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CONTENTS

JULY, 1950

VOL. XLV, NO. 5

NOVELETTES

- HEIR APPARENT, by *Lawrence O'Donnell* 19
THE LITTLE BLACK BAG, by *C. M. Kornbluth* 132

SHORT STORIES

- PRIVATE ENTERPRISE, by *Edwin James* 63
SKIN DEEP, by *Ford McCormack* 78
EXPOSURE, by *Eric Frank Russell* 107

ARTICLES

- SHOOTING "DESTINATION MOON", by *Robert A. Heinlein* 6
THIS IS HOT! by *Arthur C. Parlett, Jr.* 94

READERS' DEPARTMENTS

- THE EDITOR'S PAGE 4
IN TIMES TO COME 18
BOOK REVIEWS 124
BRASS TACKS 127
THE ANALYTICAL LABORATORY 162

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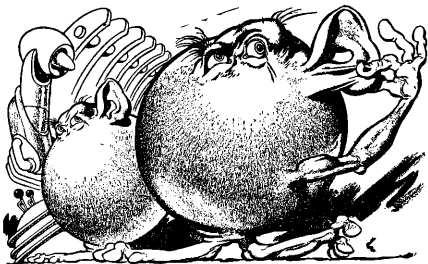
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EXPOSURE

BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

The spies sent out by a malleable race like theirs were practically proof against exposure. They could imitate anything! Which could have been tough for Earth—

Illustrated by Cartier

The Rigelian ship came surreptitiously, in the deep of the night. Choosing a heavily forested area, it burned down a ring of trees, settled in the ash, sent out a powerful spray of liquid to kill the fires still creep-

ing outward through the undergrowth.

Thin coils of smoke ascended from dying flames. Now adequately concealed from all directions but immediately above, the ship squatted

amid towering conifers while its tubes cooled and contracted with metallic squeaks. There were strong smells of wood smoke, pine resin, acrid flame-killer and superheated metal.

Within the vessel there was a conference of aliens. They had two eyes apiece. That was their only positive feature: two eyes. Otherwise they had the formlessness, the almost liquid sloppiness of the completely malleable. When the three in the chart room consulted a planetary photograph they gestured with anything movable, a tentacle, pseudopod, a long, stump-ended arm, a mere digit, anything that struck their fancy at any given moment.

Just now all three were globular, shuffled around on wide, flat feet and were coated with fine, smooth fur resembling green velvet. This similarity was due to politeness rather than desire. During conversation it is conventional to assume the shape of one's superior and, if he changes, to change with him.

So two were spherical and furry solely because Captain Id-Wan saw fit to be spherical and furry. Sometimes Id-Wan was awkward. He'd give himself time to do a difficult shape such as that of reticulated molobater then watch them straining their innards in an effort to catch up.

Id-Wan said: "We've recorded this world from far out on its light side and not a spaceship came near

to challenge our presence. They have no spaceships." He sniffed expressively and went on, "The blownup pictures are plenty good enough for our purpose. We've got the lay of the land and that's as much as we need."

"There appears to be a lot of sea," remarked Chief Navigator Bi-Nak, peering at a picture. "Too much sea. More than half of it is sea."

"Are you again belittling my conquests?" demanded Id-Wan, producing a striped tail.

"Not at all, captain," assured Bi-Nak, dutifully imitating the tail. "I was simply pointing out—"

"You point too much," snapped Id-Wan. He turned to the third Rigelian. "Doesn't he, Po-Duk?"

Pilot Po-Duk played safe by remarking, "There are times and there are times."

"That is truly profound," commented Id-Wan, who had a robust contempt for neutrals. "One points while the other functions as a fount of wisdom. It would be a pleasant change if for once you did the pointing and let Bi-Nak be the oracle. I could stand that. It would make for variety."

"Yes, captain," agreed Po-Duk.

"Certainly, captain," indorsed Bi-Nak.

"All right." Id-Wan, turning irritably to the photographs, said: "There are many cities. That means intelligent life. But we have seen

no spaceships and we know they've not yet reached even their own satellite. Hence, their intelligence is not of high order." He forced out a pair of mock hands so that he could rub them together. "In other words, just the sort of creatures we want—ripe for the plucking."

"You said that on the last planet," informed Bi-Nak whose strong point was not tact.

Id-Wan pulled in his tail and bawled, "That was relative to worlds previously visited. Up to that point they were the best. These are better."

"We haven't seen them yet."

"We shall. They will give us no trouble." Id-Wan cooled down, mused aloud, "Nothing gives us trouble and I doubt whether anything is capable of it. We have fooled half a hundred successive life forms, all utterly different from any known in our home system. I anticipate no difficulties with another. Sometimes I think we must be unique in creation. On every world we've explored the creatures were fixed in form, unchangeable. It would appear that we alone are not the slaves of rigidity."

"Fixedness of form has its advantages," denied Bi-Nak, a glutton for punishment. "When my mother first met my father in the mating-field she thought he was a long-horned nodus, and—"

"There you go again," shouted Id-Wan, "criticizing the self-evident."

Sourly, Id-Wan turned back to the photographs, indicated an area toward the north of a great land-mass. "We are located there, well off the beaten tracks, yet within individual flying distance of four medium-sized centers. The big cities which hold potential dangers—though I doubt any real dangers—are a good way off. Nearer villages are too small to be worth investigating. The medium-sized places are best for our purpose and, as I've said, there are four within easy reach."

"Which we'll proceed to inspect?" suggested Po-Duk, mostly to show that he was paying attention.

"Of course. The usual tactics—two scouts in each. One day's mixing among the natives and they'll get us all we need to know, while the natives themselves learn nothing. After that—"

"A demonstration of power?" asked Po-Duk.

"Most certainly." Id-Wan extended something like a hair-thin tentacle, used it to mark one of the four near towns. "That place is as good as any other. We'll scrape it clean off Earth's surface, then sit in space and see what they do about it. A major blow is the most effective way of persuading a world to reveal how highly it is organized."

"If the last six planets are anything to go by," ventured Po-Duk, "we won't see much organization here. They'll panic or pray or both."

"Much as we did when the Great

Spot flared in the year of—" began Bi-Nak. His voice trailed off as he noted the gleam in Id-Wan's eyes.

Id-Wan turned to Po-Duk: "Summon the chief of the scouts and tell him to hurry. I want action." Staring hard at Bi-Nak, he added, "Action—not talk!"

The fat man whose name was Ollie Kampenfeldt waddled slowly through the dark toward the log hut whence came the thrum of a guitar and the sound of many voices. He was frowning as he progressed, and mopping his forehead at regular intervals.

There were other log huts scattered around in the vicinity, a few showing lights, but most in darkness. A yellow moon hung only a little above the big stockade of logs which ran right round the encampment: it stretched the shadows of the huts across neatly trimmed lawns and grassy borders.

Kampenfeldt lumbered into the noisy hut and yelped in shrill tones. The guitar ceased its twanging. The talking stopped. Presently the lights went out. He emerged accompanied by a small group of men most of whom dispersed.

Two stayed with him as he made toward the building nearest the only gate in the heavy stockade. One of them was expostulating mildly.

"All right. So guys need sleep. How were we to know it was that late? Why don'tcha put a clock in the place?"

"The last one got snitched. It cost me fifty."

"Hah!" said the grumbler. "So time doesn't matter. What do I care about it? There's plenty of it and I'm going no place. Make less noise and get to bed. We've got no clock because the place is full of thieves. You'd think I was back in the jug."

His companion on the other side of Kampenfeldt perked up with sudden interest. "Hey, I didn't know you'd been in clink."

"After ten years on the night beat for a big sheet you've been everywhere," said the first. "Even in a crackpotorium—even in a cemetery, for that matter." Then he stopped his forward pacing, raised himself on his toes, stared northward. "What was *that*?"

"What was what?" inquired Kampenfeldt, mopping his brow and breathing heavily.

"Sort of ring of brilliant red light. It floated down into the forest."

"Meteor," suggested Kampenfeldt, not interested.

"Imagination," said the third, having seen nothing.

"Too slow for a meteor," denied the observer, still peering on tiptoe at the distant darkness. "It floated down, like I said. Besides, I've never heard of one that shape or color. More like a plane in flames. Maybe it was a plane in flames.

"We'll know in an hour," promised Kampenfeldt, a little disgrun-

tled at the thought of further night-time disturbances.

"How?"

"The forest will be ablaze on a ten-mile front. It's drier than I've ever known it, and ripe for the kindling." He made a clumsy gesture with a fat hand. "No fire, no plane."

"Well, what else might it be?"

Kampenfeldt said wearily: "I neither know nor care. I have to get up in the morning."

He waddled into his hut, yawning widely. The others stood outside a short time and stared northward. Nothing extraordinary was visible.

"Imagination," repeated one.

"I saw something queer. Dunno what could be out there in all that timber, but I saw something—and I've got good eyes." He removed his gaze, shrugged. "Anyway, the heck with it!"

They went to bed.

Captain Id-Wan gave his orders to the chief of the scouts. "Bring in some local life forms. The nearest and handiest will do providing they're assorted, small and large. We want to test them."

"Yes, captain."

"Collect them only from the immediate neighborhood. There is a camp to the south which undoubtedly holds superior forms. Keep away from it. Orders concerning that camp will be given you after the more primitive forms have been tested."

"I see, captain."

"You do not see," reproved Id-Wan. "Otherwise you would have noted that I have created flexible digits upon my feet."

"I beg your pardon, captain," said the chief, hastening to create similar extensions.

"The discourtesy is overlooked, but do not repeat it. Send in the head radio technician, then get on with your task."

To the radio officer, who made toes promptly, he said: "What have you to report?"

"The same as we noted upon our approach—they fill the air."

"What?" Id-Wan pulled surprisedly at an ear which he had not possessed a moment before. The ear stretched like soft rubber. "I was not informed of that during the approach."

"I regret, I forgot to—" commenced Bi-Nak, then ceased and strained himself before Id-Wan's eyes could catch him without a rubber ear.

"They fill the air," repeated the radio technician, also dutifully eared. "We've picked up their noises from one extreme to the other. There seems to be at least ten different speech patterns."

"No common language," Bi-Nak mourned. "That complicates matters."

"That simplifies matters," Id-Wan flatly contradicted. "The scouts can masquerade as foreigners and thus avoid speech troubles. The Great

Green God could hardly have arranged it better."

"There are also other impulse streams," added the technician. "We suspect them of being pictorial transmissions."

"Suspect? Don't you *know*?"

"Our receivers cannot handle them, captain."

"Why not?"

The radio officer said patiently: "Their methods do not accord with ours. The differences are technical. To explain them would take me a week. In brief, our receivers are not suitable for their transmitted pictures. Eventually, by trial and error methods, we could make them suitable, but it would take a long time."

"But you do receive their speech?"

"Yes—that is relatively easy."

"Well, it tells us something. They've got as far as radio. Also, they're vocal and therefore unlikely to be telepathic. I would cross the cosmos for such bait." Dismissing the radio officer, he went to the lock, looked into the night-wrapped forest to see how his scouts were doing.

His strange Rigelian life-sense enabled him to detect their quarry almost at a glance, for life burned in the dark like a tiny flame. There was just such a flame up a nearby tree. He saw it come tumbling down when the paralyzing dart from a scout's gun struck home. The flame flickered on landing but did not die out. The hunter picked it up, brought it

into the light. It was a tiny animal with prick ears, coarse, reddish fur and a long, bushy tail.

Soon eight scouts struggled in bearing a huge, thickly-furred form of ferocious aspect. It was big-pawed, clawed and had no tail. It stank like molobater blood mixed with aged cheese. Half a dozen other forms were brought in, two of them winged. All were stiffened by darts, had their eyes closed, were incapable of movement. All were taken to the examiners.

One of the experts came to Id-Wan in due course. He was red-smeared and had an acrid smell.

"Nonmalleable. Every one of them."

"Bhingho!" exclaimed Id-Wan. "As are the lower forms, so will be the higher."

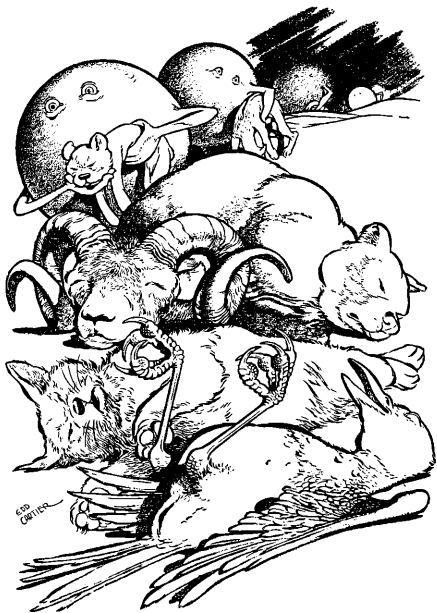
"Not necessarily, but very probably," said the expert, dodging the appearance of contradiction.

"We will see. Had any of these creatures possessed the power of imitative and ultra-rapid reshaping, I should have had to modify my plans. As it is, I can go right ahead."

The other responded, "So far as can be judged from these simple types you should have little trouble with their betters."

"That's what I think," agreed Id-Wan. "We'll get ourselves a sample."

"We need more than one. Two at least. A pair of them would enable us to determine the extent to



which individuals differ. If the scouts are left to draw upon their own imaginations in creating differences, they may exaggerate sufficiently to betray themselves."

"All right, we'll get two," said Id-Wan. "Call in the chief of the scouts."

To the chief of the scouts, Id-Wan said: "All your captures were of unalterable form."

"Excellent!" The chief was pleased.

"Pfah!" murmured Bi-Nak.

Id-Wan jerked around. "What was that remark?"

"Pfah, captain," admitted Bi-Nak, mentally cursing the efficiency of the rubber ear. As mildly as possible, he added, "I was considering the paradox of rigid superiority, and the pfah popped out."

"If I were telepathic," answered Id-Wan, very deliberately, "I would know you for the liar you are."

"Now there's something," offered Bi-Nak, sidetracking the insult. "So far we've encountered not one telepathic species. On this planet there are superior forms believed to be rigid—so whence comes their superiority? Perhaps they are telepathic."

Id-Wan complained to the chief scout, "Do you hear him? He points and pops out and invents obstacles. Of all the navigators available I had to be burdened with this one."

"What could be better could also

be worse," put in Po-Duk, for no reason whatsoever.

Id-Wan yelled, "And this other one hangs around mouthing evasions." His fur switched from green to blue.

They all went blue, Po-Duk being the slowest. He was almost a color-cripple, as everyone knew. Id-Wan glared at him, swiftly changed to a reticulated molobater. That caught all three flat out. Id-Wan excelled at molobaters and gained much satirical satisfaction from their mutual writhings as each strove to be first. "See," he snapped, when finally they had assumed the new shape. "You are not so good, any of you."

"No, captain, we are very bad," indorsed Bi-Nak, oozing the characteristic molobater stench.

Id-Wan eyed him as if about to challenge the self-evident, decided to let the matter drop, returned his attention to the chief of the scouts. He pointed to the photographs. "There is that encampment a little to our south. As you can see, it is connected by a long, winding path to a narrow road which ambles far over the horizon before it joins a bigger road. The place is pretty well isolated; that is why we picked it."

"Picked it?" echoed the chief.

"We chose it and purposefully landed near it," Id-Wan explained. "The lonelier the source of samples, the less likelihood of discovery at the start, and the longer before an alarm can be broadcast."

"Ah," said the chief, recovering the wits strained by sudden molobating. "It is the usual technique. We are to raid the camp for specimens?"

"Two of them," confirmed Id-Wan. "Any two you can grab without rousing premature opposition."

"That will be easy."

"It cannot be otherwise. Would we be here, doing what we are doing, if all things did not come easy to our kind?"

"No, captain."

"Very well. Go get them. Take one of the radio technicians with you. He will first examine the place for signs of a transmitter or any other mode of ultra-rapid communication which cannot be detected on this photograph. If there proves to be a message-channel, of any sort at all, it must be put out of action, preferably in a manner which would appear accidental."

"Do we go right now?" asked the chief. "Or later?"

"At once, while it remains dark. We have observed how their cities dim by night, watched their lights go out, the traffic thin down. Obviously they are not nocturnal. They are most active in the daytime. Obtain those samples now and be back here before dawn."

"Very well, captain." The chief went out, still a molobater, but not for long.

Bi-Nak yawned and remarked, "I'm not nocturnal either."

"You are on duty," Id-Wan re-

minded him severely, "until I see fit to say that you are not on duty. And furthermore, I am disinclined to declare you off duty so long as I remain at my post."

"Example is better than precept," approved Po-Duk, currying favor.

Id-Wan promptly turned on him and bawled, "Shut up!"

"He was only pointing out," observed Bi-Nak, picking his not-teeth with fingers that weren't.

Kampfenfeldt lumbered with elephantine tread to where three men were lounging full length on the grass. He wiped his forehead as he came, but it was from sheer habit. The sun was partway up and beginning to warm. The cool of the morning was still around. Kampfenfeldt wasn't sweating, nevertheless he mopped.

One of the men rolled lackadaisically onto one side, welcomed him with, "Always on the run, Ollie. Why don'tcha flop down on your fat and absorb some sun once in a while?"

"Never get the chance." Kampfenfeldt mopped, looked defeated. "I'm searching for Johnson and Greer. Every morning it's the same—somebody's late for breakfast."

"Aren't they in their hut?" inquired a second man, sitting up with an effort and plucking idly at blades of grass.

"Nope. First place I looked. Must've got up mighty early be-

cause nobody saw them go. Why won't guys tell me they're going out and might be late? Am I supposed to save something for them or not?"

"Let 'em do without," suggested the second man, lying down again and shading his eyes.

"Serves them right," added the first.

"They're not anywhere around," complained Kampenfeldt, "and they didn't go out the gate."

"Probably climbed the logs," offered one. "They're both batty. Most times they climb the logs when they go moonlight fishing. Anyone who wanders around like that in the middle of the night has got a hole in his head." He glanced at the other. "Were their rods in the hut?"

"Didn't think to look," admitted Kampenfeldt.

"Don't bother to look. They like to show they're tough. Let 'em be tough. It's a free country."

"Yeah," admitted Kampenfeldt reluctantly, "but they ought to have told me about their breakfasts. Now they'll be wasted unless I eat them myself."

They watched him waddle away, still worried, and mopping himself at regular intervals.

One said: "That silhouette shows there isn't much wasted."

Another said: "Hah!", shaded his eyes with one hand and tried to look at the sun.

An examiner appeared, red-

smearing and acrid-smelling as before. "They're like all the others—fixed."

"Unalterable?" insisted Id-Wan.

"Yes, captain." Distastefully he gazed down at the lurid stains upon himself, added, "Eventually we separated them, putting them in different rooms, and revived them. We killed one, then the other. The first fought with his limbs and made noises, but displayed no exceptional powers. The other one, in the other room, was already agitated but did not become more so during this time. It was obvious that he had no notion of what was happening to his companion. We then killed him after he had resisted in the same manner. The conclusion is that they are neither hypnotic nor telepathic. They are remarkably ineffectual even at the point of death."

"Good!" exclaimed Id-Wan, with great satisfaction. "You have done well."

"That is not all, captain. We have since subjected the bodies to a thorough search and can find no organs of life-sense. Evidently they have no way of perceiving life."

"Better still," enthused Id-Wan, "no life-sense means no dynamic receivers—no way of tuning an individual life and tracing its whereabouts. So those in the camp cannot tell where these two have gone."

"They couldn't in any case, by this time," the other pointed out, "since both are dead." He tossed a couple

of objects onto a table. "They had those things with them. You may wish to look at them."

Id-Wan picked up the articles as the examiner went away. They were a pair of small bags or satchels made of treated animal hide, well finished, highly polished, and attached to adjustable belts.

He tipped out their contents upon the table, pawed them over: A couple of long, flat metal cases containing white tubes stuffed with herbs. Two metal gadgets, similar but not the same, which could be made to spark and produce a light. A thin card with queer, wriggly writing on one side and a colored picture of a tall-towered city on the other. One small magnifying glass. Two writing instruments, one black, the other silvery. A crude time meter with three indicators and a loud tick. Several insectlike objects with small, sharp hooks attached. Four carefully folded squares of cloth of unknown purpose.

"Humph!" He scooped the lot back, tossed the satchels to Po-Duk. "Take them to the workshop, tell them to make six reasonably good copies complete with contents. They must be ready by next nightfall."

"Six?" queried Po-Duk. "There will be eight scouts."

"Imbecile! You are holding the other two."

"So I am," said Po-Duk, gaping fascinatedly at the objects as if they had just materialized from thin air.

"There are times and there are times," remarked Bi-Nak as Po-Duk departed.

Id-Wan let it pass. "I must have a look at these bodies. I am curious about them." He moved off to the operating room, Bi-Nak following.

The kidnaped and slaughtered creatures proved to be not as repulsive as some they'd found on other worlds. They lay side by side, long, lean, brown-skinned, with two arms, two legs, and with dark, coarse hair upon their heads. Their dead eyes were very much like Rigelian eyes. Their flesh was horribly firm despite that it was full of red juice.

"Primitive types," pronounced Id-Wan, poking at one of them. "It's a marvel they've climbed as high as they have."

"Their digits are surprisingly dexterous," explained the head examiner. "And they have well-developed brains, more so than I had expected."

"They will need all their brains," promised Id-Wan. "We are too advanced to be served by idiots."

"That is true," indorsed Bi-Nak, gaining fresh heart.

"Although sometimes I wonder," added Id-Wan, staring hard at him. He shifted his attention back to the examiner: "Give these cadavers to the scouts and tell them to get in some practice. I'll pick out the eight best imitators tonight. They had better be good!"

"Yes, captain."

The sinking sun showed no more than a sliver of glowing rim on a distant hill when the chief of the scouts reported to Id-Wan. There was a coolness creeping over the land, but it was not coldness. Here, at this time, the nights were merely less warm than the days.

Id-Wan inquired: "Did you have any difficulty in obtaining those two specimens this morning?"

"No, captain. Our biggest worry was that of getting there before broad daylight. It took longer than we'd anticipated to reach the place. In fact dawn was already showing when we arrived. However, we were lucky."

"In what way?"

"Those two were already outside the camp, just as if the Great Green God had provided them for us. They bore simple apparatus for trapping water game and evidently intended an early morning expedition. All we had to do was plant darts in them and take them away. They had no chance to utter a sound. The camp slumbered undisturbed."

"And what about the message channels?"

"The technician could find none," said the chief. "No overhead wires, no underground cables, no antenna, nothing."

"That is peculiar," remarked Bi-Nak. "Why should creatures so for-

ward be so backward? They *are* superior types, aren't they?"

"They are relatively unimportant in this world's scheme of things," declared Id-Wan. "Doubtless they serve these trees in some way, or watch for fires. It is of little consequence."

"Sitting down on their dirt is not of little consequence," grumbled Bi-Nak to himself. "I'll be happier after we've blasted one of their towns, or ten of them, or fifty. We can then get their reaction and beat it home with the news. I am more than ready to go home even if I am chosen to return with the main fleet sometime later."

"Are the scouts ready for my inspection?" Id-Wan asked the chief.

"Waiting now, captain."

"All right, I'll look them over." Going to the rear quarters, he studied the twenty Rigellians lined up against a wall. The two corpses reposed nearby for purposes of comparison. Subjecting each scout to long and careful scrutiny, he chose eight, whereupon the remaining twelve promptly switched to his own shape. The eight were good. Four Johnsons and four Greers.

"It is a simple form to duplicate," commented the chief. "I could hold it myself for days on end."

"Me, too," agreed Id-Wan. He addressed the row of two-armed, brown-skinned bipeds who could be whatever he wanted them to be. "Remember the most stringent rule:

In no circumstances will you change shape before your task is done. Until then, you will retain that precise form and appearance, even under threat of destruction."

They nodded silently.

He continued, "All your objectives have large parks into which you will be dropped shortly before dawn. You will then merge as inobtrusively as possible with the creatures appearing in each awakening town. After that, do as you've done many a time before—dig up all the useful data you can get without arousing suspicion. Details of weapons and power sources are especially needed. Enter no building until you are sure that your entry will not be challenged. Do not speak or be spoken to if it is avoidable. In the last resort, respond with imitations of a different speech pattern."

"Fanziki moula? Sfnadacta bu!" said Bi-Nak, concocting an example.

Id-Wan paused to scowl at him before he went on, "Above all, be circumspect. Don't let zeal tempt you into betrayal. After all, there are eight of you, and one may find what another has missed."

They nodded again, bipeds all of them, but with the Rigelian life-flame burning within them.

He finished, "If absolutely imperative, give up the quest and hide yourselves until the time for return. Be at your respective dropping-points in the parks at the mid-hour of the following night. You will then

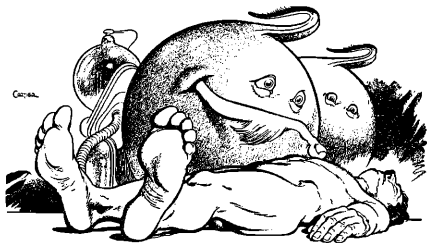
be picked up." He raised his voice in emphasis. "And do not change shape before then!"

They didn't. They had not altered by as much as one hair when they filed impassively into the ship's lifeboat between the mid-hour and dawn. Id-Wan was there to give them a final look over. Each walked precisely as the now-dead samples had walked, swinging his arms in the same manner, using the same bearing, wearing the same facial expression. Each had a satchel complete with alien contents, plus a midget dart-gun.

The lifeboat rose among the trees, into the dark, bore them away. A few creatures in the trees resented the brief disturbance, made squawking sounds.

"Not one other ship in the night," remarked Id-Wan, looking upward. "Not one rocket trail across the stars. They've got nothing but those big, clumsy air machines which we saw toiling through the clouds." He gave a sigh. "In due time we'll take over this planet like taking a kardaf-fruit from a nodus. It is all too easy, too elementary. Sometimes I feel that a little more opposition might be interesting."

Bi-Nak decided to let that point go for what it was worth, which wasn't much. Two days and nights on continual duty with the indefatigable Id-Wan had tired him beyond argument. So he yawned, gave the stars a sleepless, disinterested eye,



and followed Id-Wan into the ship.

Making for the dynamic receivers, Id-Wan had a look at their recording globes each of which had been tuned to a departing scout. Each globe held a bright spot derived from a distant life-glow. He watched the spots shrink with distance until eventually they remained still. A bit later the lifeboat came back, reported all landed. The spots continued to shine without shifting. None moved until the sun stabbed a red ray in the east.

Planting another filled glass on the tray, Ollie Kampenfeldt gloomed at a night-shrouded window and said: "It's been dark two hours. They've been gone all day. No breakfast, no dinner, no supper, nothing. A feller can't live on nothing. I don't like it."

"Me neither," approved somebody.

"Maybe something's happened."

"If one had broken his leg or his neck, the other would be here to tell us," another pointed out. "Besides, if it were anyone else, I'd suggest a search for them. But you know those two coots. Isn't the first time Johnson and Greer have taken to the jungle. Reckon they've seen too many Tarzan pictures. Just a pair of overgrown, muscle-bound kids."

"Johnson's no kid," denied the first. "He's an ex-navy heavyweight who still likes to jump around."

"Aw, probably they've got lost. It's the easiest thing in the world to get lost if you wander a bit. Four times I've had to camp out all night, and—"

"I don't like it," interjected Kampenfeldt, firmly.

"O. K., you don't like it. What are you going to do about it? Phone

the cops?"

"There's no phone, as you know," said Kampenfeldt. "Who'd drag a line right up here?" He thought it over, frowning fatly, and wiped his forehead. "I'll give 'em to morning. If they're not back by then, I'll send Sid on his motorcycle to tell the forest rangers. Nobody's going to say I did nothing about it."

"That's the spirit, Ollie," one of them approved. "You look after nature's children and they'll look after you."

Several laughed at that, heartily. Within half an hour Johnson and Greer were forgotten.

It was early in the afternoon when the tracer operators rushed into the main cabin and so far forgot themselves as not to match Id-Wan's shape. Remaining rotund, tentacular and pale purple, the leading one of the three gestured excitedly as he spoke.

"Two have gone, captain."

"Two what have gone where?" demanded Id-Wan, glowering at him.

"Two dynamic sparks."

"Are you certain?" Without waiting for a reply, Id-Wan ran to the receivers.

It was true enough. Six globes still held their tiny lights. Two were dull, devoid of any gleam. Even as he watched, another became extinguished. Then, in rapid succession, three more.

The chief of the scouts came in saying: "What's the matter? Is there something wrong?"

Slowly, almost ponderously, Id-Wan said "Six scouts have surrendered life in the last few moments." He breathed heavily, seemed to have trouble in accepting the evidence of the globes. "These instruments say they are dead, and if indeed they are dead they cannot retain shape. Their bodies automatically will revert to the form of their fathers. And you know that means—"

"A complete giveaway," said the chief of the scouts, staring grimly at the globes.

Both remaining lights went out.

"Action stations!" yelled Id-Wan, electrified by the sight. "Close all ports! Trim the tubes! Prepare for take-off!" He turned savagely upon Po-Duk. "You're the pilot. Don't squat there gaping like an ebelmint halfway out of its egg! Get into the control seat, idiot—we've no time to lose!"

Something whisked overhead. He caught a fleeting glimpse of it through the nearest observation port. Something long, shapely and glistening, but much too fast to examine. It had gone almost before it registered. Seconds later its noise followed a terrible howl.

The radio technician said: "Powerful signals nearby. Their sources seem to be—"

The ship's tubes coughed, spluttered, shot fire, coughed again. A

tree began to burn. Id-Wan danced with impatience. He dashed to the control room.

"Blast, Po-Duk, blast!"

"There is not yet enough lift, captain, and until the meters show that—"

"Look!" screamed Bi-Nak, pointing for the last time.

They could see what was coming through the facing port; seven ultrarapid dots in V-formation. The dots lengthened, sprouted wings, swept immediately overhead without a sound. Black lumps fell from their bellies, came down, struck the ship and all around the ship.

The badly lagging noise of the planes never got that far. Their leading waves were repulsed by the awful blast of the bombs.

For the final change, the Rigelians became a cloud of scattered molecules.

Settling himself more comfortably in the chair, the roving video reporter griped, "I'd no sooner shown my face in the office than the area supervisor grabbed me, told me to chase up here and give the breathless world a candid close-up of mad Martians on the rampage. I'm partway here when the Air Force chips in, holds me back a couple of hours. When I do get here what do I find?" He sniffed sourly. "Some timber smoking around a whacking big crater. Nothing else. Not a pretzel."

Dragging an almost endless hand-

kerchief from his pocket, Kampenfeldt smeared it across his brow: "We keep civilization at arm's length here. We've no radio, no video. So I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's like this," explained the reporter, "they dumped their spies in the parks during the night. They weren't around long because they got picked up with the milk. Twenty steps and Clancy had 'em."

"Eh?"

"The cops," elucidated the other. "We put the faces of the first pair on the breakfast-time videocast. Ten people phoned through in a hurry and identified them as Johnson and Greer. So we assumed that said Johnson and Greer were nuts." He gave a lugubrious laugh.

"Sometimes I've thought so myself," Kampenfeldt offered.

"Then, half an hour later, the next station on the chain infringed our copyright by also showing Johnson and Greer. Another followed suit ten minutes later still. By ten o'clock there were four pairs of them, as alike as two of you, and all grabbed in similiar circumstances. It looked like the whole cockeyed world wanted to be Johnson or, alternatively, Greer."

"Not me," denied Kampenfeldt. "Neither of them."

"The news value of that was, of course, way up. We planted the entire eight of them on the mid-morning boost which is nation-wide, our

only thought being that we'd got something mighty queer. Military intelligence boys in Washington saw the videocast, pestered local cops for details, put two and two together and made it four, if not eight."

"And then?"

"They clamped heavy pressure on all these Johnsons and Greers. They talked all right, but nothing they said made sense. Eventually one of them tried a fast out, got killed on the run. He was still Johnson when he flopped, but a couple of minutes later his body turned to something else, something right out of this world. Boy, it would have turned your stomach!"

"In that case, I want no description," said Kampenfeldt, defensively nursing his outsize paunch.

"That was an eye-opener. Anything not of this world obviously must be of some other. The authorities bore down on the remaining seven who acted as before until they realized that we knew what we knew. Forthwith they put death before dishonor, leaving us with eight dollops of goo and no details."

"Ugh!" said Kampenfeldt, hitching his paunch.

"Our only clue lay in Johnson and Greer. Since these creatures had copied real people, the thing to do was find the last known whereabouts of said people. Chances were good that alien invaders would be found in that vicinity. A shout went up

for Johnson and Greer. Fifty friends of theirs put them here, right here. The forest rangers chipped in saying you'd just reported them missing."

"I did," admitted Kampenfeldt. "And if I'd known where they'd gone, I'd be missing myself—and still running."

"Well, the Air Force took over. They were told to look-see. If an alien ship was down, it was to stay down. You know those boys. They swoop around yipping. They overdid the job, left not a sliver of metal as big as my finger. So what do I put on the videocast? Just a crater and some smoking tree stumps."

"Which is no great pity," opined Kampenfeldt. "Who wants to see things that could climb into your bed as Uncle Willie? You wouldn't know who was who with creatures like that around."

"You would not." The reporter pondered awhile, added, "Their simulation was perfect. They had the power to lead us right up the garden path if only they'd known how to use it. Power is never much good unless you know how to use it. They made a first-class blunder when they grabbed their models." He scratched his head, eyed the other speculatively. "It sure beats me that of all places in this wide world they had to pick on a nudist camp."

"Solar health center." corrected Kampenfeldt, primly.