried Seranimu, beginning to feel angry.

"Listen here, fellow! If you think you can sue us for fraud and make it stick, you're in for a surprise!" Flanagan leaned back in his swivel chair, scowling severely. "We operate our institution on an eighty-six point seven percent refund basis to take care of you smart cookies who complain. We make our profit off the dumb clucks who can't see through our hocus-pocus."

Did Flanagan admit that Home Study Mind Power was only a fraud? That he, himself, was a cheap crook, selling what he thought was a valueless course of instruction in nothing?

"I CAN SHOW you I am a Mental Giant!" shouted Seranimu.

The building quaked. Flanagan, a pained expression on his face, put both hands over his ears.

"Stop shouting, and don't be a fool! Home Study Mind Power has never made a mental giant out of anybody! I tell you it's all fraud—but you'd be hard put to prove it in a court of law. Don't think you can sue! You'd better take the money we offer you and be satisfied."

"I'll *show* you!" Seranimu bit off.

If he could levitate Flanagan from his chair, up near the ceiling someplace, maybe *that* would convince him. He concentrated. Flanagan tapped the desktop with his glasses.

"Are you ill or something?"

"No," growled Seranimu. "I'm not ill!"

"Then what are you grunting about?"

"I didn't know I was," Seranimu retorted sourly. He was annoyed. Things were different on this planet Earth than on Zingu. He said, "My wife, Pimo, knows what I can do. I

will teleport her here and let *her* convince you!"

He realized vaguely that Flanagan had stood up suddenly, but the queer, rushing sensation in his mind immediately overwhelmed him. He had the confidence gained from teleporting himself to Earth. He found Zingu, sensed himself over Morfors. He narrowed his field of concentration...his own apartment...his own living room... The close rapport of home engulfed him. He felt a living presence. He grasped and snatched.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. A figure towered over him in Flanagan's office. Not Pimo—Korisu!

"Seranimu!" roared the new arrival. "Where am I?"

Seranimu jumped up. "Not where *are* you—where *were* you? What were you doing in my living room?"

Korisu glanced once at Seranimu's working features, blanched, stepped backward.

"Now, look, old friend—"

"*My* living room!" thundered Seranimu. "I warned you!"

All the rage and frustration that had been building in him from Flanagan's cold, mad reception burst forth upon the bewildered person of Korisu. Seranimu lunged at him. They grappled, swaying back and forth. They plunged to the floor and the building shook as if in the grip of an earthquake. Earth people were shouting around then scampering madly back and forth. Furniture smashed and splintered as they rolled upon it. They clawed and thumped each other. They grunted, wheezed and swore. Korisu clamped his hands on Seranimu's throat. Seranimu was surprised. *He* was the injured husband, with right on his side. Should he not be the one to best Korisu? As it was, strength was leaving him rapidly, and it was all he could do to keep on belting his neighbor in the face.

So this was the way it ended, he thought. A roaring in the ears, shadows sweeping in, bursting lights in a darkness of pain. Well, what was there to live for, anyway? Better dead in fact than the living death of

...*Lesson Fifteen,* he thought. I am going down the long road because Korisu is a better man than I. *Lesson Fifteen.* I am dying all right, I can feel it so plain. *Lesson Fifteen.* Devil take...*Lesson Fifteen*...*How to Overcome*...*Physical Oppo-*

sition. . .with Mental Power. . .

Seranimu went limp, twitching a little. His mind gathered, coordinated and hurled its energy. At once, he could breathe again. Korisu's clutching fingers fell away from his throat. Korisu himself fell back thunderously upon the floor. Seranimu got up, rubbing his neck.

There were a number of the little Earth people in the room, men and women, dodging about to avoid his weaving passage, gibbering in their own language.

"Did you kill him, Seranimu?" cried Flanagan worriedly.

"I didn't hurt him. . . much," rasped Seranimu. "I'm sorry now that I. . ."

Flanagan seemed relieved. He straightened and looked severe. "A fine mess you've made of the place," he glowered. He turned to the other Earth people. "Get out of here, all of you. I'll handle this." He turned back to Seranimu and shook a finger up at him. "You'll pay for this damage, all right! I'm going to sue. It will cost you a pretty penny, too. Just look at what you've done! Every bit of furniture smashed—probably the roof and the foundations are damaged, too. Oh, you'll pay for this, fellow! Now take your friend and get out of here. You will hear from our lawyers!"

"I WAS SORRY I acted hastily almost immediately," explained Seranimu later to Pimo, in the privacy of their apartment on Zingu. He nursed a bruised neck. "Especially, after Korisu fastened his grip on my neck and I couldn't shake him loose. How was I to know Anisel had sent him over to borrow some sugar?"

Pimo sighed. "It is a good thing you made up with him for it. I'm sorry now I said about him what I did that time. I only said it because I was jealous of the attention you were paying Anisel."

Seranimu hugged her to him in a fit of remorse. If he hadn't lost control of himself, he might have convinced Flanagan. As it was, he had let jealousy override his judgment. Stupid, fool jealousy—for what reason? Because Korisu sometimes thought of Pimo in the same, innocently admiring way he himself often thought of Anisel. He heaved deeply.

"Now there is this letter from Flanagan's lawyers. Do you see what they charge me with? Felonious destruction of property, that's what! To the tune of three thousand, two

hundred and seventeen *shrilr!"*

Pimo began to cry. "We'll lose everything— the TV, the reprofax, the few rags of clothes I have...even that no-good percolator!"

Seranimu squeezed her tightly in his arms and comforted her. A light of battle glinted in his eyes.

"I—I was so proud of you!" she wept. "Really I was! I—I thought something would come of it, if you—if you—"

She broke down, burying her face against his broad chest.

"We cannot avoid the law," he said heavily. "We'll have to pay up and face ruin, unless..."

"Unless what, lover?" Pimo straightened, dashed tears from her eyes.

"Unless we go someplace where the law cannot reach!"

"You mean..." There were stars in Pimo's eyes.

He nodded, his lips set firmly together in an odd little half-smile of triumph.

"Another world!" breathed Pimo, awe-struck.

"A free world—an *uninhabited* world," said Seranimu. "There are many such in the galaxy. The starships turn up two or three every decade and unload reprofax machines for transmitting whole populations to them. But they travel so slowly—less than the speed of light. Moving people to the new worlds *they* discover doesn't begin to take the pressure off our population. *We'll* find our own world!"

The fragile idea beckoned like a gleaming star, bursting with the light and promise of an expanding nova...

IT WAS THEIR dreamworld, all right. Just what both of them had always wanted. They stood in the sunset in a grassy glade, beside a purling stream. Out of sight, a waterfall made music on the still, evening air. Trees arched filmy branches over their heads. The sky was blue and rose, golden and aqua. Not a creature of intelligence roamed the whole, broad surface of this unknown world. Only animals, birds, flowers, brawling creeks and broad rivers, oceans and inlets...

They went back to Zingu to pack their things.

"The TV," said Pimo. "We must take that."

"We won't need it," said Seranimu. "We'll never be bored again. Anyway, all TV programs are local rebroadcasts. We could never receive any. But the reprofax, by all

means. It contains its own power, and it will let us keep in touch. We can have Korisu and Anisel over from time to time for a hand of *prej*. Korisu, poor fellow! What a beating he gave me!"

"And what a beating I will give you again," threatened Korisu from the doorway, "if you don't take Anisel and me with you, wherever you are going. I've been standing here, listening to you plot. I have overheard you before, too."

"Korisu!" cried Seranimu. "I thought you would rather stick here in the mud..."

Korisu wagged his head. "I have had my eyes opened somewhat, friend Seranimu, thanks to you. You beat something into *my* head, too. And I beg you now, for myself and Anisel, take us along. We have been talking it over..."

It was a strain on Seranimu's psychic strength to teleport the four of them, including their possessions, to the new world far away across the galaxy. But he was glad for the extra effort. Korisu and Anisel would be a great help building a home in that distant place.

The idyll began in the glade among the trees, where he and Pimo had stood within sound of the musical waterfall. They had got tents and pitched them, and their belongings were all neatly stowed away, and they had little to think or talk about save the wonderful peace and freedom of their new way of life.

The reprofax, too bulky to occupy either of the tents, stood to one side, under the trees.

"We have been here two weeks," said Seranimu one evening. "I think we should have some news from home—see if our disappearance has caused any kind of a stir."

He turned on the reprofax and readied himself to dial for their home facsimile newspapers from Morfors. The machine warmed slowly. As Seranimu started to reach for the dials, the machine began to buzz and the screen flooded with light, announcing, *Incoming Transmission.*

He stepped back, astonished, calling to Korisu and the others. Who could be transmitting to them on this unknown world? And why? They could only wait and see. The machine could not even be turned off with a transmission coming through.

The reprofax hummed louder with a sudden surge of power. A man stepped off the plat-

form and came toward them.

"GOOD EVENING, Seranimu," said Flanagan of Home Study Mind Power, Inc., Earth.

Before Seranimu could gather his startled wits, a horde of Earthmen poured out of the machine, one after another, and scattered around the clearing.

Seranimu gulped. "This is arrest!"

Flanagan beamed, humming under his breath, as he strolled past them with a nod. He peered this way and that among the trees, looked up at the sky, and shouted directions in his own language to the other Earthmen. He smiled at Seranimu and his companions.

"Any native population here?"

"Only—only animals," stammered Seranimu.

"Wonderful!" beamed Flanagan. He was a totally different fellow from the Flanagan Seranimu had met upon Earth. Physically the same, yes; but how changed! "Simply wonderful! This will lighten the pressure on Zingu by a great deal."

Seranimu and the others just stared. Flanagan stopped pacing. "I'm afraid," he said, "I owe you an apology, as well as an explanation. What you have done, Seranimu, is the end result of your training with Home Study Mind Power. We planned it this way all along. You know how slow the starships are at turning up new worlds to take care of our extra people. Well, it has been Mind Power's aim to speed the process; to train qualifiable psi experts in teleportation—"

"You didn't say that the last time I saw you!" cried Seranimu.

Flanagan smiled, waved one hand in a deprecatory gesture. "Forget it, Seranimu, and forgive me, if you can. That was an act I put on, to guarantee success on your part. Don't you understand? I couldn't have treated you otherwise without grave danger to your psi abilities. It took us a long time to work out the correct psychological approach with successful students."

He sat down on the grass. Seranimu followed his example gratefully. He felt as if his knees wouldn't have supported him much longer.

"You see," Flanagan went on, "we of Earth undertook Home Study Mind Power with

the purpose in mind to develop psi faculties to the point where teleportation would become a feasible method of transporting masses of population to new, uncrowded homes. We had nothing definite to go on... just a long history of claims to psi events. If teleportation was possible at all, we thought, we could turn up the talent by establishing a school and offering a correspondence course. The ability predicated the desire to take such a course, you see. Anybody who had such a latent talent, *believing* he could learn through an established course of instruction, would bring it out in himself to a usable degree.

"At the same time, we heaped encouragement on those who showed promise, much to our later embarrassment. We didn't understand at first that the psi faculty is a *survival characteristic*. Ordinarily, the psi faculty shows itself only at times of stress in the individual's career, and is seldom recognized for what it is. Under conditions of recognition and encouragement, the psi faculty simply folds up. You don't need it to survive under such conditions."

"I don't understand," said Seranimu. "Pimo encouraged me."

"Not at first," she broke in. "I made you work to show me."

Flanagan laughed. "That is exactly what I made you do. Subconsciously, you succeeded in order to survive in the affections of your wife. Then you went all out to survive in *my* esteem. I made you fail by closing my mind to your probe, by nullifying your effort when your tried to levitate me—"

Seranimu flushed. "You *knew* about that!"

"Of course," said Flanagan serenely. "I am a psi expert of sorts, myself. But you moved too fast for me when you teleported your friend all the way from Zingu. You had me in a sweat when you did that. It was fortunate I could turn your act to my own ends. By threatening to sue you for damages, I put you again under the pressure of survival. You came through admirably, in just the way I intended you should. This is the first planet that has been opened up psi-consciously for Zingu. Your government will appreciate—"

Seranimu winced at the word "government. That means...?"

"No more government job

for *you*, Seranimu," smiled Flanagan. "Now that you have come through the worst, your psi faculty is set permanently. That's the way it always is. There are others worlds for you to find, after we have started this one on the road to settlement. Korisu will have his work cut out for him here, too. We will send in men and materials —a complete civilization—by reprofax."

"Suppose we hadn't brought the reprofax?" breathed Seranimu. "I could have decided against it, as I did against the TV, and then you would never have found us."

Flanagan chuckled, deep in his chest. "I can't teleport, nor do a lot of the things you can do, Seranimu. But there is one thing I'm no slouch at—a talent that accounts for my position with Home Study Mind Power, and which guaranteed that you would take the reprofax with you!"

"What is that?"

Flanagan favored him with a teasing smile.

"R e m e m b e r 'Lesson Fifteen'?"

Seranimu remembered.

"*You* put that idea in my mind when I was fighting Korisu?"

Flanagan nodded, grinning.

"My field, Seranimu, is telepathic command!"

THE END

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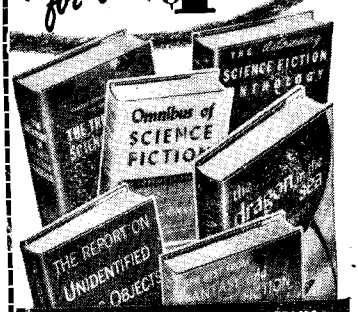

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR COMPLETE DETAILS