

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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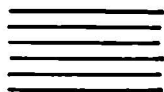
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Novelet



illustrated
by
EMSH

the silver cube

by Mark Hellington

It appeared out of nowhere, in the depths of space in the *Servadac's* path. Then it floated there, motionless, seemingly lifeless—waiting for men to investigate...

ONE MOMENT there was nothing out there but the silent, glittering emptiness of starry space. The *Servadac* hurtled through immeasurable depths, flaming with its own light like some legendary dragon. Away and beyond the stars glittered. The ship was alone, and space was cold.

The next moment...

"Object ahead, Captain!"

"Stop the ship!"

Power flared into the Kam-pensmythe tubes and the

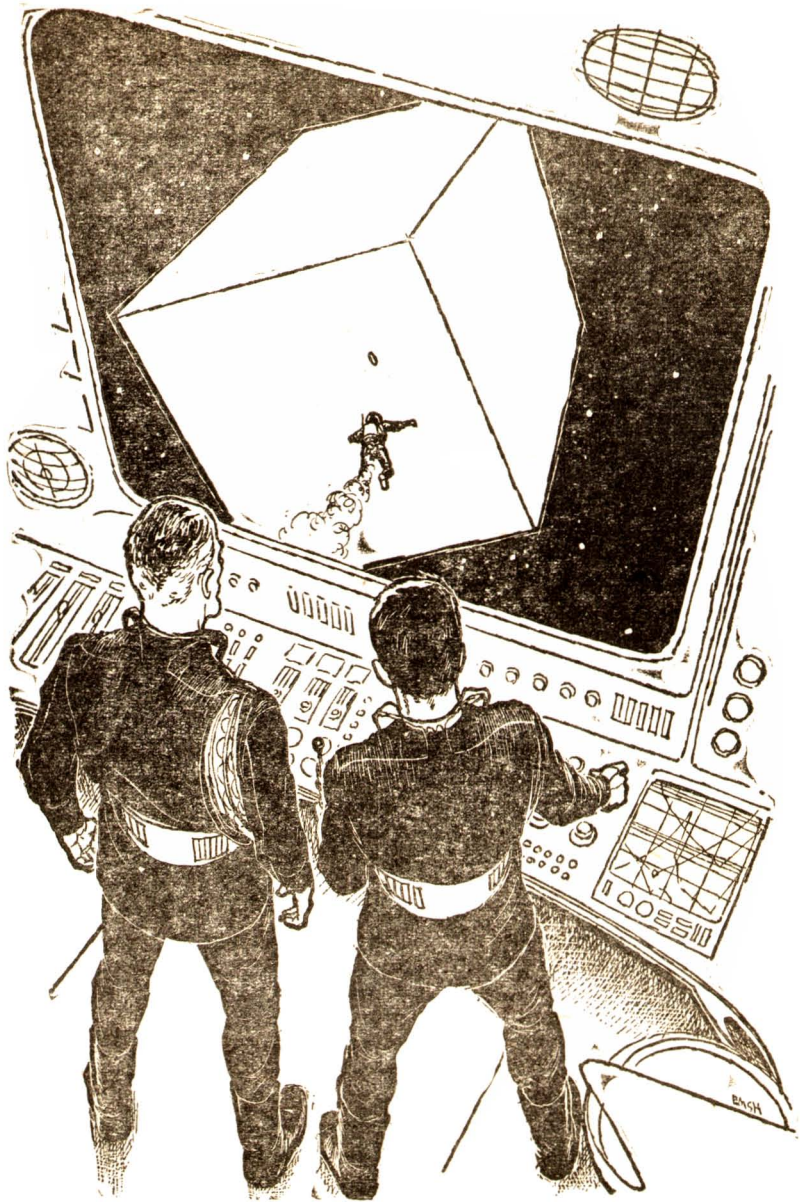
Servadac went inert; its velocity became zero without any object or person aboard being affected by the abrupt halt. The tubes died, and the ship floated in free fall.

The crew converged toward the ports to gaze out into space at the intruder.

"Where did *that* come from?"

"Not from home, you can bet!"

"Ambassadors from the stars—let's break out the



Jessup was drawing near the opening in the cube.

dress uniforms and white bow ties!"

"Invaders, I say. Want to bet?"

"If they are, why bet? What chance to collect?"

"Think they're stronger than us? Old Terra can handle anything in the system."

"Sure...but that thing is not from Sol!"

The exclamations continued; the crew delighted with the break of routine, after five years of endless, uneventful scouting. But in his bridge, the captain pondered, surrounded by his staff.

"It certainly looks like an alien machine," said Weston, the chief engineer, looking through the thick crystal of the forward port.

THE OTHERS said nothing, and their silence was a confirmation.

"Any orders, skipper?"

Captain Aram Daniels frowned. "That thing wasn't there until ten minutes ago; Neil swears to that. The scanners should have detected it an hour ago. They didn't."

"How far is it?"

"About half a mile."

Somebody whistled in appreciation.

"You know what that means, of course," said Daniels. "Either its potential speed is practically instantaneous or...or it just materialized there out of nothing. In either case, it has to be some-

thing light years away from all the science we've got."

"I say blast it, just in case," said Second Officer Neil.

"We can't risk a hostile move. Why blast? It has been there for twenty minutes and hasn't attacked us yet. It's floating in free fall, as we are keeping the same distance from us. Conclusion: that thing is here on purpose. It is here for us."

He looked around. "Questions is: What are we supposed to do about it?"

THE QUESTION remained unanswered. Daniels waited a moment longer and then smiled wryly.

"I'm paid to make decisions that involve the life of five hundred people, and take the responsibility for the decisions I make. Very well. I want every gun aboard manned; I want a twenty-four hour watch. For the time being, we stay put. We wait; let them make the first move. Then, we'll decide. All heads of department must keep their phones in contact with this cabin. Check every strategic item aboard. See what we have, what we don't have."

He stared at his staff. "I've ordered a coded message to Station Ten. If possible, they'll relay it to the Moon, and they'll tell Earth. If possible!"

He stared through the port-hole again. "This is all, gentlemen; to your posts, please."

The men withdrew. Aram

Daniels remained seated at his metal desk, thoughtfully biting the nail of his right middlefinger.

Outside, the silver cube gleamed palely in distant sun and starlight, gleamed with a greenish but beautiful sheen, its surfaces smooth and un-tarnished, running into each other with flawless, mathematical finish. The silver cube floated and yet seemed still, maintaining the same distance from the *Servadac* that it had when first sighted. It kept its distance and waited.

THE SHIP waited also. From the portholes, through the radar scanners, by the guns, the crew watched tensely and waited, while the gleaming cube remained sharply sketched against its starry background.

Hours passed, and tension grew. Jokes became fewer, and finally stopped; frowning, worrying, the men were ready for instant action, for the first order, for the first alarm... and nothing came.

At the tenth hour, something happened on the silver cube. A round, dark hole gaped at the exact center of a previously even, continuous surface.

Instantly the phone in the skipper's cabin rang deafeningly. From five different directions men came running with the information. "A door opened on the alien, captain."

Daniels was already looking through the forward port.

"I know. Nothing come out, eh?"

Nothing did come out. The round door gaped on the nearest surface of the cube, and that was all.

"It's weird," said the captain.

"Any orders, sir?"

"Let's wait a little longer."

THE CREW was again excited, again in a good humor. Something had happened.

"Give it ten minutes and somebody will come out. Who takes me on it, two to one?"

"I'll take it!"

"A gorgeous gal is going to come out!"

"You read too much fiction, bud. More likely a thing waving a white flag."

"You guys take this too lightly," said a well-muscled, rugged mechanic who had spent the last five hours calmly cleaning and assembling a parabolic rifle. "What makes you think that thing is a door?"

"Looks like a door to me," said one. The others corroborated.

"It does," agreed the mechanic. "It also looks like lots of other things."

"Like for instance?"

"Like the barrel end of a gun. Like an opening for launching missiles. Like the end of this parabolic rifle."

There was an awkward silence.

"You trying to make us

nervous, Hank?" asked someone.

The mechanic shrugged his shoulders. "No. Just trying to remind you that we don't know what's coming out. It may be a lifeboat with an ambassador. It may be a missile."

He got up, stretched his cramped muscles and came to the porthole. The greenish-silvery light reflected from the cube cast angular shadows on his square, solid face.

"If you ask me," he said, "that thing looks just like a die. And seems we've got the crap end of it!"

EVENTUALLY this observation made its way around the ship and came to Daniels' ears.

"What's the man's name?" he asked.

"Hank Jessup, sir. Mechanic first class."

"Bring him to me."

"Yes, sir."

"Hank, you're wanted in the bridge."

"Oh-oh."

"I didn't do anything!" said Hank.

"The captain only wants to talk to you, Jessup. He heard your joke about crap game. Hop along!"

"That ought to teach me to keep my big mouth shut," grumbled Jessup, letting go of his parabolic rifle.

"Good luck, Hank," called the others.

"You'll need it, boy."

THE CAPTAIN was still looking through the porthole when the ensign and the mechanic entered his cabin. He turned to study the man with thoughtful eyes. He had to raise his head to look into the other's face; he was a small man, and the mechanic was well above six feet tall.

"You Jessup?" asked Daniels.

"Yes, sir."

"You compared that cube to a die with its crap end to us?"

Hank licked his lips nervously. "Yes, sir."

"I wanted to tell you that I agree with you," said the captain.

The mechanic managed to conceal his relief from his face. Small men made him nervous; his captain made him nervous; and the fact that Daniels was small made him even more nervous. The captain went around him, as a farmer appraising a new cow, his keen eyes as needles in the mechanic's skin. Hank suffered the examination with an impassive face.

Finally, Daniels seemed satisfied. He went to the forward port and looked out, his back to the mechanic and the other men in the cabin, his hands behind his back.

"Jessup, that die has been out there for fifteen hours. Two hours ago, it opened that hole, and has been looking at us with it ever since. Not a blasted thing came out of it."

THE CAPTAIN stopped and seemed expectant. Someone nudged the mechanic.

"Yes, sir," said Hank Jessup.

"I want a man to go there, and take a look at the thing."

"Yes, sir."

"I need a sensible man, with a head on his shoulders."

"Yes, sir."

"Would you volunteer, Jessup?"

"No, sir."

"I didn't expect you to," said Daniels. Was he smiling? "I wouldn't volunteer if I were in your boots."

"Yes, sir."

"Lots of others would volunteer, I'm sure."

"Yes, sir."

"But I want a man who won't, Jessup."

"Yes, sir."

"Suppose I order you to go, Jessup?"

"Yes," sighed Hank, "sir."

II

THE CUBE and the Servadac floated steadily, two metal insects facing and defying each other. The cube was cold, silent, unfathomable; but the ship hummed inside with many lives. When a porthole opened on the ship and a minuscule, spacesuited figure floated into the vacuum, the cube remained cold and aloof.

The cube grew against its background; it loomed formidable. Hank Jessup could

feel the sweat trickling thick out of his pores—not running down, for there was no *down*, no *up*; only forward and backward—backward the ship, warm, friendly, watchful and anxious, forward the silver mass with a greenish sheen, staring at him with its empty, lidless eye. The cube stared darkly and unblinkingly at the pigmy who dared to approach it; it stared and waited.

"Jessup?"

"Jessup here, sir."

"This is the captain."

"Yes, sir."

"Any sign of life?"

"None, sir."

"You afraid, Jessup?"

"Yes, sir."

"Want to come back?"

"Might as well stick around a little longer, sir."

"That's the spirit. What's in that black hole?"

"Can't see a thing, sir. Am floating right in front of it."

"I know; we can see you. Can't you see anything at all?"

"No, sir. It's dark inside. No light at all."

"Use your headlight on it."

HANK JESSUP pressed down a lever inside his thick glove, and on the top of his round helmet a light shone forth. He directed the pencil of brightness towards the gaping mouth on the cube's surface. He thought he could see something loom far back beyond the opening: something that moved with a

strange, vibratory motion, something that had no shape, a shadow. He strained his eyes; but it was gone.

He became aware of Daniels' voice speaking to him, an undertone of alarm in it.

"Sir?"

"What happened? Why did you go silent?"

"I thought I saw...something."

"What?"

"I don't know. A shape—a shadow. But I can't see it any more; it's gone. The thing looks empty now. My headlight can't reach the bottom."

"I'm sending two more men over, Jessup. Don't try to go in there alone."

The mechanic laughed inside his helmet. "Don't worry about that, sir. I'll stick around. No son of my mother is going into that opening alone."

And as soon as he said this, Hank Jessup gravitated, slowly at first, then fast, towards the opening; he was sucked in by some mysterious force, a pressure, what not; he passed through the circular opening; he was inside.

Clang!

IT HAD happened so fast, so unexpectedly, that when the mechanic remembered to yell, he was already inside the cube, dazed, breathless. The reverberation of the metallic clang still rung in his ears when he became simul-

taneously conscious of three things:

First, he was inside a cubic cell about ten cubic feet in volume.

Second, the cell was lighted, clear as day on Earth.

Third, the opening through which he had been drawn was closed. A formidable metal lock had covered it. This was undoubtedly the source of the noise he had heard.

"Jessup! What happened? Where are you? Confound you, man, I told you to wait! Jessup? Do you hear me?"

He could hear, all right. And as this fact penetrated his brain, it superimposed itself on all the impossible things that were happening. For he had been connected to the ship through the normal wire, that served also as safety cable; he was now inside the cube, hermetically locked from the outside by a forbidding door.

Yet, Daniels' voice kept coming through the wire. "Jessup, can you hear me? Answer me! Jessup!"

Hank looked around himself. The cell was bare, the walls shone with the same silvery gleam of the outside; but their sheen was dazzling with a light that pervaded them. The light came from no apparent source of illumination. It came from the walls. They were translucent. They were metallic to the sight, but they were translucent.

He kicked at one of them

with his heavy boot. A metallic boom was transmitted to his ears through the air in his spacesuit.

At which he realized a fourth impossible thing: His feet were solid on the floor. This cell supported him with what amounted to normal Earth gravity—not the half-G provided by gyro in his own ship, but normal Earth gravity. He could feel the extra weight on his legs.

“**H**ANK JESSUP! Jessup! Can you hear me?”

Hank decided to give up thinking as a bad job. Instead, he raised his gloved hands to touch the cable attached to his waist. He found it, turned, began to follow it to the locked opening, winding it on his left arm as he went. And as he reached the heavy metal lock he made his fifth discovery.

The cable went out through the metal.

Instinctively he pulled at it. He pulled it to the right, then to the left. It went with exactly the same facility as if it were passing through plain air.

“Jessup! Jessup!”

Hank stared unbelievably at the wire. He moved it in a circle. He tugged at it. He let it drop. It dropped straight to the bottom of the lock; there, something stopped it, and the rest of it fell inside the cell, of the floor.

Hank crouched and tugged down at the part of the wire

that had been stopped at the bottom of the lock. It resisted his pull.

He touched the bottom of the lock and found hard metal against his glove.

He got up again, stretched a trembling hand towards the exact center of the circular locker; for a second he hesitated, then touched it gingerly with his fingers.

HIS FINGERS went right through. And his wrist. And half his forearm. He pulled his arm back and stood looking at the solid metal, the metal that had clanged audibly less than a minute before. He touched it again, and found nothing. His hand went through.

Hank inhaled deeply, held his breath, closed his eyes, and lunged forward to the lock. He jumped, head first.

As he jumped, a crystalline sound, musical as the vibration of delicate silver bells, reached his ears.

“Jessup! *There* he is! Jessup, are you all right?”

Hank opened his eyes. He was floating in the vacuum, and above and below him stretched the yawning abyss of endless stars.

In front of him, was his ship; behind him, loomed the silvery cube, the circular opening black and empty staring at him from the cube's face.

“Jessup, you all right?”

“Be damned if I know,”

said the mechanic, more to himself than to the other.

"What's that?"

"I'm all right, sir; nothing happened."

"I told you to wait, man!"

"I'm sorry, sir. Something pulled me in."

"What do you mean, something?"

"I don't know. A force. Some energy field, I guess. And then the door shut."

"What?"

"The door shut with me inside, sir."

Pause.

"What door, Jessup?"

"I mean the outer lock, sir."

A LONGER pause. "That lock has been open all the time, Jessup. We saw you go in, and waited for you to come out. Are you sure you're all right?"

The mechanic looked at the gaping hole, black and empty and featureless. He puckered his lips. "I guess it figures," he muttered.

"Jessup?"

"Sir?"

"Stand and wait; this is an order. I'm sending Dr. Weston and Lieutenant Neil over. You wait until they get there."

"Yes, sir."

The cube loomed before him, cold and aloof. But the quality of this aloofness had changed subtly. First, it had been menacing; now, curiously, it was inviting. It stood there, open, its black eye on

the pigmy before it, and seemed to transmit a challenge. Hank swore softly.

"I'll go back in, don't you worry," he whispered.

The cube seemed to cock a mocking eye at him.

With a swift kick of his leg, the mechanic turned toward the *Servadac* again. Two other diminutive figures had just left the airlock and were drifting towards him.

As he looked at them, he sensed a *presence* behind him.

HE KICKED again and turned back quickly. The interior of the open lock was utter darkness; and yet, something was moving inside that darkness. He thought he got a glimpse of a flutter, a disturbance in the shadows. He strained his eyes; it was gone.

The two men were by his side now, coming to a halt through their braking belt rockets. Immediately they connected their helmets with his.

"You all right?" asked the chief engineer.

"Yes, Dr. Weston."

"What's this story of a door closing on you?"

"A door did close on me, sir."

"We didn't see it."

"I saw it, sir."

"Craziest thing," said Weston. "I wonder where it comes from. I don't like it. I don't feel like going inside."

Captain Daniels' voice sounded inside their helmets. "What's that, Weston? If

Jessup could go in alone, I see no reason why the three of you can't do the same."

"Yes, sir!"

"Guess we're going in," muttered Neil.

Hank nodded his head inside his helmet. "Oh, yes! I've got an account to settle with whatever is in there."

Before the others could move, he bent forward, grasped their shoulders to gather momentum, and propelled himself towards the lock.

AS HE entered it, again the tinkling of silvery bells sounded in his ears.

The cubic cell was lighted as before, empty as before, but there were two changes: The outer lock remained open; he could see his ship, could see the two men coming back towards him from the distance where he had pushed them to move himself.

And in the wall facing him, a new lock was open where there had been none, dark and empty and waiting.

The other two crossed the outer lock, dropped on their feet behind him, and looked around.

"Amazing," said Weston, touching the other two's shoulders. "Artificial gravity!"

"Old stuff," muttered Neil.

"Without force fields? We came in as into a house! What makes them shine, I wonder?"

"They're probably hollow

glass or plastic containing fluorescent material."

"They may be glass," said Hank, "but they sound and feel like steel, sir. Kick them."

Neil kicked them. "Ouch!"

Weston laughed. "I wonder what that lock is for."

"Come into my parlor, said the spider."

The chief engineer shuddered. "Light it up with your headlamp, Jessup."

THE MECHANIC directed the beam on his helmet towards the lock.

Weston gasped. "Why, it...it doesn't go in! The light doesn't go in! Ever seen anything like that, Neil?"

"In a lab, once. Physics class. It took a huge apparatus to produce the effect."

"I guess we're supposed not to peek," said Weston.

"No," said Hank, shaking his head. "They want us to go inside without knowing what to expect."

The two men turned their heads and stared at him through the transparent plastic of their visors. "What do you mean? What—who are you talking about?"

"I don't know," said the mechanic. "But that's what they want. I know; I can feel it."

"A hunch, eh? Sometimes they come out good," said Weston. He looked at the door. "They are playing hide and seek, then. Might as well go in."

He opened his shoulder holster and held his subsonic gun in his gloved left hand.

"Come on," he said, and crossed the lock. The other two followed.

Clang!

III

THE THREE MEN jumped and turned around. The lights were on—the walls shining. And the lock through which they had come had just vanished.

Weston jumped to the wall and ran anxious fingers over it. The wall was smooth, as if there had never been an opening on it.

Hank Jessup picked up his wire. This time the tip had been cut clean off; Captain Daniels would be having a fit in a minute.

A hand nudged Jessup's shoulder. He turned, and saw Neil pointing at the opposite wall.

There was a circle painted on the wall, or ingrained in it—a red circle about the same size of the lock they had just passed. The surface of the wall within the circle was full of curious indentations.

Scattered on the floor in front of the circle were several pieces of the same silvery metal that composed the walls and apparently the whole cube.

Weston joined them in looking, and again the three men touched each other to

talk. "You know what I think? I think we've been trapped."

"A brilliant deduction," said Neil sarcastically. "What do we do next?"

THE MECHANIC was looking at the pieces of glittering metal on the floor. He pointed at them with one of his feet. "I may be crazy, but doesn't the shape of those things fit the notches on that wall?"

"It looks so," said Neil.

"Look, there's a five-pointed star. And there is one on the wall."

"Fellows," said the chief engineer, "perhaps I've gone off my rocker, but do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think we're being tested."

Hank Jessup nodded his head in silence. He had reached the same conclusion almost at once.

"What do you mean, tested?" asked Neil.

"Like psy tests. Don't you remember? When you're supposed to fit pegs and squares in their holes and things like that?"

"You mean an I.Q. test?"

"Yes!"

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me that some alien form of life is testing us to see how clever we are?"

"Or how stupid."

"No!"

"It looks like it, doesn't it? Look, suppose we pick up

those pieces on the floor and fill the holes and see what happens?"

"I sure would like to get my hands on whoever rigged this setup!" exclaimed Neil. "Testing us! Why, the..."

"We're losing time." Hank went forward and started picking up the pieces and trying them on the indentations. Weston came to help him, and presently Neil joined them.

THE PIECES fitted, but it wasn't so easy to fit them as at first they had thought. Some of them were cut out in straight, simple geometrical patterns, but others were eccentrically disposed, or without symmetry; still others were composed of patterns of curves difficult to identify and adjust. However, before fifteen minutes were passed, Weston fitted the last piece on the wall.

Immediately the wall disappeared within the boundary of the red circle, and a new lock was before them. This time, however, it was lighted.

"What was that?" asked the chief engineer, touching the others. "Did you hear that tinkling?"

"Like silver bells?" asked Neil.

"Funny you should call them *silver* bells," said Hank. "The same idea occurred to me; I've heard it before. You know what I think it is? I think it's a sign that we've

succeeded in the test."

"It may be," said Weston. "As for the silver idea, it is naturally suggested by the color of this crazy ship. I... hey! Look behind us!"

The others turned. The lock had disappeared, but now it was back; through it they could see the outer lock wide open, and through the outer lock, the *Servadac*, floating in starry dust.

THEY STOOD looking at it for a moment.

"It fits in the pattern," muttered the chief engineer finally. "We go in, we're locked up and given a test. If we succeed, they open the locks. We can either go out or go on. I guess it's extra points if we go on."

"I wonder what happens if we don't succeed?" asked Neil.

"That's easy," Weston said. "Logically, we stay locked for ever."

"Cheery thought!"

It was. The three of them chewed on it for a while.

"Well," asked Neil at last, "do we go on, or do we go out?"

"Let's go on," suggested Weston. "It's a risk, but I think it's worth it."

"I wonder," muttered Neil. But he followed the others across the new lock.

"I'll be doggoned!" exclaimed Weston.

"No clang this time," observed Hank.

They were in another cubic

chamber, slightly larger than the first two, and with two other differences.

In the center of the chamber, a candle burned in a silvery chandelier; from one of the side walls projected three hangers.

"Oh, no," said Neil. "No, no, no, *no!*"

"They want us to take our suits off," said Weston. "Now that's asking a lot! Is it real, Hank?"

THE MECHANIC had bent down and was examining the candle. "Looks so, sir, but I wouldn't count on it! I've gone through a solid-looking wall as if it were vapor since I came in."

"And locks have such a way of conveniently vanishing or clanging ponderously on us," said Weston. "Look, let's check our gauges and see."

The suits had gauges adapted to them which measured atmospheric pressure and, within limits, could determine the chemical composition of whatever gases they might be moving within.

"A little thin, but looks healthy," Weston said finally. "I can't understand how they keep it in with the outer lock open! Well, shall we undress, gentlemen?"

"No!" objected Neil again. "I won't do it! It's a trap!"

"The outer lock is still open," said Hank. "We can walk out any time if we want."

"What do you think, Jessup?" asked Weston.

The mechanic stood thinking for a moment and then, shrugging his shoulders, unclipped the metal locks of his suit and unzipped it with a swift movement. The other two drew back a step involuntarily.

The suit fell from Hank Jessup's body, dangling from the gloves, helmet and shoes. The mechanic hesitated a second and then took his hands up and removed his helmet.

CLEAN, pure mountain air filled his nostrils. He inhaled deeply, expanding his chest, and laughed, for he had suspected the worst, and it felt good to be alive.

As he stood exultant, again the crystalline bells rang, this time through the room, festive and fairylike.

"You got guts, Jessup," said Weston, shedding his own suit. "I wouldn't have been the first for the life of me!"

"It was a good gamble. After all, if they wanted to kill us, they could have done so long ago. What would be the point of fatal tricks now?"

"They might have a perverted sense of humor," said Weston, peeling his gloves.

"I thought of that, too," said Hank, smiling grimly. He bent and took his shoes off. Neil had finally started unzipping his own suit.

"Nice air, isn't it?" asked

Weston, breathing hard. "Wish we had something like this on the *Servadac*. I may be crazy, but it smells of pine trees to me."

Hank nodded. "Smells like mountain air, all right. Long time no sniff."

"You can say that again." Suddenly the chief engineer pointed at Neil and started laughing. The Second officer had taken his helmet off and was carefully sniffing the air.

"What's the matter, Neil, old boy? Something burning?"

Neil finished shedding his suit with a most unwilling manner.

"He seems to be expecting the air to go puff at a moment's notice," said Weston.

"You know," said Neil, "that might happen. Suppose we don't pass the next test, whatever it may be, and they do just that? Huh?"

WESTON stopped laughing and concentrated on folding his suit.

"I wonder how they knew there were three of us," said the mechanic pointing at the hangers.

"That's all you wonder? I wonder how they reproduced so perfectly the shape of the hangers in our own ship!"

Hank was startled by the realization that the chief engineer was perfectly right. The hangers did have the same shape and dimensions of those in their ship.

"It's all too screwy, if you

ask me," said Neil, hanging his suit. "I don't like it at all."

"We don't like it much more than you do, old boy," said Weston, hanging his own suit. "Well, Jessup, are you going to stay goggling at the hanger forever? Hang your suit, man!"

Hank awakened from his contemplation and hung his suit.

Clang!

THEY COULDN'T help jumping. The lock through which they had come in had disappeared, and a new one gaped dark on the opposite wall.

The metallic boom rang deafeningly through the walls now that they had their suits off.

"Smooth," said Weston in a low voice. "Very smooth. Until all of us hung up our suits, they left it open. As long as one had not decided to go on, they didn't close it. Very smooth!"

"You may disagree with me," said Neil, "but that clang sounded awfully definitive!"

They turned to the new gaping, dark hole and studied it silently. "I'll tell you what," said Neil, "I'm going through that hole because there's nothing else I can do, but I'm taking some protection along!"

He went to his suit, unfastened the shoulder holster and strapped it over his regula-

tion overalls. Then he unscrewed the helmet lamp and adjusted it for hand use.

"Not a bad idea at that," agreed Weston. "I'm doing the same. What about you, Hank?"

The mechanic shrugged his huge shoulders. "Can't see much use for it, but I'd be crazy if I didn't do the same."

"Well?" asked Weston when they had armed themselves and held their lamps in hand.

"Let's go," said Neil.

They went through.

"No clang again," said the mechanic.

"Now just what is this?!" exclaimed Weston, looking around.

"A nightmare chamber," said Neil.

THE CELL was cubic and of the same dimensions as the last one. It was completely bare, but it had three closed locks, one on the surface of each wall in front of them.

On the lock to the right was painted a humanoid figure. It was naked, hairy, and its features were organized in a way subtly different from human physiognomy. Something in the relative position of nose, eyes, mouth and ears made it alien without making it repugnant.

On the lock to the left was painted a monster. It was something out of a nightmare, a hallucination of ten eyes and ferocious jaws, a cross

between a spider and a bullfrog. They shuddered as they looked at it.

On the lock facing them was painted something beyond monstrosity. As they looked at it, their knees felt as if they would give way under them.

"The Museum of Madame Tussaud," whispered Weston. "God! Are *those* they?"

"I told you it was a trap," said Neil. "Let's get out of here!"

They turned. The lock to the next cell had disappeared.

"We're dead," whispered Neil, growing pale as a sheet. He took out his gun. He held it in his trembling hand. "We're dead!" he shouted. "Dead! Let us out of here!"

The shout echoed through the chamber of horrors, reverberated on each wall, came back mockingly to their ears.

They stood there, three men, and looked at the figures.

"I wonder which door is going to open first." Neil's forehead was streaming with perspiration.

Hank Jessup laughed. "Can't you see?! *We're supposed to choose!*"

IV

FOR A MOMENT, the others stared at him. Then Neil began to laugh, began to shake all over. His laugh developed into guffaws, and as he guff-

fawed, tears began to stream down his cheeks.

Weston turned to the second officer and slapped him sharply across the mouth. Neil made a sound like a child and hid his face behind his hands, gun and all: "Take hold of yourself! Hysteria is the last thing we want!"

He turned to the mechanic. "What makes you think they want us to choose, Jessup?"

"It fits," said Hank; "it all fits. They let us choose all the time, didn't they? They never made the first move, did they? No. They left us the initiative, except when they sucked me in the first time."

"Some initiative!"

"Sure, it's tough. But remember, we could have gone out; we stayed because we wanted to."

"Don't remind me of that mistake," said the chief engineer. "I'll regret it for the rest of my life, which I suspect is going to be very short."

"What are you so afraid of, you two? Here are three doors. We can choose between them. Behind them are the people who built this cube—the people who are testing us. They obviously want to meet us. What's there to be afraid of?"

"Neil, he asks what's there to be afraid of."

NEIL LAUGHED again, but this time his laughter was weaker and closer to nor-

mality. He jerked his thumb towards the front wall. "Now would you like to meet that? Would you invite it to our ship? Let's take it to meet the captain. Let's invite it for tea." He laughed again. "God!"

"But what law says we've got to meet *that* one?" asked Hank. "Look at the wall on the right! That thing isn't human, sure, but it's mighty close to it. It's almost like us. What's wrong with meeting it?"

"I'll meet it all right," said Neil, weighing his gun; "I'll put a sonic beam right between its popping eyes!"

"You will do nothing of the kind!" exclaimed Weston sharply. "These beings have done us no harm so far; what do you want to do, start a war? From what I've seen here, Sol wouldn't stand a chance against them at present. Neil, be yourself, you're letting this thing get away with you!"

"O.K. we go in and say hello. O.K. But if you don't mind, I'll keep the gun in my hand."

"As long as you don't shoot! Let's not be the first to start anything."

"Let's not start anything, period," said Hank. "Or I've got a feeling that whatever we start, they'll finish."

"All right," said Weston, "it's understood. No first move. We don't shoot unless we're shot at!"

IT SOUNDED silly; but the others nodded.

"How do we get it to open?" asked Neil. "I see no doorknob."

"Let's walk towards the door," suggested the chief engineer. "Perhaps that will do the trick."

Together they moved towards the door; the door opened.

Behind it was the *Servadac*. They looked at their ship, floating silently, peacefully in the dark of space, screened in rubies and sapphires and emeralds, its portholes shedding golden light, friendly light, warm, welcoming, human.

They stared at it.

"I don't understand," muttered Neil. "What's the meaning of this? Why do they let us go?"

"We chose the human shape, didn't we?" Hank pointed. "There's the human shape. Our own people. We're free to go."

"Without our spacesuits?" asked Neil caustically.

Weston touched his arm. "Look."

THEY TURNED. The porthole to the past cell was open; they could see their suits on the hangers.

"Very logical, very fair, very sporting," said Weston. "I didn't hear any silver bells, did you, Jessup?"

"No, sir; not this time."

"I'd say we've failed our little test."

"Yeah."

"If you want the human shape, there it is. That's what they are telling us."

"You mean," asked Neil, "they're really letting us go? Go back? To our people?"

"Yes," said Weston. "Only, we can't go." He looked at the mechanic. "Can we, Jessup?"

"No," said Hank, shaking his head.

The second officer stared wide-eyed at them. "What do you mean, *no*? They're letting us free, can't you see? We can go back!"

"That," said the chief engineer, "would mean we quit."

"So we quit! So what?"

"We can't, Neil. Can't you see? This isn't only us; it's the whole race. These things are testing us, seeing how intelligent we are, how much guts we have. We can't quit!"

"Maybe you can't, but I can and I will."

"You move to that porthole, and I'll blast you dead." Weston held his gun in his hand, and it was firm. "I'm sorry, Neil, but I mean it; you're going in with us. You may be a coward, but they aren't going to know that humans are cowards. Take your pick right now."

"I can shoot, too." Neil leveled his gun at the chief engineer's chest.

HANK JESSUP hit him. The mechanic moved with such spontaneity, such a carefree swing of trained, pliant, dynamic strength, that

none of the other two saw him move. But Neil was down, unconscious, and his gun had slid along the floor to the far edge of the cubic cell.

"Wow!" said Weston.

"That takes care of him," murmured the mechanic.

"I don't think I'd like to start an argument with you, Jessup," said the chief engineer. "Is he dead?"

"God, no. I hit him light. Look, he's moving."

"Get his gun and hold it."

"I could have a nice court martial for this," muttered Hank going after the gun.

"As civilian chief engineer, I'm still Nilson's superior," said Weston; "you acted under orders."

"Thanks," said Hank.

The second officer moaned, sat up, and took his hands to his chin.

"Get up, Neil," said Weston.

"Who hit me?" asked the mate.

"Jessup hit you. Get up!"

"He packs a wallop. My head is going round and round!"

"GET UP," repeated Weston. He pulled the other by the arm. Neil got up, still uncertain on his feet.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Are you going with us or not?"

"I don't seem to have much choice, do I?"

"O.K. We'll be watching

you. Give him his gun, Jessup."

Hank held the gun towards the mate, butt first. Neil took it and grinned weakly. "I'm all right now. Guess I was a little nervous. No hard feelings, Jessup."

The mechanic saluted. "Thank you, sir."

"That's right," muttered Neil, "I'm your superior officer; I seem to have forgotten it. I should be giving the example here. Instead..."

He turned to the chief engineer. "O.K., Weston, you run the show now. What do we do?"

The chief engineer shrugged. "We go in."

"Sure. But where? Let's pick one. We have two nightmares waiting for us. Which one do we choose? The spider thing, or..." he shuddered "the other?"

"We took the least of three evils before, and failed," said Weston. "I suggest we take the worst this time."

THEY LOOKED at the door and the painting on it. Neil licked his lips nervously. "So it's that. My God, Weston, if I live through this I'll start a scrap with you some day!"

"Save your fighting spirit," said the chief engineer grimly. "You may be needing it soon!"

"My feet keep trying to take me the other way," said Neil.

"So do mine." Weston moved forward.

The others followed.

The door opened.

Behind it, was darkness. They stopped in front of the darkness, tried to penetrate it with their eyes.

"I think I see something move," whispered Neil, holding his gun in front of him.

"So do I," said Weston. "But I can't make out what it is."

"Give you three guesses."

"Never mind."

"Aren't we going in?"

"Sure we are."

But they stood their ground in spite of themselves, looking forward, straining to see.

"We can't stay here forever," said Hank through clenched teeth.

"No, we can't," agreed Weston. With an effort, he advanced. The others followed almost at the same time.

They entered the darkness. *Clang!*

"DON'T LOOK behind, boys," whispered Neil, "But I think we've just been locked in."

"No lights this time," muttered Weston.

"No bells," whispered Hank.

"We failed again," said Weston. His voice quavered.

"And it's your fault," burst out Neil, fiercely. "Your fault, Weston, damn you!"

"I didn't know!" exclaimed

Weston in desperation. "I didn't know!"

The Thing moved.

It came towards them, coiling, folding and unfolding upon itself, its movement pure loathesomeness, sheer horror, all of it a putrid mass of decaying protoplasm. They could feel its foetor in their nostrils as a humid, warm gust. They choked on it. Bright red little things crawled within the mass, phosphorescent with a reddish light that revealed the creature in its approach, revealed it in all its terror.

"I can't stand it," said Neil, his voice toneless; "I can't stand it, Weston."

"Don't move," said Hank, his huge body trembling. "For heaven's sake, don't move!"

"Who's moving?"

THEY WERE pressing against the wall, their hands instinctively feeling for the lock that was no longer there.

Still the creature crept closer, making a sucking noise as its bulk propelled itself along the floor. It became swollen and tinted with purplish red. It loomed formidable before them, and they saw that the red things crawling in it looked like a hundred shifting mouths, gaping, hungry. They thought they saw sharp teeth glittering through the scarlet lips, they felt the added stench of breath in the foetor.

Neil screamed and fired.

"No!" shouted Hank.

But it was too late. The thin, piercing wail that was a harmonic of the subsonic beam cut into their eardrums. The red mouths all opened at once, and a roar that was a scream and a cry of fury raked through their heads. Something shot from within the seething mass, shot at them like lightning.

"Neil!" cried Weston.

They saw the second officer, his face contorted into a grimace of horror, enveloped by a semi-liquid ribbon of gelatinous matter, lifted from the floor and pulled towards the greyish terror. They heard him scream.

"No!" sobbed Weston.

BUT NEIL'S death scream was gone; so was Neil. The seething pulp made a sucking sound, and smacked as a mouth smacks that has been fed a good piece, and the red mouths snapped shut. The thing seemed to be suffering a strain. The two remaining men saw, their hair on end, a silhouette rise within the formless thing, a silhouette enveloped by it, a silhouette that struggled for a moment, waved desperate, rapidly dissolving appendages...

And then the silhouette melted and was gone.

"Neil," muttered Weston, his voice hoarse. "Neil, you poor fool! I killed him, Jessup. I forced him to come with us."

"Forget Neil; he's gone,"

said the mechanic between his clenched teeth. "Think of us!"

Again the thing moved, moved towards them, sucking at the floor with delighted anticipation.

"I can't stand it," said Weston. "Jessup, I..."

The thing opened its hundred mouths.

Weston screamed, rose his gun to his head.

Hank saw the ribbon snap from the creature's substance, and instinctively shut his eyes, waiting for the horrible sucking noise and the smack to repeat themselves.

"Jessup!" Weston's voice, so strained as to be almost unrecognizable, came to his ears.

V

HANK JESSUP opened his eyes. The chief engineer, was still by his side, trembling convulsively, his armed hand raised high above his head. Clasped around his wrist, the gelatinous ribbon kept his arm high. "Jessup," whispered Weston, "*it stopped me from killing myself!*"

"Don't move," said Hank. "Don't fight it! Stand still."

Weston stood still.

"Relax your muscles," said the mechanic. "Relax your body; let it hold your arm as it pleases."

He saw the other's teeth clench, he heard them gnash. Then, little by little, Wes-

ton's body relaxed. The mechanic could almost feel the other's effort of will. They stood there, immobile, and the greyish horror stood immobile before them.

Then, slowly; very slow, the ribbon uncoiled itself from Weston's wrist and retreated into the creature's substance.

Hank could hear the chief engineer's sigh of relief.

The ribbon shot out again, and they tensed. But it rose only to the height of Hank's chest and remained there for a moment that was eternity. Then it doubled its tip over itself, once, twice. It stopped for a little and repeated the movement.

"It's beckoning us," said Hank, his eyes on the formless mass. With a tremendous effort of will, he moved forward.

"Jessup, don't...!" muttered Weston.

The mass hollowed out in the middle and its sides crawled forward. The ribbon beckoned again. Again the mechanic forced himself to step forward.

"Jessup, for heaven's... *It's enveloping you!*"

IT WAS. AS the mechanic stood there, little beads of sweat running down the creases of his face and from behind his ears and down his back into his dampened overalls; the thing stretched two arms around him, swelled around him, purplish again,

the red mouths open again. He bit hard into his lips to stop a scream and stood rigid as the thing closed a ring around him, and rose as a wave, and came closer...

"Jessup! My God..."

The thing touched him, and Hank's skin crawled. All his body shook in a violent convulsion. His fingers tightened around the gun until the bones almost shot through the skin at the articulations. For a moment he thought that the urge to shoot at the thing, shoot at himself, shoot, shoot, shoot, would have the best of him. It grew inside him as a red haze; it came up his chest into his throat, it blinded his eyes in a crimson flash of revulsion and fear.

The thing enveloped him, pressed itself against him, tightened its coils around his legs, the pressure raising towards his waist.

Suddenly, the tension was gone from his body. It slackened, became limp. He felt no more power to be horrified or repelled. He felt indifferent. The situation had surpassed his emotional capacity, and his brain was beyond excitement.

He swung his arm listlessly, and threw his gun back over his shoulder. It hit metal and clanged; it fell on the floor and clanged again.

The whole room was filled with the sound of crystalline silver bells.

"We made it!" said Weston

behind him. "Jessup, you made it!"

BUT HANK JESSUP was standing in the middle of the thing still, and though a wave of triumph ran through him, wonder grew in him greater than the triumph itself, for the silvery sound came through the thing's hundred mouths!

As he doubted the evidence of his own ears, the sound repeated itself, the bells tolled, harmonious, unmistakable, their ethereal delicacy vibrating with strings of eerie notes.

"Why..." said Weston behind him, "the sound comes from it!"

"Throw your gun down, sir, please," said the mechanic. He was smiling.

Weston's gun clanked on the floor behind him.

Instantly, the creature began to uncoil itself from around Hank, retreated, always with the sucking sound, pressed against the side wall.

"It's making way for us," said Hank. "Come on, sir."

Weston came forward, his steps hesitant at first, then firm, though his face was pale as a ghost. The two men stood side by side, looking.

As the thing moved towards the wall, an open lock stood revealed at the end of what they could see, now, was an elongated corridor.

"My God, isn't it over yet?" muttered the chief engineer.

"I guess not," said the mechanic.

"It's like a nightmare," said Weston, "only worse."

A ribbon shut from the creature's substance, pointed the open lock. The mass pressed itself harder against the wall, making more way for them.

"Let's go," said Hank soberly.

THE MECHANIC edged this way by the creature, and the chief engineer followed him with an involuntary shudder. The mass remained immobile, and the ribbon-like pseudopod contracted into it to let them pass. The red mouths were shut. The thing was silent.

As they reached the end of the corridor, Weston said in a whisper: "I can't understand how the subsonic didn't kill it!"

"I thought of that before we came in," answered the mechanic in the same tone. "The beam is rigged for carbon resonance. That thing must be an organism built on totally different lines from Solar life!"

They crossed the lock.

Clang!

"There we go again," said Weston. "Lord, won't this ever end?"

"A shop," said the mechanic. A new interest lit up in his tired eyes. He was on familiar ground.

The cell was slightly larger than the last one before

the corridor, and several pieces of metal and wire coils were strewn all over the floor. Among them were scattered tools and what was obviously machine parts.

ON A SIDE wall hung an enormous chart. "A humanoid robot," said Weston. "I'll be damned!"

"A puzzle, I guess," said the mechanic. "We have to rig it up."

"Look at that crazy wiring," said Weston, examining the chart. "What *does* the thing work on? Those circuits are neither electrical nor atomic. Gravitic? Hum..."

"Shall we rig it up?" asked Hank.

"I think that's what we're supposed to do," said Weston. "They must be testing our mechanical ability. You're a mechanic, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir, but I'm a gunman."

"That doesn't matter; between you and me we ought to be able to figure this thing out. I only wish we could have Neil with us." He sighed. "I don't think I'll ever forget the way he died, as long as I live. Jessup, we can't ever make friends with that thing outside!"

"It didn't attack us until it was attacked," the mechanic reminded him.

"All the same, I just can't stand it!"

"NEITHER can I," confessed the mechanic. "The way I see it, they're trying to teach us a lesson at the same time that they test us. There's a system behind all this. Men have been attacked and eaten before—what impresses us so much this time is not the way Neil died, but the fact we know that the thing that ate him is at least as intelligent as we are! This shows a disregard, an indifference to human life that goes beyond all that makes us noble and sovereign in our universe.

"I think they planned it that way. I think we're being told that intelligence *can* exist under completely different forms from ours. And they're telling us the hard way—the way we won't forget! It's very easy to imagine alien beings, but it isn't so easy to face them—it goes against all previous experience."

"It's probably out of the racial memory," said the chief engineer. "That would account for our terror."

"To think," said the mechanic, "that that obscenity may have feelings like us, and conceive of beauty, of love, of truth, perhaps even worship God!... Neil couldn't take it. I wonder what would have happened if we hadn't been able to face it either."

Weston shuddered. "You saw how he died."

"No, that's not what I

mean; I don't mean us—I mean the human race. I wonder how they would have dealt with mankind if we, also, had done what Neil did.”

“Annihilate us?”

The mechanic shook his head. “No, I don't think so. I think they'd have quarantined us. We've just reached beyond our last planet, and we're all set to try for the stars. I think that's why they're testing us—to see if we can stand meeting totally alien forms of life. If we can't, they won't let us get away from Sol.”

“They may also come in hordes to the system,” suggested the chief engineer bitterly, “and hunt us down and eat us. I wouldn't put it beyond them. They seem to like the way we taste!”

This silenced the mechanic. Neil's fate was still fresh in his memory.

“I guess we might as well start working,” said Weston after awhile. “Let's first sort those parts out.”

THEY WORKED concentratedly, worrying over the diagrams as they assembled and rigged parts. The work was technically contrived, but not difficult.

“One thing I can't get,” said Weston presently, “do you remember that porthole with our ship showing through it? The last one?”

“Yes?”

“Well, we've been coming through this nightmare cube

in a straight line since we came in. Now, that door was at right angles with our direction; and yet, when it opened, we saw the *Servadac* through it. Perpendicular to the position where we last saw it. How do you explain it?”

“Perhaps the ship moved, or the cube moved,” said Hank.

“Perhaps. Look, this thing doesn't fit in any of the diagrams at all.”

“Looks like a club,” said Hank. He lifted the elongated metal tube with a grimace. “It's quite heavy.”

“Let it be. Say, *look* at this wiring! Man, this machine is crazy!”

“Only one eye,” said Hank. “What a queer face!”

They worked on, absorbed in the assembling and rigging that they both were so familiar with, and a metallic shape began to rise under their concerted efforts, a metal giant three or four inches taller than the mechanic himself.

“It looks threatening, doesn't it?”

IN TWO HOURS, the robot stood finally finished, immobile, cold, expressionless, its only glassy eye staring vacantly from an otherwise smooth steel face.

“Well, we beat all records of robot rigging here,” said Hank.

“Easy with most of the work already done for you,” said Weston. “I think we're

supposed to activate it. Look at the arrow on the diagram. It points to that button on the top of the head. You do it, Jessup; I'd have to climb a ladder to get to this thing's head."

The mechanic stood on his tiptoes and managed to press the button. A strange, powerful humming filled the cell, and he stepped back hastily and stood by Weston, who was eyeing the robot with a creator's pride in his face.

The robot's eye began to glow, slowly, lighting up to a blood red intensity. The machine moved its head, turned it slightly, and the red light fell straight on them.

"Howdy," said Weston. "What's it you do, old fellow?"

VI

THE ROBOT turned its head more, bent it down slowly. The red flare swept along the floor, touched the clublike tube where Hank had left it.

The red glow stopped on the tube.

"I guess the tube is part of it, after all," said Weston.

The robot hummed more intensely. It stepped gingerly towards the club. It bent and picked it up.

"Weston, this thing is dangerous!" exclaimed Hank suddenly, anxiety painting itself on his face.

The chief engineer looked at him and laughed. "A ro-

bot?! Are you forgetting the first law of robotics? A robot does not attack a human being!"

The mechanic stared incredulously at the chief engineer. Was he blind? Or did the fatigue of the last few hours prevent him from thinking? "This isn't a human robot!"

The robot turned towards them, the buzzing changed into a higher pitch, the tube firm on one of its silvery claws.

It came ponderously towards them.

"Weston, duck!" exclaimed the mechanic.

"This is just another test..." began the chief engineer.

The robot was almost on them, its buzzing now a high whine, its only eye beaming furiously.

"You fool, Weston!" shouted Hank desperately. He pushed the other man violently against the side wall, and ducked in the opposite direction.

The whine turned into an infernal wail, the robot struck exactly where their heads had been. The club clanged violently against the wall.

"The button!" shouted Weston. "Hank, the button!"

The chief engineer jumped towards the robot.

THE MACHINE turned to met him in an incredibly swift movement, and bathed him in red light. The clubbed

arm was up and down like a flash. There was a soft but loud thud; blood and cerebral matter splashed all over the walls as Weston's head cracked open like an egg shell. The chief engineer's body slumped against one of the walls, twitching with aimless reflexes from the rapidly disintegrating nervous centers.

The robot turned its eye on Hank Jessup.

The mechanic jumped and ducked, and the club fell thunderously against the floor one inch behind his heels. He turned with tiger-like reflexes, thanking the gods for a rough life where his strength and agility had often meant the difference between life and death.

The club whizzing around it like a helix, the robot went after him.

The man and the machine danced around each other, the man jumping desperately one second ahead of the glittering, deadly club, silent and sweating, the robot whining furiously and following him with its mad red eye. Hank Jessup appraised the situation with the practice of many struggles. It was almost like wrestling. As long as he kept moving as fast as he did now, he might escape the club; but he was rapidly losing his breath. To disconnect the robot, he had to reach for the button; but under the rain of blows, even if he did dis-

connect it, he wouldn't be able to escape death before the machine stopped. He had to distract the robot in some way, force a pause into the whirling arm. He watched for a chance, his nerves, tendons, muscles turned into taut wire.

THE ROBOT came towards him once more, its walk ponderous and slow, but its club deadly fast. Hank jumped, stepped on blood and brains from the dead man, fell. The robot stepped towards him, its armed claw swinging back. The man saw death coming to him.

At this last moment, in an instinctive reflex, he kicked violently at the robot's half raised foot. He caught it, struck; the momentum added to the robot's own, the machine bent beyond its line of equilibrium; Jessup visualized what was going to happen as the club whizzed past his head and ruffled his hair with the cold touch of death's fingers. He flung his body aside, landed on Weston's corpse, now still.

The robot fell thunderously where his bones had been one moment before.

Hank Jessup gathered his feet under himself with an agility that he would never have believed he possessed, and jumped towards the fallen giant. As the robot struggled halfway on its feet, the club already rising again, the man's hand reached the top of its neck, frantically trying

for the head. The robot continued to rise with irresistible force, and Hank jumped on it, climbed on it, stretched himself desperately, reached up.

The robot's armed claw was raised, the club beginning to descend towards the man on its back, when Hank's fingers reached the head button, pressed on it convulsively.

The robot froze. Its wail subsided to a buzz and disappeared. The red glow faded and became extinct in its only eye.

AS THE MAN fell limply to the floor, breathless, bathed in cold sweat, crystalline silver bells echoed through the bespattered cell.

But this time Jessup felt no triumph, only bitterness.

He lifted himself on his hands, looked forward; between the robot's frozen legs, he could see that the lock through which he had come was open, and the corridor beyond was empty. The alien was gone. At the end of the corridor, he could see the open lock to the next cell, and the open lock to the next, with the tips of the abandoned spacesuits. Beyond, he saw another open lock, and another; and once more beyond, he saw the outer lock, and the *Servadae* floating peacefully against its starry background.

He turned his tired head to the other side and saw what he had guessed would

be there: another dark lock open were there had been none.

He laughed gently, slowly; sat up, rested his head against the cold legs of the robot.

A strange vibration started around him. He lifted his head, and saw a strange sight. The walls seemed to turn hazy, indistinct; and Weston's scattered blood turned paler and paler and finally disappeared. He turned to look at the corpse, and saw it melt gradually on the floor, melt as hot butter, and disappear through it. The sight barely made an impression on his brain.

"Two gone, one more to go," he murmured.

THE VIBRATION stopped. The walls, the ceiling, the floor, were once more immaculate, cold, shining silver. The robot was still a giant of steel against whose leg he leaned.

The infernal artfulness of it all, thought Jessup. Each time, they, themselves, had chosen the way to their own destruction. This last time they even had built it with their own hands.

Oh, curse *their* subtle, infernal souls, if any!

Wearily, he struggled to his feet, looked at the open door to freedom, looked at the open door to the unknown. He laughed again, mirthlessly, and moved towards the door of his choice.

Clang!

He looked around. The cell was bare as the first one had been, small as the first one had been, expressionless as the first one had been. He waited a moment for something to happen.

Nothing happened.

After a while, Hank Jessup forced himself to move. No monster, no machine, no nothing. He was obviously expected to make the first move.

As usual.

He turned towards the place where the lock had been, touched it, half expecting his hands to go through the metal, as before. They didn't. His fingers touched the cold, yet glowing surface. He turned towards the other wall, thinking that might be it, and his heart tightened in his chest.

The cell had shrunk in size.

He blinked his eyes, waved his head, looked again. There was no doubt. Even as he looked, the other wall was closer, the side walls were closer. He looked up, the ceiling was closer.

"No," he said aloud. "No."

THE WALLS shrank towards him, slow, silent, cold and glowing. The cell shrank. He reached up his arm, and the tip of his fingers could touch the ceiling. One moment later, the palm of his hand could rest against it. One moment later, he had to bend his arm.

With an agonized cry, he jumped forward, crashed his

body against the other wall, in a maddened hope that it would give way, that it would melt, that he would go through. He succeeded only in hurting his already-tired body.

Frantic, he reached for the other walls, touched them all over, his fingers restless, desperate. Nothing. Solid surfaces.

He crouched like a persecuted animal, looked around himself.

The cell kept closing on him.

"No!" he exclaimed again. Tears were running down his face. "No!"

Even as death came closer, even as he gave way to half-madness and dark despair, so curious is the human mind, part of his brain wondered how did they manage to make the whole cell shrink in size: the mechanic in him knew it to be impossible to shrink more than one dimension at a time in a rigid system, and asked a question...

But just for a moment; for, as the ceiling touched his head and the side walls touched his shoulders where he crouched, the last spark of humanity went from him. He whimpered like an idiot or a child, and made himself into a trembling ball, edging desperately away from the inexorable pressure.

As the walls started crushing him from all sides, the light went out from them.

His animal scream pierced the engulfing darkness before he entered oblivion.

VII

BUT THERE, in the cold of space, the *Servadae* glowed and waited, the men moved and whispered. The silver cube kept gleaming, silvery-green, cold and immobile, its dark eye open and staring.

Captain Aram Daniels pressed his lips, bit his lips, chewed his fingernails. "Three hours," he said to himself, again and again. "Three hours!"

"Three hours," the crew told each other, their faces tense, their brows worried, "three hours!"

No more men were allowed to go out after communication with the three scouts had been cut off. The captain wanted to risk no more lives. He had also given urgent orders that no one was to shoot, or in any other way attack the cube until it became definitely evident that those who had entered it would never come back.

Out in the cold of space, in the middle of the endless cosmic spawn, ship and cube looked at each other, stalked each other, the ship warm with human and worrying life, the cube cold and indifferent as its own metal. They waited and waited. One hoped—the other looked on with the detachment of something

beyond humanity—or below it.

SUDDENLY, the men shouted inside the ship; the telephone rang in the shipper's cabin, several men came running towards it.

"What's it?"

"A man!"

"No, that's not our space-suits!"

"That thing isn't human!"

"What's those tubes it's dragging along?"

"Stand by!" came the order through the loudspeakers.

"Don't fire until order!"

"Look, the tubes are transparent!"

A moment later, a shout rang through the whole ship.

"It's them!"

"It wants to come in! It's signalling!"

"Don't fire!" the loudspeakers shouted again. "Let them in!"

THE ALIEN stood, strange with its asymmetric face and bulging eyes, and Daniels and his staff looked on at the tubes with amazed faces.

"They'll come to presently," said the alien. His voice was high-pitched, but he spoke in very good English.

"But how come?" asked the captain, still dazed. "How come?"

The alien took an eight-fingered hand to his chin. It was, as they would later learn, his race's equivalent to shrugging one's shoulders.

"We regret that they had

to pass through such a strain," he said, "but you must realize that when the fate of several star systems is at stake, one cannot be too considerate of the survival of individuals. We sincerely apologize for the absence of your Second officer, but his bodily substance was absorbed by Kli Gor almost instantaneously, and it was impossible to reassemble his organism.

"We want to assure you that we are very sorry for the incident, and will gladly make any reparation Sol may deem necessary; but you must understand that Kli Gor risked his life just as much as your men by facing them the way he did. Since it had been estimated that you would classify as degree three intelligences, and since he is degree seven, he felt justified in assuring his survival against the man's own."

The alien shut his eyes, which was the way he smiled, and opened them again. "After all, we must remember that we both stand to Kli Gor more or less in the same scale as your dogs stand to you."

"I shall forward your explanation to my superiors, and they shall decide," said Daniels. He raised his hand, that held foam-like, glittering pieces of tissue covered with complex mathematical symbols. "And these charts?..."

"These are all third degree star systems or third degree

planets in higher star systems. The...pardon me if I translate badly—the Galactic Council suggests that for the next few centuries you limit yourselves to visiting those, and avoid other systems whose form of life is too alien to your own. Even though one of your men successfully withstood the test of Kli Gor's presence, our instruments prove beyond doubt that intercommunication will be undesirable between you and races like his for a long time to come."

ONE OF the figures lying in the transparent tubes turned and moaned.

"If they're hermetically closed, how can we hear him moan?" asked the captain.

Again the alien shut his eyes. "We shall not enter into that," he said. "We do not wish to enslave your civilization with our knowledge; it will be spiritually and intellectually much more satisfactory for you when you discover those things on your own, in your own good time. That you know they are possible is all the clue your ingenious minds need.

"One last word of warning: The fact that you are advised to visit these systems in the charts does not necessarily mean that you shall be welcome there. You may establish commercial intercourse with some; you may have to fight wars against others. Still some others, you may colo-

nize... The Galactic Council leaves such problems for individual solution. We do not wish to interfere with other's lives; it has been proved that progress comes only through conflict and hardship. We have not made the road easy for you; we have merely made it less difficult."

AGAIN HE donned his transparent helmet. "Neither," he said through it, his voice just as audible as before, "do we forbid you to visit other systems than these if you so wish. We merely advise. You may do as you please; but I am sure it will not be pleasant to your kind if you meet others that you would consider monsters, and they should prove in every way your superiors without catering to your intellectual or moral standards, or even without seeing you as equally lifeworthy beings."

He touched his large belt buckle, and suddenly a thin hum pierced the air. The

transparent substance of the tubes that enveloped the two men shimmered, trembled, paled and vanished. Only they remained, still unconscious; now lying on the floor.

"The tall one," said the alien, pointing, "is a remarkable specimen. He resisted through all emotional and intellectual strains successfully, his physical endurance is very great, his *luck*—as you call it—has a very high coefficient. He barely made the fourth grade. Our instruments showed he had an inkling of the solution, but at the last moment animal fear overcame him."

"But how," somebody couldn't help asking, "did you expect the poor fellow to escape your shrinking trap?"

The alien looked at him as if the answer to this question were quite obvious. "Through the fourth dimension, of course."

