

# WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

APRIL 1955

All Stories New and Complete

Editor: JAMES L. QUINN

Assist. Editors: EVE WULFF, ROBERT W. GREENE

Art Editor: ED VALIGURSKY

Cover by Charles Casler

*Entering Earth's Atmosphere*

## SHORT NOVEL

**SHILL** by James E. Gunn **4**

## NOVELETTE

**TASK MISSION** by Fox B. Holden **40**

## SHORT STORIES

**ONE LOVE HAVE I** by Robert F. Young **60**

**WILLIE'S PLANET** by Mike Ellis **74**

**CAPTIVE MARKET** by Philip K. Dick **88**

**ESCAPE MECHANISM** by Charles E. Fritch **104**

## FEATURES

**A CHAT WITH THE EDITOR** **2**

**WORTH CITING** **102**

**WHAT IS YOUR SCIENCE I.Q.?** **103**

**SCIENCE BRIEFS** **117**

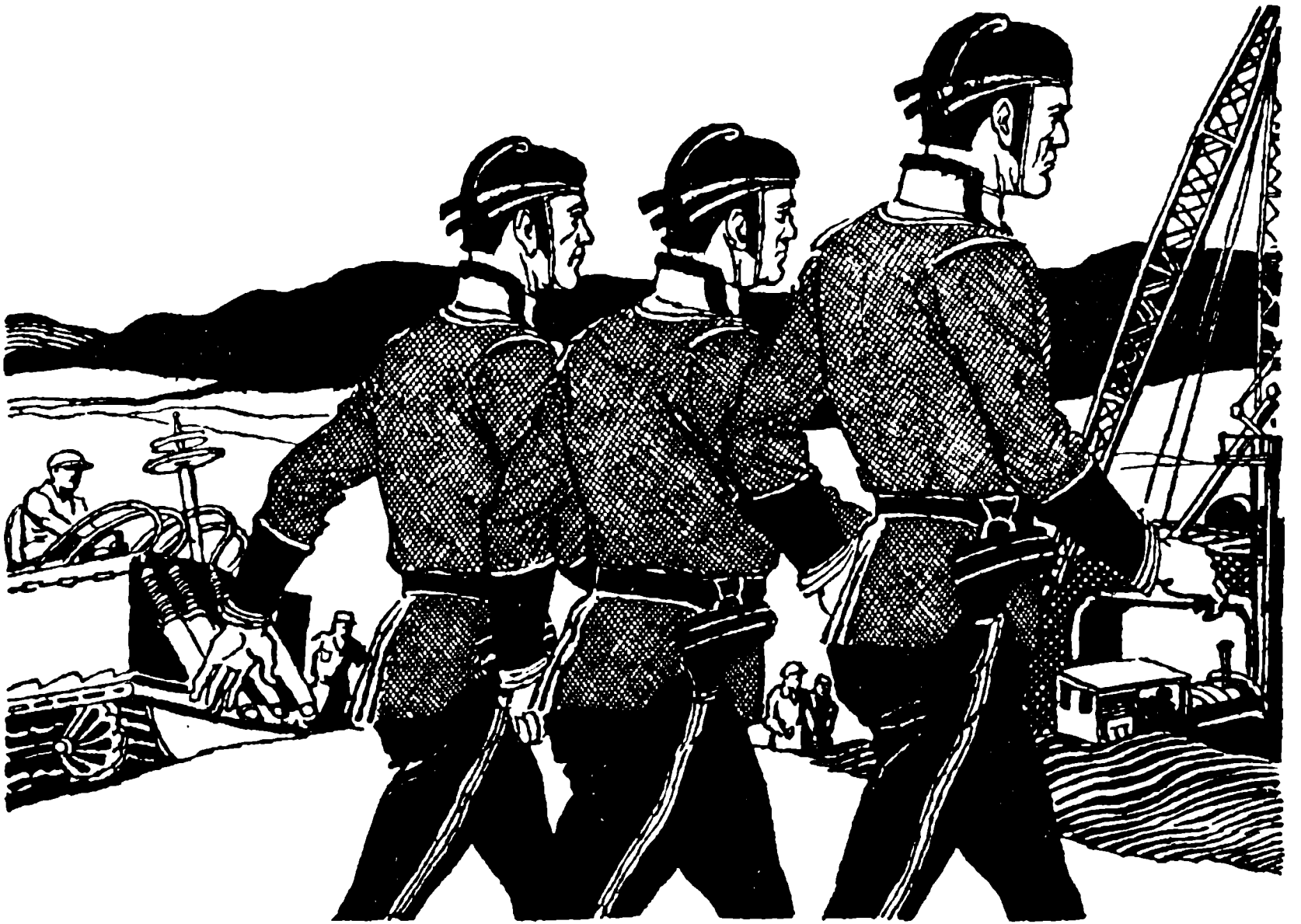
## COVER PICTORIAL:

*An Airport of the Future*

IF is published monthly by Quinn Publishing Company, Inc. Volume 5, No. 2. Copyright 1955 by Quinn Publishing Co., Inc. Office of publication, 8 Lord Street, Buffalo, New York. Entered as Second Class Matter at Post Office, Buffalo, New York. Subscription \$3.50 for 12 issues in U.S. and Possessions; Canada \$4 for 12 issues; elsewhere \$4.50. Allow four weeks for change of address. All stories appearing in this magazine are fiction; any similarity to actual persons is coincidental. Not responsible for unsolicited artwork or manuscripts, 35c a copy. Printed in U.S.A.

**EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICES, KINGSTON, NEW YORK**

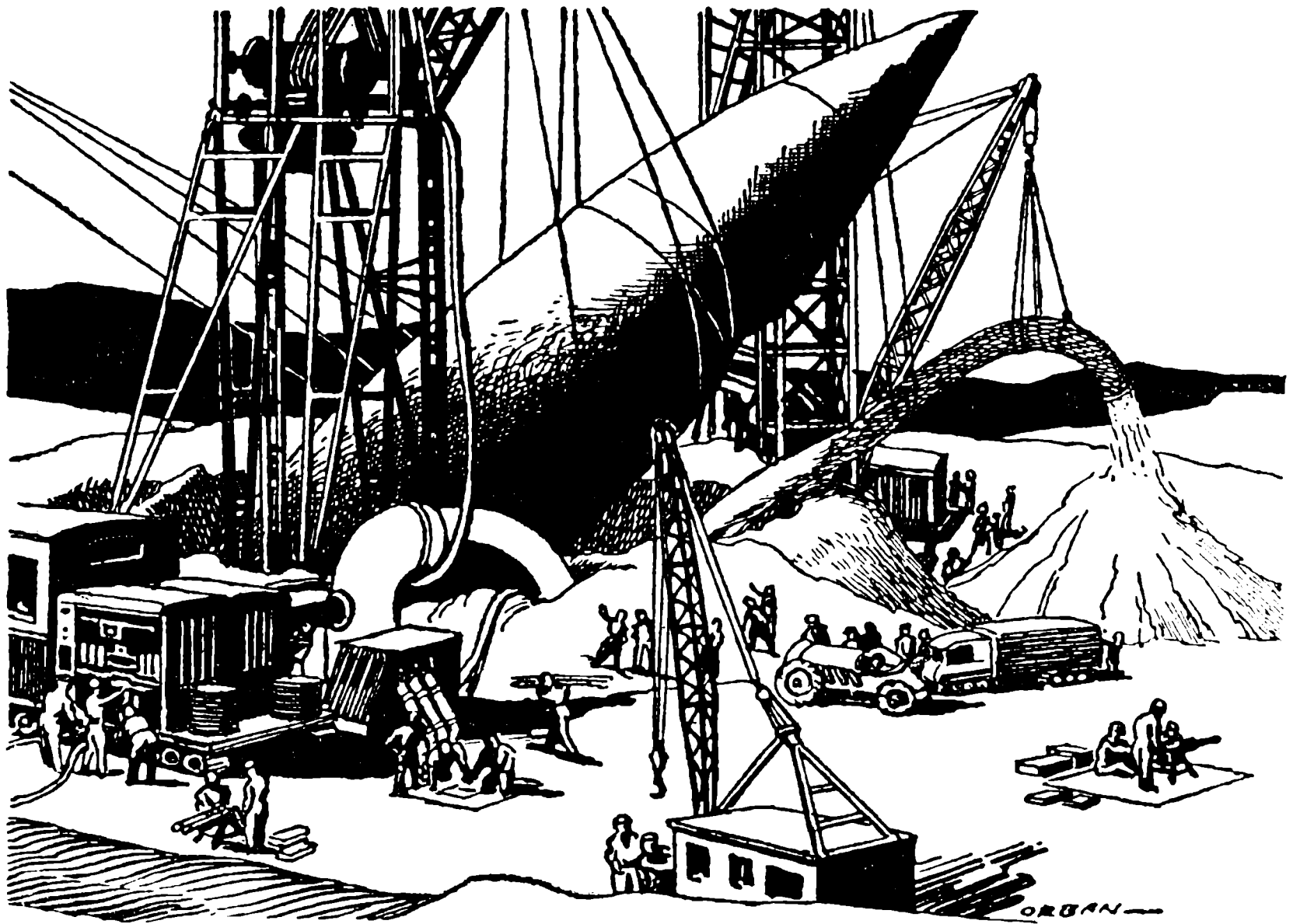
*Next issue on sale March 10th*



*Captain Jorl thought Arcturus IV was the answer to all he had ever wanted. And it was. But there was also a twist . . . How can there be an ideal where everything is perfection?*

# T A S K M I S S I O N

BY FOX B. HOLDEN



Illustrated by Paul Orban

CAPTAIN Nicholas Joel stood waiting in his fore-waist bridge; he looked again through its heavy, slotted quartz windows and now he could see them coming. He could make out the toy-like silhouette of their jeep, emerging in reckless, bounding leaps from the edge of the cultivated forest. Now they were racing at full tilt across the hard-packed yellow sand of the desert in a bee-line for the ship that had landed them here a scant three weeks ago.

Captain Nicholas Joel watched them, their excitement a visible thing as they pounded up clouds of saffron behind them, and knew without activating his personal communicator what they'd have to tell him.

"We've hit it again!" they'd tell him.

He turned his big body from the curving windows, quickly calculated the time it would take the jeep to reach the flaring stern of the *White Whale*, figured how many minutes it would take the pneumatic lift to whisk them three hundred and twelve feet up to the fore-waist, and snatched open the door of his liquor cabinet.

Sam Carruthers would be the first one to say it.

Thin, quiet Sam, who'd been in space as ship's surgeon and psychiatrist for as long as Joel himself. It had been twenty-two years since they'd left the Academy together. Sam had taken his specialty training in space medicine, while he,

Joel, had let himself get sucked into qualifying as pilot.

Twelve years of the Academy. And twenty-two more being ordered around the freezing hell of God's black universe like a toy on a string.

And for all of it, Sam still had that look in his dark, brooding eyes—the look that had been glazed with shock, but which had still not surrendered, the day they told Sam he wasn't going to make pilot.

The look would still be there four minutes and thirty seconds from now when he led the others into the fore-waist bridge to holler "We've hit it again!" It would always be.

Joel tilted the liquor bottle and one big, clumsy-looking hand poured steadily into the thick glass-ite flagon he held in the other. He downed it in a gulp.

Hit it again *hell!*

An behind Sam there would be the first officer, Dobermann. Little, wiry German who knew more about languages and semantics than the guy who'd invented them, and the best astro-navigator you could find in this or any other galaxy. Sure, they always gave Nicholas Joel nothing but the best. That was part of it. Part and parcel of the whole damn conspiracy.

Dobermann wouldn't say anything when he came in. But there'd be a thorough-going, successful, mission-accomplished look on his handsome face. Dobermann never missed.

And Southard. . . Still a kid, still wet behind the ears, but a hell of a promising astrophysicist, backed up with plenty of biochemistry and geophysics. It was still a big, romantic adventure to Southard, and

he wore the single red, gleaming stripe of ship's second officer on his broad young shoulders as though it was the thick gold circle of a full captaincy.

Joel filled the flagon and emptied it a second time. He went back to the windows, the liquor bottle and flagon still in his hands.

To most men, he supposed, the panorama that spread for miles from the stern of the up-ended *White Whale* would be a thing of sheer beauty. It would be hard for them to believe that there existed other planets far beyond the rim of their own hostile Solar System which could equal or exceed the soft beauty of the oasis they called Earth. But there it was—gently-rolling, golden desert beneath a temperate, dark-gold sun, flanked at one gently curving edge by a forest that looked as though it had been scientifically planned and landscaped for beauty. It was a big forest that covered a full third of the planet, and at its opposite edge it gave way to twelve thousand miles of unblemished shoreline which descended into gleaming, azure ocean.

And in the forest, on the ocean, even on the wide expanse of desert, there were people. Intelligent, strong, peaceful, quiet people, who might have been natives of Earth's Pacific islands of three centuries ago, save that their flesh was lighter in tone; their sun was not as young as Sol.

Farmers, mostly, Carruthers had reported. Some merchants, some travelers and explorers, even some men of a very young science, but, mostly, farmers . . . it was the way they lived. A good way, Joel

thought. A good way, in a good place.

He looked through the fore-waist bridge windows, and what he saw was beautiful.

But he filled the flagon again.

A buzzer sounded softly from the compact secondary control console which banked a full third of the bridge's fore bulkhead, and deliberately, Joel let it buzz a second and a third time before he fingered the stud that slid the small metal door open behind him. He turned as they came through it.

Fatigue and sweat lined Sam's thin face; Dobermann was audibly out of breath. Southard had to duck slightly to get into the room, but when he straightened he seemed as fresh as when the party had left the ship seventeen days before.

Joel returned their salute with the full flagon still in his left hand, and then beat Carruthers to the punch.

"All right, so we've hit it one more time! Bully for us—" He drained the flagon, reached for the bottle.

Without Carruthers, there would have been an awkward silence. But after twenty-two years, Sam knew his man.

"Ahh, you've shown us more than this, Skipper. I suppose it is a little better than our prelim reports indicate, if you want to get technical. The people want to co-operate. They're intelligent, healthy, and friendly and they realize fully what we're trying to do. They want to help us, and say we're welcome to all the mneurium-4 we want. 'Course there's only a few hundred pure megatons of it lying around,

but, if you want to get technical—"

"Go to hell," Joel said, and poured his flagon half full. He felt a little better, but it would take more than a half-bottle of Martian Colony Bond and Sam's wise answers to change things. "Go right straight to hell!" He sniffed at the Bond. "So the long arm of Superior Civilization has reached out its clanking claws again to make the Universe a Better Place to Live in, has it? God help 'em if they *believed* all the hog-wash you fed 'em, Sam."

The thin face sobered. "I spoke to them in good faith, Nicholas, and they did believe me. The fact is, they—"

"All right, I get your point! Got my mind made up, so don't start confusing me with facts." He transfixed the three of them with a restless look; a look they had grown used to. It was a gaze that matched the rest of him; the unruly, untrimmed black hair, the short, thick beard which was unneeded on a chin and jaw as big and square as Joel's, the careless, unmilitary carriage of his thick shoulders and blocky body, the blood-shot metal-blue eyes themselves. But during the split-second the gaze was upon them, they knew pages were flipping in Joel's massive head. Pages of regulations, procedures, memorized down to the last foot-note.

"Let's go in order with your reports," Joel snapped.

Southard stepped forward. "Constellation Boötis, Arcturus, planet IV. Preliminary analysis of ore-samples indicate rich lodes of mneurium-4, relatively close to the surface, and in unprecedentedly great number. Purity is unbeliev-

ably high, with—”

“All right, Southard, good report. Dobermann.”

“Minimum of linguistic difficulty, coupled with a surprisingly high aptitude on the natives’ part for language learning. In the seventeen days I had with them, I’m almost certain those with whom I worked learned at least half as much English as I did of their tongue,” the German said. He added, simply, as though the seventeen days of exhausting gesticulating, diagramming, systematizing, learning, recording, had never existed, “There will be no language difficulty, sir.”

“Good. Now you, Sam, and no shmaltz!”

“Healthy people, no cancer, no TB, no coronary troubles—”

“The mneurium-4, I know. Go on.”

“Average IQ in the 120’s—and there’s something for us to keep in mind in spite of our big technological and scientific jump on them. They’re still working with wood, iron and crude steel, but they won’t be for long. Agrarian civilization so far; they’ve got a representative type of government—democracy, and a damn good one, and they’re psychologically suited for just what they’ve evolved along that line. They actually practice what they preach, from the individual status right on up through the framework of their government. Open, honest, sincere—they have to be, because of the high degree of uniformity of IQ, and because—now get this—they *want* to be. It’s the way their minds are built, and—”

“All right, so if I believe you, we won’t be fighting to get what we want. They’re willing to meet our

terms, that it?”

“Yes, skipper. Access to all scientific data with which we can supply them now, and as much more later as they think they’ll require, in exchange for reasonable mining rights.”

“*Reasonable?*” Joel thundered. He slammed the heavy bottle down on the old-fashioned mahogany desk at his elbow. “Was *that* in the contract you made with them? How do you know what the hell they mean by reasonable?”

“Sir, if I may—”

“All right, Dobermann, go ahead and enlighten me.”

“I worked a number of hours with them on that point, to make certain there would be no errors in the semantics involved. They have learned, despite their lack of scientific medical knowledge, that as long as there is mneurium-4 around, they don’t get sick. They trust us to leave enough to insure their own well-being.”

“That’s crazy,” Joel shot back at his first officer. “How in God’s name can they know about mneurium-4 and how to use it when we’ve only known about it and have been scratching the universe for it for less than thirty years? That’s goddam nonsense—” He refilled the flagon, spilled a little of the potent liquor on his beard as he downed it.

“No, Nicholas,” Sam said. “You’re the bug on history around here. Think a minute.”

Joel drew a sleeve across his mouth, and pages flipped in his head again. Yes, Sam was right. Back as far as the twentieth century, there had been isolated tribes in South America which had been found free of the diseases that had

plagued their more civilized neighbors of the north, and it had taken the medical experts years to find out exactly why. Invariably, the answer had been usage of the most promising materials provided by nature which were closest at hand. A tribe stumbled onto something, used it—experimentally at first, then wastefully, but finally, with a thousand years' practice, pretty efficiently. And it had nothing to do with the fact that they still went around with spears and animal-hide shields. . .

"All right, I get your point, Sam," Joel said. Sam quit talking, and for a moment there was silence in the limited confines of the fore-waist bridge. Then Joel put the bottle and the flagon down on the desk, turned his back to it and faced them.

"From the way you boys talk this thing up, it all must be just jim-dandy. Maybe better than on that rock back in Aldeberan, or even better than we did in Altair, or Fomalhaut, or Procyon Seven, or any of the rest of 'em. . ." He paused again, watched their faces. They remembered—all except Southard, who hadn't been with them on any of the old strikes. But his youthful enthusiasm just about made up for the fierce pride that shone in the eyes of the others.

**B**ACK HOME, the *White Whale*, of all of Earth's great fleet of Explorer-class ships, had hung up the most enviable record. She had brought back rare elements known to men but unobtainable by them within the confines of their own tiny Solar System, or rare

life-forms, impossible to study effectively in their native habitats, or precious new data which were beyond the reach of the astronomer's observatory. It meant progress. It meant a living force in the universe, a force of learning and of knowing, which would tolerate no barrier, which would broach neither defeat nor ultimate conclusion. In short, it meant Man.

Nicholas Joel knew it, and he still hated space.

Since that first indoctrination blast out to the moon and back when he'd been a plebe—since that day that he'd realized for the first time how *big* it was. And how big men ought to be, but weren't. Big muscles, but little minds. . .

He still wondered just how the hell they'd sucked him in. They'd hit him somewhere inside, in a place he'd forgotten to guard—his instructors, his Commandant, the Secretary of Science himself. They'd sweet-talked him into staying those twelve years. Young man, they had told him, yours is a body and a brain with an adaptability to space exploration the like of which has never been duplicated in our records. You hate to fly, yet you are the best cadet pilot ever to enter the Academy. You dislike technical and scientific study, yet your grades in this field are the highest on record. You despise the regimen of the military necessary to survival in Space, yet, unaccountably, your cadet commands have been the most efficient and best handled of any in our knowledge.

Young man, they had said, here's the works on a silver platter—be a pilot—you owe it to yourself, to the world, to humanity!

Say you'll take our ships where no other man would dare, and you can write your own ticket for the rest of your life! *But you simply have to be a Pilot, young man. . .*

And he remembered how it had been with Sam, who would have moved the Earth with arms and legs tied behind him to have qualified. Sam, who had hungered for it, but had taken a lesser assignment cheerfully, just so, at least, he could be a part of some other pilot's team in space.

Sam, who had that look in his eyes.

But since his assignment to the *White Whale* fifteen years ago, there had never been a sign—not the slightest, that Joel had been able to detect, that he was doing anything but what he most wanted. That took guts, and guts. Joel understood.

And so now they'd hit it again. Mneurium-4, the "wonder-element" that science had discovered would put a host of Earth's most dreaded diseases to rout, but which it had not been able to obtain or synthesize despite years of exhaustive effort.

Captain Joel, they had told him, the radio-astronomers say there could be mneurium-4 somewhere out in Boötis. Get some.

And in spite of them and their damned passion for onward-and-upward, if they insisted he pilot space to bring them back one new gew-gaw after another to play with, then he'd bring them back gew-gaws until they choked! *Choked!*

And the world he wanted—the world he'd always wanted, would just have to be for somebody else.

Then he looked at their faces,

and they were waiting.

"All right, I get your point! Don't just stand there—Southard, get your 'copters going! I want a fully plotted area of operation for the next six months, including jump-off point as of tomorrow at 0600 hours, and on this desk by 2200 tonight! Dobermann, you won't have anything to do for awhile, so you can get Southard's servodrillers going for him; get 'em all out, form 'em on the port flank in details of five. I want to see it by 2100. Sam, has Dobermann given you any practice in their lingo? Good—all right, it's time I met 'em—you'll take me to their capital city or wherever it is their top people are and we'll get things down in black and white. I'll be ready for you in twenty minutes. Any questions?"

There weren't. Joel's three officers turned and left, each scrambling to his new assignment, glad to actually get started before something happened to upset the unexpected simplicity of the whole thing. There'd never been a mission that had come off as smoothly as this one was beginning. It promised to make them feel guilty to draw their pay checks for it. For once, it looked as though Joel was going to get what he came after without having to fight down to raw nerve and bone to get it. Good. The Captain had an easy one coming.

When they'd gone, Joel dropped his great frame into the ancient chair behind his big desk and got to work with the ship's intercom, flipping it to main circuit. He did ten minutes' talking in six, and Phase One was organized, down to the last ship's guard, down to the



last assistant servomech.

Then he had fourteen minutes until Carruthers was due, ready to drive him to meet these people in their cultivated forest.

So for every one of the fourteen minutes, Captain Nicholas Joel leaned back in the chair, shut his eyes tight, and filled in a little more of the world he wanted.

**T**HE ROADS were of hard-packed dirt, but level, and wide. Occasionally, as Sam Carruthers drove, they would pass through a hamlet, or go by small knots of men and women in carriages and wagons drawn by striped animals resembling Earth's African zebra. The farms were small but numerous, and none, Joel noted, had been entirely cleared; the trees had been thinned, and they were of a far more slender variety than grew elsewhere, but they had not been eliminated. It set well with him. Joel had always liked trees, and he had a feeling he was going to like other people who did to such an obvious extent.

Buildings, he noted, were almost entirely of wood; structures very similar to those he remembered having seen in a history text dealing with the western United States in the nineteenth century. A few were of stone, some of small, brick cubes; all were pleasing enough to the eye. And the people themselves were —

The people looked up as the jeep roared past; looked up from their work in the fields, looked out from their wagons and carriages, looked from their saddled mounts at the roadside. But there was no fear in

their glances, only the quick puzzlement of inquiring intelligence.

They were straight, well-bodied people, clothed simply in colorful garments which Joel assumed were made of cloth; the men were tall and broad and he could mentally picture the powerful muscles that rippled beneath their shirts. And the women—The women were the most graceful creatures he had ever seen, even those who were obviously no longer young; they were less fully clad than their men, and Captain Nicholas Joel liked that.

He liked it because it was honest. Where there was something beautiful, why in the name of anything holy or otherwise should it be covered up? That was the trouble with Earth and her people. There were too few things of real beauty, and when they did exist, humans seemed to have a psychotic compulsion for either ignoring them or hiding them completely. And those who did hesitate for a stolen moment's admiration were hurriedly hollered back to their jobs.

"You're surprised that they're not cluttering up the roads, trying to get a closer look at us?" Sam was hollering over the howl of the warm, oxygen-rich atmosphere.

"Good discipline," Joel grunted, still occupied with his own thoughts.

"Well, you're partly right. But more than that, we haven't stopped to look at *them!* It's sort of a half-courtesy, half-pride they have. They won't slow a stranger down if he doesn't slow them down, figuring that if he wanted to, he would; the prerogative is his. And, if he's not that interested, then neither are they!"

"You're sure some expedition didn't get here before we did?" Joel asked. "I mean—hell, they could be from Earth—"

"Ever hear of an Earthman with two hearts, skipper? But physically that's about the only difference I could find. Psychologically—" The Space surgeon hesitated.

"Psychologically what?"

"Take too long to explain—we're coming into the capital city you were talking about. And besides—" he grinned in a sidelong glance at Joel, "you might even have the brains to figure it out all by yourself."

"Go to hell!"

In a moment Carruthers was busy with the jeep, tooling it through narrowing streets, slowing it to almost a walk as men and women hastened out of their way, crowded the board sidewalks to allow them to pass unhampered. The buildings were much like those he had seen in the rural districts; a little larger, a bit taller, but none more than fifty feet in height. Neatly painted, their thin glass windows bright and clean, they did not look like part of a city at all, Joel reflected, much less part of a capital city. And everything was so quiet.

Maybe too quiet. He felt a little chill at the base of his spine, but kept looking straight ahead.

"You're sure, Sam, about leaving my guns back at the ship?"

Carruthers just grinned again. And then they turned abruptly, and hauled up in front of a long, low building of flagstone.

"This is it," the surgeon said. "No reporters, no photographers, no autograph seekers, no brass band or politicians. But you're on, Skipper."

CAPTAIN Nicholas Joel felt naked without his guns, and he felt off-balance and out of place. Standing in the sedate, oval-shaped council-chamber with these peaceful-looking people confronting him, he felt clumsy in his heavy black leatheroid uniform, big, highly-polished black boots. He felt as if he looked like what he'd been forced to be on other occasions, facing forms of life so alien that no difference counted—like a man-at-arms, like a conqueror.

Suddenly, he was glad Sam had made him leave his guns back at the ship.

"Nicholas Joel, United Americas Intergalactic Exploration Fleet, of the Ship *White Whale*, commanding!" Carruthers was introducing him in English, and he wished that Sam would have had the good sense to have said "This is Captain Joel" and let it go at that. Didn't the grinning idiot know it must have been an awful pill for these people to swallow all at once? That there were, to begin with, such things as other planets and other galaxies—and that there were, even more incredibly, other creatures that lived on them. And, whether they cared to believe it or not, some of these creatures had just landed among them, and there was nothing they could do about it!

Sam was picking his way along now in their speech, and then at an obvious gesture, Joel knew he was being introduced to their top man. Sam waved an arm toward the tallest of the twelve-man group, who arose from the opposite side of a polished wooden table, and bowed gently from the waist.

"His Excellency and Prime Gov-

ernor, K'hall-ik'hall."

Joel hesitated, then returned the bow. He had never bowed in his life, but a salute to somebody dressed in civilian clothes seemed crazy.

"Sam, you mean he's Prime Governor of—"

"The whole planet."

"Am I always supposed to say his name twice?"

"That is his name. That's the way they do it. Now shut up, Skipper, and let me do the talking. I'm going to go through the whole works again with 'em. Then we sign. Then you get a tour of the town so the people can be introduced to you officially. But don't go making any speeches! Behave, and we're in business."

"You go to—"

But Sam had already started talking in the liquid-sounding language, and Joel decided it was better for him to keep his own mouth shut and be thought stupid than open it and remove all doubt. Damn it, the whole thing was making him feel just the way he had twenty years ago, when he landed his first explorer on an alien world! It had been that long, and how many hundred meetings with alien life-forms since then, under how many fantastic circumstances, on how many God-forsaken, unworldly places? By now he was supposed to know the score. By now he was supposed to have seen everything. By now he knew the book inside and out, and had the ability to take charge no matter where in the black universe they sent him. Nicholas Joel, United Americas Intergalactic Exploration Fleet, of the Ship *White Whale*, command-

ing . . .

But nobody was challenging his right to have what he'd come for!

No *trouble*, that was the hell of it, and—and there was nothing to hate.

For a miserable moment, Captain Nicholas Joel stood becalmed, with not so much as a breeze in his sagging sails.

But he would not let them know it. He looked levelly into the eyes of each of the twelve, but even that did little to make him feel more at ease.

For he saw wisdom in the lined, kindly faces. He saw a humility and sincerity that matched the simple clothing they wore. He saw a kindness that men talked about in books and sometimes felt in their hearts, but seldom held openly in their faces for the world to see. These men were handsome in their physical stature, but they could have been little men three feet high, and they would have been the biggest that Joel had ever seen.

Now they were talking in subdued tones to Sam, and then one produced a document, and handed Sam a slender writing stylus.

"Hey Sam—" The hoarseness of his voice unnerved him, but Joel plowed ahead. "Hadn't you oughtta read that thing?"

"It's already been read, Skipper. By Dobermann. It took him three days to draw it up—he did most of the writing himself. It's already been electrostated; we've got ten copies of our own. Now keep your mouth shut or they'll think we don't trust them. You sign first, because you're the guest. Then K'hall-i-k'hall, and it's all over."

Sam's thin face had a seriousness

in it that Joel knew he did not dare question. *The trouble is, the thought stung him, you doubt, because you were born and raised on Earth. Sam knows that. And he knows how these people think. And he says sign . . . So sign, you big boob.*

Silently, Joel took the stylus from Sam, bent quickly over the papyrus-like document, and put his name, rank and ship where Sam pointed. Then he gave the stylus to Sam, who returned it to K'hall-ik'hall. And in another instant, all the mneurium-4 the *White Whale* could lift clear was theirs for the taking.

ONCE HE'D put his mind to it, Joel could converse in the language of his hosts as fluently as either Dobermann or Carruthers, and within a month he had been able to finish a limited round of visits to a full dozen of the smaller cities and towns. These people had respected his wish that he be allowed to roam their streets and public buildings without official escort, and with an ever-quickening fading of his self-consciousness, he did.

He did, more and more frequently.

And from the vantage point of their peacefully winding roads or their quaint little shops where they dispensed a fluid amazingly similar to Martian Colony Bond, Joel could hate the *White Whale* from a comfortable distance, and with a healthy, untiring diligence. This he also did, more and more frequently.

It was during one of these self-assigned off-duty periods, alone in his personal jeep, that his most re-

cent pint of Bond decided to harass him, and he discovered almost too late that he had ignored a turn of the dirt roadway. He skidded wickedly, and frightened one of the zebra-like animals drawing a vehicle much resembling a four-wheeled surrey. The animal let go with a terrified whinny, and with a sickening splintering noise, the *dhennah* went plunging off the road into the deep drainage ditch at its edge. There was also another sound, and Joel practically stood the jeep on its nose slewing it to a stop.

By the time he was out and running back, the frightened animal had gotten itself out of the ditch and was working frantically to bring the *dhennah* out after it. But the vehicle was canted at a crazy angle, and it was obvious to Joel that at least one of its starboard wheels was broken, and that it would take more than one *kaelli* to haul it out.

None of this, he reflected as he ran, was going to help diplomatic relations a bit. And he was no Dobermann. But it was none of these things that worried him at the moment.

She was screaming bloody murder, and still was hard at it when he jumped into the ditch.

She stopped when he clambered up on the steeply tilted narrow seat to which she clung. There was suddenly not a sound from her as his big hands circled her waist and gently lifted her to the ground.

Then he discovered that his voice was stuck. Dammit, an explorer captain for over fifteen years, and he didn't know what to say when he banged up some farm girl's

*dhennah!*

"I—ah, am terribly sorry. It will be replaced, of course. Very stupid and clumsy of me. I—ah, you hurt?" Rather smooth, at that!

She smiled. Slender lips, golden-colored eyes, delicately contoured face—all seemed to smile together. A breeze ruffled her tawny mass of shoulder-length hair, and Nicholas Joel just stood there.

"You are forgiven, the *dhennah* was not a costly one. I know how difficult it must be for you to guide those machines of yours at such terrible speeds . . . but of course the speeds are necessary to you in your work. Thank you for helping me."

Joel reassured himself that if only the conversation were in his mother tongue, he would of course not feel so ridiculously at a loss for words. After all, this young female was only an—an alien being.

"It was my pleasure, of course," Joel said. He thought perhaps if he could manage a smile—"I am gratified that you accept my clumsiness with such excellent grace. As intruders to begin with, my men and I—"

"Intruders, sir?" She had taken a few steps away from him to stroke the neck of the *kaelli* and quiet it, but she was still looking at him. "Why intruders? At one time, all the people of this world were not of one great community as they are now, surely you know that. But when one group travelled and visited another, no one thought of it as an intrusion." She laughed. "Are we all not one under the sun?"

"But they were of your own kind, from elsewhere on your own planet—"

"A visitor is a visitor," she said, as though suddenly puzzled. "What can it matter where he is from?"

Joel started to reply, but checked himself. Of course these people had no way of knowing. Of course they were still under the impression that intelligent life, wherever it might exist, would necessarily be in their own form. The fact that it might not be had never occurred to them! Then that was why they had not feared the *White Whale* and her crew. It was something Carruthers had probably perceived at once, something he could no doubt explain. But now Joel was seeing it first-hand for himself. Psychologically, this girl and her people were incapable of conceiving a way of life based on different reasons for living than their own, with different motives, different—ambitions.

Just, he reflected, as his own people were psychologically incapable of greeting a stranger without subconscious suspicion.

To these people, a visitor was—a visitor, and therefore a friend!

He wondered how many others beside himself, Carruthers and Dobermann knew.

"Perhaps it does not matter at all," Joel said, and he was surprised at the gentleness in his voice. He had not felt it that way in his throat for a long time. Not for a terribly long time. "Now, if you'll let me help you with that harness, we'll free your *kaelli*, and see what can be done about getting you on toward your destination!"

Joel's big fingers started fumbling with the thick leather thongs of the *kaelli's* rig. The harness felt strange and confusing to hands disciplined to the limiting exactnesses

of servocircuits and pressure-control studs, and the complexity of their co-ordination was thrown into confusion by sheer simplicity.

The girl laughed as she watched his efforts, then guided his hands with her own, and Joel felt a strange warmth mounting in his neck. And when the *kaelli* was at last freed, he said, "Now then, where can I take you? I owe you something more than just the replacement of your *dhennah*. I shall drive slowly so that the *kaelli* can follow, and you can see for yourself what it is like to ride in one of our machines!"

"But—they go like the wind!"

"Indeed they do!" Joel laughed, unaccountably pleased with her excitement. "Yes, ma'm, just like the wind!"

Quite unexpectedly, she reached for his hand, and Joel clasped hers with a quickness he had not intended. But then he was leading her to the jeep, helping her into it.

He started the powerful turbine engine, chuckled aloud at her quick gasp, then joined in her laughter.

"Just like the wind!" he cried and they were off.

The day was clear and bright and to Joel the air itself seemed to come alive with a heady excitement. This was something, it told him. This was not to hate. This was not to drink in bitterness. This was *not* to be alone.

**CAPTAIN** Nicholas Joel paced the fore-waist bridge. There was a full, untouched flagon on the mahogany desk, and the bottle of Martian Colony Bond stood, tightly corked, beside it.

He sat down, hating the feel of the chair of command beneath his big body.

What he was thinking was wrong, of course. But no man could be two men; a man could not split himself down the middle and say: this is your life *here*, this is your life *there*, for it is unthinkable that a man be prisoner of one life only—No, a man could not do that; a man had only one life.

Wrong, was it?

And who, any more a man than himself, could dare to be judge?

He would call Carruthers; he would explain, and Carruthers would inform the rest. As for Command—

A buzzer roared on the desk in front of him. It was the dispatch unit communicator—it would be Southard.

A huge forefinger hit the toggle almost hard enough to wrench it from its socket.

"Command!" Joel grated into the sensitive pick-up. "Proceed with your message." He reached for the flagon, drained it, filled it again.

"Lieutenant Southard calls Command from Servogroup 4." The youngster's voice sounded tight, excited. Now what the hell—"Request task mission. Request task mission. Position—"

Joel quickly jacked in the ship's armory circuit. An alarm klaxon would be electrifying the entire complement of combat personnel stationed in that quarter of the ship even as armory communications was taking down the co-ordinates Southard was dictating. And within one minute and forty-five seconds after that, combat units would be assembling in machine-like preci-

sion, deploying into advance order at the ship's stern.

And as the two huge sections between the *White Whale's* slender atmosphere fins opened like hungry steel mouths, disgorging flat, thick-bodied machines with their grim burdens of armed men and destroyer-artillery. Ship's Guard would be taking up defense positions, manning gun stations which commanded an energy potential sufficient to destroy a minor planet in a single, searing second of blue-white heat.

All this was automatic. A dispatch-unit request for task mission was an order, momentarily transcending even Command authority. It worked that way because the men who travelled space had learned that with the first foot they rose off the surface of Earth, theirs was no longer the privilege of living, but the task of survival. Space was emergency. And if you regarded it otherwise, it would kill you.

Joel waited. He watched only the sweep second hand on his desk chronometer; he did not need his screens, for he knew too well what was transpiring three hundred and twelve feet below him. He had seen it too many times. And too many times had he waited the necessary two minutes, listened to the taut silence of the waiting communicator.

"Command to Southard. Task mission dispatched and advancing. Now describe your situation."

"As follows—" The young lieutenant's voice was still taut, but it was not at the edge of panic. Of that Joel was certain. It was just that this was the first time, and it

wasn't a field exercise, and it hadn't just been learned the night before from an Academy manual . . .

"Servounit 4, sample tapping with four facilities at two hundred feet. Metal encountered; processed. Object depth-screened; fabricated. Extends from minus two zero zero to minus five two seven. Diameter three zero feet. Further investigation withheld pending arrival of task mission. Over for Command."

*Over for Command*, the young voice said. So many, many times . . .

He was not exactly the same Nicholas Joel, now. He was Command . . .

"All right, boy, sit easy and try to relax. What the hell is it you've got holed up out there?"

"It's a—a space ship, sir."

"What class?"

"I don't know, sir. It isn't Terrestrial."

"All right, what do the counters tell you?"

"It's about a thousand years old, sir. That's as close as the counters can come, working off a screen. Perhaps, sir, you'd—"

"Well I don't want to look at pictures! Inform task mission when they show up that I'm coming out for a look around—and I'll have their hides if they go unnailing things before I get there. You got any Bond with you, Southard?"

"Yes sir."

"All right, you get my point? Don't drink it all! This is Command, *Whale*, out!"

Joel broke the circuit just as the admittance buzzer went off; he thumbed a stud and the narrow bulkhead door slid back, admitting Carruthers and Dobermann.

"Was wondering when you two

were going to report. Sent a T-M to Southard—says he's found a space ship two hundred feet under the desert. Sometimes I think that kid works too hard. All right, got the 'copter ready?"

"Warming up on the waist ramp now," Dobermann said.

Joel stood up, reached for his guns and belt and strapped them around his thick middle. He gave Carruthers a quick look. The thin face was taut, almost expressionless, but there was an excitement smouldering in the dark eyes; the old excitement Joel had seen in them so many times before.

"No objections to the artillery this time, I take it, Sam?" Joel grunted as he clasped the big buckle, let the weight of the blasters sag their holsters down into position on his thighs. "Damn good of you! And I'm glad you understand these people so well—while we're on our way maybe you can tell me why they bury space ships."

"Maybe we ought to ask them, Skipper," Sam said with a half-smile on his thin lips.

"I get your point. But maybe they should've told us! Come on."

**O**N JOEL'S order, the task mission's guns had been reversed; drawn about the area where Southard's servounits were noisily sucking up sand, they no longer were concentrated on the excavation site, but instead defended it, slender snouts commanding an immense circular field of fire.

"You don't trust them at that, do you, Nicholas?" Carruthers said above the racket of the servounits. "Lord, you could slaughter an

army—"

"This is what it says to do in the goddamn books!" Joel snapped. "You're the guys who were so glad to make a strike."

The heavy, tracked machinery with its towering drill-housings and down-thrust vacuum-scoops whined and growled in a nerve-wrenching discord of power. Men sweated under the mild sun with a silent hurry, with a disciplined excitement.

Southard was fast and efficient.

Dobermann was silent, watching, analyzing.

Carruthers had the hungry look in his eyes that Joel did not understand.

And Joel was impatient. It was a tableau of men and machines that he had watched before, and always, at the end of it, there was something big for him to handle—frustrating if not dangerous, a mind and bone-wearying struggle if not an outright battle. They never came smooth, never.

"Forehull clear, sir!" It was Southard, calling from the lip of the immense hole his machines had excavated.

"Cut your servos!"

Southard signalled to his units, and they muttered slowly into silence, and then the silence hung over them all like a heavy thing, and Captain Nicholas Joel knew that what happened next was up to him.

With a motion of one gauntleted hand he brought Dobermann and Carruthers in next to him, and then the three of them walked with a disciplined haste to the sandy lip, past Southard, and looked down.

A pitted forehull jutted up out of the moist sand two hundred feet



below them, its plates glittering darkly in the rays of the powerful illumination units which had already been lowered.

Dobermann's quick eyes took in each detail in seconds, and then they darted up to Joel's face. Carruthers was silent, and his face was white.

"All right, let's get some winch-lifts over here!" Joel bellowed. "Torches, can-openers, let's get with it!"

And within minutes, Joel was on his way down in a bucket, big boots planted solidly on a small mountain of heavy tools.

Dobermann was following, and Carruthers was in the third bucket.

Joel's bare hands were exploring the gnurled lip of the fore-hull lock-hatch before either of them hit bottom. Dobermann was first up beside him, a heavy torch cradled in his short, thick arms.

"Ready?"

"Won't need that thing," Joel grunted. "Nobody locked up when they left. Give me a hand."

The hatch, like the rest of the hull, was pitted, but despite the moistness of the sand in which the ship was imbedded, there were no indications of corrosion. Joel made a mental note to have the lubricants in which the hinge-gymbals were packed analyzed later; they were still as good as new; the hatch was giving almost easily.

Carruthers, with an arc lantern, lit their way inside.

They walked into what was obviously a pilots' compartment. Instruments, control panels, ack-seats, notations on metal-leaf note-pads which they did not understand;

Dobermann copied them.

They descended ladder-walks into the fore-waist; crew compartment. Functional, compact, reflecting the same efficient engineering which they had encountered in the previous compartment.

Through a second bulkhead opening; supply compartment. Through another; cargo hold. It was not empty, and loading gear was in evidence, although neatly stowed in its locks.

"Mneurium-4," Carruthers said. The words made a hollow sound in the emptiness behind them.

They kept going. Armory. All units still in place. Engine room. Dobermann's counter ticked slowly in the stillness. Still a little kick left in the piles. Machine-shop; lab. Spotless, perfect order. Finally, tubes. The smooth metal gleamed in the light of Carruthers' lamp.

And that was all.

Joel turned wordlessly and started back up the ladder-walks. Dobermann and Carruthers clanged hollowly after him, scrambling to keep up.

Joel didn't stop until he had climbed back into one of the buckets, and then he waved impatiently. Machinery whined above him, and his bucket swung clear.

At the lip, he motioned for Southard.

"All right, I want ten of your people with technical research rates. Leave them with Dobermann and Carruthers. Issue return orders to your T-M, and then get these units out of here and digging up what we came after."

"But—yes sir."

Dobermann and Carruthers were at the lip, climbing out of their

buckets. There was a puzzled look, even on Dobermann's usually taciturn face.

"You two," Joel snapped, "will have a crew of researchers. Ten men. Take twenty-four hours and scrape the insides of this thing. Carruthers will report directly to me when you're finished. Dobermann, you'll nail K'hall-i-k'hall to a wall somewhere and don't let him down until you find out what became of whoever flew this tank."

He turned and walked away before anyone could protest.

CAPTAIN Nicholas Joel drained the flagon. He looked again at the faded image in the small, rectangular frame, finally returned it to the breast pocket of his tunic. Then he looked up across the mahogany desk at Carruthers and Dobermann.

"So," he said slowly, "so he told you he didn't know, did he?"

"Yes, Captain, that is what he told me. He was surprised about the space ship. He called the others in. There was the same reaction. They—"

Joel leaped to his feet. "Don't give me that!" he thundered. He grabbed at the bottle of Bond; spilled it as he poured. "You *know* he knows!"

"Captain, I was quite convinced."

"Quite convinced, quite convinced, were you . . . All right, Dobermann, get out of here. You find out anything, let me know. Sam, I want to talk to you. Go on Dobermann, *git!*"

Joel slumped back behind the desk as his first officer pivoted, left.

He tried a swallow from the flagon; fumbled at his tunic pocket for the small frame, extracted it; looked at it again. Then put it back a second time.

Carruthers sat down opposite him.

"You going to talk to me, Nicholas, or pass out before you get the chance?"

"All right, Sam." Joel got up, put the Bond back in its cabinet; emptied the flagon and put it in too. "I get your point. Only you listen. The crew of that ship was deliberately murdered. Cold-bloodedly murdered, and it isn't going to happen to us."

"I see." The ship's surgeon eyed the tips of his fingernails, then slowly looked up into Joel's red, swollen face. "Naturally, there wouldn't be any bodies around to prove your theory, would there, skipper? And no signs of struggle. We didn't see any. Of course, their guns *were* racked up pretty neatly—But it's all there in the report—" he waved a slender hand toward a roll of tape on the desk.

"Never mind your sarcastic technicalities! They were—"

"Nicholas, sit down. And listen."

"All right. But I *don't* get your point! And I don't want any of your double-talk! The trouble with you guys—"

"First of all, Nicholas, you know that crew wasn't murdered or anything of the kind. And you know, and Dobermann realizes that you know *he* knows, that K'hall-i-k'hall was lying in his teeth. And K'hall-i-k'hall knows *we* know it."

Joel lowered his eyes. "All right, Sam," he said. No, there hadn't been any use in trying to drum up

a bunch of tripe—no use in trying to fool Sam. He had known that from the start. But sometimes—sometimes, even when a man knew he was fooling himself, he had to give it a try, just to see—“They went native, didn’t they, Sam?” he said.

“Yes, Skipper. They did. Somebody back where they came from needed that mneurium-4 real bad. Somebody had guts and sweat and brains enough to get ships into space looking for it. And in their own way, somebody had faith enough to think they’d get it if it was to be found. Only, as you say—”

“Liked it here, I suppose. Liked it better than anything they’d ever seen before—and that can of theirs had a thumping set of drives, so they’d seen plenty.”

There was silence for a moment. And then Sam said, “Well, Nicholas, there it is. The psychology of the thing is obvious enough, isn’t it?” Carruthers gave him a meaningful look, and Joel’s nerves rebelled at it.

“All right, I get your point!” A big fist slammed down on the desktop. “So somebody didn’t get their mneurium-4! Somebody probably ornery enough to keep on living anyway. What do you want to bet they’re still going strong, who or wherever they are out in that black hell up there? What do you want to bet, Sam?”

The surgeon’s thin lips smiled gently. “I’d bet right along with you, Nicholas. They’re probably still going strong. I imagine they made out.”

“But K’hall-i-k’hall—”

“Is proprietor of a very pleasant

world. A world of very nice people, Nicholas, who enjoy living in their way, and get a kick out of seeing other people enjoy it. They think a little differently than a lot of folks.”

“That makes ’em bad, I suppose?”

“No.”

Joel looked into the thin face, the intent, dark eyes. The look was in them.

And Joel guessed he was finally letting himself realize what the look really meant.

It was a look that meant a hunger for all that Joel hated, and more. . .

It was a look that meant, even now after all these years, that Sam still hurt inside, and hurt badly.

“Why—why couldn’t it have been the other way *around*, Sam,” Joel said hoarsely.

The other looked up at him. “You do hate it that much, don’t you.”

“Look Sam, you’ve gotta get my point! I don’t think that crew did anything wrong! They didn’t. They just decided to stop being hunks of machinery.”

Carruthers smiled. “I get your point, Skipper. And I’m going to let you figure this one out all by yourself. But I’d like to tell you something first, just sort of as a point of information; maybe it’ll help. Skipper, I had a girl once, too.”

Joel stood still. Then he turned, opened his mouth to speak, then clamped it hard shut.

“They told me I couldn’t pilot. But I could help, and my help was needed—everybody’s was, because this wasn’t a matter of a govern-

ment project. This was a matter of a race of people who were building a ladder—a big, tall ladder, Nicholas. Sometimes it was a killer. Sometimes a heartbreaker. Sometimes a laughingstock. *But it belonged to men, and they lived and died for it; they built it, and it's theirs to climb, Nicholas!*"

Joel watched the other's worn face, and now the hurt was naked in it.

"She said, Nicholas, that it was all off if I decided to go up to space. I loved her, Skipper. *And I loved the tall ladder.*"

Joel whirled. "Sure, and what's it got us, Sam? A bellyful of cold, aching loneliness—our guts twisted and squeezed until the life's dried up in 'em—and what do we get? What do those wrangling, yapping, bellyaching rotters back home give us for it? Pension us off when we can't see our blast-off studs anymore and forget about us.

"They take the stuff we bring 'em—just as if it grew on trees, just as if it grew into a neat, pretty package somewhere all by itself! With money they can buy it—with enough money they can buy all of it! Even if we had to get it with the air sucked out of us, with our brains boiled out of us, with our crazy heads busted in.

"And you know what, Sam? There was even a time when they said we couldn't do it at all! A hundred years ago, they laughed at us for trying to get to the moon! They laughed, Sam—and those who didn't laugh *didn't even give a damn at all!*

"So I was to tell the girl I'd marry her later, but that right now they thought I ought to be a pilot!

I was to say to my life: I'll live you later, but right now I've got to be a pilot. . . And I was to freeze my insides for twenty years showing 'em they were wrong to laugh, and that it was time they gave a damn, that what I could bring home was going to mean a lot to the world they live on!

"And like a fool I did!

"And Sam—Sam, they're still yapping like little dogs for a piece of meat—not just a good piece of meat, but all wrapped up nice and fancy, no mistakes allowed, every time they whistle! And the whistling gets so easy, Sam—so easy. You can even do it while you're stabbing your neighbor in the back, while you're selling his kids down the river—even while you're taking your next breath to yap some more!

"They can go to hell, Sam! They can go to hell."

Joel slumped down in the chair behind the mahogany desk.

The surgeon looked at him, looked away.

"You've made up your mind, then."

"That's right."

"I suppose Dobermann and I can get the ship back somehow."

"You'll make it."

"I guess we will. Unless the rest feel the way you do—and I know half the crew thinks this is quite a place. In which case, of course, I suppose they'll survive, back home, even without the mneurium-4—they have for a long time. But there is one thing."

"Yeah, yeah."

"These people are fine people, as you've—found out. You couldn't even replace that *dhennah.*"

"How did you—"

"They're swell folks, Nicholas, and always will be," the surgeon said softly, "and they've never built a thing, *and never will*."

"They don't know greed, because no one has ever achieved anything worth another's wanting."

"They don't know jealousy, because no one has ever obtained anything that another couldn't."

"They don't know hate, because no one has ever discovered a thing for which to fight that another thinks of sufficient value to fight for."

"Only—if they don't know hate or jealousy, Skipper—then, *they don't know love!*"

Quietly, Carruthers rose from his chair. For a moment, he hesitated. "What is it you're lonely for, Nicholas?" he asked, and then he left the fore-waist bridge.

**T**HERE WAS a mushroom of sun-fire against the blackness of the cool night, and a thunder of power.

Slowly, ponderously, the *White Whale* backed down her column of flame, hesitated, flared again for a final time from her thick stern, and then settled to Earth.

Gantries rolled into position. And the sound of lock-hatches clanging open thrilled the length of the *White Whale*, and there were the muffled voices of men, and the voices became shouts with the joy loud in them.

The men trooped down from their great metal monster as fast as the lifts would carry them, and in small groups and in crowds they made their boistrous way across the landing plaza and toward home.

And when the shouts had died, a last man descended the smooth sides of the *White Whale*.

His eyes glanced over the great bulk of her, making certain she was secure. Then he, too, walked from her, but not as quickly as the rest.

Captain Nicholas Joel walked slowly, because he was tired.

On every side of him, in dark shadow against the night, there were tall, slender, streamlined shapes pointing toward the stars.

His slow boot-steps echoed from their hulls as he passed, a tiny midge of a thing, between them.

As Sam had said, these were things that Man had made.

And among them again was the *White Whale*.

They had said he was a good pilot. ● ● ●