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CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

- MISSION: HYPNOSIS *by Harlan Ellison* 2
Hypnotism was the Earth's secret weapon
- EVERY DAY IS CHRISTMAS *by James E. Gunn* 88
Why would anyone want to shoot Santa Claus?

SHORT STORIES

- THE GREAT ILLUSION *by Manly Bannister* 22
There was something phony on that new planet
- MR. LONELINESS *by Henry Slesar* 40
A year in outer space can seem like an eternity
- WOMAN'S TOUCH *by Evelyn E. Smith* 46
When women come to a planet changes are made
- THE UNTOUCHABLE ADOLESCENTS *by Ellis Hart* 68
How can you help a world that won't accept help?
- DEATH OF A MUTANT *by Charles V. De Vet* 112
He was born with strange and wonderful powers

FEATURES

- ULTIMATE MEASURE *by Scott Nevets* 21
- NON-FICTION *by Robert Silverberg* 67
- SCIENCE SHORTS *by Edgar P. Straus* 87
- NUCLEAR NEWS *by Steven Rory* 127

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THE GREAT ILLUSION

by MANLY BANNISTER

Illustrated by KELLY FREAS

There was something phony about the whole set-up on that planet. Their culture was counterfeit. But why did they go to so much trouble to put on their act?

CLIFF Rowley's lean jowls beaded with sweat in the stagnant warmth of the tent. He tapped a bony finger on the camp table and glared at the communicator.

"Clear out in a week! Why?"

Commander Waldo Spliid's tired voice trickled from the communicator grid. Rowley would have appreciated video hook-up now. He wondered how Spliid's features portrayed his thoughts.

"Here's final classification on Hume, Cliff. Category two X sub one."

"Closed world!" Rowley groaned. "We've only been here three months!"

"Eleven men in the field,

Cliff. You're the odd ball. Everybody else is satisfied Hume is only a step above savagery in culture. Top rating is satisfied. I don't like the conflicting picture of it, myself, but..."

"Nor I," Rowley stabbed. The look in his hazel eyes hardened.

"You wouldn't," Spliid said calmly, "even without seeing the reports. You're a percie, Cliff—our only psi-sensitive on Hume. But you've got to do a lot more than you've done yet to impress top rating. They're keener on the things you can't do than the things you can."

"A few more months, Commander..."



"A week, Cliff. Seven days. Get in and dig for all you're worth."

"Me and my little psychic shovel," Rowley commented bitterly.

A hum came out of the comm. Somewhere, far above the atmosphere of Hume, the Survey ship, with Spliid on board, cruised among the stars.

"Clean up any questions you can," Spliid went on. "Bring your notes up to date. The pilot boat will pick you up... let's see...this is Wednesday... Wednesday for us, anyway. Next Wednesday, then. Have everything ready to load. And keep on reporting."

Rowley started to retort, thought better of it. He switched off the comm.

Well, that did it. They'd had it, as far as Hume was concerned. And the puzzle still stared him in the face—*him*, Rowley, the boy who was going to do great things, like with teleconscious apprehension, with psychometry, with....

Psi-sensitives were new in the Galactic Ethnological Survey Corps—Galethsurv in the cryptic, telegraphic coding of

service vernacular. Spliid had not been sarcastic when he had called Rowley a "percie", the abbreviated, half-humorous, half-scornful, scuttle-butt designation for the percipients.

Percipency was still too new in the ethnological service to evaluate. A percie had hunches and feelings he was supposed to follow. Sometimes, it seemed, a percipient vaulted completely over painful steps of reasoning and "cogged" a conclusion that was often correct. The ability could be valuable, if properly used. That's where Rowley's harness rubbed. His wasn't being used.

He *knew* something was wrong on Hume. But if Galethsurv wanted to overlook his recommendation for further study, it should be no concern of his.

But he couldn't run away from a problem that challenged him to solve it.

LONG grass swished against his calves as he strolled thoughtfully down toward the village of thatched, stone houses, bathed in the pink glow of a setting sun. Blue smoke

curled lazily over stone chimneys, and even from this distance, he could hear the sharp, shrill voices of children raised in play. He took in the scene with a single glance, the stream running beside the village, the small, brown figures darting about the grassy lanes.

The village was nestled in a hollow of the rolling land. Beyond it and stalking around it to enclose it in a clasp of balsam, lay the great pine forest of Hume. Not really pine, but an other-world equivalent of it, each tree spaced a precise, geometrical distance from its neighbor, towering toward flecks of burnt-orange and mauve-colored clouds in the aquamarine sky.

The forest of Hume was gigantic, mystifying. It challenged the mind. It covered the whole land surface of Hume with its geometrical spacing of trees. And the people who populated Hume called themselves Keepers of the Trees.

Rowley tried to grasp the fact that what he saw here was almost endlessly repeated over the broad face of Hume. Why did he think that the *real* cul-

ture of Hume was otherwise than what he saw? A thousand thousand villages, purpling in the swift-rushing sunset... a myriad of slender semi-savages, who spent their lives tending the trees. If he, Rowley, could perceive more than other men, then what did he perceive here? He wished he knew.

What *was* the real culture? What lay behind this facade? Why did he think the impressions of his ordinary senses reported only the outward effect of a mere stage play? It was a mighty big play, performed for a very small audience—the eleven investigators for Galathurv. How could he get to the bottom of the puzzle in the few days remaining, with no more guide than an inexplicable “feeling” of falseness? Time was so short!

The illusion of reality in the village was strong enough to overwhelm him. Teramis was scratching in his garden while the light faded from the sky. He waved and called out to Rowley as he went by. Teramis had spent the day, with the rest of the villagers, among the trees, removing moss and

insects, clipping dead branches
...why?

Shy, big-eyed little kids, showing brown where they weren't clothed, ran in the grassy streets. Unusually—unnecessarily—clean for the offspring of a semi-savage people, he thought.

Tsu was drawing water from the creek as he came up. She paused, holding the water jar against youthful breasts, restrained under the taut fabric of her yellow sarong. Like others of her race, she was surpassingly slender, breathtakingly beautiful in the liquid melody of her movements. Her face was long, tanned, glowing with the ripeness of youth. Her eyes, long, tip-tilted, were lidded with mystery, and her black hair was substanceless shadow caressing her shoulders.

It almost came to him as he looked at her, greeted her. Did Tsu look the part of a shy, savage maiden of the wild? He had to admit that she did... she looked like an over-enthusiastic video casting director's idea of category two X sub one maidenhood.

The implications slipped

from his mind as she clasped his hand. The warm flesh of her palm felt firm against his.

An electric tingle wriggled up his arm. Not even the rigor of his emotional conditioning could have prevented that much. It was not good for field men to be bothered by emotions. It made their work difficult; they found wives on sub-standard worlds and wanted to bring them out to civilization; or, they reverted to the wilds themselves with their mates. The Corps conditioned its men against anything like that, so that emotional vagaries could not disturb the single-mindedness trained into them—to discover and interpret in the field.

"Good evening, *sintaha* Rowley," Tsu said.

He followed her into the house she shared with Smarin and Torl, her parents. They greeted Rowley warmly, slim, smiling, happy as usual.

It was a stage play, performed for his benefit. He moved around among the actors, but he was not an actor himself. He was the audience.

Rowley had been in this house often, always with a

haunting sense of wrongness. He knew it as well as he knew his own tent. Living room, kitchen, two bedrooms and quarters for bathing. Clean people, the natives of Hume.

Rowley sat on the stone stoop and contemplated the gathering shadows. Tsu came out and sat close beside him. He asked her again about the trees, why the people tended them.

"It is proper to tend the trees, *sintaha* Rowley. We have done so always."

Was she evading? Or did he fully understand her language, simple as it was? He had learned it quickly, and had wondered at the time that it was so similar in grammar and syntax to his own. An odd coincidence—or deliberate casting, to impress the play more easily on the audience?

"Tomorrow," he said, "I should like to learn more about the trees."

"If it will please you," she said.

ANOTHER sun was setting. Another day had gone to join the fruitless ones preced-

ing it. The expedition among the trees had told him nothing. Everything was the same as Tsu had explained several times before. His alerted senses found no discrepancy. He was disappointed, and he said as much in his evening report to Commander Spliid.

"It adds up," Spliid said encouragingly.

Rowley felt a glow.

"You get it?"

"No, frankly. But top rating must have the right slant. Where does percipiency leave off and old fashioned imagination begin? You're functioning like a percie, even when there's nothing to perceive."

"I thought *you* weren't satisfied. . ."

"I'm not a percie, Cliff. Any dissatisfaction I may feel is aroused by the conflicting reports of the field men. Anyway, we can probably clear that up in the correlating department."

Rowley's heart sank. "You *are* satisfied!"

The speaker hummed. Spliid said, flatly, "I've got to be. Everybody else is. . .except you."

Rowley grunted. "Six days!

"I'll try to uncover something."

Spliid's voice sounded worried. "I hate this, Cliff. Your talents can be valuable to the Corps. We deal in cubic parsecs of space and aeons of time. It takes more than ordinary reasoning power to cope with it."

"I believe you mean it," Rowley said.

"I do. So what's Hume? One world in millions."

Rowley's switched him off. He bit his lip. It was Galethsurv's purpose to make single, cohesive sense out of the patch-work, and tatterdemalion shreds of human culture that had been systematically turned up in the galaxy. Where did the culture of Hume fit into that overall pattern?

Galethsurv believed that the distribution of mankind among the stars had not been accident. Where, then, had Man originated? It was important to know. Remembrance of yesterday points the way toward a more highly educated guess about tomorrow. Someday, Man would find out if—or why—he had been deliberately seeded among the stars. And then...?

"SINTAHA Rowley, are you not also Keepers of the Trees on your own world?"

Tsu was so earnest with the question, Rowley was surprised. He made a wry grimace, half humorous.

"Of course, we grow trees for fruit, for shade and beauty, to cut down and make lumber for houses..."

She drew away from him, rigid, trembling.

"You cut down trees!"

He hadn't meant to make that slip. He knew her feeling for trees. Her look accused him.

"I don't understand your attitude," he said lamely.

"Nor do I understand yours." She brooded silently. "It is different, I suppose, on other worlds. The trees are different."

They sat in the lush grass, on the hillside below his tent. The toy village lay at their feet, a cardboard set in miniature.

"Your people puzzle us, Tsu. You are too different from us..."

"We have tried to make it easy for you," she murmured.

Easy? Too easy, he thought.

It was all too plain, too easy to understand. That's why he couldn't understand a bit of it.

"We hope," he went on, "that by studying your world and others like it, we may some day better understand the whole universe..."

"Or reach a better understanding of your own thoughts?"

She smiled. Her long eyes lidded heavily with amusement.

"Wherever we go," he continued doggedly, "we find people like ourselves. Human beings. They are born; they grow up; they die. Human culture is built around the processes of living and dying. Our beliefs and actions stem from those facts—that we live and that we die. We are emotionally affected by them. Sometimes, we know great happiness. Then we remember that we die, and we suffer sorrow. I have seen no sadness in your village. Everybody is happy. It... it isn't natural. I wonder how you would act if one of you were to die..."

She stirred restlessly, movement restricted by her clinging sarong.

"One of us will die for you," she said simply, "if you wish to study it."

Sudden shock hammered at his brain. What a thing to say! What did she mean? Was she really as simple as her language seemed to indicate? He felt embarrassed.

"Tsu, you know I didn't mean..."

His eye caught a flicker of movement among the brown trunks of the trees. A slim figure left their shadow, picked its way uphill through the grasses, toward them. Rowley recognized Smarin, Tsu's father. Smarin's slim ascetic face was expressionless, his long eyes hooded.

"Torl fell from the tree," he said. "Torl is dead. Come, Tsu."

Rowley felt hair prickle at the back of his neck. It seemed that Smarin had come out, strictly on cue. Then he realized that Smarin had meant it. The shock of a moment before intensified, expanded, pressurized itself into every cell of his brain.

"Oh, no!" he said.

Tsu got lithely up. She looked down at him, lips drawn,

eyes lidded with slumbering sorrow.

"It was your wish, *sintaha* Rowley. Come with us. Study and learn..."

"IT could have been an accident," Rowley reported over the comm, "but I have a feeling it was staged."

"You saw the dead woman?"

"She was dead, all right. They let me see that she was dead, then they buried her—at the foot of the tree. No ceremony. Shallow grave—not over a foot and a half deep."

"Then what?"

"Then they all went back to tending the trees. Tsu seemed happy as hell about the whole thing. She hoped I had learned what I wanted, she said."

"I'm interested," Spliid broke in. "I'm coming down tonight, Cliff."

"Where are you now?"

"About a thousand miles east of you. I looked in on Stephans this afternoon. I'll get down there after dark."

Sunsel glowed an arabesque of colors on the village at Rowley's feet. The com was silent. He switched it off.

Commander Waldo Spliid was a big, blond man. He bulked hugely at Rowley's side, among the intense shadows of the trees. Hume had no moon. Only the stars spattered a frail shine over the upper levels of the forest.

Rowley said, softly, "Here's the grave."

Spliid flashed a light, briefly.

"What did they dig it with?" "Spade—shovel."

"Steel blade?"

"Iron, anyway. I reported on that I don't know where they get metals."

Spliid flashed his light again, grunted.

"No marker."

Rowley nodded. "That's right. I thought about it at the time and wondered. I thought of mentioning it to Tsu. Know why I didn't?"

Spliid grunted again.

"I thought, if I did, somebody would come out of the trees, bringing a marker. Probably two sticks tied in a cross. Get what I mean?"

"Gimme the shovel," said Spliid.

Rowley handed him the collapsible entrenching tool he

had been carrying. The Commander bent his back, scooped at the dirt. He worked swiftly, carefully, almost silently.

"About eighteen inches deep, you said?"

"About."

Spliid fell to again. The metal blade chinked dully on moist clods. After a time, Spliid flashed his light again. His free hand entered the cone of yellow shine, prodded the moist dirt. He was on his knees, reaching far down into the hole he had dug.

"I've gone by loose dirt," he puffed. "There's no body here, Cliff."

"She was dead and I saw them bury her," Rowley insisted stubbornly. "Maybe hypnotism. I felt they were putting on a show for me. I keep asking myself why, and then I turn to the facts."

"What facts?"

"Why..." Rowley hesitated. "Hume has been classified a closed world. I think that's what they want. If this world had been uninhabited when Exploration turned it up, Colonisation would be surveying it now for settlement. If the population had a civiliza-

tion above Class G, we'd be arranging to bring them up to the technological level of the rest of the galaxy. But we shut a two X sub one world away from contact with the galaxy to avoid disturbing the natural progress of the natives. How many thousands of years before Hume will be ready? Somehow, I feel they know more about us than we think they do...and they're only too happy to be left to themselves."

"Rubbish! Why?"

"Why do they want it, or why do I think so? I don't know the answer either way. If you've ever seen a stage play, you'll understand what I mean. Everything about a stage play is phoney. You watch the play, knowing it isn't real. The scenery and backdrop are just painted imitations. All right—but the actions of the characters on the stage serve something like a catalyst. Your faculties of critical observation are suspended, and the play becomes real. For the time of the play, you are caught up in the illusion of reality that grips you. That's

the way it is here on Hume.

"You look around you in the broad light of day. You see a pastoral idyll. Everybody's happy. Everybody gets along with everybody else. All the people are beautiful, agreeable and kind. They have a simple culture, too far down the scale to admit to intercourse with the rest of the galaxy.

"Look twice, though, and you see something else. . ."

"All right," said Spliid. "Let's get back to camp."

The sloping canvas top of Rowley's tent bulked dimly in the starlight. Spliid laid a heavy hand on Rowley's arm.

"I've been thinking, Cliff. There was never a body in that grave."

Rowley started. "Never was?"

"Don't ask me. It's your idea, with talk of stage plays and phoney accidents. You made me feel it. I come down to find out. You've been the victim of something. . . I don't know what. Are you comforted?"

"No. If only we had more time!"

"We've got a few days," Spliid reassured him. "You've

got a good idea in that stage play simile. But the actors aren't very good, and the directing is abominable. It takes a lot of rehearsal to make a good play, Cliff."

For a long time after the pilot boat drifted down from the upper air and whispered away toward the stars with Commander Spliid, Rowley stood brooding, looking down into the pool of shadows hiding the village.

Stage play. Actors. What happens to the scenery when the audience goes home? Rowley shrugged and went to bed.

IN the morning, Rowley stirred together an unpalatable breakfast, then went down into the village. The natives were already stirring. Children ran in the grassy streets. The solid stone of the houses gleamed white and gray, streaked and spotted with brown, crumbling at the corners. The thatched roofs were ochre, glistening glue-grey with dew.

Painted scenery? The slender, racing children—hired extras? And Tsu—the leading lady?

He felt miserable about disturbing Tsu and Smarin today. It was intrusion on their period of mourning. Did they mourn on Hume?

There was nothing of mournful bereavement about the little stone house, gay in the sunshine, with its clustering border of purple, rose and yellow flowers. The inside was dark-brown dim, but he caught a glimpse of movement. He stepped to the door, leaned with his hand on the jamb, waiting to be noticed.

"*Sintaha* Rowley! Good morning. Here is Tsu."

Rowley dug his nails into the door post. Tsu came out skipping, but he was unaware of her. Torl...Torl who was dead yesterday...smiled at him and retreated into the interior.

Tsu took his hand, brushing against him with her usual easy familiarity. He realized that his fingers trembled in her grip.

He said, hoarsely, "That was Torl...in there!"

Tsu laughed up into his face, long eyes bright.

"Why not? It is Torl's house, too!"

"But...but...y e s t e r - day..." He couldn't bring himself to say that yesterday Torl had died and he had seen her buried.

Tsu seemed to divine the thought in his mind.

"Yesterday was yesterday, *sintaha* Rowley. Yesterday, Torl died, and you saw how it was. We hope you could make a good report of it."

He was silent as they walked. He stole occasional glances at her, wondering. Somehow, the death and resurrection of Torl provided a key. His brain was swamped with conjecture.

THEY left the village and climbed the hill. He had meant to sit with Tsu and Smarin, to share their grief a while this morning, if they would let him. Why he walked now, he could not say, save that his brain was in a whirl. And Tsu accompanied him gaily, chattering nonsense about the death of her mother.

He stopped, looked at the village below. While they were here, he would ask Tsu for information about who lived where. He had already

sketched the village from his tent. He would write in the information as an addition to his notes.

A thought struck him. Why label the props on the stage set? Labels meant nothing... unless you could see the set from the wings. It would help, if he could do that.

"Let's sit here, Tsu," he said.

She sat, obediently, among the tall grasses, folding slim, long legs under her like a child. He sat at her side, noting with relief that a slight hump in the slope hid the village from sight. He took her hand in his.

"I have thought of something," he said carefully. "Tell me about the children. Let's take Yanek... is that his name? He lives in the house next to you. How old is he?"

She regarded him from the corners of her long eyes.

"Old? Yanek is as old as a child. He is as old as he is."

"How old is Yanek in years?"

She hesitated, biting her lip in puzzlement. "There is always Yanek, *sintaha* Rowley. Why should there be anything about him of years?"

She didn't know what he was talking about. Rowley felt excitement creep along the channels of his veins.

"Can you remember when Yanek was born?"

The look in her eyes made his heart pound harder. She was alarmed!

He pressed on, relentlessly. "Yesterday, Torl died. Today, she lives. You do not understand a simple thing like age. You do not remember when Yanek was born, but he is not over seven or eight. Tsu... tell me... are you and your people immortal?"

There was an anguish in his tone that made her drop her eyes.

"No," she said, without moving her lips.

That was the truth. His inner sense told him it was. And the truth was disappointing. What had he expected? The key to immortality? The Fountain of Youth? Men had sought it in ages past and never found it.

His thoughts darted. "If you cannot remember Yanek being born, perhaps he was not born. Yet, you have families. There must be love..."

"Love, yes! We love each other, we love our world, our trees..."

"And if a young man loved you, Tsu, how would he say it?"

His heart was pounding fiercely now. A fierce zeal possessed him that was not born of her nearness, the intimacy of their seclusion. His conditioning against emotional storms had been too thorough for him to break it now. It was something else that possessed him—the excitement of the hunter viewing the first, sparse tracks of the game he seeks. He had asked. It all depended now on her answer, for the mystery was coming clear to him.

Her long eyes were heavy-lidded, candid, without guile.

"How would he among your people, *sintaha* Rowley?"

He thought, wildly, *she doesn't know!* He thought, she is inexperienced. He thought again, she would *never* know, unless..."

He slipped an arm around her bare shoulders and drew her to him.

"Like this," he said, looking down into her tip-tilted eyes.

Then he kissed her. Her sarong slipped...

"I am unhappy with you, Cliff," Commander Spliid said with chilly formality. Rowley leaned back in his chair in Spliid's office aboard the Survey ship. Spliid laid his pipe in the tray on his desk. He said, "What happened to your daily reports?"

Rowley stuffed his own pipe, lit it.

"I thought you knew. I didn't make any."

Spliid's look of exasperation wavered and dimmed through the swirls of blue smoke. It was all over now, and Rowley felt no sense of hurry. Hume was a pinpoint of light in the star-carpeted vestibules of space behind them. In another hour, they would shift into overdrive. Hume would vanish from their lives forever.

"I assume," he said, "that Hume is now officially closed."

Spliid nodded. He fixed questioning gray eyes on Rowley.

"Good," said Rowley. "That's the way it will always be."

"Always?" Spliid fumbled with his pipe. "For our lifetimes, maybe..."

"Always," Rowley repeated. He drew on his pipe, enjoying the luxury of keeping the Commander's curiosity at bay. "Human beings have no place on Hume. I found that out the day after you dropped in on me. That's why I made no reports. I just sat around, waiting for the pilot boat."

Spliid held a lighter to the dark-stained bowl of his pipe.

"So you're satisfied now, too?"

Rowley nodded noncommittally. "At first," he said distantly, "I imagined crazy things—like a super-advanced race living underground, giving us the bum's rush with a play-show they had rigged up."

"And you found out you were wrong," suggested Spliid.

"I found out I was partly right."

"I won't buy supermen living in caves, Cliff."

"Neither would I. The next crazy thing I thought was that the natives were immoral and they didn't want us to share in it. Silly, huh?"

"Pretty silly," Spliid agreed drily.

"I knew they wanted to get rid of us," Rowley went on earnestly. "I could feel it. But why? Most inferior races we run against *want* contact with the galaxy..."

"They want refrigerators and washing machines, tractors, railroad trains and automobiles," Spliid interrupted. "If we gave them, their culture would go to pot in a generation. There's a reason for our methods."

"A lot of little things about Hume didn't jibe," Rowley continued. "Bathrooms, for instance."

"No bathrooms on Hume?" Spliid grinned.

"*Bath* rooms, yes. Just bathing went on in there. And outside, where the little house in back ought to be...nothing." Rowley tamped the ashes in his pipe, withdrew a blackened finger. "We take that sort of thing for granted, you know. We assume proper facilities are around someplace and don't give them a second thought. They weren't present in the stage setting because they weren't needed."

"Come, now...!"

"Fact. Another fact: grass growing in the streets. The way those kids played on it, it would have been worn away in a week. Slim evidence, but it's part of the picture."

"WHAT I'm interested in," said Spliid, "is the death. Did you learn what they did with the body?"

"You were right," Rowley said. "There wasn't any. I saw Torl the next day, alive and kicking. That's what put me off on the immortality tangent."

Spliid grunted. "Another act in the play?"

"Yes, and badly directed. The director didn't understand death as we do."

Spliid shook himself. "Now, wait...!"

"Honest and truly. How do we think of death—most of us? We believe in somehow living on after death takes place—immortality of the soul. Can you visualize how a stage director who didn't understand that concept would cast it?"

"What do you think I am, a percie? Get on with it."

"Consider this, then. I gambled with my emotional adjust-

ment conditioning. There was one angle I hadn't exploited, because of that conditioning. Sex."

"If you are trying to tell me you unloaded the conditioning *we* give you," Spliid interrupted, "I won't believe it"

"No—I wouldn't. But, in the interest of ethnological investigation, I *could* grab a kiss. So I did."

"I see," drily.

"Not yet, you don't. I got no reaction. Like embracing a tree. Anyway, I kissed her. Somehow..." He hesitated. "Her garment..."

"No wonder you made no report," growled Spliid. "Believe me, Cliff, I'm going to have that conditioning process looked into!"

Rowley laughed, briefly. "No need for that. It's sound. You'll be interested in what that slipping garment revealed."

"Another time, another place..."

"I saw a perfect, living statue!"

Spliid's eyes alerted. "A what?"

Spliid relaxed. "I think I know what you mean. Go on."

Rowley drew heavily on his pipe. A brooding look shadowed his lean face.

"I learned about Yanek then. I learned about Tsu and Smarin and Torl and all the rest of them. If we weren't such damned prudes, Commander, and I had flipped a sarong sooner, we'd have found everything out long ago. You've heard about the sinner who was told he could remain in Heaven only on condition he could pick Adam out of the crowd? He chose the only man he could find...without a navel."

"Maybe they lay eggs," Spliid suggested. "Oviparous."

Rowley gave him a look of humorous scorn. "Do statues lay eggs?"

Spliid's expression cleared. "By God! Now I *really* understand you!"

"The natives of Hume couldn't reproduce in any manner. Naturally, I wanted to know why. And the answer came to me—protective coloration...camouflage!"

"Apparent. Camouflage for what?"

"You've heard the expression, if you can't lick 'em, join

'em...?"

"Sure, but..."

"But suppose you can't join 'em, either?" Rowley laughed, excitedly. "You make like something they want to protect!...Know anything about dryads, Commander?"

Spliid snorted. "Supernatural creatures that live in trees? Dryads don't exist!"

"Neither do the people of Hume."

Spliid looked at him in such a way Rowley felt his sanity was being weighed.

"**S**UPPOSE you were a native of Hume, and some alien beings came along. You could read their minds. You'd know right off they wouldn't recognize you as a life-form like themselves. They might move right in and destroy you without knowing it, and you would be unable to defend yourself. That was actually the situation on Hume, and we were the aliens. So the natives pretended they were a type of life-form we want to protect."

"How was it done?" Spliid wanted to know.

"Mental projection. After the directors of the play read

our minds, they tried to reproduce what they found there. They slipped on the points I mentioned, because those things meant little or nothing to them. But they were enough to rob the play of its semblance of reality.

"Tsu, Smarin, Torl...even the village itself...were all imaginary—not something we *thought* we saw, but solidified mental projections of the thoughts the natives had gleaned from our minds."

"I'm just beginning to see the real value of your talents, Cliff."

"Thanks," Rowley acknowledged briefly. "If *we* have the right to exclude inferior cultures from contact with us, a superior culture must certainly have an equal right to exclude us from contact with theirs."

Spliid wagged his head, half smiling. His pipe had gone out

and he puffed at it without effect.

"I've been waiting for you to tell me who these 'directors' are," he said.

Rowley grinned. "You won't believe this. The directors needed something to keep their play actors busy...some logical occupation of their time. What could they find more logical—to them—than taking care of trees? Because the directors themselves are the trees—the living, intelligent forest of Hume. Fantastic, isn't it?"

Spliid sighed as if deeply gratified.

"If it weren't for one thing even more so, I'd say it was the most fantastic thing I ever heard of."

"What's more fantastic than intelligent trees?"

"Human beings," said Spliid.

THE END

