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Illustrating *Sunfire*

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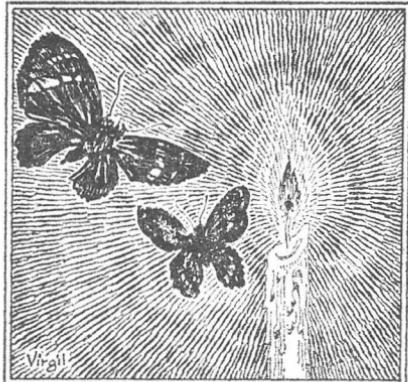
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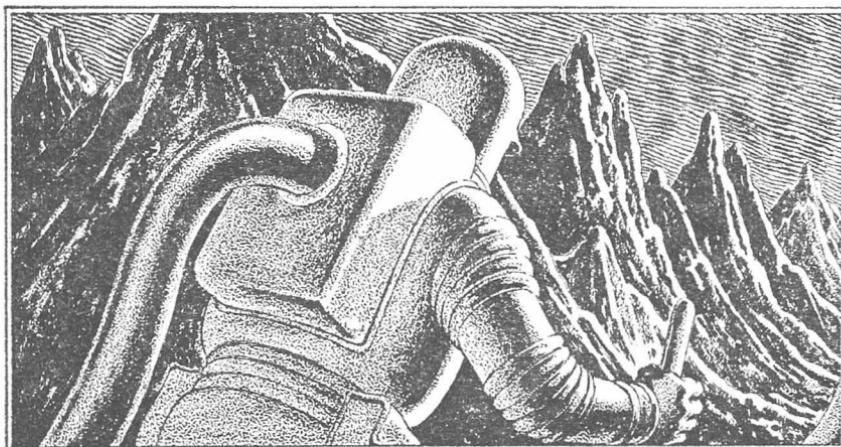


*He was walking in the pine
grove, with the resinous smell
of the trees in his nostrils. Once
he had met a smell vaguely
like it, far away from Earth.
Forget about that, a voice said
in his mind, but he would
never forget.*

SUNFIRE!

By EDMOND HAMILTON

Illustrated by FINLAY



EVERYTHING in the old house seemed just the same as it had been before he went to space.

It was incredible, thought Hugh Kellard, standing in the front hall and looking around the silent, sunlit rooms, how little it had changed. The life was gone out of it now, all the people and voices and the comings and goings when his grandfather still lived and he had visited here. But that had been long ago, and he was amazed that so much remained still untouched.

"Like travelling into the past," thought Kellard, "to come back to this part of Earth."

He was tired, in body and mind and nerve, and he stood for a while, just staring. The agent who cared for the old



place had let him in and gone away, and there was not a sound in the house. He walked into the living-room where his grandfather's desk still stood beneath a window, and looked out. The window faced northward, along the California coastal cliffs that run north along Morro Bay to Big Sur. The Pacific foamed and surged against the huge broken stones beneath the cliffs, and the hills, somber now with a tinge of autumn, shouldered massively up toward the east from the cliff road. It all looked as lonely as ever, no other houses in sight but this gray, weatherbeaten house that had faced the sea-wind and the sea-fog for over a hundred years.

Kellard walked back along the hall. On its walls still hung the ornately framed family photographs which his grandfather had stubbornly kept in place. His great-grandfather, and his great-aunt something, and all the rest of them, on back into the shadows. They were all there, they had not been touched, nothing in the house had been touched, just as his grandfather's will had enjoined. Keep the old house, he had said. Some of the family will be back some day.

The old man had been right, he thought. One of the family had come back at last, one who had roamed farther than almost anybody on Earth.

"But that's all done with," he told himself. "Here I am, and here I stay. I'm through with space."

HE started through the rooms, opening windows, letting in light and air. The furniture was faded and old-fashioned, but the place was not dusty, the agent had seen that it was kept in shape. Kellard picked one of the big upstairs bedrooms for himself, and brought in the blankets and cartons and luggage from the car. He went into the utility room and turned on the power-unit, remembering as he did so how his grandfather had disliked and distrusted the unit, how he had refused to have one until the electric wires were all gone and there was no other way to get power. He checked the stove and freezer, shoved his cartons of food into the latter, and then looked around and wondered what to do next.

Standing in the silent house, he wondered suddenly if he had been foolish to quit everything and come back to Earth and this old place?

No, he thought heavily. Mercury ended it for me. I made my decision and that is that. Forget it.

He strode abruptly out of the house and started walking. And after a little while the dark weight in his mind, the somber knowledge, faded and receded in

the new-found, old-remembered interest of the things about him.

His way took him across the road, past the shabby barns and up sloping pastures where once his grandfather had kept the fine horses he bred. Then he was in among the pines, climbing more steeply, with the resinous smell of the trees strong in his nostrils. That smell he had never forgotten, and once he had met a smell vaguely like it, far away from Earth—

Forget all that, Kellard.

The trees took him in and he walked through a dapple of sun and shadows. A deer slipped away through the pines ahead of him, and quail burst up from almost under his feet. He remembered a grove of bigger pines farther up the slope, and an old man and a boy walking up to them. How long ago was that? He had been fifteen—and he was thirty-two now. Seventeen years. Still, he thought he could find the place.

He found it. The big pines were still there, for people did not use wood much any more. The rough dark giants stood at dignified intervals from each other, and he sat down with his back against the massive trunk of the biggest.

Funny, he thought. When I was a boy sitting here dreaming about the future and what I was going to do, I never once imagined that some things would

stay much the same. The whole world would somehow be miraculously transformed—but it wasn't. This tree was here when men first reached the Moon, and Mars, and Venus and the rest, but it didn't know about that, it didn't change because of it.

KELLARD sat for a long time, still wrapped in a gray weariness, his emotions in a numb trance. He sat listening to the distant, uneasy murmur of the sea, until the sunset light shafting through the trees dazzled his eyes, and then he got up and went back down to the house. He heated food, ate it, and then went out to the porch in front of the house and sat watching the sun sink toward the vast golden sheet of the Pacific. He thought of the little dot close to the sun that he could not see, the little world and the strange, terrible place upon it where Morse and Binetti had died.

The telephone rang.

Kellard did not stir, and it rang and rang again.

Go ahead and ring your head off, he thought. You're not getting me back. I told you. I've had it.

The ringing stopped. The sun sank and darkness came with the hosts of wheeling stars, and there was no sound but the vast voices rolling in from sea, as Kellard sat staring and drinking.

He finally got up, as the fog started coming in. He moved with gravity, feeling much better. He went in and turned on the lights, and then looked at the faces that stared from the long row of framed photographs.

He raised the bottle to them in a gesture of salutation.

"You see, Kellards, that your prodigal son—or great-grandson—has come home again from space."

He gravely drank, and continued to stand looking along the faded faces.

"You were lucky—you know that? Back in your time, there were hopes, and dreams, and man's road would go on forever, from triumph to triumph everlasting. But that road was a blind alley, all the time, even if I'm the only one who knows it."

The faces looked back at him, unchanging, but he read reprobation in their steady gaze, their lined features.

"I'm sorry," said Kellard. "You had your own troubles, I know. I apologize, Kellards. I am very tired and a little drunk, and I am going to bed."

THE next morning he was making coffee when there came a banging of the old-fashioned knocker on the front door. A certain tightness came into Kellard's face. He had expected them to send some one.

He had not expected the man who stood at the door. He was not in Survey uniform, although he was the highest brass there was. He was a big, slow-moving man with a heavy face and blue eyes that seemed mild if you didn't know him.

"Well," said Kellard. And after a moment, "Come on in."

Halfrich came in. He sat down and looked interestedly around at the old room and furniture.

"Nice," he murmured. Then he looked at Kellard and said, "All right, let's have it. Why did you quit?"

Kellard shrugged. "It was all in my letter of resignation. I'm getting a bit old and tired for Survey, I—"

"Bull," said Halfrich. "It was something about that crack-up on Sunside, wasn't it?"

Kellard said slowly, "Yes. The deaths of Binetti and Morse, and the after-effects of that shock, made me feel I didn't have it any more."

Halfrich looked at him. "You've had crack-ups before. You've seen men die. You've had almost as many years in Survey as I have, and you've taken as many jolts. You're lying, Kellard."

Kellard got up, and walked a few steps and swung around again.

"So I'm lying. I want out, and what difference does it make why?"

"It makes a difference," Halfrich said grimly. "I remember from away back at Academy, even though you were two years after me. You were the space-craziest cadet there was. You spouted the glories of the conquest of space until we were all sick of it. You haven't changed in all the years in Survey—until now. I want to know what can change a man like that."

Kellard said nothing. He went to the window and looked out at the long rollers coming endlessly in and crashing against the rocks.

"What did you see on Sunside, Kellard?"

He turned around sharply at that.

"What do you mean? What would there be to see there, but hot rocks and volcanoes and a cross-section of hell generally? It's all in my report."

Halfrich sat like a judge, and spoke like one pronouncing sentence. "You saw something, you met something there. You covered by tearing out the film of the automatic sweep-camera. Whatever it had recorded, you didn't want us to see, did you?"

Kellard came toward him and spoke angrily and rapidly. "Do you realize that we flamed out and crashed there? A crash like that can do damage. It killed Binetti and mortally injured Morse, and smashed the sweep-camera."

Halfrich nodded. "That's what

we thought, at first. But the radar-sweep had an automatic recorder too. It was something new. Binetti knew about it, as communications officer, but I guess he hadn't told you, or you'd have smashed it too. Its record shows something."

A COLD feeling came over Kellard. He had thought that he had covered everything, but he had calculated from insufficient data.

He kept his nerve. A radar record was not like a photograph, they couldn't prove much from that, they certainly couldn't guess the truth from it. They *must* not guess the truth.

He laughed mirthlessly. "A radar record made on Sunside isn't worth the paper it's on. The storms of radiation there make radar practically unreliable."

Halfrich was watching him keenly. "But not entirely. And over and above the static and the fake bogies, the record shows quite clearly that you went outside the ship after the crash, that you walked about a thousand yards, and that you were approached by some things that register vaguely but unmistakably."

He paused and then he asked, "Who—or what—did you meet there, Kellard?"

Kellard was cold inside, but all the same he made a disgusted

sound that he hoped was convincing.

"Who would I meet on Sunside? Beautiful lightly-clad maidens? After all, you know, it's only four hundred degrees Centigrade there, and practically no atmosphere, and nothing much else but solar radiation and hot rock and volcanoes. I tell you, the radar record is worthless."

Halfrich was studying him with that mild estimating look that Kellard knew well, and didn't like at all. It was the look that came into Halfrich's face when friendship didn't matter and the good of the Survey did.

"You're still lying," he said. "You met or saw something there. And it did something to you—something that made you resign. Something that's taken all the life and eagerness out of you."

"Oh, hell, be reasonable!" said Kellard angrily. "You know no kind of life can exist on Sunside. My mission was the second time even Survey has landed there. Pavlik's mission, the first, didn't see anything. Neither did I. Quit dreaming it up. Go back to Mojave and your job, and leave me be."

HALFRICH rose. "All right," he said. "I'll go back to the base. And you're going with me."

"Oh, no," said Kellard. "I'm through, quit, resigned."

"Your resignation has not been accepted," Halfrich told him. "You're still liable to Survey discipline. You'll obey orders just as you always did, or you'll go up before a court-martial."

"So that's it," said Kellard.

Halfrich nodded. "That is it. I don't like to do this. You're an old friend. But—"

"But the Survey comes first," Kellard said, between his teeth.

"The Survey," said Halfrich, "comes first. It has to. It's why we've got stations on Venus and Mars and Ganymede, not to say the Moon. It's why we'll someday be able to hit for deep space and the starworlds. And when one of my best officers suddenly goes off the deep end and won't say why, I'll damn well wring it out of him. Whatever you found on Mercury doesn't belong to you, it belongs to us, and we'll have it."

Kellard looked at him and started to say something and didn't, and then turned his back on Halfrich and looked out the window at the sea. In a low voice he said,

"Let it be, John. I'm telling you now, you'll be sorry if you don't."

There was no answer to that at all, and the silence was his answer. He turned back around.

"All right, you have a rope around my neck. I'll go back to base with you. I'll tell you not one thing more than here."

"In which case," Halfrich said,

"we'll go on out to Sunside, and you'll go right along with us."

A rage born of desperation came to Kellard. He had tried to spare people this—Halfrich, the Survey, the whole human race. But they would not let it be so. Damn them, he thought, if they must do this, they have it coming to them.

"All right," he said flatly. "I'll get my jacket. I take it that you have a flier waiting."

THE fast flier, less than an hour later, whizzed down over the gaunt mountains and across the desert, and the glitter and splendor of Mojave Base sprang up to meet them. The tall ships shone like silver, and something about them, something about the feel of the place, made you think that this bit of desert did not belong to Earth at all but was part of space, a way-station, the first way-station of all, to the stars.

That, thought Kellard, was what he had thought when he had first come here, years ago. And it had not been just a youngster's passing enthusiasm, it had deepened and strengthened through all the years of work and danger —until Sunside. And oh God, he thought, why did I have to go there, at that place, at that moment. I could have lived my whole life and done my work, all of us could have, without ever dreaming the truth.

He knew now that he had no choice. He must go back to Sunside with them. For even if he told them the truth, they would not believe, they would insist on going to see for themselves. He would keep silent, and that was all he could do now.

* * *

Four days later a Y-90 experimental cruiser, outfitted for space research and with full anti-heater equipment, took off from Mojave. Kellard had kept silent. And still silent he sat in his recoil-harness and took the jolts, and heard Halfrich grunting beside him, and viciously hoped that that he was not liking it.

Halfrich had brought along a consulting biophysicist, a keen-faced man of middle age named Morgensen, who did not look as though he was enjoying the mission either. But the three-man crew of the little Y-90 were young men in their twenties. They spoke to Halfrich and to Kellard as though they were heroes out of legend, for in the Survey twelve to fifteen years of space-missions was an age.

It was only after they had gone a long way and a long time through the sunwashed spaces that one of the three, Shay, the navigator, ventured to put a question to Kellard.

"You were with the first mission to Ganymede, sir, weren't you?"

Kellard nodded. "Yes, I was."

"Wouldn't that have been something!" said Shay. "I mean, to be the first."

"It was something," said Kellard.

"Maybe someday I——" Shay began, and broke off and then went on, "I mean, if the star-drive is perfected as soon as some people say it will be, I could maybe be one of the first ones out there? Sir?"

"You could be," said Kellard. "Someone's going to be first. The stars are waiting. All we have to do is go out there and keep going, and the stars will be ours, just like the planets here are, all ours, forever and amen."

Shay looked at him puzzled, and shuffled, and then went away. Halfrich had been listening, and watching. He said, "Did you have to slap the kid's face?"

Kellard shrugged. "What did I say? I was merely repeating what everyone feels, these days. The glory of the conquest of space."

"I'd give a lot," Halfrich said, "to know what's riding you. We'll soon reach Sunside and we'll find out, but I wish you'd tell me now."

"All right," said Kellard. "I'll tell you. I've been disinherited. That's what's wrong with me."

HE would say nothing more, nor did Halfrich ask him another question, until the Y-90 was

far in past the orbit of Venus and going into its pattern of approach.

"I assume," said Halfrich, "that you bear none of us any personal ill-will. If there is anything dangerous awaiting us, now would be the time to tell us."

Kellard considered. "You're going to land, I suppose, at the same spot where we crashed."

"Of course."

"Then land, said Kellard. "As far as I know, there is not a thing there to harm you."

In the scanner, he watched Mercury swing slowly toward them, a tiny crescent of white that was hard to see against the Sun. For here the Sun was a monster thing, fringed with writhing flames, paling the stars, drenching this whole area with radiation that already would have killed them but for the ship's anti-heaters.

Kellard remembered that when he had come this way before, Binetti had quoted something, a line from William Blake's poems, he had said. "*The desire of the moth for the star.*" And that was what we were, he thought. Three little moths, going right into the furnace, and I was the only one to get out of it, but now I'm going back.

The Y-90 went into its landing pattern. It skimmed over the dark side of Mercury, the black cliffs and peaks and chasms that never

saw the Sun, and then light seemed to burst ragingly up from all the horizon ahead of them, and they were over Sunside.

In old days this little world had been called "the moon of the Sun," and it looked like it, the same stark, lifeless rock plains and ridges and cracks, the fang-like look of pinnacles in a place where no atmosphere eroded anything. But the Moon was cold and still, whereas Sunside seemed to throb with sullen hidden fires. Volcanoes spewed ash and lava, and the infernal storm of radiation from overhead made everything quiver in a shimmering haze. The indicator board told them that the temperature of the outside hull was climbing to four hundred as the Y-90 went down.

And the wide valley that haunted his dreams opened up ahead.

Across it the squat volcanic cones still dribbled ash and dust and it was all just as it had been when he had last looked back from the relief cruiser that had come from Venus Station to take him off. And there gleamed bright on its floor the crumpled wreck in which Binetti and then Morse had died.

Kellard's gaze flew to the place north of the wreck, the tumbled, odd-shaped rocks. He felt his palms sweating. Maybe there would be nothing. After all, could it all happen again?

They set down, and after the crashing rocket uproar, the steady throb of the anti-heaters was an anti-climactic sound.

"You've got the armor ready?" Halfrich asked of Morgenson.

The biophysicist nodded nervously. "Three suits, with their anti-heater equipment tested on and off all the way out."

"One suit stays here, for emergencies," Halfrich said. "Kellard and I will go out, when there's something to go out for. First, we'll make observations."

THE recording telescope-cameras and the radar, Halfrich ordered focused on the place of the odd-shaped rocks. And then, sitting there on Sunside, they watched. They waited.

Nothing.

Kellard's hopes began to rise. He was right, he told himself, it couldn't happen again.

"How long," he asked, "are we going to sit waiting for nothing because a radar made a screwy record? If those anti-heaters quit for five minutes, we're fried."

Halfrich looked at him bleakly. "I'll tell you how long. Till you tell the truth, and we see the truth for ourselves. That's how long."

Kellard shrugged. "If that's the way you want it. I would tell you to go to hell except that we're already there."

They watched and waited some more.

Morgenson said, on a rising note of excitement, "There's something—"

Halfrich got to the 'scope fast. Kellard, looking through the scanner, saw the geyser of flame that was beginning to pour up from the rocks. It grew slowly, but steadily, in height.

"What is it?" Halfrich asked him.

Can't you see for yourself?" said Kellard. "There's a blowhole out there and it throws off burning gases from the interior. It did it twice while I was waiting in the wreck."

Halfrich said, "It's in the same location where radar recorded you before, with those other blips. There's something about this—We'll go have a look."

"If you must," said Kellard. "You'll find it's just what I've said."

They got into the heat-armor. It was a clumsy outfit, for it had to have room for an efficient anti-heater, and the long tube of the heat-discharge was a nuisance. Kellard had spent days in one of these suits, waiting for the relief ship after the crackup, and he did not like the feel of it at all.

Halfrich tested the radio and then said, "All right, Shay, lock us out and stand by. Morgenson, you keep watching."

They stepped upon Sunside.

There beat down upon them such a storm of radiation, such cataracts of heat and light, that instinctively they bowed their heads as before a deluge. It took an effort of will to step forward through that tempest, but Halfrich made it. They walked, slowly and heavily, and at first they saw only the blackened rocks beneath their feet, and the little puddles and rivulets of molten lead, and their own massive armored feet plodding.

Then, as they went forward, they straightened against the impact. Through the face-plate of his armor, dimmed by the many-layered filters, Kellard saw the column of flame ahead. It was a hundred feet high now, and growing higher, and though there was no air-borne sound on this almost airless world, the sound of it came through the rocks and the soles of their feet, a throbbing and roaring that quivered through all their bodies.

THEY reached the tumbled rocks, and stopped. And now the fire-fountain was so lofty that they had to lean back their heads to look at its topmost crest. Some unthinkable diastole and systole of the fiery planet was at work, and this periodic geyser of flame was its result. The rocks shook and roared, and the fires raged higher, and Kellard thought again, what devil is in

the blood of our race that drives us to places like this where we should not be?

"I told you," he said to Halfrich. "Just a blowhole, that's all."

"The blips on the record moved," said Halfrich. "There was more than this."

"Look around you!" cried Kellard desperately. "Do you see anything moving, anything that could move? You were wrong, Halfrich. Do you have to keep us here until we all die, because you can't admit you're wrong?"

Halfrich hesitated. "I wasn't wrong. You're still lying. But we'll go back to the ship and wait."

They turned their backs on the fire-fountain, and Kellard felt the sweat pouring on his forehead. It hadn't happened this time, and they couldn't wait forever, they would have to go away and—

Morgenson's voice chattered in their ears. "Blips showing, coming—" And then he suddenly yelled, "I see them! They—"

Halfrich swung around with ponderous swiftness. There was nothing between them and the fire-fountain, nothing around the spouting flames.

"Above you, coming down!" shouted Morgenson. "My God, what—?"

Kellard slowly raised his head. Because he knew what to look for, he saw them while Halfrich was

still gazing around searching.

They came flashing down out of the sky. There were four of them this time—no, five. They were like five individual swirls of shining light, so bright that the sun-bleached heavens seemed to darken around them.

Halfrich said bewilderedly, "I don't see—"

Kellard pointed upward. "There."

"Those flakes of flame?"

"Not flakes of flame," said Kellard. "They are the children of the stars."

Halfrich went rigid, staring upward. And now Kellard knew that there was no more hope. No hope at all.

THE five bright things had flashed down toward the great fire-fountain. They plunged into it, out of it, climbed swift as the eye could follow, racing up its mighty geyser, frolicking in it joyously. The fountain raved higher and the five sped up and whirled and danced upon its rising plume, and Kellard thought that they were laughing.

In and out of the leaping fires they plunged, and then one of them veered down toward the place where Halfrich and Kellard stood. There was something so humanly purposeful in its sudden movement that Halfrich stepped back.

"Stand still," said Kellard.

"But—" Halfrich protested.
"They won't hurt us," said Kellard, his voice flat and dull.
"They're friendly, playful, curious. Stand still."

And now all five of the flashing flames were around them, darting, recoiling, then gliding forward again to touch their heat-armor with questing tendrils of living force, living light.

Halfrich spoke, trying to keep his voice steady but forming the words in a choked fashion.

"Something—in my mind—" "They're telepathic, in a way you can't even imagine," said Kellard. "And they're curious. They're curious about us, what we are, how we think. They can merge minds with us, somehow." And he added, with a last cruel impulse of dying anger, "You wanted to know. Now know."

He had time to say nothing more before the impact hit him, just as it had that other time, the full stunning shock of unearthly minds interlocking with his own, searching out his thoughts and memories.

Curious, yes. Like children who have found strange, ungainly creatures and wish to know how they live. And as they entered his mind, Kellard's mind entered theirs, fused with them, and there was again the dizzying whirl of memories and feelings that were not his own, that his different, more brutishly physical nature

could never apprehend more than dimly.

But that half-apprehension was staggering. He was no longer Hugh Kellard, a man with flesh and bones who had been born on an air-drowned heavy planet named Earth.

He was one of the children of the stars.

His memory stretched far back, for his life was almost unlimited in time. For long and long beyond human comprehension he had lived with his companions the strange and beautiful life of their kind.

Born of the stars, of the unimaginable forces, pressures, temperatures, atomic conditions within the mighty suns. Born, as the end product of an evolutionary chain almost as old as the universe itself, a grouping of photons that grew toward consciousness, toward individuality and volition. Their bodies were force, rather than matter, their senses had nothing to do with sight or hearing, their movement was an effortless flash and glide as fast as the photons of light itself.

WITH the other kind of life in the universe, the heavy slow-moving things of matter that grew upon the comparatively cold, dark planets, they had had nothing to do at all. They were of the suns, not the planets,

and those chill worlds of fixed, solid matter so repelled them that they would not even approach most of them.

Star-child, star-child, at home in the bursting splendors of the stellar fires, and able to move like light from star to star. And again Kellard felt the agony of that ecstasy that was his in this shared memory.

"We things of matter, we men, who thought that space and the stars would be ours—"

But how could the wide universe belong to solid, heavy, physical creatures who must painfully move in bubbles of air, who crawled between the petty planets encased in metal tombs, who could not even approach the glories of the great suns?

No, the ecstasy was one that men would never know except at secondhand through this brief contact! The glorious rush together of the star-children through the vast abysses, drinking up the energy of the radiation about them. The audacious and dangerous coasting along the shores of dark nebulae, racing the lumbering comets and leaving them behind, on until you felt through all your photons the beckoning warmth of the star you approached. Ignore the cinders called planets that creep around it, speed faster, faster, brothers, the way has been long but we are almost there! And

now the radiation that was so weak in the outer darks is strong and lusty-roaring, and the great prominences reach out like arms to gather us in. The shock, the joy, of the first plunge once more into the star. Dive deep, brothers, deep through the outer fires into the throbbing solar furnaces where the atoms are hammered as in forges, changing, shifting their shapes, exploding into force.

Spin in the vortices of the great stellar tornadoes, fling off and fall headlong and then dive laughing in again. Search for the others of your kind, if there are none here there will be at the next star. Up again, out of the boiling fires, and then drift quiet, dreaming, in the pearly glow of the corona, endless afternoon of warmth and light and peace.

BUT on the sunward side of the tiny planet nearby, a plaything beckons. Fire and light fountain up from the solid rock. There at least we can go, for that place is washed by tides of solar life, not chilled and dead. Speed down toward it, as the fire, the life it spouts higher out of the repellantly fixed and solid matter. Frolic in the fountain, through and around it as it rises higher. And what are the things that move on the rock near it, the things that look grotesquely as though matter had been endowed

with life? Reach out with your thought-senses and try to apprehend them. Mind, life—in matter! Try to understand how matter thinks, how matter feels, plumb the grotesque memories of them, the vistas of crawling things at the bottom of whelming air-oceans, things of clay too frail to endure, yet things that in their brief living have come here. But the mind recoils from such memories, such a life.

Brothers, we go! First to refresh ourselves in the deepest streams of the star, and then away across the abysses to another star we know. There is nothing to hold us here—

And the oneness was gone from Kellard's mind, and he was no child of light and stars, he was a man of clay, standing stupid and sick and shaking by the falling fires of the fountain.

He looked at Halfrich. But Halfrich stood, with his head bowed, and Kellard felt only pity.

He touched his arm. "We'll go back to the ship."

For a long moment, Halfrich did not respond. Then he turned and walked, plodding with head down, not looking up once at the flaring sky.

* * *

In the little ship, he sat later with Kellard. He had not spoken yet, and Morgenson and the others, bewildered and awed, had

still not dared ask questions. Finally Halfrich looked at Kellard, pain still in his eyes.

"I was thinking," he said. "I was remembering my little boy, years ago. He had just learned to walk, and he started out the door, eager to explore the whole town. He stubbed his toe, and he sat down and cried."

"You tried to spare me this," said Halfrich after a little while. "Thanks for that, Kellard. It didn't work, but thanks anyway."

Kellard said, "Look, no one else knows. No one else is ever likely to know. The only place where the men of matter and the children of stars could meet is a place like Sunside, and how many such meetings would ever by chance happen? We don't have to tell everyone, to take the heart and eagerness out of them by letting them know they'll always be second-best in space."

Halfrich thought about that. And then he shook his head. "No. We've stubbed our toe. We've learned we're not and never will be the sole inheritors of the universe. All right, we'll accept the fact and go on. The planets will be ours, just the same. And someday—" He paused, then said, "—someday, maybe, the sons of the planets and the children of stars will take hands, know each other. No, Kellard. We'll tell them."

THE END