Most stories which deal with an alien intelligence infiltrating into Earth's atmosphere presupposes that Man would not know about it until too late. But assume that its arrival is known and that it is adaptable to any form of life — how combat it !

The sentience, alien beyond the comprehension of Man, felt the speed of its tiny globe increase as it entered a strongly rising gravitational field. Exultation filled it, and relief that the long journey was almost over. Its tiny, indestructible sphere had sped the length of many universes, threading a way from its infinitely remote point of origin. While centuries began and ended it had raced on, not lonely because of the tenuous companionship of contact with other minds akin to its own. Ahead of it other tiny spheres had swept into the system; behind it, others came, a drawn-out string of glinting beads. Triumph had filled the minds ahead — they had achieved successful planet-fall.

The sentience rearranged the molecular structure of part of the tiny sphere and the wall grew transparent. A green planet eclipsed the field of view, nearing. Waves foaming upon a seashore swept behind; dark brown and green grew into a forest, and the forest into tall trees fringing a lake. Under the alien’s control the molecules of the globe gripped, braking, on the planet’s gravitational field, slowing descent. Waters opened, cushioning the fall, and all motion ceased as the sphere struck bottom.

The sentience lay for a long time resting from the shock, and seeking through its surroundings with increasing circles of awareness. Dim forms moved in the lake, minds occupied with vague and lowly thoughts. Fish. Not here was a good life-form to adopt, the alien decided. It tried to contact those of its fellows who had come before, but failed. Doubtless they had adopted native life-forms, it decided. Several planetary rotations existed between the arrival of each.

It must be patient, it decided. But patience was difficult after waiting so long. It opened the sphere and rose to the lake surface, bobbing there and scanning its surroundings. Sun shone through the trees, and a small beaked creature waded in the water among reeds. The alien scanned it keenly. It was quick, mobile, and its mind images showed it could fly. Its intelligence was limited, inarticulate with a simplicity that showed it was not the predominant species. Yet it should do, for the present.

The tussle for entry was brief, the victory complete. The alien beat the bird’s core of awareness back and back, into unconsciousness, then into death. The conflict over, it stood in the shallows, looking out with its new power of vision, listening with ears that

had become its own. The planet was very different, experienced thus.

Albert Mademann wound up his fishing line and put his gear away. Steel-shod boots kicking through the leaves, he made his way along the lake side, reflecting that he had three more weeks holiday away from the noise of 20th century civilisation. Then back by copter to the great city . . .

He halted, watching a small wading bird that stood in the shallows and showed no fear. Before, all water-birds had at once flown at his coming. This one was different. It was not injured, yet did not fly. Abruptly Albert knew it was exactly the creature he sought, to be a pet in his fishing cabin during the remaining weeks.

It ate the crumbs he threw, watching him with quick eyes. He squatted by the water, and it ate from his hand. He lifted it, and took it back to his cabin. There, he put it a plate of scraps, and remembered he must phone.

The radiophone channel was already free, and a voice he recognised came at once from the city fifty miles away.

“ Captain Penvenny here.”

“ Mademann here.” Albert wondered at the interest in Penvenny’s tones. “Anything special turned up ? I remembered I promised to phone.”

“ Nothing special,” Penvenny said. “And with you ?”

“ All as usual. Caught a nine-pounder this morning. Got a wader-bird as pet.”

“ A wader-bird ? Aren’t they hard to catch ?”

“ Not this one.”

A pause, then: “ Glad you’re enjoying it. I'll be along this evening as promised.”

The carrier faded and Albert returned hurriedly to his living room. He did not remember Penvenny had promised to call, but supposed he had overlooked it. Just as he had overlooked the big, half-wild yellow tomcat he had befriended, he thought.

He need not have feared. Some instinct had prompted the wader- bird to a perch upon the top of his bookcases, where it stood returning stare for stare with the old yellow tom. Albert smiled and put the cat out with milk, closing the door. There looked liked being a conflict of loyalties for old Sam, but when he was full of milk his predatory instincts suffered.

The alien watched from the top of the bookcase as Albert returned. Its first choice of life-form had not been wise, it realised. The habitat of the wader-bird was upon the lake-side. It had no means of maintaining its safety inside the human's dwelling, or competing on equal terms with life-forms such as the silent-footed yellow quadruped. Most suitable for adoption would be the human, the alien decided. Yet undue haste would be dangerous. The human was civilised, and obviously conformed in activity to complex patterns. Its behaviour must be studied. Only then would it become a safe host, possibly able to return to some centre where others of its kind lived. Culture errors must be avoided.

The alien sought the window, and examined the world beyond. A road vanished amid the trees. Its surface spoke of high-speed travel, which indicated a highly able primary species. It wondered if the human were the predominant or most important life-form. If not, it should at least afford a useful stepping-stone.

The yellow quadruped was licking its fur. It seemed on good terms with the human, who had fed it, the alien decided, and also appeared able to maintain itself with safety in the vicinity of the cabin. It might form a useful intermediate step.

Later, the door was set open and the wader-bird flew to a near-by tree. No indication of the whereabouts of its fellows came to the sentience occupying the bird's mind, but that was not unanticipated. The same difficulty in communication always arose when indigenous life-forms were occupied, especially when the telepathic ability of the brain was dormant, unused and undeveloped.

The alien circled the cabin, noting signs of manufacturing ability. The road drew its eyes often, but it knew a hasty move could invite death. If the road led to a city, there would be the perfect hiding place — but not until the culture and customs of the species occupying it were well understood.

A sound of infinite softness aroused the bird. The yellow tom was looking over the rooftop. The alien flew back to its original branch quickly. It had not realised the quadruped had sufficient agility to scale the cabin. The cat halted under the tree after it had sprang from the cabin roof, and the alien sat staring down at it, motionless, judging the best moment. Once, the human looked from the cabin, called " Sam!" and threw a stone, but the cat came back when he withdrew.

Stretching, Albert Mademann roused from the easy-chair and mixed a drink. Captain Penvenny should soon arrive, giving the chance of a gossip. Bit lonely in the woods, sometimes, though Albert was not the sort to bother much about that.

He went out to see if his lines were dry for reeling, and swore. Grey and green feathers were scattered a few paces from the door. He grunted.

“ Never should have trusted that animal . . .”

The sound of tyres on the road took him round the cabin. Captain Penvenny was alighting, spruce in field-grey, little more than forty, but with eyes like cold steel .

“ How do, Mademann ?” He waved, smiling.

Albert waited for him. “ Damn cat killed my wader-bird.”

Dismay, even momentary terror, showed on Penvenny’s rugged face. He halted in mid-stride.

"When? How?”

“ Didn’t see how. Half an hour ago, I’d say, when I was napping.”

The colour had certainly flown from his visitor’s cheeks, Albert noted. He himself felt little emotion. Never did — always best to take things much as they came, he thought.

Penvenny licked his lips like a man very much afraid. “ I’d have liked to see that bird, Albert ?”

Albert shrugged, an automatic gesture, and his mind clicked to other things. There was a lot to tell Penvenny. He talked about the big fish he had taken, and was not sure that Penvenny was really listening. He told of his explorations through the woods — and was sure he was not listening.

“ This the cat ?” Penvenny asked.

It sat just beyond the open door, regarding them placidly. Raising a paw, it licked it, but the action looked awkward to Albert’s eyes, trained to observe normality, and baulk at deviations, however slight. An inexplicable unease came to him, fading as his ready mind found a reason.

“ That’s him — and he’s eaten too much, judging by the look of him.”

“ The wader-bird ?”

“ I’d say so.”

Albert felt his interest in the subject wane. Everything here was normal. His mind clicked back into its accustomed track.

“ Water’s just right temperature for them big fish,” he said.

The cat watched them talking, and watched Captain Penvenny leave. Albert went indoors, and it followed, sitting at the foot of the book-case. Albert had a drink, and stood watching it, swishing the dregs in the bottom of his glass. There was always a draught by the book- case, this time of evening. Sam never sat there. Sam never sat there ! An unease began to grow in Albert's mind. Abruptly the unease spilled over. Almost as if a switch had been closed in his head he knew that here was something odd.

He dialled the radiophone. " Captain Penvenny back yet ?"

A long delay, then: " No, sir."

Fear edged the clerk's voice. Albert drained the glass, wondering why. " Give him a message when he comes in."

" Yes, sir."

" Tell him Sam doesn't sit in his usual place."

"Yes, sir."

The fear was stronger. Albert rang off. Now that the message had been given the conflict in his mind faded. Tranquil, he stood in the open door, watching the light go. That it might be strange that the clerk had taken his message without repetition did not occur to him.

Dusk was near when the radiophone buzzed. Captain Penvenny was at the other end. " I got your message." He repeated it. " That right ?"

" Just as I said." The matter now seemed one of no importance to Albert. The conflict had gone.

" Sam still there ?"

Albert squinted through the door. "Sure — "

" Will you keep him in — shut the door and windows ?"

" Of course, if you say."

" Please do." Relief lay mixed with something else in Penvenny's voice. " I'll be along early morning, to talk things over with you." "Thanks. Do that."

Albert rang off, saw that Sam was in, and closed the door. It seemed stuffy and he decided a walk in the moonlight would clear his head. Sam tried to follow him out, but Albert shoved him indoors roughly and banged the door.

The moon was full and bright, making grass and trees silver. Albert walked slowly towards the lakeside, sorry he had no right to fish at night. He stood motionless as rock, listening to the sounds that showed tiny creatures were about in the woods. A weasel came past, back high, unafraid until he moved a steel-shod boot in the leaves. Then it sprang from sight, but a louder noise approached, hesitated, then grew to a rustle at his elbow.

A girl stood in the moonlight, golden hair hanging around her shoulders. She was slender, young, and breathing a little heavily. Possibilities integrated in Albert’s mind.

“ You’re lost.”

She nodded, lips twitching. “ My auto had a breakdown back on the top road. I thought I could cut across.”

Albert remembered the top road, fully seven miles away. “ Other folk have tried that. It’s not easy by day. By night it’s impossible."

“ What’ll I do ?”

She was very tired, Albert noted. “Stay in my cabin, if you like.” He smiled. Young girl; young man; alone in cabin — not permitted. “ I’ll stay outside, of course. Prefer it, this weather.”

She studied his face, and seemed relieved. “ I’d be glad if you could — ”

He turned up the path, looking back over a shoulder. “ You must be tired, but make yourself some tea, if you like."

She followed closely, often looking around at the whispering trees. " My name’s Birdie Cairns.”

“ I’m Albert — Albert Mademann. Captain Penvenny, a friend will be here early. He can take you back. If you want to tell anyone you’re safe, use the phone.” He watched her enter, doubting if anyone would fetch her broken auto before morning, even if she asked. It was fifty miles round by road to the spot. Just before shutting the door he remembered. “ Sorry I’ll have to ask you to keep everything closed, to stop old Sam getting out.”

At the edge of the clearing was the hammock he sometimes used hot afternoons.

Albert stretched, and lay down on its stout mesh. With the horizontal position and rest, the activity of his mind began to fall sharply, diminishing to a semi-awareness near to sleep.

In the dusky gloom the alien stole soft-footed through the connecting door. The girl saw him and snapped her fingers.

“ You old Sam ?”

The alien felt uneasy. He had not observed the quadruped’s reactions to such an incident, and therein lay the danger always present when a strange life-form was adopted. Nevertheless, it appeared the quadruped was given to sleep and inactivity, and the alien lowered himself upon the floor, closing one eye, then the other. Pleasure suffused him at the change he had made. The quadruped’s vision was acute, its brain larger, and no apparent danger threatened it. It was accepted into the cabin, and the arrival of yet another creature of human form indicated that here was the predominant species of the planet. As Sam, his first act had been to eat the wader-bird, already dead because deprived of mind both natural and alien. From Sam’s original actions, the alien was sure the performance was appropriate, and observation of its effect had proved this to be so. Now, it watched the girl, noting every movement. Possibly she would form a good subject for initial trial, the alien decided. When he finally entered any place where many humans were he must be so competent that no slip arose.

When she put out the light the window was a mere dim oblong. The alien sentience stirred, rose, and jumped softly to the couch. It longed for a more suitable host. The quadruped’s memories were few, and of a nature unsuitable for use. Much of its activity was based on instincts deep in the lowest subconscious, and not available. Its cerebral paths were relatively few, its body of a type that could not possibly gain any significant place on the planet. Already its field of usefulness had ended, the alien decided.

Captain Penvenny grated back his swivel chair and stood up. “ I’d have gone out there again at once except for this meeting!” he stated. “ Now you keep me discussing imponderables !”

Two men of equal rank, and one superior, occupied a tiny semi- circle of chairs before the desk. The superior officer looked very worn.

“ There has been at least half a dozen objects strike that area ?”

The man at his right nodded. “ At least. A watch was kept after the military radar camp noted one down. Its change of velocity was in no way that of a meteorite. Furthermore, that each has struck approximately the same spot, at four-day intervals, demonstrates some purposive agency.”

“ There could have been others, earlier ?”

“ I think not, sir. Radar would have noticed.”

Penvenny wiped his brow and found cold sweat on his hand. “We’ve been over all this a hundred times! Do you realise that the lake is only fifty miles away, and that here we have a city of three million people ! If something slips in here, our chance of finding it will be exactly that — one in three million.”

His superior gnawed a lip. “ This cat?”

“ Locked in. It’s only the knowledge that Albert will obey me to the letter that lets me stay here until dawn. Except for that, conference or no, I’d be there — ”

Penvenny sank into silence, thoughts deep and bitter. A man would drive himself hard when fear was at his heels, and he would not deny the fear was there, just as upon the three faces opposite. It was devilishly difficult to fight the unknown, he thought bleakly. Thoughtless action might scatter their quarry — if quarry there was . . .

“ I haven’t slept for two days, gentlemen,” he said.

They rose, murmuring apologies.

When the door closed, Penvenny sat staring at his blotter. Since Radar sounded the alarm, no man had come out of the forest. The area was contained by every artifice of military and air power. Fifty thousand troops circled it and darkness was never allowed to descend upon any road, lane or field around the forest. Yet still he was uneasy. Something might slip through in a guise other than man, or in some unfathomable way elude capture. That a human being not human might try to leave the forest was a point heavily debated. Yet if something had come, it would realise Man was the supreme life-form of the planet. Therefore no man, except he himself, must be allowed to leave the area alive.

Other creatures might succeed. Birds, animals of the forest. That, too, had been debated. It was a loophole, yet might not be significant. In Penvenny’s opinion anything that had landed in the forest would have intelligence enough to realise, or discover, that lowly life-forms could accomplish little.

The phone brought his head from his hands. “ Penvenny here.”

“ This is Captain Monrose, on the hill sector. I’ve bad news.”

Penvenny groaned, fingers iron on the switch. “ Yes.”

“ A girl’s got into the area. Apparently she’s been camping. She was told a military exercise was in progress, and asked to leave. She drove away, then halted on the top road. After a long time a man was sent along, and he found she had gone. Apparently the car had broken down and she left it, going down on foot.”

Penvenny swore. “ Couldn’t you find her ?”

“ She’d been gone at least half an hour when we found the car was unoccupied. We went as far as we could, but did not enter the primary area. Your orders — ”

“ Quite correct, Captain.”

Penvenny released the switch. A girl. She could never leave, alive. No human in that area could ever be permitted to leave, alive, now. He must remember to take Albert more fishing lines and things, if he wanted them . . .

Morning sun glinted on the edge of the forest. Albert noted it, but felt little — things like that did not seem to mean much, usually. He watched Penvenny close the car door, and walked to him.

“ Morning, Captain. Old Sam’s dead.”

Grey chased the pale away from Penvenny’s cheeks. His tightly compressed lips twitched. “ I’m sorry, Albert. How ?”

“ Over-eating or old age, I suppose.” Albert felt regret at the passing of the old yellow tom. The body had been stiff and cold by the book- case. He had carried it to the edge of the clearing, not burying it in case Captain Penvenny wanted to see. Then he had shrugged. After all, it was unimportant . . .

A spasmodic contraction of muscles twisted Penvenny’s face. “Seen a young woman about ?”

Albert nodded. “ Birdie Cairns. Her car broke down and she’s been in the cabin all night.”

Penvenny said something inaudible, an oath of extreme bitterness. “ She still here ?”

“ Yes. I think she’d like you to take her back to the city.”

Penvenny’s lips seemed to form the phrase I’ll be damned if I do! But he smiled. “ We’ll see.”

They went round the cabin, and Albert saw the golden-headed girl was standing in the doorway, watching them. She was quieter, more controlled, than the previous evening. Her spontaneity appeared to have fled. She greeted Captain Penvenny soberly, explained why she had left her car, and asked for a lift back.

Penvenny's gaze seldom strayed from her face. " Don't think I can, this morning, Miss Cairns. I have to go on to see the forces manoeuvring beyond the top road. It's a big military exercise."

Watching, Albert thought that some secret understanding passed between the two. Birdie Cairns seemed to withdraw more into herself, defensive, yet with something fiercely dangerous in her manner. Simultaneously Penvenny's face assumed a forbidding grimness, locking every muscle and line into granite.

" If you care to wait until evening, I can take you then," he murmured.

A tiny frown crossed the girl's face. " Perhaps I should phone for someone — "

The granite of Penvenny's face was creased by a stony smile. " I doubt if the authorities will allow them in. Our exercise is covering a big area and orders are very definite."

" Very well."

She shrugged and went in, and Albert wondered why sweat shone on Penvenny's brow. They talked a while. Penvenny walked jerkily round the cabin, gaze flickering everywhere. When they emerged to sight of the car, Birdie Cairns was just walking away from it. Penvenny's hand went into his pocket, and Albert heard keys jangle.

After half an hour Penvenny unlocked the car and started it. " I'll be back this evening."

Albert watched him go. Never had he seen a man's face so grim, so lined with conflict and fear. Just before going Penvenny had smiled. " Probably you'll be able to stop here fishing a lot longer than you expected, Albert."

Beside the cabin, the alien watched the car pass from view. . It felt both triumph and unease. The adoption of the girl as host had been a trifle more difficult. Her mind had rebelled fiercely, but had eventually succumbed. A considerable store of useful memories existed in those levels of her mind which the alien could reach. Of particular interest were recollections of a great city, where sleek vehicles sped amid noble buildings, and aircraft rose from flat roofs and wide landing strips. Memories of the way in which to manipulate a vehicle like Captain Penvenny's also existed and bitter disappointment had arisen at finding the car locked. In the deepest heart of its

awareness, the alien sentience knew that it must reach that city. It was no longer safe near the lake. If escape as Birdie Cairns proved impossible, another human was near at hand . . .

The girl’s eyes turned upon him. Perhaps thirty, he was tall, muscular, well-built, with long arms now extended to fit the sections of a rod. He should, the alien decided, be an ideal specimen in which to enter the city.

Albert started at the quiet step near him. His attention had been directed upon assembling the rod, and no real awareness had been available for other things. She halted a few paces from him and he examined her. Pretty, judged by his own subjective standards. Quick-eyed, well-built — a young woman with strength and wit. As he studied her the rod was forgotten, and a tenuous unease began to ebb into his mind.

“ The radiophone won’t work,” she said.

The information washed through his brain and evoked response : “ It was all right yesterday.”

“ Broken down, I suppose.”

Evaluation, decision, response : a lie. Inform her she lied ? No. Albert smiled. “ I’ll tell Captain Penvenny when he comes.”

The unease in his mind grew, mounting like seas beyond a dam. Birdie Cairns had lost her quick spontaneity and in its stead was a calculated watchfulness. Albert knew he should have noticed it fully while Penvenny was there, but he had not. Now, he wanted to tell Penvenny. The unease keyed that reaction : Tell Penvenny. He propped the rod against a bush, not noticing it fell.

“ Think I’ll try the phone.”

His steel-shod boots thudded on the turf, but lighter feet had caught up with him by the time he gained the cabin.

"The phone won’t work" Birdie Cairns said.

A lie, a lie ! his brain screamed. He smiled. “ Perhaps you didn’t handle it right.”

He thought she was going to try to hold him back. Instead her gaze passed over him, as if evaluating their respective physiques, and she let him pass through the inner door.

The phone was dead. Without moving he saw that a flexible lead had been pulled free from the wall equipment. The sea of unease rose, and reached a critical level. He spun round, the inner dam breaking, and felt something snap, almost the electrical click of an opening switch, in his mind. Simultaneously he saw that Birdie Cairns was crumpled on the floor, and that something was moving from her towards him, like an oscillating bumble-bee driven by some unquenchable purpose. Conflict and terror filled his mind, ceasing as consciousness went and his limbs crumbled.

Stones shot from under his wheels as Penvenny swung round to a halt by the cabin. He locked the car door and ran — locked it because one could not be sure ... A moment's oversight could nullify preparation that had taken into account everything, including a relay that radiated an instant warning when the radiophone flex was broken. Penvenny knew Albert would not have broken it. The act would have been impossible.

There had been so little time to prepare, he thought as he ran to the cabin. Tiny streaks in the heavens that slowed in a way no meteorite ever did, so spaced as to overcome planetary rotation, always landing within a quarter mile of each other, around the lake. Mankind's reaction had been immediate. No living thing but he himself had gone out of the area since its isolation. Nor must it. Penvenny went chill when he remembered how near he had been to leaving the car unlocked upon the previous visit, and how Birdie Cairns had tried the door. Her presence had complicated everything immeasurably — he might have let her leave the area, in error; or kept her, without justification. It could be a mistake either way.

The cabin stood silent. A rod lay near a bush. Inside, near the radiophone, Albert Mademann was crumpled in an immobile heap. Just beyond the connecting door between the rooms lay the girl, and Penvenny knew she was dead.

A mixture of cold fear and icy triumph swept into Penvenny's mind. Stiff as if on parade, he strode to the second room, his face bleak and his lips compressed, white from pressure of facial muscles and knowledge of the terrible danger he must defy.

He bent, jerked up Albert's jersey, then back a pace, waiting . . .

Inexplicable terror seized the alien. From the moment of entry into the man's brain it had known something was horribly wrong. The brain was not a living tissue of infinite scope, but an artifact with fixed neural paths, limited, unadaptable. It compressed the alien's field of consciousness, cramping it into inactivity. Only the knowledge that the girl's life processes had ceased kept the alien sentience within the brain of its new host. There could be no return to the girl. Simultaneously with possession, mobility in the man ceased. No limb or part of him responded. Dismayed, the alien had waited. Now, a click came at the chest, and life began to fade from the artificial brain. The alien knew it must flee, or die, locked within the congealed synapses of the brain that was no real brain at all.

Captain Penvenny snarled, lips drawn, as the oscillating bumble- bee swept from Albert Mademann. He had waited as for a hornet about to issue from a hole. Albert's physical mobility had ceased automatically when his mental conflict topped a set level. Now, his cybernetic brain was switched off, cooling, and no longer a hiding-place, a refuge.

The bumble-bee seemed to have many spidery legs, vibrant, treading air. It hummed with a burbling that made Penvenny's skin creep. He struck, missed, and struck again. His hand closed upon something hot as molten steel. He squeezed, felt resistance, then nothing . . . A slowing pulsation of green fire was in his palm, fading, dying. When it was gone a tiny, flattened remnant as of a moth's crumpled wings, powdery as age-old dust, alone remained. His exhaled breath dissipated it upon the air.

Trembling, he jerked up the switch on Albert's chest, and pressed a button that initiated his physical activities. The phone flex was easily mended. The officer the other end had been waiting.

" A success," Penvenny said, and licked his lips. " Get Mademann Robots to produce some more copies of Albert. This is the only way I know to trap the newcomers in an inactivated system. I'll give a fully detailed report when I return. Now Albert is waking and must not hear me, or he'll have to be brainwashed."

Albert smiled when he got up. " I was going to call you, Captain Penvenny."

Penvenny wiped his brow and face, and smiled. " That's all right, Albert. Carry Birdie Cairns out into my car, then you can go back fishing."

Albert did not wonder why the girl was so still, as he waited for Penvenny to open the car door. When Penvenny knew about things, those things ceased to interest Albert. If in doubt, tell Penvenny. When Penvenny knows, everything is all right . . .

" You'll probably be able to stay fishing a lot longer than we thought" Penvenny said as he started the engine.

Later, Albert stood by the lake reeling in his line. Bright sun shone on the trees, making them glow golden green, but such things did not arouse much feeling in him. Instead, his attention was directed upon a robin that occupied a twig on a neighbouring bush and regarded him fixedly. A possessive instinct seized him. It would make a nice pet, he decided. The impulse rose unbidden, automatically. He took the robin in one hand, and was astonished that it did not try to fly.

Trailing his rod, he started back for the cabin. Better let Captain Penvenny know, he thought . . .