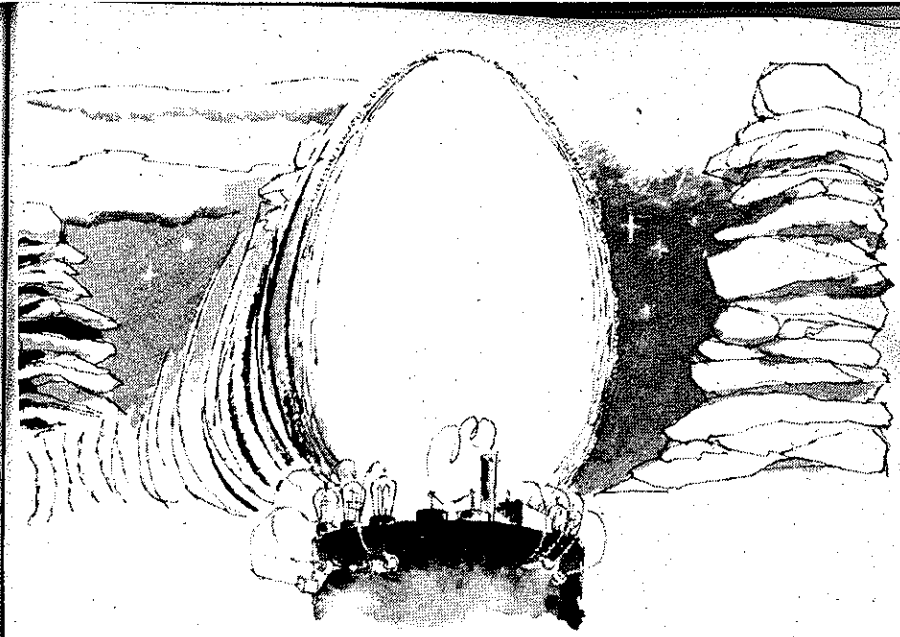


JUNKYARD

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Illustrated by SIBLEY

One thing this planet could not be accused of was lack of hospitality. Anytime it had company, it wanted them to stay — for good!

I

THEY had solved the mystery—with a guess, a very erudite and educated guess—but they didn't know a thing, not a single thing, for certain. That wasn't the way a planetary survey team usually did a job. Usually they nailed it down and

wrung a lot of information out of it and could parade an impressive roll of facts. But here there was no actual, concrete fact beyond the one that would have been obvious to a twelve-year-old child.

Commander Ira Warren was worried about it. He said as much to Bat Ears Brady, ship's cook and slightly disreputable pal of his younger days. The two of them had been planet-checking together for more than thirty years. While they stood at opposite poles on the table of organization, they were able to say to one another things they could not have said to any other man aboard the survey ship or have allowed another man to say to them.

"Bat Ears," said Warren, "I'm just a little worried."

"You're always worried," Bat Ears retorted. "That's part of the job you have."

"This junkyard business . . ."

"You wanted to get ahead," said Bat Ears, "and I told you what would happen. I warned you you'd get yourself weighed down with worry and authority and pomp—pomp—"

"Pomposity?"

"That's the word," said Bat Ears. "That's the word, exactly."

"I'm not pompous, Warren contradicted.

"No, you're worried about this junkyard business. I got a bottle stowed away. How about a little drink?"

WARREN waved away the thought. "Someday I'll bust you wide open. Where you hide the stuff, I don't know, but every trip we make . . ."

"Now, Ira! Don't go losing your lousy temper."

"Every trip we make, you carry enough dead weight of liquor to keep you annoyingly aglow for the entire cruise."

"It's baggage," Bat Ears insisted. "A man is allowed some baggage weight. I don't have hardly nothing else. I just bring along my drinking."

"Someday," said Warren savagely, "it's going to get you booted off the ship about five light-years from nowhere."

The threat was an old one. It failed to dismay Bat Ears.

"This worrying you're doing," Bat Ears said, "ain't doing you no good."

"But the survey team didn't do the job," objected Warren. "Don't you see what this means? For the first time in more than a hundred years of survey, we've found what appears to be evidence that some other race than Man has achieved space flight. And we don't know a thing about it. We should know. With all that junk out there, we'd ought to be able by this time to write a book about it."

Bat Ears spat in contempt. "You mean them scientists of ours."

The way he said "scientist" made it a dirty word.

"They're good," said Warren. "The very best there is."

"Remember the old days, Ira?" asked Bat Ears. "When you was second looey and you used to come down and we'd have a drink together and . . ."

"That has nothing to do with it."

"We had real men in them days. We'd get ourselves a club and go hunt us up some natives and beat a little sense into them and we'd get more facts in half a day than these scientists, with all their piddling around, will get in a month of Sundays."

"This is slightly different," Warren said. "There are no natives here."

There wasn't, as a matter of fact, much of anything on this particular planet. It was strictly a low-grade affair and it wouldn't amount to much for another billion years. The survey, understandably, wasn't too interested in planets that wouldn't amount to much for another billion years.

Its surface was mostly rock outcroppings and tumbled boulder fields. In the last half million years or so, primal plants had gotten started and were doing well. Mosses and lichens crept into the crevices and crawled across the rocks, but aside from that there seemed to be no life. Although, strictly speaking, you couldn't be positive, for no one had been interested in the planet. They hadn't looked it over and they hadn't searched for life; everyone had been too interested in the junkyard.

They had never intended to land, but had circled the planet, making routine checks and entering routine data in the survey record.

Then someone at a telescope had seen the junkyard and they'd gone down to investigate and had been forthrightly pitchforked into a maddening puzzle.

THEY had called it the junkyard and that was what it was. Strewn about were what probably were engine parts, although no one was quite sure. Pollard, the mech engineer, had driven himself to the verge of frenzy trying to figure out how to put some of the parts together. He finally got three of them assembled, somehow, and they didn't mean a thing, so he tried to take them apart again to figure out how he'd done it. He couldn't get them apart. It was about that time that Pollard practically blew his top.

The engine parts, if that was

what they were, were scattered all over the place, as if someone or something had tossed them away, not caring where they fell. But off to one side was a pile of other stuff, all neatly stacked, and it was apparent even to the casual glance that this stuff must be a pile of supplies.

There was what more than likely was food, though it was a rather strange kind of food (if that was what it was), and strangely fabricated bottles of plastic that held a poison liquid, and other stuff that was fabric and might have been clothing, although it gave one the shudders trying to figure out what sort of creatures would have worn that kind of clothing and bundles of metallic bars, held together in the bundles by some kind of gravitational attraction instead of the wires that a human would have used to tie them in bundles. And a number of other objects for which there were no names.

"They should have found the answer," Warren said. "They've cracked tougher nuts than this. In the month we've been here, they should have had that engine running."

"If it is an engine," Bat Ears pointed out.

"What else could it be?"

"You're getting so that you sound like them. Run into something that you can't explain and think up the best guess possible and when someone questions you, you ask what else it could be. And that ain't proof, Ira."

"You're right, Bat Ears," Warren admitted. "It certainly isn't proof and that's what worries me. We have no doubt the junk out there is a spaceship engine, but we have no proof of it."

"Nobody's going to land a ship," said Bat Ears testily, "and rip out the engine and just throw it away. If they'd done that, the ship would still be here."

"But if that's not the answer," demanded Warren, "what is all that stuff out there?"

"I wouldn't know. I'm not even curious. I ain't the one that's worrying."

He got up from the chair and moved toward the door.

"I still got that bottle, Ira."

"No, thanks," Warren said.

He sat and listened to Bat Ear's feet going down the stairs.

II

KENNETH SPENCER, the alien psychologist, came into the cabin and sat down in the chair across the desk from Warren.

"We're finally through," he said.

"You aren't through," challenged Warren. "You haven't even started."

"We've done all we can."

Warren grunted at him.

"We've run all sorts of tests," said Spencer. "We've got a book full of analyses. We have a complete photographic record and everything is down on paper in diagrams and notes and—"

"Then tell me: What is that junk out there?"

"It's a spaceship engine."

"If it's an engine," Warren said, "let's put it together. Let's find out how it runs. Let's figure out the kind of intelligence most likely to have built it."

"We tried," replied Spencer. "All of us tried. Some of us didn't have applicable knowledge or training, but even so we worked; we helped the ones who had training."

"I know how hard you worked."

And they had worked hard, only snatching stolen hours to sleep, eating on the run.

"We are dealing with alien mechanics," Spencer said.

"We've dealt with other alien concepts," Warren reminded him. "Alien economics and alien religions and alien psychology . . ."

"But this is different."

"Not so different. Take Pollard, now. He is the key man in this situation. Wouldn't you have said that Pollard should have cracked it?"

"If it can be cracked, Pollard is your man. He has everything—the theory, the experience, the imagination."

"You think we should leave?" asked Warren. "That's what you came in to tell me? You think there is no further use of staying here?"

"That's about it," Spencer admitted.

"All right," Warren told him. "If you say so, I'll take your word for it. We'll blast off right after supper. I'll tell Bat Ears to fix us up a spread. A sort of achievement dinner."

"Don't rub it in so hard," protested Spencer. "We're not proud of what we've done."

Warren heaved himself out of the chair.

"I'll go down and tell Mac to get the engines ready. On the way down, I'll drop in on Bat Ears and tell him."

Spencer said, "I'm worried, Warren."

"So am I. What is worrying you?"

"Who are these things, these other people, who had the other spaceship? They're the first, you know, the first evidence we've ever run across of another race that had discovered space flight. And what happened to them here?"

"Scared?"

"Yes. Aren't you?"

"Not yet," said Warren. "I

probably will be when I have the time to think it over."

He went down the stairs to talk to Mac about the engines.

III

HE found Mac sitting in his cubby hole, smoking his blackened pipe and reading his thumb-marked Bible.

"Good news," Warren said to him.

Mac laid down the book and took off his glasses.

"There's but one thing you could tell me that would be good news," he said.

"This is it. Get the engines ready. We'll be blasting off."

"When, sir? Not that it can be too soon."

"In a couple of hours or so," said Warren. "We'll eat and get settled in. I'll give you the word."

The engineer folded the spectacles and slid them in his pocket. He tapped the pipe out in his hand and tossed away the ashes and put the dead pipe back between his teeth.

"I've never liked this place," he said.

"You never like any place."

"I don't like them towers."

"You're crazy, Mac. There aren't any towers."

"The boys and me went walking," said the engineer. "We found a bunch of towers."

"Rock formations, probably."

"Towers," insisted the engineer doggedly.

"If you found some towers," Warren demanded, "why didn't you report them?"

"And have them science beagles go baying after them and have to stay another month?"

"It doesn't matter," Warren said. "They probably aren't towers. Who would mess around building towers on this backwash of a planet?"

"They were scary," Mac told him. "They had that black look about them. And the smell of death."

"It's the Celt in you. The big, superstitious Celt you are, rocketing through space from world to world—and still believing in banshees and spooks. The medieval mind in the age of science."

Mac said, "They fair give a man the shivers."

They stood facing one another for a long moment. Then Warren put out a hand and tapped the other gently on the shoulder.

"I won't say a word about them," he said. "Now get those engines rolling."

IV

WARREN sat in silence at the table's head, listening to the others talk.

"It was a jury-rigged job," said Clyne, the physicist. "They tore out a lot of stuff and rebuilt the engine for some reason or other and there was a lot of the stuff they tore out that they didn't use again. For some reason, they had to rebuild the engine and they rebuilt it simpler than it was before. Went back to basic principles and cut out the fancy stuff—automatics and other gadgets like that — but the one they rebuilt must have been larger and more unwieldy, less compact, than the one that they ripped down. That would explain why they left some of their supplies behind."

"But," asked Dyer, the chemist, "what did they jury-rig it with? Where did they get the material?"

Briggs, the metallurgist, said, "This place crawls with ore. If it wasn't so far out, it would be a gold mine."

"We saw no signs of mining," Dyer objected. "No signs of mining or smelting and refining or of fabrication."

"We didn't go exploring," Clyne pointed out. "They might have done some mining a few miles away from here and we'd have never known it."

Spencer said, "That's the trouble with us on this whole project. We've adopted suppositions and let them stand as fact. If they had to do some fabrication, it might be important to know a little more about it."

"What difference does it make?" asked Clyne. "We know the basic facts—a spaceship landed here in trouble, they finally repaired their engines, and they took off once again."

Old Doc Spears, down at the table's end, slammed his fork on his plate.

"You don't even know," he said, "that it was a spaceship. I've listened to you caterwauling about this thing for weeks. I've never seen so damn much motion and so few results in all my born days."

All of them looked a little surprised. Old Doc was normally a mild man and he usually paid little attention to what was going on, bumbling around on his regular rounds to treat a smashed thumb or sore throat or some other minor ailment. All of them had wondered, with a slight sickish feeling, how Old Doc might perform if he faced a real emergency, like major surgery, say. They didn't have much faith in him, but they liked him well enough. Probably they liked him mostly because he didn't mix into their affairs.

And here he was, mixing right into them truculently.

Lang, the communications man, said, "We found the scratches, Doc. You remember that. Scratches on the rock. The

kind of scratches that a spaceship could have made in landing."

"*Could* have made," said Doc derisively.

"*Must* have made!"

OLD Doc snorted and went on with his eating, holding his head down over the plate, napkin tucked beneath his chin, shoveling in the food with fork and knife impartially. Doc was noted as a messy eater.

"I have a feeling," Spencer said, "that we may be off the beaten track in thinking of this as a simple repair job. From the amount of parts that are down there in the junkyard, I'd say that they found it necessary to do a redesigning job, to start from the beginning and build an entirely new engine to get them out of here. I have a feeling that those engine parts out there represent the whole engine, that if we knew how, we could put those parts together and we'd have an engine."

"I tried it," Pollard answered.

"I can't quite buy the idea that it was a complete redesigning job," Clyne stated. "That would mean a new approach and some new ideas that would rule out the earlier design and all the parts that had been built into the original engine as it stood. The theory would explain why there are so many parts strewn around, but it's just not possible. You don't redesign an engine when you're stranded on a barren planet. You stick to what you know."

Dyer said, "Accepting an idea like redesigning sends you back again to the problem of materials."

"And tools," added Lang. "Where would they get the tools?"

"They'd probably have a machine shop right on board the ship," said Spencer.

"For minor repairs," Lang corrected. "Not the kind of equipment you would need to build a complete new engine."

"What worries me," said Pollard, "is our absolute inability to understand any of it. I tried to fit those parts together, tried to figure out the relationship of the various parts — and there must be some sort of relationship, because unrelated parts would make no sense at all. Finally I was able to fit three of them together and that's as far as I could get. When I got them together, they didn't spell a thing. They simply weren't going anywhere. Even with three of them together, you were no better off, no further along in understanding, than before you'd put them together. And when I tried to get them apart, I couldn't do that, either. You'd think, once a man had got a thing together, he could take it apart again, wouldn't you?"

"It was an alien ship," Spencer offered, "built by alien people, run by alien engines."

"Even so," said Pollard, "there should have been some basic idea that we could recognize. In some way or other, their engine should have operated along at least one principle that would be basic with human mechanics. An engine is a piece of mechanism that takes raw power and controls it and directs it into useful energy. That would be its purpose, no matter what race built it."

"The metal," said Briggs, "is an alien alloy, totally unlike anything we have ever run across. You can identify the components, all right, but the formula, when you get it down, reads like a metallic nightmare. It shouldn't work. By Earth standards, it *wouldn't* work. There's some secret in the combination that I can't even guess at."

Old Doc said, from the table's end, "You're to be congratulated, Mr. Briggs; upon your fine sense of restraint."

"Cut it out, Doc," Warren ordered sharply, speaking for the first time.

"All right," said Doc. "If that's the way you want it, Ira, I will cut it out."

V

STANDING outside the ship, Warren looked across the planet. Evening was fading into night and the junkyard was no more than a grotesque blotch of deeper shadow on the hillside.

Once, not long ago, another ship had rested here, just a little way from where they rested now. Another ship—another race.

And something had happened to that ship, something that his survey party had tried to ferret out and had failed to discover.

It had not been a simple repair job; he was sure of that. No matter what any of them might say, it had been considerably more than routine repair.

There had been some sort of emergency, a situation with a strange urgency about it. They had left in such a hurry that they had abandoned some of their supplies. No commander of any spaceship, be he human or alien, would leave supplies behind except when life or death was involved in his escape.

There was what appeared to be food in the stack of supplies—at least, Dyer had said that it was food, although it didn't look edible. And there were the plastic-like bottles filled with a poison that might be, as like as not, the equivalent of an alien whisky. And no man, Warren said, leaves

food and whisky behind except in the direst emergency.

He walked slowly down the trail they'd beaten between the ship's lock and the junkyard and it struck him that he walked in a silence that was as deep as the awful stillness of far space. There was nothing here to make any sound at all. There was no life except the mosses and the lichens and the other primal plants that crept among the rocks. In time there would be other life, for the planet had the air and water and the basic ingredients for soil and here, in another billion years or so, there might arise a life economy as complex as that of Earth.

But a billion years, he thought, is a long, long time.

He reached the junkyard and walked its familiar ground, dodging the larger pieces of machinery that lay all about, stumbling on one or two of the smaller pieces that lay unseen in the darkness.

THE second time he stumbled, he stooped and picked up the thing he had stumbled on and it was, he knew, one of the tools that the alien race had left behind them when they fled. He could picture them, dropping their tools and fleeing, but the picture was not clear. He could not decide what these aliens might have looked like or what they might have fled from.

He tossed the tool up and down, catching it in his hand. It was light and handy and undoubtedly there was some use for it, but he did not know the use nor did any of the others up there in the ship. Hand or tentacle, claw or paw — what appendage had it been that had grasped the tool? What mind lay behind the hand or tentacle, claw or paw that had grasped and used it?

He stood and threw back his head and looked at the stars that shone above the planet and they were not the familiar stars he had known when he was a child.

Far out, he thought, far out. The farthest out that Man had ever been.

A sound jerked him around, the sound of running feet coming down the trail.

"Warren!" cried a voice. "Warren! Where are you?"

There was fright in that voice, the frantic note of panic that one hears in the screaming of a terrified child.

"Warren!"

"Here!" shouted Warren. "Over here. I'm coming."

He swung around and hurried to meet the man who was running in the dark.

The runner would have charged on past him if he had not put out a hand and gripped him by the shoulder and pulled him to a halt.

"Warren! Is that you?"

"What's the matter, Mac?" asked Warren.

"I can't . . . I can't . . . I . . ."

"What's wrong? Speak up! You can't what, Mac?"

He felt the engineer's fumbling hands reaching out for him, grasping at his coat lapels, hanging onto him as if the engineer were a drowning man.

"Come on, come on," Warren urged with the impatience of alarm.

"I can't start the engines, sir," said Mac.

"Can't start the . . ."

"I can't start them, sir. And neither can the others. None of us can start them, sir."

"The engines!" said Warren, terror rising swiftly. "What's the matter with the engines?"

"There's nothing the matter with the engines. It's us, sir. We can't start them."

"Talk sense, man. Why can't you?"

"We can't remember how. We've forgotten how to start the engines!"

VI

WARREN switched on the light above the desk and straightened, seeking out the book among the others on the shelf.

"It's right here, Mac," he said. "I knew I had it here."

He found it and took it down and opened it beneath the light. He leafed the pages rapidly. Behind him he could hear the tense, almost terrified breathing of the engineer.

"It's all right, Mac. It's all here in the book."

He leafed too far ahead and had to back up a page or two and reached the place and spread the book wide beneath the lamp.

"Now," he said, "we'll get those engines started. It tells right here . . ."

He tried to read and couldn't.

He could understand the words all right and the symbols, but the sum of the words he read made little sense and the symbols none at all.

He felt the sweat breaking out on him, running down his forehead and gathering in his eyebrows, breaking out of his armpits and trickling down his ribs.

"What's the matter, Chief?" asked Mac. "What's the matter now?"

Warren felt his body wanting to shake, straining every nerve to tremble, but it wouldn't move. He was frozen stiff.

"This is the engine manual," he said, his voice cold and low. "It tells all about the engines—how they operate, how to locate trouble, how to fix them."

"Then we're all right," breathed Mac, enormously relieved.

Warren closed the book.

"No, we aren't, Mac. I've forgotten all the symbols and most of the terminology."

"You what!"

"I can't read the book," said Warren.

VII

"IT just isn't possible," argued Spencer.

"It's not only possible," Warren told him. "It happened. Is there any one of you who can read that book?"

They didn't answer him.

"If there's anyone who can," invited Warren, "step up and show us how."

Clyne said quietly, "There's none of us can read it."

"And yet," declared Warren, "an hour ago any one of you—any single one of you—probably would have bet his life that he not only could start the engines if he had to, but could take the manual if he couldn't and figure how to do it."

"You're right," Clyne agreed. "We would have bet our lives. An hour ago we would have. It would have been a safe, sure bet."

"That's what you think," said Warren. "How do you know how long it's been since you couldn't read the manual?"

"We don't, of course," Clyne was forced to admit.

"There's something more. You didn't find the answer to the junkyard. You *guessed* an answer, but you didn't *find* one. And you should have. You know damn well you should have."

Clyne rose to his feet. "Now see here, Warren . . ."

"Sit down, John," said Spencer. "Warren's got us dead to rights. We didn't find an answer and we know we didn't. We took a guess and substituted it for the answer that we didn't find. And Warren's right about something else—we should have found the answer."

Under any other circumstances, Warren thought, they might have hated him for those blunt truths, but now they didn't. They just sat there and he could see the realization seeping into them.

Dyer finally said, "You think we failed out there because we forgot—just like Mac forgot."

"You lost some of your skills," replied Warren, "some of your skills and knowledge. You worked as hard as ever. You went through the motions. You didn't have the skill or knowledge any more, that's all."

"And now?" asked Lang.

"I don't know."

"This is what happened to that other ship," said Briggs emphatically.

"Maybe," Warren said with less conviction.

"But they got away," Clyne pointed out.

"So will we," promised Warren. "Somehow."

VIII

THE crew of that other, alien ship had evidently forgotten, too. But somehow or other they had blasted off — somehow or other they had remembered, or forced themselves to remember. But if it had been the simple matter of remembering, why had they rebuilt the engines? They could have used their own.

Warren lay in his bunk, staring into the blackness, knowing that a scant two feet above his head there was a plate of steel, but he couldn't see the steel. And he knew there was a way to start the engines, a simple way once you knew it or remembered it, but he couldn't see that, either.

Man experienced incidents, gathered knowledge, knew emotion—and then, in the course of time, forgot the incident and knowledge and emotion. Life was a long series of forgettings. Memories were wiped out and old knowledge dulled and skill was lost, but it took time to wipe it out or dull it or lose it. You couldn't know a thing one day and forget it on the next.

But here on this barren world, in some impossible way, the forgetting had been speeded up. On Earth it took years to forget an incident or to lose a skill. Here it happened overnight.

He tried to sleep and couldn't. He finally got up and dressed and went down the stairs, out the lock into the alien night.

A low voice asked, "That you, Ira?"

"It's me, Bat Ears. I couldn't sleep. I'm worried."

"You're always worried," Bat Ears. "It's an occu . . . occu . . ."

"Occupational?"

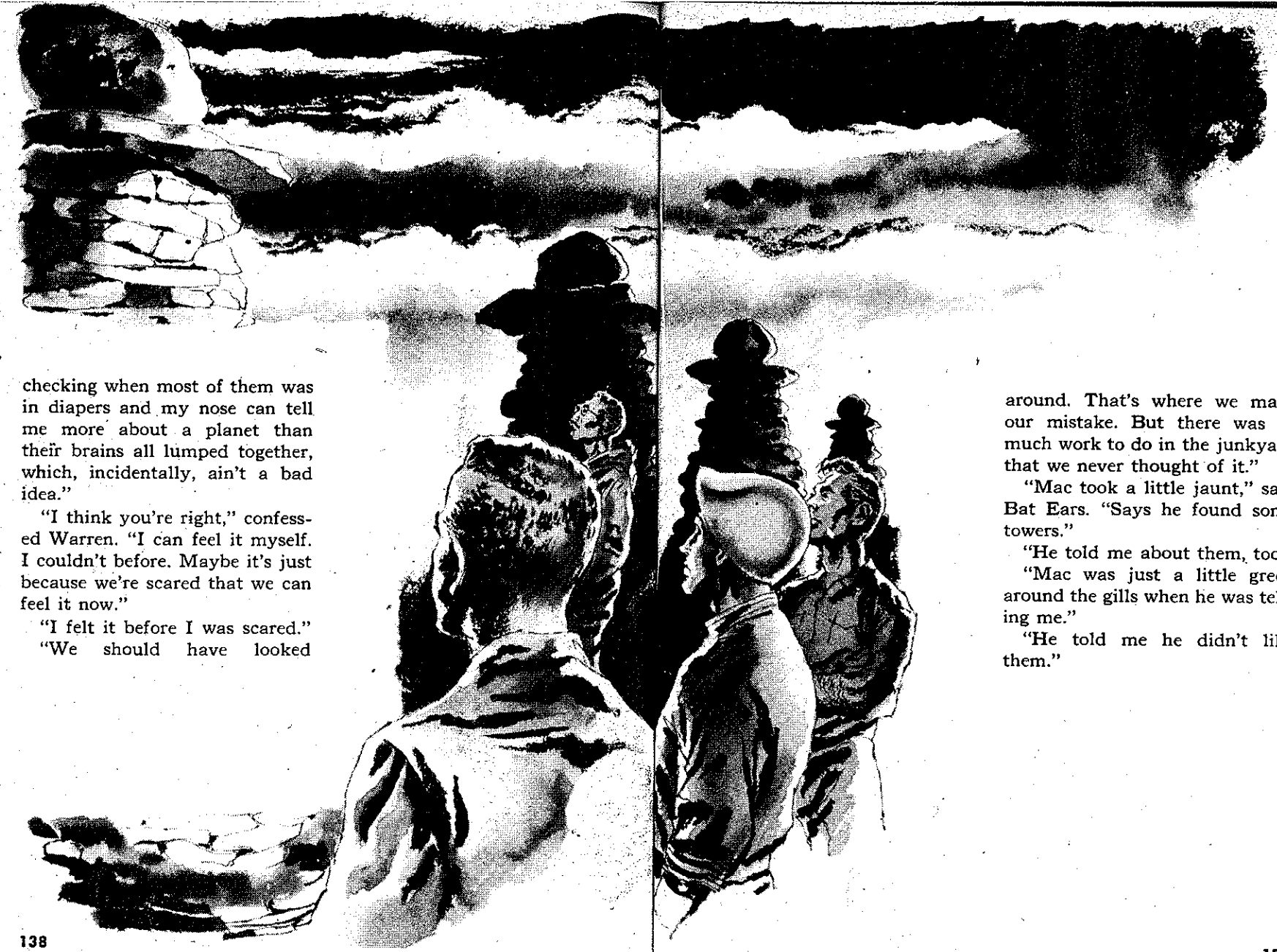
"That's it," said Bat Ears, hiccoughing just a little. "That's the word I wanted. Worry is an occupational disease with you."

"We're in a jam, Bat Ears."

"There's been planets," Bat Ears said, "I wouldn't of minded so much being marooned on, but this ain't one of them. This here place is the tail end of creation."

They stood together in the darkness with the sweep of alien stars above them and the silent planet stretching off to a vague horizon.

"There's something here;" Bat Ears went on. "You can smell it in the air. Them fancy-pants in there said there wasn't nothing here because they couldn't see nothing and the books they'd read said nothing much could live on a planet that was just rocks and moss. But, me, I've seen planets. Me, I was planet-



checking when most of them was in diapers and my nose can tell me more about a planet than their brains all lumped together, which, incidentally, ain't a bad idea."

"I think you're right," confessed Warren. "I can feel it myself. I couldn't before. Maybe it's just because we're scared that we can feel it now."

"I felt it before I was scared."

"We should have looked around. That's where we made our mistake. But there was so much work to do in the junkyard that we never thought of it."

"Mac took a little jaunt," said Bat Ears. "Says he found some towers."

"He told me about them, too."

"Mac was just a little green around the gills when he was telling me."

"He told me he didn't like them."

"If there was any place to run to, Mac would be running right now."

"In the morning," Warren said, "we'll go and see those towers."

IX

THEY were towers, all right, and there were eight of them in line, like watch towers that at one time had stretched across the planet, but something had happened and all the others had been leveled except the eight that were standing there.

They were built of undressed native rock, crudely piled, without mortar and with little wedges and slabs of stone used in the interstices to make the stones set solid. They were the kind of towers that might have been built by a savage race and they had an ancient look about them. They were about six feet at the base and tapered slightly toward the top and each of them was capped by a huge flat stone with an enormous boulder placed upon the slab to hold it in its place.

Warren said to Ellis, "This is your department. Take over."

The little archeologist didn't answer. He walked around the nearest tower and went up close to it and examined it. He put out his hands and acted as if he meant to shake the tower, but it didn't shake.

"Solid," he said. "Well built and old."

"Type F culture, I would say," guessed Spencer.

"Maybe less than that. No attempt at an esthetic effect—pure utility. But good craftsmanship."

Clyne said, "Its purpose is the thing. What were the towers built for?"

"Storage space," said Spencer.

"A marker," Lang contradicted. "A claim marker, a cache marker . . ."

"We can find the purpose," Warren said. "That is something we needn't argue nor speculate about. All we have to do is knock off the boulder and lift the cap and have a look inside."

He strode up to the tower and started climbing it.

It was an easy thing to climb, for there were niches in the stones and hand and toe holds were not too hard to find.

He reached the top.

"Look out below," he yelled, and heaved at the boulder.

It rolled and then slowly settled back. He braced himself and heaved again and this time it toppled. It went plunging off the tower, smashed to the ground, went rumbling down the slope, gathering speed, hitting other boulders in its path, zigzagging with the deflection of its course, thrown high into the air by the boulders that it hit.

WARREN said, "Throw a rope up to me. I'll fasten it to the capstone and then we can haul it off."

"We haven't got a rope," said Clyne.

"Someone run back to the ship and get one. I'll wait here till he returns."

Briggs started back toward the ship.

Warren straightened up. From the tower he had a fine view of the country and he swiveled slowly, examining it.

Somewhere nearby, he thought, the men—well, not men, but the things that built these towers—must have had their dwelling. Within a mile or so there had been at one time a habitation. For the towers would have taken time in building and that meant that the ones who built them must have had at least a semi-permanent location.

But there was nothing to see—nothing but tumbled boulder fields and great outcroppings and the blankets of primal plants that ran across their surfaces.

What did they live on? Why were they here? What would have attracted them? What would have held them here?

He halted in his pivoting, scarcely believing what he saw. Carefully he traced the form of it, making sure that the light on some boulder field was not befuddling his vision.

It couldn't be, he told himself. It couldn't happen three times. He must be wrong.

He sucked in his breath and held it and waited for the illusion to go away.

It didn't go away. The thing was there.

"Spencer," he called. "Spencer, please come up here."

He continued watching it. Below him, he heard Spencer scrabbling up the tower. He reached down a hand and helped him.

"Look," Warren said, pointing. "What is that out there?"

"A ship!" cried Spencer. "There's another ship out there!"

THE spaceship was old, incredibly old. It was red with rust; you could put your hand against its metal hide and sweep your hand across it and the flakes of rust would rain down upon the rock and your hand would come away painted with rust.

The airlock once had been closed, but someone or something had battered a hole straight through it without opening it, for the rim was still in place against the hull and the jagged hole ran to the ship's interior. For yards around the lock, the ground was red with violently scattered rust.

They clambered through the hole. Inside, the ship was bright

and shining, without a trace of rust, although there was a coating of dust over everything. Through the dust upon the floor was a beaten track and many isolated footprints where the owners of the prints had stepped out of the path. They were alien tracks, with a heavy heel and three great toes, for all the world like the tracks of a mighty bird or some long-dead dinosaur.

The trail led through the ship back to the engine room and there the empty platform stood, with the engines gone.

"That's how they got away," said Warren, "the ones who junked their engines. They took the engines off this ship and put them in their ship and then they took off."

"But they wouldn't know—" argued Clyne.

"They evidently did," Warren interrupted bluntly.

Spencer said, "They must have been the ones. This ship has been here for a long time—the rust will tell you that. And it was closed, hermetically sealed, because there's no rust inside. That hole was punched through the lock fairly recently and the engines taken."

"That means, then," said Lang, "that they did junk their engines. They ripped them out entire and heaved them in the junkpile. They tore them out and replaced them with the engines from this ship."

"But why?" asked Clyne. "Why did they have to do it?"

"Because," said Spencer, "they didn't know how to operate their own engines."

"But if they didn't know how to operate their engines, how could they run this one?"

"HE'S got you there," said Dyer. "That's one that you can't answer."

"No, I can't," shrugged Warren. "But I wish I could, because then we'd have the answer ourselves."

"How long ago," asked Spencer, "would you say this ship landed here? How long would it take for a spaceship hull to rust?"

"It's hard to tell," Slyne answered. "It would depend on the kind of metal they used. But you can bet on this—any spaceship hull, no matter who might have built it, would be the toughest metal the race could fabricate."

"A thousand years?" Warren suggested.

"I don't know," said Clyne. "Maybe a thousand years. Maybe more than that. You see this dust. That's what's left of whatever organic material there was in the ship. If the beings that landed here remained within the ship, they still are here in the form of dust."

Warren tried to think, tried to sort out the chronology of the whole thing.

A thousand years ago, or thousands of years ago, a spaceship had landed here and had not got away.

Then another spaceship landed, a thousand or thousands of years later, and it, too, was unable to get away. But it finally escaped when the crew robbed the first ship of its engines and substituted them for the ones that had brought it here.

Then years, or months, or days later, the Earth survey ship had landed here and it, too, couldn't get away—because the men who ran it couldn't remember how to operate its engines.

He swung around and strode from the engine room, leaving the others there, following the path in the dust back to the shattered lock.

And just inside the port, sitting on the floor, making squiggles in the dust with an awkward finger, sat Briggs, who had gone back to the ship to get a length of rope.

"Briggs," said Warren sharply. "Briggs, what are you doing here?"

Briggs looked up with vacant, laughing eyes.

"Go away," he said.

Then he went back to making squiggles in the dust.

XI

DOC SPEARS said, "Briggs reverted to childhood. His mind is wiped as clean as a one-year-old's. He can talk, which is about the only difference between a child and him. But his vocabulary is limited and what he says makes very little sense."

"He can be taught again?" asked Warren.

"I don't know."

"Spencer had a look at him. What does Spencer say?"

"Spencer said a lot," Doc told him. "It adds up, substantially, to practically total loss of memory."

"What can we do?"

"Watch him. See he doesn't get hurt. After a while we might try re-education. He may even pick up some things by himself. Something happened to him. Whether whatever it was that took his memory away also injured his brain is something I can't say for sure. It doesn't appear injured, but without a lot of diagnostic equipment we don't have, you can't be positive."

"There's no sign of injury?"

"There's not a single mark anywhere," said Doc. "He isn't hurt. That is, not physically. It's only his mind that's been injured. Maybe not his mind, either—just his memory gone."

"Amnesia?"

"Not amnesia. When you have that, you're confused. You are haunted by the thought that you have forgotten something. You're all tangled up. Briggs isn't confused or tangled. He seems to be happy enough."

"You'll take care of him, Doc? Kind of keep an eye on him?"

Doc snorted and got up and left.

Warren called after him, "If you see Bat Ears down there, tell him to come up."

Doc clumped down the stairs.

Warren sat and stared at the blank wall opposite him.

First Mac and his crew had forgotten how to run the engines. That was the first sign of what was happening—the first recognizable sign—for it had been going on long before Mac found he'd forgotten all his engine lore.

The crew of investigators had lost some of their skills and their knowledge almost from the first. How else could one account for the terrible mess they'd made of the junkyard business? Under ordinary circumstances, they would have wrung some substantial information from the engine parts and the neatly stacked supplies. They had gotten information of a sort, of course, but it added up to nothing. Under ordinary circumstances, it should have added up to an extraordinary something.

He heard feet coming up the stairs, but the tread was too crisp for Bat Ears.

It was Spencer.

SPENCER flopped into one of the chairs. He sat there opening and closing his hands, looking down at them with helpless anger.

"Well?" asked Warren. "Anything to report?"

"Briggs got into that first tower," said Spencer. "Apparently he came back with the rope and found us gone, so he climbed up and threw a hitch around the capstone, then climbed down again and pulled it off. The capstone is lying on the ground, at the foot of the tower, with the rope still hitched around it."

Warren nodded. "He could have done that. The capstone wasn't too heavy. One man could have pulled it off."

"There's something in that tower."

"You took a look?"

"After what happened to Briggs? Of course not. I posted a guard to keep everyone away. We can't go monkeying around with the tower until we've thought a few things through."

"What do you think is in there?"

"I don't know," said Spencer. "All I have is an idea. We know what it can do. It can strip your memory."

"Maybe it's fright that did it," Warren said. "Something down in the tower so horrible . . ."

Spencer shook his head. "There is no evidence of fright in Briggs. He's calm. Sits there happy as a clam, playing with his fingers and talking silly sentences—happy sentences. The way a kid would talk."

"Maybe what he's saying will give us a hint. Keep someone listening all the time. Even if the words don't mean much . . ."

"It wouldn't do any good. Not only is his memory gone, but even the memory of what took it away."

"What do you plan to do?"

"Try to get into the tower," said Spencer. "Try to find out what's in there. There must be a way of getting at whatever is there and coming out okay."

"Look," Warren stated, "we have enough as it is."

"I have a hunch."

"This is the first time I've ever heard you use that word. You gents don't operate on hunches. You operate on fact."

Spencer put up an outspread hand and wiped it across his face.

"I don't know what's the matter with me, Warren. I know I've never thought in hunches before. Perhaps because now I can't help myself, the hunch comes in and fills the place of knowledge that I've lost."

"You admit there's been knowledge lost?"

"Of course I do," said Spencer. "You were right about the junkyard. We should have done a better job."

"And now you have a hunch."

"IT'S crazy," said Spencer. "At least, it sounds crazy. That memory, that lost knowledge and lost skill went somewhere. Maybe there's something in the tower that took it away. I have the silly feeling we might get it back again, take it back from the thing that has it."

He looked challengingly at Warren. "You think I'm cracked."

Warren shook his head. "No, not that. Just grasping at straws."

Spencer got up heavily. "I'll do what I can. I'll talk with the others. We'll try to think it out before we try anything."

When he had gone, Warren buzzed the engine room communicator.

Mac's voice came reedily out of the box.

"Having any luck, Mac?"

"None at all," Mac told him. "We sit and look at the engines. We are going out of our heads trying to remember."

"I guess that's all you can do, Mac."

"We could mess around with them, but I'm afraid if we do, we'll get something out of kilter."

"Keep your hands off everything," commanded Warren in sudden alarm. "Don't touch a single thing. God knows what you might do."

"We're just sitting," Mac said, "and looking at the engines and trying to remember."

Crazy, thought Warren.

Of course it was crazy.

Down there were men trained to operate spaceship engines, men who had lived and slept with engines for year on lonesome year. And now they sat and looked at engines and wondered how to run them.

Warren got up from his desk and went slowly down the stairs.

In the cook's quarters, he found Bat Ears.

Bat Ears had fallen off a chair and was fast asleep upon the floor, breathing heavily. The room reeked with liquor fumes. An almost empty bottle sat upon the table.

Warren reached out a foot and prodded Bat Ears gently. Bat Ears moaned a little in his sleep.

Warren picked up the bottle and held it to the light. There was one good, long drink.

He tilted the bottle and took the drink, then hurled the empty bottle against the wall. The broken plastiglass sprayed in a shower down on Bat Ears' head.

Bat Ears raised a hand and brushed it off, as if brushing away a fly. Then he slept on, smiling, with his mind comfortably drugged against memories he no longer had.

XII

THEY covered the tower with the capstone once again and rigged a tripod and pulley above it. Then they took the capstone off and used the pulley to lower an automatic camera into the pit and they got their pictures.

There was something in the tower, all right.

They spread the pictures out on the table in the mess room and tried to make out what they had.

It was shaped like a watermelon or an egg stood on one end with the lower end slightly mashed so that it would stand upright. It sprouted tiny hairs all over and some of the hairs were blurred in the pictures, as if they might have been vibrating. There was tubing and what seemed to be wiring, even if it didn't look exactly the way you thought of wiring, massed around the lower end of the egg.

They made other tests, lowering the instruments with the pulley, and they determined that the egg was alive and that it was the equivalent of a warm-blooded animal, although they were fairly sure that its fluids would not be identical with blood.

It was soft and unprotected by any covering shell and it pulsed and gave out some sort of vibrations. They couldn't determine what sort of vibrations. The little hairs that covered it were continually in motion.

They put the capstone back in place again, but left the tripod and the pulley standing.

Howard, the biologist, said, "It's alive and it's an organism of some kind, but I'm not at all convinced that it's pure animal. Those wires and that piping lead straight into it, as if, you'd almost swear, the piping and the wires were a part of it. And look at these — what would you call them? — these studs, almost like connections for other wires."

"It's not inconceivable," said Spencer, "that an animal and a mechanism should be joined together. Take Man and his machines. Man and the machines work together, but Man maintains his individual identity and the machines maintain their own. In a lot of cases it would make more sense, economically, if not socially, that Man and machine should be one, that the two of them be joined together, become, in face, one organism."

Dyer said, "I think that may be what we have here."

"Those other towers?" asked Ellis.

"They could be connected," Spencer suggested, "associated in some way. All eight of them could be, as a matter of principle, one complex organism."

"We don't know what's in those other towers," said Ellis.

"We could find out," Howard answered.

"No, we can't," objected Spencer. "We don't dare. We've fooled around with them more than was safe. Mac and his crew went for a walk and found the towers and examined them, just casually, you understand, and they came back not knowing how to operate the engines. We can't take the chance of fooling around with them a minute longer than is necessary. Already we may have lost more than we suspect."

"You mean," said Clyne, "that the loss of memory we may have experienced will show up later? That we may not know now we've lost it, but will find later that we did?"

SPENCER nodded. "That's what happened to Mac. He or any member of his crew would have sworn, up to the minute that they tried to start the engines, that they could start them. They took it for granted, just as we take our knowledge for granted. Until we come to use the specific knowledge we have lost, we won't realize we've lost it."

"It scares you just to think about it," Howard said.

Lang said, "It's some sort of communications system."

"Naturally you'd think so. You're a communications man."

"Those wires."

"And what about the pipes?" asked Howard.

"I have a theory on that one," Spencer told them. "The pipes supply the food."

"Attached to some food supply," said Clyne. "A tank of food buried in the ground."

"More likely roots," Howard put in. "To talk of tanks of food would mean these are transplanted things. They could just as easily be native to this planet."

"They couldn't have built those towers," said Ellis. "If they were native, they'd had to build those towers themselves. Something or someone else built the towers, like a farmer builds a barn to protect his cattle. I'd vote for tanks of food."

Warren spoke for the first time. "What makes you think it's a communications setup?"

Lang shrugged. "Nothing specific. Those wires, I guess, and the studs. It *looks* like a communications rig."

"Communications might fill the bill," Spencer nodded. "But a communications machine built to take in information rather than to pass information along or disseminate it."

"What are you getting at?" demanded Lang. "How would that be communication?"

"I mean," said Spencer, "that something has been robbing us of our memory. It stole our ability to run the engines and it took enough knowledge away from us so we bungled the junkyard job."

"It couldn't be that," said Dyer.

"Why couldn't it?" asked Clyne.

"It's just too damn fantastic."

"NO more fantastic," Spencer told him, "than a lot of other things we've found. Say that egg is a device for gathering knowledge . . ."

"But there's no knowledge to gather here," protested Dyer. "Thousands of years ago, there was knowledge to gather from the rusted ship out there. And then, just a while ago, there was knowledge to gather from the junkyard ship. And now there's us. But the next shipload of knowledge won't come along for maybe uncounted thousands of years. It's too long to wait, too big a gamble. Three ships we know of have come here; it would be just as reasonable to suppose that no ship would ever come here. It doesn't make any sense."

"Who said that the knowledge had to be collected here? Even back on Earth we forget, don't we?"

"Good Lord!" gasped Clyne, but Spencer rushed ahead.

"If you were some race setting out fish traps for knowledge and had plenty of time to gather it, where would you put your traps? On a planet that swarmed with sentient beings, where the traps might be found and destroyed or their secrets snatched away? Or would you put them on some uninhabited, out-of-the-way planet, some second-rate world that won't be worth a tinker's dam to anyone for another billion years?"

Warren said, "I'd put them on a planet just like this."

"Let me give you the picture," Spencer continued. "Some race is bent on trapping knowledge throughout the Galaxy. So they hunt up the little, insignificant, good-for-nothing planets where they can hide their traps. That way, with traps planted on strategically spaced planets, they sweep all space and there's little chance that their knowledge traps ever will be found."

"You think that's what we've found here?" asked Clyne.

"I'm tossing you the idea," said Spencer, "to see what you think of it. Now let's hear your comments."

"Well, the distance, for one thing—"

"What we have here," said Spencer, "is mechanical telepathy hooked up with a recording device. We know that distance has little to do with the speed of thought waves."

"There's no other basis for this belief beyond speculation?" asked Warren.

"What else can there be? You certainly can't expect proof. We don't dare to get close enough to find out what this egg is. And maybe, even if we could, we haven't got enough knowledge left in us to make an intelligent decision or a correct deduction."

"So we guess again," said Warren.

"Have you some better method?"

Warren shook his head. "No, I don't think I have."

XIII

DYER put on a spacesuit, with a rope running from it to the pulley in the tripod set above the tower. He carried wires to connect to the studs. The other ends of the wires were connected to a dozen different instruments to see what might come over them—if anything.

Dyer climbed the tower and they lowered him down into the inside of the tower. Almost immediately, he quit talking to them, so they pulled him out.

When they loosened the spacesuit helmet and hinged it back, he gurgled and blew bubbles at them.

Old Doc gently led him back to sick bay.

Clyne and Pollard worked for hours designing a lead helmet with television installed instead of vision plates. Howard, the biologist, climbed inside the spacesuit and was lowered into the tower.

When they hauled him out a minute later, he was crying—like a child. Ellis hurried him after Old Doc and Dyer, with Howard clutching his hands and babbling between sobs.

After ripping the television unit out of the helmet, Pollard was all set to go in the helmet made of solid lead when Warren put a stop to it.

"You keep this up much longer," he told them, "and we'll have no one left."

"This one has a chance of working," Clyne declared. "It might have been the television lead-ins that let them get at Howard."

"It has a chance of not working, too."

"But we have to try."

"Not until I say so."

Pollard started to put the solid helmet on his head.

"Don't put that thing on," said Warren. "You're not going anywhere you'll be needing it."

"I'm going in the tower," Pollard said flatly.

Warren took a step toward him and without warning lashed out with his fist. It caught Pollard on the jaw and crumpled him.

Warren turned to face the rest of them. "If there's anyone else who thinks he wants to argue, I'm ready to begin the discussion —in the same way."

None of them wanted to argue. He could see the tired disgust for him written on their faces.

Spencer said, "You're upset, Warren. You don't know what you're doing."

"I know damned well what I'm doing," Warren retorted. "I know there must be a way to get into that tower and get out again with some of your memory left. But the way you're going about it isn't the right way."

"You know another?" asked Ellis bitterly.

"No, I don't," said Warren. "Not yet."

"What do you want us to do?" demanded Ellis. "Sit around and twiddle our thumbs?"

"I want you to behave like grown men," said Warren, "not like a bunch of crazy kids out to rob an orchard."

He stood and looked at them and none of them had a word to say.

"I have three mewling babies on my hands right now," he added. "I don't want any more."

He walked away, up the hill, heading for the ship.

XIV

THEIR memory had been stolen, probably by the egg that squatted in the tower. And although none of them had dared to say the thought aloud, the thing that all of them were thinking was that maybe there was a way to steal that knowledge back, to tap and drain all the rest of the knowledge that was stored within the egg.

Warren sat at his desk and held his head in his hands, trying to think.

Maybe he should have let them go ahead with what they had been doing. But if he had, they'd have kept right on, using variations of the same approach —and when the approach had failed twice, they should have figured out that approach was wrong and tried another.

Spencer had said that they'd lost knowledge and not known they had lost it, and that was the insidious part of the whole situation. They still thought of themselves as men of science, and they were, of course, but not as skilled, not as knowledgable as they once had been.

That was the hell of it—they still thought they were.

They despised him now and that was all right with him. Anything was all right with him if it would help them discover a way to escape.

Forgetfulness, he thought. All through the Galaxy, there was forgetfulness. There were explanations for that forgetfulness, very learned and astute theories on why a being should forget something it had learned. But might not all these explanations be wrong? Might it not be that forgetfulness could be traced, not to some kink within the brain, not to some psychic cause, but to thousands upon thousands of memory traps planted through the Galaxy, traps that tapped and drained and nibbled away at the mass memory of all the sentient beings which lived among the stars?

On Earth a man would forget slowly over the span of many years and that might be because the memory traps that held Earth in their orbit were very far away. But here a man forgot completely and suddenly. Might that not be because he was within the very shadow of the memory traps?

He tried to imagine Operation Mind Trap and it was a shocking concept too big for the brain to grasp. Someone came to the backwoods planets, the good-for-

nothing planets, the sure-to-be-passed-by planets and set out the memory traps.

They hooked them up in series and built towers to protect them from weather or from accident, and set them operating and connected them to tanks of nutrients buried deep within the soil. Then they went away.

And years later—how many years later, a thousand, ten thousand?—they came back again and emptied the traps of the knowledge they had gathered. As a trapper sets out traps to catch animals for fur, or a fisherman should set the pots for lobsters or drag the seine for fish.

A harvest, Warren thought—a continual, never-ending harvest of the knowledge of the Galaxy.

IF this were true, what kind of race would it be that set the traps? What kind of trapper would be plodding the starways, gathering his catch?

Warren's reason shrank away from the kind of race that it would be.

The creatures undoubtedly came back again, after many years, and emptied the traps of the knowledge they had snared. That must be what they'd do, for why otherwise would they bother to set out the traps? And if they could empty the traps of the knowledge they had caught, that meant there was some way to empty them. And if the trappers themselves could drain off the knowledge, so could another race.

If you could only get inside the tower and have a chance to figure out the way, you could do the job, for probably it was a simple thing, once you had a chance to see it. But you couldn't get inside. If you did, you were robbed of all memory and came out a squalling child. The moment you got inside, the egg grabbed onto your mind and wiped it clean and you didn't even know why you were there or how you'd got there or where you were.

The trick was to get inside and still keep your memory, to get inside and still know what there was to do.

Spencer and the others had tried shielding the brain and shielding didn't work. Maybe there was a way to make it work, but you'd have had to use trial and error methods and that meant too many men coming out with their memories gone before you had the answer. It meant that maybe in just a little while you'd have no men at all.

There must be another way.

When you couldn't shield a thing, what did you do?

A communications problem, Lang had said. Perhaps Lang was right—the egg was a communications setup. And what did you do to protect communications? When you couldn't shield a communication, what did you do with it?

There was an answer to that one, of course—you scrambled it.

But there was no solution there, nor any hint of a solution. He sat and listened and there was no sound. No one had stopped by to see him; no one had dropped in to pass the time of day.

They're sore, he thought. They're off sulking in a corner. They're giving me the silent treatment.

To hell with them, he said.

He sat alone and tried to think and there were no thoughts, just a mad merry-go-round of questions revolving in his skull.

Finally there were footsteps on the stairs and from their unsteadiness, he knew whose they were.

It was Bat Ears coming up to comfort him and Bat Ears had a skin full.

He waited, listening to the stumbling feet tramping up the stairs, and Bat Ears finally appeared. He stood manfully in the doorway, putting out both hands and bracing them against the jambs on either side of him to keep the place from swaying.

BAT EARS nerved himself and plunged across the space from doorway to chair and grabbed the chair and hung onto it and wrestled himself into it and looked up at Warren with a smirk of triumph.

"Made it," Bat Ears said.

"You're drunk," snapped Warren disgustedly.

"Sure, I'm drunk. It's lonesome being drunk all by yourself. Here . . ."

He found his pocket and hauled the bottle out and set it gingerly on the desk.

"There you are," he said. "Let's you and me go and hang one on."

Warren stared at the bottle and listened to the little imp of thought that jigged within his brain.

"No, it wouldn't work."

"Cut out the talking and start working on that jug. When you get through with that one, I got another hid out."

"Bat Ears," said Warren.

"What do you want?" asked Bat Ears. "I never saw a man that wanted—"

"How much more have you got?"

"How much more what, Ira?"

"Liquor. How much more do you have stashed away?"

"Lots of it. I always bring along a marg . . . a marg . . ."

"A margin?"

"That's right," said Bat Ears. "That is what I meant. I always figure what I need and then bring along a margin just in case we

get marooned or something."

Warren reached out and took the bottle. He uncorked it and threw the cork away.

"Bat Ears," he said, "go and get another bottle."

Bat Ears blinked at him. "Right away, Ira? You mean right away?"

"Immediately," said Warren. "And on your way, would you stop and tell Spencer that I want to see him soon as possible?"

Bat Ears wobbled to his feet. He regarded Warren with forthright admiration.

"What you planning on doing, Ira?" he demanded.

"I'm going to get drunk," said Warren. "I'm going to hang one on that will make history in the survey fleet."

XV

"YOU can't do it, man," protested Spencer. "You haven't got a chance."

Warren put out a hand against the tower and tried to hold himself a little steadier, for the whole planet was gyrating at a fearful pace.

"Bat Ears," Warren called out.

"Yes, Ira."

"Shoot the — *hic* — man who tries to shtop me."

"I'll do that, Ira," Bat Ears assured him.

"But you're going in there unprotected," Spencer said anxiously. "Without even a spacesuit."

"I'm trying out a new appro . . . appro . . ."

"Approach?" supplied Bat Ears.

"Thash it," said Warren. "I thank you, Bat Ears. Thash exactly what I'm doing."

Lang said, "It's got a chance. We tried to shield ourselves and it didn't work. He's trying a new approach. He's scrambled up his mind with liquor. I think he might have a chance."

"The shape he's in," said Spencer, "he'll never get the wires connected."

Warren wobbled a little. "The hell you shay."

He stood and blurredly watched them. Where there had been three of each of them before, there now, in certain cases, were only two of them.

"Bat Ears."

"Yes, Ira."

"I need another drink. It's wearing off a little."

Bat Ears took the bottle from his pocket and handed it across. It was not quite half full. Warren tipped it up and drank, his Adam's apple bobbing. He did not quit drinking until the last of it was gone. He let the bottle drop and looked at them again. This time there were three of each of them and it was all right.

He turned to face the tower.

"Now," he said, "if you gen'men will jush —"

Ellis and Clyne hauled on the rope and Warren sailed into the air.

"Hey, there!" he shouted. "Wha' you trying to do?"

He had forgotten about the pulley rigged on the tripod above the tower.

He dangled in the air, kicking and trying to get his balance, with the blackness of the tower's mouth looming under him and a funny, shining glow at the bottom of it.

Above him the pulley creaked and he shot down and was inside the tower.

He could see the thing at the bottom now. He hiccoughed politely and told it to move over, he was coming down. It didn't move an inch. Something tried to take his head off and it didn't come off.

The earphones said, "Warren, you all right? You all right? Talk to us."

"Sure," he said. "Sure, all right. Wha' matter wish you?"

THEY let him down and he stood beside the funny thing that pulsated in the pit. He felt something digging at his brain and laughed aloud, a gurgling, drunken laugh.

"Get your handsh out my hair," he said. "You tickle."

"Warren," said the earphones. "The wires. The wires. You remember, we talked about the wires."

"Sure," he said. "The wires."

There were little studs on the pulsating thing and they'd be fine things to attach a wire to.

Wires? What the hell were wires?

"Hooked on your belt," said the earphones. "The wires are hooked on your belt."

His hand moved to his belt and he found the wires. He fumbled with them and they slipped out of his fingers and he got down and scrabbled around and grabbed hold of them again. They were all tangled up and he couldn't make head or tail of them and what was he messing around with wires for, anyhow?

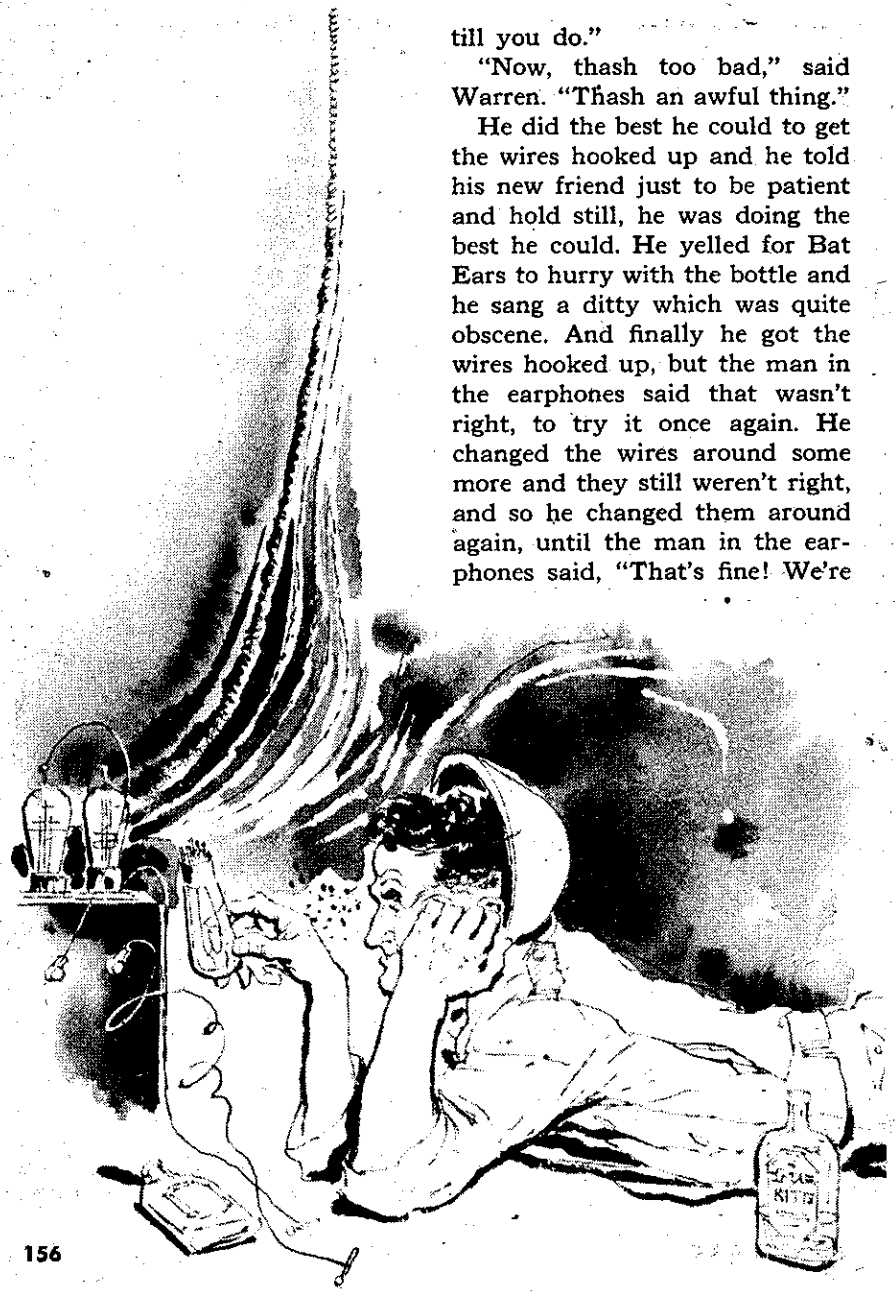
What he wanted was another drink — another little drink.

He sang: "*I'm a ramblin' wreck from Georgia Tech and a hell of an engineer!*"

He said to the egg: "Friend, I'd be mosh pleashed if you'd join me in a drink."

The earphones said, "Your friend can't drink until you get those wires hooked up. He can't hear without the wires hooked up. He can't tell what you're saying until you get those wires hooked up.

"You understand, Warren? Hook up the wires. He can't hear



till you do."

"Now, thash too bad," said Warren. "Thash an awful thing."

He did the best he could to get the wires hooked up and he told his new friend just to be patient and hold still, he was doing the best he could. He yelled for Bat Ears to hurry with the bottle and he sang a ditty which was quite obscene. And finally he got the wires hooked up, but the man in the earphones said that wasn't right, to try it once again. He changed the wires around some more and they still weren't right, and so he changed them around again, until the man in the earphones said, "That's fine! We're

getting something now!"

And then someone hauled him out of there before he even had a drink with his pal.

XVI

HE stumbled up the stairs and negotiated his way around the desk and plopped into the chair. Someone had fastened a steel bowl securely over the top half of his head and two men, or possibly three, were banging it with hammer, and his mouth had a wool blanket wadded up in it, and he could have sworn that at any moment he'd drop dead of thirst.

He heard footsteps on the stairs and hoped that it was Bat Ears, for Bat Ears would know what to do.

But it was Spencer.

"How're you feeling?" Spencer asked.

"Awful," Warren groaned.

"You turned the trick!"

"That tower business?"

"You hooked up the wires," said Spencer, "and the stuff is rolling out. Lang has a recorder hooked up and we're taking turns listening in and the stuff we're getting is enough to set your teeth on edge."

"Stuff?"

"Certainly. The knowledge that mind trap has been collecting. It'll take us years to sort out all the knowledge and try to correlate it. Some of it is just in snatches and some of it is fragmentary, but we're getting lots of it in hunks."

"Some of our own stuff being fed back to us?"

"A little. But mostly alien."

"Anything on the engines?"

Spencer hesitated. "No, not on *our* engines. That is —"

"Well?"

"We got the dope on the junkyard engine. Pollard's already at work. Mac and the boys are helping him get it assembled."

"It'll work?"

"Better than what we have. We'll have to modify our tubes

and make some other changes."

"And you're going to —"

Spencer nodded. "We're ripping out our engines."

Warren couldn't help it. He couldn't have helped it if he'd been paid a million dollars. He put his arms down on the desk and hid his face in them and shouted raucously with incoherent laughter.

After a time he looked up again and mopped at laughter-watered eyes.

"I fail to see —" Spencer began stiffly.

"Another junkyard," Warren said. "Oh, God, another junkyard!"

"It's not so funny, Warren. It's brain-shaking — a mass of knowledge such as no one ever dreamed of. Knowledge that had been accumulating for years, maybe a thousand years. Ever since that other race came and emptied the trap and then went away again."

"LOOK," said Warren, "couldn't we wait until we came across the knowledge of our engines? Surely it will come out soon. It went in, was fed in, whatever you want to call it, later than any of the rest of this stuff you are getting. If we'd just wait, we'd have the knowledge that we lost. We wouldn't have to go to all the work of ripping out the engines and replacing them."

SPENCER shook his head. "Lang figured it out. There seems to be no order or sequence in the way we get the information. The chances are that we might have to wait for a long, long time. We have no way of knowing how long the information will keep pouring out. Lang thinks for maybe years. But there's something else. We've got to get away as soon as possible."

"What's the matter with you, Spencer?"

"I don't know."

"You're afraid of something. Something's got you scared."

Spencer bent over and grasped the desk edge with his hands, hanging on.

"Warren, it's not only knowledge in that thing. We're monitoring it and we know. There's also—"

"I'll take a guess," said Warren. "There's personality."

He saw the stricken look on Spencer's face.

"Quit monitoring it," ordered Warren sharply. "Turn the whole thing off. Let's get out of here."

"We can't. Don't you understand? We can't! There are certain points. We are —"

"Yes, I know," said Warren. "You are men of science. Also downright fools."

"But there are things coming out of that tower that —"

"Shut it off!"

"No," said Spencer obstinately. "I can't. I won't."

"I warn you," Warren said grimly, "if any of you turn alien, I'll shoot you without hesitation."

"Don't be a fool." Spencer turned sharply about and went out the door.

Warren sat, sober now, listening to Spencer's feet go down the steps.

It was all very clear to Warren now.

Now he knew why there had been evidence of haste in that other ship's departure, why supplies had been left behind and tools still lying where they had been dropped as the crew had fled.

After a while Bat Ears came up the stairs, lugging a huge pot of coffee and a couple of cups.

He set the cups down on the desk and filled them, then banged down the pot.

"Ira," he said, "it was a black day when you gave up your drinking."

"How is that?" asked Warren.

"Because there ain't no one, nowhere, who can hang one on like you."

THEY sat silently, gulping the hot, black coffee.

Then Bat Ears said, "I still don't like it."

"Neither do I," admitted Warren.

"The cruise is only half over," said Bat Ears.

"The cruise is completely over," Warren told him bluntly. "When we lift out of here, we're heading straight for Earth."

They drank more coffee.

Warren asked: "How many on our side, Bat Ears?"

"There's you and me," said Bat Ears, "and Mac and the four engineers. That's seven."

"Eight," corrected Warren. "Don't forget Doc. He hasn't been doing any monitoring."

"Doc don't count for nothing one way or the other."

"In a pinch, he still can handle a gun."

After Bat Ears had gone, Warren sat and listened to the sound of Mac's crew ripping out the engines and he thought of the long way home. Then he got up and strapped on a gun and went out to see how things were shaping up.

—CLIFFORD D. SIMAK