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SCIENCE FICTION *Quarterly*

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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Laril tripped the Earthman by snapping two tentacles around its thick ankles...

EXTRA - SECRET AGENT

By H. B. Fyfe

Laril was a secret agent, so secret that he didn't know his mission. But there was an even more effective colleague on board this ship with him — the most effective possible of secret agents!

HALFWAY through his first meal on the SL4-552, Laril decided that he had made the blunder of his life in leaving Mars on that rocket. His having been the only air-and-safety technician at the agency now seemed small excuse.

He wondered why the looks of the old can had not outweighed the lure of a few easy credits for the short hop to Sol III. Unable to think of any good reason, he pushed aside the cold, synthetic food with a disgusted flip of his front tentacle.

Laril supposed he should have expected this when he had found that more than half the crew of twenty were Procyonites. The rest were mostly Solarians from Earth. He had heard even one of these complaining about

the quality of the food when drawing rations at the supply compartment.

"Zzznnn!" Laril buzzed gloomily. "Procyonites are known for lacking all taste, and Solarians are almost as primitive. When one of *them* complains...! What was wrong with me?"

He thought longingly of his home on bleak Capella VI, where food was considered worthy of careful preparation. These stingy Procyonites were carrying things too far, even for space rations; he wished he could bring himself to eat publicly with the pack of Earthmen, whose gabbling might distract him.

Giving up all hope of hunger-satisfaction till they should reach Luna, Laril rose carefully in his crowded compartment. He stood about two

Novelet of Interworld Intrigue

meters tall on four many-jointed legs, the muscles of which bulged stringily under the fine, olive scales. His four antennae reached an extra half-meter. These grew from bases around his head, one above each eye, and divided and sub-divided repeatedly into extremely delicate tendrils.

His body, slim like the narrow head, was loosely draped in a shimmering red tunic. The extremities of his tentacles, divided at the ends like his antennae, were at the moment groping for grips about the small compartment.

Hope they put the ship into spin soon, he thought, so one may at least walk!

Being in charge of much equipment, Laril was privileged to live in privacy with it. He hooked up his sleeping net, climbed in, and fastened the opening lest he float out. "Next watch," he promised himself, "I must make a better check on that rocket compartment. Why do I feel uneasy in it?"

His active mind presently relaxed in sleep permitting the other section of his Capellan brain to lapse into reflection—the equivalent of dreaming, or memory-searching, found in Earthmen and most other intelligent life. Under suggestion from the last waking thoughts, Laril's reflective mind began to assort memories concerned with the stern compartments.

He had not felt comfortable when analyzing the air in the rocket compartment, although he had made an external check of the tubes before last night's takeoff. Had there been anything wrong? No... although he remembered that one of the big tail fins showed signs of slovenly repair work.

PHYSICALLY asleep, Laril was unconscious of allowing the tip of a tentacle to slip through the net and twist one of the bolts holding the supporting hook to the bulkhead. From the seemingly solid head of the bolt, a tiny light flashed upon his rear eye,

which opened involuntarily to read the winking signal.

*You will forget until it is time!
Your reflective mind will remember
then, not before!
You will feel when you have found
it!
Guard against discovery!*

There was a stealthy movement in the corridor outside. Laril twisted the bolt; the light vanished. Then he awoke.

"Laril!"

It was a Solarian voice, which he heard as being musical in a deep, resonant fashion. He heard the Earthman talking to itself in annoyance; no doubt, it had trouble progressing along the gravityless passage on only two legs.

"You Laril?" demanded the Earthman, thrusting its head inside.

Laril's active mind was now awake, and he would not have believed he had been hypnotized had someone told him. He admitted his identity and took stock of the other.

The Earthman was almost his own height. That meant it was slightly longer than a Procyonite but instead of supporting a pudgy, blue-gray body on six short limbs, it stood upright. Where the tentacles should have been, and where the Procyonites had two extra, modified legs, the Earthman had two smaller limbs resembling its legs. It looked powerfully-muscled where the limbs joined the body, which made the blunt head almost proportional. All visible sensory organs were crowded to the front—Laril thought that clumsy—and what showed of the skin was smooth and pinkish white.

The Earthman wore blue, grease-marked coveralls and a belt with a gaudy, bejeweled buckle. This Laril rather liked for its color, but he knew other Earthmen would call it "cheap."

"I'm Bulloch," said the Earthman; "Captain wants a report."

"I shall send it presently," Laril

replied. "Tell him there is no damage and the air circulation is normal."

Bulloch departed in the direction of the control compartment, wishing loudly for the ship to be put into a spin. "If that shivering, hairless centipede can settle down!" it muttered, grabbing for a guide rail.

Laril was not clear as to what a centipede might be, but he suspected vituperation. Reminding himself to awake at a certain time, he returned to his rest.

*You will forget until it is time!
Your reflective mind will...*

DURING the following watch, Laril set out to make a more detailed check of the ship. On his belt, he hung a pouch with an assortment of meters and minor tools. Leaving his compartment, he paused, enjoying the slight gravity effect of the spin now upon the ship. "What am I forgetting?" he asked himself.

He returned for his special set of deck plans, but even that addition did not relieve his vague worry. He buzzed softly in annoyance, and went out.

He decided to begin in the rocket compartment. Two Earthmen were there on token duty, cleaning up amid the piping and metering mechanisms that delivered fuel to the rockets. Laril found no signs of structural strain, nor any indication that the Earthmen had polluted the air with their peculiar vice of *tobacco* burning. He left the compartment as soon as possible, wondering at his uneasiness while there.

"Think we'll make it, Octo?" one Earthman called.

"Why should you worry?" countered Laril, thinking of the forty-six lightyears to Capella. "You are nearly home now."

He worked his way slowly forward past storage-holds, crew-quarters, and various nooks into which were tucked mechanical necessities. At only one point did he encounter trouble, and it was not mechanical.

"Cargo compartment, nobody allowed!" a Procyonite squeaked, aiming an eyestalk at Laril as the latter tried to slide open a door on the main corridor.

"Have to check air circulation," Laril protested.

"Don't know. Nobody allowed. Ask captain!"

"Less work for me!" retorted Laril, flicking a tentacle-tip at the other, who shivered in annoyance.

He went on about his business. When he reached the control compartment, he found only a pilot and an astrogator. The pilot was a cold-eyed, reptilian Centaurian resembling a dark gray, long-legged lizard. It glanced at Laril without visible interest and relapsed into statuesque immobility. As was sensible around Sol, the astrogator was a Solarian from Earth. It was more friendly than the pilot.

"You might take a look at that ventilator," suggested the astrogator; "something's loose and clanking in there."

"Loose grill," Laril reported presently. "They tell me not to enter the cargo compartment. Why?"

The pilot flicked him a bored stare, but the Earthman shrugged. "Some whim of the captain's, I suppose. Not that we carry anything very precious, as far as I know."

Laril saw by the name-tag on the cap that the Earthman was called Rowley. He suspected from its expression that Rowley had little admiration for the captain.

He promised to repair the air vent later, and withdrew.

Walking slowly back toward the cargo compartment, he examined the side passages. His particular set of deck plans emphasized the breathing system of the ship, and he used them to orient himself.

Sliding open a door on a side-passage, he stepped into a cubicle used to store instruments and small tool parts. In a few moments, he had located the grill over the main air-duct

passing this compartment, unfastened it, and pulled himself into the opening. He discovered that he was not too tight a fit, and could pull himself along with his tentacles.

"Lucky not to be all joints, like a Solarian," he murmured. "Knowing Procyonites, I think it as well to see if they smuggle something—drugs, even robotin, for instance."

He passed several small, secondary ducts leading to various compartments. When he reached a group of four vents, he checked his deck plans. Yes, the cargo compartment was here.

He saw that one of the openings had been welded shut. *Illegal*, he thought, *but maybe that consignment of Martian wine they talk about is really expensive.*

The second section he discovered to be crammed with soft, fantastically-thick furs; the third he was able to enter by removing a grill. He found a shipment of archeological specimens ranging from metal implements to what might have been bones. Most were packed in light containers of transparent plastic. He moved to the fourth compartment.

This could take time! he thought, seeing the contents.

These consisted of a number of minor consignments which were not packed uniformly. He delved into his reflective mind as he crawled between the securing nets, trying to remember the characteristics of robotin. Light, bulky powder, probably.

There could be little or none here, he decided after hefting a few bundles. He certainly did not feel like burrowing to the center of each netful to make sure.

SOME INSTINCT impelled Laril to return to the third section. "Not much use in this," he told himself, edging between the nets of plastic bags and boxes. "Unless—could there be something mixed in that plastic?"

Impatiently, he dismissed the idea and glanced with a side-eye at a col-

lection of small, ugly statuettes. He started to move on, but something about these objects held him against his will. No doubt, they represented some form of life, but *which*, Laril was not sure. The nearest parallel he could recall was a hideous temple image he had seen once on a planet of Altair. "Well, they can't be made of robotin," he decided.

He tore his attention from the statuettes, which were fascinating despite—or perhaps because of—their gruesome distortions. He had somehow lost interest in further search. "Stupid, anyway!" he droned aloud. "I'd better get back."

Finally, he reached the opening by which he had originally entered the ventilation system, and pushed his way out into the instrument compartment. He picked up the grill and deliberately fastened it in place, ignoring the Procyonite who stood watching suspiciously.

When the grill was secure, Laril took out his pocket-recorder, glanced at one of his meters, and dictated a few numbers. The Procyonite stood quietly on its four lower legs, occasionally twitching an eyestalk or shivering with the drug-induced nervousness that made all its kind seem perpetually chilled. Laril completed his little act.

"I am Tseel," the watcher introduced itself in the high, twittering speech of Procyon's planets. "Captain will see you now."

"For what?" inquired the Capellan. "Captain," insisted the other, fluttering its atrophied forelimbs in supposedly enlightening gestures. "Now. You and he. See. Talk."

"I got your first story," Laril buzzed disgustedly.

He could not quite believe that these crawlers were as stupid as they often acted. This one, especially, seemed none too bright for space work, he decided as he followed it toward the control compartment.

CHAPTER II

WHEN THEY arrived, Tseel engaged in a whistling exchange with the Procyonite captain. The same pair were still on duty as astrogator and pilot.

From the Solarian's expression, Laril deduced that, although Rowley disliked Procyonites and even found their speech unpleasant, the astrogator was listening intently. It could do this undetected, while seeming to scan papers on its desk; for its external auditory organs—flat, crinkled appendages clinging to the sides of the head—were nearly immobile.

The captain turned on Laril. "You inspect air ducts? Where you go?"

Laril gave a carefully-censored account of his inspection, stating that the air was at the best pressure and composition, considering economy and the varied requirements of the crew. The captain wanted to check the stored instruments; it called the crewman in charge of the cubicle, the Solarian Bulloch, and led the way to the spot.

Tseel pointed out the grill Laril had removed. The conversation was squeaked back and forth too rapidly for Laril to catch more than that the captain wished the air duct examined. Bulloch, after loosening and removing the grill, helped Tseel to climb into the opening.

As they waited, Laril was reminded of the robotin he had expected to discover in the cargo. Was it imagination, or did his antennae sense the presence of the drug now? He let his uppermost tendrils undulate gently and inoffensively. Yes, by the Five Spirits! The stimulus came from the direction of the captain! Like half of the inhabitants of the Procyon planets, it must be an addict. Still, that hardly proved that a large quantity of the drug was being smuggled.

Of course, Laril reflected, they

might be trying to slip by with a small batch. Earthmen were notoriously touchy about the transportation of narcotics in their system, which Laril considered officious. After all, Earthmen were generally less susceptible to robotin than most people; was not its use for those other beings to choose or reject? Their attitude, he felt, was just another aspect of that arrogance which led them to call themselves "Earthmen" instead of "Solarians", as would be proper.

Tseel reappeared in the opening and climbed head-first down to the deck. It answered the captain's questions just slowly enough for Laril to grasp that marks of his little trip had been traced to the cargo compartments. The captain turned to him. "So you are agent of Solarian police!"

Laril wondered at his own reaction; his muscles had tensed involuntarily. Discreetly lowering the eye away from his questioner, he noted that the branching extremities of his tentacles had clenched into knots.

Why should that be? he asked himself.

"An agent of what?" he demanded, relaxing deliberately.

"Have ever been on Sol III?"

"I think so," said Laril, trying to remember when.

"And never heard of their Narcotics Bureau?"

Laril searched his memory and denied frankly that he had. "What is it?" he asked, feeling vaguely that he should know.

The captain appeared agitated. The wrinkled, bluish-gray skin of the round head darkened. The eyestalks twisted wildly, and small muscles twisted and shivered along its flanks.

"How dumb can they come?" demanded the Earthman, Bulloch. "The reason we wanna know if—"

The captain interrupted with a shrill squawk of reproof. Laril wondered if he might not have heard the name after all. It had an elusive ring of familiarity. *Something's wrong, he*

thought. *I can't seem to think clearly!*

He awoke to the fact that the two Procyonites and the Earthman were regarding him intently. His antennae warned even more urgently of the presence of robotin.

LARIL tried to leap aside as the captain made a sudden lunge at him. With one eye, he saw that the other had produced a tiny hypodermic needle from the pouch it wore on a narrow belt. Laril lashed at it with his nearest tentacle.

The captain whistled in anger and retired out of reach; the other two threw themselves at the Capellan.

He tripped the Earthman by snapping two tentacles around the thick legs, and pushed Tseel off with another. The latter reared high, pawing for a hold with stubby limbs. Laril braced himself on three legs and kicked the Procyonite heartily in the belly.

As Tseel thudded against the opposite bulkhead, Laril shoved the captain off-balance toward the doorway. He met Bulloch's new charge with a kick at the thick part of the body, causing the blunt, crowded features to contort with pain.

Then one of the clumsy, jointed upper limbs swept aside his tentacle and the other struck at him. The surprising force of the blow carried Laril back toward the exit. He tried to wind tentacles about the Solarian's limbs. With his rear eye, he saw the captain run in, low to the deck on all paws. Laril lifted one foot to kick, but the Earthman's thrashing about spoiled his aim. He felt a sharp sting in the leg...

Laril relaxed helplessly. Bulloch broke free, and seemed to stand there peering at him out of malignant little eyes for an interminable time.

The Capellan's conscious will retreated within his reflective mind. He succeeded in his effort to view the scene with detachment, yet there was

a paradox. Visible action was impossibly slow. Then, abruptly, the rate of motion changed.

Robotin effect, he thought, remembering descriptions.

His trouble was that he observed through a sensory system affected by the drug, no matter how calmly his inner mind analyzed the information reaching it. That same inner ability, however, gave him an unsuspected advantage, should he be able to employ it. He felt perfectly capable of concentrating, although his sense of time was confused and erratic. He wondered to what extent the robotin might destroy volition. He had heard that with other beings it muffled all will-power.



In a few minutes—or perhaps hours—he learned.

The captain and Bulloch appeared to the drugged Capellan to scurry about with frenzied speed, replacing instruments in their proper places and reviving Tseel. Laril suffered an infinite period of anxiety when the discomforted Procyonite hovered before him, glaring with pop-eyed resentment into the Capellan's front eye. "Now," said the captain, pushing Tseel aside, "we question!"

The words dragged out impossibly, although the voice remained shrill. Laril's sense of speed had wavered.

Automatically, he answered the questions. He congratulated himself as his reflective mind withdrew to consider the replies detachedly. Yes, he told them, it was probably true he had never heard of the Narcotics Bureau of Earth. *Probably*, his inner self noted. He felt he had been on Earth, but *had* he?

This was perfect, he thought. Sure enough, they could not reach his inner mind with the drug, just as foreseen. They would get nothing out of him.

As foreseen? By whom? What was there to get out of him? Why could

he not remember, either actively or reflectively?

The captain bleated that he must remember *Earth*.

No, honestly, he could not remember. Now? He was going to Sol III because he was tired of Mars. Yes, he had always been an air-and-safety tech, since first going into space. No, nothing else. Yes, he was sure.

Eventually, his attention began to waver. There were more questions, more automatically truthful answers; but he sensed a growing dissatisfaction among his questioners as they failed to connect him with Earth. He took obscure pleasure in that fact, even as he noticed that his physical senses were becoming blurred. He could no longer be sure just what happened outside his private reflections, but he was dimly aware of being carried back to his own compartment.

"False alarm," he heard the captain shrilling as they heaved him into his sleeping net. "Now must watch for another."

LARIL lay there, deeply withdrawn into his own ego, but unable to ponder the situation because his system was neither under his control nor naturally asleep. Before regaining normal consciousness, however, he must have slept; for he awoke alert. So alert that there must have been a cause.

Eyes still closed, Laril sought for the origin of the disturbance. He felt that considerable time had passed. There was no sound except for footsteps in the corridor. He swept his compartment with a swift glance; it was in order.

The padding steps halted at his doorway. Through the opening probed the eyestalk of a Procyonite. Laril shut all his eyes, thinking, *I must guard against discovery; that is why I awoke!*

The other being crept cautiously inside, almost flowing along the deck. Laril would never have heard it, ex-

cept for the most sensitive auditory nerves in his antennae. Eyes shut, he smelled caution and distinguished stealthy movements.

Satisfied that Laril still slept, the visitor began to search the compartment. The Capellan carefully opened his rear eye and watched the reflection in the shiny metal of the fixture from which hung his net. It was Tseel.

The elongated creature shivered nervously as it examined Laril's equipment, simultaneously handling instruments and probing into chests with various paws. Laril interpreted its jerky motions as evidence of frustration.

The Procyonite next turned to Laril himself. Without touching the sleeping net, it stared closely at him. Laril was almost caught peeping when the other dropped to all paws to creep under the net. He sneaked open another eye and saw Tseel scanning and tapping the bulkhead.

Disappointed, the Procyonite reared up beside the net, thoughtfully drumming upon the blue-gray, wrinkled skin of its belly with several paws. Laril sensed deep discouragement as Tseel finally padded out of the compartment.

As soon as he was alone, he slipped from the net. He saw that each of his possessions had been neatly replaced. "Now," he asked himself, "what could I have that is more valuable or more dangerous than I know?"

He could think of nothing. On the other hand, what could the Procyonites have to make them so jittery? Perhaps he should have found a way to examine the wine cargo.

Or the miscellaneous baggage, he thought, but what is the use? For all I can tell, they may just be haunted by the spirits of those ugly little statues, or some such thing!

Realizing that he was hungry, he went out to the supply-compartment in search of food. It was closed. As Laril was debating whether anything he might possibly find would be worth

forcing the door, Tseel ambled up from somewhere forward. "You have missed the eating period?" It inquired politely.

"Somehow or other—yes," replied Laril with heavy irony.

He considered how much he would enjoy plucking the stubby limbs from the other's body, one by one.

"Must get you food," said Tseel; "was partly our fault."

It whistled shrilly. After a moment, Bulloch arrived. At Tseel's order, it unlocked the door and entered.

I shall think of something pleasant for you, also, Laril thought. I would like to know where you sleep!

In the face of Tseel's affability, Laril saw no reason to reveal his grudge. "You understand," the other twittered, "was all mistake. Are now sure you know nothing. Robotin never, never fails."

Laril accepted without comment the synthetic rations produced from the supply room by Bulloch, and retired dourly.



DURING the next several days, Laril could detect no signs of further tampering with his belongings. Of this he made sure by leaving certain small devices in operation whenever he was away. Apparently, he was indeed considered "safe."

In routine fashion, he continued his rounds, testing less for structural strains, now, than for proper functioning of the air system. He did not pry again into the cargo compartments; having been there, he would remember all that he had seen. It was now merely a matter of interpreting his data.

What he did in his spare time would have disturbed his intended victims had they known. A varied, if compact, stock of chemicals was normally supplied for Laril's job. Like any good tech, he carried with him a number of extra substances and gadgets picked

up on many planets. With certain of these materials, he now manufactured a quantity of bluish gas and sealed it under pressure into several small containers.

Next, he attached to the valves of these some radio-controlled switches pilfered from Bulloch's stock, and then found opportunities to conceal them where he hoped they would do the most harm. One went into the air vent above Tseel's sleeping net. Another was hidden among the spare parts in Bulloch's compartment.

Unable to get into the captain's quarters, Laril slipped the third little can into the duct ventilating the control compartment. This he did under guise of repairing the loose grill of which Rowley had complained. "There will be no more trouble with that," he lied to the astrogator as he replaced the grill.

He was well satisfied that, for once, a Procyonite had relieved the chief pilot. He suspected that the latter might have spotted the forgotten "tool" left in the vent.

Laril felt a certain grudging admiration for the ugly Centaurian. At least, it was not of a race that ran in packs. A member of a limited population which had to fight a worn-out planet for a living, Laril approved of self-confidence. An Earthman had once told him it could forgive any fault, at least partly, if the individual showed courage. A Capellan felt the same about self-sufficient independence.

"My relief," Rowley interrupted Laril's thoughts.

HE YIELDED his place to another Solarian and left the compartment with Laril. They walked aft to the tech's quarters.

"Fascinating collection of instruments you have there," said the Earthman, peering in. "Mind if I look them over?"

"As your own," invited Laril, un-

obtrusively switching off the prowler-indicators he had planted.

Had he hidden the motion well enough? He thought he saw the other's eyes shift. He concentrated on trying to note whether the places searched by Tseel interested Rowley also.

It seemed not. The astrogator's enthusiasm was directed to Laril's special deck plans. "You'd have a hard time getting along without these, wouldn't you?" asked Rowley.

"I hold much of it in my memory," Laril replied.

"But you wouldn't like to lose track of these drawings, I suppose?"

"Oh, no," answered Laril noncommittally.

It bore no fruit. After a few idle remarks, Rowley announced the intention of hanging up its sleeping net. Laril was left intrigued but unenlightened. *Something queer is going on, he thought when he was alone. And the queerest part of all is that I feel I know what it's about—if I could only remember!*

Since it was a sleeping period for the larger part of the crew, he gave up the puzzle and hastened out to visit Bulloch and Tseel.

He found it convenient to work from the ventilating system, which he entered on a side passage. Soon, he peered out of a grill at Bulloch, hanging in a sleeping net below him. Laril activated the tiny radio-transmitter he carried. As the bluish gas escaped from its hiding place, it rapidly expanded into a colorless condition, but Laril could trace it by the effect it produced.

Bulloch began to twist and squirm in the net. The Earthman coughed, swallowed, then coughed more uncomfortably; it pawed at the part of the thick body which Laril thought contained the digestive organs.

The Capellan judiciously cut off the flow of the gas, but the Earthman remained restless. Finally, it awoke—not a moment too soon. Bulloch had

put away its sick-bags after a few days in space, but a frantic escape from the net and search among the lockers required only a few seconds.

Laril withdrew quietly along the air duct as Bulloch began to vomit into the plastic envelope. He reproved himself for rashness; he might very well have given the trick away by overdoing it, in which case he would have had to replace the gas container for the next sleeping.

He proceeded to visit Tseel, who slept with two other Procyonites, but that compartment was more moderate. Judging by the twitching eyestalks and violent shivering, Laril decided that Tseel experienced some horrible sleep-illusions. The only individual left to settle with was the captain, but Laril disliked releasing the gas into the control compartment until he was absolutely sure he could not penetrate the officer's own private quarters.

CHAPTER III

THE NEXT few days saw them reaching and passing the mid-point of their flight. Inexplicably, the nearness of its home planet failed to cheer Bulloch, who glowered—red-eyed and peevish—about the ship.

Tseel, Laril learned from crew gossip, had quarreled bitterly with its companions, who claimed that their former friend's mere presence in their shared sleeping compartment made them ill. Tseel now slept alone.

These details left Laril complacent. His only remaining problems were how to survive the poor food another few days and the matter of Rowley.

I wonder, he reflected. Am I too suspicious? I would not doubt that this diet makes me irritable. Something seems constantly to be probing at my mind, but what is it?

Still, from time to time, he took the trouble to examine all his possessions.

Rowley had formed a habit of dropping in frequently, without apparent purpose. Laril asked himself if the Solarian astrogator might not have visited in his absence, despite the spy-devices. *Perhaps I was seen turning them off that time*, he thought.

He was quite thorough in his search, but turned up nothing until he came to his now seldom-used deck plans. Distinctly visible to his versatile sight were many faint markings. Although occurring elsewhere, they were mainly clustered among the crew's quarters.

Laril buzzed thoughtfully as he analyzed the hue. "They must be invisible to Procyonites, as well as Solarians, except with special lights."

The nearest of the marked compartments was a sleeping space for several Procyonites. Laril noted the position of the faint cross and went the few steps along the corridor.

He found the section conveniently empty. He oriented himself and located the indicated spot. It was a cabinet on the bulkhead. Inside, he saw nothing but personal items, but his antennae sensed robotin. He peered closer. "A false back—so that is where they keep it!"

Having examined the store of drug without touching anything, Laril hastened back for more tips. Following the markings on his plans, he discovered two more caches of the robotin.

There was now little doubt in his mind that Rowley was the Solarian agent worrying the captain. The Earthman must have been quite energetic to have spied out all the little hiding places used by the crew members without being caught.

"And I took the rough handling for that!" Laril muttered.

He could not help thinking that the Solarian police were being petty, if not stupid. Laril could testify that there was only a reasonable amount of robotin aboard.

In the following days, he made himself sporadically busy about the ship, arranging to be seen working at intervals. His spare time was devoted to Tseel and Bulloch.

He also kept an eye on Rowley, who, unaware of Laril's discoveries, provided the greatest amusement. The Capellan shocked the other repeatedly by "waking" suddenly from a feigned sleep; or returning unexpectedly to his compartment while the other was adding to the list of drug caches. Admiring the cunning that led the Solarian agent to choose such a safe concealment for the notes, Laril always pretended to accept Rowley's excuses.

WHEN THE Procyonites finally caught the agent, however, no excuse was even considered. It happened about one Earth-day from Luna. Returning from a pre-landing check of an escape hatch, Laril heard a tremendous hubbub echoing from the main corridor. He peeped out from a side passage. Instantly, he jerked his head back.

A tangle of Earthmen and bleating Procyonites churned past, heading for the control compartment in a confusion of legs. One of the squealers, running low for speed, got between the longer limbs of the leading Earthman.

Laril waited until the resulting pile-up separated again into complaining but individual units, then followed. Approaching the nerve-center of the rocket, he heard a loud, monotonously-repeated radio signal above the babble of voices. The captain ran distractedly to and fro, pausing at every turn to bleat angrily at Rowley, who was under guard.

Even the Centaurian pilot showed rare animation. Laril conceded that to be natural this close to Earth and Luna, points of likely intersection for rockets on curves from many planets.

One of the Procyonites, who had been maneuvering about with a portable apparatus, jabbered at the captain.

The latter shrilled an order, and the crowd charged outside.

"From where do we receive the signal?" Laril asked Tseel, who stood with Bulloch beside the astrogator.

"From our own ship, it seems."

The Centaurian hissed something to the captain. "But they think another ship in the nearness," Tseel added.

"Who would anyone signal?"

Tseel bent an eyestalk toward the Earthman between Bulloch and himself. "We think Rowley. For his snooping police out there!"

In a few minutes, the technician with the detector-apparatus scurried back into the control section. Sliding the door shut to cut off the argumentative voices in the corridor, it reported to the captain.

"The thing is near main rocket openings," Tseel translated for Laril. "On, or in, a fin, probably."

Laril felt slightly uneasy at hearing the location mentioned, although he could detect no scrap of surprise in his mind. He wondered if he were developing a space-neurosis about rocket tubes.

"You!" shrieked the captain, patting over to Rowley and rearing up to goggle at the Earthman eye-to-eye. "You put transmitter there!"

The Solarian stared back defiantly but made no denial.

"Have watched," the captain insisted. "You thought so clever, sneaking around, finding all private robotin. Now you think call police rocket. Silly trick!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Rowley.

It glared angrily about. Laril rather hoped it would attack Bulloch. He suspected the astrogator meant to indicate defiance, not misunderstanding.

"Will say what I talk about!" declared the captain. "Go outside and turn off, wherever it is! Will be generous! You can have spacesuit!"

Rowley made a brief remark beyond Laril's knowledge of Solarian. From the emphasis, he imagined it offensive.

Bulloch reached out to restrain the other Earthman. Laril's hopes were answered when it staggered back from a sharp blow. Rowley sprang for the doorway. Tseel tripped it with an extra leg, then prudently stood aside as the two Solarians grappled. The captain ran over, a robotin needle in one forepaw.

SOME TANTALIZING instinct warned Laril it would be unwise to interfere. Buried in his mind was the half-formed thought that there would soon be enough to do. Meanwhile, this situation seemed not unsatisfactory. In the end, the captain achieved its purpose, and the astrogator sagged into an inert state, completely dependent upon outside suggestion, helpless to do anything on its own initiative.

"*Twhee!*" squeaked the captain. "Need a lot of it with these Earthmen!"

As Laril stood inconspicuously by, and while the cold-eyed Centaurian watched with a mask of indifference, the other three wrestled Rowley into a spacesuit. A pair of crewmen were summoned to guide the astrogator to an escape hatch near the tail after the captain had repeated a demand for silencing the signal device.

The pilot hissed something to the Procyonite leader, who huddled with the other over a bank of dials for several minutes.

"There *is* another ship," Tseel told Laril. "If it is a Solarian patrol, we must flee!"

"What about the Earthman outside?" asked the Capellan. "Acceleration will kick the ship from under him."

"Small loss!" interrupted the captain.

"If we are stopped, it may grow," Laril warned; "they will not like their agent killed."

The captain reflected. "Is a truth," it admitted. "They can follow signal."

"Have somebody find and cut the

power line supplying it," suggested Laril.

The captain thought that reasonable. A gesture sent Tseel scurrying into the corridor to disperse the remaining crew. Laril wondered cynically how long they would search before realizing that the transmitter was self-powered and set by time to operate automatically. Startled, he suddenly became aware of his thought.

How did I know that? he wondered.

Before he could examine his reflective mind adequately, the main communication-screen glowed to life. They were being called, presumably by the ship detected on the instruments.

They all drifted across to cluster around the Centaurian as the latter tuned in. A uniformed Earthman appeared on the screen, but immediately made way for another in civilian dress. Several faces showed in the background; but the sight of the second Solarian, the one with the sharp eyes and neatly groomed black hair, jarred Laril like a physical shock.

He remembered!

"When you see me again," this Earthman had told him, long ago it seemed, "you will remember your instructions. Not until then—they have ways to force knowledge from you if we do not hypnotize your inner mind continually."

Laril had thought that impossible; the Earthman had feared that even such a measure would not be sufficiently safe.

"We will give you a sort of 'booster' gadget," Laril was told. "Screw it to the bulkhead near your sleeping net. It will repeat a message in your Capellan light-code, and make you subconsciously guard against detection."

Now I know what's been bothering me! Laril thought.

He also realized why the ugly little statuettes in the cargo had so fascinated him. They had originally come from a planet of Altair, and this diplomat of Earth was charged with recovering them from the thief. A reac-

tion-sensitivity to them had been subtly instilled into Laril's mind.

LOOKING over the head of Tseel, the Capellan remembered the tanned skin and snapping black eyes of this Earthman. He diverted one eye to watch the captain.

"I must ask you to receive an inspection party," the latter was told. "My name, incidentally, is Taylor. This is an armed rocket of the Solarian Patrol."

The captain bleated an obscure curse in its own language.

Laril rapidly reviewed his recently-recalled orders. The Altairan statuettes had been smuggled from that system on a rocket of ostensibly Solarian registry. To salve wounded feelings—the objects were claimed to possess a religious or superstitious significance—the Solarians were forced to trace and recover them, or risk an unpleasant rupture of relations with Altair.

Taylor had told Laril they were permitting the suspected Procyonites to save them trouble as long as they appeared to be transporting the objects toward Sol and Earth. Since a break with Altair might be costly, however, there was no intention of letting them pass beyond or even disappear into some secret Earth collection.

This made continuous observation of the suspected ship necessary, which was why Laril had been planted at the space agency on Mars.

"We can always find some excuse for intercepting them near Earth," Taylor had said. "They are notorious robotin addicts, so we may even place a narcotics agent among them. Of course, that department would not know about this."

Laril brought his reflections up to date. It was his job to locate the objects and get them into Taylor's possession, unobtrusively if possible.

He saw that the captain was trying to argue. "No, no, no! Will not permit search! Don't think have fooled

us with that signal. Have caught your stupid agent."

Laril saw Taylor's eyes twitch involuntarily in his own direction before fixing the captain with a hard stare. The Capellan pushed forward a little. "Yes, you fool," he spoke directly to Taylor, "but even if we had not caught your clumsy Rowley, did you think you would actually *catch* us with any robotin?"

The captain jumped and chattered angrily. It cut off the televisor. Before the scene faded, however, Laril detected a gleam in Taylor's alert eye.

"But what else would they be after?" he demanded innocently in reply to the captain's vituperation.

PATCHES of muscle twitched and writhed all over the Procyonite's blue-gray body. It bounced up and down on its short legs, emitting piercing whistles.

Bulloch glared at Laril. The Centaurian pilot, to all appearances lost in thought, majestically ignored the bickering. Tseel, alone among them, was coherent enough to name several unlovely forms of life to be found on the planets of Procyon.

"I? You mean *me*?" exclaimed Laril; "I said something to offend?"

"Now they *will* follow if they can!" shrilled the captain. "If they enforce technicalities, can prison us!"

Snatching a packet from its pouch, it turned to Bulloch. "Here! Collect all rest! Destroy all!"

"Will show where I keep mine," offered Tseel, following the Earthman out.

The captain turned to the pilot. "Soon as signal stops," it asked weakly, "can shake loose?"

"What about the astrogator?" prodded Laril. "Shake that one loose too, and they will be vindictive."

"Then you go get him. Quick!"

"Call the rocket crew and have them cut off the fuel," said Laril; "I don't want to find myself shaken off by an odd blast while I'm out there."

He ran down the corridor at his best, four-legged speed, remembering the cold glance cast at him by the pilot. He had little hopes of the latter's being squeamish.

Now, let me think, he pondered. *What would be a good way to pass the things on to Taylor?*

On second consideration, that problem could wait. Getting Rowley inside was more important. Laril owed the Earthman a certain gratitude for more than routine police work. Besides, Rowley might possibly find and damage the mechanism Laril had welded inside the tail fin the night before leaving Mars. The Capellan picked up his spacesuit at his compartment and headed sternward.

He passed Bulloch in the corridor. The latter had stuffed several small packages into the front of its greasy coveralls and was trying to make a Procyonite part with another. Laril resolved to check on that matter the moment he had time.

The rocket compartment crew turned out to be mostly Solarians, with whom he could talk fairly well. One of them directed him to the escape hatch used by Rowley, and helped him into his complicated spacesuit. "What's going on?" he asked curiously.

"He's doped," Laril explained; "I have to get him in."

CHAPTER III

LARIL hurried though the safety chambers and reached the outer hull. He permitted one eye to scan the beauty of the stars while the other three searched out Rowley.

"Clever fellow!" he buzzed to himself as he caught sight of a space-suited figure crouching beside one of the big tail fins. With deceptive grace, he slithered his four feet in their magnetized boots along the hull till he reached Rowley.

"You will not get it out," he said, pressing his helmet against the other's

rather than use his radio. "It took me most of an hour's 'safety inspection' to weld it in there."

Rowley stopped fumbling at the rough welding Laril had done in the Martian darkness, but did not rise.

"Come inside with me," Laril ordered.

The astrogator obediently followed him to the hatch. Laril preceded him, uneasy, but more afraid to chance Rowley's thinking that "inside" meant merely the first chamber.

Having reached the interior, he waited anxiously; but Rowley popped out of the safety chamber with no delay. Laril divested himself of his suit. Before he could start on Rowley's, a group of Earthmen straggled along the corridor. He recognized the rocket crew.

"Hey, Octo!" called one. "Make yourself scarce; Bulloch just ordered all hands away from the pipes."

"I shall follow," acknowledged Laril.

To Rowley, he said, "Wait here!"

He listened until the rumble of Solarian voices had died away, then crept cautiously to the door of the rocket section. He slid it open a crack to let the tip of an antenna through.

Yes, there was animal heat and odor in the compartment. He applied an eye to a wider opening, and saw Bulloch.

The Earthman had disconnected an auxiliary meter in a fuel line and was stuffing his collection of small packets into the opening. The plan, manifestly, was to let them be swept into one of the tubes with the first maneuver. Laril, following the line with one eye to where it disappeared into the massive stern shield, decided that Bulloch had chosen the means well.

So intent was the Earthman on the task that Laril's approach went undetected until he whipped a sinewy tentacle around Bulloch's neck. Then the fun began.

At moments during the ensuing struggle, Laril doubted whether he had actually cut off Bulloch's breath-

ing. Held with flailing limbs away from the deck or other purchase, however, the Earthman was nearly helpless, and finally collapsed. As an afterthought, Laril opened one of the spilled packets and injected a dose of robotin into Bulloch. Then he reached a tentacle far into the fuel line to recover others.

Having dragged the drowsy Earthman to the door, he decided that still more effective measures remained to be taken while the watch was absent. He propped the inert Bulloch beside Rowley and returned to open other fuel lines. He did not disconnect the intercom televisior.

A few minutes later, he had the routine well organized. He entered a crew compartment, preceded by Bulloch. Rowley, dreamily holding Laril's deck plans, stood outside to warn of possible interruption. Laril preferred that to taking the time to pry the astrogator out of its spacesuit.

"I'm handin' this stuff out again," announced Bulloch, as Laril had instructed. "Step up to Octo an' claim your own!"

THREE PROCYONITES and an Earthman were in the section. As each of the former reared up eagerly to examine the packets held at eye-level by Laril, a low-hanging tentacle jabbed with a hypo. Each stood still, allowing the next to crowd past.

"Go to sleep," Laril told them. He looked at the Earthman, watching disgustedly from its sleeping net. "What about you?"

"Don't use it," was the disinterested reply.

"It will help you sleep," said Laril, gliding closer.

When the Earth man was quiet, he called in Rowley. "How many here?" he asked, hoping Rowley's memory would save consulting the deck plans.

"One in the cabinet there...false drawer...one behind a sliding section in that bulkhead..."

By the time they had worked along to the control section, the ship was in a state of peace, with all the drug replaced.

Laril slid open the door and sent the Earthmen in ahead of him. The captain immediately pounced upon Bulloch. "Did you get rid of it?"

"Every-little-bit!" replied Bulloch, promptly if somewhat mechanically. "Every-thing-is-fine."

"They insist we decelerate," Tseel told Laril.

"Why not tell them," suggested Laril, "that something is out of order? The fuel distributing system, for instance."

The reptilian pilot favored him with an intent, beady stare, but the captain was disdainful. "Would never work," it shrilled. "Hear that signal! Still going. What is wrong? Crew could not stop it?"

Laril ignored the questions and faced the cold stare from across the compartment. "I just passed the rocket section," he remarked. "The lines really *did* look to be in a dangerous state."

The Centaurian flicked a member at the intercom keys.

Wonderful, admired Laril. Looks like something you'd catch on a hook, but the relays are clicking inside that flat head. It must be a lightyear ahead of the captain!

The pilot hissed something to the Procyonite commander. The latter twittered in protest, but gave in with surprising meekness. The pilot punched out a call signal.

In a moment, their own screen glowed. Laril saw Taylor, partly clad in a spacesuit, behind the operator on the other ship. By that time he had managed to sneak close to Tseel and the captain; that left the Centaurian as the only independent will except his own aboard the ship. "Better let them board," he suggested.

The captain obediently extended an invitation. To Laril's relief, the pilot did not object.

The Patrol ship must have already

matched their speed and course, for a signal was soon sent in from their own outer hull at the main entrance port.

"Bulloch, show them the way in!" said Laril, to prevent the Centaurian from noticing any queer hesitation.

Four Earthmen came: Taylor; another official wearing the uniform of the Solarian Patrol; and two spacemen whom Laril suspected might be a pilot and an engineer. They had removed their spacesuits somewhere in the corridor, and now crowded into the control compartment with the six from the original crew. Taylor was careful not to notice Laril overtly. The attention of the others was momentarily distracted by the sight of Rowley, still in a spacesuit.

AFTER a few seconds of hesitation, the latter managed to take action on Laril's earlier coaching. "Here!" it addressed the Patrol officer. "Copy of the deck layout; shows all the dope caches."

Rowley passed it over with a nervous, jerky motion. Laril realized that the astrogator's reflexes were going through a slowed-down period. It was trying to keep up with the apparently rapid motions of the others.

"Good work, Rowley!" said the officer. "What have you got that space-suit on for?"

"Been outside, looking for a signal..."

The officer looked puzzled. Taylor interrupted. "This means, doesn't it, Mara, that you'll have to take them all in?"

"Looks that way. You certainly had a perfect hunch on intercepting them. Don't know how you guessed their position before the ship's detectors picked them up."

"Well," said Taylor, "as a representative of the Interstellar Department, I suppose I ought to take charge of the rocket and cargo until we can check her registry. Mind if I keep a couple of the crew to help?"

"We can get 'em from you later," the other shrugged.

Good, thought Laril. That problem is solved for me! Taylor must have chosen the other for simplicity.

"There is one mistake!"

Laril's tentacles twitched in surprise. The words had come from the Centurian, the first indication that it could speak Solarian. It did so poorly, making the challenge sound more like, "*Ssair issk swun misstake.*"

"Who's the lizard?" the Patrol officer broke the silence.

Taylor looked inquiringly at Laril. "I do not understand it," admitted the Capellan.

"You should hear yourself talk Solarian, Froggy!" commented Taylor's companion.

"Tseel, call the otherssss!" ordered the pilot.

The Procyonite thrust its head out the door and whistled.

"What do you mean—mistake?" demanded Taylor.

"I have been shown," said the Centurian, "that to use the rocketsss meanss explosion. I may do sso!"

"Fuel lines disconnected," Laril explained hastily; "if those firing buttons are touched, we all light up!"

"Got any friends here?" asked Taylor quickly.

"All except the lizard," said Laril, showing his hypodermic.

"Sssecond misstake!" said the Centurian. "They were mine *before* they were yours. Their brains obey *me!*"

No one moved. The chagrined Capellan heard the pad of feet in the corridor; with his nearest eye, he saw several Procyonites fill the doorway in response to Tseel's summons.

Laril had completely overlooked such a possibility. The pilot implied that the rest of the crew had been under a drugged control like his own means of controlling Rowley.

Or even, he thought, under deep hypnotism as I was before "remembering."

THE ARRIVAL of the crewmen Laril had put to sleep was ominous; he saw no Earthmen among them. Did that mean that the latter were only camouflage for spaceport officials, that only Procyonites were concerned with the theft?

If so, Rowley, at least, might still obey Laril instead of other suggestions. The captain had given the first orders, but Laril had coached the astrogator for this situation.

Taylor was watching the Capellan intently, ignorant of the complete background but alert to follow Laril's lead. The latter turned to Bulloch. "Get out of my way!" he ordered boldly.

"Ssstop him!" countered the Centurian.

The conflicting commands dumbfounded Bulloch, who stood scowling helplessly in pitiful bewilderment. Laril deliberately brushed past toward the astrogation desk.

"Ssstop him!" hissed the pilot in a cold fury.

Action resulted from this more general order. Tseel and two other Procyonites scurried forward. Laril was clamped firmly against the bulkhead.

"Ssilence for me to think!" demanded the Centurian.

Laril disapproved of the quiet. A breeze against his legs revealed that he had guided the charge to the proper spot—beside the ventilator—but he feared making a noise. "You overlooked me!" he boasted insultingly.

The pilot shifted slightly in annoyance. "Yess, after you withstood the robotin," it admitted. "How?"

"I will not tell you."

"You *will*. . . in the end!"

It was stated with a chilling assurance.

Laril blinked together the lids of the eye facing Taylor in a Solarian gesture he remembered. "It was your fault!" he accused the Earthman.

Taylor took the cue and rejected the blame vehemently. Laril complained more loudly; he checked with another eye that Rowley's helmet was

still closed. The tip of his tentacle had groped through the grill and was straining for a grip on the object he had secreted there days before.

"I ssay to you, be sssilent!" ordered the pilot again.

Laril looked around the compartment. The Centaurian squatted like stone before the controls; Bulloch and Rowley stood about limply; the Procyonites still crowded him against the bulkhead. Of the four newcomers, only Taylor was not visibly discouraged.

The captain—whose impersonation of command Laril now blamed himself bitterly for accepting—stood idly behind the pilot, while Tseel and other Procyonites filled the remaining space between Laril and the door.

The Capellan bent aside the delicate remote-control switch on the gas container. He took a deep breath and opened the valve. "Do you hiss at me?" demanded the Centaurian testily.

"Sssss!" enunciated Laril defiantly, regretting the breath expended and nervously conscious of the inflowing breeze from the ventilator behind him.

THE PROCYONITES, with their more rapid breathing, caught it first; the one nearest Laril doubled up suddenly and fell writhing to the deck. Tseel, partially conditioned by previous exposure, resisted temporarily. It staggered instinctively toward the door, already blocked by retching, blue-gray bodies.

"I feel sick," whined Bulloch plaintively.

Taylor whipped out one of the pocket-cloths carried by Earthmen and attempted to cover its breathing organ. Its dark eyes stared reproachfully at Laril. The other Solarians had lost all traces of pinkness in their skins.

I wonder what color I am, Laril thought uneasily, having been forced at last to breathe. He felt he might vomit at any moment, and was gratified to see the Centaurian rise abruptly.

With the vicious speed of a striking snake, the pilot scuttled to the cabinet beside the doorway, and began to fling twitching Procyonites bodily out of the way. Laril realized that the Centaurian's spacesuit must be kept there.

The Capellan choked at last. His vision began to blur. "Rowley!" he grunted. "Stop the pilot! Capture it! Lock it away!"

Hazily, he saw the spacesuited Earthman step forward with purpose derived from a direct order. Metal-sheathed hands groped for and tightened upon reptilian flesh.

Laril ripped off the grill behind him with a sudden, frenzied jerk. He flipped out the gas container and thrust his head into the duct for a reviving breath of clean air.

Later, he took a moment to be thankful that no one had joggled against the controls during the confusion.



Much later, after the Earthmen had repaired the fuel lines and landed the ship at a spaceport on Luna, Taylor found an opportunity to speak privately with Laril. "I forgive you, I suppose," said the Earthman, "but it was most unpleasant for a few minutes."

"I regret being unable to warn you," apologized Laril.

He was cheerful from recent overeating, and wished he could say something to smooth over his declining Taylor's invitation to vacation on Earth. He was eager for the promised payment for his adventure into police work—a berth on an interstellar ship leaving for Capella.

"Of course, you could hardly have done that," admitted Taylor. "But the way you took root at that ventilator! I wanted some air too!"

"You suffered less than most," Laril flattered the other.

Taylor looked skeptical, and

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changed the subject by admiring Laril's foresight in planting the gas beforehand. The Capellan did not explain.

"Don't feel bad about the Centaurian," advised the Earthman; "we had overlooked him also."

"Why did it steal them?" asked Laril, letting his mind dwell momentarily on the hideous little statuettes from Altair.

Taylor laughed. "As near as we can learn from Proxima Centauri V, he really is fascinated by them. He is a famous collector, who seems a bit peculiar mentally—even for a Centaurian!"

Laril reflected that the Centaurian possessed several admirable qualities. Besides, he himself could well understand how the exotic objects could exert a strange spell. "Then, all is clear now?" he asked.

"Yes, an Altairan representative is taking charge of returning the things. We are quietly deporting all who had a hand in the theft."

"Then it would doubtless look well if I depart at the same time," suggested Laril.

Taylor reluctantly agreed, and televised a call to reserve for Laril a compartment on a spaceship leaving Luna in a few hours. "I hope we work together again sometime," said the Earthman in parting.

Laril returned the compliment, but left as quickly as he could. He was anxious to get his baggage aboard the ship.

I wonder how soon I dare take it out, he thought, walking down the hall of the building.

He sincerely hoped no one had thought to search his things. There would be considerable difficulty should that single statuette be discovered in his possession. Lately, whenever he was distant from the "souvenir" he had appropriated, he felt an inexplicable urge to search for it.