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*Editor*

JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.

*Assistant Editor*

KAY TARRANT

*Adv. Mgr.*

WALTER J. MCBRIDE

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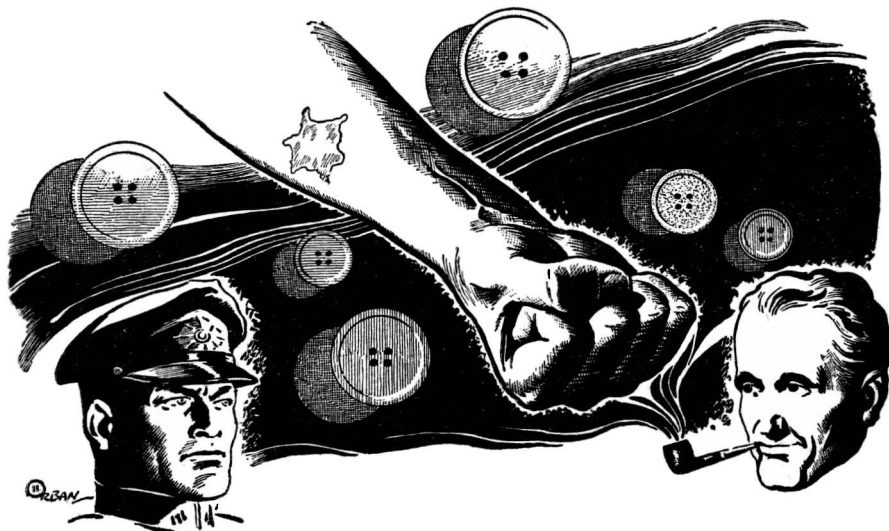
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**NEXT ISSUE ON SALE MARCH 18, 1953**



# BUTTON, BUTTON

BY THOMAS WILSON

*It's usually hard to clearly identify the character of another person; it's more confusing when you can't identify the character of —yourself!*

To: Theodore Fask, Earl Druze, Roland Crown

Joint Chiefs subhead Who, Operation Hydra

From: Leon Pearce, Investigator in charge

Re: *Ectees on Luani*

Briefly, there were no extraterrestrials on Luani at any time. There can be no doubt whatsoever about this statement, and our fears on this score were completely groundless.

In the first place, the remote control-detection devices which originally led

us to believe that an alien ship had landed on Luani were faulty, and therefore their findings were unreliable. For details, see accompanying report of technicians who examined these instruments.

Next, my radio message stating that an ectee was at large was definitely premature, and I wish to apologize for crying "Wolf" unnecessarily. At the time, however, it seemed wiser to take no chances. The initial confusion arose from an incredible misinterpretation of facts by key participants in the events which occurred on the island. Now, however, all concerned are in substantial agreement as to what actually transpired.

At the very beginning, the investigation was complicated by a shooting which initiated a peculiar chain of circumstances . . .

The MPs hustled him from the bright building, and for a moment he could see nothing in the darkness. Blindly he stumbled. A guiding hand gripped his elbow with ungentle pressure, sending a stab of pain into his shoulder. He gasped, feebly trying to free himself.

"Sorry," the MP grunted. "Forgot about your arm."

His eyes adjusted quickly, and the dim shape of the car bulked in the star-glow. "All right, Dunlap," he was told. "In the back seat."

He obeyed docilely enough, his movements made awkward by the sling.

One of the guards slid behind the wheel, the other two crowding into the back with him, the sweaty odor of their bodies close in the hot night. The car began to roll and he moved slightly, freeing his shoulder from contact with the man on his right. Headlights were a bright whisk on Luani's coral, and the tropic breeze scrubbed away the sweaty smell of man.

Wearily the prisoner's head sagged and his eyes closed. His thinking was unclear. It bothered him. There was something he should do, a decision he was to make about these people—

*These people.* Why did he think of them as these people? He was one of them too, wasn't he?

What, he wondered vaguely, was he supposed to do? What decision was he to make? And why? Whatever it was, it was too much trouble. He was hurt and tired. Desperately he needed rest. The sad, plaintive song of that need sang in his fibers. Sleep. If he could only sleep for a little while.

The thought of the thing he must do was a persistent mosquito. Buzzing, it returned to sting him into irritated awareness. He opened his gravel-lidded eyes and asked querulously, "Where are you taking me?"

"To see a guy named Pearce." The answer was flat and disinterested.

The words meant nothing to Dunlap. "Who is Pearce?"

"Big shot, I guess, came in a copter with some Gyrenes." The MP moved his shoulders impatiently. "What's it

matter to you? Four guys saw you shoot Baker."

"I didn't —" The sudden shock of the statement halted the denial on his lips. He had shot Baker? Who was Baker? He didn't know anyone with that name. Not here on Luani, at least. And to be accused of shooting someone he didn't even know was absurd. Nervously he laughed, and the MP turned from him in disgust.

Far to the left, beyond a rise too low to be called a hill, lights from the lab painted the reaching sky. With a hint of nostalgia he watched the luminous glow. The lab was where he had worked. He, George Dunlap, had been brought to Luani to help shape the H-bomb there. His home was in Philadelphia, and he had come to this coral mote in the Pacific on a ship —

A ship. Instinctively his gaze swept to the lower sky. Stars lay there, warmly glowing jewels on the velvet of darkness, obscured now and again by the flowing shapes of fronded trees. The stars and the ship —

Why was the ship that had brought him to Luani linked in his mind with the stars? Ships sailed the seas. Ah, yes, but there were different kinds of seas, and beyond the sea he was watching lay . . . The answer was born with pain, startling him with its implication.

*Home.*

Home was the stars. A star. Home, with its warm connotations of love, of

peace, of security, of belonging. Home was Out There across the empty sea of space.

But that couldn't be. Automatically, his mind tried to reject the outrageous concept. He was George Dunlap, American, Terrestrial, *Homo sapiens*. He was born of Earth, on Earth. Home couldn't be Out There —

Or could it?

Curiously he examined the idea, a baby with a new rattle. Immediately broken, kaleidoscopic images flickered in his brain. He saw a warm beach beneath a blue sun. The sand of the beach was red, the sea saltless. He saw a house like no house on Earth, and the house was — his. He walked in a great, spacious city, the capital of a planet. Wingless planes darted in the air above, and from the people about him there exuded the confidence of a mature race, covering the city with a calm mantle of peace. The people —

He tried to backtrack and catch the thing he had sensed, but the thought twisted, eluded him and was gone.

Dunlap sat rigid and sweating. Was that home? That planet of red beach and spacious city? Was that his birthplace? If it was, what was he doing here? And why did he think of himself as George Dunlap, American?

The realization that had floated at the edge of his consciousness, unadmitted, drifted upon him, and he knew. He wasn't George Dunlap. It was as simple as that.

Then — *Who was he?*

He tensed, straining forward on the seat in an agony to know, to end this driving uncertainty.

One of the guards touched him with a firm hand. "Take it easy, Dunlap."

A thrill of pain skittered through his body and breath held too long sighed out in protest. He forced himself to lean back on the seat. "O.K.," he mumbled.

The interruption had helped. He knew that now as he felt the curled ache of his kidneys, the tight coil of his stomach. He couldn't drive his memory like a stubborn beast of burden. He must coax it, cajole it into response. The carrot, not the stick. He breathed deeply and his muscles loosened.

This decision he was supposed to make . . . It must be important. Otherwise it wouldn't bother him as it was doing, and he could rest. What could it —

An eel of a thought slicked through his mind and was gone before he could grasp it. Instinctively he knew it was the answer he sought, and he tried to recall its feel and texture.

Ready — It was something about being ready — about these people being ready. It was a feeling of aloneness and questioning.

He struggled to make sense of the scattered impressions. The decision he must make involved determining whether or not they were ready for something; and he alone could decide.

There was something else, too — a

deprivation, a negation of some sort if his decision were negative.

What could it be that these people were — or were not — ready for?

Memory gave him no quick answer.

Perhaps association would furnish a clue. The guard had said that he had shot a man. Someone else had accused him of the same thing earlier today — this morning.

Rizner. Colonel John Rizner.

Strange that he should have forgotten Rizner's calling him a murderer. His hand crept up to touch the grotesque mask of bandages covering his face. Rizner had done that to him, too. Rizner had broken his nose.

Colonel John Rizner sat at his desk that Saturday morning, untroubled by thoughts of beings from the stars who might want — almost anything.

Rizner was musing pleasantly on the cold beer and picnic sandwiches he and his girl would share that night.

Such musings were all that made the island bearable for Rizner. He didn't like Luani. He hadn't wanted to come. Europe, now — Germany, for instance — would have been more to his taste. There his rank would have entitled him to a semifeudal privilege and prestige; there catering to him and his kind was a recognized occupation among the natives.

But Luani was a far cry from the fleshpots of the world. Here even the natives had been stripped away, leaving only a hot little island isolated in

the vastness of the Pacific, tight beneath the iron lid of Top Secret. No, Operation Hydra was not an assignment Colonel Rizner would have chosen voluntarily.

Marie Dorcas understood how he felt. She didn't like Luani, either. And certain hints she had dropped had suggested that she would be glad to help him dispel the monotony. Temporarily, at least.

Rizner smiled faintly. He didn't want to get involved in anything that might become unpleasant — or permanent.

The phone shrilled. For a moment he ignored it, stubbornly trying to re-gather the shards of his shattered reverie. The ringing repeated, and he gave up. "Colonel Rizner, Security," he snapped briskly.

"Ellison Baker at the lab, colonel." Fear nudged the whispering words.

"Yes?"

"Listen carefully, colonel. This is Security stuff and it's got me scared." The spilling sibilants were broken by a ragged breath. "George Dunlap doesn't have that star-shaped scar on his arm any more."

Rizner's mind grappled with the implication of the words. The scar was on Dunlap's right arm, an ugly white thing with six irregular points. A scar like that didn't just vanish. And Dunlap was one of the key men in the superduper's assembly. For a terrifying instant he saw a mushrooming cloud rising over Luani, and a few of

the radioactive bits of that cloud were chemicals which had once been John Rizner . . .

"Are you sure, Baker?"

"Yes." Frightened impatience carried a convincing ring. "He just left here. We were drinking beer together, and I got a good look. The scar isn't there. He looks like Dunlap, he talks like Dunlap, but I tell you he isn't —" Silence interrupted.

"Baker," Rizner called urgently. He heard a deep breath slowly expelled.

"That matter may come up sooner than we had expected," Baker resumed, no longer whispering but speaking with ragged breathlessness.

"He came back? Dunlap?"

"Yes. And remember I'm in a hurry for those parts."

The phone hummed emptily in Rizner's ear. Catlike he flowed from his chair and into the outer office, speaking curtly as he moved. "Man the jeep." Three carbine-carrying men were up and on their way. "Tell the lab guards to get to Ellison Baker fast," Rizner called over his shoulder.

The brassy sun struck him, bouncing from the mirror of Luani's bright soil. His eyes slitted involuntarily in the glare, making his face lean and wolflike. "Lab," he rapped, vaulting into the rear of the jeep. Already sweat was a damp undergarment on his body.

The car jerked into speed. Unconsciously Rizner touched the .45 at his

hip, a savage warrior rubbing reassurance from a talisman. His eyes squinted against the wind of their passage, and other winds, colder and harsher, buffeted his brain, tossing conjecture like scattering autumn leaves.

Impatiently he touched the confusion of his mind and it grew docile, enabling him to pull information from it like clothing from a drawer. Ellison Baker, AEC man on loan to the Army. Working on tritium trigger. Not married. Parents dead. Brother missing in action in Korea. No other relatives — Rizner stopped abruptly.

*Brother missing in action in Korea.* A lever? Possibly. Pigeonhole it for future reference.

Dunlap. Another AEC man. Single, no family. A man with a scar on his arm. Could a livid scar disappear overnight? Not without plastic surgery. Not on Luani. But a man could fake a scar without actually having one. A Russian agent could fake a scar. And today he might have forgotten to fake —

The road wound to the top of a slight rise and Rizner looked down on the corrugated metal of the lab, glinting at the edge of the bluff. As always, the sight of the lab made him vaguely uncomfortable. He realized, without really understanding, the vast power contained there. He thought of the lab as Helen's home — Helen, the H-bomb. And this Helen, modern and deadly, might unleash on the world a war more terrible by far than that

loosed by her ancient namesake for the love of Paris. This Helen loved no one, least of all Man.

But she would respond in her coldly mathematical way to Man's hesitant wooing. Oh yes, Rizner was afraid she would respond, all right. And the white heat of her response might make Helen a Black Widow.

Two figures emerged from the building as Rizner watched. Baker and Dunlap? It was too far and he couldn't be sure. Where were the lab guards? Palm fronds screened his view. "Push it," he ordered the driver tersely.

The jeep slewed around a curve, leaving the palms behind, and raced across the barren flat toward the lab. The two figures were in sight again, walking with unhurrying purposefulness toward the bluff and the sun-flecked Pacific beyond.

Rizner frowned with recognition. Baker and Dunlap, all right. Baker was ahead, his arms extended stiffly from his body.

Dust was a comet's fan in the jeep's wake as the driver's heavy foot tromped the gas. "Keep Dunlap covered," Rizner shouted to the sergeant in front. "He might be armed."

The sergeant nodded, swinging a carbine halfway to his shoulder with an easy motion.

"We want him alive," grimly Rizner added, "if possible."

Baker reached the edge of the bluff, halted, and turned. Dunlap swiveled in the direction of the approaching

jeep, snapping a quick glance over his shoulder. Baker lunged forward, grabbing at the other's arm. The sound of the shot was curiously flat, a popgun of a noise.

Abruptly Baker stopped moving. Rizner saw the incredulity and pain on his face as he straightened slowly, staggered backward, and toppled toward the sea. Dunlap wheeled toward the jeep, lifting the gun in his hand. Far out on the lagoon a fish broke the surface, and Rizner felt that a fixative had been sprayed on the stream of time.

"Shoot," he shouted hoarsely.

His command was lost in the sharp sound of the carbine's voice. Dust sprang from a spot on Dunlap's right shoulder. He spun around, dropping the gun. Brakes brought the jeep to a skidding halt as Dunlap reeled, stumbled, and fell to all fours.

"Go after Baker," Rizner barked to the men.

He himself moved toward Dunlap with stiff-legged caution. The wounded man raised his head wearily as Rizner approached, watching him curiously. Rizner knelt, impatient fingers ripping the other's sleeve. "What happened to your scar?" he asked softly.

Dunlap slumped on the ground, his face white with pain, his strangely watchful eyes intent on Rizner. "What scar? What's all this about, colonel?" His voice was thick and puzzled.

Rizner laughed as though the answer pleased him in some obscure way. "I

don't know who you are," he said casually, "or what you are. But I hope you can feel this."

Deliberately he kicked the fallen man in his wounded shoulder, inscrutably watching him twist with agony. Again the foot lifted, stamping brutally into the center of the face below, and Rizner felt the satisfying crunch of cartilage beneath his heavy heel.

Yes, Dunlap thought, Rizner had broken his nose.

Later, Rizner and General Boyer had questioned him.

Dunlap's mind was a fan unfolding segment by slow segment to expose the etched map of memory. It was coming back, and he was a stranger exploring the forgotten paths of a once familiar place. They had taken him from the hospital, and Rizner and Boyer had been waiting. He had faced the two of them, his body sagging with weariness and pain.

Boyer frowned at him pompously. "What happened to your face?"

Dunlap knew that his attempt at a grin was grotesque. "The colonel can answer that better than I can, sir." His voice was muffled and nasal.

Proudly Rizner met Boyer's inquiring glance. "I broke his nose."

"Did you have to do that, colonel?"

"Yes." No "sir," no explanation. Just "Yes." Rizner would have done the same thing again.

Boyer's shrug was a disclaimer of re-



sponsibility. "Sit down, Dunlap, sit down." Impatience failed to cover an inner uneasiness in the general's tone.

Dunlap sat, gasping as his muscles turned to sudden mush.

"All right." Rizner spoke with soft menace. "You shot Baker because he discovered that you didn't have the scar on your arm any longer. Because he knew that, without the scar, you couldn't be Dunlap. That's right, isn't it?"

"Baker?" Dunlap knew he had uttered the word, but it seemed to come from a great distance. His body floundered in the waters of weakness and his brain was a lifeless bauble packed in cotton fog.

Baker? He didn't know anyone named Baker.

"Who are you? What happened to your scar?"

He was George Dunlap, of course. Scar? He had never had a scar.

"You're working for the Russians, aren't you? How did they get you in here?"

"A canoe couldn't get within fifty miles of Luani undetected," Boyer bumbled indignantly.

No, Dunlap had protested, he wasn't working for the Russians. He wasn't a traitor.

The questioning continued. "Who was your contact with the Russians? How did you get on the island? Why did you kill Baker?"

And he had honestly never heard of

Baker. Not then. This morning on the bluff, he had known he would be captured and the part he must play had to ring true. False memories had been grafted to his brain, valid patterns blocked. But he knew about Baker now.

Dunlap smiled faintly in the darkness of the car that was jouncing him toward a meeting with a man named Pearce. Yes, he knew now why he had had to do what he had done to Baker. The mental block had made him forget.

And the block was still compressing his personality. Methodically he tried to remember who he was. Strange that he should be unable to recall that. Why should his identity be lost to him?

For a moment a name hung on the fringe of his consciousness. He was about to grasp it, about to know, when it slithered mockingly away.

Dunlap, Dunlap — He wasn't Dunlap. He knew that. The Dunlap personality was a cloak of camouflage wrapped about him, but it clung with the tenacity of a straitjacket.

That planet of the blue sun, the red beach, the spacious city — *Home*.

The association was immediate in his mind. And yet when he examined it, he was vaguely dissatisfied. The true and the false seemed to swim together, blurring indiscriminately.

The house — His house. He closed his eyes and saw it. It was a beautiful thing, soaring on impossible wings in

spans of brown stone and white metal. There was a lichenous lawn of olive green, a small shaded pool, a brook babbling away.

*He couldn't get inside the house.*

He could shift to various viewpoints of the grounds outside as easily as flipping photographs in an album, but he couldn't see the interior of the building. Why not?

Again he tried to visualize the rooms inside, and got — glimpses. Tantalizing glimpses of people. There were people in the house, people about whom he felt —

*Family.*

That part he accepted. If the house were his, it was only natural that his family should be there. But if he lived there, if his loved ones lived there, why couldn't he see them? Why were they vague shadows moving in unreal rooms?

Once again he switched to the outside, and the house was as clear in line and detail as the image of his own face in a mirror.

The city, perhaps. He had felt the aura of maturity and peace emanating from the race which inhabited the city. And he had sensed something about the people there.

He could see them moving in the gracious parks, on the broad streets, in and out of the sparkling buildings. But the people were streaks, unreal blurs as in a photograph taken at too slow a speed.

Dunlap cursed softly.

The MP at his left chuckled. "S'th'matter, bub?"

"Nothing," he muttered, "nothing."

The mental block. That was causing the failure. His powers of recall were returning, but slowly. Too slowly. A blind urgency gripped him. There was some mission he must perform, a decision about the readiness of these people for — something.

Desperately he tried again. I'm leaving home, he said silently, I'm leaving home —

He was in a ship. Before him was a porthole, and beyond the porthole was — His brain reeled back from the well of inky nothingness. The port was a gigantic pit stretching to infinity, and he was falling, falling, being swallowed in its terribly empty maw. Frantically he stabbed at the solidity of the metal rim.

One of the guards was shaking him. "Dunlap!"

He realized that he had screamed and pushed out to keep from falling. His shoulder throbbed from the quick, instinctive thrust he had made with his hands.

"Guess I dropped off to sleep," he said shakily.

The guard grunted. "Nightmares yet."

He couldn't try that again. Not right away. He wasn't ready to visualize the titanic grandeur of space. He shivered as the porthole and the terror beyond flashed again on the screen of

his mind. He'd have to work through the mental block another way.

Baker. Go back to Baker —

“Time out for a beer, Ellison?”

Ellison Baker's fingers were making a delicate adjustment to a knurled knob, his eyes intent on the faint flicker of a dial's response. For a moment the question didn't seem to penetrate the cloak of his concentration. Then he glanced up, frowning. “What?”

Dunlap grinned at him. “How about a beer?”

“Yeah, sure.” Baker straightened, flexing his cramped muscles in a luxuriant stretch.

Dunlap took two frosted cans from the tiny refrigerator. The opener bit through the metal with a satisfying hiss of escaping pressure, and he presented the brew to Baker with a flourish. “All the comforts of home, eh, Ell?”

“Yeah.” Baker's chuckle was honed with bitterness. “All the comforts of home and the H-bomb, too. The superduper herself.”

“Not letting it get you down, are you?”

“Maybe.” Baker rubbed his sleeve across his face with quick nervousness. “George, I don't like it. Have you thought about this thing? Thought what it will mean when Helen blows? Really thought about it?”

“Sure.” Dunlap nodded soberly. “Who hasn't?” He paused, watching Baker keenly. “Maybe she won't



blow. Maybe Helen will be a dud."

"Nuts. The thing works out. The tritium trigger is almost as foolproof as a percussion cap. You know she'll blow."

Yes, he knew. Intently he read the swift, precise symbols of the process as they spun through Baker's mind. These Terrestrials had it right, there wasn't any doubt about that.

"You feel guilty about it, Ell?" he asked gently.

Baker's face was tight. "How can you help but feel guilty when you know what it'll do?"

"If we didn't help make it, others would."

"Does that help? Does that make it right?"

Dunlap knew the infinite complexities of any answer to that question and refused the bait. "Tritium is hard to make. There are a lot of pile hours wrapped up in the little bit we have. The quantity of bombs will be limited by the amount of tritium available."

"You think you won't learn to make tritium faster?" Baker laughed, and the thin edge of bitter certainty keened in his laughter.

Yes, they would learn. They would manufacture tritium. They would make H-bombs ribbed with cobalt casings, then proton bombs. If any of them were left —

"Perhaps there won't be war," he said. "Perhaps the bombs won't be used even if we have them."

"Don't you read the papers, George?"

He saw the cynical hopelessness in Baker's mind. "We can't deal with those guys. You can't do business with a man with a gun. Oh, they'll try to bleed us white by the threat of war. They'll try to take the world over without war if they can. But once let 'em think they can win a war from us, and — Bingo!"

"We won't drop the H-bomb first. But if we develop it, they'll know it can be done. They'll work it out, too. It might take a little while, but they can do it. Sure, we might have more bombs than they have, but what difference will that make? It won't take a bumper crop of those babies to do the trick. One sneak attack in real force and that'll be all for us, brother."

Yes, that would be all for them. Except that they would have time to retaliate. And that would be all, period. In his mind, Dunlap was seeing another world, a planet which didn't circle the sun called Sol. It was a world much like Earth, fair and beckoning when seen from the depths of space. But from close at hand —

They hadn't landed there. They didn't need to. They had seen all they wanted to see from their ship, floating high in the radioactive atmosphere. The blasted ruins of sprawling cities, the arid deserts which had once sprung spikes of green, the ghastly blue glow of the nightside. And the lifelessness.

The lifelessness was the worst, of course. Even in their ship, death had beckoned to them, chuckling. The

hopes and dreams and toil of a civilization — gone. And it was so futile. It needn't be that way. There was no race whose ultimate, logical end was self-destruction. All that even the most warlike of peoples needed was time. Time to learn to live with their fellows. Perhaps ten years, perhaps fifty, perhaps a hundred. But time above all else. Politics had a fatal way of lagging behind technology.

And without time for it to catch up — That's all, brother.

“Suppose,” Dunlap said carefully, “beings from outside, from another planet, say, came here. If they came in peace, if they gave Earth workable economic-politico-sociological formulas for peace, for living together in cooperation rather than war —”

His voice died in futility as he caught the doubt in Baker's brain. Could you, Baker's thought wondered, substitute skyscrapers for the jungle huts of savages, give them the shining city and say, “Here, it's yours. Take it and make it tick?” Wouldn't the gap be too great both in technology and concept? What would happen to cultural continuity?

*But was man no better than a savage?* Was he? Perhaps Man is more ready for the stars than you think, Ellison Baker.

“There are things you have to learn for yourself,” Baker said aloud. “There are things you can't be told, can't be handed on an easy platter.

They have to grow and develop from within the race, stretching back into the past like an unbroken ribbon of road. The road will have its twistings and twinings, of course. A clan builds a strip, a state takes over the work, then a nation continues the job. And finally it is done. It is yours. But no outside contractor can be called in to pave that road. That would break its continuity, make it a dead end leading to a parrot culture.”

Unless the road has progressed a certain definite distance, Ellison Baker. Then that outside contractor could help with the job. Not openly, perhaps, but with a word of advice here and there. How far has Man's road gone? That was the jackpot question.

*The call tapped gently at his brain. It was faint, as though it came from a great distance. Instantly he drove out an answering thought which was both an inquiry and an acknowledgment.*

*They intend to take action about your presence on the island.*

*How much time?*

*Present estimate — eight hours minus.*

*Has a decision been reached about my mission?*

*No. The result is too close. The margin of error is greater than the indicated direction of probability.*

*Then the decision is mine to make?*

*Yes. You will have to do it alone.*

*The answer was a heavy sadness upon him, and gently he sighed.*

*Give me the latest factor values.*

*His brain grasped the numerical di-*

*mension of each precise, abstract symbol. The values weren't cut and dried absolutes, but had plus and minus tolerances like a blueprint. It was the best that could be done. The techniques for gathering data weren't perfect. Not nearly perfect enough when the fate of a race might hang on the validity of that data. And the value of one vital symbol was missing.*

Baker drained the last of his beer and clanked the empty to the floor. "Thanks for the brew, George. And," he added wryly, "for playing father confessor."

"Sure," Dunlap replied absently. "Glad you got it off your chest."

He'd have to use Baker, he knew that. That plan was the only one available now, and the foundation for it had been laid. But to do what he would have to do to Baker —

He looked at the other for a moment, and pity was naked in his eyes.

"I'll toss this out for you, Ellison." He reached down to pick up the empty container, and the short sleeve of his shirt rode up his arm.

Soft as a windblown spore alighting on Earth, his mind went out and touched Baker's, changing the pattern of the shape that Baker saw. The change was slight, but enough.

At the door, he turned. "So long, Ell," he said gravely.

Baker's gaze shied from his. "Yeah, George. See you around."

He stopped in the hall outside, keeping his mind tuned to Baker's.

Time — He had to have a little time to get the value of the vital symbol which was missing. Without that symbol, the formulas *could* give false answers. And there was only one way to get it.

He waited until Baker had called Rizner. Then he went back into the room with a gun in his hand.

The mental message had warned Dunlap: "They intend to take action about your presence on the island."

The direction of that action would be determined by three men who sat in conference several hundred miles from Luani. The three, Theodore Fask, Earl Druze, and Roland Crown, were in charge of Operation Who, the second — and secret — head of Operation Hydra. They would decide about Man and the stars. Theirs was the responsibility for dealing with the aliens(?).

Note carefully — aliens, question mark. Aliens if there were any. There were no bodies, no artifacts which could be pointed out and branded, "This belonged to Them." And yet —

Their ships had been spotted, flitting about Earth like ghostly gnats. There was no question about the presence of the ships. And the ships had come from no earthly yards.

For Earl Druze, that closely guarded fact was more than sufficient. He knew there were extraterrestrials on Earth.

And the sureness of that knowledge lit a neon milepost on the long road

of Man's history. That was the way it should be. Man's first contact with an outside race should be a bright beacon of peace and proffered friendship. It should be something wonderful and awesome and happy, something that would lead on to — greatness, perhaps. Certainly to better things. Great things.

And just as certainly, Man's first contact with the race of the ghostly ships should not be shrouded in the childish suspicions of cloak and dagger play acting.

Crown didn't feel that way about it, of course. Crown would vote against waiting any longer. He hadn't wanted to wait this long. Druze turned to Fask and knew at a glance what the decision would be.

"Gentlemen," Fask stated matter-of-factly, "the object — which we believe to have been an alien ship — landed on Luani six days ago. Our detection devices confirm this beyond the shadow of reasonable doubt. The object — or ship — touched ground, remained approximately thirty minutes, then took off again. What its purpose was we can only surmise. We have no additional data on which to base an opinion except for the fact that the landing was not detected by General Boyer's men stationed on the island."

Fask cleared his throat pedantically. "We have seen fit to wait this long without informing Boyer of the landing, hoping that the aliens would

make their presence known to us openly and peacefully. They have failed to do this. And the question now, gentlemen, is: Can we afford to wait any longer before taking action?"

Druze flexed his long fingers absently. "We don't know what they want," he said carefully. "We haven't had time to find out — yet. But this is the first time we have been sure that one of their ships has actually landed. They may be on the verge of contacting us. If they are, should we do anything to frighten them off?"

Crown laughed, and his laughter contained the deadly sound of a machine-gun's chatter. To Druze, the man himself had the look of a weapon — stubby, compact, designed to wreak blind destruction.

"Sure," Crown said harshly, "give 'em time to sabotage Operation Hydra. Let 'em make Helen blow ahead of schedule. What does it matter if Luani and the irreplaceable personnel there get vaporized?"

His staccato laughter beat at Druze like a mocking drum.

"If their intentions were hostile," Druze answered slowly, "they would have taken action before this. They have had ample opportunity."

A smile chilled Crown's lips with contempt. "Maybe they've been waiting for this, for the H-bomb. They've always been interested in our atomic projects, our rocket testing grounds. Maybe they were leaving us alone, let-

ting us play until our play became dangerous, until we developed something we could use against them. Helen might be it."

"The men on Luani could be in peril," Fask stated quietly. "Although it is true that the aliens have taken no overt action against us, neither have they done anything to indicate that their ultimate intentions are altruistic."

"If you were a Columbus voyaging to a strange planet," Druze said softly, "and found that planet divided into two camps armed to the teeth, on the brink of war, wouldn't you hesitate as they have done? Do you think that you could expect to be received in peace?"

Crown's eyes fastened on Druze cynically. "You've got the idea, all right. But as usual your motives are cockeyed. The aliens haven't landed and made their presence known openly because we're armed. I agree with that. But if we weren't armed, if we weren't prepared" — his shrug was eloquent — "they'd be on our backs. Don't worry about that."

His body has evolved, Druze thought, and become the body of a man. But his mind is still back in the jungle. He can't conceive of a peaceful contact between races. To him, it would automatically be tooth and claw. "A people who have conquered space would have atomic engines, weapons more powerful than we have dreamed of. They wouldn't be afraid, Crown.

Not of us."

Fask coughed with a hint of impatience. "I don't believe that speculation of this sort is getting us anywhere, gentlemen. The world situation is far from ideal for the proper welcoming of interplanetary visitors, granted. Nevertheless, it is not a situation of our choosing and we are powerless to change it overnight.

"As to the weapons our visitors may or may not possess, it is extremely significant to me that the presence of their ship was not detected by the men on Luani. Doesn't that suggest a possible weapon to you, gentlemen?" His eyes rested on Druze with superior expectancy, the bright eyes of a bantam bird.

Druze sighed. He had been afraid Fask would catch on. "Mental tampering," he murmured. "After all, they had to protect themselves."

Crown guffawed. "Mandrake the Magician, eh?"

Fask frowned, crestfallen. "Yes, mental tampering of some sort. And it could be continuing. The aliens *could* have landed personnel on Luani, gentlemen."

"You think there are aliens on the island?" Crown barked. "Now?"

"I think it's entirely possible, yes."

"Then there's a mouse in our trap. I say spring it." Crown's blunt fingers opened and closed suggestively. "I'd like to get my hands on one of those aliens."

God help him if you did, Druze



thought. "I think we should wait," he said aloud. "Let's give them a little more time to make contact with us." He turned to Fask, his eyes pleading. "This may be Man's big chance to live in a better world, to resolve his problems, to reach the stars. Let's give that chance a little more time. Just a few more days."

He watched Fask's mouth set primly and knew that he had lost.

Fask tapped the ends of his fingers together with finality. "I believe that they have had ample opportunity to communicate with us openly and honorably if they intended to do so. We must protect our own position. We cannot jeopardize our men and our matériel on the basis of a hypothetical premise unsupported by fact. We cannot afford to read into the minds of the aliens either ideals or motives which we wish were there, but which may well be entirely absent."

Druze rubbed his fingers over his eyes. He was suddenly very tired. And perhaps Fask was right. They couldn't afford to gamble with the lives of their own. Perhaps he, Druze, had been too prone to regard the people of the ships as a *deus ex machina* who would do Man's dirty work for him. But things never worked out that way. There wasn't any shortcut. The road was long, and it was blood and sweat, toil and tears. And Man could only hope.

Fask turned to Crown. "The fact that the landing was not detected on Luani indicates Pearce, I think."

Crown nodded. "Yeah. Send Pearce —"

Pearce had arrived on the island in a Navy plane with a Marine escort, and his coming threw Colonel Rizner into a funk.

Rizner had expected the bigwigs to be interested in Dunlap, of course. Very interested. Since the man wasn't Dunlap, the brass would want to find out things about him. That was obvious. So Pearce's coming was, in itself, no surprise.

Rizner had regarded the interview with Pearce as a necessary nuisance which might interfere with his date with Marie. Nothing more. He had captured Dunlap. That was his job, and he had done it. Now the others could take over.

But it hadn't worked out quite that way.

Rizner and General Boyer were in the warehouse which Pearce had appropriated, and the civilian's mild blue eyes held the colonel.

"After you received the phone call from Baker this morning," Pearce said gently, "you instructed the WAC in your office to get in touch with the lab guards and have them go to Baker immediately. Is that correct, colonel?"

Rizner nodded.

"Why weren't your instructions carried out? Why did the guards permit Dunlap to get Baker out of the building?"

"Corporal Haynes, the WAC, was

unable to reach the guards by phone.”

“Why?”

“The guards swear their phone didn’t ring. The line was checked later, of course, and seemed in perfect order. Apparently the trouble, whatever it was, was temporary. It was just one of those things. An unfortunate accident.”

Pearce frowned dubiously. “Perhaps. And Baker’s body was not recovered?”

“No. The current at the base of the bluff is very strong. The body was washed away before we could recover it.”

“I want to interview this man Dunlap right away,” Pearce said decisively. “General, will you have him brought here, please? Under adequate guard, of course.”

Reluctantly Boyer gave the order. It was obvious that the general resented Pearce.

Rizner slumped in his chair, scratching his head impatiently. Since coming to the warehouse, the inside of his skull had itched as though it were being tickled by a feather tip.

Pearce noticed the gesture. “I’m afraid scratching won’t help, colonel. The black box does it.”

Stupidly Rizner looked at the black box. The Marines had carried it from the plane with great care, he recalled, and now it was resting on the floor near Pearce’s chair. But it seemed nothing more than a box, a black plastic case with handles on the sides and

two dials on top.

“Little gadget of mine.” Pearce smiled with shy pride. “Psycho-jammer, I call it. Supposed to interfere with telepathy the way jamming does with radio. Not positive it works, of course. Telepaths are hard to find.”

Rizner didn’t know whether he was supposed to laugh or not. He decided against it.

Boyer did laugh, loudly and impolitely. “Which comic books do you read, Pearce?”

“I wish it were that simple, general.” Pearce seemed faintly embarrassed. He cuddled the bowl of a stubby pipe in his hand as though seeking reassurance from the touch of the familiar briar. “I think you’re entitled to know what I’m doing here. You see, we believe there may be an alien at large on the island. An extra-terrestrial. I was sent to Luani to catch him. Or it.”

“So now we’re on the lookout for Martians, eh?” Boyer chuckled scornfully.

Pearce smiled, but the smile failed to erase the grimness on his face. “Probably not Martians, general. Perhaps Venusians. Or beings from another star. But beings not of Earth.”

“You’re joking, of course.”

“No, general. This is top secret information, but we have been sure for some time now that earth was being visited by alien ships. One of those ships landed on Luani six days ago. You should have detected that land-

ing. But you didn't. We're afraid that they — whoever they are — can read minds. Perhaps even influence thoughts."

Rizner's lips were suddenly dry. "How did you find out about the . . . landing here?"

"Remote control detection devices. We suspected the eetees would be interested in Hydra."

"And Dunlap . . . you think he — ?"

Pearce nodded. "I think Dunlap is our alien, yes."

Rizner realized that Pearce was serious. Deadly serious. He wasn't fabricating a twisted jest. Stupidly he remembered Boyer's remark when they were questioning Dunlap, that a canoe couldn't get within fifty miles of Luani without being spotted. How Dunlap must have laughed inwardly at that, and at being mistaken for a Russian spy.

It hit Rizner, then, and he felt sick.

If Dunlap were an alien . . . if Dunlap could read minds — He, Rizner, had ordered Dunlap shot, had kicked him, stomped his face with a brutal boot. And he had done those things proudly, cruelly, with the haughty scorn of a captor.

If Dunlap could read minds, he wouldn't have laughed inwardly about that.

Abruptly Rizner knew that he was the unfortunate deer who had captured the hunter, and the knowledge was blind fear within him. He couldn't

face Dunlap again. He rose from his chair and the warehouse seemed to swim about him. Dimly he heard Pearce say, "Anything wrong, colonel?"

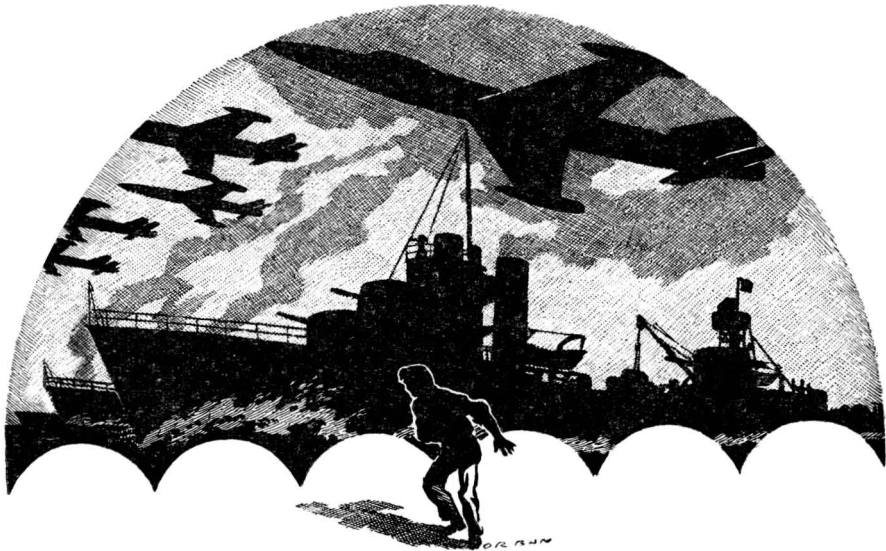
Anything wrong? That was good. He laughed, and the sound was a whimper. He had to get out. He couldn't be trapped in this warehouse with an alien who would remember what he had done, who would look upon him as he might look upon a vicious dog.

Woodenly he began to walk. The door was a bright rectangle in the dark wall, a goal. He moved toward it numbly. He had to get out, had to get out. Ten more steps . . . seven — He watched the enlarging door with apprehensive eyes.

Then he was out, and night flowed around him. A small broken cry burst from his lips. The nightmare paralysis fell from his limbs and he ran.

The ground was hard against his flying feet and the wind was alive in his face. He ran until his lungs were searing pain and he could run no more. Then he fell and sobbed against the sand. How long he lay there he never knew. But gradually his breathing slowed, and a tiny rift of sanity cleared in the fog of his fear.

Slowly he raised himself from the hard earth, rubbing loose grains of sand from his face and from his sweat-dampened hair. He looked up at the harsh glitter of Luani's sky, filled with bright, watchful stars. Only this morning he had mused romantically about those stars, picturing them as sympa-



thetic to a colonel and his date sharing beer and picnic sandwiches on a Pacific beach. Only this morning? That time was incredibly remote, a part of another existence.

The stars weren't romantic. They were the marshaling yards of alien life, and the sky was the sea of their passage. Shivering, he closed his eyes.

Marie — He should call Marie. He couldn't keep the date, of course. But that didn't matter any more. Tonight he wasn't a lover, but a child in need of a mother to soothe away fears of the dark.

The bogey man was after him.

Hopefully he tossed the thought away. His mind was a faithful retriever, trotting after it and returning

it to his feet. Yes, Dunlap was a bogey man, all right. A bogey man he could call his own. A real bogey man from whom there was no escape in awakening. This was no dream.

Again he heard Pearce say: "I was sent here to catch an extraterrestrial . . . extraterrestrial . . . extraterrestrial —"

The words drummed within him, a hook tugging at the familiar foundations of his brain.

How could he have ever imagined Luani as isolated? The great bowl of sky pressed down upon the island, winking its myriad eyes with obscene scrutiny. And that sky had spewed an alien seed which had chosen to harbor here, invading Man's familiar shore.

"It isn't true," he muttered fiercely, "it can't be true." Man was alone. Man was the intelligent animal. He wasn't a backwoods aborigine on a dark planet surrounded, unknowing, by the teeming commerce of Others.

His denials were without conviction. Dunlap —

Desperately he wanted to fling himself prone again, to claw at the ground and burrow beneath it. Could the stars see under the ground? Could they watch him still if he drew a blanket of turf over his head?

He laughed at the thought, and the shrill sound of his voice was ice water in his face, bringing shame. It rolled over him in a thick wave, and he saw himself as he was — small and shriveled and afraid. It wasn't the fear that shamed him. He was still afraid. It was the giving way. In doing that, he had betrayed himself and his race. Man deserved to be driven from his planet if he could do no better than this.

He would have to face it. Man would have to face it. There was nowhere to run. Savagely he forced himself to his feet and began to walk toward the warehouse he had fled, glancing over his shoulder as he went, fighting down the blind surge of panic.

At least, he told himself, if there are Others, they are human. Dunlap was human. They wouldn't reduce Man to the status of a pet. He hugged the thought to him for the scant comfort it contained.

Before he reached the warehouse the siren began to wail.

Dunlap's plan was working. He had gained time. A few additional hours. Enough time to find the value of the missing symbol? He didn't know. But it had to be tried. They had to be given every chance before the decision was made.

Dunlap resented having all the responsibility for making the decision thrust upon him. Vaguely he sensed that there was a good reason why it had to be that way, but the reason itself eluded him. It wasn't easy to play god for a planet.

But the string of time was burning short. He would have to act. He couldn't take any more chances. And that meant he couldn't allow himself to be turned over to this man Pearce.

Cautiously he glanced at the guards in the dimness of the car. They had grown careless. Tangibly he sensed it. And who could blame them? After all, what could one man, unarmed and wounded, do against three armed men?

Dunlap smiled quietly to himself. How were the guards to know that he was — different?

His right arm moved in its sling and pain's quick drill tore his flesh. Ruthlessly he clamped a nerve block on the agony, and inch by inch the arm came free. He struck then, with the quick, sure speed of a serpent. The edge of his hand chopped once, twice, and the

men beside him slumped.

It wasn't quite soundless. The first man fell forward, his head thudding against the front seat, and a ragged hiss of warning escaped the other man's lips. The driver turned, and Dunlap saw startled disbelief on his face as he hit him. The car slowed and swerved, nosing blindly toward a clump of palms.

Dunlap pushed the driver aside and floundered into the front, steadying the wheel with one hand. The palms would do. He extinguished the lights and let the car glide to a halt among the trees. He dragged the three men out and stretched them gently on the ground. Exertion was torture to his wounded body and he opened his mouth so the hot breath could bypass his protesting nose.

He stood for a moment, feet planted, head thrown back, planning what he must do. And he forgot to maintain the block. Waiting wolves of pain rushed upon him ravening, and he staggered as from a physical blow. Sweat poured from him as he struggled to reassert mastery in the maelstrom of his mind. He felt consciousness flowing from him like beer from a bunghole, and he fought.

He fell. The ground sent shock through his buttocks into his spine, and the feel of the fall lingered in his shoulder laughing with exquisite pain. He swam in blackness. His eyes were open, but he saw nothing. His fingers dug without sensation into the sand

on which he sat.

Desperately he nursed the thin sliver of himself which held the narrowing crack in reality's door. Darkness whispered its siren song of rest and oblivion, and for a dangerous instant the tempting thought came: why not?

Something forced him to hang on, and grimly he held. Awareness grew. His fingers felt, his eyes saw. He sweated it out and finally the block was re-established. Shakily he stood and staggered to the car.

How much time did he have? Ten minutes? Perhaps only five. And he had over three miles to go.

He would have to risk the car. It could be spotted more easily, of course. But his exhausted body wouldn't stand a fast pace on foot. He would have to walk part of the way regardless, and the alarm would be spread quickly.

Intently he examined the map of Luani impressed on his brain. He chose his route and began to drive, following no road but going in the straightest direction possible. He used no lights, but the speedometer hovered around forty. If passengers had accompanied him, they would have remembered that ride.

The siren wailed just before he reached the bluff, and lights began to bob brightly in the distance. As he climbed from the car, blood from his shoulder was a warm puddle at his belt. He concentrated on the wound

until the flow diminished to an ooze. Then, almost reluctantly, he let the car plunge from the bluff to the sea below, listening to its breathy passage into the depths.

He began to walk. The lights were closer now. Too close. They had wasted no time baying along his trail. The cave was still several hundred yards away, and he knew he had to get there and do what must still be done. It would be close. But if he could make it, he would be safe until rendezvous —

Rendezvous —

Sudden doubt nagged him. The time and place were clear in his mind, but there was something about the rendezvous. Something he should remember. Something important. Uncertainty shook him, and he felt naked and alone.

He broke into a shambling run, forcing the doubt from his mind. He had more immediate worries. No time to feel sorry for himself now. The nerve block grew harder to hold with each jarring step, and the wolves of pain slavered —

General Boyer's fingers were clumsy animals nuzzling the papers on his desk. The papers themselves weren't important. He didn't even see them. He was seeing the black mark on his record.

The whole thing was unbelievable. Vaguely he blamed Pearce. What was the Army coming to when a civilian

— a civilian, mind you — could arrive with direct authority from the President to give orders to the commanding officer?

It wasn't Army. It wasn't Proper Procedure. And General Boyer put Army, Proper Procedure and Channels right next to the Bible. He had lived by them for many years and they had never betrayed him.

The general was scheduled for retirement soon. Operation Hydra was, in all probability, his last assignment. Then would come the orderly routine of his Connecticut farm, where semi-Spartan life would be spiced by occasional reminiscences with old cronies over a scotch and soda.

He had looked forward to the years on the farm. He was essentially a simple man. A bit unimaginative, perhaps. And his Army record was his hobby. As some men collect stamps, so the general collected memories.

Army memories. They were, to him, rich and alive, and in the leisure of his declining years he would re-examine them with pride. There was nothing of outstanding brilliance in his record, true. But it was steady and sound, and a graph of his promotions would have resembled the steps of a methodical man mounting stairs.

No black marks.

Until this. Now Dunlap's escape was a blot of India ink on the previous white. And it was incredible. How had the man done it? Three guards —

Of course, he didn't for an instant

believe that Dunlap was a Martian. Or a Venusian or anything else outlandish. Sheer poppycock.

Momentarily he toyed with the idea that the whole thing was a monstrous plot designed by subversives to undermine the prestige of the Army. But he had checked on Pearce. The higher-ups were behind him, and they were deadly serious about this business.

Suddenly Boyer felt old. Elasticity had dried within him to a brittle gum. When he entered the Army the cavalry rode horses and planes were still flying machines, dinky and impractical. He had adjusted to the tank, the paratrooper, the transcontinental bomber, the A-bomb, the jet. But this nonsense about men from the stars and telepathy was too much.

He refused to credit the reality of such things. And when his superiors began to take absurdities of that kind seriously, it was time for him to step down. He would get out before the Army went completely insane.

In a way it was funny. He saw his record and the Army — the two were inseparable, of course — turned topsyturvy by a scooting object which didn't exist. A flying saucer.

It was a joke. That was the only way to treat it, as a joke. And jokes were something to laugh at. Obediently a sound came from his lips. The ring of the sound was hollow.

No, it wasn't funny. His vision blurred with sudden mist and he blinked. For a moment he sat very

still and erect, watching a parade of vanishing ghosts. Then he sighed and set to work, sorting the papers methodically. His successor would need this — And this —

Two slow tears glistened on the leather of his cheeks, and the lump was large in his throat.

Searchlights were bright fingers picking delicately over the landscape for the fugitive. Among the fingers moved dark hunters, linked by sharp voices in a nervous network of sound.

Dunlap fell heavily as one of the bright brooms swept toward him over the sand. He clung to the earth until it passed, then rose and ran in the valley of shadow. Run, fall, and wait. But there was a limit. Flesh and blood could only take so much.

Run, fall, and wait. A little closer to the goal. The block a little harder to hold.

Run, fall, and wait. Liquid fingers were knitting a warm sweater of blood for his shoulder.

Prying lights crept closer, voices grew louder. "There. What's that?" A shout clear and near.

Dunlap froze. Slowly he turned his head. The searchers were within fifty yards, and one of them was pointing with his light. He would have to get rid of them.

The web of his mind reached out soft as thistledown, seeking contact. Just a touch of control to distract their attention.



*Nothing happened.*

The web drifted out emptily, touching nothing. What was wrong? Desperately he worked with the web, casting it again and again. What had happened to him? He couldn't make contact. He couldn't control the men moving toward him.

Bitterly he watched the lights and listened to the voices, knowing he was beaten. Why couldn't he make contact with their minds? To get so close —

A sound that was half curse, half snarl rose in his throat.

A distant shout came, urgent, summoning. The hunters paused, babbling together, then raced away toward the summons.

The snarl left his body as a sigh. He was safe. Temporarily, at least. But it was not a safety of his making. Painfully he forced his muscles to hurry, knowing now the full extent of his helplessness.

Along the edge of the bluff he moved, seeking the tiny ladder of pegs. And the bright fingers picked over the sand seeking him.

Fask clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels in his schoolmasterish way. "Well, gentlemen?" The question was purely rhetorical. "You heard Pearce's radio message. He believes that there is an alien on Luani. An alien and a murderer. And he has escaped. He is at large on an island with the greatest destructive weapon known to man."

Druze frowned. "It doesn't fit. It's too clumsy. Something about it smells."

Crown laughed sardonically. "If you've finally got a whiff of it, it must stink to high heaven."

"No," Druze said softly, hiding the anger within him, "that isn't what I meant. The situation isn't logical. Not unless they're testing us. It doesn't make sense any other way. They've set up a pattern to get our reaction, the same way we put rats in a maze. We've got to make them realize that we understand —"

"Druze," Crown interrupted savagely, "what does it take to convince you? Pearce told us that that thing has already killed one man. There's a rat in this all right, but not in a maze. The rat is on Luani in our trap." He turned to Fask, flushed with the excitement of the chase. "We've got to make sure we get that thing, that alien, Fask. This calls for Red Ralph."

"I agree." Fask flipped a switch and spoke. "Red Ralph into effect immediately," he said.

Druze sighed impotently. Red Ralph meant a destroyer-submarine cordon, a plane umbrella, and Marines. He hoped the aliens were a tolerant race who wouldn't expect too much.

Dunlap pushed aside the covering and swung his body into the tiny opening in the sheer face of the bluff. It was a tight fit and he wriggled. Before he drew his head in, he glanced

up. No black gargoyles protruded from the silhouette of the lip above him, no hunters looked down. He had made it.

He refastened the covering and stood erect in darkness. Fumbling, he found the flash. Its glow revealed a cave, but not a natural one. It was small, with smooth, hard walls, and its shape was oval. There was equipment in the cave.

Dazedly Dunlap looked about, not quite knowing what to do. Blood and sweat crusted his flesh and weariness was a sodden garment he had worn too long. He was a hunted animal, hurt and tired, who, reaching the safety of its den, finds that is not enough.

His wounds. He must lick his wounds. There was medicine in a small chest. Trembling fingers stripped away shirt, removed bandages, did what was necessary. There was food; he ate, and strength which had guttered dimly began to burn with a small, sure flame.

Sleep. He must sleep and then make the decision.

Gingerly he released the nerve block. The medicine had been busy. His wounds were healing and the pain was bearable. He extinguished the light and stretched out on the floor. Immediately a feeling of wrongness, of out-of-placeness surged over him. He was a stranger half awakening in the dark to discover unfamiliarity about him.

Deliberately he thrust the feeling aside. Setting a mental alarm to rouse

him in an hour, he snuggled into the soft covers of rest and oblivion. The last sound he heard was the distant drone of planes.

He awakened and was instantly alert. Many planes were roaring overhead now, a drove of noisy vultures. Dunlap lay in the darkness listening to the whooshing blast of the jets, not greatly disturbed by the sound. Tentatively he moved his arms, his legs. The returning strength of his body bathed him in a warm, animal-like glow.

He arose, stretched, and ate ravenously. His watch told him that a scant two hours remained before rendezvous, and his decision was yet to be made. It was time to get to work. In those two hours he must decide, make whatever preparations his decision required, and be ready to leave.

But first, there were several things he must get straight.

*Who was he?*

Quickly he peered into the rooms of his mind. Access to them seemed free. Apparently the mental block was gone. Then — who was he? The name that suggested itself was — George Dunlap.

Angrily he slapped the name aside. He wasn't Dunlap.

Urgently he riffled the file of memory, and for an instant he glimpsed what he sought, dark and sealed. *His identity.* He tore at its wrapping, eager to see the familiar but forgotten thing inside. It squirted away like an orange

pip and was gone.

He shifted his attack. His companions on the ship flaring through space, his family inside the house of soaring wings —

*Why couldn't he see them? Why were they nameless?*

Clattering through the corridors of his mind he raced, desperately searching for a familiar face, a name of wife or child or friend. Tantalizingly they eluded him, playing a flirting game of hide and seek. They were ghosts mocking him with his inability to catch them; ghosts who made no effort to disguise their presence but vanished, laughing, before he could clothe them with the flesh of reality.

Sweating, he forced himself to abandon the useless chase.

What was the reason? Why was his identity, the identity of others of his race, hidden from him? So he would be unable to reveal them if captured? But that made no sense. He had been captured already.

Obviously the mental block was still partially effective.

But why should his identity be denied him when he could recall his house, the red beach and the saltless sea, the ship and the stars?

*Because, for the time being, those things didn't matter.* For an instant he sensed the thing that did matter, the thing that the people of this planet must not know. He mind reeled from the shock of that knowledge as from a live wire, and he forgot.

Something nudged his thoughts; turning them from introspective channels. The decision —

Prime question: Is Man ready for the stars?

He smiled as he recalled Baker's negative answer. Baker would have been surprised to discover how close the decision really was.

He broke out his tools, the formulas which would furnish the answer, and slid values into the symbol slots. Some values he shifted to the high limit, some to the low, reversing, juggling, his brain busy.

And, as he had known all along, there wasn't any answer. Not without a value for the vital, missing symbol. Without that, the margin of error inherent in the factor data was greater than the probability direction indicated by the result.

But it was close. Very close.

A race had to get so far under its own steam before it was ready for Contact. If it didn't, it lost its identity. Its native culture withered, died, and was replaced by the meaningless mirror of an alien growth. But if a race were mature enough, if its roots went deep enough, then it would bloom under the strong fertilizer of Contact.

But the distance a race must reach by itself was not a point, but an area; an area shaded in doubt. Before that area was gained, Contact caused regression. Beyond that area, progress. But within that area — Who could tell?

And, in so far as he could determine from the available data, Man was within the area of doubt, the region of danger. Contact with Man now was uncertainty, a gamble. It might soar him to the roof of the galaxy. And it might rob him of his heritage, make him an Indian on a reservation.

But there was danger, too, in failing to make Contact. Man bristled with belligerence. He might destroy himself before he emerged from the area of doubt. That was the rub.

*Learn, Man, to live with your fellows.*

Dunlap shook his head. How could he decide intelligently?

Restlessly he began to pace the cave. At the far end of the oval space squatted a black machine, sleek and soundless as an obedient pet. He visualized the motor within that machine, more powerful by far than any yet devised upon this planet.

Was that machine the answer he sought?

It might come to that. But not yet. There were subsidiary formulas he could try, alternatives which might throw additional light upon the problem. He became absorbed in the working factors, and was still for long minutes.

They weren't conclusive. Political structure, political growth, rate of progress toward stability — Technology, inventiveness, cultural patterns, cyclic swings — The long, tortuous road of History, with its horseshoe bends, its descents into deepening val-

leys, the sudden, breathtaking climbs —

All these things he considered, equated, and evaluated. And they weren't enough. He needed the missing symbol which represented motivation and characteristic, basic drive, the idiosyncratic twist of race.

And suddenly he realized that he had it. He had a value for the vital symbol. He had had it all along without knowing. Briefly he wondered if that was why he had to be the one to make the decision.

Eagerly he made the transformations, hoping with all his being that Man was ready, that the answer would prove his readiness. The symbol of the result flared in his brain, and he regarded it as he might a scorpion.

"Warlike," the result shouted. "Handle with care. Dangerous. Explosive. Do not open."

Dejectedly Dunlap sat upon the floor of the cave, his finger tracing a meaningless design in the invisible dust. He might have known.

The breaking of his nose, the scornful, insistent questions they had barked at him, the terror of their ruthless pursuit as he fled — The armada of planes roaring overhead, Helen and the radioactive sisters which would follow her —

All of those things were a part of the answer. And all of them shouted; "Warlike, warlike —"

Yes, he should have known

His decision was clear. Wearily he rose and walked to the black machine.

The suppressor was the only answer.

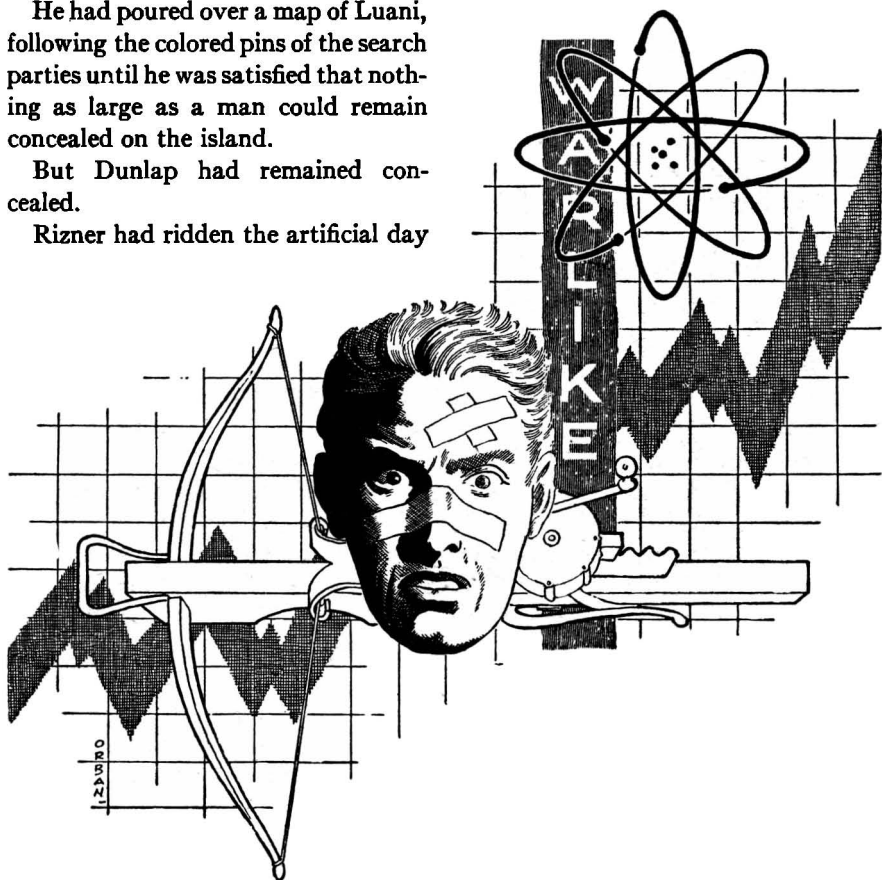
To Colonel Rizner those hours were unreal. Gradually the red coals of his fear were banked by the routine activities of the search, and the search itself became a game, a maneuver through which he could move without thought. He couldn't let himself think. Thinking about it would be a fresh draft fanning the banked fear flaming.

He had poured over a map of Luani, following the colored pins of the search parties until he was satisfied that nothing as large as a man could remain concealed on the island.

But Dunlap had remained concealed.

Rizner had ridden the artificial day

of Luani in a jeep, maintaining contact with headquarters by walkie-talkie. He had heard the swoop and whine of the planes overhead, had seen the brightly blooming flowers of their flares. He had watched the lights of the ships offshore winking at the island with fantastic coquetry, had encountered the hunters swarming like ants.



And Dunlap was still hidden. Somewhere.

On the island? To Rizner that seemed impossible. And yet, it seemed equally impossible that he could have escaped it.

It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. All these planes, all these ships, these men, armed to the teeth to ferret out and attack — What? One man? One something? It was ridiculous. And frightening.

One something from Out Yonder. One mariner washed to familiar shores by an unfamiliar sea. He glanced at the dusky pall of sky, hazed by lights beating up from the island, and was glad that the alien stars were blotted out.

Toward dawn the colonel left his jeep near the lab and walked along the bluff brooding over the leaden ocean. He was tired and he moved with slow purposelessness, smelling the good salt of the sea. Then he saw the figure.

It was huddled in a small depression not far from the bluff's edge. Just sitting there. No, Rizner told himself, it can't be. But something made his scalp prickle and fear flared within him. He trembled, half turning as though to flee, then stopped, ashamed. Like a cornered savage calling upon his gods to exercise their power through a talismanic charm, he drew his .45. Forward he moved on the balls of his feet, his finger itching at the trigger.

Dunlap knew now that they weren't

coming. His hand moved uncertainly toward the vernier dial of the tau wave, hesitated, and drew back. There was no point in trying again. He had been trying to reach them for the past two hours, ever since they failed to keep the appointed rendezvous, without success.

Not again would he see the ship and his faceless companions, nor his house and nameless loved ones. Gradually he realized that they had never intended to come. His mission was not completed.

Wearily he moved about the cave doing the things he must do before he left it for the last time. Check the dials of the black machine, pile the equipment around it. Briefly, loneliness and rebellion struggled with his sense of duty. It wasn't much of a struggle. He really had no choice, he knew that. But it was bitter.

Farewell, you whom I love but cannot recall. Farewell, beloved memories unremembered. Farewell, planet of the bright blue sun; farewell, home —

He stood at the cave's exit and looked back at his work, wanting to linger a few precious minutes more in this place which linked him to — somewhere. And he knew he could not. Dawn was pallid in the east, calling upon him to leave.

The switch of the flame gun moved beneath his finger. He played the beam like the stream of a garden hose, and its touch made the walls melt and flow. Soon the black machine and the

pile of equipment were encysted. He lifted his hand in grave salute, then quickly eeled through the opening to the outside.

He sealed the cave with the gun, did something to the switch, and threw it into the ocean below. In a moment angry bubbles broke the surface, and he knew that beneath the bubbles lay a fused twist of metal.

Slowly he climbed, kicking loose the pegs as he went. And as he ascended his mind began to close, folding in upon itself like the wedges of a Japanese fan.

This was the hardest part of all, he thought before it became too late for him to think about it. This compression of his personality, feeling his ego being encysted like the machine in the cave below, was the hardest to bear; harder even than desertion by his companions.

He crawled over the lip of the bluff. For a moment he sat, wondering why this sense of sadness was upon him. Idly he plucked a peg from the face of the rock and tossed it into the water.

What was he doing here? There was something — He gazed up at the paling stars as though hoping to read the answer in their twinkling eyes. But he did not.

It didn't matter. Aimlessly he began to walk. He reached a slight depression in the sand and sat down to wait.

Rizner found him there.

"The prisoner is human," Pearce

said slowly. "One hundred per cent human."

The band constricting Rizner's chest burst and he breathed in deep relief. "Thank God," he muttered softly.

"Knew that all the time," Boyer remarked querulously. "Of course he's human. Has to be." The general seemed suddenly old and childish.

Pearce sucked his gurgling pipe thoughtfully. "There are several oddities about the prisoner, however. First, his wounds have healed with miraculous swiftness. Second, he seems convinced that he has worked out a revolutionary approach to politico-economic theory and he says he intends to write a book about it. Third, he is suffering from a partial amnesia. He doesn't know who he is, and the events of the past week are a complete blank to him."

"He's lying," Rizner said without conviction.

Pearce shook his head. "No. We used the polygraph and scopolamine. He isn't lying." Absently he twisted the pipe in his fingers. "Colonel, about that scar on Dunlap's arm: When Baker phoned you from the lab to tell you that the scar had vanished, why was your reaction so vivid and immediate?"

Rizner frowned. "The scar was such an obvious thing. I knew it couldn't just disappear."

"You knew Dunlap couldn't be Dunlap if the scar had vanished. Is that it?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And yet you persist in calling the prisoner Dunlap. Why, colonel?"

"What else is there to call him? Mr. Alien?"

Pearce nodded understandingly. "Did Dunlap ever deliberately attract your attention to his scar?"

"Why, he showed it to me in my office one day. Laughed about it. Said everyone should have some such identifying characteristic."

"And you, general?"

Boyer nodded absently. "Showed me his scar at the lab several days ago, made some joke about radiation burns."

"I see. Colonel, will you describe Ellison Baker for me?"

"Washed out blondish; medium size. The sort you wouldn't look at twice."

"Of course," Pearce murmured. "He would be." He stared at Rizner intently. "Colonel, you're a trained observer. Don't you see the significance of what you've just told me?"

Rizner sat very still, moving the pieces in his mind. The thought that began to form was an icicle. "No," he said. "No."

"Yes. The prisoner — the man you call Dunlap — is Ellison Baker. There is no Dunlap. No one named Dunlap has ever been connected with Hydra."

"Ridiculous," Boyer mumbled petulantly.

"I'm afraid it isn't, general. The prisoner is Ellison Baker beyond the shadow of a doubt."

Frantically Rizner jerked open the drawers of his mind, seeking denial and finding none.

"The pigeonholes of personality were switched," Pearce continued. "The real Baker was given another name: 'Dunlap.' The name that remained, Baker, was . . . appropriated. Baker himself was manipulated, of course, as 'Dunlap.' He was a pawn on the board."

"Then the man who was murdered on the bluff —?"

"Was the alien. Of course, he wasn't murdered."

"A fish jumped," Rizner said slowly. "When Dunlap — the prisoner — fired, a fish jumped in the lagoon." He looked at Pearce, and fear peered from his eyes. "But it wasn't a fish, was it?"

"No, colonel. I'm afraid the 'fish' was the bullet you thought killed Ellison Baker."

"Nonsense," Boyer snorted. "Nonsense."

"I don't know when the switch was made," Pearce said, ignoring the general. "Possibly a week ago, possibly yesterday on the bluff. You were conditioned, of course, colonel. You and the others here on the island. You were conditioned to accept the substitution. Baker — the man we have captured — kept us busy while the eetes did what they wanted to do."

"But what were they after?" Rizner might have been speaking to himself. "The bomb wasn't touched. What



were they after?"

Pearce gnawed his pipe reflectively. "Certainly they wanted to reclaim the . . . one of them who had been Baker, the one who took over Baker's identity temporarily. Other than that . . . who knows? Several hypotheses are reasonable, I think. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that the aliens are benevolent. These politico-economic theories Baker has picked up from . . . somewhere, sound pretty good to me. Suppose the eetes gave those ideas to Baker so he could pass them on to us. To keep Man from blowing himself up, say.

"Or perhaps they just wanted to get acquainted with us. Perhaps they wanted us to believe that we had captured one of them to see what we'd do." He paused to relight his pipe. "We've been playing a game of Button, Button, Who's Got the Button. And so far we haven't located the button."

It would be a hard fact to live with, Rizner thought, knowing there were Others. It stripped away something from Man's essential conceit and made him small. But there *was* that one consoling fact —

"They're human," he said. "At least, they're human."

Pearce looked at him pityingly. "Are they, colonel? Are they? Remember, they conditioned you."

"But Baker," Rizner stammered. "The one of them we thought was Baker — He was —" His voice trailed

into silence as his mind twisted and reeled. For a moment he thought he had the answer, an answer as cold and hard as a button, and he opened his mouth to scream. Then the answer slipped away.

*There was something that the people of Earth must not know.*

Rizner shook his head dazedly and found Pearce staring at him with a puzzled expression. They had both forgotten.

*Report of Leon Pearce, Investigator in charge, to Joint Chiefs, subhead Who, Operation Hydra.*

It is evident, therefore, that Ellison Baker, driven by a sense of guilt about his work on the H-bomb, escaped, in his own mind, into the fictitious personality of "George Dunlap." As Dunlap, he attempted to expiate his guilt by "killing" Baker — himself. Obviously, this was an elaborate effort on his part to wipe from memory the man he had been, the man who was a symbol of contribution to a project which might result in mankind's destruction.

Accordingly he proceeded to act out a pantomime of the "murder" on the bluff near the lab. This he did so realistically that Colonel Rizner was deceived into believing that a murder had, in fact, been committed. Previously Baker had laid the groundwork for this scheme by telling Rizner on the phone that "Dunlap" was not "Dunlap," but a spy, and that the spy was planning to kill him, Baker.

This action would seem to indicate that, subconsciously, Baker rejected the fraud which he was about to perpetrate on Rizner and hit upon this method of insuring his own punishment for his "crime" toward humanity by making himself appear guilty of his own murder.

After his capture, while submerged in the "Dunlap" personality, Baker steadfastly denied that any such person as Baker had ever existed. This apparent inconsistency is, of course, merely further proof of his desperate desire to remove all trace of his former self.

In Rizner's defense, it must be stated that Baker had recently arrived on Luani; and that, because of a mixup in the States, his dossier had become confused with that of another Ellison Baker employed at Hanford.

While being brought to me for interrogation, Baker managed to escape his guards, remaining at large overnight. There is some evidence indicating that, during this period, Baker believed himself to be an alien from another world. If he did wander into such a mental fantasy, it is only additional proof of an attempt on his part to escape the unbearable reality of his work on the bomb.

Since his recapture, Baker has made the return to his own personality. Proper treatment and rest should result in his complete recovery. Naturally, he is being released by the AEC.

Scheduled preparations for testing

the H-bomb are proceeding according to plan.

Ellison Baker wasn't interested in the truth or falseness of Leon Pearce's top-secret report, now, after several months, gathering secret dust in a secret file.

Ellison Baker was happy. He was hard at work on his book, and he had found a publisher who was enthusiastic about the new politico-economic formulas set forth and developed therein.

Baker had always felt, as had the great majority of all men of all ages, that there should be some relatively simple, workable solution to the age-old problem of Man's living with his fellows in peace and plenty without the blind insanity of wars and the creeping paralysis of political corruption or overweening bureaucracy. He would have been the last man on earth to claim that his formulas furnished all the answers. But he was convinced that the approach to that problem suggested by his formulas would put Man's faltering foot firmly on the right rung of the right ladder.

Ideas, of course, are slow tools. But they are sure ones. It takes time for the thinking of the Hobbes, the Lockes, and the Jeffersons to become martial music sounding the clarion call that all men are born free and equal; that all government derives its authority from the just consent of the governed. The next step, too, would take time. The new concepts

must spread, and men must worry the meat from their bones and chew them.

But the fusion suppressor in the cave on Luani would grant time. Some time, at least —

And sometimes, when Baker grew momentarily discouraged, he would recall vaguely as in a dream the happenings on Luani. And it seemed, curiously, that once upon a far away time when he had been drinking beer with a — well, not exactly a man, but a friend — that the friend had come to him with a gun in his hand. A gun extended butt foremost. And for a time thereafter, he, Baker, had exchanged places with the friend and had looked at Man and his world through different eyes. He felt that the friend had helped him make a decision about — something. Something important. As a wise old contractor, for instance, might give a fledgling at the game a word of advice. And, somehow, his new formulas had grown out of that experience.

Leon Pearce had said that they were playing a game of Button, Button. Consciously, Ellison Baker would have denied that he could be the possessor of the button Pearce sought. But Baker knew that a button was a tool which, properly used, would help fasten and sustain the dangerously slipping garment of Man's civilization.

THE END