

*It was a curiously Earth-life world the castaways found — and like Earth, its real savagery was hidden.*

## SOS, PLANET UNKNOWN

by  
A. Bertram Chandler

*A. BERTRAM CHANDLER is the pen-name of a British seaman far better known by this name (which first appeared in science fiction in 1944) than by his own. Chandler is also almost alone among well-known s-f writers in that he has yet to produce a novel; but one of his longest stories, "Giant Killer," is an acknowledged classic.*

She died slowly, and her people fought for her life—and for their own lives—to the very end. It was like, almost, the inevitable death of a human being from old age—the breakdown of one function after another, culminating in the final, lethal convulsions. Yet she was not old, as men measure the age of their ships. She was just ...unlucky. The minor, undetectable flaws resulting from careless workmanship during her building, the other flaws introduced during routine repairs and overhauls had all, somehow, conspired in a snowballing effect and sequence of breakdowns and disasters to kill her.

Most of her people died with her —slashed to ribbons when the madly spinning flywheels of the Mannschenn Drive unit shrugged off the makeshift, jury-rigged controls (the controls proper had been destroyed by the fire some few days earlier); or asphyxiated when the shards of jagged metal, impelled by the centrifugal force of the exploding gyroscopes, sliced through airtight bulkheads and shell plating. Two more had died of their own success in repairing her five emergency Venturis, when, by one of those failures of coordination to which men are prone when their environment is disintegrating, the rockets were test-fired while the troubleshooters were still outside. Their deaths, it subsequently turned out, had been for nothing; the plasma tanks had sprung, allowing most of the reaction mass for the rockets to evaporate into space. There was no longer enough left to move her usefully.

Only one officer —the assistant purser—survived; he had been on his way from the control room to the engine room with a message, the intercommunication system having broken down. Seven passengers survived—shut in one miraculously unholed section of the ship by the slamming emergency airtight doors. Kennedy was the assistant purser's name—Ralph Kennedy. He was a tall young man, skinny rather than slim, with a high bridged, bony nose, fair hair that tended to recede at the temples, ears that protruded more than slightly. The horn-rimmed spectacles—he would not wear contact lenses—magnified his rather pale grey eyes. It may have been his uniform that now lent him his air of command—then, again, it may not. This much is certain—he was meeting this major crisis with a coolness that he had not, until this instant, known that he possessed.

He was, by virtue of his rank, king—king of a little world that was a wedge shaped segment of a disc seventy five feet in diameter, ten feet in thickness. He had reason to suppose that the rest of the disc—as well as of the rest of the ship, of which the disc was only a small part—was uninhabitable. The fact that the automatic doors had shut argued that there was hard vacuum on the other side of them.

He stood there, swaying slightly, the magnetized soles of his shoes holding him to the deck, waiting for his subjects to say their say, to make their petitions. He looked at them—the four men, the three women. He wondered if he looked as frightened as they did. He thought, I should look more frightened. Theirs is the fear of the unknown—mine is the fear of the known. And what I know is worse than any imaginings.

It was Major Fuller who broke the silence. He thrust his corpulent body to the forefront of the little knot of passengers, demanded, as he would have demanded an explanation from some erring N.C.O.,

"What's happened? Hey, young man, what's happened?"

"I think," said Kennedy cautiously, "that it's the Mannschen Drive unit. You've all seen it, of course—that affair of spinning, precessing gyroscopes right in the heart of the ship. The controls of it were giving trouble. They must have failed. Metal—the metal of the flywheels—can stand just so much. When the revolutions exceeded a certain limit the wheels either broke from their bearings, or exploded."

"How do you know it wasn't the Pile?" barked the Major. "Shouldn't you be checking for radio-activity?"

"If it had been the Pile," said Kennedy, "we shouldn't be discussing it. Besides, you will notice that the emergency, battery-powered lights aren't burning; we're still using current drawn directly from the Pile."

"Who's in charge?" snapped Fuller.

"I am, Major."

"What! A mere purser's pup!"

"That will do," said Kennedy sharply. "I want you all to know that I am in charge of this section until relieved by somebody senior to myself. It may well be that I am in charge of the ship—or what's left of her. If anybody here has experience or qualifications that will make him more suitable for the job . . ."

There was silence.

Fuller would have liked to have stepped forward, thought Kennedy, but he hasn't the guts. After all—he's Commissariat, not Combat. Gladen could, perhaps, but he's too lazy. He'll be content to write a novel around this incident when—or if—we're rescued. (And yet, Kennedy reminded himself, Gladen had been, once, Second Mate of a trading schooner on Procyon III, or Adantia, as the colonists call it. It wouldn't pay to underrate that experience now.) Tolliver will never dare say boo to any authority—he's too much of a mouse, too much under the thumb of that big, fat wife of his. And Grant, like all newly married men, wants just to sit in a corner and hold hands with *his* wife. The women? Mrs. Tolliver—the typical, suburban housewife. . . . Mrs. Grant—not one yet, but she will be (if she's lucky enough to come through this).... Miss Weldon—what use will a dress designer be in a lifeboat?

"So I take it," said Kennedy, "that nobody wants my job. All right. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to get a spacesuit out of the locker, and I'm going to use the suit radio to see if there's anybody else alive in the ship—the Drive Unit's not working now, so that'll be possible. Then I'm going out into the axial shaft and going through the ship, looking for survivors. I'll find out if any of the boats are still usable at the same time. I'll try to find out where we are."

"You're leaving us here," said Mrs. Tolliver, her voice accusatory.

"Somebody has to go," said Kennedy.

"And somebody should go with you," remarked Gladen quietly. "I'll be pleased to—after all," he added, grinning mirthlessly, "it's all material."

"How many times have I heard *that*, Stephen?" asked Miss Weldon.

"You don't have to listen," replied the writer. "Now, Kennedy, I suggest that after we get suited up, somebody—what about you, Susan?—puts on a helmet to keep in radio touch with us. We can report on what we find, and if we get into trouble we can yell for help. Doubtless Major Fuller will lead the charge to our rescue."

"There's no need to be funny, Gladen," barked Fuller.

"Was I being funny, Fuller? If I wasn't, it doesn't say much for your military reputation."

"Let's get these suits on," said Kennedy.

He went to the locker that stood in the alleyway, pulled out three of the stiff suits. One he handed to Gladen, the other he got into himself. Then, before putting on his own helmet, he showed Miss Weldon how to operate the tiny radio in the helmet of the third suit. He was amused by the contrast—the ugly, utilitarian headpiece topping her slim elegance. She guessed his thoughts, smiled at him through the thick, transparent plastic. He saw her lips moving, but heard nothing.

He put on his own helmet.

"If anybody saw me *now*" he heard her say, "they'd know that I wasn't a *hat* designer."

"Your hair," he said, "looks better without a hat, anyhow."

"Come off it, young Kennedy," Gladen's voice crackled in the helmet speaker. "This is no time to be

praising our Susan's auburn tresses."

"No," agreed Kennedy. "It's not." He raised his voice slightly. "Kennedy here, assistant purser. I am in Section Nine, Segment A. There are eight of us here—seven passengers and myself. Is there anybody else . . . alive? Come in, please. Come in."

He repeated the message a second time, and a third.

"It looks as though we're the only ones," said Gladen gravely.

"Looks like it," he said quietly, "We're going out now, Miss Weldon. We'll keep you informed."

"Do just that," she replied.

The little airlock leading into the axial shaft reminded Kennedy unpleasantly of a coffin. And yet, when he was through into what was left of the ship, he regretted having left its cramping confines. Space is so vast and a ship is so small—and when that ship is no more—as Gladen phrased it—than a drifting colander space seems vaster still. Here and there, in the twisted alleyways, lights were still burning—but they were dim and pale against the stars that gleamed through the rents in the tortured metal. And there was a sun ahead of them—neither of the men could see it directly yet but its glare struck through the pierced hull, was reflected aft from bright metal surfaces.

Kennedy and Gladen made a methodical search. They pulled themselves aft along the axial shaft and then, section by section, worked their way forward. They learned, quite early, that it was better to ignore the bodies. Some of them had been ripped or smashed, others burst by their own rapidly expanding internal pressure. None of them was pretty.

They came at last to the control room—or what was left of it. With the darkest filters of their helmets in place, they stared for a while at the glaring sun, at the planet that showed slightly to one side of it.

"What star is it?" asked Gladen at last.

"I don't know," admitted Kennedy. "The ship was not in normal space-time until the Drive blew up—and the explosion might have thrown us anywhere or, even, anywhen. As you see—the automatic log and the three dimensional charts have been destroyed. And the computer. If that were working we could feed what data we have into it and get some sort of an answer."

"What's this?" asked the writer.

"A sextant—although not quite the kind that I was used to on Adantia. I wonder if I can use it wearing a spacesuit . . ."

He took the instrument out of its case, held it as close to his eye as the helmet would permit. He looked at the reading. He raised the sextant to his eye again, his gloved fingers working clumsily on the micrometer. Again he checked the reading.

He said, "It's time we were getting out of here. The way the diameter of that sun's increasing, we're falling into it—and not slowly, either. That planet *may* be capable of supporting life."

"The boat in the Section Seven blister was intact," said Kennedy. "Miss Weldon! Tell the passengers to get into their suits and to prepare to abandon ship! We'll be back for them in a few minutes."

"I'll tell them," said Susan Weldon. "I'll tell them. But I don't anticipate any wild enthusiasm."

There was not, as Susan Weldon had forecast, any wild enthusiasm. The Grant couple actually said they were prepared to stay in wreck until picked up—Kennedy had to explain, in words of one syllable, firstly that the wreck was falling into the sun and secondly that it would be impossible to get out a distress signal until the boat was out and clear from the ship. He did not add that the chances of the signal's being picked up by any vessel capable of reaching them in less than a matter of years were remote in the extreme.

Then, both Gladen and the girl were inclined to be too bossy, too inclined to try to prevent the others from transferring their most cherished treasures from their cabins to the boat. Kennedy intervened. "The boat," he said, "is officially capable of carrying sixty people. We shall be landing on an unknown world—we may find that it is one of our colonies, on the other hand we may find that it has never even been surveyed. Anything—but anything—could be useful."

"Then I'll bring my typewriter and a supply of paper," said Gladen.

"Why not?"

"And I'll bring my portable electric sewing machine," said Susan Weldon.

"Oh, and could I bring my washing machine?" asked Mrs. Tollivcr. "It's in the baggage hold, I was taking it for our new house on Caranthia . . ."

"No," said Kennedy. "We have no time to lose. The stuff in cabins doesn't matter, but we can't afford to scour the ship for extras. Into your space suits now, all of you. As soon as you're sealed I'm going to open both airlock doors."

"Do as the man says," added Gladen. He seemed to be extracting enjoyment from the situation.

Kennedy fumed and fidgeted while the passengers got suited up. They were so *slow*. Neither he nor Gladen had been able to compute the rate of the vessel's fall into the sun of this planetary system, but the purser knew that there was no extreme emergency on that score. What did have him worried was the distinct possibility that the ship would collide with the planet that they had seen, the planet to which he intended to take the lifeboat.

At last the passengers were ready, and Kennedy made a rapid but thorough inspection of each of the spacesuits. He had done this sort of thing often enough at boat drills, but had never dreamed that the day would come when he would have to do it in, as he put it to himself, playing-for-keeps circumstances.

When he was satisfied he went to the little airlock, broke the seals on the valves and opened them. Then he was able to open both the doors.

With Gladen's and Susan Weldon's help he organized the people into a human conveyor belt—it was easier loading the boat that way than having everybody struggling through the axial shaft loaded with his own personal possessions. He felt happier when he had all the survivors into the boat and the doors dogged tight. He allowed himself to hope that the boat had not been afflicted by the same curse as had been the mother ship—and was harsh with Tolliver when he voiced the same thought.

The launching of the boat was automatic. Kennedy waited until the passengers were all strapped into their seats, made sure that his own belt was properly adjusted, then pressed the red launching button. For a second he thought that there was something amiss—perhaps there was—and then the rockets fired. He was slammed back into the padding and inflicted a painful bite on his tongue.

He remembered all that he had learned at the Academy. He exerted his strength, raised his hand against the acceleration, cut the Drive. He wasted no time, as the others were doing, in heaving grateful sighs of relief at the return to the comfort of free fall. His first job, his most important job, was to get himself oriented.

The ship was still close, but was receding visibly. Looking at her, Kennedy was surprised that anybody had survived. She reminded him of a journey that he had made through desert country on one of his holidays, when he had seen, and shuddered at the sight, the bleached bones, picked clean of all flesh, of migrating animals that had failed to make it to the next water hole and had perished of thirst. Not only

was the ship dead but, with her shell plating torn away and her structural members exposed, she was like a skeleton.

The sun was right astern. Kennedy adjusted the viewport dimmers, then actuated the gyroscope to swing the boat. Soon he was able to pick out the planet—of the apparent size of a melon, it was. He fired the rockets again, killing the velocity of the boat away from the not very distant world. He said, to nobody in particular, "The automatic pilot can do the rest, until we hit atmosphere."

There was one thing left to do.

The assistant purser pressed the button that would put the automatic radio distress call out. He waited until it had been sending for ten minutes, then switched to manual. His gloved hand was not too clumsy on the key.

"SOS," he sent. "SOS. Survivors from *Beta Pavonis*, in lifeboat, approaching planet of unknown sun. No navigators among us. Destruction of ship occurred on twenty-third day of voyage from New Tasmania to Hunteria. I can give no further data. SOS. SOS."

"Do you expect a reply?" asked Gladen.

"I'd like to get one," said Kennedy, "but I'm afraid I don't expect one. Anyhow, the monitors will pick up this call—eventually. Too, once we've landed I'll run the transmitter once a day at the same time."

"So you intend to land?" asked Susan Weldon.

"What else is there? These boats are equipped to give occupants the maximum chance of survival. We have weapons. We have fishing gear. We have seeds, even. We have a well stocked medicine chest, and all the necessary books."

"Including one on obstetrics?" asked Gladen.

Kennedy felt himself blushing. "Yes," he admitted.

"Never mind all this," blustered Fuller. "What do we do now?"

"Wait," said Kennedy. "Wait for all of two days—and perhaps a bit extra. It'll be safe enough for all of us to take our suits and helmets off now—although we'd better put them on again before we hit atmosphere."

"And if the atmosphere's poisonous," asked Tolliver, "shall we have enough fuel to take off again?"

"No," admitted Kennedy.

"Then there's not much sense in putting the suits back on," said Tolliver.

They waited.

They squabbled and bickered, and even the Grants were heard to snap at each other. They took turns at studying, through the telescope, the world towards which they were heading. There was water, and there was cloud, and there were polar icecaps. There were areas of brown, and areas of yellow, and areas of green. The certainty grew that this world would support life their sort of life.

Then came the time when they were able to circle the world in a five hundred mile orbit. Kennedy was not willing to decide upon a landing place himself, so called upon the others to suggest and to advise. Some favoured desert, some the sea. In the end it was Gladen who said, "You're skipper of this craft, Kennedy. You make the decision—and if it's a wrong one you won't be the first captain who's been a bum guesser. And, right or wrong, I'm backing you."

"And I," said Susan Weldon.

"Don't hurry him into it," growled Major Fuller.

"I'm not," said Gladen. "But none of us here seems qualified to advise Mr. Kennedy—and he's the only one who's capable of landing this boat in one piece."

"I hope," said Tolliver,

"Shut up!" snarled his wife. "The situation's bad enough now without you making it worse with your wisecracks."

"I can hope, can't I?" he demanded plaintively.

"What hope is there?" burst out Mrs. Grant. "For any of us? It's all right for the rest of you—but I'm going to have my first child in that . . . wilderness! As for you," she screamed at her husband, "you said that everything would be all right—and now look what you've got me into!"

"In the Army," wheezed Fuller, "we . . ."

"*Damn* the Army," flared Grant.

"You see," said Gladen. "If we hang here in this orbit much longer there'll be murder done. There're one or two I shouldn't mind murdering myself."

"Not me, I hope, Stephen?" asked Susan Weldon.

"Yes—even you at times, my dear."

"Don't call me *dear*!" she snapped.

"Quiet!" shouted Kennedy. Then — "We're going down. I'm going to land at the edge of that green plain, by the river. If any of you have a better idea, let me hear it. But make it quick."

There was silence.

"All right. Fasten seat belts. Stand by for deceleration."

"Get it over with," said Gladen.

"What I am doing? Don't disturb me,"

Kennedy fired a tentative blast from the starboard steering jet, then another. The craft turned, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. Kennedy had to correct with a blast from the port jet.

The boat was proceeding stern first now, with her rockets pointed in the direction of her flight. A five seconds blast from the main venturi killed her momentum. It was obvious, even without looking at the instruments, that she was falling.

Feeling increasingly confident, Kennedy turned the craft again. Rather incredulously he thought, *I'm good. I'm in the wrong branch of the Service. I should have been executive ...*

"If you're coming in too fast," said Fuller, "you'll tear the wings off us."

"It's too late to worry about that now," replied Kennedy.

*But I am so worrying*, he thought. *I wish that that old fool would keep his mouth shut.*

Then there was sound—a thin, high keening, dropping slowly down the scale from the supersonic. There was heat, engendered by friction.

*I should have made them put their spacesuits on*, thought Kennedy. *They keep out the cold—they'd keep out the heat.*

Cautiously, he manipulated the controls. He felt the pressure against his back and seat as the ship lifted. The keening noise died away.

*Down we go again*, thought Kennedy. *I hope that this slows us down sufficiently . . .*

The fourth attempt did — and then Kennedy was concerned more with the location of his proposed landing site than with the actual handling of the boat. "They fly themselves," he had been told during his lifeboatman's course.

He found the sharp peak, thrusting up from the dense forest along the edge of the plain. He located, again, the broad, silver ribbon of the river. He put the craft into a tight spiral, using the peak as a beacon. He lost altitude fast, but speed not fast enough.

But he was impatient to get it all over and done with. He knew that he had one ace up his sleeve—the so-called "fool's rockets," the forward pointing tubes, each with its charge of solid propellant, that were supposed to be the last resort of the incompetent pilot.

*They're there to be used*, he thought.

The long grass was close now, ripples running over it under the wind. Kennedy skimmed the river, was barely conscious of the yellow beach that flashed by under him. He turned the ship, wrenching her around brutally so that she was heading up wind. He pressed the firing stud of the "fool's rockets."

He heard screams behind him. He heard something breaking. Then, as his safety belt snapped, he was thrown forward against the instrument panel. He did not feel the ship tilt and topple, he did not hear the horrid screech as the starboard stub wing was torn off; he was unconscious.

"He's coming round," he heard somebody say.

He opened his eyes.

He saw first of all a blue sky, with one or two small, fleecy clouds. Something large and black was flapping slowly across his field of vision, screaming discordantly as it flew. He smelt air that was *alive*,

not the fetid, circulated and recirculated artificial atmosphere of the boat. He sniffed the tang of smouldering grass appreciatively.

"Wake up!" somebody was saying.

He shifted his eyes, saw the lean, intent face of Susan Weldon above him. Then Gladen moved to stand beside her.

"There's nothing broken," said the writer. "And, as far as I can gather from that book in the medicine chest, you haven't got concussion."

"Thanks," said Kennedy.

"Don't thank me—thank your thick skull."

"Help me up," said the assistant purser.

The man and the girl raised him to a sitting posture. He looked at the wreckage of his first and last command. Her vaned tail was in the air, her nose was in the pit that she had dug for herself. Around the rim of the pit the grass still smouldered. By the wreck sat the other passengers—Major Fuller, the Grants, the Tollivers. It seemed to Kennedy that they were looking at him with hostility.

"I'm afraid," said Kennedy, "that I made a mess of things."

"So what?" demanded Gladen. "We're all of us alive. Nobody's injured, even. Oh, I know that *they* think that you're the worst atmosphere pilot unhung—but none of them volunteered to do the job."

"I was saving fuel," said the assistant purser, "so that we could use the boat for exploring. But she'll never fly again."

"We stay in one place," said Gladen, "and that's all to the good. We keep the automatic beacon working—it seems to have survived the crash. We'll set up our camp here, and when the rescue ship homes on the beacon, its crew'll have no trouble finding us."

"It's as good a place as any," said Susan. "We have the river for fresh water and, perhaps, food. I've seen some things like crayfish. We have the forest for lumber to build our houses—and it's a safe bet that some of the birds and animals there are edible . . ."

"Some of them might view us in the same light," said Gladen.

"Don't be such a damned pessimist, Stephen. Then, as I was saying, we can clear ourselves a few acres of grass and plant our seeds . . ."

"Quite the pioneer woman, aren't you, darling?" scoffed the writer. "This is a far cry from the Rag Trade!"

"Shut up!" she snapped.

"Yes, Gladen—shut up!" repeated Kennedy. "Miss Weldon was offering constructive suggestions — and all you could do was sneer."

"Were you ordering me around, young Kennedy? I'd like to point out that your pretty uniform ceased to have any significance once we touched—and a gentle touch it was, too—the surface of this planet."

Kennedy got to his feet, helped by the girl.

He said, disappointed that his voice was not as steady as it should have been, "I'd like to point out, Gladen, that there are still a lot of things to do that only I am qualified to handle. After they have been done I'll relinquish my command willingly. Until such time I'll stay in charge."

"All right. Take charge."

"Somebody has to," said Kennedy, glaring first at Gladen and then at the group loafing by the wrecked boat. He walked, stumbling slightly in the long grass, to the wreckage. "You," he said. "Fuller, Tolliver, Grant—get that fire out."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Tolliver. "It's not doing any harm."

"I wasn't addressing you, Madam. But you and Mrs. Grant can get back into the boat and pass out four of the shovels that you will find in the after compartment."

"Were you ordering *me*?" asked the big, untidy woman.

"Yes."

"In the Army, young man," began Fuller, "a junior officer . . ."

"This is not the Army, Major. In any case, as far as the Interstellar Commerce Commission is concerned, I'm the only officer present. And I want this fire out, before it spreads."

"We should have thought of it," admitted Tolliver.

"You should have—but you didn't."

"Into the boat, dear," said Tolliver to his wife.

"I'll not stand for this," she flared.

"You will!" he snarled—and there was such venom in his voice that she hoisted herself clumsily into the airlock door and vanished. Mrs. Grant followed her.

"Stay inside," Kennedy told them when they had passed out the shovels. "I'll want some more stores out shortly."

Working hard, if not very efficiently, they extinguished the blaze before it reached serious proportions. Kennedy climbed into the boat then, climbed aft to the storage compartment. He found the tents, and the cylinders of compressed carbon dioxide that would inflate them. He got out the solar power screens, and the batteries. When they were passed out to those outside, he set the women to work stripping the chairs inside the little rocket—their cushions were so designed as to serve as beds in the tents. While they were so employed, he broke out the armament.

There was a point fifty calibre Schuster automatic rifle, with a thousand rounds of ammunition. There were two point twenty Remingtons, with four thousand rounds. There were two twelve gauge Winchester repeating shotguns, with six thousand rounds. There were six of the deadly Minotti fifty shot automatics, whose makers said, with justification, that one of the tiny, exploding slivers properly placed could stop a charging bull elephant.

There were four long-bows, and a good supply of arrows. Kennedy hoped that the party would not be on this world long enough to have to fall back on the ancient, but still effective, weapons.

He belted on a holster with one of the automades, hesitated between the Schuster and a Remington, finally slung the lighter weapon over his shoulder. The others, with the exception of Gladen, looked at him askance when he emerged from the ship. Gladen grinned.

"So you're going to enforce your authority by force of arms," he remarked.

Kennedy kept his temper.

"There are five more pistols inside, by the airlock door. If any of you can use them, you're welcome to belt them on. There's a point fifty rifle, and another point twenty, and two shotguns. These weapons are here for two reasons—for our protection and to provide game for the pot. I think that at least one of us—until we're sure that there are no dangers here—should go armed all the time."

"I wish that I had your imagination," said Gladen, half seriously.

"It's not imagination. It's just knowing all the things could possibly go wrong, and then doing one's best to cope with them. Meanwhile—do any of you know how to get these tents up?"

Nobody did.

Kennedy took off his weapons, handed them to Fuller.

"You're sentry," he said.

"When I was in the Army, young man . . ."

". . . Majors never did sentry duty. But even Majors must know something about firearms. Just be careful about opening fire—there's always the chance that you might antagonize some local intelligent life form."

"If any," said Gladen.

"Oh, shut up, Gladen. Lend a hand with this, will you?"

There were four tents, each of them neatly packaged. Kennedy broke the fastenings on the first one, pulled out the valve. He connected it to the cylinder of carbon dioxide, gave the wheel a quarter turn. The

tent filled slowly, swelling and rustling. When it was fully expanded it was a gleaming, plastic igloo, a fifteen foot diameter hemisphere. There were translucent panels in its sides to admit the passage of daylight, and there were even opaque curtains inside that could be let down to cover these. Flared tubes—each of which could be sealed if necessary—through the double skin allowed for ventilation.

Kennedy checked the netting and the guy ropes to see that there was no chafe, then drove home the pegs in a circle around the tent, made all secure.

He left the Grants, the Tollivers and Susan Weldon to set up the other tents; he, aided by Gladen, busied himself with the solar power screen. This was not arduous work—the only part of the job that made any real demands upon his energy was the adjustment of it so that it would drag the maximum power output from the westering sun. Once this was done the efficient, almost intelligent little azimuth motor would keep the screen on the most advantageous bearing until sunset. By that time, Kennedy hoped, there would be enough power stored in the batteries to suffice for cooking of the evening meal and for lights during the hours of darkness. The lifeboat's storage cells could have been used for both purposes—but the spaceman wanted to be self sufficient as soon as possible.

Somebody was calling, "Smoko! Smoko!"

He looked up from the screen controls, saw that it was Susan Weldon. She was standing in the doorway of the first erected tent. She was rattling a spoon inside a cup.

"I boiled the kettle," she called, "and made tea for us all! This is our house warming!"

"Tea!" grimaced Gladen. "Surely there's something better, Kennedy."

"There is," said the assistant purser. "It's in the medicine chest. And it's staying there."

Kennedy walked to the tent.

"What water did you use, Miss Weldon?"

"The water from the ship's tank, of course."

"Just as well. We still have to test the river water. Boiling would kill any micro-organisms, but there may be mineral poisons."

"How will you test it?" asked Gladen.

"There's a kit for doing so in the medicine chest. But I could do with a good cup of tea, and I'm having it. Major Fuller—that will do the sentry duty for the time being. Tea break!"

It was comfortable inside the tent—but, of course, the tent had been designed for comfort as well as for its other qualities. The scene, thought Kennedy, was absurdly domesticated—the seven people sitting on their cushions around the spread cloth, the steaming teapot and hot water jug, the cups, the saucers, the sugar bowl, the jug of evaporated milk. On no world, he thought, have we yet found anything to take the place of tea. I hope that we find some herb here that will be a good substitute . . .

"What now, Kennedy?" asked Fuller.

"We'll get our camp set up for the night. We'll work out a watch list. We'll get as good a night's sleep as possible, so that we're ready for some exploring tomorrow."

"A watch list . . ." said Mrs. Grant. "You really think that there might be dangerous animals here?"

"Or savages," said Gladen, grinning again.

"Or savages," agreed Kennedy. "Until we know more, we have to be prepared for *anything*."

"Are we—the women, I mean— among the watchkeepers?" asked Susan Weldon. "I can use a Minotti."

"No," replied Kennedy definitely.

"What old-fashioned ideas you have," remarked the writer.

"I'm keeping watch with Bill, anyhow," said Mrs. Grant defiantly.

"Let her," said Gladen. "Two pairs of eyes are better than one. Will you keep watch with me, Susan?"

"I will *not*," she said.

"We'll make out the roster later," said Kennedy briskly. "The next item on the agenda is accommodation. We have two married couples, one unmarried woman, three unmarried men. We have four tents. You, Mr. and Mrs. Tolliver, take one of them. You, Mr. and Mrs. Grant, take one of the others. You, Miss Weldon, will have a tent to yourself. Major Fuller, Mr. Gladen and myself will share

the fourth one. It's lucky that we have the equipment for over seven times our number of people."

"It could be a pity," said Gladen. "Anyhow—if you're lonely, Susan, I've no doubt that friend Kennedy, here, could put us through a form of marriage sufficiently legal to stick."

"I shall be quite happy by myself," said the girl—and Kennedy was relieved to hear her say it. He was, somehow, disappointed when she added, "I always have been."

"The most pressing item on the agenda now," said Kennedy, "is digging the trench and rigging the screens for the latrine."

"The man has no romance in his soul," said Gladden.

Kennedy had the fourth spell of duty—2400 hours to 0200 hours. All watches owned by the party had been set at 1800 hours at sunset—the lifeboat's chronometer, of course, had not been tampered with; the automatic distress signal would be sent out at six hourly intervals by ship's time, Greenwich Mean Time.

Kennedy wondered, when Gladen called him, if this planet did, in fact, have a period of roughly twenty-four hours axial rotation. It was one of the things that he could have checked during their approach to it from space—if he had known enough.

He got dressed by the dim light of the battery-powered lamp, moving carefully so as not to disturb Fuller—although if the fat Major were a light sleeper his own snoring must surely have awakened him. He belted on the pistol. When he was outside the tent Gladen handed him one of the point twenty rifles.

"The watch is yours," said Gladen.

"I wonder if it is midnight," said Kennedy. "There's a sort of mid-nightish feel in the air . . ." He looked up at the sky, wishing that he knew enough astronomy to hazard a guess as to the location of this planet. There was a Milky Way—but it was subtly different from the Milky Way as seen from Earth. There was a sprawling constellation that could have been a distorted Orion, and another one that wound sinuously across the black sky like a huge serpent, with a blazing star cluster at its head. There was no moon—but that he had already known.

"Anything to report?" he asked.

"No. I walked over to the edge of the forest, but I heard no noises indicative of large animals. Then I stood for a while by the river—there were quite a few splashes, but small ones. We must break out the fishing gear tomorrow."

"You should have stayed by the camp," said Kennedy.

"I'm old enough," replied Gladen, "to use my own discretion—and I used it. Goodnight to you."

"I wish that you weren't such a cantankerous bastard at times," said the assistant purser.

"You know," said the writer—and Kennedy could see his teeth gleaming in the near darkness—"there're times when I wish the same myself. Goodnight again."

"Where are you going? That's Miss Weldon's tent."

"Don't be such an innocent," replied Gladen.

Kennedy, feeling more than a little sick, walked away from the tents. Something made him turn. The light in the girl's tent snapped on, at full brilliance. Gladen—a black silhouette—was still in the doorway. Kennedy saw him turn abruptly, walk back to the tent he shared with Fuller and Kennedy. He was whistling. The assistant purser recognized the tune—it was one of the Twentieth Century songs that had, of late, been revived. It was *Lay That Pistol Down, Babe* ...

I wonder . . . thought Kennedy. I wonder . . . After all, if we're to be on this world for any length of time . . .

Should I walk up and down? he asked himself abruptly. Or should I stay still? If I walk I make a noise, and let anything creeping up on the camp know where I am. If I stand still—well, a wild animal would hear me breathing, or scent me, so what's the odds? I should have rigged floodlights—and made a glare that would have attracted savages (if there are any) from miles around. The others have the best of it—they sit back and criticize, but none of them's willing to take over command . . .

Anyhow, if we are on this world for any length of time . . . Gladen's her type really, that's the trouble

...

Suddenly he snapped out of his reverie, whipped the pistol from its holster with his right hand, switched on the torch that he carried in the other.

"Put that light out," said Susan Weldon rather crossly. "Do you want to blind me?"

"I thought you were sleeping," he said foolishly.

"Sleeping, the man says. Sleeping—with wolves pawing at the door of my tent."

"Only one wolf. I saw him slinking away with his tail between his legs."

"Not quite," she said. "I'll say this for Stephen—he took it all in good part. After all—he didn't want me quite badly enough to have a shooting match with me."

"Just as well," said Kennedy. "It'd have been a nuisance if the tent had got punctured."

"I notice that you weren't worried about either Stephen or myself getting punctured," she said tartly.

"The tent is stores," he pointed out. "You and Stephen are only passengers."

"I see," she said. "I'm pleased to learn that you do regard me as a human being. I was beginning to think that you were regarding me as just an item on the store list, or something."

"I've always thought rather highly of you," he said.

"Too highly, perhaps. Will it be all right to smoke?"

He considered the matter. He said at last. "I have noticed a few things like fireflies flitting around, and some of them have a ruddy light. Our cigarettes could be mistaken for fireflies by any potential enemy . . ."

"That's as good an excuse for a smoke as any," she said.

He pulled the packet of cigarettes out of the breast pocket of his shirt, found the filter ends by touch, put them in his mouth. He inhaled sharply. He handed one of the little cylinders to the girl. She did not draw her hand back when his touched it.

He said, "We have to remember that our supplies are not unlimited."

"And that the duration of our stay here might well be," she added.

The ruddy illumination of the cigarette showed him her face—thin, serious, the eyes seeming larger and darker than they were in actuality, the mouth wide, with a potentiality of generosity.

"That's a fact that we have to face," he said.

"That's a fact that I am facing. I'm a young woman and, they tell me, attractive. I've never had much time for men—there's always been my career. But I can't see much scope for my talents on this planet. So . . ."

"So," he asked, "what?"

"So I have to think of somebody permanent. Somebody who'll be my protector, and the father of my brats. And there's not much choice. Even if Grant and Tolliver were free I'd never consider either of them—I've never fancied suburbia. Fuller's out. It's between you and Stephen."

"Oh, I like Stephen. At times he's fun. But there's that laziness of his, and his failure to take the right things—by which I don't mean what the Tollivers and the Grants consider the right things—seriously. He could be a leader—but he'll never take the responsibility. He's a born barracker."

"So I'm elected," said Kennedy quietly.

"So you're not elected. Not yet. After all, Ralph, there's no mad rush. I like you—but whether or not I like you enough to live with you is another matter."

"I rather hope . . ." began Kennedy. "Oh, damn it. How shall I put it? I hope that you do make the decision in my favor."

"I rather hope," she said, "that I do."

She threw her cigarette away, then reached up and plucked his from his mouth. She took his face between her hands, raised her lips to his. It was a brief kiss—yet enough to stir desire. She broke away from him.

"Goodnight," she said. "And I mean goodnight."

"I'll be looking forward to saying good morning," he replied.

"By the morning," she laughed, "I might have decided in favor of polyandry."

"I make the laws here," he reminded her.

"Then you'd better take a dim view of the sentries philandering whilst on duty. Goodnight again."

She vanished into her tent.

Kennedy was amazed when he looked at the luminous figures on the dial of his watch and saw that his spell of duty was up. He walked to the Grants' tent, scratched on the plastic screen that had been let down to cover the doorway. There was no answer. He lifted the screen then, went inside.

"Grant," he called softly. "Grant!"

He called again, louder.

There was a flurry of motion on the makeshift bed. Kennedy glimpsed pale limbs and breasts, dimly luminous in the starlight. He envied Grant, and wished that his own future marital state were more certain. He backed out of the tent.

After a few minutes Grant and his wife joined him. Kennedy handed over the watch, making sure that the man and the woman were both armed and knew how to handle their weapons.

"And pass on to Fuller," he said, "and tell him to pass it on to Gladen, that I want the *exact* time of sunrise noted. We must get some idea of how time runs on this planet."

"I don't think that time's all that important," murmured Mrs. Grant.

"I do," said Kennedy, with unnecessary sharpness.

"There's no need to talk to Rose like that!" snapped Grant.

"Sorry," said Kennedy insincerely.

He walked to the tent, lifted the flap, went inside. Fuller was still snoring. Gladen was asleep—but restless in his slumber, twisting and muttering.

"Susan," Kennedy heard him mumble. "Susan, please . . ."

What with the pair of them, thought Kennedy, I shall be lucky to get any sleep at all. I wonder if Susan would let me in to her tent? But I forgot. I must set the good example. I'm the Captain—Acting, Temporary, Unpaid ...

He undressed, not bothering overduly with quietness. He got under his own blankets. In spite of Fuller's snores, of Gladen's mutterings, he dropped immediately into unconsciousness . . .

. . . and awoke with the sound of the scream still ringing in his ears.

Susan, he thought. If that swine Gladen . . .

But it was Gladen who had snapped on the light, who was stepping into his shorts and buckling on his pistol belt. Kennedy didn't bother to dress—just grabbed his pistol and a torch and ran outside. Fuller was still snoring.

The beam of another torch hit him in the face, travelled down his body.

"Ralph! What are you doing?"

"Thank God," he said. "Thank God that it wasn't you!"

"That it wasn't me who *what*?" she asked.

"Screamed. But what's happened?"

"Nothing," she said. "Well—almost nothing. The pair of lovebirds sat down just outside my tent and started chirruping away to each other, and I was just about to get up to tell them to pitch woo somewhere else when I heard her say, 'Oh, isn't he *cute*!' He said, 'He's like those animals we saw in Australia, last time we were on Earth ... What did they call them? Koala bears, wasn't it? Here-Teddy, Teddy, Teddy!' And *she* called, 'Teddy, Teddy, Teddy!' And then she screamed."

"You're not being paid ten cents a word for this," said Gladen.

"Come to the point, darling, before our nudist friend freezes to death."

"All right. As far as I can gather, this Teddy Bear of hers made a sudden, vicious and unprovoked attack and bit her on the neck. It's no more than a scratch. She's back in her tent now, and old Mother Tolliver is flapping around her like a hen with only one chick—and that one at death's store. I was coming to call you."

"I'd better see her," said Kennedy.

"You'd better get dressed first," Gladen told him. "Poor Rosie's had enough shocks for one night."

"While I'm getting dressed," said Kennedy, "slip into the boat and go to the medicine chest. Bring out one of the tubes labelled *All-Purpose Antibiotic*. The bite may be as trivial as Susan says—but it may be

badly infected."

"It is extremely unlikely that the micro-organisms of any one planet will be able to harm any alien species," said Gladen.

"I know—but whoever made the regulations concerning how medicine chests should be stocked didn't make 'em for fun. Get cracking!"

"Ay, ay, *sir*," said Gladen.

Susan followed him into the tent, talked to him while he dressed.

"Could it be serious?" she asked. "After all—there *are* such things as poisonous snakes . . ."

"Oddly enough," he said, "the ability to kill by poison seems to be confined entirely to reptiles and insects. I see no reason to assume that this planet is any exception to the general rule."

"There's one exception on Earth," she said. "A mammal, and it lives in the same country as the Koala bears that the Grants were yapping about. The platypus."

"It's got a spur, if I remember rightly," admitted Kennedy. "But it doesn't bite its victims. Let's go."

"What about *him*?" asked Susan, pointing one slim foot in the direction of the sleeping Fuller.

"Let him sleep on."

The Grants' tent was commodious enough—but now it seemed crowded, largely because of Mrs. Tolliver. She was one of those women always determined to make the most of any minor household calamity, one of those to whom there is almost no dividing line between a cut finger and decapitation. Grant was trying to get his well meaning visitors away.

"There's no danger," he kept saying. "There's absolutely no danger. If there was any poison in the wound there's none now—I sucked it out . . ."

Kennedy pushed his way past the Tollivers.

"Let me see," he said.

"If you *must*," growled Grant ungraciously.

The assistant purser knelt down beside the girl. She was half sitting, half lying on the bed, her back propped with extra cushions. She was pale, but seemed to be in no pain.

"Do you mind if I look?" asked Kennedy.

"It's only a scratch," she said.

The wound, indeed, was little more than a scratch, no more than a faint red line marring the smooth whiteness of her neck. There were no signs of either swelling or inflammation—but it was early yet for either to put in appearance.

Gladen knelt beside Kennedy.

"Here's that goo of yours," he said, handing Kennedy the tube.

"Thanks. Now, Mrs. Grant, I'm afraid that this is going to sting a little—but I can guarantee that it's sudden death to any and every micro-organism known to medical science . . ."

"It *does* sting," said Mrs. Grant in a tone of hurt bewilderment.

"I suppose you know what you're doing," said Grant.

"Poor dear," said Mrs. Tolliver. "Warm water was all it needed."

"You stay here, with your wife," said Kennedy to Grant. "The rest of you—and that means you, too, Mrs. Tolliver—get torches. We'll see if we can find the little brute that bit Mrs. Grant. It may be lurking around still."

They found the little brute without much trouble. It was about five yards from Susan Weldon's tent. It was dead—killed, thought Kennedy, by one blow that Grant had dealt it when it attacked his wife.

It was as much like a Koala bear as anything, but its fur was yellow and it had a bushy tail. It could not have died at once, thought Kennedy; the front of its body, from the mouth downwards, was wet and bedraggled. It must have sat there in the grass, choking and strangling, coughing its life out.

Now I'm getting sentimental about it, he thought.

He asked Gladen to hold the torch while he examined the creature's open mouth. It had teeth—small ones. There were no signs of poison fangs.

"She must have been petting it," he said. "She must have touched it in a tender place, and it went for

her, the same as a cat or dog will." He looked at his watch. "You might as well take over until four, Tolliver. Call Fuller then. And don't forget about the time of sunrise, if the sun comes up while you're on."

He picked up the animal by the tail.

"A fur coat for me?" asked Susan.

"Maybe. One day—if we can trap enough of these. I just want to keep it so I can have a better look at it in daylight."

Daylight came, and found a party of humans reluctant to arise to greet the dawn. Kennedy was as reluctant as any of them—but dared not show it. He almost drove the men to the part of the river that he had decided would be their bathing place. Susan, he was pleased to see, did the same regarding the women, not forgetting to complain that the ladies' bath was downstream from the men's.

Then there was breakfast, which they enjoyed in the open air. The powdered egg made a palatable enough omelette and the tea, brewed over an open fire instead of being made in a conventional pot, was good. Kennedy watched Rose Grant carefully, was pleased to see that she ate with a good appetite. The mark on her neck had almost vanished.

"What now?" asked Gladen, enjoying his after-breakfast cigarette.

"The camp chores we leave to the women," said Kennedy. "You, Major Fuller and Mr. Tolliver, will be camp guards. Gladen, Grant and myself will take a little walk into the forest."

"I think I should stay with Rose," said Grant.

"Mr. Grant," said Susan, "doubtless both Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Gladen would prefer to stay here with me—but they recognize that there's important work to be done."

"Talking of work," said Gladen, "I could be making a start on my next novel."

"Don't be silly, Stephen. You and Ralph are going out like two Stone Age types, to return loaded with meat to fill our bellies and furs to cover our nakedness. Talking of furs—where's our little friend of last night, Ralph?"

"In the tent still. I'll bring him out."

He did so.

"I still think he looks cute," said Rose Grant. "I still think that you shouldn't have hit him so hard, Bill."

"I wish that I'd hit him harder," growled Grant.

"Well," said Kennedy. "We're none of us biologists, unluckily. I suggest that you, Major, give this unfortunate animal a burial with full military honors. And I suggest, too, that if you see any more of 'em lurking around you open fire at once."

"I'll have my fur coat yet," said Susan. Then—"Hey! What about the washing up?"

"The Stone Age wife's privilege," said Gladen. "Where's Grant vanished to?"

"They're saying goodbye in their tent," said Kennedy.

"The *dears*" gushed Mrs. Tolliver.

"Of course, they haven't been married long," said her husband.

"Grant!" shouted Kennedy. "Grant!"

"All right, I'm coming. What's the rush?"

"We'll try to be back at twelve hundred hours," said Kennedy to Fuller. "That is, according to the time that our watches are set at now. If anything happens—if anything happens—loose off a shotgun; they make the biggest bang. We'll do the same. But if *we* do it, don't come a-running unless you're sure that the women are safe."

"They'll be safe with the *Army*," said Fuller.

"This is the Merchant Navy," said Kennedy foolishly.

"Well I know it," replied the Major.

"Look here, Fuller," said the assistant purser, "if you want to take charge—take charge. I'm getting tired of all this barracking."

"It's your job," said Fuller.

"Oh, all right. Where's Grant? Everybody got everything — weapons, knives, machete, compass? Then let's go."

The three men walked along the river bank, towards the forest.

"There's no planet I've seen," said Gladen, "as much like Earth as this one. This grass that we're walking over, for example. Those reeds . . ."

Grant pulled himself out of his sulking fit.

"Given almost identical conditions—mass, atmospheric content and density, humidity, temperature range and all the rest of it—evolution is bound to run on similar lines."

"Not necessarily," said Gladen. "Were you ever on Altair IV? It has all the conditions for Earth-type life forms—but every living thing has its chemistry based on silica."

"For all we know," contributed Kennedy, "the same might be true here, and everything might be quite inedible."

"I don't think so," said Gladen. "The plants haven't that peculiar crystalline shine." He stopped, bent down, plucked a blade of grass, put it to his mouth, nibbled it. "I've never tasted better!"

"Be careful!" snapped Kennedy. "That stuff may be a deadly poison!"

"And so what? Somebody has to be the guinea pig—and it might as well be me. I would suggest somebody recommend that lifeboats carry white mice or some similar animal—they'd be useful for the testing of local foodstuffs. H'm. Those berries look interesting."

"Don't be a damned fool!" said Kennedy.

"What care I how fair she be/ If she be not fair to me ... ." replied the writer.

"What are you yapping about?" asked Grant.

"None of your business—yet."

"And just what do you mean by that, Gladen? Are you insinuating that because the Weldon woman kicked you out of her tent last night you're thinking of making a pass at Rose? How big a fool can you be? She'd never look at another man but me."

"Methinks the gendeman doth protest too much," replied the writer. "All right, Grant, don't go flying

off the handle. I'll quote from the works of my old cobber Bill Shakespeare as much as I please." He turned to Kennedy. "Has the sobering thought ever crossed your mind that if we *do* have to build a new civilization here, I shall be the sole repository of Earth's greatest literature? I think you'd better organize a supply of flat slabs of granite for me, and a hammer and chisel."

"Oh, shut up!" snarled Grant.

A flight of birds flapped over, low, uttering discordant cries. Kennedy, who was carrying the shotgun, raised it—then let the muzzle of the weapon drop.

"What's wrong?" asked Gladen. "Coming over all humanitarian? Going to start a local branch of the Anti-Blood Sports League?"

Kennedy blushed.

"No. I remembered that we agreed that a shot was to be the signal that there was something amiss. If I fired—I'd alarm them back at the camp."

"I'd like to see fat Fuller charging out like the legendary U. S. Marines in full cry," commented Gladen. "All the same, young Kennedy, that was a rather backhanded system of signals you arranged."

"I know. Why didn't somebody point it out at the time?"

"Grant was too busy—and my mind was on other things. Fuller and Tolliver don't count. Or can't count. I often wonder which of the two is the dimmer."

"I suppose that if I weren't here," said Grant, "you'd be discussing me."

"Of course, dearie. There's nothing that Ralph and I like more than an all-girls-together session over the tea cups, with our hair down and our feet up. We have so much in common, haven't we, Ralph?"

"I've more in common with Grant at the moment," snapped Kennedy. "You may be enjoying this cats' corner, but I'm not. And we're supposed to be exploring, not gossiping."

"Yessir. Ay, ay, sir. Can I come back next trip, sir?"

"All right," laughed Kennedy. "You win. But let's pay a little more attention to the matter in hand."

"There's something in the grass," said Grant. "An animal . . ."

"A bird," corrected Gladen.

"It's dead," added Kennedy. He wrinkled his nose. "It's very dead."

"We can look at it, anyhow," said Gladen.

"As long as we don't touch it. The thing's probably crawling with bacteria."

"Of all shapes, colours and sizes—not to mention the odd virus or two. Ugly looking brute, isn't it? Like an Earthly vulture—only more so. I'm sorry that I have to keep on comparing things with their Tcrran counterparts—but, after all, I was brought up there."

"Local boy makes good," sneered Grant.

"Precisely. At least I'm not living on the money my father made as a New Morocco white slave trader."

"He was a theatrical agent," said Grant.

"Let's look at this bloody bird!" shouted Kennedy.

They looked at the bird. At first it seemed just a bird—large, limp, bedraggled. It was Kennedy who found the long stick and turned it over; who, by dint of poking and prodding, managed to stretch the wings to their full, four foot spread. It was then that they saw the perfectly formed claw on each wing tip.

"This must be a primitive world," said Kennedy slowly. "There may be dinosaurs—or things like 'em—in the forest."

"Could be," murmured Gladen. "Could be—but I don't think so. That mammal that Grant killed last night didn't seem any more primitive than, say, an Earthly dog or cat."

"But these claws ..."

"What about them? Oh, I know that on most planets with anything approximating to Earth-type fauna, Mother Nature, in her alleged wisdom, has allowed the wing tip claws to vanish. Once the birds could fly properly, once they had no need to make wild grabs for branches when they stalled, the claws were of no further use. But—any bird, no matter how well it flies, could always use an extra set of claws. Our friend here could handle things without having to stand on one leg to do it. It's the same with tails. We should never have been allowed to lose ours when we came down from the trees. A prehensile tail

would be of great value to civilized man."

"Oh, shut up!" snarled Grant.

Gladcn and Kennedy glared at him.

It was Kennedy who said, "What's wrong, Grant? You don't look well."

"I don't feel well. This headache. You two carry on—I'll get back to the camp."

"You might pass out on the way," said Kennedy. "We'll come with you."

In spite of Grant's indisposition they made the journey back in shorter time than it had taken them to come as far as they had done. As they approached the tents, the wrecked lifeboat, they saw only one figure, pacing slowly back and forth.

"It's Tolliver," decided Kennedy. "The women must be in the boat getting a meal together. Fuller, if I know him, is snatching a nap. He'll be quite pained when we catch him out."

"Or he's in the galley," said Gladen, "helping with lunch and having an occasional nibble of what's going to keep his strength up. 'In the Army,' he mimicked, 'we always built up a reserve of strength against any contingency.'"

"It's time we started living off the country," said Kennedy.

"Stop worrying, Ralph."

"You're back early," called Tolliver. He walked to meet them. "I took the fishing tackle to the river. I found some worms to use as bait. I caught three fine seven pounders—they look as near to trout as to be their twin brothers."

"Where's Rose?" demanded Grant. "Tell her that I'm back and that I'm going to lie down."

"She's in your tent, I think. She wasn't feeling too good herself."

"I'll get you something from the medicine chest," said Kennedy to Grant.

He saw that the young man was staggering. He and Gladen walked with him to the tent.

The flap was down. It was secured from the inside.

"Rose!" shouted Grant. "Open up! It's me!"

"She must be asleep," said Gladen.

"Rose! Open this damned flap!"

Grant tore himself from the supporting arms of Kennedy and Gladen. His strong fingers caught a fold in the material of the flap, ripped viciously. Grant made a noise that was half way between a snarl and a scream, that was like nothing human. He charged into the semi-darkness. Kennedy followed—and tripped and fell headlong. Gladen stumbled over Kennedy's body. There was the staccato rattle of a Minetti automatic, and another scream from Grant.

Kennedy scrambled to his feet, pulled his own pistol from its holster. He looked in horror at the tableau—at Grant, sprawled on the floor, the wound in his belly spilling blood and shredded intestines, at Rose Grant, half naked, sprawled obscenely across the bed, one side of her head blown off, at the fat Major, whose condition of undress would in other circumstances have been ludicrous, standing there with the still smoking automatic in his hand.

"I didn't mean to kill her," he was babbling. "But I had to shoot *him* in self defense!"

"Drop the gun," ordered Kennedy. Then, to Gladen, "Stand by the door and keep the women and Tolliver out—they must have heard the shooting."

He waited until Fuller had dropped his pistol, then stooped and picked up the pair of shorts that he had tripped over in the doorway, threw them to the fat man.

"You'd better put these on," he said. "If you're going to die—and I'm the law here—you'd better do it with some semblance of dignity."

Fuller dressed. With the resumption of his clothing something of his old manner came back.

"Let me explain, young man," he began.

"An explanation is just what I do want. If Grant had killed you it would have been justifiable homicide. But you killed Grant—and *his* wife."

"Susan," Gladen was saying at the doorway, "there's nothing you can do. Go away, please—and take Mr. and Mrs. Tolliver with you. We'll tell you all about it later."

"He came at me like a wild beast," cried Fuller. "He ... He attacked me with his teeth. Look!" His hand went up to the side of his neck, came away crimson. "I think that you should get this wound dressed before you do anything else."

"It can wait," said Kennedy. "I still want to know what happened."

"I told you. He came at us like a wild beast. Luckily my belt was by the bed. In the Army we were taught never to leave our weapons out of reach. My first shot wasn't enough. We struggled. One of the shots must have hit Rose."

"That much is obvious. *But what happened?*"

"It wasn't my fault, Kennedy. In the Army we were taught to respect another fellow's wife. But she made a play for me all the morning. And ... Well, damn it all, Kennedy, I'm still a young man, and a slice from a cut cake is never missed. And I knew that there was plenty of time before you were due back. If I'd known that Grant would come sneaking back hours before the time. . ."

"I think he's right," said Gladen. "It's pretty obvious that it wasn't rape."

"It's still murder," said Kennedy.

"No, I don't think so. It was self defense. Damn it all, man—haven't you ever been caught with your pants down by an irate husband?"

"No," said Kennedy.

"Then you've been lucky."

"I haven't played around with married women, Gladen."

"That's your misfortune. Let me tell you, anyhow, that if I'd been in Fuller's shoes—or out of his trousers—and I'd seen Grant coming for me with that expression on his face, I'd have grabbed the first weapon handy and let fly. This is my advice, Kennedy. Don't do anything rash. Don't add murder to murder. Let the law deal with Fuller such time as we're picked up."

"I suppose you're right," admitted Kennedy at last.

"Of course I'm right."

"Very well." He turned to Fuller. "Get this shambles cleared up. I suppose that we'll have to let the women in to lay out the corpses..."

"Mrs. Tolliver'll never forgive you if you don't," said Gladen.

Kennedy glared at him.

"Get this shambles cleared up, Fuller. Gladen and I will carry the bodies to another tent."

Kennedy read the solemn words over the grave—then, aided by Gladen and Tolliver, he shoveled the earth into the pit. Fuller was there, but standing well back and to one side. Susan and Mrs. Tolliver were mere, and Mrs. Tolliver's somehow indecent sobbing contrasted ill with the younger woman's dry-eyed, dignified yet real sorrow.

It was after dark when they sat down to their evening meal, which was served in Susan's tent. There had been considerable discussion about whether or not Fuller was to be allowed to eat with them. Kennedy was against it—but, he was rather surprised to discover, he was a minority of one. And he admitted to himself that his reasons for wishing to make a pariah of the unfortunate Fuller were emotional rather than intellectual.

It didn't really matter, anyhow, because Fuller died that night.

He went mad before he died. It started when he choked and spluttered over his tea and threw the cup from him. Tolliver, who was spattered by the hot liquid, said something in protest—and then went down under the Major's ferocious attack.

Tolliver would have died then, too, had it not been for the quickness of his wife. Moving with a speed incredible in one so gross she picked up a knife, flung herself on top of the struggling men and stabbed. She went on stabbing, long after the need to do so had passed. Kennedy and Gladen had to exert all of their strength to pull her off Fuller's body.

Tolliver got unsteadily to his feet. His face was bloody—but most of it was Fuller's blood. He said,

"I ... I think I'm going to be sick . . ."

Mrs. Tolliver turned on Kennedy, waving the knife.

"That . . . *beast!*" she screamed. "Poor Mr. Grant, and that poor little wife of his, and now poor George! And you're supposed to be protecting us!"

"He must have been mad," said Kennedy inadequately.

"Of course he was mad. A mad dog—that's all that he was. And you, you . . . *puppy*, let him sit down at table with us."

"We decided not to treat him as I criminal," said Susan Weldon coldly. "All of us. And I seem to remember your saying, at the time, that Mrs. Grant deserved all she got."

Mrs. Tolliver glared at her, then turned to her husband.

"Come with me, George," she said. "I'll get you cleaned up."

The big woman and the little man left the tent.

"Well?" asked Gladen, of nobody in particular.

"He was mad," said Kennedy. "I saw his face as he attacked little Tolliver. He was quite mad."

"Why?" asked Gladen.

"You tell me," said Kennedy. "You're the writer around here. You know what makes people tick."

Gladen said, "Fuller—for all his military rank—was a peaceful, law-abiding citizen. Anybody further removed from the brutal and licentious soldiery of fiction it would be hard to imagine. I well believe that it was Mrs. Grant who seduced him, and not the other way round. So—this peaceful, law-abiding citizen commits murder. Oh, it might have been in self defense, but it was not in very creditable circumstances. He brooded, as you or I might have brooded—you would—and it drove him round the bend."

"That's the way I'll write it up in the Log," said Kennedy. "Meanwhile—we'd better have another funeral. I don't suppose that the Tollivers will want to be among the mourners."

They got the shovels out again. Working by the light of two of the battery-powered lanterns they dug another grave, all of twenty feet from the grave occupied by the Grants. Kennedy was reading the Burial Service when the Tollivers returned from the river. Mrs. Tolliver interrupted him.

"Never mind that," she said roughly. "You'd better do something about George's face. That man Fuller *bit* him."

Gladen inspected the wound.

"It's hardly a scratch," he said.

"Even so, we'd better use the antibiotic," said Kennedy. "Carry on filling the grave, Gladen—I'll dress Mr. Tolliver's wound now. Then we'll meet in our tent for a conference."

When the minor wound had been dressed, when everybody was seated in the tent, Kennedy said, "I may be wrong. I hope I am. But it seems to me that there's something in the very air of this place that breeds murder. That's the danger here—nothing from outside, but only ourselves."

"And what are you doing about it?" asked Gladen.

"This is my idea. From now on we drop all ideas of modesty. From now on we all sleep in the one tent, so that if any one of us be seized by homicidal mania the others will be on hand to drag him off his victim."

"No," said Gladen. "That'd make things worse, I think. If we're all cooped up in the same tent, then tempers are going to become even more frayed than they are already. We shall increase the risk of murder, not lessen it. What I propose is this—that the two women sleep in the lifeboat—they should be safe enough behind the airlock doors. The three of us will carry on as before, splitting the night into watches."

"That's all very well," objected Kennedy, "but if any of us should go the same way as Grant or Fuller . . ."

"What reason is there that any of us should?" asked the writer. "Grant saw something that made him see red, that stripped the veneer of civilization from him in one microsecond. Fuller reacted as primitive man would have reacted—faced with a danger from which he could not run, he fought back. Successfully. Then remorse set in, and he wasn't tough enough to take it. Of course, I grant that I might have grounds for trying to murder *you*, Kennedy . . ."

"That was not funny," said Susan Weldon.

"It wasn't meant to be. But you needn't worry, my dear. I'm too civilized to go around murdering people."

"That's one of the things that's wrong with you," she said.

"You want it all ways, don't you?" he rebuked her. "Civilized when you want me civilized, uncivilized when you don't."

"Shut up, Stephen," she snapped.

"That'll be all from both of you," said Kennedy. "We'll turn to right away to get the inside of the boat fixed up as a bedroom for the ladies, and when that's finished we'll set our watches."

"I don't want to sleep in the boat," said Mrs. Tolliver.

"It will be the safest place," said Kennedy.

At last he, Tolliver, Gladen and Susan Weldon were able to convince her that this was so.

Gladen called Kennedy when it was time for his spell of duty.

He waited until the assistant purser was well out of earshot from the tent, in which Tolliver was still sleeping, before he started to talk.

"I hope," he said, "that you don't have such a wearing time as I did."

"What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? you ask. There am I, walking up and down, minding my own business, when suddenly a pair of female arms are flung around my neck and a big, wet mouth is planted on mine. Oh, no, you needn't worry. It wasn't our Susan. I shouldn't have minded *that*."

"Not Mrs. Tolliver?" asked Kennedy.

"Yes, Mrs. Tolliver. Old Ma Tolliver in person. She slobbered all over me, and told me that her dear George had never been able to give her a child, and that it was up to us to become the Adam and Eve of this new world. I declined the honor as politely as I could—which wasn't very. Then I looked at my watch and saw that it was time to call you—and that gave me a good excuse to break the clinch."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know. Prowling around, I suppose. *You'd* better watch out."

"She doesn't like me," said Kennedy thankfully.

"I didn't think that she liked me," replied the other. "But love's a wonderful thing ..."

"What was that?" asked Kennedy abruptly.

Both men stiffened, both men pulled the pistols from their holsters. Something was coming towards them—something that was crawling noisily and clumsily through the long grass, something that made a spine-chilling whimpering sound as it crawled. The beams of two torches stabbed the darkness. They fell on a man—if George Tolliver could still be called a man. Something had mangled him dreadfully around the face and neck, so that it seemed a miracle that he was still living, still moving. He got somehow to his feet, glaring at Kennedy and Gladen with glazed eyes. He tottered.

It was Kennedy who conquered his revulsion, who made a step forward to catch him before he fell. Tolliver snarled, and leapt to meet him. It seemed that the long, yellow teeth were the only recognisable features in that ruined face.

It was Gladen who fired—who, standing a little to one side, poured a stream of the explosive slivers into the body of the madman. Tolliver was knocked backwards, away from Kennedy. He fell on his back. He twitched twice, then did not move again.

"Who . . . What did it?" stammered Kennedy. "It must have been some wild beast. But why should he turn on us?"

There was a scream from the lifeboat.

They ran across the rough ground, panting, stumbling. The airlock doors of the boat were open, a light was showing inside. Kennedy was first up the ladder, first to see the struggle that raged in the living compartment. Mrs. Tolliver was huge, and she was muscled like a man, like a strong man—but Susan Weldon, for all her apparent fragility, was no weakling. She was fighting for her life, fighting to keep the other woman's blood smeared mouth from her throat. She could not spare the breath for any further outcry.

Kennedy did not hesitate. He knew, now, who it was that had almost killed George Tolliver, that had left him for dead. Moving fast, yet with a certain deliberation, he slid down the sloping deck, decreasing the range so that there would be no possible chance of his missing. He opened fire.

Then he was pulling the huge, heavy body of Mrs. Tolliver off Susan. Then the girl was in his arms, and he was kissing her desperately. He forgot Gladen. He forgot all those who had already died. All that was worth remembering, all that was worth knowing was in his arms.

It was Gladen who, at last, interrupted them, saying, "Get out of here, you two. I'll get the mess cleared up."

He had been in love before, and so had she. He had been in love before—but never before had he felt this aching intensity of desire. At times he almost wondered if it were entirely natural, but he did not let it worry him. Neither did it worry him that Gladen was doing all the work around the camp—tending the solar-power screen and the batteries, sending out the distress call at the scheduled times, even writing up the Log. At times he heard the rattle of the older man's typewriter, assumed that he was working off his frustrations by literary productivity.

Then came the morning when Kennedy and Susan, still in bed, heard the unmistakable crack of a

Minetti automatic. Kennedy climbed into his shorts, picked up his own pistol and ran from the tent. Susan, throwing a light robe around herself, followed him. Everything was silent outside. Kennedy felt a chilly foreboding, walked slowly to the tent that had once been occupied by the Grants, that now housed Gladen.

Gladen was dead.

There was no doubt as to the cause of death—even just a single shot from a Minetti can lay bare the entire chest cavity, can expose the exploded heart among the wreckage of splintered ribs. The sight was not a pretty one.

"I'll handle this," said Kennedy shakily. "Get back to the tent, darling. I'll look after everything."

"But why?" she asked. "Why did he do it?"

"I can guess," replied Kennedy. "Perhaps, in his shoes, I'd have done the same."

"Need we have been so ... selfish?" she said softly. "He must have been lonely."

She left him then, and he went into the tent to do what had to be done.

Gladen's typewriter stood on a folding table. Beside it was a little pile of manuscript. A suicide note? wondered Kennedy. He walked to the table, picked up the top sheet. It was addressed to him with the words: RALPH, THIS IS FOR YOUR EYES ONLY. READ IT, THEN ACT AS YOU SEE FIT. Kennedy picked up the second sheet.

"I'm a coward," he read, "to tell you what I have to tell you in this manner. But, perhaps, you would have paid no heed to me had I told you in any other way. It is certain that I'd never have been able to distract your attention from Susan had I not resorted to this somewhat drastic method. And it's *essential* that you know what all this is about. You're a responsible sort of bloke, and I can rely upon you to take action.

"I'll come to the point right away. *You're not immune*. Neither of you is immune. Nor am—was?—I. I thought that I was at first, that the three of us were—but latterly my natural feelings of sexual jealousy have been augmented in a most frightening manner and I've been feeling a lust towards Susan that is quite foreign to my nature. My attitude towards sex has always been that I can take it or leave it; I've never cared much either way.

Now I feel that I must have it—or else. *This 'else'*, this way out that I am taking, is better than murder and rape.

"And still I haven't come to the point. I'd better waste no more time. The . . . The *thing* has reached the stage when it has to be passed on somehow, to somebody. The fact that the only available hosts are already fully occupied, are already busy infecting and re-infecting each other, doesn't matter. (Perhaps a certain mixing of the strains is part of the process.) Anyhow, I can recognize the symptoms in myself. I tried to drink a glass of water just now. (Remember poor Fuller and his tea?) There's the excessive salivation. (Remember that little bear-thing that we thought that Grant had killed?) There's the foreboding of impending dissolution. (That's not surprising—but I'm going to *go out my way*.)

"I did a lot of research for my last novel. It was historical—late Nineteenth Century. I wanted one of my characters to die rather messily, and in a way typical of the times, so I browsed through medical text books of the period and found all sorts of really fancy diseases that haven't been known for generations. The one that most appealed to me was rabies. It could almost have been made to measure for one of the malignant, intelligent viruses that the science fiction boys are always playing around with. The fascinating thing about it was the way in which it was passed on.

"Look at it this way. Consider malaria. It was a fever, and it was often fatal. It was carried from human host to human host by a little blood-sucking insect called the mosquito—which was a host itself. The mosquito, when feeding, pierced the victim's skin with its proboscis and, first of all, injected saliva into the tiny wound to dilute the blood. But this is the point. The micro-organism responsible for malaria was transmitted from one host to the next quite by chance and entirely by the normal gratification of the mosquito's normal appetite. The same could be said about typhus, transmitted from rat to man by another parasitical arthropod called the flea.

"Then there was syphilis, one of the so-called venereal diseases. It was transmitted from man to

woman, and from woman to man, during coitus. Once again, only normal appetites were involved.

"With rabies, however, a strong element of the abnormal was involved. The disease affected the brain of the host—dogs were the most common carriers, although bats and other mammals were known to spread the infection—inducing a murderous frenzy. The afflicted animal would attack anything, everything and everybody in its path and the virus of the disease would be implanted into the wounds made by the animal's teeth, carried there by the abundant saliva. It was all very complicated. It was all far more complicated than the usual story of virus and vector, inasmuch as the vector was driven into utterly abnormal behaviour so that it could act as such.

"This local virus works on the same lines—or more so.

"The bear-thing bit Mrs. Grant. Mrs. Grant behaved in an utterly abnormal manner—yes, I'm sure that it was abnormal—with Fuller. She must have infected him, as well as her husband. (I don't think that with this virus the bite, the actual breaking of skin, is necessary; intimate contact is enough.) Then Fuller, when he attacked Tolliver, infected him. He, Tolliver, infected his wife. She, that night when she tried to seduce (or rape) me, infected me. Later she infected Susan, and she . . .

"But there's no need to write about it, Kennedy, and I'd sooner not.

"I'm almost finished now. I'll say what I have to say and then make my exit. Think about what I've said, Kennedy. Face facts. It looks as though you and Susan *will* be the Adams and Eve of a new race on this planet—and by all indications it will be a race of rapists and murderers. I may be wrong. It could be that some sort of symbiosis will work itself out over the generations, or some sort of immunity or near-immunity. Unluckily I'm no biologist, and neither are you.

"All I can say—selfishly—is that I'm glad that the responsibility is yours and not mine. I'm rather sorry that I shan't be around to see how you handle it."

"You bastard!" said Kennedy bitterly. Then—"I'm sorry, Gladen. You did right to tell me what you knew, what you guessed. You didn't tell me what to do—but that's not your job."

Moving mechanically he found a shovel, dug a grave just outside the tent. He pulled the shattered body out to the hole, rolled it in. He filled in the grave, stamped the loose earth down tight. He walked slowly to the river to wash.

I can feel the beginnings of it, he thought. The fear of water. How much is real, how much imagination after reading Gladen's testament? How long will Susan and I be able to carry on the way we are doing? Is our love—or lust—permanent, or will it give way to the other sort of lust? Shall I wake up one morning to find her teeth in my throat, or mine in hers?

The girl was waiting for him in the tent. He looked at her with coldly objective eyes. She was obviously pregnant. Would the child, he wondered, be born with the virus, already in its blood or would the poison come from its mother's milk, its mother's kisses?

"Have you ... ?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I've buried him."

"Poor Stephen," she said softly. "He must have been so very lonely. Did he leave any message?"

"No," said Kennedy.

"You're lying," she said.

He felt dislike—or was it more than dislike?—flare within his mind. She has the child, he thought. I've fulfilled my biological function. Will this cause her to hate me, to want to kill me, rather than to love me?

"What did he say?" she asked coldly.

"He left no message," repeated Kennedy.

What long teeth she has, thought Kennedy. And sharp . . .

"Why are you baring your teeth like that?" she asked.

"I can smile, can't I?" he snarled.

"What is there to smile about?" she demanded.

What, indeed? he thought. Do I kill the two of us—the three of us, rather—or do I kill just myself? Do I give her and the child a chance to live, incestuously to breed a race of monsters? Will they be

monsters? Will the child be a boy? What chance is there that she and the child will survive when I am gone?

"Why is your face working so?" she asked. "Are you mad?"

"Yes. I am. And so are you."

"What do you mean?"

"How long is it since you had a bath? How much are you drinking these days?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Will you answer my questions?"

"Will you answer mine?"

She started to say something, but he never heard what it was. Everything was blotted out by a red haze of hate—hate such as he had never known could exist. There was a low growling sound in his ears; with faint surprise he realized that he was making it. He knew dimly that he was advancing on her with hands outstretched to clutch and rend, with bared teeth. Somebody screamed. He never knew if it was her, or himself.

Somehow she managed to evade his hands, pushed past him, ran clumsily out of the tent. Turning to follow, he tripped and fell. When he recovered his feet she was half way to the forest.

He ran in pursuit. It was like the dreams that he had sometimes about flying, it seemed that he was skimming over the grass with effortless ease. He was gaining, but not gaining fast enough. When he reached the trees he had lost sight of her.

"I must find her," he was muttering. "I must find her."

He ran on blindly, staggered back from a blow that felt as though it had pushed in his face. Raging, he attacked the tree against which he had blundered, then, with a return to something approaching sanity, fell back from the unyielding, insensate trunk and stood there, looking around him.

Something white caught his eye—it was a shred of material from her robe snagged on a thorn. A little further on there was another one. He growled again, with satisfaction. Again he started to run, but more cautiously, alert for further signs of her passage. The blood from his nose ran into his open, gasping mouth, mingled with the saliva running down his chin.

Something roared, but he paid it no heed. There were so many noises in his ears that one more meant nothing. He ran on, and on, ignoring the deep scratches scored into his unprotected skin by the thorny bushes, the occasional heavy blows that he sustained as he blundered into trees. Once or twice he lost the trail and cast around in circles, whining like a dog. He must find her. That was all he knew. He must find her.

He was out of the forest, under the open sky. The small part of his mind that retained some vestige of sanity told him that she must have circled, that she was making her way back to the camp. He saw her then, a white figure half way to the gleaming hemispheres of the tents.

*She* is going to escape in the boat, he thought. She mustn't. I must catch her and kill her before she reaches the boat.

She tripped and fell. She regained her feet, but he was on her. He caught her shoulders, pulled her round so that she was facing him. He ignored the clawed fingers that reached for his face, brought his mouth, his teeth down to the white neck in which a vein pulsed.

The noises in his ears were loud, but over them he heard her screaming. She struggled viciously. When, suddenly, she went limp he was taken unawares and almost dropped her.

A second later, just before he was able to sink his teeth in her neck, he did drop her, overwhelmed by a choking dizziness charged with rage and frustration, and fell beside her. He realized dimly, before he lost consciousness, that she had regained her knees, and now was bending over him.

"We thought we'd lost you," said the doctor. "The girl did a wizard job of nursing you, but you were still delirious when we landed—you were violent when we tried to get you aboard ship. We were all relieved when we were able to put you in the deep freeze."

Kennedy looked around the plainly furnished little cabin. He listened to the faint sounds—the whine and throb of machinery, the sound of feet on metal decks—that told of a ship in deep space. He looked at the elderly, uniformed man who was sitting by his bunk.

"I still can't believe it," he said. "Put me in the picture again, will you?"

The doctor smiled.

"We picked up your signals. Our navigator worked out where they were coming from. We proceeded straight to the planetary system indicated, threw ourselves into an orbit around the world on which you had landed, succeeded, with the aid of our detectors, in locating your boat. Nobody answered our signals, so our Captain decided that there must be something wrong and gave orders that our landing

party carry arms—including, as you know, anesthetic gas grenades. Our boat landed by your camp, which appeared to be deserted. Then we saw you burst out of your tent, running like a mad thing, with Miss Weldon after you. We thought at first that you had seen or heard us landing and were hurrying to greet us. When you attacked us we were astounded. Then we managed to make sense of what Miss Weldon was shouting, and our third pilot, who was in charge of the boat, had the presence of mind to use the grenade thrower. You were lucky, too, that we had such a thing with us—if the Old Man hadn't had one broken out of the consignment of military equipment, and if we'd had only the usual lifeboat firearms, we'd have shot to kill. We could see even then that you had the human disease."

"The *what*?"

"Let me take it in order," the doctor said. "That manuscript we found in Gladen's tent gave us all the other clues we needed. You and the girl were rushed back to the ship—you partially recovered consciousness en route and gave us a lot of trouble, so we stashed you in my deep freeze. The Old Man gave me time to organize a hunting party. We caught six of those little bears, two of which carried the virus. With the local fauna, by the way, it seems to work in cycles—love during the breeding season, hate at other times. But I had already deduced that, as soon as I'd run a complement-fixation test. It always works like that when there is a breeding season, but of course in man there isn't—or else the breeding season is year-round, take your pick of definitions."

"But it's fatal," Kennedy said.

"Not at all. It's quite self-limiting; the fatalities are inflicted by the victims on each other. And the severity of the disease depends on how it's transmitted. Miss Weldon got it purely through the mucous membranes—but you got it through a break in the skin. The latter is much the more virulent form; that's why she was able to recover faster than you did, and nurse you for a week before we landed. Mr. Gladen was wrong about that, and it's a doubly sad affair that he thought he had to kill himself. He probably never had the disease at all—after all, he was raised on Earth, and very probably was hyper-immune. His imagination betrayed him."

"Now that's enough hints," Kennedy said. "The human disease—Gladen raised on Earth—what are you driving at?"

"This is the human disease, Mr. Kennedy," the doctor said regretfully. "It is common to all Earthlike planets. Early man had a good immunity to it—it seldom made him overtly mad: he simply had these emotional seizures in the same way he had periodic colds. But most of humanity had been a long time off Earth, and the inherited immunity seldom lasts beyond the first six weeks of life. Six of you were pushovers for the virus; Mr. Gladen, very probably, was not."

"As for you, luck was with you. I had no anti-serum for the disease aboard, but I was able to prepare some from the two infected bears that we caught. As you see, it works." He chuckled. "You were like a patient out of time, Mr. Kennedy—a man suffering under a curse."

"What is the name of this disease?" Kennedy said in a smothered voice.

"The official name would mean nothing to you. The two syndromes it produces have the oldest names in the universe. Love and hate."

The cabin door opened.

"I heard that, doctor," said Susan. "But you produced only half a cure."

"I didn't use all the anti-serum," said the doctor, but neither Kennedy nor the girl heard him. He shrugged his shoulders and left the cabin.