

# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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# THE UNTOUCHABLES

by CALVIN M. KNOX

NOVELETTE

*illustrated by* BOWMAN

It takes all kinds of planets, all kinds of customs to make a universe. — But who would have believed the odd reason behind Dyrain's rigid and inhuman caste system?

**T**HE planet was a sort of half-way house, lying in the vaguely-defined neutral zone between the warring spheres of influence of Earth and Deneb. Its name was Dyrain. It was Earthtype, inhabited by intelligent alien beings, and was a favorite tourist-world for well-heeled Terran travellers.

It was also the center of a Denebian spy-chain.

At least, that was the way it looked to Terra Intelligence, and that was how Lloyd Malin came to pay a visit to Dyrain.

Malin was an eight-year veteran of Terra Intelligence's outworld branch, and that meant he was just about eligible for a pension; he was one of

less than half a dozen men who had survived eight years of the job and still came back for more. He had been doing a job on Canopus VII, where the mean temperature was 110 in the shade and the gravity better than 1.5 Earthnorm, when he received a subspace communication telling him to turn over the Canopus job to another staff man and report at once for reassignment to Dyrain.

All in all, Special Agent Malin felt pretty good about the transfer. He was trained not to care what sort of environment his work took him to—but still, it was only human to prefer a balmy vacation-world to one where sweat



ran in rivers down a man and it was a struggle just to walk down the street.

The instructions did not say "report to Dyrain." They said "report to Earth Central for reassignment to Dyrain," and so Malin boarded a starship heading to Earth from Canopus VII, and four weeks later had made his landing. He went immediately to Earth Central, the nerve-center of Terra Intelligence: a squat, chunky, archaic building in the downtown section of Milwaukee.

The door screened him and admitted him. He was met by a tall man in the uniform of the Terran Military Forces who conducted him up the gravshaft into the main offices of Intelligence. Most of the faces were new; it was two years since Malin had last been here, or anywhere else on Earth, and in that time a great many personnel transfers had taken place.

One member of the staff had not changed, though. That was OMNIVAC — General Omnivac, some of the officers called him. The sprawling, many-levelled computer who served

as master control force for the unnumbered galaxy-wide tentacles of Terra Intelligence.

Malin was conveyed into a private cubicle that had direct access to the speech chambers of OMNIVAC. There he was left, in a glass-walled room, alone with the speaker-grid that connected with the complex mind far below him in the depths of the building.

**T**HE computer's astonishingly human voice said, "I've received your report on the Canopus situation, Malin. You did a good job there."

"Thank you, sir." Like everyone else in Terra Intelligence, Malin had come by now to regard the great synthetic brain as a human being. It was easier on the nerves to personify OMNIVAC that way.

"I've pulled you off the Canopus job for several reasons. One was that the probability was overwhelming that you'd be detected within the next several months. I didn't want to lose you so fast."

"I took every precaution to keep my identity hidden, sir."

"Naturally. But the prob-

ability was building. There was a slip somewhere, and I don't mean to imply that you committed any errors. It's simply that we've been suffering tremendous information leaks. The Denebians are finding out too many of our supposedly secret plans."

Malin remained silent, staring at the enamelled speaker grid. In his mind's eye he held a mental image of the computer—as a youngish general, with clipped hair, a stubby mustache, cold iron-gray eyes.

The computer went on, "We've narrowed the vector of this spy-leak considerably. We think it's centering on Dyrain. Naturally, since Dyrain is a neutral planet, we have to exercise great discretion in our investigations. If a Terran investigator should be uncovered on Dyrain, the Denebians would have a powerful propaganda-weapon to use against us in winning the affection of other neutral worlds throughout the galaxy."

"I understand, sir. It's risky to do any spying on a neutral world."

"Of course. On the other

hand, we can't afford to allow this spy-chain to continue in operation. We'll have to take certain risks if we're going to smash it—you see that, don't you, Malin?"

"Of course, sir."

"Very good. There's a spaceship leaving for Dyrain in two days, from Starport in Antarctica. It's a tourist ship, first class. We've arranged for you to be aboard. We have an entrance visa for you, all the necessary papers, a full supply of the sort of literature a tourist might be expected to carry. We've worked out a complete biography for you; it's been taped and you can pick it up hypnopedically along with any information on the planet you may need."

"Yes, sir."

"One word of caution: if you're caught, we'll have to disown you. We won't lift a finger in your defense. It has to be that way, you see—since Dyrain is a neutral world."

Malin smiled. The computer's words did not disturb him. It had always been his private feeling that an Intelligence man who got caught did

not *deserve* to be bailed out by his planet.

He simply said, "I'll do my best, sir."

**T**HAT night Malin stayed at a residence club maintained by Terra Intelligence for agents paying short-term visits to Earth. He retired early and adjusted the hypnopedic mechanism that would feed information to him while he slept.

It murmured gently through the night. When he woke, he carried with him not only a false identity but considerable information about the planet of Dyrain.

He was now Paul O'Connor, age 35, an unmarried and fairly wealthy stockbroker, who lived in that part of Connecticut known to some as South Boston and to others as Upper New York City. He had saved up his annual vacations and now was taking a year's leave, most of which he planned to spend vacationing on Dyrain. This was his third trip into space; he had visited Sirius and Procyon on business trips—Sirius five years ago, in 2780, and Procyon two years after that.

As for Dyrain, he learned that it was an Earthtype world 8100 miles in diameter, fifth in orbit around a warm reddish-gold sun. Because of its small angle of declination from its ecliptic, it had little seasonal variation. Its polar regions were cold and impassable all the year round; most of the rest of the planet was semi-tropical in nature, with pleasant winds and not excessive humidity.

The inhabitants were humanoid and probably descended from simian stock; they were advanced enough to have developed a homogenous planetary culture whose most important facet was its rigid division into castes—an administrative caste, a priestly caste, a merchant caste, a common caste (by far the largest numerically) and an untouchable caste, pariahs who lived in absolute poverty.

The Dyrainna, as they called themselves, maintained strict neutrality in the conflict between Earth and its unruly colony on Deneb's four worlds; they allowed both Earthmen and Denebians to enter the planet as tourists, though they

steadfastly refused to permit either side to establish any kind of military or other official outpost on their soil.

Life on Dyrain was easy and gentle. The Dyrainna did not wish to involve themselves in other people's arguments. Nevertheless, it looked apparent that Dyrain was serving as a channel-point for Denebian spy couriers. Malin had the tough job of smashing the spy-ring without offending the neutrality of the Dyrainna.

It was the toughest job he had ever had, in eight years of Intelligence work. He was looking forward to it eagerly.

**A** day later he caught an afternoon jet for Antarctica, where Earth's biggest spaceport had been built on what had once been a useless, frozen continent. The trip took less than half an hour; he travelled aboard a hundred-seater that rose straight up, plunged two hundred miles into space, and re-entered the atmosphere over Antarctica after travelling at fantastic speeds.

The Starport covered better than a hundred square miles,

but it was efficiently patrolled and Malin had no trouble finding his way to the departure deck for the Dyrain ship. He was carrying a suitcase filled with the sort of things a vacationing young stockbroker would be likely to carry—light reading, fancy clothes, and the like. Terra Intelligence had made up the suitcase for him. Like all outworld agents, Malin had no home, no personal property. He felt no need for it.

He presented the papers belonging to "Paul O'Connor" at the proper desks and was passed through; his ticket had been bought by Intelligence through an intricate four-way deal, to avoid any possibility of a trace. It entitled him to one first-class cabin aboard the starship *Song of Altair*, round trip, cost four thousand Galactic credits.

A conveyor-belt took his luggage aboard. He was told that checkdown for departure would begin in two hours, and he spent the time roaming around the spaceport, behaving as any departing tourist would. Intelligence had supplied him with ten thousand credits in trav-

ellers' checks, for him to use as expense-money.

He bought ten credits' worth of flight insurance, naming a mythical aunt in Wisconsin as his beneficiary. She would collect a hundred thousand credits if the *Song of Altair* failed to reach its destination. He browsed in the bookstore and purchased two tapes, both of them recent and trivial novels, to take with him.

His next stop was the Universe Bar, famed throughout the galaxy as a place where almost every alcoholic beverage known to the cosmos could be had—for a price. Summoning his sleep-learned knowledge of Dyrain, he called loudly for a kiezz—the fiery green wine of Dyrain.

He expected the bartender to look blankly at him and ask for a repeat, but the fame of the Universe Bar was upheld; the barkeep merely said, "Five credits," and punched out the order on the dial before him.

A moment later a crystal beaker filled with cloudy green liquid slid down the ramp and landed in front of Malin. He sipped cautiously; it was strong

stuff. Around him, people were drinking the cocktails of a hundred worlds, and paying a stiff price for the privilege.

The loudspeaker boomed, "Checkdown beginning for flight to Dyrain aboard *Song of Altair*. Passengers please take their places aboard ship."

The barkeep grinned at Malin and said, "Guess that call's for you, pal. Go easy on the kiezz when you get there."

Malin winked leeringly. "If it's five credits a shot there, you bet I'll go easy!"

"Give you a tip: it's half a buck a quart there. The rest's overhead and profit. Want another before you go on board, sucker?"

Malin shook his head. "One fiver's enough, thanks. I'll wait till I get there for the next shot."

He weaved away from the bar and found the aisle that led to the departure deck. Ten minutes later he was on his way aboard the *Song of Altair*, bound for Dyrain with a full cargo of wealthy tourists. As he stepped aboard, he deliberately blotted out the identity of Lloyd Malin. From here on he



was Paul O'Connor of South Boston, out for a joyride on Dyrain.

**T**AKING one thing after another, Malin thought on the eighth day of the two-week cruise through hyperspace, life on a luxury interstellar liner wasn't so bad at all. The food was superb, the accommodations plush and lavish, the nightly entertainment excellent. There was a well-stocked bar aboard ship, a recreation deck, a library, a video room whose programs originated from within the ship itself. The cost of a one-way trip was twenty-five hundred credits, but you got your money's worth.

He had mingled with the crowd of tourists on board, gotten to know them fairly well. There were four hundred passengers on the giant ship. Most of them were middle-aged couples taking the big trip of their lives; the first-trippers could be spotted by the way they stood goggle-eyed in front of the hundred square feet of the main viewplate, staring through its crystal sleekness at the unfathomable star-specked depths

of space all around. In hyperspace the sky seemed to be frozen and unmoving. It was an overpowering sight the first time, and retained some of its wonder for Malin even after hundreds of space voyages.

There were a few honeymooning couples aboard ship too, for Dyrain was considered an ideal honeymoon spot for anyone who could afford the trip. It wasn't hard to recognize the honeymooners, of course. When they came out of their cabins at all, they stuck close together, looking faintly ill-at-ease and happy all at the same time.

About ten percent of the passengers were travelling alone. There were ten or fifteen rich young playboys of the type Malin was pretending to be, and there were about twenty single women, ranging in age from twenty-one to sixty-one or thereabouts. It was deemed excellent business policy to foment shipboard romances, and so Malin found himself thrown in contact with these women fairly frequently, whenever the ship's social director could arrange it.

He played his part to the hilt, dancing gaily, drinking, spending money without care. After all, if he ran short he could always wire an Intelligence contact-man for more.

Malin circulated very thoroughly through the passenger group, getting to know as many as he could. It was part of his job. After all, there was no telling which one or ones of them happened to be Denebian couriers, on their way to Dyrain with Terran military secrets to relay back to the enemy worlds.

It could be almost any of them—or it could be none. Perhaps the courier was Florence Cottrell, the black-haired divorcee who seemed so free with her favors. Perhaps it was fat old Ben Marshall, the widowed grain-merchant; perhaps the Donovans, who were both twenty-two, newly married, and not anxious to talk to anybody but each other.

Maybe Roy Buckley, Princeton '84, making an oat-sowing trip on his father's oil money, was carrying minimicrofilms of Terran documents with him. Or it could be the Brysons, loud and noisy and forty-five-ish,

making their very first trip off Earth and making sure everybody aboard ship found out about it.

It could be any of them, or none. The Denebians could disguise their spy as well as Earth could disguise its counterspy, after all. Malin knew he would simply have to bide his time, keeping his eyes open, and watch and see. Jumping to premature conclusions might turn out to be fatal for him and disastrous for the Terran cause.

**T**HE landing came off right on schedule—June 11, 2785, on the Galactic Absolute Calendar, which was pegged to Earth's own twenty-four hour day. Throughout all of the civilized galaxy, including the Denebian sector, the Galactic Absolute Calendar was in use. It made for less confusion to have every planet keeping time by the arbitrarily-designated Terran Second.

The *Song of Altair* emerged from hyperspace at the proper checkpoint and made the planetary landing with its auxiliary jets. It was mid-afternoon when the great ship came finally to

rest on the landing apron at the starport of Dyrain Bor, the largest city of Dyrain and the only one fully equipped to handle a ship of the size of the *Song of Altair*.

"Terran tourists this way, please," a crewman said, and Malin and his fellow passengers were led through the brightly lit corridors of the starport terminal to the immigration desks of the Dyrainna government. The journey took them outdoors for a short stretch. The day was warm and mild, with the temperature perhaps seventy-five or eighty and the humidity low. A gentle breeze drifted in over the starport, carrying the alien perfumes of strange forms of life. Overhead hung the sun, a golden-red ball whose bronze beams curiously altered colors and hues.

Dyrainna moved busily to and fro in the starport area. Malin studied them with interest. They were compactly-built humanoids, no more than five feet tall, with shimmering quick-moving eyes, set wide and apparently functioning independent of each other. Their

noses were downswept beaks, their mouths wide and drooping. Most of them were a dark purple in color, though the range of color spread from light blue to a near-black.

It was possible to identify the castes, too. In the short walk Malin saw none of the administrators, but he knew they would be identified by the skull-crest of bright feathers. The priests, of which a few were visible, wore necklaces of brightly-polished silver coins as well as colorful head-crests. The merchant caste was marked by its clothing, which was loud of color and voluminous of cut, while the commoners, the members of the fourth caste, wore no crests nor coins and simple drab clothes.

But it was the untouchables who drew the whispered comments from the tourist party as it passed through the open area. Malin saw five or six of these unfortunates, clad in miserable rags, walking in a dismal shambling gait toward no particular destination. They seemed to be without hope, without life even, simply ema-

ciated walking corpses shunned by all.

They walked alone, not even keeping company with each other. Their bodies were shrunken from poverty and their eyes were turned toward the ground. Once Malin saw a merchant-caste member approach within a dozen feet of one of the pariahs and toss him a glittering coin. The pariah scooped it up without a word, and continued on his slow way.

"This way, please," their guide called to them.

They entered the customs shed, where their papers were checked through rapidly and their visas approved. A crisp-mannered English-speaking Dyrainna of the highest caste handled the procedure. Commoners lurked at the far end of the customs shed, ready to help out with carrying luggage in return for the Terran coins that served as legal currency throughout the galaxy.

When it was Malin's turn to go through the entry routine, the Dyrainna at the desk said, in a clear and un-accented English, "Are you travelling independently, Mr. O'Connor?"

Malin shook his head and smiled. "I'm supposed to report to Terran Tours, Inc. They're handling my itinerary."

The Dyrainna nodded briskly. "Very good, sir. The Terran Tours coach is just outside to your left. If you'll give your luggage voucher to me, I'll see to it that your bags reach you safely."

Malin surrendered the slip and passed through the shed and outdoors. A long green motor-coach of alien design waited there. Inscribed on it were the words TERRAN TOURS, INC. in English, and underneath it a series of bird-scratchings that probably were the same words in the native language of Dyrain.

**M**OST of the new arrivals from the *Song of Altair* had arranged their trip through the main office of Terran Tours, and so were all staying at the hotel operated by the travel company in Dyrain Bor. The motor-coach was greeted outside the hotel by a plump, pink-faced Earthman of about fifty, who met them as they stood in a huddled group wait-

ing to be led to the next stop.

"May I have your attention, please, ladies and gentlemen?" he asked, holding up his hands. "Thank you. My name is Robinson, and I'm the local representative of Terran Tours, Inc. Welcome to the pleasure-world of Dyrain, one and all! From here until the moment you blast off for your next port of call, I'll be helping you each and all to enjoy yourselves on Dyrain. First thing of all is to get you settled in your rooms. If you'll all come with me, please—"

It was a group of about fifty. Malin followed along, finding himself walking next to Florence Cottrell as they entered the hotel lobby.

"It's a lovely place, isn't it!" the divorcee chattered happily. "I mean the planet and the hotel too, of course! Weren't those pariahs *picturesque*! If I only had my camera out in time!"

With an enthusiasm that he did not feel, Malin agreed. "They're just skin and bones. It must be a terrible life, being an untouchable."

"Oh, they don't mind, I

guess. It's their station in life, and they accept it."

Together they entered the hotel lobby. It was big and well furnished, and occupied mostly by Earthmen, though there were a few native servants scattered around—and, Malin noticed with some surprise, a pair of untouchables squatting on the plush carpet with begging-bowls at their sides. It was startling to see the pariahs in these luxurious surroundings. Evidently there was a taboo against restricting their wanderings.

At the desk, Malin picked up his room assignment and was told that his luggage would be delivered to his door. Florence Cottrell was given the room next to his; Malin wondered if Terran Tours, Incorporated had arranged that, as a possible method of starting a romance between unmarried members of the group.

He noticed other familiar faces from the ship being assigned to rooms. There was burly Ben Marshall, badgering a bellhop about something, and there were the honeymooning Donovans, smiling nervously at

each other and holding hands tightly. Elsewhere he saw Roy Buckley chatting with one of the girls from the ship, and the Brysons having an argument with each other.

Malin started to head for the gravshaft, with Florence Cottrell still tagging along. Suddenly she said, "Oh, excuse me! I *must* give something to that beggar!"

She darted across the lobby, moving well despite the six-inch spikes on her shoes, and unsnapped her purse. Malin saw a coin flash in her hand and drop with a *clink* into the begging bowl of one of the squatting crosslegged untouchables. The pariah made no gesture of thanks, did not even look up.

Returning, she said, "Silly of me, but I always do what the guidebooks say. It's supposed to be terribly good luck to give alms to the pariahs here!"

**T**HE room they gave him was about what could be expected of a tourist hotel—that is, superficially decked out to seem alien, but actually not

very much different from a hotel room back on Earth. There was a molecular bath and a washstand, and a polarized window; the lighting was by modern chemoluminescence. All very Earthlike indeed.

But alien features had been slapped on the surface. The room was decorated in a Dyrainna pattern that was hard on the eyes, a series of concentric ellipses, slightly lopsided, that dwindled away to nothingness—each of them a different color, and a color that by Terran standards clashed violently with its neighbor. A caged bird sat in one corner of the room, as was traditional in every Dyrainna household.

Malin studied the bird. It was reptilian-looking, with a full set of teeth and beady green eyes; its feathers were many-colored and somewhat greasy. As he approached, it parted its huge black beak and emitted a harsh keep-away kind of sound. He noticed that the cage was sealed by a radionic lock, to prevent curious tourists from releasing the obviously dangerous creature.

A pair of incense-burners

stood on the clothes-dresser. The tour people had left a thick folder of maps on the table, along with a guidebook in case he did not have one. Very thoughtful of them, Malin decided.

A timid knock sounded at the door. Malin opened it and found a very small Dyrainna standing outside, with his luggage.

"O'Connor-*haai*?"

"That's right," Malin said. He spoke English even though a knowledge of the Dyrainna language had been hypnotically instilled into him. A stockbroker from South Boston, Connecticut, was not expected to understand the language of a planet located several dozen light-years from Earth.

The alien boy carried his baggage inside and deposited it next to the bed. He stood waiting; Malin grinned and handed him a quarter-credit piece. The guidebook had said that the Dyrainna accepted Terran money even more readily than they did their own.

"Thank you very muchly," the boy said in halting English. He gestured with respect and

then popped out of the room.

Malin unpacked quickly. His thoughts were of his mission. Somehow he had to uncover what was probably a skillfully-operated chain of spy couriers. He had no clues at all, except the information he had been given at the outset of his journey.

That was not much. A known Denebian spy had been captured a month before by Terran counterintelligence men, and in the course of their interrogation they had learned only that Dyrain served as a clearing-house for secret information. Somehow spies from the Terran area came to Dyrain and passed on their information to Denebians who carried it back into the enemy zone.

Indications were that some of the tourists who visited Dyrain from Earth were actually Denebian spies. But which ones, Malin wondered, and how will I detect them?

He finished unpacking. The roomphone rang, and he switched it on. The jovial features of the Terran Tours man, Robinson, appeared on the tiny

black-and-white phone screen.

"Everything all right, Mr. O'Connor?"

"Fine," Malin said.

"Glad to hear it. I'm calling all of the new arrivals to make sure they're having no difficulties."

"You people really believe in service, don't you?" Malin said.

Robinson chuckled. "We like to make our guests feel at home no matter what world they're on. I wanted to let you know that the first meal will be served in about an hour, in the hotel dining room. Do you have any particular food allergies?"

"Not a one."

"Fine, fine! There'll be Ter-ran food available, by the way, in case the native stuff doesn't appeal to you. But I'm sure you'll enjoy it. Everyone does!"

**A**N hour later he was in the ornately furnished hotel dining room, having changed into the sort of costume Paul O'Connor was likely to wear but which privately filled Lloyd Malin with horror. It consisted of a fashionable blue cape over yellow tights and a span-

gled vest. He had stopped off at the hotel bar for a drink of kiezz first. As he had been told, it cost only half a credit a glass—a far cry from the five-credit tab he had paid at the Antarctica Starport.

In the dining room he found he had been seated at a table with Roy Buckley and a girl named Sarah, the Brysons, and Florence Cottreil. Robinson was circulating among the tourists, making sure all the new arrivals were enjoying themselves. Dyrainna waiters were bringing food to the tables. A bowl of mild wine sat near Malin's plate, and he poured some; it helped to neutralize the effect of the potent kiezz.

The first course was a sort of fish, pungent and apparently pretty gamy. Malin, who had sampled the foods of thirty planets and so was accustomed to almost anything, did not find the dish repugnant—but in the character of Paul O'Connor he felt called upon to offer some kind of comment, and he did.

"This stuff looks like it's been hanging in a closet for six months."



He wrinkled up his nose. Across the table from him Roy Buckley cut a slice and sampled it gingerly. Finally he nodded and pronounced his verdict: "It's good."

"I don't know," Malin said hesitantly.

"Go on," Florence Cottrell urged gigglingly. "Try some!"

He did, finally, and found it not unpleasant to the taste. But he left half of it on the plate anyway. The character he had assumed was one that was a little suspicious of alien things, and it wouldn't do for Paul O'Connor to take to Dyrainna cookery too quickly.

The next course was a vegetable, and after that meat; Robinson circulated, explaining what each thing was to anyone who was curious. Malin ate quietly, saying little, listening with care, hoping someone might make a slip that would give him his first clue.

Halfway through the meat course an untouchable appeared at the doorway of the dining room—a wiry little Dyrainna, wearing only a loin-cloth. He carried a wooden begging-bowl, and began to circu-

late, pleading with his eyes for scraps of leftover food.

"I think that's disgusting," Mrs. Bryson said. "Letting filthy beggars wander around a hotel dining room!"

"It's the custom here," Florence Cottrell said. "The pariahs are holy men. Nobody dares stop them no matter where they want to go or what they do."

Mrs. Bryson shook her head stubbornly. "I *still* think it's a filthy habit!"

The pariah, as if he had heard her petulant exclamation, immediately changed course and headed for their table, standing patiently at Mrs. Bryson's elbow without uttering a word. She sawed away doggedly at her meat, trying to ignore the untouchable.

Unsmellable too, Malin thought. Evidently the beggars didn't believe in baths.

After a long moment the pariah abandoned his idea of cadging a scrap from Mrs. Bryson, and moved around the table to stand near Malin and Florence Cottrell. Grinning, Malin severed a gristly section of his meat and dumped it into

the greasy bowl. The beggar nodded and left the vicinity to devour his prize.

Mrs. Bryson muttered something darkly. Her husband tried to soothe her. Malin studied them both with diligent care. She was behaving too much like a typical tourist for it to be entirely convincing, he thought. Quite possibly all this loud complaining about the pariah was intended as a form of camouflage. Perhaps—

His attention was abruptly diverted from the Brysons by the arrival of a waiter bearing a tureen of soup. As the waiter staggered toward the table under the weight of the heavy tray, the pariah happened to cross his path, startling him and causing him to lose his balance.

Half a tureen of hot soup cascaded out over the diners at the table. Malin received a stinging splash against the back of his right hand; next to him, Florence Cottrell got the bulk of the soup on her neck and shoulders, while Mr. Bryson took a searing on his left arm.

Neither the woman nor Bryson had ever learned the Jen-

sen pain-controlling techniques, and so they yelled in pain; Malin, who had learned them, remained silent. At once Robinson came rushing toward the table, shouting apologies as he came. The waiter was down on his knees, mumbling in Dyrainna; the untouchable scurried quickly away from the scene.

Malin assured the apologetic Robinson that he had not been badly hurt, and then turned to look at Florence Cottrell, whose dress had been ruined and who seemed to have had a good scalding.

He looked at her with great interest. For at the moment when the soup landed she had cried out a single word: "*Faroo!*"

Malin found that very interesting. For *faroo* happened to be a particularly obscene curseword—in the language of the Denebians.

**I**N the momentary confusion following the accident, Malin did his best to make it seem as if he hadn't heard the incriminating obscenity that had involuntarily slipped from the woman's lips. He accepted a

napkin and the apologies of the management and wiped his sleeve. The hotel officials were so profusely upset about the incident that it was almost embarrassing to listen to them.

Malin was grateful to the clumsy waiter, though. The spilling of a bowl of soup had given him the first clue in his search.

The dining-room returned to normal after a while, and a new waiter began to serve them. Robinson assured them that the other Dyrainna was so disturbed by the incident that he had suffered a collapse and might possibly commit suicide in atonement.

"Oh, he shouldn't do that!" Mrs. Bryson exclaimed. "It really wasn't his fault. That foul little beggar scooted right in front of him just as he came along with the soup!"

Robinson smiled reproachfully. "One of the fundamentals of Dyrainna culture, Mrs. Bryson, is the freedom of the pariah to go wherever he likes. You must understand this fact to understand the way of life here."

Her husband turned on her

and said savagely, "You see, Bessie? If you bothered to read the guidebook you would have known—"

"George! Don't start anything here!"

Robinson attempted to check the quarrel before it began. Meanwhile, Malin turned his attention to Florence Cottrell and said, "Are you all right?"

She looked pale. *No wonder*, Malin thought. *She's wondering if she gave herself away with that Denebian cussword.*

She said indistinctly, "I'm—a little shaken up, I guess. The sudden shock—"

"Would you want me to show you to your room?" Malin suggested.

Smiling faintly, she said, "If it wouldn't be too much trouble—that is—"

"No trouble at all," Malin said gallantly. "Anything to help a lady in distress."

He rose from the table and helped her to her feet. The ubiquitous Robinson came by and Malin said to him, "Mrs. Cottrell feels a little shaky right now. I'm going to take her to her room."

"Perhaps you'd do better to

finish your meal," Robinson suggested. "One of the hotel staff could show her upstairs, and—"

"No, I'd rather," Malin said, winking broadly at the other. Robinson caught the implication; he grinned and said, "Very well. I hope you'll be feeling better soon, Mrs. Cottrell. And please accept our humblest apologies for this. It's a terrible way to begin a visit to a new planet, I know."

**M**ALIN steered her through the big dining-room and out onto the balcony at left that led to the gravshaft. She was walking unsteadily; obviously the sudden shower of hot soup *had* been a shock to her nervous system—enough of a shock to shatter her meticulous facade of false identity for at least a moment.

A moment that she was probably regretting right now, Malin thought.

But he believed that she would recover from that soon enough. After all, he was only a South Boston stockbroker, and unless she had been warned to expect a counterspy in the

group she would not suspect him of having understood the word she had uttered.

At the door of her room she turned and smiled at him, saying, "I'd better get out of this dress, hadn't I? Will you excuse me a moment?"

"Of course."

The dress, a plastiloom affair of translucent lace and yellow crepe, was just about ruined; a great dark area had appeared in back. Malin watched her disappear into her room, then turned and entered his own, which lay adjoining hers.

Quickly he unpacked the small kit he had carried tucked inside his shaving bag, and began to set up the equipment he wanted. A tiny ultrasonic spray, no larger than the sting of a bee, which fastened on a thread round his middle finger—a spray designed to inject veronone, the newest truth serum, at the most minute pressure.

He attached the spray to his finger, checked to make sure it was in functioning order, and straightened his cape. His hand was slightly blistered where the

soup had struck it, but he felt no pain.

After a few moments he returned to the hall and knocked gently at Florence Cottrell's door.

"May I come in?"

"Of course," she said in a seductive voice.

She had changed her clothes. The ruined plastiloom dress lay in a crumpled heap on the chair, and she had donned a peignoir of sheer blue webfoam that revealed a smooth, remarkably feminine body beneath. The divorcee had been able to read "Paul O'Connor's" mind with ease, guessing why he had wanted to take her upstairs.

He wondered whether she had been able to deduce Lloyd Malin's motives as well. He hoped not.

"You're lovely," he said softly. It was not a lie. She was a long-limbed, seductive wench, about thirty or so, with creamy skin and lustrous dark hair. The Denebians pick their spies well, he thought.

She smiled and said in a throaty voice, "My nerves need calming. Come here, Mr. O'Connor."

He drew close to her and she seemed to glide into his arms. Holding her tight, feeling the warmth of her against him, the fullness of her breasts, the sharp intake of her breath as he clasped her, he caressed her shoulders, then the small of her back, searching for the area of sensitivity where the truth serum would take most immediate effect—

He found it. As she clung to him muttering wordless sounds in what seemed like very real passion, Malin tightened his grasp on her and activated the ultrasonic spray. A nerve-jolting shot of veronone painlessly penetrated her skin.

It took only a moment to act. One second she was grinding herself against him hungrily; the next she had relaxed, gone almost limp, and the passion had vanished from her. He looked at her eyes. They were glassy. She was ready to give him any information he wanted from her, now.

**S**HE was like a bundle of old rags as he put her down on the bed, propping her head up against the pillow. She stared

at him, but her eyes did not see him. She was in a state of quick-term hypnotic trance.

Malin activated the microrecorder within his slightly over-large wristwatch and said, "Can you hear me, Mrs. Cottrell?"

"Yes." She sounded a thousand light-years away.

"Good. Just for a start, Mrs. Cottrell, suppose you tell me your real name?"

"Floren Cutril."

It was a Denebian name. Malin said, "Where were you born?"

"New Batavia, on Deneb IV."

"Ah. How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine."

Malin nodded. "How long were you on Earth posing as Mrs. Florence Cottrell?"

"Six months."

"And where did you stay during that time?"

"Several places. I was in Washington and London and Montreal."

"What did you do in those places?"

"I served as a spy for the Denebian Confederation of Worlds," she said calmly.

Malin grinned happily. "You served as a spy? And how did you transmit your information back to Deneb?"

"I didn't. I minimicrofilmed my material and brought it with me to Dyrain."

"What have you done with it here?"

"Passed some of it on to the contact who was appointed to take the material."

"Who was this?"

"The untouchable who was begging in the lobby. He's my contact man."

Malin's eyes widened in surprise. "The *untouchable*? Is he a native Dyrainna?"

"I don't know."

He scowled. "How did you give him the data?"

"Inside a hollow coin. I dropped it in his begging bowl. I have five more coins which I will give him in the next five days."

That was easily checked. "Where are those coins?"

"In my purse. Get me my purse and I'll find them for you."

He considered that a moment. Her purse might contain a weapon; he doubted that any-

one in the veronone trance could attempt an attack, but he didn't want to risk it. He found her purse, scooped out all her change, and handed it to her. She fumbled through the coins, picked out five normal-looking half-credit pieces, and gave them back to him.

He examined it. "How do you open it?"

"Pressure. I'll show you."

She took a coin from him and deftly flicked it open. It was hollow; inside lay a tightly coiled roll of minimicrofilm. Picking up another of the coins, he opened it himself and found another roll within. He opened the other three; they, too, contained film.

He said, "You are supposed to give the coins to the beggar. But what does *he* do with them? Surely he isn't a Denebian. Who does he pass them to?"

"I . . . don't know."

Annoyed, he repeated the question. Again she shrugged blankly and denied knowledge. He realized she was telling the truth; she *had* to, under veronone. The Denebians set up relay systems for stolen secrets

for just this reason—even if one link in the chain were detected, that left several others still to be found.

"All right," he said. He sealed the dummy coins again, pocketed them, and put five half-credit coins of his own into her purse. "I'm taking the message-coins and giving you good ones. When you wake, you'll remember nothing that has taken place since I entered this room. You will think that the coins you now have still contain the messages, and you will pass them along as previously planned. Is this understood?"

"Yes."

He replaced her purse on the dresser, bent over her, and injected a quick burst of the antidote. It took several minutes for her mind to clear; she stirred uneasily, rubbed her eyes, looked up at him, puzzled.

"I must have fainted," she said.

He nodded. "You blanked out completely. It must have been the shock of what happened before. Are you all right now?"

"I—think so." She smiled at

him. "Let's finish what we started before!"

She pulled him hungrily toward herself.

**T**HE next morning, Malin paid close attention to Florence Cottrell as they breakfasted in the hotel dining-room. She looked at him slyly, as a girl might look at a man with whom she had begun an affair only the night before, but there was nothing in her glance that implied she was aware he knew her secret.

The veronone had worked, then. He had extracted the information he wanted without her knowledge.

They breakfasted on Dyrainna sausages and local coffee, which was a bluish aromatic compound made from the leaves of a common Dyrainna tree. Robinson appeared at the end of the meal to announce to the vacationers that a motor-coach tour through the city of Dyrain Bor was on the slate for the morning—strictly voluntary, of course.

Florence Cottrell said, "How lovely! I can't wait to see the city!"

"I won't be able to make it," Malin said sadly.

"Oh, no? Why?"

He grinned. "I have to visit someone on business this morning. The tour will just have to wait."

"Can't you put it off?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Oh, you stockbrokers! Business business business all the time!"

"Can't help myself. But you can have a good time without me."

She reddened slightly, then shrugged. Malin thought that she was giving a remarkably good imitation of the love-hungry young divorcee on the loose—but luckily for him she had made one slip, and that had been enough. He could forget about her, now. He had to concentrate on uncovering the rest of the chain.

He accompanied her down to the lobby after breakfast; the motor-coach was waiting outside, loading up with tourists. A Dyrainna sat behind the wheel, but an Earthman from Terran Tours was guiding people aboard. It was a hot morning; the big bronze-red sun was



already high overhead. In the distance Malin could see the alien-looking buildings of the city, and beyond them the green mountains that looked down on Dyrain Bor.

And there was the beggar, sitting quietly in the sun on the front porch, begging bowl by his side. Florence Cottrell said, "There's that beggar again. I think I'll give him something."

Malin said, "Really, Flo. Isn't he the same one who tripped the waiter last night?"

"No, that was a different one," she said.

"Oh? Can you tell them apart? They look all alike to me."

She paled slightly, as if realizing she had made another slip. Then she said, "The other one had a mustache. This one has a beard. Anyway, the guidebook says it's good luck to be generous to them—and at my age I need all the luck I can get!"

She crossed the porch and opened her purse. Malin watched as she examined her change, finally selecting a half-credit piece and dropping it in

the beggar's bowl. The pariah made no response.

"That can get expensive," Malin said.

She giggled. "After what this trip is costing me, a few credits for charity don't even show."

The tour-leader cupped his hand and said, "Last call for the Dyrain Bor bus-trip. All aboard!"

"Guess I better go," the girl said. She smiled at him, blew him a kiss, and dashed into the bus.

Malin turned to look around for the untouchable. A moment before the man had been squatting in the corner of the porch; now he had risen and was ambling off down the street. Malin decided he had better follow.

Suddenly the bulky form of the genial Robinson interposed itself.

"Not going on the tour, Mr. O'Connor?"

"I'm afraid not," Malin said. He peered round Robinson, trying to keep an eye on the retreating pariah.

Robinson said, "You really should. You'll miss quite a treat if you don't see the city."

"I'll see it some other time.

I have a business appointment today, and—”

“Oh? What kind of business?”

Malin gritted his teeth. Patiently he said, “At the local stock market. It’s a highly technical matter; I don’t have time to explain.”

“I see. Well, good luck. I hope the unfortunate incident of last night hasn’t soured you on Terran Tours, Mr. O’Connor.”

“Of course not.” Robinson seemed to have so much to say, Malin thought! He disengaged himself from the over-friendly tour director and headed toward the untouchable.

There was no sign of him. While he had been detained by the talkative Robinson, the pariah had disappeared.

**H**E started to make his way down the crowded street as the bus pulled away. He had no idea where the untouchable might have gone—but he wanted to take a look around anyway, and perhaps he would be able to stumble into him. Luck seemed to be running this way on the trip so far.

Alien smells assailed him on all sides as he walked. The day was growing hot already—not unpleasantly so, for Dyrain’s climate was always moderate, but there was a definite warmth in the air. Hawkers’ cries reached him from right and from left—*“Buy this lovely hunting bird, Earthman!”* *“How about a flower for your lady?”* *“Roasted daarth-nuts for sale!”*

He paused in front of the daarth-nut booth and offered the hawk-eyed little Dyrainna vendor a quarter-credit piece. He was handed a little leather pouch containing a dozen or so of the brittle, salty black nuts.

He said to the proprietor, “I’m searching for a pariah with a beard and no mustache. I think he came this way. Have you seen him?”

Coldly the alien said, “We do not see those people even when they brush by our robes.”

“I see.” There would be no help here. He kept on going, through the noisy bazaar.

They were selling fresh-killed meat at the next corner; blue-bodied flies the size of one-credit pieces fluttered over the

exposed, butchered carcasses. Withered old women haggled with the butchers, who clawed at the sky in exasperation.

Very picturesque, Malin thought. The entire city looked picturesque. As if it had been carefully arranged for the benefit of tourists in search of quaint sights.

Two streets down, he spied an untouchable—standing alone, begging-bowl at his side, staring off into nothingness. He was not the one who served as Florence Cottrell's courier. This one had a flowing mustache of almost greenish hue, and no beard.

He was a hideous sight, in his rags and sores. As Malin looked at him, wondering if it made sense to ask him if he knew a fellow pariah with a beard, two Earth tourists appeared, a man and woman, the man carrying an expensive-looking tridim camera.

"Would you mind stepping to one side," the man said to Malin. "I'd like to get a shot of the pariah."

"Of course."

The camera clicked; the pariah stood stock-still as if

posing. The woman nudged her husband, who reluctantly pulled a small coin from his pocket and dropped it in the untouchable's begging-bowl.

Malin said, "That'll make a lovely shot."

"We have so many gorgeous photos!" the woman oozed.

"How long have you been here?"

"Three weeks. You?"

"Just got here yesterday." A thought occurred to Malin and he said, "Maybe you can help me. I'm supposed to meet a friend in the untouchable's quarter, but I can't seem to find it."

"Most of them live about eight streets from here," the tourist said. "Just go down this narrow road here and follow along straight. You can't miss it. You'll smell it three blocks away."

**T**HE tourist was right. The foul odor of rotting meat and unwashed bodies reached Malin long before the shantytown came into view. It wasn't hard to tell that he was drawing near the dismal quarter of

Dyrain Bor where the pariahs congregated.

The houses had probably been dilapidated ten centuries ago. Most of them were two-story half-timbered affairs that leaned crazily out over the narrow, badly-paved streets. Pariahs stood everywhere, with the particular hopeless expression on their faces that was so horrifying, staring off into the void.

Naked children, pot-bellied from malnutrition, squalled and rolled in the streets. Malin caught an occasional glimpse of a pariah woman, veiled discreetly lest her glance pollute some upper-cast Dyrainna male, hovering in one of the alcoves.

A few tourists wandered through the district, snapping shots to display back home. This was poverty; this was filth. Earth had not had anything like this for centuries, and there was a peculiar fascination, Malin admitted to himself, in seeing this sargasso of human debris.

He corrected himself: *not* human. Humanoid. And there was all the difference in the galaxy

in that one syllable, he thought.

He wondered what incentive the Denebians had used to get these people to spy for them. Probably the promise of a little food, no more. It didn't take much to bribe beings that were totally without hope.

He shook his head. His job was to smash the spy ring, for the sake of Earth and its kindred worlds. He was not here to pity the untouchables, but simply to put an end to the flow of secrets through them to the enemies of Earth.

Once Deneb had been allied with Earth, the mother world. After all, Earth had settled the Denebian system with colonists, hundreds of years ago. But a great gap of light-years separates Earth and Deneb, and in time friction sprang up between the two mighty powers of the galaxy—friction that had resulted in a century-old cold war spreading out over thousands of light-years. Dyrain was neutral, admitting Denebians and Earthmen alike to its ports—but obviously the Denebians were gaining sway here, if they had already won over the untouchables.

Perhaps, he thought, the Denebians were planning to touch off a revolution of the untouchables against the upper castes. That would be typical of them, all right.

He looked around. He was getting nowhere on this quest; he had just about decided to return to the hotel and wait for the bearded pariah to make his appearance there again, when he heard a grunt behind him, and whirled not quite in time to avoid a stinging blow on the side of his head.

HE turned and saw a slight figure behind him wielding a heavy club and lifting it for a second blow. He recognized the attacker: he was the bearded untouchable who had been Florence Cottrell's spy-courier.

Malin had better than a foot's height advantage over the alien. As the pariah started to bring the club down, Malin stepped to one side, caught the alien's arm, and bent it. The club dropped; the pariah emitted a little gasp of pain. Malin held the arm tight—the Dyrainna's bare, filthy skin felt coarse and almost scaly—

and tugged the alien along with him.

He knew he had to get the creature out of the pariah quarter fast. Right now the half-starved creatures were simply watching the encounter, but perhaps in a few moments they would decide to protect their fellow against the Earthman.

The untouchable wriggled and tried to get free, but Malin held him firmly by one hand and groped in his pocket for the tiny ultrasonic hypodermic filled with veronone. Intelligence had assured him that the drug was capable of affecting the metabolism of any sentient being.

He jabbed the spray against the alien's arm and activated it. The response was immediate; the Dyrainna subsided and stood obediently in his tracks.

Malin said, in the Dyrainna language, "Can you hear what I'm saying?"

The pariah nodded.

"Follow along at my side. Answer whatever questions I ask you."

Again the affirmative. They started to walk.

Malin said, "You received a

coin from a lady in the hotel yesterday. What did the coin have inside it?"

"A message."

"What kind of message?"

"I do not know. I cannot read."

Malin was willing to accept that. "What did you do with the message?"

"I turned it over to him who was to receive it."

"And who was that?"

"I do not know his name."

Scowling, Malin asked, "Where can I find him?"

"At the hotel."

"Okay. We're on our way there."

After a few moments he said, "How long have you been doing this sort of thing?"

"Many months. I am told to sit in the hotel and wait for those who give me half-credit pieces. All half-credit pieces that I receive, I turn over to him who employs me, and he gives me food and money."

Malin understood. It was a foolproof system, *almost*—hire an ignorant beggar to serve as go-between, taking the concealed messages from Denebian spies newly arrived from the

Terran sector and relaying them to the central Denebian intelligence representative, who then forwarded them to the home office.

"Why do you spy on Earth?" Malin asked.

"Because we hate the Earthmen."

"Why?"

"They made us untouchables," the pariah said simply.

"I don't understand. Explain."

"Before the Earthmen came, there was no such thing as an untouchable on Dyrain. My father five generations ago was a merchant. But when the Earthmen came it was decided that the Earthmen would like to visit our planet better if we had an untouchable caste, and so a lottery was held and those who were selected had to forfeit all their property and become outcasts. This is why we hate the Earthmen and would see the Denebians triumph."

It had been a long speech, and the drugged alien's voice nearly gave out before the end of it. Suddenly Malin felt a chill run through him.

*It can't be true,* he thought.

Yet it was possible. The entire pariah caste might have been created at the wish of the Terran tourist agencies, who knew that the sight of poverty and suffering would inevitably attract thousands of tourists.

A tourist come-on? A publicity trick?

He tried to picture thousands of Dyrainna uprooted from their way of life solely to please the wealthy Terrans who scattered their cash so freely on Dyrain. Small wonder these pariahs were spying for the Denebians, then.

His throat felt dry. But the discovery did not alter his sense of duty. He was not here to pass judgment on the tourist trade but simply to safeguard the security of Earth by uprooting the spy-chain.

They reached the hotel. Malin said to the alien, "Now you will take me to the man to whom you give the coins you receive."

**T**HEY mounted the porch steps, Malin following the alien a few paces behind. It would cause comment if he were seen by other Earthmen

actually walking with one of the untouchables.

As they passed through the doorway, the pariah first and then the Earthman, Malin said, quietly, "All right. You'll find the man and you'll point him out to me. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

They had taken no more than six steps when Robinson, the Terran Tours man appeared and grinned amiably at the approaching Malin.

"Back so soon, Mr. O'Connor? I hope your business meeting was a success."

Before Malin had any chance to reply, the untouchable said, in a calm, flat voice, "He is the ones I give the coins to."

It was spoken in Dyrainna, and perhaps Robinson thought Malin would not understand. In any event, the Terran Tours man went for his blaster a moment too slowly. By the time Robinson had the weapon in his hand and cocked, it was too late. Malin had drawn his own weapon and had put a needle-ray beam through the other's thick forearm, charring a neat

hole half an inch in diameter right through. Robinson's gun dropped, and a moment later the fat tour-manager was on his knees, clutching his wounded arm with his good one.

Malin bent and scooped up the gun. The pariah stood as if frozen.

People came running from all corners of the hotel lobby now, having heard the flash. Keeping his gun trained on Robinson, Malin said slowly and clearly, "Everything's all right. I'm an agent of Terra Intelligence. This man Robinson's a dangerous Denebian spy."

"He's lying," Robinson said thickly, in a voice heavy with pain.

Calmly Malin said, "I can prove everything I say."

To a nearby bellhop he said, "Suppose you call the office of the Terran Consul and arrange for a pickup. And there's another Denebian spy aboard that tour-coach that left this morning. We'll have to pick her up when the coach gets back."

An hour later, alone in his room, Malin had finished his report to Earth and had

beamed it out over tight-wave communication to the nearest pickup outpost of the Terra Intelligence communication system.

It was a neat, simple arrangement. The Denebians had hired fifty or a hundred pariahs to serve as couriers; the arriving Denebian spies, all of them guests at the hotel run by "Robinson," would slip the coin-encased documents to the pariahs, who later would return them to the Denebian master-spy posing as the hotel manager.

That way the chain of communication was in doubt; who would suspect a filthy untouchable of being the middleman in such a deal? If the couriers had given their material direct to Robinson, the arrangement might have been detected long before.

Malin rose and walked to the window. It was all over now. The Terran police had taken Robinson and Florence Cottrell away for interrogation, and the hot protests of the Denebian authorities on Dyrain had been silenced when Malin had produced the minimicrofilms he



had taken from the Cottrell woman.

It was time for him to return to Earth, his pose as a tourist ended, and accept reassignment to whatever task would best serve the interests of Earth.

He was going to remember the Dyrain mission, though. He'd remember the girl who called herself Florence Cottrell, and he'd remember how a spy-chain was uncovered by a bowl of soup.

But most of all he'd remember the sad-eyed untouchable, the most pathetic spy ever employed by Deneb. He was going to have to forget the pariah's story if he meant to stay loyal to Earth.

The bronze-red rays of the

midday sun came filtering through the window. The alien bird in its cage squawked fiercely at him. The Earthman shook his head, thinking of thousands of people forced into poverty to satisfy the curiosity of Terran tourists.

*The Denebians say we're selfish and arrogant, he thought. That we'll eventually lose control of the galaxy because of our attitude toward other races. And maybe the Denebians aren't wrong.*

Maybe.

He tried to forget the face of the half-starved pariah. But he knew he never would succeed.

THE END