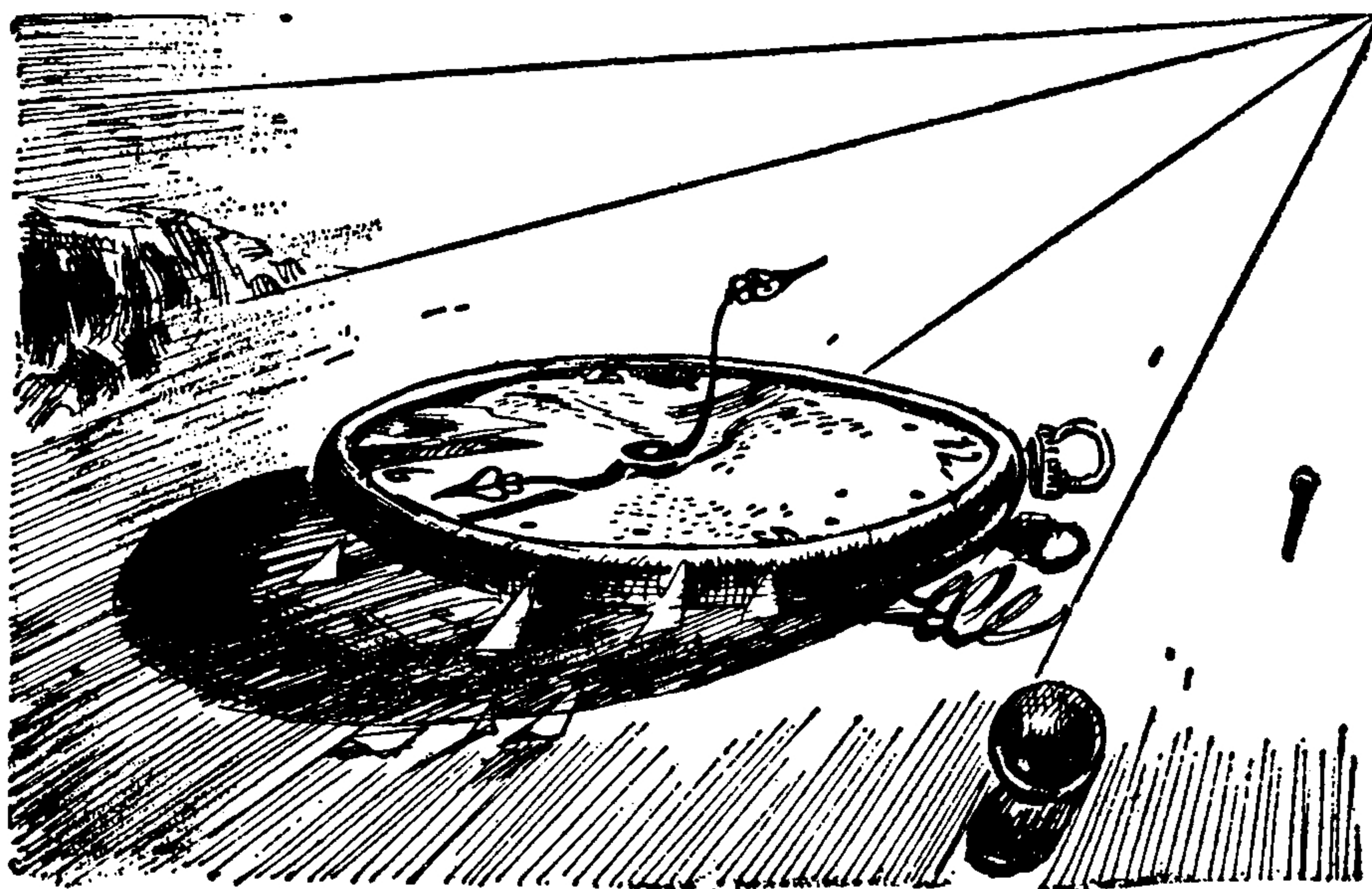
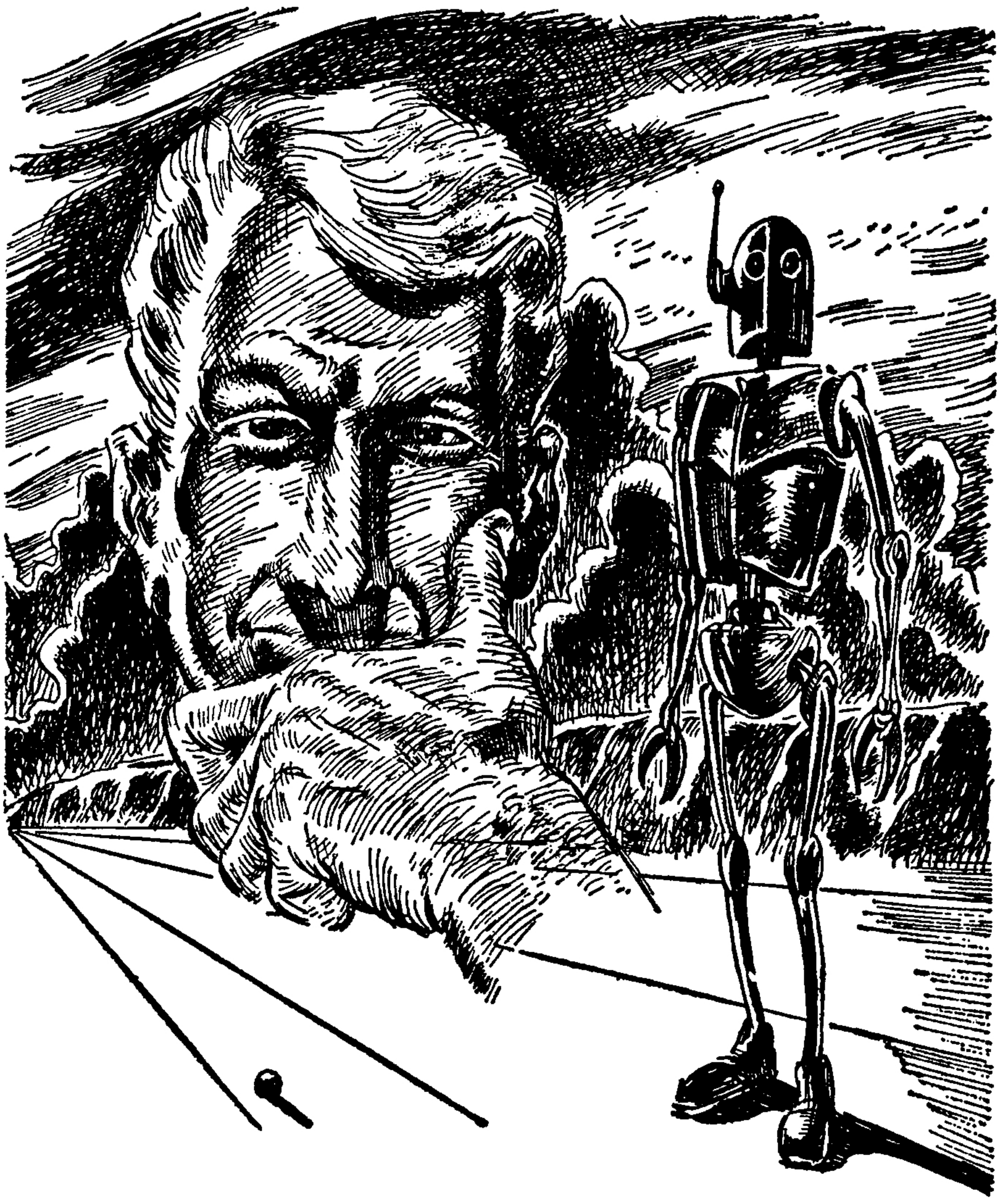


In *New Maps of Hell* (that astute critical dissection of modern science fiction), Kingsley Amis, the outspoken English novelist, a longtime reader of the genre, calls attention to what he takes to be "Simak's syndrome," a strong bucolic strain seen in a good number of his better stories, particularly in such classic works as "The Big Front Yard," "A Death in the House," and *City*, of course. There is much to be said for this view. In fact, so persistent can this longing for rural paradise be that sometimes when a Simak story is set on another planet, light-years away across the Galaxy, that world is far more idyllic than ours, but sometimes it's more deadly, as in the story you are about to read—in which Man arrives with his expertise, his army of glistening robots, his doubts about this green new world. Then those suspicions are suddenly and stunningly confirmed when an unarmed alien walks calmly out of the jungle and quietly informs him that . . .





“YOU’LL NEVER GO HOME AGAIN”

Illustrated
by SOMMERS

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

THERE was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could stop a human planetary survey party. It was a specialized unit created for and charged with one purpose only—to establish a bridgehead on an alien planet, to blast out the perimeters of that bridgehead and establish a base where there would be some elbow-room. Then hold that elbow-room against all comers until it was time to go.

After the base was once established, the brains of the party got to work. They turned the place inside out. They put it on tape and captured it within the chains of symbols they scribbled in their field books. They pictured it and wrote it and plotted it and reduced it to a neat assembly of keyed and symbolic facts to be inserted in the galactic files.

If there was life, and sometimes there was, they prodded it to get reaction. Sometimes the reaction was extremely violent, and other times it was much more dangerously subtle. But there were ways in which to handle both the violent and the subtle, for the legionnaires and their robotics were trained to a razor's edge and knew nearly all the answers.

There was nothing in the galaxy, so far known, that could stop a human survey party.

Tom Decker sat at ease in the empty lounge and swirled the ice

in the highball glass, well contented, watching the first of the robots emerge from the bowels of the cargo space. They dragged a conveyor belt behind them as they emerged and Decker, sitting idly, watched them drive supports into the ground and rig up the belt.

A door clicked open back of Decker and he turned his head.

"May I come in, sir?" Doug Jackson asked.

"Certainly," said Decker.

Jackson walked to the great curving window and looked out. "What does it look like, sir?" he asked.

Decker shrugged. "Another job," he said. "Six weeks. Six months. Depends on what we find."

Jackson sat down beside him. "This one looks tough," he said. "Jungle worlds always are a bit meaner than any of the others."

Decker grunted at him. "A job. That's all. Another job to do. Another report to file. Then they'll either send out an exploitation gang or a pitiful bunch of bleating colonists."

"Or," said Jackson, "they'll file the report and let it gather dust for a thousand years or so."

"They can do anything they want," Decker told him. "We turn it in. What someone else does with it after that is their affair, not ours."

They sat quietly watching the

six robots roll out the first of the packing cases, rip off its cover and unpack the seventh robot, laying out his various parts neatly in a row in the tramped-down, waist-high grass. Then, working as a team, with not a single fumble, they put No. 7 together, screwed his brain case into his metal skull, flipped up his energizing switch and slapped the breastplate home.

No. 7 stood groggily for a moment. He swung his arms uncertainly, shook his head from side to side. Then, having oriented himself, he stepped briskly forward, helped the other six heave the packing box containing No. 8 off the conveyor belt.

"Takes a little time this way," said Decker, "but it saves a lot of space. Have to cut our robot crew in half if we didn't pack them at the end of every job. They stow away better."

He sipped at his highball speculatively. Jackson lit a cigarette.

"Someday," said Jackson, "we're going to run up against something that we can't handle."

Decker snorted.

"Maybe here," insisted Jackson, gesturing at the nightmare jungle world outside the great curved sweep of the vision plate.

"You're a romanticist," Decker told him shortly. "In love with the unexpected. Besides, you're new. After a dozen trips you won't feel this way."

"It could happen," insisted Jackson.

Decker nodded, almost sleepily. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe it could, at that. It never has, but I suppose it could. And when it does, we take it on the lam. It's no part of our job to fight a last ditch battle. When we bump up against something that's too big to handle, we don't stick around. We don't take any risks."

He took another sip.

"Not even calculated risks," he added.

THE ship rested on the top of a low hill, in a small clearing masked by tall grass; sprinkled here and there with patches of exotic flowers. Below the hill a river flowed sluggishly, a broad expanse of chocolate-colored water moving in a sleepy tide through the immense vine-entangled forest.

As far as the eye could see, the jungle stretched away, a brooding darkness that even from behind the curving quartz of the vision plate seemed to exude a heady, musty scent of danger that swept up over the grass-covered hilltop. There was no sign of life, but one knew, almost instinctively, that sentiency lurked in the buried pathways and tunnels of the great tree-land.

Robot No. 8 had been energized and now the eight split into two groups, ran out two packing

cases at a time instead of one. Soon there were twelve robots and then they formed themselves into three working groups.

"Like that," said Decker, picking up the conversation where they had left it lying. He gestured with his glass, now empty. "No calculated risks. We send the robots first. They unpack and set up their fellows. Then the whole gang turns to and uncrates the machinery and sets it up and gets it operating. A man doesn't even put his foot on the ground until he has a steel ring around the ship to give him protection."

Jackson sighed. "I guess you're right," he said. "Nothing can happen. We don't take any chances. Not a single one."

"Why should we?" Decker asked. He heaved himself out of the chair, stood up and stretched. "Got a thing or two to do," he said. "Last minute checks and so on."

"I'll sit here for a while," said Jackson. "I like to watch. It's all new to me."

"You'll get over it," Decker told him. "In another twenty years."

IN his office, Decker lifted a sheaf of preliminary reports off his desk and ran through them slowly, checking each one carefully, filing away in his mind the basic facts of the world outside.

He worked stolidly, wetting a

big, blunt thumb against his out-thrust tongue to flip the report pages off the top of the next stack and deposit them, in not so neat a pile to his right, face downward.

Atmosphere—Pressure slightly more than Earth. High in oxygen.

Gravity—A bit more than Earth.

Temperature—Hot. Jungle worlds always were. There was a breeze outside now, he thought. Maybe there'd be a breeze most of the time. That would be a help.

Rotation—Thirty-six hour day.

Radiation—None of local origin, but some hard stuff getting through from the sun.

He made a mental note: Watch that.

Bacterial and virus count—As usual. Lots of it. Apparently not too dangerous. Not with every single soul hypoed and immunized and hormoned to his eyebrows. But you never can be sure, he thought. Not entirely sure. No calculated risks, he had told Jackson. But here was a calculated risk and one you couldn't do a single thing about. If there was a bug that picked you for a host and you weren't loaded for bear to fight him, you took him on and did the best you could.

Life factor—Lot of emanation. Probably the vegetation, maybe even the soil, was crawling with

all sorts of loathsome life. Vicious stuff, most likely, but that was something you took care of as a matter of routine. No use taking any chances. You went over the ground even if there was no life—just to be sure there wasn't.

A tap came on the door and he called out for the man to enter.

It was Captain Carr, commander of the Legion unit.

Carr saluted snappily. Decker did not rise, made his answering salute a sloppy one on purpose. No use, he told himself, letting the fellow establish any semblance of equality, for there was no such equality in fact. A captain of the Legion simply did not rank with the commandant of a galactic survey party.

"Reporting, sir," said Carr. "We are ready for a landing."

"Fine, Captain. Fine."

What was the matter with the fool? The Legion always was ready, always would be ready—that was no more than tradition. Why, then, carry out such an empty, stiff formality?

But it was the nature of a man like Carr, he supposed. The Legion, with its rigid discipline, its ancient pride of service and tradition, attracted men like Carr, was a perfect finishing school for accomplished martinets.

TIN soldiers, Decker thought, but accomplished ones. As hard-bitten a gang of fighting

men as the galaxy had ever known. They were drilled and disciplined to a razor's edge, serum- and hormone-injected against all known diseases of an alien world, trained and educated in alien psychology and strictly indoctrinated with high survival characteristics which stood up under even the most adverse circumstances.

"We shall not be ready for some time, Captain," Decker said. "The robots have just started their uncrating."

"Very well," said Carr. "We await your orders, sir."

"Thank you, Captain," Decker told him, making it quite clear that he wished he would get out. But when Carr turned to go, Decker called him back.

"What is it, sir?" asked Carr.

"I've been wondering," said Decker. "Just wondering, you understand. Can you imagine any circumstance which might arise that the Legion could not handle?"

Carr's expression was a pure delight to see. "I'm afraid, sir, that I don't understand your question."

Decker sighed. "I didn't think you would," he said.

Before nightfall, the full working force of robots had been uncrated and had set up some of the machines, enough to establish a small circle of alarm posts around the ship.

A flame thrower burned a barren circle on the hilltop, stretching five hundred feet around the ship. A hard radiations generator took up its painstaking task, pouring pure death into the soil. The toll must have been terrific. In some spots the ground virtually boiled as the dying life forms fought momentarily and fruitlessly to escape the death that cut them down.

The robots rigged up huge batteries of lamps that set the hilltop ablaze with a light as bright as day, and the work went on.

As yet, no human had set foot outside the ship.

Inside the ship, the robot stewards set up a table in the lounge so that the human diners might see what was going on outside the ship.

The entire company, except for the legionnaires who stayed in quarters, had gathered for the meal when Decker came into the room.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said.

He strode to the table's head and the others ranged themselves along the sides. He sat down and there was a scraping of drawn chairs as the others took their places.

He clasped his hands in front of him and bowed his head and parted his lips to say the customary words. He halted even as

he was about to speak, and when the words did come they were different from the ones he had said by rote a thousand times before.

"Dear Father, we are Thy servants in an unknown land and there is a deadly pride upon us. Teach us humility and lead us to the knowledge, before it is too late, that men, despite their far traveling and their mighty works, still are as children in Thy sight. Bless the bread we are about to break, we beg Thee, and keep us forever in Thy compassion. Amen."

He lifted his head and looked down the table. Some of them, he saw, were startled. The others were amused.

THEY wonder if I'm cracking, he thought. They think the Old Man is breaking up. And that may be true, for all I know. Although I was all right until this afternoon. All right until young Doug Jackson

"Those were fine words, lad," said Old MacDonald, the chief engineer. "I thank you for them, sir, and there is them among us who would do well to take some heed upon them."

Platters and plates were being passed up and down the table's length and there was the commonplace, homely clatter of silverware and china.

"This looks an interesting

world," said Waldron, the anthropologist. "Dickson and I were up in observation just before the sun set. We thought we saw something down by the river. Some sort of life."

Decker grunted, scooping fried potatoes out of a bowl onto his plate. "Funny if we don't run across a lot of life here. The radiation wagon stirred up a lot of it when it went over the field today."

"What Waldron and I saw," said Dickson, "looked humanoid."

Decker squinted at the biologist. "Sure of that?" he asked.

Dickson shook his head. "The seeing was poor. Couldn't be absolutely sure. Seemed to me there were two or three of them. Matchstick men."

Waldron nodded. "Like a picture a kid would draw," he said. "One stroke for the body. Two strokes each for arms and legs. A circle for a head. Angular. Ungraceful. Skinny."

"Graceful enough in motion, though," said Dickson. "When they moved, they went like cats. Flowed, sort of."

"We'll know plenty soon enough," Decker told them mildly. "In a day or two we'll flush them."

FUNNY, he thought. On almost every job someone popped up to report he had spotted human-

oids. Usually there weren't any. Usually it was just imagination. Probably wishful thinking, he told himself, the yen of men far away from their fellow men to find in an alien place a type of life that somehow seemed familiar.

Although the usual humanoid, once you met him in the flesh, turned out to be so repulsively alien that alongside him an octopus would seem positively human.

Franey, the senior geologist, said, "I've been thinking about those mountains to the west of us, the ones we caught sight of when we were coming in. Had a new look about them. New mountains are good to work in. They haven't worn down. Easier to get at whatever's in them."

"We'll lay out our first survey lines in that direction," Decker told him.

Outside the curving vision plate, the night was alive with the blaze of the batteries of lights. Gleaming robots toiled in shining gangs. Ponderous machines lumbered past. Smaller ones scurried like frightened beetles. To the south, great gouts of flame leaped out, and the sky was painted red with the bursts of a squad of flame throwers going into action.

"Chewing out a landing field," said Decker. "A tongue of jungle juts out there. Absolutely level

ground. Like a floor. Won't take a great deal of work to turn it into a field."

The stewards brought coffee and brandy and a box of good cigars. Decker and his men settled back into their chairs, taking life easy, watching the work going on outside the ship.

"I hate this waiting," Franey said, settling down comfortably to his cigar.

"Part of the job," said Decker. He poured more brandy in his coffee.

By dawn the last machines were set up and either had been moved out to their assigned positions or were parked in the motor pool. The flammers had enlarged the burned over area and three radiation wagons were busy on their rounds. To the south, the airfield had been finished and the jets were lined up and waiting in a plumb-straight row.

SOME of the robots, their work done for the moment, formed themselves in solid ranks to form a solid square, neat and orderly and occupying a minimum of space. They stood there in the square, waiting against the time when they would be needed, a motor pool of robots, a reservoir of manpower.

Finally the gangplank came down and the legionnaires marched out in files of two, with clank and glitter and a remorse-

less precision that put machines to shame. There were no banners and there were no drums, for these are useless things and the Legion, despite its clank and glitter, was an organization of ruthless efficiency.

The column wheeled and became a line and the line broke up and the platoons moved out toward the planethead perimeter. There, machines and legionnaires and robots manned the frontier Earth had set up on an alien world.

Busy robots staked out and set up an open air pavilion of gaudily-striped canvas that rippled in the breeze, placed tables and chairs beneath its shade, moved in a refrigerator filled with beer and with extra ice compartments.

It finally was safe and comfortable for ordinary men to leave the shelter of the ship.

Organization, Decker told himself—organization and efficiency and leaving not a thing to chance. Plug every loophole before it became a loophole. Crush possible resistance before it developed as resistance. Gain absolute control over a certain number of square feet of planet and operate from there.

Later, of course, there were certain chances taken; you just couldn't eliminate them all. There would be field trips and even with all the precautions that robot and machine and le-

gionnaire could offer, there would be certain risks. There would be aerial survey and mapping, and these, too, would have elements of chance, but with these elements reduced to the very minimum.

And always there would be the base, an absolutely safe and impregnable base to which a field party or a survey flight could retreat, from which reinforcements could be sent out or counteraction taken.

Foolproof, he told himself. As foolproof as it could be made.

He wondered briefly what had been the matter with him the night before. It had been that young fool, Jackson, of course—a capable biochemist, possibly, but certainly the wrong kind of a man for a job like this. Something had slipped up; the screening board should have stopped a man like Jackson, should have spotted his emotional instability. Not that he could do any actual harm, of course, but he could be upsetting. An irritant, said Decker. That is what he is. Just an irritant.

DECKER laid an armload of paraphernalia on the long table underneath the gay pavilion. From it he selected a rolled-up sheet of map paper, unrolled it, spread it flat and thumbtacked it at four corners. On it a portion of the river and the mountains

to the west had been roughly penciled in. The base was represented by an X-ed through square—but the rest of it was blank.

But it would be filled in; as the days went by it would take on shape and forms.

From the field to the south a jet whooshed into the sky, made a lazy turn and straightened out to streak toward the west. Decker walked to the edge of the pavilion's shade and watched it as it dwindled out of sight. That would be Jarvis and Donnelly, assigned to the preliminary survey of the southwest sector between the base and the western mountains.

Another jet rose lazily, trailing its column of exhaust, gathered speed and sprang into the sky. Freeman and Johns, he thought.

Decker went back to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down. He picked up a pencil and tapped it idly on the almost-blank map paper. Behind his back he heard another jet whoom upward from the field.

He let his eyes take in the base. Already it was losing its raw, burned-over look. Already it had something of the look of Earth about it, of the efficiency and common sense and get-the-job-done attitude of the men of Earth.

Small groups of men stood around talking. One of them, he

saw, was squatted on the ground, talking something over with three squatting robots. Others of them walked around, sizing up the situation.

Decker grunted with satisfaction. A capable gang of men, he thought. To get down to real work, most of them would have to wait around until the first surveys came in, but even while they waited they would not be idle.

They'd take soil samples and test them. The life that swarmed in the soil would be captured and brought in by grinning robots and the squirming, vicious things could be pinned down and investigated . . . photographed, X-rayed, dissected, analyzed, observed, put through reaction tests. Trees and plants and grasses would be catalogued and attempts made to classify them. Test pits would be dug for a look at soil strata. The river's water would be analyzed. Seines would dredge up some of the life they held. Wells would be driven to establish water tables.

All of this here, at the moment, while they waited for the first preliminary flights to bring back data that would pinpoint other areas worthy of investigation.

Once those reports were in, the work would be started in dead earnest. Geologists and mineral men would probe into the planet's hide. Weather observa-

tion points would be set up. Botanists would take far-ranging check samples. Each man would do the work for which he had been trained. Field reports would pour back to the base, there to be correlated and fitted into the picture.

Work then, work in plenty. Work by day and night. And all the time the base would be a bit of Earth, a few square yards held inviolate against all another world might muster.

DECKER sat easily in his chair and felt the breeze that came beneath the canvas, a gentle breeze that ruffled through his hair, rattled the papers on the table and twitched the tacked-down map. It was pleasant here, he thought. But it wouldn't stay pleasant long. It never did.

Someday, he thought, I'll find a pleasant planet, a paradise planet where the weather's always perfect and there is food for the picking of it and natives that are intelligent to talk with and companionable in other ways . . . and I will never leave it. I'll refuse to leave when the ship is ready to blast off. I'll live out my days in a fascinating corner of a lousy galaxy—a galaxy that is gaunt with hunger and mad with savagery and lonely beyond all that may be said of loneliness.

He looked up from his reverie and saw Jackson standing at the

pavilion's edge, watching him.

"What's the matter, Jackson?" Decker asked with sudden bitterness. "Why aren't you—"

"They're bringing in a native, sir," said Jackson, breathlessly. "One of the things Waldron and Dickson saw."

The native was humanoid, but he was not human.

As Waldron and Dickson had said, he was a match-stick man, a flesh and blood extension of a drawing a four-year-old might make. He was black as the ace of spades and he wore no clothing, but the eyes that looked out of the pumpkin-shaped head at Decker were bright with a light that might have been intelligence.

Decker tensed as he looked into those eyes. Then he looked away, saw the men standing silently around the pavilion's edge, silent and waiting, tense as he was.

SLOWLY Decker reached out his hand to one of the two headsets of the mentograph. His fingers closed over it and for a moment he felt a vague, but forceful reluctance to put it on. It was disturbing to contact, or attempt to contact, an alien mind. It gave one a queasy feeling in the pit of the stomach. It was a thing, he thought, that Man never had been intended to do—an experience that was utterly foreign to any human background.

He lifted the headset slowly, fitted it over his skull, made a sign toward the second set.

For a long moment the alien eyes watched him, the creature standing erect and motionless.

Courage, thought Decker. Raw and naked courage, to stand there in this suddenly unfamiliar environment that blossomed almost overnight on familiar ground, to stand there motionless and erect, surrounded by creatures that must look as if they had dropped from some horrible nightmare.

The humanoid took one step closer to the table, reached out a hand and took the headset. Fumbling with its unfamiliarity, he clamped it on his head. And never for a moment did the eyes waver from Decker's eyes, always alert and watchful.

Decker forced himself to relax, tried to force his mind into an attitude of peace and calm. That was a thing you had to be careful of. You couldn't scare these creatures—you had to lull them, quiet them down, make them feel your friendliness. They would be upset, and a sudden thought, even a suggestion of human brusqueness would wind them up tighter than a drum.

There was intelligence here, he told himself, being careful to keep his mind unruffled, a greater intelligence than one would think looking at the creature. Intelli-

gence enough to know that he should put on the headset, and guts enough to do it.

HE caught the first faint mental whiff of the match-stick man, and the pit of his stomach contracted suddenly and there was an ache around his chest. There was nothing in the thing he caught, nothing that could be put to words, but there was an alienness, as a smell is alien. There was a non-human connotation that set one's teeth on edge. He fought back the gagging blackness of repulsive disgust that sought to break the smooth friendliness he held within his mind.

"We are friendly," Decker forced himself to think. "We are friendly. We are friendly. We are friendly. We are friendly. We are —"

"You should not have come," said the thought of the match-stick man.

"We will not harm you," Decker thought. "We are friendly. We will not harm you. We will not harm—"

"You will never leave," said the humanoid, his eyes still on Decker's.

"Let us be friends," thought Decker. "Let us be friends. We have gifts. We will help you. We will—"

"You should not have come," said the match-stick thought.

"But since you are here, you can never leave."

Humor him, thought Decker to himself. Humor him.

"All right, then," he thought. "We will stay. We will stay and we will be friendly. We will stay and teach you. We will give you the things we have brought for you and we will stay with you."

"You will not leave," said the match-stick man's thought, and there was something so cold and logical and matter-of-fact about the way the thought was delivered, that Decker suddenly was cold.

The humanoid meant it—meant every word he said. He was not being dramatic, nor was he blustering—but neither was he bluffing. He actually thought that the humans would not leave, that they would not live to leave the planet.

Decker smiled softly to himself.

"You will die here," said the humanoid thought.

"Die?" asked Decker. "What is die?"

The match-stick man's thought was pure disgust. Deliberately, he reached up and took off the headset, laid it carefully back upon the table.

Then he turned and walked away and not a man made a move to stop him.

Decker took off the headset, slammed it on the table top.

"Jackson," he said, "pick up that phone and tell the Legion to let him through. Let him leave. Don't try to stop him."

He sat limply in his chair and looked at the ring of faces that was watching him.

Waldron asked, "What is it, Decker?"

"He sentenced us to death," said Decker. "He said that we would not leave the planet. He said that we would die here."

"Strong words," said Waldron.

"He meant them," Decker said.

He lifted a hand, flipped it wearily. "He doesn't know, of course," he said. "He really thinks that he can stop us leaving. He thinks that we will die."

It was an amusing situation, really. That a naked humanoid should walk out of the jungle and threaten to do away with a human survey party, that he should really think that he could do it. That he should be so positive about it.

But there was not a single smile on any of the faces that looked at Decker.

"We can't let it get us," Decker said.

"Nevertheless," Waldron declared, "we should take all precautions."

Decker nodded. "We'll go on emergency alert immediately," he said. "We'll stay that way until we're sure . . . until we're absolutely sure that. . . ."

HIS voice trailed off. Sure of what? Sure that an alien savage who wore no clothing, who had not a sign of culture about him, could wipe out a group of humans protected by a ring of steel, held within a guard of machines and robots and a group of fighting men who knew all there was to know concerning the refinements of dealing out swift and merciless extermination to anything that moved against them?

Ridiculous!

Of course it was ridiculous!

And yet the eyes had held intelligence. The being had not only intelligence, but courage. He had stood within a circle of—to him—alien beings, and he had not flinched. He had faced the unknown and said what there was to say and then had walked away with a dignity any human would have been proud to wear. He must have guessed that the alien beings within the confines of the base were not of his own planet, for he had said that they should not have come, and his thought had implied that he was aware they were not of this world of his. He had understood that he was supposed to put on the headset, but whether that was an act more of courage than of intelligence one would never know—for you could not know if he had realized what the headset had been for. Not knowing, the naked courage of clamping it to

his head was of an order that could not be measured.

"What do you think?" Decker asked Waldron.

"We'll have to be careful," Waldron told him evenly. "We'll have to watch our step. Take all precautions now that we are warned. But there's nothing to be scared of, nothing we can't handle."

"He was bluffing," Dickson said. "Trying to scare us into leaving."

Decker shook his head. "I don't think he was," he said. "I tried to bluff him and it didn't work. He's just as sure as we are."

The work went on. There was no attack.

THE jets roared out and thrummed away, mapping the land. Field parties went out cautiously. They were flanked by robots and by legionnaires and preceded by lumbering machines that knifed and tore and burned a roadway through even the most stubborn of the terrain they went up against. Radio weather stations were set up at distant points and at the base the weather tabulators clicked off on tape the data that the stations sent back.

Other field parties were flown into the special areas pinpointed for more extensive exploration and investigation.

And nothing happened.

The days went past.

The weeks went past.

The machines and robots watched and the legionnaires stood ready and the men hurried with their work so they could get off the planet.

A bed of coal was found and mapped. An iron range was discovered. One area in the mountains to the west crawled with radioactive ores. The botanists found twenty-seven species of edible fruit. The base swarmed with animals that had been trapped as specimens and remained as pets.

And a village of the matchstick men was found.

It wasn't much of a place. Its huts were primitive. Its sanitation was non-existent. Its people were peaceful.

Decker left his chair under the striped pavilion to lead a party to the village.

The party entered cautiously, weapons ready but being very careful not to move too fast, not to speak too quickly, not to make a motion that might be construed as hostile.

The natives sat in their doorways and watched them. They did not speak and they scarcely moved a muscle. They simply watched the humans as they marched to the center of the village.

There the robots set up a table and placed a mentograph upon

it. Decker sat down in a chair and put one of the headsets on his skull. The rest of the party waited off to one side. Decker waited at the table.

They waited for an hour; not a native stirred. None came forward to put on the other headset.

DECKER took off the headset wearily and placed it on the table.

"It's no use," he said. "It won't work. Go ahead and take your pictures. Do anything you wish. But don't disturb the natives. Don't touch a single thing."

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his steaming face.

Waldron came and leaned on the table. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

Decker shook his head. "It haunts me," he said. "There's just one thing that I am thinking. It must be wrong. It can't be right. But the thought came to me and I can't get rid of it."

"Sometimes that happens," Waldron said. "No matter how illogical a thing may be, it sticks with a man, like a burr inside his brain."

"The thought is this," said Decker. "That they have told us all that they have to tell us. That they have nothing more they wish to say to us."

"That's what you thought," said Waldron.

Decker nodded. "A funny thing to think," he said. "Out of clear sky. And it can't be right."

"I don't know," said Waldron. "Nothing's right here. Notice that they haven't got a single iron tool. Not a scrap of metal in evidence at all. Their cooking utensils are stone, a sort of funny stuff like soapstone. What few tools they have are stone. And yet they have a culture. And they have it without metal."

"They're intelligent," said Decker. "Look at them watching us. Not afraid. Just waiting. Calm and sure of themselves. And that fellow who came into the base. He knew what to do with the headset."

Waldron sucked thoughtfully at a tooth. "We better be getting back to base," he said. "It's getting late." He held his wrist in front of him. "My watch has stopped. What time do you have, Decker?"

Decker lifted his arm and Waldron heard the sharp gasp of his indrawn breath. Slowly, Decker raised his head, looked at the other man.

"My watch has stopped, too," he said and his voice was scarcely louder than a whisper.

For a moment they were graven images, shocked into immobility by a thing that should have been no more than an inconvenience. Then Waldron sprang erect from the table,

whirled to face the men and robots.

"Assemble!" he shouted. "Back to the base. Quick!"

The men came running. The robots fell into place. The column marched away. The natives sat quietly in their doorways and watched them as they left.

Decker sat in his camp chair and listened to the canvas of the pavilion snapping softly in the wind, alive in the wind, talking and laughing to itself. A lantern, hung on a ring above his head, swayed gently, casting fleeting shadows that seemed at times to be the shadows of living, moving things. A robot stood stiffly and quietly beside one of the pavilion poles.

Stolidly, Decker reached out a finger and stirred the little pile of wheels and springs that lay upon the table.

Sinister, he thought.

Sinister and queer.

The guts of watches, lying on the table.

Not of two watches alone, not only his and Waldron's watches, but many other watches from the wrists of other men. All of them silent, stilled in their task of marking time.

NIGHT had fallen hours before, but the base still was astir with activity that was at once feverish and furtive. Men moved about in the shadows and crossed

the glaring patches of brilliance shed by the batteries of lights set up by the robots many weeks before. Watching the men, one would have sensed that they moved with a haunting sense of doom. Would have known as well that they knew, deep in their inmost hearts, that there was no doom to fear. No definite thing that one could put a finger on and say this is the thing to fear. No direction that one might point and say doom lies here, waiting to spring upon us.

Just one small thing.

Watches had stopped running.

And that was a simple thing for which there must be some simple explanation.

Except, thought Decker, on an alien planet no occurrence, no accident or incident, can be regarded as a simple thing for which a simple explanation must necessarily be anticipated. For the matrix of cause and effect, the mathematics of chance, may not hold true on an alien planet as they hold true on Earth.

There was one rule, Decker thought grimly.

One rule: Take no chances.

That was the one safe rule to follow, the only rule to follow.

Following it, he had ordered all field parties back to base, had ordered the crew to prepare the ship for emergency takeoff, had alerted the robots to be ready at an instant to get the machines

aboard. To be prepared even to desert the machines and leave without them if circumstances should dictate that such was necessary.

Having done that, there was no more to do but wait. Wait until the field parties came back from their advance camps. Wait until some reason could be assigned to the failure of the watches.

It was not a thing, he told himself, that should be allowed to panic one. It was something to recognize, not to disregard. It was a circumstance that made necessary a certain number of precautions, but it was not a situation that should make one lose all sense of proportion.

You could not go back to Earth and say: "Well, you see, our watches stopped and so—"

A footstep sounded and he swung around in his chair. It was Jackson.

"What is it, Jackson?" Decker asked.

"The camps aren't answering, sir," said Jackson. "The operator has been trying to raise them and there is no answer. Not a single peep."

Decker grunted. "Take it easy," he said. "They will answer. Give them time."

HE wished, even as he spoke, that he could feel some of the assurance that he tried to put into

his voice. For a second, a rising terror mounted in his throat and he choked it back.

"Sit down," he said. "We'll sit here and have a beer, and then we'll go down to the radio shack and see what's doing."

He rapped on the table. "Beer," he said. "Two beers."

The robot standing by the pavilion pole did not answer.

He made his voice louder.

The robot did not stir.

Decker put his clenched fists upon the table and tried to rise, but his legs suddenly were cold and had unaccountably turned to water, and he could not raise himself.

"Jackson," he panted, "go and tap that robot on the shoulder. Tell him we want some beer."

He saw the fear that whitened Jackson's face as he rose and moved slowly forward. Inside himself, he felt the terror start and worry at his throat.

Jackson stood beside the robot and reached out a hesitant hand, tapped him gently on the shoulder, tapped him harder—and the robot fell flat upon its face!

Feet hammered across the hard-packed ground, heading for the pavilion.

Decker jerked himself around, sat foursquare and solid in his chair, waiting for the man who ran.

It was MacDonald, the chief engineer.

He halted in front of Decker and his hands, scarred and grimy with years of fighting balky engines, reached down and gripped the boards of the table's edge. His seamy face was twisted as if he were about to weep.

"The ship, sir. The ship. . . ."

Decker nodded, almost idly. "I know, Mr. MacDonald. The ship won't run."

MacDonald gulped. "The big stuff's all right, sir. But the little gadgets . . . the injector mechanism . . . the—"

He stopped abruptly and stared at Decker. "You knew," he said. "How did you know?"

"I knew," said Decker, "that someday it would come. Not like this, perhaps. But in any one of several ways. I knew that the day would come when our luck would run too thin. I talked big, like the rest of you, of course, but I knew that it would come. The day when we'd covered all the possibilities but the one that we could not suspect and that, of course, would be the one that would ruin us."

HE was thinking: The natives had no metal. No sign of any metal in their village, at all. Their dishes were soapstone and they wore no ornaments. Their implements were stone. And yet they were intelligent enough, civilized enough, cultured enough, to have fabricated

metal. For there was metal here, a great deposit of it in the western mountains. They had tried perhaps, many centuries ago. Had fashioned metal tools and had them go to pieces underneath their fingers in a few short weeks.

A civilization without metal. A culture without metal. It was unthinkable. Take metal from a man and he went back to the caves. Take metal from a man and he was earthbound, and his bare hands were all he had.

Waldron came into the pavilion, walking quietly in the silence. "The radio is dead," he said, "and the robots are dying like flies. The place is littered with them, just so much scrap metal."

Decker nodded. "The little stuff, the finely fabricated, will go first," he said. "Like watches and radio innards and robot brains and injector mechanisms. Next, the generators will go and we will have no lights or power. Then the machines will break down and the Legion's weapons will be no more than clubs. After that the big stuff, probably."

"The native told us," Waldron said, "when you talked to him. 'You will never leave,' he said."

"We didn't understand," said Decker. "We thought he was threatening us, and we knew that we were too big, too well guarded for any threat of his to harm us.

He wasn't threatening us at all, of course, just telling us."

He made a hopeless gesture with his hands. "What is it?"

"No one knows," said Waldron quietly. "Not yet, at least. Later we may find out, but it won't help us any. A microbe, maybe. A virus. Something that eats iron after it has been subjected to heat or alloyed with other metals. It doesn't go for iron ore. If it did, that deposit we found would have been gone long ago."

"If that is true," said Decker, "we've brought it the first square meal it's had in a long, long time. A thousand years. Maybe a million years. There is no fabricated metal here. How would it survive? Without stuff to eat, how would it live?"

"I wouldn't know," said Waldron. "It might not be a metal-eating organism at all. It might be something else. Something in the atmosphere, something we should have looked for."

"We tested the atmosphere."

BUT, even as the words left his mouth, Decker saw how fool-

ish they were. They had tested the atmosphere, but how could they have detected something they had never run across before? Man's yardstick was limited—limited to the things he knew about, limited by the circle of his own experience.

He guarded himself against the obvious and the imaginable. He could not guard himself against the unknowable or the unimaginable.

Decker rose and saw Jackson still standing by the pavilion pole, with the robot stretched at his feet.

"You have your answer," he told the biochemist. "Remember that first day here? You talked with me in the lounge."

Jackson nodded. "I remember, sir."

And suddenly, Decker realized, the entire base was quiet.

A gust of wind came out of the jungle and rattled the canvas.

Now, for the first time since they had landed, he caught in the wind the alien smell of an alien world.

THE END