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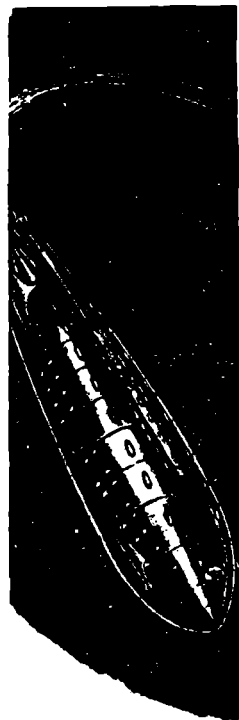
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Editor
JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.



THE GORGONS

BY MACK CHAPMAN LEA

The Natives were so peaceable they wouldn't hurt a flea—but what they did to the fleeing criminal was interesting indeed . . .

Illustrated by Timmins

The cutter came in with her siren screaming, her braking jets choked through orifices more than half closed.

"She's going to crash!" Caffery thought. "The first ship—and she's going to crash!"

The Akraltan natives, attracted as Caffery had been by the siren, were crowding into the clearing, fascinated by the sight of the great silver egg spitting fire in the sky above them. It did not occur to the natives that there might be danger, for they had never before seen a spacecraft of any description save the lifeboat which had brought Caffery and a mortally injured shipmate to their planet years earlier.

"Back with you!" The Earthman's deep voice roared under the shrill keening from the ship. He tugged at the arms of those nearest him, shoving them toward the doubtful safety of the trees. "Back with you, and quickly! Back!"

Those who heard him obeyed, not realizing the nature of the peril, but sensing the frightened urgency of the shouts. They knew Caffery. This was something he understood

and they didn't. They broke for the surrounding forest, and relayed the warning as they ran. The ship dropped into an empty field, the shock of the crash snapping brittle branches from trees a hundred yards off.

The cutter's hull showed rips and scars of a nasty fight with somebody whose gunnery had been very good indeed, but Caffery did not notice this until later. His immediate concern, as he struggled with the emergency port, was for possible survivors. A ship's surgeon, he had never paid much attention to port latches anyhow, and now, after so long a time, his memory refused to give up the combination of a Bronson space lock. He finally got the hatch open by pure accident and stepped into a jungle of tangled cables and twisted piping ripped from the bulkheads. It was a tribute to metallurgists of Earth that the bulkheads themselves were relatively undamaged. Whatever gear not welded down had survived the shock of gunfire had been knocked adrift by the crash.

There had been ten in the crew,

apparently. Eight of them were at the gun embrasures, rather grisly to look at. The four heavy atomic rifles, jarred from the trunnions, had, without exception, fallen back across the cradles of the gunners. Number nine was in the tiny engine room, a crimson mess against the forward bulkhead. One foolhardy engineer had scorned a landing cradle once too often, had overestimated the agility of his space legs and the strength of his grip on a stanchion.

The pilot was unconscious but alive. Caffery found him with a terrific welt where a sprung cradle had smashed his head into the instrument board. He was a little man with an ugly slit of a mouth queerly lopsided over a chin which receded almost to the point of deformity. On his forehead a large letter "V" had been tattooed in scarlet. Caffery stared, remembering his first trip out as a Space Patrol surgeon. There had been a sullen, cold-eyed prisoner brought aboard just before take-off and hustled through the wardroom on his way to the brig. The prisoner's forehead had borne that same bright design, the mark of a criminal four times convicted of piracy, murder, or worse. Under life sentence to the Venusburg penal colony, there had been for him no hope of reprieve, no time off for good behavior.

The doctor cursed aloud in a slow, grinding monotone until the steady flow of his profanity ended in a wrenching sob. He shook himself like a wet spaniel, fighting for self-

control, and began to fumble with the cradle straps. Knowledge of Earthly anatomy, half forgotten during the long years in which he had learned to adapt his skills to the incredible structure and metabolism of Akraltan bodies, flooded back to the mind and hands of the young surgeon as his fingers probed swiftly over the pilot's limp form. Satisfied that no bones were broken, Caffery rolled the man savagely from the cradle and carried him out of the ship.

The crowded natives fell back as he stepped through the open hatch with the still unconscious pilot in his arms.

"This one," he said, "lives, but he is hurt. Inside are nine who will not speak again. If it please you, there is need of graves." He caught the edge of the hatch against his shoulder, slammed it closed with a twist of his body. His eyes singled out a native from the group before him.

"I will return presently. Sargol, will you come?"

Caffery's hut was a quarter of a mile, more or less, from the clearing in which the cutter had crashed. He kicked open the unlatched door, crossed the single room with the native at his heels, and laid the pilot on the cot. The little man groaned and stirred, turning his head so that light from the doorway fell on the scarlet "V." He did not, however, wake up. With Sargol's help the doctor stripped him and examined him carefully. Except the welt on his forehead, the man had suffered

no obvious injuries. Caffery decided that he would probably waken shortly with nothing worse than a monstrous headache, and turned his attention to the pilot's clothing.

The man had carried no identification. His pockets held two Jorgensen blasters in addition to the one in the belt holster, which surprised Caffery a little. Most spacemen, even outlaws such as this one, considered a single weapon ample protection against the unknown dangers of alien planets. There was a small, plastic box, about four inches square and an inch thick. On one side were two small dials marked "Frequency" and "Intensity," a small meter, and a toggle switch with a protective lock to prevent accidental movement of the toggle. Caffery decided it was some sort of pocket communicator. And that was all.

The pilot moved suddenly, opened his eyes, and tried, not too enthusiastically, to sit upright. Sargol clucked like an impatient hen and pushed him back down, holding him flat with a hand on the narrow chest. Caffery turned at the sound.

"All right, Sargol," he said, and went over to the cot. The native moved aside, found a stool, and sat down to await further instructions. The pilot tried again to sit up, succeeding this time with the aid of Caffery's arm behind his shoulders. He grunted, shut his eyes, and opened them again very slowly.

"Gawd! Lemme down again, fella!" he pleaded.

Caffery lowered the man's shoulders and withdrew his arm.

"How's your head, mister? Bad?"

"Who're you? What's this dump?"

"I'm a doctor," Caffery answered patiently. "How does your head feel? You smacked it pretty hard."

"Doctor?" The pilot squinted at Caffery's thick blond beard and raggedly bobbed hair. The last razor blade in the lifeboat's emergency kit had long ago been dulled, and the Akraltans had never mastered the finer points of barbering with scissors from a first-aid packet. Barefooted, his only garment the now thoroughly disreputable trousers in which he had been cast away years before, Caffery had to admit that his six-foot frame lacked something of the dignity usually associated with the medical profession.

"Doctor! You ain't no doctor, you—" The pilot jerked himself up, turned white, and collapsed back onto the cot groaning. Caffery turned to the native.

"Sargol, if it please you, in that box the brown bottle with a red stripe around it."

"That box" was the lifeboat's medicine chest, its original contents almost intact. Earth medicines were ineffective against the aches and ills afflicting Akraltans, were, in most cases, actively poisonous to their alien systems. Sargol found the bottle and handed it to the doctor, who took out a small pill and offered it to the pilot.

"Here," he said. "Chew this up. You'll go back to sleep and after awhile you'll wake up without that headache."

The little man slapped the pill onto the floor.

"You ain't putting me to sleep, fella. Soon as I can stand up I'm leaving."

Caffery took another pill out of the bottle.

"Look, mister, there isn't any place to go except out in the woods until somebody brings another ship in here. Now, will you chew this, or do I cram it down your throat?"

The pilot stared for a moment at the husky, unkempt figure, took the pill, and began chewing slowly.

"O.K., doc, O.K. Don't . . . get . . . sore . . . just . . . because—" The voice trailed off.

Caffery, his face twisting in a humorless grin, picked up the three Jorgensens, beckoned the native to follow, and walked from the hut. He buried the blasters under the spread roots of a tree, carefully raking and reraking the raw dirt until no sign of digging remained. Then he turned toward the clearing, moving slowly, his eyes on the ground. Sargol walked beside him, started to speak, was silent a moment, and then said:

"Your kinsman is badly hurt? He will not speak again, perhaps? I am sorry, K'aa-free."

"No," Caffery answered, "his hurt is very slight. He will speak again, and soon."

"Then your sorrow is for the nine of whom you spoke before. But you will no longer be alone of your race. That is good."

"It is hard," said the doctor, "to feel alone among your people, Sar-

gol. There is much that my people could learn from your race. He in the hut is—"

Caffery stopped. How explain the meaning of that prisoner's mark? There was no word for "criminal" in the Akraltan language except a term long obsolete and known only to a few scholars. How explain murder to a member of a race to whom violence of any sort had been completely unknown for centuries?

"He in the hut," the doctor said abruptly, "has willingly caused a kinsman to speak no more."

Sargol halted and snatched at the Earthman's arm, pulling him half around.

"But, K'aa-free, such a thing has not happened for untold ages! Not since . . . not since—"

"—not since the Great-War-Fought-With-Engines," Caffery finished. "Not on your world, Sargol, has such a thing happened, but on my world of Earth— I have said that my race could learn much from yours!"

The graves were dug, nine raw red slits in the green of the clearing. The natives had disappeared, leaving a spade leaning against the cutter's hull in anticipation of Caffery's need. It was nearly sundown, and the doctor knew that following the brief Akraltan twilight the natives would fall into a sleep deeper than any surgical anaesthesia, to lie unmoving through the night wherever they happened to drop when darkness caught them. It was physically impossible for any Akraltan to remain awake in the



complete absence of sunlight. They might sleep in the woods, in the fields, in the streets of the villages, or, if they happened to be at home when sunset came, in their own huts. It made no difference to them.

"I can help you, K'aa-free?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Thank you, but you would be sick afterward, Sargol. Those nine are sights such as your people do not love. I will manage alone."

The native turned away, obvi-

ously relieved. Caffery walked slowly toward the cutter.

The pilot stirred under the blanket and mumbled something unintelligible. Caffery looked up, then, seeing that the man was still asleep, turned back to the thin metal page of the book in his lap. He realized for the first time that he had been staring at the same passage for over an hour, no part of the content reaching his mind. Tossing the volume onto the table, he

sat and watched the slow, slight movements of the pilot's breathing. The scarlet tattoo showed iridescent against skin from which Caffery's drug had drained whatever color the Venusburg fogs had not steamed away. Caffery wondered how the man had ever escaped from the Swamp, where and how he had stolen the ship in which he had obviously fought off pursuit successfully only to crash on an uncharted planet in an unexplored pocket of the galaxy.

Akralta would not remain uncharted much longer, a fact of which the doctor was joyfully certain. Sooner or later there would be Patrol cruisers nosing down through the thin air. That none had appeared already in the twenty-odd hours since the crash proved that the ship whose guns had scarred the hulk in the clearing had been crippled in the fight, possibly blasted out of space. But there would be others, squadrons fanning out in carefully calculated search curves originating at the last reported point of contact. Caffery prayed only that when they came they would arrive in daylight, that no landing party exploring by the light of the planet's triple moons should stumble across any native sleeping in the open where sunset had found him.

The man on the cot awoke and sat up, kicking the blanket into a heap on the floor. He glanced around the hut, then stared blankly at Caffery.

"Where am I?"

Caffery jerked a thumb at the space gear crumpled on a stool at the foot of the cot.

"Put on your clothes, mister. How's your head?"

"My head's all right, soldier. It was good enough to get me away from you lousy Patrolmen before, and if it's good enough I'll get away again." He reached unsteadily for his pants, holding the edge of the cot for support. "How'd you catch me?"

The doctor had found a barber's kit in the wrecked cutter. With the help of a highly amused native he had managed a fairly decent haircut, and had shaved. He had also found space gear similar to Patrol work clothing and had carefully transferred the insignia from his ragged uniform. He said:

"I didn't catch you, mister. You crashed your ship in my front yard and killed your crew doing it. What's your name?"

"Killed my crew? All of 'em?" The man shrugged. "They were Venusburg muckers. But does the lieutenant"—the voice became a mocking falsetto—"really want to know my name? Why, lieutenant, I thought you tin soldiers knew everything already."

"Why, you cheap punk—!" Caffery rose from his stool intending to slap the smirk from the other's face. The pilot drew back, whining in sudden fear. Caffery sat down again, relaxing. He looked at the man thoughtfully for a minute.

"Look here, mister," he said, "I don't like you, and I don't like your kind. But you're the first Earth-

man I've seen in five years, and I'd hate to hurt you. There's nobody on this planet but you and me and a bunch of very peculiar natives. If you behave yourself, you can be comfortable until the Patrol gets here and picks you up. If you'd rather play rough, I'll play rough." He touched the caduceus on his collar. "Not 'lieutenant,' 'flight surgeon.' Flight Surgeon Robert Caffery. Now, what do I call you?"

"You mean," the other was astounded, "you don't know me? Me? Grimaldi? Johnny Grimaldi, the first guy smart enough to skip the Swamp in fifty years, and you don't know me?" There was injured pride in the tone, followed by sharp suspicion.

"Wait a minute, fella! What are you handing me—first Earthman in five years? The Patrol don't put no sawbones on a lone outpost, and they don't leave no outpost for five years without coming to look at it. You think I'm dumb, fella, you're making a big mistake. Who are you, and what's your racket, and where am I?"

The little man twisted on the edge of the cot, brushing his holster as if by accident. Startled, he noticed for the first time that the holster was empty. He glanced quickly around the room, at the bare top of the small table, at Caffery's few belongings arranged neatly on rough shelving beside a dozen or so metal bound books borrowed from native elders. He slapped at the large patchpockets of his flying suit. Finally he looked apprehensively at Caffery.

"You can forget your Jorgensens," the doctor said. "I buried 'em where you won't find 'em, mister. And I'm not handing you a line. I was surgeon of the *Aurora* when she hit a meteor storm three light-years sun-side of Arcturus five years ago. We took a three-hundred-ton rock through the bow screens and I spent two weeks in a lifeboat nursing an engineer with a broken back. He died a couple of days before we landed here, wherever we are. I've been here alone ever since waiting for somebody to come along and discover this God-forsaken mud ball.

"So," he added bitterly, "when a ship does come it's a stinking swamp rat! I tell you again, mister, I don't like your kind, but I'm that happy to see any Earthman I'll be glad of even your company for awhile. The Patrol will be in on your tail before long. It's up to you whether or not I build a jail and put you in it till they get here."

A sudden speculative flicker in Grimaldi's eyes was masked by studied hopelessness before the doctor noticed it. The little man rose shakily from the cot, the discolored welt on his forehead forming a symmetrical pattern with the brilliant tattoo.

"O.K., doc," he said, "I guess you ain't lying. I thought another doc with a beard had turned me in. I must have dreamed him. Funny, ain't it?"

"No," said Caffery. "That was me. I had a beard yesterday." He stood up, moved to the door, and opened it. "I'm going after chow.

You lie down till I get back and you'll feel better. You're not strong enough right now to run away, and if you were there's no place to run to, so don't bust your buttons while I'm gone."

A few yards from the hut a metal tool chest from the lifeboat, set in a rock basin filled with near-freezing spring water, was Caffery's ice box. The natives kept the small chest filled with an assortment of curiously formed fruit and vegetables, nutritious and reasonably palatable. In return they asked only that they be permitted occasionally to watch Caffery eat what they had provided. As yokels gape at the side show performer chewing broken glass and razor blades, so the Akraltans watched the doctor eat. They had learned that he would not die from the menu, but they never ceased to marvel at this fact.

Grimaldi, his face vicious, watched the door close. He started across the hut, realized his weakness, and stumbled back to the cot. He spat.

"Sawbones or not, you're still a lousy Patrolman to me. We'll see whether there's no place to go or not, soldier. Johnny Grimaldi's too smart to go back to the Swamp—!"

But when Caffery returned a few moments later the little man wore as friendly an expression as his twisted mouth and cold, squinting eyes could manage.

Caffery built a fire in the hut's tiny fireplace and made vegetable stew in a native pot. Grimaldi

bolted the food noisily, like an animal, barely chewing one mouthful before gulping the next. The doctor, nibbling at a pear-shaped crimson fruit, watched him intently. Pirate and murderer the man might be, he yet represented to the cast-away first contact with the wide reach of galactic civilization. Caffery saw him as symbol of and messenger from a universe so long lost as to have faded to a forgotten dream. A hundred questions crowded each other for utterance and by their very number choked him into silence. He bit at the crimson pear and waited for Grimaldi to finish eating.

"What's the range on that radio you carried?"

"What ra—? Oh!" The last mouthful of stew spilled down the front of the convict's tunic. "Oh, quarter of a light-year, maybe half a light-year. I forgot the radio. Gimme, if you got it. You got to know how to work it."

Caffery pulled from his pocket the little box he had found with the blasters in the other's clothing. He should have been warned by Grimaldi's eagerness. He wasn't. He shoved the box across the table and Grimaldi snatched it, unlocked the switch, and snapped the toggle upright. One side of the box fell away on tiny hinges, exposing a metal grid.

"That's the speaker, doc. You'll have to lean close to hear it." The little man turned the grid in Caffery's direction. The doctor, unsuspecting, watched the needle of the meter swing over the scale,

swing slowly back as Grimaldi turned the dial marked "Frequency." When the needle rested again on zero, Grimaldi spun the "Intensity" dial to about a third of its full range and threw the toggle to the side.

Caffery stiffened as the ray caught him. There was no pain, just an icy numbness. He could move, but only with great effort, his muscles pulling sluggishly against terrific inertia as in the nightmares of his childhood. His fingers, curling slowly, felt as if being forced through cold, incredibly viscous glue. Grimaldi, savage eyes fixed on the clenching hands, carefully adjusted the output, and the numbness shaded into frigid paralysis. The doctor swayed and fell sideways to lie motionless on the floor, arms half extended, hips and knees still bent in the attitude of one sitting. Grimaldi moved unsteadily around the table and sat on the stool from which Caffery had fallen.

"Sucker!" he snarled. "All you shiny tin soldiers are suckers. Forgot what a cramping box looks like, didn't you? No, I guess you never saw one before if you been here five years, because these babies ain't that old. Anyhow, sawbones, before I turn this gadget off, remember it'll kick you over anywhere within fifty yards of it once it's tuned on your nerve frequency. I'm telling you just so you don't get no funny ideas when I let you up.

"And remember this, too, sawbones: Right now you're catching low output. I'm gonna turn it up a little, and you're gonna find out

what can happen any time I don't like the way you part your hair." Grimaldi picked the box off the table.

"This is gonna hurt," he said. "This is gonna hurt you a lot more than it hurts me."

Grimaldi inspected the wreck in the morning, locking the doctor in a provision store room while he went through the craft. On the way to the clearing they had seen natives trotting singly or in small groups back and forth through the forest, but none stopped at the sight of the Earthmen. Those who passed close enough called a salutation, which Caffery returned, and looked curiously at Grimaldi without pausing on their way. Grimaldi thought the natives were afraid of him. Caffery knew better, knew that they were deliberately staying clear until he should call for them. Sargol had relayed the doctor's description of the stranger. If Caffery called for help, they would gladly give such aid as they could. Meanwhile they stayed away lest they inadvertently cause embarrassment or actual trouble to their friend.

When Grimaldi let him out of the store room, Caffery saw with dismay that the man had found another Jorgensen. He cursed himself for not stripping the arms racks when searching the ship the night before. As they stepped out of the hatch, Grimaldi asked:

"Where's this lifeboat of yours, sawbones?"

Caffery hesitated, realizing that

thoughts of escape lay behind the question. But the boat lay less than a half mile from the cabin, and the forest, free of underbrush with the trees widely spaced, offered no particular concealment for it from the most casual search.

"I'll show you," he answered. "You'd find it anyway."

After a lengthy examination of the tiny craft, during which he forestalled any possible interference on Caffery's part by the brutal expedient of half paralyzing him with the cramping box and rolling him against a tree, the convict was jubilant.

"Look, doc, I can rig that puddle jumper with parts from the cutter! You get them good friends of yours to move me some thrust-blocks and a generator, and we'll both get out of here. If you don't try any double cross, I'll even drop you somewhere you can get home from. How about it? Well? Oh, I forgot!"

He snapped off the ray. Caffery rolled to his feet and leaned shakily against the tree, stretching his stiffened muscles.

"No!" he said. "No, mister. I can't stop you as long as you've got that box, but I won't help you. If you can't move your own gear, you'll be here for the Patrol to find. And if you kill me, God help you when the Patrol gets here, because there's a couple of hundred of those natives learned pretty fair English since I landed, and they'll talk. If you don't kill me, I'll talk. Either way you lose, but you lose more if you manhandle me."

"Don't be a sap, doc." The voice

was almost plaintive. "I feel good, like a kid, since I see how easy I can fix the boat and scam. When I feel good I don't like to hurt nobody, not even a soldier. All I'm asking is your pals move some stuff from my ship up here. All you gotta do is tell 'em, and nobody gets hurt. O.K.?"

"No!"

Grimaldi's good humor vanished, replaced by the blind fury of a thwarted guttersnipe. He flicked the dial of the cramping box to full output.

"O.K., then, you brass-bound hero! You want it the hard way, sawbones, you get it the hard way!"

He squatted on the short turf and watched, with sadistic eyes, the knots of twisted, contracting muscles springing out in almost unbroken ridges over Caffery's entire body, discernible even through the heavy cloth of his flying gear. Grimaldi began counting slowly. At "sixty" he snapped off the ray.

"Take a deep breath, sawbones. I don't want you suffocated—yet!"

Caffery gasped as the paralysis wore off his chest and the knots smoothed out of relaxing muscles. He closed his eyes and lay motionless, conscious only of cool air in his throat and the ache of ligaments overstrained.

"Once more, sawbones, just to prove you ain't really no hero. Slow, this time."

"K'aa-free!"

A dozen natives had come silently around the lifeboat's bow, seen Caffery stretched on the ground, and stopped. Grimaldi sprang up, slip-

ping the safety of his Jorgensen.

"Hold it, you gooks! Hold it!" He was badly startled, chattering like a scared monkey, but the blaster in his hand was steady. The natives paid no attention to him. The blaster meant nothing to them because they had never seen one fired. One of the Akraltans stepped forward. Caffery had painfully pulled up to a sitting position, leaning against a tree trunk. Now he tried to stand, clawing at the bark for support.

"No!" he shouted. "Turahn, stand where you are. All of you stand where you are!"

He spoke in native dialect. Grimaldi, his nerves under better control, snarled:

"Talk English to 'em, sawbones, if you're gonna talk at all! And if these ain't any of 'em the ones you said could talk English, don't talk!"

Caffery got his feet under him, clutching the tree with both arms. His knees, wrenched almost to dislocation by the opposing pull of powerful calf and thigh muscles cramping under the ray a few moments before, wobbled and knocked agonizingly against each other. It was the native addressed as "Turahn" who answered. He spoke with metallic resonance in an odd, halting accent.

"I talk En-gliss, as do three of these others. K'aa-free is hurt. What has hap-pened?"

"You guessed it, gook," Grimaldi said. "'K'aa-free' is hurt. Now get this, Tureen, or whatever your name is, and get it straight the first

time: The first sign of trouble out of you gooks, the first move you make, K'aa-free will be dead and a lot of you gooks will be dead. Get it? Savvy? Understand?"

The native looked at him calmly.

"Yes-ss. Is that all?"

"No, that's not all. I want some stuff moved up here from the wreck, heavy stuff, and I want it quick. You're gonna move it."

"Per-haps. But, for you, I think not."

"Think again, gook. Watch." Grimaldi fingered the dial of the cramping box. Caffery fell stiffly away from the tree and thumped the ground.

"Your pal ain't dead yet," Grimaldi answered the question in the natives' horrified eyes, "but he will be. You gonna move my gear?"

"Yes-ss, if you will not hurt K'aa-free."

"O.K., gook, it's a deal. But you cross me up just once and—"

The natives blinked at the flash of the Jorgensen, stared dumfounded at the smoking stump of the tree at which Grimaldi had fired. The trunk, from which the blaster had cut a three-foot section, hung swaying from branches interlocked with those of its neighbors.

"Understand?" Grimaldi asked.

"Yes-ss."

"Then get going. I'm right behind you to tell you the way if you start getting lost. Oh—you better carry him"—jerking a thumb at Caffery—"because I don't think he can walk right now."

Which was true; Caffery had

passed out. Turahn signed to a native who picked up the doctor's limp two hundred pounds without obvious effort, a performance which caused Grimaldi's squint eyes to widen. He would have guessed the native to weigh not over a hundred and thirty.

"One must go to the village," Turahn said. "Else, they will seek us. Also, there will be need of a cart, per-haps?"

Grimaldi nodded. "O.K. But no funny business. I can burn your whole village like I burned that tree, so don't try to gang up on me."

Caffery could have told him, if Caffery had been awake, that the threat of the blaster was unnecessary. The natives would not attack him, or anyone else, under any circumstances. They could never deliberately harm him in any way. For over a thousand generations following the war which had destroyed Akraltan civilization and all but exterminated the race, the Akraltans had carefully bred out of themselves all capacity for physical violence. Deep-set psychological barriers made it completely impossible for them to hurt purposely any living thing, even in self-defense. Likewise, fear had been bred out. The shattered tree inspired amazement, but not the terror Grimaldi had intended. The natives' only emotions as they moved toward the clearing were concern for Caffery, whom they had long accepted as friend and brother, and loathing for Grimaldi. They obeyed the man in the hope of saving Caffery fur-

ther agony, not because they were afraid.

And the Jorgensen in which Grimaldi placed so much faith would have been useless had the natives been able to reawaken within themselves the faintest atavistic spark of the instinct for combat. By their very nature they possessed a weapon against which Grimaldi could not fight. But by their very nature they could not willfully employ this weapon.

In something over three hours the thrust-blocks and generator were moved. In six more Grimaldi crawled out of the lifeboat, grimy and triumphant. Like most space pirates, the little man was an excellent practical engineer. If the drive circuits he had just completed were rigged more by rule of thumb than according to formal theory, they would nevertheless kick the craft through space farther and considerably faster than her original engines ever could have done.

Two of Akralta's three moons were already in the sky. Grimaldi leaned against the hull, wiping grease from his face with his sleeve. Caffery lay on the ground a few feet away in the midst of the natives who had carried the machinery from the cutter. Behind them, in a great semicircle under the trees, a packed mass of natives, almost the entire population of the neighboring countryside, stood or sat on the clean grass. Turahn's runner had talked in the nearest village, and the tale had spread. The natives, still with no idea how to deal with the unpleasant stranger from

the skies, had come to see for themselves what would happen next. The harsh gutturals of their speech sounded a bullfrog cacophony against the rustling of leaves stirring in the slight breeze.

Grimaldi asked wearily: "How long before dark?"

Caffery glanced at the sky. "About twenty minutes," he said.

"O.K., doc. Let's take off. I'll still take you with me if you want to come. If you don't—" He shrugged and fingered his Jorgensen. "I ain't scared of what the gooks can tell your pals if they get here, but I ain't leaving you behind to talk. But you did pull me out of that cutter, and I guess I owe you something for that. What do you say?"

"I'll go," Caffery answered slowly. He looked thoughtfully at the sky again, gauging the height of the pale sun. He seemed to be debating something within himself as he rose painfully to his feet. Grimaldi stood clear of the hatch and motioned the doctor to go ahead of him into the boat.

"First smart thing you've done since I got here, sawbones. In with you, and let's go. This place gives me the willies."

Caffery reached a decision.

"Look, mister, a few more minutes won't matter, and I've got stuff in the hut I'd hate to leave behind me. Come with me and bring your box if you don't trust me, but give me half an hour to get my gear."

Grimaldi hesitated.

"O.K., doc," he said. "I'm coming with you, and you better make it fast."

Caffery buckled the musette bag, slung it across an aching shoulder, and turned to the impatient little man fidgeting in the door of the hut.

"Let's go," he said.

The breeze had stopped with the setting of the sun a few moments before, and with it the rustling of the leaves had died. Also, a sudden silence had dropped over the natives who had followed the two men back from the boat and remained outside the hut. Grimaldi had noticed.

"Them gooks is awful quiet all of a sudden!"

"They go to sleep at sundown," Caffery answered shortly without interrupting his packing. "I'll be ready in a minute." There was a determined grimness in his voice, and he did not look at the little man as he spoke.

As the doctor finished strapping the bag, Grimaldi motioned him through the door and stepped behind him out into the moonlight. There was an odd expectancy in the doctor's bearing as he started through the trees, approaching the nearest of the slumbering natives. When he reached the first of the sprawled bodies he stopped.

"You better come see this, mister. It might change your plans."

Grimaldi stepped close and glanced down at the still form under the doctor's pointing finger. Caffery caught him as his knees buckled, and dragged him, a screaming idiot, back to the hut.

"—a terrible thing to do to any man, sir, but—well, what would you have done?"

Captain Ellsworth Hague, skipper of the cruiser *Antares*, set his cup carefully in the geometrical center of the saucer and looked up at Caffery.

"The same thing you did, I think, doctor. But I know how you feel. More coffee? Is the man in the booby hatch for keeps, or will he recover enough to stand trial?"

"I don't know. A little more cream, please, sir. Same thing happened to me when I landed here, and I got over it, so I imagine he will. The natives told me later it took me about two months to stop gibbering, and during that time they fed me from the lifeboat stores like a helpless brat. Next thing I remember when I began to come out of it, they'd figured out what happened. They're smart, sir, in lots of ways, and they're survivors of a race so advanced they'd have made us look like schoolboys. Anyhow, they'd camouflaged themselves for my benefit, some kind of a mental screen they trained themselves to throw out automatically so you think they look human when actually they're not. When they go to sleep, the screen drops, and—you saw Grimaldi when I turned him over to your master-at-arms."

Caffery took a long swallow of coffee.

"Judging from my own case," he continued, "I'd say that once you've been exposed and recovered you develop a kind of immunity, or you'd have found me in the same shape as our friend in the brig. Or maybe it's just that when you get to know 'em you don't give a hoot what they look like really. I don't know."

"I don't think I want to find out," said Hague, dryly. "I'm pulling the survey parties back aboard before nightfall. But tell me, if you can, just what do these inhuman saints of yours look like underneath?"

Caffery shook his head.

"I can't, sir. They're indescribable." He reached for a pencil and paper on the captain's desk. "Something like this, only more so."

The captain watched the incredible outline taking shape under the pencil point. He slapped a broad hand over the paper.

"That'll do, doctor. I get as much of the idea as I want to get. I think," he added, "that technically we are in port. Anyhow, I'll take a chance on bending Article 31 of the 'Regulations' just a little." He reached in the back of a desk drawer.

"Rinse your cup from the water jug, doctor. This is fine Scotch."

THE END

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