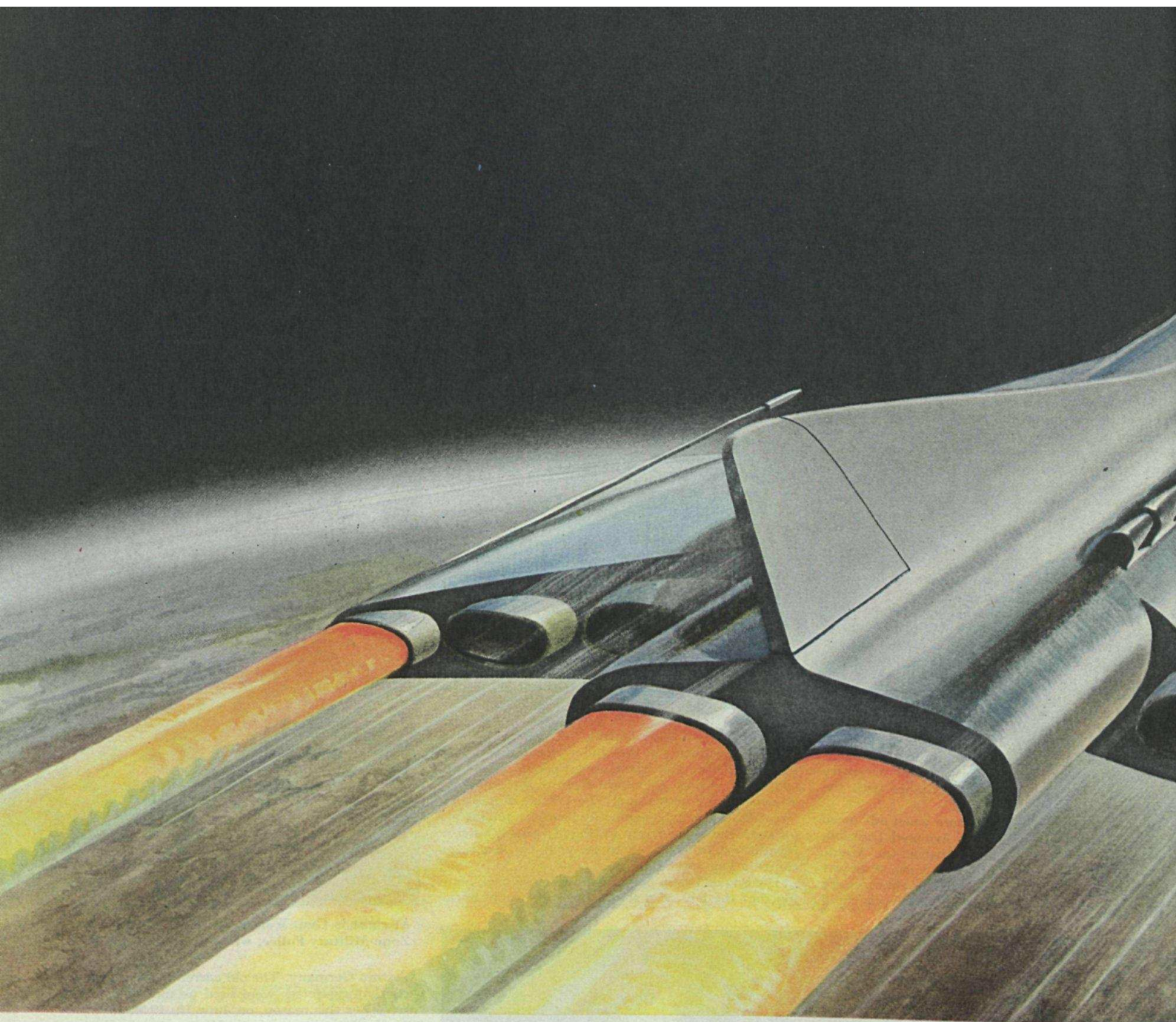




He had fuel for ten minutes. Ten hours later he hadn't come back. He was the first man

to reach

THE OUTER LIMIT

By GRAHAM DOAR

Patrolship S2J3, Galactic Guard, Sector K, reporting. . . Pursuant to instructions from the Central Council: Planet 3, Star 5, Galaxy C, Sector K, has been placed under absolute quarantine. Notification to inhabitants made. Mission accomplished.

XEGLON, Commanding.

AT fifty thousand feet he began to feel the loss of power, the thinner air starving the oxygen-eating turbojets. Their thunderous whisper rose to a screaming whine.

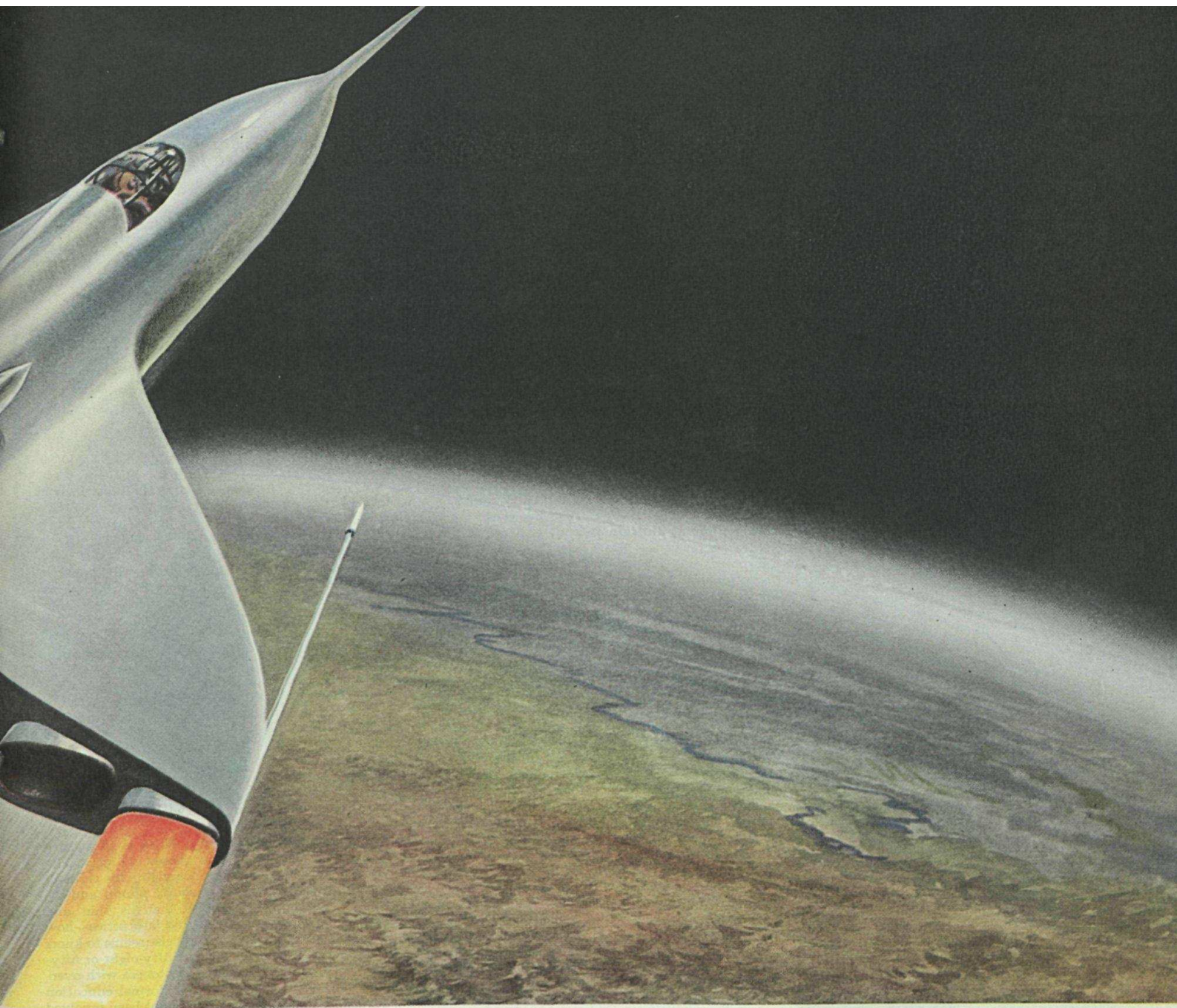
His air speed dropped from six hundred to four-eighth in the while it took to pull the lever that dropped the jet assembly, white cloud of parachute mushrooming as the heavy engines plummeted earthward. He switched on the flow of lox and alky

pressured by the nitrogen flasks under his seat. The liquid oxygen and alcohol sparked and caught, there was a hissing roar and he felt a sledge-hammer blow against his back and shoulders. Rocket No. 1 was firing, and his air-speed indicator whirled under the almost instantaneous acceleration, the sharklike ship leaping forward in a flashing upward glide.

This was the new one. The unknown. He'd flown her before, a dozen times, but not for speed and altitude, never at full power. Behind him, crowding the narrow fuselage, was fuel for ten minutes with all eight rockets firing full thrust. This was the new one and this was the day. He was going higher and faster than man had ever gone. He switched on No. 2.

He passed one hundred thousand feet at eighteen hundred miles an hour with only four rockets blasting. Counting slowly, his eyes glued to the clock on the instrument panel, he reached and turned No. 5 switch. Again the ship bucked, only slightly now, and the speed indicator rolled upward.

He was flying in absolute dead quiet. Only the sounds within the pressurized tiny cockpit reached his ears, the ticking of the clock, the beating of his heart, the small hissing of the nitrogen flow. The cataclysmic roar of his ship's passing formed miles in his wake, the mighty voice of the rockets was left far behind. He was traveling at nearly four times the speed of sound. He wondered what old terra firma



would look like at this altitude. Jammed into the crowded cockpit, his lap full of instruments, his helmeted head almost touching the canopy, there was no way he could manage to look down. But he knew the clicking camera in the floor of his plane was making a record. He cut in the seventh rocket, wondering if the recording instruments were working. The colonel wasn't going to believe this without proof. Mach 5—it was strictly a guess at this altitude—and still accelerating, still climbing.

He saw it just as he reached to switch on No. 8. He was pulling the ship in a wide circle, trying it for maneuverability at this altitude and speed. The ship jumped and side-slipped a bit when the last rocket fired. At that moment the sunlight glinted on some object far ahead and above him.

He didn't believe it. He knew all the standard explanations of the great flying-saucer plague—the runaway balloons, the planet Venus, hallucinations brought on by strain and weariness. Whatever this object was, this metallic ellipsoid turning slowly above him, it wasn't a ship. He knew that.

But he had six minutes' fuel left and with all eight rockets boosting him along, he could run rings around anything. A closer look wouldn't hurt. He pointed the shark's nose at that far-off gleam.

A long while ago the colonel had been worried. Now he was no longer worried. He had given up. He'd

had the search planes out for hours now, looking for any sign of that double-damned X2JTO that had almost certainly killed his best pilot. The colonel wasn't kidding himself that the captain might have parachuted safely. You don't hit the silk at rocket speeds forty miles up. Radar reported the ship that high when the screen went blank.

The F-80 chase planes that had been sent up to observe the test had radioed in, almost immediately after he'd dropped the turbojet take-off assembly. They'd lost him about the time he cut in the fourth rocket. The ship was flying like a dream, they'd reported, but they couldn't keep him in sight.

The colonel looked at his watch and sighed. The search had been on for nine hours, and not even a nibble yet. It was hopeless. Sometime in the next few days—or weeks—reports would begin to drift in of pieces of the ship being picked up here and there. Maybe pieces of the pilot too. In the meantime, they'd build another one. And some flying fool would take it up. Death, the fear of death couldn't stop them. It never had and it never would. They had no fear, not that kind. *Thank God*, the colonel thought, *for the flying fools*. They had punched holes in the so-called sonic barrier and were beating their stubborn heads against the walls of space itself. He himself was getting old, the colonel realized. He him-

self was afraid of a great many things. Once he'd been one of the flying fools, but now the palms of his hands were wet at the thought of sending another of his pilots up in one of those skyrockets. He wondered if there was a drink left in the bottle he had in his desk, but it didn't seem worth the effort to look and see.

The telephone at his elbow tinkled sharply. He spoke quietly, holding his voice firm with an effort. "All right."

"Colonel! He's in!"

"Who is this speaking?"

"Staff Sergeant Smith, sir."

The colonel's voice was sharp now. "Have you been drinking, sergeant?"

"He's landing right now, sir. The tower sighted him just a minute ago. The ship looks all right."

He slammed down the phone and was through the door in three long strides. His driver had seen the plane. He spun the colonel's car to the door, motor roaring, and in a split second they were tearing across the field.

There was a drink left in the bottle after all. The colonel split it between two glasses and handed one to the pilot. The junior officer, both in age and rank, was not a big man, maybe an inch or two shorter than the six-foot colonel. He was lean, whipped by strenuous play and

ILLUSTRATED BY MELBOURNE BRINDLE

(Continued on Page 67)

THE OUTER LIMIT

(Continued from Page 23)

more strenuous work into one hundred and sixty-five pounds of bone and sinew. His normally good-natured, rather boyish face with the steel-blue eyes was now a yellowish purple, the hue that passes for pallor on a deeply tanned skin. The finely tuned nerves brought a quiver to the fingers that held a cigarette, and the golden-brown liquid shivered in the glass, but his grin was easy and the deep voice came out firm and low. "Sit down, Hank. This one will knock you over."

The colonel's answering grin was friendly, if uneasy, and he said, "Bill, I've called off the search, but I'd already shot the word to Washington. I've got to get an explanation on the wire soon, so let's have it."

"What's your idea about the flying saucers, Hank?"

"Not now, Bill. First things first. I want to know—I've got to know—how you stretched ten minutes' fuel to keep you in the air over ten hours."

"Believe me, this is it." The captain leaned forward in his chair. "One thing before I start to talk. Will you have the Geiger men run over that ship before it goes to the technicians?"

"What did you run into?"

"So help me, Hank, I don't know. I don't think it's radioactivity, but we better know for sure."

The colonel reached one hand for the phone. "We'd better have you looked over, too, hadn't we?"

"No. No, I'll be all right. They said I'd be all right."

The colonel started to speak, but he checked himself and picked up the phone. He gave the orders for the Geiger team to inspect the ship for fission products, then added as an obvious afterthought, "After you complete your inspection, lieutenant, have that ship sealed. Whatever your findings, understand? Have the ship sealed, to be opened only on a direct order from me. . . . Right."

He hung up slowly, not turning back to face the pilot. His voice was tired as he spoke. "All right, Bill. This 'they' you speak of—that's going to be a little hard to get across." If he's getting ready to feed me one of those men-from-Mars yarns, he thought, I should get the psychos in right now. But I know this boy. A night's sleep—he'll be all right.

"Well, Hank, I chased me a flying saucer. And I caught it. Or rather it caught me." The captain finished his drink and placed the glass with gentle precision on the corner of the desk. "I was cruising nicely about two hundred thousand feet out at about four thousand m-p-h. I spotted—something, and decided to take a look at it. It must have been going at about half my speed. I caught up fast. It was—oh—egg-shaped and perfectly smooth. No visible openings anywhere. I made two passes looking it over and started back for a third. There was a humming sound—a kind of gentle vibration—and I blacked out. I was heading straight at the thing, Hank, and I felt this—sort of twang, as though I'd run into a harp string, and the—the black came down over me. I thought—I felt it coming for a split second—I thought—Is there another drink left, Hank?"

Sweat glistened on the pilot's forehead. The colonel passed his own still-full glass across the desk. This was probably the wrong treatment, he thought, but the guy needed a drink.

The captain took only a small swallow, but some of the flutter went out

of the strong, lean hands. "Hank, I thought it was going to be the biggest smash since Hiroshima. Well, it wasn't. I came to—inside their ship!"

The colonel spoke gently. "Bill, this is obviously a hell of a strain on you. And you'll have to run through it again, you know. Shall I call the—Major Donaldson in and let him hear it now?"

"The psychiatrist? Yeah, I guess he'll want to test my jerks. Well, Hank, if it's all the same to you, I'd like to put it off till tomorrow. I'd like to finish telling you, then go out and get good and drunk. Because, Hank, unless I miss my guess, I've just been tipped off to the way the world ends."

"Okay, Bill. But don't let Donaldson know you read Eliot or he'll certify you nuts. He thinks pilots read the comics."

"Thanks, Hank. Well, I came to, inside the ship, and I was surrounded by—let's call them men."

"The men from Mars, eh?"

A surge of color rode up the pilot's lean face. "Mars, Hank? No." He con-

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

ONSET

By Eleanor
Halbrook Zimmerman

The time of brittle eaves has

come,

Of birds being hurried down the sky;

Of new fires lighted to the drum

Of vaulting winds that hurry by;

Of snow heaped on the garden

gates,

Of ice upon cranberry bogs;

Of skis, tobogganing and skates,

And Winter, whistling up his

dogs.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

sidered. He spoke slowly. "I hadn't thought—I couldn't quite grasp where—Hank, this solar system of ours—it's a pretty big thing. I mean—you know—to us. They were trying to impress me with the importance, the absoluteness of their message, and they pointed out the terrific trouble they had gone to, the miracles of space navigation they'd had to perform in order to find us. Not our planet, Hank, but our sun! That great, blazing orb of unbearable brightness, Hank, became a pinpoint glimmer to them when nine tenths of their journey was completed. How far would that be, Hank? You tell me where they came from."

The colonel was reasonable. "Then how did they find us in the first place? What brought them here?"

"You know the old one about the man whose reach exceeds his grasp? That's us, Hank. All of us. We rang their bell, Hank. We tolled them in."

"Suppose you just tell it straight."

There was the faintest reminder of his rank in the colonel's voice. He was uneasy, he was tired and he liked this kid. It wasn't pleasant to watch this sort of thing, though he'd seen it before in these hot pilots. Let him talk it out, that might do the trick. Thank God, it was always temporary; nearly always.

"Right." Unconsciously the captain sat straighter in his chair. His tone became more clipped. "They looked—I don't know what they looked like. They were just—presences. There were a lot of them—I don't know how many. The inside of the ship was jammed com-

pletely full of incredibly intricate-looking machinery, and the noise was utterly deafening. After a few seconds I couldn't hear a sound. I—I just didn't believe it at first. Then—well, there it was. You had to believe it. I was angry, too—it seemed so—so belittling. But then suddenly I wasn't angry. There was nothing to strike at. Anyway, they seemed friendly, even gentle."

"Just one thing, Bill. If you couldn't hear anything, how did they speak to you? And in English, I suppose?"

"Funny." The pilot looked startled. "I hadn't thought of that. They didn't speak. They just—planted the ideas in my own head. It was just—suddenly, it was there—in my mind."

He never spoke a truer sentence, the colonel thought. He said gently, "Look, Bill. I'm sorry, but I'll have to pull a little rank. I'm getting Donaldson in."

Major Malcolm Donaldson, M.D., Ph.D., shifted his untidy bulk uneasily on the surface of the hard straight chair, took off his thick-lensed glasses and massaged his brows with a thumb and forefinger. Uncovered, his soft brown eyes looked tired and weak.

The colonel said, "Is that all clear, Donaldson?"

"Oh, sure. Sure, colonel." His voice was tenor in pitch, but strong and firm. "Go ahead, will you, Bill? Give us the rest of it." His brown eyes flashed a reassuring twinkle at the colonel.

"Right, sir." With the psychiatrist present, the captain was choosing his words carefully. "They knew, then, the danger as well as the utility of atomic power. They used to use it themselves, long ago; before they developed whatever it is they use now. They had their wars then; wars that almost destroyed their civilization. Now they have outlawed war throughout the sectors of space they patrol, and anywhere else they can reach. Wherever their detector system picks up traces of an atomic explosion, they send a patrol—with certain preventive powers. We've exploded—five, is it?—atomic bombs. Maybe seven. Plenty, anyway, for them to get a fix. They came. They found wars and rumors of wars. Factories busily turning out atomic weapons. So they quarantined us. This intergalactic board of health decided we were infected with a communicable disease. They sealed us off from the rest of space until we were well. That's good medical practice, isn't it, major?"

The major got up from his chair and came to stand beside the pilot, placing one pink hand on the sinewy wrist. The colonel started to speak, but the psychiatrist was first, firmly. "All right, Bill. Try to tell it straight—and keep the voice down, eh?"

There was silence for a moment, then the young captain began to speak again. "Right. Here it is, then. Out there—about a hundred miles out—they've spread a layer of—I don't know what to call it. I couldn't quite grasp—Anyway, it's there, miles deep; and it's there to stay. When an atomic bomb is exploded anywhere on this earth and the mushroom cloud of radioactive particles rises up, fission products will infiltrate into this layer. Greatly dispersed, of course, only a few will ever get so high—but they've allowed for that. And that will be it. We will then have had it."

"Easy, Bill," said the major.

"Easy? Sure. The easiest thing you know. Because when the radioactivity in this layer of—whatever—rises above the normal level of cosmic activity, its particles will begin to fission. And, gentlemen and brothers, we will then have

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GOOD CHEER

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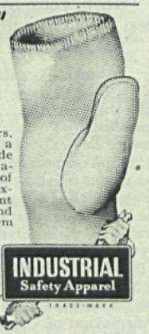
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the damndest galactic Fourth of July celebration of all time. In the time it takes that watch you're using to count my pulse, major, in the little piece of time it takes to tick just once—just once—this spinning globe will be a roaring ball of flame that will pale the sun. Colonel, your men from Mars will have to run for cover to keep from getting their hair singed. How do you like it, gentlemen?"

The rotund major fumbled a black case from his pocket and the overhead light struck a gleam from the hypodermic in his hand. "All right, Bill. Let's get your coat off and roll up your sleeve."

The pilot's breathing was harsh. He said, "We can forget about those atomic-powered spaceships, too, colonel. You see that, don't you? Unless we can figure out some way to shield the exhaust. On second thought, we won't last long enough for that to become a problem. Just forget it. That's best."

The colonel said, "Take it easy, Bill."

The major put a hand on his arm.

He shook it off. "No. That's the story. The whole thing. They finished with me, I heard the harp twang again—and I was in the plane gliding back down. You saw me land. Now, colonel, with your permission, I'm going over to the club and tie one on."

The colonel said, "No. Sorry, Bill, but not tonight. Let Donaldson give you the hypo."

"No. I've got a drink coming. Several drinks."

"Don't be an ass, Bill. I can make it an order. Go to bed, get some sleep. You've got leave coming, you can get as drunk as you like later."

The pilot stripped off his blouse silently. He said, watching the bright needle bite into his arm, "What are we going to do? I—I hadn't thought that far. What are we going to do?"

The colonel reached forward and laid a long hand on the lean forearm. "It's out of your hands now, Bill. For tonight, anyway. You don't have to worry about it. I'll draw up a summary of what you've told me; tomorrow we'll go over it together. The most we can do is make a report and try to push it right to the top. Well, that's my job, Bill. It's out of your hands. So you get some sleep, and tomorrow we'll go over it. Okay?"

"Okay." Suddenly he was tired. And the colonel would handle it. Good old Hank. The vision of a roaring, swirling mass of flame, the crackling apocalyptic thunder that he had conjured up in his mind was fading. It was still there, but faint now.

He waved a drowsy good night and stumbled outdoors.

The colonel walked after him, watched his progress toward his quarters. When the pilot was out of earshot, the colonel spoke to a soldier near the doorway. "Sergeant! Take a man and go to the captain's quarters. See him into bed and watch him all night."

"Yes, sir!"

"Keep your eye on his pistol. He's been under the hell of a strain."

"Yes, colonel. Nothing will happen, sir."

[Record for file . . . record for file. Xeglon, commanding Patrolship S2J3, to Sector Commander Zzyl, Galactic Guard, Sector K.

[Patrol Commander Pgot informed me that you requested this early, informal report on Mission S2K-C5-3 and I prepared it at once. The technical reports in detail prepared by the various teams involved in the operation will be in your hands shortly.

[Planet C5-3 was located by Patrol S2J about the 32nd time-period out of headquarters. Our nine ships went into an orbit at slow speed and confirmation of Central Council's report was

found immediately. There were definite traces of fission products impregnating areas of the upper atmosphere. Commander Pgot designated this ship to complete the mission while he returned to station with the remainder of his patrol.

[Need for the quarantine having been established by our preliminary observations, our twofold problem was (1) its nature and duration and (2) communication of the necessary warning to the planet's inhabitants. The first was, of course, a matter of comprehensive but simple tests carried out by the technicians. The second was far more difficult, owing to the fact that the creatures employ a method of communication not heretofore found. Their range approaches zero and there is almost no directional factor. They do have a means of distance-communication by mechanically generated impulses or waves but, though these were not difficult to intercept, we failed entirely at interpreting them. Our earliest attempts at communication resulted in jamming and even destroying the nerve paths of the specimens we selected. Naturally, we attempted to choose the most highly organized and stable individuals, but, working over the necessary distance, selection was not easy. Obviously a landing was out of the question. We should have had to destroy thousands of them in order to seize one and might even have suffered some losses ourselves. You know the problem of regeneration with no greater facilities than our patrolships carry.

[Computing, on the Pheng scale, such observations as our psycho-team was able to make, we were led to expect an intelligence factor between four and five plus. Emotional stability, however, ran completely off the scale—at the minus end. In spite of the high intelligence level, their almost complete lack of social organization is thus explained.

[Through the really brilliant work of the team, we finally managed to locate an area where the stability factor ran to as much as plus eight over the norm we had established. Intelligence was not at the highest, but was also above the norm. To make it even simpler, the creatures were here engaged in testing operations with their aircraft, one-man ships that we observed making greater and greater speeds, climbing to higher and higher altitudes. Briefly, the time came when one of them reached a sufficient speed at a high enough altitude that we could use the scoop on him without much danger of injury.

[It was now that our psycho-men really distinguished themselves. With their previous observations added to estimations of brain convolutions and mass, they set up a mechanical hypnotor that established contact on the very first try. Only two serious blocks were encountered. One was a systemic syndrome resulting in increase of body temperature, increased speed and power of movement, and an almost complete stoppage of the intellectual processes. This seems to be an automatic reaction and is probably a survival factor in such a poorly organized society. It was easily overcome. The other block encountered was a complete mental rejection of the situation. Our team worked patiently at this for some time and were despairing of getting through when to our surprise, the creature broke it down himself.

[To judge from this one sample, they have an instinctive and involuntary censor that closes the mind to whatever is outside previous experience. Fortunately for them, this censor appears to be in constant conflict with such logic as they employ and is frequently defeated. Otherwise, of course, even such technological and sociological development as they enjoy would have been impossible.

[Having made contact, we fixed the creature's mind, implanting the necessary warning as to the nature of the quarantine, the reasons for it, the conditions under which it may be lifted. His grasp of the entire concept at last complete, we released him, close to the pick-up point, and traced him to the surface.

[In the meantime, tests had determined that Catalyst X in a concentration of .003 negatively charged, would accomplish our task, remaining active for approximately one hundred of the planet's orbit-periods. This, being longer than the inhabitants' life cycle, should allow time for re-education and retraining of new generations—provided they heed our warning. Intermittent observation patrols and a renewal of the quarantine if need is determined are, of course, recommended.

[We proceeded now to sow the catalyst in the predetermined depth and, mission accomplished, to depart for our station. Two time-periods out from the planet, we switched to space drive. Message ends. XEGILON.]

When the colonel turned back into the room, the major had resumed his seat. He was holding up the shining hypodermic needle, moving it to catch the glimmering reflections.

The colonel barked, "Put that thing away!"

"Certainly, colonel. Sorry."

"No, Donaldson. I'm sorry. I beg your pardon."

"Not at all, sir. It's damned tough, I know. He's one of the best."

The colonel sat, wearily. "He's the best, Donaldson. That combination of guts, loyalty and lightning reflexes comes about one in ten million. Oh, well. I've plenty of good men, as far as that goes. It's the kid himself I—How does it look to you?"

"I can't tell yet. It may be a week—six months—six years. It may be gone by tomorrow morning. I'll need a whole lot of time with him before I can say."

The colonel banged his fist on the desk. "If this thing holds up his promotion, I'll—I'll go to Washington personally! He's been due for major for six months now. He needs it too. His wife's having another baby, you know."

The psychiatrist nodded. "How many's that make?"

"It's his third."

"These boys run to large families for some reason. I've wondered about that. It's living on the ragged edge of danger does it, I suppose. Ha!" His little snort of laughter made the colonel look up in surprise. "Sorry, colonel. It just occurred to me—if the captain's little fantasy were true and the word got around—brother! Would the population curve begin to shoot up! Or would it?" He was suddenly thoughtful.

The colonel said, "Well, Donaldson, we'd better get some sleep too."

The major stood up. "Right, colonel. It's going to be tough, telling his wife. Well, maybe it won't be necessary. He's a good strong boy, best nerves I've seen. I'd say things will be all right."

He wandered toward the doorway. He was reluctant to go and he wondered why. It was cozy in the little office. Outside it was dark and the desert cold was creeping down over the field. Suddenly the major wished it were daylight. He didn't want to see the stars.

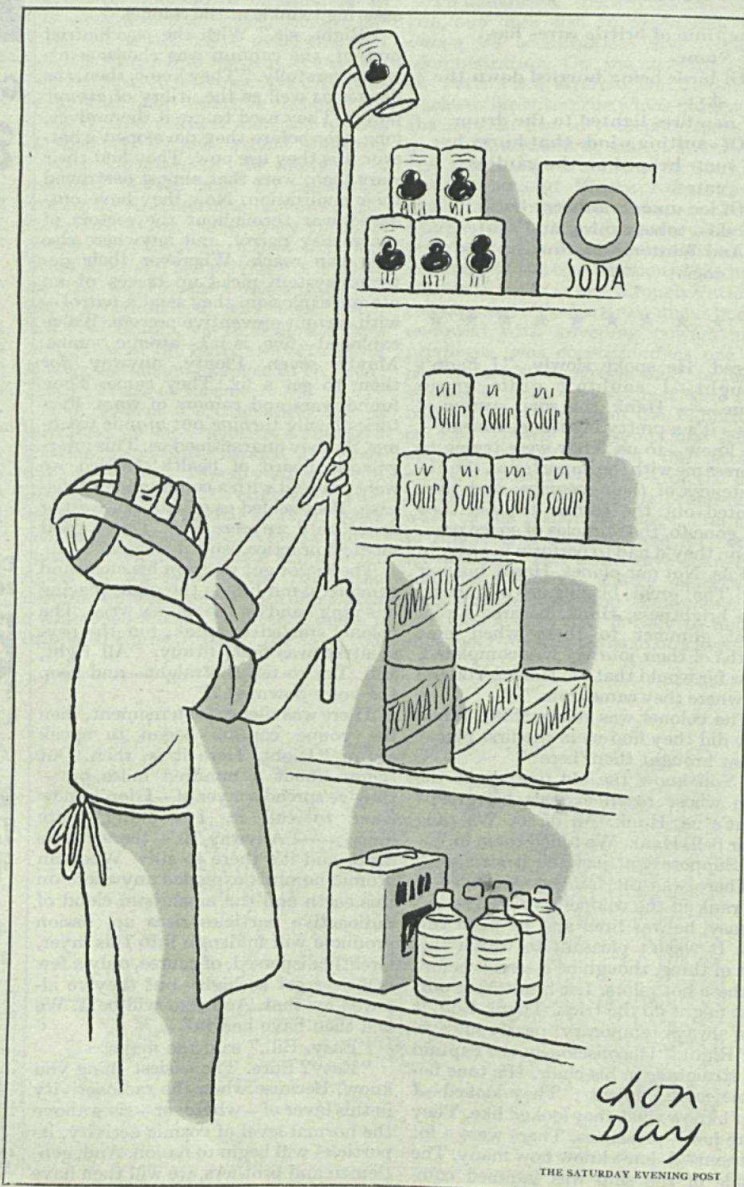
He shrugged and said good night.

"Good night, Major Donaldson."

He turned, his hand on the open door. "Oh, colonel. There is one thing. It's outside my field, but I'm curious. How did he keep that plane in the air for ten hours—with only ten minutes' fuel?"

The two men stared at each other and, through the open door, the freezing desert cold began to seep into the little room.

THE END



don
Day

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST