

PLANET STORIES



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FALL, 1950

► *Flaming Novel of the Starways*

THE REBEL OF VALKYR Alfred Coppel 4

. . . From the Dark Ages of Space emerged the Second Empire . . . ruled by a child, a usurper and a fool! The Great Throne of Imperial Earth commanded a thousand vassal worlds—bleak, starved worlds that sullenly whispered of galactic revolt . . . At last, like eagles at a distant eyrie, the Star-kings gathered . . . not to whisper, but to strike!

► *Two Powerful Nouvelts*

THE SKY IS FALLING C. H. Liddell 42

The Blow-Up was coming. It was near, near . . . Johnny Dyson knew he would see it soon. One minute, Earth. The next . . . little Nova, weeping radioactive dust into the Void. Then Johnny and the Robot would build an Eden on Mars . . .

STAR SHIP Poul Anderson 66

The strangest space-castaways of all! The Terran Explorers left their great interstellar ship unmanned in a tight orbit around Khazak—descended, all of them, in a lifeboat to investigate that alien, weirdly medieval world—and the lifeboat cracked up!

► *Five Thrilling Short Stories*

DEATH-WISH Ray Bradbury 29

They wandered the dead and fragile cities, looking for the legendary Blue Bottle—not knowing what it was, nor caring, not really wanting to find it . . . ever . . .

THE CROWDED COLONY Jay B. Drexel 36

The Conquerors laughed loudly at the dusty shrines, those crude and homely temples in the desert. More softly laughed the Martians, who dreamed of laughing last . . .

MEEM Margaret St. Clair 58

The fog-shrouded marshlands of Vaudria seethed with manhunt . . . and Duncan, with his stolen secret, sought refuge in the Earth-Ship GORGO. Safe behind steel . . . until . . .

STRANGE EXODUS Robert Abernathy 85

Gigantic, mindless, the Monsters had come out of space to devour Earth. Where, on this gutted, cosmic carcass, could humanity flee?

PATCH William Shedenhelm 93

Old pilots like Pop Gillette weren't needed any longer to handle the big ships . . . until everything went haywire on the Venus run!

► *Planet's Regular Feature*

THE VIZIGRAPH by The Readers 98

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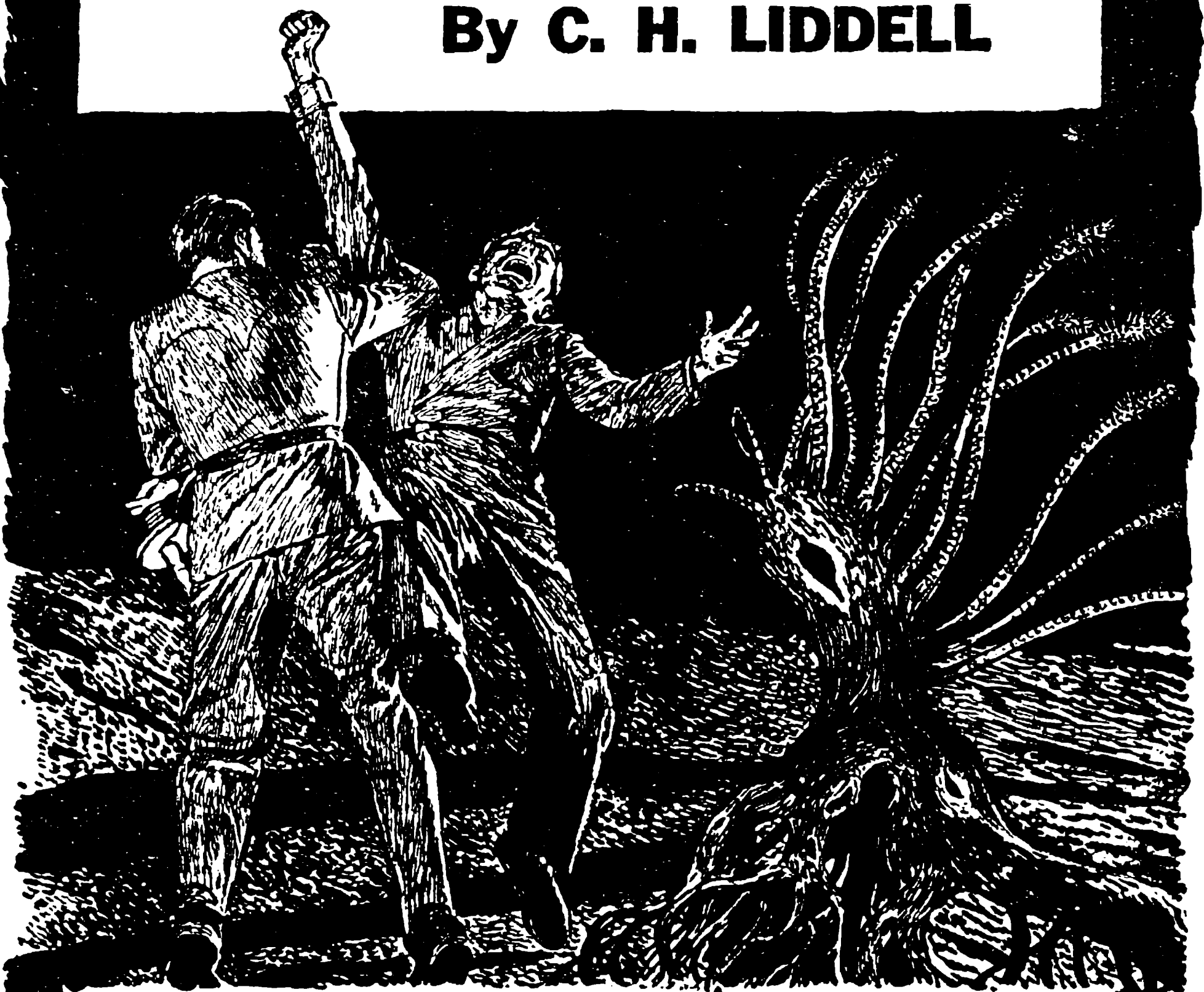
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THE SKY IS FALLING

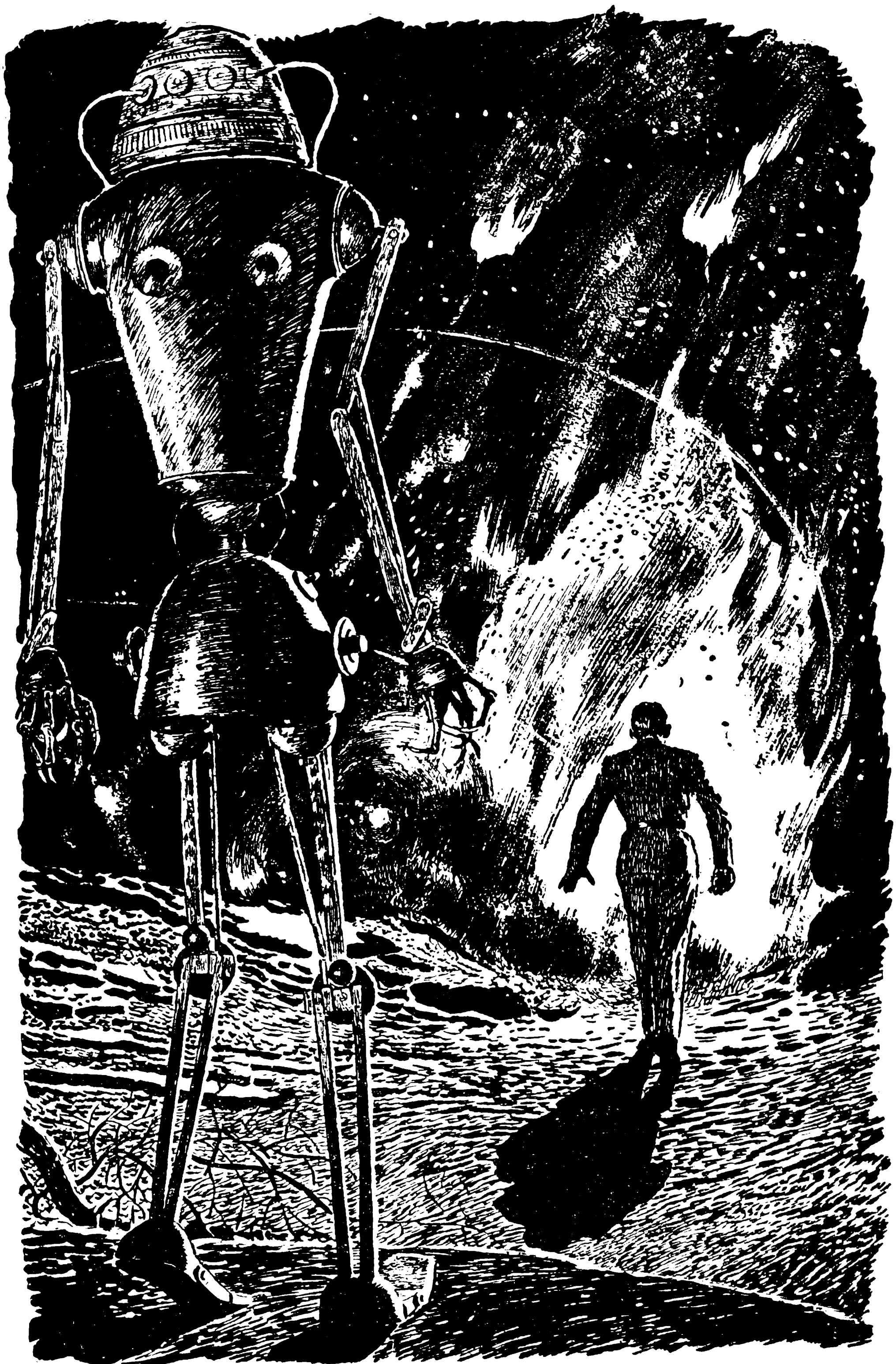
The Blow-Up was coming. It was near, near . . . Johnny Dyson knew he would see it soon. One minute, Earth. The next . . . little Nova, weeping radioactive dust into the void. Then Johnny and the Robot would build an Eden on Mars . . .

By C. H. LIDDELL



JOHNNY WONDERED WHEN the spaceship would get there. He didn't know where "there" was—nobody knew. But he was anxious for landing-day to come. It would give *day* a real meaning, after the endless artificial days and nights of the ship.

Not that the ship wasn't comfortable, and not that there wasn't purpose in that comfort. Johnny would have to be in perfect shape



"Benjy! What's the matter with you? Earth's gone . . . we're safe!"

when the hour of landing finally came and his *job* would begin. Because he wanted to be in condition to do the job, he had trained his mind to complete relaxation.

So he lay back in his deep chair and watched the viziports with their troubling tri-dimensional visions of what no longer existed. Blue sky, white clouds, birds, the tops of buildings—he closed his eyes. Perhaps it had been a mistake, after all, this hiding the blackness of space by camouflage. He didn't want to remember Earth. There was no Earth. There was a shaking white blaze among the stars, somewhere a long way back now, and that was all. No Earth.

All that remained of it was himself, this ship, the robot that took care of them both, and the images that filled the viziports with nostalgic pictures.

The rest was over, finished. He didn't often let himself think about the unpleasant past, or how, for himself, the beginning of the end had happened. . . .

LEANING BACK against the bulkhead, Johnny Dyson smiled.

"Go on," he said to the hooked fish named Benjy White.

White tipped his head back cautiously because of the cumbersome helmet he wore, sprouting wires like Medusa-hair. He looked at his own foreshortened image reflected dimly in the steel ceiling and nodded sagely at himself.

"Yeah," he said, "I learned about women from her. I sure did. Toughest tomato I ever met, then or since. Only one thing ever scared Poochie—I called her Poochie—"

Beyond the steel walls lay the endless red hills of Mars. Beyond the steel ceiling hung Orion in a blue-black sky lighted by tumbling moons. Somewhere between here and Orion rolled a time-bomb called Earth with its fuse set and lighted and the hours ticking along toward Blow-Up.

"I called her Poochie," White said. "If I told you her real name you'd be surprised. After she swiped my dough and divorced me she went right on to the top. What a woman. Now she owns half of—"

Johnny Dyson thought of the take-off, scheduled for noon tomorrow. Back to Earth. Back to the eve of Armageddon.

"Back to the world I never made," he thought fiercely. "—*I, a stranger and afraid—*"

Well, he had a right to be afraid. He knew what was coming. He thought:

Problem: To keep the ship on Mars.

Method: To steal the atomic fuel.

It was perfectly simple. All good plans were simple. Unfortunately it depended on the simple mind of White whether or not the plan worked out. And White was a well-hooked fish, all right, but he wasn't landed yet. He wore the transmitter that controlled the ship's robot. And the robot was the key to the fuel supply which could bridge the long jump between Mars, where life could be an Eden, and Earth, where life was doomed. Sooner or later, sooner or later . . .

"Oh, well," White was saying. "Funny thing is, there's a warrant out for my arrest back on Earth, and the company that issued it belongs to Poochie lock, stock and barrel. She don't know about it, of course." He chuckled sardonically.

"Think I could get her to quash that warrant? No, sir. Only one thing ever scared that woman. Thunder. If I went to Poochie right now—only it'd be a long walk—if I went to her and said, 'Poochie, remember how you used to try to crawl in my pocket whenever it thundered? Well, now, for old time's sake—'"

He grinned, shaking his head until the Medusa-wires whined against each other.

"That woman," he said admiringly. "That woman. She'd put the cuffs on me herself. Tough as pig-iron. Never was very pretty, but she looks like a hippo these days. My opinion, if she ever got the idea of conquering the world, she'd do it. Oh well. She went up. I didn't."

"What's the warrant for?" Dyson asked, not caring.

"Larceny. I guess I sort of miscalculated there." White grinned again. "Not so good, is it? I look older than I am, the life I led, but I'm under fifty. And I always felt I had my best years ahead. Still feel that way. I'd hate to waste 'em in jail. I'll tell you, Johnny, I kind of like your idea of staying on here. Not going back. Nobody to say, 'Move along, bud.' And then there's lots of things I always wanted to do, never been let. Lots

of things. On Earth, I'd never get a chance."

Now they were getting to it. Dyson kept the eagerness out of his voice with rigid control. All he said was, "We're in Eden, Benjy. We've got all the power we need in the batteries—safe power. Safe atomic power. We've got the robot. People were right when they said heaven was in the sky, Benjy. Mars is heaven."

"Mm-m. Sometimes Mars is underneath, too. Still, the closer I get to that larceny rap, the more I like your idea. Just like Paradise. Milk and honey for free. All we'd need is some houris," White said, mispronouncing it.

"You can't have everything."

"Guess not. Still, it almost seems like in this set-up you got planned, I could wish for anything and just get it. If I wished for a woman—" He snorted. "I might get Poochie, come to think of it. Oh, Lord. Maybe later we could put the robot to work on quasi-biology. I recollect something about surrogate plasms. If I could rig the genes in advance. I could maybe work out a nice, comfortable little lady and speed up her growing time. Wonder how long it'd take her to hit biological twenty? It's an idea, Johnny, it's an idea."

"Sure, why not? Wish on a star. All you need's to be on the right star. This is it. We can do anything we want, and there's nobody to stop us."

"Martine," White said.

"Two against one. Benjy?"

"Yeah?"

"We can do it. Right now."

White's brows lifted.

"What's happened? Not—" His face changed. He tilted his head to stare at the dull reflection in the ceiling. Beyond it he was seeing the night sky and the blue-green star of Earth.

"Oh no, no," Dyson said quickly. "Not the Blow-Up. Not yet, anyhow."

White shrugged. "May never come," he said, and stretched his arm out for a cigarette on the table beside him. "May never come at all."

"It'll come," Dyson said quietly. "It doesn't matter a hoot whether or not our cargo gets back to Earth. Ever since the Forties physicists have been looking for an atomic safety, and if they couldn't even find it through artificial radio-elements,

what good can Martian ores do? We've wasted six months mining junk."

"Can't tell that," White said, blowing smoke. "We got no equipment for refining and testing. All we do is hunt, dig and load. The rest is up to the physics boys."

Dyson shook his head.

"It'll come," he insisted. "Ever since Alamogordo it's been coming. So I say, what's the use of going back? All you'll get out of it's jail. All I'll get is—oh, I don't know. More hard work, more worries, the same old routine. And for what? The Blow-Up. That's all. Why work?"

WHITE, sitting on the edge of the bunk, humped himself forward, elbows on knees, cigarette dangling from his lips. The wires of the helmet cast complex shadows over his face. He didn't answer.

Dyson said eagerly, "We can pull our plan right now, Benjy. Martine's microphotographing the log. He'll be busy for a couple of hours more anyway. We'll have all the time we need to hide the fuel."

White tried absently to scratch his head and tangled his fingers in a maze of insulated wiring.

"Not so fast," he said. "What's the big rush? We got to think this over. I'm not going to haul that fuel around. Even if I had lead skin, I'd still say no thanks."

"Who's asking you to haul fuel? All you've got to do is hand over that transmitter."

White looked at him sidewise. His eyes grew slightly glassy. "Hold on there. The robot's got to stay energized. It takes somebody's mind to do that. If I took it off—"

"I'd put it on."

"Yes, but—look here, there might be trouble if I—"

"Martine's busy, I tell you."

"I mean robot trouble. Suppose we need the critter in an emergency? After all, the robot's the lad who's got to pilot us home."

"Not if we don't go. Look, Benjy. We won't be leaving Mars. Got that?"

White screwed up his face dubiously. "Yeah," he said.

"Okay. That means the ship will be immobilized. Got that too?"

White blew smoke and studied it, squinting.

"Sure."

"So we don't have to worry about the robot. All it's going to do is take the fuel out and hide it where Martine can't find it. Got that?"

White snorted and inhaled smoke.

"Sure I got it. I ain't dumb. Even if they did pick three beat-up techs like us for this crazy trip, that don't mean my head's soft yet. I get it, all right. Only, I got my orders about this robot. Martine would blow his top if he caught you with the helmet on."

"I know how to handle the thing. I've done it before."

"Not since the Chief caught you passing the buck to the robot," White said with the air of one capturing a minor pawn.

That had happened a month before when Dyson, wearing the transmitter, had sent the robot down a deep crevasse to test rock strata. Martine had objected violently. While the robot was far stronger and more agile than a man, it was also much heavier and more fragile, even in the decreased gravity of Mars. Obviously too, Martine considered the robot much less expendable than Johnny Dyson. Insofar as this argument applied to the social unit it was true, since the piloting of the ship depended on the precision, memory and integration of the robot. Dyson, however, remained unconvinced.

Now he grinned. "You learn by experience," he said. "This time he won't catch me. Just hand the transmitter over. I know what I'm doing."

"Well," White said, "well—of course if we do it at all, the robot's the boy to send. If a shield or a damper should slip I'd rather the robot was carrying the stuff than me. I'd hate to get my bones sunburned. Only, what about afterwards?"

"Martine? Oh, he'll come around. He'll have to. He can't get away without fuel. He'll find out Mars is a nice place to live—not to visit."

"I wonder about that," White murmured, and Dyson's eyes narrowed. He drew a deep breath. So much depended on this fool, this *fool*—

"I thought you were convinced," he said, after a safe interval.

"Take it easy. I didn't say no, did I? I got that larceny rap to think of. But—" he made a wrinkled grimace of indecision and touched the control button at his fore-

head with a hesitating hand.

"Go on," Dyson urged. "Take it off. From now on you can relax. You're free. You can do anything you want. Only give me the helmet."

WHITE PUT BOTH HANDS to the steel crown of the thing, lifted it a little, rolled frightened eyes at Dyson and then suddenly, with a gesture of abnegation, raised it from his head and held it out. The white line its pressure had left on his forehead turned pink. He wrinkled his brow anxiously.

"Careful, now, careful," he said unnecessarily. "Look out for that cord. And cut down to minimum before you put it on. Easy, now. Turn it up easy, Johnny."

Dyson paid no attention to him. This was his moment of triumph, and Benjy White had ceased to exist. A slow warmth seeped through his skull from the contact of the helmet, and the remote vibrations he felt were like the vibrations of music heard from far away. The music of the spheres, he thought. With this on his head he could control a planet—if Martine gave him another five minutes of freedom.

"We'll have to take the robot outside," he said. "Got a control unit on a portable?"

"Sure have." White did things to a wall panel and a square box slid out and cradled itself on a carriage with flexible telescoping legs.

"Two miles of wire will do," Dyson said. "I've got the place for the cache spotted."

"Two miles . . . mm-m. Two . . . got it. Johnny, you really figure there won't be rescue ships sent out for us?"

"Not a chance. Millions for defense, but try to get a few bucks spent on an expedition like ours, once our work's done. Rescue ships, ha. Rescue ships take expensive equipment. They take man-hours. You can't waste stuff like that, Benjy. Ask the Energy Allocation Board. It took a miracle to get this ship out and another to keep it from going for military defense."

Dyson was talking with the topmost level of his mind, waiting for enough power to accumulate, listening to the music grow stronger and stronger in his skull.

"Maybe so," White said doubtfully.

"What if the Chief sends out a signal, though? He might do it somehow. He might mark a big SOS out on the desert."

Dyson considered the possibility, weaving it in and out of that beautiful, distant vibration of music. Martine was a problem, of course. But any problem could be solved, if you approached it the right way.

"He'll come around," he said. "It's two against one, remember. Once he knows he can't ever get back to Earth, he'll come around. Once he knows our plans . . . Who'd turn down Eden?"

"Oh, it sounds like a lazy man's paradise, all right," White said. "That's for me. Little streams of whiskey come trickling down the rocks. Just the same, I'd kind of like to see our cargo get back home."

"What for? It's no good."

"Can't tell. It might be. All I'm saying is, I wish I could kick the ship on the rump and send her back to Earth."

"How can the ship get back without the robot to guide it?" Dyson asked in a too-patient voice, his eyes unfocused as he concentrated on the gathering power in the helmet.

HE TOUCHED IT with a tentative finger and then bent to the mirror set in the wall to read the reversed image of the dial set in the helmet's front. "Won't be long now," he murmured. "We're going to need the robot, Benjy. Just remember that. Unless you want to work like a dog."

"I been working like a dog all my life," White said. "And all the bones had the meat chewed off before I got 'em. Oh, I'm convinced, Johnny, but I can't help thinking about Poochie."

"You'd have plenty of time to think about her in jail."

"Guess so. Tell you what. Maybe later we can figure a way to get the cargo home. If we built another robot—it might take quite a while, but if we managed it—we could spare the one we got now."

"Why not?" Dyson agreed quickly. "Plenty of time to work that out later on."

"Plenty. We'll want something to keep us busy, after Eden's all built. I just—" He grinned a little sheepishly. "I don't know, I guess I just hate to give up without a struggle."

"We aren't!" Dyson was stung. "There's no use struggling when you haven't got a

chance. If there *was* a chance I'd be the last man to give up, Benjy. I'd fight to the last ditch. But Earth's as good as gone, and . . . oh, shut up. Don't think about it."

But he could feel it and see it—the solid planet shuddering underfoot, buckling above hollow emptiness, and the mushroom cloud rolling majestically toward the sky. Was it Man's fault? He'd picked up that fatally sharp knife of his own volition, but who gave Man the knife in the first place? God? It was the fruit of the tree of knowledge, all right, and to taste it was to die. God's fault, then, not Adam's.

"Let's go," he said abruptly. "We haven't got all the time in the world. Where's the robot?"

"Storage. Johnny, you thought how a court of law might feel about this?"

"The same way they'd feel about larceny, maybe," Dyson said, and walked the control carriage out the door. As he tiptoed it along the passage he could hear White padding after him, worrying softly under his breath.

Luckily they didn't have to pass Martine's door. Dyson urged the carriage faster, watched the trundling box rock hastily along before him like a dog on a leash. A plump Scotty, perhaps, with greyhound legs. He squeezed the bulb at the leash's end and the Scotty sprinted.

Its radioactive sodium battery had a half-life of three years. After that, the battery could be recharged, but not without a pile to produce the right isotope. And there were no atomic piles on Mars. And there never would be. Plenty of storage batteries in the ship, but all of those, even hooked up in series, couldn't throw enough power into the ship to overcome Martian gravity. No, Mars hugged the ship to her bosom now with an unbreakable grip. Mars the mother, restraining it with strong apron strings, however foolishly it might try to plunge back across space to the world where doom awaited it. Mars would receive and hide the fuel and hold the ship to her bosom forever.

The batteries would be useful, though. They'd help provide all the comforts of home. This world, Dyson assured himself, was going to be a perfect Eden, an Eden with modern plumbing.

He reined the control carriage to a halt

and opened the door at his shoulder. There was the robot, waiting in storage. It hung cradled in a resilient mould that rocked occasionally as balances automatically shifted and compensated inside the grey, gleaming body.

GIGANTIC AND INHUMAN. Segmented like an ant, thorax and abdomen linked by a universal joint. Many specialized limbs. That was the robot. It had bulb-shaped eyes set in its abdomen, for underwater vision. A turret-tower of mosaic eyes, some for day and some for night, rose from the top of the thorax.

Lion-yellow, these eyes looked at Dyson.

Urging the carriage before him, he stepped quickly into the room and moved to one side uneasily, trying to elude that steady stare. But he could not, of course. There were always facets whose optic axes faced the observer accurately enough to reveal the dark pigments around the visual sense-cells. Any spider can do the same trick. But the false pupils' stare unnerved Dyson.

He reached for a dial on the control unit. White hissed a nervous warning from the door, and Dyson closed his mouth on an equally nervous retort. After all, it had been over a month since he had worn the transmitter, and if the robot fell down the noise would wake the dead.

He turned the dial very gently. The music deepened in his skull. And the robot stirred majestically, lifting its thorax. You could hear oiled steel moving sweetly on oiled steel. Solemnly the great gleaming creature climbed from its cradle and crossed the room, walking with no remotest likeness to the motion of life.

Dyson met it in the center of the floor, at the chart-table, shooing the control-carriage before him on its nimble legs. Together man and robot bent above the table, the robot's thoracic section hanging enormous above Dyson's shoulder, reared upright and curving over him while a compound crown of eyes focused on the maps.

Dyson spun the selector until the right chart came up and spread itself out on the table in moulded relief that took the shadows of the room in miniature perfection, casting long fingers of shade across the tiny

plastic valleys that duplicated what lay just outside the ship. It was perfect duplication, every hill slope and plateau showing clear. There was even—and Dyson blinked to see it—a blunt oval replica of the ship they stood in.

He felt a little dizzy, half believing that inside that vinylite bulge on the map was a doll-sized room where a doll-sized Johnny Dyson stood watching a doll-sized chart...

Above him the robot creaked conscientiously as it lowered its compound focus toward the map. Dyson shook off the illusion of infinitely repeated Johnny Dysons receding into the microcosm and touched the map with a careful finger, thinking into the transmitter as his fingers traced a course from the ship across the plain and up the hillside. The robot watched. Faint, remote clickings could be heard from inside it as it memorized the path.

Dyson was just attempting to shake off the further illusion that a multiplicity of other and larger Johnny Dysons extended the opposite way, into the macrocosm, when a harsh, crisp voice spoke like God's, out of the air.

"Dyson!" the voice said. "Dyson!"

WHITE INHALED with a soft, appalled gasp. Dyson looked up sharply, feeling his stomach turn over. For he hadn't heard the inter-com click on. There had been no warning. And that *could* mean it had been on all the time. His voice and White's could have been babbling their mutinous plans straight into Martine's office, straight into his listening ears.

"Dyson, report to my room. At once!"

Dyson gulped. Then he shook his head at White and lifted a warning finger. If the inter-com had been open both ways, caution didn't matter now. Still, if Martine knew what they were doing, why waste time with the inter-com. The Chief's quarters were less than half a ship's length away. And Martine had long legs and a loaded revolver.

"Reporting, sir," Dyson said hoarsely.

"That's all."

There was no concluding click to prove the inter-com had been shut off. Dyson kept his finger raised.

White was having difficulty in swallowing.

There was still a chance, a good chance if Dyson hurried. He bent over the chart again, moving his finger along the course he meant the robot to travel. He worked fast, but accurately. His orders clicked out with almost mechanical precision into the precise, mechanical brain of the robot. It took about thirty seconds to finish.

Then the robot stepped back. Its huge thorax lowered on the gently purring joint, and it walked quickly out of the room. Walked—rolled—glided. There is no word for the gait of an organism like that. It went smoothly and quite fast, making no sound except for the faint, small noises within it as mechanisms adjusted to the task at hand. Clicking with metallic thoughts, it moved away.

Now it would go directly to the fuel supply chamber. Dyson's mind ran ahead of the great shining ant-shaped thing and traced its course out of the ship and across the face of Mars, as he had just traced it across the map. Over the plain, up the slope, into the cavern he had found weeks ago and marked for just this purpose. Load by load the fuel would accumulate there until not an ounce remained in the ship. And nobody but Johnny Dyson would ever know where it was. Nobody, that is, if the robot's memory track were erased in time.

As the huge, majestic metal thing vanished down the corridor White caught Dyson's eye and drew his finger across his throat.

Dyson grinned. He reached for a stylo pad with one hand and turned down the control-power with the other.

"All set," he wrote. "Robot has orders. Keep transmitter on. Robot will signal when finished. Then erase memory track." He underlined the last sentence twice for emphasis and held it under White's nose.

God's voice spoke again, peremptorily out of the empty air.

"Dyson! I'm waiting!"

"Yes, sir—coming."

Now he would have to move fast. He waited impatiently—and yet reluctantly, too—while the music of the spheres died slowly out of his skull. While its faint vibrations still rang he lifted the helmet off and fitted it on White's head. Neither of them dared to speak.

Dyson turned and ran.

HE SLOWED DOWN by the time he reached Martine's closed door, and his strong will buckled slightly in the middle. What was going to happen now? Suppose Martine's first words were an accusation?

. . . Never mind, the take-off was due tomorrow. All three men would be needed. At worst, Martine would say unpleasant things. They might be very unpleasant—if the inter-com had been on long enough.

Actually, the more urgent thing was what White would do. His conviction was shaky, at best. And he had full control of the robot now. He was entirely capable of recalling it, replacing the fuel and letting events take their own disastrous course, back to Earth, if Dyson left him alone long enough for his nerve to fail. So much depended on Dyson now—so terribly much.

He had a moment's deep longing to lay his burden down. If he just stood here silent long enough, something might happen . . .

Which was, he realized, exactly the sort of philosophy that kept Earth rolling along the old familiar groove toward atomic holocaust.

He made himself knock on the door.

* * *

Martine's collar was open at the throat. He had his shoes off and his feet in neatly darned wool socks were crossed comfortably on the desk. Johnny Dyson stared at him in shocked amazement. He had never seen the Chief before except in full uniform, rigidly correct. Now Martine's face reminded him somehow of the robot deactivated. When he saw the bottle on the desk he knew why.

For the first time he saw that Martine had a fat, soft face.

The big slob, Dyson thought exultantly. So he's solved that problem, all by himself. He's got a turn-off switch, after all. I won't have to kill him, later on. There won't be any trouble I can't handle. He can have all the whiskey he wants. We can make the stuff. Just pull out the nail in his foot, let the fire drain out, and refill with ninety-proof Martian *vin du pays*, home brewed. No, distilled. Doesn't matter. You can make the stuff out of any-

thing. All you need is a ferment. And there's plenty of ferment in this ship right now.

He restrained his immediate mad impulse to spit in Martine's eye and declare his intentions, which was probably just as well, for the Chief kept a revolver in his desk. Dyson waited, at attention, until Martine, who had been looking vacantly at the ceiling, glanced down and saw him.

"Oh. At ease. Sit down, Dyson."

"Yessir," Dyson said with a respect he no longer felt. It was hard to keep the triumph out of his voice. He should have realized that Martine had to be a second-rater too. They couldn't have spared him for this trip if he'd been first rate. "Thanks, sir," he said.

Martine waved at the desk, where a second, and empty, glass stood beside a full one and the bottle.

"Pour yourself a drink, Dyson."

THIS WAS too good to be true. Dyson moved forward willingly, because from the desk he could see the inter-com switch. While whiskey gurgled into the glass he leaned forward enough to observe that the switch was closed, after all. So Martine hadn't heard a thing. So the plan should work out perfectly, if White played along.

"Happy landings, sir," he said, lifting his small glass.

"Happy landings," Martine nodded, sniffing at his.

But they meant very different things. Dyson was thinking, "We've already made ours. And it's going to be happy ever after, world without end, amen." Not like Earth. *This is the way the world ends*—how did that line go? That quoted-to-death line with the irritating ending. He couldn't quite remember. *This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but—but—* Never mind.

"You're off duty," Martine said. "Relax."

"I'll try, sir."

"We've done a hard job," Martine said with satisfaction. "Six months in the field. Shoddy equipment. Only three of us to do everything. It's been quite a responsibility. If anything had gone wrong—" He took another drink. "Well, the ore's loaded, the records went off to Earth half an hour

ago and everything's done. Every microscopic, piddling, vital detail. Tomorrow we go on duty again. But our mission's accomplished."

"For all the good it will do in the long run," Dyson said, and told himself to shut up. He looked down warily at the glass in his hand, surprised to find it empty. Careful, Johnny, careful, he thought.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't know. After all, the nuclear physics boys have been working on the problem a long time without getting anywhere, haven't they? I don't see—"

"Are you a qualified nuclear physicist?"

"I came within an ace of being one," Dyson said.

Martine stared at him. "What happened?"

"Oh, I don't know." Dyson shrugged. "I guess I just realized finally how hopeless it all was. A good thing, too, from my viewpoint. If I were qualified now I'd be back home working on military projects like all the other competent boys. Whether they want to or not. It's practically martial law back there now."

"Got to be," Martine said, looking at him curiously. "You can't just give up, you know."

It was the same thing White had said, and it infuriated Dyson. They wouldn't see! He caught his breath for a sharp rebuttal, but what good would that do? None so blind, he thought, and remarked instead: "People don't change, sir. That's the trouble. People in general are—well, a bad lot, I'm afraid. They're bringing on the Blow-Up and no one can stop it. No matter what anybody does."

"Very likely," Martine said, bored. "Have another drink."

"Thanks, sir." Dyson leaned over and poured himself a second glass, wondering as he did so why he kept on calling the Chief sir . . . For the first time, he realized, it didn't matter whether or not he irritated Martine. The important point was to allow time to get the fuel hidden. After that, Martine would stop being an officer automatically. (Of course, there was the revolver in the desk. He mustn't go too far.)

"Where's White?" Martine asked. It was perfectly clear that he was bored. Maybe White would offer better entertainment.

"He's—resting," Dyson said wildly.

"Oh yes, energizing the robot for the take-off. I forgot. Well, now you've had your drink why don't you spell him? Maybe he'd like a drink, too."

DYSON KNEW he had to say something that would catch the Chief's interest—it didn't matter what—anything, anything. White *must* be left to do what he was doing until the job was accomplished. All doubt in his mind vanished as to whether White was actually operating the robot as he had promised. Dyson was suddenly confident about that. The only thing that mattered was to let him finish, to give him time, to keep Martine quiet.

"Sir," he said, "sir, I'd like your opinion. You've had experience. If I'm wrong I wish you'd tell me. *Is it wrong to feel my generation's been cheated of its rights?*"

Martine yawned. Then he leaned back to flip a switch, and a tape began to play *Lili Marlene* with infinitely saccharine emphasis.

"You think the world owes you a living, eh?" he asked unpleasantly.

"No, sir! Well—yes. Yes, a *living*, that's all. I want to stay alive. It isn't much to ask, is it? And the Blow-Up—"

"Dyson, you've got atomophobia. Just try to remember that when we get back to Earth you'll have a better perspective. I know the last six months haven't been a picnic, but we had a job to do. Now—"

"I've had perspective," Dyson said. "Ever since I was a kid. Sir, my father was Dr. Gerald Dyson."

Martine opened his eyes.

"Oh. So that's how you qualified for this trip. I wondered. You had the right technical training, of course, but—I wondered."

"Oh yes, I had training. My father insisted on that. He worked on one of the first bombs, you know. He was one of the men who said, 'Oops, sorry.' Afterward he got a mission in life—to find an atomic control. Of course, there isn't any. He'd just lighted a stick of dynamite and handed it over to me. Until I was old enough to stand up for my rights and say the devil with it. Parents always try to compensate for their failures through their children. But I've finally got clear away from Earth. For the first time in my life

I'm out from under the shadow of—" He paused, looked down at his glass, shuddered a little.

"The shadow of the cloud, sir. A big black cloud, spreading out. I was brought up with it. My father ran the films over and over, studying them. I dreamed about that cloud. It got bigger and bigger. My father could have handed me an Eden on Earth, with controlled atomic power. It could have been like a magic wand. It could make all work unnecessary. By rights a fellow like me, born in the Atomic Age, should never have any problems at all. Unlimited power's the answer to everything. But the only answer we're getting is the Blow-Up."

"I wish you'd quit saying that," Martine declared with sudden irritation. "You talk as if Earth had already gone up. It hasn't. Maybe it won't. There's a good chance we can still find a control. At least, we can go on trying."

"But don't you see, that kind of thinking is just a pep talk to the galley slaves?"

"If your precious Blow-Up ever does come," Martine said severely, "it'll come because people like you—" He paused and then shrugged. "Skip it," he said. "You've been under a strain, too. How about spelling White now at the robot and . . . no, wait a minute. I forgot." He regarded Dyson with distrustful memory showing on his face.

DYSON THOUGHT of the robot climbing down the crevasse and Martine blowing his top. He almost grinned. The Chief's paramount nightmare must be that something would happen to the robot. It had taken seven years in building and it was as integral a part of the ship as the fuel load. The fuel made up the muscles, but the robot was the brain that kept the complicated organism of the ship functioning in space. Dyson had thought first of disabling the robot, but he'd discarded the idea very soon. For one thing, he didn't know how. The robot had compensatory protective devices, the equivalent of an ego balancing its id. And anyhow, later on it would be useful.

When Eden was built on Mars the robot would furnish the perfect means of reducing details to a minimum. It could do almost anything. To Martine its primary

function was running the ship, and it was less expendable than the men, but Martine's feeling toward the robot had a touch of narcissism, Dyson thought. Probably every time Martine looked in a mirror he saw a synthesis of Martine and robot.

Later on, when the robot was made a hewer of wood and drawer of water—Dyson found himself suppressing a grin. Martine wouldn't like that at all. But he'd come around eventually. He could be bought, one way or another, just as Benjy White had been bought, with an intangible coinage.

Martine sat up, lifted his feet to the floor and groped with his toes for the discarded shoes.

"Guess I'll take White a little drink," he said.

The whiskey's spreading warmth had been relaxing all the tension in Dyson's body. Now suddenly every nerve twanged taut again and he heard without a sound the same vibrating chords like distant music which he had sensed in his skull when he wore the control helmet. Only this time the music was all discords. He had to stop Martine. He *had* to.

But Martine was on his feet now, stamping into his shoes, leaning to snap their catches. He tucked the bottle under his arm and picked up two clean glasses.

"Sir!"

"Well?"

"I—I'll take over, sir. I know how to handle the transmitter. Let me go. I'll send White in—"

Martine was at the door now. He simply shook his head briskly and went out, letting the door slam behind him.

Dyson looked at the clock, horrified to see how little time had passed, horrified to realize that in spite of all he had done this could still be happening. Surely, he had thought, at the last moment something would occur to him, some clever way to outwit Martine, *some* way to carry through the scheme that had so far worked so smoothly . . .

Martine's footsteps receded down the passage into silence. *Lili Marlene* crooned itself away in over-sweet harmonies toward a close while Dyson swung like a metronome toward the door and away from it, waiting in vain for some idea about what to do next. Finally *Lili Marlene* was left for good and all under the lamplight, and

Dyson discovered that he was opening Martine's desk with shaking hands.

But the revolver wasn't there any more.

So Martine would catch White while the robot was still at work hiding the fuel, and the ship would go back to Earth, and all Johnny Dyson's brave plans for a new world began to waver around the edges. Of course, he could run away, he could hide. They could go back without him, if they would—but in the long run he couldn't win. Sooner or later ships would come screaming down through the thin air above the scarlet plains, loaded with truant officers hunting Johnny Dyson . . .

* * *

He stopped on the threshold of the storage room. Benjy White was solving nothing by twisting his hands together in an agonized way above the spindle-legged control carriage. The robot-cradle, of course, was empty. Martine wore the transmitter helmet, and by the look on his face Dyson knew the robot's activation directions were coming in clear and strong. Martine knew everything.

His eyes met Dyson's.

Dyson turned and ran.

A DOLL-SIZED JOHNNY DYSON ran across the contours of a doll-sized chart away from a doll-sized vinylite spaceship. He didn't dare look up because in the sky the face of a gigantic Johnny Dyson might be looking down at him. Time had slipped back fifteen minutes and he had fallen into the microcosm, and somewhere up there, enormous in an inconceivably vast spaceship, the whole scene was playing itself over again, from the moment Martine's voice had snapped an order-to-report into the inter-com.

The vast, invisible finger of giant Johnny Dyson, fifteen-minutes-ago-Johnny-Dyson, had traced his trail in advance. He knew where to run. He knew the route the robot would have followed. But the time-factor was unknown.

The fuel might already be stored in the cache and camouflaged. Even if it had, still he had failed. For White hadn't erased the robot's memory track and Martine could follow every step of the way through the path of the metal mind.

Martine was running behind him now. So was White, he thought. But he didn't look back. He was running from more than Martine, more than men. He ran from the power and tyranny of a suicidal and homicidal Earth. Under his feet the ground rang hollow, as though his subterranean palace were already built, and waited, a hollow Eden, for its inheritor.

Then on the hillside ahead he saw a flicker of moonlight on metal and in the grey pallor of the night the robot came ponderously into his range of vision, toiling mindlessly under its fuel load toward the cave.

A shout sounded behind him, ringing thinly in the cold air. Glancing back, Dyson saw the dwarfed figures still running behind him. The ship looked doll-sized beyond. Illusion persisted. Everything had gone small. Ahead of the minimized White came marionette Martine, the transmitter gleaming on his head, while he guided a puppet's puppet, the control box, at a grotesque rocking run across the plain. All of them, pursuers and pursued, moved with the nightmare slowness and lightness that Martian gravity induces.

Dyson's head start—for he had plunged headlong out of the ship, and the others had lost time searching for him in the corridors—was a totally useless thing. He knew it. But he could not yet give up the faint hope that somehow, somehow, a way would be revealed to him at the last crucial moment.

There was a white flash in the dark, and the thin report of a revolver behind him. Probably it was a warning only, for he heard no whine of a bullet going by. He looked up, meeting the crooked gaze of the two moons like two uneven eyes—eyes in the face of giant Johnny Dyson. The sky around him was filled with conflict. Orion's club was lifted, Taurus' horns were lowered, Andromeda struggled in her chains, Sirius was a bared and gleaming fang. And bright among them hung a blue-green planet—blue for purity, green for peace . . .

Dyson's vision telescoped through a dizzy spiral, down diminishing vortices of time and space. At the end was the blue-green world and ten-years-ago Johnny Dyson, fifteen-years-ago Johnny Dyson, quite ignorant and quite safe. The world

was his parents' responsibility in those golden days. Not his. Oh youth, youth, lovely and lost and safe.

Martine fired again.

Here-and-now Johnny Dyson ran on toward the robot, which was in the act of vanishing into the dark mouth of the cave. The cave was only an ant-burrow and the robot was a shining pale ant with a grain of sand clutched in its mandibles. Spatial dimensions had lost all importance along with the rest of the natural laws. Only in dreams did you seem to float like this when you leaped, running as if through glue from pursuing dangers.

Directly ahead was a pile of shielded canisters, damper-hooks in place. Dyson slowed to study them, trying confusedly to estimate how many foot-pounds or tons of lifting pressure they represented. Not enough to lift the ship. There were only eight. If the robot had hidden all the rest, then Mars' apron-strings would still be strong enough to tie the ship down forever. If—if . . . of course! If the rest were in the cave, and if he could get there first, then the answer was childishly easy. How could he have missed it? Exultation boiled up in him, filling his throat with triumph.

He heard his name shouted, and he sprinted, bending low at each jump so the thrust of his toe would carry him forward and not up against the easy gravity of Mars.

HE REACHED THE CAVE MOUTH just as the robot's emerging thorax caught light from the rolling moons. It did not pause, but its false pupils examined him, the radioatomic brain analyzed him as a mobile obstacle, and the great worker-ant walked straight ahead. Dyson got out of the way. The worker-ant moved majestically downhill toward the remaining fuel-canisters.

Dyson paused at the cave mouth, peering in. It was so dark in there. He hesitated for a moment, knowing the solution to his problem was waiting for him in the dark, but feeling a curious reluctance to enter that black enclosure.

He glanced back. Martine and White were much closer, running silently, and the robot was moving down the slope toward them ahead of its twin shadows. There

were more shadows than men moving toward him up the hill, twice as many shadows, in twinned pairs, one black and one gray on the purple mosses. Deimos and Phobos spun through the emptiness overhead, pale silver shaping the ghosts of all moving things behind them on the ground. But it was Phobos that guided them. Phobos, who is Fear.

Dyson turned his back on them. They were still far enough away to look tiny. He could reach across the vinylite map and take the control box away from Martine between his thumb and finger . . .

Instead he took out a pocket fluorescent and shook it alight. With an uncomfortable feeling that he was somehow violating a sanctuary, he stepped into the cave. There were the canisters, row upon row against the rocky wall.

This was the mouth of Eden. He had chosen this site for his underground palace, hidden safely away in case after all rescue ships did come from Earth. But he hadn't really expected rescue ships. The spreading cloud of his childhood had gradually swelled until Earth was scarcely visible to him any more. It was a shadow cast before the flash of the Blow-Up.

Working quickly, with both hands, he stripped the damper-hooks from the canisters . . .

A few minutes afterward he ran out of the cave and down the slope toward the approaching men with their escort of nervous shadows. His shout broke on a high-pitched note of triumph.

"Walk right in!" he cried across the plain. "It's all there, Martine! It's all in the cave! Go and get it!"

Then the thunders began.

THERE WASN'T any real danger. Not as long as they stayed out of the cave. The fuel was blowing off canister by canister, not all at once, because each was a unit and constructed with every safety precaution mankind knew how to apply. Each one had a half-life of sixty-five seconds. They weren't blowing all at once because Dyson hadn't activated them all at once. He had only two hands.

One canister blew. Eight seconds later another one blew. The power that should have lifted a spaceship was going into light and sound and radiation too subtle to look

dangerous. A man could walk into the cave and right up to the canisters, if he wanted. And he could walk out again.

What would happen to his cells, his marrow, his blood and bones, later, was another matter. Radium can be leached from the human body. But the invisible poisons in the cave couldn't be, ever. Gamma radiation leprosy, quite incurable, was pouring out of the canisters into the alternate white glare and blind darkness of the cave.

Before that threat human conflicts altered.

But not quite instantly. There was a brief, stunned interval in which Martine struggled with the readjustment of his own mind, changing rage over into terror, triumph into the awareness of defeat.

He pointed his revolver.

"Go back in," he said. "Turn it off."

"No," Dyson said.

"I'll count three."

"I'd rather be dead."

Martine hesitated a moment. Then, "White," he said.

White was staring at the bright mouth of the cave. It blinked and went dark. He licked his lips.

"No, sir," he said.

"Go in yourself," Dyson said to Martine, grinning, seeing the older man's face lighted again by the renewed glare from the cave. He waited until the thunder ceased briefly to vibrate, and said, "It's easy, you know. Just push the dampers in again. Either way, you lose. Stay where you are and you're washed up as a commander. Or go in the cave. You'll get back to Earth with the cargo and maybe you'll wear more stars on your shoulders—only you won't have any shoulders."

"Shut up," Martine said crisply.

The thunders rolled.

Martine drew a noisy breath and yanked the control-carriage toward him. It came on its spindling legs, like a dog. He turned a dial. There was a clank of metal on rock and the robot moved slowly into sight toward them. He had cancelled its commands, then, and Dyson's orders were erased from its mind. But too late. Much too late.

Now it began to move mindlessly toward the cave.

"Fine," Dyson jeered. "That's the way,

to save the fuel, all right. It'll ruin the robot, of course, so it can't pilot the ship. But what of it? Mars is a nice place to live!"

Martine began to curse him.

"Oh shut up," Dyson said. "You're through. So's Earth. When the Blow-Up comes, we'll be out of it right here in our Ark, watching the Deluge from a nice safe distance."

The thunders rolled.

Martine made his mistake. He fell back on argument. His voice was still firm, but what he said was, "Earth needs our cargo—"

Dyson took a long chance and swung his arm. The revolver sailed out of Martine's grip and thudded softly on the moss at Benjy White's feet. That meant Martine's finger hadn't been inside the guard, on the trigger. And that meant many things . . .

"Our cargo?" Dyson echoed, poised on his toes and watching Martine intently, ready to forestall the slightest move toward the revolver. He wanted to pick it up himself, but that would instantly change the plane of conflict from moral to physical, and on the moral plane he knew he was already the winner.

Why didn't White pick it up? Why had White come along, anyhow? Whose side was he on? Probably he didn't know himself. Dyson grimaced angrily at him. But he kept on talking:

"We haven't got the cure for the Blow-Up in our cargo, Martine. There isn't any cure. And for one reason—just one. That's people. Men and women. They're no good, Martine. So they're going to die. All of them." He nodded toward the roaring cave. "This is the way the world ends," he said.

MARTINE LOOKED UP the slope, listened to the thunder. He didn't move. He had nothing to say. Watching him, Dyson realized that he didn't care whether White picked up the gun or not. He had won without guns.

"All right, Martine," he said, almost casually. "Let's have the helmet. You won't be needing the transmitter any more."

There was a pause. The thunders rolled. Dyson glanced at White, who was staring at the pale eye of the cave. Dyson stooped

swiftly and picked up the gun.

"Johnny."

It was White, still looking as if hypnotized into the cave-eye.

"Well?"

"Listen."

The thunders rolled.

"I hear it," Dyson said. Martine neither moved nor spoke.

"Pint-sized Blow-Up," White said. "The real one would be a lot worse. Noisier. Somehow I never thought of that before. The noise."

"We won't hear it."

"We'd see it, though. I'd see it. I'd know." He wrenched his gaze away from the glare of the cavern and looked up into the dark, toward the blue-green star of Earth. "Poochie," he said slowly, "was always afraid of thunder."

Dyson felt the bottom of his stomach drop out. He didn't know why yet, not with his mind. But there was some danger approaching that had taken the lead away from him, out of his control. It was coming closer and closer, with every word White spoke and every slow thought that took shape in his brain.

"I told you about Poochie," White said. "She used to be my wife, once. And the only thing that ever scared her was thunder. Used to hang on to me when—"

The thunders rolled.

"Benjy," Dyson said, his mouth dry. "Benjy—"

"So I'm crazy," White said. "Can't help what you think, kid. I never thought the Blow-Up would sound like this. I think I ought to be around where Poochie could find me, if she wanted, in case the Blow-Up comes."

He started up the slope toward the cave.

"Benjy!" Dyson said. His voice trembled. "You'd be dead in six months. And what good would it do? Our cargo can't stop the Blow-Up."

"How do you know?" White asked over his shoulder. "It's not for us to say. Our job wasn't to stop the Blow-Up. It was to get some Martian ores back home. A man ought to do his job if he takes the pay for it."

"Benjy! Don't move! I tell you, you can't stop the Blow-Up!"

"I sure as hell can stop this one," White said, and went on up the slope.

"Benjy, if you take another step I'll shoot!"

White glanced over his shoulder.

"No you won't, Johnny," he said. "No, you won't."

Dyson tried to squeeze the trigger.

He couldn't.

He concentrated on White's silhouetted back and sighted along the revolver, and he forced a command down his arm, into his index finger. But the message never got through. Martine moved faster.

MARTINE took the long, quick forward step and slammed the edge of his palm down on Dyson's wrist. The gun exploded in mid-air as it spun away.

The thunders rolled.

"Benjy!" Dyson shouted. It came out a thin whisper. He had to stop Benjy. He had to. Benjy mustn't go into that cave. It was very, very wrong, somehow, for anyone but Johnny Dyson to go into that cave. He took a step forward, but Martine, revolver ready, blocked his path. Martine, the truant officer, ready to collar him and drag him back to Earth. Back to work, discipline, responsibility.

Work. Discipline. *Responsibility*—

"Oh, no, no!" Johnny Dyson whispered. In his mind's eye he saw his fragile Martian Eden glisten under the moons, all its palaces and shining towers beginning to dissolve around him.

A Geiger began to tick in his brain.

It ticked faster and louder.

It roared.

Then he felt the flash. He felt the top of his head open and the bursting nova explode and the ballooning black cloud spurt upward through the sutures of his skull. The cloud rolled out enormously, its edges curling over and under in the familiar, the terrible shape of doom. He looked up to see it . . .

He saw the Earth-star, blue-green against the dark. He saw it change. *He saw it change . . .*

The explosion in his head must have been only a faint and remote echo, he thought, of that other and larger and farther nova-burst. For an instant half the sky was blotted out in the white glare of exploding Earth. He saw it happen.

Then the glare receded and condensed. The Earth-star took shape again, no longer

blue for purity and green for peace, but a dreadful, shaking, unstable glow.

This is the way the world ends . . .

Not with a bang, but a whimper.

He heard himself laughing.

He stumbled up the slope after White.

"Benjy!" he yelled. "Benjy, wait! It's happened! Didn't you hear? Look up—*it's happened!*"

White slogged on, not turning. Dyson labored after him, seized his shoulder. White paused and looked uncertainly into his face. Dyson couldn't stay still. He couldn't stop laughing. He danced—the old, old dance of triumph. When Martine reached the spot he danced around Martine too.

"What's happened?" Martine shouted at him.

"The end of the world!" Dyson shrilled. "This is the way, all right. You *must* have heard it! Earth's gone. We're safe. Safe in Eden. Look up, you dopes, look up!"

Two of the men looked up, while the third danced. Danced and laughed. Johnny couldn't stop laughing, even when Martine and White lowered their gaze and stared at him.

"Dyson," Martine said in a curious, low voice. "Dyson. Listen. Nothing's happened. You must have—imagined it. Look up, see for yourself."

Johnny looked. It was still there, all right. A trembling white glare in the sky. He laughed more shrilly than ever.

"But Dyson—" Martine said. White shook his head at him, reached out and took Johnny by the arm, stopping his dance.

"It's all right, Johnny," he said. "You're safe now. Everything's fine. Now you just take it easy and wait for me. I'll be back in a little while." He whispered something to Martine. Then he started up the slope again, toward the cave.

Johnny stared after him.

"Benjy!"

There was no answer.

"Benjy, what's the matter with you? You don't need to save the fuel now. Earth's gone. We're safe. We don't have to go back. Don't you understand—"

"Easy," Martine said. "It's all right."

White went on slowly up the hill, his shoulders hunched as if against a wind that was not blowing. He was getting smaller

and smaller, vanishing into the microcosm. Johnny Dyson blinked into the white eye of the cave. Then the rolling thunders swallowed Benjy.

AFTER A WHILE THEY were in the ship again, ready for the take-off. And, after that, Martine and White talked as if they had actually left Mars, headed back toward—well, not Earth, because obviously there was no Earth. Where, then?

Johnny tried to figure it out. When he asked questions the answers he got were so irrational that he had to translate them into his own terms; but presently he found a solution that satisfied him. When they said "Earth" they meant it only as a symbol. They were, logically enough, going to try to locate another habitable planet somewhere, a planet even better than Mars, where they could rebuild Eden.

And that was all right too. Because, after thinking it over, Johnny realized that it would have taken a lot of hard work to build his Martian Eden, even with the robot to help. It would have been quite a responsibility.

It was better to let the older men have the responsibility.

Of course the Blow-Up must have been quite a shock to Martine and White. It was difficult for them to readjust. But it did no harm to let them pretend. The name didn't matter. They thought of the new, undiscovered planet as Earth. When they found it they might even call it Earth—New Earth, in memory of the bad Old Earth that was gone. Gone forever, with all its worthless, evil infestations of humanity. For that Johnny couldn't really feel regret.

He made allowances for his companions, even when they acted a little crazy. It was odd, being the only completely sane man in the ship.

He waited. There was a period of vivid, confusing dreams in which he almost imagined himself back on Earth, but presently the dreams passed and were gone. Then he was able to sleep soundly again.

. . . Johnny's spaceship kept on going. Sometimes he wondered when it would reach its destination. He was tired of the artificial days and nights of the ship, and those viziports with their disturbingly vivid images of what no longer existed. It had been pointless, after all, trying to disguise the blackness of space with those visions of Old Earth outside the windows. And it had been rather foolish to disguise the robot so that it looked like a man in white when it came in to bring him food and get its orders from him.

Someday when he felt more like it, he would change the orders and remake the robot, casting it back into its metal reality. But he was tired. He had to rest. He musn't take on any unnecessary responsibilities now, because the day was coming when the ship would land on a habitable planet and his work would begin.

And he'd do his *job*. He'd do it well. He hadn't given up. Oh no, not Johnny Dyson.

His own father had lain down on the job, of course, first trying to pass the buck to Johnny, and then, when that failed, simply by going insane. A complete refusal to accept responsibility. Yes, that was the only sin—giving up. For if his father had stayed on the job, he might have found an answer. After all, Dr. Gerald Dyson had been a brilliant man.

But Dr. Gerald Dyson had given up. He had ended his career in an insane asylum, very likely so happy in his ultimate retreat that he'd never even known it when the Blow-Up came.

If I'd had my father's chances, I'd have kept on fighting to the last ditch, Johnny thought. But I've got my own job. It isn't too late. And if the ship ever reaches a habitable world, I'll start right in working at it.

He glanced at the viziport images of a world that had given up and therefore had died, quickly and painlessly.

Johnny smiled.

He was so happy in his spaceship room that he never knew it when the real Blow-Up came.