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## MAGAZINE

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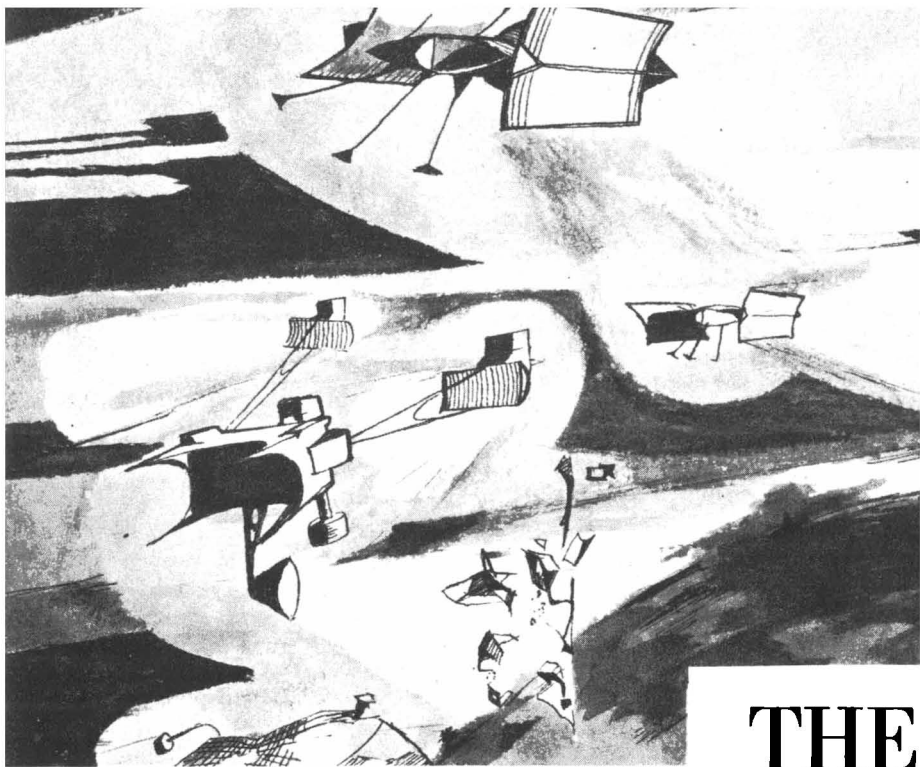
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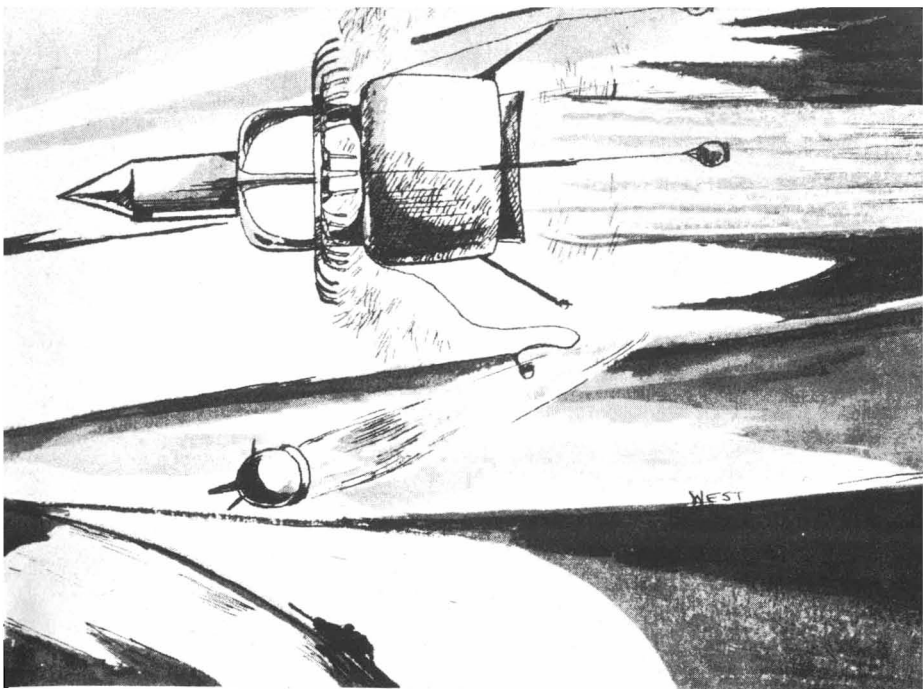
# THE

I

**A**S the ships of two warring worlds fought savagely in space and in air over Belcron, Moka's capital city, Hugh Hawkins paced anxiously up and down the vast, empty MT area. It wasn't his own safety he was concerned about — the Singalese ships would be as careful as Moka's own not to run any risk of damaging the Gate, and it was

for that reason that Hugh's standing orders were to take cover in the MT area at the first threat of an enemy raid.

Although scores of people were dying every minute all around him, Hugh Hawkins, the Mokan Gatekeeper, had no choice but to stay under cover and take no part in defense duties or even rescue operations. Not for Hugh Hawkins the safest of space-raid duties. He was far too valuable.



# GATEKEEPERS

Besides, he was technically neutral.

Of course, it was always possible in such a ferocious, chaotic battle that a stray shot would find him, or that a damaged ship would crash down on the huge enclosures which was generally known as the Gate. But if that happened, if the Gate itself was accidentally destroyed, Hugh Hawkins wouldn't be valuable any more.

***The equation of power was easily balanced: He had the key to victory in their struggle against another planet — they had his wife!***

**By J. T. McINTOSH  
Illustrated by WEST**

It was not, however, any such considerations that made Hugh so jumpy. It was the fact that Alice was out in the middle of the turmoil.

When the first warning came, a special flash to the Gatekeeper, Hugh had tried to take her to the Gate with him. But she had pointed out that it was test night and he'd have to be at the Gate until after midnight. So if they both went there straight away, and the fighting went on into the evening, they'd get nothing to eat all day.

"I'll stay and fix a picnic dinner, honey," she had said. "You get over right away. I'll follow when I'm ready."

He had protested, but she had pointed out that she wasn't under strict orders to dive for cover at the first hint of a raid, and he was. "Maybe I'll get there before anything happens," she had said optimistically.

But she hadn't. The fighting had lasted for over an hour already. And merely by the noise and the ground tremors Hugh could tell that it was a big raid.

He clenched and unclenched his hands. Didn't she know that he'd rather go hungry all day and all night than go through this torment? He was so sick with worry that by the time she did arrive he wouldn't be able to eat anyway.

Strictly, no one but the Gatekeeper himself was allowed in the MT area, not even the Gatekeeper's wife. Nearly two years ago, however, Hugh had told the Secretary flatly that he wouldn't take refuge there unless Alice could come too. The Secretary had shrugged and said, "Oh, well." So two people out of Moka's two billion were allowed to enter the MT enclosure—Hugh and Alice Hawkins. The Secretary wasn't. The President wasn't. Most particularly the army and navy chiefs weren't.

Hugh walked across bare concrete to the door through which Alice would enter.

On the other side of that door were three sentries. A guardhouse was built onto the Gate enclosure on the left; and other guards protected all the access roads around the Gate. Most of the time only a token force policed the checkpoints, for the Gate without the Gatekeeper was like an omelette without eggs. But when Hugh was there, and most particularly every eleventh night, when the tests were run, the Gate was guarded more closely than the treasury vaults.

Hugh willed the bell over the door to ring. When it did ring, as he watched it, he jumped convulsively, his heart racing from shock. Leaping to the door, he pressed his thumb to the lock and

— slowly and automatically, as though alive — it opened.

**A**LICE walked in nonchalantly, carrying a picnic basket. She was immaculate in a yellow nylon shirt and flared red skirt, with bubble stockings and red plastic shoes, as if she had dressed for a picnic in the country instead of a dash through a city of destruction and death.

"Did you have any trouble, darling?" Hugh asked, the weight suddenly lifted from his heart. "You took two hours."

"Did I? Well, I had to fix dinner. And naturally I had to change. You wouldn't want your wife to look like any ordinary pretty girl, would you?"

"Anyway, you're here now. Let's go to the office."

"Yes, let's." She looked round the empty concrete arena and shuddered slightly. "This place gives me the creeps when it's like this. And I used to love it when it was busy. Say, Hugh, I drove straight through without being stopped. There's three guards outside that door, of course, but they were the only ones I saw."

"I guess the raid has disorganized things. Is it bad out there, darling?"

"Pretty bad," she said quietly.

When they reached the office in the control block at the cen-

ter of the area, Hugh phoned the checkpoints. He couldn't get an answer from Block A, but Block B replied at once.

"Say, Sergeant, my wife just drove straight through. Is something wrong?"

Sergeant Bronowski's voice came back. "We've been trying to raise Block A, sir, but can't. They may not have been hit, though. Communications often go during a raid. You think you're okay in there, sir? Hadn't you better go to one of the deep shelters?"

"I'm okay here. The Singalese ships won't harm the Gate," said Hugh confidently.

"If they're so careful about the Gate, how come they raid Belcron?"

"They've got to do it occasionally, Sergeant, in case we trade on the protection of the Gate and surround it with important personnel, munition dumps and our most dangerous — to them — defense installations."

"I get it, sir. Okay, we'll send a party over to Block A. Are you going ahead with the tests tonight, sir?"

"Oh, sure. Even if the fighting's still going on, it doesn't affect the tests. But I think the Singalese ships will be called off before the tests are due."

"I hope you're right, sir. I sure hope so."

**H**UGH hung up and turned. Since he found Alice beside him, he reached out for her. At first he merely meant to touch her shoulder, but then, still affected by his recent fear when he had thought something might have happened to her, he found himself taking her in his arms and kissing her as if the date of their wedding had been next week instead of ten years past.

"Well, well," said Alice, surprised. "Haven't you made a mistake, Buster? I'm your wife."

"My wife is the most wonderful girl in the world. My wife is the most beautiful girl I know. My wife is the nicest, kindest, cleverest person I ever met."

"Thank you, honey," said Alice, kissing him tenderly. "The best of it is, all that you said is true."

It was true, certainly, that she was a beautiful girl. Her oval face was the kind beloved by artists and photographers but not movie directors — she looked too intelligent to be a film star. And her figure at twenty-eight was better than it had been at eighteen, when Hugh married her. Then she had been slim but angular, occasionally awkward. In the last ten years she had developed curves that she didn't possess before, but no bulges.

"I'm really a pretty lucky fellow," Hugh mused. "Married to a girl like you. Kept out of any

danger in the middle of an inter-planetary war. Given a nice house and paid a fat salary for doing not a hell of a lot."

A slight cloud passed over Alice's face. Although what Hugh said was essentially true, sometimes she wished Hugh was still an ordinary MTO. Since the war started four years ago there had been five Gatekeepers, and the other four hadn't retired voluntarily. Nor had they been sacked.

Two years ago, when Hugh had been appointed Gatekeeper, it had seemed, for one thing, that the war with Singal wouldn't last much longer. For another, MTOs were on half-pay for the duration, since they weren't doing anything, and the Hawkins's financial position had been close to desperate, especially as there had been a false alarm at the time that Alice was going to have a baby.

But two years later the war was still going on, and nobody believed any more that it would be over soon. Official propaganda was taking the line that it would last at least three years more. And official propaganda was generally over-optimistic.

Alice turned away and began to unpack the basket. Hugh moved after her and put his arms round her from behind. Although he had always known he loved her, not for years had he felt as he had felt in the last couple of

hours, when he was forced to face the thought of life without her.

"Darling, it's much too soon to eat," he whispered. And he began to pull her shirt out of the waistband of her skirt.

"Hugh, it's the middle of the afternoon," she protested laughingly, "and broad daylight—"

"And we're in the center of the MT area," Hugh murmured, "the most private place in Belcron." He caressed her bare waist.

Her breath came faster, "I thought we were too old for this kind of behavior," she said.

They weren't.

## II

**C**HET Blaken nodded to the guard and unlocked the door behind him. After he had passed through the door and locked it again, he expelled his breath in a slow sigh of relief, as he always did when he was alone in the vast MT area at Newlyon.

Blaken was an old man and it had been a long time since he had feared death. Yet only here, where there could be no danger of any kind, did he ever really relax.

He had been the Singalese Gatekeeper for eleven months now, and it seemed like eleven years. It wasn't death he feared. It was the possibility that if he

were ever tested, he would be proved unworthy. Six other Singalese Gatekeepers had died rather than betray their beliefs — could he?

He was becoming more and more afraid that he couldn't. He wasn't brave. Indeed, he knew himself to be a physical coward. Perhaps he should resign, so that one of the two deputies could be appointed Gatekeeper. Perhaps it was his duty to resign.

In his mind he ran through the events which would follow his resignation. There would be surprise and suspicion when he said he wanted to resign, for a man of his known beliefs should never want to relinquish the post of Gatekeeper. Then he would have to complete the training of the new Gatekeeper. The master lock on the MT control board would be changed, the new lock keyed to the new Gatekeeper and not to him.

And everybody would know that he had resigned because he was a coward.

He shook his head. He wasn't brave enough to admit he was a coward. Even if it was his duty.

Besides, if he weren't Gatekeeper, what would he do in this bitter, all-embracing war between two sister-worlds which had become enemies?

Before Chet was appointed Gatekeeper, things had been

tough for him, for he was a pacifist. In no circumstances would he have fought his fellow-man. So it was fortunate for him that he had been appointed to a job in which he had to be one hundred per cent non-combatant.

Fortunate? Yes, but the last eleven months had hardly been the happiest of his life.

In a few hours he would call Hugh Hawkins on Moka and they would talk before running the routine tests. It was only with Hugh, whom he had never seen, who was on a world at war with his own, that Chet could talk these days with any real sympathy and friendship.

**I**F ever two worlds shouldn't have fought a war, they were Moka and Singal. The only two inhabited worlds of the Biara system, they were so far from any other inhabited world that contact with the rest of the human race was slight and trade non-existent. Moka and Singal should have been the friendliest of sister-worlds, and for a long time they had been. There was little natural competition: Singal, the inner world, was poor in metals but rich in food, while Moka, a manufacturing world, grew little but made everything the two worlds needed.

And when the Gate had finally gone into operation after nearly

fifty years of heartbreaking trial and error, and the loss of thousands of lives, it had seemed less than ever likely that the two worlds would ever have differences more serious than squabbles. Moka and Singal had seemed too dependent on each other ever to resort to war. The matter transmission Gates at Belcron on Moka and Newlyon on Singal had operated ceaselessly day and night. Metals, coal, manufactured goods, oil and synthetic textiles had passed through the Gate from Moka to Singal; meat, hides, wool, butter, cheese, grain, vegetables and wine had gone from Singal to Moka. The exchange had been roughly a million tons per day — roughly, for matter transmission was reckoned in volume rather than in weight.

Yet four years ago that had suddenly ceased. For four years the great MT areas had been empty and silent.

As usual, something to fight about had been found. The *casus belli* in this case was the asteroid belt between the two worlds. Moka was jealously afraid that Singal would get all the metals she needed there, set up factories and thus become independent; Singal objected to Moka's greedy cornering of all the natural resources in the system.

It had been predictable that when war did come it would be



long, bitter and indecisive. Moka was short of food and Singal was short of everything else. But Moka could synthesize food and Singal could improvise. When the war finally did end, it wouldn't be because Moka was starving or because Singal had nothing left to fight with.

Chet glanced at his watch. It was only 7:23. Tests were usually carried out at midnight on the eleventh day, since conditions were best then on both worlds. Ten of Singal's days equalled eleven on Moka, with a little matter of eleven minutes over. Singal allowed for the eleven minutes by an adjustment every month.

**I**T took Chet five minutes to cross the vast reception area and reach the control block. He spent them envying Hugh Hawkins, not because Hugh was young, but because Hugh had a wife whom he loved and who loved him. Unlike Chet Blaken, Hugh Hawkins didn't have to face his vast responsibility always alone.

Chet went straight to the radio room and switched on the tape recorder. It was too soon to call Hugh; Hugh wouldn't come on the air until 11:30. Chet always recorded his talks with Hugh, and played them back when loneliness weighed most heavily on him. In the machine was the tape he had

recorded at the last test, eleven days ago.

The machine started in the middle of conversation, the quality so good despite the fifty million miles between Singal and Moka that Hugh's cheerful young voice was reproduced as well as Chet's older, wearier tones.

"... getting very short of white wine," Hugh was saying, "despite the fact that it's all been doctored with synthetic grape-juice and alcohol to make it go ten times as far — making it barely drinkable, as you might guess. You wouldn't drink the stuff, Chet. But it's still better than synthetic beer."

Chet's own voice: "I'll slip you half a dozen cases in the next test transmission. Sorry I can't get them for you now."

A slight plop—the tape recorder was monitored to operate only when there was a signal, and it took nine minutes for Chet's voice to reach Moka and the answer return. On playback, owing to the monitoring, there was no delay.

"You tempt me, Chet. God knows how you tempt me. But I won't accept the offer. If anybody found out, there'd be the devil to pay. And what happened here would be nothing to what would happen there if anybody discovered you'd been transmitting contraband. But I'll

tell you what we can do. I'll send you that metal fishing-rod you wanted, made out of a new alloy, and your story can be that we wanted to test whether MT affected the temper. You'll get away with that because nothing of this material has ever been sent through the Gate. And you can send me a dozen chickens."

"Chickens?" Chet echoed, astonished. "I can't do that, Hugh. I'll get hung. Food is Number One contraband. One chicken, maybe, alive, since a living creature is the best test. But not a dozen, for Pete's sake. Hell, you wouldn't take wine and you want chickens! Have you gone crazy in the head, Hugh?"

The plop again, and then Hugh's chuckle. "This is something that can only be worked so often, Chet, but the last time was three years ago, before our time. You send a live chicken on test, right? Only something goes wrong and the chicken arrives dead — but edible, of course. Naturally the two Gatekeepers get worried and you send out for more live chickens and we use a different link. Only the next one arrives dead too. This goes on until I have eleven dead chickens, and after that one comes through alive, and we're both relieved we've found the fault and cured it."

"I get it. Okay, you can have

your chickens. And I'll sure be glad to get that fishing-rod. The season's just starting here."

**T**HERE the taped conversation ended, for after that the tests had begun and Chet never taped what was said then. Hugh wasn't so careful. He even had his wife with him sometimes. From things which had been said Chet gathered that she was very beautiful, and she certainly had a lovely voice. He would have liked to see a picture of her but had never liked to ask for one in case the request should be misunderstood. He thought of Alice as a friend, like Hugh.

Looking at his watch again, Chet saw that it was barely eight o'clock. Still three and a half hours to go.

These regular tests were more than just routine. MT depended on countless millions of transmitting and receiving links being in perfect register. Every slight deviation had to be detected and corrected at once. Moreover, all the variables — solar interference, gravitic bias, bounce effect, space dust concentration — had to be laboriously plotted and allowed for as they occurred. The Gatekeepers didn't do all the calculations themselves, but they had to make all the adjustments.

It was because of all this that

it hadn't been possible, when the war started, simply to close down the MT stations for the duration. Unless they were kept in constant register there would be no Gate at the end of the war — merely two vast junkheaps.

So it was necessary that if the Gate was to be preserved, it must be regularly tested and adjusted. But not used, except for the tests. Obviously.

The ringing of Chet's phone bell was a welcome diversion. He snapped the switch and the sentry's voice came through, sounding puzzled. "Guy here with a truck, Gatekeeper," he said. "Apparently passed through the other checkpoints okay. Says something about chickens."

"That's right," said Chet. "I'll be right out."

He walked back through the vast, empty arena. Hugh Hawkins would get his chickens. Chet had arranged the matter so that even if an official inquiry was made, which was unlikely, he'd be in the clear. He would take in only one bird, leaving the others outside the Gate in the care of the sentries. But a little after twelve o'clock he'd be out again, looking agitated, and telling the sentries that there was something wrong, that he'd need some more chickens.

It was strange, Chet thought, that two men like Hugh and him-

self, who would die if they had to (and they might easily have to) in order to discharge their main responsibility as Gatekeepers, were quite unconcerned about illegally slipping a friend a steel fishing-rod or a dozen chickens.

### III

HUGH sipped his wine, made a face, shrugged and drank some more. Catching Alice's eye, he blew her a kiss.

She was sleek and immaculate again, and there was nothing to show that she had so recently been so active in the emotions of love. Indeed, she looked like a wise virgin. The virginal quality in her beauty had always been one of her chief charms, and after ten years of marriage she seemed in no danger of losing it.

They had eaten a fair meal, considering how uninteresting synthetic food generally was. And the wine, poor as it was, was better than no wine at all.

"Chet Blaken offered to send half a dozen cases of wine," Hugh said.

"And you didn't take it?"

"Couldn't very well. How could I carry out half a dozen cases of wine without anybody noticing?"

"If you gave the guards a bottle each they wouldn't notice."

Hugh shook his head. "Once bribery starts, corruption soon sets in. I told Chet to make it a dozen chickens instead, and we have a story to cover us in case anybody finds out."

"How are you going to carry them out?"

"Simple. In the picnic basket."

Alice nodded at the fishing-rod in a canvas case leaning against the wall. "That's for Chet?"

"Yes. We've got a story for that, too."

"I'm sorry for Chet," Alice said quietly. "People don't understand how it is with Gatekeepers. But we've got each other. He's got nobody."

"Huh? What are you talking about, darling?"

"Maybe I get it more than you. People treating me as a sort of enemy, because you're the Gatekeeper. Everybody knows that if you let the army and the navy have their way, the war would be over in a week."

"But there's an agreement . . ."

"I know, honey, you don't have to convince me. You and Chet are guardians, to see the Gate isn't used or tampered with, so that it'll still be there when the war's over. And if Singal didn't trust you, or Moka didn't trust Chet, the Gate would just have to be destroyed. But people who have lost sons, daughters, husbands and parents aren't very

reasonable. All they can see is that if you let the army send through an atom bomb that would blow up half Singal —"

"If I did, it would be the biggest sell-out in history."

"Of course it would. But don't you see, honey — I know all that, I agree with you, I can stand anything that happens because I know we're right. But Chet hasn't got a lovely understanding wife like me."

"I knew it was a mistake to say all those nice things about you."

**T**HEY stopped to listen as a screaming noise far away began as a high whisper and became a shriek. It sounded more like a ship than a shell. Abruptly the scream was cut off and the ground shivered, although the ship must have crashed at least ten miles away.

They said nothing about what they had heard; there was nothing to say.

The phone bell rang. Bronowski's voice said: "Block A was flattened, Gatekeeper. None of the men got out. But we've sewn everything up now, sir. There's no risk of anybody getting through."

Hugh acknowledged the message and put down the instrument. He looked round, puzzled, as he heard Alice gasp.

Three men stood in the doorway, three men in the dark green uniform of the Mokan Army. One was a general and the other two were colonels. All three had guns covering both Hugh and Alice.

"Stand away from that phone, Hawkins, or I'll shoot your wife dead," the general said harshly.

For the next few minutes Hugh was to curse himself for doing as he was told. If he had picked up the phone Alice would certainly have been shot, and probably himself as well. But the guard force *would* have been alerted, and whatever the raiders had in mind would have failed.

But hope springs eternal in the human breast, and Hugh had stepped away from the phone, hoping that some other way might be found, before he realized that he wasn't going to get such a chance again.

One of the colonels moved between Hugh and the phone. The other moved behind Alice, whose face was ashen.

"I'm General Howth," said the tall, lean-faced man who led the group. "Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Hawkins. We're no renegades. We have the full backing of the Army."

"But not of the government," Hugh said sharply.

"As you say. There are times of extreme emergency when it's

necessary to take special powers and bypass the government, Hawkins."

"You're wasting your time," said Hugh. "I presume you have some scheme for using the Gate, and consequently need me. It'll save a lot of trouble if you realize that I'll never co-operate with you, and that nothing you can do will make me."

"Your wife is here, Hawkins," said Howth meaningly.

HUGH shook his head wearily. "Why is it that military chiefs never have any imagination? Why is it they always see only their own side of any problem? General, the Gate cost four hundred million million dollars to install, and it took fifty years to do it. It took thousands of ships, Mokan and Singalese, strung out in space to relay the first transmissions. Thousands of men died before it was working properly. And when the war started, nothing would have been easier, here or on Singal, than to destroy one installation so that the whole colossal, dangerous, expensive, heart-breaking job would have to be done again after the war. Didn't it give you some hope for the human race when the governments of Moka and Singal decided four years ago that even though temporarily we were going to be at war, the

Gate would be maintained and never used, so that it would still be there when the war was over? Didn't you feel, as I did, that at last human beings were beginning to act like adults instead of mal-adjusted children?"

Alice turned her eyes to Howth, praying that Hugh's appeal would have some effect. Couldn't he see that what Hugh said was so?

When wars started, soldiers invariably blew up tunnels and bridges and roads that led across and under the defended lines. Naturally. And three or four years later, when the war was over, the bridges and tunnels and roads were rebuilt.

But the Gate, the matter-transmission link between Belcron on Moka and Newlyon on Singal, was something bigger than any tunnel or bridge or road. Bigger, and yet more vulnerable. Obviously neither planet could allow it to be used while the state of war existed. But if it were destroyed — and destruction of that tenuous link would be tragically easy — then when the war was over, as one day it would be over, the vast labor of reconstructing the Gate, and the vast expense, would have to be borne by two wounded, bleeding worlds who were dependent on each other and would always be dependent on each other, even if

they quarreled often and occasionally fought.

And it might take another fifty years — fifty years during which there could be no prosperity on either world, not without the Gate. It might, in such circumstances, take more than fifty years. There might never be a Gate again.

So the governments of Moka and Singal had said: Right, we're at war, and the Gate must go into cold storage. But whatever happens, whoever wins and whoever loses, the Gate is going to be needed again. Instead of destroying this wonderful thing that took so long to create, we'll appoint men independent of the war, independent of Moka or Singal, who will maintain the link without ever allowing it to be used for purposes of war. Men who alone, one in Belcron and one in Newlyon, will be able to control the Gate.

*Men of such honesty and sincerity and idealism that Moka can trust the Singalese Gatekeeper and Singal can trust the Gatekeeper on Moka.*

And since the war began four years ago, the Gate had never been used except for the regular tests operated by the two Gatekeepers. But Moka now had its fifth Gatekeepers and Singal had its seventh. Ten men had been idealistic enough to die for their



ideals. And it began to seem that the toll would soon rue.

**A**LICE'S eyes sought Howth's, and she saw with a stab of pain in her heart that he was quite unmoved by Hugh's appeal.

"Hawkins," Howth said grimly, "we're losing this war. Yet we have a weapon that can win it. An atom bomb through the Gate . . . a battalion of men . . . a flight of bombers . . . a bacteriological onslaught. Five minutes' use of the Gate could win the war for us. And you say —"

"I say it's never going to happen," said Hugh. "General, have you ever heard the name Chet Blaken?"

The General frowned. "Blaken? No."

"He's my colleague, my friend. Chet Blaken is the Gatekeeper at Newlyon. If it weren't for Chet Blaken, an atom bomb would come through our Gate. Or a battalion of men. Or a flight of bombers. Or just tainted air carrying pestilence that would kill us all. But Chet Blaken is so honest that even you thrust him."

"That's where you're wrong. The army believes that we must use the Gate to defeat Singal before Singal uses it to defeat us."

"For Christ's sake, General, use your head! Singal could have done this fiendish thing you want to do any time in the last four

years. Six Singalese Gatekeepers have been killed seeing that nobody did."

"This argument is singularly pointless," Howth said coldly. "Hawkins, the Army means to use the Gate."

"And I tell you that it never will."

"You don't understand, Hawkins. You accepted our appearance with commendable coolness. You haven't asked how we got here. Although we took advantage of the raid to get past Block A, we found it necessary to kill the three guards and substitute men of our own. You'll understand from this that we're quite determined."

"You're crazy killers," said Hugh bitterly.

"Please, Hawkins," Howth said, and through his voice came the first hint that he was a man with human feelings, "don't make this any worse than it has to be. You must be aware that we're prepared to cut your wife to pieces before your eyes if necessary. Or if you seem able to bear your wife's pain better than your own, we can demonstrate that you can suffer terrible agony without any possibility of escaping by dying. Please recognize this and act like a reasonable man."

Hugh said nothing. His eyes sought Alice's, and they tried to



sum up ten happy years together in one final moment together.

#### IV

**C**HET unlocked the door and opened it. The three guards were wary but not really suspicious; anything which got past the other checkpoints must be all right. And besides, the small dilapidated livestock truck driven by one old man didn't look as if it need concern them very much.

Their wariness didn't do them any good.

The silent shots from the interior of the truck must have been absolutely simultaneous. The three sentries dropped with hardly a sigh, two of them with their heads blown off and the third with a hole the size of a soup-plate in his chest. Only a second or so later Chet was seized from both sides and bundled back through the door from which he had just emerged.

There were six men in all, dressed in rough, dark clothes and all with cloths over their faces. Alarmed as he was, Chet couldn't help finding this slightly reassuring. The fact that he wasn't to be allowed to see their faces strongly suggested that he was going to be alive afterwards. If he was to meet the same fate as the guards they wouldn't be

concerned about whether he'd recognize them again or not.

A short man with sparse fair hair did the talking: "Everything has gone like clockwork, Blaken, so you needn't waste your time thinking you're going to be rescued. The truck will drive back in a few minutes and check out. The guards on the door aren't due to be relieved until two o'clock: So we won't be disturbed."

"Who are you?" Chet demanded. It wasn't a very intelligent question to ask six masked men, but he felt the need to force himself to be bluntly defiant. Now that the crisis had come, he was as scared as he had always feared he would be.

They were marching him back to the control building. One of them ran on ahead to check up.

The short man laughed. He wasn't scared. Indeed, he seemed exultant, as perhaps he had a right to be. A successful raid on the Gate must have been well planned and faultlessly carried through. Chet's request that a livestock truck should be passed through must have been seized on as a heaven-sent opportunity. Chet still didn't see how the truck had been able to get through with six men concealed in it, but that was an academic point, no longer of any great interest. They were here. Perhaps some of the guards

at the checkpoints had been heavily bribed beforehand.

"You can call me the Peacemaker," the blond man said, "for I'm going to end the war." He chuckled, pleased with himself.

**T**HEY reached the control block and Chet was nudged back into the radio room he had recently left. The man who called himself the Peacemaker had a quick look round. Apparently satisfied, he nodded. Three of the men went out, probably to go to the entrance of the MT area and pose as the sentries who had been murdered.

"You may as well know the situation," the Peacemaker said. "We left a box outside just now. At midnight you will send that box through the Gate to Moka. The instant it arrives, temperature and atmospheric pressure differences will cause it to detonate, spraying bacteria over a large area."

He shrugged. "I grant that if Moka expected this, or learned exactly what had happened within a few minutes, it might be possible to destroy the whole area and nullify our efforts. But Moka won't realize what has happened for some hours. They will be reluctant to destroy the Belcron Gate, and by the time any countermeasures are taken they will be much too late."

"You fool," said Chet contemptuously, and he had the satisfaction of seeing the Peacemaker draw himself up angrily. "You can't do this crazy thing without me, and you certainly can't do it with me."

"You're going to find just what kind of a fool I am," said the other man. Clearly he was an egotist; Chet had touched him on the raw. "Listen. Our organization found out that tonight a heavy Singalese raid is being made on Belcron. We know that the Navy's orders are to destroy as much as possible in the neighborhood of the Gate there without damaging the Gate itself. Knowing this, knowing that there would be chaos in Belcron at this moment, we decided that tonight was the time to win this war. We discovered also that you had given orders that a truck was to be passed through. It was necessary then to —"

"You fool," said Chet again. "I gather you belong to some tinpot so-called patriotic organization? Friends of Singal, Singalese Victory Party, or something of the sort? Don't you think the Government knows what's best for Singal? Of course you don't. Like all crazy fanatics, you —"

"Blaken," said the other furiously, "if you were not necessary to us I'd have you shot as those guards were shot. You're a traitor.

You want Singal to lose this war."

"Like all fanatics, you see a little bit of the problem and dismiss everything else as unimportant," said Chet. He was finding that so long as he talked as if he wasn't afraid, he almost succeeded in preventing himself from being afraid. "Suppose this insane plan of yours works. The culture you wish to release in Moka will presumably cause an epidemic which will spread over the whole world and into the Moka Navy. Inevitably, if it is sufficiently virulent to bring Moka to her knees, it will spread here too, and —"

"We have the antidote. Moka hasn't. Everything has been thought of, Blaken."

**C**HET tried another approach. "Can't you see that Moka and Singal are dependent on each other? That if you weaken Moka, you weaken Singal? When this war ends, as it must end, Singal is going to need Moka!"

The short man spun on his heel. "Number Two, get that syringe ready. Three, hold this old man."

Chet felt a stab of fear again. They were going to drug him, make him incapable of resisting them. His fear made him speak when a braver man would have said nothing.

"I said you were a fool. You're going to drug me with menticol or narco-meryllium. You know that only I can operate the Gate, that only the individual pattern of my brain's impulses will unlock the machines? Without me the Gate is useless. Don't you know that if I am drugged, my brain pattern alters so that even I can't operate the machines?"

The Peacemaker's muffled curse showed that he had heard something of the sort but had hoped that it wasn't true.

Chet already wished that he had stayed silent. True, menticol would damage his brain seriously and probably permanently, but it would have been quick and easy. He could have let them drug him, knowing that although he would soon cease to be aware of what was going on and he might do and say things that would horrify him if he knew about them, he couldn't be made to operate the Gate.

"Go ahead," he said. "Try it. Drug me and see what happens."

"It will have to be the other way," said the man who called himself the Peacemaker. "Do you enjoy pain, Blaken?"

And Chet knew that he was going to need all the courage he could screw up, and more. A fanatic would stop at nothing, because fanatics always knew — knew beyond all possibility of

doubt—that they and they alone were right.

This was what Gatekeepers always feared. That was what Gatekeepers always had to be prepared for. No matter how carefully the Gate was guarded, sooner or later a group of so-called patriots temporarily captured the Gate and its Gatekeeper. This was the seventh time it had happened in four years.

And the other six Gatekeepers had duly died to protect the Gate and the Gate agreement. So the six previous attempts had been abject failures.

But where was Chet Blaken going to get the courage to make the seventh a failure too?

## V

**N**ATURALLY Hugh Hawkins didn't suspect for a moment that on Singal Chet Blaken might be going through the same kind of ordeal at exactly the same time. Although at various times and in various ways attempts had been made on both worlds to force the current Gatekeeper to assist in some unofficial or semi-official attempt to bypass the rigid Government control of the Gate, at no time had there ever been simultaneous attempts on both worlds.

Yet the coincidence was not remarkable. It had been the Sin-

galese raid on Belcron which had made the Singalese extremists decide on this particular time for their effort; and it was the Singalese raid on Belcron which allowed General Howth and his Army opportunists to slip into the MT area undetected by the guards.

No one but the gods knew that there was a risk of pestilence from Singal being released on Moka at the same time as an atom bomb from Moka exploded on Singal. The old classical gods, certainly, would have been amused. It was the kind of situation they enjoyed.

Hugh had been shown the bomb. It lay outside in one of the transmission bays, a small, uninteresting object which looked like a two-gallon water can. Despite its unimpressive appearance, it could destroy a quarter of the population of Singal, and more than a quarter of Singal's material resources. Undoubtedly this would be enough to end the war.

"It would be sensible to bow to the inevitable," Howth said.

Hugh shook his head.

Howth turned. "Take the woman outside," he ordered harshly, "and soften her up. Then bring her back and the real business can begin."

A black-browed colonel seized Alice roughly by her belt. When she started to struggle he cuffed

her hard on each side of the head, heavy blows that buffeted her a foot each way.

Hugh leaped at the colonel. The paralyzing charge from the third man's gun caught him in midair. He collapsed like a sack of potatoes and didn't even see Alice being dragged out.

**T**H**ERE** was no pain; his nerves were temporarily dead. He could see nothing but the floor under his face, so close that his eyes couldn't focus on it. He could hear, however. He heard Alice run, her high heels beating a staccato patter of fear on the concrete. He heard her fall heavily. He heard her scream. He heard sickening noises that sounded like a boot being driven hard into a soft body. He heard Alice sobbing in anguish and, worse, begging and pleading.

The paralyzing charge had been minimal. Hugh was able to squirm within seconds, and as Alice was brought back he was climbing stiffly and awkwardly to his feet.

There was hardly any change in her appearance, apart from the fact that her hair was disordered. But the bloom was off her. She wasn't lovely and assured any more. Her fear made her look almost ugly, and it was horrible to see her cowering away from the man who had hurt her.

Howth faced Hugh. "Are you going to send that bomb through?"

"No," said Hugh wearily.

Howth looked at his watch. "The Singalese Gatekeeper will expect you to call him in three hours' time. Three hours is a long time. It can be made to seem longer. For the last time, are you going to co-operate, Hawkins?"

"No."

Hugh found himself collapsing again. The man behind him must have paralyzed him. Helpless, he was hauled up, sat on a chair and tied in it. He saw Alice only when his head happened to be turned in her direction.

When they had finished with him, they tied Alice in another chair facing him. Hugh tried to smile at her but couldn't. The paralysis hadn't worn off yet.

Howth's voice was exasperated. "We don't want to do this, Hawkins. We're not enjoying it. But we have to make you send that bomb through. Carry on, Berton."

Berton was enjoying it. Hugh could see that. Slowly, with lascivious pleasure, he cut away Alice's shirt, piece by piece, until she was quite nude above the waist. Hugh writhed in fury when he saw the dark contusions on her ribs, the huge angry red mark on her side.

Berton enjoyed suspense, too. Turning away from Alice, he left

her like that while he prowled about the room, picking up things and laying them down again. Presently he found something which interested him. It was the metal fishing-rod intended for Chet Blaken. He took out the top section, the thinnest, springiest part of the rod, and tried whipping the air with it experimentally. The swish it made in the air seemed to delight him. He kept cracking the rod viciously and then looking at Alice, who had gone very pale.

"Get on with it, Berton," said Howth harshly.

"Yes, sir."

**A**LICE closed her eyes as Berton approached her with the rod. A moment later, however, she opened them again, unable to wait passively, unable to pretend that what happened to the pale half-naked body tied in a chair was a matter of no concern to her.

Berton swung with the rod and a fraction of a second later Alice screamed — a raw, agonized scream which showed that the pain was worse than anything she had expected. A straight red line was drawn across her ribs, blood just beginning to ooze from it and spoil the thin, neat line. Berton swung again, and this time the sound of the blow was covered by another scream from

Alice; she screamed before the blow landed. Another red line nearly a foot long spurted bright red, across her shoulders this time. There was a gap of an inch or so in the middle. The hollow between her breasts began just there and the steel whip hadn't quite reached the bottom of the cleft.

For the third time Berton struck, and this time Alice hadn't stopped screaming between the strokes. The third long red line was only an inch above her skirt, on the soft flesh of her waist. There was no bone there to protect her, and this time the gash was as deep as a sword-slash. Blood gushed down and tried to hide on her red skirt.

Hugh didn't realize he was going to surrender until he had done so. He never remembered afterwards what he said. He would have said anything to stop what Berton was doing to Alice. After he had said it, whatever it was, he was conscious only of relief as Berton reluctantly stepped back, mingled with horror as Alice slumped in a faint. For a moment Hugh was afraid she was dead.

Howth was speaking, but Hugh didn't listen. All that mattered was that Alice would be hurt no more. He didn't regret his surrender; he only regretted that he had delayed it. Whatever hap-

pened, even if a miracle somehow saved them both, Alice would carry three terrible scars to her grave.

Whether Hugh would keep his word was another matter altogether. It didn't trouble his conscience that he had told the General he would do as he was told, without having the slightest intention of actually sending an atom bomb through the Gate to Newlyon. Even if he had merely postponed Alice's ordeal for a few hours, that was something.

Of one thing there was no doubt. He couldn't have let Berton beat Alice to death. He would say anything rather than allow that.

Whether he would *do* anything rather than allow that still remained to be seen . . .

**I**T was 11:25. "Watch him," said the Peacemaker as Chet began to snap switches. "If he does anything but what he said he'd do, let him have it."

Apart from the waiting, Chet hadn't had a bad time. More sensibly, perhaps, than Hugh Hawkins, he had allowed the threat of torture to convince him.

In a way all attempts to coerce a Gatekeeper were futile. In the end, he had to be in sole control of the machines. Whatever had been said and done, whatever he had promised, the question in the

end was whether he would betray his trust and save his life or toss his life away and in doing so make all schemes to control him, and through him the Gate, a complete waste of time.

The trouble was, his life was forfeit. Chet knew perfectly well that if he jammed or fused or disoriented the machines so that matter transmission was temporarily impossible, the Peacemaker would not say to him: "Okay, you win. We'll go away and leave you in peace."

Ten other Gatekeepers, faced with something like this situation, had been able to do their duty. Six on Singal and four on Moka. Was he going to add to the list? Or was he to be the first without the courage to guard the Gate with his life?

It was Hugh's turn to speak first this time. But the clock on the wall registered 11:30, and then 11:31, and still no sound emerged from the loudspeaker.

The Peacemaker was impatient. "I thought you said —"

"I told you," Chet explained. "Hawkins began to transmit at 23:30. But we won't hear his voice until nearly 23:35. Wait."

"When he speaks," said the Peacemaker grimly, "do exactly what you always do. Don't think you can outsmart us, Blaken. Don't try talking in code that he'll understand and we don't.

Unless that case goes through the Gate, you're going to die. Remember that."

Chet nodded. There was no need to act scared. He was scared. Being scared, he could try to act as if he weren't.

At last it came: "Hugh Hawkins, Mokaan Gatekeeper. You there, Chet?"

"I'm here, Hugh," Chet said. He knew what to do; the only question was whether he could do it or not. The impulse to postpone the moment was strong — so strong that he knew that if he started postponing, he'd go on postponing.

"This is Chet Blaken, Singalese Gatekeeper. You know my voice, don't you? Well, there are three men here with me. They —"

There were two loud curses, and a shot. Chet Blaken's brains, the only brains in existence which could operate the Singalese Gate, were splashed against the metal case of the radio transmitter.

Chet Blaken hadn't failed after all.

## VI

**A**T Belcron they all had to wait four and a half minutes for Chet's reply. Howth and the two colonels were very careful to say nothing; anything they did or said would be picked up on

Singal and the Singalese Gatekeeper would instantly switch off his matter transmitter.

Alice was pale and drawn, wrapped in Hugh's jacket. Howth had let Hugh wash her wounds and bind them up, but they had no opportunity to talk privately. She had tried to talk with her eyes, pleading, despite her fear, despite her desire to live, that whatever he did he wouldn't send the atom bomb through the Gate. Without words she had tried to tell him that although she had screamed, although she had pleaded, she didn't want them to purchase their lives at such a price.

Hugh himself still didn't know what he was going to do. The bomb wasn't going through, that was certain. But exactly how he was going to handle the situation he didn't yet know. Perhaps something Chet said would give him a clue.

Then Chet's voice came. "I'm here, Hugh." A pause. "This is Chet Blaken, Singalese Gatekeeper. You know my voice don't you? Well, there are three men here with me. They —"

They heard other voices cursing, and the sound of a shot. Then silence.

Hugh began to laugh. It was semi-hysteria. There was nothing funny about the death of Chet Blaken, Singalese Gatekeeper,



his friend. The laughter was shock, not humor.

Howth was slapping him. "Get that bomb through!" he was slapping him. "Get that bomb through!" he was shouting. "Get it through now, before —"

"It's too late," said Hugh, getting control of himself with an effort. "It's much too late. There can't be any matter transmission without Chet, and Chet's dead."

"He may not be dead. What we heard may be —"

"It doesn't matter whether he's dead or not. The microphone was on when you started shouting."

Howth cursed. In his frustration he caught sight of Alice. "Berton!" he snapped.

Hugh didn't wait for the order Howth was going to give. He interrupted quickly, forcing them to listen, to think, to realize that fury at their failure could accomplish nothing.

"Don't you understand? What happened here happened at New-lyon too. There was somebody with Chet, trying to make him do what you were trying to make me do. Don't you understand yet? *Chet Blaken died to save Moka.*"

Howth paused.

It wouldn't have any permanent effect. He was not a man of much imagination. But for an instant he glimpsed something that he had never seen before and would never see again — that

there were things more important than victory, even in the middle of a bitter war.

He growled and gestured to the other two. And the next moment they were gone.

Alice threw herself in Hugh's arms, winced with pain and then broke down completely. Hugh wondered if he should phone the guards to warn them that there were men coming out of the MT area, but decided it was unnecessary. Anyone at all, except Hugh or Alice Hawkins, who emerged from the Gate area would be held under heavy guard. Even a general and two colonels.

There would be a court-martial. The three men wouldn't get the death sentence, but they'd get long terms of imprisonment.

Of course they had known that all along, and went ahead anyway. They were patriots.

**T**HAT wasn't the end. The end came three days later.

The Secretary sent for Hugh. Hugh thought nothing about the summons, assuming that the Secretary merely wished to talk about the Howth affair or to inform him of new security arrangements designed to make sure that nothing of the sort could ever happen again. But when he saw the Secretary's face, Hugh knew that the matter was much more important than that.

"This is in strict confidence, Hawkins," the Secretary said.

"Of course, sir." Although a Gatekeeper was a great and important and valuable person, he naturally addressed the Secretary as "sir."

"Singal is prepared to make peace," said the Secretary.

Hugh jumped to his feet. "That's great news, sir."

"Wait. The terms Singal offers are . . ." He shrugged. "Not good, not bad. Barely acceptable. The point is, Hawkins — this is what I want to consult you about — they say the reason for offering terms concerns the Gate."

"The Gate, sir?"

"It seems . . . I don't pretend to be an expert on these matters, Hawkins. Although the Gate is in my department, there is so much secrecy that . . . However. The Singalese Gatekeeper, as we all know, died defending the Gate. I understand that there are always two deputies available with the necessary knowledge and training, and that in such a case one is selected as the new Gatekeeper and the installation is keyed to his brain pattern."

"That's so, sir."

"The Singalese government tells us that one of these deputies died in a raid a week ago and the other was killed yesterday in a motor accident. They say that there is consequently only one

way in which the Gate can be saved. They say they are prepared to make peace so that this thing can be done. What I want to ask you, Hawkins, is this: Is this a Singalese maneuver to gain some advantage, or is what they say likely to be true?"

Hugh was suddenly very happy and very proud. "You can take the Singalese offer at its face value, sir. The only way the Gate can be saved is to appoint one of our deputies here and for me to go to Singal and establish a new Singalese Gatekeeper. That is, unless —" he paused for a moment, the implications of the situation only gradually unfolding themselves to him — "unless both brain locks are removed and the Gate is thrown open again."

"In which case you'd still have to go to Singal?"

"Yes, sir, if the two Singalese deputies are both dead. You see, sir, although before the war there were hundreds of MT officers who could control routine matter transmission, the security measures which were taken at the beginning of the war didn't stop at brain locks keyed to a single Gatekeeper. The method of operation was changed so that at any one time only the Gatekeeper and his two deputies know how to operate the controls. And of course only the Gatekeeper himself can —"

"I see, I see. So you think Singal's offer is genuine?"

"Yes, sir."

**A**ND two days later, even before the peace was official, Hugh and Alice Hawkins left for Newlyon — by spaceship.

In their private lounge in the ship, Hugh put his arm round her tenderly, being careful not to touch her wounds. Nevertheless, he felt something, or rather, the absence of something, and looked down at her accusingly.

"You've taken off the bandages," he said. "They should still be on."

"I know, honey, but with a figure like mine is it fair to spoil it with bandages?"

She sounded like herself again.

"What are you thinking?" she asked presently. "If anything."

"About Chet. He was always afraid he'd fail if he was ever really tested. Well, he didn't."

"He saved us," said Alice quietly. "You weren't going to send it through, were you?"

"Of course not."

She nodded. "I knew you only promised to stop them . . ." She shuddered uncontrollably for a moment, then went on bravely: "Anyway, Chet saved us."

"He saved more than us, darling. He saved Moka and Singal."

"How do you make that out?"

Hugh was silent for a moment

before replying. Then he said: "This is the first time that any two powers fighting a war have ever admitted that there's anything more important than their war. Chet and I both felt that was a great concession. That was one reason why we couldn't let the Gate agreement be broken. Chet's death was the final straw."

"How?"

"It showed that security didn't work and that one of these things had to happen. One, some Gatekeeper wouldn't be such a hero as Chet and the Gate would be used as a weapon of war. Two, the Gate would have to be destroyed. Three, Moka and Singal would have to make peace. Well, the two worlds decided they didn't want One or Two to happen. So there was only Three left."

Alice stirred a little as her wounds itched. "Now there won't be any more Gatekeepers. You're Chief MTO from now on. A pity. There isn't much glamor in that title."

"Hell, didn't I tell you, honey? They're giving me a courtesy title. Poor Chet gets posthumous medals from both Moka and Singal. But I didn't die, so I get a courtesy title instead. They invented it just for me."

"What is it, darling?"

"The Last Gatekeeper."

— J. T. McINTOSH