

STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 19, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

March, 1949

A Complete Novel

THE BLACK GALAXY

By MURRAY LEINSTER



Barred from space, Rod Cantrell suddenly gets an unlooked-for opportunity to fight the marauders who threaten the existence of all cosmic life! 13

Two Complete Novelets

- THE SOUND OF BUGLES..... Robert Moore Williams 74
"By the sweat of your brow shall ye earn your daily bread—" is still true on the hard-working Earth—but what of the fiery planet of Mars?
- THE LOOT OF TIME..... Clifford D. Simak 88
Marooned in the past, a party of travelers send an SOS ringing far into the future! A Hall of Fame classic reprinted by popular demand

Short Stories

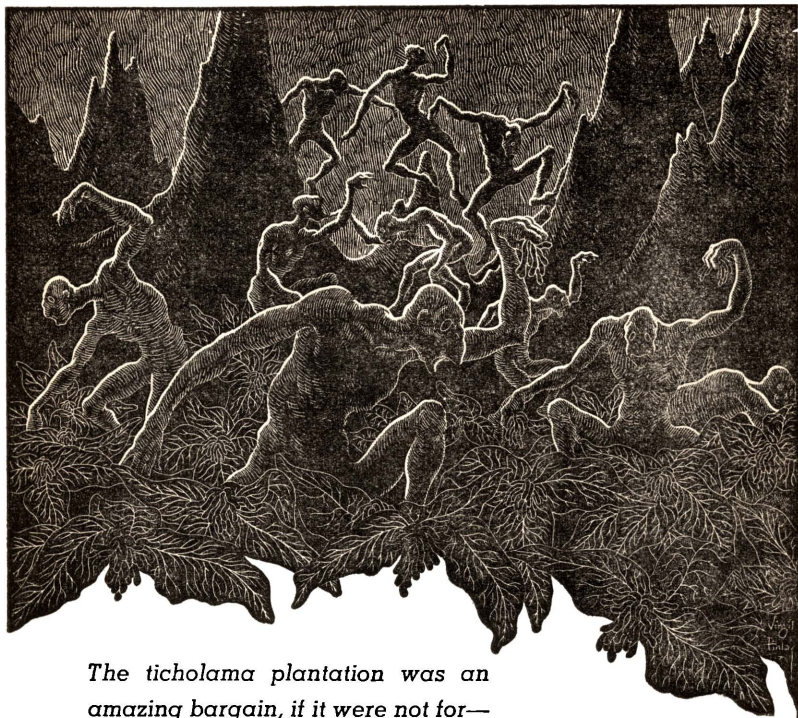
- THE MAGNIFICENT FAILURE..... Rene LaFayette 104
History calls Jonathan Bates the Father of Exploration, but—
- THE HOWLING BOUNDERS..... Jack Vance 115
Magnus Ridolph found the ticholama plantation an amazing bargain
- MARIONETTES, INC..... Ray Bradbury 125
Braling and Smith sought vacations from their wives, and almost succeeded
- TURNOVER TIME..... Noel Loomis 129
Fated to miss the moon, a rocket-ship's doomed to be lost in space

Features

- THE ETHER VIBRATES (Announcements and Letters)..... The Editor 6
- THE ROAD TO SPACE TRAVEL (Part I)..... Willy Ley 68
- SCIENCE FICTION FAN PUBLICATIONS..... A Review 156
- SCIENCE FICTION BOOKSHELF..... A Department 161

Cover Painting by Earle Bergey—Illustrating "The Black Galaxy"

STARTLING STORIES, Published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 4600 Diversey Ave., Chicago 39, Ill. Editorial and executive offices, 19 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter November 22, 1946, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1949, by Better Publications, Inc. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.00; single copies, \$.25; foreign and Canadian postage extra. In correspondence with this magazine please include postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.



The ticholama plantation was an amazing bargain, if it were not for—

THE HOWLING BOUNDERS

My brain, otherwise a sound instrument, has a serious defect—a hypertrophied lobe of curiosity.
—Magnus Ridolph.

THE afternoon breeze off Irremedial Ocean ruffling his beard, yellow Naoslight burnishing the side of his face, Magnus Ridolph gazed glumly across his newly-acquired plantation. So far, so good; in fact, too good to be true.

He shook his head, frowned. All Blantham's representations had been corroborated

by the evidence of his own eyes: three thousand acres of prime ticholama, ready for harvest; a small cottage, native-style, but furnished adequately; the ocean at his doorstep, the mountains in his back-yard. Why had the price been so low?

"Is it possible," mused Magnus Ridolph, "that Blantham is the philanthropist his acts suggest? Or does the ointment conceal a fly?" And Magnus Ridolph pulled at his beard with petulant fingers.

A Magnus Ridolph Story by JACK VANCE

Now Naos slipped into Irremedial Ocean and lime-green evening flowed like syrup down out of the badlands which formed the northern boundary of the plantation. Magnus Ridolph half-turned in the doorway, glanced within. Chook, his dwarfish servant, was sweeping out the kitchen, grunting softly with each stroke of the broom.

Magnus Ridolph stepped out into the green twilight, strolled down past the copter landing to the first of the knee-high ticholama bushes.

He froze in his tracks, cocked his head.

"*Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow*" in a yelping chorus, wild and strange, drifted from across the field. Magnus Ridolph strained, squinted through the dusk. He could not be sure. . . . It seemed that a tumult of dark shapes came boiling down from the badlands, vague sprawling things. Olive-green darkness settled across the land. Magnus Ridolph turned on his heel, stalked back to the cottage.

* * * * *

MAGNUS Ridolph had been resting quietly in his hotel—the Piedmont Inn of New Napoli, on Naos V—with no slightest inclination toward or prospect of an agricultural life. Then Blantham knocked and Magnus Ridolph opened the door.

Blantham's appearance in itself was enough to excite interest. He was of early middle-age, of medium height, plump at the waist, wide at the hips, narrow at the shoulders.

His forehead was pale and narrow, with eyes set fish-like, wide apart under the temples, the skin between them taut, barely dented by the bridge of his nose. He had wide jowls, a sparse black mustache, a fine white skin, the cheeks meshed, however, with minute pink lines.

He wore loose maroon corduroy trousers, in the "Praesepe Ranger" style, a turquoise blouse with a diamond clasp, a dark blue cape, and beside Magnus Ridolph's simple white and blue tunic, he appeared somewhat over-ripe.

Magnus Ridolph blinked, like a delicate and urbane owl. "Ah, yes?"

"I'm Blantham," said his visitor bluffly. "Gerard Blantham. We haven't met before."

Watching under his fine white eyebrows, Magnus Ridolph gestured courteously. "I believe not. Will you come in, have a seat?"

Blantham stepped into the room, flung back his cape.

"Thank you," he said. He seated him-

self on the edge of a chair, extended a case. "Cigarette?"

"Thank you." Magnus Ridolph gravely helped himself. He inhaled, frowned, took the cigarette from his lips, examined it.

"Excuse me," said Blantham, producing a lighter. "I sometimes forget. I never smoke self-igniters; I can detect the flavor of the chemical instantly, and it annoys me."

"Unfortunate," said Magnus Ridolph, after his cigarette was aglow. "My senses are not so precisely adjusted, and I find them extremely convenient. Now, what can I do for you?"

Blantham hitched at his trousers. "I understand," he said, looking archly upward, "that you're interested in sound investment."

"To a certain extent," said Magnus Ridolph, inspecting Blantham through the smoke of his cigarette. "What have you to offer?"

"This." Blantham reached in his pocket, produced a small white box. Magnus Ridolph, snapping back the top, found within a cluster of inch-long purple tubes, twisting and curling away from a central node. They were glossy, flexible, and interspersed with long pink fibers. He shook his head politely.

"I'm afraid I can't identify the object."

"It's ticholama," said Blantham. "Resilian in its natural state."

"Indeed!" and Magnus Ridolph examined the purple cluster with new interest.

"Each of those tubes," said Blantham, "is built of countless spirals of resilian molecules, each running the entire length of the tube. That's the property, naturally, which gives resilian its tremendous elasticity and tensile strength."

Magnus Ridolph touched the tubes, which quivered under his fingers. "And?"

Blantham paused impressively. "I'm selling an entire plantation, three thousand acres of prime ticholama ready to harvest."

Magnus Ridolph blinked, handed back the box. "Indeed?" He rubbed his beard thoughtfully. "The holding is evidently on Naos Six."

"Correct, sir. The only location which supports the growth of ticholama."

"And what is your price?"

"A hundred and thirty thousand munits."

Magnus Ridolph continued to pull at his beard. "Is that a bargain? I know little of agriculture in general, ticholama in specific."

Blantham moved his head solemnly. "It's a giveaway. An acre produces a ton of ticho-

lama. The selling price, delivered at Starport, is fifty-two munits a ton, current quotation. Freight, including all handling, runs about 21 munits a ton. And harvesting costs you about eight munits a ton. Expenses twenty-nine munits a ton, net profits, twenty-three munits a ton. On three thousand acres that's sixty-nine thousand munits. Next year you've paid the land off, and after that you're enjoying sheer profit."

Magnus Ridolph eyed his visitor with new interest, the hyper-developed lobe in his brain making its influence felt. Was it possible that Blantham intended to play him—Magnus Ridolph—for a sucker? Could he conceivably be so optimistic, so ill-advised?

"Your proposition," said Magnus Ridolph aloud, "sounds almost too good to be true."

Blantham blinked, stretching the skin across his nose even tauter. "Well, you see I own another thirty-five hundred acres. The plantation I'm offering for sale is half the Hourglass Peninsula, the half against the mainland. Taking care of the seaward half keeps me more than busy.

"And then, frankly, I need money quick. I had a judgment against me—copter crash, my young son driving. My wife's eyes went bad. I had to pay for an expensive graft. Wasn't covered by Med service, worse luck. And then my daughter's away at school on Earth—St. Brigida's, London. Terrible expense all around. I simply need quick money."

MAGNUS RIDOLPH stared keenly at the man from beneath shaggy brows, and nodded.

"I see," he said. "You certainly have suffered an unfortunate succession of events. One hundred thirty thousand munits. A reasonable figure, if conditions are as you state?"

"They are indeed," was Blantham's emphatic reply.

"The ticholama is not all of first quality?" inquired Magnus Ridolph.

"On the contrary," declared Blantham. "Every plant is in prime condition."

"Hm-m!" Magnus Ridolph chewed his lower lip. "I assume there are no living quarters."

Blantham chortled, his lips rounded to a curious red O. "I forgot to mention the cottage. A fine little place, native-style, of course, but in A-One condition. Absolutely livable. I believe I have a photograph. Yes,

here it is."

Magnus Ridolph took the paper, saw a long building of gray and green slate—convex-gabled, with concave end-walls, a row of Gothic-arch openings. The field behind stretched rich purple out to the first crags of the badlands.

"Behind you'll see part of the plantation," said Blantham. "Notice the color? Deep dark purple—the best."

"Humph," said Magnus Ridolph. "Well, I'd have to furnish the cottage. That would run into considerable money."

Blantham smilingly shook his head. "Not unless you're the most sybaritic of sybarites. But I must guard against misrepresentation. The cottage is primitive in some respects. There is no telescreen, no germicide, no autolum. The power plant is small, there's no cold cell, no laundromat. And unless you fly out a rado-cooker, you'd have to cook in pots over heating elements."

Magnus Ridolph frowned, glanced sharply at Blantham. "I'd naturally hire a servant. The water? What arrangements, if any, exist?"

"An excellent still. Two hundred gallons a day."

"That certainly seems adequate," said Magnus Ridolph. He returned to the photograph. "What is this?" He indicated a patch in the field where one of the spurs from the badlands entered the field.

Blantham examined the photograph. "I really can't say. Evidently a small area where the soil is poor. It seems to be minor in extent."

Magnus Ridolph studied the photograph a minute longer, returned it. "You paint an arresting picture. I admit the possibility of doubling my principal almost immediately is one which I encounter rarely. If you'll tick off your address on my transview, I'll notify you tomorrow of my decision."

Blantham rose. "I've a suite right here in the hotel, Mr. Ridolph. You can call me any time. I imagine that the further you look into my proposition, the more attractive you'll find it."

To Magnus Ridolph's puzzlement, Blantham's prediction was correct. When he mentioned the matter to Sam Quien, a friend in the brokerage business, Quien whistled, shook his head.

"Sounds like a steal. I'll contract right now for the entire crop."

Magnus Ridolph next obtained a quotation

on freight rates from Naos VI to Starport, and frowned when the rate proved a half munit less per ton than Blantham's estimate. By the laws of logic, somewhere there must be flaw in the bargain. But where?

In the Labor Office he approached a window behind which stood a Fomalhaut V Rhodopian.

"Suppose I want to harvest a field of ticholama on Naos Six," said Magnus Ridolph. "What would be my procedure?"

The Rhodopian bobbed his head as he spoke. "You make arrangement on Naos Six," he lisped. "In Garswan. Contractor, he fix all harvest. Very cheap, on Naos Six. Contractor he use many pickers, very cheap."

"I see," said Magnus Ridolph. "Thank you."

He slowly returned to the hotel. At the mnemiphot in the reading room he verified Blantham's statement that an acre of land yielded a ton of ticholama, which, when processed and the binding gums dissolved, yielded about five hundred pounds of resilian. He found further that the demand for resilian exceeded by far the supply.

He returned to his room, lay down on his bed, considered an hour. At last he stood up, called Blantham on the trans-view. "Mr. Blantham, I've provisionally decided to accept your offer."

"Good, good!" came Blantham's voice.

"Naturally, before finally consummating the sale, I wish to inspect the property."

"Of course," came the hearty response. "An interplanet ship leaves day after tomorrow. Will that suit you?"

"Very well indeed," was Magnus Ridolph's reply. . . .

BLANTHAM pointed. "That's your plantation, there ahead, the entire first half of the peninsula. Mine is the second half, just over that cliff."

Magnus Ridolph said nothing, peered through the copter window. Below them the badlands—arid crags, crevasses, rock-jumble—fell astern, and they flew out over Hourglass Peninsula. Beyond lay Irremedial Ocean, streaked and mottled red, blue, green, yellow by vast colonies of colored plankton.

They put down at the cottage. Magnus Ridolph alighted, walked to the edge of the field, bent over. The plants were thick, luxuriant, amply covered with the clusters of purple tubes. Magnus Ridolph straightened, looked sidelong at Blantham, who had come

up behind him.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said Blantham mildly.

Magnus Ridolph was forced to agree. Everything was beautiful. Blantham's title was clear, so Magnus Ridolph had verified in Garswan. The harvester agreed to a figure of eight munits a ton, the work to begin immediately after he had finished Blantham's field. In short, the property at the price seemed an excellent buy. And yet—

Magnus Ridolph took another look across the field. "That patch of poor soil seems larger than it appeared in the photograph."

Blantham made a deprecatory noise in his nose. "I can hardly see how that is possible."

Magnus Ridolph stood quietly a moment, the nostrils of his long distinguished nose slightly distended. Abruptly he pulled out his checkbook.

"Your check, sir."

"Thank you. I have the deed and the release in my pocket. I'll just sign it and the property's yours."

Blantham politely took his leave in the copter and Magnus Ridolph was left on the plantation in the gathering dusk. And then—the wild yelling from across the field, the vaguely seen shapes, pelting against the afterglow. Magnus Ridolph returned into the cottage.

He looked into the kitchen, to become acquainted with his servant Chook, a barrel-shaped anthropoid from the Garswan Highlands. Chook had gray lumpy skin, boneless rope-like arms, eyes round and bottle-green, a mouth hidden somewhere behind flabby folds of skin. Magnus Ridolph found him standing with head cocked to the distant yelping.

"Ah, Chook," said Magnus Ridolph. "What have you prepared for our dinner?"

Chook gestured to a steaming pot. "Stew." His voice came from his stomach, a heavy rumble. "Stew is good." A gust of wind brought the yelping closer. Chook's arms twitched.

"What causes that outcry, Chook?" demanded Magnus Ridolph, turning a curious ear toward the disturbance.

Chook looked at him quizzically. "Them the Howling Bounders. Very bad. Kill you, kill me. Kill everything. Eat up ticholama."

Magnus Ridolph seated himself. "Now—I see." He smiled without humor. "I see! . . . *Hmph.*"

"Like stew?" inquired Chook, pot ready. . . . Next morning Magnus Ridolph arose

early, as was his habit, strolled into the kitchen. Chook lay on the floor, curled into a gray leathery ball. At Magnus Ridolph's tread he raised his head, showed an eye, rumbled from deep inside his body.

"I'm going for a walk," said Magnus Ridolph. "I intend to be gone an hour. When I return we shall have our breakfast."

CHOOK slowly lowered his head and Magnus Ridolph stepped out into the cool silence, full into the horizontal light of Naos, just rising from the ocean like a red-hot stove-lid. The air from the ticholama fields seemed very fresh and rich in oxygen, and Magnus Ridolph set off with a feeling of well-being.

A half-hour's walk through the knee-high bushes brought him to the base of the outlying spur and to the patch of land which Blantham had termed poor soil.

Magnus Ridolph shook his head sadly at the devastation. Ticholama plants had been stripped of the purple tubes, ripped up, thrown into heaps.

The line of ruin roughly paralleled the edge of the spur. Once again Magnus Ridolph shook his head.

"A hundred and thirty thousand munits poorer. I wonder if my increment of wisdom may be valued at that figure?"

He returned to the cottage. Chook was busy at the stove, and greeted him with a grunt.

"Ha, Chook," said Magnus Ridolph, "and what have we for breakfast?"

"Is stew," said Chook.

Magnus Ridolph compressed his lips. "No doubt an excellent dish. But do you consider it, so to speak, a staple of diet?"

"Stew is good," was the stolid reply.

"As you wish," said Magnus Ridolph impassively.

After breakfast he retired to the study, and called into Garswan on the antiquated old radiophone.

"Connect me with the T.C.I. office."

A hum, a buzz. "Terrestrial Corps of Intelligence," said a brisk male voice. "Captain Solinsky speaking."

"Captain Solinsky," said Magnus Ridolph, "I wonder if you can give me any information concerning the creatures known as the Howling Bounders."

A slight pause. "Certainly, sir. May I ask who is speaking?"

"My name is Magnus Ridolph; I recently

acquired a ticholama plantation here, on the Hourglass Peninsula. Now I find that it is in the process of despoliation by these same Howling Bounders."

The voice had taken a sharper pitch. "Did you say—Magnus Ridolph?"

"That is my name."

"Just a moment, Mr. Ridolph! I'll get everything we have."

After a pause the voice returned. "What we have isn't much. No one knows much about 'em. They live in the Bouro Badlands, nobody knows how many. There's apparently only a single tribe, as they're never reported in two places at the same time. They seem to be semi-intelligent simians or anthropoids—no one knows exactly."

"These creatures have never been examined at close hand?" asked Magnus Ridolph in some surprise.

"Never." After a second's pause Solinsky said: "The weird things can't be caught. They're elastic—live off ticholama, eat it just before it's ready to harvest. In the day time they disappear, nobody knows where, and at night they're like locusts, black phantoms. A party from Carnegie Tech tried to trap them, but they tore the traps to pieces. They can't be poisoned, a bullet bounces off their hides, they dodge out of heat-beams, deltas don't phase them. We've never got close enough to use supersonics, but they probably wouldn't even notice."

"They would seem almost invulnerable then—to the usual methods of destruction," was Magnus Ridolph's comment.

"That's about it," said Solinsky brightly. "I suppose a meson grenade would do the trick, but there wouldn't be much specimen left for you to examine."

"My interest in these creatures is not wholly impersonal," said Magnus Ridolph. "They are devouring my ticholama; I want to halt this activity."

"Well—" Solinsky hesitated. "I don't like to say it, Mr. Ridolph, but I'm afraid there's very little you can do—except next year don't raise so tempting a crop. They only go after the choicest fields. Another thing, they're dangerous. Any poor devil they chance upon, they tear him to pieces. So don't go out with a shotgun to scare 'em away."

"No," said Magnus Ridolph. "I shall have to devise other means."

"Hope you succeed," said Solinsky. "No one ever has before."

MAGNUS RIDOLPH returned to the kitchen, where Chook was peeling starchy blue bush-apples.

"I see you are preparing lunch," said Magnus Ridolph. "Is it—?" He raised his eyebrows interrogatively.

Chook rumbled an affirmative, Magnus Ridolph came over beside him, watched a moment.

"Have you ever seen one of these Howling Bounders close at hand?"

"No," said Chook. "When I hear noise, I sleep, stay quiet."

"What do they look like?"

"Very tall, long arm. Ugly—like men." He turned a lambent bottle-green eye at Magnus Ridolph's beard. "But no hair."

"I see," said Magnus Ridolph, stroking the beard. He wandered outside, seated himself on a bench, and relaxed in the warm light of Naos. He found a piece of paper, scribbled. A buzz reached his ears, grew louder, and presently Blantham's copter dropped into his front yard. Blantham hopped out, brisk, cleanly-shaven, his wide-set eyes bright, his jowls pink with health. When he saw Magnus Ridolph, he shaped his features into a frame of grave solicitude.

"Mr. Ridolph, a distressing report has reached me. I understand—I just learned this morning—that those devilish Bounders have been seen on your plantation."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "Yes, something of that nature has been called to my attention."

"Words can't convey my sense of guilt," said Blantham. "Naturally I'd never have saddled you with the property if I'd known . . ."

"Naturally," agreed Magnus Ridolph succinctly.

"As soon as I heard, I came over to make what amends I could, but I fear they can only be nominal. You see, last night, as soon as I banked your check, I paid off a number of outstanding debts and I only have about fifty thousand munits left. If you'd like me to take over the burden of coping with those beasts." He paused, coughed.

Magnus Ridolph looked mildly upward. "That's exceedingly generous of you, Mr. Blantham—a gesture few men would make. However I think I may be able to salvage something from the property. I am not completely discouraged."

"Good, good," was Blantham's hasty comment. "Never say die; I always admire

courage. But I'd better warn you that once those pestiferous Bounders start on a field they never stop till they've run through the whole works. When they reach the cottage you'll be in extreme danger. Many, many men and women they've killed."

"Perhaps," Magnus Ridolph suggested, "you will permit the harvester to gather such of my crop as he is able before starting with yours?"

Blantham's face became long and doleful. "Mr. Ridolph, nothing could please me more than to say yes to your request, but you don't know these Garswan contractors. They're stubborn, inflexible. If I were to suggest any change in our contract, he'd probably cancel the entire thing. And naturally I must protect my wife, my family. In the second place, there is probably little of your ticholama ripe enough to harvest. The Bounders, you know, attack the plant just before its maturity." He shook his head. "With the best of intentions, I can't see how to help you, unless it's by the method I suggested a moment ago."

Magnus Ridolph raised his eyebrows. "Sell you back the property for fifty thousand munits?"

Blantham coughed. "I'd hardly call it selling. I merely wish—"

"Naturally, naturally," agreed Magnus Ridolph. "However let us view the matter from a different aspect. Let us momentarily forget that we are friends, neighbors, almost business associates, each acting only through motives of the highest integrity. Let us assume that we are strangers, unmoral, predatory."

BLANTHAM blew out his cheeks, eyed Magnus Ridolph doubtfully. "Far-fetched, of course. But go on."

"On this latter assumption, let us come to a new agreement."

"Such as?"

"Let us make a wager," mused Magnus Ridolph. "The plantation here against—say, a hundred thirty thousand munits—but I forgot. You have spent your money."

"What would be the terms of the wager?" inquired Blantham, inspecting his finger-tips.

"A profit of sixty-nine thousand munits was mentioned in connection with the sale of the property. The advent of the—ah!—Howling Bounders made this figure possibly over-optimistic."

Blantham murmured sympathetically.

"However," continued Magnus Ridolph,

"I believe that a profit of sixty-nine thousand munits is not beyond reason, and I would like to wager the plantation against 130,000 munits on those terms."

Blantham gave Magnus Ridolph a long bright stare. "From sale of ticholama?"

Magnus Ridolph eloquently held his arms out from his sides. "What else is there to yield a profit?"

"There's no mineral on the property, that's certain," muttered Blantham. "No oil, no magnoflux vortex." He looked across the field to the devastated area. "When those Bounders start on a field, they don't stop, you know."

Magnus Ridolph shrugged. "Protecting my land from intrusion is a problem to which a number of solutions must exist."

Blantham eyed him curiously. "You're very confident."

Magnus Ridolph pursed his lips. "I believe in an aggressive attitude toward difficulties."

Blantham turned once more toward the blighted area, looked boldly back at Magnus Ridolph. "I'll take that bet."

"Good," said Magnus Ridolph. "Let us take your copter to Garswan and cast the wager into a legal form."

In the street below the notary's office later, Magnus Ridolph tucked his copy of the agreement into the microfilm compartment of his wallet.

"I think," he told Blantham, who was watching him covertly with an air of sly amusement, "that I'll remain in Garswan the remainder of the day. I want to find a copter, perhaps take back a few supplies."

"Very well, Mr. Ridolph," and Blantham inclined his head courteously, swung his dark blue cape jauntily across his shoulders. "I wish you the best of luck with your plantation."

"Thank you," said Magnus Ridolph, equally punctilious, "and may you likewise enjoy the returns to which you are entitled."

Blantham departed; Magnus Ridolph turned up the main street. Garswan owed its place as Naos VI's first city only to a level field of rock-hard clay, originally the site of native fire-dances. There was little else to commend Garswan, certainly no scenic beauty.

The main street started at the space-port, wound under a great raw bluff of red shale, plunged into a jungle of snake-vine, inchmoss, hammock tree. The shops and dwell-

ings were half of native-style, of slate slabs with curving gables and hollow end-walls; half dingy frame buildings. There was a warehouse, a local of the space-men's union, a Rhodopian social hall, an Earth-style drug-store, a side street given to a native market, a copter yard.

At the copter yard, Magnus Ridolph found a choice of six or seven vehicles, all weather-beaten and over-priced. He ruefully selected a six-jet Spur, and closing his ears to the whine of the bearings, flew it away to a garage, where he ordered it fueled and lubricated.

He stepped into the TCI office, where he was received with courtesy. He requested and was permitted use of the mnemiphot. Seating himself comfortably, he found the code for resilian, ticked it into the selector, attentively pursued the facts, pictures, formulae, statistics drifting across the screen. He noted the tensile strength—about the same as mild steel, and saw with interest that resilian dampened with hesso-penthol welded instantly into another piece of resilian.

HE LEANED back in his chair, tapped his pencil thoughtfully against his notebook. He returned to the mnemiphot, dialed ahead to the preparation of resilian from the raw ticholama. The purple tubes, he found, were frozen in liquid air, passed through a macerator, which pulverized the binding gums, soaked in hesso-hexylic acid, then alcohol, dried in a centrifuge, a process which left the fibres in a felt-like mat. This mat was combed until the fibres lay parallel, impregnated with hesso-penthol and compressed into a homogeneous substance—resilian.

Again Magnus Ridolph sat back, his mild blue eyes focused on space. Presently he arose, left the office, crossed the street to the headquarters of the local construction company. Here he spent almost an hour; then, returning to the garage, he picked up his copter, and rising high over the jungle, headed south. The jumble of the Bourou Badlands passed below, Hourglass Peninsula spread before him, with his plantation filling the landward half, that of Blantham's the remainder.

Naos hung low over the sea when he landed. Chook was standing in the pointed doorway, eyes fixed vacantly across the ticholama field, arms dangling almost to the ground.

"Good evening, Chook," said Magnus Ridolph, handing his servant a parcel. "A bottle of wine to aid your digestion."

"R-r-r-r."

Magnus Ridolph glanced into the kitchen. "I see that you have dinner prepared. Well, let us eat our stew, and then the evening will be free for intellectual exercises."

The blurred green twilight drifted down from the badlands, and, dinner over, Magnus Ridolph stepped outside into the evening quiet. Under different circumstances he would have enjoyed the vista—the olive-dark *massif* to his left, the fields, black in the greenish light, the blue-green sky with a few lavender and orange clouds over the ocean. A faint yelp came to his ears—far, far distant, mournful, lonely as a ghost-cry. Then there came a quick far chorus: "Ow-ow-ow-ow."

Magnus Ridolph entered the cottage, emerged with a pair of infra-red-sensitive binoculars. Down from the mountains came the Bounders, leaping pell-mell high in the air, hopping like monstrous fleas, and the suggestion of humanity in their motion sent a chill along Magnus Ridolph's usually imperturbable spine.

"Ow-ow-ow-ow," came the far chorus, as the Bounders flung themselves upon Magnus Ridolph's ticholama.

Magnus Ridolph nodded grimly. "Tomorrow night, my destructive guests, you shall sing a different song."

The construction crew arrived from Garswan the next morning in a great copter which carried below a bulldozer. They came while Magnus Ridolph was still at breakfast. Swallowing the last of his stew, he took them out to the devastated tract, showed them what he wished done.

Late afternoon found the project complete, the last of the equipment installed and Magnus Ridolph engaged in testing the machinery.

A heavy concrete pill-box now rose on the border of the blighted acreage, a windowless building reinforced with steel and set on a heavy foundation. A hundred yards from the pill-box a ten-foot cylindrical block stood anchored deep into the ground. An endless herculoy cable ran from the pill-box, around a steel-collared groove in the block, back into the pill-box, where it passed around the drum of an electric winch, then out again to the block.

Magnus Ridolph glanced around the little room with satisfaction. There had been no

time for attention to detail, but the winch ran smoothly, pulled the cable easily out, around the anchor block, back again. Inside the door rose a stack of resilient plates, each an inch thick, each trailing three feet of herculoy chain.

MAGNUS RIDOLPH took a last look about the pill-box, then strolled sedately to his copter, flew back to the cottage.

Chook was standing in the doorway.

"Chook," said Magnus Ridolph, "do you consider yourself brave, resourceful, resolute?"

Chook's bottle-green eyes moved in two different directions. "I am cook."

"*Mmph*," said Magnus Ridolph. "Of course. But tonight I wish to observe the Howling Bounders at close quarters, and desiring some assistance, I have selected you to accompany me."

Chook's eyes turned even farther out of focus. "Chook busy tonight."

"What is the nature of your task?" inquired Magnus Ridolph frostily.

"Chook write letter."

Magnus Ridolph turned away impatiently. During the course of the meal he once more suggested that Chook join him, but Chook remained obdurate. And so about an hour before sunset Magnus Ridolph shouldered a light knapsack and set out on foot for his pill-box.

The shadow of the foremost spur had engulfed the little concrete dome when he finally arrived. Without delay he ducked into the dark interior, dropped the knapsack to the floor.

He tested the door. It slid easily up and down, locked securely. He moved the rheostat controlling the winch. The drum turned, the cable slid out to the anchor block, around, returned. Magnus Ridolph now took one of his resilient plates, shackled the tail-chain to the cable, set it down directly before the doorway, lowered the door to all but a slit, seated himself, lit a cigarette, waited.

Shade crept across the dark purple field, the blue-green sky shaded through a series of deepening sub-marine colors. There was silence, an utter hush.

From the mountains came a yelp, far but very keen. It echoed down the rock-canyons. As if it were a signal, a series of other yells followed, a few louder and closer, but for the most part nearly lost out in the wasteland.

"Ow-ow-ow-ow."

This time the cries were louder, mournful, close at hand, and Magnus Ridolph, peering through the peep-hole in the door, saw the tumble of figures come storming down the hill, black against the sky. He dipped a brush into a pan of liquid nearby, slid the door up a trifle, reached out, swabbed the resilient plate, slid the door shut. Rising, he put his eye to the peep-hole.

The howling sounded overhead now, to all sides, full of throbbing new overtones, and Magnus Ridolph caught the flicker of dark figures close at hand.

A thud on top the pill-box, a yell from directly overhead, and Magnus Ridolph clenched his thin old hands.

Bumps sounded beside the pill-box, the cable twitched. The howling grew louder, higher in pitch, the roof resounded to a series of thuds. The cable gave a furious jerk, swung back and forth.

Magnus Ridolph smiled grimly to himself. Outside now he heard a hoarse yammering, then angry panting, the jingle of furiously shaken chain. And he glimpsed a form longer than a man, with long lank arms and legs, a narrow head, flinging itself savagely back and forth from the snare.

Magnus Ridolph started the winch, pulled the plate and its captive approximately ten feet out toward the anchor block, shackled another plate to the cable, daubed it with heso-penthol, raised the door a trifle, shoved the plate outside. It was snatched from his hands. Magnus Ridolph slammed the door down, rose to the peephole. Another dark form danced, bounded back and forth across the cable, which, taking up the slack in the chain, threw the creature headlong to the ground with every bound.

THE YELLS outside almost deafened Magnus Ridolph, and the pill-box appeared to be encircled. He prepared another plate, raised the door a slit, slid the plate under. Again it was snatched from his hands, but this time black fingers thrust into the slit, heaved with a bone-crushing strength.

But Magnus Ridolph had foreseen the contingency, had a steel bar locking down the door. The fingers strained again. Magnus Ridolph took his heat-pencil, turned it on the fingers. The steel changed color, glowed, the fingers gave off a nauseating stench, suddenly were snatched back. Magnus Ridolph shackled another plate to the cable.

Two hours passed. Every plate he shoved

under the door was viciously yanked out of his hands. Sometimes fingers would seek the slit, to be repelled by the heat-pencil, until the room was dense with stifling organic smoke. Shackle the plate, daub it, slide it out, slam the door, run the cable further out on the winch, look through the peep-hole. The winch creaked, the pill-box vibrated to the frenzied tugging from without. He sent out his last plate, peered through the peep-hole. The cable was lined, out to the anchor block and back with frantic tireless forms, and overhead others pelted the pill-box.

Magnus Ridolph composed himself against the concrete wall, found a flask in his knapsack and took a long drink.

A groaning from the winch disturbed him. He arose painfully, old joints stiff, peered through the peep-hole.

A form of concerted action was in progress: the cable was lined solidly on both sides with black shapes. They bent, rose, and the drum of the winch creaked, squawked. Magnus Ridolph released the winch brake, jerked the cable forward and back several times, and the line of black figures swayed willy-nilly back and forth. Suddenly, like a flight of black ghosts, they left the cable, bounded toward the pill-box.

Clang! Against the steel door—the jar of a great weight. Clang! The door ground back against its socket. Magnus Ridolph rubbed his beard. The steel presumably would hold, and likewise the sill, bolted deep into the concrete. But, of course, no construction was invulnerable. Thud! Fine dust sprang away from the wall.

Magnus Ridolph jumped to the peep-hole, in time to glimpse a hurtling black shape, directed seemingly at his head. He ducked. THUD! Magnus Ridolph anxiously played a torch around the interior of the pill-box. Should there be a crack—

He returned to the peephole. Suppose the Bounders brought a length of steel beam, and used it for a battering-ram? Probably their powers of organization were unequal to the task. Once more he seated himself on the floor, addressed himself to his flask. Presently he fell into a doze.

He awoke to find the air hot, heavy, pungent. Red light flickered in through the peephole, an ominous crackling sound came to his ears. A moment he sat thoughtfully, while his lungs demanded oxygen from the vitiated atmosphere. He rose, looked forth into a red and white pyre of blazing ticholama. He sat

down in the center of the room, clear of the already warm concrete.

"Is it my end, then, to be fired like a piece of crockery in a kiln?" he asked himself. "No," came the answer, "I shall undoubtedly suffocate first. But," he mused, "on second thought—"

He took his water bottle from the knapsack, brought forth the power pack, ran leads into the water. He dialed up the power, and bubbles of hydrogen and oxygen vibrated to the surface. He pressed his face to the bottle, breathed the synthetic atmosphere. . . .

Blantham's copter dropped to Magnus Ridolph's landing and Blantham stepped out, spruce in dark gray and red. Magnus Ridolph appeared in the doorway, nodded.

"Good morning, good morning," Blantham stepped forward jauntily. "I dropped by to tell you that the harvesters have nearly finished on my property and that they'll be ready for you at the first of the week."

"Excellent," said Magnus Ridolph

"A pity those Bounders have done so much damage," sighed Blantham looking off in the direction of the devastated area. "Something will have to be done to abate that nuisance."

Magnus Ridolph nodded in agreement.

BLANTHAM inspected Magnus Ridolph. "You're looking rather tired. I hope the climate agrees with you?"

"Oh entirely. I've been keeping rather irregular hours."

"I see. What are those two domes out in the field? Did you have them built?"

Magnus Ridolph waved a modest hand. "Observation posts, I suppose you'd call them. The first was too limited, and rather vulnerable, in several respects, so I installed the second larger unit."

"I see," said Blantham. "Well, I'll be on my way. Those Bounders seem to have gotten pretty well into the plantation. Do you still have hope of a sixty-nine thousand munit profit on the property?"

Magnus Ridolph permitted a smile to form behind his crisp white beard. "A great deal more, I hope. My total profit on our transaction should come to well over two hundred thousand munits."

Blantham froze, his wide-set eyes blue, glassy. "Two hundred thousand munits? Are you— May I ask exactly how you arrive at that figure?"

"Of course," said Magnus Ridolph affably. "First of course is the sale of my harvest.

Two thousand acres of good ticholama, which should yield forty-six thousand munits. Second, two hundred forty tons—estimated—of raw resilian, at a quarter munit a pound, or five hundred munits a ton. Subtract freight charges, and my profit here should be well over a hundred thousand munits—say one hundred and ten thousand—"

"But," stammered Blantham, his jowls red, "where did you get the resilian?"

Magnus Ridolph clasped his hands behind his body, looked across the field. "I trapped a number of the Bounders."

"But how? Why?"

"From their habits and activities, as well as their diet, I deduced that the Bounders were either resilian or some closely allied substance. A test proved them to be resilian. In the last two weeks I've trapped twenty-four hundred, more or less."

"And how did you do that?"

"They are curious and aggressive creatures," said Magnus Ridolph, and explained the mechanism of his trap.

"How did you kill them? They're like iron."

"Not during the day time. They dislike the light, curl up in tight balls, and a sharp blow with a machete severs the prime chord of their nervous system."

Blantham bit his lips, chewed at his moustache. "That's still only a hundred fifty or sixty thousand. How do you get two hundred thousand out of that?"

"Well," said Magnus Ridolph, "I'll admit the rest is pure speculation, and for that reason I named a conservative figure. I'll collect a hundred thirty thousand munits from you, which will return my original investment, and I should be able to sell this excellent plantation for a hundred seventy or eighty thousand munits. My trapping expenses have been twelve thousand munits so far. You can see that I'll come out rather well."

Blantham angrily turned away. Magnus Ridolph held out a hand. "What's your hurry? Can you stay to lunch. I admit the fare is modest, only stew, but I'd enjoy your company."

Blantham stalked away. A moment later his copter was out of sight in the green-blue sky. Magnus Ridolph returned inside. Chook raised his head. "Eat lunch."

"As you wish," Magnus Ridolph seated himself. "What's this? Where's our stew?"

"Chook tired of stew," said his cook. "We eat chili con carne now."