The three crewmen remaining on the Quest had been without sleep for the past forty hours. First there had been the usual long wait while the spacetug sank towards the planet below; then mounting excitement caused by the landing party's cautious but unusually promising reports.

And then — silence.

Beyond the main observation port blazed Arcturus 707. A star within the Ursa Major Group of type and magnitude strikingly approximate to Sol, it had attracted them almost against their will. Other stars in the Moving Cluster spangled the celestial sphere with reds, blues, golds and white behind them in naked — and uninvestigated glory.

Peter Coyne's gaze travelled over them, far away to the right, as he strove to locate any movement, but no silvery glint, or red rocket trail told of the return of the tug. There was only the vastness of interstellar space with the main groupings of stars but little changed in spite of the Quest's great — although galactically insignificant-distance from home.

Now that the planet below — the most promisingly Earthlike world found in their fifty light years of searching — was eclipsed from view by the slow rotation of the ship's hull, he would have to seek a new place from which to watch; not to watch was unthinkable, even though radar would certainly forestall his vision.

" Think we should take a second boat to search ?" a voice asked.

Peter put his back to the port and its view of infinities unknown. " Not yet." A part of him had gone down with the tug but he held himself firmly in check, trying to appear confident as he looked into his subordinate's naturally pale face with its taut expression and strained eyes. " There's been no report of danger."

" Nor anything else !" Ken Rowan stated, lips thinned. " Only — this silence."

Peter studied him with the critical eyes both of second-in-command intent on the morale of a crewmember, and of a doctor in charge who had seen men break with terror. Rowan was young and therefore impatient but had courage.

" Maybe the Captain's got his reasons," he pointed out. " We'll search if they don't

report within the hour.”

But it did seem a long time since Captain Fryer had released the tug from the Quest’s lock. There was both thrill and fear in the fact that he and “ Jolly ” Bill Blundell would be the first men to tread Arcturus III. Gravity tests, surface temperature readings, spectrum analysis of the atmosphere — all that sort of thing could be done from remote safety. But eventually, inevitably, some men had to venture their health and sanity on the virgin soil that might one day support a colony.

He left the port and trod the ship’s central ladder up to the astrogation room. The Quest was big, but only just large enough to contain the vast quantity of equipment necessary for self-preservation and maintenance. Her crew was small. That was one of the reasons why he had had a place, he thought as he clanged shut the companion door. A man who could telescope positions of doctor and Second-in- Command was well suited to such an appointment. Thus also with the others: the Captain’s knowledge of minerals was great; what Jolly Bill Blundell did not know about soils was unimportant, and Ken Rowan was both radio mechanic and expert on vegetations and their possible suitability for introduction on Earth. Finally there was Joe Tomas, astrogator, yet fully qualified to operate the ship if something happened to both Captain and 2 i/c.

Tomas looked around sharply as Peter entered the astrogation chamber. Peter’s impressions — heightened unnaturally by the tension — were struck by the man’s cold, critical eyes in contrast to the boyish face.

Tomas’s fair brows, already lifted, rose higher. “ No news from the Captain yet, Doc ?”

Peter felt the hidden animosity — as always. Tomas considered that he, Peter Coyne, was too young at twenty-eight for the position of 2 i/c., tests the Quest’s personnel had taken notwithstanding.

“ None yet, Joe.”

Tomas put aside references which were the means of finding Arcturus 707 no matter where they moved within the vastness of Space. “Time there was.”

Peter looked away from the astrogation nacelle, Arcturus III floated majestically far below, green, brown and grey, with tufts of cloud singularly reminiscent of Earth obscuring areas of her surface.

“ Bound to take time to investigate,” he pointed out. “ They may have forgotten us for a while in their excitement — ” That did not sound like Fryer at all, and he ended lamely: “ Both of them have to collect samples, check on things we can only guess at from here.”

Tomas’s vaguely hostile silence closed around them. Peter, gazing down at the planet waiting so invitingly below kept thinking : Unknown, never trod by man before.

Sooner or later the second tug would have to go down there, orienting on the Captain’s bearings. And yet — no matter how lamely it sounded —it was true that the Captain and Bill might have found it necessary to go off together, checking some of the thousand and one points which would need clarifying before more ships could come confidently from Earth — and not illogical to suppose that some disturbance in the upper atmosphere had blocked radio signals from the tug’s small radio, to the big set in front of which Ken Rowan kept watch.

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown of command. When the ship’s intercom system buzzed, he snapped up the switch, sensing Joe Tomas’s eyes upon him.

“ Second-in-Command here.”

“ Rowan speaking — ” Blast the man, thought Peter, who else was there ? “ There’s a ship coming up behind !”

Astonishment washed through Peter. “ A ship ? You mean the Captain’s tug ?”

“ No, sir. A — ship.”

Impossible. Peter bit off the word unsaid. Ken was not given to fancy. Men of that kind do not gain positions on ships like the Quest, Yet in this whole vast sector of the Ursa Major there was no scheduled Earth ship. Interstellar vessels were few, their scattering across the Galaxy equal to a pinch of sand thrown across ten thousand stars.

“ You’ll get a view of her in a minute, sir !”

Rowan’s voice held shocked surprise. As Tomas rose involuntarily from his swivel seat, Peter stepped to the astrogation nacelle, staring back into the pin-pricked dark behind the Quest's fluted stern.

A vast ship, squat and wide, was drifting upon a course that would bring her level at perhaps five hundred yards distance— and Peter knew immediately that no change in Earth ship schedules had arisen. Rows of close-set ports glowed and their reflected light picked out identification markings as strange symbols. No builder on Earth had designed her.

“ Where — did that spring from . . . ?” Joe Tomas breathed.

There being no answer to a question like that, Peter let it pass. Wherever it had come from and whatever its intentions were, he had no intention of abandoning his Captain too easily. But his heart thumped as he thumbed the panel communicator.

“ Any news from the tug ?”

“ No, sir.” Somehow Rowan seemed to have regained his clipped efficiency at seeing something solid. “ But there’s a signal from our neighbour.”

“ Stars, man! Put it on.”

Distribution switches clicked and an odd, interrupted burbling came from the reproducer. It might be an attempt to contact the Quest . . . or it might be a report intended for companions near or far away; but it was certainly unintelligible and no form of communication employed by Earth ships.

The noises ceased and the vast ship slowed as it came level to block the light of a myriad stars.

Rowan said tensely: “ Radar shows something coming from the ship.”

Peter strained forward. Out of the gigantic shadow drifted a mote silvered by the light of Arcturus 707. Clearly not a missile, because slow-moving, it resolved itself into a flattened spheroid with single row of circumference ports. He swallowed with difficulty — his mouth was so dry: for, as mankind had spread amongst the stars, strange animals and plants, bacteria, viruses, creatures great and small had been found; but never any manifestation of a challenging intelligence — until now.

“ Looks like a boarding party,” Tomas said unevenly. “ What are you going to do about it ?”

“ See what they want — what else ?”

“ Then you don’t think we ought to escape while we are still in one piece ? That ship’s big.”

“ There’ll be no running,” said Peter. “ Not while I’m in charge. Not if I can help it.” He was well aware how ragged were the nerves of all of them. “ Don’t forget the Captain.” He took a deep breath. “Joe, you go down and take over from Ken. Get the engines warmed up ready for anything — ”

“ Then you do think we may have to crash clear ?”

“ As a last resort — yes.” Peter stared coldly at Tomas. “ But if you do anything at all

without orders I'll have you in irons."

Turning from Tomas's livid face, he looked up at the intercom speaker. " Ken, break out a gun and come down and stand behind me while I try to parley."

" Yes, sir."

Peter turned with a deliberate movement, descended without haste to the inner lock of the ship's main port. Through the periscope viewer at the side of the door, he saw that the spheroid had come to rest outside. A section had come down, showing a featureless segment within the strange ship, and forming a platform level with the airlock. Three beings, tall as a man, stood waiting.

As Peter operated the lock, he studied them. Tall as a man — and there the similarity ended. Of the six feet of height, over five was body. Below that, three legs barely six inches long waddled forward with a curious rotating movement as the outer door opened. He continued to observe them through the ports in the inner door. The entire visible surface of the creatures was a dull brown, wrinkled, either rubbery skin or some type of suit . . . the latter, he assumed a moment later, unless they could live in vacuo.

With the trio through the outer doorway, he closed it. Half way up the body a dozen limbs twice the diameter of his thumbs and about a hand's breadth long made a fringe, and it occurred to him — as his mind tried to analyse the situation — that the creatures were far less fitted for physical violence than himself and his two companions.

The inner door opening to his touch, his gaze rose to their faces, and halted. Four vertical orifices extended where eyes, nose and mouth might have been, opening and closing rhythmically. A strange haze seemed to shimmer around the heads so that, try as he would, he could not decide if he was viewing the creatures themselves, or through some transparent shield or other protective device, or whether the vertical slits were in some type of rubberish headgear, concealing the being within.

The three halted well inside the inner door, still as posts upon their tripod feet.

Peter closed the door behind them.

" You are welcome."

He hoped they might at least signify that the aural vibration of his voice was detected, but they merely stood.

He pointed to himself and made a questioning gesture. No result. He held up one

finger, pointed at himself ; held up three and pointed at them. Gesticulating at fenceposts would have had just the same effect.

From the ship outside it was clear the newcomers were technologically advanced, and some inner sixth sense prompted him to feel that the three were looking upon his gesticulations rather as a man might regard the wrigglings of a frog. Between frog and man there could be no real communication, because man was infinitely more intelligent than any amphibian. Similarly, these aloof beings seemed to be awaiting some manifestation which he could not produce.

“ How about if they’re telepathic — muttered Rowan into the silence from behind him.

It was . . . more than probable, Peter thought. They were waiting for a demonstration of telepathy from him — the quickest, most sure and most complete means of communication . . . when one could do it ! As well might a man wait for speech from the unsuitable larynx of a frog, he thought.

He pointed to his lips, waggled his tongue, then said “ I am a man,” with a finger on his chest. No movement. He sent Rowan for materials and wrote the same words in large print. Nothing showed whether the three observed, or attached any significance to his actions, or the symbols.

Without warning they turned around and approached the lock. Quite evidently they wanted to leave. He wondered desperately if he had somehow told them what they had come to discover. He considered keeping them as hostages, but decided such an action would be worse than futile.

If he did nothing to provoke them, at least he could hope that they and their ship would go back from wherever they had come, leaving him to his plain duty of waiting for his fellows and helping them if it were necessary.

His last view of the creatures, as he manipulated the controls, was as of three rubbery posts entering the spheroid which immediately closed itself up and drifted back towards the parent vessel.

“ Scare-y things, weren’t they ?” Rowan, standing in the corridor into the heart of the ship, managed a grin. “ Do you really think they were telepathic ?”

“ If so,” said Peter bitterly, “ then it was a damned poor show we put up. I wonder what they thought of us.” He did not add his real thought, which was that would a telepathic race consider non-telepathic man a civilised being ? Telepathy would create new standards.

He led Rowan back to the Control Room, meeting Tomas’s critical gaze and only

drawing some small comfort from the feeling that if that man could have done better he would have lost no time in saying so. They looked at the motionless alien ship and listened to its burbling over the radio, knowing now that she must be communicating with some distant companion, possibly awaiting reinforcements.

“ We can’t wait any longer,” he decided aloud.

Tomas reached out to the controls. “ You mean we get out of here?”

“ No !” Peter managed to get the word out quietly. He looked from Tomas’s face — eager to flee — to Rowan’s which was full of indecision. “ I’m going down for the Captain, you understand ?”

He would do it right. Time did not seem to be of so much importance as Tomas appeared to think. If the alien ship had been going to destroy them it would have wasted no time. He told them he was going to the Captain’s cabin to log what had happened.

He was just finishing his hurried report, when the intercom relay awoke.

“ Hello Quest. Captain Fryer calling — ”

What relief ! Good for Rowan using initiative in putting the signal straight through.

Then an incoherent mumble following the call sent shivers up his spine. Something was wrong with the Captain — something mental, by the sound of that horrid noise.

Great stars ! So that was the explanation of the radio silence. And he was the ship’s doctor; no psychiatrist. Physical ills were his forte. On top of everything else, Captain Fryer, the most experienced crew- member, was coming back to them apparently as a liability instead of an asset.

Tomas’s voice, off key with alarm, jerked from the intercom. “ Hey, doc. Hear that ?”

“ Yes.” Peter strove to hold his voice steady. Tomas could not be blamed now for a tendency to panic — no, not panic. Tomas was perfectly right, according to his own standards, in wanting to get back to Earth.

“ For heaven’s sake, doc !” urged the astrogator, “ come on up here. Can’t see the boat yet, but Ken’s picked it up on radar and is bringing it in on remote. The Captain’s lost control. Is that O.K.?"

“ I’m coming . . .”

He tried to compose himself first. Men were comparative strangers in Interstellar Space, and he was fresh from completing his time in St. Mary's Hospital, Manchester. If Captain Fryer was ill, it was probably nothing a fledgling doctor could know about.

" Hurry up, doc," begged Tomas from the intercom. " We can see the boat."

" Right !" Flinging off a depressing sense of his own inadequacy, he snatched up the emergency bag and hurried to the companionway.

Beyond the main port, the planet glowed as a blue-green crescent, thinned by the speed of their orbit. Near the edge of the dark portion of the disc, the rising spaceboat made a silver of flame.

Tomas's cold, critical eyes caught his and Peter shivered. Tomas, for all his boyish face, had an unfeeling, juggernaut core — a man with a rule-book for a heart.

Tomas studied him. " So you're going through with it, in spite of everything. What do you think you can do with that bag ?"

Peter did not answer. They were all keyed up by the succession of dilemmas.

From the remote control behind Tomas, Ken turned from the view screen. " Getting a picture of the inside — see !"

They stared in silence at the pictured interior of the spaceboat. Blundell's thick-set body writhed on the floor, kicking as though at an unseen enemy. On the pilot's couch Captain Fryer moved spasmodically. Peter sensed Tomas's shudder.

" Poor devils !" said Ken. He handled the remote controls instinctively as he stared up at the viewscreen.

Blundell rolled over with the alteration of the spaceboat' s course, struck the curved wall and seemed to lose consciousness.

Fryer's eyes opened, narrowed. His hands lifted oddly as if the very co-ordination of muscle was an effort. His clumsy fingers touched the radio control.

" Something strange in here ! Feel them — "

His fists clenched and sound cut off as his hand fell away from the radio. He twitched and struggled as if in contact with an unseen enemy.

" I'd better get into a suit," said Peter.

Ken nodded. “ Another fifteen minutes and I’ll have them in orbit around us — Oh hell ! I’d forgotten — ” He turned. “ Look, the big ship’s moving off !”

It was going with majestic slowness, Peter saw . . . and he guessed that it was not yet leaving them. Could it be that —

“ At least their mass won’t stop us getting the boat in orbit around us,” said Ken, voicing Peter’s own thought.

Tomas cleared his throat.

“ We mustn’t rush into this,” he said harshly. “ We’ve got to consider everything.”

“ Go on,” prompted Peter. “ Say what’s in your mind so we can get everything straight.”

Tomas glared, then shrugged. “ Two ill. Three left. We can’t bring contamination aboard. They knew what danger they were facing when they went down there. They’re older than we are . . . and wouldn’t blame us ... if we . . .”

“ If we what ?” asked Peter.

Tomas smiled uneasily. “ We’re all three of us young. You know the shortage of experienced men. This needs a team of specialists — not three fellows like us with that gigantic ship — ” he jerked his thumb in the direction of the alien, “ — giving us competition. Earth’ll be glad to see us come back so preparations can be made for defence against those monsters. We’ll get a bonus just for locating this planet. Everything suggests we ought to go back now. No one can blame you if—”

“ If you were out there in that boat,” said Peter softly, “ would you want me to give the order you’re hinting at ?”

Tomas stared at him for a moment and then turned.

Peter watched him go to the spacesuit lockers. Doctors were not immune from diseases. Either the Captain or himself or Tomas was absolutely essential to do the astrogation to get them back to Earth ... to get the ship back to Earth. And it was certainly important that some of them should get back ... to tell of the big ship and its unearthly occupants, and to warn of the hidden danger down there on that beautiful planet.

In fact, the very devil of it was that Tomas was right— according to the rules, as well as according to his own moral standard. They had as much duty to humanity as to Bill and the Captain.

“ Coming in nicely,” Ken said, his back to them. “ Get that helmet on, doc. Give those bugs hell for us. I’ll soon have the boat in some sort of orbit.”

Tomas held the suit open. “ You do see what I’ve been getting at, doc ? I know it’s not pretty, but we’ve already hung about a lot longer than anyone would have expected us to.” He frowned. “ Facts have to be faced.”

“ You face them, then !” Peter snapped. “ As from now, you’re in command.”

Minutes later he left the airlock and all space was a fathomless gulf as he dived clear of the ship.

A fleck of light grew into the spacetug as he jetted towards it. Clutching the handles beside the airlock, he looked back at the Quest and then beyond the earthship at the gigantic alien now with its ports run into a single unbroken line by distance.

He entered the airlock. The unknown waited in front, separated only by a clamped door — or perhaps by the thickness of his suit if the very air carried infection. He had felt like this once before, as he had been waiting to step into an isolation ward on Earth. But now there was no knowledge of what to look for, no experienced men in sterile white to call on for assistance.

Pressures equalized and he stepped inside the cabin.

Captain Fryer was twisted on the couch, sweat beaded his face and his eyes were tightly shut as though excluding something Peter could not see. Blood flashed red on his wrists where nails had dug deep.

Peter took the three paces around him to where “ Jolly ” Bill Blundell writhed in the angle of floor and curved wall. Picking up the thick-set body, Peter strapped him securely to the other couch.

Bill had been his best shipboard friend, but it would not do to consider personal feelings. One needed a clear head for tests, especially when working in a thick suit, and without any pretence at laboratory conditions.

Peter opened his doctor’s bag, thanking heaven the catch had been designed for easy release, and for the hours spent in practice using of the kit under all conditions.

He selected a knife and lifted the Captain’s arm. Slitting the woven tunic was unexpectedly difficult for the knife seemed to slide over the cloth. Perhaps the material was tougher than average although more likely it was an effect of his fumbling fingers. He secured the Captain’s arm beneath a strap, sawed down through

the stretched cloth, pulled apart the frayed edges. He would have to practice cutting cloth for future occasions — if there were future occasions for him.

Fitting one head of the diagnoser into the armpit against the Captain’s brachial artery, he strapped the arm over it, then went through the same routine for Bill.

Switching on the diagnoser, he studied the readings.

The Captain’s skin was hot and feverish. Respiration uneven. Temperature 102- — uncomfortably high. Vein firm, pulse kick strong, 120 per minute — fast !

He clicked over to the second head. Skin cold and chilled. Respiration uneven. Temperature 93 — dangerously low. Pulse kick strong, but very uneven 60 to 90 per minute. Symptoms of shock. Evidently Bill had a lower resistance, or was in a later stage.

Peter fitted fresh attachments to his gloves and took blood smears. Blood count normal. Into his memory came filed data of each man’s bacteriological state. Both unchanged significantly from his last routine examination. Although Bill’s population of staphy was again much lowered by the treatment he had been having —

If there was no definite germ or virus, that made his entire collection of antibiotics useless !

He noticed that Bill had gone limp. In alarm he looked at the diagnoser’s meters. At once curiosity mingled with the alarm because Bill’s condition seemed to have improved . . .

“ Doc !”

Captain Fryer’s lips were moving, his eyelids were opening spas- modically, eyes rolling. Words choked from his lips. “ I know — You want to help — Careful — Doc ! all around me— Don’t - Pressure in my head — ” Then only mumbling.

Bill was writhing again, and also mumbling. If there were words in the stream of incoherence from both the stricken men, Peter could not make them out through his own muffling suit.

His skin crept. Both men seemed to fight unseen enemies. So vivid was this impression that he turned uneasily, examining every part of the ten foot diameter cabin. Something in hiding might be manipulating his comrades' — he corrected himself self-consciously — his patients’ minds.

Their illness certainly seemed to be not of the flesh, and he wondered if — his suit

notwithstanding — it was only a question of time before he too succumbed to unseen forces.

Hurrying now, he went over the cabin systematically, section by section. He took a sample of the dust in the air circulation filter. Some bits of hair . . . The Captain was going bald rather quickly and these probably came from him. Otherwise nothing.

Nothing ! Could something be eluding him with a cunning — perhaps an intelligence equal to or greater than his own, observing him, awaiting its opportunity ?

He took fresh blood samples, erected the analyser and left it working while he stripped the two men . . . to an accompaniment of his own cursing at the hampering suit and the toughness of the cloth. Even to see clearly through the helmet while searching for any small skin puncture was not easy; but at last he was satisfied that there was nothing that might be the bite of an alien insect, the sting of any unfamiliar poisonous plant or the tooth mark of any unearthly animal. Bill’s bruises were plainly from being loose during rocket blast; the Captain was as nearly unmarked as any man could be. And the separated substances of the blood sample seemed perfectly normal.

That settled it. With no significant physical change — apart from body secretions naturally accompanying mental disturbance — he had to admit the thing he feared most. The illness was wholly psychiatric.

He took a deep breath. Something had happened to these men. Had they seen something unbearable ? Of all the senses normal to humanity, sight is the most vivid. Surely now he had the beginnings of an answer.

A drug to relax tension . . . There was no chemical reason why he should not inject straight away. Something that would numb the controlling part of their brains, so that he might receive the answers he needed.

He chose his capsule with care, waited for the injection to take affect on the Captain — who seemed the more likely to be able to make coherent answers — and began directly.

“ Captain Fryer ! Can you hear me ?”

The eyes opened, staring blindly. “ Yes.”

“ Captain Fryer, what was the most unusual thing that happened before you left Arcturus III ?”

“ Blundell brought in jelly balls . . . Living matter, he said to me, that could separate titanium to form its core.”

Peter frowned, out of his depth. Titanium was a metal . . . very chemically active. Why should that excite anyone ? Perhaps the others on the Quest could tell him. For the first time he remembered that Tomas and Ken must have been watching him all this time from the screen.

He pressed the send switch of the radio. “ Ken, you’re the engineer. What’s so special about an organism that separates titanium ?”

“ Titanium ?” The voice was curious, “—the metal most used in spaceships ? Why, it’s hard, stands stress and temperature changes and doesn’t corrode once it’s crystallised. But it’s hell to purify out of ore. If there’s something down there on that planet which can do it biologically, it’s the answer to a metallurgist’s dream.”

Peter looked down at the Captain’s blank face. “ Captain Fryer, what did you do with those jelly balls?”

“ Blundell put them in the hold. He was the expert and he said it was quite safe.”

Safe ? On a world that was quite different from Earth, who could say what was safe ? Peter looked down at the hatch cover behind the acceleration couches. Did some dangerous emanation come from this jelly stuff ? Would it affect him as soon as he opened that hatch ?

“ The alien ship has got a companion,” Ken Rowan’s voice said from the radio.

Peter felt shock. The immediate danger to his two crewmates had pressed from his mind the less dramatic, more remote threat of the giant ship and its occupants. “A companion ?”

“ Second ship just the same. Sections of each have opened and there’s something pointed at us. When you get near a port, take a look — ”

“ Doc !” That was Tomas interrupting. “ If they start anything, we’ll have to leave you — you understand that ?”

“ Yes.” Peter wished that two wholly unrelated dangers to their safety had not risen simultaneously. An unknown disease — and two unknown ships. Alone, each was a grave threat. Together they did not bear consideration. It was like trying to fight a monster with two heads. To do that a man must be a veritable Hercules.

The only thing he could do was to face the problem nearest to him, and leave the other to Tomas.

Once more he felt he was moving into the unknown as he forced himself to knock aside the togs and lift the cover over on its hinges. His quickening breath hazed the helmet front but he could just see a mass of jelly globes resting in a transparent container amongst other samples on the bottom of the shallow stowage space above the power pile.

As he knelt, reached down and lifted out the container, he seemed to feel uneasiness come. into his mind with a jerkiness not unlike physical contacts with something dangerously hot. Putting down the container on the overturned hatch, still kneeling and bending over it, he kept still. And the weird sensation ceased, leaving him with the impression that it was not the result of any emanation from the jelly, but rather of the overwrought state which had been building up inside him ever since he had entered this little cabin.

Striving to ignore this manifestation of his own nervous tension, he returned to the two men.

“ Captain Fryer, what’s so special about an organism able to crystalize titanium ?”

The Captain’s voice put into different words the same meaning conveyed by Ken Rowan from the safety of the Quest.

No answer to the illness in that. He bent over the pale face. “ What else unusual did you find on the planet ?”

“ Nothing — unless you count its open invitation for colonisation. I’ve never seen anywhere so like Earth. Human beings could just walk straight on to it.”

Just walk straight on to it, thought Peter, as unsuspectingly as mice walk towards the cheese in a trap.

He studied the contents of the plastic container. The jelly globes were about two inches in diameter. Some of them were immersed in a liquid which was itself in globular suspension because of the no- gravity. All glistened with moisture. Peter noticed that their cores shone silvery — that would be the titanium. Hairs grew on the glistening surfaces of the mass and he noticed some of these move, altering the positions of the globes to which they were attached. So the globes could move . . . and did so by means of these hairs — flaggella. Many tiny Earth creatures did the same.

Hairs . . .

He recalled the short hairs he had found in the air filters. Yes, they bore comparison with the flaggella of the globes. Perhaps some of the globes had previously been released in the cabin. Dare he risk letting loose some more ? If not, what other

experiment could he make? His own uneasiness seemed to be building up. Joe Tomas would desert him like a flash if he endangered his own health — with Ken Rowan an easy prey to all the obviously logical arguments. And then there were the alien ships. More than the lives of Bill and the Captain hung upon the right answer being quickly found to solve this most pressing of their problems.

Peter looked towards the couches. Two men, so helpless, wholly dependent on him. He shook his head. Strange how confused he felt ... as though many voices were struggling faintly in the back of his mind, too weak for expression — -just a background of unease.

With sudden decision, he eased off the top of the container. He had half expected the globes to fly out; felt perverse chagrin that they did not. Water drops, disturbed by the air, floated up. One of them touched the front of his helmet and ran down as he jerked his head in reflex action away from the unknown. A short hair — one of the flag- gelia — twitched and wriggled where the droplet had been. His eyes ached as he stared at it so close to his face.

He ducked the helmet against another suspended drop of water, moved as before and saw a further two hairs left twitching on the glass. Could these hairs be parasites on the jelly creatures, clinging like leeches ?

He removed one from his helmet with forceps and studied it under a microscope. A single living cell with a nucleus within the elongated protoplasm, it definitely had independent life.

Was this, then, the thing that could affect human beings ?

Excitedly, he reached out and thumbed the radio over to send. “ Tomas, I think I’ve got it !” He explained briefly.

Tomas. did not answer straight away; when he did, his voice was harsh. “ I see. You’ve done a good job, doc. Your name will go down in history. Is there anything you’d like us to do for you back on Earth ?”

“ Eh ? ” Peter’s blood ran cold. “ What do you mean ?”

“ Don’t you know ? Can’t you tell that you’ve been affected by these things — in spite of your suit ? You must realise that we can’t risk letting you come back on board the Quest.”

Peter licked his lips. Long before any ship could bring a real team of planet investigators, the spacetug’s supplies would have given out. The immensity of interstellar space did not bear thinking about. “ Aren’t you going to give me any more

time ?”

“ Do you think we ought to ? Isn’t it our duty to get back to Earth? Earth must know about this planet — and the titanium discovery — and these big ships.”

Peter tried hard not to think that Tomas might be saying those things because of the bad feeling between them. Tomas was not devoid of all humanity. Yet he felt sure that if the Captain had been able to issue an order, there would have been less haste. “ Give me another hour,” he urged. “ If I’m to be left behind ... at least give me a chance to die usefully. Don’t make someone else go through all this over again. I’m sure I’m on the brink of something.”

“ Very well, then.” The hesitation was apparent. Perhaps, thought Peter, it was lucky that Ken was there as a witness of all this. “ You do something, that’s all,” snapped Tomas. “ I’m sick of seeing you fiddling to no effect !”

Peter sighed with relief, and immediately found himself struggling against a fresh and increased confusion within his mind. Apparently only the need to face the recent crisis had brought clarity. He bent his head so that his twitching face would be hidden from the watchers on board the Quest.

All down the front of his thick suit hairs were wriggling. Thousands of them, each with a life of its own.

Flaggella from the globes !

Horrified, he beat at them, trying to crush or dislodge the tiny creatures — but almost immediately realising the futility of such actions, since they were on his arms, too, and so all over him.

Now he could never return to the Quest. No, that was muddy thinking. The situation was not much changed. The vacuum of space would destroy anything alive that was exposed to it . . . He could go back . . . if he could persuade Tomas and Ken to have him. But that did not apply to the others. If he put the Captain and Bill into suits they would carry the infestation with them . . .

If only his head would stay clear ! Single cell creatures multiplied by division. Just one on the inside of a suit or on or within a man would carry the peril right into the Quest.

He replaced the cover on the container with shaking hands. It fitted closely but he sealed it with tape to be quite sure that no more of the hair-like creatures could escape.

Now, how could he dispose of the remainder ? He tried desperately to think through

the increasing pressure of tensions in his head.

“ Look out of the port, doc.” Ken’s voice over the radio interrupted his thoughts.

He turned, looking over the inert shapes of Bill and the Captain. Arcturus 707 blazed clear and bright. The planet was eclipsed from the field of view but the slow orbital motion of the tug around the Quest had put the alien vessel directly before him. Her companion was half a mile beyond, and similar in appearance. The ports of both ships were open and a dozen spheroid ships were floating steadily towards him.

“ Doc !”' said Tomas’s voice. “ This is it. We’ll have to leave you.”

“ No !” Peter tried desperately to think of something. Tomas was a self-seeking man. Make him think that he would have a court of inquiry to face if he returned to Earth before the last moment, and he would stay. “ You’d better not. I didn’t want to say this, Tomas. But what I put in the log just before leaving would make things look very black for you, if you go before something really happens.”

“ Before something really happens ?” Tomas was finding responsibility too heavy for him — just as the Earthside tests had suggested he might. “ Do we have to wait until we are all destroyed ? How much longer do you want ?”

“ Not long.”

Peter returned his attention to the task near at hand.

What could he deduce about the parasites, besides the fact they were equally at home on the skins of human beings as on their natural, presumably unthinking hosts ?

The globes were evidently water creatures and human skins were moist. Men required a humid atmosphere. He went to the humidity meter on the air conditioner. Suppose he dried out that artificial dampness in the air ?

He turned up the heater, cut off the water supply and waited. It would take time. He returned to the acceleration couches. Now he could see the minute hair-like organisms on the skins of the stricken men; before he had missed them amongst the natural hairs of the body. Evidently they could multiply very rapidly under favourable conditions.

After another glance at the humidity meter — the needle was creeping back — he remembered Tomas amongst the increasing confusion of his thoughts and went to the radio.

“ I — think I’ve got a means of clearing the infection — ” he managed to say. “ Anything happened to — you ?”

“ Not yet.” It was Ken’s tense voice answering him. Even Ken sounded as though he thought all this was just playing for time. They didn’t think he could do it.

He stumbled to the meter. The needle was going back very slowly, the temperature shooting up.

He couldn’t feel the heat inside his suit but his mind seemed full of devils whispering incoherently, now wildly, now as though trying to argue with him. He tried not to mumble to himself. He wanted to run — but there was nowhere to run — no escape from the prison of this little cabin. He must get out !

Panic overwhelmed him. Then something stronger than his own will compelled him to stop with one hand on the airlock.

In horror at what he had been about to do, he tore at the fastenings of his suit. Without its protection, he would not be able to go back to endanger the others on the Quest. The courage to throw it off would at least save them. If his nerve went again and he opened the tug, he would die quickly, but Ken and Tomas would live to carry the news to Earth.

Struggling clear of the suit was like coming out of a mental jungle into the physical sensations of a scorching desert. Dry, burning air caught at his throat and prickled on his skin but he found himself looking around the interior of the cabin with clear eyes. On the shiny covers of the acceleration seats hair-like creatures squirmed and came together into centipedes that moved in haphazard, frantic fashion on flailing legs. Tiny individuals still came crawling out of the clothing floating loosely around the naked men, still came off their drying skins to form more communal creatures in an attempt to escape the dry heat destroying them.

Peter felt something on his lips. Wriggling, tiny, hair-like . . . Instinctive reaction was to spit it out, but a greater knowledge halted him. Simultaneous with its presence came vague voices of Tomas and Ken . . . But not voices , he realised, for the radio was silent, and there was something more direct, more fundamental about this new contact. Fear and hesitation was in both men’s minds, sensed clearly. Both wished to put the Quest to flight, but hesitated for their differing reasons.

“ I’m better ...” a voice said.

Peter found Captain Fryer standing behind him. In the clear eyes glowed a new awareness — the same as coursed through his own brain, and their minds met without speech in knowledge of what had happened to them. Peter gasped. No casebook held details of such a parasite — two hours fever, then awareness . . .

On the two giant ships preparations for attack hesitated. Their builders were powerful — but just. For centuries the patrol had roamed their part of the Galaxy, discovering, helping and sometimes slaying. Small, helpless, insignificant life could exist. Great, fully-aware. intelligent life could exist also. But between was a huge group, creatures intelligent, yet without the ability to understand and control —creatures who could lie, cheat, rob and murder, because mind could not see into mind, nor brain contact brain. Such intelligent but untelepathic creatures must die, because a menace to world beyond world. The aliens had felt regret as their instruments had shown the approaching Quest, for this was obviously an intelligent and highly developed race, although no telepathic emanations came from it across Space.

They had been patient, eager for some hint of even a dormant power which could be developed. But none had come from the gesticulating biped's mind. Finally, they had returned to their own ship aware that here was a new, promising race, but one which might have to die.

There was just one chance left. Right from the first contact, they had brought all their mental power to bear in an effort to influence the bipeds towards the one planet in this part of Space which had natural conditions like those that had been detected in the intruding ship. It was possible, although not always certain, that telepathic parasites could provide the ability that nature had not.

Time had shown that they could in this case.

The equipments with which the Earth ship could have been destroyed like a snuffed spark were withdrawn into the hull. Between the captains of the two alien vessels communication and new hope fled. Perhaps, after all, this race need not be destroyed. No, they and their ship could live . . .

" Captain Fryer here," a voice snapped, somehow allowing no argument. " Prepare to take us aboard."

" Yes, sir."

Peter heard the words through a confused haze of images, but he knew that condition would pass, as surely as had the fevers of Bill and the Captain. But the look he had seen in Fryer's eyes had demonstrated that the new awareness, however, would not pass. It was worth a few hours' fever while the parasites multiplied in a man's body, he decided; a score of germs and bacteria normally inhabiting mankind were less useful.

His pulse was growing uneven, his brow hot. A doctor's training helped, after all. Fryer and Bill had not been able to understand, and it had been their instinctive resistance to the unknown which had brought about that frightening mental condition. They had not known what it meant when they had become hosts. They had thought

only of a difficult-to-work metal and jelly blobs able to crystalize it easily. His fever rising, Peter thought of neither. Instead, his mind reached out through the confusion of his comrades' thoughts and contacted minds in the two alien ships.

The whole of mankind could be telepathic now, and what mattered it that a parasite produced the effect ?

Bill Blundell's strong arm was encircling his shoulders, Bill's homely face — although indistinct — was certainly grinning again, but it wasn't Bill's voice that came briefly into his mind — it was the typically mocking but encouraging thought: " Happy dreams, Peter. We're going home."

Content, he realised that his companions were preparing to enter the Quest. Then stupor dimmed his vision.