

# HOLE IN THE SKY

*Irving Cox, Jr.*

Bwani Ngani sat sulking in his hut, the night noises of the jungle throbbing outside the skin-draped door. In the flickering firelight his string of leering god-masks threw long shadows on the thatched ceiling. Bwani Ngani dropped the spell-powder into the blaze and whispered his prayer of hate. For ten years the mission people had been encroaching on his control of the tribe; but now they had gone too far. If the son of the chief took a bride without making the ancient sacrifices, the old gods would die.

Yet none of it would have happened if the Reverend Colwaite had been destroyed first. Bwani Ngani's voice rose steadily, and he went outside his hut, staring up at the sky.

"Hear me, Oh demons of the forest," he intoned. "Hear me, Oh God of the Thousand Eyes!" He looked up at the stars. After a time he saw the sign, and his heart exulted. . . .

. . . Emil Padgham was furiously angry when he saw it. Short, round, and pink-faced, Dr. Padgham gave the impression of a mild-mannered old man, a stereotype of the typical Professor Emeritus. Normally he lived up to his appearance; but now his day had been a long series of nagging frustrations, underscored and exaggerated by the brittle, glaring heat that lay over the campus. Even at sunset there was no welcome breeze from the bay.

As soon as Milly began to clear away the dinner dishes, Dr. Padgham stormed out to the little observatory he had built over his garage. Almost at once he was at the door again, yelling across the lawn at his sister, working in the kitchen.

"Milly! I told you not to let those kids in here again!"

"I didn't, Emil. I've kept the door locked and—"

"Well, they were here. They've been fooling with the telescope."

"Oh, I don't think so, Emil. You're just upset because you missed your nap." She spoke quietly, wearily patient.

"It's a trick!" he cried. "The oldest trick in the world. What do they take me for? A doddering fool in his dotage?" The comparison lashed at his mind as if someone had actually called him names. "Bring me the alcohol, Milly—the bottle on the pantry shelf—so I can clean the lens."

"In a moment, Emil; as soon as I—"

"I want it now!"

"When I finish the dishes, Emil." Her voice was suddenly sharp. He heard the kitchen window bang shut and he knew she was angry, too.

Dr. Padgham flung himself into the chair beneath his telescope, mopping his forehead. The heat in that tiny, cluttered room was suffocating. The professor sat surrounded by shelves crammed with a chaos of unrelated things; a collection of butterflies and a stamp album; shelves of chemicals; a photographic enlarger; a ham transmitter; a dozen handbooks of astronomy. Dr. Padgham's hobby room contained a little of everything—except any reminder of the subject he had taught for more than thirty years.

Dr. Padgham, for two decades the head of the English department, had retired from the university faculty two years before, but he still lived on Faculty Avenue, and he was still a familiar campus figure. In the year of his retirement Dr. Padgham's seventeenth book had come off the press. Unlike its sixteen predecessors, the book had been immensely popular. Dr. Padgham used the unexpected windfall of royalty checks to build his hobby room over the garage. For a quarter of a century he had wanted to dabble in the sciences taught by his colleagues on the faculty; now he could. Overnight he turned literature out of his mind, and took up everything else.

At the moment, astronomy occupied his attention. He had bought a telescope and turned his garage room into an improvised observatory. His direct-view glass was an excellent one, however tiny in comparison with the equipment of the university observatory on Ryder Hill, overlooking the campus. Although he frequently used the observatory and was on ex-

cellent terms with both Dr. Bullett and Dr. Crane, Dr. Padgham felt more at home with his own telescope.

He sat for some minutes glaring at the metal cylinder. After his anger cooled a little, he looked through the glass again. The thing was still there, a tiny point almost touching Jupiter. Of course, the kids had got into the hobby room that afternoon and painted it on the lens. Milly was always careless with keys. No doubt they expected him to play the fool and to claim the discovery of a new heavenly body. It was not the trick that infuriated him, but the fact that the neighborhood children apparently thought so little of his intelligence.

Dr. Padgham's hand shook as he attempted to adjust the focus. In his clumsiness he moved the glass itself; but the black dot so close to Jupiter did not move with it.

Nothing, then, was on the lens!

As he realized what that implied, his sister entered the room behind him, bringing the bottle of alcohol. Milly was a thin wisp of a woman, tiny, white-haired and motherly. For ten years—since the death of the professor's wife—she had been his housekeeper. She banged the bottle down on a workbench and folded her arms indignantly.

"There," she said. "Perhaps I should make one thing clear to you, Emil: I have my own work to do in the house. If you must play around with your toys, you can at least have the patience—"

"Never mind!" He moved away from the telescope. "I don't need the alcohol now, Milly."

"You might have considered that before you started yelling orders at me."

"Look for yourself! There's something new out there, beside Jupiter."

She glanced in the telescope and then back at him, disinterested and still angry. "Of course; something black. But I won't have you put me off like this, Emil. You seem to have forgotten—"

"Later, Milly. I'm going up to the observatory."

"Emil! I want you to listen to me!"

"Put the things away and lock the door, Milly, will you? I want to catch Dr. Bullett and Dr. Crane before they leave."

Words poured from her lips in a torrent, but he ignored her. At some point, as he crossed the campus toward Ryder

Hill, Dr. Padgham's day-long anger shaded away into pleasurable excitement.

The path up to the observatory was steep. The professor had to pause twice to catch his breath, for he was old and considerably larger than he should have been. He was heartened to see the glow of light in the reception room. Either Dr. Bullett or Dr. Crane was still at the observatory, then. As he considered the matter, Dr. Padgham rather hoped he would find only one of them.

Dr. Bullett and Dr. Crane were both young, ambitious, intelligent, and widely respected astronomers. Having been jointly in charge of the observatory since it was built, they had been fast friends—until recently. Their falling out was the tea-table sensation of the campus. The cause of their disagreement was, of course, scholarly—Dr. Bullett's publication of his *Theory of the Heliocentric Universe*, which was not only an attack upon Dr. Crane's more cherished concepts of the universe but seemed very personal because of repeated references to research which had been made by both men.

As it turned out, both astronomers met Dr. Padgham when he entered the observatory. And it was only because of their bitter antagonism that either of them gave him a hearing. The professor explained what he had seen. Dr. Bullett at once labeled the discovery an illusion and Dr. Crane, instinctively, took an opposed point of view.

"It's probably a meteor," he said gently. "But let's check it with the big eye and make sure. Dr. Bullett has a regrettable habit of condemning other men's opinions whenever they disagree with his own."

As soon as the observatory telescope had been focused upon Jupiter, Dr. Crane turned toward the professor, frowning.

"It's there, all right," he said. He glared at Dr. Bullett. "I'd guess it has a mass four or five times that of Jupiter itself; but it's funny no other observatory has reported it."

"What do you think it is, Dr. Crane?" the professor asked.

The astronomer drummed speculatively on the mechanism of the telescope and looked at Dr. Bullett. "I've an idea this may upset some of our current fairy tales about the universe."

Dr. Bullett angrily took over the glass. "On the contrary," he said, "this should prove my Heliocentric Theory."

"Oh?" Dr. Padgham felt distinctly uncomfortable, first because he seemed to have set off a further difference between the two men; secondly because he wasn't exactly sure what Bullett's Heliocentric Theory was. True, he had waded through the treatise when it was first published in the *Journal*, but the pages of mathematics had meant very little to him. The only thing he understood was Dr. Bullett's general hypothesis that the Solar System was the exact center of a finite universe which expanded and contracted at intervals calculable in terms of billions of light years.

"I suggest that you examine the manifestation again," Dr. Bullett went on suavely. "It is a tremendous mass, and it is moving in an orbit that crosses Jupiter's."

"Any body entering the Solar System could trace such a pattern," Dr. Crane said frigidly, "if you concede an infinite universe with no central point of explosion."

Dr. Bullett laughed. "Such a system, Dr. Crane, must necessarily presuppose curved light and curved orbits for every body of matters. This—" He hesitated, unable to find a suitable name for it; with a shrug, he gave up. "This thing of Padgham's you will observe, is moving in a straight line directly toward the sun—the center of the Heliocentric Universe. What we are witnessing is the end of a period of expansion. This is the first of the rim-stars to fall inward again toward our sun; it is the beginning of the period of contraction."

"You build a remarkable fiction on a single piece of evidence," Dr. Crane countered. The two men began to quarrel bitterly. Suddenly Dr. Padgham had a violent pang of nagging, personal responsibility. If he had not burst into the observatory with news of his discovery, the antagonism between the two astronomers would not have broken out again. Futilely he tried to intervene; the two men ignored him. And Dr. Padgham's feeling of personal responsibility persisted, growing like the searing flames of a troubled conscience.

Dr. Padgham stole another look in the telescope. What he saw was a vast, black saucer, the color of the space surrounding it and yet subtly and distinctly different. It was like a black, opaque disk lying flat on a sheet of shimmering black silk. The thing was entirely clear and at the same time vaguely nebulous. While he watched, it suddenly loomed larger; the glow of Jupiter vanished behind it. For a moment

Dr. Padgham had the impression that he was not observing a tangible and material object, but a vast emptiness, a kind of hole in the canopy of space.

When he turned away from the telescope he was shivering. His throat was cold as he told the two astronomers what he had seen. Their eager excitement was almost—but not quite—enough to bury their animosity. . . .

. . . The Reverend Samuel Colwaite stood on the veranda of his bungalow with jungle leaves rustling high above him. The son of the chief had promised not to use the ancient sacrifices at his wedding. It was the Reverend Colwaite's greatest triumph since he had come to the mission; it symbolized the final degradation of Bwani Ngani and the heathen gods. The Reverend Colwaite clenched his fists and raised his eyes in prayer toward the sky, his mind pulsing with the exciting tang of hatred. He saw the black disk drop silently into the heavens, swallowing up one of the stars. The Reverend Colwaite read it as a sign that his triumph had been noted and approved; and his soul sang with exaltation. . . .

. . . Within a week the intrusion of the black disk into the Solar System had become something of a sensation—in a mild scholarly way. The excitement spread outward from the university observatory. As each new group of astronomers heard of the discovery, more giant lenses were trained upon the stranger. Everywhere theorists began to turn out papers of explanation, all carefully hedged about with qualifying footnotes. But the total audience was still very limited and specialized. There had been no notice of any sort in the popular press, except for a single paragraph buried in *Time* and headed "Quo Jupiter?"

Since Dr. Padgham had made the discovery, the intruder was called Padgham's Planet. The name seemed to be the only point on which any of them agreed. There were as many different points of view as there were observers and the disagreement was always venomously violent.

As he read the scholarly papers that came to the university, Emil Padgham tried to fight off his persistent and unquenched sense of personal responsibility. Vainly he tried to resist having the phenomenon bear his name. He sought evidence that some observatory somewhere had discovered

the intruder before he had; but he found none. No astronomer reported anything until after he had news of the original discovery from the university.

Dr. Padgham's sense of responsibility turned slowly ominous and terrifying; for a majority of the astronomers conceded that Padgham's Planet would probably hit the earth—a black mass four times the size of Jupiter.

"Yes, it's possible, if Bullett's Heliocentric Theory is sound," Dr. Crane told Emil Padgham. "In which case, Bullett will be right—and he'll never live to know it." The astronomer smiled pleasantly. "On the other hand, according to the more acceptable concepts, Padgham's Planet is moving in a normal, elliptical orbit; it should pass through the Solar System without damage. We simply haven't observed it long enough to understand the direction of its orbit."

"Yet, since it's possible that this—" Dr. Padgham smiled lamely, because the only suitable phrase seemed so archaic and unscientific. "—that this may be the end of the world—"

Dr. Crane shrugged. "Of the scattered dust we call the Solar System. But the universe is endless, Dr. Padgham. There'll still be life somewhere else."

"But doesn't science have a responsibility to the public?"

"You mean, is it up to us to call on them to—to give up their sins and repent?" The astronomer found the idea very amusing.

"I was thinking of it from a slightly different angle. If it happens, it will be quick—floods, quakes, fires, and then nothingness." As Dr. Padgham verbalized the catastrophe, each word expanded the weight of the responsibility lying on his soul. He added weakly, "If the public doesn't know in advance of the danger, there would be no time for panic." That, somehow, would be his fault, too, if he could do nothing now to prevent it.

"You're suggesting that we conspire to keep this quiet, more or less for the good of the patient? Because he's going to die anyway? You're a foolish sentimentalist, Dr. Padgham."

"Sentiment sometimes has a value."

"But science deals in the truth, not its implications."

Dr. Padgham persisted patiently, "Nonetheless, you say you aren't sure. The public isn't likely to understand that quite as you do, Dr. Crane, nor to accept it with any grace.

You might create panic for nothing; it could destroy civilization—science along with everything else.”

“Now that argument makes sense. I’ll see what I can do. The Western Association is meeting here, on campus, next weekend; I might arrange it for you to address them yourself. . . .”

. . . Saminov threw the translations on Dr. Varik’s desk and the little astronomer’s hands shook as he read them. Saminov waited, ramrod straight, fingering the lapel of his uniform while he glared down on Dr. Varik’s gleaming bald head. At last the astronomer looked up.

“But this was only three weeks ago,” he said hopefully.

“And you have made no observations, Varik?”

“I—I—” The astronomer clenched his fist and hoped that his lie would sound convincing. “Indeed, yes; naturally; but I have waited for the—the decision of the Party.” He darted toward the telescope.

“You did wisely,” Saminov agreed. “But your report will be ready for publication in the morning? Properly dated?”

“Yes; yes!” The astronomer’s voice trembled with awe and wonder. “Come see it for yourself, Saminov, a great black sphere so large it obscures Jupiter! . . .”

. . . The scientists who met in the university observatory Saturday evening were quite unaccustomed to any kind of public notice. They were, consequently, altogether flattered when they found that Mike Parron had attended the meeting; and it only dulled the flattery a little when the reporter said he wanted to interview Dr. Padgham first.

Mike Parron and Dr. Padgham talked in the observatory, while the members of the association gathered in the lecture hall below. The professor was worried. He had already discussed the problem with the astronomers. They had definitely not warmed to the idea of concealing the present possibility of disaster. With a reporter actually attending the meeting, the professor knew his prospects were decidedly dim.

Parron perched on the corner of a desk, a slim, tweedy, alert-eyed man, with a cigarette drooping from his lips.

“So you found it three weeks ago,” he said, reviewing the notes he had taken at the meeting. “You were the first man to see it? Funny thing, Dr. Padgham. AP had a report on the



wires this morning from Moscow. Seems a Russian—Dr. Varik—claims a prior discovery, two days earlier than yours. They've named it the Lenin, and they're playing the whole thing up big."

Dr. Padgham gasped with relief. "I hadn't heard." For that one moment his own feeling of responsibility lifted.

"But don't worry about it. They always claim a first in everything."

"No! I'm sure they're right. It relieves my mind a great deal. All this time I've had a feeling that it was somehow my fault. If I had just kept quiet, perhaps none of this—" The professor spread his hands helplessly. "It's foolish, of course, but I can't shake the idea."

The reporter shifted his cigarette, dropping a tiny mound of ash on the polished floor. "It is serious, isn't it, Dr. Padgham?"

"You've talked to Dr. Bullett?"

"He buttonholed me at the door. Gave me a lot of chatter about something he called the Heliocentric Universe. All I got out of it is that Padgham's Planet—or the Lenin, if you like—"

"Lenin, by all means."

"Well, it's dead certain to hit the earth."

"Only if Dr. Bullett's theory holds water."

"The hell with theory! This is a story!"

"Mr. Parron, I want to ask you not to print it."

The reporter was amazed. "What do you take me for? I've won two Pulitzers writing the news—all the news. Boss Aretta tried coercion on me once, with a gun in my back; it didn't work. If you think you—"

"Should a story be printed, Mr. Parron, regardless of the harm it can do?"

"A good newspaper publishes the truth, period."

"Consider the facts first. If the—if the Lenin is going to hit us, it hardly matters what you write, one way or the other. Isn't it better to leave the public in ignorance as long as possible? On the other hand, if nothing is going to happen, your story could only cause chaos and terror that might destroy civilization."

The reporter laughed while he crushed out his cigarette. "I never thought I'd live to hear a professor pleading for

ignorance. Let me make one thing clear: I'm a reporter, Dr. Padgham, not a moral philosopher."

Mike Parron turned away and slouched down the stairway to the reception room. Dr. Padgham followed him slowly, miserably dejected. It was impossible for him to hold back the crushing conviction of his own responsibility.

He slipped out quietly and walked back to Faculty Avenue. Instead of going into the house, he climbed the stairway to his hobby room over the garage. He sat for a long time staring at his telescope, but in his mind he saw the flaming terror of a civilization helplessly watching the approach of its own destruction.

He looked with horror on the gray, black face of death. Not the death of himself as an individual. That was normal and necessary. He was an old man and, all told; he had lived a pleasant life. His own extinction meant nothing. But what he saw now was the end of man and of all the things of his making; of life itself, caught in the convulsive flame of broiling granite and seething seas, the fine atomic mist of nothingness.

Milly came up the steps, smiling when she saw him.

"I'm so glad you're back, Emil!"

He got up quickly. "I'm sorry; I should have let you know."

"It's all right now." She clung to his hand as they walked back toward the house. "It's so odd, Emil! After all these years, I—I was afraid to be here alone."

He nodded toward the night sky. "Because of that?"

"I suppose so. But it isn't for myself, Emil. I began to think about other people. Especially the children; the very little ones. It seems such a—such a shame, somehow." Her voice broke and he saw that she was crying.

As they mounted the steps to the porch, Dr. Bullett hailed them from the front walk, on his way home from the observatory.

"Night, Dr. Padgham. Fine meeting, wasn't it?"

"Very."

"That reporter fellow—Parron—he promised us this would be on every front page in the country by tomorrow morning. My Theory of the Heliocentric Universe!" He glared triumphantly up at the stars. "Think of it! Proof in my own lifetime!"

Dr. Padgham trembled because he thought, instead, of

torment and chaos, of mobs stampeding in terror to escape the inescapable.

"Look, Dr. Padgham!" Dr. Bullett called again, pointing toward the sky. "It's already close enough for you to see it with your naked eye."

Both Dr. Padgham and Milly studied the heavens, but neither of them could find the black intruder. The professor apologized, "I suppose my sight isn't what it used to be. I'll have to stick to my telescope a little while longer. . . ."

. . . The drums throbbed and Bwani Ngani sprang into the circle of dancing black giants, shrilling the ancient hymn to the God of the Thousand Eyes. He wore his fiercest god-mask, a towering monstrosity of drooping feathers splashed with the sacrificial blood. He pointed toward the sign in the sky and chanted his incantation to the demons.

The son of the chief and his bride clung hand in hand on the fringe of the frantic mob, withdrawn from the hypnotic savagery of hate. They spoke with their eyes; after a moment they turned away and took the path toward the mission cottage.

"So much fear and anger," she whispered when they were alone. "I have no room in my heart for it, or it would drive out my love for you."

"And signs in the sky! Childish nonsense. The white friends at the mission have taught us that."

"God is Love, not a demon or a devil mask. That I learned, too."

They saw the roof of the mission through the trees and, in the clearing in front, the Reverend Colwaite and his staff were gathered at prayer. . . .

. . . The first newspaper account of the discovery of Padgham's Planet, written in restrained and scientific prose, had aroused very little popular interest. There the matter might have died if the newspapers had not referred to the thing by name. Within an hour a diplomatic incident had exploded. The Russians claimed the right to name the phenomenon; formal protest was made to the state department. The American press reacted unanimously. It became a matter of national honor to defend the name of Padgham's Planet.

Dr. Padgham tried desperately to use the situation to escape

his burning conviction of responsibility that gave him no peace. If the Russians claimed the invader, let them have it. But the astronomers were too busy quarreling over interpretations of the phenomenon to give Dr. Padgham a hearing. After a delay of a week, the editor of an influential city newspaper consented to see him; but when Dr. Padgham explained what he wanted, the editor merely shook his head.

"We understand your modesty, Dr. Padgham, but this involves our national sovereignty. If we give in on one point, there's no telling what new demands they'll make."

"But a name means nothing! If they say it is the Lenin—"

"It is the principle involved that we must consider, Dr. Padgham."

"Since this thing bears my name, will you grant that my opinion may have some value? I'm sure Dr. Varik saw the thing before I did. Can you publish that comment at an interview?"

"It is entirely against our established editorial policy."

"When this situation began," Dr. Padgham explained, "Mike Parron told me that no news could ever be suppressed because—"

"Suppressed! Did you actually suggest—"

"That's neither here nor there. My point is this: if the original story had to be printed because newspapers publish all the news, what about my comment? Isn't that in the same category?"

"Truth, Dr. Padgham, is entirely relative; and the issue here involves our national interests. The situations are totally different. And now you must excuse me; I have my work to do."

Dr. Padgham departed, thoroughly frustrated. It was a cool afternoon. He walked back to the university.

On all sides he saw evidence of the impact Padgham's Planet was having upon his society. Bars advertised the Helio-centric Cocktail. Department store windows were crowded with gowns and accessories designed for the time "When the Planet Comes." In a bookstore were pyramids of the latest best seller, a slim volume whipped out by a popular evangelist and entitled *Afterward, What?* Slightly smaller type on the scarlet dust jacket asked, "When the end comes, will you be ready?" Across the marquee of a theater dancing lights announced "First Pictures of Padgham's Planet"; the line of

patrons was a block long. A garish sign in the window of a television shop proclaimed that every night at eight-thirty Padgham's Planet was on the air, sponsored by Neuro's Neutral Nerve Pills. At intervals along the street small telescopes had been put up; for twenty-five cents a customer could study the approaching disaster for a full three minutes, although it was now so close that it rode in the sky as large as a silver dollar.

It was all a form of madness; Dr. Padgham knew that. But it was not the particular kind of madness he had feared. It had never occurred to him that even catastrophe could be organized, commercialized, and exploited.

The evening newspaper was on the lawn when he got home. He sat on the porch, thumbing through it. Just before he threw it aside, a story caught his eye. It was a description of Padgham's Planet written by Mike Parron. All the familiar phrases were there—"non-radiant body . . . beyond analysis. . . ." But something new had been added, Parron's own impression that he was not looking at a material substance but at nothingness. He described it as a hole in the sky.

Dr. Padgham suddenly recalled his own impression when he had first looked at the phenomenon through the observatory telescope. He dropped the paper and hurried across the lawn into his hobby room over the garage. Oddly enough, he had not seen the black disc since he had discovered it. He had been too depressed to want to use his telescope again. Nor did he own a television receiver, so he had not been able to enjoy the nightly telecasts. And, even though Padgham's Planet loomed so large in the sky, his sight was apparently so poor that he was still unable to see it.

Abruptly he wanted to study the phenomenon again. His hand trembled as he adjusted his telescope. Another thought occurred to him. The planet had never moved from its place in the sky; yet the earth turned. And observatories in China and Russia, Europe and India were studying it simultaneously. . . .

. . . "Can it be done?" the President asked.

"Yes and no," the rocket expert answered. "We have the techniques and the know-how. I think we can convert our stock-pile of atomic weapons into power units, but—"

"No," the general broke in sharply. "Mr. President, we dare

not strip ourselves of our defenses."

"The most trustworthy mathematicians give us twenty days," the President said, ignoring the general. "How many can we finish in that time?"

"Very few," the rocket expert admitted. "We can build two or three—maybe half a dozen. At most we can provide for a hundred men and women, certainly no more."

"We'll have to select wisely, then."

"Even then it's only a gamble. In theory we can use the atomic power, but we have never experimented with it."

"I cannot release anything from our stock-pile!" the general declared.

"It will be done by executive order," the President told him.

"My responsibility is the defense of the nation," the general said. "Do you think the enemy won't jump us when he knows what we're doing?"

"The solution, then, is to ask them to take part. This, after all, is a threat to mankind itself. Our international bickering—"

"Appeasement!" The general snorted that one word and stomped out.

"It's the thing I had in mind," the rocket expert admitted. "If their technicians and ours could work together, if we can use their stock-pile as well as our own—well, we might provide escape rockets for as many as a million people."

The President sighed. "We'll ask for a conference, then. It will mean publicity, and I rather hoped to avoid it as long as possible. . . ."

. . . The son of the chief and his bride entered the clearing. The Reverend Colwaite interrupted his prayer to receive them, his thin body quivering with pleasure. "Into the fold! Into the fold!" he cried, but the son of the chief did not understand the white man's tongue. As the praise and thanksgiving died away, the Reverend Colwaite asked in the native dialect, "You have come to me to have our kind of wedding ceremony?"

"No, my white friend; we have run away from the hate dance."

"So Bwani Ngani's trying that! It won't do him any good."

"He tells our people of a sign in the sky. They begin to

think the old gods are returning. It is bad for them; we ask your help."

"My God is stronger. Bwani Ngani will be destroyed."

"It is not that which we ask, white friend. Cannot the good in our gods live side by side with yours? Cannot you and Bwani Ngani talk and come to an understanding? We, too, have gods of Love and Kindness. Are they not the same as yours?"

"Look into the sky, you black savage! See the sign of my God! It comes for vengeance on the unbelievers. Go back to your people and say to them to repent while there is time. My God will abide no others!"

The bride spoke for the first time, timidly and softly, "In the mission school, white friend, you taught us Love and Brotherhood, not vengeance. You said there was good in all men. Is there not, then, some good even in Bwani Ngani?"

The Reverend Colwaite threw back his magnificent head and began to pray to the sky. His staff knelt and their voices joined with his. The son of the chief and his bride stood watching for a moment before they stole away. They took another path through the jungle and shortly the pounding of the hate drums and the mission prayer faded away behind them. They found a cave high above a river, and they sat on the earth together. . . .

. . . "Escape Rockets Planned! Russian Delegation Flying to Washington!" Newsboys were shouting hoarsely on every corner when Dr. Padgham went back into the city. Stunned, frightened mobs jammed the streets.

Emil Padgham knew the truth, but none of the men he tried to see had time to hear him. He went to the radio stations, but National Guardsmen surrounded the buildings. He had no pass that would admit him to a newspaper office. He tried talking to strangers on the street, but they shrugged him aside, glaring at him with glazed eyes.

Dr. Padgham thoroughly understood the reason for the precautions. The government was aware that real panic would follow news of the projected escape rockets. The pleasant commercial binge was over; the people faced reality. But for a time the tumult of a mob could be contained if there were no leader to orient the milling toward a single point of action. Consequently, the means of mass communication had

to be rigidly controlled.

But Dr. Padgham knew the truth! He had to be heard before it was too late! Desperately he tried to use the amateur radio transmitter in his hobby room. He talked into the microphone until he was hoarse; he could only hope that someone heard and understood him.

After five hours a unit of guardsmen came and took his transmitter away. Twelve men stayed behind. Dr. Padgham was confined to his house. His telephone was ripped out. The guards were forbidden to talk to him.

He was helpless, isolated like a dangerous fever germ. Mankind had chosen to immobilize the truth and embrace chaos. Only Milly understood, and she was as helpless as he was. For endless hours they sat on the porch, looking down into the city by the bay, two weak, old people who might have prevented the volcano building below them.

But they were not cut off from news. For two weeks the negotiations with Russia went on in Washington. Always at the point of agreement, the conference never quite achieved it, for the Russians insisted that the invader must be called Lenin and the Americans, bolstered by hysterical editorials and scare-headlines screaming appeasement, dared not give up the name of Padgham's Planet. Meanwhile, the phenomenon grew to the size of a black cartwheel in the sky.

After a fashion the rocket project moved forward. Two ships were gradually taking shape on the Mojave Desert. The general had reluctantly released one antiquated atomic weapon for experimental purposes, and the scientists had demonstrated a safe method for converting the weapons into atomic rocket power.

Two great controversies raged in the newspapers. The first had to do with the destination of the escape rockets. Since Padgham's Planet would clearly destroy the Solar System, it seemed necessary for the new civilization, if it managed to survive the flight, to be set up in another part of the Galaxy. The opposition claimed that distance made such a goal impossible; it proposed that the new world be created on Padgham's Planet itself.

The second controversy was far more violent. It revolved around the selection of the fortunate few who would survive. Only a nationwide lottery seemed democratic, yet that might people the new world with mad men or morons, criminals or



perverts. One conservative newspaper wanted only successful men to be chosen, but it was unable to make a specific definition of success; another proposed college professors; a third held out belligerently for "real Americans," again, unfortunately, getting muggy in the matter of definition.

As the days passed Dr. Padgham learned that a small rocket was being built on the university campus. It was not general news, and yet it was broadly hinted at in all the broadcasts. The professor guessed that the rocket was to contain the records and books from the university library, along with the laboratory equipment of the scientists. At least the new civilization was to be given a brave start, granting that any of the personnel chosen had the intelligence to use the accumulated records of man's heritage.

As long as the conference with the Russians continued, the public seethed with inner fear but there was no disorder. If the two nations could come to an agreement, a million people—possibly more—might escape. Each individual's chance of survival was thereby that much greater.

Evangelists exhorted everywhere and at all hours. The churches were crowded to overflowing. Very few people slept. At night they lined the borders of the bay in their cars, staring silently and belligerently up at the black sky.

And, suddenly, Padgham's Planet was three times the size of the moon.

Only when the Washington conference failed and the Russian delegation went home did the restrained tension shatter into chaos. The mob swarmed into the city, looting, burning, destroying. Emil Padgham and Milly stood at their front gate as the savage tide surged past. The mob fear beat at them, clutching at their minds, trying to draw them away from their lonely island of reason into the vortex of madness.

Emil Padgham knew why the people were going to the university campus. There was a rocket there—an escape rocket. Each individual in the mob wanted it for himself, every man was fighting every other for one futile chance of personal survival.

Both Padgham and his sister tried to scream out the truth at the mob, but their words were torn from their lips and ground into nothingness by the hurricane of chaos. Suddenly Milly darted into the flood of humanity. She was brutally

buffeted by a hundred stampeding feet and rudely cast back on the lawn, like driftwood rejected by an angry sea.

But she achieved her purpose: she had pulled to safety two small children who had been trapped in the throng. They sat on the grass beside her, quietly watching the turmoil.

Emil Padgham bent over his sister. She opened her eyes slowly; her body writhed in pain. "There is no way out," she whispered, while a tiny froth of blood flowered on her lips. "It is easier for men to accept the madness and die with it than to believe the truth."

And so she died.

Padgham stood up, his mind in an agony of grief. He heard a roaring overhead and looked up. Beyond the flames flickering over the city a thousand planes were rising from an airfield across the bay, soaring straight up into the sky, their silver wings glinting in the sunlight. As Dr. Padgham followed their flight, the sun dimmed and went out.

He saw his namesake, then—for one brief instant of terror—a vast disk of black emptiness filling all the sky. He saw the tiny fleet of silver planes shatter and explode against the blackness, like fireflies gleaming in the depths of an endless night.

From a great distance he heard the voices of the two children Milly had saved.

"Where are all the people going?" the boy asked.

"I don't know," the girl said. "My Mommy told me the sun went out."

"That's silly; it didn't. I can still see it."

"Yes, so can I."

The truth, Padgham thought: of course the children knew it. They saw reality, not the nightmare the adult mind created. With a sigh he took the children by the hand and led them into the house, away from the sound and the chaos. "Let's see if we can find some milk and cookies," he suggested. The children's eyes shone with pleasure. . . .

. . . At dawn they looked out on a quiet, green world, where dew still danced in the sunlight. The son of the chief frowned at the bright, blue sky, his eyes puzzled.

"It's gone," he said. "The sign they said the gods had sent to destroy us."

His bride slipped her hand into his, smiling confidently.

"They were just talking to frighten us—to make us obey. There was no sign. There is no god of hate—only the god of love, that you and I understand."

"But last night, when we were in the clearing, I thought I saw a—" He hesitated, unsure of his words. "—a kind of something in the sky. I know the Reverend Colwaite saw it; I know Bwana Ngani saw it."

"People will always see what they want to see. They twist truth to suit themselves. They make evil and terror just as real as—" She took him in her arms and pressed her lips, warm and sensuous, against his. "Just as real as this."

Some time after that, when the sun was higher in the sky, they walked back to the village. It puzzled them that both their native settlement and the missionary compound had vanished. But they felt no fear—for their souls were too crowded with the fulfillment of their love for each other to admit even the tenuous waifs of the black evil.