

MECHANISTRIA

by *Eric Frank Russell*

There we were, standing on the mezzanine of Terrastronaut Seven Administration Building. Not a darned one of us knew why we had been summoned so unexpectedly or why we weren't blasting as usual for Venus in the morning. So we hung around, asking unanswerable questions of each other with our eyes and getting ourselves nowhere. I had once seen thirty Venusian guppies gaping in adonoidal dumbfoundment at an Aberdeen terrier named Fergus and straining their peanut brains for the reason why one end waggled. They looked pretty much as we were looking right now.

Portly and bland as ever, Captain McNulty came along just as the nail-gnawing contest was about to begin. He was followed by half a dozen of the Upsydaisy's leading technicians and a skinny little runt we'd never seen before. In the rear came Jay Score walking lithely over floorboards that squeaked under his three hundred or more pounds. I never failed to be surprised by the casual ease with which he bore his massive frame. His eyes were aglow as they gave us that all-embracing look.

Gesturing to us to follow; McNulty led us into a room, strutted onto its small platform and addressed us in the manner of one about to tutor a newly-formed third grade. "Gentlemen and vedras, I have with me this afternoon the famous Professor Flettner."

He made a precise bow toward the runt who grinned and did a bit of foot-twisting like a kid caught snitching the fudge.

"The professor is seeking a crew for his extra-solarian vessel, the Marathon. Jay Score and six of our technicians have volunteered to go along with me. We have been accepted and have received the necessary extra training during the term of your leave."

"It was a pleasure," put in Flettner, anxious to placate us for stealing the skipper.

"The Terrestrial Government," continued McNulty, flattered, "has approved the entire complement of my former command, the Venusian freighter Upskadaska City. Now it's up to you fellows. Those who may wish to stay with the Upskadaska City can leave this meeting and report for duty. Will those who prefer to accompany me please signify by raising a hand." Then his roving eye discovered the Martians and he hastily added, "Or a tentacle."

Sam Hignett promptly stuck up his brown mitt. "Captain, I'd rather stay with you."

He beat the rest of us by a fraction of a second. Funny thing, not a single one of us really was bursting to shoot around in Flettner's suicide-box. It was merely that we were too weak to refuse. Or maybe we stuck out our necks for the sake of seeing the look that came into McNulty's features.

"Thank you, men," said McNulty in the solemn sort of voice they use at burials. He swallowed hard, blew his nose. His gaze roamed over us almost lovingly, became suddenly abashed as it discovered one Martian figure flopped in a corner, all its limp tentacles sprawling negligently around.

"Why, Sug Farn ---" he began.

Kli Yang, chief coach of the Red Planet bunch, chipped in quickly with "I put up two tentacles, Captain. One for myself and one for him. He is asleep. He deputed me to act on his behalf, to say yes, or say no, or sing, 'Pop Goes The Weazel' as required."

Everyone laughed. Sug Farn's utter and complete laziness had been a feature of life aboard the Upsydaisy. The skipper alone was unaware that nothing short of an urgent outside job or a game of chess could keep Sug Farn awake. Our laughter ended and the sleeper immediately filled in the silence with one of those eerie, high-pitched whistles that is the Martian version of a snore.

"All right," said McNulty, striving to keep a smile away from his mouth. "I want you to report aboard ship at dawn. We blast at ten ack emma G.M.T. I'll leave Jay Score to give you further information and answer any Questions."

The Marathon was a real beauty, Flettner designed, government built, with fine lines halfway between those of a war cruiser and those of a light racing rocket. Indeed, she had space-navy fittings that were luxurious by comparison with what we'd had on the Upsydaisy. I liked her a lot. So did the rest.

Standing at the top of the telescopic metal gangway, I watched the last comers arrive. Jay Score went down, returned lugging his enormous case. He was allowed more weight in personal luggage than any three others. No wonder, for only one item among his belongings was a spare atomic engine, a lovely little piece of engineering coming to eighty pounds. In a way, this was his standby heart.

Four government experts came aboard in a bunch. I'd no idea of who they were or why they were going with us, but directed them to their private cabins. The last arrival was young Wilson, a fair-haired, moody lad of about nineteen. He'd had three boxes delivered in advance and now was trying to drag three more aboard.

"What's in those?" I demanded.

"Plates." He surveyed the ship with unconcealed distaste.

"Repair, dinner or dental?" I inquired.

"Photographic," he snapped without a glimmer of a smile.

"You the official picture man?"

"Yes."

"All right. Dump those boxes in mid-hold."

He scowled. "They are never dumped, dropped, chucked or slung. They are placed," he said. "Gently."

"You heard me!" I liked the kid's looks but not his surly attitude.

Putting down the boxes at the top of the gangway, and doing it with exaggerated care, he looked me over very slowly, his gaze travelling from feet to head and all the way down again. His lips were thin, his knuckles white.

Then he said, "And who might you be when you're outside your shirt?"

"I'm the sergeant-at-arms," I informed in I'm-having-no-nonsense-from-you tones. "Now go dump or place or lower those crates someplace where they'll be safe, else I'll toss them a hundred feet Earthward."

That got him right in his weak spot. I think that if I'd threatened to throw him for a loop he'd have had a try at giving me an orbit of my own. But he didn't intend to let me or anyone else pick on his precious boxes.

Favouring me with a glance that promised battle, murder and sudden death, he carried the boxes into mid-hold, taking them one at a time, tenderly, as if they were babies. That was the last I saw of him for a while. I had been hard on the kid but didn't realize it at the time.

A couple of the passengers were arguing in their harness just before we threw ourselves away. Part of my job is to inspect the strappings of novices and they kept at it while I was going over their belts and buckles.

"Say what you like," offered one, "but it works, doesn't it?"

"I know damn well it does," snorted the other, showing irritation. "That is the hell of it. I've been right through Flettner's crazy mathematics a thousand times, until my mind's dizzy with symbols. The logic is all right. It's un-assailable. Nevertheless, the premise is completely cockeyed.

"So what? His first two ships reached the Jovian system simply by going zip! and zip! They did the round trip in less time than any ordinary rocketship takes to make up its mind to boost. Is that crazy?"

“It’s blatantly nuts!” swore the objector, his blood pressure continuing to rise. “It’s magic and it’s nuts! Flettner says all astronomical estimates of distances can be scrapped and thrown into the ash-can because there’s no such thing as speed inside a cosmos which itself-plasma and ether alike-is in a series of tremendous motions of infinite variability. He says you can’t have speed or measurable velocity where there’s nothing to which you can relate it except a fixed point which is purely imaginary and cannot possibly exist. He claims that we’re obsessed by speeds and distances because our minds are conditioned by established relations inside our own one-cent solar system, but in the greater cosmos there are no limitations to which our inadequate yardstick can be applied.”

“Me,” I put in soothingly, “I’ve made my last will and testament.”

He glared at me, then snapped to the other, “I still say it’s looney.”

“So’s television and arguers,” retorted his opponent, “but they both work.”

McNulty came by the door at that moment, paused, said, “Seen to that lad Wilson yet?”

“No-I’ll be there in one minute.”

“Try and cool him down, will you. He looks as if he’s in a blue funk.”

Reaching Wilson’s cabin, I found him sitting there with his harness on. He was dumb, glassy-eyed and worried stiff.

“Ever been on a spaceship before?”

“No,” he growled.

“Well, don’t let it bother you. I admit there are rare occasions when people go up in one piece and come down in several, but according to official statistics the roller coasters killed more last year.”

“Do you think I’m scared?” he demanded, standing up so quickly that he startled me.

“Me? Oh, no I” I fumbled around for words I couldn’t find. His bothered expression had vanished and he was looking rather hard. “See here,” I said, speaking as man to man, “tell me what’s eating you and I’ll see if I can help.”

“You can’t help.” Sitting down; he relaxed, became as moody as before. “I’m worrying about my plates.”

“What plates?”

“Those photographic ones I brought on board, of course.”

“Heck, they’ll be safe enough. Besides, what good will worrying do?”

“Plenty,” he said. “When at first I let ‘em go on trust I had them walloped to powder in two successive accidents. Then I developed the habit of worrying about them. I was doing a really good job of worrying just before that Century Express smashup and I lost only two, both unexposed. I worried all but six of my outfit through the big Naples quake. So it pays me, see?”

“Hell on a bike!” I said.

“Leave me alone and let me get on with my job,” he invited. Upon which he leaned backward, tightened his harness and calmly resumed his worrying.

Can you tie that? I was still stupefied by the queer tricks of some professions when I arrived at the scene of the uproar at the top of the starboard gangway. McNulty was bawling out the Martians. The latter had emerged from their especial quarters where air was kept down to the three pounds pressure to which they were accustomed. They were now outside in the alien and objectionable atmosphere.

Somebody went solemnly down the gangway bearing Earthward an enormous vase of violently clashing colours and exceedingly repulsive shape. The Martian chorus of protest arose crescendo. There were shrill chirrupings and much snaking of angry tentacles. I gathered that the porcelain

monstrosity was Kli Morg's chess trophy, the Martian notion of a championship cup. It was in vile taste from the Terrestrial viewpoint. Anyway, the skipper's orders were orders and the abomination stayed on Earth.

Next instant the siren howled its thirty seconds warning and all those still out of harness raced for safety. The way those Martians ceased their oratory and beat it was something worth seeing.

I got myself fixed in the nick of time. The air-locks closed. Whoom! A giant hand tried to force my cranium down into my boots and temporarily I passed out.

The world swelling rapidly before our bow was little bigger than Terra. Its sunlit face had a mixture of blacks, reds and silvers rather than the old familiar browns, blues and greens. It was one of five planets circling a sun smaller and whiter than our own. A small, insignificant group of asteroids shared this grouping but we had no difficulty in cutting through their orbits.

I don't know which star that sun was supposed to be. Jay Score told me it was a minor luminary in the region of Bootes. We had picked on it because it was the only one in this area with a planetary family and we'd selected the second planet because its present position stood in nice, convenient relationship with our line of flight.

At that, we were going a devil of a lot too fast to circle it and submit it to close inspection before landing in some choice spot. We were striking its orbit at a tangent with the planet immediately ahead. The landing was to be a direct one, a hawklike dive with a muffled prayer and no prancing around the mulberry bush.

The way Flettner's unorthodox notions went into action was again something to bring one's heart into one's gullet before it could be swallowed back. I believe that the vessel could have done even better had its functioning not been handicapped by the limits of human endurance. McNulty must have gained the measure of those limits with astonishing accuracy, for the deceleration and drop brought me down alive and kicking-but I had the deep impression of my harness all over my abused carcass for a week.

Reports from the lab said the air was twelve pounds and breathable. We drew lots for first out: McNulty and all the government experts lost. That was a laugh! Kli Yang's name came first out of the hat, then an engineer named Brennand was lucky, followed by Jay Score, Sam Hignett and me.

One hour was our limit. That meant we couldn't go much more than a couple of miles from the Marathon. Spacesuits weren't needed. Kli Yang could have used his head-and-shoulder contraption to enjoy his customary three pounds pressure but he decided that he could tolerate twelve for a mere hour without becoming surly. Hanging binoculars around our necks, we strapped on needle-ray guns. Jay Score grabbed a tiny two-way radiophone to keep us in touch with the vessel.

"No fooling, men," warned the skipper as we went through the air-lock. "See all you can and be back within the hour."

Kli Yang, last through the lock, ran his saucer eyes over the envious ship's company, said, "Somebody had better go wake Sug Farn and tell him the fleet's in port." Then four of his ten tentacles released their hold and he dropped to ground.

My, was that alien surface hard! Here it shone black and glassy, there it was silvery and metallic with patches of deep crimson appearing in odd places. I picked up a small lump of silvery outcrop, found it amazingly heavy; solid metal as far as I could tell.

I tossed the lump through the open door of the air-lock so that they could get busy analysing it, and at once Kli Morg stuck out a furious head, goggled his eyes at the inoffensive Kli Yang and remarked, "A blow on the cranium is not funny. The fact that you are now with a bunch of Terrestrials doesn't mean that you have to be equally childish."

“Why, you amateur pawn-pusher,” began Kli Yang, speaking with considerable warmth. “I’d have you know ---“

“Shut up!” snapped Jay Score authoritatively. He started off toward the setting sun, his long, agile legs working as though intent on circumnavigating the globe. The radio swung easily from one powerful hand.

We followed in single file. In ten minutes he was half a mile ahead and waiting for us to catch up.

“Remember, long brother, we’re only flesh and blood,” complained Brennand as we reached the emergency pilot’s huge, efficient figure.

“Not me,” denied Kli Yang. “Thank Rava, my kind are not made of so sickening a mess.” He emitted a thin whistle of disgust, made swimming motions with his tentacles through air four times as thick as that of Mars.

“I could row a boat!”

Our progress was slightly slower after that. Down into a deep, shadowy valley, up the other side and over the crest. No trees, no shrubs, no birds, no other sign of life. Nothing but the black, silver and red semimetallic ground, a range of blue veiled mountains in the far distance and the gleaming cylinder of the Marathon behind us.

A swiftly flowing river ran down the centre of the next valley. Reaching it, we filled a flask to take back to the lab. Sam Hignett risked a taste, said it was coppery but drinkable. The rushing waters were faintly blue with darker shades swirling in their depths. The banks were of ground considerably softer than the surface we’d just traversed. Sitting on the nearer bank, we contemplated the torrent which was much too swift and deep to cross. After a while a headless body came floating and bobbing along.

The mutilated corpse vaguely resembled that of an enormous lobster. It had a hard, crimson, chitinous shell, four crablike legs, two lobsterish pincers and was half as big again as a man. Its neck was a raw, bloodless gash from which white strings dangled. What the missing head had looked like we could only imagine.

Full of mute menace, the cadaver turned and rolled past while we sat in a fascinated row and watched it, our eyes going from right to left and following it until it swept round the distant bend. What filled our minds was not the question of how the head looked, but who had removed it and for what reason. Nobody said anything.

This gruesome sight had barely departed in the grip of the rapid current when we got first evidence of life. Ten yards to my right a hole showed in the soft bank. A creature slithered out of it, went to the brink of the water, drank in delicate sips.

Four-legged, with a long triangular tail, it resembled an iguana more than anything else. Its skin was black with an underlying sheen of silver like shot silk. Its pupils were shiny black slots in silvery eyeballs. Length: about six feet, including tail.

Having swallowed its fill, this thing turned round to go back, saw us and stopped abruptly. I fingered my needleray just in case it had combative ideas. It examined us carefully, opened its jaws in a wide gape that revealed a great, jet-black gullet and double rows of equally black teeth. Several times it favoured us with this demonstration of biting ability before it made up its mind what to do next. Then, so help me, it crept up the bank, joined the end of our row, sat down and stared at the river.

I have never seen a crazier spectacle than we must have presented at that moment. There was Jay Score, huge and shining, his craggy features the colour of ancient leather. Next, Sam Hignett, our Negro surgeon, his teeth gleaming in bright contrast with his ebon features. Then Brennand, an

undersized white Terrestrial sitting beside Kli Yang, a rubber-skinned ten-tentacled, goggle-eyed Martian. Next, me, a middle-aged, greying Terrestrial and, finally, this black and silver alien wottizit. All of us glumly contem-plating the river.

Still nobody said anything. There didn't seem anything adequate to say. We stared, the creature stared, all of us as phlegmatic as could be. I thought of young Wilson and how preciously he'd have mothered a plate with this scene on it. Pity he wasn't there to record it for all time. Then as we watched another body came floating down, one like the first. No head.

"Somebody can't be popular," remarked Brennand, fed up with the silence.

"They're independent," informed the iguana, solemnly.

"Like me."

"Eh?"

Five people never stood up with greater promptitude or timed an ejaculation so perfectly.

"Stick around," advised the lizard. "Maybe you'll see something." It blinked at Brennand, then slithered back into its hole. Silver gleamed along its black tail as it went down.

"Well," said Brennand, breathing heavily, "can you pin your ears to that!" A dazed look in his eyes, he went to the hole, squatted on his heels and bawled, "Hey!"

"He isn't in," responded the thing from somewhere in the depths.

Licking his lips, Brennand gave us the piteous glance of a hurt spaniel, then inquired somewhat insanelly, "Who isn't in?"

"Me," said the lizard.

"Did you hear what I heard?" demanded the flabbergasted Brennand, standing up and staring at us.

"You heard nothing," put in Jay Score before any of us could reply. "It didn't speak. I was watching it closely and its mouth never moved." His hard, brilliant eyes looked into the hole. "It was thinking purely animal thoughts which you received telepathically and, of course, translated into human terms. But because you are not normally receptive of telepathic thought-forms, and because you have not previously encountered anything that broadcasts on the human waveband, you thought you heard it talking."

"Stick around," repeated the lizard. "But not around my burrow. I don't like the publicity. It's dangerous."

Moving away, Jay picked up the radiophone. "I'll tell them about the bodies and ask if we can explore a mile or two upstream."

He moved a switch. The instrument promptly emitted a noise like Niagara in full flow. Nothing else could be heard. Changing to transmission, he called repeatedly, switched back and was rewarded only by the sound of a mighty waterfall.

"Static," suggested Sam Hignett. "Try lower down the band."

The radio had only a limited bandwidth but Jay turned all the way across it. The waterfall faded out, was gradually replaced by an eerie, dithering sound like that of a million grasshoppers yelling bitter-bitter-bitter. That gave way to a high, piercing whistle followed by another waterfall.

"I don't like this," commented Jay, switching off. "There is far too much on the air for what looks like an empty world. We are going back. Come on--let's move fast."

Lifting the radiophone he trudged rapidly up the bank and over the crest. His mighty figure looked like that of some old-time giant as it became silhouetted against the evening sky.

He put on the pace, making it a gruelling task to keep up with him, We needed no urging. Much of his uneasiness had communicated itself to us. Those decapitated bodies ---

McNulty heard us through, sent for Steve Gregory and asked him to give the ether a whirl. Steve beat it to the radio room, came back in a few minutes. His eyebrows were tangled.

“Skipper, it’s alive from two hundred metres right down into the ultra-short waveband. There isn’t room to get a word in edgeways.”

“Well,” growled McNulty, “what sort of stuff is it?”

“Three kinds,” replied Steve. “There are whistles of a steady and sustained type that might be direction signals. There are eight different waterfalls of considerable intensity. I reckon they are power broadcasts. In between all these is an orgy of gabbling which suggests this place is fairly crawling with life.” He did more acrobatics with his eyebrows which were of the bushy sort suitable for such performances. “ Couldn’t get any vision except for typical interference patterns racing across the screen.”

Looking apprehensively through the nearest port, one of the government experts opined, “If this planet is well populated we must have picked on the local Sahara.”

“We’ll use a lifeboat,” decided McNulty. “We’ll send out three men, well armed, and give them half an hour to look round. They should be able to cover best part of five hundred miles and be back before dark.”

Most of us would have liked another lucky dip in the hat, but McNulty nominated the three. One of them was a government biologist named Haines; the others were engineers holding lifeboat coxwain’s certificates.

It took no more than four minutes to swing out a lifeboat on its automatic derricks and lower it to ground. The three clambered in. All had needle-ray guns. In addition there were half a dozen miniature atomic bombs on board, while a multiple pom-pom stuck its menacing bunch of barrels through a glassite turret in the tiny vessel’s bow.

That little expedition was adequately armed all right! It wasn’t so much that we really expected trouble or were going looking for it, but rather that we believed in doing more than keeping our fingers crossed.

With an amusingly squeaky blast the twelve-ton cylinder shot from the Marathon’s mothering bulk and curved skyward. It whined away to a pinpoint in no time, then it was gone.

Steve had reset the lifeboat’s radiophone and now was in touch with it on four-twenty metres. Biologist Haines was at the vessel’s observation window doing the reporting.

“Sixty miles out and six miles up. Mountains ahead. We’re climbing.” Silence for a minute, then, “Over the top at twelve miles altitude. There’s a long, straight, artificial-looking line cutting the foothills on the other side. We are diving towards it, lower, lower . . . yes, it’s a road!”

“Anything using it?” yelped Steve, his brow-bushes snaking around.

“Nothing as far as we can see just yet. It’s in excellent condition. Not deserted, but seldom used. Ah, another road over on the horizon, maybe forty miles away. We’re making for it now. Seems as if . . . as if . . . there are shapes moving swiftly along it.” Another pause while his listeners danced with impatience. “By heavens, there are dozens ---“

The voice blanked out completely. Nothing more came over the ether except a steady rustling noise like that of dead leaves dancing in a random wind.

Frantically, Steve went over his receiver, adjusting, retuning, doing all he knew to bring back the voice so suddenly gone from the air. But there was nothing, nothing except that persistent and eerie whispering on four-twenty and the all-pervading uproar below two hundred.

The crew clamoured for the chance to take out a second boat. We had four of the little vessels as well as the slightly larger and much faster pinnacle. McNulty refused to let any more go.

“No, men,” he said, his plump features unworried. “One bunch at a time is enough. The rest of us will wait here. We’ll stay put until morning to give that boat a chance to find us again. It may be safe enough. Perhaps its radio has gone out of commission or some minor fault has developed among its navigational instruments.” A glint came into his eyes. “But if it’s not back by dawn we’re going to discover the reason why.”

“You bet!” came a murmur of many voices.

Thrum-thrum-thrum! The sound had a chance to be noticed during ensuing quietness. We now realized that it had been drumming dully through the room for most of a minute but only then did it register in our minds. A strange yet familiar sound, that steady thrumming--and it wasn’t caused by the returning lifeboat.

A crew never poured through the airlock as quickly as we did at that moment. Outside we stood with our backs to the great curved shell of the Marathon and stared at the sky. There they were, three, four, five of them: long, black rocketships flying in arrowhead formation.

Young Wilson’s face lit up, he yipped, “Oh, lordy!” and produced a camera from nowhere. He sighted it at the black things above.

None of us had been quick-witted enough to bring out binoculars, but Jay Score didn’t need any. He stood with his long legs braced apart, his big chest protruding, his head tilted back, his gleaming orbs focused on the overhead spectacle.

“Five,” he said. “Ten miles up, moving fast and still ascending. Either they’re painted dead black or made of some very black metal. Don’t resemble any design on Terra. Their stern tubes are exposed instead of being sunk in the tail, and they’ve even got fore and aft fins.”

He continued to watch long after I had developed a crick in the neck. Still thrumming faintly, the five disappeared from sight. They had passed right over the Marathon without noticing it, blasting at an altitude that made our reposing vessel less conspicuous than a dropped pin.

Kli Morg chirruped, “They’re not so far behind us after all. They’ve got rocketships, they decapitate lobsters, and in all probability they’re instinctively hostile towards strangers. I can see them offering us a big tentacle, yes, right in the masticatory orifice!”

“Hope for the best rather than expect the worst,” advised McNulty. He gazed around at his crew, then at the sleek shape of the Marathon. “Besides, we’re a darned lot faster than anything limited to a mere solar system and we know how to take care of ourselves.”

He patted his needle-ray significantly. I’d never seen our plump and amiable skipper look so tough. He had a most disarming habit of understating his sentiments but, at the right time and in the right place, he could be a very hard egg.

Nobody though could look half as tough as Jay Score who was standing at his side. There was something about that guy’s firm, solid, statuesque pose, his brief speeches and rapid decisions, and the fiery eyes glowing in a rocklike face, that gave him an appearance of serene power such as you see on the phlegmatic features of those unknown gods they dig out of strange and lonely places.

Jay rumbled, “All right, let’s go in and wait for dawn.”

“Sure,” McNulty agreed. “Tomorrow we’ll get some of these mysteries sewed up, whether that boat returns or not.”

He didn’t know that tomorrow he’d be sewn up himself along with the rest of us. Neither did any of us suspect it. Young Wilson wouldn’t have whistled half so shrilly and happily as he developed his exposed plate had he guessed that it would be lost forever within twenty-four hours.

One of the navigators on night watch first saw the machines. They appeared suddenly and furtively about an hour before the pale dawn, ghostly shapes skittering around under dying stars and among the darkest shadows.

At first he thought they were animals of some kind, probably nocturnal carnivores. But his doubts grew too strong, he sounded the general alarm and we dashed to our posts. An engineer trundled a portable searchlight to one of the ports, let its powerful beam probe encompassing gloom.

At the other end of the beam something big and glittering promptly skedaddled out of the cone of light. Its evasive action was so swift that nobody got more than a glimpse of it, a vague, uncertain impression of a tentacled globe encircled in the vertical plane by a rim like that of a wheel. It seemed to roll on this rim, twisting and turning with astounding agility.

The searchlight could not follow it since the beam was pouring through the glassite pane and had no room to sweep sidewise. We waited awhile, tense, expectant, but nothing else trespassed into the bar of revealing brilliance, though we could sense many things moving around just beyond reach of the rays.

Digging out a couple more searchlights, we positioned them behind two other ports, tried to catch our besiegers napping by switching the beams on and off at erratic intervals. This method was more effective. Again we caught a momentary view of the dodging globe-thing as it shot away from the sudden lance of the third light.

A minute later the second light illuminated a great, trellis-patterned metal arm as it swung ponderously upward into concealing darkness. There was something big and brutal at the end of that arm; and it wasn't a hand. The thing reminded me of a mechanical excavator or steam-shovel.

"See that?" bawled Steve. His face was shadowed behind the searchlights but I knew where his eyebrows were going. Rumour had it they'd once gone right over the top and halfway down his back.

I could hear Brennand breathing heavily beside me, and a faint, subtle hum coming from Jay Score farther up the passage. The searchlights exuded a smell of warm air and warmer metal.

Knockings and scrapings sounded from dead astern. That was our blind spot, full of auxiliary driving-tubes, and it wasn't possible to see from inside what was going on. McNulty barked an order. Two engineers and a navigator beat it up to that end. There was no way of determining the capabilities of these things outside, but if they were busily detaching our interchangeable tubes, well, we'd be fastened to that spot for ever.

"Time we made up our minds," suggested Jay Score.

"Meaning what?" McNulty inquired.

"Whether we go outside and meet them or blast off and leave them."

"Yes, yes, I know." McNulty was bothered and a little testy. "But we still don't know whether they're friendly or hostile. I can't assume that they are hostile and I daren't assume that they're not. We've got to be cautious. The Terrestrial authorities won't stand for any rough handling of natives without adequate reason." He sniffed disgustedly.

"And that means if they are hostile we must run away or else sit here until they make our reasons adequate."

"I propose," offered Kli Yang, brightly, "that we open the starboard lock and whistle them a little tune. When one of them comes up we'll jerk him inside and let him look us over. If he displays understandable fondness for us we will kiss him. If he does not we'll eject him, in pieces."

Pr-r-r-ang! The loud clang came from the stern, echoed and re-echoed all over the vessel. McNulty winced as he visualised one of his precious tubes springing from its patent socket. He opened his mouth to say something, shut it as a bellow of rage came from the engine-room. The next instant a terrific crump burst in the rear and the whole ship shot twenty yards forward in a belly-slide.

Helping the sprawling skipper to his feet, Jay Score said, "Looks like Chief Andrews has settled the question. Nobody's going to fool around with his pipes!"

An angry muttering continued to trickle out of the engine-room, a steady, determined rumble like that of a small volcano held in check. McNulty knew better than to try to tackle the outraged chief in his present bellicose mood.

Looking out the nearest port just as its light shot through once more, McNulty spotted a retreating mechanism almost caught by the stabbing beam. Frowning, he spoke to Jay Score rather than to the rest of us.

"We have a choice of two moves. Either we must blast off or stop them meddling with the boat. The first may mean losing the missing lifeboat for keeps. By the looks of things, the second will mean trouble aplenty." His roving gaze found Steve Gregory. "Steve, go and have one more try at raising that lifeboat. If you can't get it we'll radio instructions in the hope that they can receive them, after which we'll open a lock."

"Right, skipper." Steve departed, one brow still more or less on his forehead. He returned within five minutes. "Not a squeak."

"Have your guns ready, men. Move one of those lights into the starboard lock and aim it on the door-gap." He stopped as the Marathon gave a sudden lurch, moving through an arc of ten degrees, then sluggishly rolling back onto an even keel." And mount a pom-pom beside the light"

His listeners scattered at top speed, leaving him with Jay Score and the two engineers who were shifting the search-light.

"Whew!" breathed McNulty. "I don't care to think of the power that can roll our tonnage the way it's just been rolled."

Clink-clink-clunk! The noise rang gonglike through the Marathon's hull and sounded loudly in the armoury where I was busy doling out lethal persuaders. Came a second lurch, more violent this time. The arc was at least fifteen degrees, but again the ship reacted by swinging upright.

Running out with an armload of belts for the pom-pom, I found Jay Score waiting by the inner door of the lock. The ship settled with a shudder. Jay didn't say anything, just stood there with his rubber-soled feet braced firmly on the steel checkerplates of the floor, his huge form erect, his glowing orbs watching the gradually turning disc of the outer door.

With everything ready, the weighty door wound inward along its worm, came to the end, drew free like a great metal plug. The control arm rolled the heavy mass aside and simultaneously the searchlight filled the gap with an eye-searing glare.

Many scufflings, clankings and scrapings sounded in the dimness beyond but for a long time nothing appeared in the opening. Probably they thought the new gap was nothing but another observation-port. Hushed with expectancy; we stood and waited, but still nothing showed itself.

Greatly daring, a Flettner computator named Drake stepped into the column of light, walked slowly along the treadless stepping-strip at the bottom of the circular door gap, stood on the outer rim and looked down. The next instant he let out a startled cry and was snatched from sight.

A big, broad-shouldered, bandy-legged engineer had followed behind Drake, and with apelike speed reached out a thick, hairy arm to grab the disappearing man's harness straps. He missed, for a moment stood defeated on the brink before he in his turn gave a gruff bellow and was whisked into darkness. By now Brennan had got to the middle of the hole but stopped in his tracks when McNulty gave a warning shout.

Brennan wasn't taken. He contributed to the general yelp as something outside tried to snatch him out of the tunnel, yelped louder when a snaking Martian tentacle wound round his waist and

lugged him back. It must have been an awful pull judging by the way Kli Yang's many great suckers flattened for anchorage on the floor.

With grim calmness, McNulty asked, "What was it, Brennan?"

Before the other could reply there came a tremendous banging and clanking immediately outside. A huge, square-ended and shining shape struggled into the airlock opening. It faced the searchlight, being fully revealed in the glare. I had a good view of its boxlike front with a coiled copper antenna sticking out the top like a caricature of a curl, and with a pair of big lenses staring at the light with cobra like lack of emotion.

Without waiting for McNulty, the gunner at the pom-pom decided this was no time to write to headquarters about the matter. He let fly. The din was terrific as the weapon's eight barrels pounded like pistons and a stream of midget shells poured through the door-gap. The invading creature appeared to dissolve before our very eyes, bits of rended metal, splinters of glassy substance and empty shell-cases flying in all directions.

The invader no sooner had gone than another was there, peering into the inferno without a blink. Same square end, same copper antenna, same cold, expressionless orbs. That, too, flew to pieces. Another and another. The gunner was wild with excitement and busily cursing one of his left-side feeders for being slow at the loading-rack.

A brief silence followed the wrecking of the fourth alien, a silence broken only by the rattle of fresh ammunition-belts being draped around the pom-pom.

"Well, the authorities at home can't play hell about this," decided Captain McNulty. "Not after I've had two men taken, not to mention the lifeboat." He seemed to derive much comfort from the thought that his conscience was clear.

Somebody pounded down the passage and into the lock, said to him, "Number three light just showed Drake and Minshull. They've been carried away."

"They aren't in the danger zone, then?" chipped in Jay Score. "Good!" His eyes on the door-gap, he posed with a casual air while his right hand jiggled one of those hell-eggs known as a pocket A-bomb. Up and down, up and down, with a horrible nonchalance that made me want to scream and jump on my dental plates.

"For Pete's sake, quit doing that!" protested someone who felt the same way I did.

Jay glanced around to see who was stroking a rabbit's foot. His eyes were cold, cold. Then he thumbed the projecting stud, tossed the egg through the gap into outer darkness. Everyone immediately grovelled, tried to push his own face through the floor and dig deep into bare earth, McNulty included.

There came a flash of supernal brilliance followed by an awful roar that rolled the ship sidewise onto its opposite atmospheric fin. After that, several slow heaves as of an earthquake.

A mutilated length of metal tentacle flew in from the dark, going whoo-whoop with sheer speed, and cracked against the wall. Something faintly resembling the big end of a nautical telescope ricocheted off the pom-pom shield, zipped over the crouching skipper's fat, uplifted beam, skinned one of my earlobes, scored a long, yellowish mark along the steel floor.

If we expected more and lengthier silence outside, we were mistaken. The reverberations of the explosion had only just died away when a noise of violently torn metal came from the Marathon's stern, clanking feet and clattering claws hammered inward. Way back past the engine-room somebody yelled bloody murder, choked, gurgled.

Alien monstrosities surged full pelt into the airlock as perforce we turned to face this assault from a new direction. The pom-pom gunner stuck to his post and--ignoring what was taking place

behind his back-concentrated on shooting a clear way through the outer door-gap. But via the mutilated stern, the passages and catwalks, a metallic zoo poured upon us.

The next two minutes fled like two seconds. I saw a wheeled globe whirl into the room, followed by a nightmarish assortment of metal things, some with jointed legs and pincer-armed front limbs; some with tentacles, some with a grotesque assortment of outlandish tools.

A grabbing pincer glowed red-hot and seized-up at the hinge when a well-aimed needle-ray found its weak spot. But its coffin-shaped owner pressed on as if nothing had happened, its projecting lenses staring glassily. In the hazy throw-back from the searchlight I saw Wilson burn away a lens-collar and deprive it of an eye before it snatched him up and held him.

The pom-pom suddenly ceased its rabid yammering and fell onto its side. Something cold, hard and slippery coiled around my waist, lifted me bodily. I went over backward through the lock, borne high in the unrelenting grip of my captor. I saw a many-tooled object grab the skipper's struggling form and bear him from the fray in like manner.

My last view of the melee showed a wildly gesticulating metal globe apparently floating toward the ceiling. It was fighting at the end of a thick, sucker-surfaced rope that would not let it go. McNulty and his captor blotted out the rest, but I guessed that one of the Martians had stuck himself to the roof and was blandly fishing in the mob below.

At a fast jog-trot the thing holding me set off toward the dimly glowing horizon. Dawn was breaking, with sunup due in twenty minutes. The landscape cleared rapidly. My bearer was holding me down upon the flat of his long, level back, a taut cable around my chest, another around my waist, a many-jointed arm holding my legs. My feet were free to waggle around and my right hand still gripped a heavy needle-ray, but I was held far too tightly to bring the weapon to bear where it could do any good.

A dozen yards behind, McNulty was being lugged along like a bag of meal. His carrier differed from mine, being bigger, heavier, with eight multiple-jointed legs, no tentacles, but a dozen arms of various lengths. Four of its arms were holding down the writhing skipper, the two front ones were extended in imitation of a praying mantis, the rest were folded at its sides. I noticed that every now and again the contraption's grotesque copper curl would flip out straight, quiver questioningly; then abruptly coil like a watch-spring.

We passed other machines. A large group of them hung around the Marathon's damaged stern, big ones, small ones, squat ones, tall ones. Among them loomed the monstrous automaton with the steam-shovel hand. It squatted imperturbably at the end of a deep channel scooped from the ground below the ship's stern tubes. Half a dozen machines were extracting the bottom tubes. The top ones already were out and lying on the ground like so many drawn teeth.

"Well," I thought, with a deal of bitterness, "so much for Herr Flettner and his genius. If that bigbrain had never been born I'd now be sitting pretty aboard the good old Upsydaisy."

The thing on which I was having an unwanted ride began to increase pace, building up to a lumbering gallop. I couldn't twist round far enough to make an examination of it. The grips upon me were firm, unyielding and painfully tight. I could hear the metal pads of its feet clattering with noisy energy on the semi-metallic ground, but all I could glimpse was a rocking leg-socket that oozed a strong-smelling mineral oil.

Behind, McNulty's mount also accelerated. The light grew stronger. I raised my head as much as I could, saw a veritable procession of burdened machines stretching back to the ship. It was not possible to identify the various victims from my point of disadvantage.

A thrumming in the hazy sky drew my attention. Night had not sufficiently withdrawn her darkening hand and I failed to see the rocketships though I could follow their progress as steadily

they blasted from north to south. After more than an hour, my captor stopped and put me down. We must have covered somewhere about thirty miles. I ached all over. By this time the sun was up and we were at the verge of a wide, smooth road surfaced with dull, lead-coloured metal. A coffin-shaped object about seven feet long—the fantastic horse I had ridden upon the flat of my back—surveyed me through its horribly unemotional lenses.

Still retaining its grip, it shoved me through the doorway of a waiting vehicle. This was a big, boxlike affair mounted on double tractors and had the inevitable copper antenna protruding from its top. I had just time to note a dozen similar tumbrils lined up behind when I was thrust into darkness.

The skipper followed me half a minute later. Then Brennand, Wilson, a computator and two engineers. The skipper was wheezing deep down in his chest. The engineers were using an amazing mixture of Terrestrial, Venusian and Martian oaths.

The door banged and locked itself, apparently of its own accord. The machine jerked as if prodded by an invisible finger, trundled forward at fair speed. It stank of oil. Somebody sniffed and sniffed and did some vituperative muttering in the gloom. I think it was Brennand.

Finding his automatic lighter, the skipper flicked it and we had a look around. Our moving prison proved to be a steel cell nine feet long by six wide. There wasn't so much as a ventilator. The oil-smell grew to the unbearable pungency of the cat house at the zoo.

Still sniffing and muttering, the offended Brennand raised his needle-ray and started to cut a hole in the roof, so I got mine going and speeded up the glowing circle. Metal flowed easily. The severed plate dropped out in a couple of minutes. If our carrier had any sentience, it remained unaware of its own mutilation for it kept going straight ahead without pause or falter.

The sky didn't show through the roof. No vision of fleecy clouds greeted us, no welcome flood of light poured in. Above the gap in the steel lay a thick coating of dark green stuff impervious to our needle-rays. We concentrated all we had upon it, without avail.

A try at the door and the walls brought no better result; green stuff again. The floor turned out to be the weak spot. As the machine roared onward, we cut a hole in the floor, light immediately sprang through it, we found ourselves staring down at a swiftly spinning shaft and a section of running road.

With his gun pointed downward, Brennand said, "Mother, see what I can do!" and cut the shaft.

The machine lost pace, stopped. We braced ourselves for an almighty crash that did not come. One by one the following machines swerved around us and kept going. Brennand and I continued to study the hole in the floor while the others kept an anticipatory watch upon the door. McNulty and his computator had lost their weapons in the affray, but one of the engineers had retained his while the other engineer clung to a four-foot spanner with which -- it was rumoured -- he frequently slept.

We had no way of telling whether our dogbox had a driver or whether it functioned of its own volition or under some form of remote control, but if a driver or anyone else opened that door, we were all set to make a determined break. Nothing happened. We waited five tense minutes during which I wondered which of our crew were imprisoned in the other overtaking machines and to what sort of grim fate they were being rushed.

Finally we enlarged the gap in the floor and had almost made it big enough for our purpose when something huge and heavy churned along the road, hit our machine a gentle bump. Came a loud, metallic click and the next instant we moved forward, slowly, then faster. A breakdown dingus had come on the job.

The portion of road visible through the hole soon streamed past at a rate that put an end to any thoughts of escape via that route. To drop through would be foolhardy in the extreme; if we weren't chewed up by the speeding tractors we'd certainly be minced by anything that might be running close behind.

"This," remarked McNulty, "is most annoying."

"Annoying?" echoed Brennand, eyeing him peculiarly. He kneeled, put his face to the hole and enjoyed a few breaths of uncontaminated air. One of the engineers snickered.

"I have lost a seven hundred dollars owl-eye camera," announced young Wilson, with some ire. His eyes tried to stab the skipper to death. "That's a damnsight more than annoying! I'll take it out of their metal hides first chance I get!"

"Here's your blamed camera," announced Brennand. He got to his feet, extracted it from his pocket, handed it over, a thing little bigger than a cigarette pack. "You dropped it as you were lugged out of the ship. I caught it a moment before I was slung after you."

"Thanks-you're a pal!" Wilson fondled it with loving fingers. "I've been worrying about it." He stared straight at me, repeated, "Yes, I've been worrying about it."

One of the engineers glanced at the section of road flicking past the hole. The broken shaft, of course, was not rotating.

"We're being towed. If I were sure that nothing is following close upon us ---." He let it hang a minute, then finished, "Hey, sit on my legs while I get my head through and have a look."

"No, you don't," snapped McNulty. "We're moving much too fast to risk a drop. We stay together and face events together."

So we sat on the floor wistfully watching the circle of light, our backs to the cold, hard walls. Somebody dug out an airtight can of cigarettes, opened it, handed it around. We smoked in glum silence.

Eventually our vehicle stopped and a multitude of grindings and clankings sounded all around. The entire machine shuddered as an unseeable enormity lumbered by at one side, shaking the ground with its tonnage. On the other side, something purred like a dynamo as it approached our door. We stood facing the door, alert, wide-eyed, those who had ray guns holding them ready.

With surprising swiftness the door clicked and swung wide. A big, multi-jointed arm reached through the opening, felt blindly around. The way it did it reminded me of a pet-store dealer groping in a box for white mice. I was still gaping at that shiny limb, my needle lined on its backmost joint, when one of the engineers ducked under it and leaped out whooping defiance.

The fantastic searcher was just about to fasten upon the skipper when the back joint seized as the ray hit dead on and the whole arm lost its flexibility. It withdrew, stiff and awkward, as the second engineer charged forth in the wake of the first. This one was the guy with the four-foot spanner. The silliest thoughts occur to one at the most inappropriate times; I remembered as I followed the computator and McNulty close upon this fellow's heels that at no time had I seen him put down that spanner or let go of it for a moment.

Outside the battle was short and sharp. We found ourselves faced by forty machines of eight distinct types. Half a dozen of them were no bigger than dogs and did nothing but canter around observing everything that happened. The biggest was a monstrosity twice the size of a Pullman coach and had one great, telescopic arm terminating in a huge, black disc.

Five yards from the door, struggling in the grasp of a many-armed coffin, the engineer who'd got out first was striving to burn away the contraption's near-side lens. The one with the spanner had tangled with a wheeled globe and battered ineffectually at the universal joints from which its writhing tentacles sprouted. He was cursing with great vigour and admirable fluency.

On the left a tall, idiotic gadget faintly resembling a drunken surrealist's notion of a sober giraffe, was running away with McNulty. It had four arms that tightly embraced the luckless skipper, four legs that moved in ungainly swings, and a greatly elongated neck from the top of which shone a single lens. Still full of life, the skipper was putting up a futile struggle.

With its front limbs thrown out in mock affection a glassily staring coffin thumped forward to clasp me to its bosom. It moved with that dull, heavy dum-dum-dum you hear in Africa when an enraged rhinoceros is making for you. A belly-fluttering sound. It was so near that I sensed its characteristic stink of warm machine oil.

I stepped backward beyond what I thought would be the limit of its full reach and promptly it slid another twenty inches of joint from its metal casing. That trick almost cost me my unwary head. I tripped and went down in the nick of time, felt its bear-trap hand swipe across my top hairs.

There was something ghastly about the silence of this battle. Our opponents made no sound in any way vocal. Except for our own oaths and grunts nothing could be heard but the smooth purring of hidden works, the swish of metal tentacles, the clank of jointed arms, the thud of massive metal feet.

My opponent snatched downward as I dropped, but I rolled as never I'd rolled before, dodged both its grab and its pounding legs. My needle-ray spiked at its flat under-side and did no good whatsoever. Twisting clear, I sprang to my feet, glanced rightward, saw the computer's body lying in one place and his brains in another. I felt sick. As I swung to watch the coffin, the Pullman thing-which had taken no part up to then-aimed its disc at me and bathed me from head to feet in a powerful beam of pale-green light. Theoretically, as I discovered later on, that beam should have jammed my radio animation and made me stiffer than that stiff they call Rigor Mortis. But since I had non-mechanical animation of my very own the device remained nothing more than a pale-green light.

The globes were by far the speediest of all this crazy assortment of super-gadgets and it was a globe that got me in the end. My coffin-shaped opponent lumbered clumsily around to have another go at me, another coffin galloped toward me from the opposite side, and as I tried to divide my attention between both, a globe nipped in from behind and laid me out.

At one moment my ray was pouring its thin blade into the body of the nearest oncomer while over its sights I had a view of McNulty and the giraffe retreating far behind my attacker's back, then - thunk! - the universe exploded in my head, I let go my weapon and collapsed.

McNulty called the roll. Tattered and weary, but his plump little form still in one piece, he stood with his shoulders squared back and looked us over. Jay Score posed. beside him, big and solid as ever, his stallite chest sticking out through the shreds of his uniform, but his eyes glittering with the old, everlasting fires.

"Ambrose:"

"Here, sir."

"Armstrong."

"Here, sir."

"Bailey."

No reply. The skipper glanced up, frowning.

"Bailey. Does anyone know what has happened to Chief Steward Bailey?"

Somebody said, "Haven't seen him since just before the fight on the ship, sir." Nobody added to this information.

“Humph!” McNulty’s frown deepened. He marked his list and continued. I was puzzled as I looked over our mauled but still tough gang. Something missing, something missing. But either the skipper hadn’t sensed it or else he was ignoring it, for he proceeded methodically with his task.

“Barker, Bannister, Blaine, Brennand . . .” Again his eyes lifted as there came no response.

“Brennand was in our dogbox,” I reminded. “I don’t know what happened to him.”

“You can’t say definitely that he’s dead?”

“No, sir.”

“Brennand never came out of that machine,” offered a voice. It was the gentleman with the spanner. He stood beside the eyebrow-wagging Steve Gregory, and his face looked like a half-eaten orange, but still he was attached to his hunk of iron. Maybe the machines had let him keep it because they’d mistaken it for part of his arm. He said, “I was the last to go under in that free-for-all. Brennand wasn’t taking part. Neither was Wilson.”

McNulty registered a touch of woe; Jay Score showed a little interest, The skipper made two marks on his list and carried on. It wasn’t until he reached the letter K that I discovered the missing factor nagging my subconscious.

“Kli Dreen; Kli Morg, Kli . . . where’s Kli Dreen?”

We stared around, the whole bunch of us. Not a Martian among those present. Not one. Kli Yang, Sug Farn and the rest-nine in all-were missing. Neither could anyone remember seeing them after the struggle in the Marathon. The last man out of the vessel had been Murdoch, a government expert, and he swore that when he got snatched the Martians were still aboard and still fighting. Leastways, none of them had been tossed into his vehicle, the last of the line.

We could think up no satisfactory explanation of Martian escape from durance vile, nor hazard a guess at their present state. Perhaps their enormous strength had pre-vailed against the metal monstrosities, though that didn’t seem likely. My private notion, which I kept strictly to myself, was that they’d managed to get the foe crazy about chess and right now both sides were waiting breathlessly for someone to jump a bishop two squares. The Martians were fully capable of a stunt as lopsided as that.

Marking all the Red Planet names, McNulty continued to the bottom of his list, omitting Sixth Engineer Zeigler in the same way that he’d omitted Chief Andrews, and for the same reason. Those two were known to be dead.

They’d succumbed to that first onslaught through the stern. Summing up, McNulty found seven dead, five missing, not counting the Martians. The missing consisted of Haines and his two men in the lifeboat, also Brennand and Wilson. This was a serious loss to our small company and our only comfort lay in the thought that the missing ones nevertheless might be alive.

I took stock of our prison while the skipper mooned sadly at the roll. We were in a metal barn, a great, bare place a hundred feet long by sixty wide by forty high. Its walls were smooth, drab-coloured, windowless. The deeply curved roof, equally drab, was devoid of any opening, but from its apex hung three large spheres of translucent plastic that glowed with orange light. Closely as I examined the walls I could not find upon their dead flat surface a single line or solitary flaw suggestive of a butt weld or any other kind of joint.

“Well, men--” began McNulty.

He got no further. Thinly, eerily, a long-drawn scream trickled through the thin cracks around the building’s only door: It was a high-pitched sound thrust up to the very peak of agony and it had many reverberations as if escaping through a long, metal corridor. Above all, it was a human voice-or the voice of what was left of something human.

The men milled around, their foreheads glossy with perspiration. Murdoch looked sheet-white. Sam Hignett's black fingers opened and closed as they itched to go to the aid of the sufferer. The engineer with the spanner had rolled up his sleeves and revealed a tattooed nautch dancer on the muscle of his lower left arm. The dancer shimmied as he changed and tightened his grip on the spanner. His face still looked like hell, but his eyes were hard.

Slowly, Jay Score expressed the general feeling by saying,

"If we had the handling of one of these automatons we'd pull it to pieces to see what makes its cuckoo call the hours." He stared at nobody in particular. "In that respect, they may resemble us, much as I hate to admit it. Any man who doesn't fancy being picked to bits to satisfy alien curiosity had better take care that they never get him out of here alive!"

Again the terrible scream. It broke off abruptly the moment it reached its top note and ensuing silence seemed as horrible as the noise. I could imagine them now, clickcould bear his six. I could see no point in trying for the roof, anyway. All the same, this futile effort served to occupy our hands and minds for a short while.

Blaine tried his needle-ray on the wall with the obvious idea of cutting a series of foot-holds, but this stuff proved much different from that with which the vehicles were built. It heated up quite normally, turning primrose colour at maximum temperature, but flatly refused to melt or be cut.

This attempt with the ray gave the skipper the notion of making an inventory of available weapons. Between the lot of us there were seven ray guns, one ancient vest-pocket automatic pistol the owner of which claimed that it had been used by his father in the Final War, one four-foot spanner, two tear-gas pencils.

Events had shown the ray guns to be a fat lot of use against our armour-plated enemies. The rest of the stuff was mere lumber. But the inventory served to reveal one interesting angle of the foe's psychology in that anyone who'd clung grimly to his weapon had been permitted to keep it. This suggested that they didn't know weapons when they saw them!

We'd just finished inspecting this inadequate armament when the door shot open with suddenness that caught us napping and two lobsterlike things were thrust into our prison. The door shut with a vicious clash, giving us not the slightest glimpse of what lay beyond it. Skidding helplessly across a corner of the metal floor, the lobsters brought up against the wall in a manner that laid them flat. For a moment they reposed there while we stared at them fascinatedly and they gaped back at us. Recovering, they came to their legs. It could now be seen that their heads more resembled those of insects than of lobsters, for they had multiple-lensed eyes and butterfly antennae.

Getting over their surprise, these creatures talked to us, not vocally, but with quasi-telepathic speech that seemed to pop up inside our brains. Their weird mouths never opened, their palps did not move, but so efficient was their projection of thought-forms that it was difficult to believe they weren't addressing us in our own language. It was a feat very much like the iguana's.

One of them-I couldn't decide which one-said, "You are strangers from some other place. You are soft-bodied things, quite unlike the hard-shelled things of our solar system. Can you understand us?"

"Yes," replied McNulty, bugging his eyes at them. "We understand you."

"Sound waves!" The strange pair stared at each other in mutual dumbfoundment, their delicate antennae quivering. I could almost hear the ejaculation-mark at the end of their comment. "They communicate by means of modulated sound waves!" For some reason best known to themselves, this verged on the incredible. They gazed at us as though we outraged a basic law of nature, then,

“You are difficult to talk with. You do not assist with your minds. We have to push in our thoughts and pull out yours.”

“I’m sorry,” apologized McNulty. He gulped, composed himself. “Mental communication is not our specialty.”

“It is of no consequence. We are managing.” Each of them made identically the same vague gesture with the same claw. “Despite our differences in shape and form, it is apparent that we are brothers in misfortune.”

“At the moment,” agreed McNulty, refusing to see anything permanent about this status. He was now beginning to regard himself as something of a universal contact-man

“Have you any idea of what they intend to do with us?”

“They’ll dissect you”

“Dissect us? Cut us up?”

“Yes.”

McNulty scowled and asked, “Why?”

“They dissect all the individualistic. They’ve been doing it for years, centuries, trying to discover the cause of personal independence. They are intelligent machines, but their intelligence is completely communal.” The lobster or whatever it was, mused and went on, “Upon our own world of Varga there are tiny aquatics of similar type in that they’re nothing remarkable as individuals but display high intelligence when functioning in organized groups. They share a racial mind.”

“Like certain termites,” suggested the skipper.

“Yes, like termites,” confirmed whichever of the two was doing the mental talking-or was it both? I couldn’t see how he-or they-could agree about termites of which they knew nothing until I remembered that what was in the skipper’s mind had been impressed on their minds, too.

“For many, many circumsolar revolutions they have been trying to conquer the neighbouring water-world of Varga, which is our home planet. Our people have resisted with some success but occasionally some of us are captured, brought here and dissected.”

“They are only machines, though?”

“They are machines of a large number of functional types, all kinds of warriors, all kinds of workers, even experts and specialists. . But they are machines.” He stopped, shocked us to the marrow by suddenly pointing an accusative claw at the silently watching Jay Score. “Just as he is a machine ! He is made of metal and his mind remains closed to us! We do not like him!”

“Jay’s a hell of a lot more than a mere machine,” declared McNulty in open indignation. “He’s got something no stinking gadget ever had. I can’t explain what it is, but ... well ... he’s a person.!

A low murmur showed that he had expressed the irrational but nonetheless convinced opinion of his crew.

“What I’ve got is no more than the general complaint,” suggested Jay, unsmiling. “I’ve got independence. That makes me a candidate for the butchers along with the rest.” He sighed, added, “I suppose I’ll go the way of all flesh.”

Grinning at this pessimistic sally, McNulty said to the abashed lobster-things, “If you are sensitive to the thoughts of our kind you might be able to tell us whether you can detect any human emanations from elsewhere. A few of my men are missing and I’d like to know whether they’re still alive.”

The pair of strange creatures from Varga went quiet while their antennae trembled as if delicately searching a portion of the ether beyond our range and comprehension. Something

rumbled noisily along the corridor and passed our door without stopping, but they took no notice of this diversion.

After a while one of them-or both-said, "Our range is short, exceedingly short. We can tell you that a mind like yours has just gone away, gone forever. It petered out even as we were conversing. There are no other minds of your type within receptive distance."

"Oh," said McNulty, disappointed.

They pointed claws toward the roof and went on, "But up there, there are other minds far stranger than yours, far different from ours. They are unique. We would not have thought them possible. Unbelievable as it may be, they can concentrate upon two subjects at one and the same time."

"Eh?" said McNulty, scratching his head. He could make nothing of this information.

"Two subjects at once! Most remarkable! They are high up in the air but descending toward the roof. One of them is thinking of an array of little gods on a square composed of coloured squares and is also thinking of ... you!"

"What?" McNulty shouted.

I saw Steve Gregory's scalp swallow his eyebrows as he followed the skipper's example and stared wildly upward. We all looked pop-eyed at the roof. Next instant came a tremendous thump that shook the place from end to end and a huge dent appeared in the curve of the roof. Something hammered violently on the metal plates, other things created an uproar in the corridors beyond the door. The combined noises were awful; I felt like a bug in a boiler with half a dozen riveters at work on the seams.

Our unofficial spanner-bearer was one guy with observation and initiative. He'd noticed that the door opened inward. With his hefty four-foot instrument still in one fist, he crammed his other hand into a back pocket, felt around, proved himself tough enough to think nothing of sitting on two short, thick screwdrivers and a small lump of metal shaped like an axe-head. These items he walloped into the base of the door, performing the task with some difficulty, but finally managing to wedge the thing good and tight. He'd barely finished when the row in the corridor increased and a great weight made the door groan.

It looked as though our time had come, delayed a few precious minutes by the fastened door. Those clanking enormities outside were thirsty for samples to slice apart. Our much-prized individualism was to be our downfall. On this basis it struck me that the spanner-holder and Sam Hignett might be chosen for first carving if the carvers had any preferences, because they'd be curious about why the former possessed a half-metal, double-length arm and why the latter had a black skin in contrast with everyone else's white. I also wondered what would be their reaction when they got the measure of Jay Score.

The door shook to a terrific blow, did not turn on its hinges but did begin to bulge in the middle. Brilliant light streamed through the gap between its bent top edge and the wall. Caterpillar treads rattled past outside while the mechanism thrusting at the door maintained its powerful pressure.

"Don't shoot until you see the green of their teeth," grinned the door-wedger. He spat on the floor, leaned on his spanner like a waiting knight leaning on his mace. The pose made his tattooed nautch dancer look incongruous. Came a loud tearing sound from the roof as a great section of it was pulled away bodily. Sunlight poured over our upturned faces. A large, leathery, bulbous body with many huge, sucker-surfaced arms tumbled over the ragged rim, clung with three of its snaking limbs and hung grotesquely in mid-air. It was Sug Farn.

Adding three more tentacles to those maintaining his overhead hold, he extended the remaining four downward. His full spread was thirty-two feet, now reduced by five or six feet of sucker-hold

upon the roof. His tentacle tips dangled and curled enticingly a good fourteen feet from the floor. The door made an alarming bend inward while Sug Farn hung there and we looked up at him with various degrees of hope. The lobster creatures surveyed him aghast.

Then suddenly he came down another ten feet, grabbed four of the crew, swung them up to the hole in the roof. They went like mahouts lifted in elephants' trunks. Eyeing the hole, I could see that Sug Farn no longer had any direct hold of his own, his upper tentacles being closely entwined with the equally ropey limbs of another Martian anchored out of view on the roof-top. Sug Farn raised the four to within a few feet of the hole whereupon other tentacles writhed through from above, took them from him. Then four more and four more.

What with trying to keep my attention divided between this circus act and the dangerously creaking door, I hadn't taken overmuch notice of the Vargans, but now I discovered they were having a bitter argument with McNulty.

"No," declared the skipper, firmly. "We do not give in. We do not face the inevitable. We do not die with aplomb, as you put it." He sniffed his disgust. "We had a tribe on Earth that looked at things your way. They celebrated their miseries with nonchalant belly-slitting. It never got them anywhere."

"But escape simply isn't done," the Vargans persisted, as though talking about a war atrocity. "It is dastardly. It is contrary to convention. It is outrageous defiance of the accepted rules of war. Even a child knows that a prisoner must maintain honour by uncomplainingly accepting his fate."

"Bunk!" snorted McNulty. "Balderdash! We're not on parole. We've made no promises and don't intend to make any." He watched another four sail upward to freedom.

"It is wrong, utterly wrong. It is disgraceful. A captive is lost forever. Why, our own people would kill us from sheer shame were we to go away. Have you no conscience?"

"But, damn it," swore McNulty, "your rules are idiotic."

We aren't bound by them. We don't subscribe to them. No matter what you say, it's perfectly legitimate for us to ---"

"Listen!" interjected Jay Score. His glowing eyes shifted from the expostulating skipper to the partially wrecked door which now threatened to give way at any moment. "Isn't this a hell of a time to debate different codes of ethics?"

"Sure, Jay, but these hard-shelled dunderheads-ouch!"

His surprised expression was comical as the imperturbable Sug Farn fished for him, got him and lugged him clean out of the argument.

The door gave way at last, bursting with a sound that tore the ears. Not counting the defeatist Vargans, there were seven of us remaining on the floor when the door fell in and a thing like a fifty ton tank rumbled headlong into the busted jail.

A clicking, whirring mass of coffins, globes and other nightmarish contraptions crowded hard behind it. The leading invader was so big it filled the large doorway with only a couple of inches to spare on either side. Fascinatedly, too fearful to move, I watched its great caterpillar treads streaming downward over the front cog-drives as it lumbered toward me, an alien juggernaut.

His black features curiously alight, Sam Hignett yelled at Sug Farn, "Me last! "

Our Negro surgeon might have got his self-sacrificing wish, but he counted without the tentacled individual dangling overhead. A speedy globe got through the door-way, beat the juggernaut along the floor and grabbed at Sam. It was about two seconds too late. Silently, without comment or visible excitement, Sug Farn released three of his clinging arms from the roof, garnered all seven of us and with a mighty effort heaved us beyond reach.

As I slowly soared to the hole I could feel a subtle trembling in the limb lifting me while Sug Farn strained his utmost to raise the big burden. Another limb reached down, coiled around me, took some of the weight. Up through the hole I caught a glimpse of another Martian figure crawling along the underside of the dented roof toward the top of the nearer wall, then I was in the sunlight and on my feet.

Sitting in its handy roof-dent like a mud-hen on its nest was the pinnacle. There the powerful little vessel rested, its tubes ready for action, its smooth, streamlined shape a thing of delight. No vision could have done more to boost the spirits of weary men.

Metal buildings towered all around us, most of them with roofs higher than the one on which we were standing. Square or oblong in plan, without windows or decorations of any sort, all were severely and depressingly utilitarian. No smoke or steam arose from any point within view, but puffs of coloured vapour came from several invisible sources.

Many of the buildings bore great latticework radio masts; a few had complicated aerial arrays resembling directional antennae. The entire place was a metal metropolis.

Down below, wide, straight, evenly-spaced streets were filled with scurrying machines of at least a hundred types. Most of them looked like nothing we'd formerly seen; one in particular, a long, semi-flexible contraption, reminded me of a monster centipede. It had a triple row of revolving cutters projecting from its front and evidently functioned as some sort of tube borer or subterranean excavator.

A small proportion of coffins and globes were visible among the crowd, with a couple of giraffes and several of those inquisitive, seemingly useless gadgets that had got under our feet during the earlier affray. Observing this medley of alien forms, I developed the notion that the globes and coffins were different kinds of warriors, the giraffes were civil police and that the nosey little machines were reporters or war correspondents who kept constant watch and transmitted continual reports either to some co-ordinating centre or maybe to the community as a whole. But I didn't feel too sure about the giraffes.

While two-thirds of the rescued crew clambered into the pinnacle, giving it a full load, I stood with Jay Score at the ragged edge of the roof-hole and looked into our recent prison. It was an amazing sight. The pair of lobster-things had gone, presumably to their anticipated fate. Immediately beneath us, squatting like an enormous iron toad in the middle of the floor, was the fifty tonner that had burst in through the door.

Around it glassy-eyed globes whirled hither and thither, occasionally waving tentacles at us in what could have been fury-if an automaton is capable of fury. Several coffins had folded their jointed rear legs, sat and stared up at us in fantastic imitation of a pack of balked hounds, their forward lenses having gained enough tilt to bear on the roof and reveal their escaped prey. Despite their total lack of facial animation I could almost see their jaws open and tongues hanging out. Most of the moving machines made a continual clicking and clanking. Their pungent oil smelled to high heaven.

Thirty feet above this mob, Sug Farn and Kli Yang had stuck themselves securely to the tops of opposite walls and now fished for the enemy. Sug Farn snaked out a tentacle that looked as though it could have anchored a battleship, spread the end suckers on the flat, smooth back of a squatting coffin which-to judge from its posture-was patiently waiting for us to drop like over-ripe grapes. Sug Farn lifted the coffin which immediately clanked with alarm and waved its jointed legs. An alert globe whirled to its rescue.

Kli Yang at once chipped in and took the globe with all the blank-faced nonchalance of a chameleon tongue-swatting a fat fly. The coffin soared twenty-five feet, the suckers let go, it

dropped on the back of the fifty tonner, crashed thence to the floor with a rattle of busted internal works and lay motionless. The globe, which was lighter, went up fighting madly in the sucker-grasp of Kli Yang, then was flung on top of another globe. The flung one went dead. The struck one suffered some sort of injury to its steering circuits and proceeded to race round and round in a tight circle.

Looking longingly at the biggest monstrosity which continued to sit unmoving beneath us with all the indifference of a dumped flivver, Kli Yang remarked, "This is how we won the fight in the ship. We sat on the ceilings where they couldn't get at us. We picked them up, dropped them and left the rest to nature. They can't climb. Neither could they get into the Marathon a machine big enough to reach us.

With one saucer eye on me and Jay, he rolled the other downward for another look at the foe. This independent swivelling of Martian eyes always did give me the creeps and always will. To Sug Farn, he added, as if it were a logical afterthought on the same subject, "Kli Morg ought to have sacrificed his bishop."

"Yes, I had just reached that solution," agreed Sug Farn using a globe to crack the pate of a giraffe. "Morg tends to err on the side of economy in his games. That makes him somewhat slow to see that the loss of a bishop now is well worth the gain of two rooks ten moves later. "He sighed, Said, "Watch this!" made a swift snatch at a gesticulating object that seemed to be a mass of weird tools, got it by a big knobbed projection on its front, hurled it against the base of Kli Yang's wall.

Whoom! Heat bathed my legs as the pinnacle blew free and drummed into the sky. That left eleven of us on the roof plus the double-minded Martians amusing themselves by converting our prison into a junk-yard. Turning, I saw the pinnacle zooming northward on a stream of thunder and fire.

"They'll be back for us shortly-if we're still here." Jay Score's brilliant optics studied the Martians and the metal horde below. "Kli is wrong in suggesting that they have no climbers. How did they erect these buildings?"

"None of those can climb," I argued uneasily, pointing to the crowd down there.

"No-but I bet they have some kind of building machines stowed away, some kind of mechanical steeplejack. Ten to one they will haul them out as soon as they get over the confusion we've caused by defying their rules of war." He indicated surrounding streets in which no great excitement was yet evident. "It is taking a long time to sink in. I doubt whether a prisoner has ever broken free within living memory, if they have memories. Temporarily they are stumped by a situation they can hardly comprehend."

"Yes, we certainly are dealing with a totally different kind of mentality," I agreed. "It looks as if they're too conditioned to meet the abnormal and cope with it promptly."

I didn't mention it because Jay was too much of a definite personality, but I felt that he had some advantage over the rest of us in being able to look at things from the viewpoint of our mechanical opponents.

Kli Yang crawled up through the hole, followed by Sug Farn. The latter stared around, settled himself in the dent made by the pinnacle, wrapped himself up in his own tentacles and went to sleep. From him came high, soft and long-drawn whistles.

"Slumbering!" complained Kli Yang. "He cannot do anything without grabbing himself a sleep on the strength of it." Keeping one disgusted eye fixed on the snoring Martian, he swivelled the other toward Steve Gregory. What with his off-centre eyes and Steve's jiggling eyebrows, I began to wonder what hidden talents I might possess. "I suppose," said Kli Yang, gloomily, "it didn't occur to anyone in the pinnacle to leave a chess-board behind? "

“No, it didn’t,” Steve admitted, secretly thankful for the omission.

“It wouldn’t,” grumbled Kli Yang. Edging away from us, he dug out a tiny bottle of hooloo scent, sniffed at it pointedly. I suppose the twelve pounds pressure was beginning to get him down. I never did believe those indecent Martian descriptions of the human odour.

“How did you know which building we were in?” Jay Score inquired.

“We came drumming over,” Kli Yang told him, “with poor hope of finding you in this jumble of edifices. We circled around several times and were much surprised that the mob of things in the streets took not the slightest notice of us. Eventually we saw that line of parked vehicles with Brennand and Wilson standing on top of one signalling frantically. So we picked them up and landed on this, the nearest roof. Our drop was slightly clumsy because the pinnace is hard to handle with controls made for human limbs.”

“Brennand and Wilson are safe then?” I put in.

“Yes. Kli Dreen yanked them into the boat. They said they’d got out of their vehicle through the hole in its floor instead of the door, after which they were completely ignored. They were amazed by the way in which they’d been left alone and they couldn’t understand it”

Glancing at me, Jay said, “See-escapees! The abnormal factor! Nobody knew what to do about them. They were in blatant denial of local ethics, a problem that required time to solve solely because new and previously unknown.” He strolled to the edge of the roof, his crepe-rubber soles carrying his weight silently on the smooth surface. Another roof adjoined ours, but on a lower level. He stared down at it, his eyes aglow.

“Those screams came from somewhere under there. Come on, let’s see whether we can tear up a corner and have a look at what’s beneath.”

He dropped four feet onto the lower roof, followed by Armstrong, me and the others. Together we heaved and strained at a lapping metal corner. It gave way, coming up with unexpected ease. That metal was darned peculiar stuff, fairly hard, impervious to heat, yet bendable along the line of a hidden grain. No wonder the Martians had been able to rip a hole in the roof.

Peering through the gap, we found a long, narrow room that might have been either a laboratory or an operating theatre. Apparatus of all kinds littered it, including radiant lamps, sterilising chests, trays of peculiar instruments, wheeled tables, and an assortment of junk we couldn’t recognise.

Half a dozen highly polished and superbly finished machines were busy in this room, their shiny, unemotional lenses intent on their tasks. They had dexterous digits. What they were doing gave me the willies.

Two lobster-things were spread all over the room, part of one on a near table, two heads on another, a mass of innards on a third. Whether they had been the same pair with which we had talked or whether they were two others, it was impossible to tell. The machines were fooling around with the bits, putting sections under odd-looking microscopes, sticking pieces into various kinds of apparatus.

The lobsters had nothing recognisable as blood but their mutilated parts exuded an oily, colourless juice. All the same, there were significant daubs of crimson on one of the unoccupied tables, spots of crimson on the floor, spatters of crimson on a couple of the mechanical vivisectionists. In a wire basket, carelessly tossed aside, lay a pair of human hands. The left one, white and flaccid, still bore a gold signet ring. It had belonged to Haines!

Armstrong cursed violently and said, “God, what wouldn’t I give to be able to blow this place to shreds.”

“There’s nothing we can do-yet,” commented Jay Score not visibly moved. “We’re too late to save anyone.” He eyed the next roof which lay on the same level and about twenty-five feet away.

Like the outpiece on which we were standing, it projected from a bigger and higher building surmounted by a tall radio mast. Twin antennae ran from this mast to another on a matching edifice a hundred yards off. "I think I can jump that gap," Jay murmured.

"Now take it easy," advised Armstrong, looking over the edge at the big drop under that twenty-five foot chasm. "Wait until the pinnacle comes back. If you try a leap of this description and fail to make it by a couple of inches, you'll go down fast and far. You'll be converted into a thousand souvenirs scattered over the street."

Returning to the hole in our roof, Jay glanced down through it. "They are still waiting," he reported, "but they won't wait for ever. They're likely to go into action before long." He came back, the tattered rags of his uniform flapping around his great stallite legs. "So I'd better have a little action on my own account"

Before any of us could make a move to prevent him, he'd measured his pace and started. There was no stopping him once he was on his way : his solid and powerful three-hundred or more pounds made too much mass for mere human muscles to oppose. Kli Yang, perhaps, might have done it, but he didn't try.

With a superswift and well-timed run, Jay shot off the rim of our roof, arced over the intervening street, landed with a good yard to spare. A second and easier jump carried him to the higher level. Reaching the lattice-mast, he went up it like a monkey and tore away its antenna. Then he returned; the same spectacular leap performed with the same margin.

"Some day," suggested Kli Yang, comfortingly, "you will get yourself electrocuted-if you don't first break your neck." He gestured to the street. "It may be coincidence or it may not, but some of those machines have quit moving."

It was true. Amid the hurly-burly below a number of automatons had become lifeless as statues. They were all of the same kind. Other types were unaffected and jostled around as of yore. Coffins, globes, wormlike things and large, lumbering mock-bulldozers went about their business as though nothing had occurred, but the few specimens of this one particular type-an egg-bodied, spindle-legged device-posed like ones petrified in their tracks.

"I'd say they have radio-animation," ventured Jay. "Each kind has its own waveband and its own station from which it draws power." He pointed to other masts sticking up all over the city. "If we could put those out of action, I think we'd stiffen the lot into temporary immobility." "Why temporary?" I asked. "To deprive them of power would be rather permanent, wouldn't it?"

"Not necessarily. There's such a large variety of machines designed for every imaginable function that ten to one they've also got an independently-powered radio repair squad which would come to life the moment everyone else went dead."

Someone interjected, "If their radio mechanics look anything like an ambling lighthouse, there's one on his way here already." He jerked an indicative thumb northward.

We looked that way. The object coming down the north road was fantastic in the extreme. It consisted of a long metal platform running on-huge wheels ten to twelve feet in diameter. From the centre of the platform rose a gradually tapering tubular body terminating in a many-lensed, many-armed top piece more than sixty feet above ground level. The thing seemed taller than a fire-tower, dominating the street and some of the buildings.

"Clap hands-here comes Charlie!" said the gentleman who owned the ancient pistol. He gripped the out-of-date weapon with much determination. Compared with the oncoming colossus, the pistol was absurd. One might as well hope to bring down a rogue elephant with spit-balls.

"An automatic erector, I think." Jay watched it coolly, calmly. "Probably it has been summoned to pick us off."

The little gang of humans seemed damnably unconcerned about the matter. Maybe they were trying to conceal feelings like those bubbling in my own insides. As the tremendous menace rumbled slowly and inevitably nearer, my stomach shrank to a small, hard ball.

Down in the street the mechanical horde still went to and fro, while beneath the hole in the roof waited another hungry pack. Jay might be able to get away by means of his mighty leaps from rooftop to rooftop, but the rest of us could do nothing but wait like steers in a slaughterhouse.

Then a dot appeared in the sky and a high-pitched whine told us that the pinnacle was coming back. A swift little bullet, it dived toward us at full pelt. As nearly as I could judge it was likely to reach our precarious perch slightly ahead of the threatening tower-contraption, but I doubted whether it could land, open its airlock, take us aboard and blow free before trouble started. Our pulses working overtime, we watched the swift onrush of the pinnacle, the weighty forward trundle of the super-sized foe, and anxiously compared the progress of both.

Just as I'd decided that half of us might make it at the expense of the other half, those in the pinnacle saw the advancing tower. The vessel made no attempt to land. Describing a tight half-turn that rocked it laterally, it shot over us with a screaming rush of air, cut across the head of the tower now a mere fifty yards away. A midget atomic bomb must have dropped, though I didn't see it go down.

"Drop!" rasped Jay Score, urgently.

We flopped on our faces. Something whooped sky-high, our building swayed, a rare assortment of hardware fountained up from the street. For a few seconds there was an eerie silence broken only by the composite clankings of survivors of the metal population and the receding howl of the pinnacle. Then came a great crash as the towerlike mechanism fell headlong. The building shuddered again.

I clambered to my feet. The tower reposed full length in the street, its platform wrecked, its long, tubular body twisted and distorted, its lensed and many-armed head battered out of recognition and devoid of animation. The fallen giant had put an end to a dozen smaller machines with its collapse.

"Damme," chirruped Sug Farn, violently awakened. "What's all the row about? Are they at it again?" He stretched his tentacles, yawned.

"Get out of that dent," ordered Kli Yang, looking at him with disfavour. "Make room for the pinnacle."

Without haste and with poor grace, Sug Farn moved over to a corner of the roof where we formed a tiny, hopeful group. Zooming round in a shallow sweep, the pinnacle came in, settled down, landed. Under its weight, the dent in the roof became slightly deeper, more pronounced. But for immense supports beneath the roof, and the expertness of the vessel's landing, the little ship might have burst clean through the plates and thrown the lot of us into the enemy's power.

Thankfully we piled into the boat. The skipper wasn't aboard and neither was Brennand. Second Navigator Quirk held the controls and had a crew of five Terrestrials and one Martian, the minimum for a vessel of this size. The Martian was Kli Dreen. He didn't say a word to his snaky-armed fellows as they squirmed through the lock, merely stared at them and sniffed.

"I will bet twelve interplanetary dollars," Kli Yang told him, acidly, "that your underworked brain never thought of bringing our low-pressure helmets so that we could find relief from this infernal stink."

"Hear him!" appealed Kli Dreen, swivelling one eye toward me. "He explores the universe and then complains about a little pressure." The eye rolled back to Kli Yang as he added triumphantly, "Kli Morg would have won if he hadn't insisted on saving his bishop."

“Ha-ha!” Kli Yang laughed with artificial violence. He tried to wink knowingly at Sug Farn, and failed. The Martians frequently tried to imitate the Terrestrial habit of significantly closing one eye; they kept on trying despite the dismal fact that it can’t be done without eyelids. “A week late in seeing the solution, as usual!”

I found young Wilson standing by the forward observation port, near Pilot Quirk. The camera lay ready in his hands and he fairly drooled. Two more cameras sat in holding-straps on the wall, one of them an instrument with a lens the size of a saucer.

“Oh, sarge,” he yammered at me. “Shots, shots, shots-dozens of them.” His face was magenta with professional glory. “And I got that tower-thing the moment we bopped it. Watch me get these two as well.”

Peering over his shoulder I had a look through the port. Sure enough two more of the lofty erections were coming down the street, swaying like drunken sailors as they progressed. Back of me I could hear our airlock door being wound home.

Wilson’s camera went click-click. The pinnacle stirred, swept away from the roof, boosted speed under Quirk’s expert hands. No Martian could handle a boat with quite the same touch as a well-trained Terrestrial.

I went in search of Jay Score, found him prone by the little bomb hatch in the belly. He was holding a banger and released it just as I got there. Putting my face to the nearest port, I saw the building adjoining our former prison bulge at the walls and throw its roof at the clouds. The inside must have been a shambles.

“So much for their operating-theatre,” growled Jay. His eyes were like coals. “That one took them. apart for a change!”

I could sympathise with his feelings but, darn it, a robot isn’t supposed to experience so human an emotion as a thirst for revenge. Still, nobody cared to show surprise at his rare moments of unrobotic sentiment. By all the laws he wasn’t supposed to have any more feelings than a dummy-but the fact remained that he did have them, in a cold, phlegmatic sort of way.

“McNulty won’t like that,” I pointed out. “He’ll say that despite our losses the Terrestrial authorities will call it unnecessary destruction. He’ll let his conscience nag him all the way home.”

“Of course,” agreed Jay, with suspicious alacrity. “I did not think of that. What a pity!” His voice hadn’t altered its inflection in the slightest degree while his face, of course, remained completely without expression. His thoughts were as easy to read as those of a stone joss.

He went forward to see Quirk. Soon afterwards we made a series of swoops as steadily we drummed northward. Each time the boat ducked down there came a resounding twang from outside, so I had another go at the port, found we were busting a few antennae on our route. I didn’t need extra-sensory perception to know that Jay had a hand in that performance, whether McNulty approved or not.

Quickly the great metropolis rolled away beneath us, its roads dotted with hurrying machines plus a good number that were stalled, unmoving. Back in the distance I could just make out the pair of towers which by now had reached our recent sanctuary. One track minds; they had been ordered to do a job and were still trying to obey a full minute after we’d gone.

That city covered twenty square miles and all of it metal. I’ve never seen so much metal in one place, nor think I’ll ever do so again.

Out here in the suburbs the egg-bodied machines remained in sweet repose along with three other kinds, and I could see various individuals hors-de-combat on the wide arterial roads running north and south.

Whang! went another antenna, then we soared to twenty thousand feet. On the southern horizon a second city now revealed faint outlines of high buildings and tall masts.

Like a beautiful golden spindle the Marathon lay on the black and crimson surface. Most of the crew were busy around her stern. Diving to her starboard side, the pinnacle landed and we poured out. It wasn't until that moment I remembered that my belly had been empty for hours.

We heard the other part of the story over a quick and more than welcome meal. It appeared that the Martians had coped with all attacks until the globes and coffins withdrew. These had posted themselves at short distance from the ship and waited for nobody knew what; perhaps for the Martians to come out and be flattened in the open or, more probably, for the arrival of some other kind of machine better able to deal with them.

The Martians had seized this opportunity to blow free in the pinnacle and had seen their besiegers swarm into the abandoned vessel the moment they left. But except for wrecked specimens lying around, the hostile horde had gone by the time we returned.

"You know," pondered Jay Score, "it looks rather as if mere motion is their definition of sentient life. It moves, therefore it lives. The Marathon has no animation of its own, so they considered it as being no menace in itself. They were after the crew. When the crew were all gone, they bothered no more about the ship." His eyes examined us speculatively. "Nobody's thought of trying it, but it's possible that if you're cornered and stand perfectly motionless, they might leave you alone. Yes, they might at that! But if you move, they're after you forthwith!"

"I wouldn't care to try that no-motion stunt," said a voice, dryly. "Give me my feet every time. And, mister, let 'em be fast feet!"

"Wonder if they'll attack again, before we've completed repairs," I ventured.

There's no knowing. In my opinion, they've a most curious mentality, if you can call it that," Jay went on. "They accept the familiar, are instinctively and immediately hostile towards the unfamiliar. The vessel was assaulted solely because it was an unknown interloper. By this time it's probably recorded in their communal mind as a known wreck of no particular consequence. It won't be until some passing machine reports unrecorded activity here that the communal mind may connect it with our escape, ponder what should be done about it, then order that it be done."

He glanced through a port toward dusty hills half shrouding the setting sun. "We'd better move fast"

Beating it outside we lent a hand at the tough job of resocketing the stern tubes. It was one heck of a task, using an inadequate derrick and manhandling the great pipes into position. Meanwhile, the Martians repaired the torn stern, their welding machines flashing brilliant blue. Engineers went over the combustion-chambers, checking efficiency. Three more made good the damage done in the nearby airlock, mostly by the pom-pom.

Quirk took the pinnacle over to the far road while we were engaged in these tasks. The skipper didn't want him to risk it, but he hung high in the clouds until the road was temporarily free of traffic, shot down and found the missing lifeboat. Three of his crew brought it back together with the bodies of Haines' two companions.

As far as we could tell from the available evidence, the lifeboat had landed openly and in friendly fashion with Haines unaware that a waiting Pullman-thing had blanked out his radio channel. Haines had been captured. The other two had gone down fighting and been left motionless. We buried them in the evening along with Chief Andrews and the others.

Long after dark the blue flashes of Martian welders cut through the night and steady hammerings sounded in various parts of the vessel. We were doing plenty to advertise ourselves and no doubt about it, but risks have to be taken.

All this time McNulty alternated between ill-concealed gloominess and high spirits. I reckon the former was due to anticipation of another attack before we had finished. The latter might have been because we were making ready to blow free, or perhaps because we'd gained a cargo of astonishing specimens in the shape of three wrecked globes and two smashed coffins. Our attackers had taken away all the remaining junk or, to put it another way, had removed the rest of their wounded from the battlefield.

At two o'clock the following afternoon the tedious task was finished with a few loud hurrahs and a few more sulphurous versions of the same. We blasted off. Down in the cargo-hold the government experts gloated over our load. Soaring miles above the scene of recent troubles, we reached the second city in the south, touched ground near its outskirts.

"Here we should be a new factor." remarked Jay Score.

"Let's see how they take it."

I timed it by my watch. The attack came in exactly thirty-seven minutes.

The local technique was different. First of all the reporters came along, carefully inspected us with many skitterings around then hastened back to the city. Next, a dozen Pullman-sized gadgets waddled up, aimed their discs at us and bathed the entire vessel in their rays. Steve Gregory immediately shot out of his room complaining that his radio had gone haywire. He illustrated the trouble by violently oscillating his brows.

Outside, more forces joined the futile disc-manipulators. Things with enormous hands, things with a multitude of built-in tools, all made for our stern. The inevitable array of coffins and globes scouted warily around.

Two giraffes turned up and unknowingly posed for young Wilson. By now the skipper decided that we had waited long enough and had better not give the opposition any time to meddle with the stern-pipes. With a terrific whoosh! that misted the landscape we shot skyward, leaving them flustered and defeated.

Twenty minutes afterward we plunked down within easy reach of a wide but little used road and waited for something to come along on its ownsome. The first arrival proved to be a galloping coffin with eight steadily thumping legs, four folded arms, two tentacles in front, its idiotic copper curl unwound and sticking straight up like a solitary hair. Half a dozen of us barred its way, our ray guns aimed more as a gesture than anything else. They weren't much of a threat to these metal things, as we knew only too well.

It was all Jay's idea to which McNulty had consented with much reluctance. The skipper agreed to the ambush only on condition that we arranged it near enough to be covered by one of the Marathon's pom-poms. I could see the fast-firing weapon's eight barrels peering from the nearest lock as the coffin slowed its pace, then stopped.

Six more of the crew got into the road behind our victim, another four covered the side opposite the Marathon. The coffin looked us over, its lenses hard, shiny and without expression, its copper antenna quivering questioningly. I had a strange notion that somehow its horde already knew about its predicament and were summoning the riot squad. I also knew that if it chose to charge blindly ahead, we could do nothing to stop it. That metal mass could go through our ranks like a knife through cheese.

For a few breathless moments the alien entity stared at us and we stared back. Then it lumbered around preparatory to beating a retreat, found itself cut off, turned to face its original direction. We looked at each other until the silence and the tension became unbearable. Still the thing did not stir a limb.

“As I thought, just a metal hick,” said Jay, blandly ignoring the fact that he wasn’t skin and bone himself. Boldly he walked to within three or four feet of the coffin, gestured toward the Marathon, beckoned and walked away.

A beckon is unmistakable in any language, on any world. I certainly didn’t expect that grotesque thing to obey the gesture. But, so help me, it did!

With his broad back turned to the coffin, Jay marched toward the ship and the coffin came to life and followed him with the slow, meek gait of a dejected horse. That was the only time I’ve seen the spanner-holder gape and let go his tool.

Meeting a pop-eyed McNulty at the lock, Jay said, “See, it has crazy ethics. It believes it is my prisoner and therefore must face its fate.” Leading it inside, he conducted it to the hold, parked it in a corner where it stood obediently, without overt move. “Chances are it will become lifeless the moment we get beyond the sphere of power-radiation from which it draws its vim. We had better let Steve play with it: maybe he’ll be able to restore its animation with some sort of portable power-pack.”

“Humph!” said McNulty, staring owlshly at the coffin.

He turned to Blaine. “Tell Steve to come down here.”

This surrender of a potentially tough specimen occupied our minds as we fastened the locks and prepared to take off for keeps. Apparently the things would give battle in squads but not as individuals. One could not look into that coffin’s mind-if it had a mind other than its share of the communal consciousness-but we wondered whether, like the lobsters, it was now fated to meet death at the hands of its fellows if ever it returned.

Their way of looking at things was crazy and craziest of all was their intolerance of initiative such as we possessed. Or was it really so lunatic by comparison with the ethics of humans? Maybe it all depends on what is meant by ‘human’. I’m no profound scholar, no expert in history, but I seemed to recall a long-gone war far, far back in the dark ages, when the Japanese refused to admit they had any men missing and callously declared them dead.

But it wasn’t long before we learned that corporate mentalities have advantages as well as disadvantages. We blew free from the black and crimson ground, shot skyward for the last time on this cockeyed world, burst through the clouds and promptly encountered four long, black rocketships. They were vessels such as we’d seen previously and they squirted along in perfect line.

There was no question of the leader spotting us and issuing orders to the others. They saw us simultaneously, reacted simultaneously, moving in remarkable and impressive unison. It made me think of a major scientific mystery, namely, that of how a flock of birds often alter course, change formation, wheel, form and turn like creatures governed by one mutually shared mind. These ships duplicated the bird trick. They switched course together, cut into our path in echelon formation, bathed us in the same useless rays that had failed to affect us before but again got Steve Gregory mad. I had never witnessed such perfect teamwork.

It did them no good, did us no harm. Had their rays functioned as they were expected to do we’d soon have been a smoking heap on the ground beneath. Diving through the aura, we zoomed on toward free space. They followed, changing to line-abreast with mathematical precision, nosing upward at identical angles as though one man were handling all four by remote control. Together they blew their auxiliaries, spurted along our trail, narrowed the margin between us.

“Pretty fast,” commented Jay. “About as fast as we are when running in normal drive. I’d certainly like to have a look at their engines and pilots.”

“I’ve no desire to see them,” grunted McNulty. “I’ve had enough of them for one trip:’ He bawled into the engine-room phone, the Marathon heeled over, plunged sickeningly, shot upward again. Glassware broke in the galley and somebody offered loud and vulgar opinions about ships that dipped and captains who made them dip. The pursuing quartet heeled, plunged and rose behind us in unison.

Greenish rays reached out for us once more, flickered without avail, then four streaks of fire flashed by on one side. They even missed by precisely the same margin!

“That’s enough to be going on with,” declared McNulty, not inclined to tempt fate. He gave the Marathon an S-turn, said curtly, “Straps!”

We’d barely time to jump into harness before he threw her in Flettner drive. I couldn’t see them because you can’t use the observation-ports while prostrate, but the quartet behind must have shrunk to vague dots in the space of one heartbeat. At uncatchable velocity we went out of that solar system, skimming by the water-world of Varga so fast that nobody saw it. That lump of cosmic plasma and its amphibious inhabitants would have to wait until some other trip.

All the way home the Martians kept to the starboard lock enjoying its three pounds pressure and their everlasting chess. Jay spent much of his time down in the cargo hold along with Steve—presumably nursing the dumb coffin—but the Martians did chivy him into having seventeen games of which he won three. They gloated and published the figures all over the ship.

Wilson remained in his cabin brooding. I wasn’t foolish enough to ask any questions or try to comfort him. The clumsy warriors of Mechanistria had converted his first few plates to splinters while cavorting around the ship, but his subsequent shots were large in number and beautiful in execution. He was determined to worry them safely home.

Two cruisers met us outside Terrestrial atmosphere, escorted us down. The old, familiar browns, blues and greens of Earth made the loveliest sight I’ve seen, though the Martians still preferred dirty pink and said so. They were arguing with some heat over a lost pawn when we landed with the whole world watching and listening via the international network.

McNulty made the speech expected of him. “We have had a somewhat difficult time ... unquestioning hostility that is much to be deplored ... this uncomfortable episode:’ And so on and so on.

Flettner was duly exhibited in front of us, blushed like a kid at McNulty’s frequent references to the efficiency of the ship in which, for once, he didn’t resort to understatement.

Back of the crowd of greeters I saw old Knud Johannsen, the robot master, struggling to get through and anxiously looking for Jay. Sometimes I wonder whether I have precognition for—although I didn’t know what was coming—the sight of that white-haired, old wizard wanting to meet his last and greatest creation made me think of a fond father seeking his son.

The rah-rahs ended and we began to unload. Cans of coppery water, flasks of compressed alien air, hundreds of samples of earths and metals were lugged out. We produced the busted automatons and the government experts rushed away with them as if they were transferring the jewels of Asia. Wilson departed even faster, bearing his plates and several cans of film.

Old Knud extracted himself from the onlooking mob, said to me, “Hello, sergeant—where’s Jay?” He had no hat and his silvery locks gleamed in the sun.

Jay emerged from the lock at that moment. His shining eyes found the white-haired figure waiting for him. You know, robots can’t make wisecracks, they just can’t—and Jay had never made one in his existence, leastways, not a recognisable one. But this time he made one of the best I’ve ever heard and it brought a slight lump into my sentimental gullet.

Taking Knud's thin, veined hand in his huge metal paw, he said, "Hello-Dad!" I couldn't see Knud's fond face, but I heard Jay add, "I've brought you an interesting souvenir."

He gestured toward the lock from which came a loud clanking and a whiff of pungent oil. The captive coffin emerged, its copper curl coiled up and attached by a wire to a black box on its back. Steve Gregory walked behind it, his eyebrows lopsided with gratification.

Arm in arm, Jay and Knud strolled away, the alien automaton following close behind, Steve trailing in the rear. I lost sight of them when two special-delivery toughies started to haul up the gangway an enormous vase of horrible shape and revolting colours.

Reaching the top, one of them produced a paper, surveyed it with distaste and informed, "This super-gobboon is for a Snake-arms named Kli Morg."

"I'll go tell him." As a precautionary afterthought, I said, "Meanwhile, you'd better return it to ground-level-the skipper won't have it on board."

They broke it on the way down.