FRANCIS GEORGE RAYER

POWER FACTOR

"When humanity reached the third planet of the Myra Group it was habitable but uninhabited... not until a generation later was an alien life-form located in that part of space, but contact with it was difficult to establish..."

E. R. JAMES: "History of the Seven Empires." .

Wind tore down from the hills, bringing the distant thunder of the mighty cataract of the Eider Dam. Sam O'Connelley looked over his control-panel and from the curved window of the power-house building. Orange clouds marked the spot where Syria Major had set. Soon would come the twenty hour night, the period of peak load.

The desk communicator buzzed.

"Main Central here," Sam said automatically.

"There's a memo from Diplomatic West." It was the girl in the office below. "Urgent."

"Read it."

"From Diplomatic West. Regarding first landing of Aliens. Whole of Valley City to be fully illuminated through dark period. Valley City in no circumstances to be included in load shedding area. This an order and priority."

Sam sighed. "So they're taking no chances? They want the whole place bright as day."

"Seems so, Mr. Connelley." She hesitated; "We were wondering...?

"About Meriel? The hospital says it will be tonight. I saw her a few moments on visi. She's taking it well, but..." He hesitated. "No use pretending. It's serious."

He knew the girl below was worried. Everyone in 'Main Central knew everyone, and everyone's affairs. His wife Meriel has been one of them until two weeks before. Her going, and the manner of it, had saddened the tiny community of the powerhouse that was perched on precipitous rocks twenty miles from anywhere.

"I'm sorry, Mr. O'Connelley- "

He switched off. He wondered whether Meriel would live through the operation.

Perhaps. It had been nobody's fault that a half-ton derrick block had come loose and nearly taken her life in its swing. Perhaps it would have been better if she had died, he thought bleakly. That would have been quick and comparatively painless... smashed spines did kill people.

Night was coming. just over the rim of the hills he could see the reflected glow of Valley City. Diametrically opposite, a full hundred miles behind him, Meriel lay at Medical Centre. Between them stretched rocks, ravines and stony desert.

A light on the wall map went on. East, over the rim of the horizon, darkness had come. A string of power-houses dotted Myra 3, joined by an immense grid that straddled mountains and valleys. Water power was cheap- and the only power available. Another indicator glowed. The twilight hand was creeping west and station after station taking up the load as a million lights came on and a million factory hands began shifts that started with the cool of evening.

Sam rested his hands on the desk, his fingers near the rows of control buttons, his eyes on the illuminated meters.

In Medical Centre the surgeon straightened and stepped back from the bed where a frame supported a golden-haired woman.

"The twenty-four hour delay until tomorrow could be fatal," he murmured. "The spinal cord is under pressure..."

His assistant nodded, his eyes intent on the lined, mature face of his senior. "That was Doctor Crofton's opinion."

His voice was reverent. A young man, he was prepared to go on his knees before the skill of Crofton and Williams. The two, inseparable partners, had pulled back many a shattered human body from the burning.

Williams sunk his chin on his knuckles. "I would prefer to wait until daylight. There is nearly always load-shedding."

"There's the auxiliary equipment, sir."

Williams did not answer. To him every human life was a thing wholly precious, to be saved if human skill allowed. With fingers firm yet infinitely gentle he had examined the patient; with eyes intent, studied the radiographs. Before coming to the ward he had sat for fully thirty minutes, silent, thinking. He had not seen Crofton, then. Each preferred to arrive at a decision personally, then see if they tallied. They always did.

Crofton, lean, sixty, was in the corridor. Doctor and surgeon fell into step side by side.

"It must be tonight, Crofton."

"Yes, I fear so, Williams."

Williams thought of the mass of tiny, broken fragments of bone. Razor-edged instruments would be within a thousandth of an inch of vital nerves. If those nerves were severed paralysis could arise, or coma, or death.

"Her constitution is good," Crofton said. "But some derangement to her sympathetic system is arising..."

"Yes: I noted two phases of cardiac syncopation."

"That's what I mean." Crofton drew in his lips. "Every hour's delay reduces her chances."

The assistant, walking behind, listened eagerly, jumped as Williams turned on him. Williams was brisk, quick... could have been a General on a battlefield making instantaneous personal decisions.

"Have a message sent to her husband- "

"Mr. O'Connelley, sir?"

"Yes, O'Connelley. Say that we shall operate tonight, beginning at an early hour, and that he will be informed directly the operation is completed, and before if anything arises."

"Yes, sir."

He vanished down a side corridor. Williams thought again of the radiographs. Only once before had he seen a spinal disaster so extensive. He remembered that one still: it had taken eight hours.

Alone in his study he flung open the window. Night darkened the sky. A breeze moved, but seemed unrefreshing. The air bore down heavily. Far away across the sky a momentary flash burned from heaven to rock.

The building 'phone rang and he answered.

"Mrs. O'Connelley will be ready in the theatre in thirty minutes, sir."

"Very well, matron."

He returned to the window in time to hear the remote echo of thunder. A second flash showed, dim behind cloud. He sighed, consciously relaxing nerve and mind for precious moments. Yes, he thought, those radiographs told a bad story.

Commander Roche listened to the rumble of thunder, and swore. Never before had he felt responsibility so heavy upon him. The whole of Diplomatic West waited upon his merest gesture. From the balcony of his private room he had observed the descent of the alien ship. There had been no belching of fire earthwards, no roar of rockets or crackle of electronic devices. Only a slow, measured descent like a feather drifting earthwards in still air. Now the delegation was waiting. It was his duty, his privilege, to lead them to the alien vessel.

He slid a finger inside his collar, drew himself upright, and stalked down the corridor. On the steps of Diplomatic Centre he paused. As a gesture, it suggested that he was in complete control of the situation, unhurried and imperturbable.

Aides and officers appeared, forming a tail that wound behind him as he passed round the corner of the building.

Ahead was the alien, globular ship, a dull grey that had blended well with heaven and cloud. Radar screens had shown that it was only an insignificant speck that had detached itself from the major blip that still lingered watchfully two hundred Earth miles above.

"They haven't opened their vessel, sir," an aide whispered.

"No."

Commander Roche's voice suggested that he had anticipated that they would not yet have done so.

"What kind of beings are they, sir?"

"The aliens?" His tone almost suggested that his mind had turned to other and more important things. "Who can say?"

It sounded almost flippant, but he wondered what they were about to see. Communication had now existed for almost five years between the newcomers and men, but no personal contact had been made. Then an alien call had suggested exactly this.

"They must resemble us, sir, since they did not want other atmospheric or gravitational conditions arranged for the discussion."

Commander Roche volunteered no answer. He personally felt that the newcomers had a supreme disregard for such things. Any gravity would do- any atmosphere- it seemed .

Conscious that there were fifty men at his back, he strode on. The grey globe stood thirty feet tall. He hoped the alien delegation was impressed, for Diplomatic Centre was illuminated as at full noon. A bare half-mile away the nearer outskirts of Valley City glared kilowatts at the sky. The aliens would see that mankind had power. That was diplomacy. Ten thousand buildings shone under the night sky. That was impressive. Signs flashed, vehicles roared along lit streets. That showed mankind was no mere savage.

A sudden momentary doubt seized him. "You left orders that in no circumstances was load-shedding to take in this area."

His aide nodded. "Yes, sir. Very definite instructions. As an order."

"Good!"

Commander Roche strode on, leggings glinting, breeches whispering, shoulders wide; gleaming, erect, tall and determined.

A section of the sphere's side seemed to be growing transparent. The Commander's eyes glinted in the battery of searchlights upon the square; he sensed that many thousands of eyes were upon him- human eyes, looking to his leadership. Alien eyes, too, perhaps, discerning him through the growing transparency.

Sam O'Connelley's gaze moved from the wall map to the pointers of the secondary instruments backing up his desk. The load was creeping towards peak earlier than usual, this evening. It was an hour since the girl below had sent up a message.

"They will be operating immediately things are ready, Mr. O'Connelley. You will be informed of progress."

"Thanks, Judith."

He judged that another half-hour would see the load meters approaching the red. Then, by pressing buttons here, oil-filled contactors in the power-house would actuate. Power would be drawn via the eastward grid from generators which were creeping into the dawn area and had current to spare.

A phone rang. He took it with one hand, eyes on his meters.

"Main Centre here."

"This is Stanhope Gulley. I anticipate having to make an approximate two~and-a-half per cent. drain on the grid to maintain service."

"Thanks"

Sam wondered why Stanhope Gulley anticipated that- usually they held out. He pressed a communicator button.

"Check why Stanhope Gulley anticipates inability to supply demand, Judith."

A pilot light on the map came on before she answered. He saw that the two-and-a-half per cent. drain on the eastward grid had begun.

"Reporting on Stanhope Gulley." Her voice was clipped, efficient. "Rainfall on the eastern watershed ten per cent. below annual average for the area over last three weeks."

"Thanks"

No water, no power, Sam thought. Rain, in its billions of tiny droplets, was all they had to maintain nine-tenths of the population's requirements.

The window was black. A glow showed where Valley City stood. His mind turned from that to Meriel, miles away.

Though snug in his office the works-manager sighed. "Been the same ever since this alien scare started," he declared.

"More production! We need arms, equipment, stores, spares-"

The lanky block foreman nodded. He had entered to a bucolic summons. "What is it?"

The works-manager thumped a blue form on his desk. "Just come in! The eight-hour rest period is to be reduced to four hours and shifts re-arranged to fit. The change is to begin at once."

"It'll cause some black looks, boss. The heavy plant really needs eight hours for checking--"

"It must be four! They say keep it rolling-- so we keep it rolling!" He swore. "To them, it's as simple as that!"

Wind moaned over barren hills. High, girdered towers sang to the piping fury of it. Heavy cables, 375,00 volt, three-phase, moaned a low undercurrent of sound. Cities glowed, sprawling masses of light.

Sweating, face white, the pilot stared down into the black- ness. Cloud hid all but occasional glimmers that might have been any city within a hundred miles, by map. On the inter com the navigator's voice came, fear in it.

"Any sight of a bearing, sir?"

"No. Any chance of repairing the damage?"

"No, sir. The static just ruined things, here."

Static was a mild word, the pilot thought. Heavy black nimbus had discharged a blue bolt that crackled from cloud to plane and plane to mountain range below. The smell of it and fused wiring hung in the cabin. Without radio and radar he felt like a man without eyes.

Uprushing air tossed the plane. He rose, banking, trying to get a view of the earth below. Fly high-- you could see nothing; fly low- you could hit a peak if you were off course. The way to hell lay either way, he thought.

"I could try another parachute flare, sir."

"How many left?"

"Three."

"Try one."

Twenty seconds later it blossomed below, brilliantly white, swinging. The pilot strove to see, lips moving. Then craggy rock showed below and a tall structure of lattice-work metal ahead, too near. He turned the plane, rising, knowing it too late.

A wing struck taut wires. Sparks arced between cables and plane and the latter plunged, swinging devilishly as about a pivot. A scream on the intercom was cut off, lost in the roar of destruction. Sheared cables sprang back like snakes, arcing. Flames licked up from the battered machine, illuminating the rocky hills that stretched away into the dim distances of night.

Commander Roche felt pleased. The psychological approach paid, he thought. Already the aliens had seen that Man was to be respected- was no savage, but fully civilised, powerful, skilled, not to be trifled With. He felt that the first hour of the conference

had been a success, and leaned back in his chair.

The aliens sat opposite. Or, he should say, occupied a position apparently on the chairs which had been placed for them. There were seven, he supposed. They were dim, like ten-gallon transparent bottles inside which oscillated a single brilliant red dot. A mechanism stood on the polished table before them. They had brought it. Externally, it was a simple black box.

"We are deeply conscious of the great honour you have done to receive me," it stated.

Commander Roche wondered for the hundredth time whether it indeed made audible sounds or whether the words were projected mysteriously into his own mind. The aliens had brought the box- it had floated behind them, apparently supported by nothing, as they followed in orderly procession back to Diplomatic Centre. They had appeared like a string- rather resembling seven children tightly holding hands.

He drew in his lips. "We humans are always ready to meet beings of other worlds, and to help them, if we can." That word "help" suggested consciousness of superiority. He remembered how that was pointed out in the fifth manual dealing with the psychological approach to aliens.

"Thank you. I shall be pleased to ask for your help if I ever need it."

Commander Roche wondered why they always referred to themselves in the singular; also how long these formalities would last. The main object was twofold- to assure that the aliens were not dangerous, and to obtain an assurance that the human domination of Myra 3 would not be hindered.

"We are pleased to receive you on our planet here," he murmured.

The shapes above the chairs rested unmoving; only the red dots within the transparent outlines oscillated. "By Galactic time, you are newcomers to this area of space," the box said.

The Commander felt that the words "our planet here" had gone unnoticed. "We often colonise and adopt uninhabited planets," he pointed out.

"So do I," the box said.

He wondered if it were a threat. "Such planets we regard as homes from home and protect as such," he declared.

The box offered no comment. Commander Roche felt irritated. He suspected that his visitors were evil, or at least had evil intentions. Things so remote from flesh and blood

must be evil! It was necessary to be firm-- to demonstrate that Earthmen knew their superiority. Seven green bottles, he murmured to himself. That was psychological, but uplifting nevertheless.

"We humans do not normally tolerate any interference with our plans." he said. "We are a determined race."

"An admirable characteristic."

"When we begin a thing, we see it through."

"Commendable."

"Naturally we have occasionally met resistance, in the past, but have always overcome it."

"Encouraging for you."

Commander Roche felt red. But he smiled. He had not gained his position through influence, but through ability. "You agree, then, that we are justified in remaining here and developing the planet ?"

The dots vibrated. He wondered what form of life they were, and how they communicated between themselves.

"Not at all", the box said.

He jumped. "You have misunderstood me! I observed that you must agree that we should stay here-"

"That was understood."

The Commander felt cold inside. "Then possibly I misunderstood your answer?"

"Apparently not."

Sitting in his office, Sam O'Connelley cursed the order that meant Valley City must be kept fully supplied. He felt that a five per cent. reduction in voltage there would noticeably ease the load. Stanhope Gulley was already drawing eight per cent. from the eastward grid, and had phoned that her heavy industrial load would have to be maintained a full four hours longer, so that her output would not become available.

He pressed a button. "Have Valley City contacted? Will they accept a five per cent. reduction?"

The reply came within minutes. "No reduction can be accepted. This is an order. Diplomatic Centre."

A phone rang. He took it.

"Grid beyond Newhaven East reported broken. This report is being passed to all stations."

Sam gnawed his lip, acknowledging. So the stations west of East Newhaven were on their own, he thought. There would be no drawing power from the generating plant now becoming relieved of demand as daylight came in that direction.

He wondered how Meriel was progressing. No further report had come.

The surgeon withdrew from the theatre into an annex where an orderly removed his mask and mopped his face. Even the radiograph had not shown the worst, Williams thought. They would need the fluorescent radiographical apparatus and deep probes. There was one snag. The fluorescent radiograph would not operate on the hospital auxiliaries. It had been installed since their fitting.

Dr. Crofton came in. "You anticipate using the fluorescent radiograph and deep probes, Doctor Williams?"

"Yes, Doctor Crofton. How will she withstand the operative shock?"

"Moderately well, if not too prolonged."

"As I thought."

They were silent in a mutual understanding almost of communion. Williams thought of the Woman's husband.

"Might Mr. O'Connelley like to be near her ?" Crofton asked suddenly.

Williams summoned an orderly. After a minute he returned. "Mr, O'Connelley is chief engineer at the Eider

"Thank you." .

Time to re-sterilise and return to the theatre, Williams thought. His few moments rest after the long preliminary, but comparatively uncritical stage, was ended.

Surgeon and doctor moved as one to the annex door.

Sam swivelled in his chair and pressed buttons. The last hour had seen the load increase as cities westward began to draw power and the night shifts started. The peak load usually came about four to six hours after nightfall.

An engineer's voice came back. "The break in the power line has been located sir, but will not be repaired until dawn."

"Why not?" Sam's voice was sharp.

"The spot is inaccessible. sir. It was located by a survey aircraft. Apparently a mailplane struck the lines."

"Very Well."

The power grids straddled miles of rocky wilderness. Probably gangs would not reach the spot until after dawn. Eyes on this meters, he phoned.

"Eider Dam Main Central to Stanhope Gulley. Can you reduce your demands ?"

"Not without drastic load-shedding."

An undercurrent of panic was in the voice. Sam wondered whether that night's battle would be won. If the load exceeded the rated capacity of the system, automatic switching gear would come in. Cascade switching was every power-house engineer's nightmare.

An overloaded system threw in an adjacent circuit. That circuit, if already fully loaded, protectively threw in a third. The third, if unable to supply the extra demand, tripped into circuit a fourth, and so on while lights zig-zagged across the maps and the complex grids straddling the planet became progressively more and more involved in the chaos.

Sam wiped his brow. The 'phone rang. The girl's voice was new. Judith had ended her duty period.

"A gram from Medical Centre, Mr. O'Connelley"

"Read it."

" 'Can full rated voltage be maintained this night period Crofton and Williams'."

Sam thought of twenty things simultaneously. Of Meriel. Of a memo, still remembered, explaining that the equipment at Medical Centre had exceeded the rating of their

auxiliary generator plant. Of cascade overload tripping, when five thousand miles of overhead landlines might become involved within minutes.

"Wait," he said.

He used a second phone. The reply came soon. "Diplomatic West cannot in any circumstances accept any power cut. This is a special order, effective for tonight only."

He replaced the phone. Another was ringing. "Stanhope Gulley to Main Central." The panic was audible now. "Present increase in load will result in a two-and-a-half per cent. overload Within the hour."

"Noted," Sam said.

He took up the first phone. His face was white, his lips set. "Inform Medical Centre that the full rating will be maintained for them," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Wind piped over the burned-out mailplane wreckage. A craft had droned overhead, and gone. A single line-observation man had awakened in his hut backed against a slope in the rocky fastness and answered the radiophone. Grunting, he had donned protective clothing and gone out.

From a safe distance he stared at the broken cables, now sloping from tower to earth. Fifty yards ahead was a hundred-foot chasm, unbridged. Behind him lay twenty miles of rocky hills.

He walked carefully, bowed against the wind pressure. The girder tower sang mournfully. At last he went back. The wind slammed his hut door and the vertical rod antennae sang like an organ pipe.

He reported, then philosophically turned in. He personally doubted whether the repair gang would arrive by dawn. Meanwhile, sleep beckoned.

Commander Roche felt that his shirt was wet upon his back. Mentally calling the aliens seven green bottles helped not at all, now. Phrase by phrase they had halted his attack. Now he was on the defensive, almost in retreat. '

"We are an amicable race, not given to attacking others pointlessly," he said.

The box was silent. Aides flanking the Commander rustled their papers.

"A friendly inter-relation between humanity and yourselves should be possible, for the

mutual benefit of both," Roche observed.

"Indeed," the box said.

The Commander felt slightly encouraged. "You can rely upon our honouring any agreement - "

"An unnecessary assurance."

"Why?"

"Because your interference would in any case not be permitted."

Commander Roche felt hot. The words implied that the aliens regarded mankind as an inferior life-form.

"We could trade." He let the inference pass. "Possibly you require certain minerals--certain ore or raw materials--?"

"No."

"Possibly information- medical or scientific knowledge."

"Your culture is insufficiently interesting and advanced."

This was not in the manuals, Roche thought. The aliens apparently wanted one thing only-- that humanity quit the planet.

"Naturally we cannot contemplate leaving," he said firmly.

"Your agreement would not necessarily be required."

A direct threat, he thought, The first! He gazed contemplatively at the seven semi-transparent forms, each suspended a bare inch above the seats of the chairs. Their inner red dots oscillated, but never rhythmically. It was a random movement; or a controlled, conscious movement, as unrepeating as human thought.

He made a heavy noise in his throat, puffing his cheeks. "We are a branch of a powerful people. We have colonised many planets, despite opposition."

"So also have I," the black box observed.

Commander Roche looked at the clock. It was four hours since the aliens had entered the building.

"Fifteen per cent. voltage reduction is already imposed on the northern area," Stanhope Gulley said. "There was no other way to avoid an overload trip."

Sam perspired. "Eider Dam cannot withstand additional load. We're at maximum." '

"Can't you draw from Cactus Point?"

Cactus Point was 40 on the list; Eider Dam 39; Stanhope Gulley 38. "No," Sam said; "I've rung them." If Stanhope Gulley tripped its load to Eider Dam that would be the beginning of chaos. Thunk, thunk, thunk:- the overload trips would work as fast as that. Stanhope Gulley, Eider Dam, Cactus Point- and on and on in a sequence of cascade switching that might involve a score of generating stations in as many seconds.

That had happened once, Sam remembered. Half a continent had been plunged into darkness until morning.

"A call, Mr. O'Connelley," the girl below said through the desk communicator.

"Put it on."

"This is Diplomatic West." The voice was agitated. "I am speaking on behalf of Commander Roche. In no circumstance is power to any section of Valley City to be reduced."

"So I understood previously." Sam felt sarcastic.

"This is double priority in addition to previous orders"

"Trouble ?"

There was a pause. "The aliens are proving-- intractable. Commander Roche feels that any reductions in power will demonstrate technical unpreparedness, and hence weakness."

" I see"

The other phone was ringing. A young, concise voice sounded, new to Sam's ears. "Dr. Crofton and Dr. Williams have asked me to contact you, Mr. O'Connelley."

Sam tensed. "Go ahead."

"Prolonged deep surgery will be necessary for some time yet. I was to point out that

the fluorescent radiograph will not operate on auxiliary supplies. It is hoped that you will be able to maintain the supply -- "

"And if I don't ?" Sam asked, eyes on his meters.

"It will be difficult for us, Mr. O'Connelley. "Deep instruments have been inserted. Their manipulation would become impossible, their withdrawal dangerous." '

As bad as that, Sam thought. He seemed to see Meriel, so vividly alive; but so deathly still, last time.

"Naturally, Dr. Crofton and Mr. Williams would do all they could." The voice was reverent. "But the condition of many vertebrae is critical. Any hindrance could be-dangerous."

"Thanks"

Sam gazed at the wall map automatically. The night band had moved many, many miles westward. Meriel, he thought, deathly still. Factories west would be coming into evening production. That half-ton swinging block had been nobody's fault. His eyes went to the clock. Another half-hour would see the peak demand.

"They asked for full production and they'll have it," the floor steward declared. "Eight hour rest period cut to four. Who will grumble if We can service the plant in two hours? Not the bosses! Nor the men. . 'They'll get paid. They'll like the extra !"

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his overall. Machine tools beyond counting hummed, screamed and roared in the half square mile of factory. Lights glared on busy men. The works-manager rubbed his hands. Usually he did not descend from his office.

"Excellent!" he said. "Keep it up !"

He turned, anxious to be gone from the clatter. A girl met him at the corridor entrance.

"A phone call from Stanhope Gulley, sir."

"Never heard of them."

"I gathered it was important, sir."

"Very well."

He rolled along to the comfort of his office. The call had been put through. He let it wait, lighted a cigar, puffed, then took up the receiver.

"Stanhope Gulley power-station here." The man had obviously been waiting.

"Yes?"

"Could you accept a reduction in voltage? We are having difficulty in meeting the load. It was noted your peak demand began early, cutting down our margin."

The works-manager snorted. "Isn't production important? Aren't we doing our best in difficult conditions?"

"But, sir -- "

"And you can't do your bit your end!" The snort materialised like a horse's sneeze. "I shall register a personal complaint if there's a power cut! We pay Well enough - "

"But - -"

"Bah !" He hung up, feeling triumphant with justified Wrath. "Some silly switchboard fiddler!" he stated aloud. "Wish he were on my staff a few months-I'd liven him !"

He subsided more comfortably into his chair, puffing angrily.

Sam knew that the choice which had been forcing itself upon him was near. He had seen it, had anticipated it- but been unable to make a decision. He hoped the replies to his messages would provide a solution.

"Mr. O'Connelley?" It was Judith back on the communicator.

"Yes?"

"Reply from Medical Centre in ."

"What is it ?"

"Operation will not be terminated for at least an hour."

Half his chance gone, he thought bitterly. There was a pause, then: "Answer from Diplomatic West has just come in, sir."

"Give it."

"The discussion is not expected to end for some hours. "

"Thanks."

He sat motionless, brain active. Was Meriel's life to be sacrificed on the altar of Roche's diplomacy? Did many human lives depend upon Roche's success?

Loading was reaching a peak which could not be met. If he delayed his decision automatic overload protectors would take over, cascading into a chaos which would probably plunge both Valley City and Medical Centre into darkness.

His lips a thin line, Sam put a finger on a switch button. A tiny pressure here, and great oil-immersed contractors in the power-house would slam over . . . The muscles of the finger tightened. If Medical Centre had power, it would save Meriel's life. But there was a duty to one's fellows, too. . .

"That will be very satisfactory," Commander Roche said. He stood aside as the seven bobbing cores drifted as one into the craft. The black box followed them, and halted.

"I had looked upon bio-chemical life-forms as inferior," it said. "Naturally I apologise. That error arose from my lack of information."

"Your ignorance was understandable." Roche felt superior now. "We pardon it. But in future, you will know better."

"Assuredly." '

The box was withdrawn through the transparency and the latter became opaque. The globe rose like a soap-bubble.

Roche breathed unevenly, still unable to believe in his triumph. Back in his office, alone, he took up the phone. "Put me through to Main Central power-station."

He knew that he himself would get a medal; he wondered if the man at Main Central Would. It was deserved. But he would not get it.

A girl answered. "Main Central here."

"I wish to speak to your chief switchboard engineer."

"He's left, sir. An assistant is in charge."

"I-I wished to speak to him personally."

"He's gone to his wife, at Medical Centre. Can I take a message?"

"No-no, I think not."

Commander Roche sat motionless, phone cradled. Alien life-forms would never fully understand Man, he thought; nor would Man understand aliens. The dissimilarities could be too great. His visitor had been amazed. Men acted and thought for themselves-were individuals. They did not necessarily follow instructions. That proved they were free- thinking. The alien was one; non-free-thinking. That entity had realised the superiority of beings that were multiple, independent, so that millions of individuals made up one whole. There were differences. When one entity divided into seven-or a thousand-it was still one, non-free-thinking, non-individual, still merely "I" .

Commander Roche poured himself whisky, fumbling in the light of the single hand-lamp that stood on his desk. Outside, the city was silent in total black-out.