

A plump little man, leaning back in a chair by the door, got slowly up, looking Pulcher over.

"In back," he said shortly.

He led Pulcher behind the store, to a three-room apartment. The living room was comfortable enough, but for some reason it seemed unbalanced. One side was somehow heavier than the other. Pulcher noticed the nap of the rug, still flattened out where something heavy had been, something rectangular and large, about the size of a Tri-V electronic entertainment unit.

"Repossessed," said Lasser. "Sit down. Dickon called you a minute ago."

"Oh?" It had to be something important. Dickon wouldn't have tracked him down for any trivial matter.

"Don't know what he wanted, but he said you weren't to leave till he called back. Sit down. May'll bring you a cup of tea."

Pulcher chatted while the woman fussed over a teapot and a plate of soft cookies. He was trying to get the feel of the home. He could understand Madeleine Gaultry's desperation. He could understand the Foltis boy, a misfit in any society anywhere. What about Jimmy Lasser?

The elder Lassers were both pushing sixty. They were first-generation Niners, off an Earth colonizing ship. They hadn't been born on Earth, of course — the trip took

nearly a hundred years, physical transport. They had been born in transit, had married on the ship. As the ship had reached maximum population level shortly after they were born, they were allowed to have no children until they landed. At that time they were about forty.

May Lasser said suddenly: "Please help our boy, Mr. Pulcher! It isn't Jimmy's fault. He got in with a bad crowd. You know how it is, no work, nothing for a boy to do."

"I'll do my best."

BUT it was funny, Pulcher thought, how it was always "the crowd" that was bad. It was never Jimmy — and never Avery, never Sam, never Walter.

Pulcher sorted out the five boys and remembered Jimmy: nineteen years old, quite colorless, polite, not very interested. What had struck the lawyer about him was only surprise that this rabbity boy should have the enterprise to get into a criminal conspiracy in the first place.

"He's a good boy," said May Lasser pathetically. "That trouble with the parked cars two years ago wasn't his fault. He got a fine job right after that, you know. Ask his probation officer. Then the Icicle Works closed—" She poured more tea, slopping it over the side of the cup. "Oh, sorry! But — but when he went to the unemployment office

GALAXY

Mr. Pulcher, do you know what they said to him?"

"I know," said Pulcher.

"They asked him would he take a job if offered," she hurried on, unheeding. "A job. As if I didn't know what they meant by a job! They meant *renting!*" She plumped the teapot down on the table and began to weep. "Mr. Pulcher, I wouldn't let him rent if I died for it! There isn't anything in the Bible that says you can let someone else use your body and not be responsible for what it does! You know what tourists do! 'If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off.' It doesn't say, 'Unless somebody else is using it.' Mr. Pulcher, renting is a *sin!*"

"May." Mr. Lasser put his teacup down and looked directly at Pulcher. "What about it? Can you get Jimmy off?"

The attorney reflected. He hadn't known about Jimmy Lasser's probation before. If the county prosecutor was holding out on information of that sort, it meant he wasn't willing to cooperate. Probably he would be trying for a conviction with maximum sentence. Of course, he didn't have to tell a defense attorney anything about the previous criminal records of his clients. But in a juvenile case, where all parties were usually willing to go easy on the defendants, it was customary . . .

"I don't know, Mr. Lasser," Pul-

cher said. "I'll do the best I can."

"Damn right you will!" barked Lasser. "Dickon tell you who I am? I was committeeman here before him, you know. So get busy. Pull strings. Dickon will back you or I'll know why!"

Pulcher managed to control himself. "I'll do the best I can. I already told you that. If you want strings pulled, you'd better talk to Dickon yourself. I only know law. I don't know anything about politics."

The atmosphere was becoming unpleasant. Pulcher was glad to hear the ringing of the phone in the store outside. May Lasser answered it and said: "For you, Mr. Pulcher. Charley Dickon."

Pulcher gratefully picked up the phone. Dickon's rich, political voice said sorrowfully: "Milo? Listen, I been talking to Judge Pegrim's secretary. He isn't gonna let the kids off with a slap on the wrist. There's a lot of heat from the mayor's office."

PULCHER protested desperately: "But the Swinburne kid wasn't hurt! He got better care with Madeleine than he was getting at home."

"I know, Milo," the committeeman agreed, "but that's the way it is. So what I wanted to say to you, Milo, is don't knock yourself out on this one, because you aren't going to win it."

"But—" Pulcher suddenly be-

THE DAY THE ICICLE WORKS CLOSED

77

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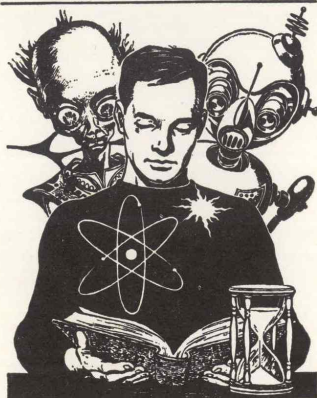
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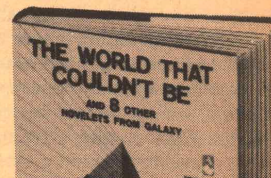
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WHAT KIND OF FICTION?

EVER read this one? "Lancelot Buckmeister climbed the long stairs to the observation platform of the ancient, abandoned Empire State Building and scanned the skies. There it was! The faint glint of light that was far Alpha Centauri, where humanity's last surviving hope swung in orbit around a strange new star."

We did, but we sent it back to the writer with a polite note that said, "If Lancelot wanted a closer look at Alpha Centauri, he would have done better to climb the long stairs down to the ancient, abandoned 34th Street Station of the BMT. He would have had to look directly through a few thousand miles of Earth in any case. Centaurus is a southern constellation."

Plowing as we do through some millions of words each year to find the right number of serials, novels, novelets and shorts to fill GALAXY, we hit this sort of thing with distressing frequency. It isn't always as bad as this. Sometimes (all too often!) it is far worse. Why? What keeps writers, espe-

cially new writers, from doing enough reading in the subjects they are writing about to avoid blunders?

Nothing. And yet—the incoming manuscript heap is constantly high with rockets that won't move once they are out in space (because there's no air for them to push against), bombs "dropped" from satellites (why not "drop" a bomb from Mars?), and so — endlessly — on.

That's an editor's job, of course, and we do our best. But there's another problem where the editor can't help much — a much worse problem in terms of the eternal struggle to find enough first-class stories.

That problem is the aridity of ideas.

Here, more than anywhere else, is where writers must learn to do their homework. There are stories to be written that cannot be conjured up out of last decade's textbooks, stories that come out of today's latest fruits from the laboratories and the institutes.

GALAXY

DOZENS of magazines and technical journals keep us up to date on what is new in modern science, invention and technology. What is new is a very great deal. Take only one magazine — the current issue of *Industrial Research*, say — and thumb through it. Page 12 tells about the astonishing new "aqua-therm" — a "pipeless pipe" that conducts water through water in a way, and with a precision, that must be seen to be believed. It melts ice, it keeps fish alive, it helps unbury buried treasure at the bottom of the sea. Is there a story there? Probably a dozen of them — ranging from an ice-free Arctic to, perhaps, a whole new concept of underwater farming.

Page 28 opens up a new world of lighting based on the phenomenon of electroluminescence, including such attractive notions as "see-through" windows that emit light on both sides without obstructing vision.

Page 84 designs half a dozen new spacecraft for us, licking the acute problems involved in getting rid of the heat of re-entry by such diverse schemes as shedding hot sparks, "sweating," "heat-sinks" and, most provocative of all, the magneto-hydrodynamic screen which keeps ship and air from contact in the first place. It tells us that "man will orbit the Earth by the end of 1959" (did he? It may be happen-

WHAT KIND OF FICTION

ing while this issue is on the press!) And it completes the schedule of conquering space as follows: "Land on the Moon by 1965; be on Mars and Venus three years later; and travel almost as fast as light, that is, 670 million mph, within 40 years."

That is — Alpha Centauri before we are out of the 20th century.

Maybe Lancelot Buckmeister will have something to look for after all!

That's only one issue of one magazine, and only the barest quick scanning of its contents. There must be many stories here; there's no way of telling, given fertile imagination and writing skill, what line on what page might produce a great new story. But the pity is that the stories won't write themselves.

With about one technical graduate in four going into research, with the nation's Research & Development spending running to hundreds of millions of dollars a month, the laboratories are turning out material enough for all our plot-provoking needs. And science-fiction writers are the logical pipeline between the scientists and the public, as far as the *interpretation* (not the mere reporting) of new ideas is concerned. It is the imagination in depth of a first-rate science fiction writer that can flesh out a dry technical report and show us in human

(Continued on page 194)

Meeting of the Minds

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

*What mission had the Quedak been given?
Even he couldn't remember any more—but
he refused to die till it was completed!*

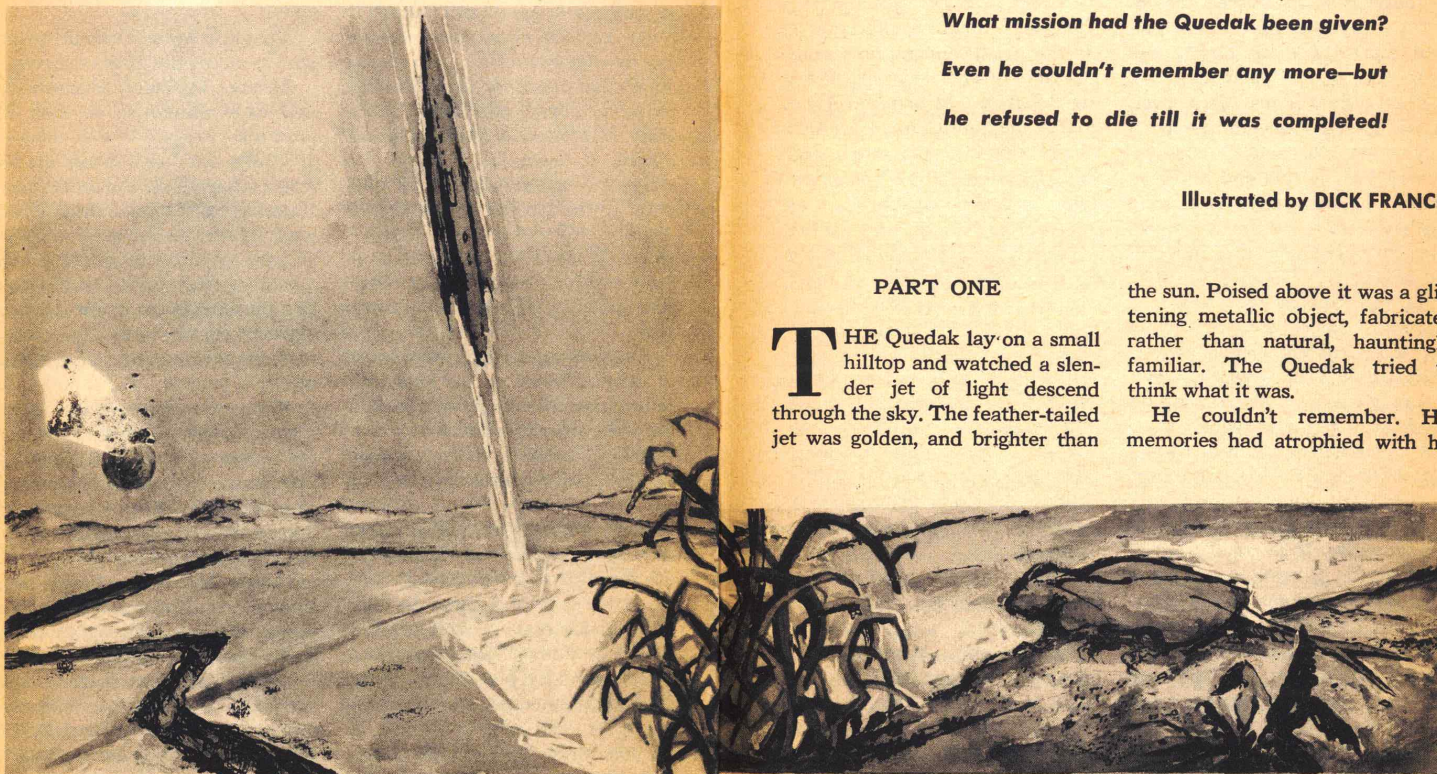
Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

PART ONE

THE Quedak lay on a small hilltop and watched a slender jet of light descend through the sky. The feather-tailed jet was golden, and brighter than

the sun. Poised above it was a glistening metallic object, fabricated rather than natural, hauntingly familiar. The Quedak tried to think what it was.

He couldn't remember. His memories had atrophied with his



functions, leaving only scattered fragments of images. He searched among them now, leafing through his brief scraps of ruined cities, dying populations, a blue-water-filled canal, two moons, a spaceship...

That was it. The descending object was a *spaceship*. There had been many of them during the great days of the Quedak.

Those great days were over, buried forever beneath the powdery sands. Only the Quedak remained. He had life and he had a mission to perform. The driving urgency of his mission remained, even after memory and function had failed.

As the Quedak watched, the spaceship dipped lower. It wobbled and sidejets kicked out to straighten it. With a gentle explosion of dust, the spaceship settled tail first on the arid plain.

And the Quedak, driven by the imperative Quedak mission, dragged itself painfully down from the little hilltop. Every movement was an agony. If he were a selfish creature, the Quedak would have died. But he was not selfish. Quedaks owed a duty to the universe; and that spaceship, after all the blank years, was a link to other worlds, to planets where the Quedak could live again and give his services to the native fauna.

He crawled, a centimeter at a time, and wondered whether he

had the strength to reach the alien spaceship before it left this dusty, dead planet.

CAPTAIN JENSEN of the spaceship *Southern Cross* was bored sick with Mars. He and his men had been here for ten days. They had found no important archaeological specimens, no tantalizing hints of ancient cities such as the *Polaris* expedition had discovered at the South Pole. Here there was nothing but sand, a few weary shrubs, and a rolling hill or two. Their biggest find so far had been three pottery shards.

Jensen readjusted his oxygen booster. Over the rise of a hill he saw his two men returning.

"Anything interesting?" he asked.

"Just this," said engineer Vayne, holding up an inch of corroded blade without a handle.

"Better than nothing," Jensen said. "How about you, Wilks?"

The navigator shrugged his shoulders. "Just photographs of the landscape."

"OK," Jensen said. "Dump everything into the sterilizer and let's get going."

Wilks looked mournful. "Captain, one quick sweep to the north might turn up something really—"

"Not a chance," Jensen said. "Fuel, food, water, everything was calculated for a ten-day stay. That's three days longer than *Polaris* had.

"We're taking off this evening."

The men nodded. They had no reason to complain. As the second to land on Mars, they were sure of a small but respectable footnote in the history books. They put their equipment through the sterilizer vent, sealed it, and climbed the ladder to the lock. Once they were inside, Vayne closed and dogged the hatch, and started to open the inside pressure door.

"Hold it!" Jensen called out.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought I saw something on your boot," Jensen said. "Something like a big bug."

Vayne quickly ran his hands down the sides of his boots. The two men circled him, examining his clothing.

"Shut that inner door," the captain said. "Wilks, did you see anything?"

"Not a thing," the navigator said. "Are you sure, Cap? We haven't found anything that looks like animal or insect life here. Only a few plants."

"I could have sworn I saw something," Jensen said. "Maybe I was wrong... Anyhow, we'll fumigate our clothes before we enter the ship proper. No sense taking any chance of bringing back some kind of Martian bug."

The men removed their clothing and boots and stuffed them into the chute. They searched the bare steel room carefully.

"Nothing here," Jensen said at last. "OK, let's go inside."

Once inside the ship, they sealed off the lock and fumigated it. The Quedak, who had crept inside earlier through the partially opened pressure door, listened to the distant hiss of gas. After a while he heard the jets begin to fire.

The Quedak retreated to the dark rear of the ship. He found a metal shelf and attached himself to the underside of it near the wall. After a while he felt the ship tremble.

THE QUEDAK clung to the shelf during the long, slow flight through space. He had forgotten what spaceships were like, but now memory revived briefly. He felt blazing heat and freezing cold. Adjusting to the temperature changes drained his small store of vitality, and the Quedak began to wonder if he was going to die.

He *refused* to die. Not while there was still a possibility of accomplishing the Quedak mission.

In time he felt the harsh pull of gravity, and felt the main jets firing again. The ship was coming down to its planet.

AFTER a routine landing, Captain Jensen and his men were taken to Medic Checkpoint, where they were thumped, probed and tested for any sign of disease.

Their spaceship was lowered to

a flatcar and taken past rows of moonships and ICBMs to Decontamination Stage One. Here the sealed outer hull was washed down with powerful cleansing sprays. By evening, the ship was taken to Decontamination Stage Two.

A team of two inspectors equipped with bulky tanks and hoses undogged the hatch and entered, shutting the hatch behind them.

They began at the bow, methodically spraying as they moved toward the rear. Everything seemed in order; no animals or plants, no trace of mold such as the first Luna expedition had brought back.

"Do you really think this is necessary?" the assistant inspector asked. He had already requested a transfer to Flight Control.

"Sure it is," the senior inspector said. "Can't tell what these ships might bring in."

"I suppose so," the assistant said. "Still, a Martian whoosis wouldn't even be able to live on Earth. Would it?"

"How should I know?" the senior inspector said. "I'm no botanist. Maybe they don't know, either."

"Seems like a waste of — hey!"

"What is it?" the senior inspector asked.

"I thought I saw something," the assistant said. "Looked a little like a palmetto bug. Over by that shelf."

The senior inspector adjusted

his respirator more snugly over his face and motioned to his assistant to do the same. He advanced slowly toward the shelf, unfastening a second nozzle from the pressure tank on his back. He turned it on, and a cloud of greenish gas sprayed out.

"There," the senior inspector said. "That should take care of your bug." He knelt down and looked under the shelf. "Nothing here."

"It was probably a shadow," the assistant said.

Together they sprayed the entire interior of the ship, paying particular attention to the small box of Martian artifacts. They left the gas-filled ship and dogged the hatch again.

"Now what?" the assistant asked.

"Now we leave the ship sealed for three days," the senior inspector said. "Then we inspect again. You find me the animal that'll live through that."

THE Quedak, who had been clinging to the underside of the assistant's shoe between the heel and the sole, released his hold. He watched the shadowy biped figures move away, talking in their deep, rumbling, indecipherable voices. He felt tired and unutterably lonely.

But buoying him up was the thought of the Quedak mission. Only that was important. The first part of the mission was accom-

plished. He had landed safely on an inhabited planet. Now he needed food and drink. Then he had to have rest, a great deal of rest to restore his dormant faculties. After that he would be ready to give this world what it so obviously needed — the cooperation possible only through the Quedak mind.

He crept slowly down the shadowy yard, past the deserted hulls of spaceships. He came to a wire fence and sensed the high-voltage electricity running through it. Gauging his distance carefully, the Quedak jumped safely through one of the openings in the mesh.

This was a very different section. From here the Quedak could smell water and food. He moved hastily forward, then stopped.

He sensed the presence of a man. And something else. Something much more menacing.

"WHO'S THERE?" the watchman called out. He waited, his revolver in one hand, his flashlight in the other. Thieves had broken into the yards last week; they had stolen three cases of computer parts bound for Rio. Tonight he was ready for them.

He walked forward, an old, keen-eyed man holding his revolver in a rock-steady fist. The beam of his flashlight probed among the cargoes. The yellow light flickered along a great pile of precision machine tools for South Africa, past a

water-extraction plant for Jordan and a pile of mixed goods for Rabaul.

"You better come out," the watchman shouted. His flashlight probed at sacks of rice for Shanghai and power saws for Burma. Then the beam of light stopped abruptly.

"I'll be damned," the watchman said. Then he laughed. A huge and red-eyed rat was glaring into the beam of his flashlight. It had something in its jaws, something that looked like an unusually large cockroach.

"Good eating," the watchman said. He holstered his revolver and continued his patrol.

A large black animal had seized the Quedak, and he felt heavy jaws close over his back. He tried to fight; but, blinded by a sudden beam of yellow light, he was betrayed by total and enervating confusion.

The yellow light went off. The black beast bit down hard on the Quedak's armored back. The Quedak mustered his remaining strength, and, uncoiling his long, scorpion-jointed tail, lashed out.

He missed, but the black beast released him hastily. They circled each other, the Quedak hoisting his tail for a second blow, the beast unwilling to turn loose this prey.

The Quedak waited for his chance. Elation filled him. This

pugnacious animal could be the first, the first on this planet to experience the Quedak mission. From this humble creature a start could be made. . .

The beast sprang and its white teeth clicked together viciously. The Quedak moved out of the way and its barb-headed tail flashed out, fastening itself in the beast's back. The Quedak held on grimly while the beast leaped and squirmed. Setting his feet, the Quedak concentrated on the all-important task of pumping a tiny white crystal down the length of his tail and under the beast's skin.

But this most important of the Quedak faculties was still dormant. Unable to accomplish anything, the Quedak released his barbs, and, taking careful aim, accurately drove his sting home between the black beast's eyes. The blow, as the Quedak had known, was lethal.

The Quedak took nourishment from the body of its dead foe; regretfully, for by inclination the Quedak was herbivorous. When he had finished, the Quedak knew that he was in desperate need of a long period of rest. Only after that could the full Quedak powers be regained.

He crawled up and down the piles of goods in the yard, looking for a place to hide. Carefully he examined several bales. At last he reached a stack of heavy boxes. One of the boxes had a crack just

large enough to admit him.

The Quedak crawled inside, down the shiny, oil-slick surface of a machine, to the far end of the box. There he went into the dreamless, defenseless sleep of the Quedak, serenely trusting in what the future would bring.

PART TWO

I

THE big gaff-headed schooner was pointed directly at the reef-enclosed island, moving toward it with the solidity of an express train. The sails billowed under powerful gusts of the northwest breeze, and the rusty Allison-Chambers diesel rumbled beneath a teak grating. The skipper and mate stood on the bridge deck and watched the reef approach.

"Anything yet?" the skipper asked. He was a stocky, balding man with a perpetual frown on his face. He had been sailing his schooner among the uncharted shoals and reefs of the Southwest Pacific for twenty-five years. He frowned because his old ship was not insurable. His deck cargo, however, was insured. Some of it had come all the way from Ogdenville, that transshipment center in the desert where spaceships landed.

"Not a thing," the mate said. He was watching the dazzling white wall of coral, looking for the gleam

of blue that would reveal the narrow pass to the inner lagoon. This was his first trip to the Solomon Islands. A former television repairman in Sydney before he got the wanderlust, the mate wondered if the skipper had gone crazy and planned a spectacular suicide against the reef.

"Still nothing!" he shouted. "Shoals ahead!"

"I'll take it," the skipper said to the helmsman. He gripped the wheel and watched the unbroken face on the reef.

"Nothing," the mate said. "Skipper, we'd better come about."

"Not if we're going to get through the pass," the skipper said. He was beginning to get worried. But he had promised to deliver goods to the American treasure-hunters on this island, and the skipper's word was his bond. He had picked up the cargo in Rabaul and made his usual stops at the settlements on New Georgia and Malaita. When he finished here, he could look forward to a thousand-mile run to New Caledonia.

"There it is!" the mate shouted.

A thin slit of blue had appeared in the coral wall. They were less than thirty yards from it now, and the old schooner was making close to eight knots.

AS the ship entered the pass, the skipper threw the wheel hard over. The schooner spun on its keel.

Coral flashed by on either side, close enough to touch. There was a metallic shriek as an upper mainmast spreader snagged and came free. Then they were in the pass, bucking a six-knot current.

The mate pushed the diesel to full throttle, then sprang back to help the skipper wrestle with the wheel. Under sail and power the schooner forged through the pass, scraped by an outcropping to port, and came onto the placid surface of the lagoon.

The skipper mopped his forehead with a large blue bandanna. "Very snug work," he said.

"*Snug!*" the mate cried. He turned away, and the skipper smiled a brief smile.

They slid past a small ketch riding at anchor. The native hands took down sail and the schooner nosed up to a rickety pier that jutted out from the beach. Lines were made fast to palm trees. From the fringe of jungle above the beach a white man came down, walking briskly in the noonday heat.

He was very tall and thin, with knobby knees and elbows. The fierce Melanesian sun had burned out but not tanned him, and his nose and cheekbones were peeling. His horn-rimmed glasses had broken at the hinge and been repaired with a piece of tape. He looked eager, boyish, and curiously naive.

One hell-of-a-looking treasure-hunter, the mate thought.