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# STARTLING STORIES

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## A Complete Novel



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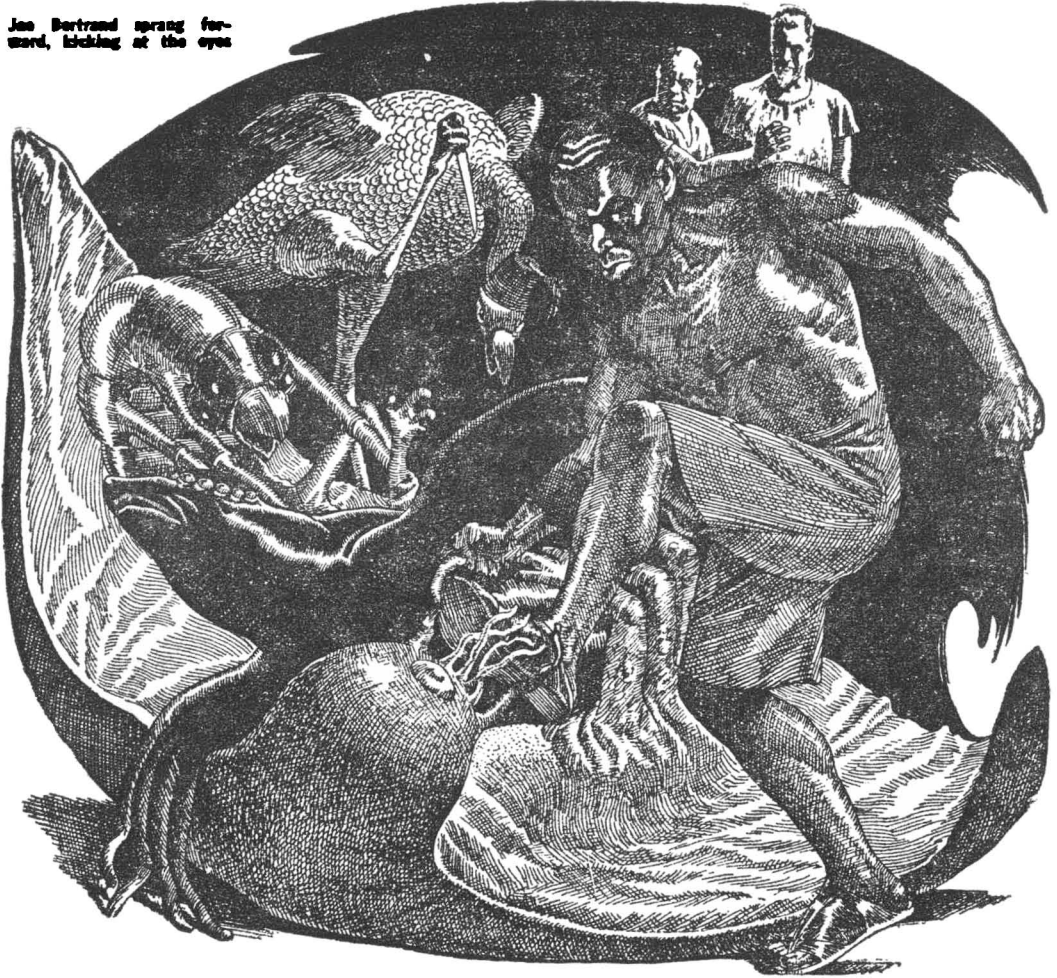
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Joe Bertrand sprang forward, kicking at the eyes



# The Unspeakable McInch

By JACK VANCE

*Magnus Ridolph runs up against old-fashioned earth-style graft when he becomes a troubleshooter in Sclerotto City!*

**"MYSTERY"** is a word with no objective opposite, merely describing the limitations of a mind. In fact a mind may be classified by the order of the phenomena it considers mysterious. . . . The mystery is resolved, the solution made known. "Of course, it is obvious!" comes the chorus. A word about the obvious: it is always obvious. . . . The common mind transposes the sequence, letting

the mystery generate the solution. This is logic in reverse; actually the mystery relates to the solution as the foam relates to the beer. . . .

—*Magnus Ridolph.*

**T**HE Uni-Culture Mission had said simply, "His name's McInch, he's a murderer. That's all we know." Magnus Ridolph would have refused the

commission had his credit balance stood at its usual level. But the collapse of an advertising venture—sky-writing with luminescent gases across interplanetary space—had left the white-bearded philosopher in near-destitution.

A first impression of Sclerotto Planet reinforced his distaste for the job. The light from the two suns—red and blue—struck discordantly at his eyes. The sluggish ocean, the crazy clutter of slab-sided rock suggested no repose, and Sclerotto City, a wretched maze of cabins and shacks, promised no entertainment. Finally his host, Klemmer Boek, chaplain-in-charge of the Uni-Culture Mission, greeted him with little warmth—in fact seemed to resent his presence as if it were due to some private officiousness of Magnus Ridolph's own.

They rode in a battered old car up to the Mission, perched high on a shoulder of naked stone, and the dim interior was refreshingly cool after the dust and dazzle of the ride.

Magnus Ridolph took a folded handkerchief from his pocket, patted his forehead, his distinguished nose, his neat white beard. To his host he turned a quizzical glance.

"I'm afraid I find the illumination disturbing. Blue, red—three different shadows for every stick and stone."

"I'm used to it," said Klemmer Boek tonelessly. He was a short man, with a melon-sized paunch pressing out the front of his tunic. His face was pink and glazed, like cheap chinaware, with round blue eyes and a short lumpy nose. "I hardly remember what Earth looks like."

"The tourist guide," said Magnus Ridolph, replacing the handkerchief, "describes the effect as 'stimulating and exotic'. It must be that I am unperceptive."

Boek snorted. "The tourist guide? It calls Sclerotto City 'colorful, fascinating, a commonwealth-in-miniature, a concrete example of interplanetary democracy in action'. I wish the man who wrote that eyewash had to live here as long as I have!"

He pulled out a rattan chair for Magnus Ridolph, poured ice-water into a glass. Magnus Ridolph settled himself into the chair and Boek sank into another opposite.

"Now then," said Magnus Ridolph, "who or what is McInch?"

Boek smiled bitterly. "That's what you're here for."

Magnus Ridolph airily glanced across the

room, lit a cigar, said nothing.

"After six years," said Boek presently, "all I know about McInch I can tell you in six seconds. First—he's boss over that entire stinking welter out there." He gestured at the city. "Second, he's a murderer, a self-seeking scoundrel. Third, no-one but McInch knows who McInch is."

Magnus Ridolph arose, walked to the window, depolarized it, looked out over the ramshackle roofs, stretching like a tattered Persian rug to Magnetic Bay. His gaze wandered to the shark-tooth crags stabbing the sky opposite, down the bay to where it opened into the tideless ocean, out to a horizon shrouded in lavender haze.

"Unprepossessing. I fail to understand how it attracts visitors."

**B**OEK joined him at the window. "Well—it's a strange world, certainly." He nodded at the roofs below. "Down in that confusion live at least a dozen different types of intelligent creatures—expatriates, exiles, fugitives—all crowded together cheek by jowl. Unquestionably it's amazing, the adjustments they've made to each other."

"Hm . . ." said Magnus Ridolph non-committally. Then: "This McInch—is he a man?"

Boek shrugged. "No one knows. And anyone who finds out dies almost at once. Twice Headquarters has sent out key men to investigate. Both of them dropped dead in the middle of town—one by the Export Warehouse, the other in the Mayor's office."

Magnus Ridolph coughed slightly.

"And the cause of their deaths?"

"Unclassified disease." Boek stared down at the roofs, the walls, lanes, arcades below. "The Mission tries to stand apart from local politics, though naturally in rubbing alien noses into Earth culture we're propagandizing our own system of life. And sometimes—" he grinned sourly—"circumstances like McInch arise."

"Of course," said Magnus Ridolph. "Just what form do McInch's depredations take?"

"Graft," said Boek. "Graft, pure and simple. Old-fashioned Earth-style civic corruption. I should have mentioned—" another sour grin for Magnus Ridolph—"but Sclerotto City has a duly elected mayor, and a group of civic officers. There's a fire department, a postal service, a garbage disposal unit, police force—wait till you see 'em!" He chuckled, a noise like a bucket

scraping on a stone floor. "That's actually what brings the tourists—the way these creatures go about making a living Earth-style."

Magnus Ridolph bent forward slightly, a furrow appearing in his forehead. "There seems to be no ostentation, no buildings of pretension—other than that one there by the bay."

"That's the tourist hotel," said Boek. "The Pondicherry House."

"Ah, I see," said Magnus Ridolph abstractedly. "I admit that at first sight Sclerotto City's form of government seems improbable."

"It becomes more sensible when you think of the city's history," said Boek. "Fifty years ago, a colony of Ordinationists was founded here—the only flat spot on the planet. Gradually—Sclerotto hangs just about outside the Commonwealth and no questions asked—misfits from everywhere in the cluster accumulated, and one way or another found means to survive. Those who failed—" he waved his hand—"merely didn't survive."

"When you come upon it fresh, like the tourists, it's astounding. The first time I walked down the main street, I thought I was having a nightmare. The Kmaush, in tanks, secreting pearls in their gizzards . . . centipedes from Portmar's Planet, the Tau Geminis, the Armadillos from Carnegie Twelve . . . Yellowbirds, Zeeks, even a few Aldebaranese—not to mention several types of anthropoids. How they get along without tearing each other to pieces still bothers me once in a while."

"The difficulty is perhaps more apparent than real," said Mangus Ridolph, his voice taking on a certain resonance.

Boek glanced sidewise at his guest, curled his lip. "You haven't lived here as long as I have." He turned his eyes back down to Sclerotto City. "With that dust, that smell, that . . ." he struggled for a word.

"In any event," said Magnus Ridolph, "these are all intelligent creatures. . . . Just a few more questions. First, how does McInch collect his graft?"

**B**OEK returned to his own chair, leaned back heavily. "Apparently he helps himself outright to city funds. The municipal taxes are collected in cash, taken to the city hall and locked in a safe. McInch merely opens the safe when he finds himself short,

takes what he needs, closes the safe again."

"And the citizens do not object?"

"Indignation is an emotion," said Boek with heavy sarcasm. "The bulk of the population are non-human, and don't have emotions."

"And those of the population that are men, and therefore can know indignation?"

"Being men—they're afraid."

Magnus Ridolph stroked his beard gently. "Let me put it this way. Do the citizens show any reluctance toward paying their taxes?"

"They have no choice," said Boek. "All the imports and exports are handled by a municipal cooperative. Taxes are assessed there."

"Why isn't the safe moved, or guarded?"

"That's been tried—by our late mayor. The guards he posted were also found dead. Unclassifiable disease."

"In all probability," said Magnus Ridolph, McInch is one of the city officials. They would be the first to be exposed to temptation."

"I agree with you," said Boek. "But which one?"

"How many are there?"

"Well—there's the postmaster, a Portmar multipede. There's the fire-chief, a man; the chief of police, a Sirius Fifth; the garbage collector, he's a—a—I can't think of the name. From 1012 Aurigae."

"A Golespod?"

"That's right. He's the only one of them in the city. Then there's the manager of the municipal warehouse, who is also the tax collector—one of the Tau Gemini ant-things—and last but not least, there's the Mayor. His name is Juju Jeejee—that's what it sounds like to me. He's a Yellowbird."

"I see. . . ."

After a pause Boek said, "Well, what do you think?"

"The problem has points of interest," admitted Magnus Ridolph. "Naturally I want to look around the city."

Boek looked at his watch. "When would you like to go?"

"I'll change my linen," said Magnus Ridolph, rising to his feet. "Then, if it's convenient to you, we'll look around at once."

"You understand now," said Boek gruffly, "the minute you start asking questions about McInch, McInch knows it and he'll try to kill you."

"The Uni-Culture Mission is paying me

a large fee to take that chance," declared Magnus Ridolph. "I am, so to speak, a latter-day gladiator. Logic is my sword, vigilance is my shield. And also," he touched his short well-tended beard, "I will wear air-filters up my nostrils, and will spray myself with antiseptic. To complete my precautions, I'll carry a small germicidal radiator."

"Gladiator, eh?" snorted Boek. "You're more like a turtle. Well, how long before you'll be ready?"

"If you'll show me my quarters," said Magnus Ridolph, "I'll be with you in half an hour."

**I**N GLOOMY triumph Boek said, "There's all that's left of the Ordinationists."

Magnus Ridolph looked at the cubical stone building. Small dunes of gray dust lay piled against the walls, the door gaped into blankness.

"At that, it's the solidest building in Sclerotto," said Boek.

"A wonder McInch hasn't moved in," observed Magnus Ridolph.

"It's now the municipal dump. The garbage collector has his offices behind. I'll show you, if you like. It's one of the sights. Er—by the way, are you incognito?"

"No," said Magnus Ridolph. "I think not. I see no special need for subterfuge."

"Just as you like," said Boek, jumping out of the car. He watched with pursed lips as Magnus Ridolph soberly donned a gleaming sun-helmet, adjusted his nasal air-filters and dark glasses.

They plowed through fine gray dust, which, disturbed by their steps, rose into the dual sunlight in whorls of red, blue and a hundred intermediate shades.

Magnus Ridolph suddenly tilted his head. Boek grinned. "Quite a smell, isn't it? Almost call it a stink, wouldn't you?"

"I would indeed," assented Magnus Ridolph. "What in the name of Pluto are we approaching?"

"It's the garbage collector—the Golespod. Actually, he doesn't collect the garbage, the citizens bring it here and throw it on him. He absorbs it."

They circled the ancient Ordinationist church, and Magnus Ridolph now saw that the back wall had been battered open, permitting the occupant light and air, but shading him from the two suns. This, the Golespod, was a wide rubbery creature,

somewhat like a giant ray, though blockier, thicker in cross-section. It had a number of pale short legs on its underside, a blank milk-blue eye on its front, a row of pliant tendrils dangling under the eye. It crouched half-submerged in semi-solid rottenness—scraps of food, fish entrails, organic refuse of every sort.

"He gets paid for it," said Boek. "The pay is all velvet, as his board and room are thrown in with the job."

A rhythmic shuffling sound came to their ears. Around the corner of the old stone church came a snakelike creature suspended on thirty skinny jointed legs.

"That's one of the mail carriers," said Boek. "They're all multipedes—and pretty good at it too."

**T**HE creature was long, wiry, and his body shone a burnished copper-red. He had a flat caterpillar face, four black shiny eyes, a small horny beak. A tray hung under his body containing letters and small parcels. One of these latter he seized with a foot, whistled shrilly. The Golespod grunted, flung back its front, tossing the trailing tentacles away from a black maw underneath.

The multipede tossed the little parcel into the mouth, and with a bright blank stare at Boek and Magnus Ridolph, turned in a supple arc and trundled around the building. The Golespod grunted, honked, burrowed deeper into the filth, where it lay staring at Boek and Magnus Ridolph—these two returning the scrutiny with much the same detached, faintly contemptuous, curiosity.

"Does he understand human speech?" inquired Magnus Ridolph.

Boek nodded. "But don't go too near him. He's an irascible brute."

Magnus Ridolph took a cautious step or two forward, looked into the milky blue eye.

"I'm trying to identify a criminal named McInch. Can you help me?"

The black body moved in sudden agitation, and a furious honking came from the pale under-body. The eye distended, swelled. Boek cocked an ear.

"It's saying, 'Go away, go away!'"

Magnus Ridolph said, "You are unable to help me then?"

The creature redoubled its angry demonstrations, suddenly lurched back, flung up its head, spewed a gout of vile-smelling fluid. Magnus Ridolph jumped nimbly back, but a

few drops struck his tunic, inundated him with a choking fetor.

Boek watched with an undisguised smile as Magnus Ridolph scrubbed at the spot with his handkerchief. "It'll wear off after a while."

"Umph," said Magnus Ridolph.

They returned through the dust to the car.

"I'll take you to the Export Warehouse," said Boek. "That's about the center of town, and we can go on foot from there. You can see more on foot."

To either side of the street now, the shacks and small shops, built of slate and split dried seaweed stalks, pressed ever closer, and life clotted more thickly about them. Human children, grimed and ragged, played in the street with near-featureless Capella-anthropoids young, immature Carnegie Twelve Armadillos, Martian frog-children.

Hundreds of small Portman multipedes darted underfoot like lizards, most of whom would be killed by their parents for reasons never quite understood by men. Yellow-birds—ostrichlike bipeds with soft yellow scales—strode quietly through the crowd, heads raised high, eyes rolled up. Like a parade of monsters in a dipsomaniac's delirium passed the population of Sclerotto City.

Stalls at either side of the street displayed simple goods—baskets, pans, a thousand utensils whose use only the seller and the buyer knew. Other shops sold what loosely might be termed food—fruits and canned goods for men, hard brown capsules for the Yellowbirds, squirming red worm-things for the Aldebaranese. And Magnus Ridolph noticed here and there little knots of tourists, for the most part natives of Earth, peering, talking, laughing, pointing.

Boek pulled his car up to a long corrugated-metal shed, and again they stepped out into the dust.

**T**HE warehouse was full of a hushed murmur. Scores of tourists walked about, buying trinkets—carved rock, elaborately patterned fabrics, nacreous jewels that were secreted in the bellies of the Kmaush, perfumes pressed from seaweed, statuettes, tiny aquaria in sealed globes, with a microscopic lens through which could be seen weirdly beautiful seascapes peopled with infusoria, tiny sponges, corals, darting squids, infinitesimal fish. Behind loomed

bales of the planet's staple exports: seaweed resin, split dried seaweed for surfacing veneer, sacks of rare metallic salts.

"There's the warehouse manager," said Boek, nodding toward an antlike creature standing waist high on six legs. It had dog-like eyes, a pelt of satiny gray fur, a relatively short thick thorax. "Do you want to meet him? He can talk, understand you. Mind like an adding-machine."

Interpreting Magnus Ridolph's silence as assent, Boek threaded the aisles to the Tau Gemini insect-thing.

"I can't introduce you," said Boek jovially—Magnus Ridolph noticed that he assumed affability like a cloak in the presence of the town's citizens—"because the manager here has no name."

"On my planet," said the insect in a droning accentless voice, "we are marked by chords, as you call them. Mine is—" a quick series of tones came from the two flaps near the base of his head.

"This is Magnus Ridolph, representing the Mission Headquarters."

"I'm interested," said Magnus Ridolph, "in identifying the criminal known as Mc-Inch. Can you help me?"

"I'm sorry," came the ant-creature's even vibrations. "I have heard the name. I am aware of his thefts. I do not know who he is."

Magnus Ridolph bowed.

"I'll take you to the fire-chief," said Boek.

The fire-chief was a tall blue-eyed Negro with dull bronze hair, wearing only a pair of knee-length scarlet trousers. Boek and Magnus Ridolph found him at an observation tower near the central square, with one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder. He nodded to Boek.

"Joe, a friend of mine from home," said Boek. "Mr. Magnus Ridolph, Mr. Joe Bertrand, our fire-chief."

The fire-chief darted a swift surprised glance at Magnus Ridolph, at Boek, and back again. "How do you do," he said as they shook hands. "I think I've heard your name somewhere before."

"It's an uncommon name," said Magnus Ridolph, "but I presume there are other Ridolphs in the Commonwealth."

Boek looked from one to the other, shifted his weight on his short legs, sighed, looked off down the street.

"Not many Magnus Ridolphs, though," said the fire-chief.

"Very few," agreed the white-bearded sage.

"I suppose you're after McInch."

"I am. Can you help me?"

"I know nothing about him. I don't want to. It's healthier."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I see. Thank you, in any event."

**B**OEK jerked his plump thumb at a tall building built of woven seaweed panels between bleached bone-white poles. "That's the city hall," he said. The Mayor lives upstairs, where he can, *ha, ha*, guard the city funds."

"Just what are his other duties?" Magnus Ridolph asked, gently beating the dust from the front of his tunic.

"He meets all the tourist ships, walks around town wearing a red fez. He's the local magistrate, and then he's in charge of town funds and pays the municipal salaries. Personally I don't think he's got the brains to be McInch."

"I'd like to see the safe that McInch is so free with," said Magnus Ridolph.

They pushed through a flimsy creaking door, into a long low room. The seaweed panelling of the walls was old, worn, shot with cracks, and each crack admitted twin rays of light, these painting twin red and blue images on the floor. The safe bulked against the opposite side of the room, an antique steel box with button combination.

A long yellow-scaled neck pushed down through a hole in the ceiling, and a flat head topped by a ridiculous little red fez turned a purple eye at them. A sleek yellow body followed the head, landing on thin flexible legs.

"Hello there, Mayor," said Boek heartily. "A man from Mission Headquarters—Mr. Ridolph, our Mayor, Juju Jeejee."

"Pleased-to-meet-you," said the Mayor shrilly. "Would you like my autograph?"

"Certainly," said Magnus Ridolph. "I'd be delighted."

The Mayor ducked his head between his legs, plucked a card from a body pouch. The characters were unintelligible to Magnus Ridolph.

"That is my name in the script of my native planet. The translation is roughly 'Enchanting Vibration'."

"Thank you," said Magnus Ridolph. "I'll treasure this memento of Sclerotto. By the way, I'm here to apprehend the creature

known as McInch—" The Mayor gave a sharp squawk, darted its head back and forth. "—and thought that perhaps you might be able to assist me."

The Mayor wove his neck in a series of S's. "No, no, no," he piped, "I know nothing, I am the Mayor."

Boek glanced at Magnus Ridolph, who nodded.

"Well, we'll be leaving, Mayor," said Boek. "I wanted my friend to meet you."

"Delighted," rasped the Mayor, and tensing his legs, hopped up through the hole in the ceiling.

A hundred yards through the red and blue shimmer brought them to the jail, a long barracks built of slate. The cells faced directly out on the street. Visible were the disconsolate head of a Yellowbird, the blank face of a Capella anthropoid, a man who stared as Boek and Magnus Ridolph passed, and spit speculatively into the dust.

"And what are their sins?" inquired Magnus Ridolph.

"The man stole some roofing; the Yellowbird assaulted a young Portmar centipede; the Capellan, I don't know. The chief of police—a Sirius Fifth—has his office behind."

**T**HE office was a tentlike lean-to, the chief of police an enormous torpedo-shaped amphibian. His flippers ended in long maniples, his skin was black and shiny, he smelled sickly-sweet. A ring of beady deep-sunk eyes completely circled his head.

When Boek and Magnus Ridolph—both perspiring, dirty and tired—appeared around the corner of the lean-to, he rose quivering and swaying on springy foot-flippers, drew one of his flippers across his barrel. Where the fingers had passed words sprang out on the black hide in startling white.

"Good-day, Mr. Boek. Good-day, sir."

"Hello, Fritz," said Boek. "Just passing through, showing my friend the town."

The amphibian lay back in his trough-shaped seat. The flippers passed along his barrel, the first message having faded.

"Anything I can show you?"

"I'm trying to find McInch," said Magnus Ridolph. "Can you help me?"

The flippers hesitated, fluttered across the barrel. "I know nothing. I will assist you in every official manner."

Magnus Ridolph nodded, turned slowly away. "I'll let you know when and if I

discover anything."

"Now," said Boek, coughing, clearing his throat of dust, "there's the post-office." He turned, looked back toward the Export Warehouse. "I think it's about as short to walk as it is to return for the car."

Magnus Ridolph glanced up at the two suns in the sea-green sky. "Does it cool off during the evening?"

"To some extent," said Boek, stepping forward doggedly. "We want to be back at the Mission by sunset. I never feel quite easy out after dark. Especially now, with McInch." He pursed his plump mouth.

Their path took them between the rickety shacks toward the waterfront. Life swarmed everywhere, life of the most disparate sorts. Through the windows and doors they saw quiet unnamed bulks, other shapes, agile and quick. Eyes of a dozen different kinds watched them, sounds never heard on Earth met their ears, smells never intended for earthly nostrils drifted across the roadway.

The scene around them gradually assumed a redder tone, as the blue sun sank lower toward the horizon. As they reached the post-office—a slate shed adjacent to the space-port, it dropped below the horizon and vanished.

If Magnus Ridolph expected interest and enthusiasm for his mission from the Postmaster, a Portmar centipede, he was disappointed. They found him sorting mail—standing on half his legs, rhythmically pigeon-holing letters with those remaining.

He paused in his work while Boek introduced Magnus Ridolph, stared at the detective with the impersonal uninterested gaze to which Magnus Ridolph was becoming accustomed, and disavowed any knowledge of McInch.

Magnus Ridolph glanced at Boek, said, "Excuse me, Mr. Boek, I'd like to ask the Postmaster one or two confidential questions."

"Certainly," sniffed Boek, and moved away.

Magnus Ridolph presently rejoined him.

"I wanted to find out what type of mail the civic officers received, and also any other circumstances he might have noted which would help me."

"And did he help you?"

"Very much," said Magnus Ridolph.

**T**HE two men skirted the waterfront, where giant seaweed barges loomed

dark at their moorings, then back toward the Export Warehouse. The red sun was close to the horizon when they finally reached the car, and blood-colored light gave the town an aspect of fabled antiquity, softening the clutter and squalor. Silently they drove up the bumpy road to the Mission at the top of the ridge.

As they alighted, Magnus Ridolph turned to Boek.

"Have you a microscope conveniently at hand?"

"Three," said Boek shortly. "Visual, electronic, gamma-beta."

"I'd like to use one of them tonight," said Magnus Ridolph.

"As you wish."

"Tomorrow I believe that, one way or another, we shall clear up the affair."

Boek stared at him curiously. "You think you know who McInch is?"

"It was immediately obvious," said Magnus Ridolph, "in the light of my special knowledge."

Boek clamped his jaw. "I'd bolt my door tonight, if I were you. Whoever he is—he's a murderer."

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I believe you're right."

Sclerotto night was long at this season—fourteen hours—and Magnus Ridolph arose, bathed, dressed himself in a clean white and blue tunic, all before dawn.

From the windows of the reception hall he stood watching for the sunrise, the sky as yet holding only a blue electric glare, when he heard a tread behind him.

Turning he found Klemmer Boek watching him, the round head twisted to one side, the blue eyes full of brittle speculation.

"Sleep well?" was Boek's greeting.

"Indeed I did," said Magnus Ridolph. "I hope you slept as soundly."

Boek grunted. "Ready for breakfast?"

"Quite ready," said Magnus Ridolph. They passed into the dining room, and Boek ordered breakfast from his lone servant.

They ate silently, the blue pre-dawn light growing ever stronger. Only after coffee did Magnus Ridolph lean back, expansively light a small cigar.

"Still think you can settle the case today?" asked Boek.

"Yes," said Magnus Ridolph, "I think it's very possible."

"Er—you know who McInch is?"

"Beyond a doubt."



"And can you prove it?"

Magnus Ridolph let a plume of cigar smoke curl up through his fingers into the first watery ray from the sapphire-blue sun.

"After a fashion—yes."

"You don't sound very assured."

"Well—I have a stratagem in mind which will save us a great deal of time."

"Yes?" said Boek, with heavy sarcasm, drumming his fingers.

"I would like you to have Mayor—ah, Juju? . . . call a meeting this afternoon of the city officials. The city hall would be a satisfactory place. And at the meeting we will discuss McInch."

**A**S THEY plowed through the dust to the city hall, Boek snapped "This seems a little melodramatic."

"Possibly, possibly," said Magnus Ridolph. "Possibly dangerous also."

Boek hesitated in midstride. "Are you sure—"

"Nothing is a certainty," said Magnus Ridolph. "Not even the continued rotation of this planet on its axis. And the least predictable phenomena I know of is the duration of a life."

Boek looked straight ahead, said nothing.

They entered the city hall, paused in the ante-room a moment to let their eyes adapt to the dimness. Ahead of them to right and left, bulks of different masses and shapes began to form, splotted here and there by the rays of red and blue which entered through the matting.

"The garbage collector is here," said Magnus Ridolph behind his hand to Boek. "I can smell him."

They advanced into the central room. The Mayor had been pacing solemnly back and forth, red fez perched slantwise, in the center of a rough circle formed by the Golespod garbage-collector, the multipede postmaster, Joe Bertrand the firechief, the Tau Gemini warehouse manager, and the amphibian Chief of Police.

"Gentlemen," said Magnus Ridolph, "I won't take up much of your time. As you all know, I have been investigating that entity known as McInch."

There was movement about the room—a twinkling of the multipede postmaster's legs, a quiver on the police-chief's rubbery hide, a twist of the Mayor's neck. There were slight nervous sounds—a soft hiss from the skatelike Golespod, the Negro fire-chief

clearing his throat.

The warehouse manager—the ant-like creature of Tau Gemini—spoke in his toneless voice. "Exactly why are we here? Make your purpose clear."

Magnus Ridolph serenely stroked his beard, glanced from creature to creature. "I have learned McInch's identity. I have estimated the sum he costs Sclerotto every day. I can prove that this creature is a murderer, or at the very least that he attempted to murder me. Yes, me—Magnus Ridolph!" and Magnus Ridolph stood stiff and stern as he spoke.

Again there was the guarded movement, the near-silent eddy of sound, as each of the creatures took itself into the familiar places of its own brain.

**M**AGNUS RIDOLPH said gravely, "As the governing body of the community I would value your advice on what course of action I should follow. Mr. Mayor, have you a suggestion?"

The Yellowbird wove its neck in a series of quick darts and plunges, piped a shrill series of excited unintelligible tones. The head came to a stand-still, the purple eye stared craftily at Magnus Ridolph. "McInch might kill us all."

Boek cleared his throat, muttered uncomfortably, "Do you think it's a good idea for us to . . ."

Fire-chief Joe Bertrand said, "I'm sick of all this pussy-footing. We have a jail. We have a legal code. Let's judge McInch by what he's done. If he's a thief, put him in jail. If he's a murderer, and if he can take mental surgery, let's give it to him. If he can't, let's execute him!"

Magnus Ridolph nodded. "I can prove McInch is a thief. Several years in jail might prove a salutary experience. You have a clean sanitary jail, with germicidal air-filters, compulsory bathing, pure, sanitary food—"

"Why do you emphasize the wholesomeness of the jail?" buzzed the warehouse manager.

"Because McInch will be exposed to it," said Magnus Ridolph solemnly. "He'll be vaccinated and immunized, and live in a completely germ-free environment. And this will hurt McInch more than death. Now," and he looked at the metal-tense figures around him, "who is McInch?"

The garbage-collector reared amazingly

erect, leaning far back, revealing its pale underbody, its double row of pale short legs. It writhed, hunched. "Duck!" yelled Boek as the Golespod spat a stinking wash of liquid to all quarters of the room. From the depths of its body came a rumbling voice. "Now all die, all die. . . ."

"Quiet!" said Magnus Ridolph sharply. "Quiet everyone! Mayor, quiet please!"

The Yellowbird's crazed piping diminished. "There is no danger for anyone," said Magnus Ridolph, coolly wiping his face, eyes upon the Golespod, who still reared back. "An ultra-sonic vibrator below the floor, a Hechtmann irradiator in the ceiling have been operating ever since we entered the room. The bacteria in McInch's serum were dead as soon as they left his mouth, if not before."

The Golespod hissed, lowered himself, plunged for the door, little legs pumping like pistons. The chief of police lunged like a porpoise from a wave, landed on the Golespod's flat writhing back. His clawed flippers hooked in the flesh, tore. The Golespod screamed, turned on its back, scraped the amphibian between its legs, folded itself around him, squeezed. Joe Bertrand sprang forward, kicking at the milk-blue eye. The Portmar centipede rippled into the mêlée, and with each of his slender feet seized one of the Golespod's, strained to pull them aside from the constricted chief of police. The Mayor hopped up through the hole in the ceiling, hopped back with a skewer, stabbed, stabbed, stabbed. . . .

**B**OEK staggered out to the car. Magnus Ridolph, throwing his stinking white and blue tunic into a ditch, joined him.

Boek clung to the wheel, his pink face clabbered.

"They—they tore him to pieces," he whispered.

"An unnerving spectacle," said Magnus Ridolph, testing his clotted beard. "A sordid adventure in every respect."

Boek turned a round accusing eye at him. "I believe you planned it like that!"

Magnus Ridolph said, gently, "My friend, may I suggest that we return to the Mission and bathe ourselves? I believe clean clothes would help restore our perspectives."

A sober Klemmer Boek sat across from Magnus Ridolph at the dinner table, a Klemmer Boek who barely looked at his food. Magnus Ridolph ate fastidiously, though

substantially. Once again he wore crisp linen, and his white beard was soft, expertly trimmed.

"But how," blurted Boek, "did you know the garbage-collector was McInch?"

"A simple process," said Magnus Ridolph, gesturing with his fork. "A perfectly straightforward sequence of logic; a framework of theory, the consulting of references—"

"Yes, yes, yes," muttered Boek. "Logic this, intelligence that. . . ."

Magnus Ridolph's mouth twitched slightly. "Here, in the concrete, is my chain of thought. McInch is a grafter, a thief, stealing large sums of money. What does he do with his loot? Nothing very conspicuous, otherwise his identity would be common knowledge. Assuming that McInch spent some or all of his money—an assumption by no means sure—I considered each of the civic officials, the most likely suspects, from the viewpoint of one of his own race.

"There was Joe Bertrand, the fire-chief. By this test, he was innocent. He lived frugally in an uncongenial environment.

I considered the Mayor. What was a Yellowbird's definition of delight? I found it would include a field of a certain type of flower, the scent of which drugs and exalts the Yellowbirds. Nothing of this sort was evident on Sclerotto. The Mayor, in his own eyes, lived a meager life.

"Next the warehouse manager, the Tau Gemini ant-creature. The wants of these individuals are very modest. The words 'luxury' and 'leisure' have no equivalents in their language. If for this reason alone I was tempted to drop him. I learned from the postmaster that he purchased a number of books every month—these were his only conspicuous indulgence—but their value was commensurate with his salary. Temporarily, at least, I dismissed the warehouse manager.

"The chief of police—a decisive case. By nature he is an amphibian, accustomed to a diet of mollusks. His planet is marshy and dank. Contrast all this to his life here on Sclerotto. A wonder he is able to survive.

"I wondered about the postmaster—the multipede from Protmar's Planet. His concept of luxury is a deep tank of warm oil, massage by little animals captured and trained for that purpose. This treatment bleaches the skin to a sandy beige. The postmaster's skin is horny and brick-red, a sign of poverty and neglect.

"Consider the garbage collector. The human reaction to his way of life is disgust, contempt. We cannot believe that a creature wallowing in filth possesses subtle discriminations. However I knew that the Golespods possess an internal sense of the most delicate precision. They exist by ingesting organic matter, allowing it to ferment under the action of bacteria in a series of stomachs, and the ensuing alcohol they oxidize for energy.

"Now the composition or quality of the organic raw materials is of no concern to the Golespod—garbage, protein waste, carrion, it's all one, just as we ignore slight variations in the air we breathe. They derive their enjoyment not from these raw materials, but from the internal products—and to these ends, the variety and blends of bacteria in their stomachs is all-important.

"Over the course of thousands of years, the Golespods have become bacteriologists of an extremely high order. They have isolated millions of various types, created new strains, each invoking in them a different sensual response. The most prized strains are difficult to isolate and hence are expensive.

"When I learned this, I knew that the garbage-collector was McInch. In his own mind he was in a supremely enviable position—surrounded by unlimited quantities of organic materials, able to afford the rarest, most enticing blends of bacteria.

"I learned from the postmaster that the Golespod indeed received a small parcel from every incoming mail-ship—these of course the bacteria he imported from his home planet, some fantastically expensive."

**M**AGNUS RIDOLPH leaned back now, sipped his coffee, watching his wan host over the rim. Boek stirred. "How—how did he kill the two investigators then?" he asked. "And you said he tried to kill you."

"Do you recall how he spat at me yes-

terday? When I returned to the Mission I examined the stain under your microscope. It was a thick blanket of dead bacteria. I could not identify them, but luckily my precautions had killed them." He sipped his coffee, puffed his cigar. "Now, as for my fee, I believe you received instructions in that connection."

Boek rose heavily, walked to his desk, returned with a check.

"Thank you," said Magnus Ridolph, gazing at the figure. He tapped his fingers musingly on the table. "So Sclerotto City finds itself without a garbage collector. . . ."

Boek scowled. "And no prospect of finding one. The city'll stink worse than ever."

Magnus Ridolph had been languidly stroking his beard, gazing thoughtfully into space. "No . . . I fancy that the profit would hardly repay the effort."

"How's that?" inquired Boek, blinking.

Magnus Ridolph roused himself from his reverie, dispassionately considered Boek, who was chewing his fingernails.

"Your dilemma aroused a train of thought."

"Well?"

"In order to make money," said Magnus Ridolph, "you must provide something that someone is willing to pay for. A self-evident statement? Not so. A surprising number of people are occupied selling objects and services no one wants. Very few are successful."

"Yes," said Boek patiently. "What's that got to do with collecting garbage? Do you want the job? If you do, say so, and I'll recommend you to the Mayor."

Magnus Ridolph turned him a glance of mild reproach. "It occurred to me that 1012 Aurigae teems with Golespods any one of whom would pay for the privilege of filling the job." He sighed, shook his head. "The profit of a single transaction would hardly justify the effort . . . A Commonwealth-wide employment service? It might be a venture of considerable profit."