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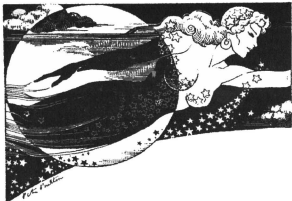
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# A MATTER OF FAITH

BY MICHAEL SHERMAN *Illustrated by* POULTON

Among an infinite multitude of worlds, almost any type of culture is possible. But all science requires that cause and effect be related. To the fellahin culture of the worlds of Ein, no real science was possible. There was only the will of Ein. Yet Dondyke found that both their religion and their peculiar science could be horribly effective!

Laird Dondyke found himself remembering that the descent to hell was easy. It was easy, too, to enter the planet Grekh; you just

boarded an interworld ferry from either of the two sister-planets, Pittam or Spewry. There were no custom-houses,



immigration officials, or whatever; anyone might come and go as he chose. But the similarity between Avernus and Grekh ended there.

Corey had dissented, of course. Tom Corey had been bitterly opposed to this whole business, now. It was Dondyke's own private bid for the jackpot, and what they'd faced up to now might prove easy by comparison. But if Tom was right all the way—well, he wouldn't be the first man to go to hell to bring back a woman.

The shuttle between Spewry and Grekh was a matter of a few days, just long enough for Dondyke to work up a light sweat of

anxiety over Corey. They'd parted on Spewry a week ago; they would meet on Grekh, but Dondyke would have no way of knowing whether his partner had made it until the time came.

For the twentieth time, Dondyke shrugged. There was no use fretting; Tom was the level-headed one, the balance wheel of the expedition. But he couldn't help remembering that Corey had tried to veto this return to Grekh, pointing out that Dondyke could work his personal plans just as well later, after they'd returned to Earth with the film they'd come after. They had to return for the ship—but they didn't have to pull the whis-

kers of the Faithful by stopping at the city.

The ferry's lights flickered as the ship nosed into the bluish aura that was the atmosphere of Grekh, the most important to Earth of the three nearly-identical worlds. The planet was a globe hanging before them, swelling faintly as the aura thickened. Soon it would be a faint, pastel blue and the golden light of the sun—true gold in color—would give the feeling of entering a vast blue cavern; it was the same on all three of these worlds of Ein, bathed in this magic-seeming light.

He stood by a port, paying no heed to a knot of robed passengers, some kneeling, some standing, but all genuflecting and chanting, "Ein, Ein!" The men in the nearest group made the ritual motions with the left hand, tracing a pattern in the air with the first two fingers; farther down the ship, another, similarly-dressed group also chanted and made the same patterns, but with their forefingers only—a life-and-death trifle that distinguished the True Believers of Grekh from the Faithful of Speewry. And if any son of the third world, Pittam, were aboard, he was tracing the same pattern, and calling upon the same deity—but although he used the two fingers of his left

hand, as did the True Believers of Grekh, he began the pattern at the bottom, rather than the top.

Dondyke smiled outwardly at such hair-splitting, but there was no smile inside; at this moment, it would have been comforting to have a god upon whom to call for aid—or merely to commend his resignation. No knives would flash now; on all three worlds, the moments before entering the atmosphere of Ein's planets was too sacred to mar. But afterwards, any son of Grekh might seek the blood of one from Pittam or Speewry, while all considered the Infidel fair game. Dondyke couldn't hope that none of them would recognize him.

"You're looking on death, Unbeliever!"

The Earthling turned to grin at a bulky, dark-haired man in a sloppy uniform. "You're an Infidel, too, Ferrymaster."

The other returned the grin and ran a coarse hand across the stubble on his jaw. "You forget that they need me; only Unbelievers can ply the ferries and trading ships—and navigators aren't easy come by. But you, now—from what I've heard, you might be expendable."

There was a sardonic smoothness in his tone that made the

Earthling pause; nerves urged him to action. He held his breathing regular with difficulty and let his thoughts start taking form, trying to add up a fleeting impression. The Ferrymaster took a dirty toothpick out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth, while the lights began flickering again. "Sometimes the power cuts out completely when we hit atmosphere," he said too casually. "Looks as if it might happen this time."

Dondyke studied the right arm that hung too loosely. It was unusual for an Infidel not to mention his name when he met another in these worlds. And while no True Believer could operate machinery on Speewry or Pittam, even indirectly, there was a slight difference in the faith of Grekh. It might be possible for a convert . . .

Dondyke's hand shot forward to seize the other's wrist. "Silence—and hold still. There's a poisoned burr on my ring—the Lord Engineer's own formula. It's fast—and no antidote known." His other hand darted up to the dark man's armpit and prodded. He grinned savagely. "No Unbeliever carries a Tool of Vengeance, Ferrymaster. So you're to kill me when you have the lights cut off, as an Act of Faith?"

The Ferrymaster shook his

head and relapsed into fatalism. "All is as Ein wills. For a moment, I was afraid, but now I fear nothing. Kill me if you like. Ein has a greater punishment in store for you, ravisher!"

Ravisher! But Alanna wouldn't have betrayed him, after that last night on Grekh before he left. If she'd recognized him as an Unbeliever—but she couldn't have known him. He'd based all his plans for abducting her back to Earth on that. Still, someone had recognized him. Well, Corey had always said he'd do himself in over a woman. He couldn't regret it, whatever the cost.

The Ferrymaster suddenly spat out the toothpick, and the lights went out as if that had been a signal. Probably it was. But it caught Dondyke off guard, and he loosened his grip. The man jerked back, freeing himself. The poison had been only a lie, anyhow.

Dondyke caught himself. There was the prick of a blade against his skin. Then his arm leaped out, and he had the Ferrymaster's wrist again. It was obvious now. They'd been saving him, making no effort against him, for this private Act of Faith against him. And they might still win, unless . . .

Then he had the knife, twisting it out of the other's hand

with the cat-like speed that had saved him from too many jams to mention. His arm shot out, and there was a shriek from the darkness. Ein had not deemed the Ferrymaster's Faith enough, and had gathered him back to the relative.

Dondyke leaped rapidly to one side, realizing that the man might have had an aide staked out for just such a contingency. He moved two steps, and collided with another body.

Fighting in the dark wasn't his idea of fun, but he'd done it before and survived. He'd left the knife in the Ferrymaster. The other seemed unarmed, which made them equal. He began pulling the man toward him, reaching for a throat, when something was suddenly pressed into his hand. His fingers closed over the familiar form of the container of microfilm they'd stolen on Speewry. "Tom!"

"Tried to warn you, Laird." The soft whisper came as they continued the mock battle, Dondyke slipping the container into the place he'd arranged in his clothing. The words came between grunts that were not entirely simulated; the lights might go on in any instant, and the struggle had to look good. "They know you're coming back, and why."

"My party now, then. Keep

out. Wait at the ship, in the desert where we first landed. Did you get this open?"

"All copied, and copy's hidden in the ship. It'll blow up if they find it."

"Good." They were locked together now, where they could talk mouth to ear. "I'll take the original to the Lord's Engineer, make a deal, get safe conduct for Alanna and me, and we go back to Earth with the copy. If I don't show in a week, go back alone—don't try to help."

"I still say chuck the whole thing, Laird. It's been too easy. We're crowding our luck."

"Maybe," Dondyke said. Then he stiffened as the ship's lights revealed them. Corey was fixed as a lean, ragged fanatic. He closed in on his partner. "Get ready for it," he whispered.

The passengers were gathered around the pair now, at a respectful distance; and though there was no question that their sympathy was with the attacker, Dondyke knew that he didn't have to fear interference. This was another Act of Faith, an individual matter wherein the Believer trusted to his skill and the will of Ein. Civil disputes never devolved into violence—before witnesses, at least—without loud preambles and thorough accusations. If the attacker were bested, this would be regarded

as Ein's will; no other Believer would molest the victor before another sunrise. They'd be shocked enough to find two had already tried it on him.

He sent Corey flying across the deck, where the man suddenly seemed to slump and lie still. Dondyke went below, leaving the True Believers to their disappointment and the discovery of the dead Ferrymaster. For a while, they'd be sure Ein had willed his success—it might last long enough for him to succeed!

If not . . .

## II

*Easy is the descent to hell.*

It had been more than easy. It had been rigged, from the moment he'd sat across from the Terrestrial Administrator in his office on Anteros, light-years away and back in time.

"We called you in, Dondyke, because you're just the crazy type of adventurer to pull off miracles—and because we think we've got an angle on you." The Administrator had smiled, brushing that aside for the moment. "Somewhere those ancient equations can be found on the worlds of Ein, and we're willing to pay any price for them. They're in a sort of code—one we can break—one container of microfilm, say, from the planet

Grekh. Get those equations. Copies will do; we're not out to deprive the people of the originals, which have some religious importance to them. Bring back a copy and name your price."

It had sounded too pat then. The adventurer from the mother world of Earth had looked at the official and chuckled. "You couldn't pay it; I have my own matters to attend to. Sorry you wasted your time." He arose, slowly.

"Just a moment." The Administrator's smile was thin and not to Dondyke's liking. "I said we were willing to pay any price to get those equations. You're the man to get them for us." He flicked an Intercom. "Bring in Corey!"

That stopped Dondyke. He hadn't seen Corey for five years, but his "own matters" had involved an emergency call from the former fellow adventurer. There was a blood debt, and Dondyke couldn't turn down such a call. Now . . .

Apparently Corey's call had been too late. Dondyke dropped back into his seat, and the Administrator continued. "We thought you might not be interested in the proposition, so we investigated. Thomas Corey has been convicted of treason and espionage; he has been sentenced to the Mercury mines!"

"Go on!" Dondyke saw the door open, while the guards brought in a lean, light-haired man. Corey made no sign that he recognized Dondyke.

"I've reviewed this case," the Administrator said, "and I'm not entirely convinced of Corey's guilt. The evidence against him is too strong to set aside his conviction at present; but I can offer a pardon under conditions."

His eyes swept to Corey, and the newcomer nodded. "I'm listening."

"You and Dondyke can go to the worlds of Ein, or you can serve a life sentence on the Mercury mines. If you succeed, I guarantee your pardon, and the restoration of your position—with consideration for extra service."

The Earthling adventurer veiled his eyes as he turned to the Administrator. "It looks like your deal, after all. What's the game?"

"Do you accept, Corey?"

"Naturally."

"Excellent. As you know, gentlemen, the three worlds of Ein are located in some peculiar section of space-time which the Hadley dimension drive can locate, but which we can't describe verbally. They are inhabited by the descendants of Earth people; how many centuries, rela-

tively, the original exiles have lived there is anyone's guess; to us, the atomic age is no more than a couple of centuries old. They fled during the first decade, yet they must have inhabited the worlds of Ein for at least a millenium of their time—morphologists believe it would take about that long for their kind of scientific theocracy and semi-fellahin civilization to develop and reach the point it has."

"Any Terrestrials settled there since?" Corey wanted to know.

"Quite a few. At least several hundred Terrestrials and Earthlings. The time factor's peculiar; you set out today—you may arrive some decades behind someone who left last year. We know that the worlds were 'found' after the development of the Hadley drive—yet the grandchildren of some of the earliest settlers have come back."

"Then there's no telling what year it will be when we get back?"

"No. But going from that system to ours, the discrepancy isn't large. No one has returned before he left, so there have been no real paradoxes."

So they'd been given all the briefing there could be and a ship with the Hadley drive. They'd set out for Grekh—and



then the merry-go-round began with the discovery that the equations had already been stolen from Grekh by an agent of one of the other worlds. Unfortunately, according to Corey, they hadn't discovered it until the night when Dondyke had discovered Alanna. They had gone to Pittam, where they found a similar situation. And finally they had turned to Speewry.

And there it had been too easy. It had almost seemed that Speewry had only stolen the equations so that they could be put into the hands of Dondyke and Corey. It had worried Corey, and not without reason. But Dondyke had accepted the good luck and headed back toward his own private mission on Grekh.

They'd learned a lot—enough to write a book back on Earth and become authorities on the worlds of Ein—but not enough to live here long. Enough for Dondyke to be accepted and liked by many of the Faithful, but not enough for his acceptance by the woman he wanted. Alanna had made no secret of his attraction for her—but she hadn't known him for what he was.

It had been too easy, except for that. Even the clumsiness of the Ferrymaster had added to that deceptive ease. But Dondyke knew the case of the de-

scend to hell had nothing to do with what happened after that.

Corey's worries were echoing in his head as he slipped off the interworld ferry and set off for whatever he'd meet.

### III

A whispering was around Dondyke as he strode through the narrow streets of the city six days later, a murmuring of tongues and dialects. The sun above him was golden in hue, and he had the feeling of having entered a cavern, the vault of which might be interplanetary distances away, but enclosed, nevertheless. He strode along with the feeling he was walking on eggshells.

There had been nothing positive he could name—only blind alleys to his search where there should have been none. Now he had one day left, and he was no nearer filling his mission than before. He had the urge to run, before a net settled over his head. He could almost see the cat-and-mouse game drawing to an end.

Yet everything looked the same. Over Pittam and Grekh hung the shadows of extinction, since those missing equations were the source of a weapon which all True Believers were certain could destroy a world

completely. Yet the people of Grokh went about their affairs with their indigenous fatalism, concerned only with salvation, confident that Ein was greatest and his will would prevail to their glory.

Here, as on the other worlds, was a profusion of dialects and of racial and body types. Terrestrials and their descendants were numerous and taken for granted, though most of them were Infidels. Costumes had no standardization, except for the religious-administrative orders. What a person wore depended on his taste and purse. Over in a courtyard a naked Seeker—a member of one of the many philosophic cults—was haranguing about the sinfulness of clothing.

The mutterings about Dondyke were discreet, the faces impassive. But a fair crowd followed at a moderate distance, pointing him out. "The Infidel returns; O Faithful, lock your sisters away!" Any female Believer was a sister, as any male was a brother—but the word could mean wives as well. He looked about; the glances that met his turned away quickly, but not too swiftly to conceal the knife-thoughts that lurked behind those eyes.

Some of those onlookers, no doubt, fingered Tools of Venge-

ance—knives decorated with the sacred symbols of Grokh, and woe to the Unbeliever who was discovered with one.

Underlying sameness—but with deadly trifles that made the difference. A genuflection made with two fingers instead of one; a pattern drawn from the top or the bottom. On such rested eternal salvation or damnation. These were the outward signs. Where were the other differences? Why had he failed so quickly in his attempt to remain unknown among them long enough for his purpose?

A persistent voice kept telling him to turn back to the ship—now! He thrust it away. So he was throwing his life away for a fancy—it was only his life. Corey was safe. He wouldn't overstay the limit. He'd go back to Earth as a hero.

Dondyke looked around again, trying to neglect the knife that ground against his nerves. "Tomorrow," he growled. "I've got till then, and I'll make the deal today." There was still no official charge, and he had nothing to fear but some private Act of Faith. He had one more day.

There would be no energy-weapons, unless they honored him by declaring a Holy War against him personally. There were no Peacekeepers, as the po-

lice were called, within sight. The mob couldn't vent fury on him unless he were arrested, and even knife-throwing was permitted only in real battle. When his time was up, he'd go. He shrugged, smiling at the realization of how appropriate the philosophy was.

Few vehicles were in evidence, and no animals were on the streets, tortuous and ill-lit as they were. Low buildings overhung the streets, and foot-bridges spanned the second-stories. He stood to one side, as a bevy of colorfully-clad servants approached, bearing a litter; he restrained himself from smiling at its blonde occupant. There were no street-signs, but he knew better than to ask directions. He had to rely on memory.

The deep tones of a gong came to his ears, from an open plaza ahead. At once, all fell silent around him, all motion stopped. Then, from a concealed speaker came the cultivated, authoritative words of an official Proclaimer.

"In the name of Ein and the Son of Grekh! Let any who hear and are Unbelievers come now to witness justice." Twice more it was repeated. Then the Proclaimer added his postscript. "Any beloved children of Grekh who are not engaged in the Lord's labor or sick, let them

come also and witness what Ein wills to be. No command is this nor shall penalty be laid upon you if you heed not; yet it is better that you come."

Dondyke scowled, but there was no escape; he could only hope that the executions, if any, would be few and that there would be no sermons or prolonged trials. If luck was really against him, it might last until sundown, though.

When he arrived at the plaza, to take a bench reserved for Infidels, his heart sank momentarily. This looked like a two or three day session. The Faithful could come and go as they wished, but it would go hard with the Unbeliever who tried to slip out. He'd be well fed and given comfortable sleeping accommodations; but only a summons from an official could permit his departure before the final prayer. The roll of microfilm seemed to burn him, in spite of its disguise. And the ship would leave tomorrow—his only way to get back to Earth!

The Proclaimer mounted a pulpit in the far corner of the plaza, and the judge was entering, to seat himself in the central chair, before a broad table.

"In the name of Ein and his Engineer! Thus sayeth Grekh: When the poor man cries for jus

tice, let him be heard, nor suffer him to stand waiting upon the business of the mighty."

Dondyke groaned. Civil suits would begin the proceedings, and they might take days!

The first case was interesting, at least, though Dondyke had learned enough not to expect anything spicy. The complaint told of seduction, breach of promise, and desertion; but these were only background. The charge was defamation of the woman's character, involving economic injustice—girls of that business paid higher taxes. Preliminary examination established that both the man and woman were children of Grekh. The question was: had the bounder given malicious and false information to the tax collectors?

It could have been worse. Readings from scripture were at a minimum, and the case moved right along, to end in an hour and a half. Honor was restored, her status was changed, and excess taxes were to be refunded with interest. The accused was dismissed with a warning, since the evidence hadn't established that he'd committed slander.

Refreshment was served as the trials proceeded; Dondyke leaned back during the following cases, trying to figure his time to the ship. He'd need most of the night, at least. Finally

the Proclaimer announced that sentence would be passed on three convicts who had been tried the preceding day.

"In the name of Ein and the Son of Grekh! Let the convicted ravisher, Ahren, be brought forth."

There was a clanking of chains as the convict was led in. A court attendant set pen, ink and parchment before the judge, who genuflected and leaned forward to write out the sentence. The blotted parchment was carried to the pulpit of the Proclaimer.

"Ahren, false follower of Ein, Deceiver from Pittam—on whom Ein's cure lie—you did enter into conversation with a daughter of Grekh in the absence of her brothers." This was a mere summary. "That you touched her not does not absolve you, for evil lies in intent, and is not diminished by degree of action."

He picked up the parchment, scanned it, and took up a weighty volume to one side, thumbing through the pages. Obviously, the judge had merely noted chapter and verse, which meant the law was to be enforced literally.

"Whatever Deceiver shall ravish a son or daughter of Grekh, that one shall surely be put to death."

The accused showed no con-

cern over the sentence, but tried to lift his chained left hand to trace the symbol of Ein in the air as was done on Pittam. Such blasphemy was provided against by the chains. The servants hurried him away.

Again the gong, and the Proclaimer's voice. "Let the convicted Unbeliever be brought forth."

Dondyke sat upright. This was why all Infidels in the district were compelled to attend court. He saw the condemned brought in, wearing the garb of a trader, a broad-brimmed hat shielding his face. Then he looked up where the sun was in decline. Time was nearly up.

"Thus sayeth Grekh: let not the Infidel, whatever his fault, be put to death without a chance to embrace Ein, the merciful; and let mercy be shown to the Unbeliever who testifies."

The judge leaned forward. "Unbeliever, you have refused to speak, and your silence has proven your guilt. Yet may your life be spared if you testify before me; and if you then answer our questions, further mercy shall be shown you."

Any Infidel could escape the death-sentence for any crime short of assassination of the Lord's Engineer by being converted. But it was rare for extra mercy to be offered for co-operation. It bespoke an unusual

case, and the lack of court-summaries indicated a political offense in the state-secret category.

"You have destroyed all evidence save the testimony of those who saw what they saw, but the record of all rests in your brain, Infidel," continued the judge. "By the will of Ein, this information can be obtained from you painlessly if you cooperate, or it can be agony if you resist."

Why didn't the fool testify?

They'd learn what they wanted to know in any event.

Dondyke's musings were cut short as the prisoner spoke. "I will testify."

*Corey's voice!* Then—the ship had been discovered! That was the crime, and a deadly one indeed. The ship had been destroyed—there was no way back! Now they'd get the full record of Corey's and Dondyke's mission. They'd hunt Dondyke down at once . . .

Corey must have held out as long as he could, hoping for summary execution.

Dondyke saw Corey straighten and turn, slightly, so that part of his profile was visible to the on-lookers. Then his voice rang out. "There is no Lord save Ein, and unto Pittam were the equations given!"

For an instant, all was silence—like the moment that follows a wreck, the moment before screams break out. Then rage was howling through the court. Dondyke leaped to his feet, the spell that had frozen him broken. But the Faithful in the front rows were swift in their vengeance. A dozen of them had leapt upon the blasphemer before the Earthling could take more than a step. He saw the flash of knives . . .

Dondyke staggered back, his brain numb. No eyes were on him. He was forgotten for the moment. Nothing could be done for Corey—nothing. Nor could anyone get any information from him. He'd taken the only way to conceal that.

Laird Dondyke turned and slipped softly toward the nearest exit, his mind racing, careful not to run yet, lest someone's attention should be drawn, before anyone remembered now that another Infidel was present.

He was running, though, when he realized that there was now no place to which he could run!

#### IV

He seemed to have been running forever—running and hiding, to dash on again. Long since, he'd ceased to notice

where his feet were taking him. The city was an unreal thing around him; the only reality was an ache that filled his body, and the weight of the film he carried. It was light enough, yet it seemed to drag him back. His fingers started to tear it away; then they dropped limply to his sides.

If it was found on him, the answer was death. If he threw it away, the result was the same. It had been with him too long, had soaked up his personal body-aura which machines here could detect. Mechanical bloodhounds would find him quickly and surely where men without them might fail. No amount of washing or disinfecting could wipe away the trace now; only time would dispel it, and time was against him.

It was night again, night with the streets nearly deserted; a magic quality lay over the city, magic that had been his friend many a night before. Beyond the wall, he heard a woman singing, and did not hear, for the voice in his brain was another voice and another woman. Then it was Corey's voice, whispering. "I have a feeling we're crowding our luck."

Dondyke turned, looking around him wildly, knowing in part that no one spoke to him, no one pursued. It was only a

fever from Specwry, striking at him tardily, now that he was exhausted physically and mentally. There were stars in the sky, stars that fell into unfamiliar patterns, and Dondyke yearned to find a ship to take him into the midst of their strangeness, to travel faster than thoughts that crowded upon him. He had to run faster, run to the ship.

There was no ship; the ship was gone. There was no ship; the way back was gone.

Then, abruptly, the sounds died; he felt a curlous, detached sensation, as if he were both standing outside himself and within; he could feel the semi-resilient pavement beneath his feet, hear the now-slowng beating of his heart, see occasional spots of light as he passed a tavern or latticed window, smell the air freshened by rain.

And the detached Dondyke looked about contemplatively and wondered what he would have done had he been in Corey's position.

"I'd have gambled," the other Dondyke replied instantly. "I'd have testified straight, joined up, looked for another day when I could beat the opposition at their own game. Bluff them—never say die . . ."

But the time would come when he'd have to say die, and know

it was real—when there was no way out, no choice but the manner of death, and perhaps not even that—only the way to take it. A time when no amount of imagination, bluff, swagger, bravado, or whatever would let him kick over the table and stop a game that was going against him, turn it into a contest on his own grounds!

"I can choose," protested the other Dondyke, defiantly. "I can always choose." He was breathing more easily now. "I can make my choice, and it's a free choice because no one can make it for me, or force me to accept any other choice against my will."

But only the choice itself was free; he hadn't picked the alternatives, and none of them were to his liking.

"I can still choose," the other Dondyke insisted, walking mechanically again. He'd adapt himself to this world, now; there was no other world for him. Change his appearance; play the game the way they demanded until a break came . . .

But he couldn't fool them; there were attitudes and ways he hadn't learned. They'd spot him, no matter what he tried.

The night had somehow gone, the sun was golden above his head before he knew it was there again. The voice within him sank

back into the depths and he came to a stop, slipping back into the shadows of an alley. He had to stop, to think this out . . .

There was a child in front of him, a small boy looking up at him. He could hear the boy's steps, and a sudden tearing sound from above that jerked his eyes up. On the roof of the building, one of the big tiles was slipping, just over the child.

A burst of strength sent Dondyke leaping out into the sun, to seize the toddler, take a few quick steps and set him down as the tile thudded to the pavement. Then the scene blurred; there was a hand on his arm. He couldn't be caught now—he had to hide, to change himself, to adapt!

Then . . . a face before him, a wise and gentle face, and an old man's hands were guiding him to a place out of the street. He crossed a patio, entered a house, and the old man's hands were leading him to a couch.

There was sleep, then, pierced by dreams which shivered into nothing when he stirred to momentary wakefulness, and he heard the sound of rain. Rain entered into his dreams, and voices—voices that echoed his inner torments of the night and other voices that came from without, crying for the Infidel.

## V

He was awake and himself again. He opened his eyes and saw an old man seated on a cushion beside his couch, smoking a pipe and watching him with the patient eyes of one to whom eternity is nothing. Without knowing how he knew, the Earthling realized that the voices from outside had been those of Peacemakers, demanding him.

But the old one had sent them away. And Dondyke recognized him now—Kalin, the First Hypothetician, second highest religious authority on the planet, subordinate only to the Son of Grekh, the Lord's Engineer himself.

"Why did you tell them I wasn't here?" he asked.

"I did not tell them so. They asked me for an Unbeliever and I said that none was here."

"But—Kalin, I'm Laird Dondyke, Earthman and Infidel, wanted by the authorities."

The Hypothetician nodded, then arose and drew the curtains, admitting a stream of golden sunlight that seemed to play about his hair. Dondyke could look out into the courtyard and the street beyond, but the glass was transparent only one way. "True," the old man said. "You are Dondyke—but no Infidel, I



think. Your action was that of a son of Grekh, and I see the hand of Ein bringing you here."

The fugitive shook his head, trying to brush away mental cobwebs. He raised himself on an elbow and found the movement an exertion. No matter now, even if he could stand; he knew servants were near, and could enter the nearly bare room—bare except for the couch, the cushion, and a small table—before he could reach the doorway.

"I don't understand," he said. "The way you say it, it must mean something important to you; but these matters mean very little to me."

Kalin smiled slowly, then clapped his hands, and a servant entered, bearing food and drink on a tray. He put them on the table, and Dondyke could see no weapon.

"Eat, drink, and hear me," Kalin said. "You do not know what you did. They tell me you came into this sector like a man in a trance. There was no thought of what this act might mean to you; you did it without calculation or even impulse that you knew." He made a sign and the servant left, returning with a small boy.

The child ran to the oldster and climbed upon his lap. Kalin stroked the boy's head. "Do you remember this boy, Dondyke?"

The features were familiar, but Dondyke could not place them. "I . . . I . . ." He paused, wondering why his speech failed him. "I think I have seen him, or a child very much like him, somewhere . . ."

"This is my grandson, the last gift of descendants from Ein; it pleased Ein that my seed brought forth girls only, and I loved them, yet what man seeks not a son in his image? Of my daughters, none remain in this world. But she who was my favored child gladdened my heart with a man-child ere she returned to the relative.

"You, Dondyke, are a hunted man. You fled from pursuit last night, knowing your life forfeit. Yet when day came, you moved from the shadows to the light where all watchers could see you clearly. You came straight to pick up this child and bear him to safety."

He paused and considered Dondyke. "There is no evil in you—youth and wildness, but the substance of Evil dwells not in you. I tell you, Dondyke, Ein has sent you here just as Holy War with Speewry comes."

There was laughter in Dondyke's belly, coming up into his throat, but when he looked at the old man and the child again, his mockery died within him. When he spoke, his voice was

soft. "These things have never meant anything to me; why should they now? I have heard of your god, but it means little to me." He sat up suddenly, breathing heavily. "Bah! Am I a sniveler, to go fawning after religion I cared nothing for all my life, or bargain with a god I paid no heed when I thought the game was mine? No! I do not mock you, Kalin—or Ein—but I don't do homage, either."

The old man nodded, then arose and went out of the room, hand in hand with the boy. Dondyke sank back on the couch. He was a fool. He'd spit on the last chance he'd probably get. He'd be treated well enough—until he was well enough to be taken away. His fingers searched his clothing until he found the object he had forgotten since he left the court; they hadn't searched him.

## VI

Kalin came again the following day, but made no reference to their previous conversation. He spoke of other Terrestrials he had met, and asked Dondyke about his home planet. Yet he always stopped short of asking leading questions. And he asked about Dondyke's health.

"It's damned strange, Hypothetician; I've gone through

worse strains than this without keeling over."

"There are some sicknesses no doctor can find, Dondyke, for Ein works in a way beyond all understanding. He has made us all different, and you he has made as he has made you; you call yourself Infidel, yet your heart gives lie to your tongue. You can remove this lie, which your mind insists on, but your heart rejects. Submit to your heart, Dondyke, and know what your intellect tells you is weakness for the strength it is. There is war within you, and the battle drains you; you need strength for a greater war."

"You really believe this, don't you, Kalin?"

The Hypothetician's face was grave, and his gentle voice took on a more forbidding tone. "We know much about you—I and those who have watched you many months, here and on Speewry, Ein disrupt it! My watchers have reported, and from many small pieces, I have made a picture. I know what you carry with you, Dondyke!"

The Earthling started and swore beneath his breath. He'd given himself away like a tyro. He tried to get up.

"Ein has taken your strength from you; yet, this and more can be returned to you if you submit to him."

"And if I refuse?"

"As Ein wills, so shall it be. Yet you but fill a design, since Ein is the master of stratagem. Are you afraid to make a test, Dondyke?"

"What kind of a test?"

"One which I, too, shall share. For I stake my faith that if you testify, your strength will return."

"Suppose it doesn't?"

Kalin stroked his beard. "We shall take the object from you and you will be given safe passage to Speewry—or Pittam, if you like, be it cursed. Do you fear the test?"

Dondyke smiled bitterly. Back to Speewry or Pittam! The old one would keep his promise—the Act of Faith was the most sacred task in the worlds of Ein. But much good it would do in the other hostile worlds. What could he lose? Testify straight; join up; see if they could be bested at their own game.

He drew a deep breath, almost regretting his decision at the old man's expression of joy. "I'll testify: *There is no Lord save Ein, and unto Grekh were the equations given.*"

Kalin beamed. "Now is the substance of Ein in you, Dondyke. Tomorrow, believe it, my son, you will be whole. You wish to see the Lord's Engineer, do you not?"

"I'd planned to," the Earthling admitted.

"So shall it be. I have told no one of what you have. You shall tell him. But Ein dispenses knowledge to those whom he will, and it is best to be prepared. Your heart has spoken but your mind still follows your own purposes. Let it be so, but I shall prepare you."

## VII

Way was made for Dondyke as he pushed on, noting the landmarks, until he came to the great dome that was the Engineer's palace. It lay a short distance from other dwellings and markets, pure white in color, and apparently unbroken. The fact that he had come this far unmolested told Dondyke that he would not be hindered, even though some of the populace showed their dislike. He would be admitted to the Engineer's palace. After that . . .

There were no guards outside, no visible signs of temporal power. He came up to the dome and stepped on a golden flagstone, marvelling again at the deceptive technology of the worlds of Ein. He stood and waited until an opening appeared in the dome, seemingly by magic; a small crowd watched from a respectful distance, mur-

muring in awe as the Earthling stepped through the portal, which vanished behind him.

Bright gold lined an imitation vault above his head; the inner surface was flecked with silver stars at its top, symbols of the Faithful of the visible manifestation of Ein. On the walls, the gold was interlaced with arabesques of mathematical notations and signs, woven into fantastic patterns; the floor was a huge mosaic of differential equations, surrounding an enormous infinity symbol. Here it signified that all existence—past, present, future and their infinite bypaths—was contained within the Infinite substance of Ein.

The antechamber was vacant, save for a man seated on a hassock. He wore the robes of high and trusted service in temporal matters—white, trimmed with gold; but the absence of the infinity symbol on his garments proclaimed him an Unbeliever. The Engineer made use of whatever material Ein sent to the children of Grekh.

Unbelievers who held public office on Grekh had no names. This man was known only as the Lord's Designer, and Dondyke had met him before. The official looked at the Earthling for a moment, then said, "You were a fool to return, Laird Dondyke.

There can be no mercy for you in the eyes of the Son of Grekh; your deceit is known."

Had Kalin betrayed him, after all? No, it didn't sound right; the Designer must be referring to his conversion. He smiled. "By the cones of Ein, Lord Designer, I speak fact. I have seen the First Hypothetician, Kalin, and have testified before him; it is as a subject and fellow-Believer that I crave an audience with the Lord's Engineer."

"A scoundrel as well as a fool but that is hardly news." There was a suggestion of a smile on the other's face that belied his words. "By Ein himself, I like you, Dondyke, and I'll do what I can. But you've leaped into the fire. As an Infidel, you had certain immunities which you lost the moment you became a convert." He shook his head and stroked his short beard. "You should have waited, conversion too early can be as fatal as too late. Well, you're warned; I can do little more than make suggestions to His Intellect."

"You underestimate your influence. I'd rather have it for me than against me."

"I am as Ein made me," the other said diffidently. He lowered his voice. "I hope you took time to learn the True Abstractions. If you knew the Extrapolations as well, it wouldn't

hurt—though that could hardly be expected from a fresh convert."

Dondyke shrugged. The Designer took out a pipe and lit it. "Bah! You tried to abduct a daughter of Grekh. You know there can be no compatibility between the children of Grekh and Unbelievers."

Dondyke nodded and frowned. "I knew it. Wheuce I came, my language, my skin color—all are irrelevant. It doesn't matter. I could be the Engineer's son, and if I didn't believe . . ."

He tried to say the words lightly, but there was realization in him of their seriousness. He was bound to the worlds of Ein now. Alanna, who hadn't been in his plans, had indirectly put him in that position. They could have gone directly to the ship and have been safely back to Earth by now. But she had existed, he had seen her . . . that was all.

"I learned the True Abstractions and the Extrapolations and the Postulates of Ein, for your information. I can plead my case. *'Thus sayeth Grekh—knowledge and intelligence and great cunning may there be among the Infidel, yet, children, let not thyself be misled; for from Ein alone comes understanding; and without Ein, knowledge is empty recitation, intelligence a de-*

*lusion, and the cunning shall devise their own downfall.'*" The Earthling exhaled, grinning.

Behind the Designer, a spot on the wall glowed and spread to form a large circle. It became translucent, then transparent, until it appeared to be a portal through which any could pass. To the ignorant, this was magic; to the educated among the Faithful, the use of Ein's will by certain procedures. Dondyke knew that energy machines below the dome had altered the vibrational patterns in the area so that solid objects still vibrating at normal rate in this world could pass through as water passed through sand. There would be no resistance.

The Designer nodded. "So be it. Now we consult His Intellect."

The room they entered was only slightly larger than the antechamber, containing only a video screen and a desk, behind which sat the Lord's Engineer, first among the sons of Grekh. Unlike the potentates of the other two worlds—the flabby Son of Speewry, under the thumbs of his wives, and the monkish Son of Pittam, who spent all his time on theology and left administration to peculating viziers—this man bore a reasonable resemblance to the adulatory descriptions of him. Like the ancient Saladin of Earth, he could

be a man who made history, rather than being its object.

Alone among the multitudes of the Faithful, this man wore pure white, and the golden infinity symbol lay directly over his heart. He affected no rings, bracelets, turban or other covering on his head, no jewelled garters, or fur-trimmed shoes, as were worn by most of the lesser officials.

Dondyke followed the Designer, waiting for him to repeat the salutation. *Relativity rests in all Being*, and for the Son of Grekh to trace the infinity symbol with his left hand. The ruler motioned his Designer to a seat at his right and Dondyke to another, in front of the desk.

"The ways of Ein are beyond all formulation," he said. "Is the Unbeliever driven by madness that he returns to us?"

Dondyke remembered Kalin's explicit instructions. No matter what the ruler said to him, his first response must be, "To the Intellect of the Lord become flesh would I testify." He put as much conviction into the phrase as his voice could muster.

"Whoever would testify, let him be heard without prejudice."

Dondyke performed the genuflection, tracing the infinity symbol in the air with two fingers of his left hand, starting at the top;

if he erred, it would be his last mistake.

*"There is no Lord save Ein, and unto Grekh were the equations given."*

Now the Son of Grekh bowed his head, hearing and speaking as both priest and potentate, for there could be no division between church and state here. "Ein be in thy words, True Believer; speak to me now of the True Abstractions."

This phrase was meant literally; to these people, the words of Ein were Ein, as were the symbols and genuflections; the very substance of the god was in them, and the slightest alteration in their structure obliterated the godhead from them, leaving them open to the substance of Evil.

The convert drew in a deep breath. Faulty memory, of course, betrayed the substance of Evil in the speaker, unmasked him as a Deceiver.

*"Upon a far world did Ein create the races of Man, and to great estates did he raise them. But the substance of Evil, warring with the Lord, infiltrated many unwary ones among men, bringing forth heresies, blasphemies, and schisms, driving men to destruction until at last the planet itself approached annihilation. Yet Ein, who is master of stratagem, knew all the*

*stratagems of Evil; and unto Grekh did the Lord reveal the Equations, bidding him to construct. And Grekh gathered followers about him, constructing as the Equations of the Lord directed, that they might seek safety in a distant world, as Ein willed.*

*"Now with Grekh were two followers, Pittam and Speewry, be they cursed, into whom the substance of Evil crept; by stealth did they copy the Equations that they might deceive and traduce the children of Grekh when they had come to the world where the Lord directed them, and which they named after Grekh. And, by Evil, were two similar worlds created, and placed in the same system as Grekh; thither came the accursed Pittam and Speewry, and their followers, calling themselves also children of Ein.*

*"Yet only unto Grekh were the Equations given, and when Ein wills, as happens all that happens by his will, then shall the False Followers be destroyed."*

The Lord's Engineer raised his head, made the infinity symbol, then pressed a button on his desk. An instant later, a servant entered through another spot in the wall, bearing a tray which she placed on the desk. As she saluted, then turned to exit, Dondyke found himself regret-

ting that the Designer insisted upon maintaining his status of honored Infidel; the daughters of Grekh had to cover themselves completely from the eyes of Unbelievers—happily, though, the law did not specify the material that should make up their clothing, and the Earthling appreciated the fact that the girl's garments couldn't have been more sheer. The ruler took the lid off the tray, motioned to the objects thereon. "Eat, then, of the cones of Ein, True Believer."

He'd passed the first test; Ein only knew how many more there would be. Dondyke tried to remember what he'd picked up of the postulates of Ein, the common law, constantly swelling, which made up the volumes from which the official Proclaimers chanted, prefacing each quotation with, "Thus sayeth Grekh."

According to the ritual, Dondyke picked up one of the small ice cream cones with his right hand; the Designer wound his saah about the finger of his right hand and took the second cone; the current Son of Grekh then picked up the remaining cone with his left hand. The two Believers ate their cones, while the Designer replaced his on the tray. When they had finished, the ruler of Grekh spoke again.

"There are those who call falsely upon Ein, and Believers

may be deceived thereby even I, when Ein so wills; but the True Believer and child of Grekh alone can perform an Act of Faith. Your testimony has been heard, Dondyke; choose your task, as is required when the Infidel dedicates himself to Ein. For know that the True Believer cannot err in the rightness of his choice."

And that, Dondyke thought, was the second test.

The Lord's Engineer, or anyone else here, could afford to make ritual acceptance of the Earthling's conversion, so long as he testified and performed the initial ritual correctly. But verbal declarations would not be taken as final; they would give him all the instruction he wished in these simple matters, but none would assist the neophyte as to what sort of task was appropriate for his Act of Faith.

A True Believer was supposed to know. If he was not pretending, then he had literally been entered into by the substance of Ein, and error in religious matters was now impossible.

He glanced at the Designer now, and nodded, as if to admit that he saw why the other hadn't joined. As a professed Unbeliever, the man had definite rights, and certain advantages over the Faithful, so long as he obeyed the laws and paid tribute; in some ways, he could live

more securely than a Believer, so long as he remembered the essentials. But strait and hard was the way for any person not bred in the environment of the culture, if he wished to become a member of the consensus. A native might atone satisfactorily for minor deviations, but not a convert—one slip proved the conversion deceit, and the convert himself an embodiment of the substance of Evil.

Dondyke smiled grimly as these thoughts ran through his mind, as much at himself as at the wry humor behind it. It would be swift at worst, he thought. They didn't go in for torture; they would look on him as Ein's instrument of testing their vigilance, show him courtesy because Ein had presented him in the form of a man, and politely introduce him to the vibration chamber.

He thought of the jests that would pass around the Terrestrial Administration office as time went by without his return, but the picture refused to stick with him. He took a deep breath, bringing his thoughts into focus.

"The Equations of Ein," he said, "were put onto microfilm—as were the deceptions of Pittam and Speewry, be they cursed! All in all, there were hundreds of



rolls of film, containing wisdom of all kinds, which Grekh included for True Believers for days then to come."

"All this is manifestly so," agreed the Lord's Engineer, "but let us come to the point."

"I am at the point, Your Intellect. One of these rolls was stolen not long ago, and the theft was traced to the Deceivers of Speewry. Many children of Grekh have returned to the relative in attempts to recover the sacred film; but if I have not been misguided, Ein has not yet willed its delivery into your hands."

The ruler nodded. "And you, Laird Dondyke, do choose this for your Act of Faith?"

Dondyke shook his head. "There is no longer any need, Your Intellect." He reached into the pocket and unzipped the leather pouch, sighing with relief as his fingers touched the metal container. He placed it on the desk. "Ein has willed that the sacred film be returned to you now."

The Son of Grekh stood up, his eyes fixed upon the container; he reached beneath his blouse to bring out a small object that looked like a pendant. With his left hand, the ruler picked up the container and placed the tip of the object against it. At once, the metal

began to glow; then, as the Lord's Engineer traced the infinity symbol, it split open and a roll of film popped out upon the desk.

"Verily, Ein wills that I behold a miracle," breathed the Designer. "Dondyke, you didn't cart it off to carry it back in your pocket, did you?"

Laird Dondyke laughed easily now. "Hardly. Though even that wouldn't have been impossible, had Ein so willed," he added judiciously. He turned to face the Son of Grekh. "This I confess freely, Your Intellect. When I started out after the sacred film, I was an Unbeliever, and it was in my thoughts to use the film for a bargaining-point with you. But I came to know that only the will of Ein could have delivered it to me, and permitted me to bring it to you. I am here, but not to bargain. I appear before Your Intellect as a repentant sinner, hopeful of the mercy for which you are known and praised daily by the Faithful."

"The Lord has willed that we who rule or assist in ruling should temper justice with mercy where the offender repents," the Son of Grekh said. He looked at the Designer. "What would you say in this case?"

The other shook his head. "My understanding is but sufficient to

hear and obey; yet it would seem that mercy would not be wasted."

"Ein gives you a sage tongue, honored Inſidel. And truly, it would seem that Ein is in you, Dondyke. There can be neither admonishment nor chastisement for your sins of yesterday, for Ein willed them that you might be brought onto him. And whatever favor you wish shall be so, if Ein wills." Before Dondyke could reply, he pushed a stud on his desk and spoke into a microphone, then turned to the Earthling. "The maiden shall be sent to you without delay!"

Dondyke blinked, but he knew thanks were not in order here. He hadn't expected that. But he controlled himself. "Then let me speak to the Protector of the Faithful. Speewry, on whom Ein's curso rest, plots war against us. I saw the preparations—part of them—while I was there. I don't know exactly what they have, but they're confident of success, and act as if they mean to strike soon."

"We have heard." The ruler touched the roll of film. "In this Ein has dictated the secret of their doom and our safety. Herein lie the secret names of many things, including that of their world. We shall construct according to the sacred Equations, as Ein wills, and the secret name of Speewry may be broadcast

with such intensity that the accursed world returns to the relative."

Dondyke found it hard not to shudder. Behind the religious mummary, he knew, there lay solid technology—the secrets he'd been sent to steal. They had vibrational weapons that could do amazing things to matter. But it was all magic on the surface.

He'd read something about the legends of secret names on Earth, the "numina" of objects. Perhaps it wasn't a name, but a key vibration. Hit the "secret name" of a water-glass on a violin, and the glass shattered.

He finished the interview and went out eagerly to meet Alanna again. But his thoughts were on the test of the Act of Faith. In war time it might be worse than usual.

## VIII

There was no literal sword over his head, but Dondyke was learning what Damocles must have gone through; he felt like the man who had taken the king's place only to learn why Damocles was happy to hire a substitute. Corey's words echoed again; it had been too easy, so far . . .

It was too easy. He had the feeling that, if the circumstances

hadn't occurred as they had, some other happening would have landed him in the same position. Kalin had said he knew what the Earthling was carrying, but Kalin had seemed unsurprised.

He'd been playing their game for them all along, he thought; the theory wasn't flattering to him, but it seemed to have some rationality. He tried to tabulate the factors.

Item: the Equations had been stolen from Grekh, and from Pittam; no doubt of that. The entire populace had been too moved for it to be a put-up job, and Dondyke and Corey weren't important enough to trap in such elaborate ways.

No; their usefulness had come after the event.

Item: the Equations were necessary for the war; whoever had them could build whatever weapon it was which would annihilate the other two.

Therefore, Grekh had been forced to get the film back.

Item: a number of the Faithful had perished in the attempt to recover the stolen film—True Believers of Grekh. He and Corey had arrived on Speewry shortly after one plot was uncovered and had attended the trials. No put-up there.

Therefore, it should not have been simple for Corey and him

to steal the film; yet, when all was said and done, they had accomplished it with comparative ease.

Why? Either agents of Grekh on Speewry had run interference for the Unbelievers, assuming they could get information which a native of any of the three worlds could not—since this was a sacred matter and their religious training would force them to betray themselves; or else Speewry had wanted the film returned to Grekh!

The first would explain the absence of pursuit from Speewry, and also how Kalin knew as well as why Dondyke was sent to the Lord's Engineer. The other explanation would account for everything, too—perhaps even better. Either way, it looked as if his part had been written for him. But why should Speewry be willing to let Grekh have its sacred Equations back when they were necessary for constructing a weapon? Why had there been only one copy in the first place? Why didn't anyone know the contents of the film, at least?

Of course, he knew that the Believers on all three worlds were certain that the other two worlds would be destroyed. The return of the film would be a sign that Ein willed the immediate annihilation of Speewry.

If it had been taking place anywhere else, the answers would be simple: the Equations had been tampered with, then resealed. Speewry had taken the originals, made a copy with significant alterations, and waited for agents of Grekh to steal them back. All the failures could have been window dressing; when Speewry was ready, the next attempt at recovery could be successful.

As it had been!

But this was not Earth. Here only the implements of the rulers could open the containers. Corey had known how to cut the container open and reseal it without leaving a trace. But no one on the worlds of Ein had developed such tools. Dondyke was certain of that.

He arose from the couch in the palatial apartment they'd given him, and strode to the window, oblivious of Alanna beside him.

"My lord is pensive," she said. "Grekh sayeth that a man should speak his heart to his sister, lest his thoughts fester."

Dondyke looked at her and around the apartment. Any other time, he'd have enjoyed this. Lord, he wished he could talk with her about it all; she was smart enough. But Ein couldn't save him if he let on.

"Is my lord displeased with his sister?"

She knew damned well he wasn't. He sighed and said, "I await inspiration."

And that was true enough. They had accepted his conversion so quickly that it must mean his Act of Faith would be "inappropriate"—unless it was something too good for them to pass up. Either way, they couldn't lose.

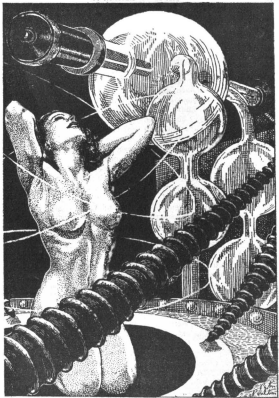
She smiled and beckoned him back to the couch, to stroke his hair. "It will come when Ein wills. Even as our hearts were gladdened in his time, so shall revelation be yours when Ein wills."

The trouble was, he liked it here. He wouldn't have gone back to Earth now, even if a ship awaited him. Even Speewry's getting ready to attack didn't bother him too much. But there was something . . .

Something he knew but didn't know he knew. Those equations had to be the right ones; the machine had to work. But if he could get a look at things, perhaps . . .

He'd better do something, and do it fast, if he didn't want to wind up going to the relative.

A servant entered to announce the Lord's Designer, and Alanna arose. "I cannot be seen thus," she said regretfully. "And I



think you would like to speak to the Infidel alone."

"Now, my sweet," Dondyke protested, "I haven't any secrets . . ."

"Not now, perhaps." She shrugged engagingly. "But in time. Oh, don't look so pained, my lord. I wasn't born during this consensus. A woman can become bored, you know, when things are too easy." She kissed him enigmatically. "I want to find out how much I attract you when there is some competition." She left the room while he was still open-mouthed.

Dondyke closed his mouth and grinned. "There's much to be said for the worlds of Ein," he said as his visitor entered.

"Honor to thee, most reverend saint," the Designer greeted him with too wide a grin.

"Most . . . what?"

The Designer made himself comfortable and accepted a drink from the servant. "Oh, you're a saint, all right; you may as well resign yourself to the promotion."

"I thought saints were supposed to be ascetic and rather unsanitary hermits," the Earthling objected.

The official raised his glass. "Not on Grekh. Oh, there are a few mystics who go for the anchorite existence—but they're

usually too old for anything else, anyway. The Son of Grekh humors them so they won't get in the way. If you disapprove, you can vote against them in the next consensus."

"Oh," muttered Dondyke. "And how does that work, if it isn't a state secret."

"It isn't. Very simple. The laws and morals of the planet are determined by a consensus of the Faithful every year; each brother and sister writes whatever alterations he feels should be made in the laws; since the consensus is made up of people containing the substance of Ein, it cannot be wrong, so the majority wins."

Dondyke lit a pipe interestedly. "You mean actually an honest, democratic election? No votes thrown out, no ballot-boxes stuffed?"

"Strictly on the level. Of course, every True Believer performs an Act of Faith between each consensus, and the plebiscite is held among the survivors."

"But what about the malcontents? There must be some who don't like things as they are. What's to prevent them from agitating and swinging others to their way of seeing matters?"

The other took a long drink and stretched. "Ein misguides whom he will. I have noticed

that a man or woman who doesn't fit tends to be faulty in his choice of appropriate Acts of Faith. It looks easy, Dondyke, but a demagogue would find it very difficult to make headway here. Even a few Sons of Grekh have returned to the relative while performing Acts of Faith."

Dondyke started to pace the floor. "That stumps me. I know that theoretically I don't have to choose anything vast and heroic, but I have a feeling that only something big will be appropriate."

"You always insist upon doing things the hard way. If it was the girl you wanted, you could have gotten her without conversion."

"Now he tells me!"

"And the job would have been intricate enough to hold your interest, I'm sure, although not quite as dangerous. After all, I'm not without companionship. Any woman who is not the wife of a Believer is automatically a maiden, irrespective of her state of innocence. Quite a number of maidens choose the comforting of worthy Infidels as their Act of Faith—always the possibility of making a convert."

He puffed on his pipe. "As long as a maiden's faith is sufficient, the substance of Evil can-

not enter her; contrariwise, so long as she shows no sign of being infected with Evil . . . you see? Only legal marriage is ruled out."

"Yeah." Dondyke abridged. "Alanna has enough between the ears to keep me interested, anyway. She's deferential without being too damn submissive. I'm not exactly used to women being slaves, though, even as well treated as these are."

"Oh, they aren't," said the Designer. "Study the Postulates of Ein and you'll see that women are not to be regarded as inferior. Men are better adapted for some activities, women for others. You'll find quite a few women in business, as a matter of fact; they aren't forbidden to compete with men, although . . ."

"Et cetera," the Earthing broke in.

Alanna came in, fully dressed, and bowed to the Designer. "I hope you have cheered my lord," she said.

"I am thinking of Spewry, on whom Ein's curse rest," Dondyke told her. He was, too. He'd killed before, but was the murder of a world no worse than killing one man? They meant to destroy Grekh just as thoroughly, of course . . . why should he balk at homicide in self-defense?

"All our days are numbered, beloved," she said. "And if the

day of the Deceiver is on him, should we not praise Ein and be glad?"

But an entire planet!

"Verily," he sighed. "But my heart is sad, Alanna, at the thought of more than a few children of Grekh, who, for various reasons of Faith dwell upon that accursed world. Will our weapons spare them?"

"This is in the hands of Ein, who calls all to him when and how he wills."

"To call them home," put in the Designer, "would be the same as advertising our plans."

"Evil is not entirely ignorant," said the girl, "nor is it powerless, my lord. Were it easy to overcome and were the struggle pleasant at all times, what merit would there be in the victory? They are as safe in Ein's hands there as they are here."

Dondyke lifted his shoulders and let them fall. This was the answer he knew would be forthcoming; it represented the general opinion—the consensus. There could be no partial measures among the Faithful when total annihilation of the enemy was possible. But what would Believers do for tests when all enemies were gone—or had the argument of necessary evil been thrashed out already?

As if he had been reading the

Earthling's mind, the Designer said meditatively, "I believe there have been those in the past who wondered if Ein really willed the destruction of all Deceivers. The argument was that there would be nothing further for the Faithful to do."

Alanna smiled. "I remember this from my studies; it troubled me until my instructor assured me that there was a simple answer which I'd see by myself after I'd thought about it more thoroughly."

"I am sure," the Designer put in, "that Dondyke has already deduced it; but alas, lacking Faith and having studied little, it escapes me."

Alanna stroked the Earthling's face. "Surely my lord knows that Ein is greatest and can easily devise new tests for the True Believers when those enemies we see before us have been wiped away. There is no need for us to fret about what such tests may be, or how we should meet them; when the time comes, as Ein wills, then shall we face them."

"Umm, yes," murmured Dondyke. "There's an old saw about the Lord never closing one door before opening another."

"A saying of Unbelievers," she denied. "Pitiful souls who follow a false faith and expect it to do everything for them. We



know, now, that Ein closes and unlocks doors about us, but we must find them ourselves, through Faith and his will."

Dondyke reached for wine. This had the earmarks of an all-night discussion of Faith.

It was.

## IX

In the Designer's quarters, the Earthling could breathe and speak more freely; there seemed to be no spying and listening in upon Honored Infidels—or at least, none of the insistent, nagging variety. He could speak freely, so long as no True Believers were in the same room.

"I'm still far from eager for the honor of murdering a planet," he said. "But I haven't any taste for martyrdom, either; if it's my neck or theirs . . ."

The other shrugged. "It would have come about sooner or later. The basic facts are all there, and Terrestrials who've come here in the last few decades have given us the technical details. I might add that it's damned close, Dondyke; Spewry and Pittam aren't far behind us—if they aren't breathing down our necks. Ein knows which will strike first, and under the circumstances I'm for us."

"Yeah. That's the way I ought to feel about it. Something's

happened to me, damn it all; maybe I'm losing my sand. If we had to stand off an invasion, it wouldn't bother me, but this push-button stuff . . ."

"Dondyke," the Designer said, "if I were sure that the weapon would actually kill them, my conscience might be troubled, too. But I don't think it will necessarily harm them at all."

"You mean it won't work?"

The Designer lowered his voice. "For our own heads, it had better. I mean I'm not sure they will be killed off. You've seen how the portals appear and disappear; the vibration rate is altered, so that matter becomes immaterial from our standpoint; but when it's brought back, it hasn't been changed in any way that I can see.

"I've managed to experiment with animals. They haven't been harmed. I think most likely the inhabitants of Spewry will just suddenly find themselves somewhere else. They won't know when it happens, and as long as the planet isn't transported into the middle of something or too near or far from another sun, the odds are they won't be harmed. Psychologically, they have built-in protection—Ein has wrought a miracle, to preserve them from the Deceivers of Pittam and . . ." He broke off and tapped his chest.

Dondyke chuckled. "Beautiful. But what is to prevent them from vibrating themselves right back, as soon as they build their own machine, if they don't already have it?"

"Theoretically, nothing! In actual cases, their chance of discovering the precise vibration phase that sent them off in any definite time is just about zero. It's quite a method of disposing of enemies. To the Faithful, they will have been shot straight into some sort of limbo."

Dondyke stretched as he got up. "Well, that's some relief. Damn, this living like a prince and saint combined gets dull fast. I'd like it every now and then—but I can't take a steady diet of it."

"You're supposed to be meditating on your Act of Faith, if you don't remember. Time means little to the True Believer; you have until the next consensus—about seven months—although, in your case, I wouldn't overstretch the meditation."

"I am meditating, day and night. Listen, there's something fishy in this business." He told the Designer a carefully modified account of the expedition to Speewry, which managed to include most of what puzzled him. "Doesn't it sound a bit phoney to you?"

The Designer was lost in thought for a while. "I think your first explanation is the most likely. We have a number of spies on Speewry, posing as True Believers of that world; as Acts of Faith, some have even testified to the Hypothetician of Speewry. There could have been collusion you knew nothing about."

Dondyke shook his head, feeling as if the eggshells all about him were going to crack any moment. "But why couldn't they do as much for one of their own crowd, before this?"

"Did it ever occur to you, Laird, that the man who returned the Equations would automatically become a person of tremendous importance? You thought of it—but you didn't think far enough." He leaned forward. "The equations had to be recovered, of course—but by the right person. If wrong persons chose the mission for an Act of Faith, they had to fail. But no honor could be too great for Unbelievers, since they would represent no political danger. *Had you declined conversion*, Dondyke, I could predict a great and happy future for you. As things are, you're in the balance; you're a popular hero, true, but the question arises of how you'll use your weight. The fact that you are still relatively

ignorant of many fine points of theology, known instinctively by the natives, may save you yet—if you survive!”

“I know some math,” the Earthling said. “If I could see the Equations and check them over . . .”

The other shook his head. “Out of the question, I’m afraid.”

“And I don’t suppose you could give me any kind of hint as to what might be an appropriate Act of Faith?”

“Not at the moment. Dondyke, I’m a lowly Infidel and don’t comprehend such fine matters of truth. I mean it; they’re beyond me. That’s why I never succumbed to the temptation to become converted.”

The Earthling considered it for a moment. “Obviously, the Act should be connected with my special talents. Umm, I might be able to assist with the construction. How’s it going?”

“It moves along.”

“I mean, when will the first tests be made?”

“Tests?” The Designer stared at the Earthling as if the latter had lost his reason, then started to laugh. He poured Dondyke some wine, still chortling, wiping away tears with his other hand. “I could blackmail the eye-teeth away from you if I were

dishonest,” he gasped. “For awhile, you almost had me wondering if you’d really been converted; you nearly convinced me. But if you expect tests to be made . . .”

Dondyke’s mouth opened, but no words came out.

“Oh, True Believer,” roared the Designer, “how does anything that happens come to pass?”

“Why . . . by the will of Ein, of course.”

“And how does everything happen?”

“By the will of . . . God!” Dondyke gulped his wine hastily and reached for the bottle. “I never thought of that.”

“Precisely, unfinished son of Grekh. Anything and everything that happens represents the specific will of Ein at that instant: it does not establish a law of nature. There’s no such thing as cause and effect, but only one law. Water flows downhill today and the day before and the day before that? Ein willed it, each time; he may not will likewise next time. Chemicals combine? Ein wills it. Repeat it a thousand times and it comes out the same? Well, it may be that Ein shall will further repetition, so we will make note of our observations of Ein; but we cannot take them for granted.”

“But . . .” protested the Earth-

ling, "how is machinery kept in order here? How can it be kept working? How do you repair it?"

The Designer smiled. "Scientists here spend their lives in observing what Ein has willed in steady sequences; when their Faith is firm, and they ask the right questions, they get the right answers. And the Lord's Engineer has wisely chosen to let Infidels do most of the field work, under the supervision of the Faithful, of course. The sons of Grekh excel in mathematics but they aren't good mechanics, so Unbelievers do most of the construction jobs.

"It's a matter of Faith; those who supervise technics and the Infidels do so as Acts of Faith. I'm afraid, Laird, that if the vibrator doesn't do exactly what is expected of it the very first time—without tests—your career as a member of the consensus will be brief."

"I'm not building it!"

"Nooo. But you delivered the sacred film bearing the basic Equations, and you were an Infidel during most of the period when they were in your possession. You may have practiced some sort of deceit; the best you could hope for is routine execution."

Dondyke frowned. "I thought

torture wasn't the fashion here."

"In your case, routine execution might not be regarded as entirely sufficient. Officially, torture doesn't exist, but on rare and special occasions, a condemned man will fall into the hands of indignant citizens." The Designer motioned for silence as the wall glowed and a servant entered bearing a message in a sealed envelope. They waited until the man had departed. "He's supposed to be a mute, but one can never tell; it might be an Act of Faith." He opened the envelope and read the contents.

Dondyke stared into his glass. Then he shrugged. "So I return to my sainthood and my soft living and wait for something to happen. I hope the ability of the vibrator team is on a par with the Faith of their sponsors."

"They're capable enough, and the supervisors have been chosen for their outstanding piety—in proper rituals while the work progresses, that is. And to take notes."

"Then it's all in the hands of Ein. What's the day?"

"Tomorrow. That's what was in the communication. I'm supposed to summon you. Well, you're here, so why not stay? I can offer all manner of diver-

sions—unless you'd rather try more philosophy with Alanna."

Dondyke grinned. "Why not?"

## X

Airplanes were unknown in the worlds of Ein, and space-ships were operated only by Unbelievers. But the Lord's Engineer had a dirigible, which was used for occasions of high ceremony. It was ornate, shining gold and decorations on the outside; but the furnishings in the smallish gondola were as simple as those in the Engineer's office.

Dondyke reflected upon his first arrival on Grekh, as well as on Pittam and Speewry. He and Corey had landed in an uninhabited spot and concealed the ship, then made their way into the nearest town on foot. The similarity of experience on all three worlds was that no one among the natives ever questioned him as to whence he came. He was there, and his presence was accepted; only his religion was of interest. In all this time, only Kalin had shown interest in his origin.

And the only differences he'd been able to make out among the True Believers of Grekh, Pittam and Speewry respectively were that each averred they, alone, had been given the True Equations; this and the slight differ-

ences in testimony and Postulates of Ein.

Was there another basic difference that didn't show on the surface? Was that what he'd been trying to remember? All he could think of were Corey's words: "It's been too easy . . . we're crowding our luck . . . There is no Lord save Ein, and unto Pittam were the Equations given."

There had been something in Corey's voice then . . . as if he'd been speaking deliberately, intending his words for Dondyke . . .

The dirigible floated in the pastel blue sky of Grekh, and within was the master vibrator—a simple-looking gadget which Dondyke might easily have overlooked under other circumstances. This was the key; other transmitters would amplify the vibration. Its control panel was set up in front of the Lord's Engineer; Dondyke, the Designer, Alanna, and a few servants were the only others present. One of the few video screens on the planet—the device was used only for official communication here—showed the planet Speewry as a globe about as large as the apparent size of Terra's full moon.

The Son of Grekh placed the reel that Dondyke had delivered into a projector and trained it

on a wall surface. "Now, True Believers, and most loyal and honored Infidel, shall we destroy the false world of Speewry, if Ein so wills."

He touched the control, not of the vibrator, but of the projector. Dondyke saw figures, various mathematical symbols, and what looked like paragraphs of connected lines, curves, hooks and circles—all equally meaningless. He sighed, and wondered how much of a ceremony would have to precede the essential business; his glance wandered idly to Alanna.

The girl's face had drained of color; she sat rigid, her fingers gripping the arms of her chair, her eyes flooded with horror.

"Abomination!"

It was the potentate's voice, bristling with fury; his features were contorted as he cut off the projector and glared at the Earthling. Then his face calmed, and Dondyke decided that the fury was better. "Ein deceiveth whom he will, and whom he will he leadeth aright. Dog of a False Follower, did you hope to traduce us with this trick?"

Dondyke turned to the Designer, who also showed distress, then back to the Lord's Engineer. "I don't understand, Your Intellect," he said. "What have I done?"

"Oh you fool, you swaggering, thoughtless fool," sighed the Designer. "What, have you done? *This is the wrong script!*"

"Even the Infidel knows," muttered the Son of Grekh. "So be it, then; Ein wills that there be a different ceremony." He looked at the Earthling musingly. "The forces of Evil planned cleverly when they sent you, Dondyke; I too was deceived. Yet it is strange to me that you could hope to mislead us unto the end." He turned to Alanna. "This one must die, my sister, yet we shall not make haste; his deceit was uncovered too easily, and it worries me."

There were tears in the girl's eyes. "Yet his testimony was true; could a Deceiver do thus?"

"But . . . the Equations!" Dondyke gasped. "The vibrator was constructed from the Equations which had been stolen from Grekh."

"Can't you see it yet, man?" came the tired voice of the Designer. "They know the Equations all the time; it was the script; without the script in which the equations were given unto Grekh, all is meaningless; what you brought back from Speewry were the Equations in the script of Pittami!"

And again Dondyke heard

Corey's words: "... *Unto Pittam were the Equations given.*"

"Have you never heard the Extrapolations?" asked the Lord's Designer.

Dondyke thought desperately. "I have studied them, Your Intellect, and though some of them did not make much sense to me, this didn't seem too important; for there are matters that treat with understanding, and matters that treat with faith that believes without understanding. I took it on such faith."

"That was well spoken. Yet your faith is false, Dondyke—even though it is of a measure I have never before seen; there can be only one answer."

"You see, Laird," said Alanna sadly, "the Equations do not rest on cause and effect, as Unbelievers imagine in their ignorance. All that happens is by the will of Ein, and only in the script that he gave to Grekh lies power; without the power in this script, the Equations are meaningless. That is why we fear not destruction from Pittam and Spewry; their script is false and has no potency."

"You mean," Dondyke said slowly, "that it is all a matter of faith."

"Truly," said the Son of Grekh. "And thus are we merciful to Unbelievers, who are more

to be pitied for their belief in meaninglessness; we would pity the people of Pittam and Spewry if we knew not that they are creations of the substance of Evil, beings without souls, sent by Ein to test the Faithful."

Dondyke sat stunned, looking vacantly at the now-useless machine before him—useless because it would never be used. Unless the missing roll of film were recovered . . . and even then, he supposed, this particular machine would be destroyed because it had been built under deception.

No wonder he'd been able to steal the film where dozens of others, far more skilled in such matters, had failed.

*Faith. Tests of the Faithful  
Acts of Faith!*

He stood up suddenly. "Lord Engineer, is it just to condemn one who has testified truly without a trial?"

"This is never done, Dondyke."

"Then by the cones of Ein," Dondyke cried, his voice ringing in the small room, "I demand a trial—a trial of Faith. This is my Act of Faith, O Son of Grekh, for what was dark to me has become lighted. I cannot say how I know this, for Ein reveals not all things to any man, but this I know: that vibrator

before us will destroy Speewry."

"Blasphemy, Earthling," said the Designer, wearily.

"I call on the Protector of the Faithful," Dondyke repeated. "Make the test—turn on the vibrator. If it works, then Ein has shown his will in a mysterious way and through his instrument, Laird Dondyke. If not, then truly I am a Deceiver."

The Lord's Engineer pondered for a moment. "It is entirely without precedent. Yet as an Act of Faith . . ."

"Surely," said Alanna, "we can leave it in the hands of Ein."

" . . . yet there can be no limitation upon the will of Ein. It shall be as you say."

"The vibrator," Dondyke asked, "was built according to the text of the true equations, was it not?"

"It was."

"And under the supervision of True Believers?"

"Even so."

Dondyke lifted his hands and let them fall. "Then I am content."

The Lord's Engineer motioned to one of the servants, who twisted a dial on the video screen, bringing the image of Speewry into greater magnification. Then the Son of Grekh threw the control switch, which

set numerous other vibrators into operation all over Grekh.

All they needed now was one slight miracle, Dondyke thought. In the screen, the planet Speewry loomed; then, it began to blur, and as they watched, fade slowly. Finally, it disappeared altogether.

The Lord's Engineer arose, standing before Dondyke, and made the infinity symbol. "Praise unto Ein, who exalteth whom he will, and whom he will he maketh bend low. I acknowledge thee, Dondyke, Son of Ein, whose faith passeth belief, and petition thee to be on my left hand, as my loyal Designer is on my right."

"Accept," whispered the Designer.

"As Ein wills, I accept," the Earthling answered. The ruler bowed, then went into another room in the gondola, which was now heading for the palace.

Dondyke found his arms full of Alanna, but he turned to the Designer first. "Well—it worked. But look . . . what does this Son of Ein business mean? Or didn't he capitalize it?"

The other chuckled. "He capped it, so to speak. It means, roughly, that he's quitting before he gets behind. You came through on an Act of Faith which actually negates all the basis of the Faith. He's too



smart to reject it, and getting rid of Spewry was too valuable a service to be overlooked. He wants you on his side, but he doesn't want any more such radical Acts of Faith—so he made you Son of Ein."

"Your faith has been established once and for all; no more tests are required."

The girl looked up at Dondyke. "You will have philosophers and theologians busy for a century, my lord, explaining. But it is no paradox; it only seems that way to us now."

Dondyke shook his head. Had the Lord's Engineer really believed that the vibrator wouldn't work? He was clever; he knew when to yield gracefully and make it look like a triumph of diplomacy.

"I don't know about that," he said, "but there's something I'd like to know. Will someone please tell me—*what is the true script?*"

The Designer stroked his short beard. "There is a small volume in the library, looked upon as a curio, which no one can read since it's written in the form of English. It tells about an expedition to a far-away world, and of the preparations for it; they wanted records of all aspects of the culture, and these were put on microfilm. That made for a minimum

weight and space occupied; records were made in triplicate, and a copy of the complete set was on each of three ships.

"Now, in order to conserve space and weight further, these records—outside of figures and symbols—were made in the shortest methods of writing they knew—the language was reduced to shorthand, in three different systems: Gregg, Pittman and Speedwriting."

Dondyke laughed, all the tension releasing itself in one burst of mirth. "I can guess the rest of the story; the time came when the question arose as to which of the three scripts was the original, true one. The people had completely forgotten what written English looked like. So they warred over shorthand systems!"

The Designer coughed gently. "An interesting work of fiction, of course; perhaps it is just as well that it has never been translated."

"But a romantic tale could cause no harm," Alanna protested. "For surely, Ein . . ."

Dondyke cut her off as efficiently and enjoyably as possible. "Enough of philosophy and theology for now. If Ein wills revelation, that will come to me. This is my world now, and the Son of Ein takes what the Lord sends him on Faith!"