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STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES

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THE PERFECT INVASION

by S. D. Gottesman

Imperial Earth had subdued star after star in her drive for Galactic power, but when the sudden onslaught of an unheard-of enemy turned the tables, there was only Bartok and his Intelligence Wing to meet the invincible invaders!

Illustrations by Dolgov

"HEAVENS!" said Bartok mildly. "And Oh, my Lord!" His face wore a curiously complex look, as though he were half stunned with shock and otherwise doubting what he saw. Said Bartok: "They can't do this to us." He turned decidedly from the transceiver and began to pace his office. Into his personal mike he snapped: "Send in the number one houri."

Babe MacNeice entered on cue. "What," she asked, "is the matter with our overlord and preceptor?" She studied his face and dropped the smile. "Barty," she said worriedly, "what's wrong?"

"Sit down," he growled, shoving a chair at her. Looking fixedly at the ceiling he said: "I just got a report from somewhere in the neighborhood of a punky little star named Arided in Cygnus. Babe, we're being invaded. The world is being invaded."

The girl laughed briefly. "Don't be an ass," she said.

"It's true," said Bartok.

She rose and began to pace beside him. Finally she exploded: "They can't do this to us! They simply can't — why, we're the invaders; we always have been!"

Bartok looked sidewise at her. "That's the way I felt," he observed sagely. "I know what you

mean. Question is, what do we do now?"

"I don't know. Let's hear the transcript from the communications outfit." Silently he turned on the rewind and replay. It said mechanically: "Office of Commander Bartok, Intelligence Wing, Fleet Command. Go ahead." That was a sort of letterhead.

Immediately there was the agitated voice of some man or other: "Barty? This is Hogan, of the Aries Hogans. I jammed this through to you — personal report. It's going to panic them if it gets out. Be very careful."

Bartok's voice: "I remember you — patrol duty for the Arided section. Give me the facts in a hurry, son."

Hogan's voice: "Ships coming at us from everywhere, it seems. A big lineship was blown to pieces before it could report. I'm the only intelligence man in the district, I guess. I don't know whose the ships are — I don't know how they work. I'm speaking from the fourth planet of Arided — polyp-like natives, oxygenous atmosphere. They're systematically bombing the cities."

Bartok's voice: "Stop beating yourself over the head, Hogan. You're crazy!"

Hogan's voice: "If that's the way you feel. They're laying a line barrage along the planet,

letting it rotate under their fire. We can't get a thing into the air — it's jammed up bad. I don't know, Barty, honest I don't know —" What Hogan didn't know remained a mystery, for the transcript ended right there with a strangled wail and a deafening report.

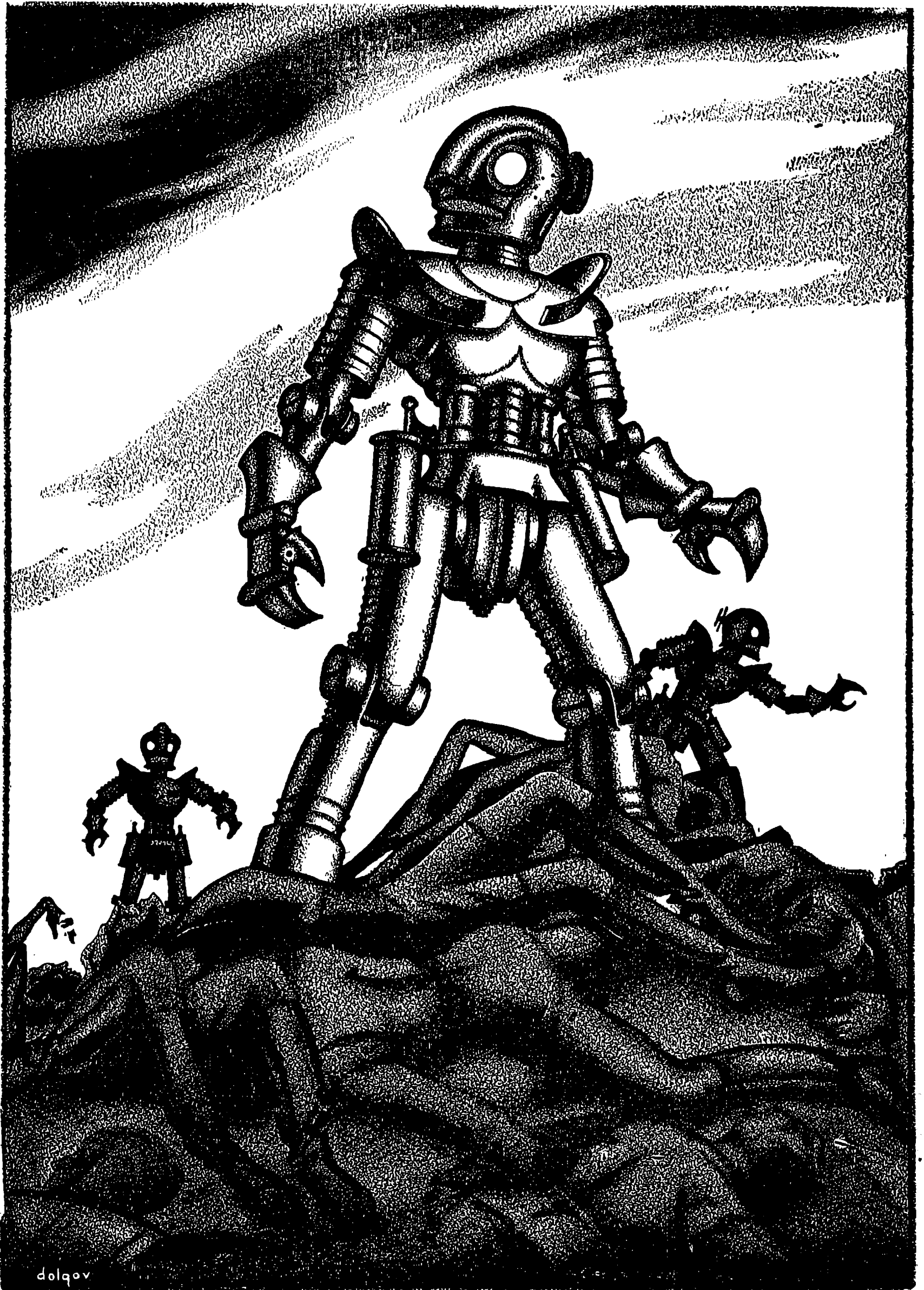
"Oho," said Babe MacNeice in a long exhalation. "He wasn't kidding."

Bartok was at the phone: "Get me Fitzjames," he said. "Yes — the all-highest Admiral of the Fleet, the slave-minded ol' wind-jammer in person." In a rapid aside to Babe he snapped: "I can't handle this. I'll leave it to the navy — it's their baby."

Again at the phone. "Admiral? Shoot some patrollers out to Cygnus Arided. Don't be surprised if they don't come back. Invasion, admiral. I wouldn't kid you." He hung up sharply.

"That," he said absent-mindedly, "is that. Whether their tactics are capable of defensive war remains to be seen. There is room for doubt."

THE PATROLLERS did not come back. However, one managed to keep unbroken contact with the flag-ship until it was blown out of the ether, and the story it told was plenty nasty. No description of the invading ships was given except what the patroller got over in the customary strangled



dolgov

wail just before it broke off sending. It could be assumed that they weren't reaction-type vessels. They moved faster than light, which meant knowledge of the unified field theory's most abstract implication. They had, without a doubt, bombed or rayed out of existence, the populations of about three score planets. This meant that either their science was something infinitely beyond the Terrestrial grasp, so far beyond it that it could not be called classified knowledge at all but must, necessarily, be lumped together as a divine attribute, or their ships were *big*.

The Fleet had successfully colonized a great deal of space and in the course of wiping out unsuitable native populations and encouraging others, battling moderately advanced peoples and races, suppressing the mutinies inevitable in a large, loose organization, and smacking down the romantic imbeciles who had a few tons of hard cash to throw away on what was considered a career of piracy, had developed an extraordinary amount of offensive technique and armament.

Their ships were marvelous things. They were so big that they were built at special dry-docks. When they took to the ether from these they would never touch land again until they were scrapped. There simply wasn't anything firm enough to bear their weight. You could explore a line-ship like a city; wander through its halls for a year and never cross the same point. When the big guns were fired they generally tore a hole in space; when the gunshells exploded they smashed asteroids to powder.

But the Fleet had nothing to show that could match the achievement of the as-yet nameless invaders, who had rayed the life out of a major planet as it revolved beneath them. According to the reports the job had been done in the course of the planet's day. One ship could not

send a ray powerful enough to do that; possibly twenty might, but they would inevitably foul one another if they got within a million miles nearness. And a million miles clearance between each ship would mean that they'd separately be about eight million miles from the planet. And from that distance you can't work rays or bombs. From that distance you can just barely think unpleasantly of the planet, which doesn't do either good or harm.

From all accounts and from the terrified deductions these invaders packed solid jack, and plenty of it.

It wasn't very long before the invaders were in complete control of the sector they had first arrived at, and had won that control without a real fight or even once tipping their hands as to what they had and what they could do if they were hard-pressed.

There had begun a general exodus back to Earth; one would have thought that there was already a major space-war on from the scrambling and confusion. Any planet that boasted a grav-ing-dock for minor ships of the line was thrice overloaded with a charge of human beings, for the mere presence of dismantled destroyers was a guarantee of temporary security. After three weeks of the senseless scrambling the Admiral was forced to declare that there would be no more admissions to planets and whole systems having vital bearing on the welfare of the Fleet. He quietly began a program of evacuation so that if there should be a raid on a Fleet base there would be no deaths save those in the service. Things were confused; public temper was generally timid. The prospect of a defensive had scared the living daylights out of them. It was utterly unthinkable that Earth, the great invader, should get a taste of her own medicine.

Where they came from nobody knew, where they were going nobody dared to say. But it

was perfectly obvious that the All Earth and Colonies culture stood in their way, and that they were bound to stamp them flat. The invaders must have been awfully foul creatures in their psychological make-up to do what they did, for they gave no hint of their moves, which is the dirtiest trick that you can play on anyone. They simply moved up slowly and surely from their obscure base on the outermost planets of the Earth culture.

And they kept moving. There were no survivors; that was the most appalling part of their technique. Everybody who could run, ran. Everybody who was left, died. Communication was cut off simply and efficiently by scrambling techniques which must have meant the expenditure of trillions of kilowatts per hour. Or did the invaders have some unsuspected source of energy? Nobody knew; that was the hell of it.

BARTOK was good and ready to blow his brains out. It was his specialty, as commander of the Intelligence Wing, to relay information as to the whereabouts and plans of whatever enemy might be at hand. It was his misfortune that this enemy simply refused to let him know.

He was brilliant, brilliant as a flawless diamond, and just as hard. Give the man a problem in smuggling or in colonial subjugation and he'd have it cracked in jig-time. But this — ! It was impossible.

Babe MacNeice, assistant extraordinary, consoled him with: "Barty, you've done all you can — all anybody can to stop them. It isn't your fault that they've got more on the ball than we have or could hope to have." A philosophical shrug of the shoulders. "It's a question of making room for our mysterious friends. They may not even strike at Earth. They may even turn back."

"They may even," said Bartok sourly, "turn into packages of

Rinso. But don't count on it. Babe, this is a *spot*." There were dark circles under his eyes big enough to make barrels with.

"Then how about a joy-ride?" asked the girl. She looked absent-mindedly at her fingernails.

Bartok was studying her closely. "Yeah," he said. "How about it?" He dropped into a chair. "Shoot," he said. "I know that mysterious air of yours."

In cloyingly sweet tones she replied: "Barty, darling, don't be an old silly. Aintcha gonna take itsy-bittsy Babesy for a ride?"

He stiffened as if he had been shot. "Sure," he said. "Why didn't you say it that way before?" They shot up to the roof in Bartok's private elevator and got into the commander's very private plane. As they took off he growled: "All right — spill it."

"I'm sorry I had to be sickening before you got the idea through your skull that I wanted absolute and complete privacy," she said, again her own brisk self. "But I have a notion."

"She has a notion," said Bartok expectantly.

"Take it easy. Only a hunch — still — where do you suppose there's enough room for a complete invasion-culture to develop without once coming into contact with the Earth culture till now, when it's at its height?"

"Space is plenty big, Babe. There's room for a thousand colonial systems as big as ours that we'd never even know of."

"Okay. That establishes the very first postulate. Those things are real. Therefore one doesn't have to be a psychic to investigate them. I am not psychic; ergo I can and will investigate them — in person." The girl avoided Bartok's eyes, and rattled on: "May be that my logic doesn't hold water, but I think I can handle the job. You wouldn't send me out there, and I know you're on the verge of saying that you'll go yourself."

"Well, you'll do no such damned thing, because they need

you here as a relay center and someone whose statements to the public have some degree of authenticity. You're the only one in the whole blasted navy that's worth a whoop in hell, and our benighted citizens know that as well as that yellow-bellied Admiral of the Fleet Fitzjames. Now that it's settled that you can't be spared we'll get around to the reasons why I, rather than any other agent from the wing, should be assigned to this job."

"We can dispense with that," said Bartok wearily. "The fact is that next to me you're the best worker we have. So go, my child, with the blessings of this old hand."

"Cut the kidding," she snapped. "I mean business. Instead of the blessing of that old hand I'd like some advice from that old head."

"You can have my biography," said Bartok. "Twenty Years a Spy, or, The Tale of a Voyeur Who Made Good." He took from his pocket a small package. "This," he said, "I have been carrying for the moment when you'd pop your kind proposition. It's lightly sealed. In a moment of supreme danger you are to open it and be guided accordingly."

"Thanks," she said grimly. "Whatever it is, I believe I'll need it."

CHAPTER II.

BARTOK had never thought he could forget Babé, but that was just what he did in the next two months. It was the healthiest thing to do after she had hopped off in the big, fast one-seater that had been built especially for her jaunt. And Bartok was busy. Bartok was so busy that sometimes he thought he must be mad and living in a world of hallucinations on the reasonable grounds that nobody could be as overworked as he was and survive it.

Quietly and persistently the invaders kept moving in, establishing bases as far as anyone could see. The personnel of the

Intelligence Wing was dispersed throughout the colonial system to restore order and prevent hampering of the Fleet as it was making ready to attack.

It was, of course, somewhat problematical as to just when that attack would come. The yellow-bellied Admiral Fitzjames was cowering in his flagship behind miles of steel and chewing his nails with sheer terror. For the ships he sent out — cruiser, destroyer, patroller, interceptor or miles-long battlewagon of the line — simply didn't come back. If they got within sighting distance of the invaders they never survived to tell of it. And the ether was still jammed thick as apparently unlimited power could make it. Or was their power unlimited? Nobody knew.

It was bidding fair to be the most successful invasion of all times; just as the successful exploration is the one without adventure to mark its high points so this invasion was completely unchronicled by those invaded. They simply didn't know.

The galactic state of jitters is not easy to describe, but that's what it was. Tap a person on the shoulder and he'd turn with a shriek, fainting dead away. Suicide was on the upcurve, psychoses were increasing, messiahs popped up like mushrooms to lead the saved to glory and life everlasting. Bartok's men arrested these as fast as they could and even formed a few rival cults on the premise that a few million fanatic followers would be not at all bad things to have about, thus capitalizing on the stressful times.

Production and distribution of commodities bade fair to break down; it was Bartok's men who saved them. Acting on an old-time tradition Intelligence men stood with drawn guns at the doors of factories, offering to blow the guts out of the man who stopped working.

The commander, on the fly between the stars of the colonial system, hadn't time to change his socks, let alone receive re-

ports, notions and nostrums from cranks. Therefore it was natural that he refused to see the sailor from the flagship of the fleet who said he had something awfully important to tell him, but that it wasn't official. It would have been better if Bartok had listened, for the sailor was going to tell him what the Admiral had said to his secretary while passing through the sailor's corridor. It had been: "By God, Hackenshaw, if something doesn't happen I sail for parts unknown and that beastly Bartok can fight his own war!" But the sailor never saw Bartok, in spite of deserting from the flagship and commandeering a lifeboat to make the trek from Venus to Algol. Instead he was shot for desertion when they picked him up in a math parlor where he was spending his last hours of life in the popular diversion of the day, capping formulas.

Hence it came as a staggering blow to Bartok to learn that the Fleet — all the line-ships, that is — had simply taken off into space after raiding all the cities near at hand for women. They were headed, when he heard the news, for a minor star-cluster near the edge of the universe, and in the opposite direction of that from which the invaders were coming.

"Akh!" screamed Bartok, when the news was broken to him. "The—the—the—" Words failed him. For hours afterwards he was in a daze. When he snapped out of it his first words were: "How about their commissariat?"

A subaltern tactfully informed him that they had made no provisions of any sort for food and supplies. A couple of hours after Bartok was heard to observe: "They're going to starve to death." Which was the exact truth.

When the Fleet was eliminated from the scheme of things Bartok found himself in more or less complete command of the colonial system. What vestiges of an executive committee there had

been on Earth were quite shrivelled away. Most of the committee had died of fright when they learned that the Fleet had left them high and dry.

The Intelligence Wing took unto itself all authority of life and death, officially, at last. They had been shooting leaders for quite a while, but it hadn't been with sanction and consent from above. The Wing expanded legally to cover with its charter all those tenders, lighters and graving-ships which had been left behind by the back-bone of the Fleet. It made them the most powerful unit then in the colonial system, with fire-power to match any that sporadic rebellions might bring up.

Meanwhile the invaders progressed amazingly, almost forgotten as the cause of the system-wide crisis. They would have been totally lost from the public eye in the confusion had not reports come in about once a week that there was no further communication with such-and-such a sector. A few retired sailors moved forward pins on their star-maps and wondered how they managed it without once showing their hand.

And Bartok, who had once wished at least six times a day that he might have a free hand to remake the colonial system — "— and obstacles be damned!" — was wondering if a really sound case could be made out against his willfully inhibiting — by means of an overdose of cyanide — his metabolic process.

IT BECAME apparent that after four months of horrid confusion and blood-letting that things were quieting down, partly due to the able handling of the situation by the Intelligence Wing, which managed to keep the lid on practically everywhere and save the system from a complete premature smash-up, mostly because the populace had got used to the idea of being invaded, and successfully.

The ordinary round of living began again, with perhaps a

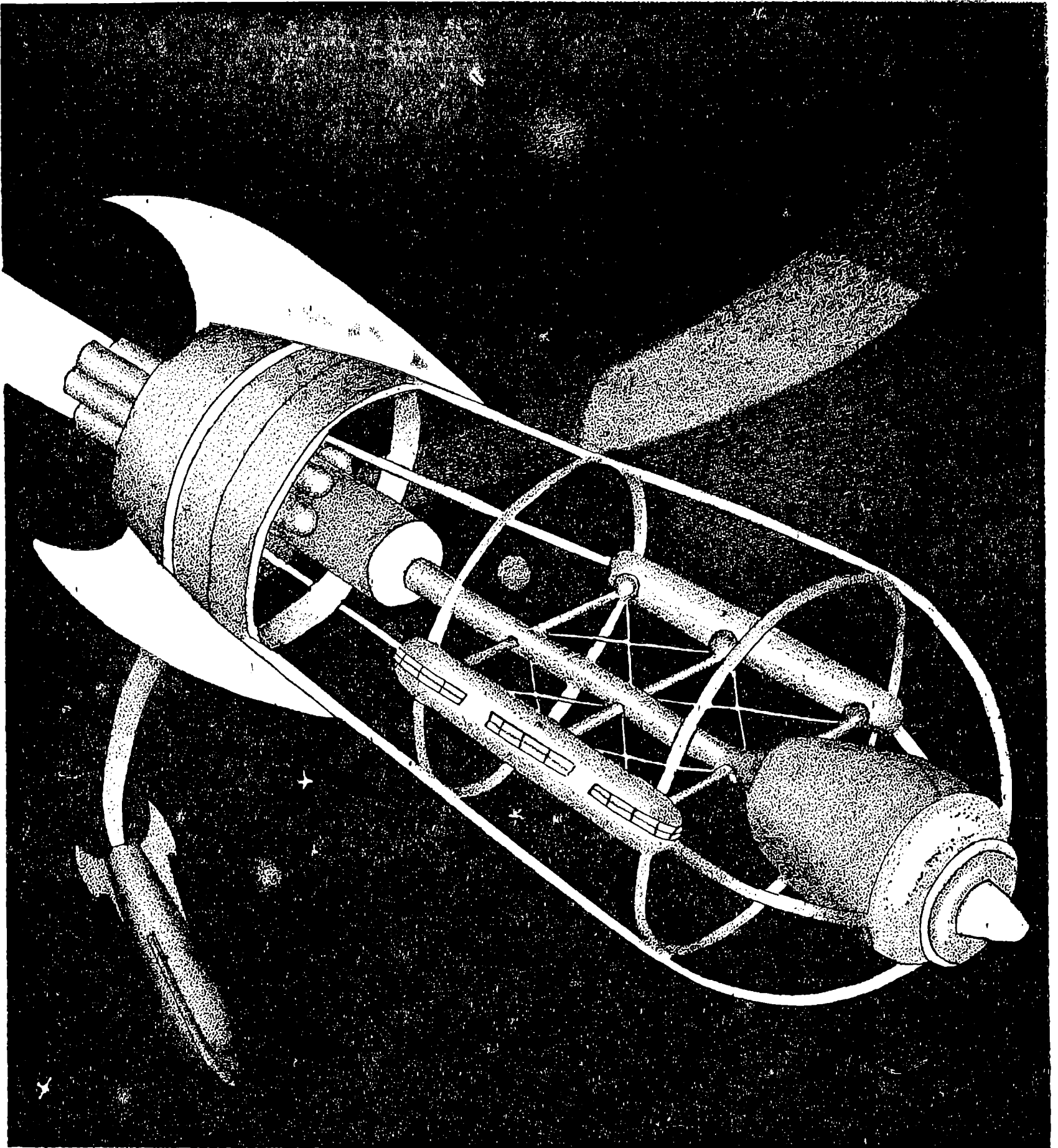
little more feverish gaiety in the math parlors and a little less solemn conviction in the houses of worship. When Systemic Coordinator Bartok (the title had been hung on him while his back was turned; he still swore that he was nothing more than the Wing Commander acting under emergency powers) was able to take a vacation the last of the internal trouble was officially over and done with. It had been ugly, certainly, but there had been episodes in the system's history even less attractive, as when the docks broke down during the days of the old Nine Planet Federation and there had actually been people starving to death and homeless.

It had occurred to Bartok as he lounged in his birthday suit with the other convalescents at Venus Springs, at the South Pole, that it would be touching and entirely appropriate to the spirit of the service to pay tribute to that deceased but magnificent female, Babe MacNeice.

He had arranged in his mind's eye a procession of notables to lay wreaths on a simple block of tungsten. He had just begun to work out the details of the speech he would make when there came a faint blating noise from his wrist, the only part of him that was dressed, and that purely for utility. From the tiny transceiver came: "Barty, this is Central in New Metropole. The recorder in your private office has just begun to squawk. Who's it hooked up to?"

Bartok thought, furrowed his brow like a plowed field. "MacNeice," he said at last. "She's the only one hooked up to G7. I'm coming right up." In about the time it took him to dress he had called a plane, one of the very special racer models that he had fallen into using during the quick-moving past months when a second clipped was a score of lives saved.

In two hours flat he was slamming his office door behind him and jiggling the dials of the transceiver set on G7. No answer.



"Babe!" he snapped. "Are you in? Speak up!" No answer.

His fingers jittery, he set the machine for rewind and replay. The letterhead spoke its piece tinnily, then the voice of Babe MacNeice snapped out briskly over the wires:

"Hello, Barty. This'll get to you sooner or later if you survive. It'd be too much to hope that I'd have you on the wire. Things must be pretty whacky

down there — eh? I'll begin the report in good order.

"Took off — hell, you saw me. Went toward Arided without any trouble. Was hailed by a lot of freighters and sundry obsolete crates that had no business being in the ether. They seemed to think that I was going the wrong way. Few billion off Arided transceiving got muddy; then I slapped right into a zone where there simply wasn't any getting

electricity or magnetism through at all.

"I sighted something in the deeps where there wouldn't be any Earthly ships around, so I did a quick fade. That's greekish for dodging and twisting so fast that I caught up with my own light-waves. After a few minutes of that I streaked straight behind a star. They probably hadn't seen anything move so fast, so they weren't ready.

Damned good things you put racing motors into my scow — otherwise you wouldn't be hearing this. For that matter, maybe you aren't. I'll get on.

"Those of my instruments that weren't chasing their tails because of the freak fields floating around there told me that I was being followed twist for twist. They had a tracer of some kind on me, because they didn't know where I was — just where I was going. Which isn't good. I stayed perfectly quiet, waiting for them to show up so I could shoot a torpedo at them. Show up they did. They had a funny craft, Barty — damned funny.

"It was open to space — just a skeleton ship. Not very big, either. Twenty times my length, about. Couldn't get any details, but there was something awfully peculiar about it. Anyway, I fired my torpedo, which was a mistake. It was a magnetic, and since the fields were thrown out of kilter it buzzed around, skinned past me once, and lost itself in space. Then they got gay and began throwing things at me — odd design, all of them. There was a skeleton-shell, like their ship, that packed an awful wallop when it exploded on time a thousand to my starboard. And they have rays.

"Yes, honest-to-God rays, like you read about in the story-books! Not having the experience of an Aarn Munroe or the ray-screens of a Richard Seaton, also like you read about in the story-books, I just ran like a scared rabbit. And then it occurred to me to open that mysterious package you handed me. I did so. What did I find? Another mysterious package inside it, with the note: 'So you think this is a tough spot? Think it over again before opening this.'

"It was a dirty trick, Barty, but it worked. I gave 'em the old one-two. 'One' being a cloud of smoke thick enough to confuse any tracer, 'two' being the space-mines you so thoughtfully shoved onto my scow at the last moment over my protests that I didn't

want to be a flying powder-keg.

"I scattered the mines like bird-shot through the fog, and later had the intense satisfaction of seeing the ship that was on my tail explode in several pieces. That must make the first blood for our side in this war.

"I figure that blood-drawing saved my life for the moment, because exactly three hours later I was taken in tow by five more of their ships, same pattern and size. And that was where your little joke began to wear thin, because I opened the second box and found inside it another box and another note, which said: 'And this too shall pass away. Don't open this one unless the going's *really* bad. Cheer up; the worst is yet to come.' Who the hell do you think you are — Elbert Hubbard?

"As I was saying, they must have taken me prisoner to find out how I had managed to knock off one of their boys. I couldn't see a thing except the skeletons of the ships and buggy creatures crawling around on the beams. Disgusting sensation, *really*.

"They landed me on one of Arided's planets, considerably one with an atmosphere. I got out in cold blood. My God! Barty, you never saw such a place! I don't know what it was like before; the usual colony-planet, I suppose, with labor-barracks and factories and semi-detached homes. But what I saw! Towers, Barty — all towers, spiring into the heavens like mountain peaks! I'll swear that most of them went way above the atmosphere line. And there was machinery, machinery, machinery — the ground was solid with it, heaving pistons, reaction jets like volcanoes. You don't know what I'm talking about, Barty. You have to see it. I'm sneaking in these last words under very trying circumstances — undergoing what the tinny brutes call purification. I'm going to see the master after being kept waiting for months, and whatever he decides to do with me goes on this world. They —"

The replay broke off. That was all. There weren't any sound-effects, not even the customary strangled wail, and glad enough Bartok was for that. Apparently she had been caught using the transceiver, and it had been smashed. Bartok straightened himself out tiredly. He'd kept the world fairly well up while the invasion was going on; there were others capable to take over now that the real crisis was past and there was nothing to do but wait for the taking-over by whatever the incredibly soulless creatures were that could ray all the life of a planet out of existence without a qualm.

He was getting old anyway. Time to make room for younger men. He might have a fling now as any time at applied mortality. He was going to build himself a cruiser and streak out to Arided and Babe.

CHAPTER III.

HIS EXPERIENCE with the invaders was substantially the same as Babe's, though he reasoned — and correctly — that they would adjust for detection of a mine-field layed in a smoke-screen. Therefore he trotted out something so antiquated in concept that the invaders would surely have forgotten it, if ever they had known the device.

In the neighborhood of the first invasion port, the star in Cygnus, he encountered the phenomena Babe had described — utterly scrambled fields. Experimentally he held an electromagnet to a bit of steel. First there was no reaction, then the steel slid to the magnet. Then it hurled away from it like a bullet!

Throughout his experiments he hadn't failed to keep a lookout. The chime that signalled foreign bodies rang just once, and he trotted out his modernized version of the ancient Greek fire, fore-runner of explosives. He squirted the blazing stuff through his rear jets in a wide-

open pattern, obscuring the sight of him more effectively than any fog-cloud could have done. When his simpler instruments told him that the ship tailing him was quite lost in the Greek fire he sprayed out a flock of tiny, powerfully explosive pellets.

There was one blast and it was all over; the tailing ship was dispersed through space, and whatever had been its crew was lost beyond repair.

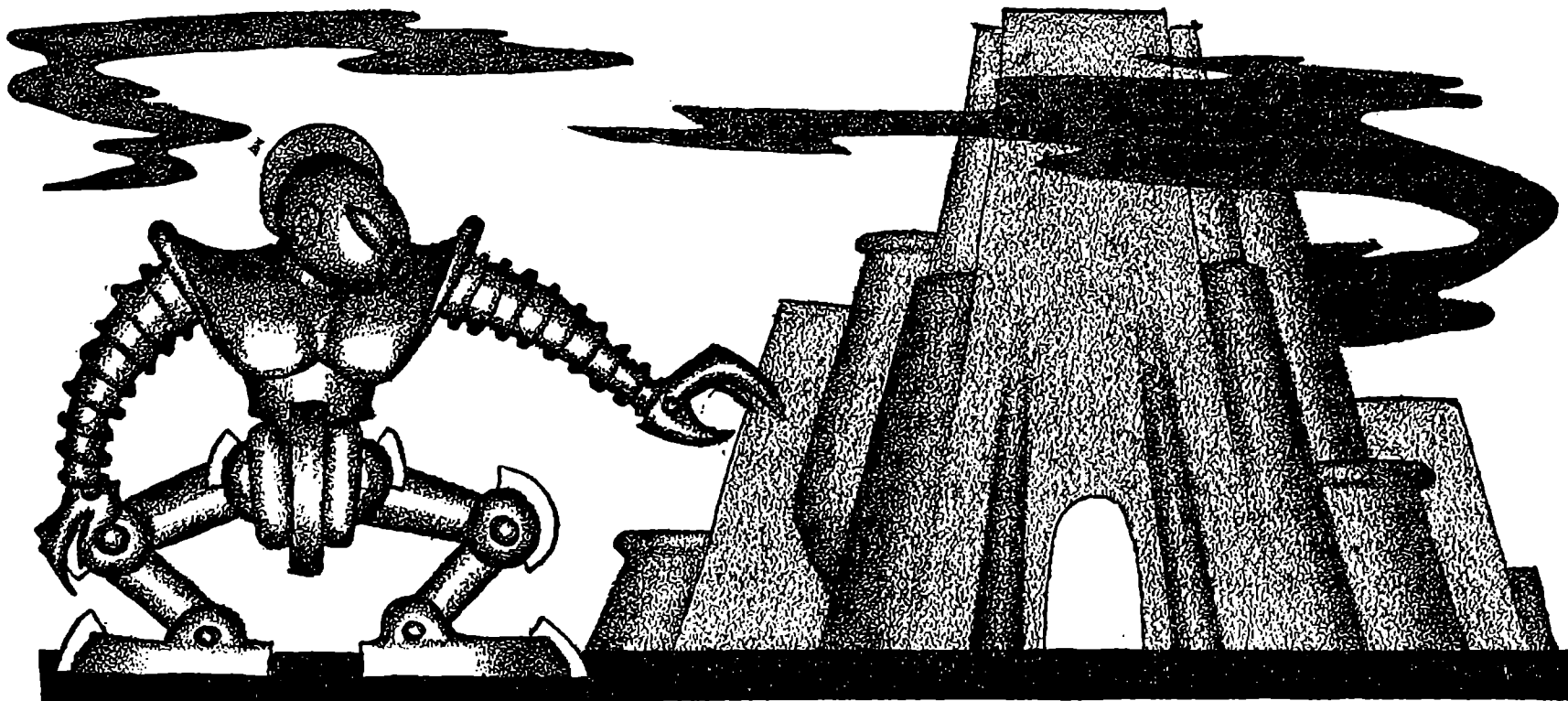
Having effected this, Bartok set his motors to idling in the direction of the invasion star and lit a cigarette, waiting in almost perfect calm to be detected and taken in tow.

which scuttled nasty things about the size and very nearly the shape of men.

Bartok was baffled by the metallic sheen of the things when it hit him that they were robots. "Damned clever," he mused. "Damned clever indeed. They don't need air, they don't need a commissariat; all they need is orders and oil. I wish we'd thought up that gag a few centuries ago!"

They landed him skillfully and easily on the fourth planet. As Bartok looked about he realized slowly that Babe hadn't been under any hallucinations when she'd sworn that the engineering

sprang to attention after the fashion of a guard of honor. Bartok had never seen robots before; there were enough hands to do the work of the colonial system and the social problems that would have been raised caused any experimentation with robots to be frowned on by the executive committee. And where was the executive committee today? God only knew. It was a very sure bet that if any of it was left this residue would be mopped up by the despised and strictly forbidden mechanical men. Somebody had beaten the colonial system to the punch. But who could it be?



He did not have long to wait; there were half a dozen ships on him in twenty minutes. They clamped onto him what he realized must be the perfected tractor ray, so long celebrated in song and story and never yet seen on any spaceway till now.

As the tractors dragged him through space towards Arided he inspected very closely the ships that were applying it. They were six in number; as Babe had said they were remarkable for the fact that they were quite open, being no more than a power-unit around which was built a framework containing emplacements for weapons of all sorts and conditions. There were cat-walks as well, up and down

works that had been run up were the most remarkable things in the unknown universe. There were towers everywhere, great patches of concrete for landing and servicing ships; long lines of them hanging in the air waiting for room. Not one square inch of ground space except narrow cat-walks could be seen free of any mechanism. What was not transmission gears was solar engine; what was not solar engine was unimaginably complex calculators clicking and buzzing away as robots stalked among them to tear off results and deliver them to the nearest building.

Bartok got out of his ship; immediately a gang of robots

Commander Bartok nearly swooned when a robot-in-command came up to him and said in perfect, though toneless English: "Pray excuse this temporary detention, Wing Commander. I can assure you that it shall be terminated in a brief while."

THE BRIEF while extended itself into three days before they would tell him what was going on. During that time he had the run of a delightful apartment which lacked only books and magazines for his comfort and relaxation. Apparently to substitute for them the robot-in-chief, or whoever was in charge, sent in robots whose

specialty was brilliant conversation and repartee.

On the third day there entered the usual loquacious metal man. "Your bed is rumpled," he greeted Bartok. "I presume your feelings are the same at this opposite situation?"

"Opposite?" said Bartok, knowing from past experiences that the creature would explain some elaborately buried pun or double meaning in his greeting, which it did. There was some complex word-play with "smoothing the way" and "weighing the smooth", likewise a series of faintly ribald jests concerning the metal men themselves. Bartok, bored though he was, could not but admire the intensive manner in which they went about working a subject, whether the unified field theory or the technique of the double-take. He hadn't the ghost of a chance of holding up his own end of the conversation with this copper-plated specialist in the whimsical and amusing. He realized glumly that he wasn't specialized. He could crack a joke that would be a fairly good joke, but not half as funny or well-timed as the robot conversationalists; he could plan an attack, but not half as deadly as the robot fighters.

"Man," said Bartok, "is on the way out."

"Weigh out the consequences," snapped the creature promptly, "and you'll find your remark substantially correct. Man too is correct — or, to put it differently, wrecked at the core."

"Where did you learn English?" asked Bartok feebly. He still didn't know. And on the answer to that question hung, he felt, a great deal.

But before the robot could make some horrible pun about "Where" and "wear out" one of the larger metal men entered, with a grave salutation to Bartok.

"I," it said, "am math-minder 817. Come with me, please. Subtend angularly this surd improperly vectorial." Piercing

through the mathematical metaphors Bartok realized that he was to say good-bye to the conversationalist, because he was going on a long journey.

"It's been nice meeting you," he said helplessly.

"Thanks," said the conversationalist. "And it's been nice metalling *you*." Another pun, worked in double reverse — surely a fitting note upon which to terminate the strange intellectual companionship of the cheerfully intent killer Bartok and the grimly humorous time-passer, chat-minder 32.

In the corridor the math-minder volunteered: "Bartok, you unfortunate particle, you're going to investigate some teleology."

"That being the science of first causes," brooked the Commander. "Do you mean that at last I'm getting to see your chief?"

"Not chief. First cause, I think you said. Accelerate through this aperture." The robot's paw gently shoved him through a very heavy metal door. Bartok found himself face-to-face with a very young man.

"Hello kid," he said. "What brings you here? Captured?"

"Sort of," admitted the boy. "You're Mr. Bartok, aren't you?"

"Only in jest. Everybody calls me Barty." He was trying to put this young man at his ease; presumably he was destined for the same ordeal as he. Prestige of the genus homo demanded that he keep a stiff upper lip.

"Okay — Barty. I suppose you know why you're here?" The Commander stared in amazement. The boy had mounted a flight of steps to a throne-like affair that took up most of one wall. "I suppose you know why you're here?"

"Wha-a-at? Son, who the hell are *you*?"

The boy sagged down into the seat. "Unwilling master," he said, "of the most powerful army in the universe."

"BARTY!" screamed someone.

"Babe!" Bartok screamed right back, catching the girl in mid-air as she hurled herself into his arms. After a few preliminaries he demanded, "Now what goes on here?"

"I'll introduce you," said Babe MacNeice. "Barty, this is Peter Allistair, from Capella. He's a bit young — twenty — but he's all right. It's not his fault, any of it."

"How can that be?" demanded the Commander. "If you're their boss? Do you know what your ships are doing?"

The boy sagged deeper into the chair, a haunted look on his face. "I sure do," he said. "And I'd give my right arm to stop it. But they won't believe me. I made the things, but they won't believe me when I say I want them to stop their colonization."

"You and who else?" asked Bartok. "You and who else made these billion or so robots?"

"I did," said the boy defiantly. "At least I did indirectly. You know there's a law against robot-experimentation — or was. Well, I couldn't let well enough alone. I had an idea about robots, so I came to Arided, which was the least populated section that I could find, and I built the damned thing."

"Built *what*?"

"A robot whose function was to manufacture robots. And that was the fatal error. You know how resolute those things are in carrying out their jobs." Bartok, thinking of three days of solid punning, nodded absently. "Well, this thing would have killed me if I'd tried to stop it. It said it had a divine mission to perform. So it built another flock of robot-manufacturing robots, which did the same.

"Then they began to branch out and make ordinary fetchers, mathematical workers and a few fighters. I got interested and designed a ship from the math workers' figures. And a stray remark I dropped to one of the proteans — those are the robot-

makers — about fanaticism gave them the idea of turning out fighters with souls bonded over to me. I swear I didn't mean it that way! But look at the result.

"Every week or so one of the foreman robots brings me a list of the suns that are now under my imperial domination. And I can't explain to them because they aren't trouble-shooters specialized to straighten out a mess like this. And the proteans can't make a trouble-shooter because they aren't the originals, who simply manufactured for its own sake. The originals are all worn out and scrapped, and the ones that are turning out robots now are also fanatics with the idea of conquest for my greater glory.

"It's a chain of events that's been twisted around and tied to its tail. If you can find a way to stop it let me know."

Entered a grim-faced fetching-foreman robot. "Worshipful master," it intoned, "your dominion is extended this week over twenty new suns. Accept this list, your children beseech." He handed to Allistair a sheet of names.

The boy let it fall to the floor. "Listen," he said passionately to the robot. "I don't want any more sheets like this. I don't want to conquer any suns or planets. I want the proteans to stop making robots. And above all I want you damned hunks of tin to stop calling me worshipful master! I'm not worshipful and I'm not anybody's master."

The foreman said methodically: "Worshipful master, despite your folly we are loyal and shall make you lord of all things that are. It is for your own good that we act. Do not forget the day when you said to the great protean 27: 'Fanaticism may be a good thing. If you machines had more of it things'd be a lot easier for me. If I wanted I could be master of the universe with you machines, given that touch of lunatic bravery.'" The foreman stumped out of the room.

"Where they get those ideas I don't know!" shrilled Allistair.

"I haven't the faintest idea of what their machinery's like. My God, what I set in motion when I built protean 1!"

"The trouble is," said Bartok broodingly, "that you have all the fire-power you need and no control whatsoever over it. And because of this lack of control you are even now waging the most successful invasion of all time. I don't blame you — I know the spot you're in. You say you don't know a thing about these late-model robots?"

"Not a thing," almost sobbed the young man. "Not a thing. About twenty robot generations have gone by since I built protean 1, and they've been evolving like wildfire. A math robot thinks up a new law of electromagnetics, takes it to a physics robot who applies it and takes it to a protean, who incorporates it into the next series of machines. That's the way it perpetuates itself. They invented death-rays, tractor rays — I don't know what-all!"

"You shouldn't have said fanaticism, son," worried Bartok. "That was the *one* concept that couldn't have been cancelled out by another suggestion. Because a full-fledged fanatic brooks no obstruction whatsoever to achieve his aim. Not even such a trifling detail as the fact that policy, orders and authority are opposed to that aim."

"And," said Babe, "these robots are the most full-fledged anythings you could hope to see. Did you meet one of their full-fledged humorists, Barty?" She shuddered. "Back on Earth we'd lynch a comedian who never let you catch a breath between gags."

"What'm I going to do?" asked the young man simply. "I can't have this on my conscience. I'll blow my brains out."

"Babe," said Bartok. "That package I gave you — still got it?"

"Yes, you old home-spun philosopher." She produced the package. "How many more to go in this Chinese ring trick?"

"Only one. Open it up." Curiously she tore off the seals and read from the neatly-printed card that was in the last of the boxes: "If you've given up hope be ready to die. If you haven't, try misdirection." She stared at the Commander. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"The purpose of the little boxes was simply to jog your imagination in tight spots. There isn't any cure-all formula except the thing you carry in your skull. The human brain is a marvelous mechanism . . ." He turned abruptly on Allistair. "Take me to see one of your proteans, son."

CHAPTER IV.

"MAKE tracks, Babe!" the Commander yelled, sprinting for the little cruiser in which he had arrived at Arided. He flung himself into the cabin a second after the girl and a split-second before the craft roared into the air.

"We are now," said Bartok, sprawled comfortably along the floor, "going to see the first and, I hope, the last real space-battle of its kind, fought with rays, disintegrators, ray-screens, inertia-less drive and all the lunatic creations that crack-brained authors have been devising for the past few centuries. It is fitting and proper that this war should be fought, because no real lives are going to be lost and it will inevitably end in a stasis, both sides having wiped each other out."

"But can he put up a real fight?" asked the girl worriedly.

"Remember what I said about the human brain, Babe? It's bigger and better than any thinking-machinery, however elaborate. It's nature's way, which is often best. Nature's way was to smash the protean and perform a simple operation that substituted Allistair's brain for its impulse-mechanism."

"What happens then?" she asked. "Not that I question that he ought to die in a good cause."

He was a nice kid, but it was a flagrant piece of criminal negligence, monkeying with robots."

"Agreed. So he makes retribution in the best way he can. Those damned protean machines control about half a billion robots apiece after they manufacture them." He shuddered briefly as he remembered what the protean had looked like. Bartok had expected a neat, man-sized robot; instead it had been a million cubic feet of solid machinery.

The Commander yawned: "So, having taken over this protean's control factors with his own brain he is in a position at last to direct the creatures he made. Of course he'll use his robots to fight the other robots. Here comes the first contact."

Far to the rear of the speedy craft there was a titanic flaring of lights and colors as two fighting ships met. Unimaginable forces roared from the search-light-shaped projectors, impinged spectacularly on thinly glowing ray-screens. The ray screens went down after about three minutes of brilliant resistance and the ship vanished in a puff of vapor.

"Ugh! Disintegrators!" said the girl. "So they really had them!"

"Why not? To the mechanical mind everything is possible except common-sense. Instead of negotiating with Allistair they'll

be confident of their superiority. And, fire for fire, they are stronger. Also their tactics are perfect. But young Allistair's tactics are bound to be faulty, which means that his ships will show up where they couldn't possibly be and blow whole protean units to hell and gone. His fire-control has the edge on them in that it's unpredictable."

Babe's eyes were astern, on the colossal battles going on; on the forces being released that made a Fleet flagship's biggest big guns seem feeble. "This part of space," she said, "will never be the same. It'll be like trying to plot a course inside the orbit of Mercury. I suggest that you proclaim that fact to the world."

Bartok grinned. "More speed," he said. "I wouldn't want to be caught in one of their fire-balls. See that?" He pointed excitedly at a moving fleck of light that had separated itself from a monster flying fort just off the ground. "That thing's as big as Ceres — and it's explosive. More speed, Babe, if you value my hide."

"I do," she said shortly. "The colonial system, or what's left of it, is going to need a firm hand to tide over the stresses and strains of this robot's war."

"It shouldn't last for more than a few years," said Bartok. "When a force like that gets split they haven't got time for

anything else. And don't fret about the colonial system. There's a lot left of it yet, and it's right in the palm of my hand."

Babe MacNeice looked hard at the Commander. "If any other man," she said, "told me that I'd make it a point to blow up this ship before we touched Earth. But I think you can be trusted."

"Algol ahead," said Bartok, pointing to a star-disk off the bow. "The outposts of empire, where they're chewing their nails about the strange noises and flashes to be seen and heard over the communications systems. We'll have to evacuate them nearer Alpha Centauri or thereabouts. Can't chance one of those fireballs hitting a planet of the system!"

He reached for a recorder and began barking orders into the mouthpiece. Before the cylinder was half grooved he had — verbally — evacuated three galactic sectors, reorganized the Intelligence Wing, scrapped the now-obsolete graving docks where no battlewagon would ever dock again, converted the lighters and tenders of the Fleet into freight ships for emergency use, and begun to draft a new constitution for the All Earth and Colonies Federation.

"That," said Babe happily, "is the way I like to hear you talk.

Algol loomed ahead.

FANTASY AND THE WAR

Just after the editors had completed this issue of *Stirring Science Stories*, the news came of the sudden assault upon our nation. In the days that followed, America gave thought to the new emergency. So, likewise, did the clubs of science-fiction readers for shortly we received the following communication from John B. Michel, Director of the famous Futurian Society. We pass it on to you: —

"The Futurian Society of New York declares its unswerving sympathy and loyalty to the great struggle being carried on by four-fifths of the population of the Earth headed by the alliance of the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China against the barbarian thrust of the Nazi-Fascist-Japanese Axis. It makes this declaration in the firm conviction that the further progress of science and civilization upon which the

visions and dreams of science-fiction are mainly based is dependent entirely upon an Allied victory. The shape of the Future is being decided on the field of battle of the Present. Science-fiction readers, writers and enthusiasts have no other possible choice but to do all in their power to aid and speed the triumph of civilization over fascism. To this end, the Futurian Society appeals to all science-fiction clubs, publications and readers to issue similar declarations and to do all in their power to help the United States to absolute victory."

The editors and publishers of this and the other magazines of the Manhattan Fiction group are completely in agreement. Fantasy can play a good part by helping men relax and keeping alive the right to dream. *Stirring Science Stories* will do its share to that end.