

A. Bertram Chandler is the dean of Australia's science fiction writers and returns to this magazine after far too long an absence with a puzzle: How could a planetary colony based on religious ideals have regressed to primitive squalor? What caused—

THE LONG FALL

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Illustrated by STEVE FABIAN

“YOU ARE getting the feel of the ship, Captain?” asked the Baroness.

Grimes, with a mouthful of tea, could not reply at once. He hastily swallowed the almost scalding fluid and was embarrassed by the distinctly audible gurgle. He put the fragile cup down in its saucer with too much of a clatter.

"Perhaps," he admitted cautiously, "the ship is getting the feel of me . . . He realised that she was regarding him even more coldly than usual and hastily added, "Your Excellency."

"But surely, to a spaceman of your experience, a ship is only a ship," she said.

You know bloody well that this one isn't, he thought mutinously.

To begin with, a normal ship is not built of gold—even though that precious metal, its molecular structure rearranged by the Electran metallurgists, is superior to any of the alloys usually utilised by naval architects. And a normal ship is not automated to the extent that *The Far Traveller* was. A normal ship does not possess a mind of her own—although many generations of spacemen, and of air-men and seamen before them, have half believed that such is the case. A normal ship, come to that, does not have a Master who is on the run from the long, punitive arm of the Interstellar Federation's Survey Service as ex-Commander Grimes, lately captain of IFSS *Discovery*, most certainly was.

A normal ship does not boast an Owner's Suite decorated and furnished in a style appropriate to the salon of a well-heeled titled lady in Eighteenth Century France ...

Michelle, Baroness d'Estang, was more than merely well-heeled. She was filthy rich; as a member of the financial elite who had made their home on El Dorado she could not possibly have been anything else. Her spaceyacht, *The Far Traveller*, had been built to her own specifications by Astronautics and Electronics of Electra, a yard specialising in the construction of non-standard vessels. The Baroness had not intended to employ any crew whatsoever; the pilot-computer was programmed to cope with almost every possible astronautical problem. But Lloyd's of London had refused to supply insurance cover unless a qualified, flesh-and-blood Master were on the Register. A Captain Billinger had been the first such and he had been happy to resign during the vessel's stay on Botany Bay. Grimes, anxious to get away from a planet on which his popularity had diminished, had replaced him.

So here he was, seated on a spindly-legged chair in the Baroness's boudoir, sipping tea that was far too weak for his taste. He was attired in a uniform that he hated, all purple and gold, that would have been more appropriate to a Strauss operetta than to a spaceship—but one of the conditions of his employment was that he wear his employer's livery. What rankled most was that his captaincy was only nominal. To begin with, the Baroness knew far too much. As Billinger had coarsely said, she shoved her tits into everything. And then the ship herself had a brain—a real brain, although nonorganic—and a personality. Definitely female it was, and . . . bitchy. Billinger had referred to it—her—as Big Sister. The nickname was apt. After lift-off from Botany Bay she had set her own trajectory for Farhaven, one of the comparatively recently rediscovered Lost Colonies that the Baroness was visiting in search for material for

her doctoral thesis.

And what did *she*, a typical rich bitch from El Dorado, want a doctor-ate for? Grimes wondered, regarding her over the gold rim of his teacup. She was ornamental enough without any academic titles. She was languidly at ease on her chaise lounge, attired, as usual, in a filmy robe that revealed more than it concealed. Her dark au-burn hair was braided into a coronet in which clusters of diamonds sparkled. She could have been posing for a portrait of a decadent aristocrat from almost any period of Man's long history. Decadent she may have looked—but Grimes knew full well that the rulers of El Dorado were tough, ruthless and utterly selfish.

She said, looking steadily at Grimes with her big, violet eyes, "We have decided to let you handle the land-ing."

He replied, as nastily as he dared, "I am sure that the ship can manage by herself quite nicely."

She said, "But you are being paid—handsomely, I may add—to do a job, Captain Grimes. And this Farhaven is a world without radio, without Aerospace Control. During your years in command in the Survey Service your brain has been pro-grammed to deal with such situations. The ship's brain has not been adequately programmed in that respect." She frowned. "As you already know, I have brought such deficiencies in programming to the attention of the builders on Electra. Fortunately the guarantee has not yet ex-pired."

The golden robot butler refilled her cup from a golden teapot, added cream from a golden jug, sugar from a golden bowl. Grimes declined more tea.

He said, "Please excuse me, Your Excellency. Since I am to make the landing, I should like to view again the records made by *Epsilon Pavonis* and *Investigator* ...

"You may leave, Captain," said the Baroness.

Grimes rose from his chair, bowed stiffly, went up to his far from uncomfortable quarters.

HE SAT BEFORE the playmaster in his day cabin watching the pictures on the screen, the charts, the presentation of data. As he had done before, as soon as he had learned of The Far Traveller's destination, he tried to put himself in the shoes of Captain Lentigan of *Epsilon Pavonis*, one of the Interstellar Transport Commission's tramps, who had first stumbled upon this planet. *Epsilon Pavonis* had been off trajectory, with a malfunctioning Mannschenn Drive. As far as Lentigan was concerned Farhaven had been merely a conveniently situated world on which to set down to carry out repairs and recalibration. He was surprised to find human inhabitants, descendants of the crew and passengers from the long-ago missing *Lode Venturer*. He had reported his discovery. Then *Investigator* was sent to make a proper survey. Her captain, a Commander Belton, had run into trouble. And as Farhaven was of no commercial or strategic importance to any of the spacefaring races its people were left to stew in their own juice.

Grimes allowed himself to wonder what they would make—if anything—of the Baroness, himself and Big Sister ...

GRIMES SAT in the captain's chair in *The Far Traveller's* control room. The Baroness occupied the chair that, in a normal ship, would have been the seat of the second in command. She was dressed in standard spacewoman's uniform—white shorts and shirt, but without insignia. She needed no trappings of rank; in the functional attire she was no longer the decadent aristocrat but still, nonetheless, the aristocrat.

The yacht was not equipped with robot probes—a glaring omission that, said the Baroness, would cost that shipyard on Electra dearly. There were, however, sounding rockets, a necessity when landing on worlds with no spaceport facilities; a streamer of smoke is better than nothing when there are no Aerospace Control reports on wind direction and velocity—and at least as good as a primitive windsock.

The Far Traveller dropped steadily down through Farhaven's atmosphere. She was in bright sunlight although the terrain below her was still dark. Grimes had told Big Sister that he wanted to land

very shortly after sunrise—which was S.O.P. for the Survey Service. The almost level rays of a rising luminary show up every smallest irregularity of a surface and, when a landing is being made on a strange world, there is a full day after the set-down to make initial explorations and to get settled in.

Grimes, during the preliminary orbitings of Farhaven, had selected his landing site—an unforested plain near the mouth of one of the great rivers, a stream that according to the charts was called the Jordan. *Epsilon Pavonis* had set down there. So had *Investigator*. A little way upriver was what Captain Lentigan had referred to as a small town and Commander Belton as a large village. Neither Lentigan nor Belton had reported that the natives were hostile, their troubles had been with their own crews. None of the material that Grimes had seen went into great detail but he could fill in the gaps from his imagination. He had experienced his own troubles with his own crew on Botany Bay.

Big Sister broke into his thoughts. She said, her voice metallic yet feminine, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere, "I would suggest that I fire the first sounding rocket, Captain."

"Fire at will," ordered Grimes.

(In a normal ship some alleged humourist would have whispered, "Who's Will?")

He watched in the screen the arrow of fire and smoke streaking downwards. Its trail hardly wavered.

"Ideal conditions, Captain," commented the Baroness.

"It would seem so, Your Excellency," agreed Grimes.

But from his own, highly personal viewpoint they were far from ideal. Over many years he had regarded his pipe as an essential adjunct to shiphandling—and for those many years he had been absolute monarch in his own control room. But the Baroness neither smoked nor approved of smoking in her presence.

He allowed his attention to stray briefly from the controls to what he could see of the sunlit hemisphere through the viewports. Farhaven was a wildly beautiful world but, save for patches of fertility along the rivers and coasts, it was a barren beauty. To the east, beyond the narrow sea, reared great, jagged pinnacles, ice-tipped, and to the west similar peaks were already scintillant in the first rays of the rising sun. Unless there were considerable mineral wealth about all that this planet would be good for would be a holiday resort—and it was too far from anywhere for the idea to be attractive to those shipping companies involved in the tourist trade.

Big Sister said, "I would suggest, Captain, that you pay more attention to your controls. It was, after all, with some reluctance that I agreed to let you handle the landing."

Grimes felt his prominent ears burning as he blushed furiously. He thought, *I'd like five minutes alone back on Electra with the bastard who programmed this brass bitch . . .* He saw, in the screen, that the sounding rocket had hit and that its luminous smoke was rising directly upwards. But it was thinning, would not last much longer.

He ordered, "Fire two."

Big Sister said, "It is not necessary."

"Fire Two!" snapped Grimes. He added, grudgingly, "Wind can rise suddenly, especially just after sunrise, especially in country like this."

"Fire two," acknowledged Big Sister sullenly as the second rocket streaked downwards, hitting just as the first one expired.

And there was wind, Grimes noted with smug satisfaction, springing up with the dawn. The luminescent pillar of smoke wavered then streamed seawards. Grimes applied lateral thrust, kept the flaring rocket head-in the centre of the stern view screen.

The sun came up relative to the land below the ship, topping the jagged rim of the range to the eastward. The plain toward which *The Far Traveller* was dropping flared into colour—blue-green with splotches of gold and of scarlet, outcroppings of white from which extended long, sharply defined black shadows. *Boulders . . .* thought Grimes, stepping up the magnification of the screen. Yes, boulders, and the red and yellow patches must be clumps of ground-hugging flowers since they cast no shadows. The second rocket, still smoking, was almost in the centre of one of the scarlet patches; there was no unevenness of the ground there to worry about.

The ship dropped steadily. Grimes was obliged to make frequent small adjustments to the lateral thrust controls; that wind was unsteady, gusting, veering, backing. He reduced the rate of descent until *The Far Traveller* was almost hovering.

"I am not made of glass, you know," remarked Big Sister conversationally.

"I had hoped to make the landing some time before noon," said the Baroness.

Grimes tried to ignore them both. *That bloody wind!* he thought. *Why can't it make up its mind which way to blow?*

He was down at last—and the ship, suddenly and inexplicably, was tilted a full fifteen degrees from the vertical. She hung there—and then, with slow deliberation, righted herself, far more slowly than she should have done with the lateral thrust that Grimes was applying. There was no real danger, only discomfort and, for Grimes, considerable embarrassment. He had always prided himself on his shiphandling and this was the first time that he had been guilty of such a bungled landing.

When things had stopped rattling and creaking the Baroness asked with cold sarcasm, "Was that necessary, Captain?"

Before he could think of a reply Big Sister said, "Captain Grimes was overly cautious. I would have come down fast instead of letting the wind play around with me like a toy balloon. I would have dropped and then applied vertical thrust at the last moment."

And you, you cast-iron, gold-plated bitch, thought Grimes, *deliberately made a balls-up of my landing . . .*

"Perhaps, Captain," said the Baroness, "it will be advisable to allow the ship to handle her own lift-offs and set-downs from now on."

The way she said it there wasn't any "perhaps" about it.

BIG SISTER carried out the routine tests for habitability. The captains of *Epsilon Pavonis* and *Investigator* had reported the atmosphere better than merely breathable, the water suitable for drinking as well as for washing in and sailing ships on, a total absence of any micro-organisms capable of causing even mild discomfort to humans, let alone sickness or death. Nonetheless, caution is always essential. Bacilli and viruses can mutate—and on Farhaven, after the landing of *Lode Venturer*, there had been established a new and sizeable niche in the ecology, the bodies of the original colonists and their descendants, just crying out to be occupied. The final tests, however, would have to wait until such time as there was a colonist available for examination.

Big Sister said, "You may now disembark. But I would recommend . . .

Grimes said, "You seem to forget that I was once a Survey Service captain. Landings on strange planets were part of my job."

"You are no longer in the Survey Service, Captain," Big Sister reminded him.

The Baroness smiled maliciously. "I suppose that we may as well avail ourselves of Captain Grimes' wide range of experience. Quite possibly he was far better at trampling roughshod over exotic terrain than bringing ships, to a gentle set-down prior to the extra-vehicular activities." She looked away from Grimes. "Big Sister, please have the pinnacle waiting for us. We shall board it from the ground. Oh, and an escort of six general purpose robots. Armed."

"Am I to assume, Your Excellency," asked Grimes stiffly, "that you are placing yourself in command of the landing party?"

"Of course, Captain. May I remind you that your authority, such as it is, does not extend as much as one millimetre beyond the shell of this ship?"

Grimes did not reply. He watched her sullenly as she unbuckled herself

From her seat, left the control room.. He unsnapped his safety belt, got up, went down to his quarters immediately below and abaft control. He found that his robot stewardess had already laid out a uniform of tough khaki twill with shoulder boards of gold on purple, gold-braided cap, boots, a belt with attached holsters. He checked the weapons. These were a Minetti projectile pistol—as it happened his favourite personal weapon—and a hand laser. They would do. He changed slowly. Before he was from

the too familiar voice came from the speaker of the playmaster in his day cabin, "Captain Grimes, Her Excellency is waiting for you."

He buckled on the belt, went out to the axial shaft, rode the elevator down to the after airlock. He walked down the golden ramp to the blue-green grass. The pinnacle was there, a slim, torpedo shape of burnished gold. The Baroness was there, in khaki shirt and breeches and high boots, looking like a White Huntress out of some archaic adventure movie. The general purpose robots were there, drawn up in a stiff line, staring at nothing. From belts about their splendidly proportioned metal bodies depended an assortment of hand weapons.

"We are waiting," said the Baroness. "Now that you are here, will you get the show on the road?"

"I thought you said that you were to be in command, Your Excellency," Grimes reminded her.

"I am in command, but I do not believe in keeping a dog and doing my own barking," she told him. Grimes flushed angrily. "Your orders?" he asked.

"To take this pinnacle to the settlement mentioned by *Epsilon Pavonis* and *Investigator*. Then, when Grimes made no immediate move, "Don't just stand there. *Do something*."

He turned to the escorting robots, tried to imagine that they were Survey Service marines.

"Embark!" he ordered sharply.

The automata turned as one, strode in single file to the pinnacle's airlock, stepped aboard.

He said to the Baroness, "After you, Your Excellency."

He followed her into the pinnacle. She took the co-pilot's seat in the control cab. The robots were already standing aft, in the main cabin. The airlock doors shut while he was still making his way to his own chair. He noted that the Baroness had not touched the console before her. He sighed. This was Big Sister again, showing him who was really in command.

He buckled himself into his seat. Before he was finished the voice of the ship came from the transceiver, "Proceed when you are ready, Captain Grimes."

The inertial drive was already running, in neutral. He switched to vertical thrust, lifted. The river was ahead; in the bright sunlight it was a ribbon of gleaming gold winding over the blue-green grasslands. There was altogether too much gold in his life these days he thought. He flew until he was directly over the wide stream then turned to port, proceeding inland at an altitude of about fifteen metres. Ahead of him were the distant, towering ranges, their glittering peaks sharp against the clear sky.

The Baroness was not talkative. Neither was Grimes. He thought, *If those were real marines back there they'd be making enough chatter for all of us.*

He concentrated on his piloting. The river banks were higher now, rocky, sheer, with explosions of green and gold and scarlet and purple where flowering shrubs had taken hold in cracks and crevices. He considered lifting the pinnacle to above cliff-top level then decided against it. While he was here he might as well enjoy the scenery. There was little enough else to enjoy.

The canyon became deeper, narrower, more tortuous. And then, after Grimes had put the pinnacle through an almost right angled turn, it widened. The actual river bed was still relatively narrow but, strung on it like a bead, was an oval valley, lushly fertile, bounded by sheer red cliffs unbroken save for where the stream flowed in and out.

It was as described in the two reports. The village was not. It was utterly deserted, its houses delapidated, many of them apparently destroyed by fire at some past date. Shrubs and saplings were thrusting up through the charred ruins.

Grimes set the controls for hovering, took the binoculars from their box to study the squalid settlement. There were few houses of more than one storey. The structural material was mud or clay, reinforced with crude frames of timber. The windows were unglazed but from some of them filthy rags, the remains of blinds or curtains, fluttered listlessly in some faint stirring of the air.

The Baroness had found her own glasses, was staring through them.

She said softly, "A truly Lost Colony . . . And we have come too late to find any survivors . . .

A voice—that voice!—came from the transceiver.

"May I suggest, Your Excellency, that you observe the cliff face to the north of your present position?"

Big Sister, thought Grimes, was still watching. She would have her sensors in and about the pinnacle and every one of the robots was no more—and no less—than an extension of herself.

He turned the boat about its short axis to facilitate observation. He and the Baroness studied the forbidding wall of red rock. It was pitted with dark holes. The mouths of caves? He thought that he could detect motion in some of them. Animals? And then a human figure appeared from one of the apertures and walked slowly along a narrow ledge to the next cave mouth. It was naked. It was a woman, not old but not young, with long, un-kempt hair that might, after a thorough wash, have been blonde. The most amazing thing about her was her apparent lack of interest in the strange flying machine that was shattering the peace of the valley with its cacophonous engine beat. Although it was quiet inside the pinnacle—its builders had been lavish with sonic insulation to protect the delicate ears of its aristocratic owner—the racket outside, with the ahythmic clangour of the inertial drive echoing and re-echoing between the cliff faces, must have been deafening.

Then she did turn to look at the noisy intruder. Somehow her attitude conveyed the impression that she was not very interested, that she wished the clattering thing would go away. Grimes studied her through his binoculars. Her face, which might have been pretty if cleaned and given a few slight cosmetic touches, was that of a sleepwalker. The skin of her body, under the dirt, was pallid. That was strange. People who habitually went naked, such as the Arcadian naturists, were invariably deeply tanned.

She turned again, walked slowly into the cave mouth.

Three children, two girls and a boy, came out on to another ledge. They were as unkempt as the woman, equally incurious. They picked their way down a narrow pathway to ground level, walked slowly to one of the low bushes. They stood around it, picking things—nuts? berries?—from its branches, thrusting them into their mouths.

The Baroness said, addressing Grimes almost as though he were a fellow human being, "As you know, Social Evolution in the Lost Colonies is the title of my thesis. But this is devolution. From spaceship to village of mud huts . . . From mud huts to caves . . .

"Caves," said Grimes, "could be better than mud huts. Less up-keep ...

"Indeed?" Her voice was cold again. "Put us down, please. Close to those children but not close enough to alarm them."

If they were going to be alarmed, thought Grimes, they would have been alarmed already. Surely they must have seen the pinnacle, must be hearing it. He landed about ten metres from the filthy urchins. They did not look away from whatever it was that they were doing.

The airlock doors opened and the little ladder automatically extended. The Baroness got up from her seat. Grimes put out a hand to detain her. She scornfully brushed it aside.

He said, "Wait, Your Excellency. The robots should disembark first, to draw the fire. If any."

"If any," she repeated derisively.

She pushed past him, jumped down from the airlock to the ground. He followed her. The robots filed out on the heels of the humans. Grimes stood there taking stock, both pistols drawn, the Minetti in his right hand and the laser in his left. He stared up at the cliff face, at the caves. There were no indications of any hostile ac-tion. The Baroness sneered silently. Grimes returned his weapons to their holsters.

"Are you sure," she asked, "that you don't want to shoot those chil-dren?"

Grimes made no reply, followed her as she walked slowly towards the little savages clustered around the shrub. The GP robots followed him. The children ignored the intruders, just went on stolidly plucking berries—if berries they were—and thrusting them into their mouths.

They were unprepossessing brats skinny, dirty, with scabbed knees and elbows, long, tangled, filthy hair. And they stank, a sour effluvium that made Grimes want to breathe through his mouth rather than through his nose. He saw the Baroness's nostrils wrinkle. His own felt like airtight doors the instant after a hull-piercing missile strike.

He looked at the berries that were growing so profusely on the bush. Berries? Elongated, bright purple berries? But berries do not run to a multiplicity of wriggling legs and twitching antennae. Berries do not squirm as they are inserted into hun-gry mouths. The eaters chewed busily while a thin, purple ichor dribbled down their filth-encrusted chins.

It was no worse than eating oysters, thought Grimes, trying to rationalise his way out of impending nausea. Or witchetty grubs ...

"Children," said the Baroness in a clear, rather too sweet voice.

They ignored her.

"Children," she repeated, her voice louder, not so sweet.

They ignored her.

She looked at Grimes. Her expression said, *Do something*.

He put out a hand to grasp the boy's shoulder. He was careful not to grip hard or painfully. This required no effort; his own skin was shrinking from contact with that greasy, discoloured integument. He managed to turn the child to face him and the Baroness. Then he was at a loss for anything to say. "Take me to your leader," did not seem right somehow.

"Please take us to your parents," said the Baroness.

The boy went on chewing and swallowing, then spat out a wad of masticated chitin from which spines and hairs still protruded. It landed on the toe of Grimes' right boot. He kicked it away in revulsion.

"Take us to your parents," repeated the Baroness.

"Wha?"

"Your parents." Slowly, patiently, "Your mother. Your father."

"Momma. Fadder. No wake."

"He says," volunteered Grimes, that his mother and father are sleeping.

She said, "A truly blinding glimpse of the obvious, Captain. But, of course, you are an expert on first contacts, are you not? Then may I ask why it did not occur to you to bring along bright trinkets, beads and mirrors and the like, as gifts to people who are no better than savages?"

"I doubt if they could bear to look at themselves in a mirror, Your Excellency," said Grimes.

"Very, very funny. But you are not employed as court jester."

Slowly she removed her watch from her left wrist. It was a beautiful piece of work, jewel rather than instrument—although it was fantastically accurate and in the extremely unlikely event of *The Far Traveller's* chronometers all becoming nonoperational could have been used for navigational purposes. Its golden bracelet was a fragile seeming chain, its thin case was set with diamonds that flashed dazzlingly in the sunlight. She dangled it temptingly before the boy's eyes. He ignored it. He shrugged out of Grimes' grip, pulled another of the repulsive grubs from the bush and thrust it into his open mouth.

But one of the girls was more interested. She turned, made a sudden snatch for the trinket. The Baroness was too quick for her, whipping it up and out of reach.

"Gimme!" squealed the unlovely child. "Petty! Petty! Gimme!"

"Take . . . us . . . enunciated the Baroness slowly and carefully, "to . . . Momma . . . Fadder . . ."

"Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!"

The Baroness repeated her request. It seemed to be getting through. The girl scowled, then slowly and deliberately gathered a double handful of the wriggling purple horrors from the branches of the bush. Then, reluctantly, she led the way to the cliff face. She paused frequently to look back. With her busily working mouth, with that sickening slime oozing from between her lips she was not a pretty sight.

She reached the foot of the rock wall. There was a ledge running diagonally up its face, less than a metre wide, a natural ramp. She paused, looked back at Grimes and the Baroness, at the marching robots. An expression that could have been doubt flickered across her sharp featured face. The Baroness waved the watch so that it flashed enticingly in the sunlight. The girl made a beckoning gesture then started up the path.

The Baroness followed, almost as surefooted as her guide. Grimes followed the Baroness. The ledge was narrow, its surface uneven. There was no handhold and he realised unhappily that on some stretches he would actually be leaning outwards, over a sheer drop, as he climbed. The robots began to come after Grimes. There was a sharp *crack!* as rock broke away from the edge of the path, a clatter of falling fragments.

The Baroness called, "Robots! Wait for us on the ground!" Then, to Grimes, "You should have realised, Captain, that their weight would be too much for this ledge."

They climbed—the half grown girl, the Baroness, Grimes.

They negotiated, a difficult crossing of the natural ramp with a more or less horizontal ledge. Fortunately the cliff face here was scarred with cracks, affording foot- and handholds.

They climbed.

Once Grimes paused to look back and down—at the gleaming, golden pinnace, at the equally refulgent robots. It was an exaggeration he knew, but they looked to him like ants standing beside a pencil dropped on to the grass. He was not, after all; so very high above ground level—only high enough to be reasonably sure of breaking his neck if he missed his footing and fell.

After that he kept on looking up and ahead—at the Baroness's shapely rump working in the sweat-stained khaki of her breeches, at the meagre buttocks of the naked girl. Neither spectacle was particularly erotic.

They climbed, crossing another horizontal ledge and then, eventually, turning off the diagonal path on to a third one. It was as narrow as the natural ramp.

Ahead and to the left was the mouth of one of the caves. The girl slipped into it; the Baroness followed. Grimes followed her. Less than two metres inside the entrance was an almost right-angled turn. The Baroness asked, "Did you bring a torch?" Then, "But of course not. That would have required some foresight on your part."

Grimes, saying nothing, pulled his laser pistol from its holster, thumbed the selector switch to broadest beam. It would serve as an electric torch although wasteful of energy and potentially dangerous.

But it was not required, although it took a little time for his eyes to become used to the dim illumination after the bright sunshine outside. There was light here—wan, eerie, cold. It came from the obscenely bloated masses of fungus dependent from the low cavern roof, growing in bulbous clusters from the rocky walls. The girl led them on, her thin body pallidly luminescent. And there were other bodies sprawled on the rock floor, men and woman, naked, sleeping . . .

Or dead . . . thought Grimes.

No, not dead. One of them, a grotesquely obese female, stirred and whinnied softly, stretched out a fat arm to a nearby clump of the fungus. She broke off a large hunk, stuffed it into her mouth, making a disgusting gobbling sound, swallowing noisily. She sighed gustily, flopped back to her supine position. She snored.

There were other noises—eructations, a brief trickling sound, a splattering. And there was the . . . *stink*. Grimes trod in something. He knew what it was without looking. Sight is not the only sense.

Still the girl led them through the noisome cave. They passed adults, adolescents, children, babies, all sprawled in their own filth. They came at last to a couple with limbs intertwined in a ghastly parody of physical love.

"Momma! Fadder!" shrilled the girl triumphantly. "Gimme!"

The Baroness handed the watch to her. It was no longer the pretty toy that it had been when first offered. In this lighting it could have been fabricated from lustreless lead, from beads of dull glass.

The girl took it, stared at it, then flung it from her. "No pretty!" she squawled. "No pretty!"

She pulled a piece of the glowing fungus from the wall, stuffed it into her mouth. She whimpered as she chewed it then subsided on to the rock floor beside her parents.

"My watch," said the Baroness to Grimes. "Find it." After rather too long a time she added, "Please."

Grimes used his laser pistol cautiously, directing its beam upwards while looking in the direction from which the brief tinkle of the fall of the watch had come. He saw it shining there against the rock wall. He made his way to it, picked it up. It had dropped into a pool of some filth.

The Baroness said, "I am not touching it again until it has been sterilised. Put it in your pocket. And now, will you try to wake these people?"

Grimes pocketed the watch, re-turned the laser pistol to its holster. He squatted by the sleeping couple. He forced himself to touch the unclean skin of the man's bare shoulder. He gave a tentative tap, then another.

"I said *wake* him, not *pet* him!" said the Baroness. "Shake him!"

Grimes shook the sleeper, rather more viciously than he had intended. The man slid off the supine body of the woman, fell on to his side. He twitched like a sleeping dog afflicted by a bad dream. Dull eyes opened, peered out through the long, matted hair. Bearded lips parted.

"Go 'way. Go 'way."

"We have come a long distance to see you . . . said the Baroness.

"S'wot?" asked the man without any display of interest. "S'wot?" He le-vered himself to a half sitting position, broke off a piece of the omnipre-sent fungus from the near wall, brought it towards his mouth.

"Stop him!" ordered the Baroness.

Grimes caught the other's thin wrist in his right hand, forced it down. The man struggled feebly.

"I am the Baroness d'Estang," announced that lady.

So what? thought Grimes.

"S'wot?" demanded the man. Then, to Grimes, "Leggo. Leggo o' me you bassar!"

Grimes said, "We'll not get much from these people."

She asked, "Are you an expert? I find it hard to believe that you are expert in anything."

The man's free hand flashed up, the fingers clawing for Grimes' eyes. Grimes let go of the other's wrist, using both his own hands to protect his face. The cave denizen at once abandoned his attack and crammed the handful of fungus into his mouth, swallowing it without chewing. He immediately lapsed into unconsciousness.

"Now look what you've done!" snarled the Baroness.

"I didn't do anything," said Grimes.

"That was the trouble!" she said. She snarled again, wordlessly. Then, "All right. We will leave this . . . pigsty and return when we are better prepared. You will collect samples of the fungus so that it may be analysed aboard the ship and an effective antidote prepared. Be careful not to touch the stuff with your bare hands."

He prodded a protuberance of the nearest growth with the barrel of his Minetti. He hated so to misuse a cherished firearm but it was the only tool he had. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, extracting from its folds the Baroness's watch, putting it down carefully on the floor. He wrapped the cloth around the sample of fungus, making sure that there were at least three thicknesses of cloth between it and his skin. He re-moved his cap, placed the untidy parcel in it.

He followed his employer out to the open air.

AFTER THEY had returned to ground level Grimes ordered one of the robots to get specimens of the purple grubs from one of the bushes, also samples of the leaves upon which the revolting things were feeding. Then the party reboarded the pinnacle. Grimes took the craft straight up with the automatic cameras in action. The pictures would be of interest and value—the deserted village, the faint, rectangular outlines on the surrounding terrain showing where fields had once been cultivated, the cliff face with the dark mouths of the caves. No humans would be seen on these films; the children who had been feeding from the bushes had gone back in-side.

The flight back to *The Far Traveller* was direct and fast. Grimes felt—and was—filthy, wanting nothing so much as a long, hot shower and a change into clean clothing: And the Baroness? Whatever he was feeling she must be feeling too, doubled and re-doubled, in spades. The robots, who should have been doing the dirty work, were as gleamingly immaculate as when they had left the yacht.

They landed by the ramp. The Baroness was first out of the pinnacle and up the gangway almost before Grimes had finished unbuckling his seat belt. By the time that he was aboard she was nowhere to be seen.

He saw her discarded clothing in a little heap on the deck of the airlock chamber. Big Sister said, "I suggest, Captain, that you disrobe before coming inside the ship . . .

He growled, "I was house-broken at least thirty years before you were programmed."

He stripped, throwing his own soiled khaki on top of the Baroness's gear. He thought wryly, *And that's the closest I'll ever get to the bitch . . .* Nonetheless he was not sorry to get his clothes off; they

were distinctly odorous. He walked naked into the elevator cage, was carried up to his quarters. The robot stewardess, the literally golden girl, awaited him there. She already had the shower running in his bathroom, removed her skimpy uniform to stand under the hot water with him, to soap and to scrub him. To an outside observer not knowing that the perfectly formed female was only a machine the spectacle would have seemed very erotic. Grimes wondered who was washing the Baroness's back—her butler or her lady's maid? He hoped that whichever it was was using a stiff brush ...

He asked his own servant, "Aren't you afraid you'll rust?"

She replied humourlessly, "Gold does not corrode." She turned the water off. "You are now sterile."

I am as far as you're concerned, he thought.

He stood for a few seconds in the blast of hot air and then, clean and dry, stepped into his sleeping cabin. He looked with distaste at the gold and purple livery laid out on the bed. Reluctantly he climbed into it. As he did up the last button the voice of Big Sister said, "You will now join the Baroness in her salon."

Captain Grimes filled and lit his pipe. He badly needed a smoke.

Big Sister said, "Her Excellency is waiting for you."

Grimes inhaled a satisfying lungful. Big Sister repeated, "Her Excellency is waiting for you."

Grimes decided to allow himself three more inhalations.

Big Sister said yet again, "Her Excellency is waiting for you."

Grimes said, "What I tell you three times is true."

Big Sister said, "What I tell you is true."

Grimes put his pipe in an ashtray. The stewardess produced a little golden atomiser, sprayed him with a fragrant mist.

He said, "Now I reek like a whore's garret."

Big Sister said, "You do not, now, reek like an incinerator."

Grimes sighed and left his quarters.

THE BARONESS said coldly, "You took your time getting here, Captain. I suppose that you were obliged to indulge yourself by sucking on that vile comforter of yours. Be seated."

Grimes lowered himself cautiously into one of the frail-seeming chairs.

"I thought that we would view the film of the orgy again."

"The film of the orgy, Your Excellency? I didn't know that there was one."

The voice of Big Sister came from the Baroness's playmaster, an instrument that contrived to look as TriVi set would have looked had such devices been in existence during the reign of Louis XIV of France.

"Like the other records made on and about this planet it was obtained from the archives of the Survey Service on Lindisfarne. It is classified—for viewing by officers with the rank of Survey Service captain and above. You, Captain Grimes, resigned from the Survey Service with the rank of commander only."

"Let us not split hairs," said the Baroness generously. "Although he is only a civilian shipmaster Captain Grimes should be accorded his courtesy title. The film, please."

The screen of the playmaster came alive, glowing with light and colour. There was the village that they had visited—but a living settlement, not a crumbling ghost town. There were the people—reasonably clean, brightly clothed. There were the spacemen and spacemen from the survey ship. And there was music—the insistent throb and rattle of little drums, the squealing of flutes. There was something odd about it, a tune and a rhythm that did not accord with these circumstances. Grimes suddenly recognised the Moody and Sankey lilt. He started to sing softly to the familiar yet subtly distorted melody.

"Yes, we'll gather at the river,

The beautiful, the beautiful river ...

"Must you, Captain?" asked the Baroness coldly.

He shut up.

It must have been quite a party, he thought. There were animal carcasses roasting over big open fires. Pigs? And what had happened to *them*? There were great earthenware pots of some liquor being passed around. There were huge platters heaped with amorphous hunks of . . . something, something which, even in the ruddy firelight, emanated a faint blue glow. And the music. Another familiar hymn tune . . . The words formed in Grimes' mind:

*Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven,
Feed me till I want no more ...*

The party was getting rough—not rough in the sense implying brawls but rough inasmuch as inhibitions were being shed along with clothing. It was fast developing into an orgy. Grimes was no prude—but he watched with nauseated disgust three children who could not have been older than eight or nine, two girls and a boy, fondling a fat, naked, supine crewman.

Then Commander Belton strode on to the scene. Grimes knew him slightly. After all these years he was still only a commander, was officer in charge of a third class Survey Service base on Pogg's Landing, a dreary, un-important planet in the Shaula Sector. A sour, embittered man . . . Looking at the playmaster screen Grimes realised that Belton had changed very little over three decades.

Belton looked not only sour and embittered but righteously furious. Behind him were a couple of lieutenant commanders and a captain of marines, all trying to look virtuous. Behind them were twelve marines in full battle order.

Belton shuddered away from a plump, nude girl who, a jug of liquor in one hand, a platter of the fungus in the other, was trying to tempt him. He barked an order. His officers and the marines opened fire with stun-guns. Those revellers who were still on their feet fell, twitching. Grimes saw a hapless woman topple into one of the fires. He watched the marines dragging their unconscious shipmates towards the waiting pinnacles, caring little what injuries were inflicted in the process. Finally there was a scuffle around the camera itself. It was knocked over and kicked around—but still recorded a series of shots of heavily booted feet trampling on sprawling naked bodies.

And that was it.

"Well?" asked the Baroness, arching her fine eyebrows.

"These things happen," said Grimes. "After all, Your Excellency, a spaceship isn't a Sunday School."

"But the colony should have been," she told him. "Surely you must be aware that the founders of the Starhaven colony were old members of a religious sect, the True Followers. And the True Followers were notorious for their puritanism."

"There were spacemen too, Your Excellency—and spacemen are usually agnostics."

"Not always. It is a matter of record that the Master of the *Lode Venturer* was a True Follower. So were most of his officers."

"Beliefs change, or are lost, over the generations," said Grimes.

Then Big Sister's voice came from the playmaster. "Analysis of the samples has been completed, Your Excellency. Insofar as the larval stage of the indigenous arthropod is concerned there is protein, of course. Amino acids. Salts. A high concentration of sugars. It is my opinion that the children of this world regard those larvae as their counterparts on more privileged planets regard candy.

"And now, the fungus. It supplies all the nutritional needs of the people of Starhaven. By itself it constitutes a perfect balanced diet. Analysis of the human excreta adhering to the boots of yourself and Captain Grimes indicates that its donors were in a good state of physical health . . . "Physical health . . . interjected the Baroness.

"Yes, Your Excellency. Analysis of the fungus indicates that it is, but for one thing, a perfect food . . . Formulae appeared on the screen.

C_2H_5OH ... $(C_2H_5)_{20}$. . .

"Alcohol," said Grimes. "Some people might think that its presence would make the food really perfect."

"The ways of organic intelligences are, at times, strange to me," admitted Big Sister. "But, to continue. There are other, very complex molecules present but, so far as I can determine, they are non-toxic . . .

"And there was no evidence of dis-ease in the feces?" asked the Baro-ness. "No indication of breakdown of liver, kidneys or other organs?"

"No, Your Excellency."

"Blotting paper," said Grimes.

"*Blotting paper*?" asked the Baro-ness.

"A spaceman's expression, Your Ex-cellency. It means that if you take plenty of solid food—preferably rich and fatty—with your liquor there's no damage done. That fungus must be its own blotting paper ...

"It could be so," she admitted. "There are some people who would regard this world as a paradise—eternal alcoholic euphoria without unpleasant consequences."

"There were babies in that cave," said Grimes, changing the subject.

"What of it, Captain?"

"To have babies you must have childbirth."

"A blinding glimpse of the obvious. But I see what you are driving at and I think I have the answer. Before the colonists retreated from their village to the caves there must have been doctors, midwives. And those doctors and midwives are still functioning."

"In those conditions?" he demanded, horrified.

"In those conditions," she replied. "Do not forget, Captain, that thee human race contrived not only to sur-vive but to multiply long before there were such things as spotlessly clean maternity wards in hospitals literally bulging with superscientific gadgetry, long before every passing year saw its fresh crop of wonder drugs. And perhaps those doctors and midwives will pass on their skills to the coming generations—in which case the colony stands a very good chance of survival. Perhaps they will not—but even then the colony could survive.

"Nonetheless," she went on, "I must discover the reason for this quite fantastic devolution. There must be records of some kind in the vil-lage."

"There are no records," said Big Sister. "I sent the general purpose robots back to make a thorough search of the settlement, Your Excel-lency. It seems certain that the ar-chives were housed in one of the buildings destroyed by fire. There are no records."

"There could be records," said the Baroness slowly, "in the memories of those living in the caves. I must try to devise some sort of bribe, re-ward . . . Some sort of pay-ment . . . What would induce these people to talk freely?"

That pretty watch hadn't been much good, thought Grimes.

"My watch," said the Baroness suddenly. "Have you cleaned it for me, Big Sister? Did it need repair?"

"Your watch, Your Excellency?"

"Yes. My watch. It was a gift from the Duke of . . . No matter. The cap-tain brought it back in his pocket. It had been dropped into a pool of . . . ordure."

"There was no watch in any of Captain Grimes' pockets, Your Excel-lency."

Grimes remembered then. The thing had been wrapped in his hand-kerchief. Then he had removed it, to use the handkerchief to parcel up the specimen of fungus. He must have left it in the cave ...

He said as much. He added, "When we go back tomorrow morning I'll find it."

The Baroness had been almost friendly. Now she regarded him with contemptuous hostility. She snapped, "You will go hack to the cave and find it *now*."

GRIMES went up to his quarters to change into his khakis; he did not think that even the Baroness would wish him to scrabble around in that noisome cavern wearing his purple and gold finery. When he left the ship it was almost sunset. The pin-nace was awaiting him at the foot of the ramp. There were no general purpose robots to escort him. He had assumed that Big Sister would lay them on as a matter of course. She had not but he could not be bothered to make an issue of it.

He boarded the pinnacle. It began to lift even before he was in the pilot's chair. Big Sister knew the way, he thought. He was content to be a passenger. He filled and lit his pipe. The more or less (rather

less than more) fumes had a soothing effect. His seething needed soothing, he thought. He might be only an em-ployee but still he was a shipmaster, a captain. To be ordered around aboard his own vessel was much too much. And all over a mere toy, no matter how expensive, a gaudy trinket that the Baroness had been willing enough to hand to that revolting female brat.

The pinnacle knew the way. This was the third time that it was making the trip from the yacht to the valley. It had no real brain of its own but, when it was not functioning as an ex-tension of Big Sister, possessed a memory and was at least as intelligent as the average insect.

It flew directly to the village while Grimes sat and fumed, literally and figuratively. When it landed darkness was already thick in the shadow of the high cliffs.

"Illuminate the path," ordered Grimes.

As he unsnapped his seat belt he saw through the viewports the cliff face suddenly aglow in the beams of the pinnacle's searchlights, the brightest of all of which outlined one of the dark cave openings. So that was where he had to go. He passed through the little airlock, jumped down to the damp grass. He walked to the cliff face, came to the natural ramp. He hesitated briefly. It had been a dangerous climb—for a non--mountaineer—even in daylight, in company. But, he was obliged to ad-mit, he could not complain about lack of illumination.

He made his slow and careful way upwards, hugging the rock face. He had one or two nasty moments as he negotiated the really awkward parts. Nonetheless he made steady progress although he was sweating profusely when he reached the cave mouth. This time he had brought an electric torch with him. He switched it on as he entered the natural tunnel.

Did these people, he wondered disgustedly, spend all their time sleeping? It seemed like it. Sleeping, and eating, and copulating. But the paradises of some of the Terran religions had not been so much different—although not, surely, the paradise of a sect such as the True Followers ...

The bright beam of the torch played over the nude bodies sprawled in their obscene postures, over the clumps of fungus that looked almost like growths of coral—or naked brains. These glowed more brightly after the beam of his torch had played over them.

Carefully picking his way through the sleepers he made his way deeper into the cave. He was watching for the glint of gems, of bright metal. He did not see the slim arm that stretched out from an apparently slumbering body, the long-fingered hand that closed about his ankle. He fell, heavily. His torch was jolted from his grasp, flared briefly as it crashed on to the rock floor, went out. His face smashed into something soft and pulpy. His mouth was open to cry out and large portion of the semi-fluid mess was forced into it. He gagged—then realised that the in-voluntary mouthful was not what, at first, he had thought it was.

The fungus, he realised.

It tasted good.

It tasted more than merely good.

There was a meatiness, a sweet-ness, a spiciness and, he thought, considerable alcoholic content. It would do no harm, he considered, if he savoured the pleasant taste a few seconds more before spitting it out. After all, he rationalised, this was sci-entific research, wasn't it? And Big Sister had given the fungus full marks as a source of nourishment. He chewed experimentally. In spite of its mushiness the flesh possessed texture, fibres and nodules that broke between his teeth, that released aromatic oils which were to the original taste as a Vintage Burgundy is to a very ordi-nary *vin ordinaire*.

Before he realised what he was doing he swallowed.

The second mouthful of the fungus was more voluntary than otherwise.

He was conscious of a weight on his back, of long hair falling around his head. Languidly he tried to turn over, finally succeeded in spite of the mul-tiplicity of (it seemed) naked arms and legs that were imprisoning him.

He looked up into the face that was looking down into his.

Why, he thought, she's beautiful ...

He recognised her.

She was the woman whom he and the Baroness had seen emerge briefly from the caves. *Then* her

overall filth-iness had made the biggest impres-sion. *Now* he was unaware of the dirt on her body, the tangles in her hair. She was no more (and no less) than a desirable woman, an available woman. He knew that she was looking on him as a desirable, available man. After all the weeks cooped up aboard *The Far Traveller* with an attractive female at whom he could look, but must not touch, the temptation was strong, too strong.

She kissed him on the mouth.

Her breath was sweet and spicy, in-toxicating.

She was woman and he was man, and once he was out of his confining clothing they were one.

The tension-releasing explosion came.

She slumped against him, over him, her nipples brushing his face. Slowly, slowly, she rolled off him. He realised dimly that her hand was against his mouth. It held a large piece of the fungus. He took it from her, chewed and swallowed. It was even better than his first taste of it had been.

He drifted into sleep.

HE DREAMED.

He was a child.

He was one of the *Lode Venturer's* survivors who had made the long trek south from the vicinity of the north magnetic pole. He could remember the straggling column of men, women and children loaded with supplies from the wrecked ship—food, sacks of precious Terran seed grain, sealed stasis containers of the fertilised ova of livestock, the 'incubator broken down into portable components, the parts of the solar power generator.

He was one of *Lode Venturer's* people who had survived the trek as well as the crash landing, who had found the valley, who had helped to till the fields and plant the grain, who had worked at setting up the incubat-ing equipment Although only a child he had shared the fears of his elders as the precious store of provisions dwindled, the knowledge that, in spite of strict rationing, it would not last until the harvest, until the in-cubators produced the progenitors of future herds of meat animals.

He remembered the day of the drawing of lots.

There were the losers—three young men, a middle-aged woman and another one who was little more than a girl—standing there, frightened yet somehow proud, while further lots were drawn to decide who would be executioner and butcher. A fierce ar-gument had developed—some of the women claiming, belatedly, that females of childbearing age should have been exempt from the first lot-tery. While this was going on another boy—the son of the middle-aged woman—came down from the caves to which he had run rather than stay to watch his mother slaughtered. He was bearing an armful of the fungus.

"Food!" he was shouting. "Food! I have tasted it and it is good!"

They had all sung a hymn of thanksgiving then, grateful for their delivery from what, no matter how necessary, would have been a ghastly sin.

Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven,

Feed me till I want no more, want no more,

Feed me till I want no more ...

He awoke then, drifting slowly up from the warm, deep sleep. He did what he had to do, relieving the pres-sure on bowels and bladder as he lay there. He wondered dimly why people ever went to the trouble of fabricating elaborate sanitary arrangements. The fungus needed his body wastes. He needed the fungus. It was all so simple.

He reached out and grabbed another handful of the intoxicating stuff. The woman—or another woman—was with him. While he was still eating they coupled.

He slept.

HE DREAMED.

He was the Pastor, the leader of the settlement.

He had looked over the arrangements for the feast and all was well. There was an ample supply of the strong liquor brewed and distilled from grain—the last harvest had been a good one, surplus to food requirements. Pigs had been slaughtered and dressed, ready for the roasting. Great baskets of fungus had been brought down from the caves. Since it had been discovered that it thrived on human manure it had proliferated, spreading from the original cavern through the entire subterranean complex. Perhaps it had changed, too. It seemed that with every passing year its flavour had improved. At first—he seemed to remember—it had been almost tasteless, although filling and nutritious.

But now . . .

The guests from the ship, clattering through the night sky in their noisy flying boats, were dropping down to the village. He hoped that there would not be the same trouble as there had been with the guests from that other ship, the one with the odd name, *Epsilon Pavonis*. Of course, it had not been the guests themselves who had made the trouble; it had been their captain. But *this* captain, he had been told, was a True Follower. All should be well.

All was well.

The love feast, the music, the dancing, the singing of the old, familiar hymns ...

And the love ...

And surely the manna, the gift from the all-wise, all-loving God of the True Followers, was better than ever it had been. What need was there, after all, for the corn liquor, the roast pig?

Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven

Feed me till I want no more ...

He walked slowly through and among the revellers, watching benevolently the fleshly intermingling of his own people and those from the starship. It was . . . *good*. Everything was good. He exchanged a few words with the Survey Service petty officer who, dutifully operating his equipment, was making a visual and sound recording of the feats. He wondered briefly why the man was amused when he said that the pictures and the music would be acclaimed when presented in the tabernacles of the True Followers on Earth and other planets. He looked at the group at which the camera was aimed—a fat, naked, supine crewman being fondled by three children. It was a charming scene.

And why the strong sensation of déjà vu?

Why the brief, gut-wrenching disgust?

He heard the distant hammering in the still, warm air, growing louder and louder. More boats—what did they call them? pinnacles?—from the ship, he thought. Perhaps the captain himself, Commander Belton, was coming. He would be pleased to see how well his fellow True Followers on this distant world had kept the faith ...

Then the dream became a night-mare.

There were screams and shouts. There was fighting.

There were armed men discharging their weapons indiscriminately, firing on both their own shipmates and the colonists.

There was his confrontation with a tall, gaunt, stiffly uniformed man. (Again the flash of déjà vu.)

There were the bitter, angry words.

"True Followers, you call yourselves? I understood that my men had been invited to a religious service. And I find a disgusting orgy in progress . . ."

"But we are True Followers. We were saved. God Himself sent his manna to save us from committing the deadliest sin of all. Here! Taste! Eat and believe!"

And a hand smashed viciously down, striking the proffered manna from his grasp, as Belton shouted, "Keep that filthy muck away from me!"

He saw the muzzle of a pistol pointing at him, saw the flare of energy that jolted him into oblivion.

HE SLOWLY DRIFTED up into semi-consciousness. There was a woman.

There was more of the manna. Again he slept.

HE DREAMED.

He dreamed that a bright, harsh light was beating through his closed eyelids, that something hard was nudging him in the ribs.

He opened his eyes, immediately shut them again before he was blinded.

A voice, a somehow familiar female voice, was saying, "Captain Grimes, Captain Grimes! Wake up, damn you!" And then, in a whisper, "Oh, if you could only see yourself!"

He muttered, "Go 'way. Go 'way:"

"Captain Grimes! John!" There was a hand on his shoulder, shaking him. He opened his eyes again. She had put her torch on the ground so that he now saw her by its reflected light. She was a woman. She was beautiful—but so was everybody in this enchanted cavern.

She said, "I must get you out of here."

Why? he wondered. *Why?*

She got her hands under his naked shoulders, tried to lift him. He got his hands about her shoulders, pulled her down. She struggled, kneeling him in the groin. He let go and she stood up, stepping away from him. He was dimly aware that the shirt was torn from her upper body. In spite of the pain that she had inflicted upon him he felt a surge of desire, reached out for her exposed breasts. She stepped back another pace.

He wanted her, but to get up to go after her was too much trouble.

But he muttered, "Do'n' go. . . Do'n' go . . . I . . . want you. . . Always . . . wanted . . . you . . ." Her face was glistening oddly.

Dimly he realised that she was weeping.

She said, "Not *here*. Not *now*. Pull yourself together. Come back to the ship . . .

He said—the words were coming more easily now—"I ... hate ships . . . All . . . True Followers hate . . . Stay. . . here. . . Be. . . happy . . .

Her face and voice hardened. "I'll get you out of here by force!"

He was losing interest in the con-versation. He reached out languidly for the omnipresent manna, chewed and swallowed.

He muttered, "You . . . should . . . try . . . this . . . Make . . . you . . . human . . ."

But she was gone.

It did not matter.

The warmth of the communal life of the cavern surrounded him.

There were women.

And always there was the manna. He slept.

HE DREAMED.

He was one of the crowd being ad-dressed by the Pastor.

"We must sever all ties with Earth!" he heard. "We are the true, the real True Followers. Were we not saved by God Himself from death and from deadly sin? But these Earthmen, who have intruded into our paradise, who have strayed from the true path, refuse to believe ...

"So burn the houses, my people! Destroy everything that links us with faithless Earth, even our herds and our crops!

"God's own manna is all that we need, all that we shall ever need!"

And somebody else—Grimes knew that it was one of the community's physicians—was crying over and over, in a sort of ecstasy, "Holy symbiosis! Holy symbiosis!"

Crackling flames and screaming pigs and the voices of the people sing-ing . . .

Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven,

Feed me till I want no more . . .

AGAIN THE too bright light and again the hand shaking his shoulder . . . "Wake up, John! Wake up!"

"Go 'way . . ."

"John! Look at me!"

He opened his eyes.

She had placed her torch on a ledge so that it shone full upon her. She was naked. She said softly, "You want me. You shall have me—but not here, among these degenerates, this filth." She turned slowly, saying, "Follow . . ."

Almost incuriously he watched her luminous body swaying away from him. Before she reached the mouth of the cave he had fallen back into sleep.

A long while or a little while—he had no way of knowing—later he awoke. After a few mouthfuls of manna he crawled around until he found a woman.

And slept again.

And dreamed.

SUBTLY the dreams changed.

There were, as before, memories from the minds of the colonists who had long lived in symbiosis with the fungus but there were now other memories—brief flashes, indistinct at first but all the time increasing in clarity and duration. There were glimpses of the faces and bodies of women whom he had known—Jane Pentecost, Maggie Lazenby, Ellen Russell, Una Freeman, Maya ...

The women ...

And the ships.

Lines from a long-ago read and long-ago forgotten piece of verse drifted through his mind:

The arching sky is calling

Spacemen back to their trade ...

He was sitting in the control room of his first command, the little courier *Adder*, a king at last even though his realm (to others) was an insignificant one. Obedient to the touch of his fin-gers on the console the tiny ship lifted from the Lindisfarne Base apron.

. . . *All hands! Stand by! Free Fall-ing!*

The lights below us fade . . .

And through the dream, louder and louder, surged the arhythmic ham-mering of a spaceship's inertial drive.

HE AWOKE.

He scooped a handful of manna from a nearby clump.

He chewed, swallowed.

Somehow it was not the same as it had been; there was a hint of bitter-ness, a rancidity. He relieved himself where he lay, crawled over and among the recumbent bodies until he found a receptive women.

Like a great fat slug, he thought briefly.

(But what was a slug? Surely noth-ing like this beautiful creature . . .)

After he was finished with her—and she with him—he drifted again into sleep, even though that mechanical clangour coming from somewhere outside the cave was a continual irri-tation.

HE DREAMED more vividly than be-fore.

He had just brought *Discovery* down to a landing in the Paddington Oval on Botany Bay. His officers and the marine guard behind him he was marching down the ramp to the vi-vidly green grass. Against the pale blue sky he could see the tall flagstaffs, each with its streaming ensign, dark blue with the cruciform constellation of silver stars in the fly, with the superimposed red, white and blue crosses in the upper canton.

There was a band playing.

He was singing in time to the famil-iar tune.

Waltzing Matilda, Waltzing Matilda,

You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me . .

He awoke.

THERE WAS STILL that arrhythmic hammering, drifting in from some-where outside—but the music, vastly amplified, almost drowned the mechanical racket.

*Up jumped the swagman, sprang into the billabong,
"You'll never catch me alive!" cried he . . .*

And what was this noisome bil-labong into which he, Grimes, had plunged? Would his ghost still be heard after he was gone from it? Would his memories of Deep Space and the ships plying the star lanes remain to haunt the swinish dream-ers? Would that honest old national song replace the phoney piety of the True Followers' hymns?

Manna! he thought disgustedly, kicking out at a dim-glowing mass. It splattered under his bare foot and the stench was sickening. He was seized with an uncontrollable spasm of nausea. Drained and shaken he stum-bled towards the cave entrance, the music luring him as though he were one of the Pied Piper's rats. He tripped over sleeping bodies. A woman caught hold of his ankle. He looked down at her. He could not be sure but he thought that she was the one who had been responsible for his orig-inal downfall. Almost he brought his free foot smashing down on to her sleepily smiling face but, at the last moment, desisted.

She was what she was, just as he was what he was—and he had wal-lowed in the mire happily enough ...

He stooped and with both hands almost gently disengaged her fingers.

He staggered on, finally out on to the ledge. The sunlight at first blinded him. And then he saw her hanging there above the valley, beau-tiful and brightly golden, *The Far Traveller*. It was from her that the music was blaring. It ceased sud-denly, was replaced by the amplified voice of Big Sister.

"I am sending the pinnacle for you, Captain Grimes. It will come as closely alongside the cliff as possible. The robots will help you aboard."

He waited there, naked and filthy and ashamed, until the boat came for him.

GRIMES—clean, clothed, depilated but still shaky—sat in the Baroness's salon telling his story. She listened in silence, as did the omnipresent Big Sister.

When he was finished Big Sister said, "I must make a further analysis of the fungus specimens. Drug addic-tion among humans and other in-telligent life forms is not unusual, of course, but the symbiotic aspects of this case intrigue me."

"The dreams," whispered Grimes. "The dreams . . . I must have experi-enced the entire history of the Lost Colony . . .

"For years," said Big Sister, "the fungus has been nourished by the waste. products of the colonists' bodies—and when they have died it has been nourished by the bodies themselves. It has, in some way that I have yet to discover, become the col; onists. Is there not an old saying: A man is what he eats? This could be true for other life forms. And the symbiosis has been more, much more, than merely physical—and by eating the fungus you, for a while, en-tered into that symbiotic relation-ship."

"Very interesting," commented Grimes. "Very interesting. But you must have known *what* was happen-ing, if not why. You should have sent the robots to drag me out by force."

"Command decisions are not my prerogative," said Big Sister smugly. "Her Excellency did, however, wish to effect a forcible rescue but I dis-suaded her. It was a matter for humans only, for humans to resolve for themselves—and essentially for a human of your sort to resolve for him-self. I know very well, Captain Grimes, how you hate robots. Had you been rescued by automata it would have rankled for the rest of your life." There was a brief, almost human chuckle. "I must admit, how-ever, that after Her Excellency had failed to recapture you by the use of a *very* human bait I did make some use of my knowledge of your peculiar psychology—your professional pride, your rather childish nationalism . . .

Grimes ignored this last. He turned to the Baroness.

"So it was not a dream," he mur-mured, "when you . . .

She looked at him coldly.

"It was not a dream," she said. "And I shall not forget how I offered myself to you and how that offer was ... ignored. There was a time when I thought that something—not permanent but mutually satisfying—might develop between us. But no more. Our relations will remain as they have been since I first engaged you, those between employer and employee."

Grimes remembered with increas-ing vividness how she had exposed herself to him, had tried to tempt him.

He said, "I am sorry. But I was under the influence of the . . . manna ...

She said, "*In vino veritas*, Captain Grimes. And what makes it worse is the knowledge that the cacaphony of a ship's engines, the trite music of a folksong about an Austrialian sheep-stealer, succeeded where I failed."

He began, "But . . .

She said, "You may leave."

If only that Lotus Land were more hygenic, he thought, he might well return there.

But he knew that he never would.

—A. BERTRAM CHANDLER