to quote:

ROBERT HEINLEIN

"My literary habits consist mainly of a running fight to stay away from people, telephones, and correspondence long enough to get stories written down. I've no particular knowledge of the techniques of writing fiction and am afraid to find out, remembering what happened to the centipede who was asked how he handled his legs. I become very attached to my characters and kill them off reluctantly. Am married to a wonderful rarity: an even-tempered redhead."

MURRAY LEINSTER

"I was a professional writer long before I could vote, and to date have had published about 1,300 stories, 29 books, some motion-pictures, radio and TV plays. I've been published in 12 languages besides English, and in Braille. My hobby, naturally, is gadgets. I live in a house that was built in 1650, where I enjoy writing about life in 2650."

H. L. GOLD

"I'm 5-9, weigh 155 stripped, was born in Montreal and educated in the U. S., am married and have one son. While learning to write I held the usual jobs: junior pharmacist, shoe salesman, floor scraper, apprentice upholsterer, etc. My favorite job, though, was the one where I used to drown—so that lifeguard students could practice rescue on me. I've written and sold over 5,000,000 words under 32 pen names, edited or published more than two dozen magazines in various fields."

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THE INVADERS

By MURRAY LEINSTER

It started in Greece on the day after tomorrow. Before the last act raced to a close, Coburn was buried to his ears in assorted adventures, including a revolution and an invasion from outer space!

We're not given to throwing around the word "epic" lightly, but here is *one! Swashbuckling action, a great many vivid characters, and a weird mystery — all spun for you by one of the master story-tellers of our time.*

ON a certain day — it may be in the history books eventually — Coburn was in the village of Ardea, north of Salonika in the most rugged part of Greece. He was making a survey for purposes which later on turned out not to matter much. The village of Ardea was small, it was very early in the morning, and he was trying to get his car started when he heard the yell.

It was a shrill yell, and it traveled fast. Coburn jerked his head

upright from the hood of the car. A whiskered villager with flapping trousers came pounding up the single street. His eyes were panic-stricken and his mouth was wide. He emitted the yell in a long, sustained note. Other villagers popped into view like ants from a disturbed ant-hill. Some instantly ran back into their houses. Others began to run toward the outskirts of the village, toward the south.

Coburn, watching blankly, found himself astonished at the number of people the village contained. He hadn't dreamed it was so populous. All were in instant frenzied flight toward the mountains. An old woman he'd seen barely hobbling, now ran like a deer. Children toddled desperately. Adults snatched them up and ran. Larger children fled on twinkling legs. The inhabitants of Ardea vanished toward the hills in a straggling, racing, panting stream. They disappeared around an outcrop of stone which was merely the nearest place that would hide them. Then there was silence.

Coburn turned his head blankly in the direction from which they had run. He saw the mountains — incredibly stony and barren. That was all. No, not quite — there was something far away which was subtly different in color from the hillsides. It moved. It flowed over a hill crest, coming plainly from somewhere beyond the mountains. It was vague in shape. Coburn felt a momentary stirring of superstition. There simply couldn't be anything so huge. . . .

But there could. There was. It was a column of soldiers in uniforms that looked dark-gray at this distance. It flowed slowly out of the mountains like a colossal snake — some Midgard monster or river of destruction. It moved with an awful, deliberate steadiness toward the village of Ardea.

Coburn caught his breath. Then he was running too. He was out of the village almost before he realized it. He did not try to follow the villagers. He might lead pursuers after them. There was a narrow defile nearby. Tanks could hardly follow it, and it did not lead where they would be going. He plunged into it and was instantly hidden. He pelted on. It was a trail from somewhere, because he saw ancient donkey-droppings on the stones, but he did not know where it led. He simply ran to get away from the village and the soldiers who were coming toward it.

This was Greece. They were Bulgarian soldiers. This was not war or even invasion. This was worse — a cold-war raid. He kept running and presently rocky cliffs overhung him on one side, a vast expanse of sky loomed to his left. He found himself panting. He began to hope that he was actually safe.

Then he heard a voice. It sounded vexed. Quite incredibly, it was talking English. "But my dear young lady!" it said severely. "You simply mustn't go on! There's the very devil of a mess turning up, and you mustn't run into it!"

A girl's voice answered, also in English. "I'm sure — I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I'm afraid I can't explain. But, truly, you mustn't go on to the village!"

Coburn pushed ahead. He came upon the people who had spoken. There was a girl riding on a donkey. She was American. Trim. Neat. Uneasy, but reasonably self-confident. And there was a man standing by the trail, with a slide of earth behind him and mud on his boots as if he'd slid down somewhere very fast to intercept this girl. He wore the distinctive costume a British correspondent is apt to affect in the wilds.

They turned as Coburn came into view. The girl goggled at him. He was not exactly the sort of third person one expected to find on a very lonely, ill-defined rocky trail many miles north of Salonika.

When they turned to him, Coburn recognized the man. He'd met Dillon once or twice in Salonika. He panted: "Dillon! There's a column of soldiers headed across the border! Bulgarians!"

"How close?" asked Dillon.

"They're coming," said Coburn, with some difficulty due to lack of breath. "I saw them across the valley. Everybody's run away from the village. I was the last one out."

Dillon nodded composedly. He looked intently at Coburn. "You know me," he said reservedly. "Should I remember you?"

"I've met you once or twice," Coburn told him. "In Salonika."

"Oh," said Dillon. "Oh, yes. Sorry. I've got some cameras up yonder. I want a picture or two of those Bulgarians. See if you can persuade this young lady not to go on. I fancy it's safe enough here. Not a normal raid route through this pass."

Coburn nodded. Dillon expected the raid, evidently. This sort of thing had happened in Turkey. Now it would start up here, in Greece. The soldiers would strike fast and far, at first. They wouldn't stop to hunt down the local inhabitants. Not yet.

"We'll wait," said Coburn. "You'll be back?"

"Oh, surely!" said Dillon. "Five minutes or less."

He started up the precipitous wall, at whose bottom he had slid down. He climbed remarkably well. He went up hand-over-hand despite the steepness of the stone. It looked almost impossible, but Dillon apparently found handgrips by instinct, as a good climber does. In a matter of min-

utes he vanished, some fifty feet up, behind a bulging mass of stone. He did not reappear.

Coburn began to get his breath back. The girl looked at him, her forehead creased.

"Just to make sure," said Coburn, "I'll see if I can get a view back down the trail."

Where the vastness of the sky showed, he might be able to look down. He scrambled up a barrier two man-heights high. There was a screen of straggly brush, with emptiness beyond. He peered.

He could see a long way down and behind, and actually the village was clearly in sight from here. There were rumbling, caterpillar-tread tanks in the act of entering it. There were anachronistic mounted men with them. Cavalry is outdated, nowadays, but in rocky mountain country they can have uses where tanks can't go. But here tanks and cavalry looked grim. Coburn squirmed back and beckoned to the girl. She joined him. They peered through the brushwood together.

The light tanks were scurrying along the single village street. Horsemen raced here and there. A pig squealed. There was a shot. The tanks emerged from the other side. They went crawling swiftly toward the south. But they did

not turn aside where the villagers had. They headed along the way Coburn had driven to Ardea.

Infantrymen appeared, marching into the village. An advance party, rifles ready. This was strict discipline and standard military practise. Horsemen rode to tell them that all was quiet. They turned and spurred away after the tanks.

The girl said in a strained voice. "This is war starting! Invasion!"

Coburn said coldly, "No. No planes. This isn't war. It's a training exercise, Iron-Curtain style. This outfit will strike twenty — maybe thirty miles south. There's a town there — Kilkis. They'll take it and loot it. By the time Athens finds out what's happened, they'll be ready to fall back. They'll do a little fighting. They'll carry off the people. And they'll deny everything. The West doesn't want war. Greece couldn't fight by herself. And America wouldn't believe that such things could happen. But they do. It's what's called cold war. Ever hear of that?"

The main column of soldiers far below poured up to the village and went down the straggly street in a tide of dark figures. The village was very small. The soldiers came out of the other end of the village. They poured on after the

tanks, rippling over irregularities in the way. They seemed innumerable.

"Three or four thousand men," said Coburn coldly. "This is a big raid. But it's not war. Not yet."

It was not the time for full-scale war. Bulgaria and the other countries in its satellite status were under orders to put a strain upon the outside world. They were building up border incidents and turmoil for the benefit of their masters. Turkey was on a war footing, after a number of incidents like this. Indo-China was at war. Korea was an old story. Now Greece. It always takes more men to guard against criminal actions than to commit them. When this raid was over Greece would have to maintain a full-size army in its northern mountains to guard against its repetition. Which would be a strain on its treasury and might help toward bankruptcy. This was cold war.

The infantry ended. Horse-drawn vehicles appeared in a seemingly endless line. Motorized transport would be better, but the Bulgarians were short of it. Shaggy, stubby animals plodded in the wake of the tanks and the infantry. There were two-wheeled carts in single file all across the valley. They went through the village and filed after the soldiers.

"I think," said Coburn in biting anger, "this will be all there is to see. They'll go in until they're stopped. They'll kidnap Greek civilians and later work them to death in labor camps. They'll carry off some children to raise as spies. But their purpose is probably only to make such a threat that the Greeks will go broke guarding against them. They know the Greeks don't want war."

He began to wriggle back from the brushwood screen. He was filled with the sort of sick rage that comes when you can't actively resent insolence and arrogance. He hated the people who wanted the world to collapse, and this was part of their effort to bring it about.

He helped the girl down. "Dillon said to wait," he said. He found himself shaking with anger at the men who had ordered the troops to march. "He said he was taking pictures. He must have had an advance tip of some sort. If so, he'll have a line of retreat."

Then Coburn frowned. Not quite plausible, come to think of it. But Dillon had certainly known about the raid. He was set to take pictures, and he hadn't been surprised. One would have expected Greek Army photographers on hand to take pictures of a raid of which they had warning. Probably United Nations observers on the scene, too. Yes. There should be Army men and probably a United Nations team up where Dillon was.

Coburn explained to the girl.

"That'll be it. And they'll have a radio, too. Probably helicopters taking them out also. I'll go up and tell them to be sure and have room for you."

He started for the cliff he'd seen Dillon climb. He paused: "I'd better have your name for them to report to Athens."

"I'm Janice Ames," she told him. "The Breen Foundation has me going around arranging for lessons for the people up here. Sanitation and nutrition and midwifery, and so on. The Foundation office is in Salonika, though."

He nodded and attacked the cliff.

It hadn't been a difficult climb for Dillon. It wasn't even a long one for Coburn, but it was much worse than he'd thought. The crevices for handholds were rare, and footholds were almost nonexistent. There were times when he felt he was holding on by his fingernails. Dillon seemed to have made it with perfect ease, but Coburn found it exhausting.

Fifty feet up he came to the place where Dillon had vanished. But it was a preposterously difficult task to get across an undercut to where he could grasp a stunted tree. It was a strain to scramble up past it. Then he found himself on the narrowest of possible ledges, with a sickening drop off to one side. But Dillon had made it, so he followed.

He went a hundred yards, and then the ledge came to an end. He saw where Dillon must have climbed. It was possible, but Coburn violently did not want to try. Still . . . He started.

Then something clicked in his throat. There was a rather deep ledge for a space of four or five feet. And there was Dillon. No, not Dillon. Just Dillon's clothes. They lay flat and deflated, but laid out in one assembly beside a starveling twisted bush. It would have been possible for a man to stand there to take off his clothes, if he wanted to. But a man who takes off his clothes — and why should Dillon do that? — takes them off one by one. These garments were fitted together. The coat was over the shirt, and the trousers fitted to the bottom of the shirt over the coat, and the boots were at the ends of the trouser legs.

Then Coburn saw something he did not believe. It palpably was not true. He saw a hand sticking out of the end of the sleeve. But it was not a hand, because it had collapsed. It was rather like an unusually thick glove, flesh color.

Then he saw what should have been Dillon's head. And it was in place, too. But it was not Dillon's head. It was not a head at all. It was something quite different. There were no eyes. Merely holes. Openings. Like a mask.

Coburn felt a sort of roaring in

his ears, and he could not think clearly for a moment because of the shrieking impossibility of what he was looking at. Dillon's necktie had been very neatly untied, and left in place in his collar. His shirt had been precisely unbuttoned. He had plainly done it himself. And then — the unbuttoned shirt made it clear — he had come out of his body. Physically, he had emerged and gone on. The thing lying flat that had lapsed at Coburn's feet was Dillon's outside. His outside only. The inside had come out and gone away. It had climbed the cliff over Coburn's head.

The outside of Dillon looked remarkably like something made out of foam-rubber. Coburn touched it, insanely.

He heard his own voice saying flatly: "It's a sort of suit. A suit that looks like Dillon. He was in it. Something was! Something is playing the part of Dillon. Maybe it always was. Maybe there isn't any Dillon."

He felt a sort of hysterical composure. He opened the chest. It was patently artificial. There were such details on the inside as would be imagined in a container needed to fit something snugly. At the edges of the opening there were fastenings like the teeth of a zipper, but somehow different. Coburn knew that when this was fastened there would be no visible seam.

Whatever wore this suit-that-looked-like-Dillon could feel perfectly confident of passing for Dillon, clothed or otherwise. It could pass without any question for —

Coburn gagged.

It could pass without question for a human being.

Obviously, whatever was wearing this foam-rubber replica of Dillon was not human!

Coburn went back to where he had to climb down the cliffside again. He moved like a sleepwalker. He descended the fifty-foot cliff by the crevices and the single protruding rock-point that had helped him get up. It was much easier going down. In his state of mind it was also more dangerous. He moved in a sort of robot-like composure.

He moved toward the girl, trying to make words come out of his throat, when a small rock came clattering down the cliff. He looked up. Dillon was in the act of swinging to the first part of the descent. He came down, very confident and assured. He had two camera-cases slung from his shoulders. Coburn stared at him, utterly unable to believe what he'd seen ten minutes before.

Dillon reached solid ground and turned. He smiled wryly. His shirt was buttoned. His tie was tied.

"I hoped," he said ruefully to Janice Ames, "that the Bulgars would toddle off. But they left a

guard in the village. We can't hope to take an easier trail. We'll have to go back the way you came. We'll get you safe to Salonika, though."

The girl smiled, uneasily but gratefully.

"And," added Dillon, "we'd better get started."

He gallantly helped the girl remount her donkey. At the sight, Coburn was shaken out of his numbness. He moved fiercely to intervene. But Janice settled herself in the saddle and Dillon confidently led the way. Coburn grimly walked beside her as she rode. He was convinced that he wouldn't leave her side while Dillon was around. But even as he knew that desperate certitude, he was filled with confusion and a panicky uncertainty.

When they'd traveled about half a mile, another frightening thought occurred to Coburn. Perhaps Dillon — passing for human — wasn't alone. Perhaps there were thousands like him.

Invaders! Usurpers, pretending to be men. Invaders, obviously, from space!

II

They made eight miles. At least one mile of that, added together, was climbing straight up. Another mile was straight down. The rest was boulder-strewn, twisting, donkey-wide, slanting, slippery stone. But there was no sign of anyone but themselves. The sky remained undisturbed. No planes. They saw no sign of the raiding force from across the border, and they heard no gunfire.

Coburn struggled against the stark impossibility of what he had seen. The most horrifying concept regarding invasion from space is that of creatures who are able to destroy or subjugate humanity. A part of that concept was in Coburn's mind now. Dillon marched on ahead, in every way convincingly human. But he wasn't. And to Coburn, his presence as a non-human invader of Earth made the border-crossing by the Bulgarians seem almost benevolent.

They went on. The next hill was long and steep. Then they were at the hill crest. They looked down into a village called Náousa. It was larger than Ardea, but not much larger. One of the houses burned untended. Figures moved about. There were tanks in sight, and many soldiers in the uniform that looked dark-gray at a distance. The route by which Dillon had traveled had plainly curved into the line-of-march of the Bulgarian raiding force.

But the moving figures were not soldiers. The soldiers were still. They lay down on the grass in irregular, sprawling windrows. The tanks were not in motion. There were two-wheeled carts in

sight — reaching back along the invasion-route — and they were just as stationary as the men and the tanks. The horses had toppled in their shafts. They were motionless.

The movement was of civilians — men and women alike. They were Greek villagers, and they moved freely among the unmilitarily recumbent troops, and even from this distance their occupation was clear. They were happily picking the soldiers' pockets. But there was one figure which moved from one prone figure to another much too quickly to be looting. Coburn saw sunlight glitter on something in his hand.

Dillon noticed the same thing Coburn did at the same instant. He bounded forward. He ran toward the village and its tumbled soldiers in great, impossible leaps. No man could make such leaps or travel so fast. He seemed almost to soar toward the village, shouting. Coburn and Janice saw him reach the village. They saw him rush toward the one man who had been going swiftly from one prone soldier to another. It was too far to see Dillon's action, but the sunlight glittered again on something bright, which this time flew through the air and dropped to the ground.

The villagers grouped about Dillon. There was no sign of a struggle.

"What's happened?" demanded Janice uneasily. "Those are soldiers on the ground."

Coburn's fright prevented his caution. He shouted furiously. "He's not a man! You saw it! No man can run so fast! You saw those jumps! He's not human! He's — something else!"

Janice jerked her eyes to Coburn in panic. "What did you say?"

Coburn panted: "Dillon's no man! He's a monster from somewhere in space! And he and his kind have killed those soldiers! Murdered them! And the soldiers are men! You stay here. I'll go down there and —"

"No!" said Janice, "I'm coming too."

He took the donkey's halter and led the animal down to the village, with Janice trembling a little in the saddle. He talked in a tight, taut, hysterical tone. He told what he'd found up on the cliffside. He described in detail the similitude of a man's body he'd found deflated beside a stunted bush.

He did not look at Janice as he talked. He moved doggedly toward the village, dragging at the donkey's head. They neared the houses very slowly, and Coburn considered that he walked into the probability of a group of other creatures from unthinkable other star systems, disguised as men. It did not occur to him that his

sudden outburst about Dillon sounded desperately insane to Janice.

They reached the first of the fallen soldiers. Janice looked, shuddering. Then she said thinly: "He's breathing!"

He was. He was merely a boy. Twenty or thereabouts. He lay on his back, his eyes closed. His face was upturned like a dead man's. But his breast rose and fell rhythmically. He slept as if he were drugged.

But that was more incredible than if he'd been dead. Regiments of men fallen simultaneously asleep. . . .

Coburn's flow of raging speech stopped short. He stared. He saw other fallen soldiers. Dozens of them. In coma-like slumber, the soldiers who had come to loot and murder lay like straws upon the ground. If they had been dead it would have been more believable. At least there are ways to kill men. But this . . .

Dillon parted the group of villagers about him and came toward Coburn and Janice. He was frowning in a remarkably human fashion.

"Here's a mess!" he said irritably. "Those Bulgars came marching down out of the pass. The cavalry galloped on ahead and cut the villagers off so they couldn't run away. They started to loot the village. They weren't pleasant. Women began to scream, and there were shootings — all in a matter of minutes. And then the looters began to act strangely. They staggered around and sat down and went to sleep!"

He waved his hands in a helpless gesture, but Coburn was not deceived.

"The tanks arrived. And they stopped — and their crews went to sleep! Then the infantry appeared, staggering as it marched. The officers halted to see what was happening ahead, and the entire infantry dropped off to sleep right where it stood!

"It's bad! If it had happened a mile or so back . . . The Greeks must have played a trick on them, but those cavalrymen raised the devil in the few minutes they were out of hand! They killed some villagers and then keeled over. And now the villagers aren't pleased. There was one man whose son was murdered, and he's been slitting the Bulgars' throats!"

He looked at Coburn, and Coburn said in a grating voice: "I see."

Dillon said distressedly: "One can't let them slit the throats of sleeping men! I'll have to stay here to keep them from going at it again. I say, Coburn, will you take one of their staff cars and run on down somewhere and tell the Greek government what's happened here? Something should be done about it! Soldiers should

come to keep order and take charge of these chaps."

"Yes," said Coburn. "I'll do it. I'll take Janice along, too."

"Splendid!" Dillon nodded as if in relief. "She'd better get out of the mess entirely. I fancy there'd have been a full-scale massacre if we hadn't come along. The Greeks have no reason to love these chaps, and their intentions were hardly amiable. But one can't let them be murdered!"

Coburn had his hand on his revolver in his pocket. His finger was on the trigger. But if Dillon needed him to run an errand, then there obviously were no others of his own kind about.

Dillon turned his back. He gave orders in the barbarous dialect of the mountains. His voice was authoritative. Men obeyed him and dragged uniformed figures out of a light half-track that was plainly a staff car. Dillon beckoned, and Coburn moved toward him. The important thing as far as Coburn was concerned was to get Janice to safety. Then to report the full event.

"I . . . I'm not sure . . ." began Janice, her voice shaking.

"I'll prove what I said," raged Coburn in a low tone. "I'm not crazy, though I feel like it!"

Dillon beckoned again. Janice slipped off the donkey's back. She looked pitifully frightened and irresolute.

"I've located the chap who's the mayor of this village, or something like that. Take him along. They might not believe you, but they'll have to investigate when he turns up."

A white-bearded villager reluctantly climbed into the back of the car. Dillon pleasantly offered to assist Janice into the front seat. She climbed in, deathly white, frightened of Coburn and almost ashamed to admit that his vehement outburst had made her afraid of Dillon, too.

Dillon came around to Coburn's side of the vehicle. "Privately," he said with a confidential air, "I'd advise you to dump this mayor person where he can reach authority, and then go away quietly and say nothing of what happened up here. If the Greeks are using some contrivance that handles an affair like this, it will be top secret. They won't like civilians knowing about it."

Coburn's grip on his revolver was savage. It seemed likely, now, that Dillon was the only one of his extraordinary kind about.

"I think I know why you say that," he said harshly.

Dillon smiled. "Oh, come now!" he protested. "I'm quite unofficial!"

He was incredibly convincing at that moment. There was a wry half-smile on his face. He looked absolutely human; abso-

lutely like the British correspondent Coburn had met in Salonika. He was too convincing. Coburn knew he would suspect his own sanity unless he made sure.

"You're not only unofficial," said Coburn grimly. His hand came up over the edge of the staff-car door. It had his revolver in it. It bore inexorably upon the very middle of Dillon's body. "You're not human, either! You're not a man! Your name isn't Dillon! You're — something I haven't a word for! But if you try anything fancy I'll see if a bullet through your middle will stop you!"

Dillon did not move. He said easily: "You're being absurd, my dear fellow. Put away that pistol."

"You slipped!" said Coburn thickly. "You said the Greeks played a trick on this raiding party. But you played it. At Ardea, when you climbed that cliff — no man could climb so fast. No man could run as you ran down into this village. And I saw that body you're wearing when you weren't in it! I followed you up the cliff when —" Coburn's voice was ragingly sarcastic — "when you were taking pictures!"

Dillon's face went impassive. Then he said: "Well?"

"Will you let me scratch your finger?" demanded Coburn almost hysterically. "If it bleeds, I'll apologize and freely admit I'm crazy! But if it doesn't . . ."

The thing-that-was-not-Dillon raised its eyebrows. "It wouldn't," it said coolly. "You do know. What follows?"

"You're something from space," accused Coburn, "sneaking around Earth trying to find out how to conquer us! You're an Invader! You're trying out weapons. And you want me to keep my mouth shut so we Earth people won't patch up our own quarrels and join forces to hunt you down! But we'll do it! We'll do it!"

The thing-that-was-not-Dillon said gently: "No. My dear chap, no one will believe you."

"We'll see about that!" snapped Coburn. "Put those cameras in the car!"

The figure that looked so human hesitated a long instant, then obeyed. It lowered the two seeming cameras into the back part of the staff car.

Janice started to say, "I . . . I . . ."

The pseudo-Dillon smiled at her. "You think he's insane, and naturally you're scared," it said reassuringly. "But he's sane. He's quite right. I am from outer space. And I'm not humoring him either. Look!"

He took a knife from his pocket and snapped it open. He deliberately ran the point down the side of one of his fingers.

The skin parted. Something that looked exactly like foam-

rubber was revealed. There were even bubbles in it.

The pseudo-Dillon said, "You see, you don't have to be afraid of him. He's sane, and quite human. You'll feel much better traveling with him." Then the figure turned to Coburn. "You won't believe it, but I really like you, Coburn. I like the way you've reacted. It's very . . . human."

Coburn said to him: "It'll be human, too, when we start to hunt you down!" He let the staff car in gear. Dillon smiled at him. He let in the clutch, and the car leaped ahead.

In the two camera-cases Coburn was sure that he had the cryptic device that was responsible for the failure of a cold-war raid. He wouldn't have dared drive away from Dillon leaving these devices behind. If they were what he thought, they'd be absolute proof of the truth of his story, and they should furnish clues to the sort of science the Invaders possessed. Show the world that Invaders were upon it, and all the world would combine to defend Earth. The cold war would end.

But a bitter doubt came to him. Would they? Or would they offer zestfully to be viceroys and overseers for the Invaders, betraying the rest of mankind for the privilege of ruling them even under unhuman masters?

Janice swayed against his shoulder. He cast a swift glance at her. Her face was like marble.

"What's the matter?"

She shook her head. "I'm trying not to faint," she said unsteadily. "When you told me he was from another world I . . . thought you were crazy. But when he admitted it . . . when he proved it . . ."

Coburn growled. The trail twisted and dived down a steep slope. It twisted again and ran across a rushing, frothing stream. Coburn drove into the rivulet. Water reared up in wing-like sheets on either side. The staff car climbed out, rocking, on the farther side. Coburn put it to the ascent beyond. The trail turned and climbed and descended as the stony masses of the hills required.

"He's — from another world!" repeated Janice. Her teeth chattered. "What do they want — creatures like him? How — how many of them are there? Anybody could be one of them! What do they want?"

"This is a pretty good world," said Coburn fiercely. "And his kind will want it. We're merely the natives, the aborigines, to them. Maybe they plan to wipe us out, or enslave us. But they won't! We can spot them now! They don't bleed. Scratch one and you find — foam-rubber. X-rays will spot them. We'll learn to pick them out — and when some specialists look over those things that look like cameras we'll know more

still! Enough to do something!"

"Then you think it's an invasion from space?"

"What else?" snapped Coburn.

His stomach was a tight cramped knot now. He drove the car hard!

In air miles the distance to be covered was relatively short. In road miles it seemed interminable. The road was bad and curving beyond belief. It went many miles east and many miles west for every mile of southward gain. The hour grew late. Coburn had fled Ardea at sunrise, but they'd reached Náousa after midday and he drove frantically over incredible mountain roads until dusk. Despite sheer recklessness, however, he could not average thirty miles an hour. There were times when even the half-track had to crawl or it would overturn. The sun set, and he went on up steep grades and down steeper ones in the twilight. Night fell and the headlights glared ahead, and the staff-car clanked and clanked and grumbled and roared on through the darkness.

They probably passed through villages — the headlights showed stone hovels once or twice — but no lights appeared. It was midnight before they saw a moving yellow spot of brightness with a glare as of fire upon steam above it. There were other small lights in a row behind it, and they saw that all the lights moved.

"A railroad!" said Coburn. "We're getting somewhere!"

It was a railroad train on the other side of a valley, but they did not reach the track. The highway curved away from it.

At two o'clock in the morning they saw electric lights. The highway became suddenly passable. Presently they ran into the still, silent streets of a slumbering town — Serrai — an administrative center for this part of Greece. They threaded its ways while Coburn watched for a proper place to stop. Once a curiously-hatted policeman stared blankly at them under an arc lamp as the staff car clanked and rumbled past him. They saw a great pile of stone which was a church. They saw a railroad station.

Not far away there was a building in which there were lights. A man in uniform came out of its door.

Coburn stopped a block away. There were uneasy stirrings, and the white-bearded passenger from the village said incomprehensible things in a feeble voice. Coburn got Janice out of the car first. She was stiff and dizzy when she tried to walk. The Greek was in worse condition still. He clung to the side of the staff car.

"We tell the truth," said Coburn curtly, "when we talk to the police. We tell the whole truth — except about Dillon. That sounds

too crazy. We tell it to top-level officials only, after they realize that something they don't know anything about has really taken place. Talk of Invaders from space would either get us locked up as lunatics or would create a panic. This man will tell what happened up there, and they'll investigate. But we take these so-called cameras to Salonika, and get to an American battleship."

He lifted Dillon's two cameras by the carrying-straps. And the straps pulled free. They'd held the cases safely enough during a long journey on foot across the mountains. But they pulled clear now.

Coburn had a bitter thought. He struck a match. He saw the leather cases on the floor of the staff car. He picked up one of them. He took it to the light of the headlights, standing there in the resonant darkness of a street in a city of stone houses.

The leather was brittle. It was friable, as if it had been in a fire. Coburn plucked it open, and it came apart in his hands. Inside there was the smell of scorched things. There was a gritty metallic powder. Nothing else. The other carrying-case was in exactly the same condition.

Coburn muttered bitterly: "They were set to destroy themselves if they got into other hands than Dillon's. We haven't a bit of proof that he wasn't a human being. Not a shred of proof!"

He suddenly felt a sick rage, as if he had been played with and mocked. The raid from Bulgaria was serious enough, of course. It would have killed hundreds of people and possibly hundreds of others would have been enslaved. But even that was secondary in Coburn's mind. The important thing was that there were Invaders upon Earth. Non-human monsters, who passed for humans through disguise. They had been able to travel through space to land secretly upon Earth. They moved unknown among men, learning the secrets of mankind, preparing for — what?

III

They got into Salonika early afternoon of the next day, after many hours upon an antique railroad train that puffed and grunted and groaned among interminable mountains. Coburn got a taxi to take Janice to the office of the Breen Foundation which had sent her up to the north of Greece to establish its philanthropic instruction courses. He hadn't much to say to Janice as they rode. He was too disheartened.

In the cab, though, he saw great placards on which newspaper headlines appeared in Greek. He could make out the gist of them. Essentially, they shrieked that Bulgarians had invaded Greece

and had been wiped out. He made out the phrase for valiant Greek army. And the Greek army was valiant enough, but it hadn't had anything to do with this.

From the police station in Serrai — he had been interviewed there until dawn — he knew what action had been taken. Army planes had flown northward in the darkness, moved by the Mayor's, and Coburn's, and Janice's tale of Bulgarian soldiers on Greek soil, sleeping soundly. They had released parachute flares and located the village of Náousa. Parachutists with field radios had jumped, while other flares burned to light them to the ground. That was that. Judging by the placards, their reports had borne out the story Coburn had brought down. There would be a motorized Greek division on the way to take charge of the four-thousand-odd unconscious raiders. There was probably an advance guard there now.

But there was no official news. Even the Greek newspapers called it rumors. Actually, it was leaked information. It would be reasonable for the Greek government to let it leak, look smug, and blandly say "No comment" to all inquiries, including those from Bulgaria.

But behind that appearance of complacency, the Greek government would be going quietly mad trying to understand what so fortunately had happened. And Coburn could tell them. But he knew better than to try without some sort of proof. Yet, he had to tell. The facts were more important than what people thought of him.

The cab stopped before his own office. He paid the driver. The driver beamed and said happily: "*Tys nikisame, é?*"

Coburn said, "*Poly kala. Orea.*"

His office was empty. It was dustier than usual. His secretary was probably taking a holiday since he was supposed to be out of town. He grunted and sat down at the telephone. He called a man he knew. Hallen — another American — was attached to a nonprofit corporation which was attached to an agency which was supposed to cooperate with a committee which had something to do with NATO. Hallen answered the phone in person.

Coburn identified himself. "Have you heard any rumors about a Bulgarian raid up-country?" he asked.

"I haven't heard anything else since I got up," Hallen told him.

"I was there," said Coburn. "I brought the news down. Can you come over?"

"I'm halfway there now!" said Hallen as he slammed down the phone.

Coburn paced up and down his office. It was very dusty. Even the seat of the chair at his secretary's desk was dusty. The odds

were that she was coming in only to sort the mail, and not even sitting down for that. He shrugged.

He heard footsteps. The door opened. His secretary, Helena, came in. She looked surprised.

"I was at lunch," she explained. She had a very slight accent. She hung up her coat. "I am sorry. I stopped at a store."

He had paused in his pacing to nod at her. Now he stared, but her back was turned toward him. He blinked. She had just told a very transparent lie. And Helena was normally very truthful.

"You had a good trip?" she asked politely.

"Fair," said Coburn. "Any phone calls this morning?" he asked.

"Not this morning," she said politely.

She reached in a desk drawer. She brought out paper. She put it in the typewriter and began to type.

Coburn felt very queer. Then he saw something else. There was a fly in the office — a large, green-bodied fly of metallic lustre. The inhabitants of Salonika said with morbid pride that it was a specialty of the town, with the most painful of all known fly stings. And Helena abhorred flies.

It landed on the bare skin of her neck. She did not notice. It stayed there. Ordinarily she would have jumped up, exclaiming angrily in Greek, and then she would have pursued the fly vengefully with a folded newspaper until she killed it. But now she ignored it.

Hallen came in, stamping. Coburn closed the door behind him. He felt queer at the pit of his stomach. For Helena to let a fly stay on her neck suggested that her skin was . . . somehow not like its usual self.

"What happened to those Bulgarians?" demanded Hallen.

Coburn told him precisely what he'd seen when he arrived in Náousa after an eight-mile hike through mountains. Then he went back and told Hallen precisely what he'd seen up on the cliffside.

"His cameras were some sort of weapon. He played it on the marching column, it took effect and they went to sleep," he finished. "I took them away from him and brought them down, but—"

He told about the contents of the camera cases being turned to a gritty, sooty powder. Then he added: "Dillon set them to destroy themselves. You understand. He's not a man. He's a creature from some planet other than Earth, passing for a human being. He's an Invader from space."

Hallen's expression was uneasy and compassionate but utterly unbelieving. Helena shivered and turned away her face. Coburn's lips went taut. He reached down to his desk. He made a sudden,

abrupt gesture. Hallen caught his breath and started up.

Coburn said curtly: "Another one of them. Helena, is that foam-suit comfortable?"

The girl jerked her face around. She looked frightened.

"Helena," said Coburn, "the real Helena, that is, would not sit down on a dusty chair. No woman would. But you did. She is a very truthful girl. You lied to me. And I just stuck pins in your shoulder and you didn't notice. They're sticking in your foam suit now. You and the creature that passed for Dillon up-country are both aliens. Invaders. Do you want to try to convince me otherwise?"

The girl said evenly: "Mr. Coburn, I do not think you are well —"

Then Coburn said thickly: "I'm crazy enough to put a bullet through you if your gang of devils has harmed the real Helena. What's happened to her?"

Hallen moved irresolutely to interfere. But the girl's expression changed. She smiled. "The real Helena, Mr. Coburn," said an entirely new voice, "has gone to the suburbs to visit her fianceé's family. She is quite safe."

There was dead silence. The figure — it even moved like Helena — got composedly to its feet. It got its coat. It put the coat on. Hallen stared with his mouth open. The pins hadn't convinced him, but the utterly different voice coming from this girl's mouth had. Yet, waves of conflicting disbelief and conviction, horror and a racking doubt, chased themselves over his features.

"She admits she's not Helena!" said Coburn with loathing. "It's not human! Should I shoot it?"

The girl smiled at him again. Her eyes were very bright. "You will not, Mr. Coburn. And you will not even try to keep me prisoner to prove your story. If I screamed that you attack me —" the smile widened — "Helena's good Greek friends would come to my assistance."

She walked confidently to the door and opened it. Then she said warmly: "You are very intelligent, Mr. Coburn. We approve of you very much. But nobody will believe you."

The office door closed.

Coburn turned stiffly to the man he'd called to hear him. "Should I have shot her, Hallen?"

Hallen sat down as if his knees had given way beneath him. After a long time he got out a handkerchief and painfully mopped his face. At the same time he shivered.

"N-no. . . ." Then he swallowed. "My God, Coburn! It's true!"

"Yes," said Coburn bitterly,

"or you're as crazy as I am."

Hallen's eyes looked haunted. "I—I . . ." He swallowed again. "There's no question about the Bulgarian business. That did happen! And you were there. And —there've been other things. . . . Rumors. . . . Reports that nobody believed. . . . I might be able to get somebody to listen. . . ." He shivered again. "If it's true, it's the most terrible thing that ever happened. Invaders from space. . . . Where do you think they came from, Coburn?"

"The creature that looked like Dillon could climb incredibly fast. I saw it run and leap. Nothing on Earth could run or leap like that." Coburn shrugged. "Maybe a planet of another sun, with a monstrous gravity."

"Try to get somebody to believe that, eh?" Hallen got painfully to his feet. "I'll see what I can do. I . . . don't know that I can do anything but get myself locked up for observation. But I'll call you in an hour."

He went unsteadily out of the door. Coburn instantly called the Breen Foundation on the telephone. He'd left Janice there less than an hour before. She came to the phone and gasped when she heard his voice. Raging, he told her of Helena, then cautioned her to be especially careful — to be suspicious of everybody.

"Don't take anybody's word!" snapped Coburn. "Doubt everybody! Doubt me! Until you're absolutely certain. Those creatures are everywhere. . . . They may pretend to be anybody!"

After Coburn hung up on Janice, he sat back and tried to think logically. There had to be some way by which an extra-terrestrial Invader could be told instantly from a human being. Unmask and prove even one such creature, and the whole story would be proved. But how detect them? Their skin was perfectly deceptive. Scratched, of course, they could be caught. But one couldn't go around scratching people. There was nothing of the alien creature's own actual form that showed.

Then Coburn remembered the Dillon foam suit. The head had been hollow. Flaccid. Holes instead of eyes. The creature's own eyes showed through.

But he'd have to make certain. He'd have to look at a foam-suited creature. He could have examined Helena's eyes, but she was gone now. However, there was an alternative. There was a Dillon in Salonika, as there was a Helena. If the Dillon in Salonika was the real Dillon — if there were a real Dillon — he could look at his eyes. He could tell if he were the false Dillon or the real one.

At this hour of the afternoon a Britisher would consider tea a necessity. There was only one

place in Salonika where they served tea that an Englishman would consider drinkable. Coburn got into a cab and gave the driver the address, and made sure of the revolver in his pocket. He was frightened. He was either going to meet with a monster from outer space, or be on the way to making so colossal a fool of himself that a mental asylum would yawn for him.

He went into the one coffee-shop in Salonika which served drinkable tea. It was dark and dingy inside, though the table-clothes were spotless. He went in, and there was Dillon.

Coburn's flesh crawled. If the figure sitting there with the *London Times* and a cup of tea before him were actually a monster from another planet . . .

But Dillon read comfortably, and sipped his tea. Coburn approached, and the Englishman looked up inquiringly.

"I was . . . up in the mountains," said Coburn feverishly, "when those Bulgarians came over. I can give you the story."

Dillon said frostily: "I'm not interested. The government's officially denied that any such incident took place. It's merely a silly rumor."

It was reasonable that it should be denied. But it had happened, nonetheless. Coburn stared, despite a consciousness that he was not conspicuously rational in the way his eyes searched Dillon's face hungrily. The eyes *were* different! The eyes of the Dillon up in the mountains had been larger, and the brown part — But he had to be sure.

Suddenly, Coburn found himself grinning. There was a simple, a perfect, an absolute test for humanity!

Dillon said suspiciously: "What the devil are you staring at me for?"

Coburn continued to grin uncontrollably, even as he said in a tone of apology: "I hate to do this, but I have to be sure. . . ."

He swung. He connected with Dillon's nose. Blood started.

Coburn zestfully let himself be thrown out, while Dillon roared and tried to get at him through the flying wedge of waiters. He felt an enormous relaxation on the way back to his office in another cab. He was a trifle battered, but it was worth it.

Back in the office he called Hallen again. And again Hallen answered. He sounded guilty and worried.

"I don't know whether I'm crazy or not," he said bitterly. "But I was in your office. I saw your secretary there — and she didn't feel pins stuck in her. And something did happen to those Bulgarians that the Greeks don't know anything about, or the Americans either. So you're to tell

your story to the high brass down in Athens. I think you'll be locked up afterward as a lunatic — and me with you for believing my own eyes. But a plane's being readied."

"Where do I meet you?" asked Coburn.

Hallen told him. A certain room out at the airport. Coburn hung up. The telephone rang instantly. He was on the way out, but he turned back and answered it. Janice's voice — amazingly convincing — came from the instrument. And at the first words his throat went dry. Because it couldn't be Janice.

"I've been trying to get you. Have you tried to reach me?"

"Why, no. Why?"

Janice's voice said: "I've something interesting to tell you. I left the office an hour ago. I'm at the place where I live when I'm in Salonika. Write down the address. Can you come here? I've found out something astonishing!"

He wrote down the address. He had a feeling of nightmarishness. This was not Janice —

"I'm clearing up some matters you'll guess at," he said grimly, "so I may be a little while getting there. You'll wait?"

He hung up. And then with a rather ghastly humor he took some pins from a box on the desk and worked absorbedly at bending one around the inside of the band of the seal ring he wore on his right hand.

But he didn't go to the telephoned address. He went to the Breen Foundation. And Janice was there. She was the real Janice. He knew it instantly he saw her. She was panic-stricken when he told her of his own telephone experience. Her teeth chattered. But she knew — instinctively, she said — that he was himself. She got into the cab with him.

They reached the airport and found the office Hallen had named. The lettering on it, in Greek and French, said that it was a reception room for official visitors only.

"Our status is uncertain," said Coburn drily. "We may be official guests, or we may be crazy. It's a toss-up which status sticks."

He opened the door and looked carefully inside before he entered. Hallen was there. There was a lean, hard-bitten colonel of the American liaison force in Greece. There was a Greek general, pudgy and genial, standing with his back to a window and his hands clasped behind him. There were two Greek colonels and a major. They regarded him soberly.

"Howdo, Coburn," said Hallen painfully. "You're heading for Athens, you know. This is Miss Ames? But these gentlemen have . . . ah . . . a special concern with that business up-country. They'd like to hear your story before you leave."

"I suppose," said Coburn

curtly, "it's a sort of preliminary commission in lunacy."

But he shook hands all around. He kept his left hand in his coat pocket as he shook hands with his right. His revolver was in his left-hand pocket now too. The Greek general beamed at him. The American colonel's eyes were hard and suspicious. One of the two Greek colonels was very slightly cross-eyed. The Greek major shook hands solemnly.

Coburn took a deep breath. "I know my tale sounds crazy," he said, "but . . . I had a telephone call just now. Hallen will bear me out that my secretary was impersonated by somebody else this afternoon."

"I've told them that," said Hallen unhappily.

"And something was impersonating Dillon up in the hills," finished Coburn. "I've reason to believe that at this address" — and he handed the address he'd written down to Hallen — "a . . . creature will be found who will look most convincingly like Miss Ames, here. You might send and see."

The American colonel snorted: "This whole tale's preposterous! It's an attempt to cash in on the actual mystery of what happened up-country."

The Greek general protested gently. His English was so heavily accented as to be hard to understand, but he pointed out that Coburn knew details of the event in Náousa that only someone who had been there could know.

"True enough," said the American officer darkly, "but he can tell the truth now, before we make fools of ourselves sending him to Athens to be unmasked. Suppose," he said unpleasantly, "you give us the actual facts!"

Coburn nodded. "The idea you find you can't take is that creatures that aren't human can be on Earth and pass for human beings. There's some evidence on that right here." He nodded to the Greek major who was the junior officer in the room. "Major, will you show these other gentlemen the palm of your hand?"

The Greek major frowned perplexedly. He lifted his hand and looked at it. Then his face went absolutely impassive.

"I'm ready to shoot!" snapped Coburn. "Show them your hand. I can tell now."

He felt the tensing of the others in the room, not toward the major but toward him. They were preparing to jump him, thinking him mad.

But the major grinned ruefully: "Clever, Mr. Coburn! But how did you pick me out?"

Then there was a sensation of intolerable brightness all around. But it was not actual light. It was a sensation inside one's brain.

Coburn felt himself falling. He knew, somehow, that the others

were falling too. He saw everyone in the room in the act of slumping limply to the floor — all but the Greek major. And Coburn felt a bitter, despairing fury as consciousness left him.

IV

He came to in a hospital room, with a nurse and two doctors and an elaborate oxygen-administering apparatus. The apparatus was wheeled out. The nurse followed. The two doctors hurried after her. The American colonel of the airport was standing by the bed on which Coburn lay, fully dressed.

Coburn felt perfectly all right. He stirred. The American colonel said sourly: "You're not harmed. Nobody was. But Major Pangalos got away."

Coburn sat up. There was a moment's bare trace of dizziness, and that was gone too. Coburn said: "Where's Miss Ames? What happened to her?"

"She's getting oxygen," said the colonel. "We were rushed here from the airport, sleeping soundly just like those Bulgarians. Major Pangalos ordered it before he disappeared. Helicopters brought some Bulgarians down, by the way, and oxygen brought them to. So naturally they gave us the same treatment. Very effective."

The colonel looked both chastened and truculent. "How'd you know Major Pangalos for what he was? He was accepted everywhere as a man."

"His eyes were queer," said Coburn. He stood up experimentally. "I figured they would be, if one looked. I saw the foam suit that creature wore up-country, when he wasn't in it. There were holes for the eyes. It occurred to me that his eyes weren't likely to be like ours. Not exactly. So I hunted up the real Dillon, and his eyes weren't like I remembered. I punched him in the nose, by the way, to make sure he'd bleed and was human. He was."

Coburn continued, "You see, they obviously come from a heavy planet and move differently. They're stronger than we are. Much like the way we'd be on the moon with one-sixth Earth gravity. They probably are used to a thicker atmosphere. If so, their eyes wouldn't be right for here. They'd need eyeglasses."

"Major Pangalos didn't —"

"Contact eyeglasses," said Coburn sourly. "Little cups of plastic. They slip under the eyelids and touch the white part of the eye. Familiar enough. But that's not all."

The American colonel looked troubled. "I know contact lenses," he admitted. "But —"

"If the Invaders have a thick atmosphere at home," Coburn said, "they may have a cloudy sky. The pupils of their eyes may need to be larger. Perhaps they're

a different shape. Or their eyes may be a completely alien color. Anyhow, they need contact lenses not only to correct their vision, but to make their eyes look like ours. They're painted on the inside to change the natural look and color. It's very deceptive. But you can tell."

"That goes to Headquarters at once!" snapped the colonel.

He went out briskly. Coburn followed him out of the room to look for Janice. And Janice happened to be looking for him at exactly the same moment. He was genuinely astonished to realize how relieved he was that she was all right.

He said apologetically: "I was worried! When I felt myself passing out I felt pretty rotten at having failed to protect you."

She looked at him with nearly the same sort of surprised satisfaction. "I'm all right," she said breathlessly. "I was worried about you."

The roaring of motors outside the hospital interrupted them. More and more vehicles arrived, until a deep purring filled the air. A Greek doctor with a worried expression hurried somewhere. Soldiers appeared, hard-bitten, tough, professional Greek soldiers. Hallen came out of a hospital room. The Greek general appeared with one of the two colonels who'd been at the airport. The general nodded, and his eyes seemed cordial. He waved them ahead of him into a waiting elevator. The elevator descended. They went out of the hospital and there was an armored car waiting. An impressive escort of motorcycle troops waited with it.

The Greek general saw Coburn's cynical expression at sight of the guards. He explained blandly that since oxygen brought sleeping Bulgarians out of their slumber — and had been used on them — oxygen was handy for use by anybody who experienced a bright flash of light in his mind. The Bulgarian soldiers, incidentally, said that outside the village of Ardea they'd felt as if the sunlight had brightened amazingly, but they felt no effects for two hours afterward, when they fell asleep at Náousa. So, said the general almost unintelligibly, if anything untoward happened on the way to the airport, everybody would start breathing oxygen. A sensation of bright light would be untoward.

The armored car started off, with motorcyclists crowded about it with weapons ready. But the ride to the airport was uneventful. To others than Janice and Coburn it may even have been tedious. But when she understood the general's explanation, she shivered a little. She leaned insensibly closer to Coburn. He took her hand protectively in his.

They reached the airport. They roared through the gateway and directly out upon the darkened field. Something bellowed and raced down a runway and took to the air. Other things followed it. They gained altitude and circled back overhead. Tiny bluish flickerings moved across the overcast sky. Exhaust flames.

Coburn realized that it was a fighter plane escort.

The huge transport plane that waited for them was dark. They climbed into it and found their seats. When it roared down the unlighted field and took to the air, everything possible had been done to keep anybody from bringing any weapon to bear upon it.

"All safe now!" said the voice of the American colonel in the darkness of the unlit plane, as the plane gained height. "Incidentally, Coburn, why did you want to look at Pangalos' palm? What did you expect to find there?"

"When I started for the airport," Coburn explained, "I bent a pin around the band of a ring I wear. I could let it lie flat when I shook hands. Or I could make it stand out like a spur. I set it with my thumb. I saw Pangalos' eyes, so I had it stand out, and I made a tear in his plastic skin when I shook hands with him. He didn't feel it, of course." He paused. "Did anybody go to the address I gave Hallan?"

Hallan said, in the darkness: "Major Pangalos got there first."

The blackness outside the plane seemed to grow deeper. There was literally nothing to be seen but the instrument dials up at the pilots' end of the ship.

The Greek general asked a question in his difficult English.

"Where'd they come from?" repeated Coburn. "I've no idea. Off Earth, yes. A heavy planet, yes. I doubt they come from our solar system, though. Somewhere among the stars."

The Greek general said something with a sly up-twist of his voice. Whatever and whoever the Invaders were, he said, they did not like Bulgarians. If they'd knocked out the raiding party simply to test their weapons against human subjects, at least they had chosen suitable and pleasing subjects for the test.

There was light. For an instant Coburn tensed. But the plane climbed and the brightness steadied. It was the top of a cloud bank, brilliantly white in the moonlight. They had flown up through it, and it reached as far ahead as they could see. A stubby fighter plane swam up out of the mist and fell into position alongside. Others appeared. They took formation about the transport and all flew steadily through the moonlight.

"I wish I knew," said the American colonel vexedly, "if

those creatures were only testing weapons, or if they were getting set to start bargaining with us!"

"Meaning?" asked Coburn.

"If they're here," said the colonel angrily, "and if they do mean to meddle in our business, they may set up a sort of auction with us bidding against the Iron Curtain gang for their friendship. And *they'd* make any deal!"

The Greek general agreed drily. He said that free people were not practical people. They were always ready to die rather than cease to be free. Surely the Greeks had proved themselves ready to die. But people like the Bulgarians thought that to continue to live was the most important thing in the world. It was, of course, the practical viewpoint. . . .

"They can have it!" growled Coburn.

Janice said hesitantly: "But the Invaders haven't killed anybody we know of. They could have killed the Bulgarians. They didn't. The one who called himself Dillon stopped one man from killing them. And they could have killed us, earlier today at the airport. Could they want to be friends?"

"They're starting the wrong way," said Coburn.

The Greek general stirred in his seat, but he was pointedly silent.

The pilot snapped abruptly from up at the bow of the plane: "Colonel! sir! Two of the fighters are climbing as if they've spotted something. There go the rest."

Coburn leaned across Janice to stare out the window. When the fighters were below the transport, they could be seen in silhouette against the clouds. Above, their exhaust flames pin-pointed them. Small blue flames climbed steeply.

The big ship went on. The roar of its motors was steady and unvarying. From a passenger seat it was not possible to look overhead. But suddenly there were streaking sparks against the stars. Tracer bullets. Fighters swerved and plunged to intercept something. . . .

And a Thing came down out of the sky with a terrific velocity. Tracer bullets sprayed all around it. Some could be seen to richochet off its sides. Flashings came from the alien craft. They were not explosions from guns. They were lurid, actintic, smokeless blasts of pure light. The Thing seemed to be made of polished metal. It dodged, trying to approach the transport. The fighters lunged to prevent it. The ghastly game of interception seemed to rush here and there all over the sky.

The strange object was not possibly of human design or manufacture. It had no wings. It left no trail of jet fumes or rocket smoke. It was glittering and mirror-like, and it was shaped almost

exactly like two turtle-shells base to base. It was flat and oval. It had no visible external features.

It flung itself about with incredible darts and jerkings. It could stop stock still as no plane could possibly stop, and accelerate at a rate no human body could endure. It tried savagely to get through the swarming fighters to the transport. Its light weapon flashed — but the pilots would be wearing oxygen masks and there were no casualties among the human planes. Once a fighter did fall off in a steep dive, and fluttered almost down to the cloud bank before it recovered and came back with its guns spitting.

That one appeared to end the fight. It came straight up, pumping tracers at the steel flier from below. And the glittering Thing seemed to stop dead in the air. Then it shuddered. It was bathed in the flaring sparks of tracers. Then —

It dropped like a stone, tumbling aimlessly over and over as it dropped. It plummeted into the cloud bank.

Suddenly the clouds were lighted from within. Something inside flared with a momentary, terrifying radiance. No lightning bolt ever flashed more luridly.

The transport plane and its escort flew on and on over the moonlit bank of clouds.

Presently orders came by radio. On the report of this attack, the flight plan would be changed, for safety. If the air convoy had been attacked once, it might be attacked again. So it would be wisest to get it immediately to where there would be plenty of protection. Therefore, the transport plane would head for Naples.

Nearly the whole of the United States Mediterranean fleet was in the Bay of Naples just then. It had been there nearly a week, and by day its liberty parties swarmed ashore. The merchants and the souvenir salesmen were entranced. American sailors had money and they spent it. The fleet's officers were social assets, its messes bought satisfyingly of local viands, and everybody was happy.

All but one small group. The newspapers of one of the Italian political parties howled infuriatedly. They had orders to howl, from behind the Iron Curtain. The American fleet, that one party's newspapers bellowed, was imperialistic, capitalistic, and decadent. In short, there was virulent propaganda against the American fleet in Naples. But most people were glad it was there anyway. Certainly nobody stayed awake worrying about it.

People were staying awake worrying about the transport plane carrying Coburn and Janice, however. On the plane, Janice was fearful and pressed close to Coburn, and he found it an absorbing

experience and was moved to talk in a low tone about other matters than extra-terrestrial Invaders and foam suits and interstellar travel. Janice found those other subjects surprisingly fitted to make her forget about being afraid.

Elsewhere, the people who stayed awake did talk about just the subjects Coburn was avoiding. The convoy carrying Coburn to tell what he knew had been attacked. By a plane which was definitely not made or manned by human beings. The news flashed through the air across continents. It went under the ocean over sea beds. It traveled in the tightest and most closely-guarded of diplomatic codes. The Greek government gave the other NATO nations a confidential account of the Bulgarian raid and what had happened to it. These details were past question. The facts brought out by Coburn were true, too.

So secret instructions followed the news. At first they went only to highly-trusted individuals. In thirty nations, top-ranking officials and military officers blindfolded each other in turn and gravely stuck pins in each other. The blindfolded person was expected to name the place where he had been stuck. This had an historical precedent. In olden days, pins were stuck in suspected witches. They had patches of skin in which there was no sensation, and discovery of such areas condemned them to death. Psychologists in later centuries found that patches of anaesthetic skin were typical of certain forms of hysteria, and therefore did not execute their patients. But the Invaders, by the fact that their seemingly human bodies were not flesh at all, could not pass such tests.

There were consequences. A Minister of Defense of a European nation amusedly watched the tests on his subordinates, blandly excused himself for a moment before his own turn came, and did not come back. A general of division vanished into thin air. Diplomatic code clerks painstakingly decoded the instructions for such tests, and were nowhere about when they themselves were to be tested. An eminent Hollywood director and an Olympic champion ceased to be.

In the free world nearly a hundred prominent individuals simply disappeared. Few were in position to influence high-level decisions. Many were in line to know rather significant details of world affairs. There was alarm.

It was plain, too, that not all disguised Invaders would have had to vanish. Many would not even be called on for test. They would stay where they were. And there were private persons. . . .

There was consternation. But

Janice, in the plane, was saying softly to Coburn: "The — creature who telephoned and said she was me. How did you know she wasn't?"

"I went to the Breen Foundation first," said Coburn. "I looked into your eyes — and they were right. So I didn't need to stick a pin in you."

The thought of Coburn not needing to stick a pin in her impressed Janice as beautiful trust. She sighed contentedly. "Of course you'd know," she said. "So would I — now!" She laughed a little.

The convoy flew on. The lurid round disk of the moon descended toward the west.

"It'll be sunrise soon. But I imagine we'll land before dawn."

They did. The flying group of planes flew lower. Coburn saw a single light on the ground. It was very tiny, and it vanished rearward with great speed. Later there was another light, and a dull-red glow in the sky. Still later, infinitesimal twinklings on the ground at the horizon. They increased in number but not in size, and the plane swung hugely to the left, and the lights on the ground formed a visible pattern. And moonlight — broken by the shadows of clouds — displayed the city and the Bay of Naples below.

The transport plane landed. The passengers descended. Coburn saw Hallen, the American colonel, the Greek general, and a Greek colonel. The other had been left behind to take charge of things in Salonika. Here the uniforms were American, and naval. There were some Italian police in view, but most of the men about were American seamen, ostensibly on shore leave. But Coburn doubted very much if they were as completely unarmed as men on shore leave usually are.

A man in a cap with much gold braid greeted the American colonel, the Greek general, and the Greek colonel. He came to Coburn, to whose arm Janice seemed to cling.

"We're taking you out to the fleet. We've taken care of everything. Everybody's had pins stuck in him!"

It was very humorous, of course. They moved away from the plane. Surrounded by white-clad sailors, the party from the plane moved into the hangar.

Then a voice snapped a startled question, in English. An instant later it rasped: "Stop or I'll shoot!"

Then there was a bright flash of light. The interior of the hangar was made vivid by it. It went out. And as it disappeared there were the sounds of running footsteps. Only they did not run properly. They ran in great leaps. Impossible leaps. Monstrous leaps. A man might run like that on the moon, with a lesser gravity. A

creature accustomed to much greater gravity might run like that on Earth. But it would not be human.

It got away.

There was a waiting car. They got into it. They pulled out from the airport with other cars close before and behind. The cavalcade raced for the city and the shoreline surrounded by a guard less noisy but no less effective than the Greek motorcycle troopers.

But the Greek general said something meditative in the dark interior of the car.

"What's that?" demanded someone authoritatively.

The Greek general said it again, mildly. This latest attempt to seize them or harm them — if it was that — had been surprisingly inept. It was strange that creatures able to travel between the stars and put regiments and tanks out of action should fail so dismally to kill or kidnap Coburn, if they really wanted to. Could it be that they were not quite sincere in their efforts?

"That," said the authoritative voice, "is an idea!"

They reached the waterfront. And here in the darkest part of the night and with the moon near to setting, the waters of the Bay of Naples rolled in small, smooth-surfaced, tranquil waves. There was a Navy barge waiting. Those who had come by plane boarded it. It cast off and headed out into the middle of the huge harbor.

In minutes there was a giant hull looming overhead. They stepped out onto a landing ladder and climbed interminably up the ship's metal side. Then there was an open door.

"Now," said the American colonel triumphantly, "now everything's all right! Nothing can happen now, short of an atomic bomb!"

The Greek general glanced at him out of the corner of his eyes. He said something in that heavy accent of his. He asked mildly if creatures — Invaders — who could travel between the stars were unlikely to be able to make atom bombs if they wanted to.

There was no answer. But somebody led Coburn into an office where this carrier's skipper was at his desk. He looked at Coburn with a sardonic, unfriendly eye.

"Mr. Coburn, I believe," he said remotely. "You've been very well staged-managed by your friends, Mr. Coburn. They've made it look as if they were trying hard to kill you, eh? But we know better, don't we? We know it's all a build-up for you to make a deal for them, eh? Well, Mr. Coburn, you'll find it's going to be a let-down instead! You're not officially under arrest, but I wouldn't advise you to try to start anything, Mr. Coburn! We're apt to be rather crude in dealing with emissaries of enemies of all the

human race. And don't forget it!"

And this was Coburn's first inkling that he was regarded as a traitor of his planet who had sold out to the Invaders. All the plans made from his information would be based on the supposition that he intended to betray mankind by misleading it.

V

It was not yet forty-eight hours since Coburn had been interrupted in the act of starting his car up in Ardea. Greek newspapers had splashed lurid headlines of a rumored invasion by Bulgarians, and their rumored defeat. The story was not widely copied. It sounded too unlikely. In a few hours it would be time for a new set of newspapers to begin to appear. Not one of them would print a single word about the most important disclosure in human history: that extra-terrestrial Invaders moved blandly about among human beings without being suspected.

The newspapers didn't know it. On inside pages and bottom corners, the London papers might refer briefly to the remarkable rumor that had swept over Greece about an invasion force said to have crossed its border. The London papers would say that the Greek government officially denied that such a happening had taken place. The New York papers would be full of a political scandal among municipal officials, the Washington papers would deal largely with a Congressional investigation committee hearing, Los Angeles would have a new and gory murder to exploit, San Francisco news would be of a water-front strike, Tokyo would talk of cherry blossoms, Delhi of Pakistan, and the French press would discuss the political crisis. But no newspaper, anywhere, would talk about Invaders.

In the United States radar technicians had been routed out of bed and informed that night fighters had had a fight with an alien ship manned by non-humans and had destroyed it, but their radars detected nothing at all. An hour after sunrise in Naples they had come up with a combina-

tion of radar frequencies which were built to detect everything. Instructions were going out in code to all radar establishments on how to set it up on existing equipment. Long before that time, business machines had begun intricate operations with punched cards containing all known facts about the people known to have dropped out of sight. Other machines began to integrate crackpot reports of things sighted in divers places. The stores of Hunter and Nereid rockets — especially the remote-control jobs — were broken out. Great Air Transport planes began to haul them to where they might be needed.

In England, certain establishments that had never been mentioned even in Parliament were put on war alert. There was frantic scurrying-about in France. In Sweden a formerly ignored scientist was called to a twice-scrambled telephone connection and consulted at length about objects reported over Sweden's skies. The Canadian Air Force tumbled out in darkness and was briefed. In Chile there was agitation, and in Peru.

There was earnest effort to secure coöperation from behind the Iron Curtain, but that did not work. The Iron Curtain stood pat, demanding the most detailed of information and the privilege of inspecting all weapons intended for use against anybody so far unnamed, but refusing all information of its own. In fact, there was a very normal reaction everywhere, except that the newspapers didn't know anything to print.

These secret hassles were continuing as the dawnlight moved over Italy and made Naples and its harbor quite the most beautiful place in the world. When daylight rolled over France, matters were beginning to fall into pattern. As daybreak moved across the Atlantic, at least the measures to be taken began to be visualized and orders given for their accomplishment.

And then, with sunrise in America, real preparations got under way.

But hours earlier there was consultation on the carrier in the Bay of Naples. Coburn sat in a wardroom in a cold fury which was in part despair. He had been kept in complete ignorance of all measures taken, and he felt the raging indignation of a man accused of treason. He was being questioned again. He was treated with an icy courtesy that was worse than accusation. The carrier skipper mentioned with detachment that, of course, Coburn had never been in any danger. Obviously. The event in the airport at Salonika and the attack on the convoy were window-dressing. They were not attempts to withdraw him from circulation, but to draw attention to him. Which, of course,

implied that the Invaders — whoever or whatever they might be — considered Coburn a useful tool for whatever purpose they intended.

This was before the conference officially began. It took time to arrange. There were radio technicians with microphones. The consultation — duly scrambled and re-scrambled — would be relayed to Washington while it was on. It was a top level conference. Hallen was included, but he did not seem happy.

Then things were ready. The skipper of the carrier took over, with full awareness that the very highest brass in Washington was listening to every word.

"We can skip your technical information, Mr. Coburn," he said with ironic courtesy, "unless you've something new to offer."

Coburn shook his head. He seethed.

"For the record," said the skipper, "I repeat that it is obvious that your presence at the scene when those Bulgarians were knocked out, that you were attacked in Salonika, that the ship carrying you was also attacked, and that there was an incident on your landing here: — it's obvious that all these things were stage-managed to call attention to you, for the purposes of . . . whoever staged them. Have you anything more to offer?"

"No," growled Coburn. "I've told all I know." He was furiously angry and felt completely helpless.

"Your information," purred the Skipper, "and the stage-managed incidents, make you look like a very patriotic citizen who is feared by the supposedly extra-terrestrial creatures. But we don't have to play any longer, Mr. Coburn. What were you told to tell your government? What do these . . . extra-terrestrials want?"

"My guess," snapped Coburn, "is that they want Earth."

The skipper raised his eyebrows. "Are you threatening us in their name?" he asked, purring.

"I'm telling you my guess," said Coburn hotly. "It's just as good as yours and no better! I have no instructions from them. I have no message from them. I've only my own opinion, which is that we humans had better get ready to fight. I believe we ought to join together — all of Earth — and get set to defend ourselves."

There was silence. Coburn found himself regarding the faces around him with an unexpected truculence. Janice pressed his hand warningly.

"All of Earth," said the skipper softly. "Hmmmm. You advise an arrangement with all the earth. . . . What are your politics, Mr. Coburn? — No, let us say, what are the political views of the extra-terrestrial creatures you tell

us about? We have to know."

Coburn seethed. "If you're suggesting that this is a cold war trick," he said furiously, " — if they were faking it, they wouldn't try tricks! They'd make war! They'd try conquest!"

Coburn saw the stout Greek general nodding to himself. But the Skipper said suavely: "You were with one of the creatures, you say, up in the village of Náousa. Would you say he seemed unfriendly to the Bulgarians?"

"He was playing the part of an Englishman," snapped Coburn, "trying to stop a raid, and murders, and possibly a war — all of them unnecessary!"

"You don't paint a frightening picture," complained the skipper ironically. "First you say we have to fight him and his kind, and then you imply that he was highly altruistic. What is the fact?"

"Dammit!" said Coburn. "I hated him because he wasn't human. It made my flesh crawl to see him act so much like a man when he wasn't. But he made me feel ashamed when I held a gun on him and he proved he wasn't human just so Janice — so Miss Ames wouldn't be afraid to drive down to Salonika with me!"

"So you have some . . . friendly feelings toward him, eh?" the skipper said negligently. "How will you get in touch with his kind, by the way? *If* we should ask you to? Of course you've got it all arranged? Just in case."

Coburn knew that absolutely nothing could be done with a man who was trying to show off his shrewdness to his listening superiors. He said disgustedly: "That's the last straw. Go to hell!"

A loud-speaker spoke suddenly. Its tone was authoritative, and there were little cracklings of static in it from its passage across the Atlantic.

"That line of questioning can be dropped, Captain. Mr. Coburn, did these aliens have any other chances to kill you?"

"Plenty!" snapped Coburn. "And easy ones. One of them came into my office as my secretary. She could have killed me. The man who passed for Major Pangalos could have shot us all while we were unconscious. I don't know why they didn't get the transport plane, and I don't know what their scheme is. I'm telling the facts. They're contradictory. I can't help that. All I have are the facts."

The loud-speaker said crisply: "The attack on the transport plane — any pilots present who were in that fight?"

Someone at the back said: "Yes, sir. Here."

"How good was their ship? Could it have been a guided missile?"

"No, sir. No guided missile. Whoever drove that ship was right on board. And that ship was

good. It could climb as fast as we could dive, and no human could have taken the accelerations and the turns it made. Whoever drove it learned fast, too. He was clumsy at the beginning, but he learned. If we hadn't gotten in a lucky hit he'd've had us where he wanted us in a little while more. Our fifty-calibres just bounced off that hull!"

The loud-speaker said curtly: "If that impression is justified, that's the first business to be taken up. All but flying officers are excused. Mr. Coburn can go, too."

There was a stirring everywhere in the room. Officers got up and walked out. Coburn stood. The Greek general came over to him and patted him on the shoulder, beaming. Janice went out with him. They arrived on the carrier's deck. This was the very earliest hour of dawn, and the conference had turned abruptly to a discussion of arms and tactics as soon as Washington realized that its planes were inadequate for fighting. Which was logical enough, but Coburn was pretty sure it was useless.

"If anybody else in the world feels as futile as I do," said Coburn bitterly, "I feel sorry for him!"

Janice said softly: "You've got me."

But that was less than complete comfort. It is inborn in a man that he needs to feel superior. No man can feel pride before the woman of his choice while there is something stronger than himself. And Coburn especially wanted to feel that pride just now.

There were very probably discussions of the important part of what Coburn had reported, of course, during the rest of the morning. But there was much more discussion of purely military measures. And of course there were attempts to get military intelligence. Things were reported in the sky near South Africa, and from Honolulu — where nobody would ignore what a radar said again, especially the juiced-up equipment just modified on orders — and from other places. Not all the reports were authentic, of course. If there were any observations inside the Iron Curtain, the Iron Curtain countries kept them to themselves. Politics was much more important than anything else, in that part of the world.

But Coburn need not have felt as futile as he did. There was just one really spectacular occurrence in connection with the Invaders that day, and it happened where Coburn was. Almost certainly, it happened because Coburn was there. Though there is reason to believe that the newspaper campaign on shore, declaring that the American fleet risked the lives of all Naples by its mere presence,

had something to do with it too.

It was very spectacular.

It happened just after midday when the city and its harbor were at their most glamorous. Coburn and Janice were above when it began. There was an ensign assigned to escort Coburn about and keep an eye on him, and he took them on a carefully edited tour of the carrier. He took them to the radar room which was not secret any longer. He explained reservedly that there was a new tricked-up arrangement of radar which it was believed would detect turtle-shaped metal ships if they appeared.

The radar room was manned, of course. It always was, with a cold war in being. Overhead, the bowl cages of the radars moved restlessly and rhythmically. Outside, on deck, the huge elevator that brought planes up from below rose at the most deliberate of peace-time rates.

The ensign said negligently, pointing to the radar-screen: "That little speck is a plane making for the landing field on shore. This other one is a plane coming down from Genoa. You'd need a good pair of binoculars to see it. It's a good thirty-five miles away."

Just then, one of the two radarmen on duty pushed a button and snapped into a microphone: "Sir! Radar-pip directly overhead! Does not show on normal radar. Elevation three hundred thousand feet, descending rapidly." His voice cut off suddenly.

A metallic voice said: "Relay!"

The ensign in charge of Coburn and Janice seemed to freeze. The radar man pressed a button, which would relay that particular radar-screen's contents to the control room for the whole ship. There was a pause of seconds. Then bells began to ring everywhere. They were battle gongs.

There was a sensation of stirring all over the ship. Doors closed with soft hissings. Men ran furiously. The gongs rang.

The ensign said politely: "I'll take you below now."

He led them very swiftly to a flight of stairs. There was a monstrous bellowing on the carrier's deck. Something dark went hurtling down its length, with a tail of pale-blue flame behind it. It vanished. Men were still running. The elevator shot into full-speed ascent. A plane rolled off it. The elevator dropped.

An engine roared. Another. Yet another. A second dark and deadly thing flashed down the deck and was gone. There was a rumbling.

The battle gongs cut off. The rumbling below seemed to increase. There was a curious vibration. The ship moved. Coburn could feel that it moved. It was turning.

The ensign led them somewhere and said: "This is a good place.

You'd better stay right here."

He ran. They heard him running. He was gone.

They were in a sort of ward room — not of the morning conference — and there were portholes through which they could look. The city which was Naples seemed to swing smoothly past the ship. They saw other ships. A cruiser was under way with its anchor still rising from the water. It dripped mud and a sailor was quite ridiculously playing a hose on it. It ascended and swayed and its shank went smoothly into the hawse-hole. There were guns swinging skyward. Some were still covered by canvas hoods. The hoods vanished before the cruiser swung out of the porthole's line of vision.

A destroyer leaped across the space they could see, full speed ahead. The water below them began to move more rapidly. It began to pass by with the speed of ground past an express train. And continually, monotonously, there were roarings which climaxed and died in the distance.

"The devil!" said Coburn. "I've got to see this. They can't kill us for looking."

He opened the door. Janice, holding fast to his arm, followed as he went down a passage. Another door. They were on the deck side of the island which is the superstructure of a carrier, and they were well out of the way, and everybody in sight was too busy to notice them.

The elevator worked like the piston of a pump. It vanished and reappeared and a plane came off. Men in vividly-colored suits swarmed about it, and the elevator was descending again. The plane roared, shot down the deck, and was gone to form one of the string of climbing objects which grew smaller with incredible swiftness as they shot for the sky. Coburn saw another carrier. There was a huge bow-wave before it. Destroyers ringed it, seeming to bounce in the choppy sea made by so many great ships moving so close together.

The other carrier, too, was shooting planes into the air like bullets from a gun. The American Mediterranean fleet was putting out to sea at emergency-speed, getting every flying craft aloft that could be gotten away. A cruiser swung a peculiar crane-like arm, there was a puff of smoke and a plane came into being. The crane retracted. Another plane. A third.

The fleet was out of the harbor, speeding at thirty knots, with destroyers weaving back and forth at higher speeds still. There were barges left behind in the harbor with sailors in them, — shore-parties or details who swore bitterly when they were left behind. They surged up and down on the

mêlée of waves the fleet left behind in its hasty departure.

On the fleet itself there was a brisk tenseness as it sped away from the land. Vesuvius still loomed high, but the city dwindled to a mere blinking mass of white specks which were its buildings. The sea was aglitter with sunlight reflected from the waves. There was the smell of salt air.

Men began to take cryptic measures for the future. They strung cables across the deck from side to side. Arresting gear for planes which would presently land.

Their special ensign found Coburn and Janice. "I'm supposed to stay with you," he explained politely. "I thought I could be of use. I'm really attached to another ship, but I was on board because of the hassle last night."

Coburn said: "This would be invader stuff, wouldn't it?"

The ensign shrugged. "Apparently. You heard what the radar said. Something at three hundred thousand feet, descending rapidly. It's not a human-built ship. Anyway, we've sent up all our planes. Jets will meet it first, at fifty thousand. If it gets through them there are . . . other measures, of course."

"This one beats me!" said Coburn. "Why?"

The ensign shrugged again. "They tried for you last night."

"I'm not that important, to them or anybody else. Or am I?"

"I wouldn't know," said the ensign.

"I don't know anything I haven't told," said Coburn grimly, "and the creatures can't suppress any information by killing me now. Anyhow, if they'd wanted to they'd have done it."

A dull, faint sound came from high overhead. Coburn stepped out from under the shelter of the upper works of the island. He stared up into the sky. He saw a lurid spot of blue-white flame. He saw others. He realized that all the sky was interlaced with contrails — vapor-trails of jet-planes far up out of sight. But they were fine threads. The jets were up very high indeed. The pin-points of flame were explosions.

"Using wing-rockets," said the ensign hungrily, "since fifty-calibres did no good last night, until one made a lucky hit. Rockets with proximity fuses. Our jets don't carry cannon."

There were more explosions. There was a bright glint of reflected sunshine. It was momentary, but Coburn knew that it was from a flat, bright space-ship, which had tilted in some monstrously abrupt maneuver, and the almost vertical sunshine shone down from its surface.

The ensign said in a very quiet voice: "The fight's coming lower."

There was a crashing thump in the air. A battleship was firing

eight-inch guns almost straight up. Other guns began.

Guns began to fire on the carrier, too, below the deck and beyond it. Concussion waves beat at Coburn's body. He thrust Janice behind him to shield her, but there could be no shielding.

The air was filled with barkings and snarlings and the unbelievably abrupt roar of heavy guns. The carrier swerved, so swiftly that it tilted and swerved again. The other ships of the fleet broke their straight-away formation and began to move in bewildering patterns. The blue sea was criss-crossed with wakes. Once a destroyer seemed to slide almost under the bow of the carrier. The destroyer appeared unharmed on the other side, its guns all pointed skyward and emitting seemingly continuous blasts of flame and thunder.

The ensign grabbed Coburn's shoulder and pointed, his hands shaking.

There was the Invader ship. It was exactly as Coburn had known it would be. It was tiny. It seemed hardly larger than some of the planes that swooped at it. But the planes were drawing back now. The shining metal thing was no more than two thousand feet up and it was moving in erratic, unpredictable darts and dashes here and there, like a dragon-fly's movements, but a hundred times more swift. Proximity-fused shells burst everywhere about it. It burst through a still-expanding puff of explosive smoke, darted down a hundred feet, and took a zig-zag course of such violent and angular changes of position that it looked more like a streak of metal lightning than anything else.

It was down to a thousand feet. It shot toward the fleet at a speed which was literally that of a projectile. It angled off to one side and back, and suddenly dropped again and plunged crazily through the maze of ships from one end to the other, no more than fifty feet above the water and with geysers of up-flung sea all about it from the shells that missed.

Then it sped away with a velocity which simply was not conceivable. It was the speed of a cannonball. It was headed straight toward a distant, stubby, draggled tramp-steamer which plodded toward the Bay of Naples.

It rose a little as it flew. And then it checked, in mid-air. It hung above the dumpy freighter, and there were salvoes of all the guns in the fleet. But at the flashes it shot skyward. When the shells arrived and burst, it was gone.

It could still be sighted as a spark of sunlight shooting for the heavens. Jets roared toward it. It vanished.

Coburn heard the ensign saying in a flat voice: "If that wasn't

accelerating at fifteen Gs, I never saw a ship. If it wasn't accelerating at fifteen Gs . . ."

And that was all. There was nothing else to shoot at. There was nothing else to do. Jets ranged widely, looking for something that would offer battle, but the radars said that the metal ship had gone up to three hundred miles and then headed west and out of radar range. There had not been time for the French to set up paired radar-beam outfits anyhow, so they couldn't spot it, and in any case its course seemed to be toward northern Spain, where there was no radar worth mentioning.

Presently somebody noticed the dingy, stubby, draggled tramp steamer over which the Invaders' craft had hovered. It was no longer on course. It had turned sidewise and wallowed heavily. Its bow pointed successively to every point of the compass.

It looked bad. Salvos of the heaviest projectiles in the Fleet had been fired to explode a thousand feet above it. Perhaps —

A destroyer went racing to see. As it drew near — Coburn learned this later — it saw a man's body hanging in a sagging heap over the railing of its bridge. There was nobody visible at the wheel. There were four men lying on its deck, motionless.

The skipper of the destroyer went cold. He brought his ship closer. It was not big, this tramp. Maybe two thousand tons. It was low in the water. It swayed and surged and wallowed and rolled.

Men from the destroyer managed to board it. It was completely unharmed. They found one small sign of the explosions overhead. One fragment of an exploded shell had fallen on board, doing no damage.

Even the crew was unharmed. But every man was asleep. Each one slumbered heavily. Each breathed stertoriously. They could not be awakened. They would need oxygen to bring them to.

A party from the destroyer went on board to bring the ship into harbor. The officer in charge tried to find out the ship's name. There was not a document to be found to show what the ship's name was or where it had come from or what it carried as cargo. That was strange. The officer looked in the pockets of the two men in the wheel house. There was not a single identifying object on either of them. He grew disturbed. He made a really thorough search. Every sleeping man was absolutely anonymous. Then — still on the way to harbor — a really fine-tooth-comb examination of the ship began.

Somebody's radium-dial watch began to glow brightly. The searchers looked at each other and went pale. They hunted fran-

tically, fear making them clumsy.

They found it. Rather — they found them.

The stubby tramp had an adequate if rather clumsy atomic bomb in each of its two holds. The lading of the ship was of materials which — according to theory — should be detonated in atomic explosion if an atomic bomb went off nearby. Otherwise they could not be detonated.

The anonymous tramp-steamer had been headed for the harbor of Naples, whose newspapers — at least those of a certain political party — had been screaming of the danger of an atomic explosion while American warships were anchored there.

It was not likely that two atom bombs and a shipload of valuable secondary atomic explosive had been put on a carefully nameless ship just to be taken for a ride. If this ship had anchored among the American fleet and if it had exploded in the Bay of Naples . . .

The prophecies of a certain political party would seem to have been fulfilled. The American ships would be destroyed. Naples itself would be destroyed. And it would have appeared that Europeans who loved the great United States had made a mistake.

It was, odd, though, that this ship was the only one that the Invaders' flying craft had struck with its peculiar weapon.

VI

We humans are rational beings, but we are not often reasonable. Those who more or less handle us in masses have to take account of that fact. It could not be admitted that the fleet had had a fight with a ship piloted by Invaders from another solar system. It would produce a wild panic, beside which even a war would be relatively harmless. So the admiral of the Mediterranean fleet composed an order commending his men warmly for their performance in an unrehearsed firing-drill. Their target had been — so the order said — a new type of guided missile recently developed by hush-hush agencies of the Defense Department. The admiral was pleased and proud, and happy. . . .

It was an excellent order, but it wasn't true. The admiral wasn't happy. Not after battle photographs were developed and he could see how the alien ship had dodged rockets with perfect ease, and had actually taken a five-inch shell, which exploded on impact, without a particle of damage.

On the carrier, the Greek general said mildly to Coburn that the Invaders had used their power very strangely. After stopping an invasion of Greece, they had prevented an atomic-bomb explosion which would have killed

some hundreds of thousands of people. And it was strange that the turtle-shaped ship that had attacked the air transport was so clumsily handled as compared with this similar craft which had zestfully dodged all the missiles a fleet could throw at it.

Coburn thought hard. "I think I see," he said slowly. "You mean, they're here and they know all they need to know. But instead of coming out into the open, they're making governments recognize their existence. They're letting the rulers of Earth know they can't be resisted. But we did knock off one of their ships last night!"

The Greek general pointedly said nothing. Coburn caught his meaning. The fleet, firing point-blank, had not destroyed its target. The ship last night had seemed to fall into a cloud bank and explode. But nobody had seen it blow up. Maybe it hadn't.

"Humoring us!" realized Coburn. "They don't want to destroy our civilization, so they'll humor us. But they want our governments to know that they can do as they please. If our governments know we can't resist, they think we'll surrender. But they're wrong."

The Greek general looked at him enigmatically.

"We've still got one trick left," said Coburn. "Atomic bombs. And if they fail, we can still get killed fighting them another way."

There was a heavy, droning noise far away. It increased and drew nearer. It was a multi-engined plane which came from the west and settled down, and hovered over the water, and touched and instantly created a spreading wake of foam.

The fleet was back at anchor then. It was enclosed in the most beautiful combination of city and scene that exists anywhere. Beyond the city the blunted cone of Vesuvius rose. In the city, newspaper vendors shrilly hawked denunciations of the American ships because of the danger that their atom bombs might explode. Well outside the harbor, a Navy crew of experts worked to make quite impossible the detonation of atomic bombs in a stubby tramp-steamer which had — plausibly, at least — been sent to make those same newspapers' prophecies of disaster come true.

A long, long time passed, while consultations took place to which Coburn was not invited. Then a messenger led him to the ward-room of the previous conference. He recognized the men who had landed by seaplane a while since. One was a cabinet member from Washington. There was someone of at least equal importance from London, picked up en route. There were generals and admirals. The service officers looked at Coburn

with something like accusation in their eyes. He was the means by which they had come to realize their impotence. The Greek general sat quietly in the rear.

"Mr. Coburn," said the Secretary from Washington. "We've been canvassing the situation. It seems that we simply are not prepared to offer effective resistance — not yet — to the . . . invaders you tell us about. We know of no reason why this entire fleet could not have been disabled as effectively as the tramp-steamer offshore. You know about that ship?"

Coburn nodded. The Greek general had told him. The Secretary went on painfully: "Now, the phenomena we have to ascribe to Invaders fall into two categories. One is the category of their action against the Bulgarian raiding force, and today the prevention of the cold-war murder of some hundreds of thousands of people. That category suggests that they are prepared — on terms — to be amiable. A point in their favor."

Coburn set his lips.

"The other group of events simply points you out and builds you up as a person of importance to these Invaders. You seem to be extremely important to them. They doubtless could have killed you. They did not. What they did do was bring you forward to official attention. Presumably they had a realistic motive in this."

"I don't know what it could be," said Coburn coldly. "I blundered into one affair. I figured out a way to detect them. I happened to be the means by which they were proved to exist. That's all. It was an accident."

The Secretary looked skeptical. "Your discoveries were remarkably . . . apt. And it does seem clear that they made the appearance of hunting you, while going to some pains not to catch you. Mr. Coburn, how can we make contact with them?"

Coburn wanted to swear furiously. He was still being considered a traitor. Only they were trying to make use of his treason.

"I have no idea," he said grimly.

"What do they want?"

"I would say — Earth," he said grimly.

"You deny that you are an authorized intermediary for them?"

"Absolutely," said Coburn. There was silence. The Greek general spoke mildly from the back of the room. He said in his difficult English that Coburn's personal motives did not matter. But if the Invaders had picked him out as especially important, it was possible that they felt him especially qualified to talk to them. The question was, would he try to make contact with them?

The Secretary looked pained,

but he turned to Coburn. "Mr. Coburn?"

Coburn said, "I've no idea how to set about it, but I'll try on one condition. There's one thing we haven't tried against them. Set up an atom-bomb booby-trap; and I'll sit on it. If they try to contact me, you can either listen in or try to blow them up, and me with them!"

There was buzzing comment. Perhaps — Coburn's nails bit into his palms when this was suggested — perhaps this was a proposal to let the Invaders examine an atomic bomb, American-style. It was said in earnest simplicity. But somebody pointed out that a race which could travel between the stars and had ships such as the Mediterranean fleet had tried to shoot down, would probably find American atomic bombs rather primitive. Still —

The Greek general again spoke mildly. If the Invaders were to be made to realize that Coburn was trying to contact them, he should return to Greece. He should visibly take up residence where he could be approached. He should, in fact, put himself completely at the mercy of the Invaders.

"Ostensibly," agreed the Secretary.

The Greek general then said diffidently that he had a small villa some twenty miles from the suburbs of Salonika. The prevailing winds were such that if an atomic explosion occurred there, it would not endanger anybody. He offered it.

"I'll live there," asked Coburn coldly, "and wait for them to come to me? I'll have microphones all about so that every word that's said will be relayed to your recorders? And there'll be a bomb somewhere about that you can set off by remote control? Is that the idea?"

Then Janice spoke up. And Coburn flared into anger against her. But she was firm. Coburn saw the Greek general smiling slyly.

They left the conference while the decision was made. And they were in private, and Janice talked to him. There are methods of argument against which a man is hopeless. She used them. She said that she, not Coburn, might be the person the Invaders might have wanted to take out of circulation, because she might have noticed something important she hadn't realized yet. When Coburn pointed out that he'd be living over an atomic bomb, triggered to be set off from a hundred miles away, she demanded fiercely to know if he realized how she'd feel if she weren't there to. . . .

Next day an aircraft carrier put out of Naples with an escort of destroyers. It traveled at full speed down the toe of Italy's boot, through the straits of Messina, across the Adriatic, and

rounded the end of Greece and went streaking night and day for Salonika. Special technicians sent by plane beat her time by days. The Greek general was there well ahead. And he expansively supervised while his inherited, isolated villa was prepared for the reception of Invaders — and Coburn and Janice.

And Coburn and Janice were married. It was an impressive wedding, because it was desirable for the Invaders to know about it. It was brilliantly military with uniforms and glittering decorations and innumerable important people whom neither of them knew or cared about.

It it had been anybody else's wedding Coburn would have found it unspeakably dreary. The only person present whom he knew beside Janice was Hallen. He acted as groomsman, with the air of someone walking on eggs. After it was over he shook hands with a manner of tremendous relief.

"Maybe I'll brag about this some day," he told Coburn uneasily. "But right now I'm scared to death. What do you two really expect to happen?"

Janice smiled at him. "Why," she said, "we expect to live happily ever after."

"Oh yes," said Hallen uncomfortably. "But that wasn't just what I had in mind."

VII

The world wagged on. The newspapers knew nothing about super-secret top-level worries. There was not a single newsstory printed anywhere suggesting an invasion of Earth from outer space. There were a few more Flying Saucer yarns than normal, and it was beginning to transpire that an unusual number of important people were sick, or on vacation, or otherwise out of contact with the world. But, actually, not one of the events in which Coburn and Janice had been concerned reached the state of being news. Even the shooting off the Bay of Naples was explained as an emergency drill.

Quietly, a good many things happened. Cryptic orders passed around, and oxygen tanks were accumulated in military posts. Hunter and Mereid guided missiles were set up as standard equipment in a number of brand-new places. They were loaded for bear. But days went by, and nothing happened. Nothing at all. But officialdom was not at ease.

If anything — while the wide world went happily about its business — really high-level officialdom grew more unhappy day by day. Coburn and Janice flew back to Salonika. They went in a Navy plane with a fighter plane escort. They landed at the Salonika airport, and the Greek general

was among those who greeted them.

He took them out to the villa he'd placed at the disposal of high authority for their use. He displayed it proudly. There was absolutely no sign that it had been touched by anybody since its original builders had finished with it two-hundred-odd years before. The American officer who had wired it, though — he looked as if he were short a week's sleep — showed them how anywhere on the grounds or in the house they would need only to speak a code-word and they'd instantly be answered.

There were servants, and the Greek general took Coburn aside and assured him that there was one room which absolutely was not wired for sound. He named it.

So they took up a relatively normal way of life. Sometimes they decided that it would be pleasant to drive in to Salonika. They mentioned it, and went out and got in the car that went with the villa. Oddly, there was always some aircraft lazying about overhead by the time they were out of the gate. They always returned before sunset. And sometimes they swam in the water before the villa's door. Then, also, they were careful to be back on solid ground before sunset. That was so their guards out on the water wouldn't have to worry.

But it was a nagging and an unhappy business to know that they were watched and overheard everywhere save in that one unwired room. It could have made for tension between them. But there was another thought to hold them together. This was the knowledge that they were literally living on top of a bomb. If an Invader's flying ship descended at the villa, everything that happened would be heard and seen by microphones and concealed television cameras. If the Invaders were too arrogant, or if they were arbitrary, there would be a test to see if their ship could exist in the heart of an atom-bomb explosion.

Coburn and Janice, then, were happy after a fashion. But nobody could call their situation restful.

They had very few visitors. The Greek general came out meticulously every day. Hallen came out once, but he knew about the atomic bomb. He didn't stay long. When they'd been in residence a week, the General telephoned zestfully that he was going to bring out some company. His English was so mangled and obscure that Coburn wondered cynically if whoever listened to their tapped telephone could understand him. But, said the General in high good humor, he was playing a good joke. He had hunted up Helena, who was Coburn's secretary, and he had also invited

Dillon to pay a visit to some charming people he knew. It would be a great joke to see Dillon's face.

There was a fire in the living room that night. The Greek servants had made it, and Coburn thought grimly that they were braver men and women than he'd have been. They didn't have to risk their lives. They could have refused this particular secret-service assignment. But they hadn't.

A voice spoke from the living-room ceiling, a clipped American voice. "Mr. Coburn, a car is coming."

That was standard. When the General arrived; when the occasional delivery of telephoned-for supplies came; on the one occasion when a peddler on foot had entered the ground. It lacked something of being the perfect atmosphere for a honeymoon, but it was the way things were.

Presently there were headlights outside. The Greek butler went to greet the guests. Coburn and Janice heard voices. The General was in uproarious good humor. He came in babbling completely uncomprehensible English.

There was Helena. She smiled warmly at Coburn. She went at once to Janice. "How do you do?" she said in her prettily accented English. "I have missed not working for your husband, but this is my fiancé!"

And Janice shook hands with a slick-haired young Greek who looked pleasant enough, but did not seem to her as remarkable as Coburn.

Then Dillon stared at Coburn.

"The devil!" he said, with every evidence of indignation. "This is the chap —"

The General roared, and Coburn said awkwardly: "I owe you an apology, and the privilege of a poke in the nose besides. But it was a situation — I was in a state —"

Then the General howled with laughter. Helena laughed. Her fiancé laughed. And Dillon grinned amusedly at Coburn.

"My dear fellow!" said Dillon. "We are the guests this whole villa was set up to receive! The last time I saw you was in Náousa, and the last time Helena saw you you stuck pins in her, and —"

Coburn stiffened. He went slowly pale.

"I — see! You're the foam-suit people, eh?" Then he looked with hot passion at the General. "You!" he said grimly. "You I didn't suspect. You've made fools of all of us, I think."

The General said something obscure which could have been a proverb. It was to the effect that nobody could tell a fat man was cross-eyed when he laughed.

"Yes," said Dillon beaming. "He is fat. So his eyes don't look

like they're different. You have to see past his cheeks and eyebrows. That's how he passed muster. And he slept very soundly after the airport affair."

Coburn felt a sort of sick horror. The General had passed as a man, and he'd loaned this villa, and he knew all about the installation of the atomic bomb. . . . Then Coburn looked through a doorway and there was his Greek butler standing in readiness with a submachine-gun in his hands.

"I take it this is an official call," said Coburn steadily. "In that case you know we're overheard — or did the General cancel that?"

"Oh, yes!" said Dillon. "We know all about the trap we've walked into. But we'd decided that the time had come to appear in the open anyhow. You people are very much like us, incidentally. Apparently there's only one real way that a truly rational brain can work. And we and you Earth people both have it. May we sit down?"

Janice said: "By all means!"

Helena sat, with an absolutely human gesture of spreading her skirt beside her. The General plumped into a chair and chuckled. The slick-haired young man politely offered Janice a cigarette and lighted Helena's for her. Dillon leaned against the mantel above the fire.

"Well?" said Coburn harshly. "You can state your terms. What do you want and what do you propose to do to get it?"

Dillon shook his head. He took a deep breath. "I want you to listen, Coburn. I know about the atom bomb planted somewhere around, and I know I'm talking for my life. You know we aren't natives of Earth. You've guessed that we come from a long way off. We do. Now — we found out the trick of space travel some time ago. You're quite welcome to it. We found it, and we started exploring. We've been in space, you might say, just about two of your centuries. You're the only other civilized race we've found. That's point one."

Coburn fumbled in his pocket. He found a cigarette. Dillon held a match. Coburn started, and then accepted it.

"Go on." He added, "There's a television camera relaying this, by the way. Did you know?"

"Yes, I know," said Dillon. "Now, having about two centuries the start of you, we have a few tricks you haven't found out yet. For one thing, we understand ourselves, and you, better than you do. We've some technical gadgets you haven't happened on yet. However, it's entirely possible for you to easily kill the four of us here tonight. If you do — you do. But there are others of our race here. That's point two."

"Now come the threats and demands," said Coburn.

"Perhaps." But Dillon seemed to hesitate. "Dammit, Coburn, you're a reasonable man. Try to think like us a moment. What would you do if you'd started to explore space and came upon a civilized race, as we have?"

Coburn said formidably, "We'd study them and try to make friends."

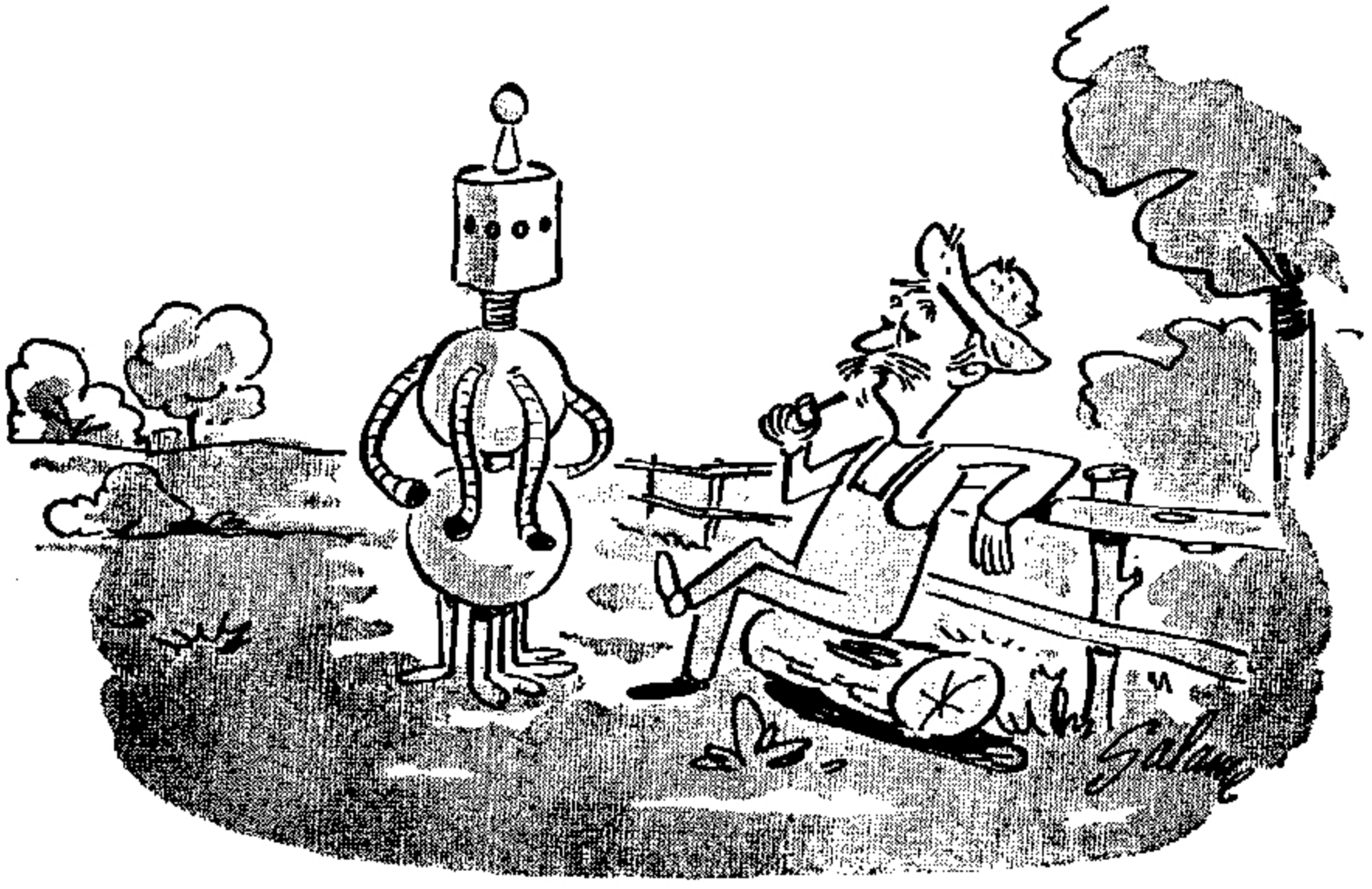
"In that order," said Dillon instantly. "That's what we've tried to do. We disguised ourselves as you because we wanted to learn how to make friends before we tried. But what did we find, Coburn? What's your guess?"

"You name it!" said Coburn.

"You Earth people," said Dillon, "are at a turning-point in your history. Either you solve your problems and keep on climbing, or you'll blast your civilization down to somewhere near a caveman level and have to start all over again. You know what I mean. Our two more spectacular interferences dealt with it."

"The Iron Curtain," said Coburn. "Yes. But what's that got to do with you? It's none of your business. That's ours."

"But it *is* ours," said Dillon



"City Feller?"

urgently. "Don't you see, Coburn? You've a civilization nearly as advanced as ours. If we can make friends, we can do each other an infinite lot of good. We can complement each other. We can have a most valuable trade, not only in goods, but in what you call human values and we call something else. We'd like to start that trade.

"But you're desperately close to smashing things. So we've had to rush things. We did stop that Bulgarian raid. When you proved too sharp to be fooled, we grew hopeful. Here might be our entering wedge. We hammered at you. We managed to make your people suspicious that there might be something in what you said. We proved it. It was rugged for you, but we had to let you people force us into the open. If we'd marched out shyly with roses in our hair — what would you have thought?"

Coburn said doggedly: "I'm still waiting for the terms. What do you want?"

The General said something plaintive from his chair. It was to the effect that Coburn still believed that Earth was in danger of conquest from space.

"Look!" said Dillon irritably. "If you people had found the trick of space travel first, and you'd found us, would you have tried to conquer us? Considering that we're civilized?"

Coburn said coldly, "No. Not my particular people. We know you can't conquer a civilized race. You can exterminate them, or you can break them down to savagery, but you can't conquer them. You can't conquer us!"

Then Dillon said very painstakingly: "But we don't want to conquer you. Even your friends inside the Iron Curtain know that the only way to conquer a country is to smash it down to savagery. They've done that over and over for conquest. But what the devil good would savages be to us? We want someone to trade with. We can't trade with savages. We want someone to gain something from. What have savages to offer us? A planet? Good Heavens, man! We've already found sixty planets for colonies, much better for us than Earth. Your gravity here is . . . well, it's sickeningly low."

"What *do* you want then?"

"We want to be friends," said Dillon. "We'll gain by it exactly what you Earth people gained when you traded freely among yourselves, before blocked currencies and quotas and such nonsense strangled trade. We'll gain what you gained when you'd stopped having every city a fort and every village guarded by the castle of its lord. Look, Coburn: we've got people inside the Iron Curtain. We'll keep them there. You won't be able to disband your armies, but we can promise you won't have to use them — be-

cause we certainly won't help you chaps fight among yourselves. We'll give you one of our ships to study and work on. But we won't give you our arms. You'll have your moon in a year and your whole solar system in a decade. You'll trade with us from the time you choose, and you'll be roaming space when you can grasp the trick of it. Man, you can't refuse. You're too near to certain smashing of your civilization, and we can help you to avoid it. Think what we're offering."

Then Coburn said grimly: "And if we don't like the bargain? What if we refuse?"

Dillon carefully put the ash from his cigarette into an ashtray. "If you won't be our friends," he said with some distaste, "we can't gain anything useful from you. We don't want you as slaves. You'd be no good to us. For that reason we can't get anything we want from the Iron Curtain people. They've nothing to offer that we can use. So our ultimatum is — make friends or we go away and leave you alone. Take it or leave it!"

There was a dead, absolute silence. After a long time Coburn said: "Altruism?"

Dillon grinned. "Enlightened self-interest. Common sense!"

There was a clicking in the ceiling. A metallic voice said: "Mr. Coburn, the conversation just overheard and recorded has to be discussed in detail on high diplomatic levels. It will take time for conferences — decisions — arrangements. Assuming that your guests are acting in good faith, they have safe conduct from the villa. Their offer is very attractive, but it will have to be passed on at high policy-making levels."

Dillon said pleasantly, to the ceiling: "Yes. And you've got to keep it from being public, of course, until your space ships can discover us somewhere. It will have to be handled diplomatically, so your people are back of a grand offer to make friends when it happens." He added wryly, "We're very much alike, really. Coburn's very much like us. That's why — if it's all right with you — you can arrange for him to be our point of confidential contact. We'll keep in touch with him."

The ceiling did not reply. Dillon waited, then shrugged. The Greek general spoke. He said that since they had come so far out from Salonika, it was too early to leave again. It might be a good idea to have a party. Some music would be an excellent thing. He said he liked Earth music very much.

A long time later Janice and Coburn were alone in the one room of the house which was not wired for sound. There were no microphones here.

Coburn said reluctantly in the

darkness: "It sounds sensible all right. Maybe it's true. But it feels queer to think of it. . . ."

Janice pressed closer to him and whispered in his ear: "I made friends with that girl who passed for Helena. I like her. She says we'll be invited to make a trip to their planet. They can do something about the gravity. And she says she's really going to be married to the . . . person who was with her. . . ." She hesitated. "She showed me what they really look like when they're not disguised as us."

Coburn put his arm around her and smiled gently. "Well? Want to tell me?"

Janice caught her breath. "I — I could have cried. . . . The poor thing — to look like that. I'm glad I look like I do. For you, darling. For you."