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GENIUS LOCI

Novel of Alien Mystery

by Thomas N. Scortia



Out in the cornfield, he saw a flash of white as the strange woman appeared again . . .

★ GENIUS LOCI ★

by Thomas N. Scortia

Whoever heard of a plant blight that affected people? Well, they had it in this frontier colony of New Glendale, and Alfred Cadis was expected to track it down. But that was only a minor mystery—a major one was the matter of things freezing, when the temperature never fell below 60 degrees Farenheit!

Illustrated by ORBAN

I SHOULD warn you about New Glendale," the Colonial Administrator said.

Alfred Edward Cadis rubbed his hands together nervously, inspected the weave in the skirt of his tunic where it lay in silken folds over his knees, and blinked near-sightedly. "Warn?" he said, blinking rapidly.

"Well, not exactly warn," the Administrator said. "Perhaps, 'prepare you for' would have been a better choice of phrase."

He should have known there would be a catch to it, Cadis thought with a sinking sensation. Why was it he always caught the dirty assignments that no one else would touch with a tractor beam?

When Tobita, the little

chief of the Agronomy Section, had suggested that he might enjoy a jaunt out to the periphery, Cadis should have known that it meant only trouble. If he had only stood up to the man, asserted his seniority...

He pictured himself towering over the tiny Oriental (as indeed he did physically) and demanding his rights as the senior unrated member of the staff. The thought of opposing the insinuating paternalism of Tobita's authority was frightening, but pleasant when...

"...nothing really to be alarmed about," the Administrator was saying. "It's just that they're a bit odd, even for a stage I settlement."

"Well," Cadis said timidly, "they really can't be too bad. After all they did come from

California originally, and they're an English-speaking group."

"Have you ever been to California?"

"Well," Cadis admitted, "California is quite a distance from Boston but..."

What, he wondered, was wrong with the Administrator? He saw nothing particularly humorous in his remarks.

THE ADMINISTRATOR began to riffle through the papers in the personnel file before him, trying to hide his strange amusement the while. "Um, I see you're not married."

"No," Cadis said, half belligerently.

"That could prove awkward."

"I can't see how."

"Well, no matter. You've undoubtedly coped successfully with the problem for forty-two years."

"Thirty-eight," Cadis amended hesitantly.

"The records say...well, they could be in error. Any-way they need you pretty badly out in New Glendale. They're trying to establish a pork-corn agricultural economy and their corn has developed some kind of blight."

"Pork—corn economy? Surely, you can't be serious. In this day and age?"

"I told you they were a bit odd. The point is, if the current corn crop fails, the group

will have to abandon the planet and that means we'll have to start all over again. I need hardly tell you how difficult it is to find groups willing to colonize a new world."

HE FUMBLED in a drawer of his desk and handed Cadis a bound set of microcards, ruffling them metallically first and counting them. "These will give you a general rundown on New Glendale's geography, soil characteristics, atmosphere and the like. The routine data your section members always get before a field assignment. The settlement has a complete lab with self-contained power source. You won't need anything but your basic equipment."

The Administrator consulted his manicured nails. "I've arranged space for you on a quartermaster ship leaving for Gleep tomorrow."

"Gleep?" Cadis said. "But that's in the opposite direction."

"There's no direct connection," the Administrator said. "New Glendale is somewhat difficult to reach."

THREE THINGS Alfred Edward Cadis disliked in a man: an air of competence, physical beauty, and any other quality that made him feel ineffectual.

He disliked the pilot of the QM ship instantly.

The pilot fulfilled the third

requirement nicely by being self-confidently in his late twenties. Cadis spent the three days to planetfall on Gleep reading the data on New Glendale and rereading one of the several taped twentieth century romances which he'd brought from his private library. "*Jon Carpenter and the Torturer of Mars*" he'd found long ago to be an effective antidote to extended exposure to competitive bustling young men. Part of his addiction to that imaginary series, he supposed, was due to his mother's disapproval of them.

"Alby," she would say in her shrill ragged voice while he winced at the too-precious contraction of his first name, "Alby, you'll warp your mind with that trash."

Up until her death when he was thirty-four, he'd read them surreptitiously in the secrecy of his room. Jon Carpenter's adventures with the Green Princess of Varoom had been an escape from the deadening dullness of life that closed in about him. Even now the stories still had the pleasure of a vice, secretly enjoyed.

His first three days on Gleep passed rather pleasantly with Jon Carpenter, even though he found himself billeted with three young space-men of the Survey Service, who sat up far into the night playing poker and either arguing politics or trading out-

rageously unbelievable stories of their experiences with certain women of the local settlement. Cadis was annoyed at times to find himself seriously wondering if a man might be physically capable of some of the feats boasted.

THE YOUNG men left four days after he arrived, and a week after that two members of the QM service moved in. These remained five days. At two days lacking a month, Cadis decided he'd better check on passage to New Glendale.

"New Glendale?" the Gleep Port One Routing Officer said. "Where's that?"

Cadis told him.

"You've gone in the wrong direction."

"I'm told there's no direct connection."

"Well, we'll just ship you on to Land's End. Maybe they can help you out."

"But I want to go to New Glendale," he protested.

"Mister, I'm a busy man," the Routing Officer said.

A week later Cadis made planetfall on Land's End.

"Well, it's about time," the Land's End Routing Officer said. "How did you come, by pneumotube?"

"But..."

"Never mind. Captain L'Heureux's been waiting for you for two weeks, cluttering up my number nine pit with that smelly tub of his."

"Well, I'd like to get a

shower and 'fresher first," Cadis said. "I haven't had one since..."

"Mister," the Routing Officer growled, "I'm getting mighty impatient about that number nine pit."

Fifteen minutes later Cadis walked up the ramp to the *Squalus* out of New Glendale.

CAPTAIN L'HEUREUX looked as rusty as his ship. The rusty appearance stemmed chiefly from the reddish-yellow stains that discolored his matted grey chin-whiskers. He was wearing a greasy chief's helmet, set askew on thick ragged hair and...for a moment Cadis couldn't believe his eyes...a buckskin shirt and trousers.

"Humph," the Captain said, eying his tall lanky frame, "time was when they sent better."

Cidis stared at him coldly and then dropped his eyes as L'Heureux glared back and spit a brown stream past his legs and onto the ramp.

He took the acceleration couch L'Heureux indicated and fifteen minutes later they were planet-free and in null-drive. Cadis discovered the reason for L'Heureux's rusty-looking whiskers as the ship went into free fall. For a moment he fought a heavy nausea compounded of weightlessness and innumerable tiny droplets of tobacco juice that floated through the

air of the ship in the breeze of the air-circulation units.

"You're a tender one," L'Heureux said, turning in mid-air above him.

Cidis tried to answer, then pressed his lips tightly together.

The next three days, he fought a constant battle against tobacco juice, bread crumbs, various items of laundry—in short anything that L'Heureux cared to discard indiscriminantly. Every foreign object on the ship seemed to take to the air and develop an unnatural affinity for him.

Worse, he began to itch.

CADIS WASN'T quite sure how or when it started. There were no adequate facilities for keeping clean, of course, and he had not had the opportunity to bathe before leaving Land's End. However, the itch which he developed began to reach epic proportions. Along with this, he developed a sense of light-headedness quite apart from the sensations of free fall.

It was several days before he realized that something was wrong. Through a burning haze, he told L'Heureux.

"Hah. Probably the blight."

"Blight?"

"The corn blight."

"Very funny, I'm sure," he said, through a red mist that drifted over his senses.

"Think ye'd be tougher at your age," L'Heureux said.

"I'm just thirty-eight," Cadis lied automatically, but with only weak conviction.

"Huh," L'Heureux snorted. "You married?"

Cadis shook his head. For a moment vision dissolved in a black cloud. With sudden panic he realized that was on the verge of fainting.

And he itched abominably.

"Well, maybe things ain't so bad," L'Heureux said, eyeing him speculatively. "Now, I got me a daughter named Nettie. Looks kinda frail, but she's stronger nor any mule..."

"I like being a bachelor," Cadis said painfully.

"Tain't what you like."

"What's wrong with being a bachelor? There's no law against it."

Something was terrible wrong, Cadis realized. The cabin had assumed a distorted air of unreality. He felt himself sinking into a black fog.

From a great distance, he heard L'Heureux laugh and laugh and laugh.

The last thing he heard was the man gloating words, "On New Glendale they is."

II

LEJA LORIS, Green Princess of Varoom, spurred her six legged Droat across the crimson desert. He followed close on her flank, his own mount churning the desert sands with its three-toed clawed feet. Far

ahead the brilliant towers of the Crystal City caught the morning light, splitting the cobalt rays of the setting blue sun and mingling them with the bright emerald of the rising green sun. It still lacked an hour before Varoom's third sun appeared above the horizon and the desert air was cold.

Leja Loris reined her steed suddenly, her biceps swelling beneath the broad bands of copper that encircled her arms. The Droat's laboring feet clawed at the sand, futilely contesting her strength. Then it sank wearily to its padded knees and in a single fluid motion of her lithe body Leja Loris leaped to the sand in a haze of gauze-like robes.

A second later he was beside her, his bare bronzed arms encircling her waist.

"Here, my love," she breathed, "we will make our stand."

"You mean, fight them?" he asked uncertainly, his hand straying weakly to the massive broadsword at his waist.

"Listen," she said.

The chill air was filled with the distant throb of a flyer. He looked far out over the red desert to the City of Exquisite Agony from which they had fled. Silhouetted against the setting blue sun, the dark speck of the flyer sped toward them.

'Gal-douch!

Gal-douch, the Torturer!

“DEAR LOVE,” she said, caressing the hard line of his jaw with her eager fingers, “we must die in each other’s arms.”

“But I don’t want to die,” he protested.

“Hush, Alby,” she said, her face suddenly stern. (His mother, he remembered, had always looked like that when he tried to protest some command.)

“You are strong,” she said.
“So I am.”

He pulled her firm body to his, aware of the disaphanous garments that billowed about her and fell to the desert sand. Her flesh was warm in his bare arms, smooth and soft with an underlying firmness.

“Just as you are strong,” he said in a voice thick with excitement and desire.

The heavy beat of the flyer echoed from the sky and he looked up to find the swift open vessel almost upon them. In the prow stood the hughly obese figure of Galdouch, his great body brilliant in platinum armor, his wild yellow hair and crimson-stained beard framing blazing eyes of accusation. His heavy arm was extended in a gesture of menace, the flashing broadsword in his fist flashing avenging blue light.

“It’s too late, you beast,” he sobbed and bent the Princess to him. She was warmth and desire and soft yielding, blending into his manly

strength with sudden surrender as his mouth approached the full redness of her rich lips.

She closed her eyes and murmured softly...ecstacially...

“EHOSAPHRAT, what a cream puff.”

“Shut up, you idjit,” a rumbling voice said from the darkness that suddenly swallowed the princess of Varoom. “Wonder is the boy ain’t in a worse state.”

“Boy, she says.”

“Well, he ain’t no withered-up lemon like you, Terrence L’Heureux.”

“I think he’s kinda cute,” a third younger voice said in thin feminine tones.

“Nettie, turn up the light,” the rumbling voice said.

“Yes’m.”

Alfred Cadis became conscious of the sensations of his body; he was resting on something very soft. His whole body was consumed with a nagging itch, and his nose wrinkled with the first hint of a coming sneeze. He tried to move and discovered that he was weighted down with what felt like endless layers of cloth. He suddenly realized that he was cold, as a chill draft penetrated to his bare arms, raising a rash of goose flesh.

He opened his eyes.

“You see,” the rumbling voice said, “your blathering woke him up.”

In the yellow light from a flickering lantern on a table in the corner of the room, he saw that the rumbling voice belonged to a woman.

A woman?

WELL, THERE might be some doubt in certain circles. She was massive. She towered above L'Heureux as a Sequoia towers above a scrub pine. Without the contrasting figure of the Captain, she might have seemed squat, she was so wide. Below stevedore shoulders, her breasts swelled like ramparts guarding the heavy belly and gross hips which they threatened to envelop with their sheer weight.

"Don't you move," the woman said. "You just got yourself a touch of the blight."

"Blight?" Cadis demanded and tried to sit up.

He was in a massive, antique bed with patinaed brass scrollwork forming intricate designs about the brass tubes that composed the foot. A mound of quilted comforters pressed him down into the soft yielding mattress. With a thrill of horror he realized all at once that the bedding was a ticking stuffed with—he felt his stomach twist—with feathers. No wonder he was itching so violently.

"Now, I'm Missus Gaelmicha, should you want to know," the woman said, moving into the light, "though

they usually call me Mom Gaelmicha or just Mom."

"What's this about the blight?"

"Well, you know about that," L'Heureux said.

"What you came here for," Mom Gaelmicha added.

SHE HAD moved into the dim light from the lamp. Perhaps, he thought, it was the highlights, but the effect was startling. He had expected a face whose features were smothered beneath suety layers of fat. Instead he saw thick brows and features that looked as if they had been blasted from tough granite, without the finesse of final polishing.

The woman oozed strength. Like...he couldn't think for a moment of whom she reminded him. But there was something a little frightening in the half-remembered resemblance.

"I came here because of the corn blight," Cadis said uncertainly.

"And," L'Heureux chuckled, "that's exactly what you got."

"Don't you worry, though," Mom Gaelmicha said. "You'll be right as rain tomorrow. Meantimes, Nettie'll tend you."

He looked toward the flickering light. The girl was partly hidden in shadows, but what he saw was disturbing. *Tall and athletic looking, peasant type*, he thought.

"I can take care of myself," he said. "What I want to know..."

"Tomorrow," Mom Gaëlmicha said and turned with L'Heureux toward the door. Before he could protest, she was gone, the door closing with great finality behind her.

"DON'T YOU fret," Nettie said in a firm voice. "I'll fend for you."

"I've had just about enough," he announced angrily. He pushed the heavy comforters from him and rolled violently from the bed. The mattress shifted at the last minute, tumbling him to the cold floor.

Cadis rose to his feet, massaging the bruised bare flesh. Bare?

He looked down at himself; then he plunged for the protection of the bed and the comforters.

Nettie was giggling. "You're pretty."

III

THE BLIGHT," Joseph Tennat said, surveying the endless stretches of yellow-green corn from the low hill, "is a tribulation over which we are meant to have no control. It is a test. I do not approve of your presence here."

Alfred Cadis eyed the man in amazement. *Where in hell, he thought, did he get those*

buckskin trousers and shirt? The stuff didn't look like a synthetic.

"Balderdash," Mom Gaëlmicha said.

"Hold your tongue, woman." Tennat fingered the Mayor's medallion that hung from a plastic thong around his neck.

"Yet," Cadis said softly, "from what Mrs. Gaëlmicha tells me, if you don't solve the problem of the blight, the colony may well fail."

Tennat seemed to stiffen. He was thin and dark; he wore his authority as if it were a tunie of metal that forced each movement and expression into a stiff formalized pattern. His thin, ascetic face was set in motionless layers under thin brooding eyebrows. Only the lips held any defineable expression, and these were pressed together in a wrinkle of faint distaste.

"New Glendale," Mayor Tennat said, "is not just a place. New Glendale is an idea, an oasis of strength in this wanton age. It cannot fail."

"Huh," snorted Mom Gaëlmicha. "Let's go down and see the corn." She favored Cadis with a look of patience sorely tried.

TENNAT led the way down through tall reed-like grass that reached to the knees. The ground was soft and spongy and between the

hummocks of grass, Cadis could see a soft carpet of purplish-grey moss. Mom Gaelmicha puffed heavily beside him. He took her arm and felt thick muscles tense under layers of fat.

"Thanks," she said heavily. "Tain't often an old crow like me gets a helping hand from a good-looking youngster."

Cadis felt his face flush as Tennat stopped beside a stand of corn. The man began to kick vigorously at the ground with a heavy toe, throwing gouts of red-yellow dirt into the air. "Heathen growth," he puffed.

The edge of the stand was being invaded by the purple-grey moss which had carpeted the ground. Cadis kneeled and inspected the roots of the nearest corn plant. The white filament roots, looking for all the world like the clawed fingers of an old man clutching at the soil, were covered by a thin layer of the moss. It cloaked the exposed roots in a fine grey down that stopped at the base of the plant. As nearly as he could see, the plant had not suffered from the parasite.

In fact, the plant was one of the few that looked at all healthy. The plants further into the stand had yellowed, drooping leaves and listless tassels which hung limply from the crown of the stalk. He pushed the nearer plants aside and moved into one of

the rows. The edges of many leaves were curled while their tips were browned and dying. He pulled a dwarfed ear from one of the stalks and shucked it, throwing the dry silk to the ground. The ear was hard and discolored.

"Have you had a frost?" he asked.

"ON NEW GLEN DALE?" Mom Gaelmicha snickered. "The yearly mean temperature is sixty degrees. Don't vary three degrees either way from one year to the next."

"A paradise," Tennat said dreamily, "with just the bite needed to remind one that work has to be done."

"This looks like frost damage," Cadis said.

"Oh?" Mom Gaelmicha pressed in to look. Cadis was conscious of her bosom pressing against his arm. He handed the ear to her and leaned over to finger the heavy corn stalk. Its surface felt spongy. Under the pressure of his fingers, the surface indented as though something had ruptured the supporting cellulose fibers.

"That's the way they all been," Mom Gaelmicha said.

They retired to the open area before the corn, and Jacob Tennat scratched his chest vigorously.

"What's wrong?" Cadis demanded.

"It's merely a touch of the blight coming on."

"Nonsense," Cadis said.
"Just corn fuzz."

THEY RETURNED to the low hill overlooking the stand and mounted the beetle which had brought them to the sight. As he settled himself in the middle seat of the vehicle, Cadis was aware of Mom Gaelmicha's eyes on his back.

Tennat slapped the starter, and the hidden gyros whirred gratingly. With a jerk, the supporting wheels retracted and the beetle plowed slowly across the open ground separating the corn stand from the one next to it.

The whole valley was filled with young corn, divided neatly into quarter acre stands. It swelled up the low slope to the settlement like a sea of green. Only the outlying sections of the planted area, however, had come to earning, as yet—which was odd, since they were last planted.

They followed a narrow lane between the stands until it broke into the main street of the settlement. He would never get used to it, Cadis decided. If one ignored the bright shaft of the *Hope*—the original colonial ship—arrowing up from the plain to the west of the settlement, the scene looked like something out of a bad historical novel.

The crude buildings were apparently made of logs, with

hinged windows and chimneys meant to service huge fireplaces. And some distance up the slope and removed from the settlement, a stockade, complete with watchtowers and firing slits.

Only instead of being of logs, the settlement and the stockade were of fused dirt, melted and roughly sculptured with a heat beam into the semblance of structures made of logs.

Sheer insanity! There was even a flag flying atop the central tower of the stockade, a bright banner of red and white stripes with a blue field, in which a circle of stars gleamed brightly.

THEY PASSED through a massive gate, near which two sloppily-uniformed guards sat on the bare ground. There was a rattling of chains, and a moment later a plastic portcullis fell, blocking the gate. Cadis wasn't sure, but there seemed something anachronistic about the portcullis. He decided that he'd better not remark about it.

The supporting wheels of the beetle fell with a thump as the gyros cut off. The Mayor climbed from the vehicle and yelled, "L'Heureux."

L'Heureux's face appeared above the rail that rimmed the firing platform between the watch towers. "You want me?"

"Take a detail out to number two stand. There are still two heat beams with a charge. I want that heathen moss burned away from the good ground."

"If we use those charges," L'Heureux protested, "we won't have any serviceable beams 'til they rewind the generator."

"Don't argue, man. I won't have a heathen growth contaminating good Earth corn."

Small groups of men and women were moving toward them from the rustic buildings in the compound. Most of the women wore tight bodices and full skirts, bulked by layered petticoats. The men generally were clad in the same pseudo-buckskin that the Mayor affected, although a few wore blue uniforms with bright red lapels and shiny brass buttons.

"YOU DON'T look happy," Mom Gaelmicha said at Cadis's elbow.

He looked at her silently.

"Fact is," she said, "you look downright uncomfortable!"

"I want to talk to you when you have the time."

"Mayor, I'll take our Mister over to the lab," Mom Gaelmicha said.

The Mayor nodded absent-
ly, and walked toward the
group of men being assem-
bled by L'Heureux.

"Come on," the woman said.
"Just what's your position

around here?" Cadis demanded as he followed her across the compound.

"Me?" Sorta mid-wife, though we ain't had no children yet. Then I take care of the lab."

"Are you a technician?"

They paused beside a windowless cabin and she motioned him in. "Technician? Land, no. I'm a hex woman."

Cadis whirled angrily as the door closed behind them and hidden light sources glowed softly. He had a fleeting impression of gleaming worktables, an analytical balance, a portable multi-spectrum microscope. "I've had just about enough!"

"Keep your voice down," Mom Gaelmicha said briskly.

"In this day and age, such nonsense."

Mom Gaelmicha placed thick hands on heavy hips and glared at him. "Mister Cadis," she said precisely, "I feel you might better fulfill your mission here if you learn some measure of self-discipline."

For some seconds, Cadis was too shocked to speak.

IV

MOM GAELMICHA lowered her bulk on to a light laboratory stool and glared at him scornfully. "Well, they certainly sent me the leavings. Didn't they brief you on this job?"

Alfred Cadis shook his head silently.

"For heaven's sake," she said, "you don't think the Colonial Bureau's going to let a bunch of anti-social primitives loose on a new world without watching them?"

"Well," he managed. "The thought hadn't occurred that..."

"Then you'd better do some thinking. We spent a lot of money to bring you out here."

"Oh," he said, brightening, "then there's more to it, than this silly blight?"

For an instant his eyes were filled with visions of secret meetings, vague deeds of derring-do, the sort of thing a Jon Carpenter might do by the side of Leja Loris.

"You seem to have a talent for jumping to conclusions," Mom Gaelmicha interrupted.

"Well, you surely don't care what happens to a group of near-schizophrenics like the *New Glendalers*."

"**O**H, FOR HEAVENS sake," she said again vehemently. "You and the stay-at-homes centerwise make me sick. All the frontier worlds have been settled by malcontents, by the unadjusted, the slightly abnormal who can't quite get along in our tight little civilization in the center of the galaxy."

"But they're all insane," Cadis protested.

"That's not true. They're no

more insane than the Mormons or the Pilgrims five centuries ago. In fact, by California standards where they started, they're a little dull. Tennat—who started this movement—is a historian of sorts; he decided that the universe was going to hell in the proverbial basket, and that only a return to the simple basic virtues of four centuries ago could redeem it. The point is, we don't want this colony to fail and if the blight isn't licked, it may well do that."

He stood for moments, digesting this information. Mom Gaelmicha sat like a mountain of authority, waiting for him to speak. The sight of her great bulk in its new perspective was somehow frightening.

"Very well," he said at last. "Now, what do you know about the blight?"

SHE EYED him intently. "That's better; well, somehow they've associated what's happening to the corn with another problem. You've had some experience with it. It's a sort of anaphylactic reaction that manifests itself as a skin irritation or a rash. There doesn't seem to be any discernable cause. We've rid the whole area of native vegetation. Atmospheric analyses by the automatic equipment of nitrogen, oxygen, several inert gases, and some hydrocarbon vapors other

than carbon dioxide—but in minute concentrations. We're still using largely offplanet food."

"Any unusual symptoms?"
"Chillblains."

"I thought you said the temperature rarely went below sixty."

"Never below sixty," she said. "That's what it looks like, though; quite a number of the blight suffers wind up with a skin condition resembling chillblains."

"This whole place is insane," Cadis said.

"And then there's the rats."
"Rats?"

"Well, some small rodent-like creature. We've trapped one or two, but they died. They have an omnivorous appetite. That's why we're using oil lamps now. The beasties chewed all the insulation off our man generator. We're rewinding it now."

"Well," he said, "it looks as if a little poison spread about...."

"That's what we thought. We killed a few with arsenicals. After a while, arsenicals didn't work. Then the beasties became immune to seleno compounds, cyanide, and organic phosphones. It's got so they even thrive on XDP."

HE WAS ABOUT to say something when the door flew open and Captain L'Heureux thrust his head into the room. "Better come help."

"What's the matter?" Mom

Gaelmicha demanded, rising to her feet.

"It's the weeding crew, the ones the Mayor sent out to burn out the moss. They all come down with the blight."

"It never rains," she said, getting ponderously to her feet.

L'Heureux vanished from the doorway. She fumbled in one of the great pockets of her dress and produced a vial. Inside was a single large capsule. "Here, take this. Go on, it ain't poison."

He eyed the capsule for a moment and then popped it into his mouth. "What's that?" Cadis demanded. "Some anti-blight medicine?"

"Uh, uh," she said, turning to the door. "Promised Nettie I'd give it to you."

He grabbed his throat.

"Nettie?" he said hoarsely.

"Well," she said with a crooked smile, "long's you're here in New Glendale, you got to abide by the laws. Like the ones concerning bachelors."

She had lapsed into the outlandish New Glendale drawl with no visible effort.

"You can't be serious," he said.

"Nettie's taken a shine to you." She eyed him slowly from head to foot. "Give me ten or fifteen less years and I might my own self."

Cadis flushed uncomfortably. "What's that got to do with taking pills?"

"What else would you do with a love potion?"

She was through the door before he could speak, leaving him with a sense that the walls were closing in about him.

V

CADIS PRESSED the syringe against the man's bare arm, and tripped the trigger. The man's arm jerked spasmodically as the high pressure spray penetrated the skin. "All right; that should help a bit."

The man nodded his head silently and tried to scratch at the patch of hair on his chest. Cadis grabbed the hand and lowered it to the bed.

Before he drew the sheets over the patient, Cadis looked at the inflamed areas of the chest and belly where the man's nails had lacerated the flesh. The skin was grey-blue with a coarse almost scaled appearance. "Take it easy," he said. "You'll sleep in a minute.

He walked down the aisle, between beds filled with the silent figures of the men from the heat beam detail, and into the small dispensary at the front of the colony hospital.

"Why in heavens didn't you bring a medic when you came?" he demanded.

MOM GAEL MICH A looked up, tiredly. "Try to persuade an M. D. to come out here.

We've all had courses on

first aid, and a few advanced training in basic sanitation and general chemotherapy. Beyond that, well..."

She shrugged her great shoulders.

"The anti-histamines seem to help," he said, depositing the jet syringe beside a tray of others.

"What do you think it is?"

"How should I know? It looked like some allergic reaction; that's why I tried an anti-histamine. Shotgun therapy, nothing more. Have you had much of this?"

"Nothing this bad before. Your own attack was the first instance in which anyone's been more than inconvenienced by it."

"Well, it almost killed those six men in there."

"We'll have to get a medic in here now," she said. "If we last long enough."

"It shouldn't take more than two or three weeks."

"Don't get optimistic. There's no null-wave transmitter on New Glendale, and L'Heureux can't get off-planet for another eighteen months."

"Eighteen months?"

"That's right. The fuel for the shuttle ship is manufactured in the pile of the *Hope*, the ship that brought us here. She's an old Mark VI freighter, reconverted, which means it takes that long to manufacture enough fuel."

"Well, what's wrong with taking the *Hope*?"

"You'd have 'to convince Tennat—and that's a hopeless task, believe me."

Cadis busied himself for several minutes, fixing some small sections of tissue in parafin.

"I took some sections of skin from several of the men," he said at last. "I want to take them over to the lab and see what they look like under the 'scope."

"I'll keep watch here."

HEE LEFT her sitting tiredly at the work table, and started across the compound, so Mom Gaelmicha had told him, was normally lighted by strings of filament bulbs; but the "rats," had attacked the insulation of the wires so often that, had the generator been functioning, the lines would have shorted instantly. They had been without illumination in the compound for several weeks now.

"Oof!" The breath was driven suddenly from Cadis, as he collided with a body in the dark. He clutched the box containing the parafin fixed skin sections and said, "Oh, sorry,"

"That's all right," a feminine voice said.

For a moment, he thought it was L'Heureux's daughter, Nettie, but then a match glowed briefly and he saw that the voice belonged to someone else. "Oh," she said, "you be the in-lander."

BEFORE the match flickered out, Cadis had a quick impression of blonde or light brown hair, high cheekbones and full sensuous lips.

"I'm Sue Milsatdt," she said, her voice suddenly silky in the half dark. "I been wanting to meet you."

A sudden suspicion hit him. "Do you normally meet people by deliberately running into them in the dark?"

He was suddenly conscious of her warmth as she stepped very close to him. Firm flesh brushed his arm. "It ain't as if I did any wrong," she breathed. "I think it might be nice for us to be acquainted."

He tried to back away but she was pressing forward. "I . . . I have a great deal of work to do," he said. "I can't stay to talk. . . . Perhaps later we can have a long conversation," he added in desperation.

"I'd sure like that," she said softly.

He moved quickly to the side and before she could recover, he was past her. He could see the glow of lamps and he made for them.

"Later," she called softly after him.

HE FOUND the laboratory building before he reached the lights. Cadis fumbled for a switch in the wall box, inside the door, and heard the whirr of a hidden motor as the rods of the small lab pile slid into their undamped position. Then he

fumbled on the other side of the door until he found the light switch. Fluorescent ceiling panels glowed whitely and the lab was suddenly brilliantly lighted. He was glad that Tennat had preserved sufficient good sense in his obsession to provide a separate power source for the lab. It would be impossible, Cadis realized, to operate some of the equipment such as the microscope on the low wattage of the mercury turbine and pile that powered the colony proper.

He found the microtome and started to make sections of the tissue specimens he'd taken from the stricken men. He'd avoided using quick freeze technique on the sections because of the appearance of the skin, suggesting as it did something similar to frostbite.

An hour later, he stepped back from the screen of the microscope in disgust. He'd checked sections under the electron beam, under visible and u-v light. There was no sign of any sort of obviously foreign virus—only the usual staphylococci, and other bacteria one might expect. For a short time, he'd thought he had something in a few shreds of what appeared to be fungus, but reference to one of the books from the lab library convinced him that the stuff was a common enough growth, indigenous originally to Terra.

HE REALIZED, of course, that this sort of thing was completely outside of his speciality and that he might have missed a dozen clues to the source of the trouble. Cadis wished he could trust himself to run a few biopsies on nervous tissue from the stricken men, but that, he decided, was beyond him at the moment.

When he finally switched to a lower magnification using visible light and began to examine the cell structure, he knew that he had hit upon something. The cells looked shriveled and dehydrated. A great many of the walls were ruptured, and the cytoplasm inside lacked definition. Freezing might do that to a cell, but who had ever heard of this sort of thing at sixty degrees?

He finally quit in disgust and damped the pile. He stepped outside, before the ceiling panels had ceased glowing, and waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness. New Glendale's small moon was making its swift transit across the night sky—its second of the evening he calculated—and the compound was feebly lighted by its rays.

He moved toward the gate, answered the sleepy challenge of the guard and passed through to the outside.

THE SETTLEMENT proper was some distance down

the hill from the stockade, the deceptively crude houses gathered roughly into a series of blocks with a main street running through the center, and several streets running perpendicular to it.

Behind the town, tall stands of corn stretched out toward the foothills that ringed the valley. In the white moonlight, the whole scene had an unreal, dreamlike quality. Only an occasional light still burned in the windows of the low buildings as he passed through the streets.

Cadis guessed that it must be close to two in the morning, and wondered how Mom Gaelmicha was doing back in the hospital. Well, he could do little more there, and he might as well get some sleep. The one room building where he had been billeted was down a side street on the edge of the settlement. It had been a dormitory at the start of the colony, but all the beds had been removed, except the one which they'd set up for him. "Bachelor House" Mom Gaelmicha had called it. Only, he thought, there were no more bachelors in New Glendale. None, but Alfred Cadis.

He paused on the stoop, looked out over the field of corn that stretched from the side of the building, and wondered where the animals were kept. He realized that he'd seen no signs of cattle—or, more important, pigs—since he'd arrived. He'd noticed sev-

eral small vegetable gardens in various spots throughout the settlement, but no animals of any sort.

He was looking out across the corn field when he saw a sudden flash of white. For a moment he thought that it was his imagination. Then he saw it again.

SOMEONE was moving silently through the corn, stopping occasionally as though listening for some sound. Cadis waited, wondering whether he should call out. The white shape was moving in his direction, he saw. He stepped from the porch and moved toward the shape. At the edge of the corn field, he stood, looking down the space between the lines of plants. The long shadows of the plants half darkened the space between them. In another ten minutes, the moon would set and he would be in total darkness.

He stood as the shadows lengthened. Then for an instant he saw white movement; something flitted from one row to another, passing across his sight, barely fifty feet away.

He waited but the form did not appear again. Long minutes passed as the light in the sky died. When the night again closed in, he turned toward the dormitory.

Inside, he undressed in the darkness, feeling the chill of the night close in upon him.

He draped his clothing across a rude chair beside the bed, as his flesh prickled with the cold. His blind hands found the thick coverlets, and he slid between them into the bed.

In the next instant, Alfred Cadis yelled and leaped out, his big toe picking up a splinter from the floor in the process. "Get out of my bed!"

"Your feet's cold," a sleepy voice complained.

HE FUMBLE D in his pockets searching for a match. The bed creaked and he heard bare feet smack the floor.

"Ain't you coming back?" the voice demanded.

"Who...who is it?"

"You told me you wanted to talk later," the voice said complainingly.

"I said get out of my bed," he said, trying to strike a match.

The flame blossomed suddenly.

It was the girl he'd met in the compound, the one called Sue something-or-other. He identified the light hair and the high cheekbones and...

He lowered his eyes and the match fell from his fingers. "You...you..." he managed.

"I thought you wanted to talk," she said.

"You...put something on."

He heard her rise from the bed.

"Stay away." In the next in-

stant he turned, and started for the door.

He had barely taken five steps when he sat down heavily.

"Ouch," a voice complained from the darkness. "You stepped on my toe."

"I'll do more than that if you don't go," he snapped, wondering how she'd managed to get to the door that quickly.

"You ain't supposed to feel that way," the voice said.

"Nettie L'Heureux, you git out," Sue's voice said from behind him. "I got here first."

"Merciful heavens," he groaned, "what is this? A convention?"

VI

IT WAS OVER an hour before he managed to rid himself of them. They left side by side, each bitterly accusing the other of being an interloper.

When he finally returned to his bed, Alfred Cadis tossed for half an hour before he finally dropped off to sleep. His dreams were filled with visions of unclothed women pursuing him down endless rows of corn. To make matters worse, there was snow on the ground and he was barefooted. His feet were freezing... and overhead a baleful blue sun burned down.

Each time he looked back, the pursuers seemed to gain.

There seemed endless num-

bers of them and sometimes they wore the faces of Nettie L'Heureux and Sue Milstadt. The features were constantly changing, however, fading into the face of Mom Gaelmicha and Leja Loris, into the faces of a dozen women he'd noticed idly in the compound that day.

The face of Leja Loris persisted, but he was not Jon Carpenter; he was only Alfred Edward Cadis, fleeing from the advances of an endless host of predatory women.

He stumbled and fell, and he knew that they were about to overtake him. They would fall on him and do unspeakable things to him, unless... He rolled over and looked into a white emotionless face. The face seemed to shift, to flow into the features of Leja Loris.

The expression was faintly quizzical, as if the owner were somehow baffled at his reaction. Cold hands caressed his shoulder, ice-cold hands that brought a thrill of reaction to his bare flesh. But the face and the white body below it was desirable beyond words.

But the face...inhuman...without character...searching for some meaning to his sudden desire...

HE SAT UPRIGHT in bed. The room was shrouded in darkness. He was shivering with cold, and for a moment he thought he was still dreaming. His blind hand found the

bedclothing where it had drifted to the foot of the bed.

There was a faint movement in the darkness. He clutched the coverlet and held his breath. For a moment, he was afraid that they had returned, but the noise did not repeat itself. He lay down, pulled the coverlet over his head, and fell into an exhausted sleep.

The cold face of the white woman haunted him with wide questioning eyes, eyes which were set in the hauntingly desirable face of Leja Loris.

THE NEXT morning, Cadis changed to a pair of buckskin trousers and a tasseled shirt with a drawstring neck—the outfit which Mom Gaelmicha had given him the day before—and went looking for the woman. He found her at the generator shack, watching L'Heureux and a technician whom he had not met, running final tests on the rewound generator. The low, drafty building was filled with the muted sob of the low calory pile and its mercury heat exchanger.

He told her what had happened the night before.

"They won't like that," she said.

Atop the squat generator housing, L'Heureux began to swear mightily.

"Well," Cadis said, "I can't say I care for... They? Whom do you mean by 'they'?"

"Uhhmm," Mom Gaelmicha said and yawned. "Didn't get a wink last night."

"Who's 'they'?" he insisted.

"The other girls. . . . Calvin Shotts," she bawled at the technician, who was leaning precariously over the side of a makeshift scaffolding to apply a screwdriver to the bushes of the generator, "you'll crack your skull sure."

"The other girls? You mean there's more?"

"Whyn't you go out and look at the corn?"

"What other girls?"

"'Bout twenty, I'd say."

"Single girls?"

"Well, you don't need worry 'bout no other kind."

"I thought New Glendale started out pretty evenly divided as to sexes."

"Did."

"Well?"

"Don't you 'well' me in that tone of voice," she said, her voice suddenly hard with authority. . . .

CADIS STEPPED back in voluntarily, feeling like a small boy surprised with jam on his face. Then he realized that she had effectively stolen the initiative from him.

She smiled at him for long uncomfortable moments and then reached out to pat his cheek lightly. "Don't you fret yourself. I'm just getting crotchety in my old age."

He felt himself reddening with pleasure. This was ridiculous, he thought. Fawing

like a puppy who has just been spanked and immediately petted.

But what a warm, basically kindly woman she was.

"It's just. . . ." he stammered. "Well, things are different here than in Boston."

"You're too nice a boy to worry your head," she said. "Don't you think twice; Mom Gaelmicha's got plans of her own about. . . ."

"There's them that works instead of jawing all the time," L'Heureux said bitterly as he bounced from behind the heat exchanger and approached them.

"**T**HERE IS a shortage of men," Mom Gaelmicha said, all business. "That's why the Mayor called on the common bed law and made being a bachelor criminal Lots of precedent for. . . ."

"Heh, heh, "L'Heureux chuckled, "the lad getting cold in his bachelor bed?"

"You be a dirty-minded heathen," Mom Gaelmicha said.

"Don't you think I ain't wary o' what you're thinking," L'Heureux snapped.

"Shut up and mind your business." Mom Gaelmicha turned and lumbered through the door, while L'Heureux stood, staring after her and rubbing his greasy hands on his buckskin trousers.

"She sure brews a mess of trouble for small pickings," L'Heureux said.

"What's that mean," Cadis asked.

L'Heureux cocked his head and laughed. "You be finding out soon enough."

He left L'Heureux in the generator shack and went back to the lab. For the rest of the morning, Cadis worked with the skin sections he had mounted. There was nothing further, it seemed, to be found from the specimens and finally he threw the things into the incinerator.

THE PRIMARY problem of the corn blight was still his main interest, he decided. After all, there was no reason really to connect the anaphlactic reaction and the corn blight, beyond a certain nagging association between the frozen appearance of the corn and the symptoms of chill-blains, and cell rupture he'd noted in the skin sections.

He decided to quit for lunch. As he made his way across the compound toward the gate, he noticed that L'Heureux was shepherding several work parties in setting up heavy charging units of the sort that might power a portable heat or tractor beam, drawing its power from a broadcast beam from the power shack and storing it in aleph-gap condensers. Near the gate he saw several light heat beams with the charging units already mounted and the power antennae fully extended.

"What's all this?" he asked the guard by the gate.

"Them be the weeders," the man said slowly.

"Weeders?"

"They be used to kill out the weeds so's more corn can be planted."

He passed through the gate and made for the communal kitchen at the far end of the settlement's main street. Well, he thought, Tennat's disdain for the present century didn't prevent him from using its methods. He supposed that the temperature of the heat beams could be lowered enough to destroy the rank alien growths without destroying the humus of the soil. Very selective, though it seemed unlikely that the same beams could be used in the corn fields already planted, without great care.

A SMALL group had lined up in front of the entrance to the dining hall and Cadis found a place in their rear. He paid little attention to the low conversation and occasional jokes passed down the line ahead of him. Most of the men were clad in the ubiquitous buckskin, much soiled by their labors. He wondered at the function of the uniformed men, and gathered that the military garb was largely a concession to Tennat's sense of rightness. The men who had been manning the heat beams were uniformed, of course, as were

the sentries by the gate of the stockade. It seemed, he thought, a little silly; but no one else seemed to think so.

He felt something firm and provocatively shaped against his arm and there was suddenly the heavy scent of cloves in his nostrils.

"Hello, you ain't mad, mister?" a silky voice said.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," he said and stared straight ahead.

"I sure didn't mean to peeve you," Sue Milstadt's voice said softly.

"I'm not peeved," he said stuffily.

"I sorta thought maybe you liked me."

"Would you mind not moving in so close?"

"I took a bath and scented myself. Don't that show I want to be friends?"

"Friends?" He turned and looked at her. She'd bound her hair with some faded ribbon so that it piled high on her head. The dress she wore was a light blue synthetic, and her young, hard-muscled body filled it in a most disturbing manner.

"PLEASE," he said with difficulty, "I can appreciate your situation but... Look, don't you have a boy friend?"

"Did."

"What happened to him?"

"Witchwoman got him."

"You mean Mom Gaelmicha?"

"Huh," Sue snorted. "I

mean the one from over the hills."

"You mean there's another settlement?"

"No other. He just wandered off. Been seeing that witchwoman, just like the rest of them."

"Rest?"

"All the other good-for-nothings, the ones that wouldn't work. She's got her a mighty big desire."

He saw Mom Gaelmicha striding purposefully for the line from the direction of the stockade.

"What witchwoman are you talking about?" he asked hurriedly, before the other woman could get within hearing.

"The one that hexed the corn."

"You know you ain't supposed to be here," Mom Gaelmicha said as she lumbered up to them.

Sue Milstadt turned swiftly. Her hand flew to her face.

"Oh. You ain't gonna tell."

"Not if you git."

The younger woman walked a few steps, and looked back.

"I said go on," Mom Gaelmicha intoned.

AS THE GIRL withdrew, Cadis said, "Look here, that wasn't necessary."

"It was to keep from having an outright war."

"War?"

"Well, the girls in the settlement drew lots to see who had next chance at you."

He stood for a moment di-

gesting this bit of news. He could feel the anger beginning to burn in him. "That's the last straw," he said fiercely. "It isn't enough I get sent to this god-forsaken place. Now I'm being raffled off."

"Here now, don't you fuss. You're all right."

"I'll do what I please," he said.

"Don't raise your voice. It's all for your own good."

"Who's after my virtue now? Nettie L'Heureux?"

"Nettie. No, she's disqualified for last night; so's Sue."

"So, who won the next chance."

Mom Gaelmicha lowered her eyes and gazed at her ample middle. Then she giggled.

"Oh, no!"

Mom Gaelmicha looked up fiercely, her black eyes staring. "It ain't as terrible as you might think," she said hotly.

VII

HE WAS SO furious that he could barely eat his lunch. Mom Gaelmicha had followed him into the dining hall, but Cadis had outmaneuvered her by taking the sole remaining seat at a crowded table.

He was busily attacking an ear of roasted corn when one of the men, a giant with flaming red hair and a receding chin, nudged his neighbor and said, "Our bachelor's got him a mighty fine appetite."

"Suppose he's fattening for

the slaughter," the smaller, black-haired one said.

Cadis glared at him silently and renewed his attack on the ear of corn.

At the end of the table, a thin, freckled man in his early twenties looked up and said, "Leave him be."

"Eric's sure full of the milk of kindness these days," the small dark man said.

"New dads get that way," noted the redhead.

"Maybe you wish you was single," the small one said.

"You can shut your mouth, Frank Bark," said Eric.

"Maybe you and him could chase her then," The redhead guffawed loudly.

"She sure didn't give you a tumble before you was hitched," Eric said.

"That's a lie," snapped the redhead.

"Oh, let him be," the one called Bark said.

They lapsed into silence and Cadis nodded at the man named Eric, who had interceded for him.

LATER, AS they were carrying their dishes to the wash hopper, he found himself behind the man. "Thanks," he said. "I'd had just about all I could take."

"Nothing's needed. Name's Eric Wharton, by the way. I 'spect thing's is getting pretty hot for you."

"Hot isn't the word," Cadis admitted, as they walked to the door. "Say, what's all this

about 'her'. They mean the hex woman?"

"Oh, you seen her already?"

"Well, not exactly. Just heard about her."

"Not surprised," Eric said. "I'd sure give a wad for the chance. She's mighty handsome, I hear tell."

"Do only men see her?" Cadis demanded, wondering what exactly they were talking about.

"No," Eric said after a moment. "Seems that most of them what sees her are, though. And mostly the bachelors, now since the women got smart. Last one was Mark Balsemo last month."

"What happened to him?"

ERIC SHRUGGED. "They all just sort of go away. Can't say I blame them."

"Have you ever seen her?"

"No, and I don't care to. Got me a nice wife, and a baby coming. Be the first one in the settlement if all goes well."

"I wondered about that," he said. "The settlement's been here almost two years, hasn't it?"

"Well, nobody likes to talk about it."

"About what."

"Well, there ain't no kids, up to now. Mostly early miscarriages. Some trouble with animals. Don't make sense."

"Sense?" Cadis asked. "I'm beginning to wonder what does make sense around here."

He stopped at the lab to get a specimen kit, borrowed a beetle, and set out for the number two stand of corn where he had been with Ten-nat, L'Heureux and Mom Gaelmicha the day before.

THE NUMBER TWO stand was located in a small valley, just over the ridge from the settlement. He found L'Heureux and his group clearing the area to the left of the stand with their heat beams. They had already burned over at least three acres, and were pushing rapidly toward the low line of hills that ringed the valley. The work was apparently proceeding rather slowly. The rank moss that covered the ground seemed to hold out for an unprecedented number of minutes, before the heat of the beam brought its juices to a boil. Then the stuff shriveled suddenly and burst into glowing sparks, while a coil of oily black smoke oozed upward. The stuff burned with a resinous odor.

The ground at the edge of the stand was covered with a light, powdery grey ash. Alfred Cadis noticed that the ground between the patches of the moss was still moist. The heat beams were apparently being operated at just under the boiling point of water; yet the moss was burning, as if it contained some highly flammable internal resin.

He began to cut sections

from the corn plants in the stand. The plants on the north side seemed much healthier than those he had observed the day before. Whatever the alien moss might be, it didn't seem to hurt the corn.

He pulled a pocket magnifier from the specimen kit, and examined a section of one of the healthier corn plants under its five-power magnification.

THE TISSUE along the rough cut looked healthy, but just under the layer of cellulose threads that supported the softer sap layers, he saw something. He tried for a smoother cut with a scalpel from the kit.

Under the lens he saw that the sap layer was surrounded by glittering particals of something. For a moment, Cadis couldn't believe his eyes. The plant seemed perfectly healthy; yet, as he watched, the warmth of his hand penetrated the thin section he had sliced away from the larger stalk, and the tiny crystals began to melt.

Ice?

At sixty degrees?

He sniffed at the plant. There was only the faintly acrid odor of starchy sap.

He found a sprig of the alien moss holding to the bottom of one of the healthy plants and examined it. Under the ten-power magnification, mottled pigmented bodies

sorted themselves. The purplish grey under the glass appeared a mixture of black, white, red, and blue bodies.

And each tiny cell-like body was surrounded with glittering pinpoints that melted as he watched.

He was just about to section another corn plant when he heard a yell. Cadis rose to his feet and pushed rapidly through the corn into the open.

IN THE distance, he saw L'Heureux's group milling about. Several of the men had fallen to the ground, while the others tried to help them to their feet. The heat beams were still glowing; but as he watched, they flicked off one by one.

"Cadis," L'Heureux yelled from a distance.

"What is it?"

"Get help from the stockade. I got me some more blight cases."

He mounted the beetle and guided it back over the hill. As he approached the settlement, he saw that the streets of the small village were filled with people, all converging on the stockade. Dimly he could hear the screams of women and the swearing of men.

Most of the people had objects in their hands, and were striking wildly at the ground. As Cadis watched, a black flood separated itself from

the group, and flowed along the ground away from the stockade.

The crowd turned and followed swiftly, striking at the tide of black.

Before he could stop the beetle, the tide was bearing down on him. The black wave was alive. From the mass came the sound of clicking mandibles, while a thousand tiny eyes glared at him as the rodent-like things bore down on the vehicle.

He knew that the beetle could not turn on time. If they overran him...

He tugged frantically at the control bar of the beetle as the black flood approached.

VIII

THEY WERE a black, undulating carpet, rolling toward him. Cadis had a brief moment to take in the details of some of the nearer animals; they were long and ferret-sleek, with broad flat muzzles and a row of white razor teeth—the sort that could strip the flesh from a man in seconds. Four clawed feet moved mincingly across the ground, speeding the sinuous bodies toward him.

He pulled frantically at the control bar, and the beetle turned abruptly. Something spat deep within the mechanism, and the dim whirr of the gyroscope within the machine died. The two-wheeled vehi-

cle poised for an instant as though on a precipice. Then it was falling, throwing him forward and out of the cab. He landed on the hard ground in the bath of the wave of rodents.

He tried to scramble to his feet. He rolled to his knees and looked up to see death bearing down upon him. The borders of the wave were scarcely six feet from him as he pushed himself to his feet turned, stumbled, and fell flat before them.

He waited in silent terror for the end.

And the tide parted as it reached him.

IN WONDER Alfred Cadis saw the animals stream around his prone body, the living stream parting neatly to the right and left. For a moment he couldn't believe his own luck as they went past.

With sudden daring he stretched out his hand—and the flood altered its course.

He was wrestling with his shirt, in an instant peeling it from his back. Quickly he made it into an impromptu sack, tying the arms and using the drawstring on the front to close the collar. He saw that he would have little time left.

He made several clumsy passes. On his fifth try he bagged two, simultaneously. The small animals thrashed

violently in their buckskin prison. And then the flood was past him, and one of the men from the settlement was helping him to his feet.

"For God's sake, what happened?" Cadis asked.

"The varmints came over the hill just like you saw," the man panted.

He saw that it was Eric, the one who hoped to be the father of the first child born to the settlement. "Any damage?"

"The generator," Eric said. "They stripped it clean again."

HE WAS TOO tired to care, when night came, that the long-promised lights in the compound would again be delayed. He and a detail of the men had brought back the stricken members of L'Heureux's party and Cadis had enlisted the help of Eric and L'Heureux in giving the anti-histamine injections he'd found effective against the blight.

"There were at least a dozen cases of the blight among the people in the settlement as well—including Mom Gaelmicha, who had been brought into the temporary hospital in a fitful coma.

He stood watching her massive form toss in delirium after he had administered the injection and shook his head.

"Never thought she'd get it," L'Heureux observed.

"Well, she'll pull through; it isn't likely to be fatal."

"First time for everything," L'Heureux said darkly.

Cadis placed the tray of syringes tiredly on a rude table. "Can you handle the rest?"

"Sure, but..."

"I want to have a look at the beasties I captured."

"I guess me and Eric can do for them," L'Heureux said grudgingly, as he looked toward the other side of the long room where Eric was finishing with the last of his assigned patients.

CADIS LEFT them and walked slowly across the darkened compound. New Glendale's swift little moon was winging across the sky, throwing dancing shadows before him as he walked.

He entered the lab, found the switch that activated the lab's power supply, and sighed as the walls glowed. At least there was some place in this insane settlement where things were familiar, and not ripped by the roots out of some madman's distorted imagination of what constituted past history.

A noise from the corner of the room broke his chain of thought. He walked over to the improvised cage in which he had imprisoned his "rats!" The cage was actually an empty packing case, over which he had weighted a metal grill from the inside of an incubator.

tor. A sound of rapid scratching came from the box.

He bent forward to look into the shadowed interior. The first thing he thought of was walzing mice. Both rodents were turning in swift circles, as though trying to bite their tails. The tiny clawed feet made rapid scratching sounds on the wooden bottom of the case.

He drew the grill aside slowly, to get a better look. Both rodents ignored him; they circled rapidly in their pointless chase, endlessly traversing a circle of scarcely a foot in diameter. He started to reach in, to see if they would still avoid contact with him. Then he saw the gleam of razor teeth and thought better of it.

THREE WAS a muffle furnace against the far corner of the lab; hanging from its underside was a pair of thick gloves made from some heat-resistant plastic. Cadis walked over, pulled them from their hook, and donned them; then he went back to the cage. Neither animal had ceased his endless chase.

He reached in carefully. The animals ignored him as his gloved fingers closed on one. He lifted it carefully from the cage, while its feet made rapid churning motions and its body twisted as though it still paced its tiny circle.

He examined it at arms length. There seemed to be

nothing wrong with the creature—no obvious injuries, at least. Why such behavior... as though something had happened to its motor nervous system. He brought it closer for a better look, realized he had been holding his breath, and exhaled with conscious effort.

The effect was so startling that he almost dropped the creature. As his breath hissed from his lungs, the twisting animal stopped its gyrations for a moment; then, slowly, it became rigid. Its whole body sagged, and in the next instant Cadis was holding a limp mass of bone and muscle. There was no doubt that the animal was dead.

Poisoned by a cloud of carbon dioxide?

No, he decided, as he pulled the gloves from his hands. There was an appreciable percentage of the gas in New Glendale's atmosphere. The animal was accustomed to breathing the stuff.

What then? A virus carried on his breath? That seemed hardly likely. Any microorganism would take a finite time in which to act. A virus didn't give you the flu in a matter of seconds, much less kill you.

What then?

HE LAID the small corpse on a table and brought out a dissecting kit. After some twenty minutes, he knew no more than when he

started. The internal organs were fairly simple. The creature seemed to be vaguely mammalian, hermaphroditic, and oviparous. There were a series of what appeared to be functioning mammary glands, two distinct sets of what he thought were gonads, which discharged into a common duct. There were several round egg-like objects developing in the duct. These held large embryos floating in sacs on a mass of protein material.

He found a simple three vesicle brain in the fore-skull and traced two parallel nerve cords down the dorsal surface. These periodically bulged in complex ganglia, which in turn radiated filament-like nerves of greenish tissue to the periphery of the body. Under the magnifying lenses of the dissecting stage, the nervous tissue was limp and flaccid—as though extensive autolysis had already begun to degrade the cell structure.

Cadis took several sections from one of the large ganglia and examined it under the optical microscope. The lumpy-looking cells were in wild chaos. Cell walls had collapsed, and the cytoplasm of the cells was a confused mass of undifferentiated material. There were a number of intact cells, but these looked as if they had been dipped in alcohol; their membranes were indented and withered-looking. Without the use of a

stain, he couldn't make out too many of the more intimate details of the cells; but he was quite sure that the material in the intact cells was not appreciably disturbed.

It was as if a host of small ice crystals had formed between each individual cell, expanded, and imploded the cells of the creature.

HE TOOK fresh sections from viscera, muscles, and connective tissue. These seemed in perfect condition, there was no sign of degeneration of the cell structure.

Carefully he donned the insulating gloves again and secured a scalpel and a set of forceps. These he chilled briefly in the freezing chest; then he secured the second animal from its cage. The creature was still revolving ceaselessly, as though its energy were inexhaustible.

There was no time for the niceties; besides his technique had never been too good with small animals in college. Cadis secured the section of muscle and nerve from the beast and prepared it on a chilled slide. The rodent continued its endless gyrations in the improvised cage, heedless of the flow of ichor streaming from the wound in its rear leg.

Under the microscope, details were fuzzy. Fluid suffused the tissues of the muscles and the contained nerves. But there was no doubt about

the important feature, the one he had expected to see.

Grouped around one large ganglion, a thin layering of crystals gleamed in the light. As he turned the micrometer adjustments of the mechanical stage, he saw that the same crystalline material coated the nerves running from the ganglion.

He returned the ganglion to the center of view and inspected it closely, under higher magnification. He adjusted the iris diaphragm and switched to polarized light.

WELL, THAT knocked his theory into a cocked hat. The crystals weren't hexagonal; they were roughly cubical. That meant that the substance wasn't ice. As Cadis watched, the crystals were indeed melting. He'd been careful to interpose a cooling cell before the substage light of the microscope, but as the temperature of the slide rose, the crystals began to melt. He'd purposely kept the room temperature at the prevailing temperature outside. Yet, the slight increase from the substage lamp was destroying the crystal structure around the nerve strands.

No wonder the first animal had died. The slight heat of his breath had been sufficient to destroy the crystal sheath that was apparently necessary to the animal's life.

He was wondering what analogy could be drawn be-

tween this and the crystalline substances he'd found in the corn plants when a knock sounded on the door.

It was Sue Milstadt. "Any one here?" she asked.

"No, but..."

She pushed past him and closed the door.

"You'd better not let Mom Gaelmicha find you here," he said, retreating behind a lab table.

"Mom Gaelmicha's dead o' the blight."

For a moment he was too stunned to speak.

"The important thing we have to discuss, Mr. Cadis," Sue said crisply, "is what you've accomplished to date. We didn't spend the taxpayers' money to send you out here solely to toy with young maidens and their affections."

Alfred Cadis stared at her. "Oh, good heavens! Not you, too?"

IX

BACHELOR'S HALL was cold and empty and he could not sleep. Cadis burrowed his head under the heavy coverlets and tried to drown thoughts in an endless chant of counting, repeating auto-suggestions of sleep, but no sleep came.

The death of Mom Gaelmicha had been unsettling, even if it had removed a source of embarrassment. He had liked the big, ponderous woman—had, in fact, felt almost filial

toward her, recognizing in her the same rock-hard strength that his own mother had possessed.

At least he'd felt that way up until she had started to act like some adolescent swaytail.

And now Sue Milstadt.

It reminded him of one of those Martian farces where everyone turned out to be a spy of the Venusian underground, each spying on the other and unaware of the other's identity. The Colonial Bureau, Cadis decided, must be buried under its own red tape to assign two independent agents to the settlement and not let either be aware of the other.

IN THE DISTANCE, he could hear sounds of shouting. That crazy Tennat, he thought, out with his crews this time of night. They'd rigged up a series of pressure tanks together with a large alcohol reservoir and with the improvised flame-thrower, Tennat proposed to destroy all of the alien moss encroaching on his corn.

"That heathen stuff is the cause of all our misery," Tennat had declared after Cadis briefed him on what he'd discovered in the lab.

Well, what did you do with a fanatic like that? Let the others lose their sleep burning out the moss growths. Cadis yawned under the coverlets and tumbled sleepily,

deafening his ears to the distant noise...

The night stretched endlessly on and it was cold and the cold was heavy on his limbs... And pleasant... Like the caress of a soft hand, a distant hand that was...

No longer distant!

The touch on his arm and his face was gentle, and dreamily he looked into her white face.

SHE WAS bending over the bed and, although it was totally dark in the room, her white form was quite clear. Full snowy bosoms and chalk white swelling limbs... and a face both strong and gentle... Like the faces of the women of his dreams.

Like... There was a haunting feeling of familiarity in the cold strength of the jaw, the purposeful eyes.

Cadis reached up and touched her flesh. For a moment she shivered and drew back; he saw the mark of his hand, as though the heat of his touch had melted a clear imprint in the flesh.

"What... who..." he stammered.

She touched her fingers to her lips and started to move toward the door.

"Wait," he said.

She beckoned, moved closer and then moved away again.

His whole body was suddenly tense with longing. He'd never experienced such a yearning before in the tight,

controlled emotionality of his life.

He was pushing from the bed, trying to move toward the ghostly shape while an inner force clutched at him, pulled him back.

And his whole body was on fire...

He fell to the bed, writhing in agony as...

Agony! Terrible, unbearable agony! Like acid on raw nerve endings. It raced through his system, its fire for an instant paralyzing whole sections of his brain.

ALFRED CADIS twisted in violent spasms, as convulsive messages traced fiery paths along his raw nerves. If he could have withdrawn, he would have done so; but no motor reflex he had ever developed could deal with the source of his agony.

The pain was all-consuming, drowning rational thought in its searing flood. His brain throbbed with the pulsations of his tortured nervous system and the creations of his mind trembled and shattered into glistening shards.

The source of the pain was vulnerable, but barely. It could not be destroyed. He could surround it (he?) with a potion of his being, envelop it with his great substance (his?), encyst it with his vast being as a focus of infection (His being? Vast and girding?) is sealed away by lay-

er on layer of cornified tissue.

Or failing that, consume his own vast substance (vast? Who was he? Cadis? Being?) and destroy, utterly...

His lungs ached with the force of his screams. Cadis shook his head violently, fighting the wave of pain that had possessed him. Then he fell back, exhausted, feeling the strength draining back into his limbs.

For an instant, he had been ripped from the room, from all familiar surroundings and hurled into some vast cauldron of fire.

Then he remembered the woman of white and he pushed his weakened body from the bed. His bare feet touched the cold floor. He shivered and began to pull on his clothing.

HE STUMBED through the dark toward the door. Outside the dark ranks of corn marched away from the bachelor's hall. Was that a white shape he saw flitting through the stand?

No, only his imagination.

He was a little frightened at the depths of feeling he'd experienced for an instant when the woman had appeared.

Or had it been only a too-real dream, a white thing twisted from his thoughts, shaped by the talk of the day, summoned by desires and wants hidden deep within it's

mind where he'd pressed them throughout the years.

He was suddenly very much afraid. He felt a little like crying, as though he could revert to the small boy he had been years before; as though again that great strong hand could gather him in to the massive bosom and tender words soothe away all cares and...

My God, he thought, what's happening to me?

He heard the sound of someone moving through the dark, and a shadowed shape turned the corner of the building. He straightened, with an effort of will.

"CADIS?"

It was L'Heureux's voice.

"Yes?"

"It's happened again?"

"The blight?"

"That's right."

"To the men manning Tennat's flamethrower party?"

"How...?"

"Never mind, how; I think I'm beginning to see some sense in this."

"Well," L'Heureux said in the crisp tone Cadis dreaded, "this thing is past equivocation. Your theories had better prove correct or the settlement is finished."

"I presume," Cadis said tiredly, "that you were sent out by the Colonial Bureau to spy on this group?"

"Observe and report," L'Heureux corrected, punc-

tuating his words with a stream of tobacco.

"And Nettie?"

He could imagine L'Heureux's shrug in the dark. "What else?"

X

HEY HAD to use Bachelor Hall as an emergency hospital. Cadis wasn't too disappointed as they moved his gear from the barn-like building and moved in the bedding and patients. His major concern at the moment was the supply of anti-histamine on hand. He'd used their supply of Cardatron and had switched to its methyl ester derivative, but now even this material was running low.

And before the hour was out, they had their second death and then their third.

After he had done what he could, he left the hall, and walked to the stockade. He found Tennat and L'Heureux in the Mayor's quarters at the far end of the compound. The Mayor looked very tired.

Cadis told them what had happened.

"It seems impossible." Tennat shook his head.

"Devil's work sure," L'Heureux said.

"We'll destroy every bit of that hell-weed, if we have to blast it out," Tennat cried, with sudden vehemence.

"That," Alfred Cadis said,

"is exactly what you will not do."

The Mayor stiffened and started to speak.

"Haven't you made the association by now? Every time one of your weeding crews goes out, we have an outbreak of the blight. I imagine if you check back, you'll find that your early cases of the blight involved some such weeding activities, either by a crew or by individuals."

"You ain't trying to say them weeds is responsible for the blight?" L'Heureux asked.

"Maybe. I don't know yet."

The Mayor shook his head. That would be hard to believe. How could a mere plant cause such distress?"

"By airborne spores, by some vapor it exudes. Who knows."

"But," the Mayor protested "that's all the more reason for destroying the weeds."

"Only, not until we know how to protect ourselves," Cadis said.

HE AND L'HEUREUX left the Mayor and threaded their way through the darkened compound to the laboratory.

"This is the one bright thing about coming to New Glendale," Cadis said, as the ceiling panels glowed. "At least there's light here."

"Huh," growled L'Heureux, "you ain't got the pioneer spirit."

"You are so right."

"What about this airborne spore theory?"

"Do you believe it?"

"Huh, uh," L'Heureux said.

"Neither do I. We're up against something a lot more subtle than that. This thing seems to have certain elements of pattern in it, a certain feel of... well, direction."

"Well, we just can't sit on our fannies and let the blight chase us off New Glendale."

"We may do just that. Of course, one way or another, your job will be finished here."

"Well, now," L'Heureux said, "I was toying with the idea of staying. Actually it isn't a bad world."

"Even with this bunch of madmen running it?"

"I don't think that's too fair," L'Heureux said. "Lots of the settlers don't hold with Tennat's ideas, but they're willing to go along with the idea for a chance at a new world."

"Like Sue Milstadt, maybe?"

"Well sure. She's a good example of the adventure-some sort. There's lots of women these days with a streak of independence."

Cidis told him of Sue's real position in the settlement.

"Well, I'll be damned."

"How long have you been with the Colonial Bureau?"

L'Heureux said, "To tell you the truth, this is my first assignment."

"And Nettie?"

"Same way. She's my real daughter, by the way."

"**C**HECK ME if I'm wrong: You were a freighter skipper, or something similar?"

"Right."

"Unemp'oyed?"

"Well, now, I wouldn't say..."

"And they recruited you with this assignment in mind, probably sent you through a period of hypno-training."

"You've been reading the book."

"With minor changes, that could read like Sue's story."

"So?"

"I've got a theory; tell you more tomorrow. In the meantime, do you have any sort of scout ship aboard the *Hope*?"

"Only the life craft, the flitters, but they maneuver pretty well in an atmosphere if you don't try to crowd them."

"Let's you and me take one out tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Like to take a flight north, look over the ocean areas; just prowl."

"Seems like damned foolishness."

"I told you I had a theory."

They discussed final details and Cadis started to leave. "Damp the pile before you go," he called back.

"See you don't fret yourself, sonny," L'Heureux called after him, the reas-

sumed New Glendale accent ironically overaccented.

HOW DO YOU cope with something like this, Cadis wondered as he passed through the gate of the stockade. An alien world with an unknown menace, and a group of eccentrics headed by a Mayor as mad as a hatter. And to make life even more complicated, a colossal bureaucratic snafu that dumped four agents from the same department into the settlement, completely unaware of each other.

With the exception of L'Heureux and his daughter, he corrected himself. Now that seemed rather odd. Surely, the Bureau could have picked agents with more ability and guile than those two; it didn't make sense. Granted, as with any large organization, the Bureau had its share of administrative duplication, still there were some shrewd men heading it; and New Glendale was a large-scale operation in terms of its far-reaching consequences.

Item: L'Heureux and Sue were both on their first assignment. What if the same had been true of Mom Gaelmicha? Was it possible that the Colonial Bureau could be so naive as to pick a group of agents at random from the population at large, give them only the most sketchy of orientations, and then depend upon them for the detailed

specialized information necessary to a proper evaluation of the defiant culture of New Glendale?

HE FOLLOWED the darkened settlement street to Bachelor's Hall, intending to pick up his bedding where the emergency crews had piled it in one corner of the great room—after the patients from the latest outbreak of the blight had been moved in.

This was the first moment he'd had for a full realization of the events of the day and he felt a dark loneliness settling on his mind. He'd never felt so removed, so divorced from friends. Cadis was not the type of man who makes friends easily; but he still needed some sense of belonging, some identification with his fellows to exist. The loss of Mom Gaelmicha weighed upon him. He could not understand the peculiar attraction her great strength had for him, and he knew that properly he should have little fondness for the memory of that mountain for a woman after...

But really, what wrong had she done?

He stood on the crude porch of Bachelor Hall and gazed out over the stand of corn stretching away under the soft light of the moon. The valley rolled upward, as if approached the foothills at

the base of the mountains, and he could see the endless tossing tassles of the plants blending together into a dim frothy landscape, like a forgotten sea on some incredibly alien world.

He could even see...

He stepped from the porch and pushed his way through the corn, his blind feet snagging in exposed roots. Ahead he saw again that quick flash of white, and...

THREE WAS no doubt of it this time. Alfred Cadis was not dreaming, and the white form was too suggestive of the reality for him to doubt what it was. A kind of insanity seemed to seize him; and he began to run wildly through the narrow rows. His breath came in heavy gulps as the sharp leaves of the corn lashed and cut his face.

The only thing he knew at the moment was that what ever lay ahead was most desirable, what he had wanted all his life. Desirable...yet unpossessible. Chaste beyond the chasteness possible to anything of earth.

He caught a quick, exciting glimpse of the white form; and then a hurried toe caught on an exposed corn root. He fell in a tangle of broken stalks, his face driving violently into the soft cool ground.

He must have lain there for the better part of an hour, his chest heaving for air, while

thought and reason slowly returned. Finally he rose to his feet and made his way back through the corn to the hall. Inside, he found Eric dozing in a chair near the door while two of the settlement women at the far end of the hall sat near a lantern and spoke in low tones. Several of the men on the pallets on the floor tossed fitfully in the delirium compounded of drugs and the after-effects of the blight.

"Uh," Eric said when he brushed past him quietly and began to secure his bedding from the corner of the room.

"Any further trouble?" Cadis asked.

"Nothing here," Eric said softly. "Most sleeping like babes."

"I'm bedding down outside if you need me," Cadis said.

"It's cold out there. Why not throw down a pallet in here."

"Air's fresher." Then he had a thought. "How's the wife?"

Eric beamed proudly. "Any day now."

"Does she know you're an agent for the Colonial Bureau?"

Eric righted his chair with a clatter; the noise brought a disapproving hiss from one of the women at the far end of the hall. "How the blazes did you find that out?"

"It figures," Cadis said and walked from the building.

HE COULDN'T say exactly what impulse drove him to sleep on the porch, rather than to find a temporary billet with one of the families in the settlement. Perhaps it was the chance to see the white visitor again; but there seemed a much deeper compulsion than that. Alfred Cadis was afraid to admit it, but it wasn't really a matter of choice.

He had to.

He slept poorly, and every strange noise in the night—the rustle of the corn in some errant breeze, the creaking of the porch under his shifting weight, the faint mutter of conversation from inside the building—brought him instantly awake.

When he finally did sleep, his dreams were filled with shapeless fantasies. He dreamed again about exotic pursuit across the red sands of Varoom, but Gal-douch wore the face of Tennat, shifting into the face of L'Heureux and then into Cadis' long-dead father. Leja Loris, her trembling body clasped in his, seemed to become a being of snow that melted in the heat of his embrace. Only a diaphanous sketch of a face remained as her body became vapor—A face that hung in the morning light and flowed into the grinning features of Mom Gaelmicha.

After that, he was aware of a voice that talked to him and pleaded with him; there was the distant image of the woman of white with full breasts and cold arms outstretched. But he knew that those arms could not hold him, that the heat of his embrace would destroy her. She was like a statue of alabaster or...better still...of ice, recipient of love and tenderness and loyalty, but immaculate...forever immaculate...

As all the distant women in his life should have been. Capable of love that should be denied, but could be voiced only because the barrier between them made her untouchable...

Somehow he was horrified at the thought, and yet...

What did it matter to him, who was not human? Who was quite apart from humanity, and understood only dimly. There was a part of him that had absorbed the object of desire, used it as a tailor uses a pattern of measurements to tailor cloth, but...

Well, that was mere seeking for survival, the desire in some fashion to remove the menace to his existence...

And he...she...they came through the darkness of dreams and for the first time he said what he had always wanted to say

"I love you," he said; it was very easy, for there was no barrier to the words, no

thought of extending the idea to its logical, dreaded fulfillment...

For there was no choice. The barrier was not one of training, of psychological conditioning. The choice was simple and physical and immediate. Immaculateness or non-existence...

Which was the way, Cadis told the white woman who looked and yet did not look like Mom Gaelmicha, was the way he had always wanted it.

And he was wide-awake and shivering in the early morning light, and very disturbed.

He sought out L'Heureux after breakfast, his mind still struggling through the layers of unreality that had possessed it during the night.

"What's wrong?" L'Heureux demanded. "You look like you seen a ghost."

"Perhaps I have."

What was a ghost? he thought. The surviving pattern after death. Blended of the emotional reactions of the viewer and the essence of the viewed?

Lord, is this the thing that has lain in my mind for years, and...

Madness...? Was there a way...?

They went to the *Hope* and readied one of the flitters. L'Heureux suggested that they could use the launching tubes of the big ship, rather

than trying to crane the craft down to the ground.

Cadis very nearly lost his breakfast when the launching tube catapulted them into the morning air with a blast of air. The craft dropped heavily for a second, and then the jets caught. In seconds, the stockade, the regular rows of houses, and the green corn-fields of the settlement dropped away below them.

After they had breasted the low mountains that surrounded the New Glendale settlement, they passed over broad plains solidly carpeted by the grey-blue moss. As far as the eye could see, it spread into the horizon with an achingly smooth texture from their height. Occasionally, they passed over swarms of the rodent-like creatures which had attacked the settlement. The sound of their passage did not seem to disturb the animals.

“NOTICE anything unusual?” Cadis asked L’Heureux above the whistle of the jets.

“Nope.”

“On any normal planet, you’d expect to see a great number of life forms—both plants and animals.”

“So?”

“So far, we’ve seen exactly one species of plant, and one species of animal; that’s unprecedented.”

“That what you wanted to find out?”

“No. Let’s keep going.”

They had been flying roughly west. He gave L’Heureux directions to find the coast line of the land mass over which they flew and to follow it north.

To be truthful, Cadis admitted to himself, he did not know exactly for what he was looking. There certainly must be some clue to the concerted attack of the animals and the moss upon New Glendale. He began to wonder if, perhaps, they were not dealing with some sort of planet-wide empathy between the animals and the moss plant, a common attempt of the two to rid the planet of its unwanted visitors.

They were passing over a small, winding river when something attracted Cadis’ attention. He signaled L’Heureux to drop lower.

For a moment, his breath halted in his throat at the sheer brilliance of the colors below. What had appeared from a high altitude to be a heavy tinge of ochre on the surface of the river became an astonishing slash of bright crimson threading its way through the center of the river. It was as if an artist had painted a dreary river scene of flat plains and colorless water and then, in sheer disgust at the monotony, had dipped his coarsest brush in alizarin crimson and raked it savagely through the shoddy stream.

THEY MADE a second pass back at barely a hundred yards altitude and he saw that the colors did not separate. The swirling line of red remained homogeneous.

"What do you think it is?" L'Heureux asked.

"The first survey maps showed it," Cadis said. "I think they were probably right; they thought it was algae."

"Look at the ice."

The stream was glinting in the bright sun with the brilliance of a myriad facets. It was literally swollen with ice—not large chunks, as though an solid covering over the river had recently melted and broken apart; this ice, rather, was a fine, almost pasty sludge that swirled like thick syrup through the water. There was something suggestive of life in the way the pattern changed, turned in on itself, and moved slowly down stream.

Ice? he thought.

Ice at sixty degrees?

He looked astern at the swirling colors, then saw that the color had altered. A strip of dirty red—the color of clotted blood—divided the bright red of the algae. For a moment, he didn't make the connection; then he realized that the long strip of darker red paralleled their course as they flew above the stream.

Even as he watched, the trailing end of the dark red streak faded into the brighter

red. Could the heat of that passage cause such a change?

He punched L'Heureux on the shoulder. "Get some altitude and then make a low angle pass," he ordered. "Cut out your jets as soon as you have enough speed to carry you."

L'Heureux grunted acknowledgement.

THEY TURNED, gained altitude, and began a swift decent. On the upswing, L'Heureux cut the jets and Cadis watched as the dark streak on the water continued to follow them; it paced the swift shadow of their craft on the water.

He had never heard of a plant being as light-sensitive as that, Cadis thought. The algae seemed to be absorbing the energy of New Glendale's sun so fast that the momentary loss of its energy produced the rapid darkening of the crimson color. The clotted-blood color, he decided, must be the reduced form of whatever pigment the plant used to carry on its photosynthetic activities.

Only...of what possible use could so much energy be to a simple plant?

Unless the idea that was beginning to form in his mind was... But that was ridiculous.

An hour later, they came within sight of the coastline. The grey-blue moss persisted to the very water's edge. The

vast ocean that stretched to the horizon was a mottled grey, and green, with vast swathes of crimson riding on its surface. Only here the crimson masses were in even more pronounced motion.

The surface of the sea was a slurry of fine crystals as far as the eye could see, and the great masses of crimson algae dyed the ice a brilliant red. The masses of algae swirled with a restless motion, disappearing from the surface and boiling up again as though carried on slow currents that rose from the ocean floor.

The effect was somehow frightening and yet fascinating. It was like watching the flow of arterial blood under a microscope, seeing the heavy corpuscles tumble through tiny capillary networks in living tissue.

He was watching the surface intently and as the thought of comparing the movement to the flow of blood occurred to him, the red algae seemed to organize itself in one area into discrete disk-shaped areas and flow in a narrow stream outward to a point where it disappeared beneath the surface of the ocean.

Tentatively, he thought: *flow left. branch...*

And the particular stream he was watching turned sharply to his left and then divided into two streams.

The flitter passed over the stream, and the bright red fad-

ed. In the next instant the stream lost definition and became again a disorganized patch of color swirling in the ocean of ice.

"That's enough," he told L'Heureux. "Let's get back."

XII

“YOU'RE completely mad," Mayor Tennat said.

"Am I?" Cadis demanded. "I can prove it easily enough."

"I won't have such blasphemy in New Glendale."

"I'd suggest you drop that pose, too."

"We've found you out, Mayor," L'Heureux said, grinning through yellowed whiskers.

"New Glendale is a complete farce," Cadis added.

"No," Tennat said worriedly. "No, that isn't true."

"Do you deny that you were commissioned by the Colonial Bureau to set up this phoney back-to-the-good-old-days movement, to attract malcontents for the colony on New Glendale?"

Tennat's face dropped. "I don't know how you found that out," he said, "but, please ... I mean, if you can be discreet..."

L'Heureux began to laugh. "He's been had the same way as the rest of us."

"What do you mean?" the Mayor demanded.

"He means," Cadis said, "that every member of the

New Glendale settlement was contacted by the Colonial Bureau and assigned the job of spying on this colony to see that it didn't develop into a schizoid culture."

"But that's utter nonsense."

"Is it? How else can the Bureau get a bunch of malcontents working together toward one end. Each man and woman in the colony has been content to quietly work for the growth of the settlement because he thought he had no permanent interest in it. Yet each one received hypno-conditioning to integrate himself into the settlement life gradually, to the point that he wouldn't want to return."

"In short," L'Heureux laughed, "this whole crazy set-up—even the backwoods accent they taught us—is a part of the Bureau's attempt to reproduce a pioneer settlement compounded of malcontents and whacks."

TENNAT shook his head.

"Face it, Mayor," L'Heureux said; "we've been took."

"But the blight, and the rats, and the rest?"

"Well, that's something they didn't anticipate."

"And there's more there than meets the eye," L'Heureux said.

"But..."

Cadis outlined what he had found.

"But it still doesn't make sense, none of it. The disappearance of the men from the

settlement; the ice that you say can't exist—especially in the tissue of living things."

"Oh, there's precedent for it," Cadis said. "I remember an inorganic course in college, where they mentioned the existance of hydrates—combinations of water with nearly-insoluble materials like methane or carbon tetrachloride to form substances that freeze at higher temperatures."

"But there's no such substance on New Glendale," Tennat objected.

“YES, THERE is. The original atmospheric analysis lists an unidentified hydrocarbon. As for the formation of ice in living tissues, the reactive groups of animal and vegetable proteins can serve the same purpose. That's where the hydrate could form there, at the interphase of a protein molecule and the fluids surrounding it."

"But that still doesn't explain any of our troubles."

"Let's go over to Locksley Hall. If what I believe is true, we should be able to test the theory with one of the blight patients."

"No," Tennat said, "I can't have that."

"You want to find out the truth, don't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"Then, come on."

Cadis walked from the mayor's office into the stockade compound and started toward

the gates, the Mayor and L'Heureux bringing up the rear. He watched the guard open the side door and wondered if the man still thought he was the only agent of the Colonial Bureau in the settlement. It was very possible, since the ones he'd unmasked so far weren't likely to start comparing notes.

He moved purposefully down toward the settlement. It was rather amazing, he thought, the way the whole destiny of the colony had suddenly devolved upon him. All of his life, he had been content to be the follower of a more forceful personality, assuming that the gift for leadership was some God-given attribute reserved for a chosen few. It was not a little startling, and certainly rather fascinating, to discover that men—even men like L'Heureux and Eric and Tennat—would instinctively follow someone who acted positively.

Perhaps that had been the whole problem in his relationship with the other men in the Agronomy section, a simple inability to put his best foot forward with the required aggressiveness. His whole life had been a parade of vacillation and indecision and now...

"What are you up to?" L'Heureux whispered as he caught up with Cadis.

"Never mind. You'll see."

THEY FOUND Sue Miltstadt on duty in the improvised hospital. There were only five pallets remaining on the floor and all of the men were sleeping soundly.

"What happened to the rest?" Cadis asked.

"Five we moved back into the main dispensary," she said. "Two were all right this morning. The rest..."

Her tired sigh was more eloquent than any statement of fact.

Cadis walked to the medical kit on the table behind her, and secured a pressure syringe and two ampoules.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Which one of your patients has been under sedation the longest?"

"Frank Bark, I think. She led them over to a pallet some distance removed from the other four.

Cadis had thought the name sounded familiar. It was the big redhead who'd first taunted him in the dining room about the campaign to end his bachelorhood. Bark's face was white and cold-looking now, with no trace of his former ruddy complexion. As they stood over him, he moaned and turned in his sleep.

"Here, pull up his sleeve," Cadis said.

As soon as Sue had done so, he pressed the syringe against the arm and released a cloud of nupamine from the syringe.

The stimulant penetrated the arm and spread into the man's system quickly. In moments he began to roll his head, and breathe more rapidly. His lids fluttered, and he wetted his lips painfully.

At this point, Cadis injected the hypnotic in the second ampoule.

FOR LONG moments they waited as the drug fought the effect of the earlier stimulant. Bark groaned softly and lay breathing deeply.

"Bark," Cadis said quietly, "can you hear me?"

"Yes." The voice sounded distant, far removed from the room.

"Where are you?"

"Here." The tone was faintly petulant.

"Yes, but you're someplace else, too."

"Leave me alone," the man moaned.

"Stop it!" Tennat grabbed Cadis' arm. "What are you trying to do."

Cadis shook the hand aside.

"Where are you?"

"All places...everywhere. The sea, creeping across the land...seeing through tiny eyes, growing into the deep earth...the plains.. seeing...living..."

"Why do you want to harm us?"

"Because...hurt.. pain every time."

"We can hurt you much worse," Cadis said.

"No."

The man's voice changed. It thickened to a throaty rumble. For seconds the words were incoherent. Then...

"No, you can't do that, because your world and mine exists because of me," the voice said.

"My heavens," Tennat whispered, "do you hear that?"

"Alby, Alby," the voice said. "There's so much here for you. Why destroy it and all that it could mean to..."

My God, Cadis thought, no one has called me Alby since...

"Stay out of my mind," he yelled at the man on the pallet. "Keep your filthy hands out of my mind."

"Alby," the voice sobbed, "everything you've ever wanted. Only...only...don't get old and bitter now, Alby."

He pushed his way through the group about Bark, his throat hot and swollen with a mixture of desire and revulsion.

"My God," he heard L'Heureux say, "it's her, sure as sin."

Sue was staring wide-eyed at the face of the man on the pallet. "It was Mom Gaelmicha's voice."

"But that can't be," Tennat objected.

XIII

ERIC WHARTON'S son was born that night. It was the first child ever to be born in the New Glendale settlement. It would

have been better for the child, and for the Whartons, if it had died in delivery.

"The thing is all around us," L'Heureux growled.

"It's trying to change us to suit its own purposes," Cadis said tiredly.

He looked around the Mayor's small office, seeing the tired expression of defeat in Tennat's eyes; watching the way the lamp's flickering yellow light played on the cold features of L'Heureux; seeing the mixed fear and lack of understanding in the faces of the two girls, Nettie and Sue.

"How can a thing like that exist?" Tennat said.

"By the nature of the hydrates that compose it, I suppose. When water crystallizes, it forms a lattice that's hexagonal in cross-section."

"Like snowflakes?" L'Heureux asked.

"That's right. The hexagonal crystal is under strain; it has to lose a lot of energy to remain stable. But the hydrate crystal is in the same collapsed state as liquid water; it's cubical in nature. The big molecule in the center of the water molecules forms the hydrate and adsorbs energy in the process. That's why water under these conditions can freeze so far about normal freezing point."

"And both the hydrate crystal and normal ice could exist side by side at those temperatures?"

"Rather like Maxwell's demon on a grand scale," Cadis said. "The overall temperature would still be in the sixties."

"But a thing...a thinking animal made of ice," Nettie said.

"**T**HAT'S EXACTLY what we have to contend with," Cadis said. "They've used the phenomenon in low temperature computors before. The system can store binary impulses, the ice crystal and the hydrate crystal being the two poles of the system. In a way, the whole system is like a mass of unorganized diodes. Don't ask me how this thing first came into existence, but you've got to face it. Every drop of water on New Glendale...the seas, the tissues of the moss and now the corn, the nervous tissues of the things you called rats...every molecule of water is capable of entering into the complex. The seas and the algae we found furnish its energy, and the moss your men tried to kill are a part of its body."

"But it's vulnerable," Tennat said. "We've demonstrated that."

"And so are we. The thing is changing the corn, incorporating the corn into its being, and is trying to change other things...including us."

"It can't do that," Tennat said; "it can't change the given form of man."

"It doesn't have to," Cadis

said. "You saw the Wharton baby—humanoid, but not human any longer. The men with the blight were changed; their nervous systems were brought under the control of this thing to such an extent that, when you destroyed part of its substance, they reacted empathetically by collapsing, and even dying."

"But that means," L'Heureux said, "that anyone who's had even a touch of the blight, and survived, is in some way under the influence of this thing."

"Yes," Alfred Cadis said, remembering the thing he had yet to do, the consummation of his search.

"There's only one thing you can do; you have to leave. New Glendale is finished."

He left them, sitting in silence and went down through the settlement to Bachelor Hall. They'd removed the remaining blight patients to other quarters and he had the barn-like structure to himself again. He found his bedding and carried it out on the porch. Then he lay down and pretended to sleep.

HE WAS STILL quite awake when she came from the cover of the corn. She crossed the short distance to the porch and stood looking down at him. He waited breathlessly for her to move.

He was aware of the utter whiteness of her body, of the cold, smooth breasts, and

white thighs, the cold and distant beauty of the woman.

An inhuman beauty. A dream-like untouched beauty.

She started to move from the porch, and he was on his feet in an instant. "Wait," he called.

She stopped for a second, like a startled fawn sniffing the air; then she was running across the ground toward the stand of corn, white limbs flashing with the faint glint of ice.

"You'll come back," he called to her. "You have to, now that I know what you are."

The face that looked back for an instant was one compounded of dreams—alien, and yet familiar—with the blended features of those he had expected to see. She smiled coldly; for an instant, the air stirred about his ears, and the words whispered, "Soon, love."

In the next instant she screamed.

The sky in the west became a stark white with a brilliance that rivaled the noon sun. He was half-blinded for an instant. When he could see again, she was gone.

HE TURNED and ran through the streets of the settlement, sobbing his fury. How could the fool do such a thing? He ran up the slope to the stockade. The doors were closed; he pound-

ed on the entrance gate, sobbing hysterically.

The utter idiot. He had destroyed everything.

A heavy wind was blowing from the west now, whipping at his garments. The wind was cold, colder than anything he had yet felt on New Glendale.

The entrance gate flew open and he pushed the guard aside. The wind whipped through his hair as he ran for the Mayor's quarters. Overhead, lightning flickered tentatively, and the distant hiss of an approaching flitter cut the noise of the wind.

He found L'Heureux and Tennat by the door to the Mayor's quarters. "You idiot," he yelled, "what have you done?"

"Bombed the beast," Tennat said. "What we should have done in the first place. Killed it."

"The ice being?" he yelled. "You've solved your problems all right. He was the one thing that stabilized the climate on this crazy world."

"What do you mean?" L'Heureux demanded.

"It was he who created this even climate of yours; he can't exist without it. Even if you haven't killed him, you've wrecked New Glendale for any further colonization."

"We tried to teach him a lesson," L'Heureux said. "You can't kill anything that large."

"No," Cadis said, "but you can make him awfully mad."

LIIGHTNING began to blast overhead and the wind whipped through the compound. Even as they watched, heavy clouds formed against the morning glow on the horizon.

"What can we do?" Tennat yelled against the wind.

"Mayor," Nettie L'Heureux called from the gate. "Get Cadis down to the settlement. It's terrible."

Cadis grabbed Tennat by the arm, his fingers biting in fiercely. He waved his hand at the slim shape of the *Hope*, towering above the plain north of the settlement. Lightning was flashing around her gleaming nose.

"There's your only answer," he yelled. "If you act fast enough to save what you still have."

Then it began to snow.

By the time the people of New Glendale had gathered their few belongings together, and hurried toward the *Hope*, snow was falling in great wind-driven clouds.

Cadis stood, watching the last group carry a bundle of equipment toward the *Hope*.

L'Heureux passed him and stopped. "Come on," he yelled above the wind.

"Listen," Cadis yelled.

There was a distant rumbling and the ground shook slightly under them.

"Earthquakes next in order," Cadis yelled. He laughed and pointed at the ground. "Ice expanding in

the geological faults; he'll get you yet."

"Come on," L'Heureux yelled again.

He shook his head.

L'Heureux paused for a moment as though he were debating force. Finally he shrugged, spat a thin stream of yellow juice into the snow, and began to run as the ground rumbled again.

Cadis stood in the settlement street, waiting.

After a while, he saw her coming—a moving blob of white against the softer white of the drifting snow. He heard the jets of the *Hope* begin to throb in warm-up.

Then he was running toward her.

He found her standing, her arms outstretched, a wide-eyed expression of anticipation on her cold face. She looked like Leja Loris now—though later, he knew, she would look like a dozen others.

Object of love. Untouchable. Frozen in white purity, immaculate.

He turned and ran into one of the houses lining the

street. A lamp still burned on the top of an abandoned chest of drawers. He picked it up and hurled it to the floor; flames flickered and raced across the floor.

He turned and kicked at one of the drawers from the chest. One large stick he drenched in the blazing oil on the floor and then he ran from the burning house.

In minutes all the houses surrounding the white figure in the street were blazing.

With a shuddering roar, the *Hope* became airborne. Cadis watched it rise slowly above the line of blazing houses and then gain speed.

It raced toward the blood-ing clouds overhead.

He brandished his torch at the fleeing ship and laughed.

They were all fools, he thought; fools, fleeing reality.

He looked at his white woman, his ice woman standing in the street, her cold features a fiery red as New Glendale blazed about them.

Alfred Cadis stood, waiting for his woman of ice to thaw.

