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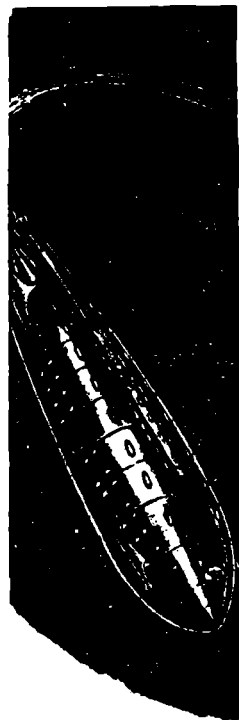
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Editor
JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.





THE GREAT AIR MONOPOLY

BY RENÉ LAFAYETTE

A neat racket the boys had—you had to buy the privilege of breathing the air of the planet! And enforcing that tax law was quite a trick. Effective, too—

Illustrated by Cartier

Ole Doc sat in the cool sunlight of Arphon and pulled at a fragrant pipe. The *Morgue*, his ship-laboratory, sat in lush grass up to its belly beside the sparkling lake and from its side came out an awning to make a stately pavilion for the master.

Sun¹² was thirty degrees high and Arphon's autumn sucked hun-

grily at the warmth, even as Ole Doc sucked at the pipe. He was getting away with something with that pipe. His little super-gravitic slave Hippocrates was bustling around, all four hands busy, now and then coming to a full stop to lower his antennae at Ole Doc in disapproval. It was not of his

master that he disapproved, it was the pipe.

"What if it is his birthday?" growled Hippocrates. "He shouldn't. He said he wouldn't. He promised me. Nicotine, *ugh!* and three whole days until he takes his treatment. Nicotine on his fingers, poisoning him; nicotine in his lungs. Poison, that's what it is. In the pharmacopoeia !!" And he rattled off a long, gruesome list of poisons for, once going, his phonograph-recordwise mind went on into Nilophine, Novocaine and Nymphodryl. Suddenly he realized where all this was heading and in anger at himself now as well as Ole Doc, got back to work with his birthday party preparations. They were very intricate preparations. After all, there had to be nine hundred and five candles on that cake.

Ole Doc paid his little slave no heed. He sat in the sunlight and puffed his pipe and occasionally made intricate calculations on his gold cuff—his filing case was full of torn cuffs containing solutions which would have rocked even his brothers of the Universal Medical Society,* much less the thousand

* U.M.S.—Universal Medical Society—the supreme council of physicians organized in the late Twenty-third Century after the famous Revolt Caduceus which claimed the lives of two billion humanoid of the Earth-Arcton Empire through the villainous use of new medical discoveries to wage war and dominate entire countries. George Moulton, M.D., Dr. Hubert Sands the physiochemist, James J. Lufberry, M.D., and Stephen Thomas Mettridge, M.D., who was later to become as well known as Ole Doc Methuselah, had for nearly a hundred years kept to a laboratory studying far beyond contemporary skills and incidentally extending their work by extending their own lives, came out of retirement, issued a pronouncement—backed with atomic and du-ray hand weapons and a thousand counter-toxins—which denied to the casual practitioner all specialized

and five humanoid systems in this one galaxy.

He didn't hear the clanking chains or the bark of the guards on the march, even though they came closer with every second and would pass hard by the ship. It was nothing to Ole Doc that Arphon was a boiling turmoil of revolt and murder. In the eight hundred and eighty years since he had graduated from Johns-Hopkins Medical school in Baltimore, Maryland, First Continental District, Earth, Orbit Three, Sun¹, Rim Zone, Galaxy¹, Universe—or 1, 316°, 1 m. ly hub¹, 264-89, sub-3²⁸ which will find it for you on the space charts if you are going there—he had seen everything, done everything, felt everything, tasted everything, been everything including a Messiah, a Dictator, a humanoid animal in a glass dome and a god, and there were few things left to amaze or interest him.

He supposed some day he would crack up or get shot or forget his regular youth treatments for a month and wind up in the quiet crypt where sat the nine hundred

medical secrets. Thus peace came to the Empire. Other systems anxiously clamored for similar aid and other great names of medicine quietly joined them. For centuries, as the Universal Medical Society, these men, hiding great names under nicknames, who eventually became a fixed seven hundred in number, maintained a Center and by casual patrol of the Systems kept medicine as well as disease within rational bounds. Saluting no government, collecting no fees, permitting no infringement, the U.M.S. became dreaded and revered as The Soldiers of Light and under the symbol of the crossed ray rods impinged their will upon the governments of space under a code of their own more rigorous than any code of laws. For the detailed records and history of the U.M.S., for conditions governing the hundred-year apprenticeship all future members must serve and for the special codes of call and appeal to the U.M.S. in case of plague or disaster, consult L. Ron Hubbard's "Conquest of Space," 29th Volume, Chapter XCLII. René LaFayette.

coffins of black ebony and gold containing all the mortal remains of Soldiers of Light who had departed the service in the only way possible and whose brothers had carefully brought them home.

He calculated from time to time and filled his pipe. After a while, when dinner was over, he'd go to the lake, make an artificial dusk and try out his battery of flies on the trout. Just now he was calculating.

It had come to him that morning that negative could be weighed and if this were so, then it could be canned and if that were true, he could undoubtedly surprise his colleagues at the Center some two hundred million light-years away by making painless amputations so that new limbs could be grown.

He had just come up to his ninety-sixth variable when Hippocrates heard the chain gang. The little slave was ashamed of himself for being too busy or too provoked to heed sounds audible to him these past sixteen and two-tenths minutes.

Hippocrates jumped to the panel, making the *Morgue* rock with his great weight and four-handedly threw on a combination of switches which utterly camouflaged the *Morgue*, screened Ole Doc without making him invisible, trained outward a brace of 600 mm. blasters rated at a thousand rounds a second and turned down the oven so that his cake wouldn't burn. These four importances attended to, Hippocrates hung invisible in the door and eyed the column with disfavor as it came in sight.

Ole Doc saw it at last. It would have been very difficult to have avoided it, seeing that the vanguard—a huge Persephon renegade—would momentarily stumble against the screen, the limit of which he was paralleling.

It was a weird sight, that column. The lush grass bent under white human feet and became stained with red. Clothing ripped to nothing, eyes sunken and haunted, bent with iron fetters and despair, the hundred and sixteen people captive there appeared like shades just issued forth from hell for a bout with Judgment Day.

The guards were brutish humanoids, eugenized for slave tending. And this was odd because Ole Doc himself a hundred or was it fifty years before had thought the practice stopped by his own policing. These ape-armed, jaguar-toothed devils were like humans mad with a poisonous stimulant or like Persephons dragged from their pits and injected with satanic human intelligence. Their pointed heads were as thick as helmets, their necks were collared with an owner's mark, their shoulders and shaggy loins girded about with blasters and brass cases and their elephant-pad feet were shod in something resembling spittoons. Whoever owned and controlled that crew who in turn controlled these human slaves must be a very rough lad himself.

Doc raised a microglass to his eye and read the collar brand. It wasn't a man's name, it was a commercial company stamp. "Air, Limited."

Maybe they would have gone on

by and nothing whatever would have been written in the *Morgue's* log. But then Ole Doc saw her.

She was slight, but strong enough to bear this iron. She was curved just so and thus. And her eyes and nose and mouth made a triangle, just . . . well, and her hair flowed back and down her back.

Ole Doc sat up and the pipe dropped unheeded to the ground. He looked harder. The lines before and behind her vanished. The guards vanished. The grass, the sunlight, all Arphon vanished. And there was this girl. Ole Doc stood up and his knees wobbled a little which was odd because Ole Doc was in a physical recondition far superior to most men of twenty-five.

She saw him and for an instant, as she looked and he looked broke her stride. The slave behind her was old and stumbled. The slave ahead was jerked back by his collar. The Persephon humanoid whirled off the screen he had just bumped and came around to see the tangle. And down came his brass rod.

It never touched the young lady. Ole Doc had not practised drawing and hip shooting for about four hundred years but his hand had not forgotten. That Persephon humanoid sort of exploded into a mist. His arm flew up sixty yards, turned at the top and came down with a thump on the *Morgue's* screen where it lay, dripping, suspended in air. The guard's blaster belt went off after an instant like a chain of small cannons and blew tufts of grass in the air. The hole

smoked and the other guards came up sharply, gaped and as one faced about with guns drawn looking for their quarry.

It was not quite fair. Ole Doc was out of the screen where he could shoot without deflection and he was shooting. And even if he was a fine target it was still not sporting. He had five Persephons only to shoot at him and then there were four, three, two, none. And patches of grass smoked and there was silence. A final belt cartridge exploded in a hole and there was silence again.

The Persephons never knew that they had had the honor of being shot by a Galactic Medalist in short arms.

The slaves stood still and shivered. A wild one had pinked an old woman at the end of the column and she was sitting down staring at her own blood. The rest were gazing miserably at this new menace who had risen up from the tall grass. Ole Doc found he was shaking with the excitement and he disliked finding it so for he had often told himself that one should never get a thrill out of killing, that being a barbarous sort of joy and besides at the end there it had been but five to one. He picked up his fallen pipe, jammed it into his mouth and took a drag. The slaves screamed and fell back from this smoking monster, the tobacco habit having been extinct most everywhere for hundreds of years.

Hippocrates grunted with disgust. He had not been able to

more than slew the 600 mm. into position and had not had the satisfaction of shooting even one round.

He came out. Shrilly shrewish he said: "You ought to know better. I have told you and told you and told you and you ought to know better. You'll get hurt. I've said you'll get hurt and you will. You leave that to the bravos and buckos. It says right in your code that 'Whosoever shall kill large numbers of people solely for satisfaction shall be given a hearing and shall be fined a week's pay, it being the mission of this Society to preserve mankind in the galaxy—'" He brought up short. His terror for Ole Doc had brought him into an error of quoting the Parody Code. It actually said "... kill large numbers for experimentation shall . . ." This fussed him so that he shut off the force screens and came down and would have carried Ole Doc straight back into the ship for a take-off had not his revered master been staring so hard, pipe again forgotten.

Hippocrates took the pipe. He looked for the objection. He knocked out the bowl. He looked again, more wonder in his antennae waves, and slyly broke the pipe to bits. Still no objection. Hippocrates poured out the contents of the pouch and heaved bits and leather as far as his very powerful arms could throw. Still no objection. Hippocrates walked all the way around Ole Doc and stared at him. His master was staring at the line of slaves.

No, at the center of the line.

And someone there was staring as though hypnotized.

"Oh," moaned Hippocrates, seeing plenty of trouble. "A girl!"

Now it was no plan of Ole Doc's to inspect Arphon of Sun¹². He was on his leisurely way to hand a deposition warrant to a System Chief over in Sub-Rim 18, 526°, that worthy having failed to respect Section 8, Paragraph 918 of Code 94 of the Universal Medical Society. And if Arphon has slaves like this, it was theoretically none of his medical business.

But she was staring at him.

He flushed a little and looked down. But he was caped in gold and belted in scarlet with metal wings on his yellow boots and was decent.

Hippocrates sighed with the depth of resignation. He went over and chopped the girl out of the line with a simple twist of the iron links, bare-handed. Then he set her bodily to one side and to the rest made pushing motions with his hands.

"Shoo! Shoo!" said Hippocrates. "You are free. Go!"

"Nonsense," said the girl in a voice which made tingles go up and down Ole Doc's spine. "How can they go anywhere? They have no money to pay the air tax."

"The air—" Hippocrates gaped at her. She was just a human being to him. Personally he liked machines. "Nonsense yourself. The air's here and the air's free. Shoo! SHOO! You stay," he added over one of his shoulders to the girl. "Shoo!"

And the slaves sank down and began to inch forward on their knees to the little slave. "No, no," they cried. "We cannot pay the tax. We have sickened already in our homes when the air was shut off. We cannot pay. We are re-possessed and on our way to re-marketing. Don't send us away! Help us! Money, money! You pay our tax and we will work—!"

"Master!" cried Hippocrates, scuttling back. For there were definite limits on his skills and when these were reached he had but one god. "Master!"

But the slaves just came on, inching forward on their knees, hands pitifully upraised, begging and whining and Hippocrates fell hastily back again.

"Air, air. Buy us air! You pay our tax. Don't send us away!"

"MASTER!"

Ole Doc paid no heed to his slave now behind him, to the pathetic cries, to the creeping throng or to anything else on Arphon for that matter. He was still staring at the girl and now she blushed and pulled the rags of a robe around her.

That did it. "Put her in the ship!" said Ole Doc. "The rest of you get out of here. Go back to your homes! Beat it!" But this relapse into the vernacular of his youth had no effect on the crowd. They had crept forward, leaving flattened grass behind them.

Suddenly an old man with a ragged gray stubble and thin chest caught at his throat, rose up and

with a wild scream cried, "Air! Air! Oh—" And down he went, full length into the grass. Two others shortly did the same thing.

Ole Doc sniffed alertly. He looked at his third cloak button but it was still gold and so the atmosphere was all right. He sniffed again. "Test for air," he said to Hippocrates.

The little fellow leaped gladly into the *Morgue* and in his testing brought visibility back to the ship. He saw, through the port, that this startled half a dozen of the slaves out there into fits and the fact made him feel very superior. He, master of machinery, tested for the air. And it was good.

Ole Doc pulled down his helmet to cover his face and walked forward. He rolled over the senseless antique of sixty-five winters and examined him for anything discoverable.

He examined several more and from the eighth, who just that instant was half blind with airlessness and the flash of Ole Doc's U.M.S. gorget, flicked out a specimen of spittle and passed it to Hippocrates.

"Culture it," said Ole Doc.

"Negative," said Hippocrates six minutes later, still carrying 'scope and speed culture flask. "Bacteriologically negative."

"Air!" screamed the old man, reviving. And an instant later She went down on her face and didn't move.

Ole Doc had her in the ship in about ten seconds. Hippocrates threw a force cordon around the

rest and four-handedly went through them spraying a sterilizer all over them with two hands and breaking their chains apart with the remaining sets of fingers.

"Air!" they whined and gasped. "Air, air, air!"

Ole Doc looked sadly down at the girl on the table. She was fragile and lovely, stretched there on the whiteness of the *Morgue's* operating room. She was in odd contrast to all these brilliant tubes and trays, these glittering rods and merciless meters. Ole Doc sighed and then shook off the trance and became a professional.

"There's such a thing as malnutrition," he said to Hippocrates. "But I never heard of mal-oxygenation. Her chest— Here, what's this?"

The tag had been clipped solidly through her ear and it read, "Property of Air, Limited. Repossessed Juary 43rd, '53. By order of Lem Tolliver, President, Air Limited."

That offended Ole Doc for some reason. He tore it off and put a heal compress on the small, handsome ear. When he removed it five seconds later there were no scars.

Ole Doc read the tag again and then angrily stamped it under foot. He turned to his job and shortly had a mask on the girl which fed her oxygen in proper pulsations and gave her a little ammonia and psionized air in the bargain.

He was just beginning to take satisfaction in the way her lovely eyes were flickering as she came

around when Hippocrates leaped in, excited.

"Ship landing!" blurted the little fellow. "Guns ready. Tell me when to shoot."

"Whoa," said Ole Doc. "Force screen them off until you see what they are at least. Now, there you are, my dear."

She struggled up and pulled off the mask. She looked mystified at her surroundings until she heard others calling for air outside. Then she flicked her eyes at Ole Doc and it was his turn to sigh.

"Ugh!" said Hippocrates. "Nicotine, women! You never live to be ten thousand, I bet. Next, run!"

"Fine idea," said Ole Doc. "My dear, if you'd like to step this way—"

Hippocrates watched him open doors for her. He knew Ole Doc would take her to a stateroom where she could shower and shift into Ole Doc's robe. And then in the salon that Michalo had newly designed, they'd sit in soft lights and talk above the whine of violins. *Ugh!* It had been exactly nineteen years and six days since Ole Doc had shown any interest in a woman— The little slave paused. He grinned. After all, this was Ole Doc's birthday. It was hard enough to live hundreds of years with nothing ever exciting any more. Hippocrates knew for his people, gypsum metabolism though they were, normally went utterly stale at twelve thousand and faded into complete boredom. Humans lived faster in the head—

He grinned and swung up into

a gun turret. Let him have his birthday and three cheers for it.

But the ship called Hippocrates back sharply. And he was again intensely annoyed with Ole Doc. Women. Now look at the trouble that was coming. The ship was a Scoutcraft Raider for atmosphere travel and it had enough armament to slaughter a city and it was manned with humans who, even at this distance, looked extremely unreliable.

It landed on the edge of the screen and five guards leaped down, blasters ready to cover the debark of a huge-shouldered, black-garbed man. Hippocrates was reminded of a vulture and almost whiffed the odor that always clings to those birds. He turned on the near screen and disregarded the fact

that its force kicked about twenty slaves a dozen feet or more outward from the *Morgue*.

The five scouted the grass, found the holes where the guards had been and fished up bits of melted brass. They stood and glared at the slaves who, seeing the ship had begun to howl and plead and creep toward that as they had toward Hippocrates.

The big human stopped and looked at the *Morgue*. Its stern was toward him and he didn't see the crossed ray rods on the nose or the meaningful letters *U. M. S. S. Morgue, Ole Doc Methuselah*.

"You better stop," said Hippocrates in the high turret.

The men stopped.

The big human looked up at the turret. He signaled his men to fan out and for his ship to depress its



heaviest cannon. Hippocrates shivered a little for he was not sure his screen would hold against the size of those muzzles.

"I'm Big Lem Tolliver!" shouted the human. "This is Air, Limited talking and if you got a good reason why my Persephons ain't alive, spill it, for I ain't withholding my fire long."

"You better go away!" yelled Hippocrates in derision. "If my master sees you, he'll cut you open to see the size of your liver or drill holes in your skull to equalize the vacuum. You better go!"

"Only a hundred and fifteen in this gang," said a shrunken human being who reached only to Tolliver's elbow but who served him as a lieutenant of sorts. "According to the radio report, that's one missing."

"Search the ship!" said Big Lem Tolliver.

Hippocrates swooped down with his 600 mm. "Stop and go away. This is the U.M.S.S. *Morgue* and we specialize in dead men named Lem Tolliver."

He thought this was pretty apt. After all, he'd never imagined being able to convert lines from "Tales of the Early Space Pioneers." He was a success. It stopped them.

"Spacecrap!" said Lem Tolliver in a moment. "That's no U.M.S. ship! You'd never steal a slave if you were."

"Slaves are U.M.S. business, pardner," said Hippocrates. "And even if they weren't, we'd make it our business, son. You going to go along and tell your mama to wipe your nose or am I going to

have to wipe it myself—with 'sploders. Now git!" He was certainly converting well today.

"Up there, Tinoi. Search it and if they've got the missing one, haul her out. And then we'll see about the murder that's been done here amongst our people."

Tinoi, the shrunken one, hung back. He'd never had a taste for 600 mm. stuff himself. Let them as would be heroes, he valued his daily issue of *doi*.

Hippocrates saw the hesitation and grew very brave. He spanged a dozen sploders into the earth before the group and would have shot a thousand more as warning if the Scoutcraft Raider, ordered so, had not replied with a resounding vomit of fire.

The *Morgue* reeled as the screen folded. The top turret caved into tangled smoke. The side port fused and dripped alloy gone molten. And Big Lem Tolliver looked on in some annoyance for there went his chance of recovering the missing repossessed slave.

The men went about collecting the hundred and fifteen and forming them into lines. They were bitter because they could not imagine what had burst these perfectly good chains and they had to tie lines through the broken links.

"Air!" moaned the prisoners.

"Stow it," said Big Lem. "We'll teach you to breathe air you didn't pay for. Form 'em up boys and get them on their way. That spaceship, or what's left of it, is a shade too hot for me."

"You ain't goin' to make me escort them," said Tinoi. "It's a heck of a walk to Minga. I bought them Persephon-castes to do the walking."

"If I say walk, you'll walk," said Big Lem. "And if I say walk straight out into space, you'll walk. And if I say hoof it from here to Galactropolis, you'll walk every condemned light-year of it barefoot. If I can't have my orders obeyed, who can? And if you can't obey Big Lem Tolliver, you can't obey nobody. Who thought up this company? Who makes it work? Who handles all the paper work and hires politicians and abdicates kings when he chooses? Who keeps the whole confounded planet running and your belly full. Lem Tolliver, that's who. And what's Air, Limited but Lem Tolliver? And what's Arphon but Lem Tolliver? And that makes me a planet."

This syllogism caused a return of good humor. He expanded, rocked on his heels and looked down at Tinoi. "Yessir. That makes me Arphon, or mighty doggone near. Well, Tinoi, do you walk?"

"Guess so, Arphon," grumped Tinoi and appeared very beaten about it. He knew better than to appear elated. Somebody else would have got the detail if he hadn't objected and it would be fine to breathe something else besides the ozone stink of the Scoutcraft Raider. Too, he could always sell a slave or two to some farm and turn in a death report. "Guess I'll have to," mumbled Tinoi, "but I'll need two gunners and a marine off

the ship, and don't go making me take Connoly along."

"That's Connoly and two marines you'll get," said Tolliver. "Now line 'em up and get—"

"Well," said Tinoi, forgetting his elation about Connoly who could surely build them litters for the slaves to pack. He stared at the smoking side of the spaceship. "There's somebody alive."

And indeed it appeared to be the truth. Crawling backwards out of the smoke came a seared being, tugging at the boot of a second. Tinoi was all action. He swooped in, holding his breath against the fumes and snatched up the obviously live one.

Coughing and beating out a burning spot on his coat, he let her slide into the grass. "There's the missing one," he said. "Now we can get on our way."

Big Lem looked down at her and made a disdainful face. She was very badly singed property, an enormous burn blotting out almost all of her face and destroying one eye. Wounded and bedraggled, it was plain that she would no longer gladden the eyes of man.

Tinoi looked at her tag, the one around her ankle, and then stared at the ear where the repossession tag should have been and was not. He looked at his boss. "This is Dotty Grennan, the one they picked up 'specially for you. She sure is spoiled for looks."

"Throw her into the line. Some men will buy anything," said Big Lem.

"Don't guess she'll be able to walk much," said Tinoi.

"What's that to me? Throw her in. Captain! Captain! Here, you Foster. Get up there and tell my captain to send Connoly and two marines out here and stand by to take off."

The man named Foster leaped up into the Scoutcraft Raider with the message and came back shortly eating a chocolate bar to walk the line up.

"Air," moaned the slaves. "Air!"

"Shut up, you repossessed mothers' sons," said Tinoi, beating them into line with the butt of his blastick. "Form up, form up or I'll give you a lot more air than you'll ever be able to use." He tried four times to make an old man stand on his feet and then left off profanity, and held an open hand toward Tolliver.

"I'll have to have a few charges," said Tinoi. "After all, it's bad enough to walk to Minga without having to drag a hundred and sixteen passed out repossessions."

"It's a waste of company money," said Big Lem. But he signaled Connoly as the big gunner came out of the Raider and Connoly went back for charges.

These were small cylinders with "A.L." painted in red on them, and when they were exploded around the slaves, sent off a greenish spray which hung foggily about them. Tinoi stepped clear and waited for the murk to dissipate and then, when the slaves had revived, turned to and lined them up without further delay.

Big Lem watched the crowd move off. He knew Tinoi would probably be carried most of the way in litters made by Connoly and he understood what would happen to a couple of those younger girls. And he knew a dozen would be sold and reported dead. But Lem Tolliver could appreciate that kind of loyalty and wouldn't ever have understood another kind of man. He grinned as the last of them disappeared in the trees and without another look at the smoking spaceship, boarded the Scoutcraft Raider and took off.

An hour later Ole Doc came to himself lying in the grass where the girl had pulled him. For a little while he lay there and enjoyed the cool fragrance of the soft blades around him. It was quite novel to be alive and to be so glad to be alive.

After a little he rose up on his elbows and looked at the *Morgue*. The alloy had stopped dripping and the smoke had cleared away but the poor old ship looked ready for a spare parts house. The upper turret had been straight-armed back, a ten-foot hole lay under her keel and the keel was bent, and the near port had been melted entirely out of line. And then he took heart. For she wasn't hulled that he could see and her tubes at one end and her Texas on the other were untouched. He started to spring up but the second he put weight on his right hand it collapsed and he felt sick.

He looked down and saw that his palm was seared away and his

wrist sprained or broken. He felt rapidly of his shoulders and chest but his cloak had protected him there. One boot was almost seared off but his ankle and foot were uninjured. Aside from singes, his wrist and hand, he had survived what must have been a considerable conflagration. He came up swiftly then and went through the hot door. Small spirals of smoke were rising from the salon upholstery. One huge gold panel had curled off its mountings from heat and a silver decanter was lying in a puddle on the charred rug, struck squarely by a ray translating itself through the hull.

But the young woman was gone and Ole Doc, looking back at the trampled meadow through the misshapen door understood suddenly how he must have got out there. No calloused space ranger would have tried to rescue him. Either the girl had tried or Hippocrates—"Hippocrates!" "Hippocrates," "Hippocrates," echoed the empty cabins.

Ole Doc raced into the Texas and looked around. He went aft to the tube rooms and found them empty. And he had nearly concluded that they must have taken his little slave when he thought of the jammed turret.

The ladder was curled into glowing wreckage and the trap at the top had fused solidly shut from the impact of a direct hit. Ole Doc stood looking upward, a lump rising in his throat. He was afraid of what he would find behind that door.

He went casting about him for a burning torch and was startled by a whir and clang in the galley as he passed it. In a surge of hope he thrust open the door. But little Hippocrates was not there. Pans, spoons and spits were just as he had left them. A bowl of gooey gypsum and mustard, the slave's favorite concoction for himself, stood half eaten on the sink, spoon drifting minutely from an upright position to the edge of the bowl as the neglected mixture hardened. A small, pink-bellied god grinned forlornly in a niche, gazing at the half-finished page of a letter to some outlandish world. The whir and clang had come from the opening oven door on the lip of which now stood the ejected cake, patiently waiting for icing, decorations and nine hundred and five candles.

Ole Doc closed the galley softly as though he had been intruding on a private life and stood outside, hand still on the latch. For a long, long time he had never thought about it. But life without Hippocrates would be a desperate hard thing to bear.

He swore a futile, ordinary oath and went to his operating room. His hand was burning but he did not heed it. There was an amputator in here some place which would saw through diamonds with cold fire. He spilled three drawers on the floor and in the blinding glitter of instruments finally located the tool.

It wasn't possible to reach the trap without taking away the twisted ladder and for some minutes

he scorched himself on the heated metal until he could cut it all away. Then it occurred to him that he would have no chance of getting Hippocrates down if there was anything left of him for that little fellow weighed five hundred kilos even if he was less than a meter tall.

Ole Doc found rope and mattresses and then, standing on a chair, turned the cold fire on a corner of the trap. He stopped abruptly for fear the excess jet would touch Hippocrates' body on the other side and for a while stood frowning upward. Then he seized a thermometer from his pocket and began to apply it all over the steel above him. In a minute or two he had found a slightly higher temperature over an area which should compare with the little slave's body and he chalked it off. Then, disregarding the former lines of the trap, jetted out five square feet of resistant metal as though it had been butter. The torch was entirely spent when he had but an inch to go but the lip had sagged from weight enough for him to pry down. A moment later he was crawling into the turret.

Hippocrates lay curled into himself as though asleep. He was seared and blackened by the heat of the melting girder which had buckled and pinned him down.

Ole Doc hurriedly put a heart counter against the slave's side and then sagged with relief when he saw the needle beat-beat-beat in faint but regularly spaced rhythm. He

stood up, feeling his own life surging back through him, and wrenched away the confining girder.

Carefully, because he had never made any study of the slave's anatomy—which anatomy had been the reason Ole Doc had bought him at that auction God knew how many, many scores of years ago, two centuries? three?—Ole Doc trussed the little fellow in a rope cradle and by steadying the standing part over a split jet barrel, began the weary task of lowering the enormous weight down to the mattresses below.

It took a full twenty minutes to get Hippocrates on an operating table, but when that was done, Ole Doc could examine him in perplexity. Other than diet, which was gypsum, Ole Doc knew nothing about the slave.

The antennae were not injured. The arms were bruised but whole. The legs appeared sound. But there was a chipped look about the chest which argued grave injury. Hippocrates was physician to himself and knowing this Ole Doc went back to the tiny cabin off the galley.

He found some amulets which looked like witchcraft and a bottle which his keen nose identified as diluted ink with a medical dosage on the label. He found some chalky looking compresses and some white paint.

Completely beaten he went back and sat down beside the table. Hippocrates' heart was beating more faintly.

His anxiety becoming real now,

like a hand around his throat, Ole Doc hurried to the galley. He had seen Hippocrates tipsy a few times and that meant a stimulant. But it wasn't a stimulant which Ole Doc found.

The letter was addressed in plain lingua spacia.

Bestin Karjoy,
Malbright, Diggs Import Co.
Minga, Arphon.

By Transcript Corporation of the Universe charge U.M.S. O.D.M.

Dear Human Beings:

Forty-six years ago you had one Bestin Karjoy of my people doing your accounts. Please to give same Bestin this message. Hello Bestin. How are you? I am fine. I have not been feeling too good lately because of the old complaint and if your father still employ with you you tell him Hippocrates needs to come see him and get some advice. My master got birthday today so I give him happy birthday with nine hundred and five candles which surprise you for human but you know how big and famous he is and anyway I can come in gig tonight and see you about dawn-dark halfway on park front because I don't know where you really live and your father. . . .

The cake must have demanded something there for it stopped in a blot.

"At five dollars a word outer space rates!" exclaimed Ole Doc. But when he had read it through he was willing to have it at five hundred a word.

He hastened back to the operating table and put the gypsum and mustard close to hand, stacking with it water, the diluted ink and a call phone turned on to the band of his own, propping up a note:

"Hold on, old fellow. I'm returning with your friend Bestin or his father. I'll stay tuned on this phone."

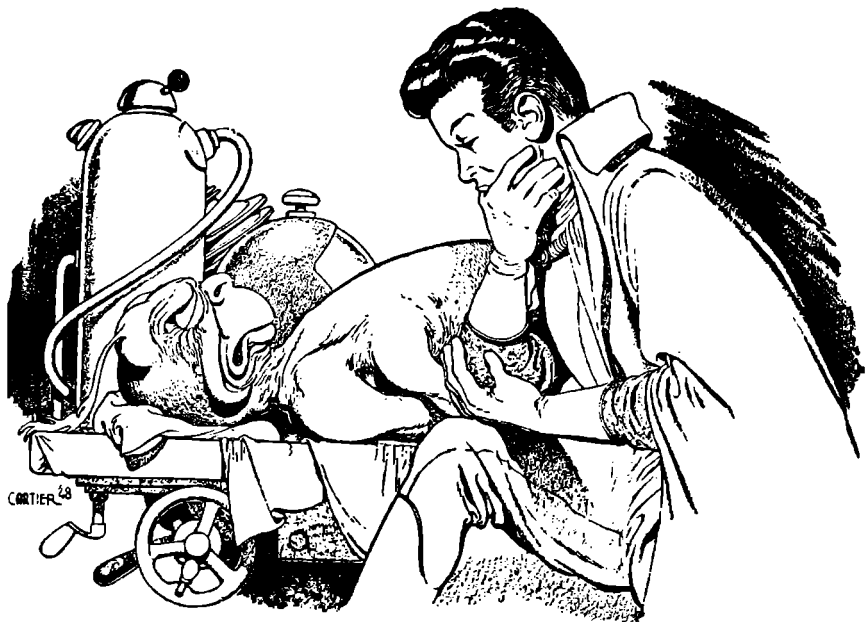
His hand annoyed him as he tried to write with it and when the note had been placed he plunged his arm to the elbow into a catalyst vat and felt the painful prickling which meant a too fast heal. It would scar at this speed but what was a scar?

He saw that the gig, which had been on the side away from the blast, was uninjured, and he had almost launched it when he saw it would never do to go demanding things in his present charred state.

Impatiently he threw on a new shirt, boots and cloak and thrusting a kit and a blaster into his belt, lost no further time.

The gig was a small vacuum-atmosphere boat, jet powered and armed. It was capable of several light-years speed and was naturally very difficult to handle at finites like ten thousand miles an hour. Ole Doc went straight past Minga twice before he properly found it, glimpsed it just long enough to see the landing strip in the middle of town and put the gig down to paving at three hundred and eighty.

Ordinarily Ole Doc disliked middle-sized towns. They didn't have the chummy, "hello-stranger" attitude of the pioneer villages of space and yet lacked any of the true comforts of the city. Built by money-hungry citizenry around a space repair yard such towns were intent upon draining off the profit of the mines and farms incoming and out-



going. They were, in short, provincial. A rover port had some color and danger, a metropolis had comfort and art. Such as Minga had law and order and a Rotarian club and were usually most confidently proud of being dull.

And so Ole Doc didn't give Minga much of a glance, either passing over or walking in. Brick fronts and badly painted signs—houses all alike—people all— But even Ole Doc in his rush had to slow and stare.

Minga was a city, according to the Space Pilot, of ninety thousand people where "a limited number of fuel piles, ice, fresh water, provisions and some ship chandlery can be obtained" and "repairs can be made to small craft in cradles with capacity under one hundred tons"

and "the space hospital is government staffed by the Sun¹² System Navy with limited medical stores available" and "two small hotels and three restaurants provide indifferent accommodations due to the infrequency of stopovers." Not exactly the sort of town where you would expect to see a well-dressed man of fifty carefully but unmistakably stalking a cat.

It was not even a fat cat, but a gaunt-ribbed, matt-furred, rheumy-eyed sort of feline which wouldn't go a pound of stringy meat. But from the look on the well-dressed gentleman's face, there was no other reason than that.

"Had he seen a riot, a golden palace, a ten-tailed dog or a parade of seals singing "Hallelujah," Ole Doc would not have been much

amazed, for one sees many things strange and disorders unreasonable in a lifetime of rolling through the systems great and small. Ole Doc had been everywhere and seen everything, had long ago come to the conclusion that it wasn't even curious, but a well-dressed obviously influential old man engaging in the stalk of a mangy cat—well!

The gentleman had crept around the corner to pursue his game and now he had a fence for cover and with it was using up the twenty-yard lead the cat had had originally. In his hand the gentleman held a butterfly net and in his eye there was hunger.

The cat was unable to locate its pursuer now and stopped a bit to pant. It looked beleaguered as though it had been hunted before and the old gentleman had it worried. It crouched warily behind a post and condensed itself anew when it saw Ole Doc some thirty feet away. This new distraction was its undoing.

Soft-footed and alert, the old gentleman left the fence and crossed the walk out of the cat's range of vision. Too late the animal caught the shadow beside it and sprang to escape. There was a swish of net and a blur of fur, a yowl of dismay and a crow of triumph and the old gentleman, by twisting the net into a bag below the hoop, struck an attitude of victory.

Ole Doc started breathing again and walked forward. The old gentleman, seeing him, held up the prize.

"A fine morsel now, isn't it, sir?"

said the old gentleman. "Been three solid weeks since we've dined on good, tasty cat. Don't yowl, my good rabbit avec croutons to be, for it won't do you a bit of good. My, my, my that was a long chase. Ten solid blocks and tortuous, too, what with thinking every instant some guttersnipe would leap out and snatch my prize from me. For I'm not as young as once I was. Dear me."

Ole Doc could see no insanity in the fellow's eyes nor find any fault other than this enthusiasm for dining on mangy cats. But, he decided suddenly, this was no time to follow the quirks of the human mind. Serious business—very serious business—was waiting for him in the wrecked hull of the *Morgue*. He glanced anxiously at his radio pack. The *tic-tic-tic* of the heart counter was very slow.

"Sir," said Ole Doc, "while I can't share your enthusiasm for cat on toast, I could use some of your knowledge of this town. Could you tell me where I might find a company known as Malbright, Diggs? They import, I think and have their main office here in Minga."

At this the old gentleman stopped admiring his capture which was now entirely subdued. "Malbright, Diggs. Bless me!" And he removed a pocket handkerchief and blew his nose heavily. "You won't be from any town on Arphon, then."

"Be quick, man. Where can I find any member of that firm?"

The old gentleman blew again. "Well," he said, "if you've a mind

for fantasy, you might try looking in heaven and then again, as their creditors would have had it, in hell. One place or the other I dare say you'll find my poor old billiard companion Malbright and his sad little partner Diggs. But Arphon isn't hell, sir. Indeed it's two stops beyond."

"The firm has failed, then. Where was it located?"

"Oh, the original Malbright, Diggs has failed, sir. But it's Air Limited you'd have to approach to get any trace of their affairs. Malbright was the cause of it you see, poor chap. Got to needing more and more air and couldn't pay the bill out of his share. And he took to well," and here he blew his nose again, "from the till you might say and one day the firm failed. Poor Malbright. Had to have the air, you see. Couldn't pay the bill. And as it was a partnership, Diggs stood ready but unable to settle the accounts. And that was the end of it. A fine, thriving business it was, too, until Malbright took to needing air. But it's all gone, all gone." And he looked around him at the autumn day as though the dismal winter snows lay heavily over the streets.

Ole Doc frowned. "Air? What nonsense is this about air. Short time ago I heard something of it. But I haven't any time. You'll remember a small extraracial clerk that Malbright had, then. Probably four-handed. Name of Bestin Karjoy—"

"Oh, dear me, no. Malbright and Diggs must have had a thou-

sand clerks. Business ran into the billions of tons per annum, you know. Customers all over the system. Fine, rich company. Poor Malbright." And he honked again on the handkerchief.

Ole Doc was impatient. "How could a firm like that fail just because one partner needed a little air. Why, man, the whole sky around here is full of it. Air!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the old gentleman, shocked. "I beg your pardon." And before Ole Doc could think of further questions, the old gentleman hurried away, clutching his precious rabbit soup in the form of a very mangy cat, and was gone.

Ole Doc's boots were angry on the pavement. He was struck now, as he looked for signs, with an air of decay and unhappiness about the town. There were people here and there but they were listless and incurious like beings who have been hungry too long or who despair of any hope. Store windows were cluttered of dusty junk. The theater marquee was advertising the personal appearance of a singer ten years dead. Shutters groaned in the faint wind and stairs staggered in crazy disrepair. The town looked like it had been sacked and repeopled with ghosts.

There was a city park ahead, a pitiful little thing of broken fountains and root-cracked walks and Ole Doc saw two dogs slinking through it, wary like hunted beasts, sniffing hungrily at refuse.

The town, he realized with a start, was starving. The children

he saw in a doorway were bloated and unpleasant. Ole Doc turned toward them and they made a sorry effort to run away. He peered into the interior of the rickety dwelling and saw that they were now clustered around the bed of a woman who might, in other stages of economics, have been comely.

She saw his shadow and turned. Warily she tried to motion him away. "No. No more . . . I can't . . . I can't pay."

This was definitely his business but he thrust it aside. "Madam, I am not trying to collect money. Here is a gold coin," and he dug one from his money pouch and placed it courteously on the table. "I want to find a man, an extra racial being of four hands, named Bestin Karjoy. Direct me to some one who will know and you shall have my deepest thanks."

She managed to understand this and then made a motion at her eldest boy. "Go, Jimmy. Go show him what he wants." But she looked suspiciously at the coin as she picked it up.

Ole Doc winced when he saw how close to the skin her bones were. He pulled a small hypo gun from his pocket, fumbled in his kit and loaded it with slugs. The jet it shot penetrated without pain and he triggered it six times before he left the room. They didn't know they had been force fed and only stared in awe at the small gun, afraid it might be a blaster.

Ole Doc motioned to the eldest and went back into the street. But

he might have found the place himself.

It was a great, gold-fronted building before which lounged Persephon guards. And over the top of the door was the mighty legend, "Air, Limited" and on the panel, "Big Lem Tolliver, Savior of Arphon."

Ole Doc gave the boy another gold coin and then breast the guards. They stopped him with guttural grunts and were about to argue in earnest at his pressure when they both came up rigid, staring straight ahead. Ole Doc put the hypo gun back into his pocket, looked hard at the guards to make sure the rigor had set good and hard and would stay for a while and walked on in.

A clerk came up. "This is a private office, sir. The general entrance for the payment of taxes, rentals and bail are next door. Besides—"

"I want to see your records," said Ole Doc. "I am looking for an extraracial man named Bestin Karjoy and no second-rate town like this is going to stop me. Where are your records?"

Fatally, the clerk had new objections. There was a small snick and Ole Doc put the gun back into his pocket. "You are a trained clerk and obedient to one Lem Tolliver. It is the will of Tolliver that you find the name Bestin Karjoy in your files and give me the address."

The narco slug had bitten straight through the modish waistcoat and pink silk undershirt. "Yes sir.

Coming right up, sir. Won't keep you waiting a minute, sir. What Big Lem wants—"

"Who says Big Lem wants anything?" came hugely from the door. "I," he said waddling closer, chin outthrust, "do not like gents who go around spieling off orders I ain't issued. Now, whoever you are, let's hear just why you impersonate a messenger for me."

Ole Doc looked at him rather wearily. He gripped the hypo gun in his pocket, but he never got a chance to use it. Some sixth sense told one of Tolliver's bodyguard that an attack was imminent and Ole Doc was seized from behind and held hard while the contents of his pockets were turned out by Tolliver.

The small meters and instruments, the minute boxes of pellets, the hypo gun itself, these meant nothing to Tolliver or anyone around him. But the gorget meant something— The solid gold ray rods of the U.M.S. which were chained to Ole Doc's throat in such a position as to protect the most vulnerable point of the jugular. Tolliver tried to yank it off, failed to break the chain and so had to stare at it.

"U.M.S.," said Tolliver. "Huh."

A clerk had come in to aid his fallen brother of the files and ink-pots for the first one, under the stimulus of the narco slug and crossed orders had quietly fainted away. "Universal Medical Society," said the new clerk. And then he realized what he had said and jumped back, letting his brother

clerk fall. He stared, mouth agape, at Ole Doc.

"Univ—" began Tolliver. And then his face went a little white. He bent as he stared at Ole Doc. Then, dismissing it. "He'd imitate a messenger. He'd pretend anything. He ain't no Soldier of Light. Where's the crowd with him?"

"They they operate alone," said the second clerk. "I . . . I read in the *Universal Weekly* that they—"

"Bosh! What would they care about Arphon? U.M.S.," blustered Tolliver, "is strictly big time. He'd never land here. Listen, you whatever-you-call-it, don't give me no stuff about U.M.S. You're here for graft and I'm on to your game. Now, let's see how good you are at crawling out of your lie. Go on, crawl!"

Ole Doc sighed. He had seen such men before. "I suppose I am addressing Lem Tollander."

"Tolliver!"

"Lem Tolliver, then. President or some such thing of Air, Limited."

"Correct. And you come here for a shakedown. Listen—" And then he stopped and looked at a new thing in the contents of the pockets. It was a slave ear tag. "Ah," he said, snatching it up from the desk, "you've been tampering with company property already. Oh, yes. That girl—so you were in that ship we blasted a few miles east of Minga, huh? Say, buddy, don't you know where to stop? A guy'd think you were kind of confused. You've already lost an old tub of a space tramp, and lucky you got out

with yourself in one chunk. What kind of nerve is this—"

"Oh, do be quiet," sighed Ole Doc.

The flood of speech was suddenly dammed. It had been years and years since anyone had said such a thing to Big Lem Tolliver. Judging from the attitudes struck by the men in the office at this blasphemy, it was going to be years and years before anyone tried to say it again, too.

But Big Lem was a man of many convictions and foremost amongst them was a decided prejudice in favor of his own vast greatness. He had been honeyed and buttered and siruped so long by fawning menials that he had forgotten there were other ways to talk.

Big Lem looked more closely at Ole Doc. "Who are you anyway?"

"You seemed convinced of something else a moment ago. I'm a doctor."

"Ah," said Big Lem. He brightened and rubbed his huge paws together. "A doctor. A crooked doctor impersonating a U.M.S. soldier. Ah."

The whole thing was opened to a page he could read. He scooped up the print. This fellow had come here for a shakedown, impersonating a Soldier of Light. And because men are likely to best understand what they themselves actually are, Big Lem Tolliver was utterly satisfied.

Grinning, the president of Air, Limited, had his men search the visitor for other weapons and equip-

ment and then with every cordiality, ushered Ole Doc into an office big enough for a ballroom and ten times as fancy.

"Sit down, sit down," said Big Lem, sprawling into the oversize chair behind his king-size desk. "Know very much about doctoring?"

Ole Doc played it patient, stilling the urgency he felt now that his small pack radio had been taken from him. He sat down in a high-backed leather chair. "Others no doubt are much better informed," he sighed.

"Where and when did you pick it up?"

"Well a very long time ago. I may not know as much about modern medicine as I might."

"Went to school maybe?"

"Yes. But it was a long time ago."

"Sure, sure. And probably got kicked out of the profession for some . . . well, we all make mistakes and recovery isn't possible unless one uses his wits." He winked ponderously and laughed much beyond the need of it. "I tell you, doc, you wouldn't think to look at me that I was just a typical trans-system tramp once. Look around. Them hangings cost a fortune and them pictures is worth a cold five million. They're originals and if they ain't and I ever find out about it, God help my agents." He laughed again. "Well, doc, I guess you're wondering why I'm being so great about this thing. huh?"

"Somewhat."

"You're a cool one. I like that."

I like it very much. Well, I tell you. I could use a doctor. I don't need a good one, see. You'll do just fine if you know anything at all."

"I thought there were doctors here."

"Them that was here up and went away." He enjoyed a brief chuckle and then sobered. "I had a doc as partner. He'd been a good one in his day but drink and women had got too much for him. He died about five years back and we been kind of isolated for some time, like. So, I can use a doctor. A doctor that ain't all knocked around by professional ethics."

"And what's in it for him?"

"Thousands and thousands and thousands. Oh, I can pay all right. And pay very well indeed. Taxes, fees, sales . . . I can pay. Air, Limited is just about as sound a concern as you'll ever find, my friend." He beamed jovially. "You give me quite a turn with that thingum-a-jig on your throat. The U.M.S.— Well, you knew how to back up a play. If I thought you was on the level, you wouldn't be sitting there, but I know you ain't. Not an honest pill in your pockets. No stethoscope. A blaster. Oh, I can tell a thing or two."

"Where'd I slip up?" said Ole Doc innocently.

"Why, the blaster of course. The U.M.S. is death on violence. Oh, I've studied up, I have. And I figure the chances of one of their big patrols coming this way is about ten million to one at least in this century. We ain't nothing on Ar-

phon and Sun¹² is gone to pieces as a confederated system. We don't spread no germs around and we ain't in any kind of quarantine. So they won't come. But if one of them big gold ships with the hundred men crews come around, why I want to be reasonable. So that's where we talk business. You seem to know the ropes."

"Yes," said Ole Doc. "One has to understand his fellow man to get along. Just why are you worried?"

"Well, doc, it ain't so much the U.M.S. Them Soldiers would never come here and wouldn't stay if they did. No, it's the way taxes have fallen off. I want you to do something about it. People don't pay their taxes. And then there's the fees—"

"Wait. Are you the government?"

"Well, in a way, yes. At least there ain't any other government on Arphon just now and we're a big commercial outfit. So, well we collect taxes for the machines."

"What machines?"

"The health machines of course." And here Big Lem began to laugh again.

"Maybe we can do business of one kind or another," said Ole Doc. "But there's one thing I've got to fix up. I want to get hold of an extraracial being named Bestin Karjoy. You let me find him and then I'll come back—"

Big Lem looked sly. "Some old partner in crime, eh? Well, doc, if that's what you want, you'll get it."

"Now," said Ole Doc.

"When we've settled a thing or two," said Tolliver. "You'll work for me?"

"We'll settle this when you've found this Bestin Karjoy for me," said Ole Doc. "It won't wait."

"I'm afraid it will, my friend. Will you sign on?"

"I'd have to know more," said Ole Doc, restraining a blow-up with difficulty and holding on to his cunning.

"Such as—"

"What taxes? What air? What are you doing?"

"We sell air," said Tolliver. "We sell it in small bombs or in cans and we get a hundred dollars for a flask big enough to keep a man a month. Now that's legal, isn't it?"

"Why air?"

"Why not?" said Tolliver. "Men have to breathe, don't they?"

"What taxes then," said Ole Doc.

"Why, the taxes to keep the machines running. Didn't you see the big machine central when you came into town?"

"I wasn't looking closely," said Ole Doc.

"Well, that's just one. We got hundreds all over the planet. And we keep them going so long as the citizens pay the tax. And when they refuse to pay it, well, we get 'em to put up a bond. And—"

"What kind of a bond?"

"Personal liberty bond, of course. If we don't collect when it's due,

then the man's liberty is over and he's repossessed by us."

"Why do you want him?"

"Slaves, of course. Nine-tenths of the people on this planet would rather be slaves than have the machines stop. So there we go."

"You mean nine-tenths are slaves by this action. See here, Tolliver, what do the machines do?"

"Why, they keep the outer spacial gases from settling down and killing people. The gases ruin the oxygen content of the air. So we run the machines and keep the gases going up, not down. That's simple, isn't it? And the air bombs we sell let men breathe when they've been hit by the gases too much."

"What kind of gases?"

Tolliver looked shrewdly at Ole Doc. The crook, thought Tolliver, was pretty intelligent. Well, all the better. "That's where I need an expert," said Tolliver. "Now if you'll just join up and take orders—"

"Let me look this thing over first," said Ole Doc. "Money is money but it just may be that I can't do a thing about it."

Suspicion was a fine quality to find in a man. Tolliver reared up and was about to call when Tinoi, sweating hard from his walk, scuttled in. He saw Ole Doc and left his prepared report unsaid.

"New recruit," said Tolliver. "They all get here, Tinoi?"

"About twelve died on the way in," said Tinoi. "Them Persephons don't have good sense when it comes to driving—"

"How much did you get?" said Tolliver.

Tinoi looked aggrieved and his boss laughed.

"Well, put them in a stockade and no, wait. Here. Take this man around and let him look the place over."

Tinoi twisted his head sideways at Ole Doc in suspicion, and then he caught a secret gesture from Tolliver which said, "Watch him, don't let him see too much, kill if he tries to get away."

"I need this man," added Tolliver.

Ole Doc rose. "If you'll let me know where I can find Beštin—"

"Later, later. Take him along, Tinoi."

Outside Ole Doc tried to regain his weapons and was refused. He would have made a stronger bid if he had not just then seen the slaves waiting before the door.

They were groveling in the dust, lying prone with exhaustion or looking in dumb misery at the huge gold office building which was their doom. These were the same slaves Ole Doc had seen earlier for there was the same grizzled ancient, coughing and whining in their midst, "Air! Air!"

Ole Doc took half a dozen strides and was outside. He saw what he was looking for and went sick inside. There she was, lying on a litter, moaning in semi-consciousness, twisting with fever. The beauty of her was spoiled, and her spirit was shredded with pain.

With another pace, Ole Doc tried to approach her. He knew how



she had been burned, why he had been lying outside in the grass. Connoly was standing hugely in his way, lordly drunk by very positive.

"Nobody gets near them slaves," said Connoly. "Orders."

"Come back here, you," said Tinoi. He scuttled down the steps and grabbed Ole Doc from behind.

Ole Doc offered no fight.

"Who's this bloke?" asked Connoly, when they had him back at a decent distance.

"Recruit, the boss said. Just what we don't need is a recruit," grumbled Tinoi. "Too many splits now. Too big a payroll. Connoly, you run these pigs into the stockade. I got to play nursemaid to this kid here. Never get to rest. Never get a drink. Never—" he trailed off. "Come on, you. What are you supposed to do?"

"I'm supposed to repair the machines," said Ole Doc.

"Well, come on, then." He scuttled away and Ole Doc followed.

The machine was above eye level which was why Ole Doc had missed it. It was a huge, gold drum and it stood squarely on top of the office building. They went up to it in an elevator and found it humming to itself.

Ole Doc had pulled his dome on from some instinct. But he was surprised to find Tinoi getting quickly into a mask before he stepped out of the elevator.

"What's wrong with it?" said Tinoi.

Ole Doc spoke at urgent random. "The rheostats."

"The . . . well, you know your business, I guess. There's the port and there's the vats. You work and I'll stay here and rest. Walk a man's legs off and then don't even let him drink. Keep your hands out of the vats, now."

"I'll need some of the things I left in the office," said Ole Doc.

Tinoi went to the phone and called and presently a clerk came up with them in a paper bag. No pellets, no hypo gun, no blaster—Ole Doc spread out his small kit.

"Don't look like tools to me."

"I'm a chemist," said Ole Doc.

"Oh, I get you. I told him the mixture was too strong. I even get it."

Ole Doc smiled and nodded. "We'll see."

He gingerly approached a vat in the dark interior. On looking around he found a simple arrangement. There was a centrifuge in the vat and a molecularizer above it and then there were ports which carried ionized beams out into the

surrounding air. He stepped up and saw that a constant stream of fluid in very tiny amounts was being broadcast through the jets to be carried by the wind all around the countryside. He went back to the vats.

With a drop of the mixture on a filter, he rapidly ruled out virus and bacteria with a pocket analyzer. Intrigued now, he made a rapid inspection for inorganic matter and was instantly in the field of naturally produced plant secretions.

He took a bit of "synthetic skin" from his case and got a very violent reaction. On the grid, the thing was an allergy product of a plant. And when he had run through twenty alkaloids, working slowly because of his impoverishment in equipment, he knew what it was.

Ragweed pollen!

He went outside and looked thoughtfully at the town below.

The beams were sufficient to carry jets of it far beyond the town limits and the winds would do more. To the east was a large expanse of greenhouse glass and a monocular told him it was surrounded by Persephon guards and a high, electrified fence. Common sense told him that ragweed was grown there in large quantities.

"Well?" said Tinoi. "Ain't I ever going to get that drink?"

"You were right," said Ole Doc. "It's too strong. I'm satisfied. Let's go."

Tinoi grunted with relief and started down. Then he changed his mind and stood aside to let Ole Doc into the elevator first. But

Tinoi went just the same. He went very inert with a beautiful uppercut to hoist him and lay him down against the far wall.

Ole Doc rubbed his gloved knuckles as he turned Tinoi over with his foot. The cranial structure told him much. Tinoi had been born and bred in the slums of Earth.

"Ragweed," said Ole Doc. "Common, ordinary ragweed. And the older a race gets the more it suffers from allergies. Tinoi, Connoly, Big Lem himself—Earthmen." He was searching Tinoi's pockets now and he came up with a drug so ancient and common that at first he didn't recognize it and thought it was cocaine.

The analyzer set him right. "Benadryl!" said Ole Doc in amazement. "Ragweed, and here's benadryl. Earthman to begin with and not very susceptible. Benadryl to keep him going and to prevent a serious case of asthma. Air—asthma—oxygen for asthma, benadryl for asthma— But it can't be air in those bombs. It wasn't benadryl."

He pushed "Basement" and descended. The door opened on a storeroom guard. He took Tinoi's blaster and put a neat and silent hole through the Persephon guard who stood outside the basement storeroom. The guard had alerted, had seen the body on the floor when the elevator opened and had not had time to shoot first. Ole Doc shot the lock off the storeroom door.

And it was there that he came afoul of another ancient custom.

A bell started ringing faintly

somewhere in the upper regions of the building. For a moment he was not alarmed for he had safely bypassed all the offices in the elevator. And then he saw a wire dangling, cut by the opened door. An old-fashioned burglar alarm!

He grabbed up a black bomb with its A.L. lettering and sprinted for the elevator. But the door closed before he got there and the car went up without him, carrying Tinoi's unconscious message.

Ole Doc was shaken into the mistaken idea that this place was further guarded by gas for he began to sneeze. Then he saw that his helmet was not sealed tight and hastily repaired it. Ragweed. He was sneezing from the solution of pollen which still stained his glove. A heavier dose would have left him gasping and as it was his eyes watered and he staggered as he fumbled for the stair door.

It crashed toward him and three Persephons leaped out of the area-way. It was not fair to them just as it had not been fair to their brothers that morning. Ole Doc gripped the searing-hot blaster, picked up the weapons of the first fallen one, stepped over the other two bodies and started on up the stairs. The top door was locked and he shot it open.

The clerks screamed and thrust back away from him for they saw murder in his old-young eyes.

Big Lem was frozen in his office entrance. The burglar alarm gonged *clang-clang-clang* with furious strength over them all.

"What's in this?" shouted Ole Doc, thrusting out the bomb.

"Put that gun down!" bawled Tolliver. "What the devil's wrong—"

Ole Doc heard in his keyed up phone the tiny whisper of leather above the clanging gong. He spun sideways and back and the shot intended for him fired the wood beside Big Lem Tolliver.

Connoly the gunner was ponderously wheeling for a second shot. Ole Doc snapped a quick one across his chest. Connoly's face vanished in a dirty black gout of smoke. He somersaulted backwards down the front steps and landed, dead but still writhing, in the midst of the slaves he had not had time to herd away and now would herd no more.

Ole Doc was still skipping backwards to avoid a counterattack by Big Lem. The elevator door clanged shut and Tolliver was gone.

Ole Doc headed for the stairs and took them four at a time, cloak billowing out behind him. He had wasted too much time already. But he couldn't leave this building until— They weren't on the second floor. Nor the third. But the switch box for the elevator was. Ole Doc shattered its smooth glass with a shot and finished wrecking it with another. Voltage curled and writhed and smoke rose bluely.

That done he went on up with confidence. The only Persephons he found fled down a fire escape in terror. Ole Doc went on up. The roof door was barricaded and he shot it in half.

Big Lem Tolliver might have

been the biggest man on Arplion but he didn't have the greatest courage. He was backing toward the "machine" and holding out his hands to fend off a shot as though they could.

"You're not playing fair!" he wailed. "You see the racket and you want it all. You're not playing fair! I'll make it halves—"

"You'll face around and let me search you for a gun," said Ole Doc. "And then we'll get about our business. You've violated—"

"You want it all!" wailed Tolliver, backing through the door of the dome. He tried to shut it quickly but Ole Doc blew the hinges off before it could close.

The shot was too close for Tolliver's nerves. He leaped away from it, he stumbled and fell into a vat.

He screamed and quickly tried to grab the edge and come out. Ole Doc stopped, put down the bomb and dropped a stirring stick to the man's rescue.

Tolliver grabbed it and came out dripping, clothes with green scum running off them, hanging ridiculously upon him. The man was trying to speak and then could not. He clawed at his eyes, he tried to yell. But with each breath he sucked in quantities of poison and his tortured skin began to flame red under the scum.

Ole Doc threw the bomb at his feet where it burst in bright green rays. He expected Tolliver to breathe then, wreathed in the climbing smoke. But Tolliver didn't. He fell down, inarticulate with agony

and lack of breath and within the minute, before Ole Doc could find means of tearing the clothes from him and administering aid now that the "A.L." air bomb had not worked at all, Big Lem Tolliver was dead.

In the elevator Tinoi still lay, struggling now to come up from his nightmare. When he saw Ole Doc standing over him, Tinoi's own gun in hand, the lieutenant of the late Air, Limited could not be convinced that any time had passed. But he was not truculent, not when he saw Tolliver's body. He could not understand, never would understand the sequence of these rapid events. But Tolliver was dead and that broke Tinoi.

"What do you want wif me?" he sniveled.

"I want you to set this place to rights eventually. Meantime, shut off that confounded machine and come with me."

Tinoi shut it off and the ripples in the vats grew still. Ole Doc hiked down the steps behind the cringing Tinoi and so into the main offices on the ground floor.

The clerks stared at the cringing Tinoi.

"You there," said Ole Doc. "In the name of the Universal Medical Society, all operations of Air, Limited are ordered to cease. And find me this instant the whereabouts of Bestin Karjoy, extraracial being."

The clerks stared harder. One of them fell down in a faint.

"The Univ . . . The Universal Medical Society . . ." gaped another. "The real one. I told him

I thought he was a Soldier," whimpered the clerk who had first announced it. "When I read that article— Now I'll never get my weekly check—"

Ole Doc wasn't listening. He had Tinoi and another clerk by the collars and they were going down the steps, over the dead Connoly, through the moaning slaves and up the avenue at a rate which had Tinoi's feet half off the ground most of the way.

At ten thousand miles an hour, even freighted with her passengers and the thousand kilos of Bestin and his antennae-waving father, the gig did not take long to reach the injured *Morgue*.

Bestin's father was making heavy weather of trying to unload the bundles he had brought when the gig landed and Ole Doc hurriedly helped him. The old extraracial being hobbled on ahead into the operating room of the *Morgue* and then, when Ole Doc would have come up he found himself heavily barred outside by eight hands. The door clanged shut, didn't quite meet at the bottom, bent and was shut anyway.

Ole Doc stood outside in the trampled grass and stared at the *Morgue*. The girl on her stretcher was forgotten. Tinoi and the clerk might as well have been grass blades.

Tinoi grumbled. He knew that he could run away but where could he run to escape the long arm of a Soldier of Light? "Why didn't you tell me?" he growled at the clerk.

"You punks are supposed to know everything—"

"Be quiet," said the clerk.

There was a sound inside as of plumber's tools being dropped. And then the clatter of pipes. A long time passed and the sun sank lower. Ole Doc came out of his trance and remembered the girl.

She was moaning faintly from the pain of her burns.

Ole Doc timidly knocked on the door of his operating room. "Please. Could I have the red case of ointments on the starboard wall?"

He had to ask three times before Bestin's two right arms shot impatiently out with the red case. Ole Doc took it and the door clanged shut again.

The girl shuddered at the first touch and then a hypo pellet quieted her. Ole Doc worked quickly but absently, one eye on the ship. Tinoi gaped at what Ole Doc was doing and the clerk was ill.

The girl did not move, so strong was the pellet, even when half the skin was off her face and arm. Tinoi had to turn away, rough character though he called himself, but when the click and scrape of instruments didn't sound again, he faced back.

Ole Doc was just giving the girl another shot. She was beginning to stir and turned over so that Tinoi could see her face. He gaped. There wasn't a trace of a scar, not even a red place where the sear had been. And the girl was very, very beautiful.

"Feel better?" asked Ole Doc.

She looked around and saw the

clearing. She recalled nothing of the in between. She did not know she had been to Minga and back and thought she was that minute finished dragging Doc from the burning ship. She sat up and stared around her. It took a little soothing talk to convince her of what had happened.

She saw Ole Doc's mind was not on what she was saying nor upon her and she soon understood what was going on in the ship.

"Some one you like?" she asked.

"The best slave any man ever had," said Ole Doc. "I recall . . ." But he stopped, listening. "The best slave a man ever had," he finished quickly.

The sun sank lower and then at last the clicking and chanting inside the ship had stopped. The door opened very slowly and the old man came out, carrying his clumsy bundles. He put them in the gig. In a moment, Bestin came down the twisted ladder and walked stolidly toward the gig.

Ole Doc looked at them and his shoulders sagged. He rose and slowly approached the old being.

"I understand," said Ole Doc, finding it difficult to speak. "It is not easy to lose . . . to lose a patient," he finished. "But you did your best I know. I will fly you back to Min—"

"No, you won't!" howled Hippocrates, leaping down from the *Morgue*. "No you won't! I will do it and you will tell those two stupid humans there and that woman to put things to rights in that ship

they messed up. Put them to rights, you bandits! Wreck my *Morgue*, will you! She's more human than you are!"

He shook four fists in their faces and then turned to beam affectionately at Ole Doc.

The little fellow was a mass of fresh plaster of Paris from neck to belt but otherwise he was very much himself. "New pipes," he said. "Whooeee whoooo whoooo!" he screamed, deafening them. "See? New pipes."

Ole Doc saw and heard. He sat down on the grass weakly and began to laugh. Hippocrates was offended. He did not know that this was from the shock of his own near demise, from the close shave of never getting aid to him. He did not know that the biggest swindle in a thousand systems had had to relax its wealthy sway before he could be cured. He was offended.

"Clean up that ship!" he shouted, jumping into the gig. "And as for you," he declaimed, pointing at his beloved master, "don't you touch that cake. The birthday party will be at six. You invite girl but those stupid humans, never! I go now. Be right back."

And the gig shot tremendously away.

Ole Doc wiped away the tears of near hysteria and took one of his own pills. He got up. "You better do what he says, people. And as for you, Tinoi, tomorrow morning we'll shut off and destroy those 'machines' and get this planet run-

ning again. Jump now. You heard him."

The clerk and the girl—who gave Ole Doc a lingering, promising glance—entered the ship to begin their work. But Tinoi lingered.

"Better jump," said Ole Doc.

"Sure. I'll work," said Tinoi.

"But one thing, Mister Doctor, you're a Soldier of Light and I ain't even good enough to talk to you, I know. But—"

"Well?"

"Sir," plunged Tinoi. "It's them bombs. We had our allergy pills, but them bombs was pretty good, too. If they're so expensive to make like *he* said, how'll we ever get enough to cure up—"

"My man," said Ole Doc, "your precious bombs were one of the oldest known buncombes in medical history. A propellant and ephedrine, that's all. Ephedrine barely permits the allergy patient to breathe. It wasn't 'air' you were selling but a phony, second-rate drug that costs about a dollar a barrel. They'd take a little and needed more. You were clear back in the dark ages of medical history—about a century after they'd stopped using witches for doctors. Ragweed, ephedrine—but they were enough to wreck the lives of nearly everyone on this planet.

"Oh, get into the ship and get busy. It makes me sick to think of it. Besides, if Hippocrates gets back and finds his *Morgue* still messed up, he'll make you wish you'd never been born. Jump now, for by all that's holy, there's the gig coming back now."

THE END