FRANCIS GEORGE RAYER

FIRSTLING

KENNETH WATCHERSON stood on the hilltop, gazing across the lowlands South of his village. Not even the profuse trees and bushes in the valley bottom could conceal the great waves of silt that extended far as his eyes could reach. A mile away, at the foot of the hill, were the irregular, green-grown hummocks of The City.

A light step came on the grass behind him. He turned quickly, then relaxed. The girl halted two paces away, smiling. Not dangerous, he thought. She was scarcely twenty, lithe, almost slight, with long, dark hair.

" You are son of The Watcher," she said. "I have seen you." He nodded. His father, too, had been Son of The Watcher. The Watcher had been ... his great-grandfather? Who knew? A man, they said, who had controlled a great apparatus or machine that had watched the heavens.

" I, too, have seen you." He looked at her steadily. " You are Ruth, daughter of Jesse, from the village North across the hills." They were silent. The sun was low, throwing the undulations in the valley into strong relief.

" You are a long way from your village, Ruth," Kenneth said. " It is not safe. What brings you? "

She looked down into the valley. " Answer for yourself? "

" To see The City? "

" Yes." Excitement suffused her face. "Did our people really live there, as the old ones say? Or is it a legend, like the legend of the day when the seas came over the earth — ? "

" That is no legend ! " he reminded her sharply. " The sand and earth they carried lies deeply in all the valleys ! I have seen it, high almost as the hills, littered with strange things made of metal, which the old ones called ships — "

Ruth shrugged. " The old ones tell so many strange tales. I do not believe them. I have asked them, and they are only repeating stories their grandfathers told when they were children. A story passed through many tongues changes."

She turned abruptly and slipped away. With a last glance at the mounds hiding The

City, Kenneth started towards his village. The idea that had for a full month been forming in his mind had become a definite plan to be carried through.

Few of the village houses were more than one-room high. Of wood, stone and salvaged bricks, the two-score dwellings formed a rough circle. As Kenneth passed a line of bushes a shadow rose from their concealment, grunted in recognition, and vanished. He passed on into the compound, his angular face turned slightly as if he listened for some distant sound, and a spark in his light blue eyes. He caught himself in the attitude, and frowned. He often seemed to be listening — when there was no voice, no sound . . .

The women had made a camp fire, and at the edge of its light stood a man of moderate build, grey-haired, perhaps forty-five. Kenneth touched his shoulder. Julius Justin's opinion was usually worth while.

" I want to talk, Julius."

" Yes? " Justin's voice was quiet, low. "About — ? "

" The City."

Justin's gaze flickered around. A woman was carrying wood to the fire; two children sat nearby, watching a man fashioning a boot.

" We'll go to my hut, Ken," he suggested.

There, he halted, the firelight showing strong lines on his face. " First, a warning, if you can call it that," he said. " I saw you talking to Ruth Sandison, daughter of Jesse. I wouldn't see her again, if I were you."

Kenneth frowned, watching sparks fly heavenwards. " And why? "

" There are rumours that she is strange— that she has gone out in the night, saying someone called, when there was no voice. When she was a child she would sit for many hours listening, they say, though no one spoke and there was no sound for the ear to catch." He halted. Kenneth looked from the fire to him. " I see, Julius. We met by chance." He considered, momentarily silent. " About The City — "

"Yes? "

" It was built by our people, many years ago? "

" So the old ones say."

" Someone must have built it," Kenneth persisted, and the excitement which always came when he spoke of it began to mount. His pulses hastened; he seemed on the brink of discovery. " If our people built it, there may be things there to help us — "

Justin sighed. " You feel we need help? "

"Greatly!" Kenneth indicated the circle of huts. "If our people could once build a great city such as the old ones speak of, they should be able to do so again. But we cannot! His eyes flashed. "We build stone and wood huts! We dig up and use things we can no longer make for ourselves ! One day those things will be used up. We shall have no more sharp knives, no more metal utensils. Already some things are no more, the old ones say. There were drugs in bottles that would cure pain — tiny machines to make light — a score, a hundred things ! They are used, and we cannot make more. Every year we lose something we cannot replace Every year we become more — more — "

" Primitive? " Justin suggested.

" Yes ! And I feel the key lies in The City. We must go down there before it is too late, learn how to make the things we need — "

" The old ones say it is unlucky to be in the valleys," Justin objected. " All who were in the valleys died."

" But you have been down into The City!

There was a long silence. " Once," Justin admitted at last. " An old friend heavy with years wished to show me before he died. There is a way down into The City — a way difficult and dangerous, little more than a tunnel amid ruins."

" You will show me? "

" Perhaps, one day."

Kenneth gripped Justin's arm. "Tonight ! "

Their eyes met for long moments. Justin drew himself free, wincing.

" Quietly," he cautioned. " Someone may hear. Yes, if you wish — tonight. Meet me on the slope above The City an hour after sunset."

He abruptly turned and entered his hut. Alone, Kenneth breathed deeply, calming his hammering pulses. Already the sun was half hidden behind the distant hills and the fire was being built up. He walked slowly towards it, aware of the cold nip of the air. An old man was sitting near it, with a child each side of him, his arms about their

shoulders.

" Tell us more,” one was pleading.

He nodded slowly. " I will, son of my son. Once our people went at a great pace over the land, yet without running. They soared in the air, like the birds, and sped over the waters. They had machines to take their voices many, many miles, and boxes which carried their words and faces over all the world.”

Kenneth moved slowly on. He had heard all this many times before — had himself sat enthralled, when a boy.

" Tell us why we always live on the hills,” one lad urged.

" Because it is safe — only the hills are safe. Our peoples who were on high hills lived, and those who were in the valleys died.” He wagged his head sagely. " There was no time for those in the valleys to gain the hills. As it was, so it can be again. Only fools and the wild dogs live in the valleys ...”

Passing from hearing, Kenneth wondered. That legend seemed one of the strongest, most persistent. It was dangerous to live in a valley. Once, long before, he had asked why. The old man had shaken his head. " I do not know why, lad. I only know that it is so. My father told me, and his father before him.”

Beyond the ring of firelight, Kenneth halted, listening. Abruptly he had thought he could hear a distant voice — a voice that called, so remote that only some sixth sense caught it. But the night was still, windless. He frowned. Often the voice seemed not to be in his ears at all, but rather a wordless utterance speaking straight into his brain, formless, inarticulate. It came, fleetingly; vanished when he strove to hear or capture it. Now, it was gone. He shivered. The air was cold once the sun had set, he thought.

He moved round to the South rim of the village. The shadow rose.

" You are going out, son of The Watcher? ”

" A little while.”

" There have been many dogs over the hills of late.”

" I’ll take care.”

Kenneth went on alone. The stout staff in his hand had cracked many a wild dog’s skull, and there was a knife at his belt. Often he examined it. Polished, sharp, all metal, it was without price. He longed to make one its equal.

A little way down the hillside Justin waited. He waved, pointing, and began to stride away down into the shadowy valley.

Justin held the burning faggot higher. " We are almost there.”

Kenneth followed him closely and they wound on through the stumps of The City. Sometimes rough grass was under their feet; sometimes they sank ankle-deep in loose sand that shone in silvery brown streaks in the moonlight.

" Many of the taller buildings once projected through the silt, they say,” Justin stated as he led the way. " The roofs and walls were taken to build our villages. Time has levelled the rest.”

They descended into a rift sinking low between the silted building tops and halted at a smooth wall pierced by the rectangular outline of a narrow window. Justin entered, dropping to the floor beyond and Kenneth followed, landing in deep dust. The torchlight showed stained walls.

" There is a stairway,” Justin said.

The treads were rusty, often broken, and wound down and down as if to the bowels of the earth. Kenneth felt it difficult to believe that the building had once stood high and clear above ground level. Yet so legend declared. It was many times higher than the tallest building in the village, he thought as they went on and on, their feet scraping on the rusty, littered treads.

At the bottom they halted, standing on dried mud in an irregular tunnel with crumbly, sandy walls.

" There are passages,” Justin said. His voice echoed queerly. " They were made by the water draining away through the silt, my old friend said, and are not safe.”

Silent, Kenneth Watcherson felt a hundred questions demanded answer. If all the hillocks visible above were building tops, and the buildings were as high as this, The City must have been vast and imposing beyond anything of which he had dreamed. He followed in the red torchlight. There must have been myriads of people, he thought, not just a few hundred, like in the villages.

Justin halted abruptly at a sloping wall of loose, dark sand.

" This way was open last time I came.” His tone was uncertain. " We’ll try the other direction.”

Weeks could be spent in exploration, Kenneth thought. If as many years as the old ones said had indeed passed, much would be destroyed. But metal objects and other things would remain . . .

As they went on he began to realise just how complex The City had been. The flickering torchlight revealed many things to which he could not put a name and once they entered a long tunnel of artificial construction and having metal rails its full length. One building contained many pictures of wonderful devices. Another housed the mouldering remains of countless objects such as Kenneth had never seen before.

" They were books," Justin said.

At last, after a long time, he halted. " You've seen enough? "

Kenneth was silent. He would never have seen enough, he knew. His excitement was almost tangible. " Our people must live in a city like this again, Justin! We must re-learn these crafts, re-discover this lost knowledge ! "

" How? " Justin asked quietly.

" Search — discover — "

Justin shook his head. " The villagers' lives are hard and busy. There is no time."

Kenneth sadly admitted that was so. Their primitive, day to day life left no margin for exploration, or for digging away the sands burying these relics of the past. Justin put a hand on his shoulder

" It's time we went back."

They wound through the intricate old watercourses that sometimes followed streets and sometimes cut through damaged buildings.

" Look," Justin said, and halted. " Someone else has been here !

He held the half-burnt torch before a cavity in the crumbled wall. Silt had been dug away by someone who had tunnelled into an adjacent building. The work looked recent, and more than a single person, unaided, would attempt. Justin listened.

" No one from the village would come down here, Ken." He looked into the hole, and down the crumbling tunnel, his face strained and the whites of his eyes showing. '* I — don't like it," he said.

He hesitated, then went on, walking rapidly. Kenneth stopped him at the foot of the

derelict spiral stairway. His light blue eyes and angular face shone with eagerness.

" I’m going to stay — to search by myself !

Justin drew in his lips. " It’s not wise — ”

" You’ll give me the torch? ”

" If you wish.” Justin’s face expressed unease. " But — ”

Kenneth took the faggot, hissing with burning resin, from the other’s hand.

" I’ll light you to the top of the stairs,” he said.

When Justin had gone, he descended and stood in the silent tunnel. Once again a voice seemed to be calling to him — demanding his attention. Yet when he turned his mind to it it ceased, as if a whisper intended for the subconscious only.

When the feeling had passed he began to explore, carefully noting every turning he followed.

Some rooms were full of rusty masses of machinery. Others were silted up and could not be entered, though sand had not penetrated into the central rooms of many of the larger buildings. Time after time he followed a rough channel cut by waters of long before until he reached a wall, then searched for a window or door to enter. His sense of wonder increased and he lost check of passing time.

At last, in an inner room, he emerged upon a scene that made him pause in astonishment. The walls and floors were unstained and perfect. Chairs stood as if placed there that same hour, and shelves were filled with the things Justin had called books. He opened one, but the lines of tiny symbols meant nothing, and he replaced it, looking around. He saw now that at some earlier period the door had been tightly closed so that the room had been saved.

Padded seats faced two upright boxes that stood alone. He walked round them, trying to remember the few words he had been taught so that he could decipher the words on the boxes.

"HISTORY MACHINE SCHOOL GRADE I”

he read laboriously. There was a button marked " ON ” and a blank screen. He pressed the button, starting as a humming began and the screen sprang to life.

Coloured views of amazing cities played on the screen. A voice began to speak from

inside the box, abruptly became harsh, then ceased, but the changing scenes continued. He sank into the nearest chair, all else forgotten.

A sphere like the Earth-Globe map Justin had once showed him appeared, receding, circled by an object he immediately recognised as the moon. From space, clearly outlined, came thousands of irregular bodies, following the moon and passing her. Her orbit changed, wobbling, and the scene flashed back to earth. Unspeakable waves rose on all the mighty oceans of the world, sweeping over continents, torrenting with terrible fury down valleys, often overtopping the very mountains themselves. Kenneth stared, only half understanding, dimly wondering whether this was prophesy, prepared as a warning before the event; or an actual record, by some miracle saved. The beautiful cities sank beneath the sea and sand, and water flowed where dry land had been. A mountain peak flashed into close-up, and from it a silvery streak burned up into the heavens. A scene showed the streak nearer, long and shining as a knife-blade, but lined with what seemed to be tiny windows behind which lights burned. Kenneth frowned. He would have called it a ship, he thought. But the old ones who had described ships had said they went upon the sea. This one had seemed to leap from the earth up into the sky. It was incomprehensible.

The screen went dark and he saw that it was the end. He rose, realising with a start of dismay that his torch was almost burnt out. Amazement at the things he had seen, and only half understood, changed to fear. The way back to the staircase was long and uncertain — impossible if the torch failed . . .

Even as the fear jerked into his mind the torch hissed, spluttering. The flame dipped, rose brightly, then went out. Darkness came, close and total.

Eight light years away planet N7 glowed under a pinky sky. Her red sun was setting beyond a jagged skyline and Bill Travvis let his gaze circle along the horizon, taking in the desolation. The raised table of scorched pumice extended far as his eyes could reach. His gaze returned to his ship, whose underside was buckled inwards like tinfoil.

He swore and the word rang in his helmet, then silence returned, broken only by the hiss of oxygen. He walked once round the ship, plodding stolidly under the weight of his suit and equipment, and the pull of 1.4 gravity.

Broken inner bulkheads showed, and mechanisms irreparably damaged. A half-mile furrow scarred the pumice, showing how she had struck at several hundred miles per hour. The emergency port from which he had struggled half unconscious, hung open. She would never fly again. He turned his back. She was scrap. The glancing impact had ruined her while he was yet far from his destination. That destination must be reached — the message he was to deliver was vital.

The daylight was going and at the zenith a bright star already showed. He drew his

belt tight, feeling for the message pouch at his side. It was intact. He zipped it open and took out the sealed envelope. It was undamaged. And it should be delivered, he decided. Atmospheric conditions made radio communication impossible. No telephone lines existed. Therefore upon his own determination delivery depended.

He set off briskly across the plateau, the shoes of his pressurised suit crunching over the porous lava. Delivery should be made . . .

He judged that he had walked two miles before he realised that he was being followed, and he halted, listening. The planet's two small pinky moons hung near the horizon, casting a weak light upon the uneven, fissure-torn pumice.

Behind him something like a long, low hillock moved, seeking from side to side to find his trail. He stared, striving to discern its outline in the dim light. The hillock was thirty feet long, eight wide, and two high, and ran like a huge flat woodlouse on many legs. He wiped his faceplate, momentarily trembling. He had been told that dangerous life-forms existed, but had not expected to meet them at first hand. Worse, he was not armed.

He began to hurry. The night was soundless. His steelshod boots crunched and the weight of his suit seemed to have increased. The sack of food-capsules and first-aid bore heavily on his back, and each time he looked back the flat, land-whale of a creature was still following, but nearer. It had three huge, dim eyes each side, at the front. There was no discernible head, but a frill that fluttered over the ground. Dark fawn, with darker spots irregularly along its sides, its body tapered into a long, thin tail. It moved like an invertebrate.

Soon he began to run with long, easy strides which he hoped would conserve his energy. When he looked back he saw that the creature was still following, flowing over the rocks.

He hastened and found himself upon fissured, uneven ground. Cracks large enough to trap a foot spread everywhere, meeting crevasses down which a man could fall. He saw that the creature was a bare fifty yards behind, and scrambled on, his breath growing thick and ragged. Beyond was a plain of smooth pumice. He reached it and sprinted, not stopping until the pain in his lungs was intolerable.

The light had dimmed and he saw that one moon had set. The creature was confidently crossing the broken rock as if aided by the dimmer light. He shivered. When the second moon went, it would be inky darkness for him, but the thing that followed would still see . . .

He turned the suit oxygen a little higher, panting. He must hide, he thought.

He ran on, sweating inside the suit, looking for somewhere to conceal himself, or for a crack which might pass his body, yet not allow the creature to follow. His message must get through. A world depended on it.

Kenneth Watcherson stood motionless in the inky darkness, wondering whether he dared hope. Moving with infinite caution, he had tried to retrace his way, but had known himself lost before the hour was gone.

The sound that had brought hope was repeated — a girl's voice, calling, very far away. He shouted, making the tunnel echo. When the echoes had gone silence returned and there was no answer.

He moved on, a hand extended to touch the crumbly sand wall. Far ahead a faint glow broke the utter blackness, growing steadily until a torch came round the corner, carried by a girl whose dark hair hung about her shoulders.

" So it is you, Kenneth, son of The Watcher," she said.

He felt untold relief. " I thought I was lost — I stayed too long. There are wonderful things — "

" I know," she said, and held the torch high, looking down the tunnel. " I have been here before. But now we must not stay. Others have been here — people not of our villages, who may wish us harm."

He recalled Justin's words, and the signs of digging. Yet it seemed impossible.

" If not from the villages, from where, Ruth?

She made a gesture expressing ignorance. " It will soon be dawn, above. We must go."

She turned, leading the way without hesitation. They ascended the steps and emerged through the window. A grey light showed the dawn was not an hour away.

" Much of what the old ones tell is true," Kenneth said with emotion. " There were great cities. The moon and earth wobbled and the seas rose over the things our peoples of long ago had built."

She gazed at him, brow puckered. " The moon — wobbled ? "

" Shooting stars swept in from space, turning her, perhaps bombarding the earth ..."

He wondered whether they would ever know the exact details of the catastrophe. Probably not. But its results were everywhere apparent in the silted valleys, the hills of

sand and mud.

This girl seemed to understand many things, being wise beyond her years, he thought. He put out the torch.

" Our tribes are going downhill to savagery — and extinction. Every generation loses a little. Mere existence has become more important than learning or progress. Knowledge is forgotten, lost. In a few generations it will be too late — it may even now be too late! ”

" I know.” Her eyes were sober. " My father once told me that there was a tribe away beyond the hills who has tried to save the old knowledge and sciences.” Colour and anticipation came to her face. " I am going to join them !

They started along the rift and Kenneth felt his inner unrest increasing. Life at the village was stagnant. Of them all, only Justin spoke of things other than those connected with the ordinary, day to day, elementary life. Once, a year before, he had sighed. " Once the creators of great cities, we have become a tribe of hunters and shack-builders, Ken! ” he had said. "Ten generations hence we shall be cave-dwellers — or extinct!

At the foot of the slope they parted, and he watched the girl called Ruth, daughter of Jesse, hasten on until she was gone from sight. The sun was rising. He turned towards his own village.

Julius Justin stood with his back to the sunshine and shook his head slowly. " I think you should stay, Kenneth,” he stated quietly.

" But the village is — stagnant ! They seem to think everything always was like this, and always will be. There’s no progress, no improvement — ”

" All the more reason why you should stay,” Justin said quietly. " A few like you can help the others. I’ve tried to keep interest and knowledge alive. You can help. We must stay, for their sake, don’t you see? ”

He made a wide gesture, taking in the huts. Kenneth felt torn between agreement and impatience. When so few of the villagers bothered to think for themselves, it was important that the more intelligent and knowledgeable should not desert. Yet the rumour Ruth had spoken of had set his blood racing.

" I — I can’t promise to stay,” he said. His gaze settled on a group talking at the other side of the ring of huts and he wondered if something unusual had arisen to stir the villagers’ interest. At this hour the clearing would normally have been deserted.

Justin followed his glance. "You were down in The City until dawn? ”

" Almost.”

“ Then you wouldn’t have seen the lights in the sky? ”

A shock ran through Kenneth. " Lights in the sky? ”

" For about an hour, well after midnight. Blue, moving very fast.”

Kenneth looked at the talking group and Justin’s face. The latter expressed strong curiosity and Kenneth wondered what had happened.

" Tell me,” he urged.

" It wasn’t long after I got back. One of the lads who was outside noticed, and began calling his parents. There was quite a hubbub — ”

" And the lights? ”

" Like shooting stars, but much nearer and bigger, and blue. They seemed to leave a trail of blue sparks, and to be descending.”

Kenneth wished he had been able to see. " Which way did they go? ”

Justin pointed away over the distant hills towards the lowlands beyond. " That way. They were very low over the hilltops, and still descending.”

" Someone will go to — to investigate? ”

" I don’t think so,” Justin said slowly. " They were travelling so fast that they may not have struck earth until they had gone scores of miles. It was probably a shower of shooting stars, the old ones say, and it would be foolish to search.”

He fell silent, as if there was nothing to add to the scanty information. He did not appear satisfied with the explanation he had given.

" You don’t believe they were — shooting stars,” Kenneth stated with conviction.

Justin expelled his breath. " I don’t. They were too low, too regular — ” He paused. " Yes, regular, equally spaced, travelling in two lines — ”

He left it at that. Kenneth could not quiet his inner restlessness, and long before noon came he knew that he could not stay in the village. He must find, instead, if any truth

lay behind Ruth's words, and what the lights in the sky had been.

Eight light years away Bill Travvis gazed up from a cleft into the pinky moonlight, the rasp of his breath loud in his ears. The great silverfish was casting from side to side, seeking his trail with vibrating fringe. It came towards the crevasse and he drew back until the rock bit his sides with an abrupt jerk. For a moment he feared the suit was torn — without oxygen, the atmosphere would support human life for scarcely twenty seconds. But the pressure- gauge reflected in a tiny prism near one eye remained unaltered.

A heavy shape obscured the slip of moonlight sky. Something waved like a fan along the edge of the rift. The creature began to follow the opening, searching for a wider spot into which it could force itself. He watched, conscious of prickly sweat on his forehead.

The creature passed thrice along the cleft, then withdrew from sight. The scrape of its many feet on the pumice ceased and silence returned. Holding his breath, he listened. The quiet was a total absence of sound that did not reveal whether the great silverfish was waiting at the edge of the crevasse, or a mile away.

He waited, damning the chance that had caused a fault in one of his ship's control jets. But for that the vital message would have been delivered hours before.

When twenty minutes had passed without sound he worked his way stealthily to the edge of the cleft. He wished that he could wait until dawn. But the nights were long, and his oxygen might not last.

His head rose slowly above the jagged edge. The plateau was dotted with irregular shadows, but none of them moved. The remaining moon had already dropped appreciably towards the horizon.

He climbed out and stood on the edge of the cleft. The noise of his steel-shod boots seemed to warn all the silent night of his presence. His eyes smarted with staring through the dimness and he bit his lips, thinking of the twenty miles of terrain which he must cover on foot. As time passed the remaining hours of life slipped away in the measured hiss of his irreplaceable oxygen.

He reduced the flow slightly and set off with long strides, only halting once to examine the sky. Stars shone, weak and distant. He could not distinguish the one about which circled the planet he had the duty to save …

He had been walking for almost an hour when he became aware of a loss of tension around his waist. He halted in apprehension. The belt was gone, and with it both pouch and vital message.

When, he wondered. Memory came. The tug at his suit when he had hidden in the cleft. The buff envelope lay there. So sure was he that he could almost picture it as if by second sight. The belt, snapped by a needle of rock . . . The pouch, with the message that he must deliver to the only man able to act upon it . . .

He looked ahead, where safety lay. Then back over the rough, uncertain miles where danger was. Then abruptly he turned, reduced the flow of oxygen again, and began to retrace the way he had come . . .

With the hilltop at his back Kenneth Watcherson gazed down the slopes in the afternoon sun. The group of villages lay far behind and he was acutely conscious of the stillness. Trees and bushes dotted the slopes, thick with rough grass, and nothing moved within his field of vision.

In the back of his mind a voice had seemed to whisper, then had as abruptly ceased. The voice had seemed to call, demanding that he give heed — a whisper of some sixth-sense. Then it was gone.

He went on towards the lowlands. He had never mentioned the voice, even to Justin, who might have dismissed it as mere fancy.

He made his way across a broad dip that lay between two hills, ascending towards a rise that should give a broad view of the lower ground beyond. Higher up were brambles and thorn trees through which sheep had made winding trails. He was half way up the slope when the sound of someone hastening through the bushes came, higher, ahead and approaching. He pushed back behind a clump of brambles, watching the path. Alone, this far from the villages, it was best to remain unseen . . .

The noise of hurried progress came nearer and quick, panting breathing. Bushes up the trail parted and a girl with torn limbs and clothing appeared, half running, half stumbling. Kenneth’s breath hissed between his teeth. Ruth, daughter of Jesse . . . and afraid, if he had ever witnessed fear.

He stepped into the trail. She halted, eyes wide, one hand going instinctively to her throat, a half cry stilled on her lips as she recognised him.

"You, son of The Watcher. I was afraid — ” She looked back, breathing heavily.

He listened. No sound came down the hillside.

" You’re not being followed,” he said, striving to reassure her.

Much of her terror remained. " We cannot be sure — they could come soundlessly — ”

" Who? ”

She did not answer, but stood gazing back up the slope, her eyes still dilated. He took her arm gently.

" Someone was following you? ”

She shook her head quickly, her dark hair swaying. " No — no, not men — ”

" The — dogs? ”

Again the quick head-shake. Her breathing had grown less heavy, and her pallor was going.

" Not men, nor dogs, Kenneth,” she said. " Something unlike either — like nothing I have seen before — ”

Terror had begun to creep back into her eyes. He saw that she had come a long way, and that her fear had been extreme.

" Where did you see — them? ” he murmured.

" Beyond the hills in the valley.”

" Then you’re safe here.”

She looked at him, her gaze searching, and abruptly smiled weakly. " Yes, we should be safe — here.”

He saw that her terror was subsiding, and his mind turned towards discovering its source. Her words had been strange and the placid slope gave no clue.

" What was it you saw? ” he asked gently.

The smile vanished. " I — I don’t know. I can’t explain. Like — like lights that moved — ”

He thought of the things Justin had seen. " Lights that moved, Ruth? ”

" Green dots, all vibrating and dancing — ” She halted, obviously lacking words to describe what she had witnessed. " They seemed to — to follow me.”

He let it sink in, waiting, but she said no more. He wondered whether the green dots

were connected with the blue streaks that had flashed over the villages in the night.

" I'd like to see for myself," he stated.

She shook her head. " It would be dangerous! "

" It may not be."

It took him fully twenty minutes to convince her. At last, reluctantly, she agreed.

" I will show you the way," she said, and turned back along the trail. " It will take an hour. I had run a long way."

More than an hour had passed when they approached the final rise over which they could observe the lowlands beyond. Ruth's agitation increased and Kenneth wondered what he was to see. She moved more slowly, parting the bushes that grew near the skyline under clumps of saplings.

" They were half-a-mile away, right below here," she whispered.

He cautiously raised himself, his gaze slowly taking in an increasing area of the scene below. The flat, marshy ground stretched away into the hazy distance. Parts were sand, too salty to support other than patches of coarse sea-grass. Nearer, a profusion of trees and wild plants of all kinds showed where a strand of rich alluvial mud had been deposited, and beyond the ridge of vegetation was a sight that made Kenneth pause with held breath.

" That's — them." Ruth's voice quivered.

Kenneth held her arm. Green dots, she had said, and the description fitted. The dots moved, wavered and oscillated like a vast swarm of fireflies. Each a foot or more across, they hastened hither and thither near the ground, or rose and congregated in turning, swirling masses. Half hidden behind the trees, a ridge of newly-excavated sand and earth was visible, forming a wall ten feet high and as mathematically level as if formed by a mould.

" That wasn't there before," Ruth said in his ear.

Kenneth watched, scarcely breathing, certain that the ceaseless movement of the faintly luminous green dots was not purposeless, but directed towards some end.

" They must have built the wall," Ruth whispered.

" Perhaps. You're sure it wasn't there before? "

" Yes.” She was silent a long time, then stirred. "What — what are they? ”

He did not reply. He could give no answer, no explanation. He could only assume that the things, whatever they were, had built the wall, and were therefore purposeful and probably intelligent. He felt Ruth start.

" I believe they’ve noticed us,” she said uneasily.

Several of the dots had left the others and were moving slowly towards the foot of the slope. Kenneth felt sure that nothing, however keen its vision, could have seen him looking from among the leaves. Yet the dots were coming slowly towards them, moving smoothly several feet above the ground like orbs of shimmering light.

He drew back until the skyline concealed their movements. Ruth seemed to be right. The things were aware of their presence on the hill.

" It’s not safe to stay,” she said, her eyes pleading. " I’m afraid.”

She turned suddenly away and began to hurry into the dip that rose towards a higher ridge of the hills beyond. He hesitated, then followed, catching up with her so that they jogged on together. At the second ridge of the hills he paused and looked back. Three green orbs had just appeared among the trees they had left, five hundred yards behind, and were wavering in and out among the branches. The movement was not aimless.

" Don’t stay — ” Ruth urged.

The shapes came out from the trees, pausing. All at once, in the silence, Kenneth seemed to hear a voice calling him — but not a voice that reached the ear. It was a voice that spoke directly into his mind, wordless, inarticulate yet urgent. He tried to focus his attention on it, and just as suddenly it was gone.

He looked at Ruth, saw her face was white, and abruptly remembered Justin’s words and warning.

" You felt it too,” he said.

She looked at him quickly. " The — the voice? ”

" Yes.”

She nodded. " I have often felt it — but never so strongly.”

They turned and went on so that rising ground hid the objects by the trees from view. Kenneth felt certain that the phenomenon related by Justin was connected with this new discovery. It fitted, and the arrival of the green orbs so soon after the "shooting stars ” could not be mere chance.

There was no sign of pursuit, and they reduced their pace to a brisk walk. The villages must be warned, Kenneth thought. The things he and Ruth had seen might not be content to remain near the marsh.

The sun was low with coming evening when they laboured up the last slope towards the higher ground beyond which the villages huddled. Kenneth became aware of two forms which had drawn near and were following a path parallel to their own. As the bushes thinned he saw them clearly. They were strangers. The leader was tall, thin, and with an egg-shaped head almost devoid of hair. He came across the grass and stood in their path.

" Greetings, villagers.” His voice was faintly mocking, his eyes piercing. " We have been waiting for you.”

Kenneth halted. The second man also had the same oddly egg-shaped skull, but was heavily built, with black, hairy brows. He studied them both.

" I do not know you. You are strangers in these parts.”

" We are,” the thin man said. He paused. " We call ourselves the Espuns.”

Kenneth frowned. ” That is a strange name.”

" Perhaps. We are a strange people. Once, many generations ago, the words Extra Sensory Perception might have meant something to you. Now, I know it does not.” He smiled enigmatically. “ My friend here understands. We have sought you many, many months.”

Kenneth felt Ruth draw closer to him. He faced the strange pair, so unlike the villagers in both dress and manner. Their smooth faces carried expressions of high intelligence; their eyes seemed to look completely through him, reading his innermost thoughts.

" My friend here is Oskin,” the tall man said. " Oskin Telpath.”

Kenneth nibbled his lips. " That is a strange name — ”

The tall man shrugged. " Perhaps. His father’s name was Telpath. Like father, like son.”

" And your name? ”

The other shrugged again. ” I am called — The Listener. That is enough.”

Kenneth felt Ruth’s fingers on his arm. " Let’s go,” she whispered.

The two did not move from their path. " You cannot go, yet, Ruth, daughter of Jesse,” the man who called himself The Listener stated. " Nor you, Kenneth Watcherson. We have things to discuss — to arrange.”

Kenneth shook his head, wondering how their names were known. "It is not for us to discuss or arrange — it is for the whole village, if what you propose affects them. I am not their leader — ”

" No.” The word was very quiet. " But you are something more important than leader. You are the first of them to understand. Because of that we have sought you ...”

His voice faded, but his gaze did not waver. The piercing eyes were full of meaning, and Kenneth suddenly found the phrases going on and on in his own mind, wordless but clear "We have sought you because you are the first to understand the ability we have, and which you may yourself have and develop. We are telepathic, of a race of telepaths. Your villagers are not, but you yourself have the power, dormant still, and can understand ...”

The wordless impressions ceased. The Listener smiled. ” I see you have understood, Watcherson,” he said. " We have not sought in vain. We need your help — just as you will benefit from ours.”

He turned smartly, his companion at his side. " Let us go to your village,” he said.

The uneven miles in the weak pinky moonlight had seemed doubly long. Twice Bill Travvis had mistaken the way and wasted valuable time. Then he reached a wide span of broken pumice, and knew he had gone too far. He turned, seeking the cleft. The search had seemed endless, hopeless — then it was at his feet. He lowered himself. The pouch and belt lay as he had pictured them.

He climbed out, and tucked the message under the strap of a gauntlet, momentarily dizzy. That message must be delivered without fail to the only man who could act upon it. His instructions had been clear.

Something touched his boot. Blinking, he looked down, startled. A dozen creatures large as rabbits surrounded him; others were swarming up from the fissure. As he moved they scampered away, and he began to hurry again along the way his feet had already trodden twice.

The little black creatures ran with him, maintaining their positions, and he paused. Their numbers had grown. Six feet of clear space remained around him — beyond that were a hundred forms, making a dark, close ring.

Something again touched a foot, and he looked down. Two of the creatures were licking a boot with quick, rough tongues, making a sound like a file on leather. He kicked them off. Abraded spots marked his armoured footwear, and he lashed out with his feet, tottering. The members of the ring moved with him, at a safe distance, never breaking the circle.

He gasped and stopped, lungs straining and cold moisture on his brow. The diameter of the clear space around him began to decrease; a rasping began on one heel . . .

He turned the oxygen up a little and began to walk quickly. The ring resumed its position, flowing on like black velvet, broken only by many tiny eyes. He had been warned not to land, he recalled bitterly. But then, his landing had not been from choice.

He was almost at the point he had previously reached when something alighted with a light shock on one shoulder. A quick rasping began on the metal of his helmet.

He struck the creature down. The ring expanded momentarily, then returned to its former diameter, dipping, rising and falling as it flowed over the uneven ground.

Once he stumbled, and grew aware of his fatigue. The forty per cent, extra gravity meant a lot, when suit and equipment totalled over sixty pounds, he thought, and wondered if the load could be reduced. The pouch and belt were back in the cleft. The message, in its envelope, was under the strap of one gauntlet. There was the pack of food capsules, and first aid pack. He threw them behind. Part of the dark ring of bodies followed, forming a smaller, second ring. Then the diameter of the ring shrank abruptly and wriggling creatures covered the pack.

He went on, aware that the clear space around him was reducing its size in infinitesimal stages. Ahead lay ridge upon ridge of pumice, dark in the pinky moonlight. Beyond, he hoped, would be better going. To his left was unknown ground, undetailed on any map. To his right were rocky peaks, and the remaining small moon was dropping into a position which would take it behind them.

The moon was cradled between two peaks when the pumice plain ahead abruptly ceased. The velvet circle, now mere inches from his feet, changed its shape, and he found himself upon the edge of a precipitous slope. He turned right and hoped it was for the best.

As time passed his steps lagged and members of the velvet circle grew more bold. He could find no more items of equipment to throw away. One oxygen container was exhausted, and it went. Stumbling on, he listened to the hiss from the last container.

The edge of the plateau slowly grew less sheer. He reached a point where a gulf barred his progress, and stood swaying on its brink. His limbs were lead, the weight of the suit unsupportable. He looked at the oxygen indicator and slightly reduced the flow.

A low drumming filled his head.

The velvet circle began to press near, encouraged by his stillness. Quick tongues rasped his boots ... he looked down and saw that the plateau terminated in a long pumice slope steep as a roof and ending in depths which his eyes could not reach. It was that — or retracing his way miles along the ridge.

Knowing it folly, he lowered himself over, and released his grasp. The momentary vision of a hundred pairs of tiny, bright, frustrated eyes looking down at him faded as his speed increased.

He strove to keep his feet below him, and to brake his progress with outstretched arms. An open gulf loomed up ahead. He knew that only the extremity of his danger had prompted him to such folly . . .

The man who called himself The Listener stood in the centre of the village with his hands on his hips. His piercing eyes surveyed the huts and his almost hairless head bobbed.

" As I expected. Backward. Unprogressive. Primitive. Ignorant, without doubt. Don’t expect you’d last another five generations. Everyone forgets a little. Every son grows up a trifle more ignorant than his father.” His roving gaze settled on Justin. ” Do you work metals? ”

Justin looked abashed and shook his grey head slowly. " No. Some of us have ideas of how it might be done, but lack the means — ”

" You should devise the means ! Man gained his position because he made tools to help himself. Where will you be in five hundred years without tools? Have you any medical science? ”

" A few simple remedies.” Justin’s voice was quiet. " Only those easy to prepare — ”

" As I expected ! ” A tapering hand took in the village. "This type of building shows your limitations ! It is backward, degenerate, like the other villages. Primitive — the

clearing, the stockade — an unconscious copy of the settlements of pre-history!

" Things have been very difficult — ”

" They will be easier when you employ improved methods ! You all waste time and energy prodigiously!

Listening, Kenneth wondered wbat the newcomers would do. None could deny the truth of their claims. Old, primitive methods left little time for more than mere existence.

The two had marched directly towards the village, as if well aware of the path. A mile from it, Kenneth had realised that he was following them alone. Ruth had slipped away without word or sign.

" We shall be glad of any help,” Justin said.

Oskin, who Kenneth noted watched but said little, nodded. " Of course. Let us hope you are not so backward as to make our task more difficult.”

The pair strode off and the villagers watched them go in silence. The two disappeared into the largest building, made of stone and salvage bricks and used as a store against the winter months.

" Need knowledge always cause arrogance? ” Justin murmured.

His tone conveyed that no answer was expected. The villagers drifted back to their own occupations and Kenneth related in full detail what Ruth and he had seen. Justin’s intense interest was infused with astonishment.

" It wasn’t will-o’-the-wisps — marsh gas burning? Nor reflections on patches of water — ”

" No. I wouldn’t make a mistake like that. What’s more, they were building a wall — and some followed us to the top of the rise.” He remembered how the forms had seemed to search among the trees. " They were alive.”

" And seem to be connected with the blue streaks,” Justin mused. He paused, deep in thought. "What does all that suggest to you? ”

Kenneth did not reply. If the orbs were alive — if they had come in the two strings of blue lights — they were intelligent, and not of Earth. The knowledge shook him.

" I can see it on your face,” Justin said quietly. " You feel as I do. They’re not of this

world, but alien — from some other planet or system. The old ones have told of other suns, so far away that light itself takes many years to reach us. These newcomers may have travelled from some such world.”

Kenneth watched Oskin and his companion leave the hut and go from sight beyond the circle of dwellings. When alone together, the two never seemed to speak. He wondered if their telepathic communication was of so perfect a nature that speech was unnecessary. It seemed probable. Another hour would bring evening, and it seemed likely to be stormy. High clouds that had piled up before the wind were lowering, darkening the sky, and a smell of rain was in the air.

He was just seeking his hut when upraised voices drifted from the opening leading to the circle of dwellings, and a voice he did not recognise kept repeating his name with increasing wrath. A big man of fierce expression and red face came striding across the clearing and halted.

" You’re Kenneth Watcherson? ” he demanded.

Kenneth stood before his open door. "I am.”

" Then what have you done with her? ”

Kenneth frowned, puzzled. " I don’t understand.”

The big man put his thumbs in his leather belt. ” Perhaps you don’t know me ! I’m Jesse Sandison! That help you to understand? ”

" In part. You mean Ruth — ”

The other snorted. " Who else? She hasn’t come back. I haven’t seen her since early morning.”

" And why do you think I know anything about it? ” Kenneth felt his irritation growing at the other’s attitude.

" Because she mentioned your name!

" I see.” He saw that all Jesse Sandison’s protective instincts were aroused; that his temper was high, and that he would be a redoubtable opponent, whatever the cause.

" Then you know where she is ! ” Sandison caught Kenneth’s shirt at the chest, the muscles on his forearm bulging. " I may have a name for hot temper, but if I think it’s justified — ”

"It’s not! ” Kenneth snapped.

He struck the other’s hand away. Sandison clenched a fist. "He said you were together an hour or more back — ”

" He? ” Kenneth felt his patience gone. " Who? ”

" The short one of the two — ”

" Oskin Telpath? ”

Kenneth felt annoyance at the outlandish pair. If Oskin had mentioned them, he should have had the sense to say that Ruth had slipped away alone. Jesse Sandison seemed to be working himself into a state of fury. His hands were clenched, his expression ominous.

" You’re being made a fool of,” Kenneth said coldly.

They stared at each other, the tension mounting. A thin circle of watchers had gathered, silent but interested. Fights were not unusual . . . Julius Justin pushed through them.

" Let’s get this clear and settle it peacefully,” he urged. Sandison muttered something inaudible and Kenneth wondered exactly what Oskin had told him. It was obvious that Sandison was not the man to favour talk, preferring to use his fists. Many were similar. Life in the villages could be hard. His fury was clearly boiling up to a new heat, reaching the level when he would listen to no one. He curled up a fist, took a step forward, then abruptly paused. His gaze turned skywards, and his mouth fell open.

Other faces turned upwards and Kenneth raised his eyes towards the darkening heavens. A brilliant spot of blue light was visible through a gap in the clouds, travelling in a descending, spiral path. It swept lower until it appeared near overhead, then curved from sight into the heavy nimbus piled up by the wind.

" Same as all those we saw before! ” Justin exclaimed.

The light reappeared beyond the village, its altitude much reduced, and sailed from view beyond the rooftops. It’s landing Kenneth thought and began to run.

From beyond the buildings he could see a blue, reflected radiance on the trees two hundred yards down the hillside. Fifty yards farther on a slight rise in the ground brought the source of light into full view.

An object such as he had never before seen rested on the turf. Perhaps fifteen paces in diameter, it shone as if made of glass and internally illuminated by blue light. Slightly flattened, its height was only half its diameter, and it shimmered and wavered ceaselessly as if constituted of radiation and energy alone. No fixed, mechanical structure was visible, and nothing to show what the object might contain.

Justin’s fingers sank into his arm. "Undoubtedly one of those that went over, Ken, and some kind of vessel,” he hissed.

As they watched the blue radiance weakened at one spot until a dark hole grew visible. For a long time nothing happened, then a green shape bobbed from the hole, maintaining a position several feet from the ground. The dark spot slowly resumed its full luminescence and the green shape began to drift away from it towards the village.

" That’s one like we saw in the marshland ! ” Kenneth stated.

The object moved on towards them. Like the vessel, it seemed to have no definite outline, but to be a shining radiance, a spot of green, subdued flame. When it had traversed half the distance its speed decreased and it vibrated slowly up and down, described several small circles, then came on once again.

Kenneth heard a sound of muffled terror behind him and looked over his shoulder. Jesse Sandison, quite forgotten, was running back up the slope towards the village. With him went those villagers who had ventured so far.

" Don’t blame them ! ” Justin said.

They stared at the approaching orb. Seen more closely, it appeared to have an inner core of denser light. Always above ground level, it drifted among the trees and bushes, avoiding them.

" An emissary ! ” Justin whispered.

The significance of his words only slowly sank in. Kenneth watched, stifling his impulse to run. The object, in common with its fellows in the marsh, did not move aimlessly. Consciousness and intelligence were apparent. It was alive — though living in some way unknown to Earth. Of pure energy? A mental entity, with no physical body? Kenneth did not know.

“We shouldn’t expect living things from other worlds to be like those on Earth,” Justin hissed.

Thirty yards away, the object ceased to advance and once again bobbed up and down. A long period of stillness followed, then it again approached. Kenneth felt something

tugging at his mind, as if a wordless voice was striving to tell him something of the gravest importance. With the feeling came sudden panic. He turned and ran up the hillside, and found Justin running at his heels. Only when he was at the nearest hut did he pause. Two figures stepped from its concealment.

"You invite danger, son of The Watcher," a voice stated.

It was the man who called himself The Listener, with Oskin at his side. Kenneth stared at them. They used telepathy, they had said. Justin had explained a little of its meaning to him. Telepathy had always been possible to humanity, but had remained unused — a mere sixth-sense that sometimes gave warning of danger.

" Quite soon you could become one of us, and speak mind to mind," Oskin murmured.

Kenneth was silent. The two had been by the hut. Yet the warning that had come into his mind had somehow seemed to originate from the glowing green orb. Or was that his fancy, caused by the strangeness of it all?

" The thing's coming right up to the village, by the look of it," Justin muttered.

They drew back as the sphere of green luminescence approached, retreating across the clearing, then beyond the houses to the hilltop. From there, Kenneth watched the orb circle and bob among the dwellings. Several times it passed through a doorway from sight, only to emerge and go on. It slowly circled every hut and object in the clearing, avoiding only the camp fire that the women had been piling high against night. At last, after a long time, it halted in front of the largest hut and commenced to bob slowly up and down. Justin stirred uneasily.

" It's waiting for us," he said.

It was dark when Bill Travvis regained consciousness and memory. A blunt outcrop of rock had struck him. Every bone ached. There was the bruised feeling of damaged flesh at his right leg, and a sensation of oozing, liquid warmth when he moved. With extreme relief he found that the bone was not broken. One ear hurt, and there was dried blood on his cheek.

He gained his feet, swaying. Ahead was a dark, oily swamp. Behind was the slope down which he had fallen.

" He shall get his message," he muttered.

The sound of his voice came as a surprise to his ears. He coughed, his bruised rib hurting. His eyes went to the oxygen indicator, and a chill swept through his limbs. Even the incoming hiss seemed weakened ... or it could be that his one eardrum was

damaged.

He found a way to the edge of the swamp. Rocky islets projected through the ooze, low, dimly-seen mounds. A faint miasma of vapour rose from the muddy surface. He looked right and left. The swamp continued far as he could see. He pushed one foot forwards, testing the mud and water for depth. Something whirred and wriggled below the surface, snakelike. At knee depth was hard, uneven rock. He lowered his other leg, stepping into the slime. Eight light years away was a world to be saved. It was a big responsibility for one man, he thought. Especially when that world had been their own — their native planet, the earth from which humanity had sprung ....

The way seemed without end. It ceased to be reality and became nightmare. Borne down by intolerable weight, half suffocated, tired in nerve and muscle, he forced himself on. Time seemed no more. Hours or days could have passed. He did not know, scarcely noticed. Again and again he fancied that light was coming, and that the long night of the planet was at last ended. But there was no dawn. His brain was too fatigued to recall how many hours of darkness there would be.

He seemed to have floundered through mud for aeons, sometimes totally submerged, aware only of things that whirred and pressed against his suit and helmet in the darkness. He rose from the ooze to rocks, scraped the mud from his faceplate, and could discern no star. Only a luminescence of indescribable dimness covered all the swamp, created, he supposed, by billions of minute, urgent living things.

He tottered over rocks and fell headlong. Rope-like shapes snared his feet, and were kicked off. The outside world seemed far away. Only existed pain, effort, the prickly heat of the suit, and deadening exhaustion. And, behind it all, a fierce determination. Those who had chosen him to deliver the message should not be disappointed, he kept repeating. While consciousness remained, his will would drive his aching body onwards.

" You could try fire to drive it away," Oskin stated.

They had watched the alien entity for a long time and it remained motionless before the hut. The villagers had grown restive afraid to approach the curious object or its vicinity, yet anxious to return to their dwellings.

" It did avoid the heat," Justin mused.

Several of the villagers kindled brands and cautiously advanced towards the motionless green orb that floated like a patch of light and seemed to be waiting. It was odd, Kenneth reflected, how that thought kept intruding into his mind. The alien entity was waiting — but for what? How could a being so strange hope to establish intelligent communication with the villagers, or achieve anything useful for itself if it did.

When the flames were fifteen paces away the orb began to bob excitedly, retreating. It withdrew from the village and down the slope. The dark, empty space re-appeared in the vessel's side ; the orb passed inside from view. The vessel resumed its uninterrupted sheen and rose soundlessly. It circled once over the village, gaining height, then sped into the clouds towards the marsh.

" Likely enough that's not the last we shall see of them!" Justin decided.

Kenneth wondered why he felt a strange regret that the alien being had gone. When he returned to the village there was no sign of Jesse Sandison. He decided he would await darkness, then again seek the depths of the silted buildings in the valley, where so many indications of mankind's glorious past lay buried.

The tunnel walls were sandy, streaked with dark, dried mud that looked almost black in the torchlight. Kenneth found himself wondering who the other visitors to the depths of The City had been, and what had prompted them to dig clear the obstructing silt at the spot Julius Justin had pointed out.

He continued slowly, searching for the room where the history machine had been. Memory of the incidents shown remained vividly in his mind. Particularly clear was the image of a slender, shining vessel — if vessel it was — rising from beyond the peaks. If a ship, it must have carried men — valiant adventurers who had flown from Earth while there was yet time, seeking to escape the fantastic waves that had inundated every continent. He supposed he would never know if they had found sanctuary amid the stars.

It was much farther than he had supposed, and he entered the chamber with mounting excitement, determined to see the picture sequence again. There might be other records, too, which would explain more of the past ....

He halted near the seats, dismay and astonishment blending. The machines were damaged. Panels had been torn loose, and wires and broken components littered the floor. He knew instinctively that the machines would never function again ; nor would it be within his power to repair them.

Angered, he searched the room. A rusty metal bar lay behind; one machine. It had been used fiercely, devastatingly. The act could have been that of a madman, if not so complete and methodical.

He studied some of the books and printed matter, but found many words he could not decipher. The ancient art of reading was one he must master as soon as possible, he decided. By its means he could learn a great deal. Most of the books seemed to cover ancient periods, and he replaced them regretfully.

He left the room at last, carefully closing the door, and went from the building. Once, many years before, water had apparently found a channel along a corridor and down two flights of stairs, sweeping them clean. From there, the torrent had formed a sandy- walled channel through two rooms, and had emerged from a broken, window. The tunnel dipped sharply, levelling only as it reached a hard, artificial surface. Damp suggested that water still escaped! from the valley that way when rains were heavy.

As he stood wondering which way to go a whisper began in. his mind. He froze, not concentrating upon it so that his conscious thought would drive it out, but letting it build up until it was clearer than ever before. Some mind seemed to be striving to contact his own — to communicate a warning .... Then the feeling was gone, the contact broken. He waited, but the prompting voice did not return. At last he went on. An hour or more could be spent on exploration.

The uneven tunnel divided into two smaller channels, one turning at the exposed corner of a building, mere feet high and with a roof wholly of crumbly sand. He followed it a little way, seeking a door or window in the building wall. There was none, and the watercourse strayed so that soon the building itself no longer formed one side of the tunnel. He halted, looked back, and saw a dim glow as from another torch near the junction with the main subterranean passage. It faded almost instantly and the uneven opening was again lost in blackness.

He hurried back to the junction, but the light had gone. The larger tunnel seemed the obvious one to follow, and he went that way, listening and trying to discern any movement ahead. There was none.

The rooms in the building proved empty, or so blocked with sand that no one could enter them. In one place many floors had caved informing a dark well the torchlight could not penetrate. Nearby whirling currents had made a labyrinth of channels, many large enough to admit a man. In that bewildering maze, cut by rainwater or the draining seas of generations before, many people could remain hidden. No use to search, he thought, and returned to the irregular arched tunnel outside the building.

He spent an hour extending his search for information, without success. Many of the smaller channels cut by the percolating water were impassable; others sank or ascended abruptly, or were blocked by falls of sand. Mud and silt had oozed through broken windows and open doors, drying in caked masses when the water drained away. Large areas lay under sand so tightly compressed and settled that no way through it existed.

Conscious that time was passing, he abandoned the search. It could be continued later, with helpers. As he approached the bottom of the derelict stairway a feeling of danger began to intrude itself into his mind. He began to hurry, then halted. Oskin and

The Listener stood at the foot of the ruined steps, each with a lantern that burned steadily. The face of the tall man was mocking.

" We knew you must return this way, Watcherson.”

They did not move; seemed, indeed, to be deliberately barring his way. The sensation of personal danger returned, but he suppressed it.

" I did not know you had been down here,” he said.

The tall man nodded. " Many times, recently and months ago.”

The feeling of danger increased. He had never liked the two.

" I was just going up,” he stated.

They did not move so that he could pass. " I doubt if anyone else from the village would come down here,” Oskin murmured.

To Kenneth’s ears his words seemed to have a double significance — to constitute a threat. Oskin’s companion nodded slowly.

" As you say, it is unlikely,” he murmured.

Kenneth felt their eyes calculatingly upon him, unguarded now so that the threat in their gaze was apparent. For a careless moment the vigilance with which they hid their thoughts wavered. For an instant Kenneth seemed to read their minds, but this time not because they wished, as on the hillside.

In that instant he learned that his presence — his mere existence — was in some way a danger to an important plan of the pair and their as yet unencountered companions. He did not know what that plan was, only that it was of vital gravity to the two confronting him. Then the guard they kept over their thoughts returned, and the telepathic contact was broken. Both stepped forward . . .

Kenneth turned and ran, the torch flaring and smoking in one hand. He doubled round corners and turnings, seeking a chance to reach the stairs. Once above ground, he could outdistance them, he was sure.

At first when he looked back two lanterns bobbed in pursuit. Then only one was visible, and that less frequently. He reached a tunnel where the water had run parallel with a block of buildings, sprang through an open window, and crouched against the wall on the silted floor, concealing the torch with his body. Running feet passed the window, and the sound of heavy breathing. He waited a moment, then looked out. No

light showed. He vaulted from the room and retreated towards the stairway.

The passages were dark and silent. Half running, he did not falter until nearly at the foot of the stair. Arms folded, the tall man stood there in the gloom.

" You had to come this way," he said mockingly.

Kenneth spun round. A lantern was coming along the tunnel — probably Oskin had gone past his hiding place deliberately . . .

Arms lapped round him from behind, pinioning him so that the torch fell. A low, derisive laugh sounded in his ears. " We shan't be coming back, Watcherson," the voice murmured. Something descended heavily on the back of his skull, and complete darkness engulfed him.

Consciousness slowly returned with a feeling of acute discomfort. Kenneth grew aware of uneven earth under his back, an aching head, and silence. He opened his eyes. The darkness was utter and unrelieved.

He sat up with difficulty, feeling around. The floor was moist sand. Extended, his right hand met a smooth wall, cold and slightly damp. He rested, head clearing, then rose cautiously to his feet and moved to the wall. One hand against it, the other before him, he took two cautious steps. His hand encountered a second wall at right angles. He followed it, met a further wall, and turned again. Two more right-angle turns followed, and he knew that he was back at his starting point. The room was roughly eight paces by ten, and with no door. Judging by the damp, it was probably a basement.

He made a second circuit, feeling as high up the walls as he could reach. They were uninterrupted. Any steps that had existed had either rotted to powder or been withdrawn from above.

He crossed the floor, diagonally and at regular, increasing distances from one wall. It was uneven and damp, but without opening, central staircase, or anything he could reach. His exploration finished, he halted, lips compressed.

His prison had been ably chosen.

The darkness and silence remained complete. He searched the floor for pebbles and fragments of stone to throw at the walls above his reach. The ceiling seemed ten or fifteen feet above. The pebbles rebounded from the walls at all points except one spot high up on a shorter wall. There, some rang on metal and some did not fall back. He tried jumping, grappling the wall, but could not reach the opening.

After a few attempts he rested, considering. He had established that there was an

opening, and it was doubtless the one through which he had been dropped. Carefully throwing pebbles, he gauged that it was at least four feet out of reach.

He searched the floor on hands and knees. There was nothing except the moist sand. At last, feeling further search pointless, he squatted on his heels, sifting it through his fingers. It was the only thing he had, he thought — there might be enough ... He began to scrape and scoop it towards the wall where the opening was.

The hours became a nightmare of scraping and scooping, scraping and scooping. His hands were sore and his muscles ached, but the mound of sand slowly grew. As it grew his elation increased. Such an infinity of toil was worth while when it meant life itself.

The silt upon the floor was shallow. As time passed he had to carry it farther and farther in meagre handfuls. His elation began to change to uncertainty, then to fear. The mound would have to be higher than he had anticipated — he could not spring from it, as from the floor . . . He could not be sure that there was enough sand.

At last he knew that there was not. He scraped the floor, made the mound compact and steep, and still knew there was not. Finally, he stood in the darkness, hope gone.

The entity that was pure mind and energy wavered and bobbed above the buried ruins of The City. Scanning the ground with a sense akin to vision, yet uninfluenced by darkness or light, it located the cleft and sank towards it. It could directly sense the gravitational field of the planet, and it drew itself lower and lower, scanning, until a sudden cessation of radiated energy echoes told it that a space existed. Its inner intelligence centred on its task, it passed through the hole.

The broken staircase glowed under the dim green light of its passing. It wavered slowly along the maze of tunnels, its mind reaching ahead and in every direction. Mentally sensitive vastly beyond any creature on Earth, it could discern the labyrinth of tunnels, yet was at the same time strongly aware of its limitations. An entity of great intelligence, and maintaining itself at a high level of kinetic energy, it was non-physical. It could not, by its own efforts, have moved even a single grain of sand in its path.

No more substantial than a puff of green smoke, it drifted on, impelling itself along the tunnels towards the human mind that it could sense, and which it must save.

Kenneth Watcherson stared as a faint green radiance slowly appeared above, showing in outline the oblong door which he had failed to reach. Several times he had sensed that something was striving to set up mental contact with him, and he had wondered if Oskin or his companion would return.

A single green orb appeared in the opening, dimly illuminating his cell with cold light.

For a full minute it remained there, moving slowly up and down, then it withdrew. The dim, reflected radiance gradually diminished until it was gone.

Kenneth licked his lips. In some odd way he felt his hope returning, as if help was coming, or would be brought.

Time passed and nothing happened. Very slowly his fear began to return, and he wondered how long he had been in the basement cell. Many hours had undoubtedly passed, and the chances that anyone would find him were minute.

He prowled the floor, or sat with eyes closed. An hour later a voice calling his name jerked him to full wakefulness. He shouted. The reply was nearer and a torch appeared in the opening, dimly revealing the face of Ruth. She lay full-length, and he could grasp her hands from the mound. Wiry as a youth, she drew him up.

" So it was trying to lead me here," she said.

He half guessed. " What? "

" The green — being. I — I felt it wanted me to follow. We're a long way from the stairs."

She looked back, obviously anxious to start at once. Kenneth followed through a maze of winding passages until at last they reached the stairway. Ruth Sandison paused.

" Why do they wish to kill you? "

" I — don't know."

Little more than the fact itself had become apparent. But when their minds were unguarded he had felt that the two newcomers had some plan — and that his presence threatened it. His knowledge ended there.

They emerged into full daylight, mounting the hillside. The tumps of The City, as the villagers always called it, fell away below, lost in the undulations of sand and fertile mud which half filled the valley.

" Once, when all this happened, a ship left this planet," Kenneth said. " I have seen pictures."

She looked at him, her expression suggesting her mind was elsewhere. " You won't be able to go back to your village," she said quietly.

He started, realising he had already been looking for the path going that way.

" You mean there is danger from Oskin and the other," he said. " Perhaps I can deal with them — "

She shook her head quickly. " Others have come into the villages — their companions. They call themselves Espuns. An odd name." She was silent, thoughtful. "They are a race that has developed the use of telepathy. It could be a great help to mankind, but I feel they are using it for evil ends. When they spoke to you, mind to mind, on the hills, I felt that — "

They passed amid trees and Kenneth wondered how much she knew or understood. If what Julius Justin had said was true, then she, too, might have an inherent telepathic ability waiting to be developed. She, like he himself, seemed to have flashes of such insight.

" How did you know the alien wanted you to follow it? " he asked quickly.

She halted. " I — I don't know. I felt it wanted me. Something at the back of my mind seemed to prompt me to follow."

He was triumphant. " You have heard voices that seemed to speak directly to your mind? "

" Yes," she admitted doubtfully. "My father was angry, but — "

" Only because he didn't understand! I've had such feelings, too, but never told anyone ! It means we may learn to use telepathic communication!

They gazed at each other and he wondered why so many centuries had passed before this dormant ability of man had emerged. Perhaps the old, busy life, lived by the people of The City, had not left time for it to make itself felt. Or they, with all their inventions, had not needed it.

Farther on, she pointed through the trees. " See."

Part of the village could be seen and a score of newcomers, following Oskin, was visible. They appeared to be making two of the larger dwellings ready for their own use, and as Kenneth watched the man who called himself The Listener came from the second dwelling, pointing and saying something. Two of the newcomers went off from sight. The villagers stood in a group at the other side of the clearing, obviously undecided and not wholly pleased.

" You're right," Kenneth said. " I can't go back."

She nodded. " It’s not safe for you to come with me. There’s a cave over the ridge of the hills. You could hide there.”

He remembered the spot, where a tangle of bushes covered the slopes and no one ever went. When a lad he had found that cave, and was surprised a second person knew of its existence. It would be a sanctuary — he needed rest.

" There’s a spring,” she said. " I can bring you food.”

Half unconscious from fatigue, Bill Travvis struggled up rising ground. The miles of filthy swamp lay behind. Ahead was the low vegetation which covered much of the surface of the planet, and was as yet unexplored. He had ceased to estimate the distance he had already travelled, instead driving himself on and on.

His clothing adhered to his body, and once he had been forced to open his suit faceplate, to wipe it. The oxygen-lacking air made him pant and he closed it quickly, gasping.

Some inner, driving force made his legs pump on and on. Often he scarcely knew that he walked, and he had ceased to notice that the message, slimy, torn, yet complete, had by some miracle remained safe under the strap of his gauntlet. Sometimes he stumbled to his hands and knees, only to rise and go on.

He did not see the shapes that began to move in the low vegetation on slightly higher ground parallel with his course. Upright, stubby and big-chested, they talked together in monosyllables, following and watching.

He mounted rising ground and saw ahead the dim light of coming dawn, pink and weak. Beyond the rise was a valley, fully two miles broad and filled from lip to lip with stunted bushes. He saw it all, but not with full consciousness. It seemed a mirage through which he must plod.

He began to search for a path down into the valley, his breathing heavy from the failing oxygen. Behind him, drawing nearer, crept the natives. Each bad a long, reedy tube held by a thong to his back. Their leader unslung his tube, inserted a tiny dart into its mouthpiece, and raised it to his lips, his beady eyes judging the distance to the Earthman. His dart, tipped with a poisonous cactus spine, would penetrate even an inch of tough hide.

Kenneth Watcherson sat in the mouth of the cave, resting. A tiny spring bubbled just out of sight beyond rocks, tinkling in the stillness. Uppermost in his mind was the way in which the alien entity had sought him out in the labyrinth of subterranean channels. That had displayed conscious will — and the desire to save him.

He stared away over the tree-tops in the direction of the marsh. For a long time an idea had been growing in his mind : he would visit the alien encampment again. And, perhaps, would steel himself against taking flight . . .

He rose, refreshed, aware that barely enough hours of daylight remained for him to cross the hills. Ruth was coming up the precipitous track and he went to meet her. She halted.

" You’re not going back to the village, Kenneth? ”

" No. Across the hills to the marsh.”

She looked surprised. " It’s not safe! You mightn’t get away so easily again — ”

" I’m not sure we need have retreated so soon that first time! he objected. ” We assumed the aliens were dangerous. Perhaps they’re not. Perhaps they have some other purpose.”

She shook her head slowly, determinedly. " It’s too big a risk. You don’t know.”

" But I feel I’m right !

He left it at that, not trying to explain. It was impossible to put his thoughts into words. There was only the feeling, strong, possibly mistaken, that the visitants in the marsh would do him no injury.

" I intend to risk it,” he stated.

That, too, was difficult to explain. But at the back of his mind was the feeling that the risk was justified, though he did not know why.

Ruth was silent and uneasy. He left her, starting off down the narrow path.

The aliens bobbed and danced behind the earthworks their machines had thrown up, intermingling ceaselessly. They rose and fell, twirling and vibrating, sometimes high, sometimes descending from view. From half way down the last slope Kenneth watched them in the evening light and wondered whether Ruth’s warning should have been heeded. The aliens were totally unlike any living thing on Earth. No one could be sure what motives they might have.

He slowly continued his descent. The green orbs seemed already aware of his presence. Some came across the marsh a little way towards him, retreated, then approached again. His lips set with determination, he walked steadily on. The hazard must be taken if he was to learn whether his guess was correct.

The shapes ceased to swirl, bobbing vertically while a dozen crossed the earthwork and floated towards him, their speed slowly decreasing as they drew nearer. Torn between panic and resolution, he halted, forcing himself to remain motionless. The orbs surrounded him, barely ten feet away, rising and falling very gently. His coolness returned, and he wondered what he should do. They were certainly observing him in some unfathomable manner, but it was not clear how communication could be established. That they wished to communicate he was sure — that belief, an inner prompting, had brought him across the hills.

Very slowly mental images began to form in his mind, unbidden by his own will. Familiar, now, with the latent power of his own brain, he did not try to suppress them. They built up steadily, gaining clarity and coherence, and a new understanding dawned. The problem of communication was solved. Direct mental contact, imperfect as yet, was established— and by the aliens, whose vertical movements were now almost imperceptible.

Why didn’t you get into touch with us before ? he thought.

The answer came back, wordless yet clear : Because yours is the only ordinary human mind with which we can communicate. And you must be near at hand.

Mental images came and went and he seemed to lose contact with the world surrounding him. There was no longer rough grass under his feet and the evening wind on his face. Instead, he was seeing a planet utterly unlike Earth — a world eight light years away, with a pinky sun and two moons. The aliens’ home, it was wild and desolate. Strange animals lived in the fissures torn across vast rocky plains. Poisonous reptiles inhabited great swamps, floating in the ooze. The only intelligent animal life-form was squat, subhuman, with barrel chests to compensate for the lack of oxygen. Small-skulled, they maintained a precarious existence on the marginal land by the swamps, killing ruthlessly with poisoned darts everything that entered their territory.

It is an inhospitable planet, he thought.

Yes, but we were adapted to it. The creatures and natives could not harm us — but the beings of your species were not so fortunate.

Kenneth felt astonishment. My species ?

Those that came many years ago.

Mental images showed a scarred ship slanting down out of the pinky sky, and revealed the terrible hardships of the men she had brought. Attacked by great creatures, raided

by natives, the colonists had been near to extermination. Only slowly had they gained a footing, building a walled city where a huge cataract could provide power for electric generators. There, secure, their children had been born, fathering new generations who had worked ceaselessly to colonise the planet.

The images faded and he became aware that something more immediate and important demanded attention. It was a warning, vital and urgent, and somehow difficult to understand. Only slowly did it begin to clarify in his mind . . . then the vision faded, replaced by a feeling of dismay and terror. He became abruptly aware of the hillside, dark with night, and human voices, upraised and angry. Flaming torches flared up the slope, carried by a score of men.

The ring of alien beings broke and they retreated towards the earthwork, hesitated, then passed over it. He strove to regain the interrupted mental contact but could not.

A shout drifted down the slope. “They’re afraid of fire! ”

He doubled along the hillside towards bushes that offered cover, uncertain whether he had been seen. Crouching there, he looked back. Some of the men were villagers, but the others he did not recognise. They would be companions of Oskin, he decided, who was leading them down towards the marsh.

Two broke away from the main party, coming towards him, and he started up the hill away from them, following a gully that offered cover. At the brow of the hill he looked back. The two men had come into view, following at a brisk trot. Beyond them, the party had momentarily halted a hundred yards from the nearest ridge of the earthworks.

He turned and began to run. The light was going fast and the way uncertain, but his pursuers seemed to follow with an uncanny instinct and gain slowly. He left the path and pushed among bushes, climbing a rocky slope. Concealed at its top, he watched the two follow unerringly, never hesitating. It seemed they would surely catch him.

He ran on, but whenever he looked back they were behind, nearer, and he slowly realised the truth. Their abnormal insight helped them and if he hid in the densest brush they would still know his position . . . Only one chance remained. He must fight them, one against two, relying on sinew and muscle.

He made for high ground and a clear space amid the bushes. There, he turned, the staff he always carried in his hands, his eyes defiant. The two emerged from cover, halting.

" I’ve cracked many a wild dog’s skull with this,” he said.

They parted, circling him in opposite directions and drawing nearer. He tried to probe their minds, exercising his new and developing ability. It was difficult, but he sensed enough of their feelings to increase his determination to the limit. They intended to kill him. He was the only villager able to gain contact with the aliens in the marsh. For that reason alone they regarded his death as essential.

They made simultaneous rushes from opposite directions, leaving him no time to ponder the significance of what he had learned. He caught the nearest on the shoulder and both sprang back out of reach of his staff.

" Telepathy won’t help you when you’ve got broken bones !" Kenneth growled.

He felt angry blood pounding in his veins. The two circled him like wolves, just out of reach, their eyes intent. One bent quickly, picking up a stone large as his fist, and both laughed. The sound chilled Kenneth. It suggested they knew they must win — they were two to one, and could anticipate his every move —

" We’ll see ! ” he cried, and sprang, staff whirling.

The nearer ducked, but not quickly enough. A blow grazed his head and he howled. Simultaneously, Kenneth felt arms grasping his from behind, tearing the staff away. He staggered and fell, his antagonist astride him. The man was strong, wiry — but had not been born and raised in the hills. Kenneth flung him off, rising. The second man had recovered, and sprang. Kenneth put every ounce of strength thirty years of hardy living had given him into a blow which took the other on the chin. The man collapsed.

Branches snapped and Kenneth spun round, then relaxed. His remaining attacker had flown.

He retrieved his staff and set off obliquely along the slope, hurrying. It seemed unlikely that his enemy would give up so easily, when companions who would help were so near.

A weak moon had risen above the hills, dimly lighting the way, and he turned towards the villages. Julius Justin, at least, should be warned, he decided. The aliens seemed to be friends ; the men calling themselves the Espuns, enemies, though human.

He often listened, but could hear no pursuit. If men followed, it was silently, slipping without sound through the trees. The way was long and he judged that at least two hours had passed before he gained the ridge of hills beyond which the villages lay.

At last he emerged upon the highest slope, and halted in astonishment.

The village clearing was ablaze with fires and torches and excited voices drifted faintly

to his ears. Beyond the huts, in a broad semi-circle, wavered myriads of green, nebulous forms, each shining with its own inner light.

He approached the village, cautiously watching for anyone who might be an enemy. The voices grew louder, telling of panic and excitement, and he saw that the villagers were forming a ring of fire beyond their dwellings. Flaming brands were thrust in the earth and piles of sticks were being thrown up ready to light. Among the villagers the strangers moved, urging them on unceasingly. Kenneth bit his lips. The villagers had evidently accepted Oskin and his companions eagerly upon their return.

" Fire is the only thing to keep them away ! ” a tall stranger was declaring. " They followed us from the marsh — ”

Kenneth slipped among the huts, looking for Justin. He was nowhere visible and Kenneth retreated to a spot where discovery was less likely. It seemed that Justin was not in the village, he thought, and began to circle round towards the string of fires.

The green entities had taken up a position fifty yards from the nearest fire and it was not apparent what they intended to do. He approached them slowly, keeping bushes between himself and the village. Three green forms left their companions, drifting towards him, and as the distance decreased he felt mental contact being established once more. He halted, waiting, and they surrounded him. He felt no fear. They had helped Earthmen on that other planet so far away —

And we wish to help you, too, their minds whispered. We have travelled across eight light years of space to reach you, coming alone because no human could travel in our vessels and because they now have no interstellar ship. The humans here who call themselves the Espuns are dangerous. They want only personal power, and use the old sciences for evil ends. They are not like you and your friends, who wish to make a noble new earth.

Our fellowmen on your planet sent you? Kenneth asked.

Yes, the thought came. They, too, developed telepathy, under our guidance. But they are not as the Espuns, but honest and working for the good of all, like yourself. Telepathy is a wonderful power. Distance can be as nothing to it, when its users are skilful. The humans on our planet tried to contact you, but failed. They learned of the Espuns and their plans, and wished to warn you. They could not. Sometimes they thought their minds had contacted you, but the contact was always broken before a message could be given. Your mind is the only one among the villagers they could reach, even momentarily. The Espuns know this, and wish to kill you.

Kenneth thought of the strange planet his fellowmen had begun to colonise, so far away, and experienced disappointment.

Shall I never have contact with my fellows there ? he wondered.

You may, the green orbs thought. We set out ten years ago, voyaging to bring this message. Since then we have learned that a human with tremendous telepathic powers is rumoured to live in an outpost in the wilds. A messenger was sent to him, asking him to contact you — to warn you —

The mental voice abruptly ceased and Kenneth saw that a bunch of villagers was advancing behind flaming torches. A fragmentary farewell entered his mind — We cannot face these radiations you call heat — then the twirling luminous forms retreated to their fellows.

Momentarily he felt unable to run. Belief and doubt conflicted in his mind. What the aliens said might all be untrue, calculated to deceive him. The green orbs were strange — unearthly. The Espuns, though odd, were human. Could the word of an alien, non-human race be trusted, or was it a trick? He did not know.

He wished that the humans of the distant planet had been able to reach him, to explain. Their word could be trusted. He stared at the bobbing green forms and suddenly felt that he was a fool to believe them.

" There is Kenneth, son of The Watcher ! ” a voice cried.

He seemed not to hear it or notice the flaming brands. Would it not suit the aliens well if a conflict arose between the remaining branches of humanity on earth, so that they killed each other?

A second voice joined the first. "He is betraying us ! He is helping our enemies! ”

A dozen hands pinioned him.

Julius Justin, flanked by the elders of the surrounding villages, shook his head slowly, regretfully.

" I find it difficult to believe you,” he said.

Kenneth was silent. He had expected this, and knew that his own explanation had been unconvincing. He himself was no longer convinced, but felt that the aliens were enemies, and his indecision had undoubtedly shown itself.

Jesse Sandison stood near, his thumbs in his leather belt. " You were talking to them,” he accused.

“ I was.”

" To betray us? ”

Kenneth shook his head. " No.”

Sandison leaned forward. " Oskin and the others say you were with the aliens in the marsh, too!"

Their faces were grave. Kenneth sighed heavily. He had been fortunate to secure a fair hearing, he supposed. Justin had insisted on that. But now there was little enough he could say in his own defence.

" We may receive a — a message from our fellows,” he pointed out.

There was a long silence. " From those men who flew to another planet? ” Sandison asked, his voice unbelieving. " What proof have you such a thing ever happened? ”

Kenneth opened his lips to speak, but was silent. The history machine had been destroyed — undoubtedly by Oskin or his companions, so that no proof would be available.

" There is no proof,” he admitted. "But this message may come — ”

" And from what you say you will be the only one able to receive it,” Justin put in.

Kenneth read disbelief on his friend’s face. Justin wanted to believe — but there was no proof. Kenneth nodded slowly.

" As you say, I am the only one with telepathic ability sufficiently developed — ”

The disbelief was on all their faces. They had not been down in The City, or seen the ship rise from the peaks. Everything of which he spoke was new to them, and incredible. At the back of the gathering the man named The Listener had been silent, apparently anxious that the prisoner should have every opportunity to clear himself. Now he rose.

" We have used telepathy for many, many years,” he said smoothly, " but we have received no message from fellowmen on another planet, and never anticipate we shall.”

His piercing eyes were fixed straight ahead and Kenneth knew he lied. The Espuns knew — knew also that eight light years of space existed between earth and that distant world, and that there was no ship large enough to cross, bringing word back to

Earth. Already the Espuns were in virtual control of the village and planning to drive the aliens away, their warning undelivered. Bitterly Kenneth wished that others of the villagers had his ability, and that he was not the only telepath among them, a firstling whose unproven word no one would believe.

" Seems we're wasting time talking any more," Jesse Sandison stated abruptly.

The two men plodded on in the pinky sunlight, walking awkwardly from the load they carried. They mounted a path, passed inside the pressurised dome at its end, and opened their suit helmets immediately they had laid their burden down.

" He looks in a bad way," one said.

He studied the insignia on the breast of the mud-caked suit and gently pulled a torn envelope from under the strap of one gauntlet. He looked up.

" A message ! Better get a doctor — and the C.O."

He waited until his commanding officer appeared, brisk and upright, and saluted.

"We found him over in the valley, sir. Collapsed from fatigue, I think. Another few minutes and the natives would have got him." He held out the envelopes. " It's probably urgent, sir."

The C.O. opened it and read quickly. His brows rose; he frowned. Finally he folded the message. From where he stood he could see through the transparent wall of the dome of the outpost.

" It's come all the way from headquarters ! " he said. H.Q. was in the great, noble parent city first built and almost half way round the globe. Many times in his career he had wished some direct means of communication existed, but the planet's static made radio and telegraphy impossible. "And important right enough ! Get Barnaby."

The lieutenant's features expressed surprise. " Barnaby ! "

"Yes! The telepath! Seems he's the only man here they think can get a message over to someone eight light years away ! "

Jesse Sandison pushed a way through the crowd. " Let the girl speak ! " he ordered gruffly.

Ruth halted, her eyes fixed on Kenneth as if her words were for him alone. " I believe you ! I know you're speaking the truth ! " Her gaze swept over Oskin and his companions. " They're lying! They want to dominate us — be our masters! "

Kenneth scarcely heard, or noticed that she continued. Suddenly a mind had seemed to try to contact his own. Immeasurably powerful, noble and kind, the brain trying to set up communication seemed very remote ... he opened all his levels of consciousness to it, exercising to the full his telepathic ability, and the crowded gathering snapped from sight and hearing.

He seemed to stand in a city under a pink sun, facing a man who was white-haired, noble and kind.

" I am Barnaby," the man was saying . . .

He pointed through the transparent dome to the city, and with a gesture indicated that there were other cities beyond. He beckoned, and two officers brought in a companion whose face bore the print of hardship.

" This is Bill Travvis, who brought me the message," Barnaby said.

Travvis smiled fleetingly, and Kenneth felt he deserved undying gratitude. In the vision Barnaby's lips seemed to move again.

"We came from Earth in the ship made before civilisation was destroyed. In a few years, now, we shall again have ships able to cross space back to you. Until then, remember the aliens are your friends and ours. They helped us here. They have crossed space to help you. And to warn you against a race whose minds we have sometimes contacted — who are humans, yet evil . . . Do not help them. They will destroy everything worthy of Man. The aliens are harmless, gentle and wise. Mankind and they will look to the stars together, seeking other planets. Explain to your friends. You are the first of the splendid new race to inhabit Earth, telepathic yet not cruel ..." The vision began to fade as if contact could no longer be maintained. " Remember we shall be with you within the decade, travelling in new ships we are building — "

The city under the dome faded, and Barnaby was gone. Kenneth opened his eyes and saw terror on the face of Oskin and in the glances of all his companions.

"They are coming in new ships," Oskin breathed.

He seemed to have collapsed; his face was white, his panic obvious.

Seconds passed in silence, then a wave of understanding spread through the villagers. " Kenneth, son of The Watcher, speaks the truth! " someone cried.

A sudden scurry stirred the throng; a babel of voices rose; fists waved —

At the edge of the village Kenneth and Justin watched the last of the Espuns being driven none too kindly down the hill. Kenneth turned his gaze upon the aliens bobbing and hovering as if awaiting his presence. Yes, these beings of energy and mind could help Man, just as Man might help them. There was much to be done before the human ships came, opening up space-routes between Earth and a multitude of other planets. One day, perhaps, he would meet Bill Travvis, he thought, and would shake his hand.

" The Espuns were an oddity," he murmured. " Perhaps are some kind of mutation. They'll die out." He turned his gaze again to the green orbs. " I'd better go and see what our friends down there have to say."

A heavy hand touched his shoulder. He turned to meet the eyes of Jesse Sandison. Sandison smiled.

" Good luck, son of The Watcher."

Kenneth nodded and began to walk down the slope.