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NOVELET

OF SUCH AS THESE

*Even a new world, built from a clean slate, needs solid tradition
behind its rules . . .*

By IRVING COX, JR.



FAR BELOW, in the red-rocked canyon, the highway train ground steadily up the mountain road. Jeff the White watched grimly from the Desert View cutout at the crest of

the grade. He counted the interlocked metal cars. Only six! And no sign of a guard.

Jeff slid from behind the crumbling parapet and crossed the high-

way, where Slim and Cass stood waiting. A bent, rusting sign lay partly hidden in the tangled mesquite, but the symbols on it were still readable: "*Arizona, U. S. 89.*" The Wise One, of course, had taught Jeff to read, but this sign had no significance to him. He leaned against it casually while he talked.

"There's no guard," he explained; "and it's a six-car job."

"Guns?" Slim asked.

"Should be, the Blues usually send guns in the metal vans."

He drew his revolver and ran his hand along the gleaming barrel. "Slim, you and Cass knock out the windows in the robot car as soon as the train hits the top of the grade; I'll get the control box."

Holding the rank of explorer, Jeff the White commanded the raid, it was his duty to plan the attack. Slim and Cass nodded, and Jeff sauntered back across the road. Out of habit he walked in a crouched position, taking care to keep himself concealed from the approaching

illustrated by EMSH



Suddenly Cass laughed. "No, there won't be a guard, not in this country."

"The Southerners are chicken-livered," Jeff spat emotionlessly.

train. He was as certain as a man could be that no Blues were aboard, they seldom rode the supply cars. When the Blues traveled between their metal cities, they invariably

used their soaring, graceful — and deadly — helio-disks.

Jeff clenched his jaw. One day he would capture a disk, too, everything in time. Hand-weapons first, the brutal fire-guns of the Blues. After that the border forts. It was the only way back from oblivion, precarious and hedged with terror.

Jeff lay flat behind the broken wall at Desert View and surveyed the highway. He was a tall, lean young man in his early twenties. He wore moccasins of hand-sewn animal hide and knee-length, homespun trousers. Two cartridge-belts were slung around his waist, along with twin revolvers in badly worn holsters. Above the waist he was naked. His hard-muscle chest and arms were burned brown by the sun and wind; his hair was an unkempt platinum mane.

On churning, rubberized treads the metal train roared past the summit. Two pistols cracked from the side of the highway, Slim and Cass had broken the windows in the lead car.

Jeff sprinted toward the approaching vans, leaping to catch a handhold. He fired from his left hand at the robot panel, the circuit sputtered blue fire and the train slid to a halt. Jeff jerked open the door as the cars began to slide backward down the grade, out of control. He poked at the unfamiliar buttons until he found the one that set the manual brake.

As Slim and Cass tore open the

doors of the first supply-car, Jeff heard a terrified scream. Two Blues sprang out of the box, gesturing helplessly and shouting an avalanche of words in their disharmonic tongue. Jeff recognized them as males — but their dress was different from anything he had seen before, even when he had gone with the trading caravans to the border forts.

The two Blues were unarmed and they were terrified, they turned and ran. Slim took deliberate aim and fired. The Blues sprawled on the highway, their blood spilling in red pools upon the broken asphalt. A surge of savage joy filled Jeff's soul. These were the first Blues he had seen die, and their deaths dissipated the legend of invincibility which had haunted his mind.

A THIRD Blue came timidly to the open door of the metal van — a woman, dressed as the men were, in flaming scarlet with a yellow cloak tied around her shoulders.

"We do not mean you harm," she said slowly in the language Jeff knew. "We are Savers, we came to help your people."

Slim raised his revolver again but Jeff knocked the gun from his hand. "She can't hurt us," he said scornfully. "And she might be useful."

"As a hostage?" Slim grinned. "I hadn't thought of that, if she's a big enough wheel, maybe we can trade her for a helio-disk."

Slim ripped her cloak into strips and used them to bind her feet and hands, while Jeff and Cass broke open the other cars in the train. Their find was bewildering and disappointing. Not a weapon anywhere. One car was filled with food, the saccharine, oily synthetics used by the Blues; the other cars were crammed to the metal ceilings with books. Jeff pulled one free and examined it. The tissue-thin pages were printed in English.

. . . *"The peace of Gannon, maker of all things, mover of the eternal universe, be our gift to all who read and believe. Gannon is the power, Gannon is the strength, Gannon is the only truth — the immortal spirit of the electron, the unity of nebula and galaxy . . ."*

He flung the book aside. He had come a thousand miles into the pacified Southern Plantation to raid an arms train; instead, he had captured a shipment of religious tracts. He strode along the road to the place where the bound woman lay on the gravel shoulder. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Sister Rakjak. We are your friends. Please believe —"

"And your destination?"

"The Southern Plantation. My Brothers and I bear the first commission to teach you the Way of Gannon." She moved her head awkwardly to keep it in the shadow, squinting against the glare of the sun.

"We are men of the North, Sister

Rakjak — not your chicken-livered Southerners."

"The North?" Her mouth widened in fear, and the pale blue of her face deepened to a sickly purple. "The Unsubdued! But they told us in the temple the roads were safe."

"The Blues are sometimes wrong."

"Do you — do you intend to murder me, as you did the Brothers?"

"You misjudge us, Sister Rakjak." Jeff bowed mockingly. "We want you to go with us; my people are starving to learn the Gannon Way."

She missed the sarcasm. When she tried to reply a pink froth bubbled on her lips, and she twisted her head in agony. "Please! Put me in the car; we cannot endure the glare of your sun."

The Wise One had taught Jeff that, too. It was the reason the Blues built their metal-roofed cities; it explained why Sister Rakjak and the Brothers had traveled through the desert heat in a closed, metal van. The only known physical weakness of the enemy: for years Jeff had tried to find a way to exploit it.

He carried her to the lead car, putting her on the cushioned seat in the dark, oven-like box behind the robot control booth. Then, with Slim and Cass, he detached the useless five cars of the train, pushing them into the ditch at the side of the road.

THE three men climbed into the robot car, squatting on the floor behind the control panel. Jeff's bullet had been skilfully fired; he had broken only the guide cable which fed directives from the electronic brain to the turbines. The manual controls, used when a Blue pilot took over the supply train after it entered a metal city, were undamaged. After some experiment, Jeff found the proper controls. The rubberized treads began to turn.

"At least we ride home in style," Slim said.

"We still must find guns."

"But we can't make another raid now!"

"Why not? It'll be days before they find the vans we've wrecked. The Blues have the South pacified; they don't send out guards with robot trains unless it's necessary."

Until nightfall Jeff kept the car grinding along the highway. Freed of the weight of the train, the robot van moved at top speed. They were well into Oak Creek Canyon before they stopped for the night. The highway had been slowly decaying for more than half a century, but the Blues had no reason to keep the roads in repair. The treads of the robot vans were designed to cushion the shock of the potholes, to span the storm-cut ruts of erosion. On mountain highways, where sections of the road had been completely washed away, the claw arms of the truck pushed a flat path through the rubble.

They stopped beside an abandoned vacation home in the canyon. While Cass built a fire, Jeff and Slim cut through the tangled brush and broke into the cottage. It was a commonplace practice with them, whenever they traveled beyond their own territory. Deserted homes — sometimes whole villages — provided them with a shadow of the abundance enjoyed by their ancestors.

In a kitchen cabinet they found the familiar store of canned foods — meat, fruit, juices, soups: an excellent cache relatively untouched by other raiders. Jeff and Slim carried ample armloads of the food outside to the fire, along with three unrusted saucepans that hung above the stove. The three men heated the food and gulped it crudely. They ate far more than they needed, because they could not be sure how soon they would find food again.

When his belly was full and he felt the comfortable lassitude in his muscles, Jeff went to the car and released Sister Rakjak. She walked stiffly to the fire, shielding her eyes from its glare. Cass scooped food from a saucepan into an empty can and handed it to her. She bent her head and whispered, "I give thanks to Gannon, all powerful and all merciful."

She picked at the food, forcing it between her lips. But suddenly she put down the can and turned away, convulsed with nausea. Jeff caught her as she collapsed.

After a moment of agony she smiled weakly. "Your food is — we cannot eat it."

He shrugged. "It's all we have."

"Not the meat; the vegetable matter — I will try to get used to it. I am a Saver of Gannon; I want to live among your people as one of you." She picked up her can and began to eat again. Obviously the food sickened her, but she forced it down. Jeff found himself grudgingly admiring her determination.

He studied her face in the dying firelight, and realized that she was very beautiful. The blue color of her skin was not too obvious; and, in any case, the Wise One said that the color made no real difference. The Blues were biologically human; they had simply evolved on another planet where the quality of the sunlight was different. The blueness was caused by a tissue transparency which made the tiny network of skin veins visible.

JEFF dropped on the ground beside Sister Rakjak. In the tight-fitting, scarlet gown, her body was very attractive. It had been a long time since he had left his women in the valley. His hand slid toward her, pulsing with excitement, filmed with sweat.

"Why do your people hate us?" she asked abruptly.

That jerked him back to reality. The Blues were the enemy; how could he have forgotten? He answered curtly, "Why not, Sister

Rakjak? You stole our world."

"No! We came to help you."

"By burning our cities with fire-guns? By making us slaves on the Plantations?"

"Because you resisted us; because you would never make peace. We had to establish order first."

"You Blues have a high-minded justification for every kind of savagery," he sneered. "You murder a world — in the name of good intentions!"

"It may seem so, but do you know what your world was like before we came?"

"We lived in the cities, then; we were safe. We had our own machines to work for us, or own government, our own —"

"But it was chaos!" She turned toward him earnestly. "Your planet was broken up into dozens of separate nations, always more or less at war with each other. You were tormented — driven neurotic — by social and economic inconsistencies. Your scholars and your scientists were straight-jacketed by prejudice and superstition. The majority of your statesmen were fools."

"I know nothing of that, Sister Rakjak; but . . . bad as it may have been, it was still *our* world then; we were free to make what we could of it."

"We waited a long time before we intervened; our leaders prayed earnestly to Gannon. But they saw no sign — no hope — that you could ever help yourselves."

"And that gave you the right to destroy us?"

Tears swam in her eyes; she reached blindly for his hand. "It wasn't meant to end like this! Everything went wrong. After we had once landed, it was impossible for us to retreat until your world was pacified and mature. You forced us to become conquerors."

"It's a wonderful thing when you can find words to make anything you do seem noble in your own eyes."

"It's true!"

"That's the truth as you want it to be; that much I'll grant. But to us, Sister Rakjak, the Blues will always be the savage conquerors who came to destroy us."

SHE stood up slowly; her voice was choked. "From your point of view—I have never considered it that way before. Take me back to the van, please; I want to pray to Gannon."

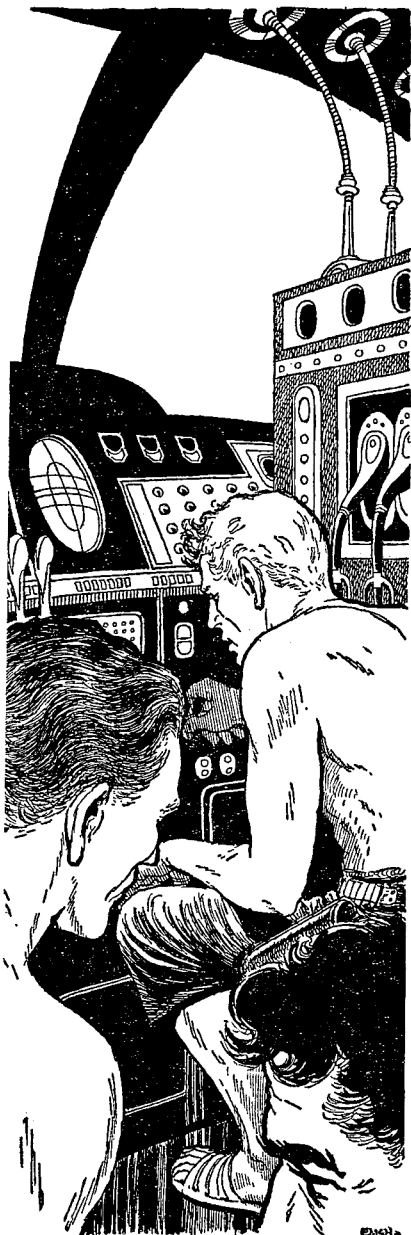
He walked with her to the edge of the clearing and lifted her through the open door of the treaded car. She held out the yellow cords which had been made from her cloak; but Jeff pushed them aside.

"I'm your prisoner," she reminded him.

"You won't escape."

"Then you trust me?"

Trust was by no means what he meant; escape in this canyon, scores of miles from the nearest metal city, would have been suicide for Sister



Rakjak and he expected her to understand that. But he shrugged his shoulders; it mattered very little what she thought.

She smiled ecstatically and touched his mane of white hair lightly with her hand. "Thank you, my friend. Trust is the first step toward mutual understanding. I'll pray to Gannon for that; I ask nothing more."

Jeff walked back to the embers of the fire, where Slim and Cass were already curled under blankets they had taken from the house. Although it would have been more comfortable, they never slept indoors when they were away from the valley. Here they had a better chance to escape any Blue patrol that might happen to come upon them. Actually, there was very little risk of that. The barbaric fury of the conquest was long passed. The fire-gun Blue patrols were no longer on the roads; the helio-disks no longer soared over the burning cities. If the three men had been taken prisoner, they would simply have been sent to the Southern Plantation for a process called orientational training. Escape from the Plantation, they had heard was absurdly easy.

They left their Oak Creek Canyon camp before dawn, as soon as it was light enough to drive the stolen robot van over the roads under manual control. Beneath the seat Sister Rakjak found one of the red-tinted face-visors which the Blues wore when they left the sheltered darkness of their metal cities. With

that to protect her from the glare, she rode in the control cabin with the three men.

The colors of early spring were lush in the Arizona canyon. New leaves on the cottonwoods formed a delicate lacework against the walls of red rock. A blazing carpet of flowers spread on both sides of the rotting highway. Deer, rabbits, a host of small game were in the shadows along the creek bed; man and the encroaching machines of his civilization had been gone for half a century, and the animals had reclaimed their world.

II

WITHIN an hour the rubber-treaded truck reached the crumbling town of Flagstaff, on the plateau above the canyon. Jeff stopped the van in front of a market building which was still relatively intact. While the three men loaded cases of canned foods into the back of the truck, Sister Rakjak walked disconsolate in the street debris. She was awed and a little frightened by the ruins—skeletal walls and broken roofs, gaunt against the bright blue sky; the glittering, jewel-like pattern of shattered glass on the streets.

Jeff paused in the sun to mop the beads of sweat from his chest. Sister Rakjak moved toward him uneasily, her face troubled behind the red mask. "This destruction!" She whispered. "Are my people—did we —"

"Not your helio-disks, if that's

any consolation," he replied. He picked up one of the bricks and scraped it with his finger. "This town wasn't burned; you only destroyed the large cities. There were probably riots here during the first panic, and after that the people ran away before your patrols caught them."

"Is it like this everywhere?"

"Yes, wherever I've been."

"I've seen very little of your world. The Brothers and I came less than a year ago; we spent all our time in the Temple of Gannon learning your language and your history."

His jaw hardened. "It's different in the North. You haven't set up any plantations for us there. We've rebuilt our city; we've learned how to make machines again, and —"

"That's what we want you to do! Rebuild your civilization sanely. We've used every technique we know to encourage it on the Plantations."

"And you've failed. You know why? Because you demand our surrender first."

"To establish order, so we can teach —"

"When men become slaves, they die. The people on the Plantations work when you give the orders; you've beaten obedience into them. But that's all you've done. The creativeness — the thing that makes us human — is gone. On the Plantations our species is dying; the slaves just don't have children, do they?" Jeff grinned savagely. "In the North that's different, too. Our

population has doubled in five years; I'm not twenty-five, Sister Rakjak, and already I have four sons."

"Sons to hate us; sons to make war against us someday!" She twisted her thin, blue hands and her voice became husky with grief. "We came to help you; we came because otherwise you would have destroyed yourselves. That is the Way of Gannon; I know it's right; and yet — yet —" She gestured emptily toward the rubble of the dead town. "We did this. What you say is right, too. I — I can't understand! How could a good thing bring so much evil?"

Slim and Cass lugged a carton of odds and ends from the store and pushed it into the truck. "That's about everything worth taking."

Jeff counted over the stores in the van. "A week's supply," he guessed. "Maybe two. We'll head west from here, I think; we should be able to knock off a weapons train between here and the coast."

Sister Rakjak gripped Jeff's arm with shaking fingers. "Is that why you came to the Southern Plantation?"

"Of course." He smiled mockingly. "Charming as it was, our meeting with you was entirely coincidental."

"Then — then you mean to fight back so soon?" When he made no reply, she turned slowly away from the three men, raising her masked face toward the sky. Beneath the visor her lips moved silently. She

twisted her hands in supplication. Her body became rigid and tense. There was no sound except the distant chatter of birds, the capricious sighing of the spring wind.

For a moment her voice was audible, ". . . for guidance, O Gannon, a sign to guide me in the Way of Gannon . . ."

Suddenly they heard the distant grinding of treaded wheels. Jeff climbed to the roof of the van, shielding his eyes to view the highway east of Flagstaff. "An eight-car train!" he cried. "Without a guard!"

The men ran toward the road, their revolvers in their hands; they repeated the maneuver by which they had captured the first train, and it was equally effective a second time. Eagerly they tore open the van doors and inspected the cargo. Two of the eight trucks contained weapons, twenty thousand tiny, deadly fire-guns.

They fastened the weapon cars behind their van, and in less than ten minutes the stolen train was headed north. Sister Rakjak again sat in the control cab with her captors. She deliberately removed her red visor and set it aside, squinting painfully against the glare.

"I want to get used to it," she said softly. There was a strangely beautiful and withdrawn smile on her face: the calm compliance of martyrdom.

IN THREE days the train was in the North country. The three men had

no fuel-problem with the robot van. The turbines were driven by sealed fission cores, designed to power the truck for the life of the vehicle.

They made camp the first night on the shore of a large, salt sea, near the site of a city which had been burned five decades before by heliodisks. The flat desert of charred, dead ground, swept bare by the wind, shocked Sister Rakjak far less than the empty, decaying villages through which they passed. She strove doggedly to conform to the habits of her captors. She learned to subsist on their food; she removed her visor for longer and longer periods at a time. By the second day angry heat blisters appeared on the blue skin of her face and hands.

Yet she never complained, nor expected sympathy. "It is the will of Gannon," she repeated again and again, like a primitive incantation.

"Don't be a fool," Jeff said to her one night.

"I won't permit myself to be different," she answered. By that time her lips were cracked and raw; it was obviously painful for her to talk. "I want to live in your world as you do — face the hardships and the discomforts we've brought to your people."

"Hardships hell! We're used to the sun."

"I will be, too."

"Will that change anything for us?"

"For me, Jeff." She touched his hand gently and tried to smile.

"When I feel as you feel, when my heart beats with yours — then I'll be ready to teach you the Way of Gannon."

"We've been instructed in that rather thoroughly for the past fifty years."

"But the Gannon Way isn't destruction and hatred. That's so terribly wrong. Gannon is goodness and power, an eternal understanding . . ." She continued to talk in her low, earnest voice. It was the same sanctimonious proselyting he had heard from other Blues when he had gone with the Wise One to the metal cities to trade. But Sister Rakjak was sincere; she honestly believed the semantic cant. Jeff found himself pitying her, and pity sapped his hatred. Perhaps, in their own terms, the Blues actually meant what they said. It was the first time he had ever considered that, and the idea was very disturbing. It blasted a devastating rift of emptiness through the settled certainty of his convictions.

Early on the third day Jeff drove the stolen train across the border of the Southern Plantation, following the dry bed of a canyon to avoid the paved highways. The border was rimmed with a closely-spaced chain of small metal cities, and the area between them was regularly patrolled.

At one time, the metal cities had been forts, marking the outer limits of the Blue invasion; in recent years they had become trade-cities, where

the Unsubdued from the North were encouraged to bring their handiwork.

Jeff the White had been half a dozen times to the trade cities in caravans led by the Wise One. In the beginning, when the forts had first been opened to trade, the Unsubdued had feared a trick. But the Wise One had insisted on organizing the first caravans. He dressed the traders in homespun and moccasins. The gee-gaws they took to trade were crudely hand-made. The first trading began when Jeff was a boy; the same deceptive pattern had been followed for more than a decade.

And the ruse had worked. The caravans which went to the border forts four times a year were the only contact the Blues had with the Unsubdued in the North. The primitive trade goods and the poor homespun were the only data by which the Blues evaluated the strength of the Unsubdued — false data, deliberately contrived. Sister Rakjak would be the first Blue to see the truth.

It was mid-afternoon before the weapons train ascended the pass into the valley. The trail snaked unmarked through windswept canyons, so twisted, so barren that no Blue patrol could have stumbled on it by chance. Twice Jeff fired his pistol in a prearranged pattern of shots to signal the lookouts posted in the rocky wasteland.

They crossed the crest suddenly.

Below them lay a broad, flat valley, walled with snow-capped peaks. A stream wandered through the thick pine forest, becoming a narrow thread of dazzling silver in the far distance. A handful of scattered, one-room cabins were sheltered by the trees. Part of the forest had been cleared and converted to farmland. But the valley itself was only a secondary, peripheral impression to the newcomer. The thing that caught Sister Rakjak's attention first and caused her to gasp in surprise — or was it fear? — was the city in the heart of the valley, an island of crisp, white buildings, gleaming like carved crystal in the afternoon sunlight.

"Home," Jeff told her.

She reached uncertainly for his hand. "It isn't — it isn't exactly what I expected."

Slim laughed humorlessly. "No, you Blues think we're savages."

"Not savages, Slim — poor, and misled, and —" She shook her head. "But we're wrong about that, too; I've been a fool."

"It's what we wanted you to believe," Cass said, "until the plan was ready —" His voice trailed off and, for a moment, no one spoke.

Then Slim put in uneasily, "We know you mean what you say, Sister Rakjak — about wanting to help us. Maybe all the Blues do. For as long as we can remember



we've planned for the time when we could start taking back what's ours. Now that we've talked to you — well, it doesn't seem such a good idea, any more."

Jeff jabbed angrily at the controls and the train ground down into the valley. "We have to talk to the Wise One," he decided; "there must be another way out."

The train rolled along a broad, gravel road past open fields. Sister Rakjak saw people working the farms, and machines moving along the furrows or pumping water into irrigation ditches from the bank of the stream. The machines were powered through flexible poles running on overhead wires. When Jeff noticed her curiosity, he explained, "Our machines — everything we have, even the building blocks used in the city — are made from plastics."

"It's a formula based on the soy bean," Slim added; "the largest crop we grow in the valley."

"Here in the North," Jeff went on, "the resources of metal are extremely limited. We save all the iron to make guns and cartridge cases. Our only source of power is hydroelectricity — from the falls of the stream, at the other end of the valley — so our machines must be driven by electricity."

"A miracle," she said softly, her eyes on the sky. "You've dragged yourselves up from defeat to —"

"This is no miracle, Sister Rakjak; we're the Unsubdued because we never accepted defeat."

"You've saved the culture of man exactly as it was?"

"Without the slightest change, Sister Rakjak; the Wise One insists on that. He reads to us from the old books and tells us the old stories, so we'll always remember."

His last statement puzzled her. "The Wise One reads to you? Can't you read the books for yourselves?"

"We know how, of course," Cass explained, "but we don't have the paper to reprint the old books, and we've been able to save only single copies of most of them. If we all tried to read those copies, we'd wear them out and our children would have nothing."

THE train turned a sharp corner in the road and the white city loomed abruptly above the pines. It stood on an artificial island, two feet above the soil. The island was an enormous sandwich of plastic disks and thick, fibrous insulation. A treaded bridge led from the gravel road to the street level of the city.

Sister Rakjak trembled when she saw the insulation. "So you know that, too?" she asked.

"How the helio-disks destroyed our cities?" Jeff nodded gravely. "We worked out the theory five years ago by watching the disks burn out swamp areas on the Plantations. Until we knew that, it wasn't safe to rebuild our city, and we lived in the cabins. We discovered that certain small areas in the swamps always survived, and they had one thing in

common: a natural insulation of some sort. That gave us the answer, of course. The helio-disks create an induced heat by forming a closed circuit with the ground. If the circuit couldn't be completed, the helio-disks would be powerless."

"You've stolen our most powerful weapon."

"Not the weapon, Sister Rakjak; we've only devised a defense against it. We still want disks of our own."

Her lips quivered, but she lifted her head proudly. "I'm glad, Jeff. It makes us equals, and equals can always find a way to live together in peace."

What reply could he make? Her naïve innocence left him feeling vaguely ashamed.

The weapons train moved along a plastic-surfaced street, past the clean, white buildings toward the center of the city. The walks were thronged. Some of the people stood on the curbing to stare curiously at the enemy trucks. Sister Rakjak saw the faces of Negroes, Orientals, a handful of Polynesians scattered among the tall, weather-tanned people like Jeff. They were all similarly dressed. The men wore white, knee-length shorts and open-necked jackets. Some, like Jeff, were naked above the waist—hardy souls, for the spring air in the valley was still crisp with the chilly touch of winter. The women were similarly dressed, but in place of the jackets they substituted loose, bright-colored blouses.

And children were everywhere—scores of them; hundreds of them—playing in noisy droves; black-faced children and white and every conceivable gradation of color between. Any dignity the city may have possessed was lost in the genial, nursery-school atmosphere. Sister Rakjak saw crowded playgrounds everywhere. Letters wrought in plastic circled the open gates with the same legend, "*Of Such as These*."

Jeff explained, "It's a religious quotation—corrupted a little by the Wise One. He had it cut over his cabin door when we went there to school."

In the heart of the city the plastic street circled a tiny park, twenty feet in diameter. Symmetrical beds of red tulips surrounded a circle of poles. From the top of each pole a different, bright-colored flag fluttered in the wind: the old national flags of the earth, preserved here in this island of freedom.

III

THE government building was beyond the park. Jeff drove the captured train into the adjoining armory. The turbines ground to a stop. Men swarmed around the vans, shouting their welcome and pounding the trucks in triumph. With laughter on their lips they reached up to help the three men out of the control cab.

Then, ominously, the chattering voices fell silent. The men had seen Sister Rakjak. They backed slowly

away as she slid from the van. Jeff looked into their faces, and he saw the familiar hatred. Sister Rakjak recognized it, too; she said gently, "I am not an enemy. I have come here as a friend, to help —"

"Prisoner?" someone in the crowd shot at Jeff.

Jeff clenched his fists. If he admitted he had taken her as a hostage, the men would be satisfied. But Sister Rakjak would be imprisoned in one of the abandoned cabins; no one would care if she lived or died.

Would Slim and Cass support him if he lied? He glanced at them uncertainly where they stood shuffling their moccasined feet against the plastic floor. In their eyes he saw an agony of indecision, a mute appeal. What could they say? Jeff was the explorer; he had commanded the raid; he must make the explanations.

"What she says is true," Jeff answered slowly. Cass and Slim nodded; their faces were relieved. "Of her own free will she has come to join us."

"A Blue?" someone demanded skeptically. "She's willing to become a valley woman?"

"Yes." Jeff's voice dropped to a whisper. "I — I gave her the marriage offer." Sister Rakjak looked at him with a puzzled expression; he avoided her eye and went on hastily, "If the Wise One consents, of course."

Almost immediately the tension relaxed. One of the men abruptly

shook Sister Rakjak's hand. "Better get something for your face," he advised with gruff friendliness. "You've had one hell of a sunburn, kid."

"A salve might help," another added. He brought a tube of white grease from a first-aid box and spread it liberally on her blistered face. He looked at Jeff and his young face broke into an uneasy grin. "You know, she's not bad-looking; not bad at all. Maybe, when we take the border forts, I'll pick up a Blue for myself."

As the armory workers began to unload the fire-guns from the vans, Jeff and Cass and Slim walked with Sister Rakjak to the adjoining government building. In her flaming, scarlet gown Sister Rakjak couldn't avoid being conspicuous. The adults on the street stared at her open-mouthed, with frank hatred. Children ran along beside her, peering at her curiously as they would have looked at a venomous reptile.

Sister Rakjak, nearly blinded by the glare of the sunlight on the white buildings, clung fiercely to Jeff's hand. "What's the marriage offer?" she whispered.

"You're my wife. It's the law; every valley woman —"

"But you said you were already married — with four sons!"

"What does that have to do with it?" He frowned; her comment didn't make sense. "Maybe you'd rather take Cass or Slim?"

"I — I don't understand." She glanced at the scores of flags flutter-

ing above the park and shook her head. "You said you'd saved your old world, Jeff, just as it was."

"Every detail; everything that the Wise One reads to us from the old books."

They ascended two steps and Jeff pushed open a side door of the government building. They entered a dark, dismally lit reception room. "The Wise One lives in the Council Hall," Jeff said.

"It's so restfully dark!" she answered, with some surprise. "Like one of our own metal cities."

"The Wise One is very old — in his eighties — and he's become a little eccentric since we built the city. He probably won't see us, but he'll talk, of course."

THE three men and Sister Rakjak sat on a cushioned lounge facing a speaker-grid set in a blank wall. Slim pushed a switch and a small, red light glared in the gloom above the grid. After a short wait they heard the clear voice of the Wise One. Crisply the three men reported the success of their raid.

"Twenty thousand fire-guns!" the Wise One exulted. "You have earned our gratitude. We'll assemble the council tomorrow and decide our final plans; within a week we'll be ready to attack the border forts."

"Not so soon, Wise One," Jeff protested. "Perhaps — perhaps we should try something else first."

The voice became very persuasive. "You have more to report, Jeff?"

"We brought back a stranger, a new woman for the valley."

"One of the ninnies from the Southern Plantation? We take only children, Jeff; you know the law!"

"Sister Rakjak is a Blue."

The voice exploded in an angry hiss. "You brought one of their women here? Have you lost your mind?"

"She's a Saver of Gannon, Wise One; she told us —"

"The Savers are a pack of rattle-brained idiots!"

"But what she says makes sense, Wise One. In our own way, maybe we're as wrong as the Blues are. If you'll listen to her —"

"No!" The word was a scream, a cry of agony. "Not a Blue! She came here to divide us, to make us doubt ourselves; she's the enemy, Jeff. Have you forgotten that? Condemn her; destroy her —"

"I gave her the marriage offer. She accepted, Wise One; she's one of us." Originally Jeff had not intended to lie to the Wise One; it was unthinkable. To the Unsubdued, the Wise One was a unified, complex symbol of government and religion. In the old days, when Jeff was growing up, the Wise One had been the only teacher the children had ever known. He taught them faith; he read them the old books; he arbitrated their quarrels, shared their childish pleasures. And subconsciously he had become a kind of god: infallible, just, gentle, and infinitely wise. All that had changed since the city

had been built four years ago. The Wise One had withdrawn into the government building, showing himself rarely in public. The new generation — Jeff's four sons — were taught by ordinary teachers, and to them the legend of the Wise One was little more than an amusing myth. But it still counted heavily with Jeff, and he was surprised that the lie came so easily.

"The marriage offer," the Wise One repeated after a long hesitation. The agony was gone from his voice; the tone was without expression. "You know what that means, Jeff; the children may be —"

"They will be the Unsubdued. I ask nothing else."

"Take her, Jeff; the law applies." For the first time the voice of the Wise One seemed old. "The council secretary will make the usual announcement."

The red light above the grid winked out. The three men and Sister Rakjak left the reception room. It was late in the afternoon, then, and the sun was setting behind the distant mountains. The white faces of the buildings were washed with pink light; long, blue shadows angled across the plastic streets.

The men separated. Jeff led Sister Rakjak to a building not far from the park. They took a sliding incline to the third floor. Eagerly Jeff flung back one of the doors that opened from the corridor. Sister Rakjak's first impression of the room was a painful glare of brilliance, for

the outer wall was transparent and the blood of the dying sun filled the room. Slowly she became aware of the furnishings, simply designed chairs and lounges made in tinted plastics. Music purred gently from a wall speaker. Far away she heard the gay chatter of children.

"Angela!" Jeff called lustily. "Joan! Ruth!"

A side door slid open. Three women ran smiling into the room. They embraced Jeff simultaneously, crying their pleasure. Four small boys crowded at their heels, shouting shrilly. Then one of them saw Sister Rakjak.

"A Blue!" he screamed. And the other children took up the name, "Daddy's brought home a Blue!"

The three women and their sons were abruptly quiet. Jeff smiled awkwardly. "Sister Rakjak, my wives — and our sons."

She said huskily, "Don't be frightened, please."

"Who's scared?" one of the boys demanded. "Someday we're going to kill all the Blues." It was the clear voice of hatred.

Sister Rakjak shrank toward Jeff. He picked up the child, spanking him playfully. "Sister Rakjak is one of us," he said evenly, "a valley woman. Never forget that."

The youngest child tugged at his mother's shorts. "Are we going to have a Blue mommy, too?"

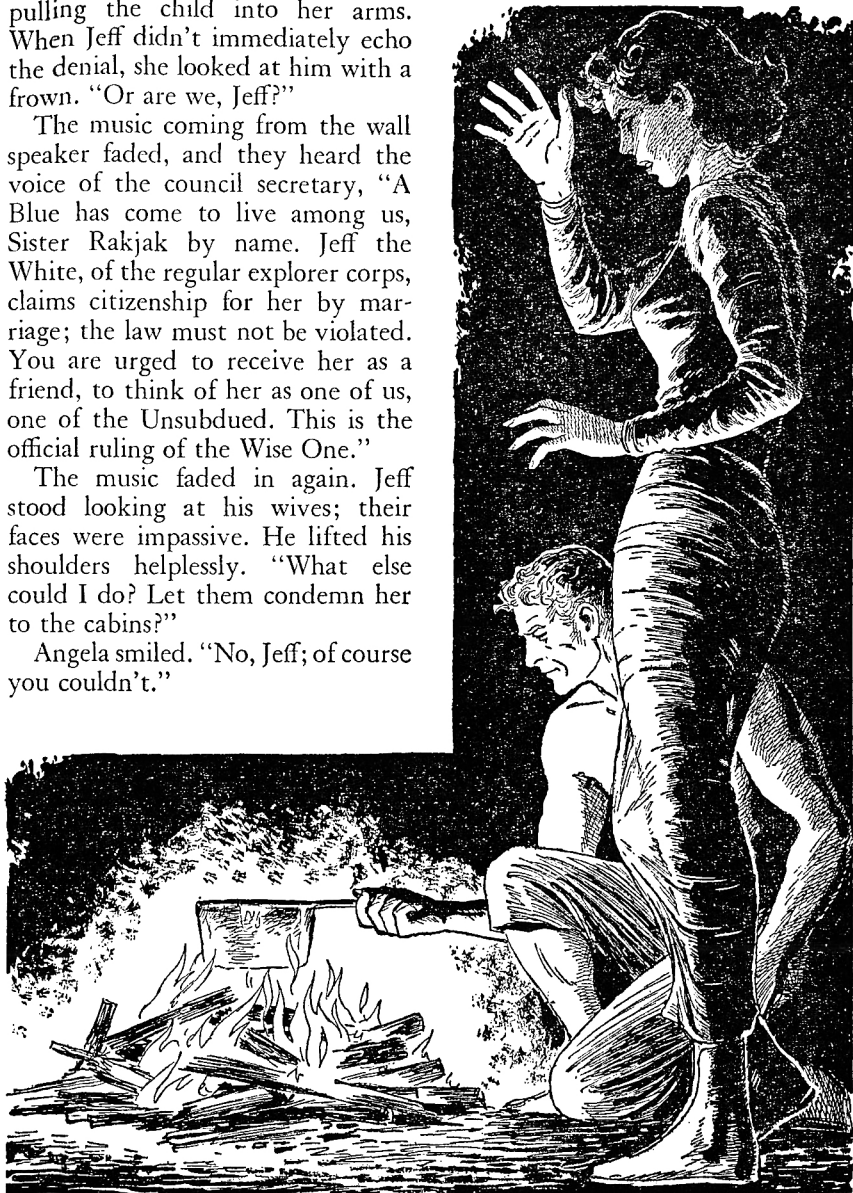
"Certainly not!" the woman whose name was Angela responded quickly,

pulling the child into her arms. When Jeff didn't immediately echo the denial, she looked at him with a frown. "Or are we, Jeff?"

The music coming from the wall speaker faded, and they heard the voice of the council secretary, "A Blue has come to live among us, Sister Rakjak by name. Jeff the White, of the regular explorer corps, claims citizenship for her by marriage; the law must not be violated. You are urged to receive her as a friend, to think of her as one of us, one of the Unsubdued. This is the official ruling of the Wise One."

The music faded in again. Jeff stood looking at his wives; their faces were impassive. He lifted his shoulders helplessly. "What else could I do? Let them condemn her to the cabins?"

Angela smiled. "No, Jeff; of course you couldn't."



Joan bit her lip doubtfully. "But is she compatible, Jeff?"

"We had no time to take the tests. She talks the way we do; she believes in the sort of thing we do; that's what counts."

Their doubts were resolved. The three women moved toward Sister Rakjak simultaneously. Ruth said, with throaty sympathy, "You poor dear! You must have had a miserable time on the road."

Joan added, "I've a skin balm I use for the children; it'll do wonders for your face."

And Angela said, "I know you want to get out of that ugly thing you're wearing and put on something more comfortable. My supplementary outfit ought to do."

The women led the bewildered Sister of Gannon through the side door. Jeff followed, stripping off his cartridge belts and his dusty homespun. "Give me half an hour to clean up and play with the kids," he called after them. "Then let's eat."

LIKE every dwelling unit in the city, Jeff's apartment consisted basically of only two rooms — the formal, glass-walled room, and a much larger room for family living. The family room was primarily a nursery, cluttered with toys. A bathing tank, four feet deep and twelve square, was built up in the center of the room. Sleeping alcoves against three walls were partly partitioned by plastic curtains. The

outer wall of the family room was again transparent; a door opened on a toy-crowded balcony overlooking the street.

The women took Sister Rakjak into one of the alcoves. Jeff plunged naked into the clear, cold water of the pool. As they always did, his sons pulled off their white trunks and played in the water with him. The enjoyment of his children was the most satisfying pleasure in Jeff's life. Now, as he ran through the usual games with his sons, he told them the story of his raid on the Southern Plantation. He dressed it instinctively in epic clothes, because the delight of childhood was closely identical with his own.

When Jeff had finished his tale, Chris, the oldest child, said with starry eyes, "I hope I can be as brave as you are when it's time for me to raid the Plantations."

Jeff slipped his arm around the boy's wet shoulder. "Perhaps, Chris, we won't be making any raids then."

"But — but what else is there?"

"A million things; more work than any of us can ever finish. We've a world to rebuild, thousands of cities like this one."

"Yes, after we drive out the Blues."

"We may not have to —"

"You mean surrender?"

"Sister Rakjak calls it understanding."

The boy pursed his lips. "Are the Blues all like her, Dad? She doesn't seem so awful."

"They're people, just as we are; some good, some bad."

"There can't be any good ones; they destroyed our world!"

"Not ours, Chris; we've kept it just as it was. No one can destroy our world, unless we do it ourselves."

"We're the Unsubdued," the boy echoed. "I never thought of it like that, Dad. It makes things kind of — kind of different."

Jeff's mind sang with hope. If he could eventually persuade Chris to understand, he could others, too. Jeff valued Chris' opinion highly. There was a difference of not quite fifteen years in their ages, and as time passed that counted less and less.

The three women brought Sister Rakjak out of the alcove and led her toward the pool. When she saw Jeff and the children, she gasped and hid modestly behind the partition.

"What's eating her?" Chris asked.

"Damned if I know."

"Do you suppose the Blues don't bathe, Dad?"

Jeff considered that, but shook his head. "Perhaps they're afraid of cold water."

He pulled himself out of the pool and stood drying himself in the hot light of the sun lamps. The four boys imitated him exactly, shifting their positions every time he did his, flexing the same muscles. While Jeff ran a comb through his unruly crown of platinum hair, Ruth slipped

out of the alcove and put her arm around his shoulder, drawing his ear close to her lips. Her face was convulsed with irrepressible amusement.

"The Blue needs a bath," she whispered, "but she's too shy to use the pool while you're here — not unless you put something on."

"Clothes in the water? It's a waste of material; what good would it do?"

"It seems to be one of their customs — something to do with moral values. She tried to explain it, but I don't understand it either. She's a stranger, Jeff, and at the beginning I think we ought to humor her whims." She brushed his cheek with her lips. "Put on your house-trunks and wait for us in the other room."

He laughed uproariously.

"We've been talking to her, Jeff. It's going to work out, I think; she'll be compatible. Give her time to get used to our ways. You know, she's quite a pretty little thing, isn't she?"

JEFF took the boys and went into the formal room. When his wives joined them, they took the sliding incline to the dining room on the lower floor of the apartment building. The room was crowded, seething with noise. A mob of children were playing on the slides and swings and teeter-totters at one end of the room, while a wife from each family worked at one of the electric ranges lined against the back wall. Other

women prepared the tables, or tended the very smallest children. The din was like the roar of a storm wind, but no one seemed to mind it.

Sister Rakjak clung to Jeff's hand. She tried to talk to him, but her timid little voice was a tenuous grace note lost in the thundering pandemonium. At intervals every adult in the room made a point of speaking to her. Their faces were friendly; their handclaspings were warm and vigorous. They had all heard the announcement of the council secretary, and they were indicating their acceptance of the ruling.

"You're one of us, now," Jeff cried in her ear, grinning broadly. He put his arm around her shoulders and drew her close. She was trembling, and that puzzled him. Why should she be afraid here, in the fellowship of the dining room?

Gradually the noise decreased as the various tables were spread and the different sets of children were called away from the play area. Then, after a fashion, Sister Rakjak was able to make herself heard. "Do you always eat like this, Jeff? In such confusion?"

"There's nothing confusing about this!"

"In our cities we have separate dining rooms, in our own homes."

He was shocked. "But that's barbaric, Sister Rakjak! The meal hour is the most important time of the day for children. They must feel relaxed; they must have companionship; they must —"

"You go through all this for them?"

"Naturally; we're a civilized people."

"In a common dining room like this, how in the world do you work out the cost of the food? Who pays for what?"

"All the food belongs to all of us. It's a necessity, like air; you don't pay money for that. Luxuries, yes — an extra blouse, the furniture in your apartment, or a pool like the one I bought for my family room."

"And this is your old world, Jeff, exactly as it used to be?"

"To the last detail. Why do you keep harping on that? It should be obvious by this time."

Angela brought platters of steak to the table. With a whoop of animal joy the four boys leaped into their chairs. They began to wolf their food the way Jeff had on the road. Only Chris had any semblance of restraint which might remotely be defined as manners. The three women smiled when they noticed Sister Rakjak's pained expression.

"We bother very little about appearances," Ruth said. "A happy meal hour is so much more important to the children."

IV

SISTER RAKJAK toyed dejectedly with her steak. She had taught herself to eat their canned vegetables without flinching; but she could not adjust to meats. And there was nothing else on the table.

Jeff smiled encouragingly. "Try the steak."

Unwillingly she cut a small piece, and when it touched her lips she did not feel the usual nausea.

"I thought it would be all right," Jeff said. "It isn't really meat, Sister Rakjak — just another chemical compound we've developed from the soy bean; we've never been able to raise cattle very satisfactorily in our valley."

When the meal was finished Jean and Ruth cleared the table by scooping all the plastic plates, platters and flatware into waste containers. Sister Rakjak was disturbed by such needless destruction, until Jeff told her that the discards would be reduced to a chemical compound and reprocessed into dinnerware.

Ruth and Angela joined other wives in a game of cards. Chris went to play with the older children; in the play area they were putting on an impromptu drama for an audience of fathers. Joan herded the three younger boys up to bed. Jeff and Sister Rakjak followed them up the sliding incline to his apartment.

"The others will leave us the formal room tonight," he told her as he shut the outer door. "It's the custom when a man takes a new wife."

"It's done so easily, Jeff? Without a ceremony, without my consent —"

"Our marriage was legalized when I made the announcement to the Wise One."

"You never asked me, Jeff."

"There was no time. I had to lie; it was the only thing I could think of to save you from the cabins."

"You might have said you love me."

"You're a woman; I'm a man; we're undoubtedly compatible: that's love, isn't it?"

"You have three other wives; do you mean to tell me you love them too, in the same way?"

"Of course. There's nothing unusual about that. I married Angela when we were still kids in school; the compatibility placement tests gave me Joan and Ruth later. That's the way we've always done it; it's the law. All women want a home and children of their own. It just happens that we've taken more girls than boys from the Plantations; the valley women outnumber the men about three to one, so every man has three wives."

He stood with his back to the transparent wall, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the moonlit sky. His voice was sharp with exasperation. Why did she ask such inane questions? Surely the Blues must have a similar arrangement. He added angrily, "It's always been a custom among men."

"No, Jeff. When the Blues invaded your world, your marriage customs were much like ours; and they were, to an extent, responsible for the neurotic maladjustments of your world. Plural marriage was a

crime; and if you and Angela had even considered marriage as school-children, you'd have been punished."

"The Wise One has read us the old books; I know what it was like." He came and sat on the lounge beside her, reaching for her hand. "You're lying, Sister Rakjak. Not deliberately, of course; you simply have your facts wrong."

HER next question confused him completely; it seemed to bear no relation to the others. "Jeff, do you know that one of your wives is colored?"

"Ruth? Of course; she's black-skinned, the way you're a Blue."

"But you're married to her!"

"And why shouldn't I be? We hit the top correlation bracket on the compatibility tests."

Sister Rakjak turned toward him, her eyes glowing. "You *have* made over your world, Jeff: everything the Blues came to do for you. There's no reason, now, for you to hate us."

He drew her gently into his arms.

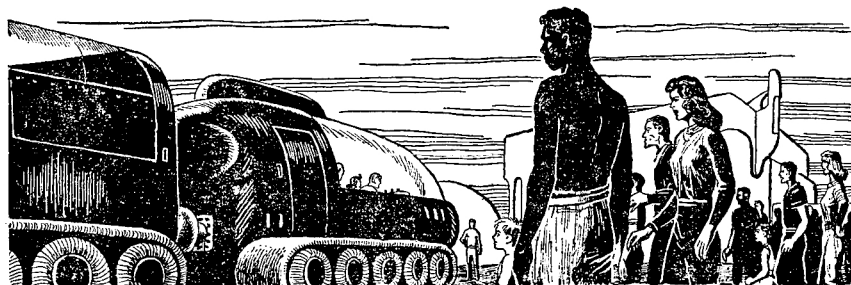
As her lips touched his, she whispered, "Understanding — that's all we need, Jeff; if your Wise One would only listen to me —" The whisper became a sigh.

THE four boys tumbled Jeff awake at the first light of dawn. In playful anger he pursued them around the family room. Screaming with delight, they tossed a barrage of cushions at him. He caught his sons, one by one, and flung them into the bathing tank. Jeff splashed in the water with them until Joan came to the side of the tank and said, "Out, you kids! And that means you, too, Jeff. Time to give your mommies a chance."

As Jeff slid over the wall of the tank, she added, "For the first week or so, I don't believe we ought to assign Sister Rakjak any community duties; let her visit in the city for a while and get better acquainted."

"Good idea. What kind of work do you think she'll do?"

"It'll have to be inside, because of the sun. She might make a good



teacher, Jeff; she seems to hit it off all right with our kids."

Jeff and his sons lay under the sun lamps while the women bathed. He was pleased when he saw Sister Rakjak join the others. Then, slowly, his warm sense of well-being departed, as he remembered what she had said to him the night before. If the old world had not been preserved here in the valley, what had happened? Jeff did not doubt that what he had was good; but if this wasn't the old culture of man, what was it? The people in the valley thought they had saved everything, even to the detail of the national flags which hung over the park — though what they had been used for no one quite knew. This was certainly what the Wise One read them from the old books; and the Wise One was the only man alive who could actually remember the invasion of the Blues. Conceivably the Wise One could have lied; but why? What possible reason could he have had for making the people in the valley believe a myth? He had taught them to fight to defend their

culture; yet if Sister Rakjak spoke the truth that culture was already dead.

As Jeff and his family left the apartment to go to breakfast, the wall speaker in the formal room chattered suddenly with the voice of the council secretary announcing the morning session of the council. At the same time the council summoned all regular raiders for maneuvers in the lower valley.

JEFF was in the regular service, with the rank of explorer. He had hoped to have a week's leave after the raid on the Southern Plantation, but the reason for the emergency order was obvious: the council would use the new fire-guns to make an immediate attack on the border forts and the men had to be ready.

Jeff walked, after breakfast, to the lower valley, where the ten thousand regulars were assembling in a clearing beside the stream. The commander of the corps explained that the maneuvers had been scheduled to give the men experience in handling the new guns. The tradi-



tional plan would be followed. Three hundred caravans would penetrate the border forts at the same time, as traders from the north; they were to take the defenses by surprise.

"We will show no mercy." The commander read off the long-established general orders without feeling. "We will give no quarter. When our attack is finished, let no Blue remain alive, let no fort remain standing."

As an explorer, Jeff commanded a caravan, but his authority had a logical rather than a disciplinary basis. His rank meant that he had had considerable experience with individual raids on the Plantations; he knew the roads and he knew the Blues. The commander of the corps, speaking for the council or the Wise One, issued the general orders; each caravan executed them as it saw fit. If Jeff suggested a plan of attack which the majority of the men under him considered foolish, they ignored it. No man in the valley would have understood any other form of authority.

Jeff issued the fire-guns to the men in his caravan. When he considered them sufficiently acquainted with the firing mechanism, he called a rest halt. A handful of the men still labored with the new weapons; the others dropped on the soft meadow grass, relaxing in the sun.

Cass and Slim joined Jeff. They wanted to talk, but they seemed awkward and tongue-tied. After half a dozen false starts, they made

themselves clear enough for Jeff to get the point. He threw back his head and laughed. "Of course it went all right; Sister Rakjak'll make a damn' fine wife."

"We've been thinking, Jeff — and talking to the men about it, too. Sister Rakjak fits in; some of the other Blues might, too."

Cass added, "Like she says, Jeff: maybe all we have to do is make them understand us."

Jeff asked thoughtfully, "How do the men feel about it?"

"It makes sense; why start a war if you don't have to?"

"The war: that's what bothers us," Slim admitted. "It's one thing to raid the Plantations. The Blues are used to that. But what happens when we knock out the border forts? The Blues still hold all the cards; if they want to, they can wipe us out."

"If the Blues are like Sister Rakjak, if they really came here to help us —" Cass shrugged his shoulders expressively. "Sure, I know they destroyed our world — or tried to. But they haven't won. The Plantations have failed; they're about ready to admit it."

"Why should we go down to the forts and slaughter all the Blues we can lay our hands on?" Slim asked. "Why not take prisoners instead? The men think it's a good idea. Bring them here. It's a reasonable guess a good many of them will react the way Sister Rakjak has; they'll see we've saved the world

they came to destroy, and nothing short of annihilation will change us. Then we could send them back to their own people; we might get a treaty out of the deal."

"Send back a band of converts," Jeff repeated softly; "the way of man instead of the Way of Gannon." He stood up, his face bright with sudden hope. "I'll ask permission to present your plan to the council; they'll have to change the general orders before we send out the caravans."

As soon as the maneuvers came to an end, in mid-afternoon, Jeff hurried back to the city. The council session had ended for the day, but he filed a request for a hearing and the secretary assigned him the opening hour of the morning session. In theory any citizen could address the council, just as every citizen was considered a member of it. But for practical purposes, as the population of the valley had grown, the council was limited to elected representatives, and petitioners to individuals who could represent well-defined groups. As an explorer, it was Jeff's responsibility to speak for any of his men who had a valid request to make of the council. In this case he would be speaking for himself as well. He knew the scheme suggested by Slim and Cass would work; it was logical. He had no doubt that the council would accept it.

Sister Rakjak met him as he returned to his apartment, with an

enthusiasm to match his own. "I've been everywhere in the city, Jeff; I've seen it all. It's magnificent what you've done."

He touched the blisters on her face gently. "They look a little better, I think."

"Jeff, do you understand what I'm saying? You've completely rebuilt your culture. You've kept everything worth saving, and junked the rest — all the neurotic inconsistency, all the prejudice, all the national hatreds. Today I met Chinese and Negroes and Whites all living together and working together in harmony."

"All men are brothers; we've always believed that."

"How can I make it clear to you? This is what your old world believed in, yes — but *not* what it practiced. You used the same words, then, but they meant nothing. Jeff, your people have no reason to live in isolation any longer; you mustn't begin the old war again now!" She caught his hand eagerly. "Could I talk to the Wise One?"

"Any citizen has that privilege."

"I want to explain to him how the Blues feel. We could send them an ambassador, or invite one here — anything, Jeff, but war. We've everything to lose and nothing to gain."

"It might be a good idea, but don't count too much on the Wise One. He's very old, Sister Rakjak; it's difficult for him to change the way he's thought since the invasion.

I'll walk up to the government house with you after dinner; we'll see what we can do."

JEFF's vague misgivings were thoroughly justified. When they sat in the dismal reception room facing the speaker grid and the glowing red light, the Wise One refused to listen to her. "I will talk to no Blue," he said tonelessly. "Under the law, Sister Rakjak, you have qualified for citizenship; be content with that." The light went out.

"It's so foolish, Jeff!" Sister Rakjak said when they were outside again. "He's thinking with his prejudices — the kind of warped logic your world used to use."

"That's natural, I suppose; he's the only living survivor."

"Have you ever known any others?"

"No, they all died in the first five years after they came to the valley. Only their children were left, and the Wise One had to be mother and father to them all."

"Isn't that something of a coincidence, that every adult should have died?"

"Their lives were hard; they had nothing when they came here."

"But the children lived," she repeated thoughtfully, "and the Wise One brought them up, teaching them what he chose and — and literally creating a new world. How many children were there, Jeff?"

"Nearly a hundred."

"There must be a hundred thou-

sand people in the valley now. How could so few —"

"Later on we brought in recruits when we raided the Plantations. Always children; the Wise One wouldn't permit us to kidnap adults. We've sent explorers to all the Plantations, even as far away as Europe and Africa. The Wise One wanted us to know every part of our planet, because someday we'd reconquer it."

"He's done all this — and still won't listen to me; it just doesn't make sense."

"Ever since the city was built, he's been eccentric; I told you that."

"Did something happen to him then, Jeff?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary, for an old man. He was taken sick on a trading expedition to the border forts. Rheumatism, maybe, or a heart attack; we've never known. He came back to the valley in a closed litter and shut himself up in the government building. We haven't seen him more than half a dozen times since. He even had a shuttered gallery built in the council hall so he could attend sessions without being seen."

"It's obviously senility. Jeff, would you let an old man who's lost his ability to think drive you to war?"

"He won't. The council gives the orders — and I have permission to address them in the morning."

Jeff counted on that. The representatives in the council were logical men. True, the Wise One was tech-

nically the presiding officer, with veto authority. But not in Jeff's lifetime had he actually intervened to change a council ruling.

V

IMMEDIATELY after the opening of the morning session, Jeff the White presented his petition to the governing body. He spoke from the rostrum; above him hung the latticed gallery of the Wise One. No one in the hall was ever sure whether the Wise One was present or not; the hanging box, like the man himself, had become a symbol for power, remote and silent and forever infallible.

The council received Jeff's proposed change in the general orders with overwhelming approval; he realized that at once. They had been reluctant to give the orders which might begin a new war with the Blues. They were as eager as Jeff to find a saner solution. When the vote was taken, it was unanimous.

Jeff left the rostrum and walked toward the exit hall. Behind him he heard the muffled banging of a gavel and, from the shuttered gallery, the angry voice of the Wise One. "The ruling is vetoed; we will attack the border forts according to the plan."

For a moment the representatives sat in stunned silence; then a dozen men began talking at once. The hidden gavel banged them to order. A woman arose and faced her fellow delegates. "The Wise One has ex-

pressed his opinion — the opinion of a man we love and respect, but still the opinion of one man; I propose that we vote again on the same petition."

From the balcony the Wise One cried, "My authority is final!"

The woman answered, "We govern ourselves; you have taught us that."

A delegate seconded her motion.

"We cannot discard the plan," the Wise One pleaded with them. "We have worked for this hour all our lives — for the time when men will defeat the Blues in battle. After that make peace with them, yes; on our terms, proudly, as conquerors, with a culture the Blues have been unable to destroy. What else will give us equality? The man who asks us to surrender the plan —"

"He asks only a minor change," the woman corrected him firmly; "an elimination of needless brutality."

"This man, Jeff the White, has married a Blue. How can we know the lies she has told him? Why has she come to the valley? To spy on us? To undermine our spirit?"

"That isn't the issue; we lose nothing by taking prisoners of war."

"The council has never been divided on an important issue. I ask you now to call a recess before you vote again. Wait until tomorrow; give yourselves time to think."

The representatives agreed to that. Slowly they moved out of their seats. A number of them milled

around Jeff, asking him about his Blue wife. He invited them to talk to her for themselves, and more than three-fourths of the council went with him. They met Sister Rakjak in the dining room of Jeff's apartment building. She was anxious to talk to them and her sincerity impressed them all.

As the meeting broke up, a messenger brought her a note. She tore it open and her face lit with pleasure.

"From the Wise One, Jeff; he says he'll see me."

"Want me to go along?"

She glanced at the note. "I'm to come alone."

TEN minutes after she had left, the wall-speakers throughout the city hummed with the voice of the council secretary. On orders from the Wise One, all regular raiders were called to caravan stations. Jeff trudged to the assembly field above the city. The emergency orders disturbed him; it could only mean that the attack on the forts had been launched.

The council was not in session; the Wise One, then, had given the order and the general plan would be followed because the council had not voted for the change. Was this the pettish senility of a stubborn old man? Would the Wise One risk losing everything he had built simply to have his own way?

The commander made an explanation of sorts: an explorer reported that the Blue patrols in the border forts were being changed. This was

the ideal moment to strike, before the new men learned the potential dangers of the border. But who was the explorer? When had he come back to the valley? Who had seen him but the Wise One?

Another lie? How many times before this had the Wise One lied? How often had he maneuvered them all, like docile children? Children! The word rang bitterly in Jeff's mind. The Wise One had made himself the great, all-knowing father; they were all his children, in a sense; this was his world, created with children he had reared.

Were the old books lies, too? Sister Rakjak had told Jeff the truth: the valley had not preserved the old world. They had saved nothing; this had all been created by the Wise One. That seemed self-evident. Jeff was surprised at his own calm acceptance of the situation. He felt neither bitterness nor resentment. This culture, made by the Wise One, fabricated from falsehood, was a world worth fighting for; no sane man would lift a finger to restore the old chaos.

Within an hour three hundred caravans were moving out of the valley toward the pass. They departed in such haste the men were not given the traditional leave-hour with their wives. The raiders wore the customary homespun and moccasins; but beneath their cartridge belts were concealed clips of stolen fire-guns. They rode bedraggled, shaggy ponies, raised in the valley

and kept more or less untamed. An explorer was expected to raid a Plantation on foot, or by means of any transportation he had the initiative to improvise on the trail; but the wild-maned ponies were considered a necessary part of the costuming for a caravan.

They made camp the first night on the arid, windy plane at the foot of the pass—a motley army of thirty thousand men. For another day they would march together, before breaking up into three hundred separate units, each destined for one of the chain of border trading cities. That was the long-established strategy of the plan, to strike simultaneously against the entire border. It would have the maximum psychological effect upon the Blues; it would convince them that the Unsubdued were stronger than they actually were.

This was the climactic hour of their lives, the decisive crisis in their civilization. They had every assurance that they would win, at least in the initial attack. The men should have been boisterous with anticipation, raucous as they sat in caravan groups around their campfires. But the army was silent, seething with a muttered unrest.

Every man knew what had happened that morning in the council; the city speakers, as always, had carried a summary of the proceedings. To each of the men Jeff's proposal had seemed entirely sane and logical. Yet they were moving on the forts

now under the original orders to burn and slaughter.

THE commander called a meeting of the caravan leaders. The three hundred men met around a campfire built in the mouth of a canyon. The towering walls of jumbled rock protected them from the wind and made it easier for individual voices to be heard.

"The council does not expect us to follow orders blindly," the commander agreed, after listening to the petitions of half a dozen explorers. "We govern ourselves. We must act unanimously on a clear majority decision, of course; and in this case it is entirely evident what the council intends. The actual vote is a matter of form. They'll send a messenger with new orders as soon as they convene tomorrow morning. Go back and tell your men that."

Someone demanded, "What happens if the Wise One uses the veto again?"

"No one man has the right to set himself up as the law."

"We've always said the Wise One was infallible; when we've had a problem we couldn't solve, we've run to him for help."

"And he taught us to depend upon ourselves. He is an old man, now, and his mind is infirm. Naturally we shall always respect him for what he has done. But this is our world, not his alone; it's up to us to run it our way. If the council messenger doesn't reach us before night-

fall tomorrow, we'll take a vote among ourselves and act upon that decision." The voice of the commander was crisp and calmly reasonable. It would not have occurred to him to resort to bombast, nor to the men to expect it. Only subconsciously was Jeff aware that his commander had proclaimed a revolution: an army in the field was to determine the validity of orders under which it marched.

The leaders carried the promise back to their caravans and the unrest dwindled. The camp relaxed; here and there groups of men began to sing.

At dawn the army began to move south again. Three hours later they saw the spiraling cloud of an approaching horseman behind them. The long, ragged line of caravans ground to a stop. Sporadic cheering swept the men. Surely this was the messenger from the council, bringing them saner orders.

But they were wrong. It was Joan. As soon as Jeff recognized his wife, he jabbed his moccasined heels into the flanks of his pony and rode out to meet her. Her face was drawn with fatigue, gray with the shadow of an incomprehensible fear. "You must come home, Jeff!" she gasped. "Your new wife —"

"Calm down, Joan; rest a minute and get your breath."

She swayed in the saddle, but with an effort she controlled her voice. "Sister Rakjak went to see the

Wise One yesterday; she never came home. All last night we worried, but what could we do? We kept saying to ourselves nothing could happen to her, not in the government house. Then — then this morning —"

"Yes? Tell me!"

"WHEN the council met, Sister Rakjak spoke to them from the Wise One's box. The shutters were open; everyone saw her. She said she had lied — to you, to the delegates when they talked to her, to all of us. She was sorry, now, and she wanted to make amends. She said we had to carry out the plan, just as we had made it; she told the council the Blues had sent her here to divide us, to weaken us, to —"

"That's impossible. She couldn't have been sent. She was on her way to the Plantation; this is nothing the Blues could have arranged."

"Even the council knows that, Jeff; she's lying *now*, for some reason. Something has happened to her, but no one's allowed to see her. You have to get her out of the government house; they'll release her to you, Jeff. You're her husband; it's the law."

"Has the council voted?"

"They would have, but the Wise One asked for another recess — this time so they could consider what Sister Rakjak said. She's going to be in his box again this afternoon."

Jeff clenched his jaw; the muscles in his face hardened. "She is like hell!"

JEFF cantered back to his caravan. After a brief explanation, he put Slim and Cass jointly in charge, and took a fresh mount for Joan. No more formal a leave-taking was expected of him; to every man the affairs of his family took precedence over all other things.

Jeff and his wife followed the twisting trail back to the valley. Two people, unencumbered, could travel far more rapidly than a host of thirty thousand men. Within four hours Jeff and Joan clattered across the treaded bridge into the white city.

He left his wife at his apartment, and sprinted across the flag-ornamented park toward the government building. The outer doors of the council hall were open for the convenience of a throng gathered on the plastic-surfaced street. Jeff shouldered his way into the building.

From the back of the crowded hall he saw his Blue wife in the gallery of the Wise One. The shutters were parted. Sister Rakjak was clinging to the ornamental rail, her eyes cast down to avoid the glare of amber and purple sunlight that fell through the transparent ceiling panels.

"How many times must I repeat the same thing?" she asked wearily. "You have a good plan; for generations you have lived in order to achieve it. Afterwards, yes — then make peace with the Blues."

A delegate replied, with a voice as weary as hers, "Sister Rakjak, you

have done nothing to influence our decision, one way or the other. We have given you the courtesy of a hearing; now if we may resume the business of the council —"

"I lied to you yesterday; do you understand that?"

"You made that same statement earlier; it has no bearing that we can see."

"I told you that you had created a new culture; I said this was what the Blues had come here to achieve — you must not believe that. This is your world, exactly as it always was. You must defend it in your own way, in the way the Wise One has taught you." She twisted her hands in agony; her voice was weak with inner torment.

A fury of anger and shame swept Jeff's mind. This was a farce, and his wife was playing the fool. Couldn't she see that? The illogic was ridiculously obvious: to argue for violence, in the name of peaceful understanding.

Jeff pushed through the crowd and sprinted around the building to the entrance to the living quarters. He slammed open the door and stumbled blindly up the steps. He stood panting at the back of the shuttered balcony while his eyes adjusted to the gloom.

He heard his wife's voice, hoarse with fatigue. In a dark corner of the box he saw the Wise One, a brittle old man hunched deep in a cushioned chair, his face and hands chalk-white. Jeff sprang toward Sister Rak-

jak, pulling her away from the railing.

She screamed. "No, Jeff! You can't interfere now!"

The Wise One stood up. "Let her go!" he whispered. In his hand the old man held a fire-gun.

JEFF turned slowly, and the muscles in his back stiffened as he clenched his fists; the Wise One held the vicious weapon steady. For a moment neither man moved. Jeff tried to estimate how much age would have slowed the Wise One's reaction-time: it seemed worth the gamble.

He sprang forward suddenly, as lithe as a cat; the old man jabbed the firing dial a split-second too late. The needle-fire cut harmlessly into the shutter studding, and the shutters fell away from the front of the box. The sudden flood of multicolored sunlight was blinding. The old man flung his arm protectively over his eyes as Jeff struck his feet.

The two men rolled together on the narrow floor. As he grappled for a hold, Jeff's hand dragged across the old man's face.

And ice was in Jeff's soul. A terrifying fear and emptiness caught at his viscera. He stood up weakly, moving back against the wall and staring stupidly at the white mask that had come free in his hand.

The Wise One was a Blue.

The sheltering shutters were gone. Every delegate in the council hall saw the Blue.

"Now you know, Jeff," Sister

Rakjak whispered; "and you've destroyed your world."

The emptiness swam in his mind; vaguely he knew what she meant, and he fought the shapeless wraith of the nightmare.

In the deadly silence, Jeff heard a whisper from the hall, "Then what she said is true: they have tried to help us."

The old man groped his way to the railing. Holding his hand to shield his eyes, he said, "You've rebuilt your world yourselves; please believe that. Your Wise One was one of you, but he died four years ago when he was in the trading city. We knew you couldn't survive without a leader, and the Brothers of Gannon elected me to take his place. You have no reason to feel shame; we have imposed nothing; all this world is your own making."

The emptiness was gone from Jeff's mind as quickly as it had come. The tension washed out of his muscles and he grinned broadly as he took his Blue wife in his arms. The old man continued his patient appeal to the delegates, until one of the representatives interrupted with a motion that treaty negotiations should begin at once with the Blues. It was seconded. The council started to debate the selection of an ambassador.

The Blue turned uncertainly toward Jeff and Sister Rakjak. "I expected confusion. This quiet acceptance of the truth — it's very puzzling."

"Why not?" Jeff asked. "Now we can solve our problem without war."

"The dejection and the loss of initiative comes slowly, I suppose. Sister Rakjak saw at once what you faced when she talked to me; that's why she was willing to help. Jeff . . . the challenge is gone, the thing that held your people together —"

"Challenge?" he repeated without understanding.

"Revenge on the Blues. As long as you built to defeat us, you had a goal; but now —" The old man spread his hands helplessly.

"Now we make a treaty." Jeff nodded toward the council hall.

"Your people — the Unsubdued — have created a new society. Years ago we began watching you quietly, helping where we could. We had to make sure you survived. If you hated us, that didn't matter. You might make peace after you took the border forts; that was the original plan of the Wise One. You needed a victory to counterbalance the bitter memory of defeat."

"But we're not children. Why didn't you simply tell us the truth?"

THE old man sighed. "I meant to, when I took the Wise One's place. Then I read the notes he had kept. He had been a scientist of some sort — a biochemist, I'd guess, since he based your economy on the by-products of the soy bean. He deliberately set out to make a new culture, by avoiding all the social misconceptions which had caused

disaster in the past. He began with untrained children. And, to make sure there would be no social heritage, he murdered all their parents and reared the children himself. It's strange, isn't it, that so much good should arise from that act of evil; and so much sorrow from the good we intended when we came?"

"On the whole, the Wise One planned well; but he was convinced that a society had to face a constant challenge in order to grow. He used the Blues for that, and he built hatred of us into everything you did." His voice dropped to a helpless whisper. "The challenge is gone, now; your people know it never existed. What other goal do you have?"

"To rebuild a planet," Jeff answered simply. Sister Rakjak slid her hand into his and smiled reassuringly.

"That's too abstract; it hasn't the clear-cut force of revenge."

"For my world it does. Perhaps the Wise One wasn't as clever as you suppose — or perhaps he built better than he knew. You see, he taught us sanity. Hatred and vengeance are symptoms of madness; we operate logically — nothing else makes sense to us. That's why the display you persuaded my wife to make was so obvious for exactly what it was. Of course the council listened — ordinary courtesy for a stranger; but when the vote came, they wouldn't have changed their minds."

"I — I think I knew that, which is why I kept asking for a further

recess." Abruptly the aging Blue's face brightened. "And there may be hope in that. You have enough confidence in yourselves to defy your own highest authority, your own Wise One. With a maturity like that—" His voice became troubled again. "The army, Jeff! They'll attack the forts under the old orders. And even that sacrifice, which we Blues were willing to make—it's pointless now."

"Can't we stop them?" Sister Rakjak asked.

Jeff laughed easily. "They'll take a vote tonight and change the orders themselves; it's the logical thing to do, isn't it?" He took her hand and led her gently toward the stairway. "You've been through enough, Sister Rakjak; it's time I took you home."

His eyes adjusted slowly to the darkness of the stairwell and he stumbled. She caught his elbow and asked, with some surprise, "Can't you see in the dark, Jeff?"

"Of course not."

"Why, I thought all men—strange, we never knew that about

your people." After a pause, she added shyly, "Do you think our child—I mean, if we have a child—"

"Half a dozen, if you like. And they won't be like either of us, Sister Rakjak; just themselves. That's why kids are fun."

"You know, Jeff, that's the real answer. Your Wise One may have meant to make hatred the core of your society. But, without knowing it, he gave you something else: the family, this worship of children. There's a saying of Gannon, 'You achieve the infinite peace of eternity, when you learn to see with the innocent eyes of a little child.'"

He smiled. "And in our belief, too, '*For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.*'" They left the government building and on the bright, sunlit street they were engulfed in the ever-present swarms of noisy, laughing children. Over the gates of their playground the plastic letters gleamed in the sun, "*Of such as these.*"

