An ideal-looking world would not necessarily be the ideal place for a colony to be set up, although it might be very difficult to discover the reason against such a venture. Perhaps the world itself wouldn't want to be colonised or a different type of alien culture take objections to the footprints of Man treading its soil.

The distant view, as seen through the binoculars, did not tell much about surface conditions on the planet. Bob slightly adjusted the focus, and again took in their surroundings up to the perimeter of visibility. The rocky table on which they had landed sloped down steeply to dusty brown sands, which rolled away to the horizon. Undulant hills passed slowly across his field of view, smooth and apparently blanketed with grass. Rocky prominences occasionally broke up their flow. There was no sign of habitation, indigenous animal life, or large vegetation.

" An ideal planet to colonise. Captain Spencer," a clipped voice stated.

Bob put down the binoculars. "It could be, sir."

Major Ruffel emitted a sound indicating impatience. Broad-shouldered, a trifle grey at the temples at forty-five, he had a spruce, wiry manner and his gesture as he took in their surroundings suggested his decision was already made.

" I have none of your doubts, Captain!" He indicated the sky, patched with cloud, and the distant hills, bright green under spring sunshine. "Virgin land, probably so fertile that everything we bring from Earth will flourish. No natives to raise difficulties." He inflated his lungs, khaki clad shoulders thrown back. "An unsullied atmosphere, clear as wine! What more would you ask. Captain ?"

Bob did not reply. Major Ruffel was probably right, but had an unfortunate habit of assuming and condemning a sub-ordinate's disagreement before it was voiced. Superficially, Antol seemed much like Earth. But the Argemone, upright on her stem fifty yards behind them, had crossed ten light years of space. This far from Earth, Bob felt it unwise to make hasty pronouncements.

" The planet may well prove habitable, sir," he said guardedly.

He left Ruffel and returned to the ship. The Argemone had touched down at dusk. They had remained inside until dawn. Sandy Trentham, their radio man, had found no local signals on any band, and that alone indicated no civilised race with an advanced

science occupied the planet. At the news, Ruffel had been jubilant. Atmosphere tests, made on the spot, and with samples taken while descending, increased his exultation. It was apparent the Major considered this a personal triumph. With dawn, they were ready to leave the ship, and explore.

Sandy Trentham came down the vessel's ladder. His very light blue uniform clashed oddly with his sandy hair and brows, giving him a boyish look.

" The Major been saying good morning ?" he asked. " Or getting your clearance on the 'all-satisfied' message to Earth?"

Bob glanced at him quickly. Under Sandy Trentham's apparent lightness was a warning.

" He's been asking you to radio Earth, Sandy?" he asked.

" He has. I've already put through the provisional message on the sub-space radio. We'll get the relayed answer inside twelve hours. It's not within the Major's power to give the final okay alone, though he'd like to do just that."

Bob nodded. Ruffel had an aptitude for taking as much credit as possible. An 'all-satisfied' colonisation message filed under Ruffel's name alone would be a high-power recommendation, back on Earth. Unfortunately for Ruffel, no such message could be sent until other officers on the ship agreed. The first colony ship from Earth could only travel at vast expense, and was not to be risked until everyone with an authoritative opinion had concurred.

" I've not given my clearance," Bob said. " Nor shall I until I'm satisfied!"

" The Major won't like it!"

Bob shrugged, and climbed up into the ship. He could give no actual reason why the 'all-satisfied' message should be delayed. He only knew that he was not yet agreed that Antol was suitable for colonisation.

Hobbs and Griffiths, two crewmen, were preparing to lower the light tracked vehicle used for ground exploration. It had a radius of several hundred miles, if necessary.

Bob went to his own cabin, stooping his lanky six feet form to pass the bulkhead doorway. He briefly reviewed the reports so far collected, and was forced to admit that he could give no reason why colonists should not come. Not even the shadow of a threat could be found in any of the details, already radioed to Earth.

Perhaps Ruffel was right, this time, Bob thought. He descended out of the Argemone

and found that the caterpillar truck had been lowered, and stood waiting. Hobbs was at the wheel, and Griffiths by his side. Major Ruffel stood in the body of the vehicle, stocky and neat as if from barracks. Sandy Trentham would stay in the ship to watch the radio, Bob guessed. Of the vessel's complement, two others were junior crewmen, engaged on routine checks, and the last Genne Moore, biology officer, incidentally Ruffel's attractive niece, and presumably still enduring self-imposed captivity in her tiny laboratory. Bob was glad she was not coming in the truck — she had an unfortunate knack of backing up the Major even when he was wrong. Her clear blue eyes would spark, her slightly snub nose twitch, and she would produce some pointedly sarcastic observation.

They rode across the hundred yards of rocky table, and began a bumpy descent to the sands at the foot of the slope. Ruffel stood with both hands grasping the truck's side rail, watching everything.

" Looks practically ideal to me. Captain," he said, as they reached the sand. " I suggest we radio confirmation when we get back to the ship."

On one of the side seats. Bob swayed to the truck's motion.

" Isn't that a trifle hasty, sir? We've not really investigated yet — "

" Do we need to ?" Ruffel snapped. " Delays cost money. My superiors don't welcome waste. What's more, I dislike delay, especially without reason."

Bob saw it was going to be difficult. The Major was so confident that Antol was an ideal planet, that his decision was already made. Confirmation of suitability would also enhance the Major's reputation as a quick worker, when received within twenty-four hours of landing.

Hobbs, behind the wheel, gave an exclamation and pointed.

" See those ?"

On one of the green slopes long legged animals, not unlike small goats, were grazing. They were restless, eating in quick snatches, heads raised between mouthfuls. As the vehicle drew near they looked up, then trotted off, disappearing over the hill.

" Probably good eating!" Ruffel said.

Bob morosely gazed the way they had gone. He wondered why he felt uneasy.

" Still looking for hidden snags. Captain ?" Ruffel asked acidly.

Bob shook his head. “ No, sir. Merely wondering why there’s no large vegetation, no trees or bushes, no birds, apparently no insects, and seemingly no variety of species like on Earth.”

Ruffel laughed. “ You’re not wanting to delay confirmation because you can’t find a snake in my paradise ?”

Griffiths chuckled audibly, and Bob felt uncomfortable. Put like that, delay seemed ridiculous. He let it pass, knowing there could be no reply.

“ I suggest we take a sample of the grass back for Miss Moore, sir.”

They stopped to collect it. Seen closely, it was quite unlike grass. An inch or so tall, it was extremely wiry, and had short, stiff roots, covered with thick hairs. As he pulled a handful of it, the sandy soil fell away. Apparently the ground held little moisture.

Ruffel was watching him, following his thoughts. “Irrigation will cure that. Captain. Irrigation— and Earth grass to fix the soil if necessary, with the trees for shade.”

Bob put the tiny plants in a sample jar from the truck, and snapped on the lid. His unease had abruptly increased ten-fold. Not the slightest breeze stirred the plants or touched his face, and he was certain this was the slope up which the restless goats had run.

The creatures had left no footprints in the sand.

Bob thought of that often, as the track made its round trip a few miles from the ship. It was in his mind as they returned, and uppermost in the hours following. He could not convince himself that he had mistaken the slope for another.

Genne Moore took the sample jar into her room. She paused at the door.

“ I have not found any reason why we should delay our ‘all-satisfied’ message,” she said. “ I don’t imagine I’ll find it here.” She indicated the jar.

Bob noted her tone. “ Aren’t we being a little hasty ? We’ve scarcely seen the planet, yet we seem to want to rash off a clearance message — ”

Her eyes sparked. “ Delay costs money!”

“ So I’ve heard already.” Bob felt extreme irritation, and wished she were not Ruffel’s niece. “ But it would cost more — much more — if we got a colony ship out here, and found the planet unsuitable.”

“ Why should it be unsuitable ?” Ruffel’s snap was in her voice, now. “ I’ve found no parasites, no significant or harmful bacteria. The air would suit a health resort.”

“ And there are no minor life forms,” Bob put in. “ No small creatures, no trees.”

“ I’d noted that.” Her voice suggested it was unimportant.

“ Presumably some oddity in local conditions or evolution which we can soon explain.”

“ And are we to give the ‘ all clear ’ before it is explained?”

They stood eye to eye. Additional colour came slowly to the girl’s cheeks. Bob saw that she was taking his words as a deliberate slight — an implication that both she herself and Major Ruffel, her uncle, did not know their job.

“ You wouldn’t be trying to cause delay to detract from what my uncle has achieved ?” she demanded icily at last.

Bob’s lips snapped together. A retort sprang to his mind, but he suppressed it. He let his eyes say what he thought, turned on a heel, and strode down the narrow corridor. He heard her door close with an angry click.

In the cramped radio room Sandy Trentham sat before his communications equipment. His eyes, keen under his shockingly sandy brows, were sympathetic.

“ Been through it again ?”

Bob sat down in the spare seat. “ It’ll be awkward. If the Major didn’t pride himself on being a quick worker, he wouldn’t rush things so. As it is, I’m witholding my approval on the 'all clear' without apparent reason. It looks bad.” He sighed. Just how bad it could look had been shown by Genne Moore. “ There seems to be every reason in the world for giving my approval, and none for withholding it. It worries me.”

“You’re thinking of some points in particular,” Sandy Trentham said, half questioning.

“ Only the lack of animal life in general, and vegetation — and the fact that those creatures we saw run up the hill seemed to leave no tracks.”

The other started. “ You’re not serious!”

“ I am, Sandy.”

“ You’ve mistaken the slope — ”

“ I’ll not deny that would be an explanation.”

Sandy Trentham relaxed, again idly twanging the bug key at his hand. “ You’ll need more than that to convince the Major, or Earth,” he said. “ Wind could cover their tracks.”

“ I’m afraid so.”

Bob got up. He could see the way everything was leading. He must agree with Ruffel — against his own conviction. Or stand out, without logical reason. In the latter case, the Argemone would probably be his last ship : Ruffel’s eventual report to his superiors would assure that.

A knock came on the steel door. Sandy Trentham rose, opening it. Genne Moore stood in the corridor. Half as much anger would have made her twice as attractive, Bob thought. Her gaze came directly on him.

“ Did you clear the sample jar, Captain Spencer ?”

It had been a long time since her tone had been quite so condemning. Bob thought. He shook his head. “ I’ve not touched it, or even seen it since you had it. Why ?”

“ The plants are gone!” She seemed about to accuse him, but did not. “ If it’s a joke by one of the crew — or anyone else — it’s pretty poor.”

“ Maybe you think I gave you an empty jar!” Bob growled. “ No. I looked in. I was gone perhaps five minutes. When I got back, the jar was empty.”

They stared at each other. There seemed nothing further to say, but a tiny fear had re-awakened in Bob’s mind.

“ Get Hobbs or one of the others to fetch you a new sample,” he said lamely at last.

He spent an hour alone in his cabin ; another hour studying the hills through binoculars. Evening was coming. The scene was peaceful. Near the ship, Hobbs and Griffiths were preparing the truck for a longer expedition. Sandy Trentham eventually came from the radio room with news that Earth was highly pleased with Ruffel’s preliminary report, and awaited a complete all-clear as soon as possible. Genne Moore had prepared a brief report on the plants. They were hardy, tough, but lived on a photosynthesis and neutriment basis akin to that on Earth. Guarded questions by Bob did not find the practical joker.

When he descended from the ship he found that Hobbs had stowed provisions and additional fuel in the truck. Bob frowned.

“ You’re — not staying outside the ship tonight ?”

Hobbs drew cords tight. “ Yes, sir. Major Ruffel wants us to camp just beyond the hills, to observe those creatures we saw — perhaps catch one.”

“ But it’s a general rule no one stays outside the ship at night until final clearance.”

“ It has been a general rule,” a voice said acidly.

Ruffel had come silently round the ship. He stood eyeing Bob as if mentally composing censuring phrases for his report. A thin smile came to his lips.

“ I have decided we need not observe the rule about staying in the ship, Captain.” His tone had a sting. “ In twenty-four hours we have found not a single dangerous animal, nor any other imaginable reason for delaying our investigations.” He paused significantly. “ You may have the power to hinder my final report to Earth — but I think you will have none to object to my instructions here.”

Bob knew he had none. Not out of his unease or doubt could he produce anything to convince Ruffel. He watched the truck slip away into the gathering evening, Hobbs and Griffiths riding jauntily. They had quickly reached the sandy plain which led to the hills, and were soon gone from view.

Bob walked halfway round the ship, and to the edge of the plateau. Here, it was only a few feet down over broken rocks, to reach the sands. He had not remembered they came so near at any point.

Evening made its last long shadows, almost gone. The sky was clear, the sunset like that following a summer day on Earth. He halted at the foot of the brief slope. Ahead were high hills of sandy soil, tops at least level with the rock table where the Argemone rested. The terrain was deceptive. Bob decided. He had not noticed hills that high during the morning’s circular trip.

He set off for a near hilltop. The tiny plants were very thick here, carpeting the sand like some wiry, noble moss. Some- times his boots sank through them, into loose sand underneath. Once he bent, testing the dampness of the powdery soil with a hand. It was almost devoid of moisture, very fine, less gritty than seashore sand, and rather like the multitude particles of a newly built anthill. It should be an excellent basis for cropping and afforestation, as the Major said.

The clear atmosphere made nightfall rapid. From the hilltop Bob could only see other hills, extending to the limit of visibility, and he turned back. All around him there seemed to be a tiny rustling, barely on the threshold of audibility, and the night air

moved quietly against his face.

Major Ruffel was waiting for him inside the ship, his expression determined. Bob guessed what was coming — the question of final clearance.

“ Have you discovered any other possible dangers, Captain Spencer ?” Ruffel asked. “ If so, perhaps you will discuss them with us.”

Bob did not miss the irony. His grey eyes clouded. Sandy Trentham stood in the corridor to the radio cabin, and nodded slightly.

“ Yes,” the Major said. “ We are all otherwise agreed that the ‘all-satisfied’ message can be sent. It’s up to you. Captain.”

Bob dusted his trousers. He had hoped the question would not become quite so direct. Apparently Sandy had agreed : there was no clear reason why not. Genne Moore would have followed the Major’s lead. She nearly always did. Therefore responsibility for delaying the clearance now rested solely on his own two shoulders. Bob thought.

“ Hobbs and Griffiths are out.” He knew he was playing for time. “ Wouldn’t it be wise to wait till morning. They may have something to report.”

Ruffel made an explosive sound, and moved impatiently. “ Delay! Delay! Why ? What reasons have you ?”

A direct question Bob knew he could not avoid. He wished there were more time — to prove his unease was without cause, or to locate its grounds. He gazed out over the dim terrain below, then back at the watching faces, outlined by the ship’s interior lighting.

“ We’re ten light-years from Earth. Can we judge by appearances, or by Earth standards, out here ? Why is this planet apparently so perfect ? Why no animals except that nervy lot of ghosts ? Why no insects or birds — ”

“ I’ve a provisional theory to cover that,” Genne Moore said from the background. “ Evolution has been rapid, so few secondary forms have branched off. Hence the simplicity of fauna. Traces of extinct, earlier types will doubtless be found. Given specific conditions, an area may easily be almost or exclusively adopted by one type of plant or animal. It happens on Earth. With the remarkable uniformity of conditions here, the area is larger, and the suitability of one life form more exclusive, that’s all.”

Bob admitted that it could be so. Yet he did not believe it was quite the full explanation. His lips set, his eyes grew stony, and his features became stubborn.

“ I’ll give my answer in the morning,” he said.

The Major reddened visibly. “ Earth is waiting our message, and we’re ready to send it — ”

“ I’m not ready to send it,” Bob said coldly.

“ For what reason ?”

“ I can’t give my reason.”

“ You mean you haven’t one, but want to cause delay!” Ruffel snapped. “ When this is known on Earth, I wouldn’t give a penny for your chances. As your superior, I demand you agree — ”

“ That’s the one thing in the world you can’t order!” Bob moved past them, into the corridor, and stalked to his cabin. Ruffel would never risk sending the clearance signal with one dissident on the ship. In the event of the millionth chance turning up, and something being against colonisation, he would lose his major’s crown, or worse.

Ten minutes brought a tap on the door. Sandy Trentham came in, visibly worried. He stood his back to the closed door.

“ The Major will break you. Bob.” It was a sad statement of fact. “ Why not give your clearance ? If anything is wrong, we’ll all be in it together. But as things stand, you’re in for a personal squashing. Bricks fall harder with fewer backs to hit, and when thrown by the Major.”

Bob shook his head sadly, and again pillowed his chin on his hands. “ I’m not satisfied, Sandy.”

“ Can you give me one watertight reason why not ?”

“ None I haven’t already mentioned.”

“ Then I wouldn’t be in your shoes from now on.”

Shaking his head sadly, Trentham left. Bob nibbled his lips. He wondered if he were risking virtual disgrace for a mere whim. For the twentieth time he reviewed all he knew. The restless goats, grabbing mouthfuls of food, the fertile soil . . . nothing here why Antol should not become a second Earth.

Another knock, more hesitant. He opened the door, was astonished to find Genne Moore, and gave her his chair. She sought for words, avoiding his gaze, then looked

him squarely in the face.

“ This is private ?”

“ Of course.”

“ Then I must tell you rapid clearance means a lot to my uncle.” Her gaze was direct, but her voice had an undertone of embarrassment. “ He’s with two other men on a short list for a most important post — an extremely important post — ”

“ And a snappy job here could tip the balance ?”

She looked at the cabin floor. “ Probably.”

Bob considered it : a quick, justified ‘ all-clear ’ would indeed be a feather in Ruffel’s crown.

“ If he passed the ‘ all-clear,’ and something turned up, he’d be back in the ranks,” he pointed out cautiously. “ It works both ways.”

“ But there is no reason why anything should turn up! I’ve not found any reason — you’ve not — ”

She gazed at him, half pleading. Bob nibbled his lips. “ Before men flew rockets, they lived in trees. Somewhere in my ancestry is a devilishly suspicious fellow. There’s women’s intuition, too. Why deny it men? Man survived to fly rockets because he was mistrustful of things he didn’t understand, when he lived in trees.”

He left it at that. There was nothing further to say. She got up, was about to open the door, then surprisingly her fingers closed over his arm.

“ My uncle thinks you’re making delay, where there need be none, because of a personal grudge or dislike. You know what he can do when he gets back to Earth.”

“ I know it,” Bob admitted with deep regret.

“ Then why not give your permission ?” Her face had a look Bob had never seen before. “ Don’t seek trouble — Bob—”

Sad, head slightly bowed, Bob gazed at her. There were eleven reasons out of ten why he should agree — or so it seemed. He dropped his eyes, drew his lips into a thin line.

“ I cannot give my permission,” he said.

He did not watch her go ; scarcely heard her. When he lifted his head, the cabin was empty.

Bob did not seek the others early. He found Ruffel stamping up and down the narrow corridor, his attention directed on the radio room. Sandy Trentham emerged, nodded, but spoke to the Major.

“ No reply from the truck, sir.”

“ But they were supposed to radio at dawn!” Ruffel looked jerkily at his watch. “ That’s over an hour ago! You contacted them last night ?”

“ Yes, sir. Immediately after they had camped, confirming the spot.”

“ Then why don’t they reply now ?”

Sandy Tentham offered no reason, but returned to his radio room. Ruffel went down out of the ship, and stamped to the edge of the rock plateau. Bob half opened the radio cabin door.

“ Any reason you can think of why they don’t answer, Sandy ?”

“ None worth mentioning. The transmitter could have packed up — but I wouldn’t bet on it. And they have spares.”

Another hour passed, with no reply, and Ruffel studied the far landscape through binoculars, from the highest attainable point on the ship. Descending, he made the only decision which seemed possible : go on foot and find what Hobbs and Griffiths were doing.

Bob soon saw that the march would be no fun. It was difficult to average even three miles an hour, on foot over the loose sandy soil. At that rate it would take nearly seven hours to travel the twenty miles.

Their emergency packs increased in weight with each hour. Major Ruffel took frequent bearings. He had become morose, his face heavy. The straight course was one relatively easy to follow, and the high sun lit the hills brilliantly. When four miles out, the ship was still visible behind. The truck should be seen without trouble, Bob thought.

They rested once, briefly. It was apparent they could not return to the Argemone by nightfall, but Genne Moore and the other crewmen should expect to see them by noon.

Hours passed. One green undulant hill replaced another. The sun lowered, and ahead

the ground seemed higher.

“ Truck should be visible from there,” Major Ruffel said.

He wiped his face, and went on. Their course had deviated less than a straight pencil line across a map.

From the top of the highest hill could be seen a vast expanse of other hills, mostly green. The truck could not be found.

“ Perhaps we’ve made less speed than I supposed,” Ruffel said.

They went two more miles, and surveyed the terrain from another hill. Bob judged that a circle of at least three miles radius was within the reach of their binoculars, but no vehicle was visible.

“ I think we’ve come a trifle too far,” Ruffel said.

No one pointed out that the truck had not been seen. Thirty minutes later the Major halted on a low hill. “ This is where it should be,” he said, defeated.

They could not see it. Nor did they find it during the day- light hours remaining. Their binoculars picked up no sign of it from any of the surrounding hills, and they abandoned the search when evening had reduced the perimeter of visibility to a few hundred yards. Sandy Trentham voiced the question which had been in Bob’s mind.

“ Why haven’t we seen their tracks ? We must have crossed them somewhere.” Trentham screwed a foot through the everlasting green carpet, into the loose soil below. “ The caterpillars would make a trail we’d see half a mile away.”

There was no answer. The light breeze, usual at evening, was too slight to cause drifting, and the verdure secured the top soil against movement, even if winds had swept the locality before they arrived.

They camped halfway up a slope, chewing iron rations, each sunk within himself. Ruffel was the last to speak.

“ We’ll check this area again, until about noon, then go back to the ship. Hobbs and Griffiths may have returned there by another route.”

That was exceedingly unlikely, Bob thought. Their outward trip had been straight as a line. If they had returned, it would be along that line, and Ruffel, Trentham and he himself would have met them early in the day.

Thin clouds came across the sky, obscuring the stars. A whisper as of night wind was all around them, and Bob dozed only fitfully. In some inexplicable way he felt that the green-clad desert hated their intrusion, and wanted them gone, or dead.

As the hours passed, the breath of night wind ceased, replaced by a close airlessness which might precede a storm. Bob stirred occasionally, trying to make his pack a more comfortable pillow. For a long interval, rather after midnight, he lay on his back awake, his gaze often on the stars high above. If Earth's sun were visible, he could not pick it out from other brighter specks scattered across the sky, seen now the cloud had gone.

The feeling of hidden enmity remained, just on the threshold of awareness. He could not pinpoint its cause. It was some primitive instinct keyed into activity by an unknown danger.

It was some hours after midnight when he awoke with a start from uneasy sleep, the feeling of unease vastly intensified. His eyes opened and a warning sensation jerked at his nerves as with physical fingers.

The night was quiet, the stars directly overhead bright and clear. The air felt heavy, confined, yet somehow alive with activity. Straining his ears. Bob decided that there was a continuous sound, so near silence that it could almost have been his imagination. Suddenly an abrupt shock ran through every nerve. He could see stars only at the zenith. All around was a darkness closer than night skies.

He started to his feet, calling Ruifel and Sandy awake. He took a pace forward, stumbled, and found himself on elbows and knees in a sloping wall of crumbly earth. He rolled over, got a hand lamp from his pack, and switched it on.

With Ruffel and Sandy, he occupied the centre of a steep conical depression. All around was a tiny downwards trickle of particles, slowly closing in the walls round them, whispering grain on grain just audible. The sloping sides of the depression were much steeper than forty five degrees, and its upper perimeter could have been thirty feet high.

" Climb!" he said. " For your life!"

Getting out of the pit was so difficult it could have been impossible. Groping hands and toes brought down minor landslides of powdery soil, burying them knee deep. Repeated attempts in one spot undermined the sand above. Minor avalanches descended on head and shoulders, covering them. Ruffel struggled out of the earth, his lamp gone, and swore. Bob spat out a mouthful of sandy soil.

" Keep moving, or we're finished."

It could have been an hour by the time they reached the top, and even then the escape was only possible because of the masses of sandy earth they had dragged down into the basin, so that it filled and became less steep.

A continuous, faint rustling filled the night, more audible as their laboured breathing subsided. All round the perimeter of the hole the tiny plants stood thick as grass on a pasture. A ceaseless wavy motion passed over the plants, beginning farther away than the light beam could reach, and racing like breakers towards the lip of the crater.

Sandy Trentham's teeth clicked audibly. " Let's get out of here!" he said, and his voice shook.

The plants were so thick, walking over them was like moving ankle deep in moss. Bob bent momentarily, flashing his lamp close on the ground. A thin film of sand was moving rapidly towards the crater, uncannily resembling flowing water. Each of the uncounted millions of tiny plants seemed to sway, brushing along a grain of sand with each minute leaf, simultaneously raising itself, so that it was always on top of the accumulating particles of earth, always moving more grains along towards the hole.

He shivered. It was so tiny an action, yet so devastating in its purpose. All at once he recalled the rocky plateau, and the way in which it had seemed nothing like so far to descend, that morning. And obliterating the goat tracks had taken only minutes.

" I think we should return at once to the ship!" he said, and Major Ruffel did not disagree.

As they marched, at first by hand lamp on a compass bearing, then by a growing dawn fight, Bob wondered if it would be too late. He knew, now, why the restless goat-like creatures snatched uneasy mouthfuls. Any living thing that had to stay in one spot, or slept, or could not move its young, was an inevitable victim for the moving sands. Could men fight an enemy as numerous as the grains on all the seashores of Earth itself ?

It was a gruelling forced march. Driven by a sense of danger, they did not rest. The sun rose clear in a cloudless sky, making bright emerald patches upon the hill slopes. The soil was dusty, loose as freshly turned anthills, slowing their progress. Bob guessed that every hill and slope had been moved again and again, sifted and turned over ceaselessly by the tiny plants. Other species of life had vanished unknown thousands of years before, buried beneath the obliterating particles. That also would have been the destiny of any camp or habitation of Man.

The emerald patches were not static, but seemed to drift with a slow, wavy motion across the hills, moving roughly parallel to their own bearing. Bob saw that his two

companions had also noted the tide. Tiny plants were brushed ahead, then in turn gave motion to their companions. The multitude of tiny motions were culminating in a vast flow directed towards the plateau where the Argemone rested.

The sun was high when Ruffel paused, checked his watch, compass and pedometer, and made brief mental calculations.

“ The ship should almost be in sight ahead,” he said, voice rough from fatigue.

A low ridge lay across their line of march, perhaps half a mile away, surmounting higher ground. Bob did not remember having seen it when they set out. As they walked, the tiny plants became even more numerous, so that in places layer on layer formed a bed knee deep.

Panting, they reached the high point of the ridge. Directly ahead, where the Argemone had stood, was a vast hill of emerald-covered earth, perhaps eighty feet high, conical and regular. Its top looked flat, and waves like those of an incoming tide ran up its sides.

Bob felt chilled, despite the sun. Ruffel’s face had a sallow, aged expression.

“ I would scarcely have believed they could do it — ” he said hoarsely.

“ It’s their numbers. Millions. Millions of millions.” Sandy Trentham’s lips were drawn, his features grimy, sagging with fatigue.

“They’ve been at it twenty four hours or more,” Bob pointed out, remembering how each time it had been less far down from the rocky plateau to the hilly plains. “ The movement probably began the minute we landed.” Their night camp would have had a similar appearance, on a smaller scale — a regular cone, with a flat top. While the cone was uncompleted, there was hope.

The ascent was over a green carpet sometimes ankle deep, sometimes reaching their knees. They slipped often, hands and toes, gripping, masses of the wiry plants coming away under their weight. The slope levelled out, and Bob saw that it was the rim of a crater. In its exact centre stood the Argemone, already buried higher than her entrance lock. The plants had not rested at dawn.

“ Are we — too late ?” Ruffel said, panting, as he came up to the rim.

Bob saw a shovel appear out of the sandy earth, momentarily revealing a hole up through which peered the stained face of one of the crewmen. The man saw them, shouted, beckoning. Then a minor avalanche of powdery soil collapsed on him, again filling the hole. Bob raised himself over the rim, sliding down feet first, Ruffel and

Trentham behind him . . .

Coughing, filthy, they got the exit port closed. The corridors just inside were two thirds filled with soil it had been impossible to remove. Bob scrambled along on hands and knees, reached a clear corridor, and ran for the ship's control room.

The Argemone's drive awoke slowly, reluctantly. Long before any lift became apparent a vast cloud of dust rose round the ship, towering towards the heavens as if from a bomb exploded under sand. Out of the billowing brown masses the ship lifted, gaining speed.

A minute later they were in clear sky. Below was a vast brown patch formed by the curling clouds of dust, casting a shadow miles long over the hills.

" We never thought you'd make it back in time," Genne Moore said from beside the control room window.

Bob locked the ship on automatic, and looked down on the surface of Antol, a peaceful, dreaming paradise indeed, he thought, but one with a snag it was certainly not yet within Man's power to overcome!

" You've saved me from the greatest blunder of my career," Major Ruffel said in a clipped, tired voice. " I have instructed a message go out at once cancelling my earlier favourable report. When we get back to Earth, I'll not forget what you've done. Captain Spencer."

Bob smiled. " It was only that somewhere in my past was that devilishly suspicious old fellow, Major," he said. He felt a smaller, smoother hand momentarily touch his.