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It was a race between man and alien to rule the stars. Scientifically, the aliens were decades ahead—but their real advantage was their incredible elusiveness!

The Best of Fences

by RANDALL GARRETT

ROMM PARMAY stepped into the Interstellar Communications Central and eased the door shut behind him.

Nobody paid much attention to him; the five hundred ICC men at the boards were talking in quiet, well-modulated voices that filled the

room with a fluctuating murmur of unintelligible sound.

At Number One board, Kerrman was staring moodily at the dead screen, blowing clouds of cigarette smoke at the control panel and watching the smoke writhe and flow down around the pilot lights and switch plates. Parmay walked across the room quietly, and stopped a few feet behind Kerrman.

"Boo!"

Kerrman jerked, inhaled a cloud of smoke, coughed, and turned around, glaring.

"Romm! Dammit, if you weren't my boss, I'd kick you where it would do the most good!"

Parmay turned solemnly, presenting his gluteal region for assault.

"Go ahead," he said sorrowfully, "I'm not the boss any more."

"All right, you're asking—*what? What did you say?*"

Parmay turned back to face Kerrman. The grin on his face threatened to break into laughter.

"Let you be the first to congratulate me. You are gazing at the Chief of Psychological Contact."

"Contact!" Kerrman grinned back. "You mean you're going out with the fleet?"

"Right. They just told me.

I've got to get myself a group together, one for each hypersee ship. So far, I am the head cheese of a totally non-existent group; I'm nobody's boss."

"Need a good assistant?" Kerrman asked hopefully.

"No, I need a good contact here. You've got my job now, and more. There isn't room on a ship to carry a complete psych analyzer, much less a synthesizer, so, for anything I dig up, you'll have to do most of the math."

"Good enough. I have—" Kerrman stopped suddenly and looked at his watch. "Wow! Almost talked too long. There's an Ancestor due in five minutes."

He sat down again at the board, cutting in the instruments. A shadow pointer moved slowly up a dial, then stopped.

"Not early, at any rate," he commented.

Better than four hundred light years away, a hypersee communicator fired out its carrier; at vast multiples of the velocity of light, that disturbance radiated in all directions through space. Less than a thousandth of a second after leaving its origin, the carrier was nudging the receptors on Earth.

On Kerrman's panel the

shadow pointer began a smoothly oscillating dance. Kerrman touched three switch plates in swift succession. A voice came from the speaker.

"Expedition Seven Nine Six calling Earth. Seven Nine Six calling Earth. Come in, Earth."

The accent was odd, and most people would have had trouble understanding it, but Kerrman was used to handling the changes that had taken place in the language in four centuries.

"Communications Central, Earth," he replied. "We're in, Seven Nine Six."

"Seven Nine Six in," said the speaker definitely. "We've been here twenty-four hours. How long have we been gone?"

"You're four minutes late; not bad correlation at all. You left Earth four hundred thirteen years, seventy-one days, two hours, thirty seconds as of now." He touched a button to produce a *ting!* "What's your subjective time?"

"Eleven years, sixty-two days, twelve hours, five minutes even as of now." A similar sound came from the speaker.

Kerrman jabbed the figures into the MAC for subjective-objective time correlation.

"Any sign of the enemy?" he asked next.

"None. They haven't landed here. We've scouted the planet carefully."

Romm Parmay, standing beside Kerrman, shook his head resignedly. No sign of them. There never was.

KERRMAN'S next job was pure psychology. That was the reason for assigning a psych engineer to the first receiver. Each call from a ship coming out of near-light drive was picked up by this board.

Kerrman glanced at the dossier on the desk before him; the four-century-old dossier that contained complete information on Expedition 796 as she had been when she left Earth.

"Am I speaking to Commander Loris Cay?"

"No. He passed away seven years ago, subjective time. I am Lieutenant William Bowman, commanding."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Lieutenant." Kerrman looked at the blank screen and wished that hypersee vision transmission had been in existence when Expedition 796 was launched. It was easier to judge a man's psych reaction by his face than by his voice alone.

"Lieutenant, can you under-

stand me all right? I've had a chance to study your pronunciation, but how does mine sound to you?"

The lieutenant admitted it was odd but perfectly clear.

"Good. Then I'll give you a brief synopsis of the history of the past four hundred years.

"When you left the only hint we had that another race was colonizing the galaxy was the sounds, which we assumed to be speech, that came over certain frequencies of the hypersee band. Since then, we have perfected vision transmission; we can see them now. And they're not pretty to look at.

"We still have no way of knowing where a hypersee wave is coming from; they are non-directional, at least insofar as we have been able to discover, so we still don't know from which direction the enemy is approaching.

"We haven't been able to correlate their vision with their voice transmission, so we still don't have any key to their language. Luckily, we're fairly sure that they don't have any key to ours, either.

"A little over a century ago, we detected something else on the hypersee band. It sounded like a weird sort of static; a whining sort of thing. The

only source that could put out that kind of disturbance was found to be material objects traveling faster than the velocity of light.

"That gave us our first clue—the first hint that hypersee ships could be built. We figured that if the aliens had them, we could get them, too.

"It took better than thirty years, but we've got it now. Our hypersee fleet has been consolidating the colonies for two hundred light years out, and we're constantly expanding.

"Within the next year, we'll be able to ship you supplies and materiel, which will speed up your colonization by about fifty years. You'll have a going civilization there in your lifetime instead of the three generations that the planners originally estimated.

"These are the major developments. Any questions, Lieutenant?"

There were questions, of course, plenty of them, but Parmay didn't pay much attention to them. Those pioneers the ICC jokingly called the Ancestors were time travelers in a very real sense of the word. They came out of near-light drive to find that the rest of the universe had passed them up; they were anachronisms.

It hadn't been too bad at first; they were not too far displaced from their own time, those who had first reported in, centuries ago.

But now they found that their speech was old-fashioned and their beautiful new ships were completely outmoded. They could not be told immediately that the new hypersee ships were transporting colonists to the stars faster than the old near-light ships were coming out of the fitzgerald. They could not be told that they had gone out in vain.

A psych engineer had to be careful in telling them what had happened. The old ships had served their purpose, of course; without them, the race of man would not be nearly as far flung through the stars as it was now. But it would be hard to convince the Ancestors that they were still performing a useful function—unless a psych engineer told them so.

KERRMAN had assigned 796 a report schedule and had cut the connection. He looked up at Parmay.

"If I'm the boss now, I can knock off any time I please. There won't be another Ancestor for three days; Eight-Oh-Two is due then. As soon

as I get all the dope on this one correlated, I'd like to talk to you. Where're you headed now?"

Parmay grinned. "I'm going to tell Alina. I want to watch her blow her stack. I'll see you at my place as soon as you quit. Okay?"

"Good enough. Don't shock your everlovin' too much."

"*Hah!*" Parmay *hah'd*. "That woman is about as shockproof as they come."

Parmay left communications and took a drop down sixty-three levels to the Hypersee Physics section. Alina's lab was deadly silent when he opened the door. The four technicians under her were watching their instruments and ignoring the door.

Parmay resisted the impulse to pull the same gag on his wife that he had pulled on Kerrman. It might ruin an expensive research project.

Alina Starnel's blonde, closely-cropped head was bent over an array of instruments that meant almost nothing to her husband. She moved her hand over a series of switch plates and looked up at the screen facing her.

The un-normal face of an alien stared out at her with its blank eyes. The fronds on the face flickered gently.

Parmay watched for the

better part of ten minutes as the face blurred, shifted, and underwent other strange transformations beneath Alina's manipulations of the controls. Her technicians spoke softly now and then, making small adjustments in the instruments they were controlling.

Suddenly Alina slapped at the switch plates. The alien face in the screen had faded out. "Damn!" she said softly.

She turned to the four technicians. "Get as much out of that as you can, though I'm pretty sure we've lost another round."

"*Bong!*" said Parmay. "Round over."

"Romm!" Alina turned, seeing him for the first time. "What are you doing here?"

"Got bored. Decided I needed a kiss."

"Well, come get it."

He did.

"Now," she said, "the truth. You don't come wandering down here at this time of day to neck. Out with it."

"I came to take you to lunch."

"At this hour? I don't usually take off this early."

"My darling Alina, I have something to tell you, and I am sure that you'll need something in your stomach to brace you when I tell it."

Alina put her palms to her temples and looked at the ceiling.

"Oh, *no!* This is what comes of being a psych engineer! He comes in and makes a remark like that because he knows damned good and well that I would drop anything to find out what he's being so mysterious about!" She dropped her hands and looked back at Romm. "All right," she snarled in mock viciousness, "I'll come. But you can't get away with this forever!"

The Colonization Program Building filled better than a cubic mile of the city's space, housing every function of the operation that was taking man to the stars, trying to get the race of man there before the aliens beat them to it. The lift shaft took Parmay and his wife up to the top level, where the apartments and restaurants were. There, they could look out through the broad windows at the rolling meadows and forest that covered the city beneath.

They sat down in a booth in the main dining room and dialed a menu.

"Now, bub," said Alina impatiently, "do I have to wait for food, or do you talk now?"

"I talk now. Do you know the present Chief of Psychological Contact?"

Alina lifted an eyebrow. "No. I never even heard of the department. What is it? Top secret, or something?"

"Not particularly. I'm it."
"That's nice."

Parmay looked at the tips of his fingers. "Nice? Oh, yes. And on the same scale, S Doradus is a comfortable warm star."

"Oh?" Alina lifted both eyebrows this time. "Why did they fire you from your old job? Did you fluff up?"

Parmay glowered. "Do you want to listen to me or not? If you're bored, you can quit paying attention."

Alina's laughter broke out into the open. "But you'll go on talking just the same!"

Parmay's laughter joined hers. "All right, vixen, go ahead and use your psychological torture methods. Just be glad that I don't use some of the refinements on you. If I were a research man instead of an engineer, I'd probably use you as a project."

"Brute! Shut up and eat!"

Through the meal, Parmay explained the new job.

"—so I'll have to pick a good crew to do the job right," he finished.

"You sound as though you're glad to be rid of the old position. Why?" Alina asked, offering a cigarette.

Parmay dragged it into light before answering.

"In a way, I am. I'm tired of telling new colonists bad news. I'm sick of feeding Ancestors half-truths. How would you like to tell a hundred thousand people, over a span of eighty years, that things are terrible, and tell them in such a way that they will think things are fine?"

Alina frowned. "Is it as bad as all that? Just because we've left them behind? Weren't they prepared for that when they left? They should know that Earth would have changed in all that time, that we would be ahead of them. Why should they be so shocked to come out of the fitzgerald and find that it's so?"

Parmay shook his head. "It's not that, honey. I have to tell them just the opposite. Look—do you realize that I have to tell them that we are losing the race with the aliens?"

"I have to tell them that we have invented hypersee vision transmission—and the aliens had it first. I have to tell them that we have had hypersee ships for seventy years and the aliens have had them for twice that long.

"I have to tell them that the aliens have made a great deal of progress, and that we have

lagged pitifully behind in copying them. Have we done anything on our own? No.”

Alina closed her eyes. “God, what pessimism. Gimme ’nother cigarette; mine went out.”

Parmay handed her a cigarette. “What do you mean: ‘pessimism’? What *have* we done?”

His wife held up a hand and began counting off fingers.

“One: Increase in the standard of living. The five-hour work week.

“Two: If and when it comes to a pitched battle between us and the aliens, we have the ionic disruptor. I can guarantee that no known conductor can stand up against it. And—”

Parmay waved her down. “Cut. That’s just another problem to hand to the Ancestors. We have increased our own personal comforts; what does that mean to a group of people who are hacking out a new civilization on some godforsaken planet a couple of hundred light years from home?”

“And how do you know we’re invincible? The ionic disruptor disintegrates all and any metals or alloys we know of. But isn’t it possible that the aliens have some alloy we don’t have?”

“You find me a non-conducting metal,” Alina said positively, “and I’ll admit that the disruptor might fail against it.”

“I repeat, my dear, how do you know we’re invincible?”

Alina lifted the eyebrow again, a habit that irritated Parmay because he couldn’t do it. “I don’t know that we’re invincible, and you know it,” she answered, ignoring syntax. “But I hardly think you can say we haven’t done anything.”

“You think not?” grinned Parmay. “Listen: ‘We haven’t done anything.’”

Alina said nothing; she just looked at him.

“You look,” said Parmay, “as though you loved me.”

“You act as though you were analyzing me. Put that slipdisc back in its case, chum; I’ll not have you pulling psychostatistics on me.”

Parmay spread both palms. “Look, ma, no analyzer. I’m innocent.”

BOTH MAN and the aliens were spreading inexorably. Neither knew, or could know, the aim, intention, or location of the other. Each knew that the other was spreading. Each was determined that the other should not be ahead in claiming the galaxy.

And each was determined that his own race, and his alone, should rule the stars.

Neither, seemingly, knew much about the other. It had become a battle of technology; a battle in which man was lagging behind. The psych engineers who told the outpost stars that man was catching up to the aliens were propagandizing in their teeth.

The enemy was ahead; the enemy was too damned far ahead.

So man fought doggedly on, hanging by his teeth, making each day, each second, count.

The Psychontact Division built up month by month as Parmay worked to get the right men into the right positions.

Specifically, Psychontact had the job of co-ordinating the colonies into a working whole, thus hoping to insure that the whole would be greater—and stronger—than the sum of its parts.

"Colonies! Colonies!" blazed Parmay, one morning. "You'd think we were bacteriological cultures!"

"Well," answered Alina, "of course we aren't."

"Well of course we *are!*" Parmay snapped back. "We're trying to spread, disease-like, over the galaxy in order to counteract the effects of an-

other type of organism which is trying to do the same."

Alina was putting some of his things into a travelcase, and she went right on shoving them in as she answered.

"Romm, why does the alien problem bother you? You're getting to be a fanatic on the subject, and it's not your problem at all. Why don't you let Xenology do its job and you do yours?"

Parmay grabbed the travelcase as Alina closed it. He smiled nonchalantly. "Honey chile, I am not a fanatic; I just have to have something to yell about. Relieves tension and all that. Remind me to give you a lesson some time."

"But—"

"Shaddup. Come here."

When Alina started asking too many questions, Parmay didn't require a complete detailed analysis of his wife to know that she was worried about him; and he didn't need to run a complete synthesis to know what to do.

Twenty minutes later, the phone chimed.

"Damn!" Parmay blistered. He kissed Alina once more, then answered.

Lon Tallen, commander of the HC-36, greeted him from the screen. "Romm, we've installed all your equipment; we'll leave in two hours, but

I'd like to have you aboard in about an hour. Can do?"

"Can. See you." Parmay cut off and grinned at Alina. "Hear that? A whole hour."

AN HOUR LATER, he was aboard the Thirty-six, checking the instruments he had had installed. But he was only checking them with half a mind; the other half was on something Alina had said.

Fanatic? Possibly. After living with a threat that hadn't materialized in fifty decades, most of the human race viewed the alien threat with apathy. A man worked to prevent their spread—or rather to increase the spread of genus *Homo*—but after all, nothing had happened so far, had it? *Peace in our time.*

The trouble was, it took a psych man to realize the effect that losing the race would have on the people of Earth, and the human beings that Earth had scattered to the stars. And the farther Man spread, the worse that shock would be.

Parmay knew what it would be like, and Parmay didn't like it.

So his wife called him a fanatic. Well, perhaps he was, but he still didn't intend to let the race down by letting the aliens get too far

ahead. Somewhere in the seven hundred million cubic light years that Man owned there must be traces of the alien, and Parmay was going to find them if he could.

The Thirty-six lifted herself off Earth only a shade less than an hour after Romm Parmay came aboard. Once in free fall beyond the moon, her nose was aimed at the approximate area of her destination: D 38°40', RA 17h-4m. Then, gently and easily, the Hypersee Ship-36 slid out of normal space-time.

Commander Tallen was watching a communicator screen when Parmay entered the Main Control Salon.

Parmay groaned in mock despair. "Every time I walk into a place where there's a communicator, somebody's got their eyes glued to it. Why?"

Tallen turned. "I like to watch Junior, here. He scares me."

The face of an alien squirmed nastily on the plate.

"Why watch him, then?"

"I guess I'm like the little boy who banged his head against the wall because it felt so good when he stopped."

"Really?"

Tallen laughed. "No, not really. I keep watching because I keep hoping I'll run across something that will

give me a clue about them. I know experts have tried and failed, but I like to think that they might have been too close to the trees to see the forest, if you know what I mean."

"I'm glad," said Parmay frankly, "that someone besides me worries about them."

"Smoke?" asked Tallen, holding out his case.

"Thanks, no."

Tallen took one himself, then: "I understand your wife is working with hypersee."

Parmay nodded.

"Did you ever ask her why we can't get a line on the aliens' location?"

"Sure. And I get the same answer I'd get if I'd asked you: 'I don't know.' Hypersee waves aren't directional. They seem to ignore normal space-time and the matter and energy in it. They probably aren't instantaneous, but they're so close to it that trying to measure their rate of propagation at ordinary interstellar distances is as futile as Galileo's experiment with the lanterns on the mountain-tops. Or was that Torricelli? Anyway, we don't have any way of knowing where they are or how far away."

Tallen looked back at the alien on the screen. "Then Junior, here, might be on the

other side of the galaxy, as far as we know?"

"Right. Or M-33 in Andromeda. Or it's possible that they died out a thousand years ago, having lived at some spot in the universe so remote that even the hypersee hasn't reached us till now."

Tallen looked incredulous. "Then why are we worrying, if the damned things might not be anywhere around? Just on the off chance that they *might* be?"

Parmay shook his head. "Not exactly. We don't know anything from a strictly physical point of view, true; but we have done some work on the psychological side. We know, for instance, that they have seen our faces and heard our voices, just as you and I can watch Junior. We know this from the basic reactions of sentient creatures to that type of stimulus. They are aware of our existence. That rules out their being too far.

"We've been working to get ahead of them for five hundred years. If they're on the other side of the galaxy, we have another five hundred years before we contact them; if they're in one of the nearer galaxies, it will be another two thousand years.

"But we'll contact them

eventually, and it had better be on even terms."

Tallen examined the glowing end of his cigarette as though he were appraising a piece of art. "Too bad there isn't a doppler in hypersee; if the drive could be located, it would make it easy." He looked up at Parmay. "Do you know why we take so long to get to Therbis? Because of the stops. Look here." He picked up a card from the desk. "I use a table of random numbers. Every time we pass a star whose number is in the schedule chosen, we have to stop to see if there is any modulated electromagnetic radiation in the system. If there is, we've found the enemy."

"And if there isn't?"

"Then we haven't found him. And I get tired of sitting for eight hours while the communications boys mess around looking for something that isn't there." He spread his hands. "That's life. We look all over the galaxy for vibrations we can locate but can't find, and we find all kinds of communications we can't locate. I think I'll stick my nose in my ear and blow my brains out."

Parmay grinned. "Do me a favor; wait till we get to Therbis. That colony is

scarcely twenty years old, and they might be worried if their contacts with the rest of civilization go around splat-tering their cerebrum over the insides of their own ships."

SEVEN TIMES during the next few days, the HC-36 approached a star and listened for electromagnetic disturbances in space.

Seven times, they got nothing but normal static.

Then came Therbis.

Someone once defined eternity as the time required for everything to happen once. If you toss a coin enough times, it will eventually land on edge; if you shuffle a deck of cards enough times, they will eventually deal out in any predetermined order. And, by the 'inherently unprovable laws of probabilities, if you watch a glass of water long enough, all the high-velocity molecules will congregate in one place and boil off, leaving the remainder of the water frozen solid. You may have to wait some ten to the twentieth years, or it may happen tomorrow. But, however improbable, each of them *can* happen.

Take a spaceship. In order for one spaceship to spot another, via radar, they must be within a million or so miles

of each other and have low velocities relative to each other. An Earth vessel might never see another Earth vessel in space unless they had arranged it beforehand. And arranging things beforehand is stacking the deck, a reversal of normal entropy that only intelligent beings can bring about.

The Thirty-six approached the Therbis sun at something less than a thousand miles per second, the actual difference in velocity between that sun and Sol. Therbis itself was the fourth planet of the system; cold and bleak. It was somewhat bigger than Terra, with plenty of water and a high percentage of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, so the greenhouse effect kept it warm enough for human beings to colonize the island chains that surrounded the equatorial belt.

The HC-36 was braking in when the odds-against coincidence happened. Near planet six, which just happened to be at its nearest approach to Therbis, a spaceship came into range of the instruments of the HC-36. At first it was thought to be a meteor; that was what the instruments were meant to look for, and that's what they expected.

But no meteor is a smooth prolate spheroid, like a football with smoothly rounded ends. And no Earth ship was ever shaped like that, either.

It was visible on the plates of the HC-36 only a few seconds—then it vanished.

Orders were already snapping over the robot control system as Parmay charged for the main salon. He had heard the alarm and came running.

Tallen was slapping his hands over switch plates with lightning movements of his wrists. "Alien ship!" he shouted. "As soon as our radar touched her, she hit hypersee. That was about thirty-five seconds before our own equipment registered the echo, so she's had better than a minute to arrange herself nicely to blast us!"

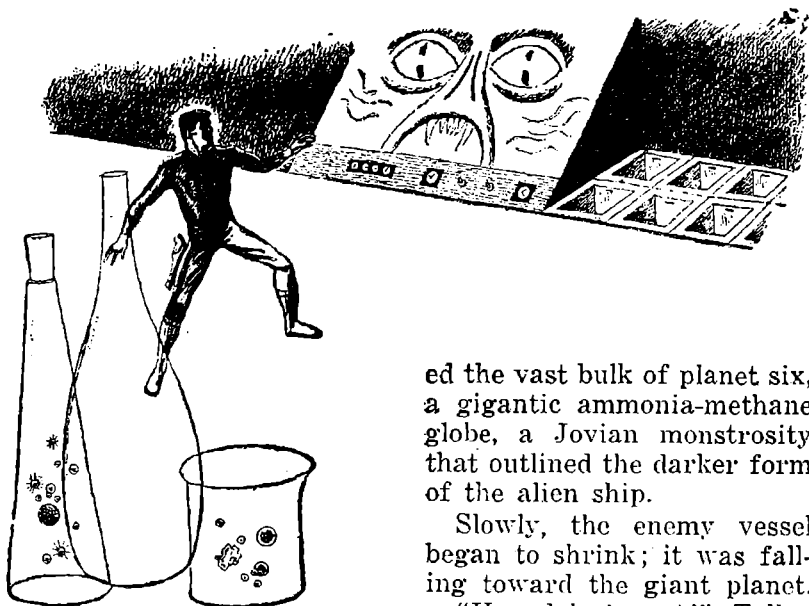
"Won't she have to come out of hypersee to do it?"

"Sure, but where?"

"I'd—"

He was cut off by a hum of power from Fire Control; at the same instant, he saw the football shape of the alien on the screen. It was less than eight miles away.

The Earthship's beam blazed momentarily on the alien vessel, then vanished. The alien dodged suddenly ahead, and something flick-



ered on her side. All hell broke loose in the Thirty-six. From the engine section came a faint thudding vibration of overload switches cutting out. The ship shivered and hic-coughed like a drink-deprived alcoholic.

Again Fire Control beamed out, and again the alien ship flared. But there was no answering blast.

Parmay, shaken, watched the weird battle on the screen. Behind the enemy ship loom-

ed the vast bulk of planet six, a gigantic ammonia-methane globe, a Jovian monstrosity that outlined the darker form of the alien ship.

Slowly, the enemy vessel began to shrink; it was falling toward the giant planet.

"Her drive's out!" Tallen shouted gleefully.

"So is ours!" snapped a voice from the speaker above the panel.

"Are we falling?"

"No, it's the hypersee that's out. The planetary drive is perfect. The hypersee is burned all to hell. No breach in the hull."

"Get us orbited to Therbis," Tallen ordered. "What damage to the alien ship?"

Fire Control answered. "The ionic disruptor didn't do as much damage as we thought. We weakened their hull, but we didn't open it."

"Okay," Tallen said, "keep an eye on the 'scope. Compute the orbit of the ship and watch it. If it shifts off the computed fall path, we'll hit it again."

Parmay grabbed Tallen's shoulder.

"Did all this get on tape?"

"Sure. Why?"

Parmay pushed Tallen aside and headed for the communicator.

THE NEWS hit Earth like a slug in the teeth. For the second time in half a millennium the human race was brought face to face with the fact that it was not the only intelligence in the galaxy, much less in the whole universe.

The instant the news came, a fleet of armed ships was given its orders, and within six hours they were squirting through hyperspace toward Therbis.

Meanwhile, the Psychological Corps was in a dither. Parmay was shooting data to them from Therbis and asking, in return, for all kinds of seemingly irrelevant information. Chemists were asked questions about organic oxidation-reduction equations; physicists were asked for data on propagation of electromagnetic waves in distorted

spaces and warped fields; biologists supplied facts about —of all things—deep sea fish.

All these things flowed into robot analyzers and synthesizers, came out and were fed back in again, directed by the frantic brain of Romm Parmay.

After twelve days, the bigwigs of Operation Interstellar were beginning to ask: "What in hell is Parmay driving at?"

And when Parmay was asked, all he would say was: "I'm not sure yet. I'm stranded here on Therbis until the fleet gets here, and I want to get back to Earth. I can't give you any answers 'til then."

Kerrman was on Earth, and he wasn't entirely unaware of what Parmay was working on. Kerrman, in fact, knew bloody well what it was. But he kept his mouth shut and applied a few ideas of his own.

Finally, word came that Parmay was on his way back from Therbis.

When he landed, the Directors of Earth were waiting for him, and two days later he was ready to appear before the assembled Directorate.

The fourteen Directors waited quietly for him to speak. The vast silence that filled the room seemed almost

a little too big for it, as though even a slight noise would not be heard if it were to be made. Pol Enson, the Speaker, looked at the others, then at Parmay.

"Okay, Romm; blaze away. I'm not a psych man, and I don't quite understand what you're driving at, but I hope you're right."

"I think I am," Parmay answered. "I've checked into it from every conceivable angle, and everything fits—there isn't one single unexplainable factor.

"We contacted the ship of the aliens. It went into hypersee. Then it attacked. Point one.

"Ask yourselves: *Why did it attack?* And then ask: *Why did we attack?*" He paused, watching them, then went on. "*Why didn't we both get the hell out of there?*"

The Directors frowned and waited.

"Keeping that in mind," Parmay continued, "let's look at our method of checking a system for the presence of aliens. We looked for modulated electromagnetics; we never found any. One explanation was that there weren't any aliens. But there's another explanation that fits the picture even better.

"They didn't put out any

because they don't know anything about them in communication!"

The frowns of the Directorate became puzzled.

"Let's take another tack," Parmay went on. "Our ionic disruptors are supposed to turn any metal into an incandescent gas. But they hardly touched the enemy ship. Why? Because it was a non-conductor! Plastics, gentlemen, plastics strong enough to construct a spaceship hull of them. And that's even stronger than you think.

"But why plastics? Why not metal? That's another clue.

"Here, then, we have a race which does not use metal or the longer electromagnetic radiations—I have no doubt that they can use the shorter ones. And they attack another ship.

"Let's get back to that because it's important; it gave me my first clue. I wondered why they attacked. There could be no reason to attack a ship that might be better armed than you, even if your psychology is bred toward pure hate.

"There is only one good reason, and it is the same reason that made us fight back instead of running. We had a colony in that system,

and we didn't want the enemy to know it. If they had found us in a system where we had no colonies, we would have turned tail and run—the only sensible thing to do.

"But we didn't—and neither did they.

"Therefore, they, too, have a colony in that system!"

THE SPEAKER said: "Where? Therbis is the only planet with—" His voice trailed off as he suddenly saw the truth.

Parmay nodded. "All this time, we've been assuming that the aliens were after the same planets we were. But every bit of evidence indicates that they live on the ammonia-methane giants!"

He paused to light a cigarette, then went on: "Alina Starrnel, my wife, has done some checking on the conditions that obtain in such an atmosphere. Alina—" he nodded toward her.

She looked at them from her cool green eyes. "The atmospheres of ammonia-methane giants are such that the surface suffers from almost unbelievable electric storms. Every sunspot on the primary, every wind, every slight change in temperature causes lightnings and electrical displays such as we on

Earth can't imagine. The atmosphere itself is a semi-conductor.

"Therefore, it would be almost impossible for them to have radio communication as we know it.

"There are two reasons why metals are not used for construction on such planets. One: the heavy, metal-bearing core of the giants is buried beneath thousands of miles of ice. Two: metals wouldn't stand the strain. At the temperatures prevailing on those planets, most metals are so brittle that they'd shatter under the loads that the unimaginable gravitational pull would cause.

"Plastics are a different matter. Any life that would evolve on such a world would be able to synthesize hard, tough materials in its own body. With plenty of carbon, hydrogen, and nitrogen around, they would have to find some way of making building materials from organic compounds. Actually, they're probably not plastics as we know them; possibly they wouldn't even stand up at normal room temperature on Earth."

Parmay took up the story again. "There, you see, is the reason we never contacted them. We never went any-

where near such planets; we had no use for them. And they wouldn't try to colonize our planets any more than we'd try to colonize Mercury."

The Speaker had a question: "How did they detect your radar when it impinged on their ship?"

Alina answered him. "On their worlds, sound would be useless as a normal means of communication. There's too much noise. It would be like you or I trying to talk within fifty feet of an atomic bomb explosion. The shorter electromagnetic spectrum, bad as it is, would permit them to 'shout' at each other over a distance of a hundred yards, and they could probably carry on a normal conversation in a room this size.

"We believe that they are naturally equipped to speak to each other by radio—after all, an electric eel can generate currents within its own body of quite sizable voltages. A slight modification, plus a controlling intelligence, could make a transmitter of a living body.

"Therefore, when our radar hit them, it probably sounded like a siren. They knew our ship was somewhere near and got the devil away from there."

The room was silent as Par-

may thanked Alina and concluded his speech.

"So, we have no quarrel with the aliens; they have none with us. We have entirely different spheres of operation. There is no need for conflict between us, now, or ever. Our job now is to contact them as best we can and trade knowledge for—"

The door opened suddenly, and Kerrman stepped in. He walked over to Parmay and whispered softly for a moment.

Parmay turned back to the Directors. "Gentlemen, Dr. Kerrman has had scout ships watching for several days in places where the aliens might be assumed to be. It's paid off. Our calculations are perfectly correct."

He grinned widely. "We don't have to worry about feeling inferior; we have a lot of things they don't, and vice versa.

"For instance, we have Earth. And I don't know how close we may have come to their home base, but they have already colonized Jupiter!

"As a poet named Frost once said, 'Good fences make good neighbors.' We've got the best of all possible fences, so—let's get friendly with the neighbors, boys!" ∞ ∞