

# PLANET STORIES



VOL. 4, NO. 10

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

JAN., 1951

► *Powerful Novel of Alien Sorcery*

WITCH OF THE DEMON SEAS . . . . . **A. A. Craig** 4

Guide a black galleon to the lost, fear-haunted Citadel of the Xanthi wizards—into the very jaws of Doom? Corun, condemned pirate of Conahar, laughed. Aye, he'd do it, and gladly. It would mean a reprieve from the headman's axe—a few more precious moments of life and love . . . though his lover be a witch!

► *Two Space-Adventure Novels*

TIGER BY THE TAIL . . . . . **Poul Anderson** 38

The haughty, horned aliens from the planet Scotha had very well organized intentions of conquering the Terran Empire—and Captain Dominic Flandry, Terra's ace saboteur, suddenly found himself in a strategic position to louse up the works. How? Well, Achilles had a heel . . . and what else could you call a Scothani?

MARTIAN NIGHTMARE . . . . . **Bryce Walton** 80

Three tough, cynical fighting-men of Earth—Danton, Keith, Van Ness—rose from their tomb of forgetfulness . . . to find themselves space-wrecked on Mars, the last hope of mankind against the evil and immortal Oligarchs. It was weird, incredible, it was a horrible dream . . . but it was real. Or was it?

► *Four Thrilling Short Stories*

TASK TO LUNA . . . . . **Alfred Coppel** 56

Two rocketships bit into lunar dust. Two men—a Yankee, a Russian—dueled in nightmare shadow and glare. What cosmic joke made them drop their weapons and die laughing?

POISON PLANET . . . . . **William Oberfield** 60

It was only a muffled gun-shot, deep in the rank, fetid jungles of Venus . . . but it plunged the crew of the VENUS I into a Hell from which there was no return . . .

GUEST EXPERT . . . . . **Allen K. Lang** 71

A problem—a strange and deadly problem—confronted Earth . . . but the visitor from Mars was very confident that he could solve it. Which he did . . . in his strange and deadly way . . .

SAFETY MARGIN . . . . . **J. T. M'Intosh** 73

The Vibro-spacedrive had one bad habit, and a mystery. The habit: It often exploded, which McCall already knew. He was to learn the mystery too . . .

► *Planet's Regular Feature*

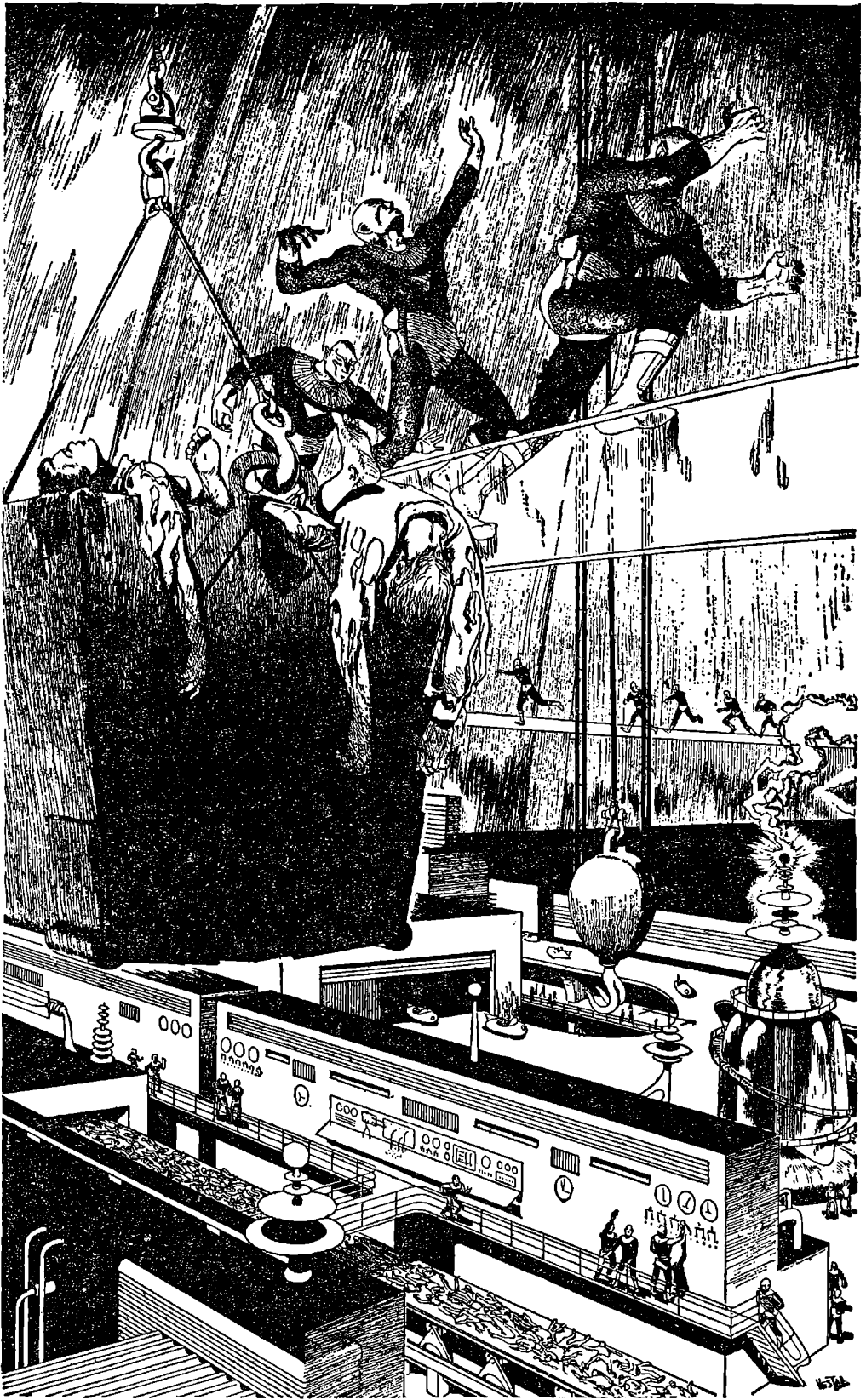
THE VIZIGRAPH—Letters from Readers . . . . . 2

T. T. SCOTT, *President*

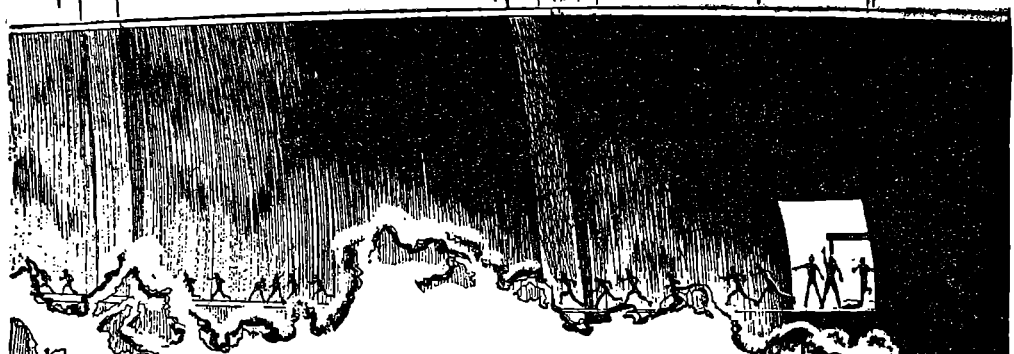
JEROME BIXBY, *Editor*

MALCOLM REISS, *General Manager*

PLANET STORIES: Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 130 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1950, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Reentered as second class matter August 15, 1950, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Price 20¢ per copy. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 130 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.



*Danton fired seven times . . . after that he stopped, because the gun was empty . . .*



*Three tough, cynical fighting-men of Earth—Danton, Keith, Van Ness—rose from their tomb of forgetfulness . . . to find themselves space-wrecked on Mars, the last hope of mankind against the evil and immortal Oligarchs. It was weird, incredible, it was a horrible dream but it was real. Or was it?*

# MARTIAN NIGHTMARE

*a novelet by* BRYCE WALTON

**HIS NAME WAS BURTON.**  
*John R. Burton.*  
*He was as happy as anyone could expect to be. His wife loved him and he loved his wife. Their children were very well adjusted, as was everyone of course in the New World system.*

*Burton worked ten hours a week in a coal mine, though the job was merely one demanding the overseeing of machines. The rest of the week was one of leisure devoted to gardening, hobbies, play, music. There was no more hate, no violence, no feelings of insecurity. It wasn't that everyone loved everyone else particularly. It was just that no one was afraid of the future anymore.*

*Sometimes though, Burton had bad dreams. Sometimes they were very bad. In these dreams it seemed that he was somebody else. Someone who—*

*But after he woke up he never remembered the dreams, so, he thought, maybe they didn't matter.*

*Burton guessed that what he was in the dreams was too horrible to remember.*

**DANTON** sat in the chair before the control bank and stared at his hands until they seemed to stop shaking. It had been a long, long way to Mars. A long, long time in which to think.

Of, for example, who had he been for the last hundred years? He had been someone, someone with a name, a job, a ritual, a wife, kids, everything. A valuable worker, a nice round peg in one of countless millions of nice round holes. Who and what you had been for the past hundred years was certainly a question that could bother you, he thought.

He glanced at Keith and Van Ness. It wasn't bothering them now. They had been two other people for a century also—but they weren't bothered now. They had passed out cold on pre-New World bourbon.

They had better snap out of it, Danton thought a little desperately. The ship had about reached Mars. They had better get up from there.

His hands started shaking again. He got a cigarette lighted and the opiate stuff crawling in his throat. He closed his eyes.

For an instant it felt better, hiding in there behind the darkness of his closed lids. But then the thoughts came faster, like schools of irritated fish.

A final war like the last one, destructive beyond memory anyway, was one most of the survivors had been more than happy to forget. They had welcomed reconditioning, the moving into the PLAN, into the New World system of non-violence. People became, largely, depending on the amount of reconditioning necessary, someone else. You can't change solidly laid foundations of thought and still be the same person.

So it was a New World. In it the people were New. Everything starting over again from scratch. A small decentralized population. Beneficent leaders, masters of psychology. No weapons, not even in museums, no conception of war, no fears of tomorrow. There were no enemies on Earth. In fact, the mind was conditioned so that the concept of an enemy was impossible. Outer space was merely a region of lovely stars on clear nights.

Of the few New System soldiers left, most were willing to be reconditioned. Three of them hadn't been willing. Richard Danton, Don Keith, Dwight Van Ness. They had degenerated into drunken pariahs, people without a group with which to identify themselves, lonely, lost, aging and ailing. Finally they did accept reconditioning. Not because they wanted to. But because they had to or go completely insane. Seers, Secretary of Social Security, said this was bad, but that they might be able to bring about an adjustment. It would be difficult, he said, because of involuntary conditioning, but he would see what he could do.

Evidently he had done all right. Danton couldn't remember the subsequent hundred years. But he had been someone. They had blotted him out, fixed him up with another name, twisted ganglia, altered synapsis, probed lobotomy here and there. Everything went, name, identity, the entire business inside and out.

But all the time, Richard Danton had been there, a pattern. A circuit disconnected. When they had needed him, they had merely twisted ganglia back, altered

synopsis, probed lobotomy again. And after a hundred years here he was again, resurrected, like a ghost. And when they were done with him, after his assignment was finished, he would go back into the grave, and that someone else would go on living.

But maybe not this time. Maybe not again. This could be a dangerous assignment for him and Keith and Van Ness. They might never get back to earth, and that might be all right—for them.

He would rather die fighting, as a soldier, than keep on living as someone else, someone he didn't even know.

According to Seers there was a chance that the final war had not been quite so final. The Oligarch Council had evidently escaped earth in secretly constructed spaceships, destined for Mars. If they had actually gotten to Mars, and had survived, they were there still, and it would be only a matter of time until they returned to Earth and destroyed it.

Other factors made it even more complicated. Earth couldn't defend itself, for one thing. It had no weapons. It had no human being capable of manning a weapon if it had one. Seers had said that the sanity of the world depended on absolute secrecy. The population was never to know anything at all, never to suspect that they might be threatened. Such knowledge, Seers said, would destroy the New System. The people weren't psychologically capable of receiving knowledge of insecurity, not for a long time yet.

But what bothered Danton was—*who have I been for the last hundred years?*

**K**EITH was crawling across the floor, gasping at an oxygen inhalor. The small, thin-faced and cynical soldier got up and sat down. He grinned. "Are we in Valhalla yet, Captain?"

"You still take this whole thing as a joke, Keith?"

"The psyche boys are good," Keith said. "Plenty good. And I still say this is just delusion they're feeding us, on suggestion tape, after good shots of hypnose." "

"Why would they do that?"

"They tried to recondition us, make

good little workers out of us. But it didn't take. We don't remember, sure—but that's no sign we were successfully changed. I say we weren't. I got it all figured out, Captain. They're killing us. Mercifully, of course, making us die happy. But we're dying just the same, dying in a dream. A dream of soldiering, of heroics, of sacrifice and high honor. Just the way we'd want it. And instead of waking up, we'll really die, in the line of duty. Like a good soldier should."

"But—"

"I'm not blaming them. I think it's a fine idea. For one thing, we aren't sure it's not really happening, so we'll have to accept it as truth. It's the real thing any way you look at it." Danton saw the grin fade slowly across the mask of Keith's face. "Are we really here, Captain?"

Danton peered into the scope again. "Yes," he whispered.

"Mars, the god of war," Keith said, "awaits his favorite sons."

A big dull reddish ball, like an eyeball, a blood-shot eye. The cone of its giant shadow streaming out, a quadrant of the heavens. And then all at once, as if the eye were closing, it darkened except where the sun splattered down on its far half, a pool of sickly light radiating outward into dissipating orange and brown.

Danton thought of the Oligarchs down there, or what remained of them. The Oligarchs and the slaves they would have brought with them in their ships. In a hundred years they could have multiplied considerably. And the Oligarchs themselves, the last of the old world type of faithless human madness—essentially amoral, no empathy, tremendous egotism—filled with the old ideas of class superiority. They destroyed with utter casualness. What advanced stage had their paranoid culture reached in a century? It wasn't something one wanted to think about.

The planet was reaching up like a clenched red fist. He felt the impulse to duck. Sweat ran down his face, itched along his ribs. A hundred years was a long time to be someone else, and now Danton was wondering if he dared trust

himself anymore as a soldier. His hands moved again over the controls.

The wrecked Oligarch ship had been found off the Mindanao Deeps by a sub-sea exploring party, brought up, reconditioned, studied. There were records and documents in it, and from these Seers made his decision. He brought back Danton. In secret, of course; send them to out of living graves. They were trained, made into astrogators, cosmologists. Everything in absolute secrecy, of course. And after the ship blasted off for Mars, only the three of them and Seers retained any knowledge that there had been a ship at all. The reconditioners had fixed that up. Those who had found it, the scientists who had studied it, no one remembered a thing.

"Find out what you can, then come back," Seers had said. "Don't fight. If you fight, you might never come back. We would never know then what to do. We can prepare ships like this one, Danton. In secret, of course, send them to Mars. But we don't want to take a chance like that unless we have to. If activity like that ever leaked out to the people, that would be the end of the New System. A sudden blast of insecurity would wreck our delicately balanced new order."

It was a fine ship, Danton thought. The Oligarchs knew machines. They worshiped them. The ship was also a monstrous arsenal, a hurtling fountain of destruction, loaded with hydrogen bombs and something called a proton cannon that could curl a planet up in space like a moth in a flame.

Power, death, throbbing around him, hot and terrible . . . the ordnance console key inches from his fingertips. Keith had said he didn't want to go back to Earth. Not and face all that business again. Why not let go, blast, die right here when the attack came? That was a soldier's way!

"I'm going to throw her into an orbit," Danton said.

He saw the weird swirling light of the moons then, the moons of Mars, as the ship slowed in its orbit. Heavy cloud-banks drifting low in colossal valleys. And then he saw the ships. Three of

them rising like giant silver beetles.

HE DIDN'T KNOW whether he deliberately bungled and failed to lift the ship out of its orbit in time, or whether — but psychologically there weren't such things as accidental blunders. Anyway, now it was too late. Maybe everyone on earth would be wiped out because of it, but Danton blundered, moved too slowly. From the ships a white cloud of released energy flashed, blinded, billowed. His ship bucked and swerved and lurched.

Keith whispered tensely, "I'll take that ordnance, Captain. *I'll take it!*"

Van Ness weaved upright, sucking at an oxygen capsule, mumbling.

Danton said, "They're not firing now. They're curious, maybe. Let them get in close. They'll come in, try to identify us. It must have just occurred to them that this is one of their old ships. Then we fire, clear our course, and run."

"Run, run, get your gun!" Van Ness mumbled.

Danton swung the view-plate. The ships hovered behind, slightly above, coasting, waiting, watching. Danton laughed aloud. For a hundred years he had been dead. Now he was alive. Really alive. His fingers were hot and wet as he gripped the T-bar, and he saw that the ships were improved types. He couldn't escape back to earth now, even if he wanted to. And he didn't have time now to figure out whether he wanted to or not. It was too late now for thinking. He preferred it that way. He said, "They're coming in close now. Keith, this is it!"

Keith nestled into the ordnance chair like a bird. His body was tight with anticipated pleasure. His fingers hooked, spread, began to tremble individually. Death was there, all around.

Without looking up, seemingly without reason, he asked, "You were engaged to marry a very pretty girl when the war ended, weren't you, Captain? Someone named Mara?"

Danton hadn't forgotten. "That's right. I couldn't explain it to her—why I wouldn't be reconditioned. She married someone else. A cybernetics engineer, named George."

"The hell with them, all of them!" Keith said. "You wouldn't want to go back there. That's what they all think about us, Captain. While they need us we're great guys, and afterwards—don't touch. No, Captain, whether this is delusion or the real thing, this is how we were meant to go. We're lucky, Captain!"

Keith manipulated the ordnance keys. Danton's eyes went blind before the incredible flash of kinetic energy release. His eyes closed. Music, lifting, whirling round and round and he was rocking with gentle joyous softness in a cradle of death . . .

But Danton got his hands up against the darkness, held on to it, pushed it this way and that, got it away from his eyes. He crawled back into the chair, blinked into the viewer. He didn't see the ships now, anywhere. Only the great clenched fist of the war-world, the red world, rushing up, growing with a silent onrushing fury, looming, broadening.

Keith's fingers dug into Danton's shoulder. "I got 'em, Captain! Burned them out like ants on a hot plate. They burned so beautiful . . ."

The ship had suffered from the repercussion; nothing responded right. Danton shoved more intensifier units into the stern tubes, straightened her a little with a couple of bursts from the steering jets, then power-dived with the tubes roaring.

He fought the controls. The numbness, the roaring, the intolerable rising temperature of the walls. Fighting for some sort of balance to get the ship hurtling in at least a low-level orbit. The walls quivered, then the whining, sighing, falling through a dense sea of twisting vapor.

Danton watched the altimeter, the power gauges, manipulated the power-tube stops. His body was an unfeeling, unconscious circuit of responses. Somehow he got the ship at vertical. The plate brought the landscape up to him, presented it to him like the unveiling work of a mad artist. Up-pushing violence of mountain walls, a valley, forest, dense alien looking stuff, thick and high and entangled and phosphorescent with a pinkish glow drifting like the reflection of a vast roaring furnace.

And—a senseless glimpse of something archaic, too primitive to be real. Only a glimpse, so that immediately after, he decided he must have seen something else. A long trail of armored cars. Amtracs, it seemed, bristling with ancient types of guns. Armored cars. Amtracs. A few hundred years ago they had had them in Earth museums.

The ship roared and shook. The scream of metal penetrated Danton's skull, became part of an iron ball grinding in his head . . .

No sentience possessed him now, no mind, no body, no hate or joy or hope or confused indecision about his twisted motivations. He thought simply, death possesses me.

**B**UT DEATH was only nearby. Life was a powertube, dimming to a dull yellow, flickering dangerously. Movement was without real substance. Shapes, voices vague and distant. He heard Van Ness and Keith talking once. Someone yelled. There was the burning sigh of the electronic rifles they had evidently been able to salvage.

The light brightened slowly. He sat up. Keith and Van Ness stood beside him. Clothing torn, faces scratched and bleeding. Keith's mouth was tight, his jaw muscles rigid and pale. He turned, held his rifle steady. Van Ness wanted to know if Danton felt all right now, anything else wrong besides the knock on the head.

Danton said he didn't know. "I thought it would be cold here." He was sweating. The air was muggy, quiet. The lake was huge before him, the mountains beyond it gigantic and blue-misted. The lake was glassy and still. Behind him was thick forest, reddish leaves, high trees, thickly entangled, odd flowers, shadows. A feeling of things alive—but of a cautious kind of living. Little eyes waiting and watching in the bushes, on the fringes.

"Out of this valley, on the desert, it would be plenty cold," Keith said.

Danton asked then, "What happened?"

Keith watched the forest warily. "We hit the lake out there, had to swim in."

"So now what?" Van Ness wanted to know.

"We still have a kind of advantage," Danton said. "They don't know who we are, or where. They know nothing."

"Neither do we," Keith said. "There's a chance Seers was wrong about the Oligarchs. Maybe their culture has changed. Maybe they don't intend to attack Earth."

"Their ego couldn't stand to forget their defeat," Danton said. "They had a highly advanced technology that could conceivably control any environment, rather than the other way round. In some ways they were ahead of the rest of the world."

Keith grinned. "That's right, Captain. You're so right."

Danton looked Keith in the eyes. "You mentioned earlier, something about sometimes thinking you should be an Oligarch. You really feel that way, Keith?"

"Why not? We didn't have a choice whose side we would fight on. We were conditioned from the time we were old enough to think, and we fought the Oligarchs for fifty years. Three-quarters of the world's population rubbed out. And then we had a world that didn't want us—unless we were three other people. We fought to destroy the old values, help build a new society. But let's face it, Captain—those old values we destroyed were our own! We helped destroy our own kind of world. So what does it mean? It means we should have fought *for* the Oligarchs, and that we really sympathize with them. Their system is a war system, probably still is. With them, there would always be a place for a fighting man. A soldier among the Oligarchs could expect honor and privilege."

Danton had nothing to say. He had thought in a similar way more than once.

Van Ness said. "Wrong, Keith. We've committed ourselves, and now we have to go on to the end of the road."

The words drifted with the wind across the glassy lake. You walked along the road, Danton thought, while the road was visible and you walked it to the end. And neither road nor the end was your own choice. Maybe the only glory was in walking it bravely. But maybe, as Keith had said, they had been on the wrong road. The Oligarchs, had they conquered, would have always provided an honorable place

for a soldier. Banners, flags, women, the rise of battle fever, the ecstatic explosions of power, the enemy dead.

Keith fired once into the forest wall. A shape fluttered away over the tops of the trees, then fell, crying at first, then screaming like a woman. "We've been followed by those things for about a mile along the shore edge," Keith said. "They don't seem friendly. They're intelligent. Big, with wings, and old-style weapons. Very old. Explosive powder stuff."

"Martians," said Van Ness.

DANTON said, "I caught a look at some human beings just before we hit the lake. Maybe I was seeing things that weren't, but there seemed to be ancient amtracs, old-style cannon, marching men."

Keith nodded. "This whole business is crazy. A highly advanced technology with spaceships in the air—and centuries-old amtracs and gun-powder on the ground! If this is all a dream and we're really on earth in a psyche-cell, somebody's got a devil of an imagination!"

An explosion, then the whine of steel missiles sent the three on their stomachs among the small sharp shells. Danton raked the forest with flash-gun fire.

Finally Danton said. "We have to move."

"Without a plan of action?" Keith said.

"No. Our plan is the same. Find out all we can and return to Earth. Seers has to know. He doesn't want to prepare a secret attack unit to send up here unless he's absolutely sure it's necessary."

"Even if we live long enough to find out something, how do we get back to Earth? By teleportation?"

"We'll have to get a ship, or try," Danton said.

The sound of explosions drifted to them, the flat reverberating roar of bombs. Van Ness looked to the right and said, "That way. And not so far either."

\* \* \*

Ten miles from the lake, the three crawled into the dense brush beside the trail. They could hear now the approach of laboring gasoline motors, the shouts of men. Danton waited. He waited tensely,



as though somewhere inside of him was a knowledge of what he waited for.

The moons moved across the high valley. The light was clear, still, with a reddish cast. Purple shadows bent and swayed in the slight and cooler wind. Through the odd light, a column of wheezing amtracs came. Broad wheels grinding, coughing engines, voices murmuring, bodies wearily slogging, humans, weary ghosts.

Van Ness whispered, "Looks as though they're in retreat."

Danton nodded. Van Ness said, "The wounded, the dead and the dying. I guess you could say we've come home again."

Danton slowly licked his lips. The fifty-years war against the Oligarchs hadn't been like this. His war had been swift and clean and shiny as the metal cities that went with the bright hot flames of atomic fission. Now the smells of sweating men drifted to him, the smell of blood and of death.

Weary, white-faced, shabbily-uniformed men filing by. Many hobbled, wounded, swinging along in a freakish dance. Crude stretchers carrying others, somewhat resentfully. Amtracs hauled still others, some wounded, others dying, some already dead. The sounds of bombardment edged nearer through the moonlight. The column moved faster. And Danton noticed then that the women were there, uniformed, hardly distinguishable from the men.

The ground jarred. Projectiles screamed. An amtrac rose up in a blossoming cone, fell apart, metal shining and bodies disintegrating. A small detachment swung in squarely toward Danton's position. The three men faded back into deeper concealment.

A tired, thickly-bearded line-officer barked an order. "Thomas! Rennin! Take the bodies away at once. According to the map, there's a disposal mart half a mile east!"

The torn bodies were rolled onto stretchers and carried into the shadows.

Danton thought: some pestilence probably. They have to get rid of the bodies fast. But why under the stress of immediate attack?

The line-officer was saying, "Men.

We've been under constant attack for eighty-five days. Our survival depends on orderly retreat until we combine forces with Rudolph's Second Army."

A woman stopped walking. Her face was streaked with dirt. She yelled, "Why doesn't the Power give us some real weapons? With a real power gun we could kill every Redbird that—"

The line-officer brought his revolver up, fired. The back of the woman's head exploded as the flattened bullet came out. The officer's face twitched. "Barrows! Select a man, take her to the disposal mart."

"Yes, sir."

After the body was gone, Danton stared dazedly at the spot where the woman had fallen. The officer was saying, "Any reference to the Powers other than that necessitated by duty and reverence, is punished immediately by execution." Then the officer sat down and looked blankly into the moonlight. That was a quotation from a manual, Danton thought. But the officer—hadn't meant it. He hadn't wanted to shoot the woman. That might be very important to consider.

Presently the officer stood up. "Men. The Redbirds will follow up this bombardment with a winged attack. They always do when the moons are right. We'll remain hidden along the trail and take them as they come in. They've never learned the strategy of ambush. Make ready for the attack. Be alert!"

**D**ANTON MOTIONED and the three of them retreated slowly, as silently as possible. They had crawled probably a hundred yards when the attack came.

The Redbirds were red. They also might be considered birds, with a reptilian dominance. Their wingspread was enormous, and their bodies were very nearly human to look at—with an alien deviation that made them seem grotesque when they really weren't grotesque at all. In a way they were beautiful. Red feathers and gold-flecked eyes.

And then the air was torn apart. Explosions, rushing bodies, breaking wings, burning feathers and singeing flesh and hissing screams. The moonlight fluttered with winged shadows,

"This is real war," Danton heard Van Ness yell. "Hand to hand. The real thing."

Danton couldn't see either Van Ness or Keith. He fought, firing wildly at shadows and substance. The real thing. It was strange, he thought, but in that fifty years of the bloodiest war, the most destructive in history—he'd never killed anything hand to hand. It had been coldly impersonal, that war. A million here, a million there. Nine million at once. And nothing remaining except charred craters. No bodies around. No one crying either. Nothing at all. But this—

Van Ness's fading scream chopped down like hot steel. Danton couldn't fire, afraid of burning Van Ness, who was being lifted up by a Redbird. Van Ness was gone almost before Danton realized that he was being carried up and away over the tree tops.

Danton crawled around in the flame-blasted clearing. His rifle was gone. The Redbird's powerful wings had slammed it into shadows and brush. He looked for Keith.

Keith!

He didn't find Keith either.

He lay still, very still. Several soldiers were poking around in the tangled debris of bodies and blood and torn brush. It was so still all at once. No sounds at all except the hard breathing of men. No wings thrashing, or screams penetrating.

Danton played dead. He was surprised at how easy it was.

He recognized the officer's voice. "Load everything that looks human in a couple of amtracs and drag them to the disposal mart."

"Yes, sir."

Motors idling. Men lifting and grunting and cursing. Danton opened his eyes just a little, stared upward into the broad river of sky far up between the mountains:

"How many casualties?"

"Not bad. We lost a quarter maybe. We probably burned down a thousand Redbirds."

"Where do they all come from? We'll never kill them all. They keep coming and they'll always keep coming."

"They're supposed to come from across

the white desert. We'll never find out. Anyone striking out across that desert never comes back."

The officer. "On the double, men!"

"Why does it go on?"

"Who knows?"

"Will we win?"

"No one can win. The Redbirds will keep coming. We keep killing!"

"The Powers are happy though. Fifty bodies to the marts. Counting yesterday's casualties, that's over three hundred to the marts since this battle started."

"And how many since the war started?"

"Who knows? When wasn't there a war, pal? What the hell would a guy do around here if there wasn't a war on?"

Danton felt hands on his ankles and wrists. He forced limpness down his body and felt himself tossed among the dead. He was hardly noticed at all, dead or otherwise. His uniform was torn, covered with blood and dirt until it looked like any other uniform; He must look pretty bad to be taken for dead.

Swarms of insects, drawn by the blood, settled in clouds. The amtrac jerked forward. Danton saw the drivers sitting up there like gray plaster figurines. One of the men started to mumble a song, a kind of chant, more like a dirge.

"Shut up! You'll get us shot!"

"Borkan's back there. He can't hear."

Danton listened. His stomach went hollow and icy at the song. It was old. It was full of ghosts, ghost treads, and ghost shadows marching out of the past, out of the present.

*"The men of the tattered battalion,  
which fights 'till it stumbles and dies,  
Dazed with the scream of the battle,  
the din and damned glare and the  
cries,*

*The men with the broken heads back-  
ward, and the blood running out of  
their eyes!"*

"Shut up!"

*"The Powers have all of the music,  
the glory and color and gold;  
Ours be a handful of ashes, a bounti-  
ful mouthful of mould."*

"Shut up, I tell you! We'll be shot! If you—"

*"Of the maimed, of the halt and the blind in the rain and the cold—"*

The song faded slowly, died out. It seemed to die of weariness, to run down. And Danton kept on hearing it—circling mournfully through his head like swirling muddy water round a stake.

One thing he was seeing now, graphically so that he would never forget: Wars weren't all the same. Sometimes fighting men hated war. He had known only the swift clean war, the septic war, a gigantic street-cleaning machine with a ray gun in front and a rotary brush in the back, with individuals turned abruptly into the earth from which they had come, and no one knowing the difference.

But in different times and places, wars could be different.

**T**HE AMTRAC STOPPED. "Let's get 'em out of here!"

Danton was thrown up, over, out and down, and other forms fell around him. He heard a moan from something not quite dead. Metal clanged. Machinery whirred. He thought of the mart, disposal mart. He thought of dropping through a hole maybe into a pit of fire, or into a vat of something. All through him as from an intravenous injection—horror.

He looked. A mound of metal, as though a bald giant had been buried up to his eyebrows. Metal corroded with green slime. And there, an opening appearing as heavy metal doors slid open. A rail-car with a spherical truck bed emerging from the opening and waiting with an eery suggestion of eager sentience in its cold metal.

The men throwing the bodies into the railcar.

"What happens to them?"

"Who knows? No one ever hears of them again. Morlan mentioned it the other day. He said the Powers demand sacrifice, like gods maybe. I'm not superstitious or anything, but—"

"Why not? Something's taking care of us, making us move around, dance on

the invisible wires. Maybe the Powers are gods. Why not? They're supposed to live forever. Never grow old."

"Push the button! Push it! Get them out of here. Wait, here's another one."

Danton felt himself plunging, striking, rolling among the other dead logs. He didn't move. Some of the horror was dissolving, because this whole disposal system was too elaborate. There was something basic and symptomatic about it, and Danton felt that it was a key. Van Ness and Keith were gone. He couldn't think about them now. Their disappearance had seemed so very final. He was alone. He still had his duty, and he was curious. He wanted to find out what he could, although the idea of somehow getting a ship and returning to Earth with what information he could garner was no longer part of his thoughts. You could take advantage of the impossible if it happened perhaps. You couldn't anticipate it as a basis for action.

But he was still curious, and that was part of his duty. The Oligarchs, the Powers, seemed interested in gathering in the blossoms of death from the fields. Very interested. One of these soldiers had said the Powers would be happy. Surely then the bodies wouldn't simply go into a vat or a flame.

"Here she goes!"

Darkness. Silent movement whirring, rapidly accelerating speed, hot wind sighing dry past his face. The body of the dead girl, her body tight up against him in the darkness, moved a little. She sighed brokenly.

Danton felt around, found the belt, holster, ancient revolver he had spotted earlier. He removed it, buckled it around his own waist. He was careful not to raise his head. Above him, close, he felt a ceiling rushing back.

Feeling the girl beside him, the girl soldier, still alive somehow, he thought of Mara who had found him unbearable because he still had the mind of a soldier and had refused to be reconditioned. She had grown to hate him—no, not hate, revulsion. It was natural. She had been reconditioned to hate anything suggesting violence.

Well, that was long ago and far away. Further away than long ago.

The car slowed, tilted. Doors slid open and a soft blue radiance filtered through. Danton clung to the metal and stared down a gleaming metal chute. He began to hear incoherent sounds coming out of his own throat, uncontrollably, as the car tilted further. He grabbed desperately, hung on as the car dumped its load into the chute, down, down into a giant pit. The pit was surrounded with high mesh walls and a steel rail. And behind the rail a circular walkway, with panels, or doors, spaced at regular intervals. Maybe a hundred or more doors.

And cranes, cranes lifting metal mouths full of the squirming mass in the pit, lifting them to the railing and onto moving belts that carried them through the walls and out of sight.

To what? *God, to what?* Danton thought.

**D**ANTON clung frantically to the empty car. Sweat made a stream down his chest, though the pit was refrigerated. Cold. The metal was frosted, it shone like ice. And in the pit some of the bodies moved and made sounds. The girl soldier. She got to her knees.

Danton tried to crawl back, back up the slippery metal of the railcar. He sought darkness back there, a place to hide. Then he stopped trying and felt his fingers loosening as he watched the girl. Her face was unrecognizable behind a mask of blood and dirt. But she was standing up now. She raised one hand. She looked up at the many expressionless doors.

The strength with which she forced the keening death-song from her body was not the strength of her body. It came from someplace else. From outside, from memory, from a last defiance that could no longer suffer punishment, from the buried ghosts of thousands of years that had died.

*"You sing of the great clean guns,  
that belch forth death at will.  
Oh, but the wailing mothers, the lifeless forms and still!"*

Danton's hands let go, and he slid down the chute.

*" . . . sing the songs of the billowing  
flags, the bugles that cry before.  
Oh, but the skeletons flapping rags,  
the lips that speak no more."*

He scarcely felt the bodies under him. He looked at the woman singing and he listened.

*" . . . sing the clash of bayonets and  
sabres that flash and hew,  
Will you sing of maimed ones, too,  
who die and die anew?"*

Danton stumbled. He reached her side.

*"Sing of feted generals who bring  
the victory home.  
Oh . . . but the broken bodies that  
drip like honey-comb!"*

Danton touched her shoulder. Her uniform hung in tatters. A line of red ran down her torn arm. She sank to her knees. He could barely hear the last two lines of her song.

*" . . . sing of hearts triumphant,  
long ranks of marching men.  
And will you sing of the shadowy  
hosts that never march again?"*

He lifted her and stood, holding her like a child. Now her eyes were closed. She would have a pretty face, he thought. The army uniform cap fell away and her hair tumbled down over his hand and arm like red dust. Her lips moved. She whispered: "No one hears. No one — ever hears."

"I hear you," Danton said.

But you don't hear me, he thought. Her body was limp. She's dead, he thought.

The crane dipped, steel jaws champing, steel-thewed neck stiff and superior, now lifting.

Danton put the girl down, leaped, caught the metal lips, clung as the crane lifted, swung, caught the rail, pulled himself over onto the walkway. His breath

was hot and his lungs burned.

He slid the ancient revolver free and examined it quickly. Its mechanism was simple enough. He twirled the cylinder, removed the safety catch. Doors? Where did they go? None of the doors seemed inclined to tell him; nothing moved around him except the crane and the conveyor belt.

He walked round the circular way once, came back. It would seem that he must crawl onto the belt to escape the pit. That would take him—somewhere. It seemed that he was destined to follow the dead wherever the dead went in this place where the dead seemed to have lost the last faint tinge of dignity or honor.

Silently, simultaneously, the doors slid open. A man was born from the darkness of each black rectangle. Bronze giant men in tunics that glittered like finely woven metallic silk. There was some variation, yet they were amazingly alike, expressionless, cold, removed. Far removed.

Danton heard the conveyor belt moving softly, swiftly behind him, carrying its macabre load. The revolver felt heavy in his hand. Then, from somewhere, a voice crackled in the pit like ice shifting.

"Bring this soldier to the Council Room."

A man's voice, without any particular characteristic other than one of detachment. It might have been the voice of a machine, or something on a tape.

Danton fired seven times. After that he stopped because the gun was empty of cartridges. Each time he fired, a man fell soundlessly, without dramatics, calmly. Each time, the man next in line stepped forward to receive the next bullet. After the last bullet was gone, three other men lifted the fallen bodies and placed them on the conveyor belt. Five others surrounded Danton. They did not touch him. If the episode had had any emotional significance at all for these men, Danton hadn't seen it. Further resistance was futile; the firing of the revolver had been only token defiance anyway.

Danton felt the refrigerated air of the pit clinging to him as the men marched him down a long tubular hall walled in dull metal.

THE ROOM was large, metal-vaulted, brittle. Mesh grid screens surrounded him at a distance, and the useless revolver hung cold and damp in his hands. Three men and three women sat behind a half-moon of bright silver suspended from the high ceiling by shimmering strands of silver, like very fine wire.

As architecture, the things he had seen were the final stage in constructivism. An elimination of the sense of weight and solidity of traditional forms. Everywhere were space constructions of metal sheets, glass, plastic, beams of angular light, some vaguely related to human figures, largely as abstracts of geometrical shapes, technological forms.

Environment and people were each a balanced projection of the other. The general effect was one of machine-like precision, brittle coldness in which man and machine had reached emotionless synthesis.

One of the men said, "Rhone, will you question this?"

The woman's voice was musical, but without warmth, like a nicely constructed music-box. "What is your name?"

He did not answer.

"You should answer, soldier. Voluntarily. I can assure you that we have ways to force your mind to give up all of its secrets."

She waited. He did not answer.

"Your actions have been peculiar, soldier. We are interested."

Danton thought fast. They had space-ships. Three of them he had seen, the three they no longer had, thanks to Keith. If he admitted being from Earth it would certainly incite immediate reprisal, and Seers wasn't ready. He wouldn't be ready for a long time. He would never be ready to receive an attack from Mars. His idea was to send a secret force to attack Mars, so that the New World populace would never know about it.

A well-planned series of lies, elaborate, complex, provoking. Find out facts. Try to postpone or avert any immediate attack on Earth. Reduce things to as individual a level as possible. He had one advantage: from his observations to this point, the Oligarch culture seemed not to have

changed its basic pattern. Evolution had merely moved that pattern forward a hundred years, solidified its static essence. Cold efficiency, egomania, class superiority—the system supported by scientific method and a fanatical, one-track dogma based on paranoia.

He had fought this force a long time. He thought he understood it.

"Your name, soldier. Your unit and rank."

"Danton West," he said. He remembered the line-officer's words, a quick frame of reference. "Captain. Second Army. That was a while back. More lately of the Revolutionary Forces."

"Revolutionary—"

Danton saw their expressions alter, almost imperceptibly, but alter they did under the masks. When that fifty-years war had ended, none of the central ruling clique, the Oligarch Council, had been found. And one thing seemed incredible to Danton as he stood there:

These three men and women seemed to be the same individuals who had made up that Oligarch Council on Earth a hundred years before.

That was logical enough. Except—

They hadn't aged at all. There had been no sign of change.

That soldier back there had said, "... *They're supposed to live forever. They never grow old.*"

"That is impossible, of course," the woman Rhone said. "Now—explain your uniform. It is unorthodox. In fact it is a duplication of the uniforms worn by officers of a certain army of another time and place of which you should know nothing. Can you explain this?"

"I can and will. We do know about those certain armies in another time and place. A hundred years ago. Earth. You think we have forgotten?"

**S**ILENCE. The woman's eyes widened, only slightly, though a tremendous inner emotional surge was obvious. One of the men leaned forward. Danton was relieved. He felt a bit more secure, seeing even this slight degree of individuality and emotion. There was the psychological effect, he knew, of feeling a subtle lessen-

ing of the unification of forces against him.

They hadn't aged, he thought. The same ones, without grayness, without wrinkles, without any sign of physical degeneration.

The woman said, not to him, voicing her thoughts, "Impossible. No one beyond the Walls can possibly know of the past. We took great pains to assure that—Mars is the only world they have ever known, the only world that ever was. Our world."

"We know," Danton said. "Others know too. The Revolutionists know. I'm telling you this much because nothing you can do can stop it. It's developed too far. Revolt. Did you think it would ever be stamped out?"

Beneath the masks, Danton could see concern, incredulous concern. Maybe they had thought they had set up an impervious regime. And maybe they actually had. But there was doubt here. Just enough of a doubt to play upon. One thing he knew, and that was that there was resentment out there beyond the Walls, whatever the Walls were, and those songs, hopeless as they were, had been songs of revolt against oppression. The germ was out there . . .

"You have a choice," the woman said. "Tell us everything you know. That, or suffer the kind of pain we cannot describe to you, a kind you will find out for yourself."

He could imagine. The Oligarchs had been efficient at everything. That had been their god—efficiency, mastery of the machines, the maintenance forever of the master-elite over the rabble.

Like an amoeba, the social forces of the world had split, the old values solidifying, the new values pulling away, coming back again, overrunning, defeating. But the Oligarchs had fled and here they had developed their particular systems to some final state.

Whatever they had waiting for him, to open his mind, it would be efficient.

She said, "You entered our Walls voluntarily. Why?"

She said it as though it were totally inconceivable that anyone beyond the Walls should seek to enter voluntarily. Maybe it was inconceivable.

"Curiosity," Danton said. He managed

to smile at each of them in turn. "There have been so many rumors growing old, becoming legends and myths. I came in to find out for myself."

"You do not expect to escape?"

Danton shrugged. "I don't care one way or the other. I had hoped to remain here." He waited. He thought. Finally he added, "I had hoped to become one of you."

"What?" one of the men said in a whisper.

The man on Rhone's right said, "A curious type. Obviously he has insight. One might almost think—"

The woman said, "We can speculate later, if we have to, Weisser. Right now we are interested in facts. Facts!"

She kept looking into Danton's eyes. Her own eyes had a curious green quality. She was beautiful, of course, physically. No one had ever denied the physical beauty of the Oligarchs. Hereditary physical beauty was important to them. They developed it by selective breeding and—no one had figured out by what other means.

There was the indication of an edge to the woman's voice now. "Three of our ships vanished. Do you know anything about those ships, soldier?"

Danton smiled. "Yes," he said, and paused for perhaps five seconds. "We destroyed them."

The silence then was longer than five seconds. It was very long. It lengthened until it was painfully heavy. The woman's voice was a whisper. "How could the rabble do that? It isn't true, of course. It couldn't be true."

"You'll never find the ships," Danton said. "There aren't any ships now. We blew them to pieces. Our scientists did it. I don't know where the scientists and their secret laboratories are. I don't know too much about the inner workings of the revolt. But I know some things you might find very valuable."

"But, Weisser, it is impossible, isn't it?"

"Of course. The man is obviously lying. They couldn't possibly have evolved any such weapon. They couldn't even have developed the concept of revolt. Their cultural patterns, their attitudes and hereditary capabilities are set. They can't change."

"Then how do we classify this soldier?"

"Why bother? Some sort of crazy deviant. We put him under the Scanners now, then dispose of him. His body has some value."

The woman said, "There still remains the question of what happened to our ships."

Danton thought: the Oligarch Council operates on a strictly top-down principle. Who is the extreme top? The woman, Rhone? Or the man, Weisser? One of them certainly. That might be important to know.

Danton dipped into the small supply packet at his waist, lifted a food-capsule to his mouth. He looked first at Weisser, then at the woman. "I can tell you a lot. And if you don't find out what is happening out there very soon, you'll be destroyed. Like those ships. I'll bargain with you. Let me remain here, enjoy certain privileges I've thought about often when I was crawling around out there in the mud. Show me what you have here, let me understand. For that, I'll give you valuable information you need to survive."

Weisser said coldly, "We—bargain with a mongrel?"

"This capsule is poison, and it isn't partial to blue-blood," Danton said easily. "A few seconds after putting it into my mouth, I'll be dead. I'll be silent then. I can tell you how the ships were destroyed, the weapons used, some things about the planned revolt. If I don't tell you, you'll never find out. And if you don't find out what is happening out there in a short time, it will be too late—for you."

The woman pointed. "Take that door out, soldier. Perhaps you'll be contacted later."

Danton smiled. "Don't wait too long. You don't have much time, beautiful."

A CORRIDOR led into a circular room, one section paneled entirely in glass. Furnishings were suspended at odd angles, the concepts of an odd structural art, from various lengths of silver strands. He stood there, then tried the door. He couldn't open it. He was locked in. He felt eyes on him.

Later he turned, moved back until he

was facing the door through which he had entered. He kept the food capsule near his mouth as the door opened and she stood there looking at him strangely.

Then she strode toward him, long slim legs and an easy imperious stride. The metallic-silk skirt that came half-way to her knees tinkled like a thousand infinitely tiny bells.

She said, "The records have been checked. One of our ships failed to get out of Earth's atmosphere when we came here a century ago. We had assumed the ship had burned up. It has been suggested that you are from Earth, that you found that ship. It would be odd if you were one of the Equalitarian soldiers who fought against us a hundred years ago."

Danton shrugged. Self control was difficult now. He had to resist an urge to reach out, put his fingers around her throat. She seemed weaponless, and it could be accomplished rapidly enough. There would be a great deal of personal satisfaction. But he still clung to the shreds of his duty. His duty to Seers, to Earth millions who could so easily die under the bombs of an enemy they had never been allowed to know even existed. Or was that the real reason? *Maybe I don't really want to kill her.*

"Think whatever you wish. I've told you the facts. I know nothing about such a ship. If you believe such a fantastic idea, then where is this ship now?"

"You'll answer that," she said. She moved nearer, nearer than necessary for conversation. How ageless and smooth her face was, he thought. Smooth and pale. And her eyes like exotic books, concealing strange and terrible secrets.

He shrugged again. "It doesn't matter much to me," he said. "My offer still stands. Take it or leave it. As I said, this capsule will kill me in seconds. After that the troubles are all yours. You won't be able to escape. Those mongrels out there, as you call them, they don't need Earth. They have minds of their own."

"That's impossible! They're mongrels."

"You think you have them set solidly and forever in a static mould, just the way you want them? The perfect slavery—culturally molded, so they don't even realize

they're slaves. That's the idea? It isn't working out that way. They're human, with minds too complex—they can never be wholly predictable. Of course you could send an agent to Earth to find out. It would reduce the odds against us."

"Us? But you've asked to become one of the Oligarchs."

"Yes. I would prefer that, frankly. But it isn't too important. I'm interested in your system for only one reason—because you never grow old. You will notice that I am growing old, hair graying, wrinkles creeping in around my eyes. I don't like that. To be ageless like you, I would bargain."

"You seem so sure of yourself. I almost believe you."

"I am sure of myself. The mongrels can manage a successful revolt. But with the information I can give you, you could put down that revolt. I can't say about the next revolt, or the one after that, or any of the revolts that will go on as long as there are men who have minds for figuring out reasons for revolting. If you try to force the information from me, I'll take the poison."

"Would you really do that?"

He nodded.

"We could go out there and get the information directly from the mongrels."

"From them, you would find out nothing. The mongrels don't know anything. Only the leaders know, the scientists, the secret underground. You would never find them. The revolt is latent in every man beyond these walls, in every man and woman and child. The leaders know how to bring out that latent desire to revolt, when the time comes. There will be adequate weapons, too. Like the ones those three ships were blasted with."

He touched her throat. He felt the stirring of the pulse. A flush rose to her cheeks. "Show me why you haven't grown old during this last hundred years, Rhone, as I have."

Her face was near his. He could see the trembling in her lips, the enigmatic brightness of her eyes. "You're attractive," she whispered. "And that's odd, that a mongrel could be attractive."

"There are differences among the mon-



grels," Danton said. He moved his hands down her arms. She shivered a little. "And maybe there's a need in you that makes me seem something I'm not."

"That may be, yes. Maybe it isn't so easy to live forever. We have all you would think anyone would want here. But there are so few of us. And the men—always the same, with faces the same and walks the same and—"

"Then you really are the same Rhone, the Oligarch of a century ago?"

"Yes."

"And it's true, you never grow old?"

"It's true. We won't grow any older. And we'll never die."

She looked into his eyes and the seconds went by and time dissolved around Danton. And he thought: the lies I have told here—are they really a conscious effort to deceive? Do I really want, unconsciously, to become an Oligarch? Why not? He had wondered about it before. Immortality. A system depending on eternal warfare for its existence. Was this not his system after all?

"Come," she said, and took his arm. "I'll show you. You interest me. You're a diversion, soldier. I'll show you what we are."

**T**HEY SAT in a small spherical car. It made no noise. It slid silently over the smooth floor by working a simple lever around. It darted like a silver beetle. First she took him back to a place he remembered well. The Pit.

She didn't seem to see things actually. She talked with a calm detachment, and sometimes her thoughts seemed far away. Danton's thoughts weren't far away.

She was saying, "The war goes on outside the walls. Their culture is one of war, and that is all they know. We established it that way. We intend to keep it that way. You see this is the Pit; here the bodies come, the ones who have died. Here the bodies are sorted roughly onto the conveyor belts which take them to the Dismembering Wards."

The car whirred them away. The next station, gleaming white rooms, shining and sterile. Danton felt the perspiration streaming down his throat.

Electronic machinery examined the bodies, mechanical hands removed them from the conveyor belts with deft selectivity, deposited them on wheeled, white slabs.

"You will notice," Rhone said calmly, "that the bodies have come through an antiseptic room, and their clothing dissolved. Now they are ready for dismembering."

Men in white moved silently down the line and did their work with sharp, quick strokes. Scalpels and tiny whirring saws and the bodies slowly dwindling into isolated parts. There was no blood, no mess, everything was efficient and thorough and clean.

"The usable body-parts are selected here," Rhone said. "Notice the departments along the walls by each slab? They are refrigerated. They contain separate sections for each of the salvaged body-parts that are worth preserving."

Behind glass in the walls, Danton saw neatly placed parts of the bodies. Hearts, fingers, hands, legs, feet, bone sections, eyes and interior organs. Kidneys, spleens, livers, carefully preserved, neatly arranged and labeled and waiting.

Danton slowly licked his lips. Her voice seemed far away now, droning like an insect on a lazy day far from anywhere, and the endless length of that room seemed dust-mantled and still, so still, he thought, and unreal; but it was real.

"From here, any part of a human body can be replaced by our surgeons. Here is the source of our immortality. When any body organ becomes worn, it is replaced. We are stocking our body-banks, soldier. As you can see."

Danton could see. What he saw was blurring a little though, and his legs seemed numb when he tried to move them.

"Why does it affect you so?" she was asking him then, and he turned and looked at her.

"Why?"

He didn't really know, or else his brain wasn't functioning at the moment. Why? It was beyond horror. It was alien, and yet why should it be alien? As a soldier, why should he find it disturbing? He had been conditioned, and his conditioning had

allowed him to destroy millions by pressing buttons, by directing missiles he never saw in flight to a target he never saw dissolve in a great white-hot flame.

Here it was planned, and here death had some transcendental meaning.

"There's one more thing for you to see," she said.

A dimly-lighted series of chambers. She pointed them out. Refrigerated banks. As far as Danton could see, the long chambers were lined with huge banks. Each filled with spare body-parts.

"You see the pattern now, soldier? We started with a select group. From among the Oligarchs only the elite of the elite was selected to come here to Mars. There are fifty of us now, as there were fifty then. No children, of course. Why complicate things?"

"Our slaves out there know nothing except that they must fight the Redbirds. Theirs is a war society. We arranged it and we've perpetuated it, and now it's the only life they know—unless your story of a revolt is true, of course, which I can hardly believe. They have only the crudest weapons. The kind of weapons we fought with on earth, soldier, left little for body-salvage, did they? We feel we've found the only way of being immortal. Why does it affect you like this, soldier? Doesn't it seem logical and fair to you?"

**D**ANTON didn't say anything. He couldn't. His throat was dry and his blood hammered past his temples. She was putting the question to him, all right; and in a way it was the same question he had asked himself more than once. To an efficiently conditioned soldier class, killing was an end in itself. Why not go on from there, carry it out to its final denominator?

"The brain never wears out," she was saying, "the only damage possible to it is due to the wearing out of supplementary body-parts, and they are seldom used to such a point. And even parts of the brain can be replaced. We have blood banks, of course. We cannot die of natural causes. If death comes from any kind of violence or accident, we can bring that body to life again.

"We are storing up reserve body-parts to keep us strong and un-aging for as long as one would care to imagine. When we are ready, of course, we shall return to Earth. We have kept that in mind, naturally. We are almost ready now to return. On Earth, of course, the same system will be established—but there our system will of necessity be slightly different. Perhaps wars will not necessarily go on unceasingly. There will be breathing spells . . . it won't matter particularly to us."

She looked at Danton closely. "First we shall wipe out most of the population. We only need a small stabilized population to provide for us."

"What about the Redbirds?" Danton said. His voice sounded weak. It was weak. "This is their planet, doesn't—"

"Their bodies are too alien," she said. "They can't be of any benefit to us. Except, of course, they provide conflict for the mongrels."

Danton closed his eyes. There was no more confusion. He knew now where the road led if you stayed on it to its end. It ended here with bodies stacked up in refrigerators. It ended with the cancellation of all human values, except the values of the fifty select—and they were no longer human in any familiar sense.

He felt sick, very sick. It might be embarrassing, he was so sick. He said, "I don't feel very well. Maybe I could rest here for a few minutes?"

She laughed. She stopped laughing, and Danton heard the sound of doors sliding and the approach of softly moving feet. Two Oligarchs—Guards, evidently, for each wore a flash-gun at his side. And between them—

Danton didn't quite believe what he saw, and if what he saw was true, he didn't know whether to be glad or not. Keith and Van Ness. The latter was terribly wounded, his face a red smear, blood soaking his side. And Keith—Keith, Danton had decided, was a dangerous man.

One of the Oligarchs said, "We brought them directly to you, on Weisser's orders. Weisser talked to them, then sent them down here. He said that you would know—"

She raised her hand and the Oligarch guard stopped talking. Danton looked at Keith's rigid, white face. Keith's lips thinned back over his teeth as he grinned at Danton. "Captain," he said. "I guess you beat me to the punch. I see you're already on friendly terms."

Van Ness moaned softly and fell to his knees. He stared sightlessly from his broken face.

Danton said, "I thought you two were gone for good."

"So did we," Keith said. "But the Redbirds dropped us over a tower, down a chute. I don't know why."

Rhone said, "The Redbirds fight for us too. We pay them. For every body they bring to us, they receive pay. A kind of drug."

She stared from Danton to Keith, then at Van Ness. "You three seem to know one another. I'll find out from Weisser." She started to tune in the communicator on her wrist. Keith stopped her. "Don't bother," he said. "I've already talked to Weisser. This man here has been lying. I'll tell you the truth."

Danton had been afraid of this. "Keith! Don't tell them anything!" But he knew somehow that his own game was over. It had never had a chance. Even without Keith's selling out, it wouldn't have had a chance. It was walking the road bravely that counted, anyway . . .

Keith said, "I'm talking, and I'll be glad to talk."

Danton shouted, "Keith! Don't do it. Don't tell them anything. You don't realize what they are!"

"It doesn't matter," Keith said, "what they are. I've been on the wrong side. Maybe I was always an Oligarch, and it's probably the same with you, only you're just too stupid to admit it. You think I want to go back to Earth, even if we had a chance to do it, which we'll never have? I hate Earth, and maybe I always have hated it—the way the New Order remade it! It's sane! Everyone an angel, filled to the hair roots with the milk of human kindness. We found it no place for us. Weisser says he'll take me in. I know where I belong!"

7—Planet—January

RHONE STOOD UP in the car, looking into Danton's face. "It's true then. The three of you are from Earth. I thought they were planning a culture down there that couldn't possibly be aggressive. How could they have sent you?"

Danton's eyes went from face to face, round the immediate area of the vast chamber. Keith was grinning thinly, watching him narrowly. This was it, and there seemed nothing to do but to go down fighting in the classic vein. A futile gesture, but what else?

He said, "It was done in secret. Only we three and one other knew about the flight." Tell the truth. It might keep them from invading Earth for a while. If they thought Earth had an army they would strike before Earth grew any stronger. The truth might keep them quiescent for a while longer. "The new social system there, it has no conception of warfare or violence. You wouldn't understand it. And they wouldn't understand you, not now."

"You used our ship to get here," she said. "That would indicate that you have no ships of your own there?"

Danton nodded. Keith laughed, a thin high laughter. He moved toward Rhone. He dropped to one knee and raised his hands to her. "They have no armaments, no ships. Psychologically they have no power to resist. Weisser said I could become one of you."

Danton pushed Rhone from the car. He shoved the control lever and the car whirled violently, slammed into the foremost Oligarch guard, sent him spinning across the metal floor. The car swerved again, struck down the other guard. Danton jumped free, ripped the weapon from the man's waist. The guard was groaning and his hands were sliding about vaguely over the floor.

The hand-gun was familiar. It was similar to the flash-guns used by the guards on Earth a century before; there would have been no need to have altered that weapon.

Keith ran at him, kicked out, and Danton fired. Keith went to his knees and looked at Danton dully and then fell forward. He rolled over and lay there, grinning blankly at nothing at all.

Deliberately, without feeling anything, Danton burned the life out of the two Oligarchs who had lain stunned where they fell. As he spun back, the woman stood stiffly almost up against him. He had expected her to attempt to run away.

She said softly, "I know what it is now. It's because you're human. It's human to grow older. It's human to die. Maybe we have the wrong idea, or maybe we've approached it wrong, I don't know. It doesn't matter now. I—"

He pressed the flash-gun toward her. She didn't seem to notice the gun. She continued to look at his face, into his eyes, searching, for something he couldn't tell what, and he didn't care.

"Did you know you have gray eyes," she whispered, "and that they deepen, get darker and darker?"

"No."

"No. No one ever told you."

Mara had told him. He barely remembered that time when she had told him.

She put her slightly opened mouth against his lips and pulled him closer.

He pulled the trigger. Her body quivered as though from the kiss, and then he stepped away and she fell at his feet. He wasn't thinking now. There was no time for that. He lifted her, carried her toward one of the refrigerated banks. Her skin had turned a mottled ugly color and her eyes were open and rigid. Quite suddenly her eyes moved up into her head, and ugly groups of purple little veins appeared underneath the skin.

He put her on the frosty floor of the huge bank. Around her, like some hideous garnishing, were eyes that looked at her accusingly. He dragged the two Oligarch guards and Keith's corpse into another bank, slammed the heavy door. Van Ness groaned and Danton lifted him into the car.

"I can't see," Van Ness whispered. "I can't see. I'm dying."

"Hang on," Danton said. "Only fifty Oligarchs, understand, Van? Forty seven now. Maybe less if those seven I shot down in the pit didn't all recover. Maybe we can get some more of them, Van!"

"I'm dying," Van Ness whispered. "I can't see."

DANTON tooled the car. As he approached doors in the long tubular halls, the doors opened automatically, closed again behind. There were turns, drops, risings, more doors, other halls.

He stopped the car. Lost, alone, somewhere. Only fifty of them—no, forty-seven now at most. They wouldn't have too large a structure here. Somewhere there would have to be a central power source. If he could find such a power unit, strike at the heart—

He shook Van Ness. He felt for the heart. It was still beating. Van Ness moaned, "I'm dying. If I could see—"

"Do you know what I'm saying, Van? Can you hear me?"

"Yes . . . sure I can hear you."

"Listen to me. We're in the Oligarch's fortress. I don't know how big it is. But it seems to be one unified structure. There has to be a central power source here. You were an engineering expert. Where would it be? Van, listen. There are only a handful of Oligarchs here now. We stand a slim chance . . ."

"But I can't see—"

"I can see."

"Yes—a central power source. I remember the words to an old song, Captain. You know, soldiering used to be a great sport. There was one about a chocolate soldier with a uniform so pretty . . ."

"Van Ness!"

"Yes."

"Where would they build that central power room? Up? Down?"

"Down."

He started the car moving. Oddly curving and angling corridors bending with geometrical precision. He saw an elevator door and he pressed the button; the door opened and he drove the car into it. Down, fast, sickeningly fast.

"Bottom . . . clear down," Van Ness mumbled. "Start from there. I can't see—"

Danton kept the elevator dropping and then it stopped. He hadn't stopped it.

He stepped to the side as the door slid open. He hit the entering Oligarch, hit him with a short hard blow in the solar plexus and when the man gasped and bent forward, Danton brought his knee up. Bone and cartilage crunched. The

man slewed to one side, and Danton hit him again and the man smashed into the wall and slid down toward the floor.

"I can't see," Van Ness said. "But what I hear has a sweet sound."

Danton dragged the Oligarch up, held him against the wall. The man sagged and lifted his hands to protect his face. His lips were torn, his nose bleeding. He stared dazedly at Danton, his eyes filled with terror, shock.

"Wha—" he started to say something. Danton pushed his flash-gun into the man's middle. And the Oligarch screamed. Danton's voice chopped into the scream.

"I'm going to kill you," Danton said. "Unless you tell me what I want to know. Tell me where the power rooms are, the central power units."

The man shook his head, no.

Danton moved the gun around, pressed the stud. Burning flesh, and the Oligarch jerked away and fell twitching on the floor, his left leg charred from the knee down. He sat and stared at the leg, and he started whimpering. He reached down with his fingers, then drew them back again.

"Tell me," Danton said. "Or what's left of you, even the body parts from your banks won't put back together again."

The Oligarch murmured, and he had changed his mind.

**T**HE OLIGARCH led them into the gigantic room, then collapsed. Danton killed him where he lay. Danton recognized some of the equipment, though he was no nucleonics or electronics expert as Van Ness had been. "Listen to this, Van. Listen to me!"

"Yes . . ."

Danton told what he saw. He was Van Ness' eyes. The generators, huge oscilloscopes, vacuumtube voltmeters, electronic power-supply panels, rolls and skeins of hook-up wire, shielding of every color, size and shape, panel plates, huge racks of glowing tubes, elaborate transceivers, long solid surfaces of gleaming bakelite, color-indexed files of resistors and capacitances . . .

Van Ness told Danton what to do. Van Ness took a long time to say a few

words, and after that he didn't seem to be able to say anything else. He didn't move either. Danton released the force of the flash-gun, left the gun in the position Van Ness had indicated, its beam burning deep into the heart of the complicated soul of the Oligarch fortress.

He would have taken Van Ness with him, but Van Ness wasn't interested anymore. He was dead. Danton left him. He would remember Van Ness alive as long as he was capable of remembering anything. Van Ness as clay he had already forgotten.

He ran toward the elevator. As it whirred upward, he felt the reverberation, the trembling, the beginnings of a low deadly murmuring. The elevator continued to rise smoothly, carrying Danton and the car, but Danton felt a giddy swaying like that of an earthquake.

A social system strictly of the top-down variety. But in the final analysis, the top wasn't the mind of Rhone or of Weisser. It was something above both of them, above the Oligarchs. Machines. And above the machines, generators and switches and volts and tubes.

The electronic interdependence was going insane within the fortress, like the intricate cellular structure of a mind within a skull.

In a hall somewhere in a catacomb of metal, Danton sat in the car, wondering which way to go, wondering if it would make any difference now, feeling the fortress above, below, all around him, breaking apart.

What about the Oligarch spaceships? Perhaps they were someplace else, away from here, and they would survive the destruction of the fortress. And maybe one or two or three Oligarchs would also survive. Even one ship, one Oligarch, returning to Earth, would be one too many.

He was looking at the far door as it slid open and a car sped through, skimming along the polished metal floor frantically, desperately. The occupant of the car, a woman, took no notice of Danton. Her face was damp and pale with fear as her car sped past. Her machines were forsaking her. Her efficiency, her gadgets and the tremendous power that had existed

for so long at her fingertips, were disintegrating, and she appeared to be disintegrating with them.

She would be intent only on escape, of course, not realizing that without her machines, she was doomed. But she might find a temporary escape from the death around her, the metal walls of the gigantic coffin.

Van Ness was gone. And Keith—convinced that soldiering was an end in itself, rather than a means to an end—had found the inevitable end for a soldier.

Danton wondered about that. He knew one thing—that the test was yet to come for him. He was not sure yet that Keith had not been right . . .

He followed the woman through a door into a chamber. It was a nice room, Danton thought. A great deal of pleasure had drifted through this room, and in it, time had probably never meant anything. Perfumed incense. Music, drifting, still rising from somewhere, pneumatic couches—but underneath something was cracking open, veins and arteries of power choking, blocked off; but the power had to go somewhere; short-circuit, the madness of a great machine-mind.

The woman had opened a panel, and beyond her, Danton could see the Martian afternoon. He had never seen a Martian afternoon before. It was beautiful, he thought, though he was hardly in a position to study or appreciate it properly. Then he saw what she was doing—the woman was escaping out the panel. There must be some way she was planning to get safely to the ground outside. It seemed to be a long way down.

But she wasn't worried about that.

She jumped. She looked back at Danton, her face pale and twisted, then she jumped. Danton ran, looked out. He looked out just in time to see her body hit. It was too far down for anyone to go that way. Her body bounced a little.

**I**NSANE, Danton thought. They had each become such component parts of the bigger machine that very likely they were all going crazy now, right along with the machine. And the machine wasn't going to last much longer either, insane

or otherwise. It was beginning to quiver, to shake and shudder, and its metal skin was beginning to groan and twist. Its metal joints were grinding together, its skein nerves wrenching and singing.

Danton looked around hurriedly. He saw the wires again, everything suspended by wires, shiny and strong. He gave a heavy table slab—legless, of course, a suspended disc of metal—he gave it a tremendous shove and it began to swing to and fro; it made a heavy pendulum, swinging wider and wider, and it began to crash into other suspended things, into chairs and into weird sculpture, crashing through structural images and distorted faces of metal. It made a sound like off-key bells bonging and clanging.

Wires finally snapped with a whine and Danton felt the hot sharpness as a strand cut across his arm, sinking in like the slash of a knife. He pushed the table slab to the wall, against the window. He managed to get several strands of the wire tied together by complicated knot designs. He yanked down an ornamental drape that seemed to have a swirling life of its own, made sheaths for his hands from finely-woven metallic cloth, and looped the wire three times around the metal sheathing.

He slid down toward the ground. It was further down than it had seemed from above. The wind was high and cold and strong. He began to sway dangerously and the wind threatened to tear him from the wire.

He glanced upward. The structure of the Oligarchs was huge, a shining silver metal thing of coldness rising up out of bare rocks. It was built on the side of a cliff, very high, and very far below was a valley. Perhaps it was the valley in which he had landed. No, that must have been far away from here. He saw no lake. But, of course, the valley itself stretched windingly away further than he could see.

He ran out of wire. He managed to lift his weight with one arm enough to unwrap the wire coils from the other. That gave him another three feet. He dropped. Pain came from a wrenched ankle and the shock of the weight on his

bones. But he hit running and he kept on running.

For somehow, though he had killed her, she was alive.

Just before dropping he had seen her, running away from the Oligarch tower. Running along a steel walkway. A fine-mesh railing separated the walkway from a sheer drop of at least a thousand feet. It was Rhone. She was running fast, too. Very fast.

He ran hard. He didn't feel the pain in his ankle. He couldn't afford to feel anything now except urgency. The cold thin air burned.

She stopped and he stopped too, flattening against the hard rust-colored rock. She was pushing a lever or something; whatever it was it got results. A silver nose projected outward from the cliff, slanting slightly upward; it blossomed out as though someone were blowing a silver bubble from stone. Out and out. It stopped.

It was a spaceship, all right. Danton figured that the power shut-off had prevented her from reaching the ship from a subterranean route. Evidently rigged for such an emergency, the wall of the cliff could also summon the ship out into the open, prepare it for blasting off from a cradle cut down into the cliff like a giant cannon barrel.

When the outer door in the side of the ship opened, Rhone ran for it. Danton was right behind her. She heard him just as she went through and into the air-lock. She turned, her mouth opened, and then he struck her with his shoulder, carried her on through the inner air-lock door and into the tubular corridor leading forward into the control room.

He dragged her forward with him as the doors closed behind him. The controls were the same in principle as those of the ship he had brought from Earth. Once set, they were automatic. He strapped Rhone in the shock-seat at the side. He strapped himself into the chair before the control panel . . .

**S**EERS, Secretary of Social Security, was a fat man with a serious round slate-gray face. He looked at Danton

thoughtfully, waited. Outside the office of Sociology Section in New World Square, the sky was a soft and promising blue.

Finally Seers said, "Well, Danton, what happened then?"

Danton shrugged. "First I dropped enough atomic fire to finish destroying the Oligarch fortress completely, and to get any ships that might have been left inside the mountain. There's nothing there now but a big black crater. I don't think there will ever be any need to worry about the Oligarchs anymore. I landed the ship in the Pacific in as isolated a spot as I could find—midway between New Zealand and Cape Horn. Then I contacted you by short wave. And here I am and here you are. And I guess that's all there is."

"Why did you bring Rhone back?"

"I had no choice," Danton said. "I guess when I killed her and put her in the refrigeration bank, that saved her life. Some surgeon did a quick job on her." Danton leaned toward Seers. "If all of it, or any of it, really happened."

"What makes you think it didn't?"

"For one thing, I'm back here alive, an impossible mission accomplished. For another—I—well, this time I *want* to be reconditioned."

"Your experience has changed your outlook, Danton?"

"Considerably. I—want to be changed. I want to be someone else, anything else. I've seen things too horrible to remember anyway. I'd rather forget everything. It could all have been delusion, hallucination rigged up in your <sup>311</sup>psychic labs. As Keith said—you boys are good at that sort of thing. If that's how it was—it was good therapy. There's a doubt in my mind, you see. It *might* have happened, and just the bare possibility that it did happen is enough to make me gladly volunteer for reconditioning."

Seers nodded. "I'm very glad you're approaching it this way. It will make the processing easier to perform, and the new personality easier to maintain. We probably will never need your kind again, Danton. Now that the Oligarchs are gone, the last threat to our new system is gone with them. The chance of some other intelligent life-form being in the universe at all is remote, and the further chance that they would take aggressive action against Earth makes the whole thing something we can logically ignore."

"That's fine," Danton said.

"You've seen where the psychology of war would lead, inevitably. If you can justify killing human beings at all, the final result is bound to be, in some form or another, what you saw on Mars."

"If I actually saw it. If I was on Mars at all."

Seers signaled through the intercom. A door opened. Rhone stood there, a tablet in her hand, and a pencil. She sat down and crossed attractive legs. Very attractive legs, Danton thought.

"Miss Tannon, this is Richard Danton. Mr. Danton, my new secretary, Miss Tannon."

She nodded, turned her nose down once more, very business-like, into the tablet.

Danton thought, It's Rhone all right. A reconditioned Rhone. They must be good at their reconditioning to change an

Oligarch mind into that of an efficient secretary. Danton said, "What about the others up there on Mars?"

"We'll take care of them, peacefully of course," Seers said. "We have plenty of time. We won't bring them back. We will set up our new system there."

Danton listened to Seers' dictation. "To Chief Psyche-adjustment Administrator. From Seers, Department of Social Security. Subject: Voluntary reconditioning of Richard Danton. To take place at once under the jurisdiction of . . ."

There was more. Danton didn't hear it . . . and later they injected something into his veins and he sat there, feeling Richard Danton dying, for the last time, going away. Richard Danton, fading out, all around him bit by bit, cell by cell, dying, never to awaken again. And remembering what he had experienced on Mars, Danton thought: It's as good a reward as anyone could ask. Goodbye, Richard Danton. It was nice knowing you, but Goodbye . . .

## *HIS NAME WAS BURTON.*

*John R. Burton.*

*He was as happy as anyone could expect to be. His wife loved him and he loved his wife. Their children were very well adjusted, as was everyone of course in the New World System.*

*Burton worked ten hours a week in a coal mine, though the job was merely one demanding the overseeing of machines. The rest of the week was one of leisure devoted to gardening, hobbies, play, music. There was no more hate, no violence, no feelings of insecurity. It wasn't that everyone loved everyone else particularly. It was just that no one was afraid of the future anymore.*

*And Burton was no longer bothered by bad dreams either, and so he was what one might consider perfectly happy, perfectly adjusted.*

*The perfect happiness of one who does not remember.*