

# WINNER TAKE ALL

Ross Rocklynne

Commander Joseph Marker was in love with planet Earth. He considered his wife, children and home to be perfection. He had tender feelings toward the violets under the ravishing lilac trees in his back yard. He furthermore had a great affection for, and a deep understanding of, all his neighbors; had no fault to find with the lowliest human being. Nothing on Earth could bring fault-finding into his usually fault-finding gaze.

The exception being Ship Co-ordinator Whitsey.

In a word, Marker, his crew, and the Colonial Planet Survey Corporation spaceship *Apollo-1*, were gone from Earth three years.

Earth had become blameless heaven, space an ink nightmare.

"So get yourself a planet," Whitsey remorselessly was telling Marker over the Leaper, which afforded tenuous communication between ship and Earth, "and you can come home."

"There aren't any!" Marker snapped. "I told you, this is the original empty apple barrel!"

"It's got a bottom somewhere," Whitsey observed mildly. "You'll come across a stellar system. Maybe. And find a planet. Maybe. And besides—"

Remarkable how easy it was for Co-ordinator Whitsey, surrounded by the blessed comforts of Earth, to get tough!

"—the Colonial Planetary Survey Corporation can't sink a fortune into an expedition without drawing a return. That's axiomatic. I would suggest you find a planet."

Marker burned. Before taking over the *Apollo-1*, Marker himself was Co-ordinator, and for eight years directed the hundred-odd Survey ships in their sifting of the interstellar sphere for new planets to sop up the population overflow of the Solar System. These planets, depending on their usability, were sold for varying prices to population groups, or to other Corporations for development and subsequent resale.

Because there was more money in field work, and because he did need a vacation from Earth (he thought) and from his family (he thought) and because (he thought) he could make a quick killing, and return to Earth after mere months in space with a planet and a big bonus—because of these things he had let the slick-talking commander of the *Ursus*—Whitsey himself—get him into the mood of taking out a ship.

The Office had been agreeable, and there was some talk that Marker would take over his co-ordinating post when he returned. But three years had passed. Whitsey had had the chance to work himself in solid. In spite of this, Marker still considered himself Co-ordinator *in absentia*. He had a hunch Whitsey did, too.

He had long since decided he didn't like Co-ordinator Whitsey. He looked with displeasure on the younger, smoother, somewhat mocking face, the only unlovable thing on Earth.

"I know now why you egged me into taking a ship out," he grunted sourly. "You already had it arranged with the Old Man to take over my co-ordinating job. Well, I'm giving myself two or three months more out here. By that time I'll know you engineered me into an empty Sack—where there aren't, never were, and never will be, any planets. Then I'm coming back to my old job."

"And the violets in your back yard," commented Whitsey dryly, having heard the details of Marker's growing nostalgia for Earth. Then his lips thinned. "Don't forget, Commander, if you return without my authorization, you'll be thrown out of the Office. And if you return with authorization, but without a planet, you'll be stripped down to office clerk."

Marker scoffed, with a confidence he did not feel. "When the Old Man understands you framed me," he stated, "he'll square things up. You'll be out on your ear."

All Whitsey did was grin mockingly.

At that moment, the ship intercommunicator blew a short,

sweet pip of sound. Marker grabbed the callback with a knobby fist. Second-in-Command Alex Jorey, from the Navigation Room, began talking at him with something more than his usual fatted lethargy.

Marker's eyes, overhung by the heavy red fringe of brow, glittered with satisfaction. Finally he hung up and twisted his lips at Whitsey.

"There goes your little pipe-dream of keeping me out in space forever," he said. "Alex Jorey just tell-taled a G-2 star. There's a drift of Sack-dust between us, but the star is blowing out the same all-wave static the Sun gives off—with an interesting off-beat which probably means a planet."

Whitsey's breath sucked in almost imperceptibly. Then he got his young face back in shape again. "Congratulations," he said dryly. "Pip me if you raise a planet." He signed off.

One planet, a gay, starkly green little world frisking with busy energy about its mighty parent.

Marker, staring with astounded eyes, had the feeling that this audacious pair danced each for the entertainment of the other. He felt, in addition, a faint belligerence, and a fainter premonition. These two owned the Sack—not the *Apollo*. Grumpily, he ordered the ship back to free-space drive and with not much feeling of exaltation further ordered atmosphere-cut.

The *Apollo-1* sank heavily down on its repelling field. The breezy gales of a healthy planetary wind system whipped about the ship. It did not take many hours of cross-hatching the latitudes and longitudes to see that here was a world made for human colonization and exploitation.

To Marker's intense disappointment, the planet had intelligent inhabitants. Sourly, Marker again called Whitsey.

Whitsey nodded, with some evidence of relief. "The presence of inhabitants," he said smoothly, "extends your task a bit. You say their cities are of a rural, unmechanized type, that they practice agriculture and tend small herds of domestic animals. Very well, it will be necessary to contact government representatives, if there are such; it will be necessary to open communications. Arrangements must be made to secure their co-operation in opening the planet for the—er—benefits to be had from human colonization."

"I'll secure their co-operation, all right," Marker growled.

"You shall *not* use weapons, Commander," Whitsey said sternly. "Tactics of eliminating a population to gain possession of a planet have of late met with considerable furor from the popular press."

Marker's small eyes regarded Whitsey with disfavor. "That's a new one," he grunted. "When you had the *Ursus* I gave you carte blanche. Anything to get new lands. Now the tables are turned, you're breaking your back to keep me from returning a profit and shoving you out of your job. Won't work, Whitsey." He signed off.

He was still vastly in love with the planet Earth, which seemed paradise enough for any man in his right mind. For a moment he toyed with the thought of blanketing the planet with Type A-12—or perhaps A-13, to do a good job—psyche-gas, which would selectively return intelligent beings to a brute status. The Office, always anxious to increase stockholders dividends, would put a *hush-hush* on the mess, would give Marker whatfor, but would privately work a bonus for him into the books.

Then he felt a sentimental pang of guilt. After all, they were people, probably had their own families, and a sense of beauty, if one could judge that from observing their peculiar, misty blue villages. And—Marker felt a squirming inside—they might even have something analagous to violets in their back yards.

He gave orders to cut the gravitics and land.

Never a subtle man, never given to indirection, Marker landed on a village street. He stood in the bridge bulge-port, which gave him a view in almost all four directions. The houses were uniformly composed of some slate material, and were uniformly sloppy in their construction. He sensed a disregard of the plumb-line. Yet, in the crazy leanings, which looked like something out of Mother Hubbard, a fascinating, giggling kind of beauty could be noted.

There were some wagons on the streets, drawn by starkly red, ballooned-quartered beasts some of which had four, some five, some six legs.

The town, extremely rural and sparse in nature, had come to a standstill. Two or three hundred inhabitants seemed greatly interested in the *Apollo-1*, and were moving with rapid prancing steps about it. Once in awhile one hopped by

using a suddenly-appearing third or fourth leg.

"Definitely not humanoid," stated Jorey, staring in fascination out of his fat enclosed eyes. "Insectoid maybe? How about those projecting knobs? Communication, maybe. No, they've got mouths—and faces capable of expression. They're beautiful, Markey!"

"Please address me as 'sir' Mr. Jorey?" said Marker on a rising inflection. He felt his own irritation.

"Yes, sir," said Jorey, bowing and scraping. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. And yes, sir." Then he stopped that to point with a fatty forefinger. A wagon drawn by a quartet of multi-legged scarlet beasts plunged down the street. As the dust of its stopping cleared, one of the creatures, a sash of red and purple knotted from the neck and again from the waist, was seen to be standing on the seat and waving its arms rapidly toward the ship.

"We're in," sighed Marker. "We'll assume this is an official, perhaps the mayor. Follow me up, Mr. Jorey. We're going to rush this thing through. I have the feeling we shall not be here long."

"There are many ways fate could interpret this, sir," said the fat, humble Mr. Jorey, but Marker blandly brushed the wisecrack aside. He sniffed. The *Apollo-1's* airlock was open. In the air was the smell of growing things. Memory of Earth stabbed at Marker again. But now there was the problem of communication.

He was to discover that communication was no problem at all. The moment the big sliding airlock door in the side of the *Apollo-1* rumbled back to expose Marker and the crowding crewmen, the being of the wagon hopped to the moist dust of the street and approached with all eagerness. Marker went down the gangplank, painfully breathing air that had an Earth-tang, pleasantly experiencing a Sol-type warmth on his burly, uniformed shoulders.

With many quick foot motions and lusty puffings, the creature stopped before Marker, its small flat eyes moving rapidly in the huge sockets. The puffing increased in tempo, whereupon a half-dozen slickly smooth stalks with milky white globes on the ends shot out.

"He shoots 'em under mechanical air-pressure," marveled Jorey out of the corner of his mouth. Marker nodded. Each

stalk grew from a tightly stretched half-balloon which merged with the creature's body. The mechanism contained an element of comedy, but Marker was only reminded of the blow-snake toys his children played with—except, he thought glumly, after three years they weren't children anymore.

Marker suspected the equivalent of a handshake when the milky white globes came in contact with his hands and head. He endured it for many minutes, while the populace, apparently much impressed, excitedly and accidentally blew out stalks of their own, or developed new legs or arms—to the accompaniment of eager puffing.

Finally the creature's stalks popped back into his body, the pouches contracting with a sigh of escaped air. The expressive, almost transparent face showed what Marker thought was delight. The rose-lips moved experimentally, making garbled sounds which gradually assumed the English equivalent.

"At last!" the being cried eagerly. "We are discovered! We have long suspected there was more to creation than our disagreeable world."

Marker refused to be dismayed. "This is true," he agreed. "But your world is, on the contrary, a most agreeable one, being much like our own planet. But it needs developing. This is our reason for seeking you out." He thereupon introduced himself and Jorey as well. The creature's name, he learned, was Fashono, the planet itself was called "Lain," which word was the equivalent of "dirt." Marker had another pang. One could as well have called his own world "Dirt," except for the unfortunate connotation of the word.

Eagerly puffing, Fashono listened to Marker's description of Earth, his eyes delighted as Marker glibly and vividly described how colonization of Earth would raise the Lainian living standard to a fantastic high. He hopped up and down on a leg which blew out of the lower part of his body under the intensity of his excitement. Marker then suggested that perhaps a quick conference could be had with the rulers of Lain—?

"We shall have such a conference," cried Fashono. "Immediately! This is too glorious an opportunity for us to miss. But first! We must quarter you and your men! You are tired of being cooped up on your mighty ship!"

Whereupon he turned and spoke in rapid garble to the puffing populace. They instantly dispersed and with rapid mo-

tions disappeared inside their mistily blue, crazily leaning homes. Moments later they emerged, many carrying small children, some loaded with possessions. Then fully half the village population melted away into the extensive jungle shrubbery bordering the village.

Marker was nettled. "We have no wish to make your people uncomfortable," he said, squirming. "We are comfortable enough in our ship—"

But Fashono was insistent. "You are sorry for these people? Hoawl! They are nothing. Let them sleep in the woods and make out as best they can. Some of them may be attacked by the *slor*-beasts, but this is, of course, unimportant."

"No?" thought Marker grimly. Now that he had come into contact with these simple people, he felt guilty and supremely sympathetic. After all, they couldn't be much different in thought, feeling, and desire from his own kind. It was one thing to consider destroying a civilization from a distant point in space, and quite another from close at hand. Obviously these people were oppressed by their rulers. Marker's conscience began to clear. Ordinarily, human colonization distorted alien cultures. Colonization of Lain would lift the inhabitants from slavery.

Reluctantly, Marker let himself be swayed, and dispersed his sizable crew to their new, individual quarters. Marker found his own house clean, gorgeously furnished with hangings and padded spindly chairs. Searching around, he was utterly surprised to note a complete absence of the use of metals. Yet tests had proved the planet abounded in such natural resources.

The conference took place an hour later, in Marker's house. Fashono listened greedily to Marker's proposals, and enthusiastically threw out his diaphanous arms.

"We shall welcome you," he cried. "You may have the planet to do as you wish. A new era has come to our stupid peoples. How I have longed for this day!"

Marker said cautiously, "But do you represent all the other ruling officials of Lain?"

Whereupon Fashono explained that he *was* all the other officials of Lain. "Not that I myself am," he explained hastily. "But we are—how shall I put the thought—*together*. We are—in communication. They think as I do. And how could it be otherwise? Such a glorious opportunity!"

Fashono, to show what he meant, blew out several stalks which he placed against Marker's head. And Marker understood. He found himself *touching* the minds of at least seven hundred Lainians. They came from readily differentiated directions, were various in personality, and were officials. They were definitely not Fashono. Marker nodded. These people had amazing thought-powers; by evidence, they were able to pluck a new language out of a person's head.

"Very well," he said. "I'm satisfied. We then have your unqualified permission to bring our technologists to Lain. We can make plans to bring millions of Earth beings here to live side by side with your peoples so that we can raise your civilization to our level."

"Unqualified!" insisted Fashono, tiny, looping eyes glittering. "You would like to inform your Office of this fact?"

"Yes," said Marker determinedly, and removed himself to the *Apollo-1* and the Leaper, which, by means of seven different sub-photonics particles which virtually leap-frogged over each other in ascending orders of speed down a light-beam, made instantaneous interstellar communication possible. Whitsey looked startled, disbelieving, and considerably put out.

"I'm suspicious," he growled. "Better watch out. They're too eager."

"That's their nature," Marker said belligerently. "Don't try to mess me up, Whitsey. You'd like to keep me out here another year. It bothers you to know I've got the planet sewed up—and by fair means, at that."

Whitsey rubbed speculatively at his pointed chin. He said casually, "You were hit pretty hard by those Lainians being forced from their homes, weren't you? But think a minute, Commander. Did you ever hear of a psychological quirk people have called 'identifying'?"

"I am interested," said Marker pugnaciously, "only in securing a planet for the Colonial Survey Corporation, Co-ordinator Whitsey! I am not interested in your attempts to sidetrack me from that aim for your own personal benefit."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you," Whitsey commented mildly. A taunting smile played around his lips. "You have my permission to go ahead with the papers, Commander. Looks like you're having excellent sailing. All luck." He signed off with a half smirk. Marker buoyantly returned to

his house, only slightly disturbed by Whitsey's remarks. Fortunately, he was astute enough to see through Whitsey's hypocrisy.

He explained to Fashono that he now had official permission for the drawing up of the necessary paper, upon which Fashono begged Marker to come to his home for the evening meal. Marker complied reluctantly, taking Jorey with him. He and the waddling navigation officer followed after the prancing Fashono.

"Say," Jorey said, pointing. "Isn't that Fashono's house, across the street?"

Marker observed that it was. "Then," asked Jorey, "why are we walking toward the other end of the village, on this side of the street, to get there?"

Marker, lost in pleasant thoughts of his reunion with his family on Earth, shrugged indifferently. "Some custom," he explained. "Let us not be concerned with small matters, Mr. Jorey, when large matters are to be taken care of."

"How stupid of me," murmured the self-pitying Mr. Jorey. "And I had thought a cutting knife to be made of molecules." With which he glumly subsided.

As Marker strode through the un-vacated half of the village, he was jolted out of his abstraction. A lightly puffing native sat before a plot of earth, delicately loosening the dirt around a flower so huge and brilliantly decorative that Marker's eyes bugged. He uttered a sound of admiration so abrupt that it was harsh. Fashono's glittery eyes turned on the tended flower.

"It offends you?" he asked, then made a blowing sound of contempt. "A mere weed, Commander, which, fortunately, is virtually extinct! Our stupid peoples are sometimes discovered tending it as if it were a deity!"

He kicked at the plant, uprooting it. The native submissively lowered his head. Marker felt an instant, unreasoning anger. He scooped up the gorgeous blossom, staring into the purple cavern of the calyx where seed pods had burst from the blow of Fashono's foot. The flower was six petaled, long stemmed, and of such deep thickly velvet perfection that Marker disbelieved his eyes. His anger began to blend with an aching nostalgia.

"Surely, Fashono," he said acidly, "you have some regard for beauty?"

"Beauty?" Fashono puffed his bewilderment. "But where is beauty except in advancement? We of Lain need your science, your machines, your great buildings, your books. Until then, we are nothing."

Marker held the flower out to arm's length, studying it. "Nonetheless," he said stiffly, "it may be to your benefit to know that Earth will bring beauty to you—if we come at all. To give you some idea of what part beauty plays in our lives, I must begin by insisting that this plant be protected and cultivated wherever it grows. It is, of course, a small request."

Fashono's rose-lips pursed. "Very well," he said with equal stiffness. "I had thought there were to be no qualifications in your offer to help us. Perhaps it is just as well, Commander. I have an equally small request to make of you. Come." Whereupon he crossed the street, and then pranced in a return direction to his own home.

As they entered, Jorey said *sotto voce* to Marker, "Commander, let us not be concerned with the small matters, when larger matters are to be taken care of, eh?" Upon which Marker merely glared him down. For a reason he could hardly put his finger on, the preservation of a nearly extinct species of plant seemed of highest importance to him.

In his home, Fashono's several wives and small children kept discreetly in the background. Fashono drew out a large scroll-map and unrolled it. He breathed lustily. Several extra finger stalks popped out of his bulging knuckles. He traced along the map, outlining a diamond-shaped territory, which Marker figured was several hundred miles in its long dimension.

"This is the home of our ancestors," Fashono explained reverently. "As nearly as we can determine, our species had its origin there. This park, our Holy Land, covered with great stands of the towering, the splendid, the majestic *pibber*-trees, is inviolate by law, because of the existence of certain historic shrines. However—" his eyes flashed angrily "—it has been invaded. Thousands of irreligious Lainians live there, build their villages in the shadow of the shrines, and will not leave no matter how often we cite the laws.

"If we but had weapons! But no, no, we have none—and perhaps will be supplied with none until your glorious machines arrive. But you, Commander Marker, do have weapons.

We beg you, as a small favor, to clean these vermin out of our sacred park."

Marker felt his stomach turn over. But he was quiet for a few seconds, thinking the thing out. Then he explained to Fashono some of the democratic principles of Earth. "These people have a right to their happiness," he said. "Historic shrines, while of importance, do not outweigh the importance of people. Perhaps this is some thing that will be taught you when our sociologists arrive. If," he added, smoothly throwing in a threat, "we come at all."

The threat had the desired effect. Fashono stammered, begged, apologized, then sagged hopelessly. "But what," he cried, "is to be done with these invading people?"

"They shall be protected," declared Marker. "This is the way things are done on Earth. Therefore, we shall enact Earth laws, declaring your Holy Land what may be called a Planetary Park, protected in perpetuum against all human destruction or interference. Your own laws shall stand as they are, with the exception that the inhabitants of the area are to live their lives in peace."

Besides, Marker thought hollowly, there are the *pibber-trees*. They must be a lot like the Sequoia, the Douglas fir—; can't have human beings getting in there and going commercial.

Fashono was most unhappy. "Very well," he sighed. "And you insist also on preserving and caring for the *gitso*-flower wherever it grows?"

"That too."

"You are foolish," sighed Fashono; but he brightened. "But come, we must not waste time expressing our differences. In time, they will be smoothed out. In the meantime, can we not let the drawing up of the agreement wait until tomorrow? There is our evening meal to be eaten; there is entertainment afterward!"

He was considerably crestfallen when Marker insisted on the agreement being drawn on the spot. He drew the form out of his pocket, placing it on an anvil-shaped table which served as Fashono's desk. Fashono puffed forlornly, then brightened again. He apparently decided to match Marker's desire for haste, for, using Marker's pen, he wrote with such blurring speed that he covered a page of the form with writing in less than a minute.

He then appeared to fall into a deep trance. Approximately seven-hundred different signatures rapidly appeared in microscopic precision. Then Fashono handed the paper to Marker.

Marker's eyes bugged at the precision of handwriting—in English. They bugged still more when he read the agreement, which he had first intended to draw up himself. The agreement was without loopholes. It gave Colonial Planetary Survey Corporation exclusive ownership of an entire planet. It also mentioned the *gitso*-flowers and the Lainian Holy Land, leaving no doubt that iron-clad agreements had been made unprovisionally protecting the existence of both. In his wildest dreams, Marker could not have hoped for such success. He casually pocketed the document, as casually thanked Fashono, and then, with Jorey, followed the Lainian to a cool shaded porch where he went through the amenities of eating a tasteless, vegetable meal. And as soon as he could, escaped back to the ship.

Whitsey raised his sleek head after reading the phototic copy of the agreement Marker sent over the Leaper. "Very good," he said a bit vaguely. "A remarkable document. But I am quite unable to see the reason for your enthusiasm over these *gitso*-flowers, Commander." There was a sly, poking note of sarcasm which Marker decided to ignore.

Marker frowned. Yes, he knew the answer now. "It's a gold mine for the Corporation," he said ambitiously. "These *gitso*-flowers outshine the orchid. Beautiful deep violet colors such as you never saw. If we can get the plant to flourishing properly, the Office will be able to add to the list of future profitables. For instance, put a full-color portrait of the *gitso*-flower on the Sales Folio for Lain—"

"Never mind," said Whitsey humorlessly. "Leave that to the Sales and Advertising Department. Now how about this Park? You fully realize that it covers a sixteenth of the area of Lain, according to the latitude and longitude boundaries noted in the agreement?"

"What of it? There *are* things that are sacred, Whitsey—or would you know?" Marker was irritated. "I've got a planet. I'm coming back to Earth as fast as I can and I'm going to stay there—in the seat you're sitting in."

Whitsey shrugged. "Very well, Commander. You understand that I must send a copy of this agreement to each member of the Board for their approval."

"They'll approve."

"I agree that they will. But you must also bear in mind that once the agreement is approved, it will then be in full force in all details. To rescind the agreement or any portion of the agreement will be an expensive, time-wasting proposition."

"It won't be rescinded."

Whitsey shrugged again, and, at Marker's insistence, agreed to rush word back to the *Apollo-1* the minute the approvals came in. He was as good as his word. Several hours later he called.

"The agreement has been codified," he said briefly, "and is now in force. Congratulations, Commander. All luck on the return flight." From Marker's view, Whitsey was a most unhappy man.

It was Marker's triumphant decision to lift for Earth immediately, but at that moment Jorey appeared on the *Apollo-1* with Fashono in tow. Jorey was a little drunk. Fashono excitably stated that a grand village entertainment, consisting of a parade, of music, of folk-dancing, of a delightful drink called *f'has*, had been planned.

"Already," cried Fashono happily, "your men have approved of *f'has*—especially Mr. Jorey! In fact the supply is running so low that a neighboring village is sending quantities more. What a time will be had by all!"

All except Marker. After the shindig broke its own back in the little hours of the Lainian morning, Marker was the only conscious intelligence in the village. His men were snugly drunk in their houses, the villagers equally drunk in theirs. It had been a fine celebration—for everybody except Marker.

As he glumly paced the dirt just beyond the airlock opening, he noted that the air, which was blowing quite forcefully, was filled with flying particles. He brushed them off his coat, and escaped into the ship. Several hours later when he awoke, a casual glance outside his cabin port showed a startling thing. The ground, the village street, the shrubby jungle beyond was solid with the wild purple of the gorgeous *gitso*-flower.

### —GITSO-FLOWERS!

Almost tottering with shock, Marker shrugged on his coat and, jittering, went to the airlock. No sooner was he outside, than he began to rage internally. The *Apollo-1* was garlanded,

but much less thickly than the terrain. Febrile rootlets were thinly imbedded in the very hull of the ship.

*Gitso*-flowers could eat metal. Ergo, no metal-work on Lain. Ergo, no Earth culture!

At Fashono's house, it took some time before Fashono's inebriated third wife would consent to waken the master. The deed was accomplished, however. Fashono came out, rubbing his great eye-sockets, and with no appearance of inebriation cried out his enthusiastic gladness at seeing Marker so soon again.

"What is this?" cried Marker, dragging the Lainian to the doorway and making a violent gesture that took in all of Lain. "You said the plant was extinct!"

"No, no," cried Fashono. "I beg you. My words—I recall them well—were '*virtually* extinct.' As they still are. The plant is a great rarity. Of course, every nine days they do cover the temperate zones—but is absolutely *nothing* to what they used to be, Commander! *Nothing*. Once these nearly extinct plants covered all of Lain every three days. It has been said by historians that the blanketing effect of these plants on our world was the main cause of our pitiful lack of development."

Marker's blood turned to liquid helium. He let Fashono talk. Soon the *goshe*-birds would come, said Fashono, gobble up the blooming *gitso*-flowers until few were left, and then would retire to their hibernaculums at North and South poles respectively. Of course, they remained aloft during this sleeping period; this required little effort, considering the virulence of the planet's wind system. At the end of six days the *gitso*-seeds would be voided, and the planetary winds would consume three days depositing them again in temperate zones, lateral winds shunting them away from the rest of the planet.

"At one time," continued Fashono, nervously puffing and accidentally sending out unwanted stalks and legs, "we had a campaign to kill the *goshe*-bird as a species. This proved impossible. Now they have worked themselves in as a main item of our food-supply."

Hollowly, Marker understood. There was a three-way ecology here, *gitso*-flower to *goshe*-bird to Lainian. For awhile his mind roved frantically through various levels. He ended up by muttering an insult at Fashono and then hurrying back to the ship, where he got Whitsey on the Leaper. Luckily, Whit-

sey had just arrived at the Office from his home. He listened impassively, then shook his head.

"The agreement, as I told you, cannot be rescinded on short notice. Furthermore, if I called an immediate Board meeting, I'd have to explain how your stupidity resulted in this impasse."

"Never mind," snarled Marker. "You could help if you wanted to. But you won't, so I'll use my own measures."

"Commander."

Whitsey spoke the word softly, to get Marker's attention.

"You've gotten yourself into a hole, Commander," he continued, leaning close to the Leaper screen at his end. "You don't have a planet at all, not if the *gitso*-flowers are considered sacrosanct, which they are by agreement."

"What's your solution?" snarled Marker.

"Forget Lain. Go out and get another planet."

Marker exploded. When he finished, Whitsey was sitting back in his chair, drumming with his fingers, and smirking.

"My advice remains the same in spite of that childish outburst," he remarked. "Look here, Commander. You've been duped and don't know it. Remember, I warned you against this thing called 'identifying'? Fashono's a liar. When he roved around in your mind picking up the language he picked up a lot beside."

Whitsey began ticking off points on his fingers.

"First, he hustled half the native population out of the village. This was a plain sympathy gag, Commander, designed to strike at your emotional make-up. After a three-year absence, you identified your emotions and desires and thoughts so thoroughly with Earth that any vague similarity between something on Earth and something on an alien planet became identical. You became sorry for those Lainians. Great Heavens!

"The Lainians are *not* human, Commander. I doubt if they cared if they had to sleep in the jungle. Maybe they didn't even care if they died, because, by telepathy, or something, they live in each other to some extent. And I doubt if the Lainians give one damn about machines or 'progress.'

"Nor is a *gitso*-flower one of the violets in your nostalgic back yard! But Fashono played on your tendency to identify, and got you to protect a lively plant which is fifteen times as big as a violet.

"Similarly, your tendency to identify Lainians with Earth humans led you to put that so-called Holy Land—an area that is six percent of the planet!—out of our hands completely. So if you add the temperate zones as another land-loss because of the *gitso*-flower, we can say that, roughly, we have fifty percent of the planet remaining. That's good bathing—for the Lainians!

"My suggestion stands. Get off the planet. Let somebody else come out there and clean up the mess. But if you let yourself get in any deeper we'll lose the planet the rest of the way."

Marker stood trembling with anger. He saw the plot. And it had been double-edged. Whitsey, from his vantage on Earth, had seen Fashono's subtleties from the first; he had let Marker sink in the mire, or had hoped that he was sinking. All this so that Marker would be kept from returning from a successful trip, and so oust Whitsey from his soft job.

"I know how I'm going to handle this," Marker growled. "Just keep out of it, Whitsey." He signed off, called the engineer, and ordered immediate lift.

Marker sighed his relief when the last of the *goshe*-birds was slaughtered. The creatures, floating in a dark shifting cloud with great shaggy wings outstretched above North and South poles, apparently were dead asleep when the *Apollo-1* came upon them. The *Apollo-1*, using broad fanning beams of sub-molecular force, drifted above the cloudy masses, sweeping them with broad lines of roasting destruction. The corpses fell by the thousands. The *goshe*-birds would never again distribute *gitso*-seeds.

Back at the village, Marker gloatingly sought out Fashono. Fashono listened politely, and then made large blowing sounds of happiness.

"This is fine," he cried. "Of course, by destroying the *goshe*-birds you have drastically reduced our food supply. But when the Earth peoples arrive with their machines, I am sure this lack will be remedied."

He thought a moment, then sighed heavily.

"But I am afraid another mistake has been made, Commander! May I tell you about it over a glass of *f'has* at my disagreeable home?"

A slow crawling started under Marker's skin. He towered over the treacherous Lainian. "Tell me about it now!"

But Fashono escaped toward his home on pretext of beckoning both Marker and Jorey after him. At Fashono's home, fully two hours passed as Fashono meticulously observed certain social customs. Then he dove for the heart of the matter, as if the important moment had arrived.

"By now," he explained, "the *goshe*-birds would be awake and the air would be thick with them as they settled to their feast. Fortunately—or unfortunately!—they have been slaughtered and thus cannot again distribute *gitso*-flower seeds. But the *gitso*-flowers were not the *goshe*-birds' only food. They also consumed the *porbo*-flies!"

"Oh-oh," said Jorey, hiding his eyes from Marker.

Marker braced himself. "And these *porbo*-flies? What are they?"

"Listen and you shall hear," said Fashono.

Marker heard; a droning, an ascending, distant roar.

"Watch and you shall see," added Fashono. He led them to a tetrahedral window which had been set into the wall by the rules of no known mathematics. Sweeping from the north came a fiery red, surging cloud of activity that blocked out half of the sky's light. The cloud thundered, droned, began to split up into its components as it swept down on the village. Marker saw scarlet butterflies.

Obviously, the lower part of the cloud was rubbing off on the ubiquitous *gitso*-flowers. The diminishing cloud rolled on, *porbo*-insects, landing and splattering against ship and village dwelling. For several minutes this continued. The cloud then passed into the distance. Fashono began his nervous puffing when Marker turned on him.

"If only you had listened to me," he complained, "or at least told me your intention to slaughter the *goshe*-birds. For, you see, the honey-gathering time of the *porbo*-flies corresponds with the eating-time of the *goshe*-birds. The *goshe*-birds arrive for their meal a few moments after the *porbo*-flies have begun their task of gathering honey. The *goshe*-birds, in their great hunger, eat *porbo*-flies and *gitso*-flowers at the same time! But now there are no *goshe*-birds!"

"So then what?" said Marker very mildly.

Fashono miserably clasped his fragile hands, playing his part to the last.

"The *porbo*-flies unwittingly shall carry *gitso*-seeds to all areas of the planet. Again our poor world will be covered with

these weeds as the *porbo*-flies flutter madly in their undiminished, growing numbers."

"And then?" asked Marker in a voice that emerged from a drum of doom.

"Then the *porbo*-flies retire to their breeding place to lay their eggs."

"Breeding place?"

Gently Marker grabbed the Lainian's tenuous shoulders in his knobby hands. He shook Fashono a little. "Where do they lay their eggs?" He shook a little harder.

"In the *pibber*-tree," Fashono cried. "Under the bark of the mighty *pibber*-tree. And how beautiful and stately those trees are, Commander Marker! They rise to the clouds in their kingly beauty! Some are ten thousand years old! Some have ancient rooms carved into their bases—our historic shrines!"

"I see. As I recall, these *pibber*-trees grow exclusively in your so-called Holy Land."

"Yes, yes! The park you agreed to protect. But I beg you to ignore this, Commander! How can the people of Earth come to us with their superior culture if you do not destroy these mighty creations of nature? I beg you not to leave our poor people so stupidly content with their miserable lot!"

Marker cast him a pale, unnerved smile. "Good-bye, Fashono," he said, and immediately went to the *Apollo-1*, Jorey waddling behind him. "Have the hatches closed," Marker told Jorey. "We're getting out of here before we lose our shirts."

"We've lost them," observed Jorey. "In fact, I felt chilly the minute we landed."

Marker was beyond reacting to Jorey's offstage comments. He got Whitsey on the Leaper, and fully described the new circumstances.

Whitsey said mildly, "So you've lost the planet."

"For good," said Marker. "You've failed at your job, Whitsey. You're going to be kicked out on your ear. It was your responsibility to see that nothing was loused up. I'm going to tell the Office the story."

"Nothing was loused up—except by you," Whitsey said smoothly. "I'll overlook that, however, if you head on out and find another planet. As for Lain, the planet will be reclaimed. I'll call a meeting of the Board in a few weeks and have the agreement rescinded and then send a more capable Survey

man out to force the Lainians to sign another agreement permitting the destruction of the *pibber*-trees."

"The *pibber*-trees will not be destroyed," said Marker flatly.

"Why not?" Whitsey sneered. "Identifying again, Marker? Thinking of Earth and Sequoia trees maybe?—when *pibber*-trees *aren't* Sequoias?"

"All right," said Marker doggedly. "I identify. So will the rest of humanity on all the human-populated worlds. There's something real sentimental about Sequoias, Co-ordinator. So I'll publicize those trees to the press. I'll bring back pictures. I'll expose Colonial Survey. The press and newscasters will raise a stink about a bunch of money-mongers who are willing to destroy what only God can make etc., etc. What do I care? I'm out of a job—just like you."

Whitsey bit his lip. "You're a fool. Fashono planned this reaction too."

"So he did," said Marker unhappily. "As Mr. Jorey happened to remark a short time ago to me, 'The customer kept on saying "yes" until the salesman got sucked up in his own vacuum cleaner.' That was me. So I'm coming home, Whitsey. The only winners in this deal are the Lainians!"

THE END