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THE UNKNOWN

By WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

This story is like a box within a box.

*On the outside—terror and tragedy in
a setting of hair-trigger action.*

*On the inside, a quiet, illuminating tale
of gentleness, hope and faith.*

ONE of the things that go bump in the night went BUMP.

It must have been a big thing. Or Thing. It jolted me almost out of bed.

I'd been dreaming I was walking through the woods, gun under my arm, and somewhere among the maples was a red deer. Walking or shooting, or both, usually found their way into my dreams somehow. There were reasons.

This inexplicable concussion in the night was made part of the dream.

The trees somehow became mountains. This was the Kasserine Pass. I was asleep in my fox-hole when the counter-attack came. Its herald was the big shell bursting a few feet away and sending my rough walls tumbling in on me.

I fought and clawed to get my head above the avalanche. . . . And awoke fighting the bed clothes.

From somewhere out in the night came a long, superhuman shriek. It was deep winter and the ice on the lake was over a yard thick. Sometimes it breaks under its own increasing pressure, and a rift will run miles across it, howling just like a banshee.

But I knew that sound well. This blood-chilling shriek, echoing from the valley sides, was similar—but not the same. It was coming from quite another banshee.

It shut off abruptly.

The silence afterwards was as it must be on the airless moon. Thick snow muffles city noises but up in these empty northern latitudes, when winter has really



set in, the quiet becomes all pervading and tomblike.

I fumbled for and found the matches under the pillow. The heat was going from the room, and with stiff fingers it wasn't easy to light the oil lamp at the side of my bunk. I blinked at the shards of glass gliting on the blankets. The window beyond my white, dead feet had a hole blown in it.

It must have been forty below out there.

The window faced northward up the valley, but there was no moon and a mass of snow-cloud brooded over us. There was a thinning of it far to the north and I could just detect the faint, gauzy dance of the Borealis.

But more immediately the trees were only blurred shadows on the white blur of the snow, and the ice-gleam of the lake was reduced to a feeble phosphorescence.

It had stopped snowing, however.

There had been no further sound since the shriek, but the door opened and in came Johnny with a blanket wrapped around him. He slept in the other tiny bedroom in this cabin. When I needed him, I thumped on the floor with the butt of a Lee-Enfield rifle.

This time I had not summoned him.

"You okay, Cap?" he asked. As always, his voice was soft and level, like a well-tended lawn.

"Yes, I'm all right, Johnny. But the darn bed-clothes have got kind of tangled—and the window's broken. Did any of the blast come your way?"

"Felt it hit the cabin. But there doesn't seem to be any major damage, far as I can tell. Can you see anything out there, Cap?"

"Not a thing. Haven't a notion what it was. Maybe a plane crash, but it didn't sound like it to me. Maybe one of those rocket satellite things fell back on us."

Johnny began tucking my blankets back. "One thing for sure—it was traveling faster than Mach One. You heard it coming down—after it hit."

He went to the window, felt the jagged hole carefully, paused, listening.

"Nothing seems to be moving out there," he said, presently.

He meant he could hear nothing moving, which was tantamount to saying that nothing was moving. For Johnny's hearing, like that of most blind men, was extremely acute.

I looked at my watch. "An hour yet till dawn. We'll sit it out. Make some coffee, Johnny."

He managed to prepare it and block up the window at much

the same time. Ex-sergeant John Bloom was good with his hands. He was pretty good at most things.

But he'd made two bad mistakes in his life.

One was marrying a girl after a week's acquaintance. You can't begin to get to know people in that time. When he was blinded and flown home, she came to see him once at the hospital, promised to come again—and never did. She vanished completely. Even the Army Pay Office couldn't locate her.

But I doubted if she ever went short of slices of soldiers' pay.

In imagination I could hear her Brooklyn slur: "Oh, *Johnny*—he's all washed up. A *wreck*. All his own damn fault, anyhow. He always was a mug."

I'd heard her say things as nasty. Her favorite catch-phrase was: "You gotta think about Number One some of the time."

Johnny's sole comment was: "You can't blame her."

He meant he couldn't. He couldn't blame anybody for anything. I told him he was too good for this world, which is as crass a statement as I ever made. This world happens to be short-stocked with good people. It can do with every one it's lucky enough to get.

Johnny's second mistake came in two parts, (1) treading on a

mine, (2) walking into the minefield in the first place.

(1) Was accidental. (2) Was deliberate. He came to pick me out of the minefield. I'd seen the warning strand of barbed wire, all right—it was the egg laid by a Messerschmitt which blew me yards beyond it. I was deafened and stumbled, and bruised to hell. But otherwise I was okay. As soon as I'd recovered my senses, I could probably have walked out of it.

But Johnny didn't wait. He walked in. He slung me over his shoulder and started to walk out. He trod on the triple prongs of a Kraut S-mine almost at once.

An S-mine was the creation of one of the not so good people in the world. It was packed with ball-bearings. Touched off by the prongs, an explosive charge lifted it chest-high in the air. And there it exploded properly. The ball-bearings could turn you into a human currant cake.

After the initial mistake. Johnny went through the right motions. He flung himself and me down so that most of the fragments would pass above us. They did.

I stopped only three of the balls, two with my backside and one with my spine. Johnny stopped only two, and those only with the fleshy parts of his thighs. But he had a bonus: a fragment of the casing passed

just behind his eyes, severing the optic nerves.

I never walked again. Johnny never saw again.

I had no family—my only brother was killed later in the Ardennes. Johnny left his parents and came and looked after me.

We'd been together for fifteen years now, twelve of them spent in this lakeside village in Maine. I had been born and reared in Maine. My face fitted there—it was long and lean, a Yankee face. When I left, I had always meant to come back to the forested hills, the peace rarely broken and then only by bird-songs, and distant guns, and the splash of a canoe paddle. Where the air was as crystal clear as the tumbling streams save for the rare blue stains of woodsmoke.

But I had never dreamed I should return as a helpless cripple.

I suppose it was a mistake to go back there. When from my window I saw the young men strike up through the birch grove on a bear hunt or wander down to the lake with their fishing tackle, the memories came back with an ache of longing. And the impotence made anger flame up in me. My self-control was coming apart at the seams. I had become a moody man.

The time of dawn came, but

the dawn itself lagged reluctantly behind. The clear patch in the north had been filled in by the steadily thickening snow-cloud which, combined with the screen of the valley-wall, strangled the sunlight at birth. Our surroundings remained obscure.

The outlook was almost as dark. More snow on top of what we'd had would make it tough indeed to clear the already blocked roads.

Waiting still for light, we washed and shaved and Johnny dressed. As always, he groomed himself as though he were about to step out on first parade. He used a cutthroat razor without ever nicking himself. Water never took the shine from his brown hair; his head was as sleek as a chestnut. His parting was a white, ruled line.

It was hard to accept that his clear gray eyes—not sunken, but healthy and so never removed—weren't observing everything, let alone anything.

Once in poor taste, I joked: "Own up, Johnny, you're faking, just for the pension."

He answered seriously: "I *do* see things, Cap—sort of in my mind's eye. It's queer. You know where things are when you know they're there, of course. But you also get a way of knowing things are there without anyone telling you. You can get it in a place you've never been to before."

He turned his head, listening. "Someone coming," he said.

I heard nothing until the knocking on the door, and then we had visitors. Aylott, who owned the sporting camp, and Barnes, who ran a chicken farm.

Barnes was a natural whiner, and he was whining now.

"I'll sue the Government. Blown half my sheds to hell, they have. Killed my best sitters. . . . Think there'll be any more trouble on account of that thing, Cap? Might it blow up again?"

"What thing?" I asked.

It was Aylott who answered, thrusting a thick forefinger at the window. "That."

I looked. Daylight was settling slowly like a precipitate from above. Some three hundred yards off, in the tree-less patch up the valley-side, I discerned dimly an unfamiliar shape. I reached for my field glasses and studied it.

It was a slatey gray, like the sky. Maybe fifteen feet high, ribbed like the dome of Florence Cathedral but tilted askew. Its outline was like half of an enormous hen's egg, with the flatter end buried deep under the snow.

A cracked egg, the glasses showed me. The fissures were fine and dark. The lines of ribbing were twisted away from symmetry.

"What d'you make of it, Cap'n?" asked Aylott, presently.

"I've never seen anything like it," I said. "But then, I've never seen a—" I fumbled for an example. "I've never seen an H-bomb."

Barnes sucked in breath sharply: "You think maybe they've dropped one, and it hasn't gone off?"

"I didn't say it was a bomb. Of course, it might be something that was dropped accidentally. But from the speed at which it came, I'd say it was fired—by rocket. Obviously it hasn't exploded. I don't think anything exploded. The damage was done by displaced air and concussion. We're seeing only part of the thing, anyhow — it's anyone's guess how much is buried.

"But do you think it's a bomb?" Aylott persisted.

"Good heavens, Aylott, how can anyone tell from here?" I said, peevishly, because I was eager to explore this novelty and yet frustrated by conditions. The thing was embedded on a slope too steep and difficult for the others to manhandle my sled up it. As usual, I was condemned to the spectator's role. I went on: "It might only be the broken-off tail of some new monster plane. The rest of the wreckage could be miles away."

"Like a cup of coffee?" asked Johnny, addressing our visitors.

"No, I've had one," said Aylott, irritably. His tone was so

untypical that I looked at him appraisingly. He avoided my eye.

Barnes licked his upper lip and said: "Sure, Johnny — thanks."

They were both frightened men.

This struck me as odd. The war had not touched them. Both had been exempted from service. Both ran one-man businesses. Aylott had a heart murmur. Barnes . . . well, no one knew much about Barnes. He was a hermit living among chickens.

No son of Center Dam had as much as set foot on the embarkation gangplank of a troopship. There had been no food shortages in this self-supporting community. The war had been as remote from Center Dam as an earthquake in Japan.

Perhaps that was why I'd chosen to end my days here. Not wholly consciously I reasoned that if the last war missed Center Dam, maybe the next one would also.

Although I'd been born way off in the eastern part of the State, and had never set eyes on Center Dam until after the war, I was yet a native of Maine. And it seemed queer to me that I had never been fully accepted or absorbed into this village. Nor Johnny either. For Maine folk are as hospitable as any in the world.

But to me it was obviously so.

Burly Jim Aylott's camp was always jam-packed with sportsmen in the season. He was ever the jovial host and the "sports" took him to their heart.

Yet even at his most genial on a Saturday night in the bar of the C.D. Hotel, bright-lit among its cluster of cabins, to me he still maintained a thin, transparent, but nevertheless solid wall of reserve. Like a glass screen. I could see him plainly through it, but I couldn't reach out and touch him.

I found the same screen between myself and others, too, always excepting Doc Nunn.

We weren't wholly welcome in Center Dam. Only now, watching these two locals, did I begin to sense the reason. We maimed creatures were a standing reminder of the lunatic world which lay beyond the walls of the sheltered valley. And of what that lunatic world could do to folk.

Also, maybe, we were a silent reproach to a community which, favored by chance and nature, had remained detached from the woes besetting civilization. I suppose, because the war had made no demands on them, they had come to think of it as none of their business.

But in their hearts they knew they were part of the common

fabric of humanity and could not tear themselves off from it. So they felt guilty. And the guilty expect to be punished. Maybe the next war wouldn't let them off so lightly.

The symbol of the next war was the H-bomb. Its herald, a rocket from the skies.

They were half expecting it, dreading it, and like fate it had come. Or something frighteningly like it.

Barnes held his coffee mug with both hands as he drank, and even so he spilled some of it.

Somebody thumped on the door. Johnny opened up. Dr. Nunn, aged and retired, teetered in. He walked awkwardly because of arthritic hip-joints, which often he cursed. (And as often I silenced a jealous inward voice which said: "Well, at least you *can* walk.")

He said: "Everyone's in a panic about that thing. I told 'em to keep away from it for the time being. Not that anyone's actually straining their gut to reach it. They keep asking me what it is. They're afraid it's a bomb. I'm afraid they may be right. What do you think about it Cap?"

I repeated that I'd seen nothing like it, but it could be a rocket missile that had gone astray.

"In which case," I added, "it'll have a dummy warhead. So there

should be no danger. Is the line still dead?"

The telephone line was a single strand wandering every which way through the woods, linking this trapper with that, one village with the next. In this area where sudden accident or illness might strike isolated men, folk had to keep in touch. Besides, the loneliness got you sometimes, and then it was a relief to ring someone up and exchange gossip. Or merely to eavesdrop on this party line—"rubbering on the line" we called it.

But late yesterday somewhere the link snapped. A rotten tree falling under its burden of snow, maybe. The weather had been too foul to go searching for the break. And now the single road running through the valley had been blocked by drifts at either end.

We were cut off from the world, except for the radio.

Dr. Nunn answered: "Yes, I near cranked the batteries flat trying to raise Forbes." (Forbes was the Game Warden.) "Wanted him to radio his HQ to contact the Army."

Johnny said: "The Army boys probably have a rough idea where it is—if they fired it. Radar tracking would have told them. They'll probably be along to collect it soon as the roads are clear."

Aylott exclaimed hoarsely: "Look! Quietly, out there!"

Barnes and the doctor joined him at the window, blocking my view. I asked them sharply to let me see. They moved aside silently. The black oblong of an open doorway had appeared in the gray dome. The door itself seemed to be hanging from twisted hinges, and a corner fragment had broken off, as though it had been hammered open.

I grabbed my field-glasses and turned them on the opening.

A white shape appeared therein and stood fumbling with something which looked like a short crowbar.

"A man in a space-suit," I reported. "That thing's no bomb. My gosh, at last they've succeeded in firing a man into space! He's come back with a bang, but he's come back alive. Aylott—you and Barnes go up there and lend him a hand. Johnny, make some more coffee—that guy'll be dying for some."

Aylott's face was relief itself. His normal cheerful grin returned. "Come on, Barnes, let's go make history—or at least get our names in the papers."

Barnes was relieved, too, and groused only mildly. "All the same, the government's gotta pay for the chickens."

They went.

Dr. Nunn asked: "Think that

feller's hurt at all? Maybe I'd better go get my little black bag out of the junk room."

"No, wait. I think he's okay."

The spaceman, as it would seem proper to call him, had dropped the thin, cylindrical object he'd been fooling with. It had fallen in the snow, and now he was gingerly lowering himself from the doorway after it. The space-suit seemed to be hampering his movements badly. I didn't wonder. Although ridged at the joints, it was plenty bulky.

The globular space-helmet was white, also, with a transparent aperture. The face behind I could see only indistinctly. It was darkish—either deeply tanned or else the man was colored. Why shouldn't a Negro be first into space, anyhow, if he were the fittest specimen for the job to be done.

The spaceman slid into the snow up to his thighs. Then he stood very still for a little while, as though adjusting himself to this uncertain renewal of contact with earth. Then he began fumbling slowly about in the snow around him.

I watched, and said suddenly:

"Doc, maybe I was wrong. He appears rather dazed. That crash might have given him a concussion."

"I'll have to bring my things here—I can't get up to him. Not

up that snow slope with these unworkable joints.”

“Okay, Doc, Aylott and Barnes will get him here somehow. He may be glad of this bed. Go get your bag of tricks—and tell Johnny I want him, will you?”

Duly, Johnny came in from what served us as a kitchen.

“The chair, Johnny,” I said, flinging back the bed-clothes.

He lifted me as though I were hollow, enfolded me in my dressing-gown, sat me in my wheelchair. I ran it over to the window.

Aylott and Barnes had come into the picture now, big, gross figures snow-shoeing it awkwardly up the white wave of snow.

They began to call and wave as they struggled up the slope. The spaceman showed no sign of having noticed them, and continued to fish around in the snow.

He found what he was seeking when the others had got within twenty feet of him. It was the thin, black cylinder. As he straightened up, he became aware of Aylott and Barnes. For a few seconds he stared at them. Then, almost casually, he pointed the cylinder at them.

With the hair-trigger reaction of a scared man, Aylott, in the lead, flung himself face-down. It was the slower Barnes who

caught the full force of the ray which leapt from the cylinder.

It must have felt like being struck by lightning.

I had a split-second glimpse of the ray. It was like a bar of plutonium at the moment of fission. Concentrated, eye-scorching light, intolerably effulgent—a brand plucked from the furnace of the sun itself.

Its glare, rebounding from the snow-sheeted landscape, seemed to beat up against the lowering cloud-layer and repel it by sheer light-pressure.

The three distant figures, the mysterious projectile, were blotted out by the all-pervading brightness which the field-glasses funneled, in twin jets like white-hot molten metal, straight into my eyes.

I dropped the glasses with a shout of agony.

Johnny was at my side within seconds. His exploratory fingers ran lightly over me. His cool hands came to rest over mine, which I was clasping to my seared eyes.

“What happened, Cap?”

I told him in breathless, tailless sentences. Tears of pain leaked between my fingers on to his.

“Poor Barnes! He got it worse than. . . . It may even have killed. . . . Johnny, warn everyone. Tell them to. . . no, they can’t

get out of the valley. Tell them to lock themselves in their cabins, block their windows, not to look out. That murderous maniac may be alone—or there may be a whole crew like him in that thing.”

“Okay, Cap.” The touch of him went.

Soon I heard his voice, strong and clarion-clear, repeating my orders outside as though he were addressing morning parade.

Contemptibly, I almost hated him for being so completely in command of himself, while I, his erstwhile commanding officer, was huddled in panic. I was in real fear that now I was as blind as he, and I knew I couldn't accept it as he had.

I'd never accepted being a cripple. Hatred of my fate, shot through with spasms of self-pity, was always returning.

And now the possibility of blindness added to that. . . .

I clenched my teeth and forced myself to drop my hands. Then I opened my eyes slowly.

There was neither intense light nor blackness. The tear-ducts hadn't quite closed and I saw the bedroom through a swimmy gray mist with a black bar, like a huge hyphen, superimposed on the scene whichever way I looked. But—I *saw*. And the bar was slowly fading: it was only the counter-image of the super-bright ray.

The relief was like a shot of benzedrine.

I looked bleakly at the slope of the valley—my glasses were still somewhere on the floor. The projectile was there, unchanged. The spaceman had progressed a few yards down the slope, towards the village, and now stood knee-deep in snow turning his head this way and that, as though undecided where to go. He was still holding the ray-gun, but slackly, at his side.

Near the foot of the slope, floundering back along the trail they'd made, were Aylott and Barnes. Barnes was sobbing—I could hear him faintly. His head was lowered and he was holding a hand to his face. Aylott, apparently unharmed, had one arm around Barnes and was helping him along.

They passed from the frame of my view.

I called Johnny. He came at once.

“Is there any sign of Doctor Nunn?”

“He's trying to get to them. He told me they were coming back. Can you see all right now, Cap?”

“Well enough,” I said grimly. “Give me that rifle. And a clip of shells.”

For once he hesitated. Then he did as I'd asked. I slipped off the magazine pressed the five .303

shells into it, one by one, against the pressure of its spring, and jammed the magazine back on. I yanked back the bolt and rammed a round up the spout. I slid the marker along the scale, setting the sights at 300 yards.

A couple of thrusts with the butt drove Johnny's temporary window patch out into the snow. Chill air seeped in. I poked the barrel through the open square, rested it on the window frame, thumbed over the safety catch.

I tucked the butt into my shoulder, began to take aim. A hand stole past my face, fumbled, pushed the safety catch on. I looked round with almost a snarl. "Johnny, what the hell—"

"Take it easy, Cap. Cover him but hold your fire. We don't know who he is or what it's all about yet. The guy might be dazed. Maybe he imagined he was being attacked and fired automatically in self-defense."

I swallowed. My hands were trembling with anger. I couldn't have hit the projectile, let alone the unknown spaceman. I tried to calm myself.

"That thing he fired, Johnny, wasn't a weapon known in the Pentagon. *Ergo*, it's a foreign secret weapon. And he's probably a member of an invading army — rocket-borne. A *blitzkrieg* by rocket — for all we know, thousands of projectiles

like that have landed. Invasion by barges is a bit out of date, you know."

Johnny was skeptical. "Who would launch an attack in mid-winter and hog its army down in snow like this? Anyhow, if there were others the radio would have been yelling its head off. I've been speaking to folk out there who've been keeping their radios on. Everything seems to be perfectly normal."

"You think this guy's on his own?"

"Yes, Cap, I do. Furthermore—"

He broke off, his keen ear catching some sound, and went swiftly from the room. Soon he returned with Aylott. They were carrying an unconscious Barnes between them. Dr. Nunn hobbled behind with his black bag.

Barnes' face was a mess. Swollen white blisters covered it, and little shreds of skin were peeling off.

"On the bunk," I said, and they laid him there.

Dr. Nunn said: "I've doped him with morphia. He's out of pain—for the present. The burns aren't so bad as they look. It's his eyes I'm worried about. Wish I'd kept my ophthalmoscope. Curse this weather—he ought to be rushed to the hospital."

He opened his bag, produced bottles and bandages, began to treat Barnes' face.

Aylott looked at me. The geniality was still missing but also missing now was fear. His face was grave, his eyes steady.

"You could have beaten it right away, and left Barnes to it," I said. "By burdening yourself with him, you risked sharing his fate."

He shrugged. "What else can you do, when it comes to it?"

The coming of the spaceman had settled a vital question for him, which the war had not. No man can foretell what he'll do "when it comes to it." Aylott had proved his courage. Now he was at peace with himself.

His gaze dropped to my rifle, traveled to its likely target.

"If you shoot him, Captain, the scientists will never forgive you. I'm pretty sure we're seeing our first visitor from another planet."

I stared at him. He didn't seem to be kidding.

Johnny said: "I'd suspected that, too."

I looked from one to the other of them, then asked Aylott: "What makes you so sure? You couldn't have more than glimpsed his face."

"A glimpse was enough. His complexion is dark green. He has no nose to speak of—just a single orifice. His mouth is lipless—it's just a wide slit in his face. His eyes are queer—they

slope down to the outer corners. Makes him look kind of sad. But they're bright eyes—intelligent."

"Well, at least he can see out of them," I said, bitterly. "I doubt if Barnes will ever see again."

Dr. Nunn, busy at the bed, sighed. "Guess you're right, Cap. The scarred corneas might be replaced, but I think the damage runs deeper than that."

I bit my lips and scowled at the unknown, who was still standing on the slope looking aimless.

I said: "If he starts coming this way, he'll have had it. So will the scientists. They'll have to make do with a dead specimen. Better a dead Martian than another blinded and burnt human—there are children in Central Dam, I'll remind you."

At which moment the unknown made up his mind. He resumed his slow advance down the slope.

I flicked the safety catch and raised my gun. I was ready for him.

"Leave him to me, Cap," said Johnny urgently. "I'll stop him. He can't blind me."

I paused irresolutely, and Johnny was gone.

"The fool!" I said, savagely. "He'll get burnt. Stop him, Aylott."

"Only if you promise not to shoot," said Aylott, firmly.

"Don't argue, man. . . . Okay, I promise. For the time being."

Aylott hurried out after Johnny, I waited impatiently for their return. Dr. Nunn quietly finished his work on Barnes. The unconscious man's head was covered with gauze and bandages, and a thick cottonwool pad was bound over his eyes.

"Well, that's the best I can do," said Nunn.

Boorishly, I didn't answer. I was on edge for Johnny's return. How much of my concern was for him, how much for myself without him, I shouldn't care to apportion.

When at last I saw him again, he was advancing steadily up the valley-side in the rough path that had been made. Aylott was a pace behind him, and maintaining that pace. The grotesquely padded alien was moving cautiously down the same path, gun in hand. The meeting was inevitable.

I swore aloud. Nunn looked over my shoulder at the scene.

"I might have known Johnny would talk Aylott round," I said, sourly. "Johnny always gets his own way."

"Let's hope he can talk the stranger round, then," said Nunn, and tut-tutted. "Incredibly foolish, going up there without any protection at all. Even a wet towel wrapped around the face, and sun-glasses . . . I hope

I shan't have to do that nasty job over again. Haven't the stuff—or the heart for it."

"You won't," I promised, and took careful aim. I had promised not to shoot if Aylott brought Johnny back. He had failed to, I was free to make another promise—this time, to shoot.

My sights were trained on where the unknown's heart should be, if he were just that much human. But I was also watching his gun arm. If that begin to lift. . . .

It did, when Johnny and Aylott were only a few yards off. I fired.

Just as I squeezed the trigger, the unknown slipped on the snow slope and veered sideways. I hit him, all the same. The impact bowled him over. The big white shape disappeared under the general whiteness.

Johnny spun around and raised his arm imperatively in the "hold your fire" signal. Then he and Aylott hurried forward and all but disappeared, too, as they investigated the fallen figure.

"Right on the nose, Cap," said Nunn, patting my shoulder. "You did the right thing."

"I saved them from a roasting."

"Of course."

Why, then, did I feel uneasy, almost guilty?

Slowly, three figures became

erect on the slope. The alien was in the middle. Aylott had secured the gun. Johnny was grasping the alien's arm, not as though he were about to frog-march him, but in a friendly kind of way. Aylott began to gesture, using the gun as a pointer. The alien gestured also, Aylott investigated something on the alien's back. Johnny began doing something there, too.

After a minute or so, Aylott pointed to the projectile, made as if to go to it. The alien pulled him back gently.

More sign language followed. "What the hell's going on?" I said, feeling gloomy and out of it. "Hand me up those field-glasses, Doc."

As soon as I began to refocus, the little party started down the path together, the unknown still in the center and seemingly being guided by the other two. They passed from view.

I turned my chair from the window and looked at the doctor questioningly. "So now we're all pals together. I don't get it."

He rubbed his chin, looking away. "The blind leading the blind," he mumbled, cryptically, and weaved his painful way to Barnes and began to take his pulse.

The coin dropped. "You mean, that other-world creature is blind?"

"Not quite," said Nunn, ab-

sently. He was thinking of something else. "Barnes will be coming out of it soon. That was the last of my morphia. It's not going to be a joyful awakening."

I banged the arm of my chair with frustration. "What *can* we do? If I could only walk! I feel so helpless."

"We're all helpless right now," said Nunn.

Presently, Aylott and Johnny led the alien in. In his thick-white suit he looked enormous in this small room. His face was as Aylott had described it, except that his curiously slanting eyes were half-closed and no longer bright.

"Where did it hit him?" I asked.

They ignored me. Aylott looked distressed. He grabbed the doctor's arm.

"Doc, can you help? This poor devil's suffocating. The captain shot two holes in the air-tank pack on his back. We've plugged them with our handkerchiefs, but most of the stuff escaped first. He has little more than is left in his suit. It won't last long. But we don't know what the stuff is. It's not our kind of air."

"It smells like almonds," said Johnny. He had gently eased the big figure into the chair by the stove. The contrast made the chair look like a child's.

"So does prussic acid gas," said Nunn, looking worried. "But surely it can't be that." He went behind the chair, sniffing at the air-tank on its harness. He coughed suddenly and violently. "Can't identify it," he choked. "But I guess . . . enough of it . . . would kill us."

Anxious to avoid condemnation as a murderer in their eyes, I said: "There must be reserve tanks in his ship, maybe whole compartments—"

"No," said Aylott, sharply and with hostility "The ship's all smashed up inside. When you get close enough, you can see it's falling apart."

"All the same—"

"No. He indicated clearly enough by signs that there was no hope there. It's a broken shell. It was a crash landing. He was alone."

"Then he was doomed, anyhow," I claimed. "You can't blame me."

"Nobody's blaming you," said Aylott. "Can we forget you for just a little while and think of him?"

"All right, all right. Here's my pen. There's a writing pad on that table. Get him to write down the formula of his atmosphere. The doc's still got plenty of chemicals and apparatus. There's chance he could whip up something that'll last your friend

till we can contact civilization again and get the stuff laboratory-produced. It's worth trying."

Dr. Nunn looked doubtful. Aylott wavered. "We'll never understand his chemical symbols."

"Okay, you say he's intelligent," I said. "Maybe intelligent enough to draw rough diagrams of atomic structures, the component elements. One dot, with another dot circling it, for hydrogen. One dot, two dots circling it—helium. And so on. Get it? I know something about it. Could be I could fathom it out."

"Maybe it would be simpler to take him to my place and let him look over my stock," said Dr. Nunn.

Johnny said: "That's a mile away, Doc. He'd use up too much energy struggling that distance through the snow, have to breathe too hard. It'd likely kill him."

"Anyhow, Doc, he couldn't look over your stock," said Aylott. "It's become obvious to us that he can see little more than dim outlines. He must come from a planet where the daylight is extremely bright. Earth to him seems as dark as Pluto would to us."

"Then for Pete's sake why did he land here?" I asked.

"I doubt if he meant to," said Aylott. "More likely he meant to orbit Earth, and take a quick

survey, but something went wrong and he crashed. Skip that for now. What can we do to help? Maybe there's something in your idea, Captain, but if the poor guy can't see what he's doing—"

"The torch," said Johnny, suddenly.

Aylott banged a fist into his palm. "Sure, the torch. Let's try it."

He picked up the ray-gun he'd laid on the table, and examined a stud on its side. "This isn't meant to be a weapon. It's only a torch—providing the kind of light *he* needs. It's blinding to us. He saw that—too late. He was scared to use it again. He chose to grope on through the dark and the unknown. That's the sort of guy he is."

I looked away, and felt depressed. I saw my gun leaning against the wall by the window. I felt like smashing it.

Aylott went on: "This stud was bent and jammed in the crash. He was working on it, then it dropped in the snow. He located it and got it straight just as we came on the scene. He only wanted to see who or what we were."

There was a faint moan from the bunk. Barnes was stirring. Nunn went to his side, made soothing sounds.

I looked at the alien, motion-

less and in discomfort in the chair. His eyes were open wider but there wasn't much life in them. His thin mouth was parted. His tongue looked brown and dry. He was gasping.

"Give me that pad," I said. Aylott passed it. I drew a few simple atoms in progressive series, was stumped for some symbol to represent the atmosphere, then decided on a sketch purporting to be a cloud of gas. Beside it I set a useless query mark.

"Give it to him."

Aylott pressed pad and pen into the alien's thickly gauntletted hands. The fingers closed on them. The eyes moved, looked down blindly.

I wheeled myself to the window, opened it wide and got away from it.

"Aaah!" came from Barnes.

I said: "Aylott, direct that torch out of the window, else we'll burn the joint down. We'll have to gamble he can see enough by reflected light from the snow. You can stay if you want, Johnny. Doc, you'd better wait in the other room. We can't risk your eyes."

"I'm staying with Barnes," said Nunn. He crouched over the slowly awakening man, shielding him with his slight twisted body and pulling the blankets further over him. I was satisfied that Barnes' eyes would be protected

from further harm by the thick, cottonwool pad.

"Very well, Doc, but keep your back turned and your eyes shut. Aylott, you'll find some dark glasses in that drawer. Put them on—and keep your eyes tightly shut while the thing's working."

I turned my chair away from him. "Count slowly up to five," I went on. "Switch on at five. Give him around three minutes. Tell us when you switch off.

"Right," said Aylott. "You set, Johnny? Keep facing that way. Here we go. One, two, three . . ."

I shut my eyes and buried my head in my arms.

". . . four, five."

Nothing could be heard except weak, inarticulate cries from Barnes. But I felt warmth on the back of my neck, warmth that became radiant heat.

The seconds dragged on. There came tiny sounds of movement and then paper rustling.

My neck felt as though it were blistering. I wanted to shield it with my hands, but it would be stupid to uncover my face.

Eternity went on, marked only by intervals between Barnes' moans. The paper had ceased rustling. I had an uncanny feeling that I was being watched intently. There were mad thoughts crossing my mind. Suppose the alien was faking? Now he had

us all with our back to him and our eyes shut. Suppose, seeing that, he went berserk and—

There was a small, floppy thud. The pad had fallen to the floor.

"It's off now!" snapped Aylott.

Like a tortoise, I put forth my head, turned it. The alien lay back, the pad at his feet, the pen lost somewhere. His eyes were closed. His face was very dark now, nearly black with congestion.

I rued my uncharitable suspicions. In near despair I said: "There won't be time enough."

Aylott pounced on the pad, frowned at it, thrust it at me. Set beside my little protons, and electrons in orbit, was a single larger system of orbits, shakily drawn.

Nine orbits. The solar system. Either the alien had misunderstood my intention or else realized that a full answer was beyond his resources now. Or beyond ours.

But he had succeeded in getting one message across. There was a simple cross marked in the orbit nearest the sun.

"Mercury," I said. "He comes from Mercury."

That explained the intense sunlight he was accustomed to. Also his slow movements under our gravitation. But it left a lot more unexplained, which to us would have to remain forever unknown.

"Doctor," called Aylott, peering intently through the face-plate. "Come quick—I think he's going."

Dr. Nunn hobbled across and gave his verdict. "Very soon now, I'm afraid. Suffocation."

We looked, horrified and helpless, at the strange being dying before our eyes, far from his world, far from our understanding. Except Johnny, that is. He'd begun to feel around the Mercurian's neck and shoulders, sliding little studs.

"Johnny's right—take his helmet off," I said, thickly. "It's the last gamble left. Our atmosphere is probably useless to him but it can hardly be worse than nothing."

Aylott was already helping Johnny. All at once the helmet came off in their hands. They lifted it free. It was like opening a furnace door. Cooking hot gases boiled out into the room with a raw, sharp smell of almonds.

We all began coughing and our eyes streamed water.

Luckily, the window was still wide open, and much of the expanding gas went pressing out to freedom.

Then a miracle happened. Because of my smarting eyes and convulsions of coughing, I glimpsed it only intermittently.

The Mercurian's strange eyes

opened wide. His face paled. He stood up slowly, his mouth still agape in that nightmare face. His hands touched his wrists and gauntlets fell silently to the floor.

His naked green hands were surprisingly thin and delicate. His fingers were pointed and without nails.

He groped around him. His left hand brushed Johnny's cheek, returned, touched it properly.

And Johnny covered his eyes with his hands and began to tremble.

The Mercurian moved forward, towards me. I bent double as another bout of coughing racked my chest. Burning fingers touched the sore place at the back of my neck. The touch was withdrawn and the pain went with it. All pain.

I sat up in speechless awe, and tremors began to run through me. Through my whole body. Through my legs, to my feet. I could feel my feet.

The Mercurian could not see where to turn next. A pale shaken Johnny came up behind him and began to guide him gently. For Johnny could see now.

Johnny led him past the astounded Aylott to Dr. Nunn, who was sitting petrified on the edge of the bunk. The Mercurian extended his left arm.

"Take his hand, Doctor," Johnny whispered.

Dazedly, Nunn did so. The tired stoop, the twisted awkwardness of his limbs, disappeared. He was made straight and whole. As long as I live, I shall never forget the expression on the face of the healer as he himself was healed.

The Mercurian, his face now all agony, as though he had absorbed all the pain he had removed, bent forward, groping along the bunk, feeling the shape of the groaning Barnes. He laid his palm on Barnes' head like a benediction. The groaning ceased.

The Mercurian straightened up and stood stock-still for a moment.

Then with a sound in his throat like the slow tearing of cloth, he fell forward across the bunk and its occupant.

I was helping to lift him before I even realized I was on my feet again. And beside me Nunn was helping, too, strong and lithe for all his age.

We laid the stranger gently on his back on the floor. Death had been delayed but not cheated. I closed his queer eyes. His skin was silk-smooth and still very warm. But by the standards of his world he was cold—ice-cold.

Barnes sat up suddenly, plucking at his bandages.

He protested, whiningly:

"What sort of game are you playin' on me? Who was that jumpin' about on me? What's the idea of blindfoldin' me? Get this stuff off—let me see, will-ya?"

"Take it easy, Barnes, you're all right," said Nunn, unbandaging him expertly.

As the pad came away, we saw that Barnes' skin was clear, unmarked, and his mean little eyes were alive with indignation.

Aylott said, uncertainly: "I was never a religious man. But now . . . I don't know."

Johnny said in an undertone: "He saved others but couldn't save himself."

Barnes stared at us, indignation passing into puzzlement.

"Who—me? What are you talkin' about? What's been goin' on here?"

I said: "He didn't waste much time scribbling on that damn—fool pad. He was studying us, seeing our troubles. I felt him watching."

"So did I," said Johnny.

Dr. Nunn flexed his knee, straightened it again, with quiet content. He gave a little sigh of happiness, and said: "Gosh, it's great to feel really fit again. You know, I never wholly scoffed at the so-called miracle cures. Ever read Alexis Carrel? He examined some of those cases—hopeless cases. And then saw the cures

happen before his eyes. And he was no sucker—he was a Nobel Prize man, for medical research. Psycho-somatics is stumbling along the same path. From what we've seen, we've got to accept it now: sudden organic changes to nerves and muscle and bone are possible."

"Unfortunately, our friend seemed unable to do anything with inorganic chemicals," I said. "It seems plain idiotic that he had to die of suffocation. But he fought to the end. That last effort of his was magnificent."

"The triumph of the spirit," said Aylott. "I'm glad he came. It's done something for my spirit."

There was a little shriek. Barnes, who had been looking up at us, listening with his mouth open, had happened to look down and see the strange, still form on the floor.

"Gosh, who's that?"

"That," said Dr. Nunn, "is something we can't tell you, Barnes. I only wish we could. We humans tend to get big-headed about our scientific advances. The conquest of matter, the con-

quest of space, and the rest of it. Then something like this happens and we're reminded of the real scale of things. We're on a tiny island in an infinite sea. And in that sea are countless other islands, larger, maybe, or smaller—but all unknown."

That was two years ago.

I wouldn't say man's knowledge has increased all that much in the interim.

For myself, I left Maine and the impossible wish to return to boyhood. I went back into business in the immense dog-fight called Los Angeles. It's a one-man business. Literally and figuratively I stand on my own feet.

When Johnny's sight returned, he wanted to use his eyes. He went looking. For her. I've not heard yet whether he's found her. I still wonder whether she'll be worth the finding. Maybe he saw some good in her that I never did. I just don't know. As Nunn said, there's a great many things we don't know. About other people. About ourselves. About other souls on other planets.

THE END

