

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

- ★ DON BERRY was introduced to our readers in the August 1957 issue of *Science Fiction Quarterly*, by way of an ingenious time-travel tale about Sir Isaac Newton. While his main efforts are in other fields, I think we'll see more of him in science fiction.
- ★
- ★



PROBLEM IN ECOLOGY

Novelet

by Don Berry

For all his training, Nikko Varan found it hard to believe at times, that he was saving this culture from untold misery by plunging it into ruinous warfare...

M OON BETA came up over the horizon, gibbous, huge, and looking like a giant's fire-balloon. The desert sands of Procyon V caught fire beneath its muted glow; the long shadows of rocks were like plumes of red smoke trailing behind.

Nikko Varan, sometime Captain of a Terran Ecological Survey Team, stood high in the window of a rock castle overlooking the desert, watching Beta-rise bathe the sands in rose—watching and waiting.

The castle loomed up from the desert like a dark cliff, the relic of days before technology had caught up with Procyon V, of days before the great city-states of Shep-lin and Mekar had grown to dominate the planet.

Varan rubbed his blue-dyed skull speculatively, a gesture of impatience. Wheeling, he strode down the long anteroom, his formal Procyon robes swishing around his legs; at its far end, opposite the window, stood a heavy, *lin*-wood conference table. Varan moved around it, swung aside one edge of the heavy wall tapestry.

"Sergeant," he called. "It's past time. Are you picking anything up?"

A non-com in the uniform of the TES looked up, his face lighted by the pale glow of the radar scope. "No, sir. These people don't understand our concept of punctu-

ality, Captain. When they say Beta-rise, they mean anything between Beta-rise and Alpha-rise. There was a girl in Me-karCity once..."

"All right, Sergeant."

"Sorry, sir." The sergeant turned his attention back to the radar sweep.

VARAN MOVED back to the window and stared out. Under the glare of the Procyon primary, the desert was harsh and angular, but the red glow of Beta turned it into softness. Rock needles spired up from the ground, mute testimony to the power of winds that swept these uninhabited regions during the yearly conjunction of Alpha and Beta, grinding everything but the hardest stone.

The desert was silent. Within the castle, he heard only the muted hum of the motor-driven radar antenna whirling on the roof. The scene was peaceful, a peace that Varan knew was planet-wide.

It almost seemed a shame to start a war.

"Captain," came the radar operator's voice. "I have two pips, from the direction of Sheplin."

"Good," said Varan.

He waited until he could see the two air-cars glinting redly under Beta. "Give them landing instructions."

THE SERGEANT fed a pre-recorded tape into the

transmitter, guiding the two Sheplin vehicles to a landing just outside the castle walls. The parties that descended were met by silent groups of servants, who separated them deftly while leading them into the castle. The three Procyon natives from the officially marked Sheplin car were brought swiftly to the conference room, where Nikko Varan awaited them, impassive.

Silently, Varan regarded them, picking out individuals. The squat man would be Lenyadi, leader of the "loyal opposition" in Sheplin. The tall, thin one with the light fringe of blue hair was Tentran, head of the state religion. The third, Varan didn't recognize; probably a body-guard.

Procyon natives were humanoid, displaying only one critical difference from Earthmen. With blue dye coating his features, Nikko Varan could pass easily.

"Gentlemen," he said in the liquid Sheplin dialect, "you are welcome."

"Where is the remainder of our party?" asked Lenyadi bluntly.

"They are being—entertained elsewhere; my business is with you. You were asked to come alone."

"A man in my position," said Lenyadi, "is ill-advised to travel alone to secret meetings with nameless persons." He did not seem inordinately

worried at the absence of the others, Varan thought. Either Lenyadi had nothing to fear, or was putting on a fine show.

"I will be brief," said Varan.

"Please do."

"All right. Lenyadi, as leader of the minority party in Sheplin, you are anxious to become leader of the ruling party. To do this, an issue must be raised before the electorate. War with Mekar would be such an issue, provided you could prove your ability to conduct it better than the present governing party."

"No one wants war with Mekar," said Lenyadi, indifferently.

IGNORING him, Varan turned to the chief prelate. "Tentran, as Priest of the Two Moons, you would like to extend the influence of your ritual to Mekar, as well as Sheplin."

"Our differences are minor," replied Tentran carefully. "Certainly of no political significance at all."

"In other words," said Varan with amusement, "you both deny everything."

"Yes," said Lenyadi.

"Well, inasmuch as no one wants war with Mekar for any reason, the following discussion is purely hypothetical."

"Go ahead."

"Briefly, I have access to a weapon which would break the technological stalemate, which has existed for several

hundreds of years. If, hypothetically speaking, Sheplin were to employ this weapon against Mekar, Procyon would very likely become—let us say, a unified world: One government, one religion."

"How might this hypothetical weapon work?" Lenyadi asked.

Varan described a simple, multiple-bank rocket launcher, accenting its effectiveness as a tactical weapon. For some reason, the scientists of Procyon had never investigated reaction power. Though he made no more than noncommittal expressions of interest, Nikko Varan could see that the stocky politician was very much intrigued.

"We are, of course, interested in the applied sciences, not necessarily for purposes of waging war..." Lenyadi's voice trailed off.

"Naturally not," smiled Varan.

"Thus, your—weapon, might be of some small use to our scholars. What would be the price of such a thing?"

"Twenty man-weights of lead." Roughly a ton, by Procyon measure.

"A small fortune," Lenyadi mused. "Far too much, for an item of purely academic interest."

Varan stood. There was no need to spend more time with them. They had the necessary information; the next move was theirs.

"Possibly so," he said. "It is perhaps worth consideration, at any rate. You will be contacted one fiveday from now. Thank you."

THE THREE left, Lenyadi scowling at the implied rudeness. Varan went again to the window from which he had watched the landing. The other group was brought out from below, and there were a few minutes of low, agitated discussion as they reported their "captivity" to Lenyadi. Then both groups entered the air-cars and left.

The sergeant joined him at the window as he stood watching the departing specks.

"What was the other group?" Varan asked.

"As you figured," the sergeant said. "Squad of tough guys. They didn't like it a bit. How'd it go?"

"Fine," said Varan. "They're hooked."

"What are we going to do with a ton of lead?" asked the sergeant. "Why didn't you get something lighter, anyway?"

Varan shrugged. "They'd be suspicious of anything they didn't have to pay through the nose for. That's a lot of money on a planet low in heavy minerals."

"Yeah; I guess so. You going to make the next contact?"

"No," said Varan; "it's all routine from here on. Now I

have to get the next phase going."

"Which is?"

"Convince Mekar they're about to be attacked, and sell them a weapon."

II

VARAN WASHED the blue dye from his skin, and changed back into his uniform. He would contact the Mekaran government in his own *persona*, Captain Nikko Varan of the Terran Ecological Service. He would have to convince them that Sheplin was going to attack—probably not too difficult—and offer the limited aid of the TES. All undercover, of course. It wouldn't do to have Terrans fooling in Procyon affairs too obviously; at any rate, Mekar was going to lose the war, TES aid or not. If anyone did know the Terrans had given aid to Mekar, it would simply help to reinforce the picture of the TES as an ineffectual bunch of scientists, poking around and making little graphs and charts.

Which was what TES wanted.

Varan sighed. Ecology was so complicated sometimes.

"Sergeant," he called. "Get me a ground car, will you?"

"Yes, sir. Terran or Procy?"

"Terran," said Varan, as the sergeant poked his head into the door. "What are you grinning at?"

"You, sir," said the man. "You look pretty good bald. Head got a good shape to it."

"Get the hell out of here and get me that car!"

"Yes, sir!" the sergeant said, still grinning.

There were times, Varan thought ruefully, when it would be nice to have a little discipline.

BY THE TIME he had finished dressing, the groundcar was waiting for him at the door of the old castle. A few blue-dyed 'natives' were waiting for him in the courtyard, including Lieutenant Benley.

"You'd best get all the equipment back to the ship," Varan told him. "This place has served its purpose, and the Sheplin laddies just might send somebody around to see what's going on."

"All right," said Benley. "You going to MekarCity?"

"Yes," Varan said. "No driver, I think."

"How long?"

"I won't be back to the ship until Sheplin attacks MekarCity," Varan said. "Should be at least three five-days from now. I'll have to make sure MekarCity's defenses aren't quite good enough."

"That seems pretty dangerous, sir," said Benley. "If you wait until after Sheplin attacks, I mean."

Varan shrugged. "This is going to be a long war, Lieu-

tenant. A lot of people are going to be killed."

"Seems like a shame," Benley said. "They haven't known war for three hundred years—nothing except a few minor skirmishes, anyway. Nice, happy people, high standard of living. Makes me feel like a villain."

"Yeah," said Varan. "And we know what we're doing. Just think what it must've been like during the early days of the Service, when they didn't know whether it would work out. Our Founding Fathers spent some sleepless nights over it, I guarantee you that."

"I suppose so," Benley said. "Still, it's a problem everybody has to face in his own way, I guess. This job is making me nervous. I like Procyon."

"So do I. This war will cripple both city-states, if it works out right. The survivors will be living on the level they had two hundred years ago, technologically. It's too bad, but it's necessary."

"YOU KNOW," said Benley, "when I majored in Ecology at the University, if somebody told me I'd be starting a war on a peaceful, happy planet, I'd have spit in his face. Funny, you read all the theory, and never get the implications."

"Hazards of the trade. I've got to get to the City."

"All right," Benley said.

"We'll move the whole shooting match back to the ship and wait for you there."

"Good. You shouldn't have any trouble with the Sheplin crew. They'll try to cheat you on the lead weight, probably. Don't let 'em."

"Right. We'll see you, Captain."

Nikko Varan swung the little ground car away from the castle and headed into the hills toward MekarCity. The paved road was even and smooth under his tires, without cracks or blemishes after fifty years. It compared favorably with the best Terra could produce.

Procyon V had a good technology; there was no doubt of that. The citizens of both major powers lived lives of relative comfort. Plenty of good housing; adequate food for all; a highly complex social system...

Too complex.

Well, the war between the great powers would cut back on that.

SUDDENLY, the road heaved under him. Simultaneously there was a rolling blast like thunder, and the ground car flipped over on its side, skidding wildly into the low depression by the roadbed.

Varan had been thrown from behind the wheel at the initial blast, over to the passenger side. He struck his head heavily on the side of

the door. Dazedly he heard the excited babble of Procyon voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying.

A mine, he thought confusedly, the road was mined..

The door on the driver's side, now directly up, was abruptly flung open and a blue Procyon face stared in at him. Wordlessly the native extended his hand down to Varan, lying on the other door. He grasped it, was pulled up through the open door and deposited on the ground beside the car. A wisp of blue smoke was coming from the engine compartment, and Varan noted it absently.

He was surrounded by a group of perhaps a dozen Procyon natives, all heavily armed. This he couldn't understand; he was certain he would have known if there had been bandit gangs roaming the hills. Then he noticed that the weapons they carried were the standard issue of the Protectors of the Peace, in both Sheplin and Mekar.

His captors eyed him with obvious hostility as one of them bound his hands behind him, saying nothing.

"What is this all..." he started.

His question was cut off as the apparent leader of the group stepped forward and caught him across the face with the back of his fist. Varan tasted a trickle of blood on his lips, warm and salty.

The leader stepped back a pace and watched him hungrily, waiting for him to speak again. Varan did not. Finally the blue man unclenched his fist and muttered, "You have a chance to talk soon."

VARAN WAS roughly trundled into a Procy groundcar which had driven up to the side of the road after the explosion. They took off into the hills, the driver apparently following a familiar, but unmarked, pass. As they mounted the first rise, Varan glanced back and saw a crew beginning to remove the wreck of the Terran car from the center of the road. It was a well-organized party, whatever their purpose.

No more information was volunteered. For perhaps an hour they wound through the hills, finally coming upon another paved roadway which Varan did not recognize. The driver turned the groundcar onto the paving and picked up speed. Soon the tires were shrilling loudly in protest.

The Procyon primary was just below the horizon when they reached Sheplin. The first false dawn was in the sky ahead, and the squat, blocky buildings of the city were silhouetted against the yellow glow. A few tall spires reared above them, signalling the presence of a Temple of the Two Moons.

Entering the city, the groundcar slowed to a more

reasonable pace. Soon they were lost in the unplanned maze of streets around the periphery. They stopped before a gray cube of a building, not noticeably any different from the other around it. Apparently they were in a warehouse district, for most of the buildings had doors that opened along their whole length, with loading ramps projecting into the street. It was still too early for any activity.

"Geddout," the leader said in guttural Terran, shoving Varan from behind.

THEY ENTERED the warehouse and ascended a flight of light-metal stairs leading to a balcony that surrounded the single huge room. A series of doors was set off the balcony, presumably leading into offices, and into one of these Varan was shoved.

The door closed behind him, and he found himself across the room from the squat, powerful Lenyadi. Flanking him were two mean-looking Procys, both with heavy handweapons thrust in their belts. They wore the uniform of Protectors of the Peace.

Lenyadi glared at him in silence before speaking.

"So," he said. "So. The Terran Captain makes a midnight trip to MekarCity, eh? And what would that be for?"

"If this is an act of aggres-

sion against the Terran Government..."

"Let us not play any more games, Captain. What is your purpose on Procyon?"

"To study the ecology of the planet."

"Then how does it happen you are also in the weapons business?"

"I am not."

Lenyadi sighed, sounding disappointed. "Captain Varan, please use your reason. Would you be here now if I didn't know you were the one who offered to sell me the—what did you call it—rocket launcher earlier? How naive do you think we are, Captain?"

Nikko Varan said nothing, waiting to see what the point was to be. Lenyadi was right, he had underestimated either the skill or the suspicion of these people.

"Why were you going to Mekar City?" Lenyadi snapped.

"On official business of the Terran Ecological Service."

"And was your proposed transaction with Sheplin also official business?"

Varan hesitated momentarily. "No," he said. "That was—personal."

"So. Under the guise of an ecological survey, you are an arms bootlegger."

VARAN SHRUGGED. "The way they pay us, a man has to do something to make a little money."

"And how do you manage to hide arms on your ship without arousing the suspicion of your superiors?"

"I didn't offer to sell you arms," Varan pointed out. "Only the plans from which the arms could be made. It's not difficult to manage a sheaf of papers."

Lenyadi inclined his head at one of the Protectors of the Peace standing beside him. The man moved forward.

"You are lying," Lenyadi said to Varan.

"I'm not."

Lenyadi nodded his head, and the Procy guardsman threw his fist into Varan's body following with all the weight of his own frame.

Varan doubled over in pain, gasping for breath, and the guardsman stepped back.

"You are lying," came Lenyadi's expressionless voice.

"No," Varan gasped.

AGAIN THE guardsman slammed him back against the wall, following it with a stiff handed blow at the side of the neck. Varan crumpled to the floor, his bound arms twisted painfully beside him. The guard grasped him by the collar, pulled him erect. He leaned back against the wall for support.

"I don't know what you expect to accomplish by beating me up," Varan said.

"Information," Lenyadi spat. "You take me for a fool, Captain. If you were operat-

ing independently, you could not possibly have arranged such an elaborate meeting as the one at the castle. Hit him," he said to the guard. Blood began to flow from Varan's nose again.

"Do you know what I think, Captain?" Lenyadi's voice came faintly through the red haze that surrounded him. "I think you are working with the full knowledge of your government. I want to know why."

Numbly, he shook his head. "No. Couldn't—popular opinion..."

"Hit him."

It was the last thing he heard. An explosive charge went off in his head, filling it with darkness. Just before he blacked out completely, Varan felt the cool texture of wood on his cheek. *I must be lying down*, he thought vaguely, wondering how it had happened.

III

WHEN HE awoke, and climbed unsteadily to his feet, the first thing of which Nikko Varan was aware was a massive headache. He clenched his eyes against the pain and raised one unsteady hand to his forehead. Then he realized his hands were no longer bound. He opened his eyes and stared around him in the dim light.

He was in a small room—

cell, he corrected himself silently—perhaps seven feet on a side. There was a door in one wall, with a peep-hole that admitted some light from outside. Squinting through the hole, he saw that the wall opposite his door was blank. It was not large enough to give him much range of vision, and that was all he could tell. It was brightly lit outside—probably a corridor with cells leading off it.

Returning his attention to his cell, Nikko Varan saw a plate piled with a gummy mass of what apparently passed for Procyon-prisoner food. It was just in front of the door, a little to one side. Examining the door with his fingertips, he found a closed slot near the bottom, through which the food had been passed. It did not respond to his push—locked, somehow, from outside. Otherwise the cell was bare. No cot, no furniture of any kind, no sanitary facilities.

He could not tell how long he had been unconscious.

He was hungry, and sniffed suspiciously at the pile of food on the plate. Gingerly he tasted it, preparing himself for the traditional foul mess. Actually it was not bad at all, with a flavor somewhere between chalk and weak chicken soup. He finished it and sat back against the wall.

He waited.

When he estimated several hours had gone by and no one

appeared, he got to his feet and went over to the door.

Putting his mouth to the peep-hole he shouted, "Hey! Guard!"

THERE WAS no answer, and he repeated it, louder this time.

After several minutes of silence he heard footsteps coming from off to one side. He put his eye to the hole, trying to catch a glimpse of his captor.

Suddenly another eye appeared at the hole, less than an inch from his own. It widened in surprise and disappeared abruptly.

"Get back on the other side," came a voice, obviously irritated.

Nikko Varan moved back, inordinately amused by the guard's discomfiture.

There was a sound of clickings and fumbings on the other side of the door, and the slot near the bottom opened.

"Put the plate through," the guard said.

"How can I, from over here?" Varan asked reasonably.

"Come over to the door then," the guard snapped. "Just don't try anything."

Varan shoved the plate through the slot, heard it drop to the floor on the other side. Then he heard the guard pick it up, and start off down the hall. "Hey, wait!" he

called. "What about me? How do I go to the bathroom?"

The guard chuckled maliciously. "If you don't know by now, I can't tell you, Terran. Don't they teach you anything?" He laughed uproariously, hugely pleased by his own wit.

"You're a real card," Varan muttered.

"We might let you go in—oh, maybe three, four hours," said the guard. "That all right with you, Terran?"

"I guess it'll have to be," Varan said. "What am I in here for?"

"That's not my problem," came the guard's retreating voice.

Varan sat back against the wall and waited again.

BY HIS calculation it was less than two hours when the guard came back to escort him to the dingy latrine at the end of the hall. He caught his first glimpse of the world outside his cell, and it confirmed his earlier thoughts.

His cell was one of many along the hall, identical doors with their peep-holes and slits. At one end of the hall was the latrine, at the other he could see the beginning of a flight of stairs. There was no sound but the rap of their footsteps.

"Where are the other prisoners," he asked, on their way back.

"You're him," the guard said. "This place hasn't been

used for thirty years, maybe longer. Get in," he added, opening the door.

"Wait a minute. Who do I talk to about getting out?"

The guard laughed again. "Me," he said with obvious amusement. "And I'm deaf. Get in."

Back in the cell, Varan considered the dismal prospect of an endless succession of days there. It didn't seem likely. If there were no other prisoners, then the guard's time was devoted to him alone. No society seemed likely to waste one man's entire time on a single prisoner. No, there was bound to be a change, eventually.

When his wall had fifteen day-scratches on it, he began to wonder.

HE HAD NO idea what lay above the stairs at the end of the hall. For all he knew, it might open directly into the headquarters of the Protectors of the Peace. But after two weeks of the isolation and boredom of the cell, any activity seemed better than simply waiting for something that never happened.

He had begun to make plans for overpowering the guard during the twice-daily latrine walk. He began to watch carefully, seeing if there was a pattern to his activities that might be used against him.

Then, during the fifteenth day, the guard came to his cell off regular schedule. "Get

over against the wall," he grumbled, as he did every time.

Nikko Varan moved back, and the guard unlocked the heavy door.

"Come on," the guard said.

"Where?"

"Come on," the guard repeated non-committally. "Somebody wants a talk to you."

"Who?"

"You'll see. Get out of there."

They mounted the stairs and came out on the ground floor of a warehouse. It looked like the same one where he had had his "interview" with Lenyadi, but Varan couldn't be sure.

That it was the same was confirmed when they reached the balcony, and the guard pushed him through a door into the same office. Lenyadi was there, looking exactly as he had fifteen days before, except perhaps a little happier.

"Well, Captain Varan, have you been enjoying our hospitality?"

"Not much."

"Still pig-headed, I see. That is the Terran expression, is it not? Pig-headed? Yes." Lenyadi clasped his hands on the desk with satisfaction.

"All right," said Varan. "What's this all about?"

LENYADI looked surprised. "Why, Captain, nothing!

You've simply been the honored guest of Sheplin for a short while. Until certain—arrangements had been completed."

"What arrangements?"

"Captain," said Lenyadi sadly. "I believe your memory has suffered. The arrangements you yourself proposed to me, some time ago."

"The rocket launcher."

"That's right, Captain, the rocket launcher. Your—shall we say representative?—contacted me after one five-day, as agreed. All painted blue, too."

That would have been Bentley, Varan thought.

"So?" he asked.

"We came to an agreement; we bought the plans from him; and have had factories going night and day for the past two five-days, building."

"And if you intended going through with the arrangement, why was I held a prisoner?"

"Obviously, since you were headed toward Mekar when my men—found you, you intended something in the way of a betrayal. A warning, perhaps. Another weapon sale. I don't know. But it seemed better to know where you were, until we were prepared."

"And now you're prepared."

"More than prepared. We attacked Mekar last night."

SO, IT HAD started, Varan thought. According to schedule. But if Mekar were

wiped out easily, the war would have served no purpose. In order to fulfill the TES plan, *both* Mekar and Sheplin would have to be vitiated.

Varan shuddered. It was one thing for thousands of people to die for the ultimate good of the planet; it was another to have them sacrificed without point. If Sheplin won this war without breaking themselves in expenditure, the whole thing was ruined.

And Captain Nikko Varan would have the blood of all the slaughtered Mekarans on his hands, needlessly. It was not a pleasant thought. He became aware that Lenyadi was still speaking.

"...but it still hasn't been explained to my satisfaction just what part the Terran Government is playing in this." Suddenly his voice, which had been genial, hardened. "I mean to find out, Captain. From you. I have been occupied with the preparations for war until now. But I mean to find out."

"I've told you," Varan said. "The Terran Government knows nothing about my activities here." Which, very literally, was true—but misleading.

"You're lying again," said Lenyadi flatly, and Varan had a swift picture of the relentless working over he had received from the Procy guardsman before.

Lenyadi had been leaning

forward over the desk as he spoke. Now he leaned back, relaxed, and his voice became almost conversational again. "We've taken the castle where you and I first met as a command post," Lenyadi said. "We'll go there. Perhaps you will be a little more cooperative under more—intensive questioning."

THEY LEFT the warehouse, and Varan blinked uncomfortably against the strong daylight. His weeks in the dark of the cell had weakened his resistance to bright light, and he found his eyes watering painfully.

Though it was the middle of the morning, the Sheplin city was grimly quiet. Small knots of people were on the streets, and they looked up without curiosity as the car in which he rode whizzed past. Once they passed a long column of armored trucks heading toward the city gates, and Varan noted they were all mounted with rocket launchers built from the plans he—or TES—had provided. From the quantity, Lenyadi had not been exaggerating when he said the factories had been working day and night. It was still amazing that they had been able to accomplish so much in such a short time, a testimony to the high technological level the city-states had achieved.

Strange, Varan mused. It was the technology of Pro-

cyon V that the TES was attacking, and that technology made possible its own downfall. With luck, he reserved to himself. If, and only if, the Mekaran people could find an adequate way to defend themselves.

Ideally, he supposed, it might be possible to lower the standard of living of a culture without loss of life. Practically, he had never known it to happen. And yet, when he was receiving his training as a Team Captain, there had never been any mention of human beings dying, blue-skinned or otherwise.

Graphs and charts and theory and the complex mathematical formulations that governed TES operation—his training had been in terms of these abstract quantities. Not the rolling blast of rockets landing in a residential area; not the screams of the dying and the mutilated; not the shredded flesh and shattered bone and flattened cities that shouted "War!"

War was a sub-class on a chart labeled "Regulatory Mechanisms."

THE FOUNDATIONS for TES had been laid seven centuries before, in the middle of the twentieth century. Even in those days, before man had even reached the planets of his own system, some few had begun to look upon mankind as a member of an ecological community. In

the first years, the emphasis had been upon his destruction and alteration of the natural communities in which he found himself. Then, gradually, it had come to be realized that man himself formed an ecosystem, subject to the same natural laws of development and selection that governed any other group of ecologically inter-related organisms.

And in the broad pattern of development, War served; its function in the ecology of man went far beyond the obvious control it exerted over overpopulation. In a paradoxical way, Nikko Varan thought, War made it possible for man to survive...

But the cruel, physical fact of death was made no more pleasant by that knowledge. It was no wonder so many TES Captains cracked; the weight of responsibility rested heavy on their shoulders...

IV

THE GROUND CAR had left the Sheplin city now and was speeding along the open road. Periodically they passed lines of rocket-carrying trucks moving in the same direction, toward Mekar.

Finally they came into sight of the gray stone castle that now served as a Sheplin command post.

Nikko Varan wondered

briefly if his men would be looking for him, and decided not. He was on his own, now. They had not expected to hear from him while he was in Mekar City, and they knew he would be there until after the first attack. When he did not return to the ship after the attack, they would wait a reasonable time, and then lift. For the sake of one man—even the Captain of the Team—they could not afford to risk the ship in a national war. They would regretfully enter his name on the list of Team Captains killed on duty, but he could expect no help from them.

Which meant he was stranded on Procyon V for the rest of his life, however long that might be, since TES itself could hardly claim responsibility for a man who had given a city the weapons to wage war against another city.

Hazard of the trade, he thought. If you made a mistake, it was on you. Nobody knew you, officially.

One thing he could do. Try to see that the war between Sheplin and Mekar wasn't entirely a waste of life...

ABRUPTLY, Varan slumped forward in the seat, banging his head against the instrument panel. Startled, the guard in the seat behind him leaned forward, ready for trouble.

"What's wrong?" Lenyadi

demanded. "What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know," said the guard dubiously. "He just fell over."

"Well, find out," Lenyadi snapped, leaning forward to look.

The guard grasped Varan's shoulder and shook him.

"Hey, what the matter? You sick?"

Varan made a gurgling sound in his throat.

"I think he's sick," the guard said plaintively, as if disclaiming all responsibility. He leaned farther over the front seat, reaching out his hand to lift Varan's eyelid.

Suddenly Varan's elbow came up and back, connecting solidly with the guard's jaw; howling with pain, the man fell back. Varan twisted quickly, following through the punch with his elbow and grabbed the butt of the hand-weapon as the guard fell.

"All right," he said, pointing the muzzle at the driver. "Keep your speed up. Past the castle and up into the hills. The second you slack up, you better start looking for a new head."

The driver said nothing, but darted quick glances at the gun muzzle out of the corner of his eye.

"You won't make it," said Lenyadi from the back seat.

Varan was turned sideways, keeping his eyes on both the back seat and the driver. "I don't think you'll call any-

body from the castle," he said. "I suspect you're too fond of your health."

"You won't make it," Lenyadi repeated, but there was little conviction in his voice.

The groundcar came closer to the dull gray building.

"I mean it," said Varan, his voice low. "Slow down the smallest fraction and you're dead."

THE DRIVER kept his speed up. They were hailed at the first guard station on the road. Glancing back when they had passed, Varan saw the guard standing in the middle of the road, indecisively, scratching his head.

"Your guards aren't too alert," he grinned at Lenyadi.

Lenyadi shrugged.

He's a good actor, Varan thought. Silently, he debated carrying Lenyadi into Mekar with him, and turning him over to the Mekaran government. But as far as he could see, Lenyadi was almost entirely in charge of the war. On Sheplin's side, at any rate, it seemed to be organized around the single figure of the squat politician. It was possible that the whole thing would collapse without Lenyadi's guiding hand; whatever else the man might be, he would have to be a strong leader in order to mobilize an army on such short notice. No, it seemed that Lenyadi was necessary.

"When you get around the next bend," Varan said to the driver, "Stop the car and get out."

Silently, the driver did so.

"All right, Lenyadi; you and your bully boy out, too."

"What are you going to do?"

"My business. For the moment, be glad I'm leaving you alive." Walk back down the road."

WHEN THE three had gone perhaps a hundred yards, Varan swung behind the wheel and sent the ground car hurtling along the road again. He kept the turbine whining and screaming, even around the turns. The tires shrieked their protest, and several times he felt only an uneasy balance as he rounded a sharp corner, but he did not let up.

The miles rolled away behind him, relentlessly.

He stopped only once, pulling beneath a grove of trees when he caught a glimpse of a low flying aircar behind him. From his concealed vantage point he watched it fly past, noting the jury-rigged rocket racks hung beneath its stubby wings.

He stayed concealed until the plane came back, a few short minutes later. They were too close to Mekar, he thought. The pilot didn't want to risk losing his plane to Mekar fire. When the aircar had buzzed back over the

hill in the direction of Sheplin, Nikko Varan put his car back on the road, and soon was in sight of the besieged MekarCity.

It was built along roughly the same lines as the Sheplin city, squat gray buildings surrounded by a not-very-formidable wall. The Procyon natives had never developed an art form out of architecture, seeming perfectly content with the cubical structures that made up the city. Varan thought absently he might look into that facet of the culture some time, before remembering that the culture would not be the same after this war.

Not the same at all.

THERE WERE several large gaps in the city wall, where the first Shep'in barrage had penetrated, and there seemed to be a furious activity around these gaps, probably repair work. He noted with interest that the unwieldy, solid-projectile cannon were all directed toward the eastern plain, facing Sheplin. Probably the Mekarans expected a land attack sometime that night.

The city itself was set in a roughly cup-shaped plain, and Varan could see no way to cross that flat land without being seen. He decided to wait for nightfall, and try to make his way in either through one of the rocket gaps or through a gate on the other side. Probably the gates

would be heavily guarded on all sides, and he decided one of the explosion-caused holes would be the most likely possibility.

He drove the little ground-car off the road, as far up into the hill as he could go. Finally it refused to go any farther, its wheels spinning uselessly in the loose underbrush. He settled down to wait for night to come. He drowsed, waiting.

HE WAS WAKENED with a start by the sound of heavy, rolling fire from the city's defending cannon. Climbing to the top of the hill in the dusk, he saw the muzzle flashes standing out brightly against the dark walls.

Thin, luminous rocket trails were arcing over the walls, landing within the city in a series of dull crump! crump! crump! sounds. A steady rhythm of explosions came to him across the plain. With his eyes he followed the rocket trails back to their source.

Beta was just rising, the smoky red light casting long, erratic shadows. Vaguely illumined by the red moon, lines of rocket-carrying trucks wove in and out in an endlessly-shifting, sinuous pattern. They were coming up in a long line from somewhere to the rear. When they reached the front line, they turned broadside to the city

and fired the multiple banks of rockets while still moving, presenting a difficult target for the clumsily-aimed cannon on the walls. Nikko Varan had a moment of brief admiration for Lenyadi's tactics.

Gradually the front line of rocket trucks moved closer to the city, emboldened by their light losses.

If he could get into the city, reach some voice in the Mekarans government, he might still be able to even the battle up, simply by his greater knowledge of military strategy.

Panting, he made his way down the rocky, brushy hill, and stopped at the edge of the circular plain, to the south of the city.

The wall was still nearly a half mile away, over totally coverless ground. If someone on the walls spotted him running across the plain, he would be finished. Once inside the city, his white, Ter-ran face would be enough protection.

Unless, he thought bitterly, the Mekarans knew where the Sheplin armies had gotten the rocket launchers. It was a chance he had to take.

STEELING himself for the fire that might come at any minute, he began to run low across the plain. His feet pounded the dry ground; and after a few hundred yards, his breath was already coming in short, harsh gasps.

There was no fire from the city walls, apparently all their attention was directed to the east and the lines of rocket-launching trucks in their snake dance. Nikko Varan reached the wall and lay still against it, regaining his breath. Then he began to inch his way along in the dusky red light toward the gap nearest him. Attaining it, he scrambled hastily over the rubble that still cluttered it, and was in MekarCity.

Inside the walls, the city was a vision out of a nightmare. Flames leaped up all around, casting crazily-dancing shadows. Above him, on the walls, the cannon added their heavy thumping to the din that suddenly surrounded him. The red light of Beta made the whole scene appear as if drenched in blood.

There was surprisingly little panic. Knots of people ran past him, shouting, but not in fear. Groups of medical workers were tending to the wounded; long lines of men were passing shells for the cannon down the narrow streets.

Several times, as he began picking his way toward the central Government Dome, people turned to stare curiously at his white face, but none showed malice. Apparently they had not heard that the Terrans had armed the Sheplin enemy.

He was astonished at the ordered discipline of the Pro-

cyon natives; they had been taken completely by surprise, but had rallied incredibly well. He doubted that they could have done much better, even if they had been warned. They seemed prepared and organized more than he could possibly have predicted.

AS HE DREW nearer the Central Dome, the din around Varan abated slightly. The fires were less frequent now, which made no more sense to him than the organization of the people. From the hill, he had seen the rockets fall directly into the center of the city, seen their flashes and heard the echo of the explosions rolling faintly across the plain.

There was a brilliant flash above him, and Nikko Varan instinctively dropped flat. The roar that came to him was thunderous, but there was no concussion.

Looking incredulously up, he saw the last light fade from the rocket explosion. It had been headed directly for the Central Dome, and it had been stopped in mid-flight, and exploded.

Unbelieving, Varan knew there was only one explanation. There was a Dyer Screen over the center of the city. A small one, probably, since its field did not extend as far as the walls.

A Screen of the size carried on TES ships.

He scrambled to his feet

and started running again. As he rounded the next corner, he ran headlong into another figure.

"Captain!" said the familiar voice of Lieutenant Benley, "Where you been? Lord—you look like hell; here, let me help you."

"No, I'm all right," Varan snapped. "What's going on here? There's a Dyer Screen operating."

"Couldn't think of anything else on short notice, Captain. The Merakans had to have some kind of defense against the rockets. We took the screen off the ship. Where you been?" he repeated.

"Our friend Lenyadi had some foolish notion I might be trying to trick him, so he locked me up."

"**F**IGURED AS much," said the Lieutenant shortly. "Listen, let's get back to the Dome; we can contact the ship from there." He turned and began to trot down the street, and Varan followed him.

"How'd you know anything was wrong?" Varan panted. "You didn't expect me back before the attack anyway."

"A hunch," said Benley. "Kind of funny, when you think about it. You remember you told me the Sheplins would try to cheat on the lead weight? They didn't; they handed it over smiling. Also, Lenyadi didn't ask for any guarantee that the rockets

would work. A lot of little things that didn't mean much, but they just struck me wrong."

They reached the Central Dome, and the Radar-Sergeant came dashing down the steps.

"Contact the ship," Benley said. "Bring it in on the west side of the city, opposite the rockets."

"Yes, sir!" said the Sergeant. "We getting out of here?"

"Yes."

"That don't hurt my feelings any," he said happily. He turned and ran back up the stairs into the Dome. Varan and Benley followed, more slowly.

"So I came into the city to see you," Benley continued, "and found out you hadn't even been here. We figured something had gone wrong, and started organizing the people for the attack." He shrugged. "It came, right on schedule."

"Yeah," said Varan, "Lenyadi didn't miss a bet. How much damage is there?"

"It's not as bad as it looks," Benley said. "Mostly around the walls."

"Think they'll be able to hold out?"

"Yes, sir," said Benley. "They're already preparing counter-attacks on Sheplin. They'll hold. It looks like a long war, Captain."

"Good," Varan said. "Our

job's done, then. Let's get out of here."

THE TES SHIP lifted shortly before dawn, with a full complement. There had been no losses to TES personnel.

"Not even the goddam Captain," grumbled the Radar Sergeant, loudly enough for Nikko Varan to hear easily. "Seems like we could do better than that."

"Maybe you'll have better luck next trip, Sergeant," Varan said.

"Maybe, sir," said the Sergeant, dubiously. "I doubt it; you got a charmed life."

"Nobody has, in this business," said the Captain. "Suppose you go get me some coffee, will you?"

Varan sank into the deep couch of the Lounge gratefully. "You know," he said to Benley, "I haven't had a bath since this thing started."

"I know, sir," said Benley seriously. "I can smell you from here."

"You don't have to agree so damn fast," grumbled Varan. He sat for a long moment, lost in thought.

"I wonder if we'll ever get past that stage, Lieutenant," he said quietly.

"What stage, Captain?"

Varan gestured to the planet they had just left. "War. Violence. Sometimes I wonder if we take too much into our hands."

"I DON'T think so, Captain. If I did, I couldn't live with myself. In a sense, we don't do anything that wouldn't be done anyway. We just try to do it at the right time, that's all."

"I know. I'm tired. But it all looks different when you're dealing with living, dying people, instead of math."

"It works, Captain. That's the justification; it works."

"I know. Lieutenant, would you leave me alone for a little while?"

"Certainly, Captain. Call if you want anything."

I want something, all right, thought Varan bitterly. A little certainty is what I want. Maybe seven hundred years wasn't long enough to be sure. When you deal with the fates of whole races, you want to be sure, awfully sure.

But Benley was right, of course; it did work. Man, like all other creatures living in cooperation, was subject to natural laws of regulation.

Laws which operated to insure the constant forward movement of the ecosystem. In many ways, Varan realized, an ecosystem could be considered an entity in itself, composed of individuals as the individual is composed of cells.

AND IN any organism, the regulatory mechanisms are always at work. Any change in the environment of

an organism cause them to come into play. With the individual it was simpler. Too much heat, and the sweat glands came into play; too much CO₂ in the bloodstream, and the respiratory muscles are stimulated. Any organism maintained its existence in a fluctuating environment, through the ceaseless activity of the regulatory mechanisms natural to it. Cultures, too, had their means of regulating themselves; as unconsciously as the human body adapts to change, so does an ecosystem.

Just as men began to realize this, in the middle of the twentieth century, they had come to realize the danger of a technology so high that the individual member cannot cope with it. They found that this danger, like excess heat, had its own natural regulations.

When a culture becomes too complex for its inhabitants to adjust to, it is cut back to manageable size. The number of elements are reduced to a point where the individual can once again handle them. Very simply, the ecological purpose of War is to reduce the standard of living. If that standard became too high before the culture was ready for it, the individual could no longer cope with the simple physical facts of existence; the pattern that emerged then was not pleasant. It had happened once on Terra, even before space-

flight, in a country called America, which Nikko Varan knew only vaguely.

A WAR HAD been fought, a huge war, but it had failed to lower the standard of living in that country, noticeably, for the first time in history. Instead of halting, for a moment of breath in the relentless movement toward mechanization, they had gone onward unchecked. The technology had become too complex, too fast—too bulky for the individual to control. And he had responded by mechanizing himself, forcing himself into rigid behavior patterns, simply in order to deal with the incredibly complex society he had forced on himself.

The individual spent the greater part of his energies in adapting to the complexity of his culture. It was not a condition that favored the growth of the human individual. And the welfare of the ecosystem called Man depended on the growth of its members, as do all ecosystems.

Varan sighed.

That was what he had been sent to prevent on Procyon V. The war between Mekar and Sheplin would deplete both their resources; eventually, both would be forced back to a simpler mode of living. Then would begin the long struggle to build back up again. It would take long; but in that time, the social devel-

opment of the people would grow, too. And if technology outpaced social development again in the future—it would be cut back again, one way or another. War, or something else—but it would come.

VARAN THOUGHT bitterly of the individuals who must die, in order that other individuals might grow into maturity. The laws of nature were not kind. At least TES could mediate a little, see that the wars were fought at the right time, and with weapons which would not destroy the planet.

That much they could do, but no more. The laws of an ecology are not ruthless, either, but they are implacable. One way or another, it would happen; and the only thing man could do was try

to nudge it a little, one way or the other.

Varan turned his thoughts away from the rubble-laden streets of MekarCity, and saw the sergeant standing in the doorway, watching him silently.

"You 'brought the coffee, Sergeant? Thanks."

"Yes, sir. You looked—pre-occupied, so I didn't bother you."

"Yes. Yes, I guess I was, Sergeant."

"Do you mind if I ask what you were thinking, sir?"

"Just wondering, Sergeant; just wondering where we're going to play God tomorrow."

"God, sir?"

"Never mind, Sergeant. A passing thought, that's all. Just working out a little problem in ecology of my own."

