



I

NOLAND BANNISTER, superintendent of Star Control Field Office #12, was known at the spaceport and along Folger Avenue as a hell-roarer—a loud-voiced man of vigorous action. He made no secret of his dislike for administrative detail and attacked paper work with a grumbling rancor. Negligence in his staff he dealt with rudely. Mistakes of a more serious nature left him grim and white with rage.

It was Robert Smith's misfortune to commit the most striking blunder of

Bannister's long and varied experience.

As usual, at four o'clock Friday afternoon Bannister sat in his office reviewing the week's work: ships cleared for passage, ships inspected and cleared for discharge of cargo, contraband seizures, crews screened for hijackers and known performers. Last he inspected a *précis* from the logs of ships which had surfaced during the week; skimming for information of possible economic or scientific value.

Smith Was Shanghaied Into an Awesome World

SABOTAGE ON SULFUR PLANET

A Novelet by **JACK VANCE**



Near the end of the *précis* he found an informal note:

"Re SpS *Messeraria*. Supercargo very drunk when ship's log was taken. Followed me back to the office rambling about planet inhabited by intelligent life-forms (obvious fabrication). Tossed him out of office on ear. Smith."

Bannister blinked in amazement, stiffened in his chair. He switched the film back to the *Messeraria's* log, examined it with flinty attention. It appeared ordinary enough, although Cap-

tain Plum's reputation offered no surety against falsification. He checked the ship's roster against a master index.

Jack Fetch, mate. One-time member of the Violet Ray Association. Never convicted.

Abe McPhee, chief steward. Moral deviant, refused deabberation.

Owen Phelps, quartermaster. Expert gambler and game-rigger.

Doni Lowell, supercargo. Known embezzler; a brother refused to prosecute.

"Mmmph," said Bannister to himself.

Where He Found His Personal Dream of Terror!

"Nice bunch." He continued. First and second engineers, wiper, mess boy. Pasts stained to a greater or lesser degree.

BANNISTER re-read Smith's breezy message. Anger rose in his throat like the aftertaste of cheap whisky. Suppose Supercargo Don Lowell had been drunkenly babbling the truth? He punched a button on his desk.

"Yes, Mr. Bannister?"

"Who the devil is Smith? There's a report here—just a few casual lines—signed 'Smith'. Who the devil's Smith?"

"That'll be Robert Smith. A front-office man we hired last week."

Bannister said in a metallic voice, "I want to see him."

There was a wait of five minutes, while Bannister drummed his fingers on the desk. Then the door slid back a few inches, remained in this position, revealing a hand on the latch, while the owner exchanged a bit of final banter with Bannister's secretary.

Bannister barked, "Come in, come in!" He glared at the young man, still grinning, who swung the door open.

"Smith?" Bannister spoke with steely gentleness.

"Yes, sir."

"Can you guess why I want to see you?"

Smith raised his eyebrows. "Not unless it's about the suggestion I made the other day to the office manager."

"A suggestion? Well, well," said Bannister, catlike. "How long have you been with us now?"

"About a week. I'm not complaining—don't get me wrong. I just think the work I'm doing could be handled more efficiently by machine."

"What are your duties, Smith?"

"Well, I've been collating reports, reviewing similar information in Central Intelligence Bank, and appending or amending. If we had a scanner machine to grade and append the material automatically, I'd be free to tackle more important duties."

Bannister inspected Smith under lowered eyebrows. "Interesting. What do you imagine to be the price of the machine you visualize, Smith?"

Smith frowned. "I'm really not sure. That's out of my line. Twenty or thirty thousand, I suppose."

"Who would service the machine, who would code the material?"

Smith smiled at the question. "A cyberneticist, naturally."

Bannister looked toward the ceiling. "And what, I wonder, is the salary such a technical expert commands?"

Smith likewise raised his eyes in calculation. "Perhaps five or six hundred. Seven hundred possibly for a good man. You'd want the best."

"And how much are we paying you for performing identical work?"

"Well—three hundred."

"Are there any conclusions to be drawn?"

Robert Smith said candidly, "It must be that I'm worth seven hundred dollars a month to the bureau."

Bannister cleared his throat, but managed to continue in the same gentle voice. "May I direct your attention to the matter on the screen?"

"Oh, certainly." Smith swung his gaze to the three lines of neat type script. He nodded. "I remember this man very well. In terrible shape, dead drunk. Vicious stuff, alcohol." And he confided, "I myself don't drink; it rot the brain."

Bannister was fond of whisky and beer. Once more he cleared his throat. "What exactly did this man say to you?"

Smith settled himself into Bannister's most comfortable chair, stretched on his legs. "He was clearly subject to delusions and also victim of a well established persecution complex. Assured me the captain and mate of his ship were intent on his death."

"Did he mention why he was in danger?"

Smith laughed easily. "Typical paranoia. A man in bad shape. He claimed that the *Messeraria* had landed on a

unknown planet and discovered an intelligent race of beings. He made a full account in his diary—so he insisted—but the captain tore it up and obliterated passages in the ship's log."

Bannister nodded sagely. "And why did all this take place?"

"He said something about—" Smith knit his brows—"I believe it was jewels. Rather trite." He chuckled. "He could at least have given us something bizarre for our trouble—energy from the air, a paradise of beautiful

worlds, big ones and little ones. We've found dead planets and planets swarming with life, there've been insects and fish and lizards and dinosaurs and god-awful things you'd hate to see under a microscope. But never—not once, Smith—has there been the report of an intelligent race, a civilized people."

Smith nodded. "That's why I was quick to see through the man."

"You ineffable damn fool," roared Bannister, "you pitch out a man who claims first-hand information, and

The Spoilers

IF AND when Man gets around to other planets will his purpose be to build—or to loot? The Bradbury saga has been a rueful indictment of man's greedy blundering—well meant or otherwise. But there is no blundering in SABOTAGE ON SULFUR PLANET, here Jack Vance writes the swift and deadly story of a ship's crew who were bloody buccaneers, who lived for spoils and respected no lives but their own.

Evolution is a slow process—we wonder if mankind will have changed much from the likes of Drake and Kidd by the time space travel is here?

—The Editor

women, clairvoyant dragons. But no—just jewels."

Bannister nodded. "Drunk, eh?"

"Drunk as a lord."

"Crazy to boot?"

"Well, Mr. Bannister, you've heard his story. You can judge for yourself."

Bannister's fury and contempt had taken him past the stage of invective. He said in a sibilant voice, "Smith, you're a remarkable man."

Smith looked up in surprise. "Why, thank you, sir."

"A museum piece. A man with a head full of corn cobs."

Smith stared in confusion.

"We've been exploring space a hundred and fifty years," Bannister intoned. "We've found hot worlds and cold

meanwhile you have the brass to sit here grinning like a cuckoo! Where's your conscience? You feel no twinge when you accept your salary?"

"Well," said Smith hesitantly, "it still seems to me that you're grasping at straws. I sized this man up when I first picked up the log book. I'm an excellent judge of character, Mr. Bannister. I can usually predict a man's actions fairly well."

"Ah," said Bannister. "Then in that case perhaps you can predict my next sentence?"

Smith looked worried. "Is it 'You're fired'?"

"Right. You're fired."

Smith said in a weak voice, "I told you I was good at it."

ALL was not lost, thought Smith as he walked along Folger Avenue toward the space-port. If he were able to confront Bannister with the supercargo, Bannister could see for himself how completely addled was the man. No doubt there would be reinstatement, a handsome apology, promotion, a raise in pay. . . .

Smith returned to his surroundings. Folger Avenue presented a solid five-story front of ancient wooden houses, painted mud color. The ground levels housed saloons and eating-places in almost continuous succession; the few stores intervening were given to the sale of cheap clothing, second-hand goods, weapons, souvenirs of space, medicinal preparations and specifics against out-world ailments; in the upper stories were cheap hotels, warehouses, an occasional Class 12B brothel.

In spite of much that was squalid, Folger Avenue was rich with a certain swashbuckling charm, and equally rich with odor: the musty scent of the warehouses, stale spirits from the taverns, garbage in the gutter, perfume from an oil adulterator.

At last the wooden houses fell away, and Folger Avenue gave into the space-port, a great seared oval bordered by the Evan River. Three space ships occupied the far end of the field; on the lapstrake of the nearest Smith read the silver letters: *Messeraria*.

He trotted across the field, dodging crazy lenses of mottled green glass burnt into the soil by departing ships, mounted the ladder into the *Messeraria*.

A quartermaster on the gangway sat reading a paper: a gray-skinned little man no more than five feet tall, thin as a heron. He put down his paper. "Yes sir, what is it? If it's bills, you'll have to see either the captain or the supercargo, and neither one's aboard."

Smith nodded carelessly. "Where can I find the supercargo?"

"He's liable to be any place. Might try the Bobolink in Rafferty Alley, off Folger Avenue."

"I'll do that," said Smith. "Er—were you aboard last trip?"

The quartermaster squinted sharply. "What if I was?"

"Just curious," said Smith hastily. "I hear you made a pretty good trip."

"Fair. Chow was distasteful."

"May I ask, what planets did you close?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Just curiosity."

"Take it some other place."

Smith descended the ladder, started back across the field. A voice halted him. The quartermaster was looking down from the port. "This curiosity—don't go taking it near Captain Plum. He's a big rough man. Like to be unhealthy. I'm telling you out of kindness."

II

SMITH returned to Folger Avenue to search for Rafferty Alley. Every twenty steps revealed another little side-street. After wandering a hundred yards Smith came to a standstill, looking around helplessly.

A fat man wearing a remarkable green- and white-striped garment stood by the wall, observing him with speculative interest. Smith approached, made a polite inquiry.

"Rafferty Alley?" said the fat man. "Directly behind you, young fellow."

Smith turned, noted the street marker, and, a hundred feet down the alley, a bird outlined in green fluorescent tubing. "That must be the Bobolink."

The fat man was inspecting him, Smith thought, with more than ordinary interest.

"New to these parts, young fellow?"

Smith cleared his throat. "Well, yes and no."

"Gotta be careful along in here. There's strange characters watching and waiting for patsies." He laid a soft hand on Smith's arm. "Come along, I'll take you down to the Bobolink, we'll have a drink, and maybe I can do you

a good turn."

It occurred to Smith that the fat man would provide him with protective coloration; he would be less conspicuous with someone known to the district. He nodded. "Very well. It's only fair to warn you, I'm not a drinking man."

"Well, well," said the fat man. "Fancy that. Say," he nudged Smith with his elbow, "ever think you'd like to make a trip? You look like you might be good at figures. And it just so happens I know of a vacancy that wants to be filled quiet-like without any red tape."

Smith reflected a moment. The idea had many ramifications. Life in space was by no means easy and he would have to forget the supercargo of the *Messeraria*. He thought of the far worlds, the strange sights to be seen, the naked beauty of the stars seen in their native element. "I'd have to know more about it," he said cautiously. "I've never given the idea serious thought."

The fat man nodded, and pushed open the door into the Bobolink. When Smith paused, adjusting his eyes to the dimness, the fat man took his elbow and conducted him to a table where three men were sitting.

The fat man addressed the central of the three figures, a giant of a man with a low forehead, a coarse overhanging shock of hair, a splayed nose with tufts of hair sprouting from the nostrils. These the man had freakishly waxed and shaped into tiny mustaches. There was also a peculiar rancid odor, which reminded Smith of the bear pen at the Haight Memorial Zoo.

"Captain, sir," said the fat man, bending over the table with doggish servility, "here's a young fellow says he can figure pretty well and maybe he'd like to make a trip."

The giant turned clever little eyes up and down Smith's crisp gabardines. "Well, well, a dude. You ever been to space before?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Don't make too much difference. I need a man that knows how to add, how

to take orders, how to keep his mouth shut. This damn fool here can't do any of the three."

SMITH followed his glance to the man at the captain's left. He sat morosely, with his back half-turned to Smith: the supercargo who had staggered drunkenly after him into the Star Control office.

Smith turned back to the captain. "You must be Captain Plum."

"That's me. Meet Bones, my steward—" he pointed to the fat man—"Jack Fetch, the mate, and—" he jerked a thumb at the supercargo—"this is Bilge."

The supercargo straightened in his chair. "My name is Lowell."

"Harrup!" roared Plum. "If I say your name is Bilge, that's your name."

Smith conceived that a year with Captain Plum in the welded steel tube of a spaceship might be trying. He rapidly diagnosed megalomania in Plum, sadomasochism in the hatchet-faced Jack Fetch and a shifted valence in Bones, the steward; a set of ship's officers over-rich and over-ripe even in the unreal atmosphere of Rafferty Alley. Captain Plum and his nose mustache. Bones and his green-and-white-striped suit. Bilge Lowell and his delusions of an intelligent race out in the far places. Did he recognize Smith as the clerk from Star Control? Smith felt the brush of the hot black eyes, saw Lowell's pale brow furrow in thought.

Smith turned uneasily to Plum. "What's your ship?"

"The *Messeraria*. My own property." Captain Plum looked him over coolly. "Know her?"

"Never heard of her."

"A good ship," said Plum. "Good quarters, good chow." He winked slyly; the great brush of his eyebrow made near-contact with his cheek. "Maybe a little extra money at the end of the trip, if things go right."

"It sounds very interesting," said Smith. "I'd have to think the proposi-

tion over." He looked toward Lowell. "Er—your present man is leaving you?"

"Yes," said Plum. "He's leaving us."

Lowell said in a hoarse voice, as if his throat were lined with bark, "I've just been thinking. I've just been making myself up a philosophy, and I've come to the conclusion that there's nothing in the world as good as a good drink. What do you say to that, Captain?"

"I say that you've been following that philosophy too close, and it's liable to stove you in before you're much older."

"Pah. Nothing's as good as a good drink, unless it's one of them pretty jewels you carry in that big pocket of yours."

The captain swung a burly arm and there was a sound: half slap, half thud. Blood dribbled down the supercargo's chin. He grinned a wide, toothless grin. "No more teeth, cap. You're a mighty rough man."

Smith asked ingenuously, "Just what jewels are these? I'm interested in off-world minerals."

Plum's eyes glowed. "First thing you learn on my ship, son, is to ask no questions. Jump to it when orders are given, and you're fine as wine."

"Speaking of wine," said Lowell, "I'm now going to mix us a drink such as you've never tasted in the history of the world. Just like our last trip, eh, Captain?" He ducked back before Plum could strike. "Now then, don't hit a sick man. Hey, Bosco!" He called to the bartender. "Come over here."

"You got legs."

Lowell staggered over to the bar, returned with a tray full of bottles and measuring glasses.

"Watch close," said Lowell. He looked deep into Smith's eyes. "Watch close. This is important."

Smith stirred uneasily, glancing at Captain Plum, who leaned back, watching Lowell's motions like a cat fascinated by a bit of twitching paper.

LOWELL picked up a bottle, waved it in the air. "Here's arrack, good

white arrack. But it should be red arrack. Well, we'll pretend it's red arrack. The recipe calls for: Red Arrack—twenty-six and a half c.c. Very well. I put it aside. Next, the Dubonnet. I pour the bottle into the pitcher. Now I take away—take away, mind you—fourteen c.c. Seem strange to you?" He eyed Smith searchingly. "No? Good."

Captain Plum chuckled indulgently. "Bilge is cooking you up some of the Fountain of Youth."

"A jag of that slop and age means nothing," said Jack Fetch.

Lowell ignored them. "Now this stuff is Fleur de Lys Liqueur. Just Lys is good enough; I never was much at this European lingo." With a sudden clutch he tore the label in such a way that only the "Lys" remained.

Lowell was rambling insanely, thought Smith; a wink from Captain Plum confirmed the diagnosis. If only Bannister were here now!

In his husky voice Lowell said, "This is important. I'm a sick man, not long for the world. It's as well that the knowledge survives me. So: Lys—ninety-four c.c." He heaved a great sigh; his shoulders slumped. "There, that's the body of it. Now the trimmings." He laid out an orange and a lemon, three black olives and a green one.

Bones the steward suddenly bent forward, whispered into Plum's heavy ear. Plum's eyebrows shot upward; he struck out, swept the tray, bottles, glasses to the floor. The crash and clatter of breaking glass brought conversation throughout the Bobolink to a dead halt.

Lowell sat back grinning wearily at Captain Plum. "Who's the crazy one now?" He coughed. Plum surged forward, raised his arm; in sudden pity Smith reached out, pushed him back into his seat. "For Heaven's sake, Captain, take it easy! The man's not well!"

Bosco the bartender had been sweeping up the broken glass. "Who's going to pay for the good liquor and glassware? Three bottles, arrack rum, wine and liqueur—that's twenty dollars—and

five for the glass."

"Take it out of Lowell," said Plum with a heavy-lidded stare. "He ordered the drinks."

Smith said sharply, "The arrack and the liqueur weren't broken; you picked them up and carried them off. And that glassware isn't worth a dollar. Here—two dollars for half a bottle of wine, a dollar for the glass." He shoved bills at the bartender. "That's all you'll collect here; if you want more—" He paused, feeling the baleful weight of Captain Plum's eyes on his skin.

Bosco said spitefully, "You're sure a smart snipe, ain't you?" He took the money and went muttering back to the bar.

Plum said, "Does seem like you're pretty big for your britches. Minute ago you pushed me; can't say as I like it." He came to his feet suddenly, as if snapped up on a spring. A hand slammed around, struck with a crushingly sick impact.

Smith tottered limply back, caught himself with his elbows over the bar. His eyes went dim, something strange clamped at his brain. Faintly he heard Jack Fetch say in a pleased breathless voice, "The young fool's gonna challenge you, Cap; the—young—fool. . . ."

Smith whirled through nightmare, through a fury of thudding blows that seemed to diminish in intensity. From a great distance he heard sounds, but the impression most vivid was Captain Plum's great face, swollen and turgid, with the ridiculous nose-mustache, the eyes staring, wide open, the mouth working up and down as if he were chewing.

His own arms and feet were moving; he felt the jerk and strain; he felt the breath burn in his throat. His knuckles stung; he saw Captain Plum stumble awkwardly, trip on a chair, fall flailing to the floor. From his pocket rolled a green ball.

Smith stared stupidly down at Plum, who sat staring back, his eyebrows a bar across his face.

The green ball glittered, sparkled. On a sudden impulse Smith seized it, turned, ran out the Bobolińk and pell-mell down Rafferty Alley. He turned into Folger Avenue, hearing the thud of steps behind him.

First came Jack Fetch, running like a weasel. Behind was Captain Plum, yelling hoarsely.

Smith turned the corner, stopped short.

Jack Fetch came swiftly around. Smith hit the saturnine gray face as hard as he could; Jack Fetch tottered blindly toward the gutter. Smith turned, ran up on Folger Avenue.

A taxi stanchion rose from the street; a cab was moored to the davits. Smith jumped on the lift; the chain moved, he slid up the tube. From the platform he glimpsed the hulk of Captain Plum striding like a mad colossus down Folger Avenue.

He jumped into the cab. "Star Control Field Office," he directed.

BANNISTER sat with the jewel between his fingers, fascinated by the delicate snowflake light-spangles forming, building, expanding, varying, dissolving, one after the other. "It's like nothing I've ever seen before. I'll have the mineralogist look at it. Or—" he hesitated, inspected the jewel more closely—"maybe it's a matter for the biology department."

Smith hitched himself forward in his chair. "Now what? Do you think we'd better send the patrol out for Captain Plum?"

Bannister flicked Smith's face with a cool glance. Right now he's probably in the patrol office, signing a complaint against you for stealing his jewel. I can't say that you've handled this very well." He turned back to the jewel. "I had already assigned two men to check up on Plum; now there's no telling what he'll do."

The visiphone buzzed; Bannister leaned forward, punched a button. "Yes?"

"Sergeant Burt here, sir. We've picked up Lowell, the supercargo, in Chenolm Way, off Folger Avenue. He's been aratinized. Face yellow, eyes and tongue hanging loose. We've sent him to the hospital, but I'm afraid there's nothing more to be done."

Bannister cursed softly. "Damned scoundrels. How about Plum?"

"He's dropped out of sight."

Bannister nodded grimly. "Keep looking for him." He snapped off the visiphone. For a moment he sat motionless, then sighed heavily. "Well, that's that. Lowell is done for. He'll never talk to anybody again. As good as dead."

"He was lucid enough in the Bobolink," said Smith doubtfully.

"That was an hour ago. He's been dosed with aratin since, and his brain is bubbling like a pot of hot mush." Bannister sat back, looking thoughtfully at Smith.

Smith moved uneasily in his chair.

Bannister said, "I have in mind a job I think you can do. If you carry it off, you'll get a promotion."

Smith frowned. "I'm not so sure that—"

"You're a good Star Control man?"

"I was, until I was fired this morning."

Bannister gestured impatiently. "That's all water under the bridge; you're hired again. You understand that this hint of contact with an intelligent race is unprecedented? How important it is that we either verify or disprove it?"

Smith nodded. "Certainly."

"A Star Control man is resourceful and daring—right?"

"Right."

Bannister pounded the table. "We can't let Plum antagonize this race, if it exists, or destroy it with Earth diseases. If it exists, we've got to find it. And you're the man to do it, Smith!"

Smith blinked.

"Here's how I see it," said Bannister. "If there's money to be made looting this planet, Plum will be out and away

as soon as he organizes a trip. Once in space, under sky-drive, he's gone. We can't trace him. Unless of course we have a representative aboard. There's where you come in. He's practically hired you already. You return the jewel to him, tell him you're sorry you ran off with it, and that you want a chance to pick up a few yourself."

SMITH sat hunched in his chair. "You don't think he'll be angry with me?"

"You've brought his jewel back; why should he be?"

"He won't—" Smith paused, tried to gauge the temper of Plum's mind.

"Won't what?"

"Well," said Smith, "don't you think that if he got me out in space, aboard his ship, that he might take advantage of the situation to—well, beat me up?"

"I don't see why," argued Bannister.

"But I knocked him down in the Bobolink."

"He respects you for it."

"You don't think he might use that aratin stuff on me?"

"What good is a man dosed up with aratin? He needs you as a member of his crew."

Smith chewed his lips.

"I'll give you a packet of hyolone," said Bannister heartily. "Out in space, when you go into sky-drive, drop it into the thrust-box. The ship will leave a trickle of luminescence behind that we can follow at a safe distance."

Smith still seemed uncertain. Bannister eyed him under half-closed lids. Suddenly he turned to the visiphone. "Codge, get credentials ready for Sergeant Robert Smith—" He looked sideways at Smith, calculated rapidly. There was nothing to lose. "Make it Lieutenant Robert Smith, of the Extraordinary Squad."

Smith sat back in his chair. Lieutenant Smith of the Extraordinary Squad! He rolled the words around his tongue. Bannister watched covertly a moment, then rose to his feet, motioned to Smith. "Come along, Lieutenant. I'll drop

you off at the field."

They flew out across Lake Maud, circled Mount Davidson, dropped low across the Graymont district, and presently flew along the taxi lane only a few hundred feet above the mud-colored old buildings of Folger Avenue.

Below was the space-port. Polished black hulls lay quiet around the field like enormous dead beetles.

Smith pointed. "There's the *Messeraria*. Or rather—" he hesitated, frowned, searched the field. "It was about there, near that new glass blister."

"New glass blister, eh?" Bannister spoke in a strained voice. "Well, Lieutenant Smith—" he laid heavy stress on the title—"it appears the bird has flown the coop."

Smith drew a deep breath. "Perhaps it's all for the best. I never was completely comfortable with the plan. But there'll be other jobs."

III

RETURNING toward the Star Control Office, Smith pointed to a landing plat on a terrace above St. Andrews Place. "There's the Odd-Angle Club, that b'ue blazon with the green bars. I happen to be a member. Would you care to lunch with me, by way of celebration?"

Bannister gazed at him blankly. "Celebration? What for, in God's name?"

"My promotion."

"Oh," Bannister smiled grimly. "Your promotion, indeed."

He landed the boat and a moment later Desdumies, the maitre d'hotel, ushered them to a seat.

Smith signalled the bar-boy. "A drink before lunch, perhaps?"

Bannister, grudgingly, relaxed his aloofness. "A good idea."

"I'm not a drinking man myself," said Smith. "Alcohol corrodes the intellect. But naturally there's not an objection in the world to your enjoying yourself."

"Very decent of you," said Bannister

dryly. He looked Smith up and down with dispassionate curiosity.

"What's the matter?" asked Smith uncomfortably.

"Nothing at all. I know a woman who can't stand the sight of feathers."

Smith was unable to trace the sequence of thought, and glancing side-long at Bannister, seemed to notice a lack of warmth in his manner. Was it possible that Bannister considered him something less than a good fellow? Such a notion might militate against further advancement, no matter how efficient his work.

Smith said heartily, "Let me order you something a little different—a drink I imagine you've never tasted before."

Bannister made a wry face. "Camel milk, something of the sort? Thanks no, I'll stick to whisky."

"Just as you like," said Smith. "It was recommended rather highly by the *Messeraria* supercargo; he was so emphatic that I noted the recipe. Arrack—red arrack—dubonnet, a liqueur—"

"What's this?" demanded Bannister. "Lowell telling you how to mix drinks?"

Smith found a soiled bit of paper in his pocket. "Red arrack, twenty-six and a half c.c. Dubonnet—a half bottle less ten c.c. Fleur de Lys liqueur, ninety-four c.c. An orange, a lemon, four olives."

Bannister, sitting rigidly in his chair, asked, "Why haven't you mentioned this before?"

Smith made an indulgent gesture. "Just more of this alcoholic stuff."

Bannister asked in a steely voice, "Could it possibly be that he was attempting a secret-communication?"

Smith considered, "I will say this much," he admitted uneasily. "Immediately afterward, Captain Plum became violent."

"Exactly what happened? Try to remember every detail."

Smith described the episode to the best of his recollection.

Bannister, frowning, scanned the formula. "Undoubtedly he recognized you

and was trying to tell you about this secret planet. The orange and the lemon seem to refer to a double star, the three black and the green olives tell us that the planet in question was fourth from the sun."

"And the numbers must be position coordinates for the double star."

Bannister nodded shortly. "So it would seem."

"Take the first figure along the x-axis," said Smith excitedly. "Twenty-six and a half light years toward Polaris. The second figure—now I see, it's negative. A negative ten light years along the equinoctial axis, or ten light years, roughly, toward Denebola. The third figure, along the solstitial axis—ninety-four light years toward Betelgeuse. Combine the three—" He scribbled on a bit of paper. "Square root of the squares of twenty-six and a half, ten and ninety-four. Somewhere near a hundred. The direction would be roughly—" he paused, chewed his pencil—"probably in the direction of Procyon. That would be fairly close. A hundred light years in the direction of Procyon."

Bannister made an impatient motion. "Please let me think."

Smith sat back with injured dignity. Lunch was served; they ate almost in silence.

OVER his coffee Bannister leaned back with a sigh. "Well, it may be a wild-goose chase. But I'm going to stick my neck out, requisition a cruiser."

"I suppose I'd better wind up my affairs," Smith said tentatively.

"No need at all," replied Bannister. "You'll be travelling no farther than the sub-basement storeroom."

"Mr. Bannister, I hardly think you're being reasonable."

"Reasonable or not," growled Bannister, "I can't risk another of your fiascos." He rose to his feet. "And now I'll have to be back to work. Thanks for the lunch."

Smith watched the broad back retreating, then ordered more coffee.

After a few minutes' thought he rose to his feet, went to the visiphone, called Harry Codge at the Star Control Office.

"Harry," he said to the ruddy face, "have you made up those credentials for me yet?"

Codge nodded sourly. "You must be related to Bannister."

Smith ignored the implication. "Drop them into the tube, will you please? I'm at the Odd Angle Club, St. Andrews Place."

He took himself to the club office and a moment later a little cylinder thudded into the receptacle.

Smith pinned the badge inside his coat, tucked the plastic card into his wallet, ordered a cab and flew to the Bureau of Registry hard by the space-field.

He displayed his new credentials to the girl at the front desk. "Bring me the card on the SpS *Messeraria*."

"Yes sir." She went to a file, thumbed through once, twice. "That's strange."

"What's the trouble?"

"The card's not in place. Unless—" She crossed the room, flipped through a small stack of pink and blue cards. "Here it is. Change of ownership."

"Let's see the card," said Smith in high excitement.

He ran his eye down the form. "Built twenty years ago. First owners—Vacuum Transport. Sold to R. Plum and Chatnos Widna. New owner—Hermetic Line. Well, well."

"Anything wrong, Lieutenant? The Hermetic Line is very conservative—"

"No," said Smith hastily. "Nothing at all."

He turned away engrossed in his thoughts. It would be a fine feather in his cap to drag the sullen but cowed giant before Bannister for questioning. And evidently he had not departed with the *Messeraria*.

Smith crossed the space-field, climbed the ramp into Folger Avenue.

There was Rafferty Alley, and there the Bobolink. It was unlikely, thought Smith, that Plum would still be in evi-

dence after the events of the morning; still it represented a starting place for an investigation.

He felt for his badge, strode down Rafferty Alley, entered the Bobolink.

There was confusion, which Smith later was never able to sort out into component events; it was as if everything occurred in a single timeless clot.

He remembered a scraping of chairs, voices, a bull-bellow; he saw Plum's great angry face, the lips drawn back over yellow horse-teeth; he felt a clutch at his knees, an eye-watering jar at the side of his head, a buffet in the pit of his stomach.

Reality floated upward, like a picture rising on a screen leaving black beneath. Light, motion, sound, color went completely out of his perception; there was nothing.

CAPTAIN PLUM'S face, large as a house, seemed to fill the sky. A black velvet beret hung rakishly past one ear; his nose-mustache was preened and twisted to a fare-thee-well. He was so close that Smith could see the small corrugations of his skin, the bluish, the rosy muscles of the cheek stubble on the massive rectangular chin.

The little eyes peered cunningly into Smith's face. "You alive, fellow? Yes? You're lucky. Now, what did you do with my little trinket?" He took Smith's chin between his thumb and forefinger. "Hey? Where's my little gem?"

Smith became aware of a curious lightness in his limbs. He focused his eyes on the background. Metal. Suddenly terrified, he sought to rise to his feet. A belt around his middle restrained him.

Captain Plum set heavy feet to the wall, pushed his bulk out at right angles, stood in apparent defiance to sanity.

"We're in space!" shouted Smith. "You've kidnaped me!"

Plum grinned enormously, like a bear. "Shanghaied, they used to call it. Young fellow, you don't know how lucky you are. I could have put you away simple

as squeezing a bug, but I used my head. You're one of them Space Control hoop-te-doo's; still, I need a man to do my paper work, and you happened in at the right time. Just right. I kill me two birds at one lick. Three birds, as it may be." Plum ticked the points off his fingers. "I get me an honest worker. He better be honest. I get a Control snooper off my tail. And I get myself a bit of exercise sparring you now and again; rather handy you showed yourself."

"But," cried Smith, "you don't own a ship any more! You sold—"

"This ain't the old *Messeraria*, young fellow." Plum showed the inside of his maroon maw in a soundless gust of laughter. "This here's the *Dog*, a little boat more suited to our good purposes. And now you've rested on your lowers long enough; it's go to work for you, earn your way."

"I didn't ask to be brought aboard," grumbled Smith.

Plum's mouth compressed; his hand caught Smith a buffet on the cheek. Smith felt his teeth creak; before him came a vision of Lowell's toothless mouth. He sat quietly, staring at Plum.

Plum grinned slowly. "Sure, I know what you're thinking, that you'll bide your time and come at me when I least expect it. Well, I say try ahead, try ahead. Better men than you have gone that path, and it keeps me lively. Now, young fellow, on your feet. And remember I'm a hard man to please; there can't be a red cent over or under on the books; it all must come out so."

Smith silently unfastened the belt at his waist. The cruiser that Bannister had ordered out, he thought, must surely run down Plum's ship. But if there were a battle, he might easily be lost with the ship. And in the meantime— A threatening move by Plum cut short his reflections. "Are you done dreaming?" growled the giant.

Smith tried to rise to his feet; instead set himself floundering awkwardly into the air.

Plum's guffaw stung him almost be-

yond endurance. He bit his lips, and steadying himself on a stanchion, turned to Plum. "What is it you want done?"

"Up forward, my lad, up in the chart room: that's your nook. First you'll sort out my old charts, arrange them in the projector. When I press for a sector, I want to get that sector and none somewhere fifty parsecs distant. Very important. That's fair warning. Up forward!"

SMITH pulled himself forward, aching in every joint. The *Dog*, he perceived, was a small advance ship, one of the exploration "terriers" built for maneuverability, landing ease and cheap maintenance, a type in vogue among the sun-duckers of outer space. But no matter how fast, how shiftily, how desperately Plum drove his ship, once the cruiser thrust out a magnetic finger it would never win free. Smith shot a look through the forward port, seeking Procyon, past which the course must lead.

Nowhere in the field of his vision was there such a star. The sky appeared more like the region north of Scorpio—the constellation of Ophiuchus, in a direction exactly opposite to Procyon. He stared. There was some dreadful mistake. "Where are we headed for?"

"None of your damn business," snarled Plum. "Get forward into the chart room, and thank yourself I'm a merciful man."

Smith pushed himself into the chart room, numbly began to sort the star-charts. This was death, he thought, and he was in hell. Before his eyes was a black and gray panel, a bank of dials, a mesh, a row of switches. Smith focussed his attention. Radio! Long-distance radio—launching its meaningful radiation in a parallel-sided bar, to take it hot and sparkling across space.

How far had they come? Little more than a light-week or two; he could hear the whir of motors still building up acceleration.

He glanced out into the bridge; Captain Plum stood by the door bellowing back toward the engine room.

With trembling hands Smith twisted dials, aimed the antenna dead astern, flipped the switch. In a fever of impatience he waited for the circuits to warm into full power, meanwhile listening to Captain Plum's salty condemnations of the engine-room gang.

Once more he checked the direction of the beam. Dead astern, to hit Earth on the nose. He set the frequency to standard space-band. A hundred monitors were tuned to the frequency.

Now.

He spoke into the mesh. "SOS—Star Control attention. SOS. This is Lieutenant Robert Smith aboard Plum's ship the *Dog*. SOS. Attention, Bannister, Star Control Field Office Twelve. This is Lieutenant Smith. I have been kidnaped." The edge of his attention sensed that Plum's voice had quieted; he heard the rustle of heavy movement in the bridge. Desperately he bent to the mesh; he might not have another chance. Power on, direction right, frequency right. "SOS. This is Lieutenant Robert Smith, Star Control, kidnaped aboard Plum's ship, headed toward Rho Ophiuchus." He became aware of a great shadow in the doorway. "Kidnaped aboard Plum's ship, headed toward Rho Ophiuchus, Robert Smith speaking—" He could bear it no longer; he looked up. Plum stood watching him from the doorway.

"Ratting on me, hey?"

Smith said with feeble bravado, "I got the message through. You're washed up, Plum. If you're smart you'll put about."

"My, my, my," Plum jeered mincingly. "My and my Aunt Nellie. Go ahead, call again if you like."

With one eye on Plum and suddenly anxious, Smith leaned toward the mesh. "This is Lieutenant Robert Smith, aboard Captain Plum's ship, *Dog*, bound for Rho Ophiuchus—"

Plum moved carelessly forward. His hand struck Smith's face with a sound like beef liver dropping on a butcher's block.

Smith, crumpled in a corner, looked

up at Plum, standing in his favorite pose, legs spraddled wide, arms behind him.

"Damn addle-brained snooper," snarled Plum.

Smith said weakly, "It'll go just so much the worse for you when you're caught."

"Who's going to catch me? How am I going to be caught? Hey? Answer me that?" He prodded Smith with his toe.

Smith slowly drew himself to his feet. He said in a tired voice, "I sent the message three times. It's bound to be picked up."

Plum nodded. "You sent it out—dead astern. Sure the monitors will pick it up. At the speed we're leaving Earth, the frequency they get will be so they can count the cycles on their fingers. That radio isn't much good unless we're stopped."

Smith numbly considered the radio. The speed of the ship would make his message completely unintelligible.

"Now," said Plum harshly, "get back to your work. And if I catch you fooling with the equipment again, I'll treat you fairly rough."

IV

IT WAS as if the ship lay motionless, the center of all, and the galaxy flowed past in a clear dark syrup, the stars like phosphorescent motes in sea water—lost and lonesome sparks.

Two points were steady: a wan star astern and an orange-yellow glint ahead which gradually resolved into a doublet. So the days passed. Smith slunk about the ship as inconspicuously as possible, dreading the daily drubbing Captain Plum administered under the guise of calisthenics.

During the bouts both men wore magnetic slippers and twelve-ounce gloves, the exercise lasting until Captain Plum was winded or Smith too dazed to afford further entertainment.

As time went on, Smith became increasingly familiar with Plum's style of

combat: a full-chested prancing forward, arms thrashing. Perforce Smith learned the elemental tricks of defense, but in a sense this proficiency defeated its own purpose. The more adroitly he fended off the punches, the more cleverly he rolled and ducked with the blows, so did Captain Plum's violence wax, and Smith saw clearly that the end would lie at one of two extremes: either he would achieve an impregnable defense or else Captain Plum would kill him with a single terrible blow.

To avoid such an impasse, Smith tentatively went on the offensive, jabbing at Plum after his tremendous swings had thrown him off balance. The ruse was successful to such an extent that when Captain Plum found himself unable to land effective blows, with Smith darting in at will to pummel his nose and eyes, he insisted on the exercise at ever-longer intervals. At the same time his aversion to Smith reached the point of obsession.

The last few bouts were terrible episodes, in which Captain Plum, red-eyed and roaring, charged like a bull, lashing out in wide roundhouse sweeps, any one of which would have broken Smith's bones. Half-measures were worse than none, Smith now realized; he must either become a supine wad of flesh for Plum to pound at his pleasure, or he must hurt Plum badly enough to discourage him—again a dangerous undertaking.

The final bout lasted for half an hour. Both Smith and Plum reeked with blood and sweat. Plum's nostrils flared like a boar's, his great chin hung lax and limp. Smith, seizing an opportunity, struck as hard as he could, on a downward slant at the loose-hanging jaw. He felt a snap, a crush, and Plum staggered back clapping his face. Smith stood panting, half expecting Plum to go for his gun.

Plum rushed from the cargo hold, while Smith, full of foreboding, made his way to the cubby-hole which was his quarters.

CAPTAIN PLUM appeared at the mess table, his jaw taped, his lips suffused with violet. He brushed Smith with his eyes, nodded with grim menace.

Later Smith was in the chart room, calculating full consumption against distance traveled. Plum lurched close up against him. Smith turned his head, looking close into the hairy face.

"You're a mean son of a gun, ain't you?" said Plum.

Smith saw that Plum was toying with an eight-inch blade. Smith said in a low voice, "Anybody's mean when he's driven to it."

"You talking about me, young fellow?"

"Take it any way you want."

"You're walking on thin ice."

Smith shrugged. "I don't see how I've anything to gain by being polite. I don't expect much out of this trip."

The speech seemed to appease Plum; he slowly put his knife up. "You asked for it when you started that schoolboy Star Control stuff."

"I don't see it that way. Somebody's got to be at the top. In this case it's Star Control. You'd be better off if you'd turn back and make an honest report on this planet, whatever it is."

"And lose all that money? What do I care for Star Control? What have they done for me?"

Smith leaned back against his workbench, with a curious sense of speaking in an incomprehensible language. "Don't you care for your fellow-men?"

Plum vented a gruff bark of a laugh. "Humanity never bust itself open working for me. And even supposing I did, what difference does it make what goes on out here eighty miles past nowhere? Just a bunch of fuzzy yellow things."

"Do you really want to know what difference it makes?"

"Go ahead, spill it."

Smith gathered his thoughts. "Well, in the first place, human knowledge is only a small fraction of what can be learned about the universe; we've concentrated on the subjects which fit our

kind of minds. If we find another civilized race, we'd meet an entirely different complex of sciences."

Plum used a coarse expression. "We know too much as it is; if we knew any more we'd be clogging our drains. Anyhow, there's nothing out here on Rho that we don't know already."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. But if there's a civilized race, men with the proper knowledge ought to be the first to make contact."

"Then where'd my cut be? I've gone through lots to get where I am. I've taken it on and I've given it back, just to get a crack at a chance like this. Those jewels are novelties, worth plenty on Earth. I can get out to Rho, I can clip the fuzz-balls loose of the jewels, I can get back to Earth—and my fortune's made. If the scientists found Rho, they wouldn't tell me, would they? Why should I go spill my guts to them? You got things twisted all screw-wise, young fellow."

"If these things are intelligent, perhaps they're on their guard now. You'll find it dangerous taking any more of the jewels."

Captain Plum threw back his head, then winced at the wrench to his jaw. "Not a chance. We're as safe on Rho as we are in our own bunks. And why? It's easy. These fuzz-balls is blind, deaf and dumb. They walk around holding up jewels like they was offering 'em to us on velvet pillows. A clip of the knife, fuzz-ball flips over, the jewel comes rolling home. And that's the way it goes."

Leaving Smith chewing his lip nervously, Captain Plum slapped the chart table with the flat of his knife and turned away.

THE *Dog* coasted up at the big orange sun, with the small yellow sun hanging beyond, no more than a cusp visible. Nearby were the planets, yellow motes—one, two, three, four.

Through the port Smith watched the fourth planet, a world smaller than Earth, with an oily yellow atmosphere,

and which possessed an arid surface.

From the bridge came the voices of Plum and Jack Fetch, disputing where best to set the ship down: Fetch was inclined to caution. "Put yourself in their shoes, make as if it's Earth."

"Cripes, man, this ain't Earth. This is Rho Ophiuchus."

"Sure, but think of it like this: a few months ago there's an epidemic of heists; if they've got the brains of a turtle, they'll take precautions. Suppose we set down beside one of the big castles. Suppose they come along, discover the ship. Then the jig is up."

Plum spat disgustedly. "Hell, them fuzz-balls live in a dream world. They come along, feel the ship, they think it's a new kind of rock. They don't even know they've got a sun or that there's other stars; like that lightheaded super-cargo says, they got a way of looking at things that's different from ours."

"That's right. And maybe they'll know we're back by some different kind of sense, and then there'll be hell to pay. Why take the risk? Set down out in that little desert; then we can work up to the castles in the boat."

"Too complicated," growled Plum. "Then men getting lost and boat breaking down."

Compromise was reached: the ship would be landed in desolate country as near as possible to the castles, close enough to allow its use as a base of operations.

The greasy yellow atmosphere swirled up around the ship. Jack Fetch sat at the controls while Plum stood spraddled at the telescopic viewer. "Slow," he called to Fetch. "We're getting low. Take her north a bit, I see a whole settlement of big castles. Now straight down; we'll land in that little arm of desert."

Smith, standing at the chart-room port, glimpsed a series of large yellow cubical structures. From a liquid gleam at their centers it seemed as if they might be tanks.

A low ridge cut off the view; the ship

grounded. Almost immediately he heard the exit port jar open, and Captain Plum, in a heavy space-suit, crossed the foreground, walking out of his vision.

Knees shaking under unaccustomed gravity, Smith joined Fetch on the bridge. Fetch threw him a swift side-look, and turned away.

Smith asked, "What's Plum gone out for?"

"See how the land lies. If it's not safe we'll take off."

Smith peered up into the smoky yellow sky. "What's the atmosphere?"

"Hydrogen sulfide, sulfur dioxide, SO₃, oxygen, halogen acids, inert odds and ends."

"My word," murmured Smith. "Rather unpleasant stuff to breathe."

Jack Fetch nodded. "Last trip the atmosphere ate holes in our space-suits; that's why we left so soon. This time we've got specials."

"What were those square tanks?"

"The fuzz-balls live in them."

Plum's lumbering form came into view over the brow of the hill.

"Look," said Jack Fetch, "there's a fuzz-ball. Plum doesn't see him yet."

FOLLOWING Fetch's finger, Smith saw a mustard-colored creature on the hillside. It was four feet high, two feet thick—a hybrid of barrel cactus and sea urchin, with flexible feelers projecting from all sides, ceaselessly squirming, reaching, feeling. A glint of green came from the tip of its body.

"Blind, deaf, dumb." Fetch grinned like a fox. "And there goes Plum. Looks like he wants to start work at once. Never saw a man so keen after the loot."

Plum had paused in his stride; now he turned, moved cautiously toward the yellow-brown creature.

Smith leaned forward like a man at a drama. "Blind, deaf, dumb," he heard Fetch say again. Plum sprang forward, the blade of a knife flashed in the murky air. "Like taking candy from a baby." Plum held up the glint of green in a gesture of triumph, and the fuzz-ball

was a toppled mass of brittle matter.

"Murderous brute!" said Smith under his breath. He felt Fetch's sardonic scrutiny and froze into himself.

Plum stood in the locker. Smith heard the hiss of the rinses: first a sodium carbonate solution, then water. The inner door opened; Plum stamped up to the bridge.

"Couldn't be better," he announced, with vast gusto. "Six big castles over the hill. We'll clean up fast and get out."

Smith muttered under his breath; Plum turned, looked him over. Fetch said maliciously, "Smith isn't convinced we're doing the right thing."

"Eh?" Plum stared at Smith blankly. "More of your damn belly-aching?"

"Murder is murder," muttered Smith. Plum scrutinized him with eyes like black beads. "I'm planning another this minute."

Smith raised his voice recklessly. "You'll have all of us killed."

Plum twitched, took a step forward. "You damn croaker—"

"Just a minute, Cap," said Jack Fetch. "Let's hear what he's talking about."

"Put yourself in the place of these creatures," said Smith rapidly. "They can't see or hear; they have no idea what's destroying them. Picture a similar situation on Earth—something invisible killing men and women." He paused, then asked vehemently, "Would we sit back and do nothing about it? Wouldn't we strain every ounce of brain-power toward destroying the murderers?"

Plum's face was wooden. He twirled his nose-mustache.

"You don't know the mental capacity of these creatures," Smith continued. "It might be high. Because you can kill them so easily means nothing. If an invisible monster dropped down on Earth, we'd be as helpless as these things here seem to be. But for just a short time. Then we'd start devising traps. And pretty soon we'd catch one or two of our visitors and deal pretty roughly with them."

Plum laughed rudely. "You've talked yourself into a job, young fellow. Get into a suit."

Smith stood stiffly. "What for?"

"Never mind what for!" Plum snatched a weapon from his belt. "Get into that suit, or you've had the last breath of your life!"

Smith went slowly to the locker.

Plum said, "Maybe you're right, maybe you're wrong. If you're wrong—well, we'll figure out something else to do with you. If you're right—then, by Heaven!" and he cackled a throaty laugh—"you'll be doing us a good turn."

"Oh," said Smith. "I'm to be the stalking horse."

"You're the decoy. You're the lad that moves in front."

Smith hesitated. Plum said dangerously, "Into the suit!"

Smith went to the locker and donned a space-suit. On sudden thought he felt at the belt where hung a holster for a gun. It was empty.

FETCH was slipping into his own suit, lithe as an eel. Bones the steward and the men from the engine room were likewise dressing themselves. The quartermaster took up his perch at the gangway.

Plum motioned. "Outside."

Smith went to the double chamber with Fetch. A moment later they stood on the surface of Rho—a brown-yellow hardpan, sprinkled here and there with bits of black gravel and little yellow chips, like cheese parings. Condensations in the atmosphere swirled like dust devils.

This was Smith's first contact with alien soil. For a moment he stood looking around the horizon; the strangeness of the world weighing upon him almost as a force. Yellow, yellow, yellow—all tones, from cream to oil-black. Right, left, up, down—no other color occurred in his range of vision except the varicolored space-suits.

Plum's voice rasped through the ear phones. "Up the hill—spread out. Every-

one of the fuzz-balls you see, carve him. We can't have any spreading of the news."

Spreading the news? thought Smith. How could these creatures, blind and deaf as they were, communicate? Although it was inconceivable, this must be a civilization—no matter how crude—without communication. He twisted the dial of the space-suit radio. Silence up the band. Up—higher, higher, almost to the limit of the set's sensitivity. Then a harsh crackle, a sputtering of a million dots and dashes.

He listened an instant, turned the knob further. The sputtering fluctuated, then cut off abruptly. Smith twisted the dial back to Captain Plum and just in time.

"—Bones next, and where's that supercargo? Smith, you come along the outside right; if you want to wander off and lose yourself, that's your own damned lookout."

Smith thought dourly, it might be just as well; there was nothing in his future but the ultimate dose of aratin, or a bullet.

The line of men moved forward, up the slope. Smith looked tentatively back toward the ship. If it were deserted, if he could get inside, lock the port, he would have Plum at his mercy. But the outer door was clamped, and through the bull's-eye he caught the white flash of the quartermaster's face.

Smith sighed and trudged up the slope. He heard Plum's harsh cry of satisfaction. "Two, by God—two at once. Keep your eyes open, men. The sooner we make up a cargo and get off, the better."

Smith twisted the dial up to the band he had discovered. Clicking sounded loud and sharp, so loud that he came to a surprised halt.

He now stood among a tumble of sharp brown boulders a hundred feet from Bones and slightly to the rear; it was unlikely, he thought, that any of the others were watching him. He scanned the ground in his immediate

vicinity. There was nothing. He climbed the slope; the noise grew louder. He veered left toward Bones. The noise lessened. He turned off to the right.

Behind a jagged black and yellow pinnacle he found the fuzz-ball—an aimless thing, groping a slow way up the hillside. In the very apex of its torso the green jewel winked and blinked like an electronic eye.

Smith bent close, fascinated. He noted that as the spangle of light formed in the green jewel, so did the radio sputter and sound. Each spangle was different from the one previous; Smith suspected that if the radio wave-pattern were made visible on an oscilloscope, there would be concordance with the pattern of the spangle.

THE FUZZ-BALL seemed harmless enough; Smith decided to experiment. With his transceiver tuned to the fuzz-ball's frequency, he clicked his tongue into the microphone. "Ch'k, ch'k, ch'k."

The fuzz-ball made a series of odd sidewise jerks and came to a halt, as if puzzled. The feelers waved querulously. Smith said, "Take it easy, fellow." The fuzz-ball teetered dangerously to the side; the feelers performed a disorganized throbbing. From the speaker came an angry clicking. The fuzz-ball stood stockstill. Smith watched in amazement.

He said again, "Take it easy, fellow." The fuzz-ball behaved exactly as before, tottering awkwardly to the side. Smith watched narrowly. The feelers seemingly had clenched in the precise pattern as before.

Once more he said, "Take it easy, fellow," in identical tones.

Once more the fuzz-ball re-acted, in identical fashion.

Smith counted. "One, two, three, four, five."

The fuzz-ball twisted to the left, writhed certain of its feelers.

Smith counted again. "One, two, three, four, five."

The fuzz-ball twisted to the left, writhed the same feelers in the same way.

"This is odd," muttered Smith to himself. "The thing seems geared to radio stimuli, as if—"

He stared at the ground. A heavy black shadow showed, motionless.

He whirled. Silhouetted on the yellow sky was Captain Plum.

Plum's face was set in pale rage. He was speaking. Smith hurriedly turned the dial back to intercommunication.

"—lucky I came over to look. You was talking to the thing, you was rattling on us. Well, it's the last time." His hand went to his belt, came up clamped around his gun.

Smith feverishly dodged behind the black and yellow pinnacle. A bolt left a flickering, smoky trail in the atmosphere.

No use playing peek-a-boo, thought Smith desperately. He was a goner anyway. He clambered up the pinnacle in a frenzy, over a bit of a saddle, looked down at the back of Captain Plum's neck, advancing around the rock.

Bones' voice rang in his ear. "Look-out, Cap'n; he's over your head."

Plum looked up. Smith jumped into his face.

Plum stumbled, sprawled. Smith fell staggering to the ground, jerked himself to his feet. Plum was hauling himself erect. Smith ground his foot on Plum's wrist. The fingers opened, the gun lay loose. Smith grabbed. In his ear sounded voices, anxious questions. "You okay, Cap?"

Smith aimed the gun at Plum. Plum dodged and fell. Smith caught movement from the corner of his eye—Jack Fetch. Rapidly he backed into the clutter of rock. Captain Plum lay quiet. Jack Fetch showed himself cautiously. Smith raised his arm. Fetch saw the motion, and as Smith pulled the trigger he fell to the ground. The nose of the gun sputtered, melted to a blob of metal. The crystal had broken when Plum fell.

Fetch came crouching, sidling for-

ward, and Smith retreated behind the rocks.

Plum roared, "Don't shoot him; let him be. Shooting's too fast for the skunk. He likes the place so much, he can make his home here, for a few hours anyway." Irrationally he raised his voice. "Smith, you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you."

"You show your face, we'll shoot it off; we'll be watching for you. You're on your own now, snooper. You take it from here."

V

FROM a crevice between crags of black sulfur, Smith watched the men march up the hill. He glanced at the oxygen indicator. Six hours.

Cautiously he rose to his feet, looked back toward the *Dog*. The port was still locked and impregnable.

He watched the crew march up over the rise, looming on the sky. He had one chance; ambush one of them, get his gun, kill the others. One chance—dangerous, desperate, bloody.

He scrambled swiftly up the slope and peered over the ridge. There were no men in his immediate range of vision. But there were the castles—six great blocks sixty feet high, built of a dull tufa-like substance.

Smith circled to the right, around the ridge. He climbed a mound of granular stuff, like lemon-yellow sugar, and slid down the other side.

He caught a glimpse of Bones a quarter of a mile distant. No good—Bones was out in the open, and in any event Bones carried no gun. It had to be Plum, Jack Fetch, or one of the engine-room gang.

He dialed his radio up the band. A loud crackling told him he was near a fuzz-ball. There it was, a hundred feet distant. Smith watched it, fascinated. If it responded to the random noise he made, was he to assume that it had no mind of its own? If so, who or what guided it? What was its purpose?

Smith cautiously approached the creature. It moved over the ground, and now Smith saw that from its underside hung a tube which swept over the ground. When it passed over one of the yellow flakes that sprinkled the ground, it jerked, and the flake was gone.

Smith reached for one of the flakes. It came free of the ground with a trace of resistance; Smith saw a trailing mesh of dependent fibrils—a small sulfurous plant. The fuzz-balls walked abroad, gathering little bits of Rho Ophiuchus vegetables. For their own consumption?

Smith surveyed the valley. From where he stood, an easy way led down the hill, across a saddle, up a kind of rough ramp to the lip of the nearest castle, which was perhaps two hundred yards distant. Smith descended slowly into the saddle; and here the crew of the *Dog* came into view.

Down the valley they strode, along a rude road. They were busy. From time to time Smith saw the glitter of knife, the quick flash of green, the suddenly brittle mass toppling to the side.

Smith ran up the ramp to the top of the castle, watching the five men over his shoulder. His hand strayed toward the radio dial. Why not apologize to Captain Plum, ask to be given back his life? Surely something so precious was worth the humiliation. Smith shuddered. In his mind he saw Plum's gloating, blood-charged face, saw the lips twisting in a grin. There would be no mercy from Plum. Better a desperate ambush, or perhaps a boulder of glassy brown sulfur rolled down one of the slopes.

The castle beside him was full of turgid brown liquid. Water? Acid? It was more than ever like a tank from his present vantage point. The liquid boiled and swirled as he looked.

Down in the flat, Plum, Bones, Jack Fetch and the two engineers were proceeding along the crude road, overtaking and killing fuzz-balls which were strung out along the road about a hundred feet apart.

Something brushed Smith's legs; he started, swung around. A fuzz-ball wandered past him, lax as a somnabulist, and stopped beside the liquid. The surface boiled; a great arm rose up, wound around the fuzz-ball, lifted it, and dragged it under the surface. Smith stood transfixed, too startled to move. He backed slowly to the ramp.

On another ramp across the hollow suddenly appeared black forms: Jack Fetch, Bones, the two engineers. Where was Captain Plum?

SMITH saw him by the foot of the castle, looking up. Tuning into the communication band, he heard Fetch's voice. "Nothing up here, Cap—just dirty water. Some kind of cistern or blow-hole."

Plum roared back, "Don't you see no fuzzies? That's where they seem to live; there ought to be a whole swarm of them inside. Come on back down; let's split one of these castles open, see what's—"

A huge pale shape rose in the tank, four arms wrapped around the four men. Frantically, unbelievably, they fought; Smith saw their desperate shapes black on the yellow sky. They tottered; the arms jerked them into the liquid. For a second or two the communication channel rang with their agony.

Then came Plum's bellow. "What's going on, what's—" his voice died suddenly, and a black silence followed.

Smith stumbled blindly down the ramp, away from the tank. These were terrible things, a terrible world. He paused, peering around the crumbling tufa. His sight misted and blurred through the sulfurous atmosphere; it was as if he were trying to peer into a dream. He saw Plum, standing silent, as if thinking.

Smith looked at his oxygen gauge. At normal respiration, he had four hours of life. He valved it as low as possible, tried to breathe shallowly, moved with the utmost efficiency.

Suddenly he knew how to deal with Captain Plum.

Plum turned, searched the landscape. Smith saw that he carried only a knife. Smith slowly descended the slope, making no attempt to avoid discovery. Plum turned his head sharply and hefted his knife. Smith said mildly, "Do you think the knife will help you, Plum?" He picked up a cubical chunk of pyrite, heavy, compact, and continued slowly down the slope. It occurred to him that he was breathing hard; he saw that Plum was panting. He forced himself to breathe shallowly, to control his slightest unnecessary movement.

Plum said in a guttural voice, "Keep away from me, if you value your health."

"Plum," said Smith, "you're on your last lap, whether you know it or not."

"Says you."

Smith spoke in a half-whisper, with power turned high on his transmitter. Spend the power, save the oxygen. Keep Plum talking, the longer the better. "I was green when you dragged me aboard your ship. I'm not green now."

Plum cursed him in a thick voice. Excellent, thought Smith; anger increased the rate of his respiration. "I've seen gorillas as fat as you are," said Smith, "but none so ugly."

Plum's face burnt brick-color; he took a step toward Smith. Smith flung the pyrite; it struck Plum's head-dome, jarring him. Plum said, "I'm going to cut you open, Smith."

"Lumbering ape," said Smith. "You'll have to catch me first."

Plum lurched forward, and Smith retreated uphill. Plum weighed two hundred sixty pounds, Smith weighed one-seventy. Plum carried another twenty pounds slung over his back—knapsack and jewels.

Smith, keeping a few feet ahead of Plum, evading Plum's sudden dashes forward by virtue of his agility, led Plum ever away from the *Dog*.

Plum—stopped short. "You think you're going to get me up on top of that rim," he panted. "Think again, Smith. I don't know what happened up there,

but I'm not gonna let it stop me."

"I saw what happened. I saw the whole thing. It worked out just as I told you it would."

"Don't try to play me for a sucker, Smith."

"You've *been* played for a sucker, Plum, but not by me. By whatever it is that lives inside the tanks."

Plum laughed jeeringly, slapped his knapsack. "I've got about thirty of those jewels right here. If that's what you call being played for a sucker—"

"Those aren't jewels. They're beautiful little radio receivers—better than anything we have on Earth. That's what I meant when I told you that there were things for us to learn here."

Plum's eyes narrowed. "How do you figure that?"

"If I'm right," said Smith, "the fuzzballs that you've been chasing up and down the planets aren't essentially living creatures." Plum was craftily edging forward, his knife concealed behind him. Let him come. Let him make a rush. "They act more like machines—half-living robots, if you want to use the word, designed to gather food for the tank builders."

PLU^M, taken momentarily aback, blinked. "That's silly. Machinery don't look like that. Them things is alive."

Smith laughed. "Plum, you're not only unpleasant; you're stupid."

"Yeah?" said Plum softly, creeping a step closer.

"All you know is what you've seen on Earth—metal, glass, and wire. There's no metal here, just sulfur. They use sulfur in ways we've never conceived—something else Earth scientists would like to know. Sulfur, oxygen, hydrogen, traces of this and that. They make their machines differently than we make ours, perhaps breed them out of their own bodies. So if it's any pleasure to you, you're not a murderer—you're a saboteur. You've been wrecking machines and stealing the spark plugs

You've been a damned nuisance, and the people here set a trap for you. Got four out of five. Good hunting, I should—" Plum lunged forward. Instead of dodging, Smith charged forward and hit Plum with his body crouched.

Off balance, Plum clutched at him; they went down together. Plum brought his knife into play, trying to pierce the tough fabric of the space-suit. Smith ignored him, groped for Plum's oxygen hose. He caught it, yanked it loose.

Oxygen spewed out at a tremendous pressure, flapping the hose wildly. Plum cried out crazily, dropped the knife, caught the hose, kinked it, fitted it back over the nipple. Smith picked up the knife, threw it far out into the boulders.

Plum was coughing; some of the atmosphere had been carried into his head-dome.

Smith stood back, grinning. "Plum, you're as good as dead. I've got you where I want you."

Plum looked up, his eyes watering. "How do you figure, you got me? All I have to do is go back to the ship, take off, leave you waving good-by with your handkerchief."

"How much oxygen you got left?"

"I got plenty. Two hours."

"I've got four hours." Smith let the idea sink in for a moment, then said softly, "I'm not going to let you go back to the ship. Three hours from now I'm going back—by myself."

Plum stared at him, then snorted in vast contempt. "How you gonna stop me?"

"We might do a little fighting. Don't forget, you've taught me a lot this trip."

"You think you can hold me off for two hours?"

"I know damned well I can."

"Good enough. Go ahead, try it." Plum backed warily down the slope. Smith came after him and stepped in close. Plum beat his fist on Smith's head-dome, then brought up his knee, as Smith had expected. Smith grabbed the knee, jerked; Plum staggered, fell heavily on his face. Smith snatched at

the oxygen tube. Oxygen thrashed out, flailing the tube back and forth. Feverishly Plum fitted it back in place, sat looking up at Smith with a strange, pale expression.

Carefully he rose to his feet. "You keep away from me, young fellow. Next time I get you, I'll bust your neck."

Smith laughed. "How much oxygen do you have left, Plum?"

Plum glanced quickly, made no answer.

"You're lucky if there's an hour's worth. It's half an hour to the ship. Still think you can make it? All I need to do is grab that tube just once more."

Plum said hoarsely, "Okay Smith, you win. You got me licked; I'm man enough to admit it. We'll forget the bad blood, we'll go back and there'll be no more talk of anyone being left here."

Smith shook his head. "I wouldn't trust you if you were Moses on a raft. That's something else you taught me, Plum. In a way, I'm sorry. I don't want to be responsible for anybody's death, not even yours. But once aboard that ship, with you and Owen against me, two to one, how long would I last? Not very long."

"You got me wrong, Smith."

"No, Plum. One of us is going to stay here. You."

Plum rushed him. Smith backed easily out of reach, leading Plum away from the ship. Plum pounded on, arms outstretched grotesquely, and Smith trotted ahead just out of reach.

Plum halted, red-eyed, then turned and ran in the other direction, toward the ship.

Smith brought him down with a tackle, and his hand found the oxygen tube. He hesitated. He could not pull it loose. It was too cold, too calculating, this slow stealing of a man's breath.

Only a moment. Revulsion or not, it was Plum's life or his. He jerked. Plum thrashed wildly to his feet, fitted the hose back in place. His fingers were trembling. The hose had not flailed so hard.

Motion entered Smith's field of vision—something black and big. Unbelievably, he stared. Plum rose to his feet, stared likewise; together they watched the Star Control cruiser settle behind the hills, beside the *Dog*.

"Well, Plum," said Smith. "It looks like maybe you'll live after all. Spend quite some time in deabberation camp, of course. How much oxygen you got left?"

"Half an hour," said Plum dully.

"Better get going. . . . I don't want to have to carry you in. . . ."

Noland Bannister nodded to Smith as if he had never been away. The Star Control office looked cool and dim and somewhat smaller than Smith had remembered it.

"Well, Smith, I see we brought you back alive." Bannister leaned back in his chair, stretching luxuriantly.

Smith said coolly, "I'd have made it back by myself."

Bannister's eyebrows rose. "Sure of that?"

Smith looked Bannister over carefully. He saw an efficient, hard-working man who resented office work, who unconsciously visited his irritation upon his subordinates. He saw a man no bigger, no brainier, no more resourceful than himself.

"Not that I wasn't glad to see the cruiser," he said. "It relieved me of the decidedly unpleasant job of killing Plum."

Bannister's eyebrows rose still higher.

"What I want to know," said Smith, "is how the cruiser trailed us out. Sure-

ly the coordinates Lowell gave me were wrong?"

Bannister shook his head. "The coordinates were correct. You merely applied them in the wrong system. You said, 'Lowell gives us figures; they must refer to navigational data—X-Y-Z coordinates.' If you had considered a little more deliberately, you would have seen that the figures applied not to the rectangular system, but to astronomical, or polar coordinates." He blew smoke briskly into the air. "'Red Arrack' obviously meant 'Right Ascension.' 'Dubonnet' meant 'Declination.' 'Lys' meant 'Light-years.' The figures hit Rho Ophiuchus right on the nose: a fine double star. We didn't waste much time." He leaned back in his chair.

Smith flushed. "I made a mistake. Very well. I won't make it again."

"That's what I like to hear," said Bannister approvingly.

"What about that rating? Do I still have it?"

Bannister contemplated him. "You feel you've learned something about Star Control work this last trip?"

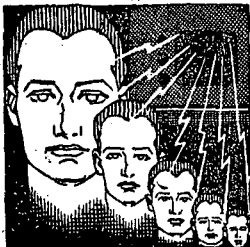
"I've learned all Captain Plum could teach me."

Bannister nodded. "Very well, lieutenant. Take a week off to rest up, then I'll find another assignment for you."

Smith nodded. "Thanks." He reached in his pocket, laid a glittering green sphere in front of Bannister. "Here's a souvenir for you."

"Ah," said Bannister, "another of the jewels."

"No," said Smith. "Just a good receiving set."



Read THE GADGET HAD A GHOST

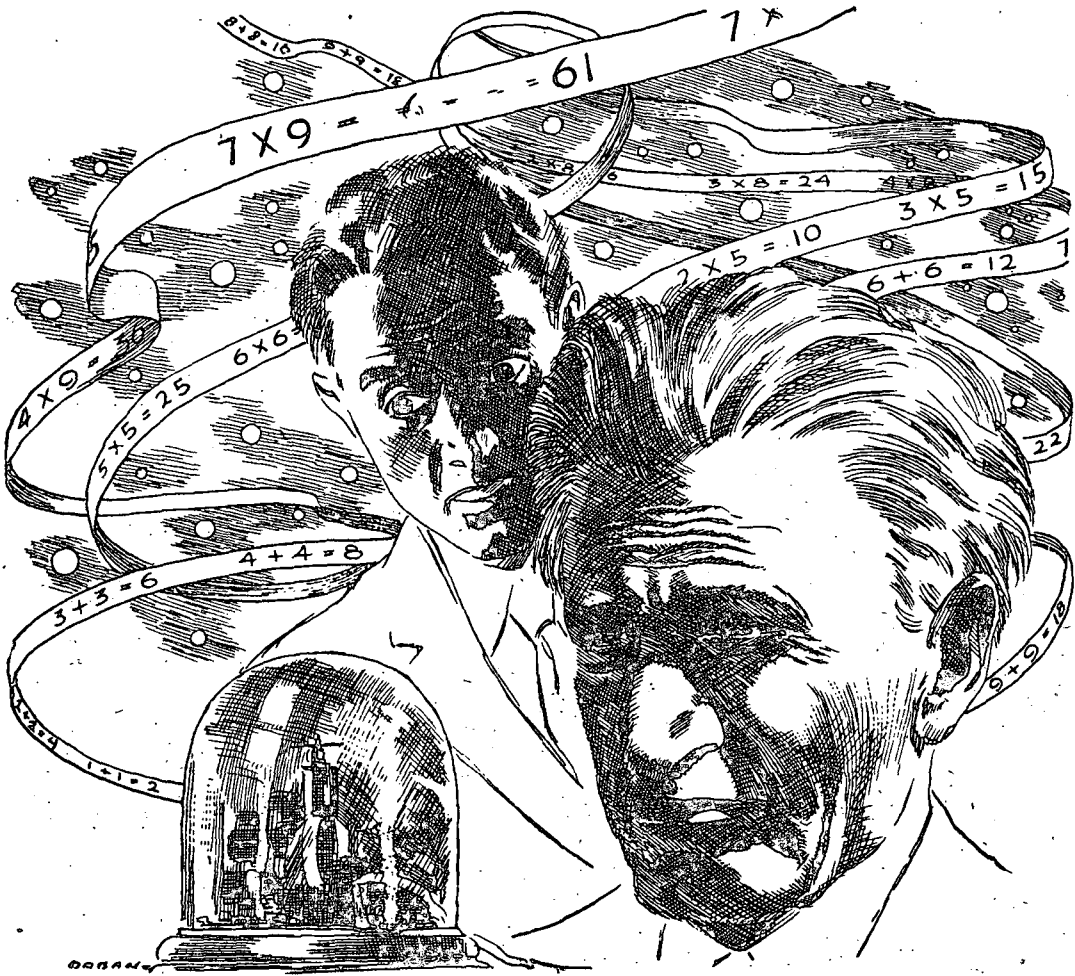
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Problem for Emmy

By ROBERT SHERMAN TOWNES

EMMY LIVED — we all used that word—in a great room that had once been the University's ROTC armory. The walls had been painted pale grey and a few partitions and glass cubicles had been set up, but the shape and vasty reach of the old armory re-

mained unchanged. Emmy almost filled the width of one end, standing a good fifteen feet high and coming out into the Room over twenty feet to where the heavy carpeting began. To the casual eye Emmy was no more than several huge grey-enamelled steel boxes

She stood in the Room . . . so much more than we, and so much less