

# SKULKING PERMIT

By  
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*Wanted: one man to do a totally impossible job. Salary: the knowledge that a planet's life depends upon his being able to do it!*

Illustrated by MEL HUNTER

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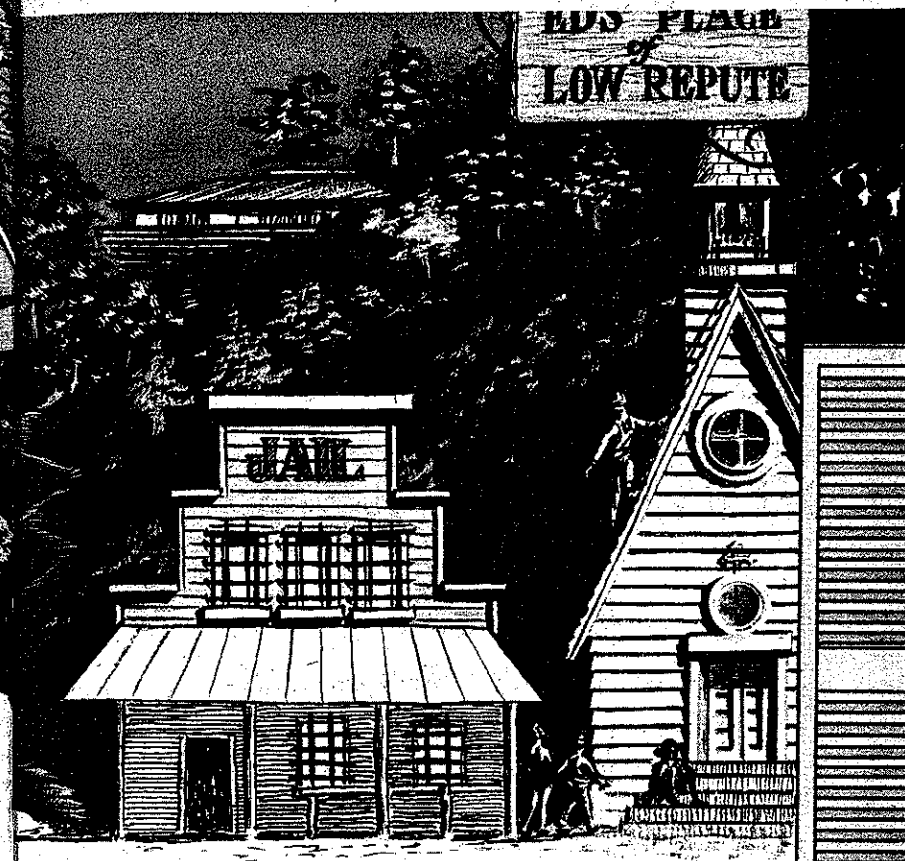
GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION

TOM Fisher had no idea he was about to begin a criminal career. It was morning. The big red sun was just above the horizon, trailing its small yellow companion. The village, tiny and precise, a unique white dot on the planet's green expanse, glistened under its two midsummer suns.

Tom was just waking up inside his cottage. He was a tall,

tanned young man, with his father's oval eyes and his mother's easygoing attitude toward exertion. He was in no hurry; there could be no fishing until the fall rains, and therefore no real work for a Fisher. Until fall, he was going to loaf and mend his fishing poles.

"It's supposed to have a red roof!" he heard Billy Painter



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shouting outside.

"Churches never have red roofs!" Ed Weaver shouted back.

Tom frowned. Not being involved, he had forgotten the changes that had come over the village in the last two weeks. He slipped on a pair of pants and sauntered out to the village square.

The first thing he saw when he entered the square was a large new sign, reading: NO ALIENS ALLOWED WITHIN CITY LIMITS. There were no aliens on the entire planet of New Delaware. There was nothing but forest, and this one village. The sign was purely a statement of policy.

The square itself contained a Church, a Jail and a Post Office, all constructed in the last two frantic weeks and set in a neat row facing the market. No one knew what to do with these buildings; the village had gone along nicely without them for over two hundred years. But now, of course, they had to be built.

**E**D Weaver was standing in front of the new Church, squinting upward. Billy Painter was balanced precariously on the Church's steep roof, his blond mustache bristling indignantly. A small crowd had gathered.

"Damn it, man," Billy Painter was saying, "I tell you I was

reading about it just last week. White roof, okay. Red roof, never."

"You're mixing it up with something else," Weaver said. "How about it, Tom?"

Tom shrugged, having no opinion to offer. Just then, the Mayor bustled up, perspiring freely, his shirt flapping over his large paunch.

"Come down," he called to Billy. "I just looked it up. It's the Little Red Schoolhouse, not Churchhouse."

Billy looked angry. He had always been moody; all Painters were. But since the Mayor made him Chief of Police last week, he had become downright temperamental.

"We don't have no Little Schoolhouse," Billy argued, half-way down the ladder.

"We'll just have to build one," the Mayor said. "We'll have to hurry, too." He glanced at the sky. Involuntarily, everyone in the crowd glanced upward. But there was still nothing in sight.

"Where are the Carpenter boys?" the Mayor asked. "Sid, Sam, Marv—where are you?"

Sid Carpenter's head appeared through the crowd. He was still on crutches from last month when he had fallen out of a tree looking for thistle's eggs; no Carpenter was worth a damn at tree-climbing.

"The other boys are at Ed Beer's Tavern," Sid said.

"Where else would they be?" Mary Waterman called from the crowd.

"Well, you gather them up," the Mayor said. "They gotta build us a Little Schoolhouse, and quick. Tell them to put it up beside the Jail." He turned to Billy Painter, who was back on the ground. "Billy, you paint that Schoolhouse a good bright red, inside and out. It's very important."

"When do I get a Police Chief badge?" Billy demanded. "I read that Police Chiefs always get badges."

"Make yourself one," the Mayor said. He mopped his face with his shirt-tail. "Sure hot. Don't know why that Inspector couldn't have come in winter . . . Tom! Tom Fisher! Got an important job for you. Come on, I'll tell you all about it."

He put an arm around Tom's shoulders and they walked to the Mayor's cottage past the empty market, along the village's single paved road. In the old days, that road had been of packed dirt. But the old days had ended two weeks ago and now the road was paved with crushed rock. It made barefoot walking so uncomfortable that the villagers simply cut across each other's lawns. The Mayor, though, walk-

ed on it out of principle.

"Now look, Mayor," Tom protested, "I'm on my vacation—"

"Can't have any vacations now," the Mayor said, "Not now. He's due any day." He ushered Tom inside his cottage and sat down in the big armchair, which had been pushed as close to the Interstellar Radio as possible.

"Tom," the Mayor said directly, "how would you like to be a criminal?"

"I don't know," said Tom. "What's a Criminal?"

**S**QUIRMING uncomfortably in his chair, the Mayor rested a hand on the Radio for authority. "It's this way," he said, and began to explain.

Tom listened, but the more he heard, the less he liked. It was all the fault of that Interstellar Radio, he decided. Why hadn't it really been broken?

No one had believed it could work. It had gathered dust in the office of one Mayor after another, for generations, the last silent link with Mother Earth. Two hundred years ago, Earth talked with New Delaware, and with Ford IV, Alpha Centauri, Nueva España, and the other colonies that made up the United Democracies of Earth. Then all conversations stopped.

There seemed to be a war on Earth. New Delaware, with its

one village, was too small and too distant to take part. They waited for news, but no news came. And then plague struck the village, wiping out three-quarters of the inhabitants.

Slowly the village healed. The villagers adopted their own ways of doing things. They forgot Earth.

Two hundred years passed.

And then, two weeks ago, the ancient Radio had coughed itself into life. For hours, it growled and spat static, while the inhabitants of the village gathered around the Mayor's cottage.

Finally words came out: "... hear me, New Delaware? Do you hear me?"

"Yes, yes, we hear you," the Mayor said.

"The colony is still there?"

"It certainly is," the Mayor said proudly.

The voice became stern and official. "There has been no contact with the Outer Colonies for some time, due to unsettled conditions here. But that's over, except for a little mopping up. You of New Delaware are still a colony of Imperial Earth and subject to her laws. Do you acknowledge the status?"

The Mayor hesitated. All the books referred to Earth as the United Democracies. Well, in two centuries, names could change.

"We are still loyal to Earth,"

the Mayor said with dignity.

"Excellent. That saves us the trouble of sending an expeditionary force. A Resident Inspector will be dispatched to you from the nearest point, to ascertain whether you conform to the customs, institutions and traditions of Earth."

"What?" the Mayor asked, worried.

THE stern voice became higher-pitched. "You realize, of course, that there is room for only one intelligent species in the Universe—Man! All others must be suppressed, wiped out, annihilated. We can tolerate no aliens sneaking around us. I'm sure you understand, General."

"I'm not a General. I'm a Mayor."

"You're in charge, aren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then you are a General. Permit me to continue. In this galaxy, there is no room for aliens. None! Nor is there room for deviant human cultures, which, by definition, are alien. It is impossible to administer an empire when everyone does as he pleases. There must be order, *no matter what the cost.*"

The Mayor gulped hard and stared at the radio.

"Be sure you're running an Earth colony, General, with no radical departures from the norm,

such as free will, free love, free elections, or anything else on the proscribed list. Those things are *alien*, and we're pretty rough on aliens. Get your colony in order, General. The Inspector will call in about two weeks. That is all."

The village held an immediate meeting, to determine how best to conform with the Earth mandate. All they could do was hastily model themselves upon the Earth pattern as shown in their ancient books.

"I don't see why there has to be a Criminal," Tom said.

"That's a very important part of Earth society," the Mayor explained. "All the books agree on it. The Criminal is as important as the Postman, say, or the Police Chief. Unlike them, the Criminal is engaged in anti-social work. He works *against* society, Tom. If you don't have people working *against* society, how can you have people working *for* it? There'd be no jobs for them to do."

Tom shook his head. "I just don't see it."

"Be reasonable, Tom. We have to have Earthly things. Like Paved Roads. All the books mention that. And Churches, and Schoolhouses, and Jails. And all the books mention Crime."

"I won't do it," Tom said.

"Put yourself in my position," the Mayor begged. "This In-

spector comes and meets Billy Painter, our Police Chief. He asks to see the jail. Then he says, 'No Prisoners?' I answer, 'Of course not. We don't have any Crime here.' 'No Crime?' he says. 'But Earth colonies always have Crime. You know that.' 'We don't,' I answer. 'Didn't even know what it was until we looked up the word last week.' 'Then why did you build a Jail?' he asks me. 'Why did you appoint a Police Chief?'"

THE Mayor paused for breath. "You see? The whole thing falls through. He sees at once that we're not truly Earthlike. We're faking it. We're *aliens*."

"Hmm," Tom said, impressed in spite of himself.

"This way," the Mayor went on quickly, "I can say, 'Certainly we've got Crime here, just like on Earth. We've got a combination Thief and Murderer. Poor fellow had a bad upbringing and he's maladjusted. Our Police Chief has some clues, though. We expect an arrest within 24 hours. We'll lock him in the Jail, then Rehabilitate him.'"

"What's Rehabilitate?" Tom asked.

"I'm not sure. I'll worry about that when I come to it. But now do you see how necessary crime is?"

"I suppose so. But why me?"

"Can't spare anyone else. And you've got narrow eyes. Criminals always have narrow eyes."

"They aren't *that* narrow. They're no narrower than Ed Weaver's—"

"Tom, please," the Mayor said. "We're all doing our part. You want to help, don't you?"

"I suppose so," Tom repeated wearily.

"Fine. You're our Criminal. Here, this makes it legal."

He handed Tom a document. It read: **SKULKING PERMIT.** *Know all Men by these Presents that Tom Fisher is a Duly Authorized Thief and Murderer. He is hereby required to Skulk in Dismal Alleys, Haunt Places of Low Repute, and Break the Law.*

Tom read it through twice, then asked, "What Law?"

"I'll let you know as fast as I make them up," the Mayor said. "All Earth colonies have Laws."

"But what do I do?"

"You Steal. And Kill. That should be easy enough." The Mayor walked to his bookcase and took down ancient volumes entitled *The Criminal and his Environment, Psychology of the Slayer, and Studies in Theft Motivation.*

"These'll give you everything you need to know. Steal as much as you like. One Murder should be enough, though. No sense overdoing it."

"Right," Tom nodded. "I guess I'll catch on."

He picked up the books and returned to his cottage.

**I**T WAS very hot and all the talk about Crime had puzzled and wearied him. He lay down on his bed and began to go through the ancient books.

There was a knock on his door.

"Come in," Tom called, rubbing his tired eyes.

Marv Carpenter, oldest and tallest of the red-headed Carpenter boys, came in, followed by old Jed Farmer. They were carrying a small sack.

"You the town Criminal, Tom?" Marv asked.

"Looks like it."

"Then this is for you." They put the sack on the floor and took from it a hatchet, two knives, a short spear, a club and a black-jack.

"What's all that?" Tom asked, sitting upright.

"Weapons, of course," Jed Farmer said testily. "You can't be a real Criminal without weapons."

Tom scratched his head. "Is that a fact?"

"You'd better start figuring these things out for yourself," Farmer went on in his impatient voice. "Can't expect us to do everything for you."

Marv Carpenter winked at

Tom. "Jed's sore because the Mayor made him our Postman."

"I'll do my part," Jed said. "I just don't like having to write all those letters."

"Can't be too hard," Marv Carpenter said, grinning. "The Postmen do it on Earth and they got a lot more people there. Good luck, Tom."

They left.

Tom bent down and examined the weapons. He knew what they were; the old books were full of them. But no one had ever actually used a weapon on New Delaware. The only native animals on the planet were small, furry, and confirmed eaters of grass. As for turning a weapon on a fellow villager — why would anybody want to do that?

He picked up one of the knives. It was cold. He touched the point. It was sharp.

Tom began to pace the floor, staring at the weapons. They gave him a queer sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He decided he had been hasty in accepting the job.

But there was no sense worrying about it yet. He still had those books to read. After that, perhaps he could make some sense out of the whole thing.

**H**E READ for several hours, stopping only to eat a light lunch. The books were under-

standable enough; the various Criminal methods were clearly explained, sometimes with diagrams. But the whole thing was unreasonable. What was the purpose of Crime? Whom did it benefit? What did people get out of it?

The books didn't explain that. He leafed through them, looking at the photographed faces of Criminals. They looked very serious and dedicated, extremely conscious of the significance of their work to society.

Tom wished he could find out what that significance was. It would probably make things much easier.

"Tom?" he heard the Mayor call from outside.

"I'm in here, Mayor," Tom said.

The door opened and the Mayor peered in. Behind him were Jane Farmer, Mary Waterman and Alice Cook.

"How about it, Tom?" the Mayor asked.

"How about what?"

"How about getting to work?"

Tom grinned self-consciously. "I was going to," he said. "I was reading these books, trying to figure out—"

The three middle-aged ladies glared at him, and Tom stopped in embarrassment.

"You're certainly taking your time reading," Alice Cook said.



"Everyone else is outside working," said Jane Farmer.

"What's so hard about Stealing?" Mary Waterman challenged.

"It's true," the Mayor told him. "That Inspector might be here any day now and we don't have a Crime to show him."

"All right, all right," Tom said. He stuck a knife and a black-

jack in his belt, put the sack in his pocket—for Loot—and stalked out.

But where was he going? It was mid-afternoon. The market, which was the most logical place to rob, would be empty until evening. Besides, he didn't want to

commit a Robbery in daylight. It seemed unprofessional.

He opened his Skulking Permit and read it through. *Required to Haunt Places of Low Repute . . .*

That was it! He'd haunt a Low Repute Place. He could form some plans there, get into the mood of the thing. But unfortunately, the village didn't have much to choose from. There was the Tiny Restaurant, run by the widowed Ames sisters, there was Jeff Hern's Lounging Spot, and finally there was Ed Beer's Tavern.

Ed's place would have to do.



**T**HE Tavern was a cottage much like the other cottages in the village. It had one big room for guests, a kitchen, and family sleeping quarters. Ed's wife did the cooking and kept the place as clean as she could, considering her ailing back. Ed served the drinks. He was a pale, sleepy-eyed man with a talent for worrying.

"Hello, Tom," Ed said. "Hear you're our Criminal."



"That's right," said Tom. "I'll take a perricola."

Ed Beer served him the non-alcoholic root extract and stood anxiously in front of Tom's table. "How come you ain't out Thieving, Tom?"

"I'm planning," Tom said. "My Permit says I have to Haunt Places of Low Repute. That's why I'm here."

"Is that nice?" Ed Beer asked sadly. "This is no Place of Low Repute, Tom."

"You serve the worst meals in town," Tom pointed out.

"I know. My wife can't cook. But there's a friendly atmosphere here. Folks like it."

"That's all changed, Ed. I'm making this tavern my headquarters."

Ed Beer's shoulders drooped. "Try to keep a nice place," he muttered. "A lot of thanks you get." He returned to the bar.

Tom proceeded to think. He found it amazingly difficult. The more he tried, the less came out. But he stuck grimly to it.

An hour passed. Richie Farmer, Jed's youngest son, stuck his head in the door. "You Steal anything yet, Tom?"

"Not yet," Tom told him, hunched over his table, still thinking.

The scorching afternoon drifted slowly by. Patches of evening became visible through the Tav-

ern's small, not too clean windows. A cricket began to chirp outside, and the first whisper of night wind stirred the surrounding forest.

Big George Waterman and Max Weaver came in for a glass of glava. They sat down beside Tom.

"How's it going?" George Waterman asked.

"Not so good," Tom said. "Can't seem to get the hang of this Stealing."

"You'll catch on," Waterman said in his slow, ponderous, earnest fashion. "If anyone in this village could learn it, you can."

"We've got confidence in you, Tom," Weaver assured him.

Tom thanked them. They drank and left. He continued thinking, staring into his empty perricola glass.

An hour later, Ed Beer cleared his throat apologetically. "It's none of my business, Tom, but when are you going to Steal something?"

"Right now," Tom said.

He stood up, made sure his weapons were securely in place, and strode out the door.

NIGHTLY bartering had begun in the market. Goods were piled carelessly on benches, or spread over the grass on straw mats. There was no currency, no rate of exchange. Ten hand-

wrought nails were worth a pail of milk or two fish, or vice versa, depending on what you had to barter and needed at the moment. No one ever bothered keeping accounts. That was one Earth custom the Mayor was having difficulty introducing.

As Tom Fisher walked down the square, everyone greeted him.

"Stealing now, huh, Tom?"

"Go to it, boy!"

"You can do it!"

No one in the village had ever witnessed an actual theft. They considered it an exotic custom of distant Earth and they wanted to see how it worked. They left their goods and followed Tom through the market, watching avidly.

Tom found that his hands were trembling. He didn't like having so many people watch him Steal. He decided he'd better work fast, while he still had the nerve.

He stopped abruptly in front of Mrs. Miller's fruit-laden bench. "Tasty-looking geefers," he said casually.

"They're fresh," Mrs. Miller told him. She was a small and bright-eyed old woman. Tom could remember long conversations she had had with his mother, back when his parents were alive.

"They look very tasty," he said, wishing he had stopped

somewhere else instead.

"Oh, they are," said Mrs. Miller. "I picked them just this afternoon."

"Is he going to Steal now?" someone whispered.

"Sure he is. Watch him," someone whispered back.

Tom picked up a bright green geefer and inspected it. The crowd became suddenly silent.

"Certainly looks very tasty," Tom said, carefully replacing the geefer.

The crowd released a long-drawn sigh.

Max Weaver and his wife and five children were at the next bench. Tonight they were displaying two blankets and a shirt. They all smiled shyly when Tom came over, followed by the crowd.

"That shirt's about your size," Weaver informed him. He wished the people would go away and let Tom work.

"Hmm," Tom said, picking up the shirt.

The crowd stirred expectantly. A girl began to giggle hysterically. Tom gripped the shirt tightly and opened his Loot bag.

"JUST a moment!" Billy Painter pushed his way through. He was wearing a badge now, an old Earth coin he had polished and pinned to his belt. The expression on his face was unmistakably official.

"What were you doing with that shirt, Tom?" Billy asked.

"Why . . . I was just looking at it."

"Just looking at it, huh?" Billy turned away, his hands clasped behind his back. Suddenly he whirled and extended a rigid forefinger. "I don't think you were just looking at it, Tom. I think you were planning on *Stealing* it!"

Tom didn't answer. The tell-tale sack hung limply from one hand, the shirt from the other.

"As Police Chief," Billy went on, "I've got a duty to protect these people. You're a Suspicious Character. I think I'd better lock you up for further questioning."

Tom hung his head. He hadn't expected this, but it was just as well.

Once he was in Jail, it would be all over. And when Billy released him, he could get back to fishing.

Suddenly, the Mayor bounded through the crowd, his shirt flapping wildly around his waist.

"Billy, what are you doing?"

"Doing my duty, Mayor. Tom here is acting plenty suspicious. The book says—"

"I know what the book says," the Mayor told him. "I gave you the book. You can't go arresting Tom. Not yet."

"But there's no other Criminal in the village," Billy complained.

"I can't help that," the Mayor said.

Billy's lips tightened. "The book talks about Preventive Police Work. I'm supposed to stop Crime before it happens."

The Mayor raised his hands and dropped them wearily. "Billy, don't you understand? This village *needs* a Criminal record. You have to help, too."

Billy shrugged his shoulders. "All right, Mayor. I was just trying to do my job." He turned to go. Then he whirled again on Tom. "I'll still get you. Remember—Crime Does Not Pay." He stalked off.

"He's overambitious, Tom," the Mayor explained. "Forget it. Go ahead and Steal something. Let's get this job over with."

**T**OM started to edge away toward the green forest outside the village.

"What's wrong, Tom?" the Mayor asked worriedly.

"I'm not in the mood any more," Tom said. "Maybe tomorrow night—"

"No, right now," the Mayor insisted. "You can't go on putting it off. Come on, we'll all help you."

"Sure we will," Max Weaver said. "Steal the shirt, Tom. It's your size anyhow."

"How about a nice water jug, Tom?"

"Look at these skeegee nuts over here."

Tom looked from bench to bench. As he reached for Weaver's shirt, a knife slipped from his belt and dropped to the ground. The crowd clucked sympathetically.

Tom replaced it, perspiring, knowing he looked like a butterfingers. He reached out, took the shirt and stuffed it into the Loot Bag. The crowd cheered.

Tom smiled faintly, feeling a bit better. "I think I'm getting the hang of it."

"Sure you are."

"We knew you could do it."

"Take something else, boy."

Tom walked down the market and helped himself to a length of rope, a handful of skeegee nuts and a grass hat.

"I guess that's enough," he told the Mayor.

"Enough for now," the Mayor agreed. "This doesn't really count, you know. This was the same as people giving it to you. Practice, you might say."

"Oh," Tom said, disappointed.

"But you know what you're doing. The next time it'll be just as easy."

"I suppose it will."

"And don't forget that Murder."

"Is it really necessary?" Tom asked.

"I wish it weren't," the Mayor

said. "But this colony has been here for over two hundred years and we haven't had a single Murder. Not one! According to the records, all the other colonies had lots."

"I suppose we should have one," Tom admitted. "I'll take care of it." He headed for his cottage. The crowd gave a rousing cheer as he departed.

**A**T home, Tom lighted a rush lamp and fixed himself supper. After eating, he sat for a long time in his big armchair. He was dissatisfied with himself. He had not really handled the Stealing well. All day he had worried and hesitated. People had practically had to put things in his hands before he could take them.

A fine Thief he was!

And there was no excuse for it. Stealing and Murdering were like any other necessary jobs. Just because he had never done them before, just because he could see no sense to them, that was no reason to bungle them.

He walked to the door. It was a fine night, illuminated by a dozen nearby giant stars. The market was deserted again and the village lights were winking out.

This was the time to Steal!

A thrill ran through him at the thought. He was proud of him-

self. That was how Criminals planned and this was how Stealing should be—skulking, late at night.

Quickly Tom checked his weapons, emptied his Loot Sack and walked out.

The last rush lights were extinguished. Tom moved noiselessly through the village. He came to Roger Waterman's house. Big Roger had left his spade propped against a wall. Tom picked it up. Down the block, Mrs. Weaver's water jug was in its usual place beside the front door. Tom took it. On his way home, he found a little wooden horse that some child had forgotten. It went with the rest.

He was pleasantly exhilarated, once the goods were safely home. He decided to make another haul.

This time he returned with a bronze plaque from the Mayor's house, Marv Carpenter's best saw, and Jed Farmer's sickle.

"Not bad," he told himself. He was catching on. One more load would constitute a good night's work.

This time he found a hammer and chisel in Ron Stone's shed, and a reed basket at Alice Cook's house. He was about to take Jeff Hern's rake when he heard a faint noise. He flattened himself against a wall.

Billy Painter came prowling quietly along, his badge gleaming

in the starlight. In one hand, he carried a short, heavy club; in the other, a pair of homemade handcuffs. In the dim light, his face was ominous. It was the face of a man who had pledged himself against Crime, even though he wasn't really sure what it was.

Tom held his breath as Billy Painter passed within ten feet of him. Slowly Tom backed away.

The Loot Sack jingled.

"Who's there?" Billy yelled. When no one answered, he turned a slow circle, peering into the shadows. Tom was flattened against a wall again. He was fairly sure Billy wouldn't see him. Billy had weak eyes because of the fumes of the paint he mixed. All Painters had weak eyes. It was one of the reasons they were moody.

"Is that you, Tom?" Billy asked, in a friendly tone. Tom was about to answer, when he noticed that Billy's club was raised in a striking position. He kept quiet.

"I'll get you yet!" Billy shouted.

"Well, get him in the morning!" Jeff Hern shouted from his bedroom window. "Some of us are trying to sleep."

Billy moved away. When he was gone, Tom hurried home and dumped his pile of Loot on the floor with the rest. He surveyed his haul proudly. It gave him the

sense of a job well done.

After a cool drink of glava, Tom went to bed, falling at once into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

NEXT morning, Tom sauntered out to see how the Little Red Schoolhouse was progressing. The Carpenter boys were hard at work on it, helped by several villagers.

"How's it coming?" Tom called out cheerfully.

"Fair," Marv Carpenter said. "It'd come along better if I had my saw."

"Your saw?" Tom repeated blankly.

After a moment, he remembered that he had stolen it last night. It hadn't seemed to belong to anyone then. The saw and all the rest had been objects to be stolen. He had never given a thought to the fact that they might be used or needed.

Marv Carpenter asked, "Do you suppose I could use the saw for a while? Just for an hour or so?"

"I'm not sure," Tom said, frowning. "It's legally Stolen, you know."

"Of course it is. But if I could just borrow it—"

"You'd have to give it back."

"Well, naturally I'd give it back," Marv said indignantly. "I wouldn't keep anything that was legally stolen."

"It's in the house with the rest of the Loot."

Marv thanked him and hurried after it.

Tom began to stroll through the village. He reached the Mayor's house. The Mayor was standing outside, staring at the sky.

"Tom, did you take my bronze plaque?" he asked.

"I certainly did," Tom said belligerently.

"Oh. Just wondering." The Mayor pointed upward. "See it?"

Tom looked. "What?"

"Black dot near the rim of the small sun."

"Yes. What is it?"

"I'll bet it's the Inspector's ship. How's your work coming?"

"Fine," Tom said, a trifle uncomfortably.

"Got your Murder planned?"

"I've been having a little trouble with that," Tom confessed. "To tell the truth, I haven't made any progress on it at all."

"Come on in, Tom. I want to talk to you."

INSIDE the cool, shuttered living room, the Mayor poured two glasses of glava and motioned Tom to a chair.

"Our time is running short," the Mayor said gloomily. "The Inspector may land any hour now. And my hands are full." He motioned at the Interstellar Ra-



dio. "That has been talking again. Something about a revolt on Deng IV and all loyal Earth colonies are to prepare for conscription, whatever that is. I never even heard of Deng IV, but I have to start worrying about it, in addition to everything else."

He fixed Tom with a stern stare. "Criminals on Earth commit dozens of Murders a day and never even think about it. All your village wants of you is one little Killing. Is that too much to ask?"

Tom spread his hands nervously. "Do you really think it's necessary?"

"You know it is," the Mayor said. "If we're going Earthly, we have to go all the way. This is the only thing holding us back. All the other projects are right on schedule."

Billy Painter entered, wearing a new official-blue shirt with bright metal buttons. He sank into a chair.

"Kill anyone yet, Tom?"

The Mayor said, "He wants to know if it's necessary."

"Of course it is," the Police Chief said. "Read any of the books. You're not much of a Criminal if you don't Commit a Murder."

"Who'll it be, Tom?" the Mayor asked.

Tom squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. He rubbed his fin-

gers together nervously.

"Well?"

"Oh, I'll kill Jeff Hern," Tom blurted.

Billy Painter leaned forward quickly. "Why?" he asked.

"Why? Why not?"

"What's your Motive?"

"I thought you just wanted a Murder," Tom retorted. "Who said anything about Motive?"

"We can't have a fake Murder," the Police Chief explained. "It has to be done right. And that means you have to have a proper Motive."

Tom thought for a moment. "Well, I don't know Jeff well. Is that a good enough motive?"

The Mayor shook his head. "No, Tom, that won't do. Better pick someone else."

"Let's see," Tom said. "How about George Waterman?"

"What's the Motive?" Billy asked immediately.

"Oh . . . um . . . Well, I don't like the way George walks. Never did. And he's noisy sometimes."

The Mayor nodded approvingly. "Sounds good to me. What do you say, Billy?"

"How am I supposed to deduce a Motive like that?" Billy asked angrily. "No, that might be good enough for a Crime of Passion. But you're a legal Criminal, Tom. By definition, you're Cold-blooded, Ruthless and Cunning. You can't Kill someone just be-

cause you don't like the way he walks. That's silly."

"I'd better think this whole thing over," Tom said, standing up.

"Don't take too long," the Mayor told him. "The sooner it's done, the better."

Tom nodded and started out the door.

"Oh, Tom!" Billy called. "Don't forget to leave Clues. They're very important."

"All right," Tom said, and left.

**O**UTSIDE, most of the villagers were watching the sky. The black dot had grown immensely larger. It covered most of the smaller sun.

Tom went to his Place of Low Repute to think things out. Ed Beer had apparently changed his mind about the desirability of Criminal elements. The Tavern was redecorated. There was a large sign, reading: CRIMINAL'S LAIR. Inside, there were new, carefully soiled curtains on the windows, blocking the daylight and making the Tavern truly a Dismal Retreat. Weapons, hastily carved out of soft wood, hung on one wall. On another wall was a large red splotch, an ominous-looking thing, even though Tom knew it was only Billy Painter's rootberry red paint.

"Come right in, Tom," Ed Beer

said, and led him to the darkest corner in the room. Tom noticed that the Tavern was unusually filled for the time of day. People seemed to like the idea of being in a genuine Criminal's Lair.

Tom sipped a perricola and began to think.

He had to Commit a Murder.

He took out his Skulking Permit and looked it over. Unpleasant, unpalatable, something he wouldn't normally do, but he did have the legal obligation.

Tom drank his perricola and concentrated on Murder. He told himself he was going to *kill* someone. He had to *snuff out a life*. He would make someone *cease to exist*.

But the phrases didn't contain the essence of the act. They were just words. To clarify his thoughts, he took big, red-headed Marv Carpenter as an example. Today, Marv was working on the Schoolhouse with his borrowed saw. If Tom killed Marv—well, Marv wouldn't work any more.

Tom shook his head impatiently. He still wasn't grasping it.

All right, here was Marv Carpenter, biggest and, many thought, the pleasantest of the Carpenter boys. He'd be planing down a piece of wood, grasping the plane firmly in his large freckled hands, squinting down the line he had drawn. Thirsty, undoubtedly, and with a small

pain in his left shoulder that Jan Druggist was unsuccessfully treating.

That was Marv Carpenter.

Then—

Marv Carpenter sprawled on the ground, his eyes glaring open, limbs stiff, mouth twisted, no air going in or out his nostrils, no beat to his heart. Never again to hold a piece of wood in his large, freckled hands. Never again to feel the small and really unimportant pain in his shoulder that Jan Druggist was—

For just a moment, Tom glimpsed what Murder really was. The vision passed, but enough of a memory remained to make him feel sick.

He could live with the Thieving. But Murder, even in the best interests of the village . . .

What would people think, after they saw what he had just imagined? How could he live with them? How could he live with himself afterward?

And yet he had to kill. Everybody in the village had a job and that was his.

But whom could he Murder?

**T**HE excitement started later in the day when the Interstellar Radio was filled with angry voices.

"Call *that* a colony? Where's the capital?"

"This is it," the Mayor replied.

"Where's your landing field?"

"I think it's being used as a pasture," the Mayor said. "I could look up where it was. No ship has landed here in over—"

"The main ship will stay aloft then. Assemble your officials. I am coming down immediately."

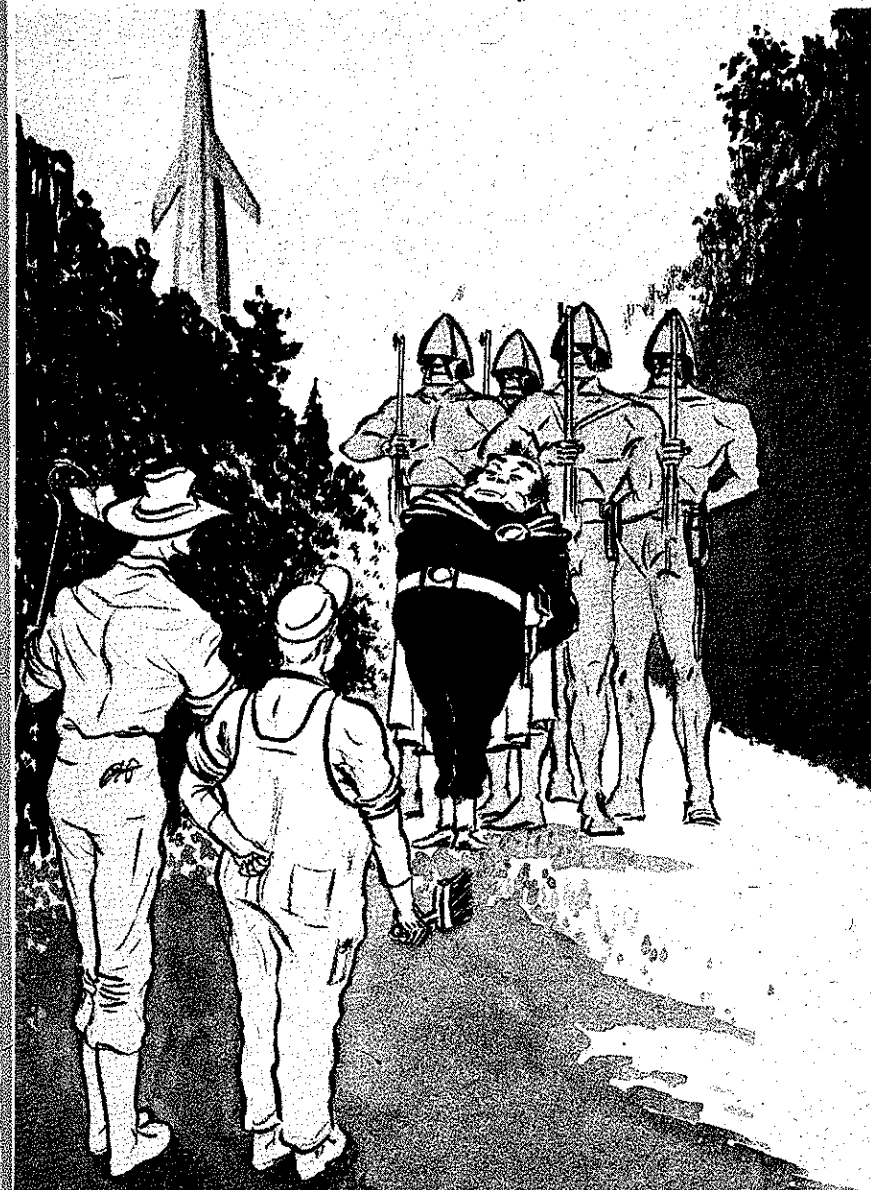
The entire village gathered around an open field that the Inspector designated. Tom strapped on his weapons and Skulked behind a tree, watching.

A small ship detached itself from the big one and dropped swiftly down. It plummeted toward the field while the villagers held their breaths, certain it would crash. At the last moment, jets flared, scorching the grass, and the ship settled gently to the ground.

The Mayor edged forward, followed by Billy Painter. A door in the ship opened, and four men marched out. They held shining metallic instruments that Tom knew were weapons. After them came a large, red-faced man dressed in black, wearing four bright medals. He was followed by a little man with a wrinkled face, also dressed in black. Four more uniformed men followed him.

"Welcome to New Delaware," the Mayor said.

"Thank you, General," the big man said, shaking the Mayor's hand firmly. "I am Inspector



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Delumaine. This is Mr. Grent, my Political Adviser."

Grent nodded to the Mayor, ignoring his outstretched hand. He was looking at the villagers with an expression of mild disgust.

"We will survey the village," the Inspector said, glancing at Grent out of the corner of his eye. Grent nodded. The uniformed guards closed around them.

Tom followed at a safe distance, skulking in true Criminal fashion. In the village, he hid behind a house to watch the Inspection.

The Mayor pointed out, with pardonable pride, the Jail, the Post Office, the Church and the Little Red Schoolhouse. The Inspector seemed bewildered. Mr. Grent smiled unpleasantly and rubbed his jaw.

"As I thought," he told the Inspector. "A waste of time, fuel and a battle cruiser. This place has nothing of value."

"I'm not so sure," the Inspector said. He turned to the Mayor. "But what did you build them for, General?"

"Why, to be Earthly," the Mayor said. "We're doing our best, as you can see."

**M**R. GRENT whispered something in the Inspector's ear.

"Tell me," the Inspector asked

the Mayor, "how many young men are there in the village?"

"I beg your pardon?" The Mayor said in polite bewilderment.

"Young men between the ages of fifteen and sixty," Mr. Grent explained.

"You see, General, Imperial Mother Earth is engaged in a war. The colonists on Deng IV and some other colonies have turned against their birthright. They are revolting against the absolute authority of Mother Earth."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the Mayor said sympathetically.

"We need men for the Space Fleet," the Inspector told him. "Good healthy fighting men. Our reserves are depleted—"

"We wish," Mr. Grent broke in smoothly, "to give all loyal Earth colonists a chance to fight for Imperial Mother Earth. We are sure you won't refuse."

"Oh, no," the Mayor said. "Certainly not. I'm sure our young men will be glad—I mean they don't know much about it, but they're all bright boys. They can learn, I guess."

"You see?" the Inspector said to Mr. Grent. "Sixty, seventy, perhaps a hundred recruits. Not such a waste after all."

Mr. Grent still looked dubious.

The Inspector and his Adviser went to the Mayor's house for

refreshment. Four soldiers accompanied them. The other four walked around the village, helping themselves to anything they found.

Tom hid in the woods nearby to think things over. In the early evening, Mrs. Ed Beer came furtively out of the village. She was a gaunt, grayish-blond middle-aged woman, but she moved quite rapidly in spite of her case of housemaid's knee. She had a basket with her, covered with a red checkered napkin.

"Here's your dinner," she said, as soon as she found Tom.

"Why . . . thanks," said Tom, taken by surprise, "You didn't have to do that."

"I certainly did. Our Tavern is your Place of Low Repute, isn't it? We're responsible for your well-being. And the Mayor sent you a message."

Tom looked up, his mouth full of food. "What is it?"

"He said to hurry up with the Murder. He's been stalling the Inspector and that nasty little Grent man. But they're going to ask him. He's sure of it."

Tom nodded.

"When are you going to do it?" Mrs. Beer asked, cocking her head to one side.

"I mustn't tell you," Tom said.

"Of course you must. I'm a Criminal's Accomplice." Mrs. Beer leaned closer.

"That's true," Tom admitted thoughtfully. "Well, I'm going to do it tonight. After dark. Tell Billy Painter I'll leave all the fingerprints I can, and any other clues I think of."

"All right, Tom," Mrs. Beer said. "Good luck."

**T**OM waited for dark, meanwhile watching the village. He noticed that most of the soldiers had been drinking. They swaggered around as though the villagers didn't exist. One of them fired his weapon into the air, frightening all the small, furry grass-eaters for miles around.

The Inspector and Mr. Grent were still in the Mayor's house.

Night came. Tom slipped into the village and stationed himself in an alley between two houses. He drew his knife and waited.

Someone was approaching! He tried to remember his Criminal Methods, but nothing came. He knew he would just have to do the Murder as best he could, and fast.

The person came up, his figure indistinct in the darkness.

"Why, hello, Tom." It was the Mayor. He looked at the knife. "What are you doing?"

"You said there had to be a Murder, so—"

"I didn't mean *me*," the Mayor said, backing away. "It can't be *me*."

"Why not?" Tom asked.

"Well, for one thing, somebody has to talk to the Inspector. He's waiting for me. Someone has to show him—"

"Billy Painter can do that," said Tom. He grasped the Mayor by the shirt front, raised the knife and aimed for the throat. "Nothing personal, of course," he added.

"Wait!" the Mayor cried. "If there's nothing personal, then you have no Motive!"

Tom lowered the knife, but kept his grasp on the Mayor's shirt. "I guess I can think of one. I've been pretty sore about you appointing me Criminal."

"It was the Mayor who appointed you, wasn't it?"

"Well, sure—"

The Mayor pulled Tom out of the shadows, into the bright starlight. "Look!"

Tom gaped. The Mayor was dressed in long, sharply creased pants and a tunic resplendent with medals. On each shoulder was a double row of ten stars. His hat was thickly crusted with gold braid in the shape of comets.

"You see, Tom? I'm not the Mayor any more. I'm a General!"

"What's that got to do with it? You're the same person, aren't you?"

"Not officially. You missed the ceremony this afternoon. The Inspector said that since I was

officially a General, I had to wear a General's uniform. It was a very friendly ceremony. All the Earthmen were grinning and winking at me and each other."

**R**AISING the knife again, Tom held it as he would to gut a fish. "Congratulations," he said sincerely, "but you were the Mayor when you appointed me Criminal, so my Motive still holds."

"But you wouldn't be Killing the Mayor! You'd be Killing a General! And that's not Murder!"

"It isn't?" Tom asked. "What is it then?"

"Why, Killing a General is Mutiny!"

"Oh." Tom put down the knife. He released the Mayor. "Sorry."

"Quite all right," the Mayor said. "Natural error. I've read up on it and you haven't, of course—no need to." He took a deep breath. "I'd better get back. The Inspector wants a list of the men he can Draft."

Tom called out, "Are you sure this Murder is necessary?"

"Yes, absolutely," the Mayor said, hurrying away. "Just not me."

Tom put the knife back in his belt.

*Not me, not me.* Everyone would feel that way. Yet somebody had to be Murdered. Who? He couldn't Kill himself. That

would be Suicide, which wouldn't count.

He began to shiver, trying not to think of the glimpse he'd had of the reality of Murder. The job had to be done.

Someone else was coming!

The person came nearer. Tom hunched down, his muscles tightening for the leap.

It was Mrs. Miller, returning home with a bag of vegetables.

Tom told himself that it didn't matter whether it was Mrs. Miller or anybody else. But he couldn't help remembering those conversations with his mother. They left him without a Motive for Killing Mrs. Miller.

She passed by without seeing him.

He waited for half an hour. Another person walked through the dark alley between the houses. Tom recognized him as Max Weaver.

Tom had always liked him. But that didn't mean there couldn't be a Motive. All he could come up with, though, was that Max had a wife and five children who loved him and would miss him. Tom didn't want Billy Painter to tell him that that was no Motive. He drew deeper into the shadow and let Max go safely by.

The three Carpenter boys came along. Tom had painfully been through that already. He let them

pass. Then Roger Waterman approached.

He had no real Motive for Killing Roger, but he had never been especially friendly with him. Besides, Roger had no children and his wife wasn't fond of him. Would that be enough for Billy Painter to work on?

He knew it wouldn't be . . . and the same was true of all the villagers. He had grown up with these people, shared food and work and fun and grief with them. How could he possibly have a Motive for Killing any of them?

But he had to Commit a Murder. His Skulking Permit required it. He couldn't let the village down. But neither could he Kill the people he had known all his life.

Wait, he told himself in sudden excitement. He could Kill the Inspector!

**M**OTIVE? Why, it would be an even more Heinous Crime than Murdering the Mayor—except that the Mayor was a General now, of course, and that would only be Mutiny. But even if the Mayor were still Mayor, the Inspector would be a far more important Victim. Tom would be Killing for Glory, for Fame, for Notoriety. And the Murder would show Earth how Earthly the colony really was. They would say, "Crime is so bad on New Dela-

ware that it's hardly safe to land there. A Criminal actually Killed our Inspector on the very first day! Worst Criminal we've come across in all space."

It would be the most spectacular Crime he could Commit, Tom realized, just the sort of thing a Master Criminal would do.

Feeling proud of himself for the first time in a long while, Tom hurried out of the alley and over to the Mayor's house. He could hear conversation going on inside.

"... sufficiently passive population," Mr. Grent was saying. "Sheeplike, in fact."

"Makes it rather boring," the Inspector answered. "For the soldiers especially."

"Well, what do you expect from backward agrarians? At least we're getting some recruits out of it." Mr. Grent yawned audibly. "On your feet, guards. We're going back to the ship."

Guards! Tom had forgotten about them. He looked doubtfully at his knife. Even if he sprang at the Inspector, the guards would probably stop him before the Murder could be Committed. They must have been trained for just that sort of thing.

But if he had one of their own weapons...

He heard the shuffling of feet inside. Tom hurried back into the village.

Near the market, he saw a soldier sitting on a doorstep, singing drunkenly to himself. Two empty bottles lay at his feet and his weapon was slung sloppily over his shoulder.

Tom crept up, drew his blackjack and took aim.

The soldier must have glimpsed his shadow. He leaped to his feet, ducking the stroke of the blackjack. In the same motion, he jabbed with his slung rifle, catching Tom in the ribs, tore the rifle from his shoulder and aimed. Tom closed his eyes and lashed out with both feet.

He caught the soldier on the knee, knocking him over. Before he could get up, Tom swung the blackjack.

Tom felt the soldier's pulse—no sense Killing the wrong man—and found it satisfactory. He took the weapon, checked to make sure he knew which button to push, and hastened after the Inspector.

**H**ALFWAY to the ship, he caught up with them. The Inspector and Grent were walking ahead, the soldiers straggling behind.

Tom moved into the underbrush. He trotted silently along until he was opposite Grent and the Inspector. He took aim and his finger tightened on the trigger...

tered, didn't want to Kill Grent, down. He was supposed to Commit only one Murder.

He ran on, past the Inspector's party, and came out on the road in front of them. His weapon was poised as the party reached him.

"What's this?" the Inspector demanded.

"Stand still," Tom said. "The rest of you drop your weapons and move out of the way."

The soldiers moved like men in shock. One by one they dropped their weapons and retreated to the underbrush. Grent held his ground.

"What are you doing, boy?" he asked.

"I'm the town Criminal," Tom stated proudly. "I'm going to Kill the Inspector. Please move out of the way."

Grent stared at him. "Criminal? So that's what the Mayor was prattling about."

"I know we haven't had any Murder in two hundred years," Tom explained, "but I'm changing that right now. Move out of the way!"

Grent leaped out of the line of fire. The Inspector stood alone, swaying slightly.

Tom took aim, trying to think about the spectacular nature of his Crime and its social value. But he saw the Inspector on the ground, eyes glaring open, limbs

stiff, mouth twisted, no air going in or out the nostrils, no beat to the heart.

He tried to force his finger to close on the trigger. His mind could talk all it wished about the desirability of Crime; his hand knew better.

"I can't!" Tom shouted.

He threw down the gun and sprinted into the underbrush.

**T**HE Inspector wanted to send a search party out for Tom and hang him on the spot. Mr. Grent didn't agree. New Delaware was all forest. Ten thousand men couldn't have caught a fugitive in the forest, if he didn't want to be caught.

The Mayor and several villagers came out, to find out about the commotion. The soldiers formed a hollow square around the Inspector and Mr. Grent. They stood with weapons ready, their faces set and serious.

And the Mayor explained everything. The village's uncivilized lack of Crime. The job that Tom had been given. How ashamed they were that he had been unable to handle it.

"Why did you give the assignment to that particular man?" Mr. Grent asked.

"Well," the Mayor said, "I figured if anyone could Kill, Tom could. He's a Fisher, you know. Pretty gory work."



"Then the rest of you would be equally unable to kill?"

"We wouldn't even get as far as Tom did," the Mayor admitted sadly.

Mr. Grent and the Inspector looked at each other, then at the soldiers. The soldiers were staring at the villagers with wonder and respect. They started to whisper among themselves.

"Attention!" the Inspector bellowed. He turned to Grent and said in a low voice, "We'd better get away from here. Men in our armies who can't kill . . ."

"The morale," Mr. Grent said. He shuddered. "The possibility of infection. One man in a key position endangering a ship—perhaps a fleet—because he can't fire a weapon. It isn't worth the risk."

They ordered the soldiers back to the ship. The soldiers seemed to march more slowly than usual, and they looked back at the village. They whispered together, even though the Inspector was bellowing orders.

The small ship took off in a flurry of jets. Soon it was swallowed in the large ship. And then the large ship was gone.

The edge of the enormous watery red sun was just above the horizon.

"YOU can come out now," the Mayor called. Tom emerged from the underbrush, where he

had been hiding, watching w a thing.

"I bungled it," he said miserably.

"Don't feel bad about it," Billy Painter told him. "It was an impossible job."

"I'm afraid it was," the Mayor said, as they walked back to the village. "I thought that just possibly you could swing it. But you can't be blamed. There's not another man in the village who could have done the job even as well."

"What'll we do with these buildings?" Billy Painter asked, motioning at the Jail, the Post Office, the Church, and the Little Red Schoolhouse.

The Mayor thought deeply for a moment. "I know," he said. "We'll build a playground for the kids. Swings and slides and sandboxes and things."

"Another playground?" Tom asked.

"Sure. Why not?"

There was no reason, of course, why not.

"I won't be needing this any more, I guess," Tom said, handing the Skulking Permit to the Mayor.

"No, I guess not," said the Mayor. They watched him sorrowfully as he tore it up. "Well, we did our best. It just wasn't good enough."

"I had the chance," Tom mut-

tered, "and then I let you all down."

Billy Painter put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It's not your fault, Tom. It's not the fault of any of us. It's just what comes of not being civilized for two hundred years. Look how long it took Earth to get civilized. Thousands of years. And we were trying to do it in two weeks."

"Well, we'll just have to go back to being uncivilized," the Mayor said with a hollow attempt at cheerfulness.

Tom yawned, waved, went home to catch up on lost sleep. Before entering, he glanced at the sky.

Thick, swollen clouds had gathered overhead and every one of them had a black lining. The fall rains were almost here. Soon he could start fishing again.

Now why couldn't he have thought of the Inspector as a fish? He was too tired to examine that as a Motive. In any case, it was too late. Earth was gone from them and civilization had fled for no one knew how many centuries more.

He slept very badly.

—ROBERT SHECKLEY



SKULKING PERMIT

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Sworn to and subscribed before me this 27th day of August, 1954.

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