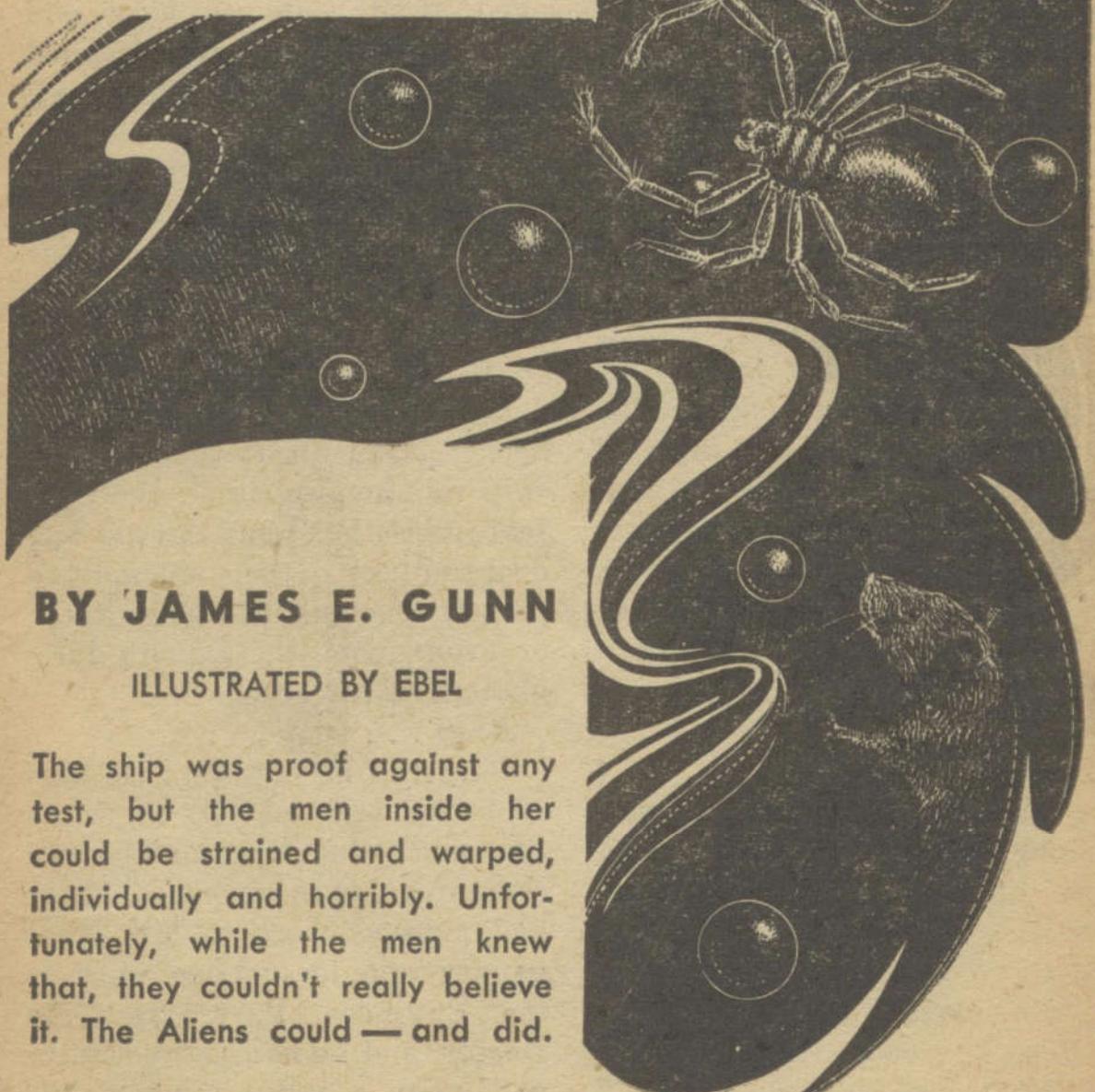


BREAKING POINT



BY JAMES E. GUNN

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

The ship was proof against any test, but the men inside her could be strained and warped, individually and horribly. Unfortunately, while the men knew that, they couldn't really believe it. The Aliens could — and did.

They sent the advance unit out to scout the new planet in the Ambassador, homing down on the secret beeping of a featureless box dropped by an earlier survey party. Then they sat back at GHQ and began the same old pattern of worry that followed every advance unit.

Not about the ship. The Ambassador was a perfect machine, automatic, self-adjusting, self-regulating. It was built to last and do its job without failure under any and all conditions, as long as there was a universe around it. And it could not fail. There was no question about that.

But an advance unit is composed of men. The factors of safety are indeterminable; the duplications of their internal mechanisms are conjectural, variable. The strength of the unit is the sum of the strengths of its members. The weakness of the unit can be a single small failing in a single man.

Beep . . . boop . . .

"Gotcha!" said Ives. Ives was Communications. He had quick eyes, quick hands. He was huge, almost gross, but graceful. "On the nose," he grinned, and turned up the volume.

Beep . . . boop . . .

"What else do you expect?" said Johnny. Johnny was the pi-

lot—young, wide, flat. His movements were as controlled and decisive as those of the ship itself, in which he had an unshakeable faith. He slid into the bucket seat before the great master console.

Beep . . . boop . . .

"We expect the ship to do her job," said Hoskins, the Engineer. He was mild and deft, middle-aged, with a domed head and wide, light-blue eyes behind old fashioned spectacles. He shared Johnny's belief in the machine, but through understanding rather than through admiration. "But it's always good to see her do it."

Beep . . . boop . . .

"Beautiful," said Captain Anderson softly, and he may have been talking about the way the ship was homing in on the tiny, featureless box that Survey had dropped on the unexplored planet, or about the planet itself, or even about the smooth integration of his crew.

Beep . . . boop . . .

Paresi said nothing. He had eyebrows and nostrils as sensitive as a radarscope, and masked eyes of a luminous black. Faces and motives were to him what gauges and log-entries were to the Engineer. Paresi was the Doctor, and he had many a salve and many a splint for invisible ills. He saw everything and

undertsood much. He leaned against the bulkhead, his gaze flicking from one to the other of the crew. Occasionally his small mustache twitched like the antennae of a cat watching a bird.

Barely audible, faint as the blue outline of a distant hill, hungry and lost as the half-heard cry of a banshee, came the thin sound of high atmosphere against the ship's hull.

An hour passed.

Bup-bup-bup-bup . . .

"Shut that damned thing off!"

Ives looked up at the pilot, startled. He turned the gain down to a whisper. Paresi left the bulkhead and stood behind Johnny. "What's the matter?" he asked. His voice was feline, too—a sort of purr.

Johnny looked up at him quickly, and grinned. "I can put her down," he said. "That's what I'm here for. I—like to think maybe I'll get to do it, that's all. I can't think that with the autopilot blasting out an 'on course'." He punched the veering-jet controls. It served men perfectly. The ship ignored him, homed on the beam. The ship computed velocity, altitude, gravity, magnetic polarization, windage; used and balanced and adjusted for them all. It adjusted for interference from the manual con-

trols. It served men perfectly. It ignored them utterly.

Johnny turned to look out and downward. Paresi's gaze followed. It was a beautiful planet, perhaps a shade greener than the blue-green of earth. It seemed, indefinably, more park-like than wild. It had an air of controlled lushness and peace.

The braking jets thundered as Johnny depressed a control. Paresi nodded slightly as he saw the pilot's hand move, for he knew that the autopilot had done it, and that Johnny's movement was one of trained reflex. The youngster was intense and alert, hair-trigger schooled, taught to pretend in such detail that the pretense was reality to him; a precise pretense that would become reality for all of them if the machine failed.

But of course the machine would not fail.

Fields fled beneath them, looking like a crazy-quilt in pastel. On them, nothing moved. Hoskins moved to the viewport and watched them mildly. "Very pastoral," he said. "Pretty."

"They haven't gotten very far," said Ives.

"Or they've gotten very far indeed," said Captain Anderson.

Johnny snorted. "No factories. No bridges. Cow-tracks and goat paths."

The Captain chuckled. "Some

cultures go through an agrarian stage to reach a technological civilization, and some pass through technology to reach the pastoral."

"I don't see it," said Johnny shortly, eyes ahead.

Paresi's hand touched the Captain's arm, and the Captain then said nothing.

Pwing-g-g!

"Stand by for landing," said the Captain.

Ives and Hoskins went aft to the shock-panels in the after bulkhead. Paresi and the Captain stepped into niches flanking the console. Johnny touched a control that freed his chair in its hydraulic gimbals. Chair and niches and shock-panels would not be needed as long as the artificial gravity and inertialess field functioned; it was a ritual.

The ship skimmed treetops, heading phlegmatically for a rocky bluff. A gush of flame from its underjets and it shouldered heavily upward, just missing the jagged crest. A gout of fire forward, another, and it went into a long flat glide, following the fall of a foothill to the plain beyond. It held course and reduced speed, letting the ground billow up to it rather than descending. There was a moment of almost-flight, almost-sliding, and then a rush of dust and smoke which over-

took and passed them. When it cleared, they were part of the plain, part of the planet.

"A good landing, John," Paresi said. Hoskins caught his eye and frowned. Paresi grinned broadly, and the exchange between them was clear: *Why do you needle the kid?* and *Quiet, Engine-room. I know what I'm doing.* Hoskins shrugged, and, with Ives, crossed to the communications desk.

Ives ran his fat, skilled hands over the controls and peered at his indicators. "It's more than a good landing," he grunted. "That squeak-box we homed in on can't be more than a hundred meters from here. First time I've ever seen a ship bullseye like that."

Johnny locked his gimbals, ran a steady, sensitive hand over the turn of the console as if it were a woman's flank. "Why—how close do you usually come?"

"Planetfall's close enough to satisfy Survey," said the Captain. "Once in a while the box will materialize conveniently on a continent. But this—this is too good to be true. We practically landed on it."

Hoskins nodded. "It's usually buried in some jungle, or at the bottom of a sea. But this is really all right. What a lineup! Point nine-eight earth gravity, Earth-type atmosphere—"

"Argon-rich," said Ives, from the panel. "Very rich."

"That'll make no real difference," Hoskins went on. "Temperature, about normal for an early summer back home . . . looks as if there's a fiendish plot afoot here to make things easy for us."

Paresi said, as if to himself, "I worry about easy things."

"Yeah, I know," snorted Johnny, rising to stretch. "The head-shrinker always does it the hard way. You can't just dislike rice pudding; it has to be a sister-syndrome. If the shortest distance is from here to there, don't take it—remember your Uncle Oedipus."

Captain Anderson chuckled. "Cut your jets, Johnny. Maybe Paresi's tortuous reasoning does seem out of order on such a nice day. But remember—eternal vigilance isn't just the price of liberty, as the old books say. It's the price of existence. We know we're here—but we don't know where 'here' is, and won't until after we get back. This is *really* Terra Incognita. The location of Earth, or even of our part of the galaxy, is something that has to be concealed at all costs, until we're sure we're not going to turn up a potentially dangerous, possibly superior alien culture. What we don't know can't hurt Earth. No conceivable method could get that information out of

us, any more than it could be had from the squeak-box that Survey dropped here.

"Base all your thinking on that, Johnny. If that seems like leaning over backwards, it's only a sample of how careful we've got to be, how many angles we've got to figure."

"Hell," said the pilot. "I know all that. I was just ribbing the bat-snatcher here." He thumbed a cigarette out of his tunic, touched his lighter to it. He frowned, stared at the lighter, tried it again. "It doesn't work. *Damn it!*" he barked explosively, "I don't like things that don't work!"

Paresi was beside him, catlike, watchful. "Here's a light. Take it easy, Johnny! A bum lighter's not that important."

Johnny looked sullenly at his lighter. "It doesn't work," he muttered. "Guaranteed, too. When we get back I'm going to feed it to Supply." He made a vivid gesture to describe the feeding technique, and jammed the lighter back into his pocket.

"Heh!" Ives' heavy voice came from the communications desk. "Maybe the natives are primitives, at that. Not a whisper of any radio on any band. No powerline fields, either. These are plowboys, for sure."

Johnny looked out at the sleeping valley. His irritation over the

lighter was still in his voice. "Imagine that. No video or tri-deo. No jet-races or feelies. What do people do with their time in a place like this?"

"Books," said Hoskins, almost absently. "Chess. Conversation."

"I don't know what chess is, and conversation's great if you want to tell somebody something, like 'bring me a steak,'" said Johnny. "Let's get out of this fire-trap," he said to the Captain.

"In time," said the Captain. "Ives, DX those radio frequencies. If there's so much as a smell of radiation even from the other side of this planet, we want to know about it. Hoskins, check the landing-suits—food, water, oxygen, radio, everything. Earth-type planet or no, we're not fooling with alien viruses. Johnny, I want you to survey this valley in every way you can and plot a minimum of three take-off vectors."

The crew fell to work, Ives and Hoskins intently, Johnny off-handedly, as if he were playing out a ritual with some children. Paresi bent over a stereomicroscope, manipulating controls which brought in samples of air-borne bacteria and fungi and placed them under its objective. Captain Anderson ranged up beside him.

"We could walk out of the ship

as if we were on Muroc Port," said Paresi. "These couldn't be more like Earth organisms if they'd been transplanted from home to delude us."

The Captain laughed. "Sometimes I tend to agree with Johnny. I never met a more suspicious character. How'd you ever bring yourself to sign your contract?"

"Turned my back on a couple of clauses," said Paresi. "Here—have a look."

At that moment the usually imperturbable Ives uttered a sharp grunt that echoed and re-echoed through the cabin. Paresi and the Captain turned. Hoskins was just coming out of the after alleyway with an oxygen bottle in his hand, and had frozen in his tracks at the sharp sound Ives had made. Johnny had whipped around as if the grunt had been a lion's roar. His back was to the bulkhead, his lean, long frame tensed for fight or flight. It was indescribable, Ives' grunt, and it was the only sound which could have had such an effect on such a variety of men—the same shocked immobility.

Ives sat over his Communications desk as if hypnotized by it. He moved one great arm forward, almost reluctantly, and turned a knob.

A soft, smooth hum filled the room. "Carrier," said Ives.

Then the words came. They were English words, faultlessly spoken, loud and clear and precise. They were harmless words, pleasant words even.

They were: "*Men of Earth! Welcome to our planet.*"

The voice hung in the air. The words stuck in the silence like insects wriggling upon a pin. Then the voice was gone, and the silence was complete and heavy. The carrier hum ceased. With a spine-tingling brief blaze of high-frequency sound, Hoskins' oxygen-bottle hit the steel deck.

Then they all began to breathe again.

"There's your farmers, Johnny," said Paresi.

"Knight to bishop's third," said Hoskins softly.

"What's that?" demanded Johnny.

"Chess again," said the Captain appreciatively. "An opening gambit."

Johnny put a cigarette to his lips, tried his lighter. "Damn. Gimme a light, Ives."

Ives complied, saying over his big shoulder to the Captain, "In case you wondered, there was no fix on that. My direction-finders indicate that the signal came simultaneously from forty-odd transmitters placed in a circle around the ship which is their way of saying 'I dunno'."

The Captain walked to the view bubble in front of the console and peered around. He saw the valley, the warm light of mid-afternoon, the too-green slopes and the blue-green distances. Trees, rocks, a balancing bird.

"It doesn't work," muttered Johnny.

The Captain ignored him. "*Men of Earth...*" he quoted. "Ives, they've gotten into Survey's squeak-box and analyzed its origin. They know all about us!"

"They don't because they can't," said Ives flatly. "Survey traverses those boxes through second-order space. They materialize near a planet and drop in. No computation on earth or off it could trace their normal-space trajectory, let alone what happens in the second-order condition. The elements the box is made of are carefully averaged isotopic forms that could have come from any of nine galaxies we know about and probably more. And all it does is throw out a VUHF signal that says *beep* on one side, *boop* on the other, and *bup-bup* in between. It does not speak English, mention the planet Earth, announce anyone's arrival and purpose, or teach etiquette."

Captain Anderson spread his hands. "They got it from somewhere. They didn't get it from

us. This ship and the box are the only Terran objects on this planet. Therefore they got their information from the box."

"Q.E.D. You reason like Euclid," said Paresi admiringly. "But don't forget that geometry is an artificial school, based on arbitrary axioms. It just doesn't work where the shortest distance is *not* a straight line . . . I'd suggest we gather evidence and postpone our conclusions."

"How do you think they got it?" Ives challenged.

"I think we can operate from the fact they got it, and make our analyses when we have more data."

Ives went back to his desk and threw a switch.

"What are you doing?" asked the Captain.

"Don't you think they ought to be answered?"

"Turn it off, Ives."

"But—"

"Turn it off!" Ives did. An expedition is an informal, highly democratic group, and can afford to be, for when the situation calls for it, there is never any question of where authority lies. The Captain said, "There is nothing we can say to them which won't yield them more information. Nothing. For all we know it may be very important to them to learn whether or not

we received their message. Our countermove is obviously to make no move at all."

"You mean just sit here and wait until they do something else?" asked Johnny, appalled.

The Captain thumped his shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll do something in some other area than communications. Hoskins—are those landing suits ready?"

"All but," rapped Hoskins. He scooped up the oxygen bottle and disappeared.

Paresi said, "We'll tell them something if we *don't* answer."

The Captain set his jaw. "We do what we can, Nick. We do the best we can. Got any better ideas?"

Paresi shrugged easily and smiled. "Just knocking, skipper. Knock everything. Then what's hollow, you know about."

"I should know better than to jump salty with you," said the Captain, all but returning the doctor's smile. "Johnny. Hoskins. Prepare for exploratory patrol."

"I'll go," said Paresi.

"Johnny goes," said the Captain bluntly, "because it's his first trip, and because if he isn't given something to do he'll bust his adrenals. Hoskins goes, because of all of us, the Engineer is most expendable. Ives stays because we need hair-trigger communications. I stay to correlate what goes on outside with

what goes on inside. You stay because if anything goes wrong I'd rather have you fixing the men up than find myself trying to fix you up." He squinted at Paresi. "Does that knock solid?"

"Solid."

"Testing, Johnny," Ives said into a microphone. Johnny's duplicated voice, from the open face-plate of his helmet and from the intercom speaker, said, "I hear you fine."

"Testing, Hoskins."

"If I'd never seen you," said the speaker softly, "I'd think you were right here in the suit with me." Hoskins' helmet was obviously buttoned up.

The two men came shuffling into the cabin, looking like gleaming ghosts in their chameleon-suits, which repeated the color of the walls. "Someday," growled Johnny, "there'll be a type suit where you can scratch your—"

"Scratch when you get back," said the Captain. "Now hear this. Johnny, you can move fastest. You go out first. Wait in the airlock for thirty seconds after the outer port opens. When Ives gives you the beep, jump out, run around the bows and plant your back against the hull directly opposite the port. Hold your blaster at the ready, aimed down—you hear me? *Down*, so

that any observer will know you're armed but not attacking. Hoskins, you'll be in the lock with the outer port open by that time. When Johnny gives the all clear, you'll jump out and put your back against the hull by the port. Then you'll both stay where you are until you get further orders. Is that clear?"

"Aye."

"Yup."

"You're covered adequately from the ship. Don't fire without orders. There's nothing you can get with a blaster that we can't get first with a projector—unless it happens to be within ten meters of the hull and we can't depress to it. Even then, describe it first and await orders to fire except in really extreme emergency. A single shot at the wrong time could set us back a thousand years with this planet. Remember that this ship isn't called *Killer* or *Warrior* or even *Hero*. It's the Earth Ship *Ambassador*. Go to it, and good luck."

Hoskins stepped back and waved Johnny past him. "After you, Jets."

Johnny's teeth flashed behind the face-plate. He clicked his heels and bowed stiffly from the waist, in a fine burlesque of an ancient courtier. He stalked past Hoskins and punched the button which controlled the airlock.

They waited. Nothing.

Johnny frowned, jabbed the button again. And again. The Captain started to speak, then fell watchfully silent. Johnny reached toward the button, touched it, then struck it savagely. He stepped back then, one foot striking the other like that of a clumsy child. He turned partially to the others. In his voice, as it came from the speaker across the room, was a deep amazement that rang like the opening chords of a prophetic and gloomy symphony.

He said, "The port won't open."

II

The extremes of mysticism and of pragmatism have their own expressions of worship. Each has its form, and the difference between them is the difference between deus ex machina and deus machina est.

—E. Hunter Waldo

"Of course it will open," said Hoskins. He strode past the stunned pilot and confidently palmed the control.

The port didn't open.

Hoskins said, "Hm?" as if he had been asked an inaudible question, and tried again. Nothing happened. "Skipper," he said over his shoulder, "Have a quick look at the meters behind

you there. Are we getting auxiliary power?"

"All well here," said Anderson after a glance at the board. "And no shorts showing."

There was a silence punctuated by the soft, useless clicking of the control as Hoskins manipulated it. "Well, what do you know."

"It won't work," said Johnny plaintively.

"Sure it'll work," said Paresi swiftly, confidently. "Take it easy, Johnny."

"It won't work," said Johnny. "It won't work." He stumbled across the cabin and leaned against the opposite bulkhead, staring at the closed port with his head a little to one side as if he expected it to shriek at him.

"Let me try," said Ives, going to Hoskins. He put out his hand.

"Don't!" Johnny cried.

"Shut up, Johnny," said Paresi.

"All right, Nick," said Johnny. He opened his face plate, went to the rear bulkhead, keyed open an acceleration couch, and lay face down on it. Paresi watched him, his lips pursed.

"Can't say I blame him," said the Captain softly, catching Paresi's eye. "It's something of a shock. This shouldn't be. The safety factor's too great—a thousand per cent or better."

"I know what you mean," said Hoskins. "I saw it myself, but I don't believe it." He pushed the button again.

"I believe it." said Paresi.

Ives went to his desk, clicked the transmitter and receiver switches on and off, moved a rheostat or two. He reached up to a wall toggle, turned a small air-circulating fan on and off. "Everything else seems to work," he said absently.

"This is ridiculous!" exploded the Captain. "It's like having your keys home, or arriving at the theater without your tickets. It isn't dangerous—it's just stupid!"

"It's dangerous," said Paresi.

"Dangerous how?" Ives demanded.

"For one thing—" Paresi nodded toward Johnny, who lay tensely, his face hidden. "For another, the simple calculation that if nothing inside this ship made that control fail, something outside this ship did it. And *that* I don't like."

"That couldn't happen," said the Captain reasonably.

Paresi snorted impatiently. "Which of two mutually exclusive facts are you going to reason from? That the ship can't fail? Then this failure isn't a failure; it's an external control. Or are you going to reason that the ship *can* fail? Then you don't

have to worry about an external force—but you can't trust anything about the ship. Do the trick that makes you happy. But do only one. You can't have both."

Johnny began to laugh.

Ives went to him. "Hey, boy—"

Johnny rolled over, swung his feet down, and sat up, brushing the fat man aside. "What you guys need," Johnny chuckled, "is a nice kind policeman to feed you candy and take you home. You're real lost."

Ives said, "Johnny, take it easy and be quiet, huh? We'll figure a way out of this."

"I already have, scrawny," said Johnny offensively. He got up, strode to the port. "What a bunch of deadheads," he growled. He went two steps past the port and grasped the control-wheel which was mounted on the other side of the port from the button.

"Oh my God," breathed Anderson delightedly, "the manual! Anybody else want to be Captain?"

"Factor of safety," said Hoskins, smiting himself on the brow. "There's a manual control for everything on this scow that there can be. And we stand here staring at it—"

"If we don't win the furlined teacup . . ." Ives laughed.

Johnny hauled on the wheel.

It wouldn't budge.

"Here—" Ives began to approach.

"Get away," said Johnny. He put his hands close together on the rim of the wheel, settled his big shoulders, and hauled. With a sharp crack the wheel broke off in his hands.

Johnny staggered, then stood. He looked at the wheel and then up at the broken end of its shaft, gleaming deep below the surface of the bulkhead.

"Oh, fine..." Ives whispered.

Suddenly Johnny threw back his head and loosed a burst of high, hysterical laughter. It echoed back and forth between the metal walls like a torrent from a burst dam. It went on and on, as if now that the dam was gone, the flood would run forever.

Anderson called out "Johnny!" three times, but the note of command had no effect. Paresi walked to the pilot and with the immemorial practice slapped him sharply across the cheeks. "Johnny! Stop it!"

The laughter broke off as suddenly as it had begun. Johnny's chest heaved, drawing in breath with great, rasping near-sobs. Slowly they died away. He extended the wheel toward the Captain.

"It broke off," he said finally, dully, without emphasis.

Then he leaned back against the hull, slowly slid down until he was sitting on the deck. "Broke right off," he said.

Ives twined his fat fingers together and bent them until the knuckles cracked. "Now what?"

"I suggest," said Paresi, in an extremely controlled tone, "that we all sit down and think over the whole thing very carefully."

Hoskins had been staring hypnotically at the broken shaft deep in the wall. "I wonder," he said at length, "which way Johnny turned that wheel."

"Counter-clockwise," said Ives. "You saw him."

"I know that," said Hoskins. "I mean, which way: the right way, or the wrong way?"

"Oh!" There was a short silence. Then Ives said, "I guess we'll never know, now."

"Not until we get back to Earth," said Paresi quickly.

"You say 'until', or 'unless'?" Ives demanded.

"I said 'until', Ives," said Paresi levelly, "and watch your mouth."

"Sometimes," said the fat man with a dangerous joviality, "you pick the wrong way to say the right thing, Nick." Then he clapped the slender doctor on the back. "But I'll be good. We sow no panic seed, do we?"

"Much better not to," said

the Captain. "It's being done efficiently enough from outside."

"You are convinced it's being done from outside?" asked Hoskins, peering at him owlishly.

"I'm . . . convinced of very little," said the Captain heavily. He went to the acceleration couch and sat down. "I want out," he said. He waved away the professional comment he could see forming on Paresi's lips and went on, "Not claustrophobia, Nick. Getting out of the ship's more important than just relieving our feelings. If the trouble with the port is being caused by some fantastic *something* outside this ship, we'll achieve a powerful victory over it, purely by ignoring it."

"It broke off," murmured Johnny.

"Ignore that," snorted Ives.

"You keep talking about this thing being caused by something outside," said Paresi. His tone was almost complaining.

"Got a better hypothesis?" asked Hoskins.

"Hoskins," said the Captain, "isn't there some way we can get out? What about the tubes?"

"Take a shipyard to move those power-plants," said Hoskins, "and even if it could be done, those radioactive tubes would fry you before you crawled a third of the way."

"We should have a lifeboat," said Ives to no one in particular.

"What in time does a ship like the *Ambassador* need with a lifeboat?" asked Hoskins in genuine amazement.

The Captain frowned. "What about the ventilators?"

"Take us days to remove all the screens and purifiers," said Hoskins, "and then we'd be up against the intake ports. You could stroll out through any of them about as far as your forearm. And after that it's hull-metal, skipper. *That* you don't cut, not with a piece of the Sun's core."

The Captain got up and began pacing, slowly and steadily, as if the problem could be trodden out like ripe grapes. He closed his eyes and said, "I've been circling around that idea for thirty minutes now. Look: the hull can't be cut because it is built so it can't fail. It doesn't fail. The port controls were also built so they wouldn't fail. They do fail. The thing that keeps us in stays in shape. The thing that lets us out goes bad. Effect: we stay inside. Cause: something that wants us to stay inside."

"Oh," said Johnny clearly.

They looked at him. He raised his head, stiffened his spine against the bulkhead. Paresi smiled at him. "Sure, Johnny.

The machine didn't fail. It was —controlled. It's all right." Then he turned to the Captain and said carefully, "I'm not denying what you say, Skipper. But I don't like to think of what will happen if you take that tack, reason it through, and don't get any answers."

"I'd hate to be a psychologist," said Ives fervently. "Do you extrapolate your mastications, too, and get frightened of the stink you might get?"

Paresi smiled coldly. "I control my projections."

Captain Anderson's lips twitched in passing amusement, and then his expression sobered. "I'll take the challenge, Paresi. We have a cause and an effect. Something is keeping us in the ship. Corollary: We—or perhaps the ship—we're not welcome."

"*Men of Earth*," quoted Ives, in an excellent imitation of the accentless English they had heard on the radio, "*welcome to our planet*."

"They're kidding," said Johnny heartily, rising to his feet. He dropped the control wheel with a clang and shoved it carelessly aside with his foot. "Who ever says exactly what they mean anyhow? I see that conclusion the head-shrinker's afraid you'll get to, Skipper. If we can't leave the ship, the only other thing we can

do is to leave the planet. That it?"

Paresi nodded and watched the Captain closely. Anderson turned abruptly away from them all and stood, feet apart, head down, hands behind his back, and stared out of the forward viewports. In the tense silence they could hear his knuckles crack. At length he said quietly, "That isn't what we came here for, Johnny."

Johnny shrugged. "Okay. Chew it up all you like, fellers. The only other choice is to sit here like bugs in a bottle until we die of old age. When you get tired of thinking that over, just let me know. I'll fly you out."

"We can always depend on Johnny," said Paresi with no detectable emphasis at all.

"Not on me," said Johnny, and swatted the bulkhead. "On the ship. Nothing on any planet can stop this baby once I pour on the coal. She's just got too much muscles."

"Well, Captain?" asked Hoskins softly.

Anderson looked at the basking valley, at the too-blue sky and the near-familiar, mellow-weathered crags. They waited.

"Take her up," said the Captain. "Put her in orbit at two hundred kilos. I'm not giving up this easily."

Ives swatted Johnny's broad

shoulder. "That's a take-off and a landing, if I know the Old Man. Go to it, Jets."

Johnny's wide white grin flashed and he strode to the control chair. "Gentlemen, be seated."

"I'll take mine lying down," said Ives, and spread his bulk out on the acceleration couch. The others went to their take-off posts.

"On automatics," said the Captain, "Fire away!"

"Fire away!" said Johnny cheerfully. He reached forward and pressed the central control.

Nothing happened.

Johnny put his hand toward the control again. It moved as if there were a repellor field around the button. The hand moved more and more slowly the closer it got, until it hovered just over the control and began to tremble.

"On manual," barked the Captain. "Fire!"

"Manual, sir," said Johnny reflexively. His trembling hand darted up to an overhead switch, pulled it. He grasped the control bars and dropped the heels of his hands heavily on the firing studs. From somewhere came a muted roar, a whispering; a subjective suggestion of the thunder of reaction motors.

A frown crossed Paresi's face. The rocket noise was gone as the

mind reached for it, like an occluded thought. The motors were silent; there wasn't a tremor of vibration. Yet somewhere a ghost engine was warming up, preparing a ghost ship for an intangible take-off into nothingness.

He snapped off the catch of his safety belt and crossed swiftly and silently to the console. Johnny sat raptly. A slow smile of satisfaction began to spread over his face. His gaze flicked to dials and gauges; he nodded very slightly, and brought both hands down like an organist playing a mighty chord. He watched the gauges. The needles were still, lying on their zero pins, and where lights should have flickered and flashed there was nothing. Paresi glanced at Anderson and met a worried look. Hoskins had his head cocked to one side, listening, puzzled. Ives rose from the couch and came forward to stand beside Paresi.

Johnny was manipulating the keys firmly. His fingers began to play a rapid, skillful, silent concerto. His face had a look of intense concentration and of complete self-confidence.

"Well," said Ives heavily. "That's a bust, too."

Paresi spun to him. "Shh!" It was done with such intensity that Ives recoiled. With a warning look at him. Paresi walked

to the Captain, whispered in his ear.

"My God," said Anderson. "All right, Doctor." He came forward to the pilot's chair. Johnny was still concentratedly, uselessly at work. Anderson glanced inquiringly at Paresi, who nodded.

"That does it," said the Captain, loudly. "Nice work, Johnny. We're smack in orbit. The automatics couldn't have done it better. For once it feels good to be out in space again. Cut your jets now. You can check for correction later."

"Aye, sir," said Johnny. He made two delicate adjustments, threw a master switch and swung around. "Whew! That's work!"

Facing the four silent men, Johnny thumbed out a cigarette, put it in his mouth, touched his lighter to it, drew a long slow puff.

"Man, that goes good..."

The cigarette was not lighted. Hoskins turned away, an expression of sick pity on his face. Ives reached abruptly for his own lighter, and the doctor checked him with a gesture.

"Every time I see a hot pilot work I'm amazed," Paresi said conversationally. "Such concentration... you must be tuckered, Johnny."

Johnny puffed at his unlit cigarette. "Tuckered," he said. "Yeah." There were two odd

undertones to his voice suddenly. They were fatigue, and eagerness. Paresi said, "You're off-watch, John. Go stretch out."

"Real tired," mumbled Johnny. He lumbered to his feet and went aft, where he rolled to the couch and was almost instantly asleep.

The others congregated far forward around the controls, and for a long moment stared silently at the sleeping pilot.

"I don't get it," murmured Ives.

"He really thought he flew us out, didn't he?" asked Hoskins.

Paresi nodded. "Had to. There isn't any place in his cosmos for machines that don't work. Contrary evidence can get just so strong. Then, for him, it ceased to exist. A faulty cigarette lighter irritated him, a failing airlock control made him angry and sullen and then hysterical. When the drive controls wouldn't respond, he reached his breaking point. Everyone has such a breaking point, and arrives at it just that way if he's pushed far enough."

"Everyone?"

Paresi looked from face to face, and nodded somberly. Anderson asked, "What knocked him out? He's trained to take far more strain than that."

"Oh, he isn't suffering from any physical or conscious mental

fatigue. The one thing he wanted to do was to get away from a terrifying situation. He convinced himself that he flew out of it. The next best thing he could do to keep anything else from attacking him was to sleep. He very much appreciated my suggestion that he was worn out and needed to stretch out."

"I'd very much appreciate some such," said Ives. "Do it to me, Nick."

"Reach your breaking point first," said the doctor flatly, and went to place a pillow between Johnny's head and a guard-rail.

Hoskins turned away to stare at the peaceful landscape outside. The Captain watched him for a moment, then: "Hoskins!"

"Aye."

"I've seen that expression before. What are you thinking about?"

The engineer looked at him, shrugged, and said mildly, "Chess."

"What, especially?"

"Oh, a very general thing. The reciprocity of the game. That's what makes it the magnificent thing it is. Most human enterprises can gang up on a man, slap him with one disaster after another without pause. But not chess. No matter who your opponent might be, every time he does something to you, *it's your move.*"

"Very comforting. Have you any idea of how we move now?"

Hoskins looked at him, a gentle surprise on his aging face. "You missed my point, Skipper. *We don't move.*"

"Oh," the Captain whispered. His face tautened as it paled. "I . . . I see. We pushed the airlock button to get out. Countermove: It wouldn't work. We tried the manual. Countermove: It broke off. And so on. Now we've tried to fly the ship out. Oh, but Hoskins—Johnny broke. Isn't that countermove enough?"

"Maybe. Maybe you're right. Maybe the move wasn't trying the drive controls, though. Maybe the move was to do what was necessary to knock Johnny out." He shrugged again. "We'll very soon see."

The Captain exhaled explosively through his nostrils. "We'll find out if it's our move by moving," he gritted. "Ives! Paresi! We're going to go over this thing from the beginning. First, try the port. You, Ives."

Ives grunted and went to the ship's side. Then he stopped.

"Where is the port?"

Anderson and Paresi followed Ives' flaccid, shocked gaze to the bulkhead where there had been the outline of the closed port, and beside it the hole which had held the axle of the manual wheel, and which now was a

smooth, seamless curtain of impenetrable black. But Hoskins looked at the Captain first of all, and he said "Now it's our move," and only then did he turn with them to look at the darkness.

III

The unfamiliar, you say, is the unseen, the completely new and strange? Not so. The epitome of the unfamiliar is the familiar inverted, the familiar turned on its head. View a familiar place under new conditions—a deserted and darkened theater, an empty night club by day—and you will find yourself more influenced by the emotion of strangeness than by any number of unseen places. Go back to your old neighborhood and find everything changed. Come into your own home when everyone is gone, when the lights are out and the furniture rearranged—there I will show you the strange and frightening ghosts that are the shapes left over when reality superimposes itself upon the images of memory. The goblins lurk in the shadows of your own room. . . .

Owen Miller
Essays on Night and
the Unfamiliar

For one heart-stopping moment the darkness had seemed

to swoop in upon them like the clutching hand of death. Instinctively they had huddled together in the center of the room. But when the second look, and the third, gave them reassurance that the effect was really there, though the cause was still a mystery, then half the mystery was gone, and they began to drift apart. Each felt on trial, and held tight to himself and the picture of himself he empathized in the others' eyes.

The Captain said quietly, "It's just . . . there. It doesn't seem to be spreading."

Hoskins gazed at it critically. "About half a meter deep," he murmured. "What do you suppose it's made of?"

"Not a gas," said Paresi. "It has a—a sort of surface."

Ives, who had frozen to the spot when first he saw the blackness on his way to the port, took another two steps. The hand which had been half lifted to touch the control continued upward relievedly, as if glad to have a continuous function even though its purpose had changed.

"Don't touch it!" rapped the Captain.

Ives turned his head to look at the Captain, then faltered and let the hand drop. "Why not?"

"Certainly not a liquid," Paresi mused, as if there had been

no interruption. "And if it's a solid, where did that much matter come from? Through the hull?"

Hoskins, who knew the hull, how it was made, how fitted, how treated once it was in place, snorted at the idea.

"If it was a gas," said Paresi, "there'd be diffusion. And convection. If it were poisonous, we'd all be dead. If not, the chances are we'd smell it. And the counter's not saying a thing—so it's not radioactive."

"You trust the counter?" asked Ives bitterly.

"I trust it," said Paresi. His near-whisper shook with what sounded like passion. "A man must have faith in something. I hold that faith in every single function of every part of this ship until each and every part is separately and distinctly proved unworthy of faith!"

"Then, by God, you'll understand my faith in my own two hands and what they feel," snarled Ives. He stepped to the bulkhead and brought his meaty hand hard against it.

"*Touché*," murmured Hoskins, and meant either Ives' remark or the flat, solid smack of the hand against the blackness.

In his sleep, Johnny uttered a high, soft, careless tinkle of youthful, happy laughter.

"Somebody's happy," said Ives.

"Paresi," said the Captain, "what happens when he wakes up?"

Paresi's eyebrows shrugged for him. "Practically anything. He's reached down inside himself, somewhere, and found a way out. For him—not for any of the rest of us. Maybe he'll ignore what we see. Maybe he'll think he's somewhere else, or in some other time. Maybe he'll be someone else. Maybe he won't wake up at all."

"Maybe he has the right idea," said Ives.

"That's the second time you've made a crack like that," said Paresi levelly. "Don't do it again. You can't afford it."

"We can't afford it," the Captain put in.

"All right," said Ives, with such docility that Paresi shot him a startled, suspicious glance. The big communications man went to his station and sat, half-turned away from the rest.

"What are they after?" complained the Captain suddenly. "What do they want?"

"Who?" asked Paresi, still watching Ives.

Hoskins explained, "Whoever it was who said 'Welcome to our planet.'"

Ives turned toward them, and Paresi's relief was noticeable.

Ives said, "They want us dead."

"Do they?" asked the Captain.

"They don't want us to leave the ship, and they don't want the ship to leave the planet."

"Then it's the ship they want."

"Yeah," amended Ives, "without us."

Paresi said, "You can't conclude that, Ives. They've inconvenienced us. They've turned us in on ourselves, and put a drain on our intangible resources as men and as a crew. But so far they haven't actually done anything to us. We've done it to ourselves."

Ives looked at him scornfully. "We wrecked the unwreckable controls, manufactured that case-hardened darkness, and talked to ourselves on an all-wave carrier with no source, about information no outsider could get?"

"I didn't say any of that." Paresi paused to choose words. "Of course they're responsible for these phenomena. But the phenomena haven't hurt us. Our reactions to the phenomena are what has done the damage."

"A fall never hurt anyone, they told me when I was a kid," said Ives pugnaciously. "It's the sudden stop."

Paresi dismissed the remark with a shrug. "I still say that while we have been astonished, frightened, puzzled and frustrat-

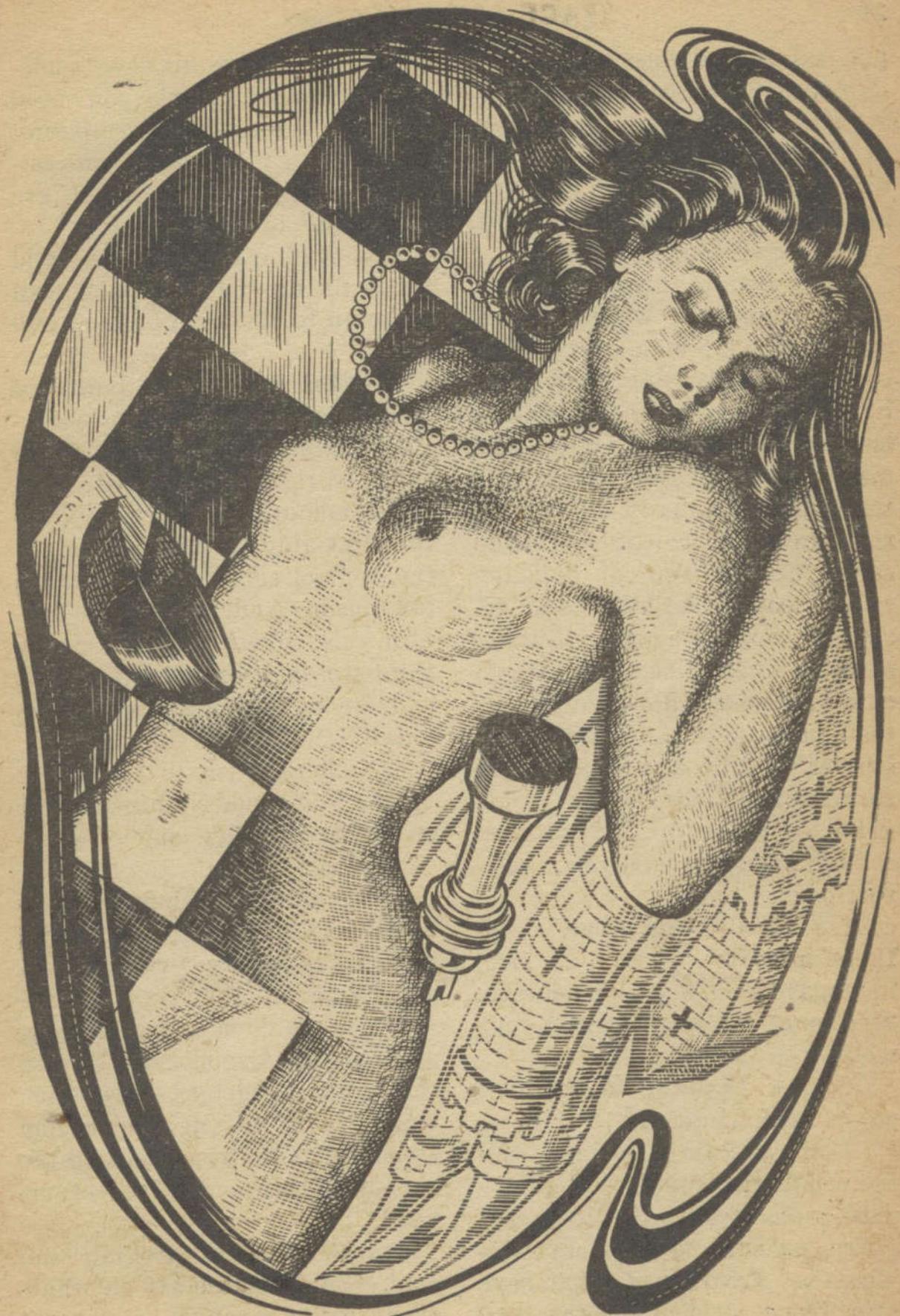
ed, we have not been seriously threatened. Our water and food and air are virtually unlimited. Our ability to live with one another under emergency situations has been tested to a fare-thee-well, and all we have to do is recognize the emergency as such and that ability will rise to optimum." He smiled suddenly. "It could be worse, Ives."

"I suppose it could," said Ives. "That blackness could move in until it really crowded us, or—"

Very quietly Hoskins said, "It is moving in."

Captain Anderson shook his head. "No . . ." And hearing him, they slowly recognized that the syllable was not a denial, but an exclamation. For the darkness was no longer a half-meter deep on the bulkhead. No one had noticed it, but they suddenly became aware that the almost-square cabin was now definitely rectangular, with the familiar controls, the communications wall, and the thwartship partition aft of them forming three sides to the encroaching fourth.

Ives rose shaking and round-eyed from his chair. He made an unspellable animal sound and rushed at the blackness. Paresi leaped for him, but not fast enough. Ives collided sickeningly against the strange jet surface



and fell. He fell massively, gracelessly, not prone but on wide-spread knees, with his arms crumpled beneath him and the side of his face on the deck. He stayed there, quite unconscious, a gross caricature of worship.

There was a furiously active, silent moment while Paresi turned the fat man over on his back, ran skilled fingers over his bleeding face, his chest, back to the carotid area of his neck. "He's all right," said Paresi, still working; then, as if to keep his mind going with words to avoid conjecture, he went on didactically, "This is the other fear reaction. Johnny's was 'flight.' Ives' is 'fight.' The empirical result is very much the same."

"I thought," said Hoskins dryly, "that fight and flight were survival reactions."

Paresi stood up. "Why, they are. In the last analysis, so is suicide."

"I'll think about that," said Hoskins softly.

"Paresi!" spat Anderson. "Medie or no, you'll watch your mouth!"

"Sorry, Captain. That was panic seed, Hoskins—"

"Don't explain it to me," said the engineer mildly. "I know what you meant. Suicide's the direct product of survival compulsions—drives that try to save something, just as fight and

flight are efforts to save something. I don't think you need worry; immolation doesn't tempt me. I'm too—too interested in what goes on. What are you going to do about Ives?"

"Bunk him, I guess, and stand by to fix up that headache he'll wake up to. Give me a hand, will you?"

Hoskins went to the bulkhead and dropped a second acceleration couch. It took all three of them, working hard, to lift Ives' great bulk up to it. Paresi opened the first-aid kit clamped under the control console and went to the unconscious man. The Captain cast about him for something to do, something to say, and apparently found it. "Hoskins!"

"Aye."

"Do you usually think better on an empty stomach?"

"Not me."

"I never have either."

Hoskins smiled. "I can take a hint. I'll rassle up something hot and filling."

"Good man," said the Captain, as Hoskins disappeared toward the after quarters. Anderson walked over to the doctor and stood watching him clean up the abraded bruise on Ives' forehead.

Paresi, without looking up, said, "You'd better say it, whatever it is. Get it out."

Anderson half-chuckled. "You psychic?"

Paresi shot him a glance. "Depends. If you mean has a natural sensitivity to the tension spectra coupled itself with some years of practice in observing people—then yes. What's on your mind?"

Anderson said nothing for a long time. It was as if he were waiting for a question, a single prod from Paresi. But Paresi wouldn't give it. Paresi waited, just waited, with his dark face turned away, not helping, not pushing, not doing a single thing to modify the pressure that churned about in the Captain.

"All right," said the Captain irritably. "I'll tell you."

Paresi took tweezers, a retractor, two scalpels and a hypodermic case out of the kit and laid them in a neat row on the bunk. He then picked up each one and returned it to the kit. When he had quite finished Anderson said, "I was wondering, *who's next?*"

Paresi nodded and shut the kit with a sharp click. He looked up at the Captain and nodded again. "Why does it have to be you?" he asked.

"I didn't say it would be me!" said the Captain sharply.

"Didn't you?" When the Captain had no answer, Paresi asked

him, "Then why wonder about a thing like that?"

"Oh . . . I see what you mean. When you start to be afraid, you start to be unsure—not of anyone else's weaknesses, but of your own. That what you mean?"

"Yup." His dark-framed grin flashed suddenly. "But you're not afraid, Cap'n."

"The hell I'm not."

Paresi shook his head. "Johnny was afraid, and fled. Ives was afraid, and fought. There's only one fear that's a real fear, and that's the one that brings you to your breaking point. Any other fear is small potatoes compared with a terror like that. Small enough so no one but me has to worry about it."

"Why you, then?"

Paresi swatted the first-aid kit as he carried it back to its clamp. "I'm the M. O., remember? Symptoms are my business. Let me watch 'em, Captain. Give me orders, but don't crowd me in my specialty."

"You're insubordinate, Paresi," said Anderson, "and you're a great comfort." His slight smile faded, and horizontal furrows appeared over his eyes. "Tell me why I had that nasty little phase of doubt about myself."

"You think I can?"

"Yes." He was certain.

"That's half the reason. The other half is Hoskins."

"What are you talking about?"

"Johnny broke. Ives broke. Your question was, 'who's next?' You doubt that it will be me, because I'm *de facto* the boy with all the answers. You doubt it will be Hoskins, because you can't extrapolate how he might break—or even if he would. So that leaves you."

"I hadn't exactly reasoned it out like that—"

Oh yes you had," said Paresi, and thumped the Captain's shoulder. "Now forget it. Confucius say he who turn gaze inward wind up crosseyed. Can't afford to have a crosseyed Captain. Our friends out there are due to make another move."

"No they're not."

The doctor and the Captain whirled at the quiet voice. "What does that mean, Hoskins?"

The engineer came into the cabin, crossed over to his station, and began opening and closing drawers. "They've moved." From the bottom drawer he pulled out a folded chessboard and a rectangular box. Only then did he look directly at them. "The food's gone."

"Food? . . . gone where?"

Hoskins smiled tiredly. "Where's the port? Where's the

outboard bulkhead? That black stuff has covered it up—heating units, foodlockers, disposal unit, everything." He pulled a couple of chairs from their clips on the bulkhead and carried them across the cabin to the sheet of blackness. "There's water," he said as he unfolded the chairs. On the seat of one he placed the chessboard. He sat on the other and pushed the board close to the darkness. "The scuttlebutt's in-board, and still available." His voice seemed to get fainter and fainter as he talked, as if he were going slowly away from them. "But there's no food. No food."

He began to set up the pieces, his face to the black wall.

IV

The primary function of personality is self-preservation, but personality itself is not a static but a dynamic thing. The basic factor in its development is integration; each new situation calls forth a new adjustment which modifies or alters the personality in the process. The proper aim of personality, therefore, is not permanence and stability, but unification. The inability of a personality to adjust to or integrate a new situation, the resistance of the personality to unification, and its

efforts to preserve its integrity are known popularly as insanity.

—Morgan Littlefield,
Notes on Psychology.

"Hoskins!"

Paresi grabbed the Captain's arm and spun him around roughly. "Captain Anderson! Cut it!" Very softly, he said, "Leave him alone. He's doing what he has to do."

Anderson stared over his shoulder at the little engineer. "Is he, now? Damn it, he's still under orders!"

"Got something for him to do?" asked the doctor coolly.

Anderson looked around, at the controls, out at the sleeping mountains. "I guess not. But I'd like to know he'd take an order when I have one."

"Leave him alone until you have an order. Hoskins is a very steady head, skipper. But just now he's on the outside edge. Don't push."

The Captain put his hand over his eyes and fumbled his way to the controls. He turned his back to the pilot's chair and leaned heavily against it. "Okay," he said. "This thing is developing into a duel between you and those . . . those colleagues of yours out there. I guess the least we . . . I . . . can do is not to fight you while you're fighting them."

Paresi said, "You're choosing up sides the wrong way. They're fighting us, all right. We're only fighting ourselves. I don't mean each other; I mean each of us is fighting himself. We've got to stop doing that, skipper."

The Captain gave him a wan smile. "Who has, at the best of times?"

Paresi returned the smile. "Drug addicts . . . Catatonics . . . illusionaries . . . and saints. I guess it's up to us to add to the category."

"How about dead people?"

"Ives! How long have you been awake?"

The big man shoved himself up and leaned on one arm. He shook his head and grunted as if he had been punched in the solar plexus. "Who hit me with what?" he said painfully, from between clenched teeth.

"You apparently decided the bulkhead was a paper hoop and tried to dive through it," said Paresi. He spoke lightly but his face was watchful.

"Oooh. . ." Ives held his head for a moment and then peered between his fingers at the darkness. "I remember," he said in a strained whisper. He looked around him, saw the engineer huddled against his chessboard. "What's he doing?"

They all looked at the engineer

as he moved a piece and then sat quietly.

"Hey, Hoskins!"

Hoskins ignored Ives' bull voice. Paresi said, "He's not talking just now. He's . . . all right, Ives. Leave him alone. At the moment, I'm more interested in you. How do you feel?"

"Me, I feel great. Hungry, though. What's for chow?"

Anderson said quickly, "Nick doesn't want us to eat just now."

"Thanks," muttered Paresi in vicious irony.

"He's the doctor," said Ives good-naturedly. "But don't put it off too long, huh? This furnace needs stoking." He fisted his huge chest.

"Well, this is encouraging," said Paresi.

"It certainly is," said the Captain. "Maybe the breaking point is just the point of impact. After that the rebound, hm?"

Paresi shook his head. "Breaking means breaking. Sometimes things just don't break."

"Got to pass," said a voice. Johnny, the pilot, was stirring.

"Ha!" Anderson's voice was exultant. "Here comes another one!"

"How sure are you of that?" asked the doctor. To Johnny, he called, "Hiya, John?"

"I got to pass," said Johnny

worriedly. He swung his feet to the deck. "You see," he said earnestly, "being the head of your class doesn't make it any easier. You've got to keep that and pass the examinations too. You've got two jobs. Now, the guy who stands fourth, say—he has only one job to do."

Anderson turned a blank face to Paresi, who made a silencing gesture. Johnny put his head in his hands and said, "When one variable varies directly as another, two pairs of their corresponding values are in proportion." He looked up. "That's supposed to be the keystone of all vector analysis, the man says, and you don't get to be a pilot without vector analysis. And it makes no sense to me. What am I going to do?"

"Get some shuteye," said Paresi immediately. "You've been studying too hard. It'll make more sense to you in the morning."

Johnny grinned and yawned at the same time, the worried wrinkles smoothing out. "Now that was a real educational remark, Martin, old chap," he said. He lay down and stretched luxuriously. "That I can understand. You may wear my famous maroon zipsuit." He turned his face away and was instantly asleep.

"Who the hell is Martin?" Ives demanded. "Martin who?"

"Shh. Probably his roommate in pre-pilot school."

Anderson gaped. "You mean he's back in school?"

"Doesn't it figure?" said Paresi sadly. "I told you that this situation is intolerable to him. If he can't escape in space, he'll escape in time. He hasn't the imagination to go forward, so he goes backward."

Something scuttled across the floor. Ives whipped his feet off the floor and sat like some cartoon of a Buddha, clutching his ankles. "What in God's name was that?"

"I didn't see anything," said Paresi.

The Captain demanded, "What was it?"

From the shadows, Hoskins said, "A mouse."

"Nonsense."

"I can't stand things that scuttle and slither and crawl," said Ives. His voice was suddenly womanish. "Don't let anything like that in here!"

From the quarters aft came a faint scratching, a squeak. Ives turned pale. His wattles quivered.

"Snap out of it, Ives," said Paresi coldly. "There isn't so much as a microbe on this ship that I haven't inventoried. Don't sit there like little Miss Muffet."

"I know what I saw," said Ives. He rose suddenly, turned to

the black wall, and bellowed, "Damn you, send something I can fight!"

Two mice emerged from under the couch. One of them ran over Ives' foot. They disappeared aft, squeaking. Ives leapt straight up and came down standing on the couch. Anderson stepped back against the inboard bulkhead and stood rigid. Paresi walked with great purpose to the medical chest, took out a small black case and opened it.

Ives cowered down to his knees and began to blubber openly, without attempting to hide it, without any articulate speech. Paresi approached him, half-concealing a small metal tube in his hand.

A slight movement on the deck caught Anderson's eye. He was unable to control a shrill intake of breath as an enormous spider, hairy and swift, darted across to the couch and sprang. It landed next to Ives' knee, sprang again. Paresi swung at it and missed, his hand catching Ives heavily just under the armpit. The spider hit the deck, skidded, righted itself and, abruptly, was gone. Ives caved in around the impact point of Paresi's hand and curled up silently on the couch. Anderson ran to him.

"He'll be all right now," said Paresi. "Forget it."

"Don't tell me he fainted! Not Ives!"

"Of course not." Paresi held up the little cylinder.

"Anesthox! Why did you use that on him?"

Paresi said irritably, "For the reason one usually uses anesthox. To knock a patient out for a couple of hours without hurting him."

"Suppose you hadn't?"

"How much more of that scuttle-and-slither treatment do you think he could have taken?"

Anderson looked at the unconscious communications man. "Surely more than that." He looked up suddenly. "Where the hell *did* that vermin come from?"

"Ah. Now you have it. He dislikes mice and spiders. But there was something special about these. They couldn't be here, and they were. He felt that it was a deliberate and personal attack. He couldn't have handled much more of it."

"Where did they come from?" demanded the Captain again.

"I don't know!" snapped Paresi. "Sorry, skipper . . . I'm a little unnerved. I'm not used to seeing a patient's hallucinations. Not that clearly, at any rate."

"They were Ives' hallucinations?"

"Can you recall what was said just before they appeared?"

"Uh . . . something scuttled. A mouse."

"It wasn't a mouse until someone said it was." The doctor turned and looked searchingly at Hoskins, who still sat quietly over his chess.

"By God, it was Hoskins. Hoskins—what made you say that?"

The engineer did not move nor answer. Paresi shook his head hopelessly. "Another retreat. It's no use, Captain."

Anderson took a single step toward Hoskins, then obviously changed his mind. He shrugged and said, "All right. Something scuttled and Hoskins defined it. Let's accept that without reasoning it out. So who called up the spider?"

"You did."

"I did?"

In a startling imitation of the Captain's voice, Paresi quoted, "Don't sit there like Miss Muffet!"

"I'll be damned," said Anderson. "Maybe we'd all be better off saying nothing."

Paresi said bitterly, "You think it makes any difference if we say what we think?"

"Perhaps. . . ."

"Nup," said Paresi positively. "Look at the way this thing works. First it traps us, and then it shows us a growing darkness. Very basic. Then it starts

picking on us, one by one. Johnny gets machines that don't work, when with his whole soul he worships machines that do. Ives gets a large charge of claustrophobia from the black stuff over there and goes into a flat spin."

"He came out of it."

"Johnny woke up too. In another subjective time-track. Quite harmless to—to Them. So they left him alone. But they lowered the boom on Ives when he showed any resilience. It's breaking point they're after, Captain. Nothing less."

"Hoskins?"

"I guess so," said Paresi tiredly. "Like Johnny he escaped from a problem he couldn't handle to one he could. Only instead of regressing he's turned to chess. I hope Johnny doesn't bounce back for awhile, yet. He's too—Captain! He's gone!"

They turned and stared at Johnny's bunk. Or—where the bunk had been before the black wall had swelled inwards and covered it.

V

"... and there I was, Doctor, in the lobby of the hotel at noon, stark naked!"

"Do you have these dreams often?"

"I'm afraid so, Doctor. Am I

—all right? I mean . . ."

"Let me ask you this question: Do you believe that these experiences are real?"

"Of course not!"

"Then, Madam, you are, by definition, sane; for insanity, in the final analysis, is the inability to distinguish the real from the unreal."

Paresi and the Captain ran aft together, and together they stopped four paces away from the bulging blackness.

"Johnny!" The Captain's voice cracked with the agonized effort of his cry. He stepped to the black wall, pounded it with the heel of his hand.

"He won't hear you," said Paresi bleakly. "Come back, Captain. Come back."

"Why him? Why Johnny? They've done everything they could to Johnny; you said so yourself!"

"Come back," Paresi said again, soothing. Then he spoke briskly: "Can't you see they're not doing anything to him? They're doing it to us!"

The Captain stood rigidly, staring at the featureless intrusion. He turned presently. "To us," he parroted. Then he stumbled blindly to the doctor, who put a firm hand on his biceps and walked with him to the forward acceleration couch.

The Captain sat down heavily with his back to this new invasion. Paresi stood by him reflectively, then walked silently to Hoskins.

The engineer sat over his chess-board in deep concentration. The far edge of the board seemed to be indefinite, lost partially in the mysterious sable curtain which covered the bulk-head.

"Hoskins."

No answer.

Paresi put his hand on Hoskins' shoulder. Hoskins' head came up slowly. He did not turn it. His gaze was straight ahead into the darkness. But at least it was off the board.

"Hoskins," said Paresi, "why are you playing chess?"

"Chess is chess," said Hoskins quietly. "Chess may symbolize any conflict, but it is chess and it will remain chess."

"Who are you playing with?"

No answer.

"Hoskins—we need you. Help us."

Hoskins let his gaze travel slowly downward again until it was on the board. "The word is not the thing," he said. "The number is not the thing. The picture, the ideograph, the symbol—these are not the thing. Conversely..."

"Yes, Hoskins."

Paresi waited. Hoskins did

not move or speak. Paresi put his hand on the man's shoulder again, but now there was no response. He cursed suddenly, bent and brought up his hand with a violent smash and sent board and pieces flying.

When the clatter had died down Hoskins said pleasantly, "The pieces are not the game. The symbols are not the thing." He sat still, his eyes fixed on the empty chair where the board had been. He put out a hand and moved a piece where there was no piece to a square which was no longer there. Then he sat and waited.

Paresi, breathing heavily, backed off, whirled, and went back to the Captain.

Anderson looked up at him, and there was the glimmer of humor in his eyes. "Better sit down and talk about something different, Doctor."

Paresi made an animal sound, soft and deep, far back in his throat, plumped down next to the Captain, and kneaded his hands together for a moment. Then he smiled. "Quite right, skipper. I'd better."

They sat quietly for a moment. Then the Captain prompted, "About the different breaking point..."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Perhaps you can put your

finger on the thing that makes different men break in different ways, for different reasons. I mean, Johnny's case seemed pretty clear cut, and what you haven't explained about Hoskins, Hoskins has demonstrated pretty clearly. About Ives, now—we can skip that for the time he'll be unconscious. But if you can figure out where you and I might break, why—we'd know what to look for."

"You think that would help?"

"We'd be prepared."

Paresi looked at him sharply. "Let's hypothesize a child who is afraid of the dark. Ask him and he might say that there's a *something* in dark places that will jump out at him. Then assure him, with great authority, that not only is he right but that it's about to jump any minute, and what have you done?"

"Damage," nodded the Captain. "But you wouldn't say that to the child. You'd tell him there was nothing there. You'd *prove* there wasn't."

"So I would," agreed the doctor. "But in our case I couldn't do anything of the kind. Johnny broke over machines that really didn't work. Hoskins broke over phenomena that couldn't be measured nor understood. Ives broke over things that scuttled and crawled. Subjectively real phenomena, all of them. What-

ever basic terrors hide in you and in me will come to face us, no matter how improbable they might be. And you want me to tell you what they are. No, skipper. Better leave them in your subconscious, where you've buried them."

"I'm not afraid," said the Captain. "Tell me, Paresi! At least I'll know. I'd rather know. I'd so *damn* much rather know!"

"You're sure I can tell you?"

"Yes."

"I haven't psychoanalyzed you, you know. Some of these things are very hard to—"

"You do know, don't you?"

"Damn you, yes!" Paresi wet his lips. "All right, then. I may be doing a wrong thing here. . . You've cuddled up to the idea that I'm a very astute character who automatically knows about things like this, and it's been a comfort to you. Well, I've got news for you. I didn't figure all these things out. I was told."

"Told?"

"Yes, told," said Paresi angrily. "Look, this is supposed to be restricted information, but the Exploration Service doesn't rely on individual aptitude tests alone to make up a crew. There's another factor—call it an in-aptitude factor. In its simplest terms, it comes to this: that a crew can't work together only if

each member is the most efficient at his job. He has to *need* the others, each one of the others. And the word *need* predicates *lack*. In other words, none of us is a balanced individual. And the imbalances are chosen to match and blend, so that we will react as a balanced unit. Sure I know Johnny's bugaboos, and Hoskins', and yours. They were all in my indoctrination treatments. I know all your case histories, all your psychic push-buttons."

"And yours?" demanded the Captain.

"Hoskins, for example," said Paresi. "Happily married, no children. Physically inferior all his life. Repressed desire for pure science which produced more than a smattering of a great many sciences and made him a hell of an engineer. High idealistic quotient; self sacrifice. Look at him playing chess, making of this very real situation a theoretical abstraction . . . like leaving a marriage for deep space."

"Johnny we know about. Brought up with never failing machines. Still plays with them as if they were toys, and like any imaginative child, turns to his toys for reassurance. He needs to be a hero, hence the stars. . . .

"Ives . . . always fat. Learned to be easy-going, learned to

laugh *with* when others were laughing *at*, and bottling up pressures every time it happened. A large appetite. He's here to satisfy it; he's with us so he can eat up the galaxies..."

There was a long pause. "Go on," said the Captain. "Who's next? You?"

"You," said the doctor shortly. "You grew up with a burning curiosity about the nature of things. But it wasn't a scientist's curiosity; it was an aesthete's. You're one of the few people alive who refused a subsidized education and worked your way through advanced studies as a crewman on commercial space-liners. You became one of the youngest professors of philosophy in recent history. You made a romantic marriage and your wife died in childbirth. Since then—almost a hundred missions with E.A.S., refusing numerous offers of advancement. Do I have to tell you what your bugaboo is now?"

"No," said Anderson hoarsely. "But I'm . . . not afraid of it. I had no idea your . . ." He swallowed. ". . . information was that complete."

"I wish it wasn't. I wish I had some things to—wonder about," said Paresi with surprising bitterness.

The Captain looked at him

shrewdly. "Go on with your case histories."

"I've finished."

"No you haven't." When Paresi did not answer, the Captain nudged him. "Johnny, Ives, Hoskins, me. Haven't you forgotten someone?"

"No I haven't," snarled Paresi, "and if you expect me to tell you why a psychologist buries himself in the stars, I'm not going to do it."

"I don't want to be told anything so general," said the Captain. "I just want to know why you came out here."

Paresi scowled. The Captain looked away from him and hazarded, "Big frog in a small pond, Nick?"

Paresi snorted.

Anderson asked, "Women don't like you, do they, Nick?"

Almost inaudibly, Paresi said, "Better cut it out, skipper."

Anderson said, "Closest thing to being a mother—is that it?"

Paresi went white.

The Captain closed his eyes, frowned, and at last said, "Or maybe you just want to play God."

"I'm going to make it tough for you," said Paresi between his teeth. "There are several ways you can break, just as there are several ways to break a log—explode it, crush it, saw it, burn it. . . One of the ways is to

fight me until you win. Me, because there's no one else left to fight you. So—I won't fight with you. And you're too rational to attack me unless I do. *That* is the thing that will make it tough. If you must break, it'll have to be some other way."

"Is that what I'm doing?" the Captain asked with sudden mildness. "I didn't know that. I thought I was trying to get your own case history out of you, that's all. What are you staring at?"

"Nothing."

There was nothing. Where there had been forward viewports, there was nothing. Where there had been controls, the communication station, the forward acceleration panels and storage lockers; the charts and computers and radar gear—there was nothing. Blackness; featureless, silent, impenetrable. They sat on one couch by one wall, to which was fixed one table. Around them was empty floor and a blackness. The chess-player faced into it, and perhaps he was partly within it; it was difficult to see.

The Captain and the medical officer stared at one another. There seemed to be nothing to say.

VI

For man's sense is falsely asserted to be the standard of

things: on the contrary, all the perceptions, both of the senses and the mind, bear reference to man and not to the universe; and the human mind resembles those uneven mirrors which impart their own properties to different objects . . . and distorts and disfigures them. . . For every one . . . has a cave or den of his own which refracts and discolors the light of nature.

—Sir Francis Bacon
(1561—1626)

It was the Captain who moved first. He went to the remaining bulkhead, spun a dog, and opened a cabinet. From it he took a rack of spare radar parts and three thick coils of wire. Paresi, startled, turned and saw Hoskins peering owlishly at the Captain.

Anderson withdrew some tools, reached far back in the cabinet, and took out a large bottle.

"Oh," said Paresi. "That. . . I thought you were doing something constructive."

In the far shadows, Hoskins turned silently back to his game. The Captain gazed down at the bottle, tossed it, caught it. "I am," he said. "I am."

He came and sat beside the doctor. He thumbed off the stopper and drank ferociously. Paresi watched, his eyes as featureless as the imprisoning dark.

"Well?" said the Captain pugnaciously.

Paresi's hands rose and fell, once. "Just wondering why."

"Why I'm going to get loopin', stoopin' drunk? I'll tell you why, head-shrinker. Because I want to, that's why. Because I like it. I'm doing something I like because I like it. I'm not doing it because of the inversion of this concealed repression as expressed in the involuted feelings my childhood developed in my attitude toward the sex-life of beavers, see, couch-catechizer old boy? I like it and that's why."

"I knew a man who went to bed with old shoes because he liked it," said Paresi coldly.

The Captain drank again and laughed harshly. "Nothing can change you, can it, Nick?"

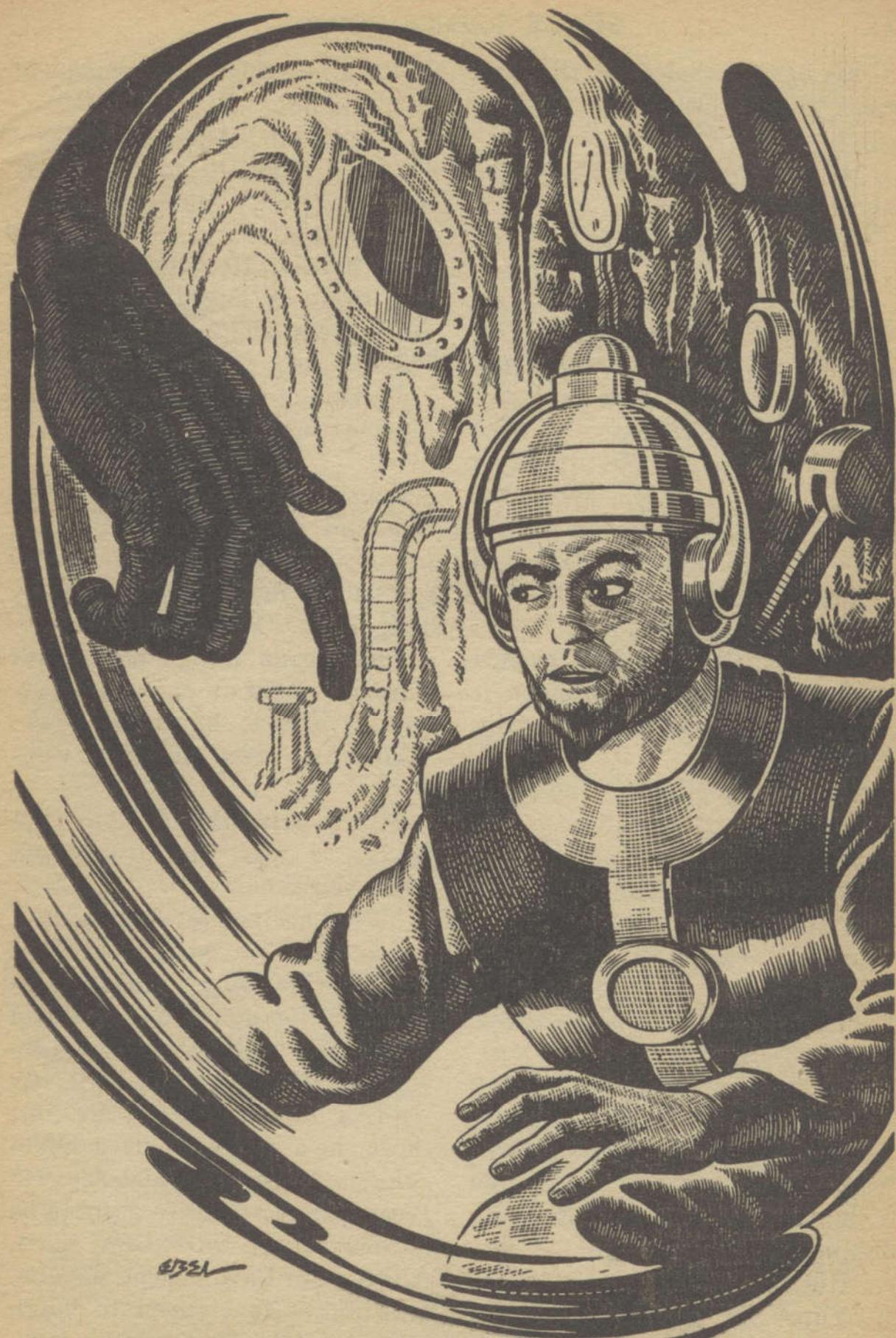
Paresi looked around him almost fearfully. "I can change," he whispered. "Ives is gone. Give me the bottle."

Something clattered to the deck at the hem of the black curtain.

"'S another hallucination," said the Captain. "Go pick up the hallucination, Nicky-boy."

"Not my hallucination," said Paresi. "Pick it up yourself."

"Sure," said the Captain good-naturedly. He waited while Paresi drank, took back the bottle, tilted it sharply over his mouth. He wiped his lips with the back



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of his hand, exhaled heavily, and went to the blackness across the cabin.

"Well, what do you know," he breathed.

"What is it this time?"

Anderson held the thing up. "A trophy, that's what." He peered at it. "*All-American, 2675*. Little statue of a guy holding up a victory wreath. Nice going, little guy." He strode to Paresi and snatched away the bottle. He poured liquor on the head of the figurine. "Have a drink, little guy."

"Let me see that."

Paresi took it, held it, turned it over. Suddenly he dropped it as if it were a red-hot coal. "Oh, dear God..."

"'Smatter, Nick?" The Captain picked up the statuette and peered at it.

"Put it down, put it down," said the doctor in a choked voice. "It's—Johnny..."

"Oh it is, it is," breathed the Captain. He put down the statuette gingerly on the table, hesitated, then turned its face away from them. With abrupt animation he swung to Paresi. "Hey! You didn't say it looked like Johnny. You said it *was* Johnny!"

"Did I?"

"Yup." He grinned wolfishly. "Not bad for a psychologist.

What a peephole you opened up! Graven images, huh?"

"Shut up, Anderson," said Paresi tiredly. "I told you I'm not going to let you needle me."

"Aw now, it's all in fun," said the Captain. He plumped down and threw a heavy arm across Anderson's shoulders. "Le's be friends. Le's sing a song."

Paresi shoved him away. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone."

Anderson turned away from him and regarded the statuette gravely. He extended the bottle toward it, muttered a greeting, and drank. "I wonder..."

The words hung there until Paresi twisted up out of his forlorn reverie to bat them down. "Damn it—*what do you wonder?*"

"Oh," said the Captain jovially, "I was just wondering what you'll be."

"What are you talking about?"

Anderson waved the bottle at the figurine, which called it to his attention again, and so again he drank. "Johnny turned into what he thinks he is. A little guy with a big victory. Hoskins, there, he's going to be a slide-rule, jus' you wait and see. Ol' Ives, that's easy. He's goin' to be a beer barrel, with beer in it. Always did have a head on him, Ives did." He stopped to laugh immoderately at Paresi's dark-

ening face. "Me, I have no secrets no more. I'm going to be a coat of arms—a useless philosophy rampant on a field of stars." He put the open mouth of the bottle against his forehead and pressed it violently, lowered it and touched the angry red ring it left between his eyes. "Mark of the beast," he confided. "Caste mark. Zero, that's me and my whole damn family. The die is cast, the caste has died." He grunted appreciatively and turned again to Paresi. "But what's old Nicky going to be?"

"Don't call me Nicky," said the doctor testily.

"I know," said the Captain, narrowing his eyes and laying one finger alongside his nose. "A ref'rence book, tha's what you'll be. A treatise on the . . . the post-nasal hysterectomy, or how to unbutton a man's prejudices and take down his pride. . . I swiped all that from somewhere. . .

"No!" he shouted suddenly; then, with conspiratorial quiet, he said, "You won't be no book, Nicky boy. Covers aren't hard enough. Not the right type face. Get it?" he roared, and dug Paresi viciously in the ribs. "Type face, it's a witticism."

Paresi bent away from the blow like a caterpillar being bitten by a fire-ant. He said nothing.

"And finally," said the Captain, "you won't be a book because

you got . . . no . . . spine." He leapt abruptly to his feet. "Well, what do you know!"

He bent and scooped up an unaccountable object that rested by the nearest shadows. It was a quarter-keg of beer.

He hefted it and thumped it heavily down on the table. "Come on, Nick," he chortled. "Gather ye round. Here's old Ives, like I said."

Paresi stared at the keg, his eyes stretched so wide open that the lids moved visibly with his pulse. "Stop it, Anderson, you swine. . ."

The Captain tossed him a disgusted glance and a matching snort. From the clutter of radar gear he pulled a screwdriver and a massive little step-down transformer down on its handle. The bung disappeared explosively inside the keg, and was replaced by a gout of white foam. Paresi shrieked.

"Ah, shaddup," growled Anderson. He rummaged until he found a tube-shield. He stripped off a small length of self-welding metal tape and clapped it over the terminal-hole at the closed end of the shield, making it into an adequate mug. He waited a moment while the weld cooled, then tipped the keg until solid beer began to run with the foam. He filled the improvised mug and

extended it toward Paresi.

"Good ol' Ives," he said sentimentally. "Come on, Paresi. Have a drink on Ives."

Paresi turned and covered his face like a frightened woman.

Anderson shrugged and drank the beer. "It's good beer," he said. He glanced down at the doctor, who suddenly flung himself face down across the couch with his head hanging out of sight on the opposite side, from which came the sounds of heaving and choking.

"Poor ol' Nick," said the Captain sadly. He refilled the mug and sat down. With his free hand he patted Paresi's back. "Can't take it. Poor, poor ol' Nick. . . ."

After that there was a deepening silence, a deepening blackness. Paresi was quiet now, breathing very slowly, holding each breath, expelling air and lying quiet for three full seconds before each inhalation, as if breathing were a conscious effort —more; as if breathing were the whole task, the entire end of existence. Anderson slumped lower and lower. Each time he blinked his lids opened a fraction less, while the time his eyes stayed closed became a fraction of a second longer. The cabin waited as tensely as the taut pose of the rigid little victory trophy.

Then there was the music.

It was soft, grand music; the music of pageantry, cloth-of-gold and scarlet vestments; pendant jewels and multicolored dimness shouldering upward to be lost in vaulted stone. It was music which awaited the accompaniment of whispers, thousands of awed, ritualistic sibilants which would carry no knowable meaning and only one avowed purpose. Soft music, soft, soft; not soft as to volume, for the volume grew and grew, but soft with the softness of clouds which are soft for all their mountain-size and brilliance; soft and living as a tiger's throat, soft as a breast, soft as the act of drowning, and huge as a cloud.

Anderson made two moves: he raised his head, and he spun the beer in his mug so its center surface sank and the bubbles whirled. With his head up and his eyes down he sat watching the bubbles circle and slow.

Paresi rose slowly and went to the center of the small lighted space left to them, and slowly he knelt. His arms came up and out, and his upturned face was twisted and radiant.

Before him in the blackness there was—or perhaps there had been for some time—a blue glow, almost as lightless as the surrounding dark, but blue and physically deep for all that. Its

depth increased rather than its light. It became the ghost of a grotto, the mouth of a nameless Place.

And in it was a person. A . . . presence. It beckoned.

Paresi's face gleamed wetly. "Me?" he breathed. "You want —me?"

It beckoned.

"I—don't believe you," said Paresi. "You can't want me. You don't know who I am. You don't know what I am, what I've done. You don't want me . . ." His voice quavered almost to inaudibility. ". . . do you?"

It beckoned.

"Then you know," sang Paresi in the voice of revelation. "I have denied you with my lips, but you know, you know, you know that underneath . . . deep down . . . I have not wavered for an instant. I have kept your image before me."

He rose. Now Anderson watched him.

"You are my life," said Paresi, "my hopes, my fulfillment. You are all wisdom and all charity. Thank you, thank you . . . Master. I give thee thanks oh Lord," he blurted, and walked straight into the blue glow.

There was an instant when the music was an anthem, and then it too was gone.

Anderson's breath whistled

out. He lifted his beer, checked himself, then set it down gently by the figurine of the athlete. He went to the place where Paresi had disappeared, bent and picked up a small object. He swore, and came back to the couch.

He sucked his thumb and swore again. "Your thorns are sharp, Paresi."

Carefully he placed the object between the beer keg and the statuette. It was a simple wooden cross. Around the arms and shaft, twisted tightly and biting deeply into the wood, was a thorny with. "God all mighty, Nick," Anderson said mournfully, "you didn't have to hide it. Nobody'd have minded."

"Well?" he roared suddenly at the blackness, "what are you waiting for? Am I in your way? Have I done anything to stop you? Come on, come on!"

His voice rebounded from the remaining bulkhead, but was noticeably swallowed up in the absorbent blackness. He waited until its last reverberations had died, and then until its memory was hard to fix. He pounded futilely at the couch cushions, glared all about in a swift, intense, animal way. Then he relaxed, bent down and fumbled for the alcohol bottle. "What's the matter with you, out there?" he demanded quietly. "You waiting for me to sober up? You

want me to be myself before you fix me up? You want to know something? *In vino veritas*, that's what. You don't have to wait for me, kiddies. I'm a hell of a lot more me right now than I will be after I get over this." He took the figurine and replaced it on the other side of the keg. "Tha's right, Johnny. Get over on the other side of ol' Beer-belly there. Make room for the old man." To the blackness he said, "Look, I got neat habits, don't leave me on no deck, hear? Rack me up alongside the boys. What is it I'm going to be? Oh yeah. A coat of arms. Hey, I forgot the motto. All righty: this is my motto. '*Sic itur ad astra*' —that is to say, "This is the way to the men's room."

Somewhere a baby cried.

Anderson threw his forearm over his eyes.

Someone went "Shh!" but the baby went right on crying.

Anderson said, "Who's there?"

"Just me, darling."

He breathed deeply, twice, and then whispered, "Louise?"

"Of course. Shh, Jeannie!"

"Jeannie's with you, Louise? She's all right? You're—all right?"

"Come and see," the sweet voice chuckled.

Captain Anderson dove into the blackness aft. It closed over him silently and completely.

On the table stood an ivory figurine, a quarter-keg of beer, a thorny cross, and a heart. It wasn't a physiological specimen; rather it was the archetype of the most sentimental of symbols, the balanced, cushiony, brilliant red valentine heart. Through it was a golden arrow, and on it lay cut flowers: lilies, white roses, and forget-me-nots. The heart pulsed strongly; and though it pumped no blood, at least it showed that it was alive, which made it, perhaps, a better thing than it looked at first glance.

Now it was very quiet in the ship, and very dark.

VII

...We are about to land. The planet is green and blue below us, and the long trip is over.... It looks as if it might be a pleasant place to live...

A fragment of Old Testament verse has been running through my mind—from Ecclesiastes, I think. I don't remember it verbatim, but it's something like this:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; A time to be

born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.

For me, anyway, I feel that the time has come. Perhaps it is not to die but something else, less final or more terrible.

In any case, you will remember, I know, what we decided long ago—that a man owes one of two things to his planet, to his race: posterity, or himself. I could not contribute the first—it is only proper that I should offer the second and not shrink if it is accepted...

—From a letter by Peter Hoskins to his wife.

In the quiet and the dark, Hoskins moved.

"Checkmate," he said.

He rose from his chair and crossed the cabin. Ignoring what was on the table, he opened a drawer under the parts cabinet and took out a steel rule. From a book rack he lifted down a heavy manual. He sat on the end of the couch with the manual on his knees and leafed through it, smoothing it open at a page of physical measurements. He glanced at the floor, across it to the black curtain, back to the one exposed bulkhead. He grunted, put the book down, and carried his tape to the steel wall. He anchored one end of it there by flipping the paramagnetic

control on the tape case, and pulled the tape across the room. At the blackness he took a reading, made a mark.

Then he took a fore-and-aft measurement from a point opposite the forward end of the table to one opposite the after end of the bunk. Working carefully, he knelt and constructed a perpendicular to this line. He put the tape down for the third time, arriving again at the outboard wall of darkness. He stood regarding it thoughtfully, and then unhesitatingly plunged his arm into it. He fumbled for a moment, moving his hand around in a circle, pressing forward, trying again. Suddenly there was a click, a faint hum. He stepped back.

Something huge shouldered out of the dark. It pressed forward toward him, passed him, stopped moving.

It was the port.

Hoskins wiped sweat away from his upper lip and stood blinking into the airlock until the outer port opened as well. Warm afternoon sunlight and a soft, fresh breeze poured in. In the wind was birdsong and the smell of growing things. Hoskins gazed into it, his mild eyes misty. Then he turned back to the cabin.

The darkness was gone. Ives was sprawled on the after couch, apparently unconscious. Johnny

was smiling in his sleep. The Captain was snoring stertorously, and Paresi was curled up like a cat on the floor. The sunlight streamed in through the forward viewports. The manual wheel gleamed on the bulkhead, unbroken.

Hoskins looked at the sleeping crew and shook his head, half-smiling. Then he stepped to the control console and lifted a microphone from its hook. He began to speak softly into it in his gentle, unimpressive voice. He said:

"Reality is what it is, and not what it seems to be. What it seems to be is an individual matter, and even in the individual it varies constantly. If that's a truism, it's still the truth, as true as the fact that this ship cannot fail. The course of events after our landing would have been profoundly different if we had unanimously accepted the thing we knew to be true. But none of us need feel guilty on that score. We are not conditioned to deny the evidence of our senses.

"What the natives of this planet have done is, at base, simple and straightforward. They had to know if the race who built this ship could do so because they were psychologically sound (and therefore capable of

reasoning out the building process, among many, many other things) or whether we were merely mechanically apt. To find this out, they tested us. They tested us the way we test steel—to find out its breaking point. And while they were playing a game for our sanity, I played a game for our lives. I could not share it with any of you because it was a game only I, of us all, have experience in. Paresi was right to a certain degree when he said I had retreated into abstraction—the abstraction of chess. He was wrong, though, when he concluded I had been driven to it. You can be quite sure that I did it by choice. It was simply a matter of translating the contactual evidence into an equivalent idea-system.

"I learned very rapidly that when they play a game, they abide by the rules. I know the rules of chess, but I did not know the rules of their game. They did not give me their rules. They simply permitted me to convey mine to them.

"I learned a little more slowly that, though their power to reach our minds is unheard-of in any of the seven galaxies we know about, it still cannot take and use any but the ideas in the forefront of our consciousness. In other words, chess was a possibility. They could be forced to

take a sacrificed piece, as well as being forced to lose one of their own. They extrapolate a sequence beautifully—but they can be out-thought. So much for that: I beat them at chess. And by confining my efforts to the chessboard, where I knew the rules and where they respected them, I was able to keep what we call sanity. Where you were disturbed because the port disappeared, I was not disturbed because the disappearance was not chess.

"You're wondering, of course, how they did what they did to us. I don't know. But I can tell you what they did. They empathize—that is, see through our eyes, feel with our fingertips—so that they perceive what we do. Second, they can control those perceptions; hang on a distortion circuit, as Ives would put it, between the sense organ and the brain. For example, you'll find all our fingerprints all around the port control, where, one after the other, we punched the wall and thought we were punching the button.

"You're wondering, too, what I did to break their hold on us. Well, I simply believed what I knew to be the truth; that the ship is unharmed and unchanged. I measured it with a steel tape and it was so. Why didn't they force me to misread the tape?

They would have, if I'd done that measuring first. At the start they were in the business of turning every piece of pragmatic evidence into an outright lie. But I outlasted the test. When they'd finished with their whole arsenal of sensory lies, they still hadn't broken me. They then turned me loose, like a rat in a maze, to see if I could find the way out. And again they abided by their rules. They didn't change the maze when at last I attacked it.

"Let me rephrase what I've done; I feel uncomfortable cast as a superman. We five pedestrians faced some heavy traffic on a surface road. You four tried nobly to cross—deaf and blindfolded. You were all casualties. I was not; and it wasn't because I am stronger or wiser than you, but only because I stayed on the sidewalk and waited for the light to change...

"So we won. Now..."

Hoskins paused to wet his lips. He looked at his shipmates, each in turn, each for a long, reflective moment. Again his gentle face showed the half-smile, the small shake of the head. He lifted the mike.

"...In my chess game I offered them a minor piece in order to achieve a victory, and they accepted. My interpretation is that they want me for further

tests. This need not concern you on either of the scores which occur to you as you hear this. First: The choice is my own. It is not a difficult one to make. As Paresi once pointed out, I have a high idealistic quotient. Second: I am, after all, a very minor piece and the game is a great one. I am convinced that there is no test to which they can now subject me, and break me, that any one of you cannot pass.

"But you must in no case come tearing after me in a wild and thoughtless rescue attempt. I neither want that nor need it. And do not judge the natives severely; we are in no position to do so. I am certain now that whether I come back or not, these people will make a valuable addition to the galactic community.

"Good luck, in any case. If the tests shouldn't prove too arduous,

I'll see you again. If not, my only regret is that I shall break up what has turned out to be, after all, a very effective team. If this happens, tell my wife the usual things and deliver to her a letter you will find among my papers. She was long ago reconciled to eventualities.

"Johnny . . . the natives will fix your lighter . . .

"Good luck, good-bye."

Hoskins hung up the microphone. He took a stylus and wrote a line: "*Hear my recording. Pete.*"

And then, bareheaded and unarmed, he stepped through the port, out into the golden sunshine. Outside he stopped, and for a moment touched his cheek to the flawless surface of the hull.

He walked down into the valley.

T. L. SHERRED is back next month, with a story that merits our rare designation as a SPACE SPECIAL. Sherred, of course, is the phenomenal writer whose single story, *E for Effort*, made such a stir that after six years out of the field, his work is still being hotly demanded by the readers. Now, at last, he's given in to the pressure, and his serial, *CUE FOR QUIET*, will lead off the next issue. When the bidding was over, we wound up with frazzled nerves and a ruined budget—but knowing that the readers would agree it was well worth all the trouble. Like a stick of dynamite, it's a nice, quiet story—until the fuse is lighted! We don't intend to spoil it by describing it in advance; but it's everything we could hope for in a Sherred story—and that's description enough!