

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# insane planet

by THOMAS N. SCORTIA

He activated the anti-grav and shot upwards, the fury of their cries behind him as he vanished in the dark.

THE SHIP popped out of hyperspace like a cork out of a bottle.

For a microsecond it hovered between being and not-being, as though deciding if it were worth the effort to exist in the real world. Its metal body flickered with the blue nimbus of a high frequency brush discharge and inside its magnaluminum skin insane instruments registered impossible readings.

The ubiquitous blue glow faded with the arcing snap of smoking relays. Almost instantly the commo bank crackled and spat like an angry cat.

"Get the hell out of here," a voice commanded.

"What the blazes was that?" Balmer demanded from the rear of the cabin. He pushed his tall, compactly sinewed body violently from the astrogator's couch and swore vigorously as the sudden movement threw him against the commo panel to his right. A toggle switch dug a small channel in the flesh above his right eye. He fished a handkerchief from his breast pocket and staunched the ooze of blood.

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*Thomas N. Scortia, author of THE SHORES OF NIGHT, which appeared in the 1956 Dikty Anthology, and many other stories, returns with this contribution to the legend about Kilroy that was old before that famous gentleman was born. Who was he? Haven't you heard about Kilroy?*

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"Damn, damn, damn," he said very carefully and with tight-lipped precision.

"You heard me," the speaker said again. "This here system's private property. Get the hell out."

"Nut!" Balmer opined loudly.

Fable grabbed a welded handhold beside the transmitter and flipped the transceiver switch to "send."

"This is Survey X-23-T. Come in and identify yourself."

He flipped the switch to "receive" and waited, blotting the cut above his eye. The audio bank above the transceiver resembled so many blank coin-sized eyes regarding him with an idiot stare. They cracked and spat and whistled. There was no other sound.

Balmer's squat, thick-necked figure floated down beside him.

"What do you think?" the pilot wanted to know.

"English. Sounds like a modern accent. Beyond that, your guess is as good as mine."

The audio bank muttered and mumbled and buzzed. Fable hit the send toggle and said, "All right, Mister. Come in and identify yourself."

The audio bank only burped.

Then there was a shrill whistling sound. It squelched abruptly and the same voice said peevishly,

"I told ya onct an' I told ya twiset. Now, git outta my system, dammit."

"Sounds like an old duck," Balmer said. "What's he doing out here?"

"Space hermit," Fable snorted. "Look, old-timer," he told the voice, "this is a League survey ship and, whether you like it or not, you're on our list."

The voice broke into a series of muffled curses. "Ain't no privacy for a man anywhere. Dog you from one system to another."

"Just doing a job. Give us three days and then we'll leave you alone."

"I know you johnnies. Give you a yard... Oh, damn, don't suppose I can stop you. Coming in to Two?"

"Two's the one," Fable admitted. "Every other planet in the system looks like a deep-freeze or a furnace."

"Okay. Atmosphere density's point seven six at sea level. Figure out your own skip pattern. And don't bother me any more."

"Wait! What's your name?" Fable clipped as the carrier wave began to fade.

"Pete Kilroy," the voice said, "and the hell with you."

"Kilroy," Balmer moaned. "Wouldn't you know it though."

"We're low on reaction mass for planetary drive," Fable pointed out as Balmer fed his skip data to the auto-

pilot. "May as well use the atmosphere to brake us since we have the data."

He began to strap himself into the astrogator's couch as Balmer completed his task. He moved the wafer-thin cathode tube in a wide arc on its mount until the surface faced him. Then he cut in the telescopic circuits.

"You won't see much," Balmer called back. "Heavy cloud masses."

Fable started to answer but the first burst of acceleration pushed him back into the couch and he felt his lungs collapse with the sudden weight. For seconds he felt the old nausea in the pit of his stomach as the fluids of his inner ear sent out insane signals each time the rockets fired briefly. Seconds later the auto-pilot began to build up speed in the new direction it had selected.

The ship accelerated at a constant two gees for nearly an hour. Finally Balmer cut the engines manually and began to make minor corrections from direct observation. Fable began to feel loggy and he was just beginning to doze when he heard a sharp exclamation from the pilot.

"What's the matter?" he demanded sleepily.

"Take a look at Two."

He reached out and cut the view screen in at normal magnification. The cloud-matted daylight side of Two filled the screen and for a

moment he could see nothing but the blue-white glare of the cloud level. Then he noticed the tiny specks scattered across the face of the white.

"Moons?" he suggested.

"Artificial satellites," Balmer said sourly. "Take a closer look."

Fable cut in the highest telescopic circuit and suddenly one of the specks swelled to a sphere of metal nearly thirty feet in diameter. It revolved slowly on its axis as he watched.

Luminous letters painted on the side of the satellite paraded across his vision.

They said, "Danger! Death Rays!"

He found another sphere in the same orbit and following the first by perhaps a hundred miles. There was a sign on this one too.

It said: "Trespassers Buried Free of Charge!"

A third sphere behind the second reported: "Quarantined! Bubonic Plague!"

"There's just one thing we need now," Balmer snorted.

"What?"

"One that says 'Beware of the Dog!'"

A moment later Fable found one.

The ship had passed the orbit of the satellites when the auto-pilot fired the engines in a quick braking blast. As the engines died, the gyroscope in the depths of the

ship sounded a rising whine and the nose of the vessel again rotated toward the world below. Fable watched the cotton-batting sphere that was Two swim down over his viewplate. As it began to dissolve into the lower edge of the screen, he cut in the forward pick-up and watched it drift back into view.

Under ordinary landing conditions, they would have approached tail downward, using the planetary drive rockets to brake their fall. It was possible to use the atmosphere of a planet to brake forward speed by skipping the ship over the fringes of the air envelope in much the same manner that a stone skips over the surface of a pond, but this was quite dangerous and difficult to do without data on air densities. With the bare data that Kilroy had given them, Fable had been able with the observed surface gravity of Two to calculate the extent of the atmosphere and to set up a skip pattern for the auto-pilot to follow. Not that Balmer was not skilled enough to handle the pattern manually, but the auto-pilot, within the limits of its operation, could adjust for the approach much more quickly and smoothly.

Fable was scanning the viewplate for a break in the cloud surface ahead when he noticed that the deck under him was trembling with a small but definite vibration.

For a moment its significance didn't penetrate. Then he yelled,

"Balmer. Check your hull pyrometers."

The pilot's hand lashed out frantically and Fable was slammed into the couch as the engines shuddered to life. It seemed for a moment as if the ship were plunging straight downward into Two.

"We shouldn't have hit atmosphere for another ten seconds," he yelled above the thin shriek of knifed air.

He could hear the heavy vibration of fuel pumps below the power deck. The bulkhead beside him began to vibrate as the stubby airfoils of the ship bit into the atmosphere. The temperature of the cabin was rising and he felt the droplets of perspiration beginning to bead his lip.

The ship yawed wildly for a moment and he seemed to lose all orientation. For seconds it seemed as if they were falling end over end. Then his sensations began to sort themselves into a coherent pattern. He realized that he had clamped his teeth tightly together. He felt the warm taste of blood from compressed gums.

For a second he lost all weight and the rockets took on a heavier note. Balmer was shouting something, but the only word Fable could make out was "Kilroy," repeated again and again.

He flipped the viewscreen

to the aft pick-up. They were falling straight down, tail first. They were in controlled flight though, he saw with relief.

"What happened?" he demanded, surprised at the steadiness of his voice.

"Point seven six, my eye," Balmer rasped. "Sea level density's more like one and a half."

No wonder they'd hit atmosphere so soon, Fable thought. A little more and the ship would have been thrown out of control to drive itself into the planet's surface far below.

"That old coot tried to kill us," Balmer said.

Fable's viewplate cleared at that moment as the ship plunged through the clouds. Below as far as his eye could see a huge planetary ocean gleamed placidly.

"Hope you brought your water wings," he said.

The ship still had a lateral component of velocity, he saw from his instruments. However, there was no feature on the surface below to which he could relate that component and it appeared as if they were falling vertically.

"I'm taking her up," Balmer said.

"Wait a minute."

"Another minute and you'll be taking a bath."

"There's an island," Fable exclaimed as a triangular land mass floated into view from

the left. He felt the rockets increase their thrust momentarily as Balmer slowed their fall. Moments later they were falling again, but this time in a path that would intersect the vertex of the triangular island. Fable saw that the major part of the island was covered with a thick growth of trees. He had a quick impression of massive buildings grouped at the end opposite from the vertex as the ship settled toward the white area that Balmer had selected. Probably a sandy beach, he thought.

"Kilroy," he heard Balmer shout.

He caught one glimpse of the beach rushing toward them. Scrawled across the smooth white expanse was a series of ragged black letters.

They spelled: "Danger! Quicksand!"

Fable kicked at the dirty black stains in the sand and then shook his boot free of clinging particles.

"Apparently, he spelled the words out in a series of bonfires," he said. "That way the charcoal marks would be visible for some distance and the rain wouldn't wash the stuff away for some time."

"Well, we can't leave him here. He's obviously a candidate for the laughing academy," Balmer grunted. He heaved his shoulders, throwing the weight of the anti-gravity pack higher on his

back, and began to buckle the remaining straps that dangled from the hollow magnesium frame. Then he checked the jet bottles and their fuel lines on either side of the assembly.

"Why not?" Fable wanted to know. "I don't relish the idea of a maniac with us on the return trip to base."

"You know better than that."

"I suppose so," Fable shrugged. He looked toward the line of trees that bordered the stretch of beach upon which they had made planet-fall.

"He must have spent the last five years making signs," he observed.

Along the border of the forest at irregular intervals were scattered large signs and small signs and he could see small placards nailed at random on the nearer trees. Several of them read: "Radioactive Area!", "Keep Off the Grass!", "Sound Your Klygon!" and one huge sign next to a break in the tree line shouted: "Don't Feed The Hypogrif!"

"Where'd he get all the materials?" Fable wondered.

"Probably from the city we saw on our way down. That undoubtedly is where he's holed up." Balmer began to buckle a needle beam to his hip.

"Well, I'll bring him back," he said.

"What am I supposed to do while you hunt this man?"

Balmer fumbled with the control box on his chest. The jet bottles sobbed and coughed as he began to drift upward.

"Just play nice," he said, "and Daddy'll bring you a lollipop."

Fable watched him rise into the sky and drift slowly to the west, his body swaying slightly from the thermal currents rising from the forest.

Fable busied himself for the next hour, running a routine mechanical check on the engines and recalibrating the navigation instruments. As soon as he had assured himself that no more could be done, he began to wonder what he might do next to escape the inevitable boredom of waiting. He began to wish that he had taken the second anti-grav frame and followed Balmer. He had to admit, however, the wisdom of one man's staying with the ship. After all, you never knew what a crazy coot such as Kilroy might do. He might even try to blow up the ship.

He wondered about the city they had seen. There'd been only a brief glimpse and neither of them had thought to trip the cameras, but he remembered low squat structures, unadorned and massive-looking even at that elevation. Certainly the beings who had built the structures weren't indigenous to the planet unless they were amphibians.

He left the ship and wandered across the beach toward the edge of the wood. He wanted to get a better look at some of the smaller signs that Kilroy had posted. The hermit had displayed a startling fecundity of imagination in conjuring up lethal dangers against which he warned the viewer.

As he approached the clearing next to the sign, forbidding anyone to feed the hypogrif, he saw that the space was quite regular. It appeared to have been cleared fairly recently and through this break in the trees a road stretched back into the forest. What he had at first assumed to be some kind of plastic paving material, he now saw to be fused dirt and sand. It was as though someone with a hot torch had melted a path through the forest down to the beach.

As he leaned over to inspect the surface more closely, he heard a violent crashing in the underbrush.

He looked up to see a nightmare of wings and talons and hooked beak plunging down on him at rocket speed.

For the briefest instant, an idiot thought giggled in his mind.

He could not well avoid feeding the hypogrif.

As soon as Balmer had ascended to nearly a hundred feet, he set a course for the

east end of the island where they had noticed the city. He watched Fable's figure dwindle to an undifferentiated blob of darkness against the white sand and then he looked down to find that he was over the forest. The growth beneath him was thick and matted with no one specific plant predominating. To his left he saw a sharp division in the forest and he flew laterally for a moment until he was directly over the area. The break was a straight path cut through the trees and he could see that the surface of the cleared lane shone with a glazed appearance. The road was quite straight and pointed like an arrow to the east toward the city.

Using the road as a guide, he continued east. He had estimated the distance to the base of the triangular island at nearly forty miles, but, after an hour of flying, he decided that it was probably closer to thirty. The sun was already hot on his back and his plastic visor was fogging with perspiration as he approached the city.

It looked quite crude. It was composed of massive cubical structures of slag-like material that showed a wavy, glazed effect on its surface. It was, he decided, probably the same fused earth that surfaced the highway. The group looked, somehow, hastily thrown together with little attention to order. He was so



engrossed in the details of the buildings that he didn't notice the shimmer in the air.

Suddenly it was as if he were wading through thick molasses that solidified in his path.

The breath was shoved violently back into his throat and the jet bottles coughed and sputtered. Then he began to fall at an impossible angle. It was as if he were sliding down the side of a slick glass dome.

Somehow he managed to regain control and steer laterally. A second later he was free and hovering some distance away from the shimmer. Kilroy, Balmer decided, must have cannibalized his ship to build a force screen that size. Either that or he had found some apparatus left by the original builders of the encampment. Whatever the explanation, the group of buildings was quite effectively encircled by an impenetrable umbrella that resisted all movement perpendicular to it.

He gained altitude for a moment so that he might inspect the shore beyond the group of buildings. He had thought that the screen might terminate in the water and that he might swim under it. Kilroy had been much too clever for that, he saw. No part of the force boundary touched the water.

Finally he drifted down to the highway. He debated

scouting the limits of the screen, hoping to find a gate. Screens of this type could be projected from a point either inside of or outside of the hemisphere and occasionally an electronic gate was used to permit local entry without collapsing the dome. Probably Kilroy had adapted his ship's meteor screen to produce the heavy field. In which case, he probably didn't have the necessary equipment for a gate, unless he'd purposely brought it along.

The anti-grav frame was beginning to weigh him down now that he had turned it off and he began to unbuckle the straps. He sat down and carefully worked the apparatus from his shoulders and onto the ground. He carried it off the highway and leaned it against the gnarled trunk of a wide-leaved tree. As he rose, he noticed for the first time that someone had carved a series of letters with a needle beam in the bowl of the tree.

"Kilroy was here," he read with a snort of disgust.

He checked the anaesthetic gun at his waist and the needle beam on the other side. Then he left the highway, walking parallel to the transparent shimmer of the screen. The vegetation on either side for perhaps twenty feet back had been flattened into a brown sere mat where the screen had apparently oscillated back and forth during a period of instability.

He had walked perhaps a hundred yards along the circumference when he saw the large sign which read: "Beware! Booby traps." Some distance away there was an even larger one which proclaimed: "Monsters! Proceed at your own risk!"

Balmer began to get angry. It was like fighting a shadow. They hadn't even seen Kilroy yet, but everywhere were the signs of his ubiquitous presence.

He paused before the "Proceed at your own risk!" sign and inspected it carefully. The white background of the sign was yellowed with age. Apparently Kilroy had painted this one at least a year before. The paint was already becoming veined with age, but there was no sign of scaling. He circled around it. There were more words on the back.

They said: "You were warned."

His feet must have encountered some tripping device at that moment, for in the next instant a heavy sapling which had been bent almost double suddenly freed itself and whipped erect. He felt a hand grab at his boots and then he was flying upward, feet first.

His head struck the ground and splinters of pain laced his skull. For seconds he was too dazed to realize what had happened. Then he discovered he was dangling, head down, from a thick rope that disap-

peared into the foliage of the tree above him.

"I have something to say," an unctuous voice said.

"Damn you, Kilroy," Balmer yelled, swinging wildly. "Come out here and cut me down."

"Keep your temper," the voice said piously.

For a moment Fable stood rooted to the highway in shocked disbelief. The beast thundered toward him in an unswerving path, its tiny yellow eyes gleaming hungrily. He saw the beaked mouth work suggestively as the thing emitted tiny, mewling cries. They were fully as horrible as if the beast were roaring with an ear-deadening volume.

Somehow he found the strength to turn. He was running then with a wild panic clutching his throat. His feet left the highway and began to sob through muffling sand. The stuff sprayed around his boots and splattered his knees. He knew with a horribly divorced part of his mind that he was going too slow, that he would never make it to the ship.

Then his right toe dug into the sand with shuddering violence and his forehead pounded into the damp sand. He lay, clutching moist gobs of white particles...waiting.

He waited for a long while.

He listened, but there was no noise.

He sat up and looked around.

The beast had disappeared.

Someone laughed a high, cackling laugh and he whirled in the direction of the wood. The ragged figure, clad in tattered plastine coveralls, eyed him from under scraggly, white brows and pursed its wrinkled lips.

"Well, now, if you ain't the picture."

"Kilroy."

"The same."

Fable clawed his way to his feet and brushed the white sand from his trousers. He wondered what had happened to the beast. Certainly Kilroy hadn't frightened it away... He started to advance on the old man.

Then he stopped. Except for the mewing cries, the beast's charge had been absolutely silent, he realized. Not a footfall and the thing must have weighed at least a ton. Come to think of it, in retrospect the legs had been moving entirely too slowly for the speed of its charge.

"Now, ain't you sorry you didn't stay away?" Kilroy said.

"You and your damn so-lideo projections," Fable snapped. He walked up to the old man and raised his fist. "If you weren't so dried up, I'd..."

"He, he, go ahead and try it."

The sudden suspicion

stopped him. He made a tentative pass and instantly Kilroy was gone as though someone had thrown a switch.

"This place ain't healthy," Kilroy said from behind him.

He whirled.

"Better git while the git-tin's good," a duet of Kilroys remarked from his left.

"Sure hate to see a lad like you come to a sticky end," a quartet giggled behind him.

"Like that," a distant chorus chanted as two mounds suddenly bulged in the sand at his feet. Each mound was marked with a crude wooden cross.

"Sure would," another voice said as all but one of the Kilroys flickered out. The remaining Kilroy flapped his arms violently and soared upward to perch awkwardly on a sign nailed high in the fork of a tree.

The sign said, "Danger! Active Volcanoes!"

The voice dripped self-satisfaction.

"I have something to say," it said.

"Keep your temper," it said.

Balmer's reaction almost blistered the air.

"Keep your temper," the oily voice admonished. There was the faintest suggestion of a wagging finger in the tone.

Balmer examined his position. The concealed noose had slipped easily over his boots as the bent sapling had snapped erect. It was, he real-

ized, a trap as old as man himself. The ancient North American Indians had used a similar device to trap small game. The thought that he was very large game indeed did nothing to maintain his forced calm.

He found that by straining he could move his head and get an uneasy view of the thick rope that supported his body. It was at least an inch in diameter and carefully woven with vines for camouflage. He noticed with a start that the light was beginning to fade and he had a mental picture of himself, hanging like a bled carcass in a butcher shop throughout the dark night.

Then he remembered the needle beam and he mouthed silent prayers that the sudden somersault had not dislodged it from its holster. He fumbled blindly for a moment and then his hand encountered the butt. As he started to withdraw it from his holster, his hands slipped and for an agonizing moment, the weapon seemed to slip from his fingers. He clapped his hand wildly to his side and his body began to sway violently. He felt the needle beam trapped between his arm and chest.

Carefully he crossed his left hand over his body. A breathless moment later the weapon was in his hand.

Taking aim was the most difficult part of the manuev-

er. The beam could be triggered for several minutes before the charge was exhausted. There was, therefore, no real problem in intersecting the plane of the rope. However, each movement caused the sapling to bend sickingly and his body to sway and rotate lazily. There was a definite chance, he saw with some alarm, that he might bring the beam in too low. Of course, his thoughts added wryly, the beam cauterized as it burned and they did have some wonderful prosthetic devices these days. Still, he rather preferred his own two limbs rather than two reasonable facsimiles of plastic and metal.

Carefully he held his hand away from his body and waited until his body had ceased rotating. The light was getting dim and it was becoming increasingly difficult to see. Finally, he took a deep breath and thumbed the firing stud, moving his arm slowly in a fanning motion.

All at once the ground slammed him in the face. He rolled over and began to free his legs from the entangling rope. His fingers briefly encountered the heel of his left boot. A thrill of reaction twisted his stomach as his hand explored the charred, gummy gash where part of the material had been melted away.

A voice to his left said, "Keep your temper!"

One hand closed on the needle beam and he leaped to his feet. He pushed the under-growth aside. In the twilight he almost overlooked the dull enameled box, half buried in the dirt and mould of the forest floor.

"I have something to say," the box said.

The flare of the beam silenced its endless chant.

He found the anti-grav frame beside the tree where he had left it. As he strapped the clumsy device to his back, he decided that there was no point in trying to find a way through the screen in the darkness. For all he knew, Kilroy might have prepared other and more deadly traps.

He made his way to the highway and stood for a moment, looking at the buildings of the encampment. He wished that he'd thought to bring a pair of binoculars. In the fast growing shadows the buildings looked even more massive than before. He could see several shadowy openings in one of the nearer structures and he wondered what race must have originally reared the buildings with such a complete disregard for anything, but raw strength. The doorway, if such it was, appeared over thirty feet high.

The general simplicity of design disturbed him. It didn't at all jibe with the advanced techniques indicated by the use of the fused earth

method of construction.

At first he didn't notice the heavier shadows moving among the buildings to his left. When the motion finally did catch his eye, he turned and saw something huge and ponderous approaching his position. The moving shape paused at his movement. He stood, waiting for some sound or movement.

Suddenly a low moan quivered on the night air as though the thing were in pain. The moan cut off in a shrill piercing cry. In the next instant the massive creature was hurtling forward in a stumbling lunge. At the last moment it encountered the force screen and lurched backward. He had only the vaguest impression of a huge body, glittering with scales and topped by a beaked face with golden hawk eyes. Then other shadows were running from the buildings toward him.

A score of creatures hurled themselves with wild abandon against the palpable screen. One by one they were hurled backward, only to renew their assault.

Quite without thinking, Balmer activated the anti-grav frame. His body shot upward into the darkness of the night, leaving the creatures below.

The fury of their shrill cries followed him into the blackness of the upper air.

A fifty foot tyrannosaurus spent the evening clawing at the airlock while Fable and Balmer argued in the control room.

"I don't see how they can be an indigenous race," Fable insisted.

"Why not?" Balmer frowned at the image in the aft screen. The shadowy monster outside was busily gnawing at one leg of the ship's tripod. It sounded like someone cracking walnuts with his teeth.

"Too big for one thing," Fable said.

"They didn't seem to have any trouble moving around."

"Probably personal anti-gravity screens. After all, we use them on heavy planets."

"You're assuming a lot."

"Look," Fable protested, "we've found only one land mass on this planet and a small land mass at that. There's no evidence of any native culture, let alone one advanced enough to build a road like that one outside."

"Well, what's the answer?"

"You said the encampment looked crude."

"That's right. Forgetting the size, just a bunch of glorified huts made of fused earth."

"Well, maybe they're shipwrecked."

"How so?"

"Well, aren't those the sort of structures we'd put up if we were forced down on a planet?"

"Not if we planned to stay permanently."

"That's the whole point. The encampment has all the air of being temporary. Maybe they're just waiting rescue."

"And Kilroy's got them bottled up behind a force screen."

"That's what worries me. This is the first contact we've had with an advanced race."

"And they're hopping mad over the antics of a screwy space hermit."

"Exactly. Apparently Kilroy decided he didn't want to be bothered. Since he couldn't remove them, he just walled them up in one corner of the island."

"No wonder they're spitting blood," Balmer said.

"We've got to contact them somehow and break the screen."

"That shouldn't be too difficult...breaking the screen, I mean. We can find the projector with a warp detector."

"But," Fable said wearily, "how do we explain their being sealed off in the first place? They don't sound as if they're in a mood to listen to alibis."

"There's one other thing," Balmer said. "If they're shipwrecked, where's the wreck?"

"The what?"

"The wreck. Where's the wreck of their ship?"

At that moment a muffled explosion sounded. The ship shuddered alarmingly. Balmer

whirled on the viewplate.

"He's trying to dynamite the tripod," he yelled as a second explosion thudded outside.

They dived for the hatch simultaneously, and tumbled down the three decks to the airlock. As the airlock opened ponderously, Fable remembered the tyrannosaurus.

"Wait," he yelled. "He may have something planted out there."

But Balmer was through the airlock and swinging agilely down the metal ladder to the sand. There was no sign of the monster.

"There he goes," Balmer shouted. He started off across the sand in a low gallop. Ahead of him, Fable saw the low figure of a man, running for the edge of the forest.

"Don't follow him," he shouted.

Kilroy's figure had barely reached the edge of the woods when a wall of flame leaped with a loud whoosh from the sand. Against the yellow backdrop, Balmer poised for an instant and then retreated hastily.

Fable met him several yards from the ship.

"Why'd you stop?" he demanded. "It's only another projection."

Balmer ruefully rubbed his forehead.

"Since when does a projection singe your eyebrows?" he demanded.

The next morning they checked for damage that Kilroy might have done during the night.

"Apparently he was just trying to scare us off," Balmer said. His face was hard and grim in the morning light as he finished adjusting the anti-grav frame to his back.

"That figures," Fable said. He was inspecting the two craters in the sand some distance from the ship. "The last thing he wants to do is maroon us."

"What bothers me," Balmer said, "is that he might stop just trying to scare us." He rubbed his singed eyebrows thoughtfully.

Fable looked in the direction of the shallow, heavily carboned trench along the edge of the woods. They had discovered several empty drums near its edge. Kilroy had used their volatile contents to lay his flame barrier. The igniter had, Fable suspected, been a simple electric match. Crude, but workable.

Balmer checked the bulky warp detector strapped to his equipment harness and said, "He's probably projecting the screen from outside the encampment. I should be able to spot it by its warp field."

"You're not going to try to lower it immediately?"

"Not on your life. Those babies didn't want to play footsie yesterday and I doubt if their temper has improved since."

Fable watched him soar into the morning sky. Then he returned to the ship. He spent the morning bringing the log up to date. Periodically he scanned the fringe of the woods.

At 1150 hours Kilroy appeared near the highway and hailed the ship. Fable inspected the man in the viewscreen for several minutes. Finally he decided that he'd better see what the hermit wanted. He couldn't decide if this were the real Kilroy or merely another projection.

The man was carrying a white flag, he saw, a flag that looked suspiciously like the tattered remains of a pair of long underwear.

"All right," he told Kilroy as soon as he was within comfortable talking distance, "spit it out."

"You johnnies better git," Kilroy said.

"You're repeating yourself," Fable sneered. He saw that Kilroy's feet were firmly planted on the ground. The sand of the beach made definite ripples around the edges of his boots.

"Tired of playing with projections?" he asked.

"Them gooks on the north end ain't projections."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you'd better not fool with them. They're sure poison."

"Poison to you, maybe. Can't say I blame them."

A needle beam suddenly appeared in Kilroy's hand. He waved it awkwardly.

"Damn it, I told you jokers to git."

The weapon, Fable saw, looked corroded, and ill-kept.

"You'd better put a charge in that if you're going to shoot anybody," he said.

Kilroy frowned. Then he swore and threw the weapon.

Fable ducked, stepped forward, and hit him. The blow didn't land solidly and in the next instant the mass of sinew and bone that was Kilroy was climbing over him.

He aimed a blow at the old man's stomach. Kilroy wiggled aside and the blow spent its force on empty air. He was suddenly on Fable's back, clawing at him like some ungainly spider. Fable dropped quickly to his knees and hunched forward. Kilroy gave a thin cry and flew over his head.

He landed on the sand and was on his feet immediately.

Before he could orient himself, Fable threw himself in a low, leg-breaking tackle. Kilroy collapsed in a heap. Fable moved to pin him to the sand as Kilroy began to struggle violently.

"Dammit," he panted. "Pick on an old man. Lemme up."

Then they heard the explosion.

Kilroy stopped struggling.

"Young idjit," he screamed. His voice was high and womanish.



Fable grabbed for his collar. "What was it?" he demanded. He shook Kilroy violently. "All right, talk."

"Young idjit," Kilroy screamed again.

"What was that blast?"

"Get out. We got to get away."

"Talk." Kilroy's teeth chattered loudly as his head snapped back and forth.

"We got to get out of here. The young fool set off the screen."

"The screen?"

"Had it booby trapped," Kilroy gasped. "Blows up if anybody tries to turn it off."

Bright beams of red light began to fan the air above the forest to the north. Then there was another explosion.

"Cut it out," Kilroy chattered. "Them monsters is loose and they'll be heading this way any minute."

"We're waiting for Balmer."

"No," Kilroy yelled. "They got him and we'll be next."

All the while new explosions punctuated the fantastic deluge of words from the man. Kilroy seemed to collapse in on himself.

Fable pulled him to his feet. Then he hit him hard on the chin and stepped back as Kilroy collapsed with a sigh.

There was a sound of violent crashing in the distance. A cloud of dust and smoke began to rise over the forest and through the cloud a small

form darted. Balmer was traveling as fast as the jet bottles would propel him.

He drew near and swooped toward the beach at top speed. He hit running and tumbled head over heels. Fable was beside him in seconds, helping him to his feet.

"Let's upship...fast," Balmer panted.

"What's happened?" Fable demanded.

"That's what happened." He gestured to his rear.

Less than a mile away, knee deep in trees that splintered before their advance, an endless stream of massive forms crashed toward them.

Fable turned to run after Balmer. Then he stopped to hoist the limp form of Kilroy to his back.

Behind him the things were bellowing their rage in voices that splintered the air.

They were well past the orbit of the last satellite when Fable returned from the hold.

"He'll sleep like a baby 'til we hit base," he said.

"Should have left him down there," Balmer growled.

"You don't mean that."

"Crazy as a loon," Balmer said. He gestured at the viewplate. It framed the last metal satellite, the one that said, "Beware! Death Rays!"

"Wonder how he built those things and got them into an orbit."

"He didn't," Fable said. "They're empty fuel tanks."

"That size?"

"Well, they're not from a human ship," Fable said.

"All right, stop being coy."

"I'm not. Kilroy told me the story on the beach. Those are empty tanks orbited by the alien ship, the one that brought our friendly gargantuas below."

"But we didn't see any sign of a ship."

"Well, that's the joker. That's why the girls were mad."

"Girls?"

"Sure. Our monsters were all female."

"Look, I've been nearly blown up and nearly stepped on like an ant. I'm not in the mood for riddles."

"Well," Fable said, "you've got to remember that people like Kilroy have a pathological desire for privacy."

"In other words, he's nuts. I'll take your word for that."

"Essentially. Anyway, when this alien star ship landed with the aliens, he didn't like being disturbed. After all, from what he'd said, he had enough trouble finding a habitable deserted world."

"But..."

"I'm giving it to you the way Kilroy gave it to me. He said they had some sort of language machine that taught him their language. Their sun's about to blow up and they're one of several survival groups. When they discovered we existed, they decided

to ask us for help in evacuating their world. Kilroy figured his little hermitage would be invaded by every kind of emergency team if they made contact. So..."

"So he locked them away."

"Wrong. He gave them directions to the nearest League base."

"But you said..."

"I know. What he didn't count on was that the males decided to go on, leaving the females behind. I guess they didn't have too much fuel and those beauties weigh a lot. Anyway, Kilroy tried the next best solution. He trapped them on the north end of the island with his screen. That leaves us with the pretty job of catching up with the males, getting help for them and finally pacifying their women."

"Hell hath no fury..." Balmer said. Then, "Wait a minute, how long have they been on the island."

"At least six months."

"You don't mean they crossed interstellar distances, using only a planetary drive."

"No," Fable said. "They have a stellar drive."

"Then they should have reached base before this."

"That's exactly it," Fable sighed. "That's why the women were so mad once they realized what happened."

When Balmer looked puzzled, Fable said, "Don't you get it? Kilroy sent them the wrong way."