

MESMERICA

I had counted on twelve well-earned months amid the soothingly familiar surroundings of Earth, but this was another simple sum that added up wrong. Some infernal nosey-poke in an observatory saw fit to convince the powers-that-be that possible pay-dirt existed in the region of Cassiopeia. Whereupon a fist-full of telegrams went to all the tried and trusted suckers requesting the pleasure of their heart's blood.

Mine came at three o'clock in a warm, mellow afternoon when I was busily occupied rocking on the verandah. Let me tell you that's no sort of time or place in which to view with approval an invitation to throw away one's arms and legs. I felt like telling the bearer where to put his message except that it wasn't his fault. So I read it and tore it up and said to hell with it and went on rocking with my eyes closed. Next day I packed and departed east to swallow the bait solely because I lacked the moral courage to refuse it. I hadn't enough guts to be a coward.

So that's why for the umpteenth time I stood by a port moodily watching a new world swell into gigantic view. Despite my lack of enthusiasm the sight became so absorbing that I almost forgot to jump into harness before the *Marathon* played its Flettner trick preparatory to landing. As it was, I made it in the nick of time. Came the usual feeling of being turned inside-out and we were there.

My proper post was in the armoury, and there I stayed while in the main cabin they chose the names of those whose backsides were to be offered for any alien kicks that might be coming. After previous experiences there wasn't quite the same bumptious enthusiasm for hitting the dirt without care, permission or weapons. Leastways, nobody beat McNulty to the mark by crawling out through the tubes this time.

The nearest observation-port framed a mass of vegetable growths of every imaginable description. They had one uncommon feature that struck me immediately, namely, that nothing was tangled around anything else. Tall or short, slender or wide-spreading, each growth stood in its own appropriate plot of ground and let a thin spray of sunlight reach the earth between its neighbours and itself. A jungle that wasn't a jungle. One could stroll through it without trouble so far as obstacles to one's feet were concerned, though there might well be other and more effective forms of opposition.

Green was the predominant colour with here and there an odd patch of yellow or brown. The chlorophyll reaction seems common to vegetation in most parts of the cosmos where quality of solar radiation favours it. The sun's rays showed golden where they struck through gaps between growths. This world's primary closely resembled Old Sol

but was a trifle hotter because a little nearer.

I felt a bit uneasy as I studied the scene outside. This strange live-and-let-live orderliness of plant-life registered with an eerie touch of artificiality. I could distinguish no organised regularity among the growths themselves, no neat patches of one type or tidy rows of another. Nevertheless I had a strong impression that they had been cultivated by some thing or things with ideas radically different from our own. It looked rather as though an alien agriculturalist had mooched around with a sack of widely assorted seeds, setting them at random just as his hand found them, but carefully spacing them according to each one's individual need. Like a man planting an oak twenty feet from a cabbage.

Brennand came along, remarked, "There appears to be a deceitful law governing other worlds, to wit: that they look completely innocent while making ready to bite your nut off."

"You think this one is preparing some mayhem?"

"I don't know. But I'll lay no bets on it being a Garden of Eden."

"Would you bet on it being a garden of some sort?"
"What d'you mean?" He eyed me curiously.

I pointed through the port. "Where's the usual battle for living-space?"

He had a look outside. "That's an easy one. The ground is poor hereabouts. It lacks fertility. So growth is sparse."

"How's that for being sparse?" I inquired, indicating a hairy, cactus-like object half the size of the *Marathon*.

"The stuff grows too haphazardly, anyway," he evaded.

"You don't plant a carrot next to a gooseberry bush."
"Somebody else might."

"Why?"

"Oh, heck!" I said, wearily. "Ask a simpler one. Ask me why I'm here when I could be taking it happily and comfortably at home."

"I know the answer to that," he gave back. "There's no morning mail on the *Marathon*."

"So what?"

"Mail contains bills, threatening letters, even irate missives from plump blondes asking what you're going to do about it."

"Hah!" I eyed him carefully. "Judging others by yourself, eh? I've often wondered why you shoot away from Earth like a guy out of a cold bath. So you're being hunted?"

"We are not talking about me," he pointed out. "We are discussing you and your possible motivations. Mine are simple - I like heavy money. These trips provide it"

A nice retort for that one lay ready on my tongue but didn't get voiced. Two engineers named Ambrose and McFarlane arrived at the armoury and demanded their stuff."

"Where are the others?" I inquired, handing out needlers; first-aid packs, emergency rations and so forth.

"There aren't any others."

"Mean to say McNulty is sending out only the pair of you?"

"That's right. Two can handle a lifeboat."

"The old boy is cautious," Brennand commented." He becomes jumpier every trip.

"You fellows want spacesuits?"

"No." Ambrose nodded toward the port. "It's thirteen pounds and has a faint fragrance of old goat, but it's healthy."

"So that's what I've been smelling all along." I jerked a suitably contemptuous thumb toward Brennand. "I thought it was him."

"You thought it was *he*," said Brennand. "Where's your grammar? "

McFarlane, a thin, wiry, ginger-haired individual, strapped on his needler, flexed his arms, invited, "In case I don't come back does anyone want to kiss me goodbye?" Then he made a face, said, "Oh, well ---" and stamped out.

A couple of minutes later the lifeboat blew free, shot westward and hammered into the distance. I could hear the faraway noise of it for quite a time after it had gone from sight.

Mooching along to see Steve Gregory, I found him squatting in his cubby-hole and sucking his teeth.

"Anything doing, Steve?"

He ran a dismal eye over his instruments. "All I get is a sizzle-pop." Then he gestured toward a thick book lying

near his right hand. " According to this Radio Koran it is the characteristic discharge of a sun called Zem 27, presumably the one burning outside."

"Nothing else?"

"Nary a thing:" Bending forward, he flipped a switch, spoke toward a box. "Speak up, lifeboat we want to hear from you."

A squeaky voice I couldn't recognise as either Ambrose's or McFarlane's answered, "Forty-four west and eight thousand up."

"See anything?"

"Nothing remarkable."

"Okay. Listening out." He leaned back. "I was under the delusion that my last trip was my last trip. I was all set to take it easy and bake my corns on the stove."

"Same here," I said. Maybe there's a curse on me. I oughtn't have grabbed that guppy's opal."

"What guppy's opal? " He perked up, raised his eyebrows.

"Never mind. I've a dirty deed contaminating my past."

"Who hasn't? " he retorted. "Back in the good old days on Venus I traded my birth certificate for a ---"

Something dinged amid his dials and meters. He flipped a switch.

A voice said a bit louder than before, "Lifeboat here. Seventy west and four thousand up. Circling over a large lake. There's what looks like an encampment on the shore."

"Stand by a moment." Steve worked another switch, said to his mike, "Captain, I've got Ambrose on. He thinks he's found local life."

"Put him through to me," McNulty ordered.

Steve made the connection. We could hear ensuing conversation through the intercom.

"What is it, Ambrose?"

"A camp on the shore of a lake."

"Ah! Who or what is occupying it?"

"Nobody," said Ambrose.

"Nobody? You mean it's deserted?"

"Wouldn't go so far as to say that, but that's how it looks from up here. There are about a hundred small pyramidal huts arranged in four concentric circles. Can't see anything moving around between them." A pause, followed by; "How about us landing and taking a closer look, Captain?"

McNulty didn't like it. The long silence showed him to be mulling it over. Undoubtedly he was trying to think up a way of getting the suggested closer look without going closer to get it. I've never known a man so unwilling to place bets on anything but a one hundred per cent certainty. Finally his voice sounded with reduced volume as he spoke in an aside to someone else.

"They want to land. What d'you think of it?"

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," answered Jay Score's deep tones.

"Yes, I suppose so, but" Another pause, then he came louder over the intercom. "Look, Ambrose, is there room for the *Marathon* to sit in that place?"

"Not without burning ten acres of bush or flattening half the huts."

"Humph!" I'll tell you what : try zooming close over the roofs a couple of times. That ought to bring them out running."

Ambrose sighed and said; "Okay, Captain; we'll try it - but I don't think there's anyone in the place to be brought out" Silence for a long while before he came back with, "No soap."

"They didn't appear?"

"No. We almost brushed the roofs off and our air-blast shook the entire place. It's empty."

"Very well, then. Make your landing and see what you can discover but be mighty careful:" His tones drifted away again as he continued, "I tell you, Jay, that after this trip some other commander can"

Steve cut the switch, said, " He's got the same trouble as you and me. He's hankering for the Upsydaisy and the regular Venus-run. We were in a nice comfortable rut there."

"Somebody has to do the heroics," I said.

"I know, I know. But the glory ought to be shared around. It can come one way too often."

He scowled at his instruments and Ambrose's voice came

out of them dulled by a steady drumming noise.

"Easy does it, Mac. Watch that row to starboard. Yes, we'll just about make it. Brakes, quick! There!"

The drumming ceased. Then followed a long conversation too much off the mike to hear in full detail until their voices rose and they started shouting at each other. Seemed they were arguing about which one went out and which stayed with the boat. Seemed that McFarlane wanted to toss for it and Ambrose wanted to examine the coin he proposed to use.

Becoming slightly red in the face, Steve operated a stud that made loud dinging noises and succeeded in attracting the attention of the distant debaters.

"Now see here, you two cretins," he said without courtesy, "each of you pulls a hair from the other's scalp. The one who gets the longest goes out. The short one stays in."

That brought a long silence ended by the sound of an opening and closing airlock.

After a while, Steve snapped impatiently, "Well, who was it?"

"McFarlane," informed Ambrose surlily. He went away from his mike, leaving the channel open. For a time we could hear his boots clumping restlessly to and fro within the little boat. Probably he was absorbing an eyeful of the outside through various ports and enviously watching McFarlane strolling around enjoying the country.

After a bit he gave an annoyed grunt, muttered something indistinguishable. His heavy space boots tramped farther away. The airlock opened and we heard his distant voice bawl out of it.

"Well, what d'you want, Bighead?"

The reply from outside couldn't reach the mike, so we didn't know what McFarlane said. There sounded an extremely faint thump as of somebody jumping out the airlock and onto thick grass. Then all went quiet. The minutes crawled by, each one an age.

Steve started to fidget. Later on his eyebrows commenced oscillating. When his large ears also got the jittering jerks it was more than I could stand.

"Look," I said. "Let's not fall to pieces, shall we? Let's say something to Ambrose if it's only to swap naughty limericks."

Giving me the ugly eye he reached for his stud, dinged the far-off receiver a dozen times, listened vfor a response. Ambrose didn't reply. Neither did McFaTiane. The boat

remained as silent as the grave though a faint and steady hum showed that its transmitter was still active and holding the channel open.

Taking his mike, Steve hoarsed into it, "Lifeboat! Are you there, lifeboat? We're calling you! Answer us, lifeboat!"

Silence.

"Ambrose!" he howled into the mike. "AMBROSE! Are you there?"

No response.

"Maybe he's gone to pay a visit," I suggested uneasily.

"What for?" asked Steve, acting stupid.

"To trim his moustache or something. People pay visits, don't they? That's what the little room is for."

"Not at this time," he said.

"What the heck has that got to do with it? He goes by his bowels, not by his watch."

"He could pick a better time than this," he persisted. Then he wagged the eyebrows a bit and added, "Anyway, I'll give him another ten minutes."

At the end of that period he dinged and bawled and did everything he knew.

The lifeboat gave back its low hum and nothing more.

We had to tell McNulty, of course. He foamed and fumed and discussed it with Jay. They decided it couldn't yet be taken for granted that anything untoward had happened at the other end. Possibly Ambrose's curiosity had overcome his caution and he'd left the boat to look at some-thing his partner had found. Or maybe he'd had to go out to help haul aboard something that needed two men's strength to handle. But he ought to have said so first. He ought to have reported his intentions and the reasons for them before leaving. There would be harsh words about this omission when he returned.

Meanwhile we'd sit tight and listen out. We'd give them at least another hour before taking alarm. So I left Steve to sit and wait, went to the galley and gave myself a meditative meal. Young Wilson was there swilling coffee.

"How's the boat doing?" he inquired.

"That's the current mystery." I bolted a wad, filled a mug of black java.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning it has squatted in a village and shut up. Steve can't get a squeak out of it"

"A village? What sort of creatures are inhabiting it?"

"No sort. It's empty. So Ambrose and McFarlane have gone in and made it emptier."

"They've disappeared?"

"I wouldn't say that."

"You wouldn't be surprised, either," he suggested, giving me a leery look.

"No, I would not"

"Hey, hey!" He made a face at the wall. "Here we go again" Then he went on, "What's McNulty doing about it?"

"Nothing just yet"

"Heck, those two guys may be cooked and eaten while we hang around resting our fannies."

"Or maybe they're cooking and eating something worth having while we're trying to masticate this dog-food." I poked the rest of the wad away, finished the java, got up.

"See you in somebody's oven."

Spent most of the next hour busy in the armoury, then let the remainder of the work wait. I was too restless to concentrate on it because I had to know what was going on. So back I went to Steve's place.

"Any ---?"

"Sh-h-h!" He held a warning finger to his lips. "Not a sound up to now but it's just started coming through."

He turned up the volume. There came the characteristic crack of an airlock door closing. Then something like the clunk of boots shuffling around at the tail-end of the distant lifeboat. Steve put out a finger, prodded the stud. Back came the loud ding of the faraway receiver's call-bell.

It was followed immediately by a peculiar sound from the opposite end of the boat. A kind of hiss or spit. Gave me the eerie impression of something non-human startled by the ding. The boot sounds didn't repeat. No tramping forward to answer the summons, as we had expected. Just the sharp spit and silence.

Frowning, Steve dinged again. No answer. Yet somebody was in the boat, of that we had no doubt. He dinged half a dozen times in quick succession, making it urgent

and ifeful. He might as well have been trying to line up three lemons for all the good it did.

"What the blazes has come over them?" he demanded.

"Try some bad language," I offered. "That loudspeaker of theirs can be heard from nose to tail."

Taking the mike, he bellowed, "Hey!"

The response to that was a louder hiss like a railroad locomotive letting go a squirt of surplus steam, also a swift clatter of bootlike noises followed by the crash of the airlock door. Then nothing. Whatever had been in the boat had gone out, and hurriedly.

Steve gaped at me, his face a mixture of emotions. "What d'you think of that? "

"I don't like it"

"Neither do I" He stared doubtfully at his microphone. "Do you suppose they're acting up because they don't want to be ordered back just yet?"

"Could be," I admitted. "Nothing of which the human mind can conceive is impossible. So by a million to one chance they may have stumbled across a cosmic cocktail bar run by a pair of voluptuous brunettes. But I don't think so. That radio talks trouble to me."

"Me, too. I'm going to tell McNulty." Changing intercom lines, he got the captain, said, "Somebody's just been in that lifeboat and wouldn't answer."

"You're sure of that?"

"Positive, Captain. I could hear the movements as plain as the nose on my face."

"You couldn't put it more convincingly," said McNulty.

"It wasn't Ambrose or McFarlane?"

Steve hesitated, said, "If it was, they've gone deaf on us. They won't respond to the call-bell. And when I yelled, 'Hey!' they beat it"

"This is ominous," decided McNulty. "We had better move fast and ---" He ceased as the loudspeaker in our little cubby-hole suddenly squawked, "Hey!" Then he said in startled tones, "What was *that*?"

"The lifeboat" With his ears trying to go fourteen ways at once, Steve juggled with switches. "I'll put it through to you."

"Now look here, Ambrose," began McNulty, authoritatively pompous. "What's the game?"

"Now look here, Ambrose," sneered the lifeboat in peculiarly stilted tones. "What's the game?"

"This is Captain McNulty talking!" roared that worthy, his blood pressure beginning to rise.

"This is Captain McNulty talking," squealed the lifeboat in outrageous imitation.

McNulty breathed heavily, then inquired in a low, almost unhearable voice, " Steve, are you playing tricks with me?"

"No, sir;" said Steve, shocked at the notion. The other bellowed afresh. "Ambrose, I order you to return forthwith and by hokey ---!" He broke off. There was a pause while the lifeboat repeated this in high-pitched and penetrating mockery. Then a new voice took his place.

"Who's there? " asked Jay Score, calmly and self-possessed.

"Who's there?" inquired the lifeboat.

"Yimmish vank wozzeneck," said Jay, in sheer nonsense.

"Yimmish vank wozzeneck," echoed the lifeboat, as though one language were equally as good as another.

Jay said decisively, "Close the line, Steve. We'll send out the pinnace to look into this."

Steve closed the line, said to me, "I think Ambrose has bought himself a parrot"

"Or a cut throat." I slid a finger across my gullet, made a gurgling sound.

He didn't like it.

Eight of us went in the pinnace, all Terrestrials. A couple of the Martians were reluctantly willing to leave their chessboards but there was no reason to suppose we'd need their help and they'd take up too much room in the boat. Jay Score didn't join the party either, which was a pity in view of the peculiar circumstances. He'd have been useful in ways we had yet to realise.

Bannister did the piloting. The pinnace boomed away from the *Marathon's* side, went up to ten thousand feet. Clouds spread thin and high on this world, so that visibility remained pretty good in all directions. Looking through the port beside my seat I could see sparsely wooded landscape stretching for miles, with rivers and streams here and there and long, rolling hills in the distance. There didn't seem to be any outstanding evidence of intelligent life, leastways,

not around these parts.

Sitting next to me, young Wilson nursed a camera that was smothered with gadgets and had a greenish filter over its lens. He kept staring out the port on his side, then at the sun, and licking his lips. In front, alongside Bannister, a blue-jowled character named Veitch was talking to Steve through a larynx-mike.

The pinnacle hammered on for quite a while before it went into a wide starboard turn and lost height. Bannister and Veitch leaned forward scanning the lie of the land through their windshield. Soon we could see the cleared patch by the river, the concentric circles of huts and the lifeboat lying nearby. We went lower, still turning. It became evident that there wouldn't be room to land without bashing up something; the grounded lifeboat fitted neatly into the only available space.

Perforce we droned beyond clear sight of this layout, being unable to turn in a circle small enough to keep going round its edge. We lost a lot more height, came back, crossed the camp at no more than five hundred feet, saw Ambrose and McFarlane lounging by the boat and staring up at us. I could hardly believe it, they looked so casual. We flashed past them in about two seconds, with Wilson snapping his camera at them through the port.

I hadn't got a very good view of the pair on the ground, what with Wilson confiscating most of the seeing space, but I gained the impression that both were unharmed and perfectly at ease. Also that Ambrose was nursing something that looked like a basket of fruit: It annoyed me more than somewhat. I had the notion that the pair of them had wandered around pandering to their guts while panic hit the *Marathon* and brought the pinnacle out. Fat lot they cared so long as they could stuff their bellies. But they'd pay for it: McNulty would skin them alive in due time. We made another U-turn, came over in a second run. Bannister made menacing gestures at them from behind the windshield. McFarlane waved back airily, as though he were on a Sunday school outing. Wilson snapped him doing it.

Veitch was saying into his mike, "They're all right. The lifeboat must have developed a radio fault to account for the stuff you heard."

I don't know what the *Marathon* answered to that, but Veitch finished, "All right. We'll drop them a note and come straight back."

He scribbled on paper, attached it to a weighted message-streamer and slung it through the base-trap at the next run over. I saw its long ribbon go fluttering down twenty yards from the pair of beachcombers below. Then we thrummed beyond view and headed back to the mother ship.

Was on my way to the armoury when Steve spotted me from his cubby-hole and called me in. He surveyed me as if trying to decide whether I were drunk or sober.

After a bit, he said, "You sure those two bums are okay?"

"I saw them with my own eyes. Why?"

"Well ... well --- " He swallowed, gloomed at his meters and switches, shifted back to me. "Their boat could develop a fault. Nothing is perfect and that goes for radio apparatus as much as anything else."

"So what?"

"I've never heard of a defect that causes messages to be bounced back word for word as spoken."

"You have now!" I said. "There's always a first time."

"It's contrary to theory," he insisted.

"So's my Aunt Martha. She has ten toes."

"Everybody has," he said.

"Yes, but not two on one foot and eight on the other."

He scowled slightly and maintained, "I'm not interested in circus freaks. I'm telling you there can be no such thing as a fault producing echo-symptoms."

"Then how d'you explain it?"

"I can't" He let go a deep sigh. "That's just the hell of it. I heard what I heard and there's nothing wrong with my

ears and it wasn't a radio fault. I tell you, somebody was giving us the yah-boo and I don't think it funny."

"Ambrose wouldn't be so childish," I said

"No, he wouldn't," he agreed meaningfully.

"McFarlane is no juvenile delinquent, either."

"No, he isn't," he said in the same way.

"Then who else?"

"Yeah!" He eyed me peculiarly. "Who?"

"Oh, shut up - I don't believe in poltergeists."

With that I continued on my way, feeling rather unsettled but refusing to show it. Steve knew his stuff all right. None better. He was the boat's radio expert. And he was so

certain of himself about this matter.

So somebody had slung McNulty's words back in his teeth. It wasn't Ambrose. It wasn't McFarlane. It couldn't be anyone else. Yet none of us had imagined it. The more one thought of this phenomenon the more inexplicable it became. Yet nothing is completely inexplicable so far as alien planets are concerned.

Reassured by the pinnacle's report, McNulty relaxed sufficiently to let a few men exercise their legs outside. No more than a dozen, with strict orders to retain their needlers ready to hand and not to go more than half a mile from the ship. The lucky dozen were picked from a hat and did not include yours truly.

They came for their weapons. One of them was Jepson, the guy who'd gotten himself all gummed up last trip. I cracked, "What are you letting yourself in for this time?"

"Nothing if I can help it," he assured with some fervour. Molders, the big Swede; took a projector; remarked, "I'm keeping my distance from you, anyway. I've had enough of sticking together."

They went out. The sky showed they wouldn't have long to ramble around because the sun already was low and there wasn't much more than another hour to nightfall.

The first shades had drawn long and dark when McNulty got the willies again. Half a dozen of the liberty boys had returned of their own accord, having found nothing outside to detain them. The ship's siren sounded with a horrid moan, recalling the others. There was some excitement up at the bow end and I noticed the pom-pom crew checking one of their multi-barrelled weapons. Something was brewing sure enough and Steve was the man likeliest to know the cause. I went to see him.

"What's up now?"

"The pinnacle dropped a message to the lifeboat, didn't it?" he said.

"It did. I watched it go down."

"Well, they've taken no notice of it" He jerked a thumb at the nightshrouded observation port on his left. "It's gone sundown and they're still sitting tight. Neither are they responding to my radio calls. I've dinged until I'm sick of it. I've bawled at them until I'm hoarse. The lifeboat's generator is still running and the channel remains open, but Ambrose and McFarlane might be the other side of the cosmos for all I can tell."

"Can't understand it " I was frankly puzzled. "I saw

them myself, taking it easy outside their airlock. Nothing wrong with either of them. And the boat itself was undamaged."

"I don't care," he asserted stubbornly. "I told you before that there's something mighty fishy about this and I say so again."

There wasn't anything useful I could add, so I mooched off, lay in my bunk and tried to read but found I couldn't concentrate no matter how I tried. The feeling that we'd had a fast one pulled on us in some mysterious way grew stronger and stronger, I became jumpier the more I thought about it but for the life of me couldn't conjure up a satisfactory explanation.

Outside, darkness now was complete save for light from the stars faintly illuminating surrounding vegetation. I was still stewing the problem of the apparently mutinous pair with the lifeboat, trying to decide what could keep them there despite all orders to the contrary, when a knock sounded on the door of my cabin and Wilson came in.

The look on his face made me sit up quick. He had the appearance of one who has unwittingly shaken hands with a ghost.

"What's eating you?" I demanded. "Got the collywobbles or something? If so, don't you be sick over me!"

"I don't know what I've got" He sat on the edge of the desk, tried to compose himself but didn't succeed very well.

"I'm on my way to see McNulty about it. But first I'd like you to check up and assure me that I'm not nuts."

"Check up? on what?"

"On these." He tossed three half-plate photographs into my lap.

I gave them a cursory glance, noted that they were the pics he'd taken from the pinnacle. Considering the awkward circumstances in which they'd been made they'd turned out pretty good. He must have snapped at one-thousandth of a second or even less, and with his lens open wider than a Venusian guppy's mouth. No blurs attributable to the pinnacle's fast motion. Sharp and clear as though taken from a standstill.

"Nice work," I complimented. "You certainly know how to handle a camera."

He stared at me with a slight touch of incredulity, then said, How about taking a closer look. See if you can find the zipper on Ambrose's hug-me-tight."

Obediently I took a closer look. Then I shot headlong out of the bunk, switched on my powerful desk-light and had another gander beneath its revealing brilliance. My bowels turned over and went all wishy-washy. A long, thin icicle substituted itself for my spine.

There wasn't any Ambrose.
There wasn't any McFarlane.

Precisely where they had stood outside the lifeboat's airlock were two repulsive objects resembling tangled masses of thick, black, greasy rope.

"Well?" inquired Wilson, watching me.

I shoved the pics into his hands. "You'd better take these to bow cabin at the double. I'm going to lay out the needlers and stuff-they'll be wanted before long!" The general alarm sounded ten minutes later. I was expecting it and went forward on the run. We gathered in the main cabin, silent and full of anticipation. McNulty strutted in with Jay Score following right behind, huge and shiny-eyed.

McNulty said with a trace of bitterness, "We have made contact with this planet's highest life-form some hours ago but not realised it until now. They're hostile and they've gained the edge of us. The first loss is ours: We're already down by four men."

"Four?" I ejaculated involuntarily.

His eyes strayed to me a moment, went back over the others. "I permitted twelve to go out. Only ten have returned. Jepson and Painter have not answered the recall siren. Neither do Ambrose and McFarlane respond to my orders to return. It leaves me no choice but to regard those four as probable casualties." His voice hardened. "We must suffer no more!"

The men fidgeted a bit. By my side Kli Yang leaned to whisper to me and Brennand.

"He is counting the pieces without detailing the moves. How can one analyse the trend of the game with insufficient --- ?"

He shut up as McNulty continued. "The true nature of the opposition is not yet fully understood but it is evident that they have mesmeric power not to be despised. Doubtless they used it to entice Ambrose from the lifeboat, making him think he was being summoned by McFarlane. That will give you some idea of what we're up against"

Brennand, who didn't know the half of what had been going on, asked, "What d'you mean by mesmeric power, Captain?"

"In fullest sense that is something we have yet to discover," responded McNulty, making it sound ominous.

"All we do know is that they can delude you into thinking you see what they want you to see-and maybe they can take it farther than that! We're facing a mental weapon of considerable potency and we've got to watch our step!"

"Does that apply to Jay?" inquired Brennand. "Can he be kidded too?"

It was a good question. Those brilliant eyes didn't function organically like ours. Their optic nerves were thin veins of silver and the brain behind was electronically unique. Wilson's camera hadn't been fooled and for the same reasons I couldn't see how Jay could be, either. But Jay merely smiled and said, "I have yet to face a test"

Kli Yang chipped in with irritating superiority. "That also applies to us Martians." He made his saucer eyes look two ways at once, pointing them at almost opposite extremes. It gave me the heebies to watch him do it. "As is evident, our optics are superior to Terrestrial organs."

"Nuts!" said Brennand.

"It doesn't matter what sort of eyes you've got so long as the brain can be deceived," Jay Score pointed out.

"That won't be so easy either," declared Kli Yang. He wagged a tentacle by way of emphasis. " Because as is well known, the Martian mind ---"

Waving him down in mid-sentence, McNulty said sharply, "This is no time to argue the respective merits of different forms. We're taking action to determine the fate of the missing men and rescue them if still alive. The *Marathon* will remain here while a search-party under Jay Score hunts for Jepson and Painter. At the same time ten men and one Martian will take the pinnacle to the lifeboat, burn down an adequate landing-space nearby and look for Ambrose and McFarlane. I want volunteers for both parties."

Ten men and one Martian would overload the pinnacle with a vengeance. But the boat hadn't far to go and it certainly was the quickest way to get a rescue party there - the stronger in number, the better. I guessed the Martian had been included despite his greater weight because McNulty hoped there might be something in Kli Yang's claim to see straight when he was most cockeyed. The *Marathon's* party was being put under Jay Score for a similar reason: that they'd have the benefit of a leader who couldn't be deluded.

I volunteered to go with the pinnacle. So did Bannister, Brennand, Kli Yang, Molders, Wilson, Kelly and several

others. Sending the rest of the crew back to their posts until he was ready to organise their outing, McNulty dealt with us first.

"Six men and one Martian will conduct the search," he ordered. "You will keep close together at all times and not permit yourselves to be separated even for a moment. The remaining four will stay in the pinnace and not leave it in any circumstances whatsoever." He stared hard at us, added firmly, "I want that to be thoroughly understood. The four in the boat do not leave the vessel even if the search-party reappears and begs on bended knees for them to come out - because by that time the search-party may not be what it looks to be!"

"Suppose they don't beg us to come out?" asked the lavishly tattooed Kelly. I noticed that he was dangling an outsized spanner from one fist.

McNulty saw the tool at the same time, remarked acidly, "You can leave that object behind. A needler will be more useful." He sniffed his disdain and continued, "It will be all right, of course, if they don't try tempt you to emerge. The problem then doesn't arise."

"So we let them in?" said Kelly, pointedly.

Hah! The skipper's face was a picture worth seeing. He opened his mouth, shut it, went pink and then red. He turned to Jay Score, making tangled motions with his hands.

"He's raised an issue there, Jay. If the party has been long out of sight, how are those in the pinnace to know whether it's safe to admit them "

Jay thought it over. "The simplest solution is to use passwords, a different one for each man. The one who can't or won't give it gets needled on the spot. That'll be tough on anyone with a lousy memory but we can't afford to take chances."

The skipper didn't care overmuch for that idea and neither did we. Something more positive, more watertight would have been better. If these alien creatures could fool us visually it was remotely possible that they could also kid us audibly, making us imagine that they were saying the right words at the right moment. I had an unpleasant feeling that they might be able to persuade us to draw up a last will and testament in their favour, in the dumb belief that they were our natural heirs.

However, none of us could think up anything better on the spur of the moment. Blood tests would have been an ideal solution, but you can't take samples and subject them to microscopic examination in circumstances where the people being tested may be trying to get aboard six jumps ahead of a pursuing army. A man could die helplessly

and messily while we were trying to prove beyond doubt that he was a man!

Leaving McNulty to summon and get on with his briefing of the *Marathon's* own search-party, we hastened with the task of stripping the pinnacle of all surplus weight and re-placing it with other things more likely to be needed. Being a sort of triple-sized lifeboat, the pinnacle normally carried bulky items that wouldn't be wanted on a local trip, such as a ton of emergency rations, enough water to last its crew for two months, oxygen flasks, spacesuits, a cosmic compass, a long-range beam radio and so forth. Dragging all that out, we installed a pom-pom and extra ammo, a gas projector, a case of bombs and a few other unfriendly gifts to natives.

I was staggering past the port airlock with a couple of pom-pom ammo belts draped around me when I noticed that one of the grease monkeys on duty there had operated the door-wind and the plug was rotating inward along its worm. The other grease monkey leaned against the facing wall, picking his teeth and watching the plug glassy-eyed. Both of them had the casual air of stevedores about to preside over the loading of twenty sacks of Venusian marshpods.

Generally I mind my own business because it's the only way to get along when a bunch of you are confined in a bottle and likely to tread on each other's necks if not careful. Perhaps recent events had made me touchy, because this time I stopped dead with the ammo clattering around me.

"Who ordered you to open up?"

"Nobody," informed the tooth picker. Painter's come back and he wants in."

"How d'you know that?"

"Because we can see him standing outside." He gave me one of those what-the-hell's-it-got-to-do-with-you looks and added, " He banged on the door. Maybe something's happened to Jepson and he's come to get help."

"Maybe," I said, shucking off the ammo belts and groping for my needler. "And maybe not!"

The door reached the end of its worm while he gaped at me as if I'd taken leave of my senses. It swung aside, revealing a great hole in the dark. Painter clambered into the hole as though a thousand devils were after him and started walking along the cut-out in the worm.

I said loudly, "Stand where you are!"

He did not take the slightest notice. Neither did he answer. He knew me well enough to come back with,

"What the heck's eating you; Sergeant?" or something like that, and if he had done he'd have got away with it: But he didn't say a word.

For a split second I watched him, unable to credit the evidence of my own eyes, because I could actually see that he was Painter from the hobnails on his boots to the widow's peak in his black hair. He was accurate in every detail, clothes and all. So utterly perfect that I had a horrible fear I was about to commit a cold-blooded murder.

I needled him. The ray caught him square in the guts before he'd come a yard inward.

What happened then stirred my back hairs and made the pair of onlookers feel sick. Something seemed to go click back of my eyes, the vision of Painter disappeared as though cut off from a suddenly extinguished epidiascope. In its place was a violently squirming mass of black rope that tried to tie itself into a million knots. Ends and loops stuck out of the tangle, throbbing and vibrating. There weren't any eyes, nose, ears or other recognisable organs; nothing but a ball of greasy coils like a dozen pythons knotted in one agonised lump. It rolled backward, fell out just as my ray spiked it again.

"Quick!" I bawled, a trickle of sweat running down my back. "Shut that door!"

They did it sluggishly, like men in a dream. One lugged the lever, the door swung across began to wind into its worm. I stayed there until it had gone all the way and rotation had ceased. There was a faint stink in the airlock, making me think of the time some guppies had roasted a goat without taking the hide off.

Jay Score came along as I was dragging the ammo belts off the floor and heaving them onto my shoulders. He sampled the air, had a look at the self-conscious grease monkeys and knew without being told that there had been dirty work at the crossroads.

"What's been going on?" he demanded.

"Painter came back," I informed. "Only it wasn't Painter."

"You let him in?"

"Yes. And he was Painter beyond all argument. I knew him better than I know my own mother."

"And so?"

"But he wouldn't or couldn't talk. He wouldn't answer back. So I took a chance." I thought of it and felt another bead of sweat going down between my shoulder blades.

"I rayed him amidships and he turned into something out of a nightmare."

"H'm! Pity I wasn't here myself - it would have provided an opportunity to check on whether I see the same as you see." He thought awhile, went on, " By the looks of it they aren't capable of speech nor of deluding us that they can speak. That simplifies matters a little. Ought to make things easier."

"They were easier on the Venus-run," I remarked with unashamed nostalgia.

Taking no notice, he went on, "We also know that they've actually got Painter and probably Jepson as well, else they wouldn't be able to put over a plausible picture of one of them." He turned to the pair on duty in the lock. " Don't open that door again without first getting permission from the skipper. That's an order!"

They nodded glumly. Jay continued on his way and I went mine. The pinnacle was ready within the hour. We piled in, a tight-fitting little mob with no room to dance around. Kli Yang sat with his head-and-shoulder piece exhausted to three pounds pressure, his long, rubbery tentacles sprawling across half a dozen laps. One of his tips rested on my knees, half turned to expose a sucker the size of a small saucer. I had a crazy desire to spit in it for no other reason than because it was sure to annoy him.

The pinnacle boomed away into the dark, Bannister piloting as before. Despite intense gloom of night it wasn't difficult to steer a direct course to the lifeboat. We had a powerful searchlight in the bow, a full quota of blindflying instruments. What helped most was the fact that the lifeboat's generators continued to function and its radio channel remained open: all we had to do was pick up the background noise and follow it to its source.

Pretty soon we roared across the alien encampment with our beam making the grounded lifeboat shine like a silver cylinder at one side. The glimpse we got of the collection of pyramidal huts was extremely brief, but I fancied I saw a few dark, shapeless things moving about the camp. Couldn't be sure of it, though.

Bannister let go a string of tiny jelly-bombs just as we cleared the camp. They flopped in a straight line covering four or five hundred yards, burst into fierce, all-consuming flame. We thundered onward, giving the blaze time to work itself out, then made a wide circle that took us over some hills, back across the lake. Finally we topped the huts at a height of fifty feet, shaking every roof in the place, and belly-slid to a landing along the ashy path cleared by the bombs.

Four were picked to stay with the boat and hold it against all comers-which included those going out if they happened to be forgetful! The stayers made careful note of our passwords. Mine was nanifani, which is a rude word on Venus. Being just an ordinary space-sailor, and no intellectual, I learn all the rude words first and remember them longest. But I never thought the day would come when vulgarity would be a survival-factor.

Those preliminaries over, we checked needlers, pocketed a bomb apiece. Brennand opened the airlock, went out, followed by Molders, Kelly, myself, then Kli Yang and Wilson, in that order. I remember staring at the dancing girl tattooed on Kelly's arm as he made his jump to ground. He had parted from his inevitable spanner and had a needler in his fist for a change. Then I jumped down and the over-eager Kli Yang landed on top of me, rolling me around in a mess of tentacles. Somehow I wriggled out from under him, making suitable remarks about the Red planet's facility for producing imbeciles.

Darkness was stygian. One could barely discern the skeletal shapes of unharmed trees and bushes beyond the area of ash. We had powerful hand-beams but didn't use them lest they make us targets for unknown weapons. When you're up against a strange enemy you have to use a modicum of caution, even if it means feeling around like a blind man.

But we knew where the encampment lay with reference to the pinnace, and all we needed to do was follow the ash-track back to its beginning. The first and most logical place to seek Ambrose and McFarlane -or their bodies- was among those huts. So we made toward them, moving quietly and warily, in single file.

Trouble started at the end of the ash-track and within twenty jumps of the camp. Before us stood a patch of bushes and trees over which the first jelly-bomb had skipped, and beyond those were some of the outer ring of huts faintly visible in the starlight. I don't think we could have recognised the queer shapes as huts had we not been expecting them and been plodding through the gloom long enough for our eyes to get adjusted.

Brennand stepped cautiously through the first of the trees with Molders a couple of yards behind. Next instant there sounded a dull *thunk!* and a startled exclamation from Molders. The big Swede paused a second or two, his eyes seeking Brennand who seemed to have vanished. Then he took a few tentative steps forward, peering into the blackness, and we heard a second *thunk!*

The third in line was Kelly, who stopped and whispered hoarsely, "Bejasus, there's something indacent around here. I'm going to show a light"

We crowded up to him as he aimed his hand-beam straight ahead. Its circle of brilliant illumination revealed Brennand and Molders sprawling in the undergrowth like kids gone to sleep in the hay. There was nothing whatever to indicate what had conked them, no sign of alien life, no surreptitious sounds in the dark. For all one could tell they'd both decided to drop dead. But even as we looked, Molders sat up, tenderly felt the back of his turnip, his expression stupified. Brennand twitched a couple of times and let go a bubbling noise.

Blinking into the strong light, Molders complained, "I got slugged!" He struggled upright, stared around, became filled with sudden fury and exclaimed, "I think it was that damn tree!"

So saying, he needled a five-foot growth standing alongside. I thought he'd gone crazy. Next instant I wondered whether I'd become a bit cracked myself.

The tree posed there, a nondescript object with long, thin, glossy leaves; manifestly and beyond all doubt a genuine one hundred per cent. vegetable. Molders' needleray hit it squarely in the trunk and at once it disappeared like a fragmentary dream. In its place was one of those horribly knotted balls I'd seen before.

Right behind the irate Molders stood another, similar growth. Despite the intensity of my concentration upon what was happening, one corner of my eye saw this second object quiver as if about to do something. I don't think I've ever pulled a needler faster. I had it out and flaring in less time than it takes to sniff. And that tree also flashed into a greasy black sphere of madly writhing rope.

I kept the needler going and Molders did likewise. There were two features of these squirming bunches of outlandish life that gave me the willies. Firstly, they took the rays in utter silence, without so much as a yelp. Secondly, I sliced off loose ends and projecting loops, whereupon the main body continued to wriggle as though unconscious of its loss while the severed bits jumped and twisted hither and thither with an eerily independent life of their own.

Well, we sliced them up into a couple of hundred pieces that continued to hump around like sections of giant black worm. Nothing chipped in to stop us and other treelike things nearby stood impassive, unmoving. Maybe they were real trees. Of that, I'll never be sure.

By the time we'd finished, Brennand was on his feet and delicately fingering an egg on his cranium: He took a poor view of the situation, was inclined to be liverish about it.

Giving Kli Yang the sour eye, he said, "You saw these things." He motioned at the squirming pieces. "How did they look to you?"

"I regret to say that they resembled trees," admitted Kli Yang, resenting being duped along with mere Terrestrials. "Shows the functional superiority of swivel-eyes, doesn't it?" commented Brennand, acidly. He felt his head again, kicked aside a six-inch length of writhing rope. "Come on!"

For some reason or other we broke into a run, reached the first hut and crowded into it together. The edifice proved a lot bigger than it looked from the air: about three times the size of an average room in an Earth-house. It wasn't subdivided but it was furnished according to somebody's outlandish ideas.

The walls and roof were made of reeds woven in complicated patterns so close that they were reasonably windproof and watertight, the whole being mounted on a frame of tough, resilient poles resembling bamboo. The floor was completely covered by a thick grass mat also woven in a theme of repeated curlicues. At one side stood three circular tables a foot high by four in diameter. I call them tables but they might have been chairs or beds for all I know.

A number of peculiar utensils hung from the roof's crosspoles, some of them carved out of solid wood, others of dull, lead-coloured metal. Most of these had thin, curved spouts pierced with a fine hole about large enough to be stoppered with an ordinary pin. Seemed to me that the creature who used these things would suck at them with a mouth as small as a vest button.

What drew our united attention as Brennand's beam focused upon it was an instrument on the wall opposite the door. It had a circular dial marked around the edge with forty-two dots. Another disc bearing one dot on its rim was mounted over this, and while we watched it shifted with almost imperceptible slowness, gradually aligning its own dot against one on the outer circle. Obviously some kind of clock, though we could not hear it ticking or detect any sound from it at all. However, it served to prove one thing: that we were up against things higher than mere savages, things with a certain amount of cerebral ingenuity and manual dexterity.

Nobody occupied this hut. It stood devoid of inhabitants while its alien clock silently measured alien hours upon the wall. Our beams went over the whole place, not missing a corner, and manifestly it was deserted. At that moment I'd have taken my most binding oath that the hut was vacant, completely vacant-though I did notice a faint goatish smell which I attributed to the stinky atmosphere or maybe the effluvia of the late tenants.

Hut number two proved the same. Empty of aliens. It held a bit more furniture differently arranged and had five of the circular tables or beds. Also two clocks. But no

owners. We gave it a thorough once-over with six pairs of eyes including Kli Yang's independently swivelling optics, and there wasn't a living thing in evidence.

By the time we'd completed our search of the outer circle by examining hut number thirty, it appeared certain that the encampment's occupants must have beaten it into the bush when first the pinnacle roared over, but had left a couple of guards to test our capabilities. Well, we'd shown them a thing or two.

All the same, I didn't feel any too happy about this unopposed stroll around somebody else's home town. Creatures who could make metal utensils and clocklike instruments ought to be able to construct weapons a good deal more formidable than bows and arrows. And that meant that perhaps we'd yet to get a taste of what they had to offer.

Why the delay in kicking our pants? Thinking it over, I realised that one could pick haphazardly on umpteen Terrestrial villages that didn't hold a soldier or a gun. When troops are needed they're summoned by telephone or radio. Maybe we had landed on a bunch of comparative hicks who'd run for help from someplace else. In that event, the fun had yet to come.

I was wrong there. We were having our hair pulled and didn't know it.

Exiting moodily from the thirtieth hut, Brennand said, "I reckon we're wasting our time here."

"You took the words out of my mouth," endorsed Wilson.

"Just what I was thinking," added Molders.

"Me, too," agreed Kelly.

I didn't put in my spoke. It wasn't necessary, with them voicing my own sentiments. I stepped out of the hut and into the dark convinced that all this fiddling around was futile, that it would be best to return to the pinnacle and take it away.

"What about the lifeboat?" asked Kli Yang.

"Let it lay," said Brennand, indifferently.

"Well, what about Ambrose and McFarlane?" persisted the Martian, his goggle eyes staring at two of them simultaneously.

"Two needles in a planet-sized haystack," declared Brennand. "We could fumble around for them until we'd got white beards a yard long. Let's go back."

Kli Yang said, "Then what'll we tell McNulty?"

"That we can't find them because they aren't here."

"We don't know that"

"I do!" asserted Brennand, peculiarly positive.

"Do you?" There was a pause while Kli Yang stewed this over. Then he asked the others, "Do you feel the same way?"

We all nodded. Yes, me with them - like the dope I am.

"That's strange," observed Kli, slowly and with emphasis. "Because I don't!"

"So what?" said Kelly, toughly.

Kli Yang turned to him. "My mind is different from yours. My eyes can be fooled - but not something else!"

"What else?"

"Whatever part of my mind is non-visual."

Brennand chipped in with, "Look, what are you trying to say?"

Holding his needler ready in one tentacle-tip and a hand-beam in another, Kli glanced warily around and said, "We came solely to find? Ambrose and McFarlane, if they can be found. Now all of a sudden you say the hell with it. You are of one accord." His eyes again tried to probe the night. "Remarkable coincidence, is it not? I think the desire to throw up the search is being imposed upon you - and that means somebody's here!"

Boy, it gave me a major jolt! For a couple of heartbeats my mind went into a confused whirl as it tried to cope with two violently opposing concepts. I couldn't see the others' faces more than dimly, but Wilson stood near enough to give me a picture of a man in a mental tangle. Further search was useless : I knew that as surely as I knew I'd got boots on my feet. We were being kidded that further search was useless: I knew that too, with equal certainty.

Then came a kind of snap in my brain as fact triumphed over fancy. It must have happened to the rest at precisely the same moment because Molders let out a loud snort of self-disgust, Kelly voiced a hearty curse and Brennand spoke in irritated tones.

"We'll rake through every hut in this place!"

So without further delay we started on the next inner circle. It would have been a good deal quicker if we had

dealt with a hut apiece, thus inspecting them six at a time, but we had strict orders to stick together and were beginning to learn sense. A couple of times I found myself on the point of suggesting that we speed up the business by splitting, but on each occasion I bit the words back because the notion might not be truly my own. If I could help it I wasn't taking orders from ropery monstrosities lurking nearby in the dark.

We reached the twelfth hut of this inner row and Brennand went in first, his hand-beam shining ahead of him. By this time we were well-nigh conditioned to expect nobody inside but still held ourselves ready to be proved wrong. Somehow I'd become last in the patrol. I was about to follow Wilson into the hut when from the deep gloom on my right there came a faint sound. I stopped at the door, aimed my beam rightward.

It revealed Ambrose outside the third hut farther along. He waved at my light though it must have been impossible for him to see who was holding it. He didn't seem mussed up in any way and posed there for all the world as if he'd married the daughter of a chief and decided to go native. Of course I let out a yelp of excitement and called to those in the hut, "One of them is out here."

They poured through the door; got an eyeful of what my beam was showing.

"Hi, Ammy!" called Brennand, starting forward.
"Hi!" said Ambrose, clearly and distinctly, then turned and went into his hut.

Needless to say we went to that edifice at the double, meanwhile wondering whether Ambrose had his hands full with a sick or badly injured McFarlane. It looked like it, the way he'd gone inside instead of coming to join us. I was so sure of finding McFarlane laid out on the floor that instinctively I felt for my first-aid pack. Reaching the hut, we went in. Our six hand-beams flooded the place with light.

And nobody was there.

Nobody!

The walls were firm and tight, devoid of any other exit. Brennand's beam had been steadily focused on the only door from the moment we started toward it. We went over the inside pretty thoroughly, yelling for Ambrose at intervals, and couldn't find room to hide a rat.

We stood there beaten, and feeling more than liverish, when Molders became smitten with a brainwave. "Why were we lured into this hut? Answer: to make us skip the last two!"

"Hell's bells!" breathed Brennand, startled. He jumped for the door. "Never mind orders: we'll divide into threes and take both together."

Molders, Kelly and I charged expectantly into hut number thirteen: Empty. Furnished more or less similarly to all the others but with nobody in occupation. The other two didn't waste time. Satisfied that they had picked the wrong dump, they chased out to join Brennand's gang next door and I was about to follow when I heard or thought I heard a choking sound behind me.

Turning in the doorway, I lit up the interior, couldn't see anything that might have caused the noise. But even as I looked, it came again, followed by a series of dull, muted thumps as of something beating upon the thick grass carpet.

More illusions, I thought. Though they were normally silent I knew that at least a few of the more talented aliens could make us hear things. I could have sworn Ambrose had said " Hi ! " when he'd replied to Brennand. Then it struck me that there must be ropey things clever enough to imitate real speech because somebody had parroted McNulty over the radio and that had been no delusion. It had been an actual voice.

Stupidly I called, "Who's there?" and made ready to needle whatever part of the hut jeeringly echoed, "Who's there?" No voice came back but the choking and thumping sounds responded with greater vigour.

My mind argued with itself. "You've allowed yourself to become separated from the others even if only by a few yards. They're all in the next hut, unable to see what happens to you - and something wants you to go to that corner and get bopped."

Curiosity pulled me - one way, caution the other. .And just then Kelly returned to see what was keeping me. That settled the matter.

"Half a second," I said. "You stand by and cover me - there's something funny here."

With that I went into the hut, beam in one hand, needler in the other, traced the noises to the farther left-hand corner. They got loud as I neared, as if to tell me I was warm in this daffy game of blind man's buff. Now I could hear them almost as clearly as the *Marathon's* bellow when she goes over to boost-point. Feeling more than silly in front of the onlooking Kelly, I dumped the beam on the floor, knelt beside it, felt around and put my hand on a heavy boot.

The next instant Kelly rapped out an extremely indecent word and squirted his needle-ray about three inches over the back of my neck. The heat of it scorched the hairs just

above my collar. Something moved closely and violently behind me, a couple of metal utensils clattered as they got thrown across the room, and a four-inch section of jerky rope hunched in front of my bended knees. At the same instant, Ambrose appeared under my extended hand.

He might have come out of sheer nothingness, as though produced by a super-magician. I was feeling around in empty space, seeking the source of the sounds, when I touched an invisible boot and Kelly's needler spouted across my neck and something promptly went haywire at back of me and there was Ambrose, flat on his back, bound and gagged. In my state of mind I was so unwilling to accept the evidence of my eyes that I tore off the gag, aimed my needler at him and spoke to the point.

"Maybe you are Ambrose and maybe you aren't. So don't echo my words. Pick a few of your own and say them quick."

I'll say he was a selective picker! What he gave forth made my ears jerk and struck Kelly dumb with admiration. It was fast and fluent and uttered with considerable passion. Usually he was a quiet sort of individual and no one would suspect that he had it in him thus to enrich the language of invective. One thing became certain beyond all doubt : no creature born of this crazy world could have put up such a performance.

Well, I carried on with the job of hacking his bonds which were made of a very tough kind of woven grass, while he continued to voice vitriolic afterthoughts and bring up words he'd previously overlooked. Bits of greasy cable wormed around aimlessly, going nowhere. There were now five faces gaping in the doorway, the others having joined Kelly.

Slinging away his severed bonds, Ambrose stood up, felt himself all over, said to the five, "Have you found Mac?"

"Not yet," replied Wilson.

"Ten to one he's in the next igloo," said Ambrose.

"You lose that bet," Wilson informed. "We've just cased it and he ain't"

"How did you go through it?" I chipped in. "Did you nose all over the floor?"

Looking at me as if I were daffy, Wilson asked, "Why the heck should we do that? "

"It'd be a good idea," interjected Kelly, hefting his needler and wetting his lips.

"Look," I said. "You see what you're told to see. And

if you're told to see nothing whatsoever "

"Listen to me," said Ambrose. "These lumps of snakes could kid you into embracing the pillow on your honeymoon. He stepped forward. Let s have another look through that hut"

Back we traipsed to number fourteen. Six beams lit it up from wall to wall, from floor to roof. Vacant. Empty. Darn it, you could see that nobody was there!

Standing in the centre of the single room, Ambrose called "Mac, can you make a noise, any sort of a noise?"

No answer.

It looked loony, him standing there appealing to somebody less visible than a ghost. I tried to imagine McFarlane lying nearby, straining mightily against his bonds in effort to create a hearable response, while he remained completely hidden by our own short-circuited optic nerves, kind of buried deep in the blind spot in our brains.

Just then a notion hit me in a way I conceived to be a real spark of genius. The hand-beams pointing in six directions - they illuminated the place much too well!

"Hey!" I said. "Let's aim these lights 'all the same way."

"What for?" asked Molders.

"Because," I informed, enjoying beating them with applied science, "we're drowning out shadows and if anyone is here they ought to throw shadows."

"Yes, that's right," agreed Wilson, openly admiring my I.Q. "So they should."

Ambrose waved an impatient hand and put me down for the count by saying, "A waste of time. You're as blind to shadows as you are to what causes them. When you're taken for suckers you're taken good and proper."

"Ugh!" grunted Brennand, little liking this assurance. He fondled his pate on which a small bump had risen.

Again addressing the room, Ambrose declaimed, "All right, Mac, if you can't let out a squeak maybe you can roll. I'll stay here. See if you can roll up against my legs. He waited a while, looking down at his boots. Time seemed to suspend itself. Then he gave up, glanced around, caught my inquiring gaze. "I'm going to feel the floor alongside the wall at this end. You do the same at the other end. The rest of you keep tramping around the mid-space. If you kick or knock anything, grab it!"

Dropping onto hands and knees, he commenced crawling

beside the wall with one hand seeking forward. I did the same at my end. Having already found Ambrose in somewhat similar a manner it wasn't so eerie an experience for me as it would have been for the others. Nevertheless it still gave me a slight touch of the heebies: There's something upsetting in not being genuinely blind yet knowing that one's eyes can't be depended upon. I'm tallang about the effect, of course, not the cause. Nothing was wrong with our eyes either structurally or functionally; the trouble lay farther back where false vision was being imposed and accepted by the brain.

While the others stooged around in the middle I came to a corner, turned and fumbled along the adjoining wah, reached the next corner, made stroking motions through thin air and - whahoo! - I touched something invisible, grabbed it, got a handful of cold and slimy rubber pipe. I couldn't let go. The shock of it kind of paralysed me so that I couldn't let go. It made a powerful squirm to get away, hauled me violently forward and I fell on my face.

Kelly used his brains. He'd a slight advantage over the rest, having witnessed the performance next door, Seeing me plunge onto my pan, he directed his needler a foot ahead of my extended fist and let it blast. In half a second there was uproar. I found myself clinging with one hand to a madly sinuous tangle of black rope which strove to lug me toward the door while Kelly cut pieces off it and Brennard rayed its middle.

Ambrose was yelling for someone to give him a knife to cut McFarlane loose. Kli Yang tried to snatch up the alien in a powerful tentacle but couldn't risk losing a lump of himself to a needler. Wilson did a war-dance in the middle of the floor, his weapon fully activated as he aimed it sloppily and let go one flare that somehow passed an eighth of an inch under Kelly's fat rear and another eighth over my hair and burned in the wall a hole the size of a dinner plate. I don't know how he achieved this feat: his ray must have bent a couple of times contrary to every known law.

I let go what I was holding and it left a greyish, smelly slime on my hand. The thing was in little bits by now, with the needlers slicing it smaller and smaller. No matter how much the sections were cut up they still humped around, their raw ends moist and black with little white strings in them: I estimate that in its original knotted-ball form the thing had been about four feet in diameter and weighed one hundred fifty pounds or more.

In the opposite corner McFarlane busied himself casting off lengths of grass cord with which he'd been bound. His expression was sour.

Finishing freeing himself, he griped at Ambrose, "Why didn't you stay in the boat and yell for help?"

"Because your twin brother appeared and beckoned me out as if it were urgent and wouldn't keep," Ambrose in-

formed. "And because I didn't know then what I know now. So full of misplaced faith I jumped out of the lock and got myself all tied up." He sniffed, added, "I've learned my lesson. I won't do it again even if they extract your plumbing right under an observation-port. I'll sit tight while you die in agony."

"Thanks," said McFarlane. "Someday I'll do as much for you." He spat on what looked like a piece of snake trying to loop itself into a circle near his boot. " Well, do we stand here gabbing all night? "

"It's you who's chewing the fat," said Brennand. He went to the door, pointed his hand-beam the way we'd come.

"We'll take you two to the lifeboat. Lift it and get back to the *Marathon* without delay. You can do all your squabbling when ---"

His voice cut off, his hand-beam quivered, then he snatched at a side pocket and rapped, "A hundred of 'em! *Flat!*" He threw something while I buried my face in the floor for the second time.

The night lit up briefly but with intense brilliance. The ground gave a twitch and the roof of the hut took off skyward like one of those ancient airplanes. A second or two later wriggly bits rained down from the stars, bounced on the floor, commenced their eternal squirming.

Even if they could make metal things and instruments, the creatures of this world didn't seem to have developed the manufacture of what we regard as weapons. Possibly they'd overlooked this line of progress while spending a million years perfecting their power of deception. Anyway, our powers must have been as alien and unfamiliar to them as theirs were to us -- and this latest demonstration of still greater power probably knocked the stuffing out of them.

We rushed out to take full advantage of confusion caused by the bomb, dashed past huts either roofless or slapped cockeyed, and held ourselves ready to sling another bomb should anything real or illusionary appear en masse. But no enemy host saw fit to bar our way, no herd of imaginary dinosaurs was planted in our path.

I wondered about the latter as I hustled through the dark with the rest. If I had the ability to make people see things I'd get a guy on the run from a thought-up rogue elephant. But then I realised that the true strength of this power lay in confusing us with familiar things--and these aliens couldn't dig up many items we'd regard as familiar. Any stock illusions they used to maintain mastery over this

planet's lesser life-forms would be completely alien to our minds and liable to have a bomb tossed at it. Yes, in dealing with us they were severely limited by lack of knowledge and experience of our particular kind. But if someday they gained" a complete understanding of humanity from feet to hair ...!

Undoubtedly this was their motive in snitching Ambrose and McFarlane. Rule one: get to know the creatures you wish to control. The four men already grabbed were intended to provide necessary data on the strength of which they hoped to take the lot of us. Maybe they could do it too, given the chance. I doubted it, being what I am, but didn't feel inclined to underestimate the opposition.

By this time we were well beyond the encampment and ought to be fairly close to the lifeboat. What with the darkness and the circular arrangement of the huts it hadn't been easy to tell one direction from another. So far as I'm concerned, I'd been content merely to follow the others like a sheep, but Brennand had struck along this line without hesitation and seemed to know where he was going. I started pondering the notion that Brennand might have been impetuous and misled the entire gang. Our pace slowed, became hesitant, as if the same thought had occurred to the others. Surely the lifeboat hadn't been planted as far out as this?

Then Brennand's beam swung round in a searching arc and revealed the lifeboat's tail-end shining metallicly on our left. Evidently we must have slanted a few degrees off-track. We went toward it.

Standing by its ladder, Ambrose blinked into our lights, said, "Thanks, fellows. We'll go straight back and see you at the other end."

With that he grabbed the ladder in both hands, made a couple of curious leg motions like a guy riding a non-existent bicycle and dived onto his beak. This looked purposeless and rather silly to me. It's the sort of irrational action that doesn't get you anywhere. Then I became aware that the lifeboat had blanked out as though it had never been and that Ambrose had taken a run at a ladder that wasn't there.

Kli Yang said a word in high-Martian for which there is no Terrestrial equivalent, directed his beam circularly in an effort to find the creature or creatures responsible for this booby-trap. That one or more were within mental range was self-evident-but what was their mental range? Ten yards or a thousand? Anyway, he found nothing but bushes and small trees or objects convincingly like bushes and trees. There was no way of telling short of spending valuable hours burning every individual growth.

Lugging Ambrose to his feet, McFarlane remarked with

a touch of malice, "Do you have to fall for them every time?"

Thoroughly riled, Ambrose snapped back, "Shut up before I bust you one!"

"You and which other three?" inquired McFarlane, quickly preparing himself for some horsing around. Shoving between them; Brennand growled, "You two more than anyone else should have the sense to know that by beating each other up you may be playing somebody else's game."

"That's true enough," supported Molders, seeing the point. "Hereafter if any of us gets a sudden desire to knock somebody's block off, he postpones it until we get back to the ship."

"Maybe you've got something," admitted McFarlane, slightly sheepish. He made a gesture. "Anyway, we've something more to worry about. Where's the boat? " " Can't be far away," I opined. " A hundred of them couldn't pick up that tonnage and carry it out of sight"

We'll circle from this point," Brennand decided. "We're bound to hit it even if we go most of the way round." He gazed in one direction and then the other, temporarily uncertain which best to take.

"Try leftward," suggested Kelly, and thoughtfully added his reason. "I'm turned that way already."

We went left, maintaining our bearing from a faint view of the outer ring of huts barely visible when all our handbeams were turned toward them. It didn't occur to me that at this stage the huts might be as illusionary as the lifeboat had proved, with the real huts standing unnoticed someplace else. I reckon we could have been persuaded to roam round in rings for the next hundred years. Or even to go in a straight line, thinking we were circling, until we were miles deep into the bush.

Perhaps that bomb had bumped off the sharpest witted of the enemy leaving the duller ones to miss up chances, for the huts were genuine enough and we found the lifeboat after going four hundred yards. This time Ambrose felt the ladder, went carefully all the way up, fingered the rim of the airlock door, patted the vessel's hull.

"Well, as I was saying before, thanks fellows!"

He unlocked the door and went in, McFarlane following. Shows you how dopey even the cleverest can be at times, because the entire six of us stood there giving them the sweet goodbye with nothing on our minds but that we'd beat it to the pinnace immediately they closed that door. McFarlane did close it, but immediately opened it again,

looked down upon us with the superior air of one who occasionally employs his think-box.

Giving us the same sort of pitying smile one bestows on a Venusian guppy, he said, "I suppose none of you want a hitch? "

Brennand gave a little jump and mentioned what should have been too obvious to overlook, "Jeepers, we don't have to use the pinnacle to go back!"

With that, he bolted up the ladder. The rest followed, me next to last with only Wilson behind. I had to wait a bit to let Kli Yang haul himself inside and get clear of the smallish lock which he'd fill to capacity without help from anyone else. Then I mounted, entered the lock, heard Wilson take the ladder over-eagerly and slip down a couple of steps. Being metal, the treads were liable to toss you onto your nut if you treated them with hurried contempt. Out in the dark I saw his hand-beam wave wildly around and extinguish. He had a second go at the ladder while I stood by the closing mechanism.

"You can climb like a giraffe," I jibed as he reached the top and got into the lock.

He didn't choose to crack back, which was unusual to say the least. As I made ready to operate the ladder-fold and shift the door-closing lever, he strolled past me with a fixed expression and exuded a strong smell of grey slime. There are moments when one must cast aside finer feelings and compunctions. So I kicked him smack in what ought to have been his belly.

And in a flash I had a tangled ball on my hands, rolling and tugging six ways at once, trying to trap my hands in contracting loops, coiling loose ends around my ankles to trip me up and lay me flat. The wild energy in it might have run a dynamo for a week. What with its greasiness and the violence of its movements, I couldn't hold it. Neither could I drag out my needler: it kept me too busy. I'd just gained the grim realisation that I was going to get the worst of this struggle when Kli Yang shoved a tentacle into the lock, snatched up my opponent, smacked him twenty times on the metal floor and slung him out through the still open door.

Without pausing to voice gratitude, I picked up my hand-beam, got a good grip on my needler and went down the ladder in double-quick time. Three or four yards away Wilson was rolling around with two dollops of active rope. Evidently his captors were striving to aim their attention two ways at once, like Martian eyes, but weren't quite able to make it. They were trying to nail Wilson down and fool any would-be rescuers at the same time. Wilson spoiled it by using more than his fair share of their mental concentration and the result was peculiar.

The vision of the struggle kept snapping on and off as if projected by an intermittent movie-dingus. For a couple of seconds I could see them. Then I couldn't. Then they were back again in plain view. I snapped a neat blast at one black thing during a momentary appearance and severed the loop it had wound round Wilson's face. Then Kli Yang fell off the ladder, belted me aside and joined the hooley.

He was especially well fitted to deal with the situation. Ignoring the visual play of here we are and here we aren't; he curved great tentacles around the area of combat and scooped up the lot, gripping them with powerful suckers. Next he sorted them out, accidentally handing Wilson a thick ear in the process. With one tentacle he dumped Wilson halfway up the ladder while he employed a couple of others to hammer the rope balls upon the ground. He kept this up for quite a while, once or twice changing rhythm to show he wasn't in a rut. Finally he held them in mid-air and walloped them together. By this time the visual switching had ceased. Kli's victims had become decidedly democratic, having no desire to pretend that they were anything else but what they were. He pitched them over a dozen trees.

That done, he followed me up the ladder, squeezed himself into the lock immediately I'd vacated it, closed the door and sealed the boat. I went forward to tell Ambrose we were all aboard, shipshape and watertight, and that he could blast off.

McFarlane was squatting beside Ambrose in the tiny control-cabin and talking by radio to the pinnacle.

"What d'you mean, you'll shoot us down if we take off first?"

The voice from the pinnacle said, "If you're returning to the *Marathon* we must be there ahead of you."

"Because we have the list of passwords and they've got to be recited. How do we know who you are?"

Scowling at the instrument board, McFarlane answered, "Yes, yes, that's fair enough-but look at it the reverse way."

"What d'you mean?"

"You bums haven't got any passwords. How will those on the *Marathon* know who you are?"

"We haven't left the boat," declared the voice with some show of indignation.

"Hah!" sneered McFarlane, perversely enjoying the

argument. "We've only *your* word for that"

There was a splutter at the other end, followed by, "Those six agreed to return here. They haven't done so. You say they're on your boat-and we've only your word for that!"

Glancing over his shoulder, McFarlane growled at me, "Speak to these crummy boneheads, Sergeant. Tell them you're here complete with a seat in your pants."

It was overhead at the pinnacle, for the voice put in sharply, " That you, Sergeant? What's your own pass word?"

"*Nanifani*," I elocuted with relish.

"Who else is there?"

"All of us."

"No casualties?"

"No."

A pause for cogitation, then, "All right, we're going back. You follow us. Land after us."

Not liking authoritative instructions from a lower rank, McFarlane bristled. "Listen, I don't take orders from you!"

"Yes you do," contradicted the other, not fazed in the least. "Because this boat is armed and that one isn't. Try anything funny and we blast you wide open. The skipper will kiss us for it!"

Defeated by the truth of that last remark, McFarlane cut off the radio with a savage flip of his thumb and sat glowering into the night. Half a minute later the darkness ahead was split by a crimson streak as the pinnacle boosted upward. We watched the flame-trail diminish at about ten thousand feet, then I grabbed the nearest grips and hung on as Ambrose fired the tubes and took her away.

Contrary to expectations our return didn't cause any panic while they tried to decide whether we really were what we looked to be. I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd subjected me to a series of tests designed to prove absolute and indisputable Terrestrialism. Fingerprints, blood-checks and so forth. But they had reduced it to a technique far simpler and easier than that. All we had to do was walk aboard and pause in the lock while Jay Score gave us the once-over.

Inside the *Marathon* it was obvious that the ship, was held ready for departure. We weren't staying long. Going

to the washroom, I had a hard job getting grey slime off my hands: it smeared and smelled and tended to kill the foam on the soap. Next I made a quick check of the armoury, found everything in order. If we took off before long things would be busy for a while, so now was the time to get the latest information from Steve or anybody willing to gossip. Couple of yards along the passage I met Jepson and gave him the sinister haha.

"So you're still in a state of animation. What happened?"

"I got picked on," he said without pleasure.

"Natch. You ought to be used to it by now."

He sniffed and commented, "I'd have some hopes of getting used to it if it occurred the same way each time. It's the variety of methods that gets me down."

How'd it come this time?"

"I was mooching through the woods with Painter. We were separated from the others but not far from the ship. Painter saw or thought he saw what looked like a kind of metal ornament on the ground and he dropped a few steps behind as he stopped to pick it up. According to him, his fingers closed around nothing."

"And then?"

"Somebody cracked his nut while he was bending. I heard him flop, turned around. I swear I saw him still standing there and holding whatever he'd found. So back I went for a look and - *bam!*"

"Same treatment as he got."

"Yes. Painter says a tree did it, but I don't know. I came around, found myself bound hand and foot, with a wad of grass strapped over my kisser. I was being dragged head-first through the bush by a couple of slimy nightmares." He made a face. "They had to be seen to be believed."

"I've seen 'em," I assured. But it wasn't until they took off their pyjamas."

"They dumped me, went away, brought back Painter similarly fastened. Then they beat it toward the boat, presumably for more clients. We lay there helpless until lights flashed, needlers flared, there was a bit of a hullabaloo and the search party found us. The boys said they'd destroyed half a dozen things that looked like trees to them but not to Jay Score. Jay strode around and picked them out for gunning."

"Old Camera-eyes, eh?"

"That's the way he is - and it's lucky for us we've got him aboard. Prize mugs we could be if we had to go around with no choice but to accept whatever we saw."

"A means will be found to combat it," I assured. "They milk me of taxes to support bulgy-brains in laboratories and I'm not chancing my neck around the cosmos for nothing. So if they want my hard-earned dough they'll have to build me a wire-hat or some other contraption that'll stop me going dreamy in a place like this."

"The next crew to land here will need wire hats all right!" he indorsed, then continued on his way.

I found Steve gnawing a dog biscuit in his cupboard and asked, "What's doing? If you know. And you know everything, Bigears."

"Don't you know?" he retorted. "Of course you don't. You know nothing, Peabrain."

"Okay." I leaned on his doorjamb. "Now that the formal introductions are over, what's the dope?"

"We're zooming when everybody's safe aboard and McNulty has viewed their reports."

"So soon? We haven't been here more than a day."

"Want to stick around? " He cocked an inquiring eye.

"Heck, no!"

"Me, neither. Quicker I get back, the quicker a nice, thick wad will be pushed at me."

"We haven't found out so darned much though," I objected.

"The skipper thinks we've got as much as is wanted," he gave back. Putting his feet up on the rim of his radio desk, he settled himself comfortably and went on, "Certain smarties on Earth pick a planet by the simple expedient of shutting their eyes and throwing a dart at a star-map. They say that's where high-life may lurk and we'd better go take a look. All we need to discover is whether the dart scored a hit and what the high-life is like. Those two items we now know - so home we go before heads are torn off and insides pulled out"

"Suits me with one reservation," I told him. "And that is expressible in two words, namely, never again!"

"Hey-hey! You said that last time."

"Maybe I did, but ---"

The ship howled, I cut off the conversation, took it on the run to my harness and just managed to survive the departure. I'd never become used to the way the *Marathon* came and went even if I experienced it a thousand times. A secret desire of mine was to subject Flettner to a few stiff doses of his own inventive ability.

We were some twenty million miles out when Bannister stuck his head into the armoury and inquired, "What was eating Mac when he yapped from the lifeboat? He sounded like I'd no right to speak to him."

"This is a guess, but I think he was being egged on to cause trouble. The old divide and rule gag on an alien plane. But it didn't work because he was too civilised to carry it that far."

"H'm!" I hadn't thought of that" He scratched his head, looked impressed. "Ingenious, weren't they?"

"Too much for my liking."

"I support that sentiment. I'd hate to dream that any of them were on board. Imagine being bottled with a bunch of guys or not-guys or maybe-guys and you can't tell who from which."

"The idea can be developed further and more intimately," I said, having already given it much thought. "That is if you care to scare yourself."

He gave me a funny sort of grin, half humorous, half apprehensive, and finished, "I can scare easier by watching those educated spiders in the starboard lock."

With that he departed and I continued with various jobs. Now that he'd mentioned them, my mind shifted to the Martians, a tentacular life-form fully as alien as anything we'd met. But we were thoroughly accustomed to them, so much so that we'd miss them if they dropped dead. Yes, the Martians were good guys. Everybody liked them. Nobody was scared of them.

Then why Bannister's strange remark? And why his uneasy, lopsided smirk? Seemed to me he was drawing my attention to some illegal capers now taking place in the Martian refuge from thick air. This thought grew on me, giving me the fidgets, until I had to drop what I was doing and go take a look.

What I saw when I applied my eyes to the small spy-hole made my back hairs jerk erect. The Red Planet gang were clustered as usual around a chess-board, all except Sug Farn who lay snoring in one corner. At one side of the board was Kli Dreen, his saucerish attention on the chess pieces as if his eyes were joined to them by invisible thread. I noticed that he was playing white.

Facing him, a big ball of greasy black rope put out an end of itself, touched a black bishop but didn't move it. The Martians took in a deep breath as though something had actually happened.

Yowee! I didn't wait to see more. I went toward the bow so fast my heel-plates struck sparks as I skidded round corners. The last bend I took the same time as Jay Score coming the opposite way, with the result that I cannoned into him full tilt. It felt like diving into a cliff. He grasped me with one powerful hand, turned brilliant eyes upon me.

"Something wrong, Sergeant?"

"You bet?" I absorbed the five-fingered feel of his grip to reassure myself that he matched his looks and I wasn't being kidded. I said, slightly breathless, "They're on board."

"Who are?"

"Those oily, coily hypnotists. Or one of them, anyway. It's fooling the Martians."
"How?"

"It's duping them at the chess-board."

"I doubt it," he said, evenly and undisturbed. "It hasn't had sufficient time to learn the game."

"You mean?" I gaped at him. "You know it's here?"

"Of course. I captured it myself. Then Kli Morg begged it off me, pointing out that it couldn't escape from their double-locked low-pressure joint: That's quite correct, though it wasn't his real reason."

"No?" I felt considerably deflated. "What was his reason?"

"You should guess it, knowing that crowd. They think they may get a run for their money at chess from a thing that can visibly move one piece but actually move another." He mused a moment. "That means they'll have to regard every apparent move with suspicion and try identify the real one as a logical probability. It should bring a new element into the game and lend it a certain extra fascination."

"Do you really think so?"

"Most certainly."

I gave up. If the Red Planet gang had a crazy obsession, he shared it enough to understand it and actually connive in it. Someday he'd win himself a Martian championship vase of violent colour and revolting shape that I wouldn't stand beside my rocking chair as a gobboon.

Space-conquerors, bah! Nutty, all of them, just like
you and me!

THE END