

# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 2 — No. 1

December, 1957

## CONTENTS

### SHORT STORIES

- THE GENTLE VULTURES** by *Isaac Asimov* ..... 2  
The Hurrians waited for Earth to have its atomic war
- BROOMSTICK RIDE** by *Robert Bloch* ..... 22  
Witches and warlocks on the new planet — impossible!
- GET RICH QUICK** by *Richard R. Smith* ..... 68  
You could make money on Delira, but it was dangerous
- QUARANTINED SPECIES** by *J. F. Bone* ..... 80  
The Venusian horgels were just too lovable!
- MISFIT** by *Robert Silverberg* ..... 98  
It's hard to exist on a high gravity planet
- THE WEEGIL** by *Ecelyn E. Smith* ..... 113  
Nobody knew what the weegil was made for

### NOVELETTE

- THE HUNTERS OF CUTWOLD** by *Calvin M. Knox* ..... 34  
It was a thrill to shoot the man-like creatures

### FEATURES

- NUCLEAR NEWS** by *Steven Roy* ..... 21
- LOOK TO THE STARS** by *Scott Nevets* ..... 33
- PYROPHORICITY** by *Wharton Pepper* ..... 67
- LIFE SPAN OF EARTH** by *Eugene W. Potter* ..... 79
- COSMIC RAYS & SHAPE OF OUR GALAXY**  
by *Norris Little* ..... 97
- SCIENCE SHORTS** by *Edgar P. Straus* ..... 126

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SUPER SCIENCE FICTION is published bi-monthly by Headline Publications Inc., at 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial office at 1790 Broadway, New York 19, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Holyoke, Mass., August 21, 1956, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copy, 35c. Subscription rates, \$1.00 for 12 issues. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts, and all such materials must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All stories printed in the magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is coincidental. Copyright 1957 by Headline Publications Inc. All rights, including translation, reserved under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in the U.S.A.

# MISFIT

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

*illustrated by* BOWMAN

The pull of a high gravity planet can do some strange things to a man's insides, unless he has been adapted to it. Foss wasn't adapted, but he had to do his task

**F**OSS stood outside the Colony Officer's shack, feeling the tremendous drag of the alien world's gravity tugging at his bones. He tried to keep himself from slouching, but it was hard. On an Earth-type world, his lean body carried 170 pounds; here on Sandoval IX he weighed 306. That sort of drag could do things to a man's insides fast.

A little knot of Adapted Men clustered across the wide street, grinning mockingly at him. Low-slung, broad-beamed, they weren't bothered by the 1.8 grav of Sandoval IX. They had been bred for it; they thrived here. And they were openly enjoying Foss' discomfort.

He knocked again.

Nothing but silence followed. Foss turned away from the door and glared at the watching *A d a p t o s*. "Hey—you! Where's Haldane? I want to see him."

After a pause one of them said lazily, "He's in there, Earthman. Just keep knockin'. He'll hear you sooner or later, I guess." He burst into uproarious laughter. Angrily, Foss pounded on the Colony Officer's door with both fists. Lifting his arms was agonizing; it was like raising them through a fog of molasses.

This time the door was opened. Colony Officer Haldane appeared, a dark scowl on his wide leathery face. Like



all of the Adapted Men on Sandoval IX, Haldane was short—no more than five-four or so—with tremendous girth through the shoulders and hips. His neck was a thick pillar; his thighs must have been immense. His type had been genetically engineered for worlds like Sandoval IX.

“Yes?” he asked, in a deep, rumbling voice. “You new here, Earthman? Don’t remember seeing your face around here before.”

“I just got here,” Foss said. He pointed to the field behind him, where the slim golden column of his two-man ship rested. “Came in from Egri V. I’m looking for someone here. Maybe you can help me.”

“That’s doubtful. We don’t run a lost-and-found for Earthmen here, you know.”

Foss felt sweat rolling down his face. Sandoval IX was a hot world as well as a heavy one.

“All I want is some information,” he said tightly. “Just information. I’m not asking for any help.”

The Adapted Man shrugged easily. “You wouldn’t *get* any help, whether you asked for it or not. *Earthman.*”

“I said I wouldn’t ask,” Foss snapped.

“Okay. Come on inside and I’ll hear you out, I guess.”

**T**HERE was a woman inside, immensely broad through the hips, big-breasted and flat-faced. To Foss she was repugnant-looking, but Adapted Men had different standards of beauty. She was ideally designed for childbearing on a heavy-gravity planet, and judging from the two stocky children playing on the floor, she had already made a good start.

“My wife,” Haldane grunted as he led Foss past. “And my children.”

Foss smiled mechanically and kept going. They turned into a small, shabby room that was probably the Adapted Man’s study. Haldane dropped ponderously into a vast pneumochair, and didn’t bother to gesture to Foss to sit. Foss sat anyway, in a smaller chair that looked sturdy enough to hold an elephant. He took a sharp breath as the gravity-strain on his heart was suddenly eased.

“What’s your name and what do you want here?” Haldane asked.

"My name is Web Foss. I'm an Earthman attached to the Civil Government on Egri V. Two weeks ago my wife...ran away. She came here. I want to bring her back."

"How do you know she came here?"

"I know. Don't worry about that. I thought you might be able to help me find her."

"Me?" Haldane asked with just a mere local official. She might be anywhere at all on Sandoval IX. There are more than twenty colonies on this planet, you know."

"Twenty's not very many," Foss said. "I'll search them all if I have to."

A smile creased Haldane's bleak face. With elaborate lack of courtesy he drew a bottle from his desk, poured himself a drink, and replaced the bottle without offering it to Foss. He sipped slowly, ignoring the Earthman. At length he said, "You know, Mr. Foss, Earthmen aren't very popular on the Adapted Worlds. We don't get very good treatment when we visit the—ah—Normal Worlds. Cheap hotels, second-rate transportation, sly snickers, that sort of thing. Look at the Adapted Man—isn't he fun-

ny?" You know what I'm talking about?"

"I know. I can't help what ignorant people say or do. They don't understand that the Adapted Men are just as human as anyone else. that without them many planets couldn't have been settled. But—"

"Spare me the sermon," Haldane said. "The fact still remains that we were bred from Earth stock and now get treated as something not quite human. Dammit, we *are* human—and better than damned soft Earthmen who'd be dead in a year on a planet like this!"

"It's not a matter of better or worse," Foss said. "On a heavy-grav planet like this, you're better suited than we are. After all, you've been Adapted for it. On an Earthnorm world, it's the other way around. It's all relative. But my wife—"

"Your wife's here. She's not in this particular colony, but she's on Sandoval IX."

"Where?"

"That's your problem, Mr. Foss."

Foss rose, fighting the gravity every inch of the way. "You know where she is. Why won't you tell me?"

"You're an Earthman," Haldane said quietly. "A superior being. Go find her by yourself."

**W**ITHOUT a word, Foss turned and left the Colony Officer's study, made his way through the dark cluttered hallway, past the children and their mother, out into the street. He kept stiffly erect, resisting the temptation to shuffle. That would be simpler, easier on his straining thigh-muscles, but he forced himself to walk springingly as if the gravity were Earth-norm instead of 1.8.

He hadn't expected much better treatment from Haldane. It was rare for an Adapted Man to even the score with an Earthman; usually it was a confused and bewildered Adapto on an Earth-norm world who met only laughter as he struggled to cope with a light grav pull or with an atmosphere so rich in oxygen that it left him half-drunk. Some of the Adaptos were bred to survive in an atmosphere only eight or ten percent oxygen; when they hit the 20% of an Earth-norm world, they spent their time on a continuous oxygen jag.

The shoe was on the other

foot now, and the Adaptos enjoyed the feeling. An Earthman had ventured into an Adapted World, reversing the usual pattern. They weren't going to go out of their way to make things easy for him.

But Carol was here... somewhere. He'd find her.

Somehow.

He stepped out into the street. The little cluster of Adaptos was still there. Foss crossed the street and headed toward them.

The group broke up as he got there. They melted away in six directions, as if they didn't want anything to do with the lean, hard-faced Earthman.

"Hold it," Foss said. "I want to talk to you."

They kept moving, strolling casually away.

"Hold it!"

He sprang forward and grabbed an Adapto by his open collar. He was almost a foot taller than the man. "I asked you to wait a minute. I want to talk to you."

"Let go of me, Earthman."

"I said I wanted to talk to you."

The Adapto jerked himself out of Foss' grasp and hit him. Foss saw the punch coming,

lifting from the hip and heading for his jaw, but there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. His gravity-prisoned body simply would not react as it had been trained to do. He made a single ineffectual attempt at ducking, and then the Adapto's fist cracked into the side of his face.

He hit the ground with astonishing speed. Crack—*boom!* He had gone over like a skulled tenpin. After a moment he felt his jaw tentatively; it still seemed to be in one piece. He realized the Adapto had merely tapped him; an unpulled punch would probably have been fatal.

Foss got up, slowly. The Adepto stood his ground, legs spread belligerently.

"Want another?"

"One's enough," Foss said. His jaw felt numb. "I just wanted to ask you something."

The Adapto sauntered away, down the empty street. Foss watched him go. It had been a mistake to attempt the use of force; even the weakest of these colonists could flatten him with a slap, and Foss was no weakling himself.

This wasn't his world, though, It belonged to the

Adaptos, and he was a misfit here—a man for whom walking and breathing were constant problems, not second nature. He looked up at the warm blueness of distant Sandoval, and scowled. It was hard to blame the Adaptos.

The offspring of men, they were objects of ridicule when they went among the so-called Normals. They were simply getting even, now.

He balled his fists angrily. *I'll show them, he thought. I'll find Carol—without their help.*

HE took a couple of steps down the broad street, knowing that if he stood still long enough his muscles would tighten and become useless.

The settlement had a rough, half-finished look. It was only three generations since the Adapted Man program had got under way, and Sandoval I% had been settled less than a decade before by a pilot group tailored to withstand its heat, humidity, atmospheric make-up, and gravity. There were perhaps ten thousand Adaptos here now, in twenty colonies scattered over the planet's face. In time they would spread and populate the entire world. In time.

And a few centuries hence mankind would spread from one end of the galaxy to the other—with even the most forbidding worlds inhabited by beings that could be called human.

Foss took a heavy step. He was thinking of Carol—of Carol, and of that last quarrel back on Egri V. He hardly remembered how it had started, by now—but he would never forget how it had finished.

Would never forget the bright anger in Carol's eyes as she said, "I've had enough, Web. Of you and of this planet. I'm leaving tonight."

He hadn't believed her. Not until he discovered she'd withdrawn half of their joint savings account and vanished. There weren't any scheduled flights out of Egri V for three weeks, and for a while he had hoped she was still somewhere on the planet.

Until he found out she'd hired a private courier to drop her off at his next port of call. Foss had spoken to the courier.

"You took her to Sandoval IX?"

"That's right."

"But that's an Adapted World. She couldn't last long there!"

The courier shrugged. "She wanted to get off Egri V in a hurry. I told her where I was going, and she paid me. No questions asked. I dropped her off there on my supply route last week."

"Okay," Foss had said. "Thanks."

And then he had borrowed the two-man ship from the Ministry, and gone after her. Carol wasn't the pioneer type; she wouldn't have gone to Sandoval IX if she knew what sort of world it was. It had been a wild, desperate move, and one she no doubt regretted by this time.

He reached a street corner and paused. The blocky figure of an Adapto was coming toward him.

"You the Earthman who's looking for his woman?"

"That's right," Foss said.

"She's in the next settlement. Ten miles west of here, roughly. I saw her last time I made a trip over that way, four-five days ago."

Foss blinked in surprise. "You're telling me the truth, aren't you?"

The Adapto spat. "I wouldn't lie to an Earthman."

"How come you're telling me? I thought none of you



meant to help me at all."

The Adapto's deepset black eyes met his. Slowly he said, "We were just talkin' about it. We figure it's simpler to tell you where she is. That way you won't be mousin' around here botherin' us all the time. Go after your woman, friend. We don't want you here. An Earthman smells up the air. He louses up the crops."

Foss licked his lips tensely, holding back his temper. "Okay," he said. "I won't inflict my presence on you any more than I have to. Ten miles west, you say?"

"Yeah."

"I'm on my way," Foss said. He thought for a moment: there wasn't much fuel left in the two-man ship, and a heavy world like Sandoval IX had a high escape velocity. He could get to the next settlement by blasting off, orbiting, and making a new landing ten miles westward, but that would consume a tremendous amount of reaction mass; quite probably, he wouldn't be able to make a second blastoff later, after he'd found Carol. He would have to leave the ship here, and find some other way of covering the ten miles.

He pulled out his wallet, "I'd like to rent a landcar from you, if you've got one. I won't need it more than an hour or so. Is it worth ten credits to you?"

"No."

Foss cursed silently, "Fifteen?"

"Save your breath, friend. My car isn't for rent at any price."

"A hundred," Foss said desperately.

"I said save your breath."

"If you won't rent me a car, someone else will." He stepped around the Adapto and headed down the street, moving as fast as was possible.

"You can save your energy too," the Adapto called after him. "You'll need it for the hike."

"Huh?"

He turned. The Adapto was smiling scornfully at him. "Nobody's going to rent you a car, friend. Fuel's too precious here to waste on you. It's only ten miles. Let's see you walk it, Earthman."

**O**NLY ten miles. Let's see you walk it.

Foss heard the words over and over again. He entered a bar further down the street.

Ten or twelve *Adaptos* were there, drinking. They looked up coldly as he came through the photon-barrier.

"We don't serve Earthmen here," the bartender said. "This is a restricted bar. Locals only."

Foss glowered at him. "I didn't come in here to drink." He looked around. "I want to rent a landcar," he said loudly. "My wife's in the next settlement. I want to go get her. Who'll rent me his car for an hour?"

No response. Foss drew a hundred-credit bill from his wallet. "I'll put a hundred credits on the line for somebody's car. Any takers?"

The bartender said, "This is a drinkin' place, Earthman, not a public square. You want to transact business, transact it outside."

Foss ignored that. "Well? A hundred credits?"

Someone at the bar chuckled. "Put your money away, Earthman. We're not goin' to rent you anything. It's only ten miles. Start walking."

Foss was silent a moment. *Only ten miles*. For an *Adapto*, that was an afternoon's invigorating hike. For an Earthman, it might mean a day or more

of weary leg-dragging. They were daring him to do it. They wanted to see him die trying.

Well, he wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

"Okay," he said softly. "I'm going to walk there, and I'm going to walk back. And tomorrow I'll be back here to show you that an Earthman can do it."

They turned away. No one was looking at him.

"I'll be back," Foss said.

He left the bar and headed across the field toward his ship. His muscles ached; his heart was throbbing wearily from the exertion needed to pump almost twice as hard. Earth-norm people weren't meant for Sandoval IX. A few weeks or maybe a month or two in this kind of grav and the tired heart would give out completely.

His throat was dry and his eyes were tearing by the time he reached the cabin of the ship. He assembled a lightweight survival kit—compass, drink-flask, food tabs, saline drops, other essentials. He strapped the pack to his back. It was a five-pound kit, the sort of burden a man would hardly notice ordinarily. Here

it weighed nine pounds, and Foss knew it would seem a lot heavier than that before he was through walking.

He stopped for a moment to rest in the acceleration cradle. Then, relentlessly, he dragged himself to his feet and clambered down out of the ship, taking every step of the catwalk carefully instead of jumping as he usually did. A jump here might snap his ankles.

The afternoon sun was high overhead. *Ten miles*, he thought. How long would it take to walk ten miles? It was 1300 now; if he covered only two miles an hour, he'd be there before nightfall.

A watching group of Adaptos called something to him as he started out. He couldn't hear what it was, but he was willing to bet it wasn't any sort of encouragement.

**T**HE land spread out broad and flat before him as he walked; it was good farm-land, rolling and brown, sun-warmed, fertile. Far off in the distance rugged steep hills, not quite steep enough to be mountains, formed a backdrop. The air was warm. A brown dirt road wound through the farmland,

leading on to the next settlement, where Carol was.

It was lovely country. It was too good a world to allow it to go to waste, which was why men had been Adapted to live on it. But Foss did not belong in the landscape scene, and he knew it.

He pulled himself along. Muscles designed to support a man of 170 pounds groaned under the burden of 306; ligaments complained. He felt mountainous, gross, impossibly heavy and impossibly weak. Torrents of sweat drenched his body.

After a while he stopped and cut a walking stick from a tree at the side of the road. Pulling the living limb from the tree required fearful effort; he was gasping and wheezing by the time he had done it. He moved on, shoving himself forward with jabs of the stick.

He had covered two and a half miles by the end of the first hour. That was a little better than schedule, but the effort left him limp. He didn't do quite so well during the second hour; the pedometer he was carrying showed that he was now only four miles out, plus two hundred yards. His pace was slackening.

*Six miles to go—*

He shambled on mechanically, not worrying now about his posture, not worrying about anything but the sheer one-foot-after-another plodding that would bring him to his goal.

*Every step will bring me nearer*, he thought. He made a little chant of it: *EVry STEP will BRING me NEARer*, taking a step forward on each accented syllable. *EVry STEP will BRING me NEARer*, over and over, until it began to drag out ... *EVry...STEP will ... BRING me... NEARer*, with longer and longer intervals between the beat.

Finally he sank into a little heap on the side of the road and rested. His breath came short. His heart thudded so hard that he shook with each pulsation. Then he thought of the mocking *Adaptos* waiting somewhere behind him—possibly trailing him, waiting for the moment he dropped of exhaustion. He levered up off his walking stick and kept going. *..What's 1.8 grav?* he asked himself. *Hell, I stand up to five and six gravs all the time in a spaceship.* *..Yeah. For ten seconds at a time*, he answered himself.

He checked his watch, then the *pedometer*. The digits swam. He was now three and a half hours out of the colony, and had covered a little better than five miles. He was falling further and further behind schedule.

*EVry ... STEP will... BRING me ... NEARer...*

He dragged his left leg forward, planted it on the ground, swung the right one up past it, then the left, the right...

He lost track of the time, of the distance, of everything. He looked at the dial every now and then, but it made no sense. From time to time, when he remembered about it, he took a tablet from his kit and swallowed it. That gave him the energy to go on a little further, and yet a little further.

The sky darkened as the sun dropped out of sight. The warmth of the day trickled off into space. *Foss* kept moving. *Only ten miles. Let's see you walk it.*

*Houses* came into sight. *Streets*. *People*.

*Ne*, not people. *Adaptos*, short, squat, grotesque. *Foss* found himself looking down at a leathery brown face. He leaned forward on the walking-

stick, trying to catch his breath.

"I'm Web Foss," he said. "I'm looking for an Earthwoman. Mrs. Carol Foss. Is she here?"

For one wild dizzy moment he thought the Adapto might sneer and tell him that he'd simply travelled in a wide circle, that he was back in the same settlement from which he'd started out so long ago.

The Adapto nodded gravely. "The Earthwoman is here, with us. I'll take you to see her."

"You're not joking, now. She's really here?"

"Of course," the Adapto said impatiently. Foss noticed him staring strangely at him. "Where's your ship?" he asked.

"Ten miles the other way. I walked here."

"You—*walked*?" the Adapto said.

Foss nodded. "Take me to my wife, will you?" The fatigue of the trip seemed to wash away. For the first time in hours, he stood up straight.

**T**HEY had put Carol in a dark back room of one of the settlement houses. As Foss entered, he saw her lying

asleep on a crude pallet. The room was windowless; the air was stale and offensive. Three empty bottles of liquor lay on their sides near the bed: two gin, one some local brew. The room looked dismal.

He approached the bed and looked at his wife.

The gravitational pull did strange things to her face; it tightened the jaw muscles, made the lips rubbery and down-drooping, imparted an idiot sag to the eyelids. She looked as if she had lost twenty pounds; her face was harshly angular and almost skull-like.

"My God," he said out loud. "Is that what a human being looks like after two weeks here?"

She stirred. Foss turned and saw two Adaptos standing curiously behind him.

"Get out of here," he said. "Leave us alone."

"*Web*," she murmured. "*Web*..."

She hadn't opened her eyes yet.

Foss leaned close over her and with trembling fingers touched her cheek. The skin was dry and flakey. "Wake up, Carol. Wake up."

She opened her eyes hesi-

tantly—then, seeing him, sat half-upright in bed, sinking back again after a moment.

"Web," she said.

"I got here this morning. The courier told me where you had been dropped off, and I figured I'd better come get you. This isn't the sort of world you would be likely to enjoy on a permanent basis."

She sat up again, with a resolute effort. "It's been hell. As soon as I felt the grav I knew I couldn't stay here... But that courier was gone, and there was no way I could get in touch. And the Adaptos weren't very helpful."

"At least they gave you a place to stay. I didn't even rate that."

"It was like a nightmare—trying to walk against that gravity." She shuddered. "I couldn't go more than ten or twenty steps without falling down. And the Adaptos—they just stood around and laughed, for the first couple of hours. Then I collapsed, and after that they were a little more decent. I had a little money; they brought me liquor, and I drank... it was the only way I could... could stop feeling the drag this place has!"

Foss held her wrist. It was almost cold.

"I guess I've been here a week or two," she went on. "I sleep most of the time. They feed me, a little. They treat me the way they would some animal that was sick. Web?"

"Eh?"

"Web, can we go home? Both of us?"

"That's why I came here, Carol."

She shook her head. "I was an idiot... running away like that, coming here. But I got my reward, I guess."

"We'll leave tomorrow," he said. "I have a ship." *Ten miles away*, he added silently.

She was staring at him. "Look at yourself in the mirror," she said suddenly. "Over there."

Foss rose, crossed the room, looked at his image. Even in the dim light, the sight rocked him. The face was that of a skeleton — a stubble-bearded skeleton with staring eyes, pale, gaunt cheeks bloodless lips. That ten-mile trip had left its mark. He looked like his own ghost.

He managed to chuckle. "Pretty awful, isn't it? You're no better. But we can fatten

up again when we're back on Egri V."

"Come here. Sit down next to me."

He cautiously lowered himself to the edge of the bed. He wriggled out of his kit-pack and stretched out next to her, feeling sick with fatigue. Seconds later, he was asleep.

**O**NLY ten miles. Let's see you walk it.

Ten miles there, ten miles back. And for the second ten-mile hitch he not only had to drag his own feet along, he had to support Carol.

The sun was blazingly warm when they set out, and grew warmer through the day. They talked incessantly, desperately, turning themselves into automata that marched on, on, without paying attention to the passing of the hours or the extent of road still ahead.

"We're lucky," Foss said after a while. "I put the ship down any old place. I could have landed it twenty miles away. Or two hundred. It's only ten."

"Only ten," Carol said.

"Only ten."

They rested frequently. Foss found himself growing oddly stronger as the day went on, as

if his body were adjusting,—*adapting*—itself to the increased pull of gravity, getting used to the drag exerted on it. He knew that was just illusion, of course; still, it was less of an effort than it had been on the way out.

The sun blazed down. Somewhere ahead was the colony, and in the colony was Foss' ship.

Somewhere.

It was still daytime when they got there.

A welcoming committee of Adapted Men stood by the road as they came by. "Walk straight," Foss whispered. "Don't slouch. Pretend you were just out for an afternoon's stroll, nothing more."

"I'll try. It's hard, though."

"You have to do it. Just for a few minutes—until we reach the ship."

He recognized a few faces. There was Colony Officer Haldane and his wife, and there the man who had knocked him down, and there some of the other jeerers. They were staring wordlessly at him.

"I came back," Foss said, when he was within speaking distance. "And I brought my wife."

"So I see," Haldane said coldly.

"I just thought I'd let you know I made it. I didn't want it to worry you."

"We weren't worried," Haldane said. "We didn't care."

But it was a lie. Foss knew. He could tell by the way their dark faces were scowling and their eyes glared that they *did* care.

They had sent the misfit into the desert to die, but he had come back alive. He had beaten them. One single Earthman.

"Excuse me," Foss said. "You're in my way. I want to get back to my ship."

But three of the *Adaptos* stood blocking the road, staring at him. He felt Carol's hand grip his arm more tightly. *No more trouble now*, he prayed.

*Not now.*

"Get out of my way," Foss said sharply. "Let me get past."

There was a moment of silence. Then Haldane said, "Get out of his way."

Sullenly, the three *Adaptos* gave way. Foss and Carol went past, on their way to the ship. He felt very tired, but he knew

now there wouldn't be any further trouble.

He walked on about twenty paces. Then he stopped and looked back. They were all staring after him.

"Thanks for everything," he said, smiling. "All the kind help. But I managed without you, didn't I?"

His eyes met Haldane's—and Haldane looked away. That was what Foss had been waiting for. An Earthman had met an *Adapto* on the *Adapto's* home grounds, and the Earthman had won. Foss could see that in Haldane's eyes. ,

He boosted Carol up into the ship, and followed her in. Just before he slammed the hatch shut, he peered out at the group of *Adaptos* outside. They were staring at him incredulously, as if they couldn't believe he had actually returned alive.

He grinned at them. The next time an Earthman came here, they'd have a little more respect for him.

"So long," he yelled. Then he slammed the hatch, dogged it shut, and went inside to begin setting up the homeward orbit.

**THE END**