

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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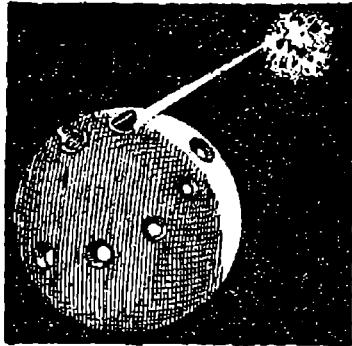
A THRILLING PUBLICATION

April, 1950

Featured Complete Novelet

PLANET OF THE SMALL MEN

By MURRAY LEINSTER



Pursued by implacable aliens from a saffron star, a quartet of Earth folk finally finds an odd haven of hope upon an astonishing world whose baffling contrasts defy logic! 11

Three Other Complete Novelets

JOURNEY FOR SEVEN.....	John D. MacDonald	48
<i>It seemed utterly senseless, that accident which made super-beings out of the people on the bus—but could there have been a larger pattern behind it?</i>		
THERE SHALL BE NO DARKNESS.....	James Blish	72
<i>Lycanthropy is bad enough in the abstract—but its horror is unbearably greater when a full-fledged werewolf arrives unheralded at a house party!</i>		
NOCTURNE	Wallace West	116
<i>It was strange, weirdly beautiful celestial music that the astronomer conducted on the faraway planet—but much stranger still was the orchestra he led!</i>		

Short Stories

CARNIVAL OF MADNESS.....	Ray Bradbury	95
<i>Rebellion flares when all flights of fancy are banned in the year 2229</i>		
LITTLE JOE	Cleve Cartmill	105
<i>Jake Murchison and the space salvagers pit themselves against pirates</i>		
THE TIME CAVE.....	Walt Sheldon	131
<i>Tremayne was angry when he found the skeleton was no fossil</i>		
THE BORGHESE TRANSPARENCY.....	Carter Sprague	134
<i>Can a work of art be a formidable foe to humanity?</i>		

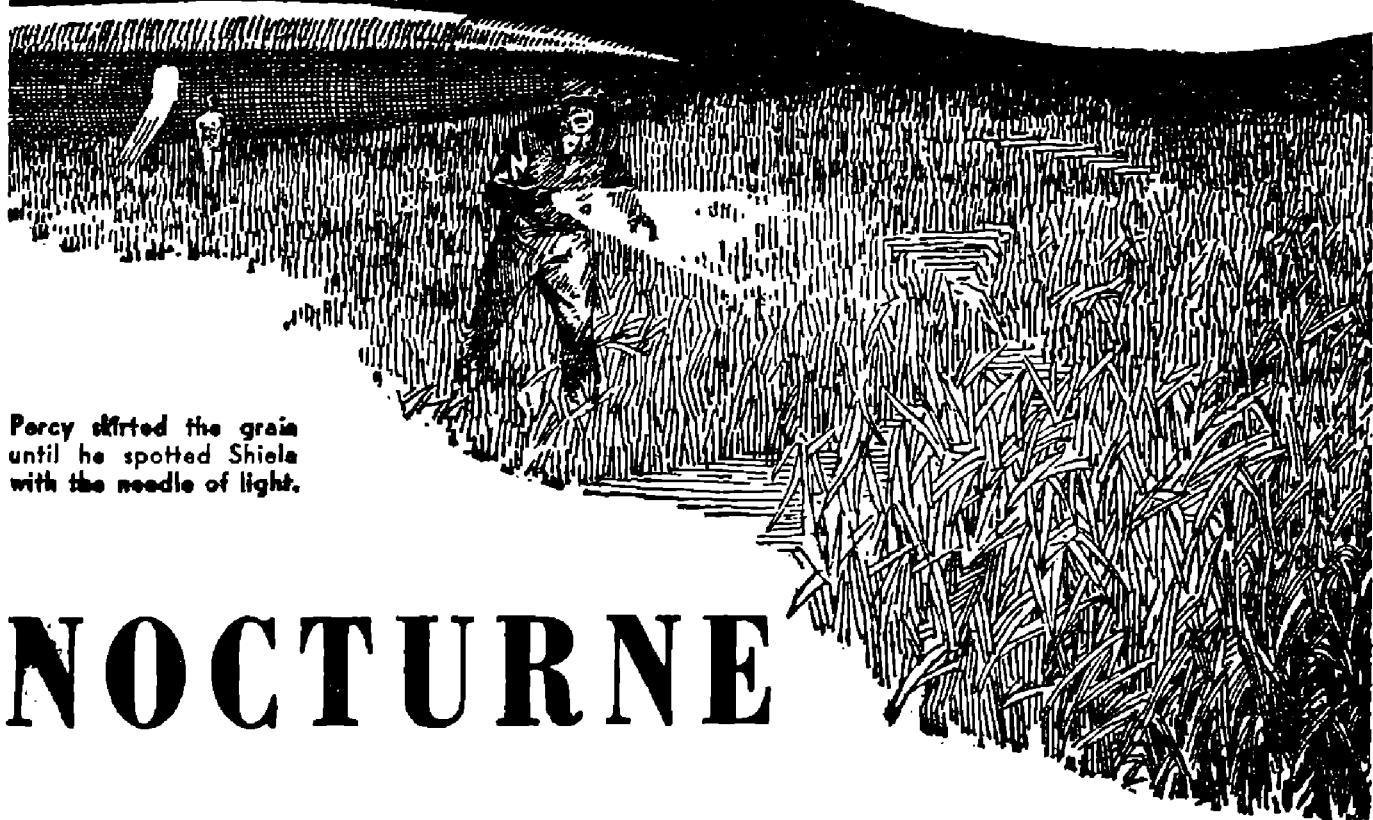
Features

THE READER SPEAKS	The Editor	6
THE POWER OF SUGGESTION.....	Simpson M. Ritter	104
WONDER ODDITIES	Science Facts	133
SCIENCE FICTION BOOK REVIEW.....	A Department	156
THE FRYING PAN.....	A Fanzine Review	158

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It was strange, weirdly beautiful celestial music that the astronomer conducted on the faraway planet—but much stranger still was the orchestra that he led!



Percy skirted the grain until he spotted Shiela with the needle of light.

NOCTURNE

CHAPTER I

Landing on Jonah

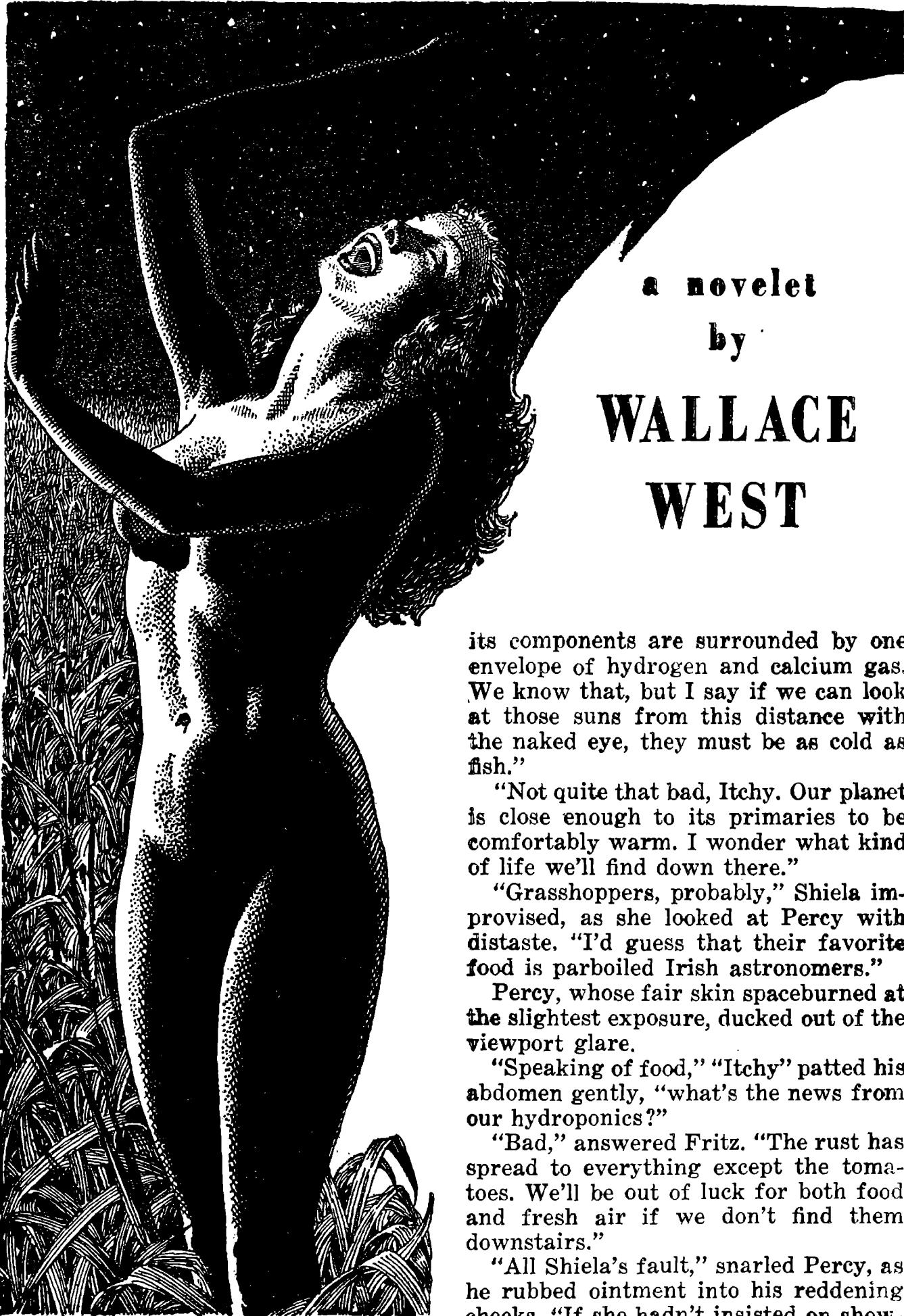
PERCY MOORE was quoting: "And it is told how Grayne of the Bright Breasts descended into hell, searching for Brian, her strong darling."

He was standing on tiptoe to peer over the shoulders of his fellow scientists—Shiela Fain, the red-haired ecologist; Fritz Schmidt, the stolid agronomist, and the Venusian ichthyologist with the unpronounceable name. All were squinting through the almost intolerable glare of the viewport as Rick Lander piloted the *Star Rover* toward her first landfall in ten months.

"Poetry again!" snorted Fritz. "I'd say Rick was trying to hit a gob of caviar frizzling on a red-hot dumbbell."

"Sorry." The little astronomer abominated the agronomist, just as he told himself he hated the others, but he kept his voice level. "If you must be technical, Rick's shooting for the single planet which revolves around L-726-8 in the constellation of Cetus, or The Whale."

"We've heard you spout all that a hundred times," hissed the ichthyologist. "L-726-8 is a red double star, located about six light years from Earth. Both



a novelet
by
**WALLACE
WEST**

its components are surrounded by one envelope of hydrogen and calcium gas. We know that, but I say if we can look at those suns from this distance with the naked eye, they must be as cold as fish."

"Not quite that bad, Itchy. Our planet is close enough to its primaries to be comfortably warm. I wonder what kind of life we'll find down there."

"Grasshoppers, probably," Shiela improvised, as she looked at Percy with distaste. "I'd guess that their favorite food is parboiled Irish astronomers."

Percy, whose fair skin spaceburned at the slightest exposure, ducked out of the viewport glare.

"Speaking of food," "Itchy" patted his abdomen gently, "what's the news from our hydroponics?"

"Bad," answered Fritz. "The rust has spread to everything except the tomatoes. We'll be out of luck for both food and fresh air if we don't find them downstairs."

"All Shiela's fault," snarled Percy, as he rubbed ointment into his reddening cheeks. "If she hadn't insisted on show-

ing the starving Centaurans how to set up 'ponics, they wouldn't have brought those cursed rust spores into our ship on their pseudopods."

"Let's not start that again!" Shiela dropped her flippant tone. "We *had* to help the Centaurans. You know as well as I do that our charter requires us to give aid and comfort to any intelligent beings we may encounter."

"Yah!" Percy's face resembled a well-buttered beet by this time, and he was in no mood for compromise. "If we should find grasshoppers when we land on Jonah, I suppose you'll insist *they* are intelligent and make us teach them how to jump farther. As for me, I'm wondering whether they'll taste better fried or grilled."

"Everything tastes better raw," said Itchy.

FURTHER argument ceased as Rick rang the alarm which meant the braking rockets were about to go on. You don't quarrel when coming in from deep space for a landing. You curl up in your bunk, strap yourself down and try to die. You do so, that is, unless you are the pilot in the control room—and then you wish you could!

The stern chase after Jonah was a long one. The ship had to rush along at fantastic speed to keep from falling into the incandescent gas cloud which reached unceasingly for it with flaming fingers. The *Star Rover* handled clumsily when out of the Warp. Nevertheless, she finally caught up with the speeding planet, circled it several times in a narrowing orbit and finally bumped thankfully to rest on a broad green plain near a winding river.

When Shiela regained enough strength to loosen her harness and stagger from her cabin to the control room, she found Rick sprawled over the console. His handsome curly head cradled in his arms, the big pilot was sleeping the sleep of the just. She stretched out a slim hand to stroke those curls, then jerked it back at the sound of footsteps.

"Go ahead, kiss him," cooed Percy,

as he entered the blister after her. "I won't look." His cynical words hid the ache in his heart.

"You knock-kneed, half-baked, insignificant little star-snooper," cried the girl, hands to her burning cheeks. "For two credits, I'd . . . I'd go and smash your precious accordion!"

"We'd better get him to his cabin," the astronomer grinned wickedly. "Sweetums has had a busy seventy-two-hour day. Here. Give me a hand."

Showing surprising strength for his slight build, he caught Rick under the armpits and backed toward the door, while Shiela carried the pilot's long legs.

"Good old Rick," he added, as they put the sleeping man into his bunk. "The only one of us who's doing what he really wants to and what he's been trained for since boyhood. The only one of us who is at home in deep space." He lit a cigarette in defiance of regulations, and concluded: "Snores, though, doesn't he?"

Every line of Shiela's flat back shouted her fury as she gave the blankets a final tuck and stalked out of the room toward the main cabin.

"Maybe we ought to wait for Rick to decide," Itchy was saying as she entered. "He's in command."

"I've checked all the instruments," Fritz argued. "The air outside is breathable and absolutely germ-free. We can see for miles over the plains, so we're in no danger from attack. Let Rick sleep while we go out and stretch our legs. What do the rest of you say?"

"Don't see any reason why not, especially since some people are ruining the little air we have left in here with cigarette smoke," said Shiela.

"I disagree," Percy cut in.

"Coward!" She spat the word at him. "Stay inside, then."

"I will. Somebody has to stand guard."

The others scrambled down the landing ramp after the main port had unscrewed. The astronomer dragged a machine gun into position so he could protect them if necessary. Then he sat down in the entry, dangled his legs and

chain-smoked as he tried to make sense out of what he saw, and out of life in general.

Superficially, the landscape resembled that of Earth. And yet, bathed as it was in ruddy light from the double sun, it was so subtly different that it made him shudder.

"Half of Shiela's prediction came true," he thought. "There's the grass—but where are the hoppers?"

The rolling landscape obviously was under cultivation. Yet what farmer would plant in such a fashion? The round fields varied from a few square yards to about an acre in diameter and had large star-shaped empty spaces between them. The crops had been planted at different times. Some of the—cane, was it?—was only a few inches high. In an adjoining patch the stalks might tower to eight feet.

"Fetishism, I suppose." He shifted his seat to keep out of the midday sun. "Fantastically wasteful, though. I don't get it."

His attention turned to his companions, who were skylarking like children escaped from school. Taking advantage of the low gravity, they had started a wild game of leapfrog along the riverside.

"They're basically a decent lot," he mused, "so why do they keep ribbing me? Is it because we've been cooped up in this space-can too long? Does my accordion playing annoy the rest of them the way it does Rick? My name, perhaps? I can't help that. Or is it just that we're all misfits: Fritz, who wanted to be a lawyer. Itchy, whose real ambition was to be a fisherman. Shiela, whose heart was broken when she found she didn't have the voice for grand opera."

HE SHRUGGED and fumbled for his lighter, remembering their first quarrel. That had been on the way out from Earth to Centaurus. They were all one happy family then, before the space jitters got them, and Shiela had seemed quite fond of him. She had been singing folksongs to his accordion accompaniment, when he had ventured to

suggest that she really was a contralto instead of a soprano.

One word led to another. After the blowup they had not spoken for months, and Rick had taken his place in her heart.

"Be careful," he heard Shiela call, now, after Fritz had made an especially spectacular leap. "Don't damage the crop. And don't step on so much as a bug until I can learn the ecological set-up here."

"Bug?" said Itchy, nibbling one of his foreclaws in puzzlement. "There are no bugs. No birds either, and not a fish in the entire river. What a dump!"

"That is odd." Fritz was dusting himself off. "How does this cane become fertilized without the help of insects? Bisexual, do you suppose?"

"And it's so quiet," said the girl. "Listen!"

But there was nothing to listen to. Not a breath of wind stirred. The cane stood dense and tall, as though carved on stone. Each of the humans could hear his own heart beating.

"The fields remind me of something," she continued. "Like—I have it!—like stubby organ pipes." She shivered despite the heat. "Maybe we'd better be getting back to the ship."

"I'll take a specimen of this and see what it looks like under the microscope." Fritz bent down at the edge of the nearest canebrake.

"No!" cried the girl.

Before the word was out of her mouth the agronomist had snapped off one of the plants at its base.

A strange thing happened then. As the stalk broke they heard a *ping*, like that made when a piano string breaks, but much louder. And as Fritz stared at his trophy in amazement, there came a soft echo of the tone from all sides, as though the horns of elfland were answering. It was a little thing, but somehow coldly frightening.

Although he was several hundred yards away, Percy heard the *ping* and its echo, as well.

"A perfect middle C," he thought. "And the responses were all comple-

mentaries. What goes on here?" Then, as he saw the others strolling hurriedly toward the ship, he called, "Don't worry, folks. I'm covering your retreat."

* * * * *

"Those plants are almost identical with terrestrial *saccharum officinarum*," Fritz told them that evening after they had finished an unappetizing meal of concentrate remnants. "It has distichous leaves, many-pointed culms, strong terminal panicles and—"

"In other words—" prompted Percy.

"In other words, it seems to be a very close relative of sugar cane. Fact is, the sugar content is extremely high. No need to worry about food any more. Just gather enough of it, run it through the synthesizer, and we'll have any kind of protein or carbohydrate we desire."

"Will it purify the ship's air if we plant it in the 'ponic tanks?" Itchy asked.

"Yep. It grows so rankly, it probably will absorb more carbon dioxide and give off more oxygen than the stuff we have been using."

"Let's start harvesting tomorrow, then." Percy pushed away his half-eaten portion of hash. "We can pay the farmers for any damage we do, if, and when, we locate them."

"No!" This time Shiela's reaction was more than her highly developed response to anything which the little astronomer suggested. "No. We mustn't touch it until the farmers give us permission."

"Now, Shiela," pleaded Fritz. "I can't scare up enough food in the whole ship to make another meal. We've got to do something."

"I know." She ran distracted fingers through her heap of auburn hair. "But I won't have the responsibility, I tell you. I think Rick should take the ship up and look for a settlement. The geometrical planting of those fields shows that a high order of intelligence exists somewhere on this planet. If we damage the cane we might lose our charter. Rick—"

"Rikki-tikki-tavi, the infallible,"

yawned Percy. "Okay. You win. We'll wait for Solomon to wake and deliver judgment."

He rose. Then, a look of astonishment on his thin face, he grabbed the edge of the table as he started to stagger crabwise across the floor.

CHAPTER II

Music in the Night

AS HIS companions roared with laughter, the answer struck him and he flushed to his ultimate freckle. He made another break for his cabin, and would have crashed into the wall if Itchy had not extruded a long leg and collared him.

"All right—laugh!" he snarled. "But wait till you stand up and seem to see the whole ship tip over."

They tried it, and had to hang on as he had done to keep from falling.

"It's really the tide," Percy condescended to explain. "Jonah is so near his suns that their pull does queer things. At noon today those suns pulled directly upward, so the only effect was our loss of weight. Since we've been at table, both suns have sunk to the horizon. We have been too busy talking to notice the change, but we're now being pulled sidewise with about the same strength as Jonah's own gravitation pulls us downward. Split the angular distance and you'll see why the floors seem to slant toward the west."

"Tonight," he continued viciously, as he jerked loose from Itchy and managed to reach the corridor, "Jonah and his primaries will all be pulling straight down. We'll be about double our normal weight. . . . Happy dreams, if your lung muscles can take it!"

"Insufferable little squirt," said Fritz, when the astronomer had gone. "Some day I'll break his conceited neck. Guess I'll put an alarm across the main port, though, and leave it open. If what he says is correct, we're going to need all the oxygen we can get tonight."

It was around midnight when Percy heard heavy shuffling sounds approaching his open cabin door. He raised leaden eyelids, managed to lift an arm and switch on the light at his bunkside, then lay inert. If a Jonahan were creeping up on him, it would have to creep. He was in no shape to offer opposition.

Instead, it was a sagging-cheeked, puffy-eyed Rick who stumbled in.

"If only Shieila could see her darling now," thought the little man, forgetting that no human is fit to look at when navigating under two G's.

"What's goin' on?" husked the pilot.

"Combined gravitational pull of Jonah and its—"

"Oh, lord, I know that." Rick sat down with a thump. "But I heard some sort of weird caterwauling. Thought you were playing your squeeze-box and came down to kick your teeth in."

"Not I." Percy nodded toward his beloved accordion and ignored the "caterwauling" crack from the tone-deaf pilot. "Maybe some of the others were singing."

"I looked in every cabin. They're all dead to the world."

"What kind of noise was it you heard?"

"Sounded like a million cats on a back fence."

"It would." The Ulsterman dragged himself to his feet and stood swaying groggily. "Let's look outside."

They resembled two drunks as they dragged their three hundred and fifty-pound bodies down the corridor with the aid of the hand rails. Arriving at the open port, they forgot their discomfort as they stared, slack-jawed, across the shimmering, slightly phosphorescent fields of cane.

A stiff wind was blowing now. Millions of plants, bent almost to the ground, were swaying in lazy waves under the pressure. And with each undulation, a thunder of piercingly sweet musical tones was sweeping the *Star Rover*.

This was not a meaningless caterwauling, despite Rick's description. Instead, the effect was somewhat as if a

forest of musical saws was being beaten in unison by primitive tribesmen.

"Like the skirling of bagpipers marching forward over a lost battlefield mounded with corpses," whispered Percy.

"Of all the gosh-awful rackets under heaven—" Rick began.

"Shut up!" The astronomer bent his head and listened intently.

"Diatonic scale, like that of the ancient Greeks," he muttered. "No half tones. No minors. No chords. No dissonances. Just a monody in march time. Lord, how far can one go back?" Then he quoted in a changed voice: "*'Agas gobhfasfaidh an fear no dhiaidh sin thrid mo lar anios!'*"

RICK'S voice came loud and harsh through a pause in the music. "Stop that Gaelic blithering!" He was sweating, though the air was cool.

"It seemed appropriate, somehow," Percy explained. "The line is from Ronsard's lament for Mary, Queen of Scots: 'And until the grass shall grow after that up through my heart.'" As a rush of wind sent the music soaring to a nerve-racking climax of dominants, he continued: "Those overtones tell the story. This is the kind of music Siva taught the Hindus when he played to them on his zitar with its million sympathetic strings."

"I think you're whacky, calling this stuff music when it's only a noise that rattles my back teeth. Come inside." He was white as a sheet as he plucked at Percy's pajama sleeve. "I can't take it."

"Your being tone-deaf makes it easy for those subsonics and supersonics to frazzle your nerves," the astronomer explained, as he pressed the buttons which set the port revolving into an airtight and soundproof seal. "You need a stiff drink."

Rick leaned against the corridor wall, wiping his face and taking great gasps of air, as though he had just run up five flights of stairs.

"What's out there?" he panted at last.

"Life," answered Percy. "Intelligent life of a high order. Those cane fields

make up a giant wind organ. My guess is that the size of the patch and the height of the cane determines the note on which each vibrates. But," he continued gravely, "where is the keyboard for that organ and what kind of being sits at it? He... or it... is a primitive. That's shown by the barbaric quality of the music. Perhaps we can find him tomorrow. Come on to bed, now. You look shot."

"I don't like it." The man who could whip the *Star Rover* through a nucleonic storm or a "coal sack" without flinching, was on the verge of hysteria. "I'm going to take the ship up and find a quieter spot. I can feel that infernal racket still—in here." And he rubbed his head in explanation.

"Suit yourself, Rick. But don't try to leave Jonah. The air-conditioner's down and the food's low."

"Do I have to have you tell me my business?"

The pilot staggered away. Percy was buckled into his harness by the time the rockets roared.

It did not surprise him, the next morning, to find the *Star Rover* nested in a field of cane identical with the one she had left. Apparently the whole planet was covered with the stuff, was one vast instrument.

Rick seemed his old supermanic self at breakfast, now that the suns were shining and the "caterwauling" had stopped. As usual, he made a great fuss over Shiela, and she almost purred whenever his laughing eyes met hers. It was tacitly understood that they would be married, someday.

"I've been talking things over with the others," he boomed as Percy skittered in late, over a floor which now seemed tilted toward the east. "Flew clean around Jonah last night. The whole darn planet, outside of its seas, rivers and lakes, is just like what you see outside. Completely uninhabited. Nothing but canebrakes."

"Should be ideal for colonization," Shiela put in.

"Not for Venusians," Itchy objected, as he slopped the chowder which was

his only remaining shipboard food. "No fish. My people like fish. Five times a day!"

"Okay. We'll log it fit for terrestrials and be on our way home. Fritz has completed his analysis of the flora, fauna and soil."

"That was easy," grinned the Dutchman. "No fauna. One type of flora. Soil a uniform sandy loam high in humus."

"But who made that music last night?" Percy asked.

"Music, he calls it!" Rick laughed. "You folks should have heard it! Nobody and no thing would be caught dead making noises like that. It's just a natural phenomenon. I'll log that, too, and suggest that only deaf persons be sent here as colonists. . . . Fritz, the next move's up to you."

"First thing we do is clean the 'ponic tanks so we can transplant cane into them. That will guarantee our air supply in space and also give us some green stuff to ward off scurvy. Then we'll mow several acres of the cane, dehydrate it and pack it ready for the food synthesizer. Drop your forks. We've got a nasty job ahead."

THEY found that the 'ponics, except for the three tanks containing healthy tomato plants, were a sour mess, due to ravages of the Centauran rust. Up to their knees in rotting vegetation, the quintet scraped, cursed, slid and perspired until they had stoked the last of the pulpy rubbish down the incinerator. They finished by hosing out the glass tanks and disinfecting them with the strongest solution Fritz could mix.

By the time the room was bright and shining once more, the day was so far advanced, and they were so exhausted and filthy, that they postponed any attempt at transplanting new growth until the next morning. After a dip in the brook, which seemed intent on running uphill and crawling over its western bank, they ate a skimpy meal of scraps and tumbled into their bunks.

Percy woke to the sounds of music and of Rick's grumbling as the pilot clumped past his door. He followed, to

find the others grouped on the landing ramp. It had been lifted clear of the ground for safety's sake.

Percy tried not to look at Shiela, who resembled her own grandmother under the pull of high gravity. The others were a depressing enough sight—with the exception of Itchy, whose hard shell could not sag.

"I never heard anything so lovely," the girl was saying as he approached. "Reminds me of a wordless Gregorian Chant."

"Listen to her!" Percy snorted. "It hasn't the slightest resemblance to an ecclesiastical Plain Song or *Cantus Firmus*. There's no mode or meter. Hardly any melody."

"Showoff! I studied voice for three years in Italy, remember."

"You wasted your time." He was fighting to keep down his anger at her display of ignorance, but it was no use. His hunger for her was so great that the only way he could keep any control over himself was to get fighting mad.

"Squeeze-box artist!"

"Cut it out, you two," rapped the pilot. Usually he encouraged them to be at each other's throats, but now he was in no mood for the cruel sport. "And shut that port. I'm going crazy! Can't sleep a wink."

"But we've got to get to the bottom of this," protested the girl. "That cane is making real music. Which means one of two things: Either it is intelligent, which I can't believe, or somebody is—is playing on it. That being the case, we don't dare transplant or cut any of it until we get permission. New Washington would be sure to lift our charter if we—well, harmed it."

Deep in his heart, Percy agreed with her, but his hurt pride forced him to side with Rick for once.

"She's talking nonsense," he told the worried pilot. "As you suggested, those tones must be the result of natural phenomena. There's nothing to get upset about."

"You're wrong on the last point," frowned Rick. "Personally, I haven't

been so upset since I was a kid and my mother dragged me to hear a performance of *Tannhäuser*. About halfway through the opera I started having hysterics. She took me home and gave me a good hiding. Now, get that port shut before I start banging my head against the wall."

He meant it!

They got little sleep the rest of the night, what with their weight and the closeness of the air inside the closed ship. They snapped at one another during a sketchy breakfast, then set grimly to work uprooting a large area of cane.

CHAPTER III

When the Cane Screamed

THE job proved difficult. The apparent early morning tilt of the fields made them seem to be digging into the face of a steep hillside. In addition, the roots of the plants formed a tangled mat extending three feet below the surface. Nevertheless, they kept doggedly at it until, by midafternoon, they had the 'ponic tanks jam-packed with burgeoning growth.

"Let's knock off," begged Itchy, whose long, carapaced body was more fit for tunneling than for strip mining.

"No," said Rick. "I want to get away from this cursed place as fast as possible. Let's try to finish."

Shiela, who had said hardly a word all day, spoke up now. Her piquant face was smudged and strained. Her voice shook ever so little as she inspected the crop of blisters on her hands.

"I still think we're going about this the wrong way," she said. "For hours, I've been convinced that the cane has been passively resisting our efforts to uproot it. I'm sure it doesn't want to be transplanted, but since we haven't—haven't hurt it much, it—"

"Look, my dear," answered Rick, as he slipped a possessive arm around her

bowed shoulders. "I know this digging is no work for a girl. Why don't you go back to the ship and rest while we finish?"

"It isn't that." She drew away from him. "It's just that I think we're going at this in too much of a rush. We should learn more about this life form before we start killing—and *eating*—it."

"What do the rest of you think?" asked the pilot.

"I've learned everything that microscopes and test tubes can tell me," answered the agronomist. "I found no sign of intelligence."

"I'm hungry and I want to go home," was Itchy's reply.

Rick glanced at Percy, but the little man said nothing as he leaned on his spade at a weird angle and wiped the sweat out of his eyes.

"That settles it, then. Shiela is overruled. Break out the machetes and get busy."

Suiting action to word, Rick swung one of the razor-sharp knives at the edge of the nearest field.

A second later he staggered back, tripped over his own feet and crashed to the ground.

For the stalks of cane were screaming as they fell!

They made a sickening, ghastly sound, and it was multiplied hundreds of times by the sympathetic responses set up in the untouched fields.

Rick leaped to his feet. His face was frightful to behold. For the first time since he had left Earth he went to pieces, lost command of himself and of the situation.

"Filthy garbage!" he railed, plunging into the thick of the brake and swinging his machete like a man possessed, despite Shiela's wail of protest. "Talk back to a man, will you? Take that—and that! Lie down and say 'Uncle'!" He was a boy again, pummelling an enemy.

Although his voice was soon lost in a rising billow of chaotic, agonized sound, his frenzy communicated itself to all of the others except the girl. Caught up in a mob psychology, they

ran to his aid and hacked and yelled above the uproar until the sap from the severed plants flowed stickily over their boots.

"Saint Bartholomew's Day," thought Percy, a part of whose mind seemed to be watching the "massacre" from miles away.

He was remembering a grisly tale his old grandmother once told him, a tale of the ghostly football players of Cushendun, who used a skull for their ball and the crumbling gate of a forgotten graveyard as their goal. But even as his thoughts raced and clamor shook the red sky, he went right on chopping cane.

Before they collapsed from sheer exhaustion they had cut ragged gaps in four fields. After the shortest possible rest period they loaded endless bundles of the stuff on their aching backs and wrestled them up the ramp. As the suns went down, they helped Fritz cram most of their harvest into the dehydrator, and a small part of it into the synthesizer for conversion into their evening meal.

"We'll finish up tomorrow and get the blazes out of this dump," said a sheepish Rick as they sat, red-eyed and relaxed, around the dining table, waiting for their food to cook. "I didn't mean to go haywire, Shiela, but I've had about all I can stand of Jonah."

SHIELA didn't answer. She sat looking at her hero as though he were a stranger. The tension was broken when a trap at Itchy's place clicked and deposited a steaming pile of synthetic fish cakes. He hissed with delight and attacked them with both hands.

The others got what looked like charcoal steak and French fries.

"The best I could turn out in a hurry," Fritz apologized.

He and Rick got busy plying knife and fork. Percy was trying to show his will power by finishing a cigarette before starting to eat, but the effort made sweat stand out on his high forehead.

Sheila took four or five bites, then pushed her plate away.

"What's the matter, honey?" Rick

asked through a full mouth.

"I don't know. Guess I'm just too tired to eat."

"She means," Percy grinned, "that she feels like a cannibal—or like a little girl who can't bear to eat her pet hen."

"That's not so!" stormed the ecologist. Then, as her face assumed a greenish tinge, she dashed from the room.

"Crazy kid," chuckled Rick, as he polished off his plate and pushed the "seconds" button. "She'll get over it. This is the best meal I've had since we left home. You outdid yourself, Fritz."

The agronomist wasn't listening. Instead, he was staring at Percy.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked. "Did Shiela's performance make you queasy, too? You haven't touched a bite."

"No," lied the astronomer. He couldn't even give that much credit to his foe. "It's—it's just that I don't quite trust this stuff. I want to see what a diet of synthesized singing cane does to you folks before I try it."

"Our pal!" Rick's face paled. "Eat up. That's an order!"

"There's nothing in the ship's articles which gives you command over my diet," Percy snapped.

"Get out of this cabin before I brain you, you little wart!" Then, with false heartiness to Itchy: "Let me try one of those fish cakes. They look good."

The sound of munching died away after Percy left.

"If there's ever a murder aboard the *Star Rover*, you'll know that I committed it," gritted Rick.

* * * * *

Gnawing hunger and his steadily increasing weight made sleep impossible for Percy. He heard the cane begin to tune up after darkness fell and the night wind rose.

For half an hour the music was tentative, hardly reaching his cabin. But when, at last, it swelled to its first crescendo, the sound jerked the astronomer out of his bunk to stand trembling, with fingernails biting into his palms.

For this time the sound really was a

discord, rasping, horrible and somehow obscene. It affected the highly trained ears of the listener in much the same way that the perfect monody of previous nights had ripped the nerves of the tone-deaf pilot.

"Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune," he choked.

The music broke off in midsweep, as though ashamed. It tried again. And again that soul-shattering discord.

Percy crawled back into bed and buried his head under the blankets. He stifled there for what seemed an eternity, then emerged cautiously. The night was utterly still. Or was that a lagging footstep far down the corridor?

Throwing on part of his clothes, he headed in the direction of the sound. Glancing into the cabins of his companions as he passed them, he saw that each was empty.

The landing ramp was empty, too, and, worse still, had been lowered until it touched the ground. He clumped back to the control room, found a lantern and returned to the port.

As he got there, the music resumed. But now there was no discord. The monody was perfect, leaping and triumphant.

PERCY swept the searchlight across those slaughtered fields, then ran down the ramp. Moments later, he had Rick's white body focused in the beam.

The big fellow's nakedness was partially concealed by a scattering of tall stalks which had escaped his machete earlier in the day. His eyeballs were rolled upward until only their whites showed. He was swaying lightly to the breath of the night wind. And he was keening like a banshee on the perfect—for him, impossibly perfect—tone of Middle C.

Percy knew, almost without having to listen, that, with Rick's help, the brake was able to regain its proper pitch.

He grasped his chief's brawny arm and shook it fiercely. The only response was a reflex which sent him sprawling. He tried again, shouting hoarse warn-

ings, and went down from a wild punch which closed his right eye.

Shaking with pain and fright, the little man went in search of Fritz. He could not budge the bellowing Dutchman. Itchy, too, was in the same cataleptic state and hissing like a calliope in the bass clef.

Percy skirted the waving, bowing grain until he spotted Shiela with the needle of light. She stood slim amidst her discarded garments, knee-deep in a trampled growth of young cane. From her round throat was pulsing a contralto note so sweetly perfect that it tore his heart.

"Shiela!" he called, when the breeze and the music died for a moment. "Shiela! Can you hear me?"

Her supple arms, upthrown above her head, did not stop their languid motion, but he fancied her body strained toward him.

"Shiela! It's Percy. Come here at once!"

She shook her head, sending her long, unbound hair in waves over milky shoulders and tip-tilted bosom.

"Grayne of the Bright Breasts," he marvelled.

Then he lunged forward. Disregarding the screams of the cane which he trampled, he caught the girl around the hips, slung her over his shoulder and ran for the ship.

She fought him like a cat. Her nails ripped his back and her knees beat a tattoo against his ribs. Somehow, though, he managed to stagger up the ramp, dump her on the corridor floor and seal the port.

As the sound of music died the girl yawned, stretched and opened her eyes. Then she screamed and fled like a nymph pursued by fauns.

"Shiela," he called, as soon as he had regained his breath and followed her to her locked cabin. "Something terrible has happened! Come out. We've got to talk."

"Go away," she sobbed. "I never want to see you again."

"It's the others," he persisted. "They're out in the brake."

"I was out there, too, wasn't I?" Clad now in a bathrobe, which clung to every womanly curve of her, she opened the door and stood leaning against the jamb. "I remember going to see what was the matter when that awful discord started. After that, everything got mixed up. I thought I was singing at La Scala. Oh, how I sang! Then you stood up in the audience and shouted at me. I hated you for ruining my aria. There was a riot or something. I woke up lying in the corridor with nothing on. I thought—"

"Never mind. Come on. I'll mix you a drink and try to explain."

"You think it was caused by the food, somehow?" she asked, half an hour later, as she fitted a poultice to his black eye.

"I'm sure of it. I ate nothing and I felt no compulsion. You had only a few bites and I was able to snap you out of it. The others gorged themselves. I couldn't budge any of them."

"It's like Circe and the men she turned into swine, isn't it?"

"Yes, although I think it's a matter of chemistry rather than enchantment. Also, I make a rather pitiful Ulysses. And where is Mercury's blue flower, which will lift the curse?"

"What can we do?"

"I don't know."

"And what can we eat?"

"Tomatoes," he answered grimly.

CHAPTER IV

Home Sweet Home

RICK, Fritz and Itchy were hammering on the port when he awoke. They laughed uproariously when he tried to tell them what had happened.

"Another of your fairy stories, Percy," jeered Rick. "It just got so stuffy in the ship that the three of us decided to sleep outside, didn't we?"

"Sure," agreed a lacklustre Fritz.

"Sure," echoed Itchy, after a pause.

"Of course we did," Rick repeated. "Fritz, I'm famished. Rustle up some ham and."

"Herring for me," warned the Venusian.

Their boisterous confidence was considerably dampened, however, when Fritz came back from inspection with a report that the transplanted cane was wilting in the 'ponic tanks.

"It almost seems to be sulking," he said with a puzzled frown. "It isn't dead. I've changed the solution. Maybe it will revive."

"Well, there's no use doing any more work outdoors until we get the 'ponics growing right," yawned Rick, as he finished his third cup of coffee. "Think I'll turn in for a while. Can hardly keep my eyes open."

He headed for his cabin and the others followed.

"What do you think, Shiela?" Percy toyed with his stewed tomatoes.

"I'm scared stiff!"

She reached out her hand as though to touch his, then drew it back and blushed.

"It's all right." He smiled ruefully. "I know you hate me, but we'll have to work together on this. Beauty and the beast, eh?"

"You're horrid!" She flounced away.

He went to his cabin and tried to think. It was no use. Idly, he took the accordion off its hook and fingered a few chords. Remembering how Rick hated the sound, he carried the instrument to the landing ramp, swung the port almost closed and sat staring out over the cane.

"Music," he said to himself at last. "They call it the universal language. I wonder?"

He rippled the keys.

"You wonder what, Percy?"

Shiela came out on the ramp, sat down beside him and hugged her dimpled knees like a little girl.

"They are—it is so primitive," he answered. "It would be like trying to explain the unified field theory in sign language. Still—"

He slammed the boards of the accor-

dion together in a crash of soaring chords. Was it his imagination, or did the cane shimmer and bow?"

"What are you thinking of?" Percy shivered like the cane as she leaned tensely against his shoulder. "We'll die here, won't we? We'll never see the green hills of Earth again."

"You mentioned Gregorian Chants the other day," he said hastily. "Here's what a real one sounds like."

Under the pressure of his long, spateful fingers, the accordion began speaking with the voice of angels.

"Perhaps the good Pope Gregory was a wee bit hasty when he ruled that the use of sharps, flats or harmony were offenses before the Golden Throne," Percy mused, his brogue thickening. "Yet if ever there was a living man who had listened to the heavenly choir, it must have been His Holiness. The Ould Bhoy, he said, would be sure to sink his pickers and stealers into any monk who let choristers sing different notes at the same time.

"Of course," he went on, his eyes still watching the plain, "different parts of a chorus could sing in rotation. But that was antiphony, not harmony. And the poor cowled fellow who first introduced a half note in the liturgy was called a dangerous radical."

"How do you know all this?" She gazed at him in wonder.

"I studied music too, child, in Belfast." His prominent Adam's apple jumped in his throat. "I dreamed of being a great orchestra leader. "But," he grinned crookedly, "the telies weren't kind to me. I became an astronomer, then. Few people look at us."

He played on and on. The untold millions of cane stalks stood at attention. The lurid dumbbell winged its way across the saffron sky.

"And now," he said after an hour, "let's commit a sacrilege—one that would have had us excommunicated a millennium ago. Primitives, you know, abominate the tritone, or use it only as a warble in air-raid sirens. Gregory called it the '*diabolus in musica*.' Listen! I'll give them fair warning."

He ended the last chant with a scandalous ululation of thirds.

From all points of the compass a thin, shocked wailing answered him. The cane writhed as though in torment.

"So endeth the first lesson." He rose and helped the girl to her feet. She did not draw away, and he went on: "To-night we'll know whether my hunch is working."

THAT evening he was on the alert and blocked Shiela's path as she started with the others out of the ship. She came to herself almost at once and followed him meekly to the landing platform.

There, as the night wore on, they sat listening raptly to a succession of Plain Songs in the eight proper church modes which would have delighted Pope Gregory's pious old heart.

"Very good indeed," beamed Percy in the hour before dawn, after he had brought a blanket from his cabin and wrapped it around the shivering, wide-eyed girl. "They learn fast. Also, you'll notice that they're skipping one note. That's because you're not doing your duty, my girl, in that field over to the left."

"It will grow up again, won't it?"

"My guess is it's growing an inch an hour right now, to be in the act as soon as possible."

"You know," she said, "this all reminds me of something I once read in an old book, by a man named Webb, or Wells. He thought life was like the sea and that the individual was only a momentary wave, or a stalk of cane growing."

"Could be." He picked up the accordion as the suns wheeled over the horizon, the breeze died and the brake grew silent. "Now, I'll give them their second lesson."

"That's an old English madrigal," Shiela exclaimed, as he swept into the lilting strains of "Sumer is icumen in."

"You did learn something when you studied voice, after all. The madrigal is also a fine example of *descantus* or counterpoint. A two-part song, you'll no-

tice, with plenty of rhythm but still no half tones or real harmony. Fra Guido of Arezzo started that ball rolling back in the Terth Century, and almost got burnt at the stake for his pains."

He shifted to the rollicking "Robin and Marion" by the Humpback of Ar-ras, and went on:

"It was a sort of revolution, you know. People had become bored with the stiff chants. They still sang them, of course, but they started combining them with popular folksongs called 'slippery songs.' What a rumpus that raised!"

"I don't understand you, Percy." She stared at him blankly. "What are you up to?"

"Let's have tomatoes for breakfast," he yawned.

* * * * *

The *Star Rover* lay silent all day while the five explorers slept the sleep of utter exhaustion.

Percy was up in time to watch Rick, Fritz and Itchy stalk out to their night-ly choir singing. They had not bothered to put on clothes this time. Neither did they speak to him or to each other. And he noticed something even more disturbing. They seemed to be acquiring characteristics of Jonah's vegetation.

Rick's curls peaked above his head for all the world like a seed pod. Fritz had lost much weight and gained a sort of elfin litheness. Itchy's shell was turning a bright green. They were drifting away, almost beyond rescue.

"The mark of cane," Percy couldn't resist saying to Shiela.

"Don't," she whispered. "The poor things! And you saved me from that."

"Only because you didn't sock me in the eye."

This night Jonah rang with as near an imitation of madrigals as the cane could supply. In fact, to the astonishment of the watchers, the men out in the field sang the words to the tunes—words they had forgotten since their far childhood on Earth.

"How about a little real harmony, now, ladies and gentlemen?" Seizing his accordion, Percy cut boldly in at the

end of a round with the crashing thunder of Luther's "A Mighty Fortress."

"The introduction of harmony in music played a big part in winning people to the Reformation," he explained to Shiela. "I'll try it again!"

Out in the fields all was confusion and dissonance for a moment.

And then the Jonahans recognized that they had met their master!

Obediently, they followed his switch to the chromatic scale, with its multitude of sharps and flats. How they did this, Shiela could only guess. Perhaps by cross resonances among the various fields of whole tones. Perhaps by wrenching their chromosomes into new patterns.

"How—" she began, then stopped.

Percy was transfigured. His hawk-nosed face had lost its homeliness. He stared unwinkingly at the high stars. His fingers flew. At last he had realized his life's ambition. He was leading an orchestra, an orchestra of billions of perfect instruments, the only living orchestra in the Galaxy. He was content.

Shiela buried her head in her arms and sobbed, silent and alone.

How he played that night! First Paganini. Then, by easy stages, into Bach, Handel, Haydn and such early masters of the symphony as Beethoven. The unearthly orchestra obeyed and supported him. Great music furled around Jonah like a banner and the very seams and rivets of the *Star Rover* sang with it. Even when his increasing weight made his fingers too heavy for the keys. Even after Shiela had half-led him to his cabin, the planetary symphony thundered on.

WHEN she shook him awake in the dusk of another day, the girl said, "The tomatoes are all gone. From now on, we starve."

"Then I must make the supreme test tonight," Percy said. "Tonight, or never, I must really talk to them. Tell them we meant no harm. Explain that we need food and help in getting home. Say that I will return and teach them more. Ask them to release the others."

"But how, Percy? How?"

"I—don't know." His heart ached as he saw how pale and thin she had become. "I thought maybe I could do it with a homophony."

"Homophony?"

"Yes, dear. That's the instrumental music developed during the last three centuries—the music perfected by Sobietsky on Earth, Trantor on Mars, and Susurra on Venus. It has one supreme melodic part with an harmonic accompaniment. It almost talks, if one has ears."

"I know. But homophony on an accordion!" She looked at him, her great eyes filled with tears. "You need a hundred instruments. You need a theremin, a trautonium and several electronophones. It's impossible!"

"I can only try." He shrugged thin shoulders.

Her heart went out to him as he took his pitiful "squeeze-box" from its hook and edged, crabwise but valiant, down the sloping corridor.

This night, as they took their places on the landing platform, the fields were hushed though a good breeze already had risen. By the starshine they could see the three explorers, also silent in their accustomed places. They looked scarcely human, now.

Percy stepped forward briskly, as though the ramp were a podium bathed in the glare of a dozen spotlights. He rapped the railing sharply.

A sigh went through the cane, like that with which Terrestrial audiences are said to have greeted the immortal Toscanini.

He started with an uncomplicated but melodic symphony—Sibelius' "Finlandia"—and, despite the lack of rehearsals and the limitations of his instrument, he completed it.

He even got through Shostakovich's Twelfth to the satisfaction of the Jonahans, who broke into an involuntary thunder of wild chords at the close. But halfway through Trantor's "Hymn to the Galaxy" he went to pieces and the homophony dribbled away into silence.

He tried again, teeth clenched and

face ghastly white. But even his expert fingers could not turn an accordion into an electronophone and the Jonahans did not understand enough to help. He broke off in the middle of a bar, hurled the instrument from him and lunged for the door.

"Wait!" Shiela threw herself on him. "You can't quit. Think of Rick, Fritz and Itchy out there. Think of yourself and what this means to all music lovers everywhere. Think of me. I have faith in you."

"I can't," he choked. "You were right. I need an orchestra."

"You have one. There never was another like it!"

"How can I tell them what I want, with that silly thing?"

"Take it!" She pressed the accordion into his hands. "Try once more—or I will hate you, the very stars will hate you!"

Obedient as a child, he resumed playing. And this time something of Trantor came through, some part of the vast dream he had had of the stars and their peoples singing and working together throughout the millennia in proud brotherhood. It came through blurred and faint, like something seen fluttering inside an alabaster box held to the light, or as some of the majesty of the Aurochs was caught when a caveman scratched its image on a wall with a charred stick.

When the song ended there was no acclaim. The cane merely waited, puzzled, tense, and somehow angry.

"I failed! They don't understand." Percy slumped against the hull, fumbled abstractedly for a cigarette and quoted: "*Ta me reidh leat go ndean-tar damh combra caol!* I am done with you until a narrow coffin be made for me!"

Again he was ugly, Shiela thought bitterly, ugly and frustrated as Satan.

"Let me try." She picked up the forgotten music box at last.

"You?" He tried to laugh. "Go ahead, then. Finger it like a piano. Never mind the bass. And remember—you're a contralto, not a coloratura."

FOR LONG moments she stood, her fine head thrown back, gazing out over the impatient fields. Then her fingers began to move hesitantly. This was no attempt at homophony—only a simple melody more than five hundred years old.

Percy stared, as though the ghost of Blind Rafferty had risen before him. He did not heed the pain when the forgotten cigarette burned his fingers.

And she sang, as once she had dreamed of doing at La Scala and the Metropolitan. Gravely, she sent her voice ringing bell-like across the plains. And her simple words carried with them the traditions, longings and aspirations of the race of man.

"Mid pleasures and palaces, tho' we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home. . . ."

"Trite," he thought, reaching out a hand to snatch the box from her. And yet, the words were evoking pictures of the red-berried rowan trees and the booming surf of Antrim Glen under his closed eyelids. Perhaps, please God, even an alien intelligence would glimpse the message.

"A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,
Which, seek through the world is ne'er met with elsewhere. . . ."

On and on she went, tearing her lonely heart out through the last plaintive reprise:

"Home. Home. Sweet, sweet home!
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home!"

They felt the tension and the questioning ease as she collapsed, sobbing, against the side of the ship.

Out in the brake, three frightened explorers started a lumbering run toward the ramp.

In the 'ponics, though they did not know it, the wilted cane rustled and straightened into new life.

"You did it, Mavourneen." Percy took the trembling girl in his arms and
(Concluded on Page 161)

NOCTURNE

(Concluded from page 130)

cradled her bright head on his shoulder. "What I couldn't do with my knowledge, you did with your heart. They understand. They'll let us go now."

"You made *me* understand first," she answered. "Oh, Percy, Percy! Forgive me for all the nasty things I've said and done to you."

* * * * *

Two days later they stood in the control room, looking down at Rick as the *Star Rover*, safely back in the Warp, plunged homeward from Jonah at four times light speed.

"Maybe you should change your mind, colleen," said Percy. "I'm just a balding star-snooper without even a past. Rick has everything a fair woman could want—a brilliant future, courage, good looks—and curly hair."

Her hand made no motion, this time, to stroke those curls.

"Poor Rick," she sighed. "Take-offs knock him out as badly as landings do. We'd better get him to his cabin."
