

FUTURE

SCIENCE FICTION

May
1953

Volume
4
Number
1

Robert W. Lowndes

Editor

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Next Issue on Sale May 1st

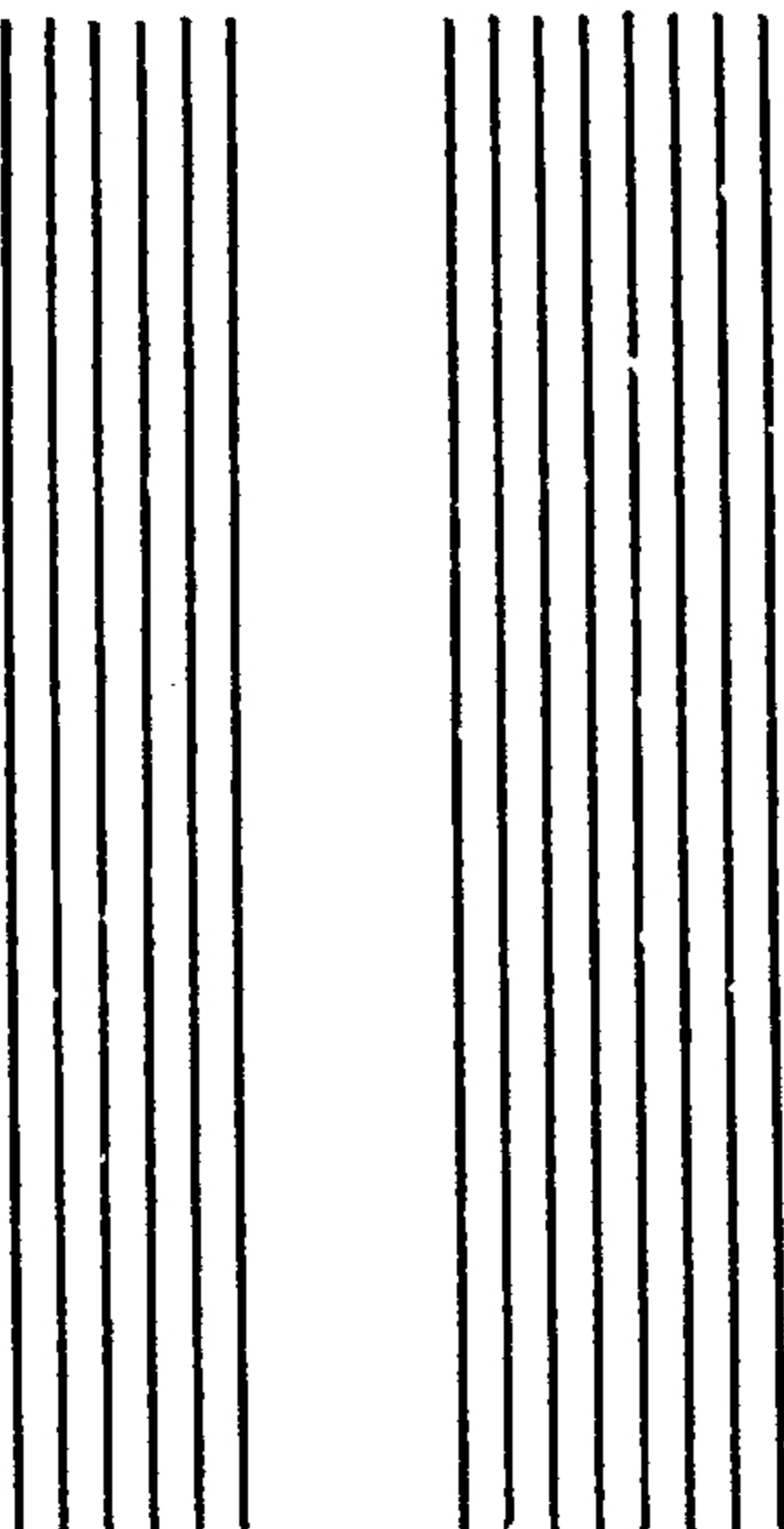
FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION, May, 1953, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass, under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyrighted 1953 by Columbia Publications, Inc. 25¢ per copy; yearly subscription \$1.50. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in the U. S. A.



Bernisty drew a blazing line in front of the Kay men.

Novelet Of
Worlds To Come

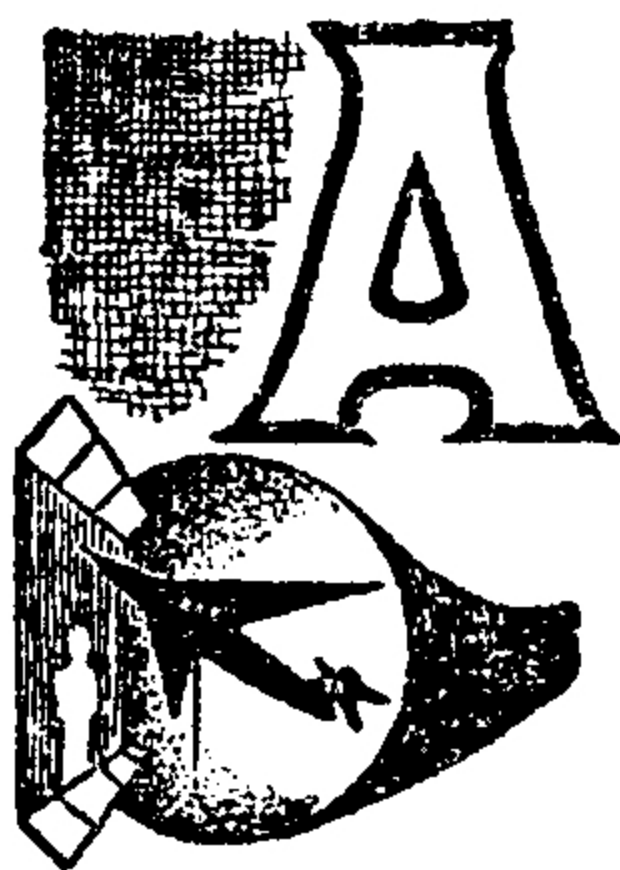
ECOLOGICAL ONSLAUGHT



The Kay system had no use for this world, but was determined that the men of the Blue Star should not develop it.

by Jack Vance

(illustrated by Paul Orban)



BOARD the exploration-cruiser *Blauelm* an ugly variety of psycho-neural ailments was developing. There was no profit in extending the expedition, already in space three months overlong; Explorator Bernisty ordered a return to Blue Star.

But there was no rise of spirits, no lift of morale; the damage had been done. Reacting from hypertension, the keen-tuned technicians fell into glum apathy, and sat staring like andromorphs. They ate little, they spoke less. Bernisty attempted various ruses; competition, subtle musics, pungent food, but without effect.

Bernisty went further; at his orders the play-women locked themselves in their quarters, and sang erotic chants into the ship's address-system. These protean measures failing, Bernisty had a dilemma on his hands. At stake was the identity of his team, so craftily put together—such a meteorologist to work with such a chemist; such a botanist for such a virus analyst. To return to Blue Star thus demoralized—Bernisty shook his craggy head. There would be no further ventures in *Blauelm*.

"Then let's stay out longer," suggested Berel, his own favorite among the play-women.

Bernisty shook his head, thinking that Berel's usual intelligence had failed her. "We'd make bad matters worse."

"Then what will you do?"

Bernisty admitted he had no idea, and went away to think. Later in the day, he decided on a course of immense consequence; he swerved aside to make a survey of the Kay System. If anything would rouse the spirits of his men, this was it.

There was danger to the detour, but none of great note; spice to the venture came from the fascination of the alien, the oddness of the Kay cities with their taboo against regular form, the bizarre Kay social system.

The star Kay glowed and waxed, and Bernisty saw that his scheme was succeeding. There was once more talk, animation, argument along the gray steel corridors.

The *Blaueim* slid above the Kay ecliptic; the various worlds fell astern, passing so close that the minute movement, the throb of the cities, the dynamic pulse of the workshops were plain in the viewplates. Kith and Kelmet—these two warted over with domes—Karnfray, Koblenz, Kavanaf, then the central sun-star Kay; then Kool, too hot for life; then Kerrykirk, the capitol world; then Kobald and Kinsle, the ammonia giants frozen and dead—and the Kay System was astern.

Now Bernisty waited on tenter-hooks; would there be a relapse toward inanition, or would the intellectual impetus suffice for the remainder of the voyage? Blue Star lay ahead, another week's journey. Between lay a yellow star of no particular note.... It was while passing the yellow star that the consequences of Bernisty's ruse revealed themselves.

"Planet!" sang out the cartographer.

THIS WAS a cry to arouse no excitement; during the last eight months it had sounded many times

through the *Blaueim*. Always the planet had proved so hot as to melt iron; or so cold as to freeze gas; or so poisonous as to corrode skin; or so empty of air as to suck out a man's lungs. The call was no longer a stimulus.

"Atmosphere!" cried the cartographer. The meteorologist looked up in interest. "Mean temperature—twenty-four degrees!"

Bernisty came to look, and measured the gravity himself. "One and one-tenth normal..." He motioned to the navigator, who needed no more to compute for a landing.

Bernisty stood watching the disk of the planet in the viewplate. "There must be something wrong with it. Either the Kay or ourselves must have checked a hundred times; it's directly between us."

"No record of the planet, Bernisty," reported the librarian, burrowing eagerly among his tapes and pivots. "No record of exploration; no record of anything."

"Surely it's known the star exists?" demanded Bernisty with a hint of sarcasm.

"Oh, indeed—we call it Maraplexa, the Kay call it Melliflo. But there is no mention of either system exploring or developing."

"Atmosphere," called the meteorologist, "methane, carbon dioxide, ammonia, water vapor. Unbreathable, but Type 6-D—potential."

"No chlorophyll, haemaphyll, blusk, or petradine absorption," muttered the botanist, an eye to the spectrograph. "In short—no native vegetation."

"Let me understand all this," said Bernisty. "Temperature, gravity, pressure okay?"

"Okay."

"No corrosive gas?"

"None."

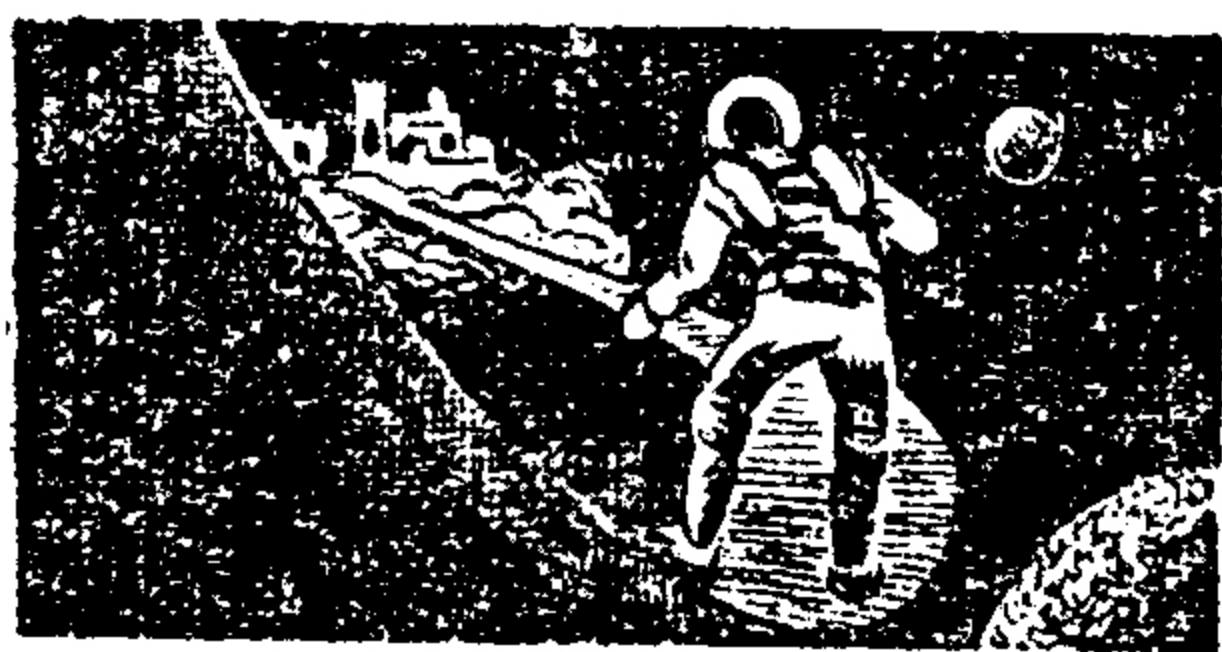
"No native life?"

"No sign."

"And no record of exploration, claim or development?"

"None."

"Then," said Bernisty triumphantly,



"we're moving in." To the radioman: "Issue notice of intent. Broadcast to all quarters, the Archive Station. From this hour, Maraplexa is a Blue Star development!"

The *Blauchm* slowed, and swung down to land. Bernisty sat watching with Berel the play-girl.

"Why—why—*why!* Blandwick the navigator argued with the cartographer. "Why have not the Kay started development?"

"The same reason, evidently, that we haven't; we look too far afield."

"We comb the fringes of the galaxy," said Berel with a sly side-glance at Bernisty. "We sift the globular clusters."

"And here," said Bernisty, ruefully, "a near-neighbor to our own star—a world that merely needs an atmosphere modification—a world we can mold into a garden!"

"But will the Kay allow?" Blandwick put forth.

"What may they do?"

"This will come hard to them."

"So much the worse for the Kay!"

"They will claim a prior right."

"There are no records to demonstrate."

"And then—"

Bernisty interrupted. "Blandwick, go croak your calamity to the play-girls. With the men at work, they will be bored and so will listen to your woe."

"I know the Kay," maintained Blandwick. "They will never submit to what they will consider a humiliation—a stride ahead by Blue Star."

"They have no choice; they must submit," declared Berel, with the laughing recklessness that originally had called her to Bernisty's eye.

"You are wrong," cried Blandwick

excitedly, and Bernisty held up his hand for peace.

"We shall see, we shall see."

Presently, Bufco—the radioman—brought three messages. The first, from Blue Star Central, conveyed congratulations; the second, from the Archive Station, corroborated the discovery; the third, from Kerrykirk, was clearly a hasty improvisation. It declared that the Kay System had long regarded Maraplexa as neutral, a no-man's-land between the two Systems; that a Blue Star development would be unfavorably received.

Bernisty chuckled at each of the three messages, most of all at the last. "The ears of their explorators are singing; they need new lands even more desperately than we do, what with their fecund breeding."

"Like farrowing pigs, rather than true men," sniffed Berel.

"They're true men if legend can be believed. We're said to be all stock of the same planet—all from the same lone world."

"The legend is pretty, but—where is this world—this old Earth of the fable?"

Bernisty shrugged. "I hold no brief for the myth; and now—here is our world below us."

"What will you name it?"

Bernisty considered. "In due course we'll find a name. Perhaps 'New Earth', to honor our primeval home."

THE UNSOPHISTICATED eye might have found New Earth harsh, bleak, savage. The windy atmosphere roared across plains and mountains; sunlight glared on deserts and seas of white alkali. Bernisty, however, saw the world as a diamond in the rough—the classic example of a world right for modification. The radiation was right; the gravity was right; the atmosphere held no halogens or corrosive fractions; the soil was free of alien life, and alien proteins, which poisoned even more effectively than the halogens.

Sauntering out on the windy surface,

he discussed all this with Berel. "Of such ground are gardens built," indicating a plain of loess which spread away from the base of the ship. "And of such hills—" he pointed to the range of hills behind "—do rivers come."

"When aerial water exists to form rain," remarked Berel.

"A detail, a detail; could we call ourselves ecologists and be deterred by so small a matter?"

"I am a play-girl, no ecologist—"

"Except in the largest possible sense."

"—I can not consider a thousand billion tons of water a detail."

Bernisty laughed. "We go by easy stages. First the carbon dioxide is sucked down and reduced; for this reason we sowed standard 6-D Basic vetch along the loess today."

"But how will it breathe? Don't plants need oxygen?"

"Look."

From the *Blauelm*, a cloud of brown-green smoke erupted, rose in a greasy plume to be carried off downwind. "Spores of symbiotic lichens: Type Z forms oxygen-pods on the vetch. Type RS is non-photosynthetic—it combines methane with oxygen to make water, which the vetch uses for its growth. The three plants are the standard primary unit for worlds like this one."

Berel looked around the dusty horizon. "I suppose it will develop as you predict—and I will never cease to marvel."

"In three weeks, the plain will be green; in six weeks, the sporing and seeding will be in full swing; in six months, the entire planet will be forty feet deep in vegetation, and in a year, we'll start establishing the ultimate ecology of the planet."

"If the Kay allow."

"The Kay can not prevent; the planet is ours."

Berel inspected the burly shoulders, the hard profile. "You speak with masculine positivity, where everything depends and stipulates from the traditions of the Archive Station. I have no

such certainty; my universe is more dubious."

"You are intuitive, I am rational."

"Reason," mused Berel, "tells you the Kay will abide by the Archive laws; my intuition tells me they will not."

"But what can they do? Attack us? Drive us off?"

"Who knows?"

Bernisty snorted. "They'll never dare."

"How long do we wait here?"

"Only to verify the germination of the vetch, then back to Blue Star."

"And then?"

"And then—we return to develop the full scale ecology."

2



tip.

Bernisty critically examined the stem. Fastened like tiny galls were sacs in two colors—pale green and white. He pointed these out to Berel. "The green pods store oxygen, the white collect water."

"So," said Berel, "already New Earth begins to shift its atmosphere."

"Before your life runs out, you will see Blue Star cities along that plain."

"Somehow, my Bernisty, I doubt that."

The head-set sounded. "X. Bernisty; Radioman Bufco here. Three ships circling the planet; they refuse to acknowledge signals."

Bernisty cast the sprig of vetch to the ground. "That'll be the Kay."

Berel looked after him. "Where are the Blue Star cities now?"

ON THE thirteenth day, Bartenbrock, the botanist, trudged back from a day on the windy loess to announce the first shoots of vegetation. He showed samples to Bernisty—small pale sprigs with varnished leaves at the

Bernisty hastening away made no answer. Berel came after, followed to the control room of the *Blauelm*, where Bernisty tuned the viewplate. "Where are they?" she asked.

"They're around the planet just now—scouting."

"What kind of ships are they?"

"Patrol-attack vessels. Kay design. Here they come now."

Three dark shapes showed on the screen. Bernisty snapped to Bufco, "Send out the Universal Greeting Code."

"Yes, Bernisty."

Bernisty watched, while Bufco spoke in the archaic Universal language.

The ships paused, swerved, settled.

"It looks," said Berel softly, "as if they are landing."

"Yes."

"They are armed; they can destroy us."

"They can—but they'll never dare."

"I don't think you quite understand the Kay psyche."

"Do you?" snapped Bernisty.

She nodded. "Before I entered my girl-hood, I studied; now that I near its end, I plan to continue."

"You are more productive as a girl; while you study and cram your pretty head, I must find a new companion for my cruising."

She nodded at the settling black ships. "If there is to be more cruising for any of us."

BUFECO LEANED over his instrument, as a voice spoke from the mesh. Bernisty listened to syllables he could not understand, though the peremptory tones told their own story.

"What's he say?"

"He demands that we vacate this planet; he says it is claimed by the Kay."

"Tell him to vacate himself; tell him he's crazy... No, better, tell him to communicate with Archive Station."

Bufco spoke in the archaic tongue; the response crackled forth.

"He is landing. He sounds pretty firm."

"Let him land; let him be firm! Our claim is guaranteed by the Archive Station!" But Bernisty nevertheless pulled on his head-dome, and went outside to watch the Kay ships settle upon the loess, and he winced at the energy singeing the tender young vetch he had planted.

There was movement at his back; it was Berel. "What do you do here?" he asked brusquely. "This is no place for play-girls."

"I come now as a student."

Bernisty laughed shortly; the concept of Berel as a serious worker seemed somehow ridiculous.

"You laugh," said Berel. "Very well, let me talk to the Kay."

"You!"

"I know both Kay and Universal."

Bernisty glared, then shrugged. "You may interpret."

The ports of the black ship opened; eight Kay men came forward. This was the first time Bernisty had ever met one of the alien system face-to-face, and at first sight he found them fully as bizarre as he had expected. They were tall spare men, on the whole. They wore flowing black cloaks; the hair had been shorn smooth from their heads, and their scalps were decorated with heavy layers of scarlet and black enamel.

"No doubt," whispered Berel, "they find us just as unique."

Bernisty made no answer, having never before considered himself unique.

The eight men halted, twenty feet distant, stared at Bernisty with curious, cold, unfriendly eyes. Bernisty noted that all were armed.

Berel spoke; the dark eyes swung to her in surprise. The foremost responded.

"What's he say?" demanded Bernisty.

Berel grinned. "They want to know if I, a woman, lead the expedition."

Bernisty quivered and flushed. "You tell them that I, Explorator Bernisty, am in full command."

Berel spoke, at rather greater length than seemed necessary to convey his message. The Kay answered.

"Well?"

"He says we'll have to go; that he bears authorization from Kerrykirk to clear the planet, by force if necessary."

Bernisty sized up the man. "Get his name," he said, to win a moment or two.

Berel spoke, received a cool reply.

"He's some kind of a commodore," she told Bernisty. "I can't quite get it clear. His name is Kallish or Kallis..."

"Well, ask Kallish if he's planning to start a war. Ask him which side the Archive Station will stand behind."

Berel translated. Kallish responded at length.

Berel told Bernisty, "He maintains that we are on Kay ground, that Kay colonizers explored this world, but never recorded the exploration. He claims that if war comes it is our responsibility."

"He wants to bluff us," muttered Bernisty from the corner of his mouth. "Well, two can play that game." He drew his needle-beam, scratched a smoking line in the dust two paces in front of Kallish.

KALLISH reacted sharply, jerking his hand to his own weapon; the others in his party did likewise.

Bernisty said from the side of his mouth, "Tell 'em to leave—take off back to Kerrykirk, if they don't want the beam along their legs..."

Berel translated, trying to keep the nervousness out of her voice. For answer, Kallish snapped on his own beam, burned a flaring orange mark in front of Bernisty.

Berel shakily translated his message. "He says for us to leave."

Bernisty slowly burned another line into the dust, closer to the black-shod feet. "He's asking for it."

Berel said in a worried voice, "Bernisty, you underestimate the Kay! They're rock-hard—stubborn—"

"And they underestimate Bernisty!"

There was quick staccato talk among the Kay; then Kallish, moving



with a jerky flamboyance, snapped down another flickering trench almost at Bernisty's toes.

Bernisty swayed a trifle, then setting his teeth, leaned forward.

"This is a dangerous game," cried Berel.

Bernisty aimed, spattered hot dust over Kallish's sandals. Kallish stepped back; the Kay behind him roared. Kallish, his face a saturnine grinning mask, slowly started burning a line that would cut across Bernisty's ankles. Bernisty could move back—or Kallish could curve aside his beam...

Berel sighed. The beam spat straight, Bernisty stood rock-still. The beam cut the ground, cut over Bernisty's feet, cut on.

Bernisty stood still grinning. He raised his needle-beam.

Kallish turned on his heel, strode away, the black cape flapping in the ammoniacal wind.

Bernisty stood watching; a taut shape, frozen between triumph, pain and fury. Berel waited, not daring to speak. A minute passed. The Kay ships rose up from the dusty soil of New Earth, and the energy burnt down more shoots of the tender young vetch...

Berel turned to Bernisty: he was stumbling; his face was drawn and ghastly. She caught him under the armpits. From the *Blauelm* came Blandwick and a medic. They placed

Bernisty in a litter, and conveyed him to the sick-ward.

As the medic cut cloth and leather away from the charred bones, Bernisty croaked to Berel, "I won today. They're not done... But today—I won!"

"It cost you your feet!"

"I can grow new feet—" Bernisty gasped and sweat as the medic touched a live nerve "—I can't grow a new planet..."

CONTRARY to Bernisty's expectations, the Kay made no further landing on New Earth. Indeed, the days passed with deceptive calm. The sun rose, glared a while over the ocher, yellow and gray landscape, sank in a western puddle of greens and reds. The winds slowed; a peculiar calm fell over the loess plain. The medic, by judicious hormones, grafts and calcium transplants, set Bernisty's feet to growing again. Temporarily he hobbled around in special shoes, staying close to the *Blauehm*.

Six days after the Kay had come and gone, the *Beaudry* arrived from Blue Star. It brought a complete ecological laboratory, with stocks of seeds, spores, eggs, sperm; spawn, bulbs, grafts; frozen fingerlings, copepods, experimental cells and embryos; grubs, larva, pupae; amoeba, bacteria, viruses; as well as nutritive cultures and solutions. There were also tools for manipulating or mutating established species; even a supply of raw nuclein, unpatterned tissue, clear protoplasm from which simple forms of life could be designed and constructed. It was now Bernisty's option either to return to Blue Star with the *Blauehm*, or remain to direct the development of New Earth. Without conscious thought he made his choice; he elected to stay. Almost two-thirds his technical crew made the same choice. And the day after the arrival of the *Beaudry*, the *Blauehm* took off for Blue Star.

This day was notable in several respects. It signalized the complete

changeover in Bernisty's life; from Explorer, pure and simple, to the more highly-specialized Master Ecologist, with the corresponding rise in prestige. It was on this day that New Earth took on the semblance of a habitable world, rather than a barren mass of rock and gas to be molded. The vetch over the loess plain had grown to a mottled green-brown sea, beaded and wadded with lichen pods. Already it was coming to its first seed. The lichens had already spored three or four times. There was yet no detectable change in the New Earth atmosphere; it was still CO₂, methane, ammonia, with traces of water vapor and inert gases, but the effect of the vetch was geometrically progressive, and as yet the total amount of vegetation was small compared to what it would be.

THE THIRD event of importance upon this day was the appearance of Kathryn.

She came down in a small space-boat, and landed with a roughness that indicated either lack of skill or great physical weakness. Bernisty watched the boat's arrival from the dorsal promenade of the *Beaudry*, with Berel standing at his elbow.

"A Kay boat," said Berel huskily.

Bernisty looked at her in quick surprise. "Why do you say that? It might be a boat from Alvan or Canopus—or the Graemer System, or a Dannic vessel from Copenhag."

"No. It is Kay."

"How do you know?"

Out of the boat stumbled the form of a young woman. Even at this distance it could be seen she was very beautiful—something in the confidence of movement, the easy grace.... She wore a head-dome, but little else. Bernisty felt Berel stiffening. Jealousy? She felt none when he amused himself with other play-girls; did she sense here a deeper threat?

Berel said in a throaty voice, "She's a spy—a Kay spy. Send her away!"

Bernisty was pulling on his own

dome; a few minutes later, he walked across the dusty plain to meet the young woman, who was pushing her way slowly against the wind.

Bernisty paused, sized her up. She was slight, more delicate in build than most of the Blue Star women; she had a thick cap of black elf-locks; pale skin with the luminous look of old vellum; wide dark eyes.

Bernisty felt a peculiar lump rising in his throat; a feeling of awe and protectiveness such as Berel nor any other woman had ever aroused. Berel was behind him. Berel was antagonistic; both Bernisty and the strange woman felt it.

Berel said, "She's a spy—clearly! Send her away!"

Bernisty said, "Ask her what she wants."

The woman said, "I speak your Blue Star language, Bernisty; you can ask me yourself."

"Very well. Who are you? What do you do here?"

"My name is Kathryn—"

"She is a Kay!" said Berel.

"—I am a criminal. I escaped my punishment, and fled in this direction."

"Come," said Bernisty. "I would examine you more closely."

In the *Beaudry* wardroom, crowded with interested watchers, she told her story. She claimed to be the daughter of a Kirkassian freeholder—

"What is that?" asked Berel in a skeptical voice.

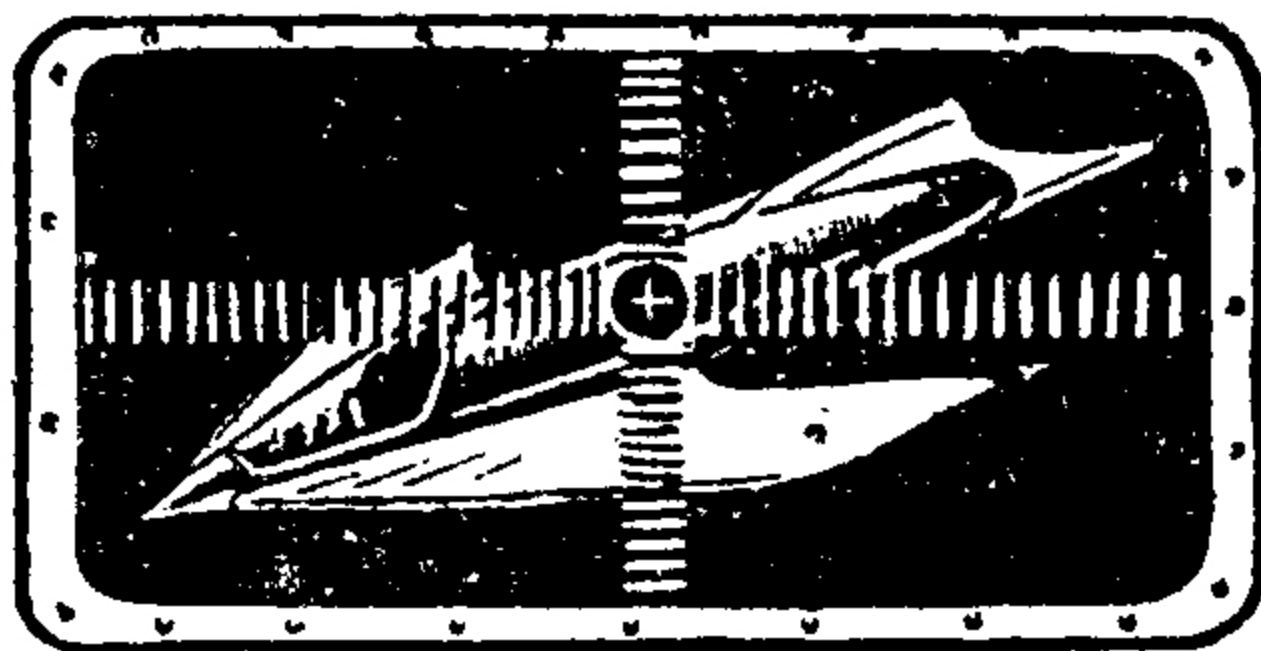
Kathryn responded mildly. "A few of the Kirkassians still keep their strongholds in the Keviot Mountains—a tribe descended from ancient brigands."

"So you are the daughter of a brigand?"

"I am more; I am a criminal in my own right," replied Kathryn mildly.

Bernisty could contain his curiosity no more. "What did you do, girl; what did you do?"

"I committed the act of—" here she used a Kay word which Bernisty was unable to understand. Berel's knitted



brows indicated that she likewise was puzzled. "After that," went on Kathryn, "I upset a brazier of incense on the head of a priest. Had I felt remorse, I would have remained to be punished; since I did not I fled here in the space-boat."

"Incredible!" said Berel in disgust.

Bernisty sat watching in amusement. "Apparently, girl, you are believed to be a Kay spy. What do you say to that?"

"If I were or if I were not—in either case I would deny it."

"You deny it then?"

Kathryn's face creased; she broke out into a laugh of sheer delight. "No. I admit it. I am a Kay spy."

"I knew it, I knew it—"

"Hush, woman," said Bernisty. He turned to Kathryn, his brow creased in puzzlement. "You admit you are a spy?"

"Do you believe me?"

"By the Bulls of Bashan—I hardly know what I believe!"

"She's a clever trickster—cunning!" stormed Berel. "She's pulling her artful silk around your eyes."

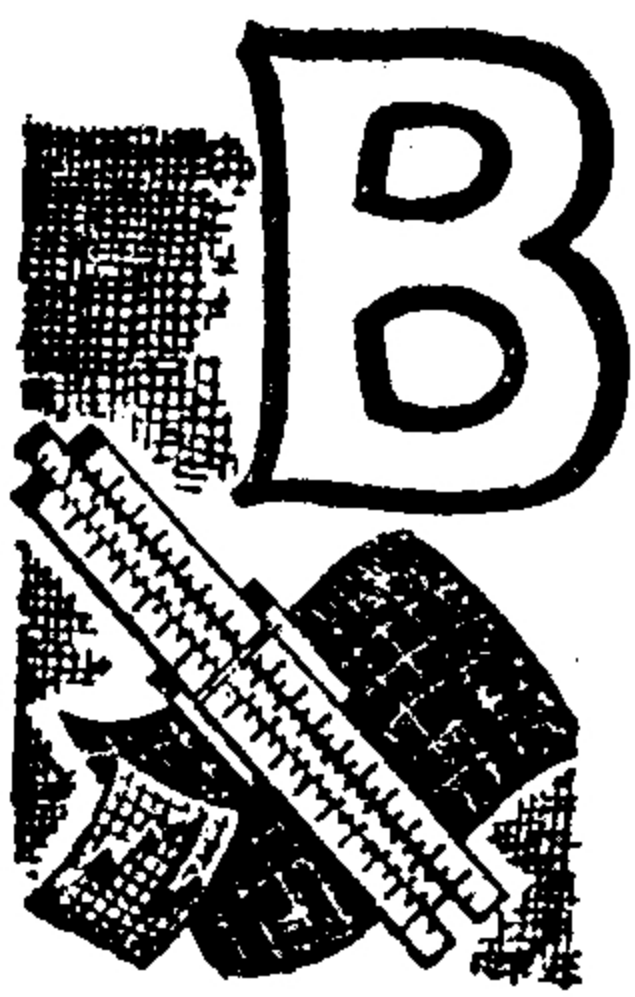
"Quiet!" roared Bernisty. "Give me some credit for normal perceptiveness!" He turned to Kathryn. "Only a madwoman would admit to being a spy."

"Perhaps I am a madwoman," she said with grave simplicity.

Bernisty threw up his hands. "Very well, what is the difference? There are no secrets here in the first place. If you wish to spy, do so—as overtly or as stealthily as you please, whichever suits you. If you merely seek refuge, that is yours too, for you are on Blue Star soil."

"My thanks to you, Bernisty."

3



BERNISTY flew out with Broderick, the cartographer, mapping, photographing, exploring and generally inspecting New Earth. The landscape was everywhere similar—a bleak scarred surface like the inside of a burned out kiln. Everywhere loess plains of wind-spread dust abutted harsh crags.

Broderick nudged Bernisty. "Observe."

Bernisty, following the gesture, saw three faintly-marked but unmistakable squares on the desert below—vast areas of crumbled stone, strewn over by wind-driven sand.

"Those are either the most gigantic crystals the universe has ever known," said Bernisty, "or—we are not the first intelligent race to set foot on this planet."

"Shall we land?"

Bernisty surveyed the squares through his telescope. "There is little to see.... Leave it for the archaeologists; I'll call some out from Blue Star."

Retraining toward the *Beaudry*, Bernisty suddenly called, "Stop!"

They set down the survey-boat; Bernisty alighted, and with vast satisfaction inspected a patch of green-brown vegetation: Basic 6-D vetch, podded over with the symbiotic lichens which fed it oxygen and water.

"Another six weeks," said Bernisty, "the world will froth with this stuff."

Broderick peered closely at a leaf. "What is that red blotch?"

"Red blotch?" Bernisty peered, frowned. "It looks like a rust, a fungus."

"Is that good?"

"No—of course not! It's—bad!... I can't quite understand it. This planet was sterile when we arrived."

"Spores drop in from space," suggested Broderick.

Bernisty nodded. "And space-boats likewise. Come, let's get back to the *Beaudry*. You have the position of this spot?"

"To the centimeter."

"Never mind. I'll kill this colony." And Bernisty seared the ground clean of the patch of vetch he had been so proud of. They returned to the *Beaudry* in silence, flying in over the plain which now grew thick with mottled foliage. Alighting from the boat, Bernisty ran not to the *Beaudry* but to the nearest shrub, and inspected the leaves. "None here... None here—nor here..."

"Bernisty!"

Bernisty looked around. Baron the botanist approached, his face stern. Bernisty's heart sank. "Yes?"

"There has been inexcusable negligence."

"Rust?"

"Rust. It's destroying the vetch."

Bernisty swung on his heel. "You've got a sample?"

"We're already working out a counter-agent in the lab."

"Good..."

But the rust was a hardy growth; finding an agency to destroy the rust and still leave the vetch and the lichens unharmed proved a task of enormous difficulty. Sample after sample of virus, germ, blot, wort and fungus failed to satisfy the conditions and were destroyed in the furnace. Meanwhile, the color of the vetch changed from brown-green to red-green to iodine-color; and the proud growth began to slump and rot.

Bernisty walked sleeplessly, exhorting, cursing his technicians. "You call yourselves ecologists? A simple affair of separating a rust from the vetch—you fail, you flounder! Here—give me that culture!" And Bernisty seized the culture-disk from Baron, himself red-eyed and irritable.

The desired agent was at last found in a culture of slime-molds; and another two days passed before the pure

strain was isolated and set out in a culture. Now the vetch was rotting, and the lichens lay scattered like autumn leaves.

Aboard the *Beaudry* there was feverish activity. Cauldrons full of culture crowded the laboratory, the corridors; trays of spores dried in the saloon, in the engine-room, in the library.

Here Bernisty once more became aware of Kathryn, when he found her scraping dry spores into distribution boxes. He paused to watch her; he felt the shift of her attention from the task to himself, but he was too tired to speak. He merely nodded, turned and returned to the laboratory.

The slime-molds were broadcast, but clearly it was too late. "Very well," said Bernisty, "we broadcast another setting of seed—Basic 6-D vetch. This time we know our danger and we already have the means to protect ourselves."

THE NEW vetch grew; much of the old vetch revived. The slime-mold, when it found no more rust, perished—except for one or two mutant varieties which attacked the lichen. For a time, it appeared as if these sports would prove as dangerous as the rust; but the *Beaudry* catalogue listed a virus selectively attacking slime-molds; this was broadcast, and the molds disappeared.

Bernisty was yet disgruntled. At an assembly of the entire crew he said, "Instead of three agencies—the vetch and the two lichens—there is now extant six, counting the rust, the slime-mold, the virus. The more life—the harder to control. I emphasize most strongly the need for care and absolute antisepsis."

In spite of the precautions, rust appeared again—this time a black variety. But Bernisty was ready; inside of two days, he disseminated counter-agent. The rust disappeared; the vetch flourished. Everywhere, now, across the planet lay the brown-green carpet. In spots it rioted forty feet thick, climbing and wrestling, stalk against stalk, leaf lapping leaf. It climbed up the

granite crags; it hung festooned over precipices. And each day, countless tons of CO₂ became oxygen, methane became water and more CO₂.

Bernisty watched the atmospheric-analyses closely; and one day the percentage of oxygen in the air rose from the 'imperceptible' to the 'minute trace' category. On this day, he ordered a general holiday and banquet. It was Blue Star formal custom for men and women to eat separately, the sight of open mouths being deemed as immodest as the act of elimination. The occasion however was one of high comradeship and festivity, and Bernisty, who was neither modest nor sensitive, ordered the custom ignored; so it was in an atmosphere of gay abandon that the banquet began.

As the banquet progressed, as the ichors and alcohols took effect, the hilarity and abandon became more pronounced. At Bernisty's side sat Berel, and though she had shared his couch during the feverish weeks previously she had felt that his attentions were completely impersonal; that she was no more than play-girl. When she noticed his eyes almost of themselves on Kathryn's wine-flushed face, she felt emotions rising inside her that almost brought tears to her eyes.

"This must not be," she muttered to herself. "In a few months I am play-girl no more; I am student. I mate whom I choose; I do not choose this bushy egotistical brute, this philandering Bernisty!"

In Bernisty's mind there were strange stirrings too. "Berel is pleasant and kind," he thought. "But Kathryn! The flair! The spirit!" And feeling her eyes on him he thrilled like a schoolboy.

BRODERICK the cartographer, his head spinning and fuzzy, at this moment seized Kathryn's shoulders and drew her back to kiss her. She pulled aside, cast a whimsical glance at Bernisty. It was enough. Bernisty was by her side; he lifted her, carried her back to his chair, still hobbling on his

burnt feet. Her perfume intoxicated him as much as the wine; he hardly noticed Berel's furious face.

This must not be, thought Berel desperately. And now inspiration came to her. "Bernisty! Bernisty!" She tugged at his arm.

Bernisty turned his head. "Yes?"

"The rusts—I know how they appeared on the vetch!"

"They drifted down as spores—from space."

"They drifted down in Kathryn's space-boat! She's not a spy—she's a saboteur!" Even in her fury Berel had to admire the limpid innocence of Kathryn's face. "She's a Kay agent—an enemy."

"Oh, bah," muttered Bernisty, sheepishly. "This is woman-talk."

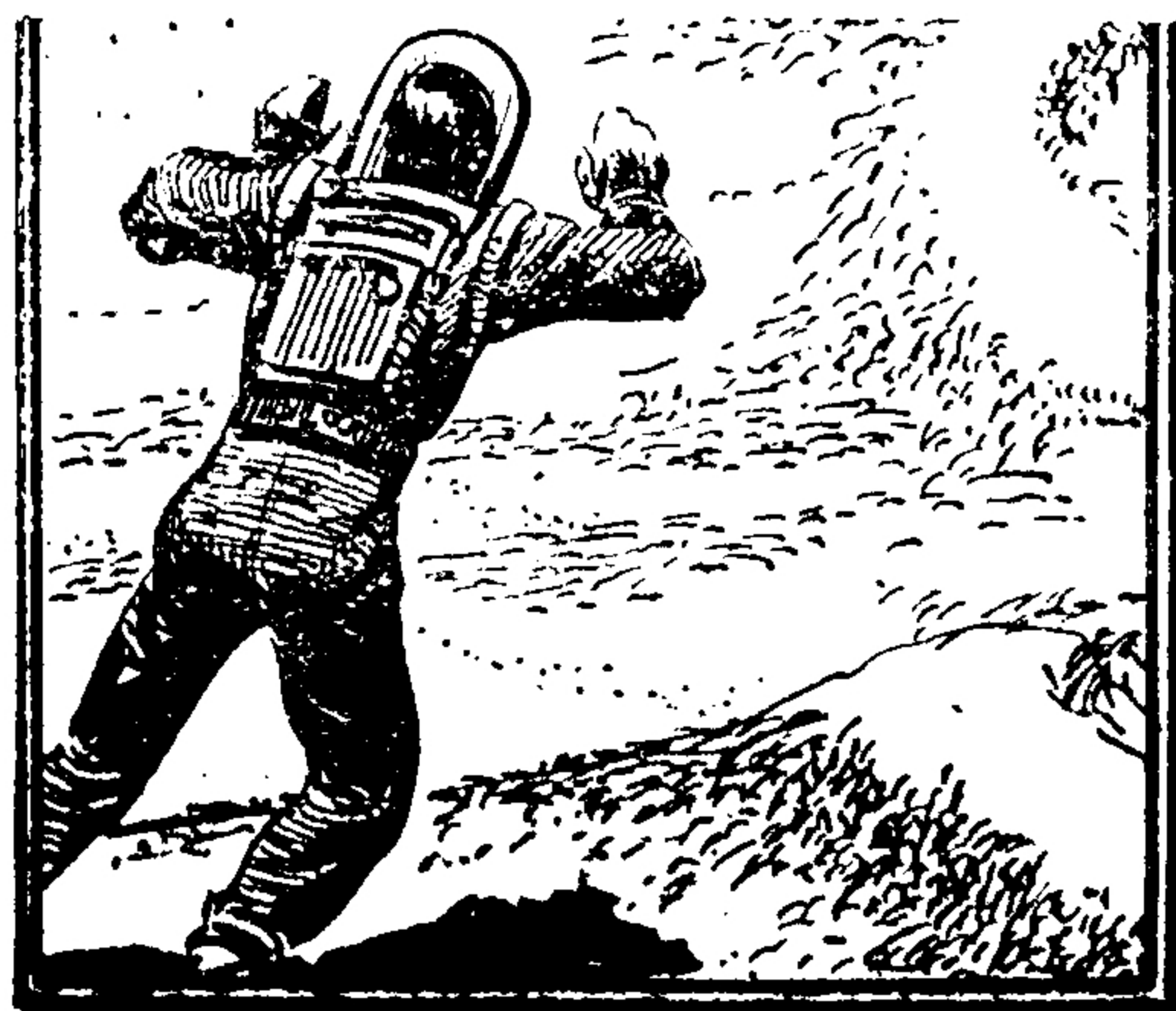
"Woman-talk, is it?" screamed Berel. "What do you think is happening now, while you feast and fondle?—" she pointed a finger on which the metal foil flower blossom quivered "—that—that *besom!*"

"Why—I don't understand you," said Bernisty, looking in puzzlement from girl to girl.

"While you sit lording it, the Kay spread blight and ruin!"

"Eh? What's this?" Bernisty continued to look from Berel to Kathryn, feeling suddenly clumsy and rather foolish. Kathryn moved on his lap. Her voice was easy, but now her body was stiff. "If you believe so, check on your radars and viewsopes."

Bernisty relaxed. "Oh—nonsense."



"No, no no!" shrilled Berel. "She tries to seduce your reason!"

Bernisty growled to Bufco, "Check the radar." Then he, too, rose to his feet. "I'll come with you."

"Surely you don't *believe*—" began Kathryn.

"I believe nothing till I see the radar tapes."

Bufco flung switches, focussed his viewer. A small pip of light appeared. "A ship!"

"Coming or going?"

"Right now it's going!"

"Where are the tapes?"

Bufco reeled out the records. Bernisty bent over them, his eyebrows bristling. "Humph."

Bufco looked at him questioningly.

"This is very strange."

"How so?"

"The ship had only just arrived—almost at once it turned aside, fled out away from New Earth."

Bufco studied the tapes. "This occurred precisely four minutes and thirty seconds ago."

"Precisely when we left the saloon."

"Do you think—"

"I don't know what to think."

"It's almost as if they received a message—a warning..."

"But how? From where?" Bernisty hesitated. "The natural object of suspicion," he said slowly, "is Kathryn."

Bufco looked up with a curious glint in his eyes. "What will you do with her?"

"I didn't say she was guilty; I remarked that she was the logical object of suspicion..." He pushed the tape magazine back under the scanner. "Let's go see what's been done.... What new mischief..."

No mischief was apparent. The skies were clear and yellowish-green; the vetch grew well.

Bernisty returned inside the *Beau-dry*, gave certain instructions to Blandwick, who took off in the survey-boat and returned an hour later with a small silk bag held carefully. "I don't know what they are," said Blandwick.

"They're bound to be bad." Bernisty

took the small silk bag to the laboratory and watched while the two botanists, the two mycologists, the four entomologists studied the contents of the bag.

The entomologists identified the material. "These are eggs of some small insect—from the gene-count and diffraction-pattern one or another of the mites."

Bernisty nodded. He looked sourly at the waiting men. "Need I tell you what to do?"

"No."

BERNISTY returned to his private office and presently sent for Berel. He asked, without preliminary, "How did you know a Kay ship was in the sky?"

Berel stood staring defiantly down at him. "I did not know; I guessed."

Bernisty studied her for a moment. "Yes—you spoke of your intuitive abilities."

"This was not intuition," said Berel scornfully. "This was plain common-sense."

"I don't follow you."

"It's perfectly clear. A Kay woman-spy appears. The ecology went bad right away; red rust and black rust. You beat the rust, you celebrate; you're keyed to a sense of relief. What better time to start a new plague?"

Bernisty nodded slowly. "What better time, indeed..."

"Incidentally—what kind of plague is it going to be?"

"Plant-lice—mites. I think we can beat it before it gets started."

"Then what?"

"I don't know..."

"It looks as if the Kay can't scare us off, they mean to work us to death."

"That's what it looks like."

"Can they do it?"

"I don't see how we can stop them from trying. It's easy to breed pests; hard to kill them."

Banta, the head entomologist, came in with a glass tube. "Here's some of them—hatched."

"Already?"

"We hurried it up a little."

"Can they live in this atmosphere? There's not much oxygen—lots of ammonia."

"They thrive on it; it's what they're breathing now."

Bernisty ruefully inspected the bottle. "And that's our good vetch they're eating, too."

Berel looked over his shoulder. "What can we do about them?"

Banta looked properly dubious. "The natural enemies are certain parasites, viruses, dragonflies, and a kind of a small armored gnat that breeds very quickly; and which I think we'd do best to concentrate on. In fact we're already engaging in large-scale selective breeding, trying to find a strain to live in this atmosphere."

"Good work, Banta." Bernisty rose to his feet.

"Where are you going?" asked Berel.

"Out to check on the vetch."

"I'll come with you."

Out on the plain, Bernisty seemed intent not so much on the vetch as on the sky.

"What are you looking for?" Berel asked.

Bernisty pointed. "See that wisp up there?"

"A cloud?"

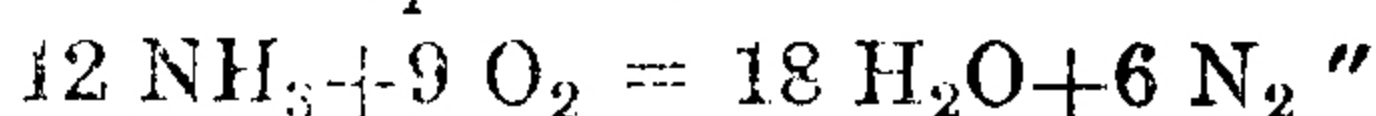
"Just a bit of frost—a few sprinkles of ice crystals... But it's a start! Our first rainstorm—that'll be an event!"

"Provided the methane and oxygen don't explode—and send us all to kingdom come!"

"Yes, yes," muttered Bernisty. "We'll have to set out some new methanophiles."

"And how will you get rid of all this ammonia?"

"There's a marsh-plant from Salsiberry that under proper conditions performs the equation:



"Rather a waste of time for it, I should say," remarked Berel. "What does it gain?"

"A freak, only a freak. What do we gain by laughing? Another freak."

"A pleasant uselessness."

Bernisty was examining the vetch. "There, here. Look. Under this leaf." He displayed the mites; slow yellow aphid-creatures.

"When will your gnats be ready?"

"Banta is letting half his stock free; maybe they'll feed faster on their own than in the laboratory."

"Does—does Kathryn know about the gnats?"

"You're still gunning for her, eh?"

"I think she's a spy."

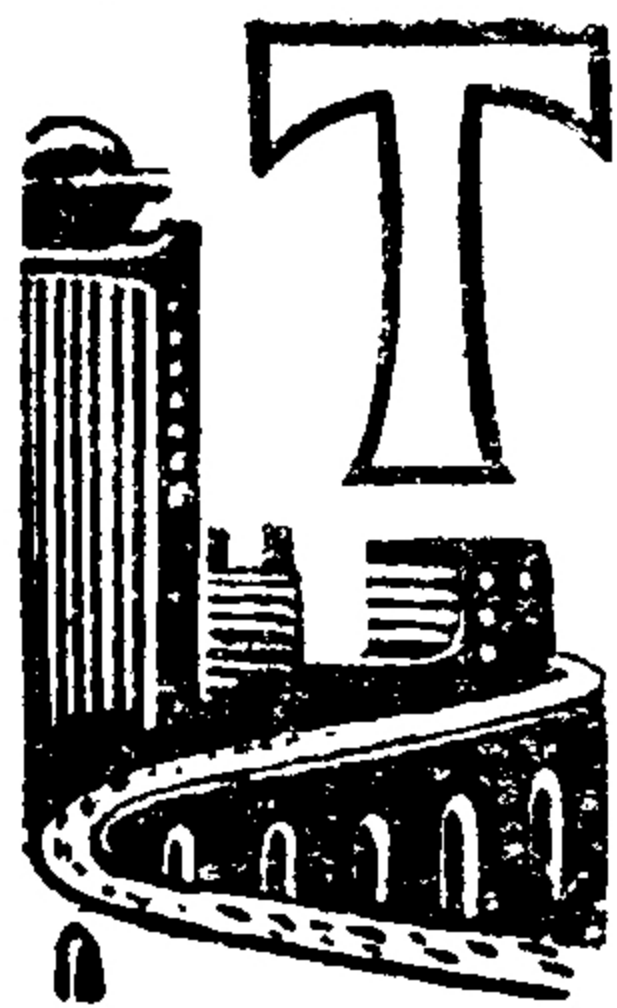
Bernisty said mildly, "I can't think of a way that either one of you could have communicated with that Kay ship."

"Either one of us!"

"Someone warned him away. Kathryn is the logical suspect; but you knew he was there."

Berel swung on her heel, stalked back to the *Beaudry*.

4



THE GNATS were countering the mites, apparently; the population of both first increased, then dwindled. After which the vetch grew taller and stronger. There was now oxygen in the air, and the bota-

nists broadcast a dozen new species—broad-leaves, producers of oxygen; nitrogen-fixers, absorbing the ammonia; the methanophiles from the young methane-rich worlds, combining oxygen with methane, and growing in magnificent white towers like carved ivory.

Bernisty's feet were whole again, a size larger than his first ones and he was forced to discard his worn and comfortable boots for a new pair cut from stiff blue leather.

Kathryn was playfully helping him cram his feet into the hard vacancies. Casually, Bernisty said, "It's been

bothering me, Kathryn: tell me, how did you call to the Kay?"

She started, gave him an instant pitious wide-eyed stare, like a trapped rabbit, then she laughed. "The same way you do—with my mouth."

"When?"

"Oh, every day about this time."

"I'd be glad to watch you."

"Very well." She looked up at the window, spoke in the ringing Kay tongue.

"What did you say?" asked Bernisty politely.

"I said that the mites were a failure; that there was good morale here aboard the *Beaudry*; that you were a great leader, a wonderful man."

"But you recommended no further steps."

She smiled demurely. "I am no ecologist—neither constructive, nor destructive."

"Very well," said Bernisty, standing into his boots. "We shall see."

NEXT DAY the radar-tapes showed the presence of two ships; they had made fleeting visits—"long enough to dump their villainous cargo," so Bufco reported to Bernisty.

The cargo proved to be eggs of a ferocious blue wasp, which preyed on the gnats. The gnats perished; the mites prospered; the vetch began to wilt under the countless sucking tubes. To counter the wasp, Bernisty released a swarm of feathery blue flying-ribbons. The wasps bred inside a peculiar, small brown puff-ball fungus (the spores for which had been released with the wasp larva). The flying-ribbons ate these puff-balls. With no shelter for their larva, the wasps died; the gnats revived in numbers, gorging on mites till their thoraxes split.

The Kay assaulted on a grander scale. Three large ships passed by night, disgorging a witches-cauldron of reptiles, insects, arachnids, land-crabs, a dozen phyla without formal classification. The human resources of

the *Beaudry* were inadequate to the challenge; they began to fail, from insect stings; another botanist took a pulsing white-blue gangrene from the prick of a poisonous thorn.

New Earth was no longer a mild region of vetch, lichen, and dusty wind; New Earth was a fantastic jungle. Insects stalked each other through the leafy wildernesses; there were local specializations and improbable adaptations. There were spiders, and lizards the size of cats; scorpions which rang like bells when they walked; long-legged lobsters; poisonous butterflies; a species of giant moth, which, finding the environment congenial, grew ever more gigantic.

Within the *Beaudry* they was everywhere a sense of defeat. Bernisty walked limping along the promenade, the limp more of an unconscious attitude than a physical necessity. The problem was too complex for a single brain, he thought—or for a single team of human brains. The various life-forms on the planet, each evolving, mutating, expanding into vacant niches, selecting the range of their eventual destinies—they made a pattern too haphazard for an electronic computer, for a team of computers.

Blandwick, the meteorologist, came along the promenade with his daily atmospheric-report. Bernisty derived a certain melancholy pleasure to find that while there had been no great increase in oxygen and water-vapor, neither had there been any decrease. "In fact," said Blandwick, "there's a tremendous amount of water tied up in all those bugs and parasites."

Bernisty shook his head. "Nothing appreciable.... And they're eating away the vetch faster than we can kill 'em off. New varieties appear faster than we can find them."

Blandwick frowned. "The Kay are following no clear pattern."

"No, they're just dumping anything they hope might be destructive."

"Why don't we use the same technique? Instead of selective counter-ac-

tion, we turn loose our entire biological program. Shotgun tactics."

Bernisty limped on a few paces. "Well, why not? The total effect might be beneficial.... Certainly less destructive than what's going on out there now." He paused. "We deal in unpredictables of course—and this is contrary to my essential logic."

Blandwick sniffed. "None of our gains to date have been the predictable ones."

Bernisty grinned, after a momentary irritation, since Blandwick's remark was inaccurate; had Blandwick been driving home a truth, then there would have been cause for irritation.

"Very well, Blandwick," he said jovially. "We shoot the works. If it succeeds we'll name the first settlement Blandwick."

"Humph," said the pessimistic Blandwick, and Bernisty went to give the necessary orders.



NOW EVERY vat, tub, culture tank, incubator, tray and rack in the laboratory was full; as soon as the contents achieved even a measure of acclimatization to the still nitrogenous atmosphere, they were discharged: pods, plants, molds, bacteria, crawling things, insects, annelids, crustaceans, land ganoids, even a few elementary mammals—life-forms from well over three dozen different worlds. Where New Earth had previously been a battleground, now it was a madhouse.

One variety of palms achieved instant success; inside of two months they towered everywhere over the landscape. Between them hung veils of a peculiar air-floating web, subsisting on flying things. Under the branch-

es, the brambles, there was much killing; much breeding; much eating; growing; fighting; fluttering; dying. Aboard the *Beaudry*, Bernisty was well-pleased and once more jovial.

He clapped Blandwick on the back. "Not only do we call the city after you, we prefix your name to an entire system of philosophy, the Blandwick method."

Blandwick was unmoved by the tribute. "Regardless of the success of 'the Blandwick method', as you call it, the Kay still have a word to say."

"What can they do?" argued Bernisty. "They can liberate creatures no more unique or ravenous than those we ourselves have loosed. Anything the Kay send to New Earth now, is in the nature of anti-climax."

Blandwick smiled sourly. "Do you think they'll give up quite so easily?"

Bernisty became uneasy, and went off in search of Berel. "Well, play-girl," he demanded, "what does your intuition tell you now?"

"It tells me," she snapped, "that whenever you are the most optimistic, the Kay are on the verge of their most devastating attacks."

Bernisty put on a facetious front. "And when will these attacks take place?"

"Ask your spy-woman; she communicates secrets freely to anyone."

"Very well," said Bernisty. "Find her, if you please, and send her to me."

Kathryn appeared, "Yes, Bernisty?"

"I am curious," said Bernisty, "as to what you communicate to the Kay."

Kathryn said, "I tell them that Bernisty is defeating them, that he has countered their worst threats."

"And what do they tell you?"

"They tell me nothing."

"And what do you recommend?"

"I recommend that they either win at a massive single stroke, or give up."

"How do you tell them this?"

Kathryn laughed, showing her pretty white teeth. "I talk to them just as now I talk to you."

"And when do you think they will strike?"

"I don't know.... It seems that certainly they are long overdue. Would you not think so?"

"Yes," admitted Bernisty, and turned his head to find Bufco the radioman approaching.

"Kay ships," said Bufco. "A round dozen—mountainous barrels! They made one circuit—departed!"

"Well," said Bernisty, "this is it." He turned upon Kathryn the level look of cold speculation, and she returned the expression of smiling demureness which both of them had come to find familiar.

5



IN THREE days, every living thing on New Earth was dead. Not merely dead, but dissolved into a viscous gray syrup which sank into the plain, trickled like sputum down the crags, evaporated into the wind. The effect was miraculous. Where the jungle had thronged the plain—now only plain existed, and already the wind was blowing up dust-devils.

There was one exception to the universal dissolution—the monstrous moths, which by some unknown method, or chemical make-up, had managed to survive. Across the wind they soared; frail fluttering shapes, seeking their former sustenance and finding nothing now but desert.

Aboard the *Beaudry* there was bewilderment; then dejection; then dull rage which could find no overt outlet, until at last Bernisty fell into a sleep.

He awoke with a sense of vague uneasiness, of trouble: the collapse of

the New Earth ecology? No. Something deeper, more immediate. He jumped into his clothes, hastened to the saloon. It was nearly full, and gave off a sense of grim malice.

Kathryn sat pale, tense in a chair; behind her stood Banta with a garrote. He was clearly preparing to strangle her, with the rest of the crew as collaborators.

Bernisty stepped across the saloon, broke Banta's jaw and broke the fingers of his clenched fist. Kathryn sat looking up silently.

"Well, you miserable renegades," Bernisty began; but looking around the wardroom, he found no sheepishness, only growing anger, defiance. "What goes on here?" roared Bernisty.

"She is a traitor," said Berel; "we execute her."

"How can she be a traitor? She never promised us faith!"

"She is certainly a spy!"

Bernisty laughed. "She has never dissembled the fact that she communicates with the Kay. How can she then be a spy?"

No one made reply, there was uneasy shifting of eyes.

Bernisty kicked Banta who was rising to his feet. "Get away, you cur. . . . I'll have no murderers, no lynchers in my crew!"

Berel cried, "She betrayed us!"

"How could she betray us? She never asked us to give her trust. Quite the reverse; she came to us frankly as a Kay; frankly she tells me she reports to the Kay."

"But how?" sneered Berel. "She claims to talk to them—to make you believe she jokes!"

Bernisty regarded Kathryn with the speculative glance. "If I read her character right, Kathryn tells no untruths. It is her single defense. If she says she talks to the Kay, so she does. . . ." He turned to the medic, "Bring an infrascopescope."

The infrascopescope revealed strange black shadows inside Kathryn's body. A small button beside her larynx; two

slim boxes flat against her diaphragm; wires running down under the skin of each leg.

"What is this?" gasped the medic.

"Internal radio," said Bufco. "The button takes her voice, the antenna are the leg-wires. What better equipment for a spy?"

"She is no spy, I tell you!" Bernisty bellowed. "The fault lies not with her—it lies with me! She *told* me! If I had asked her how her voice got to the Kay, she would have told me—candidly, frankly. I never asked her; I chose to regard the entire affair as a game! If you must garrot someone—garrot me! I am the betrayer—not she!"

Berel turned, walked from the wardroom, others followed. Bernisty turned to Kathryn. "Now—now what will you do? Your venture is a success."

"Yes," said Kathryn, "a success." She likewise left the wardroom. Bernisty followed curiously. She went to the outdoor locker, put on her head-dome, opened the double-lock, stepped out upon the dead plain.

BERNISTY watched her from a window. Where would she walk to? Nowhere. . . . She walked to death, like one walking into the surf and swimming straight out to sea. Overhead the giant moths fluttered, flickered down on the wind. Kathryn looked up; Bernisty saw her cringe. A moth flapped close, strove to seize her. She ducked; the wind caught the frail wings, and the moth wheeled away.

Bernisty chewed his lip; then laughed. "Devil take all; devil take the Kay; devil take all. . . ." He jammed on his own head-dome.

Bufco caught his arm. "Bernisty, where do you go?"

"She is brave, she is steadfast; why should she die?"

"She is our enemy!"

"I prefer a brave enemy to cowardly friends." He ran from the ship, across the soft loess now crusted with dried slime.

The moths fluttered, plunged. One clung to Kathryn's shoulders with barbed legs; she struggled, beat with futile hands at the great soft shape.

Shadows fell over Bernisty; he saw the purple-red glinting of big eyes, the impersonal visage. He swung a fist, felt the chitin crunch. Sick pangs of pain reminded him that the hand had already been broken on Banta's jaw. With the moth flapping on the ground he ran off down the wind. Kathryn lay supine, a moth probing her with a tube ill-adapted to cutting plastics and cloth.

Bernisty called out encouragement; a shape swooped on his back, bore him to the ground. He rolled over, kicked; arose, jumped to his feet, tackled the moth on Kathryn, tore off the wings, snapped the head up.

He turned to fight the other swooping shapes but now from the ship came Bufco, with a needle-beam puncturing moths from the sky, and others behind him.

Bernisty carried Kathryn back to the ship. He took her to the surgery, laid her on the pallet. "Cut that radio out of her," he told the medic. "Make her normal, and then if she gets information to the Kay, they'll deserve it."



He found Berel in his quarters, lounging in garments of seductive diaphane. He swept her with an indifferent glance.

Conquering her perturbation she asked, "Well, what now, Bernisty?"

"We start again!"

"Again? When the Kay can sweep the world of life so easy?"

"This time we work differently."

"So?"

"Do you know the ecology of Kerrykirk, the Kay capitol world?"

"No."

"In six months—you will find New Earth as close a duplicate as we are able."

"But that is foolhardy! What other

pests will the Kay know so well as those of their own world?"

"Those are my own views."

Bernisty presently went to the surgery. The medic handed him the international radio. Bernisty stared. "What are these—these little bors?"

"They are persuaders," said the medic. "They can be easily triggered to red-heat..."

Bernisty said abruptly, "Is she awake?"

"Yes."

Bernisty looked down into the pale face. "You have no more radio."

"I know."

"Will you spy any longer?"

"No. I give you my loyalty, my love."

Bernisty nodded, touched her face, turned, left the room, went to give his orders for a new planet.

BERNISTY ordered stocks from Blue Star: Kerrykirk flora and fauna exclusively and set them out as conditions justified. Three months passed uneventfully. The plants of Kerrykirk thrived; the air became rich; New Earth felt its first rains.

Kerrykirk trees and cycads sprouted, grew high, forced by growth hormones; the plains grew knee-deep with Kerrykirk grasses.

Then once again came the Kay ships; and now it was as if they played a sly game, conscious of power. The first infestations were only mild harassments.

Bernisty grinned, and released Kerrykirk amphibians into the new puddles. Now the Kay ships came at almost regular intervals, and each vessel brought pests more virulent or voracious; and the *Beaudry* technicians worked incessantly countering the successive invasions.

There was grumbling; Bernisty sent those who wished to go home to Blue Star. Berel departed; her time as a play-girl was finished. Bernisty felt a trace of guilt as she bade him dignified farewell. When he returned to his

quarters and found Kathryn there, the guilt disappeared.

The Kay ships came; a new horde of hungry creatures came to devastate the land.

Some of the crew cried defeat, "Where will it end? It is incessant; let us give up this thankless task!"

Others spoke of war. "Is not New Earth already a battleground?"

Bernisty waved a careless hand. "Patience, patience; just one more month."

"Why one more month?"

"Do you not understand? The Kay ecologists are straining their laboratories breeding these pests!"

"Ah!"

One more month, one more Kay visitation, a new rain of violent life, eager to combat the life of New Earth.

"Now!" said Bernisty.

The *Beaudry* technicians collected the latest arrivals, the most effective of the previous cargoes; they were bred; the seeds, spores, eggs, prepared carefully stored, packed.

One day a ship left New Earth and flew to Kerrykirk, the holds bulging with the most desperately violent enemies of Kerrykirk life that Kerrykirk scientists could find. The ship returned

to New Earth with its holds empty. Not till six months later did news of the greatest plagues in history seep out past Kay censorship.

During this time there were no Kay visits to New Earth. "And if they are discreet," Bernisty told the serious man from Blue Star who had come to replace him, "they will never come again. They are too vulnerable to their own pests—so long as we maintain a Kerrykirk ecology."

"Protective coloration, you might say," remarked the new governor of New Earth with a thin-lipped smile.

"Yes, you might say so."

"And what do you do, Bernisty?"

Bernisty listened. A far-off hum came to their ears. "That," said Bernisty, "is the *Blauelm*, arriving from Blue Star. And it's mine for another flight, another exploration."

"You seek another New Earth?"

And the thin-lipped smile became broader, with the unconscious superiority the settled man feels for the wanderer.

"Perhaps I'll even find Old Earth.... Hm..." He kicked up a bit of chrome stamped with the letters FORD. "Curious bit, this..."

