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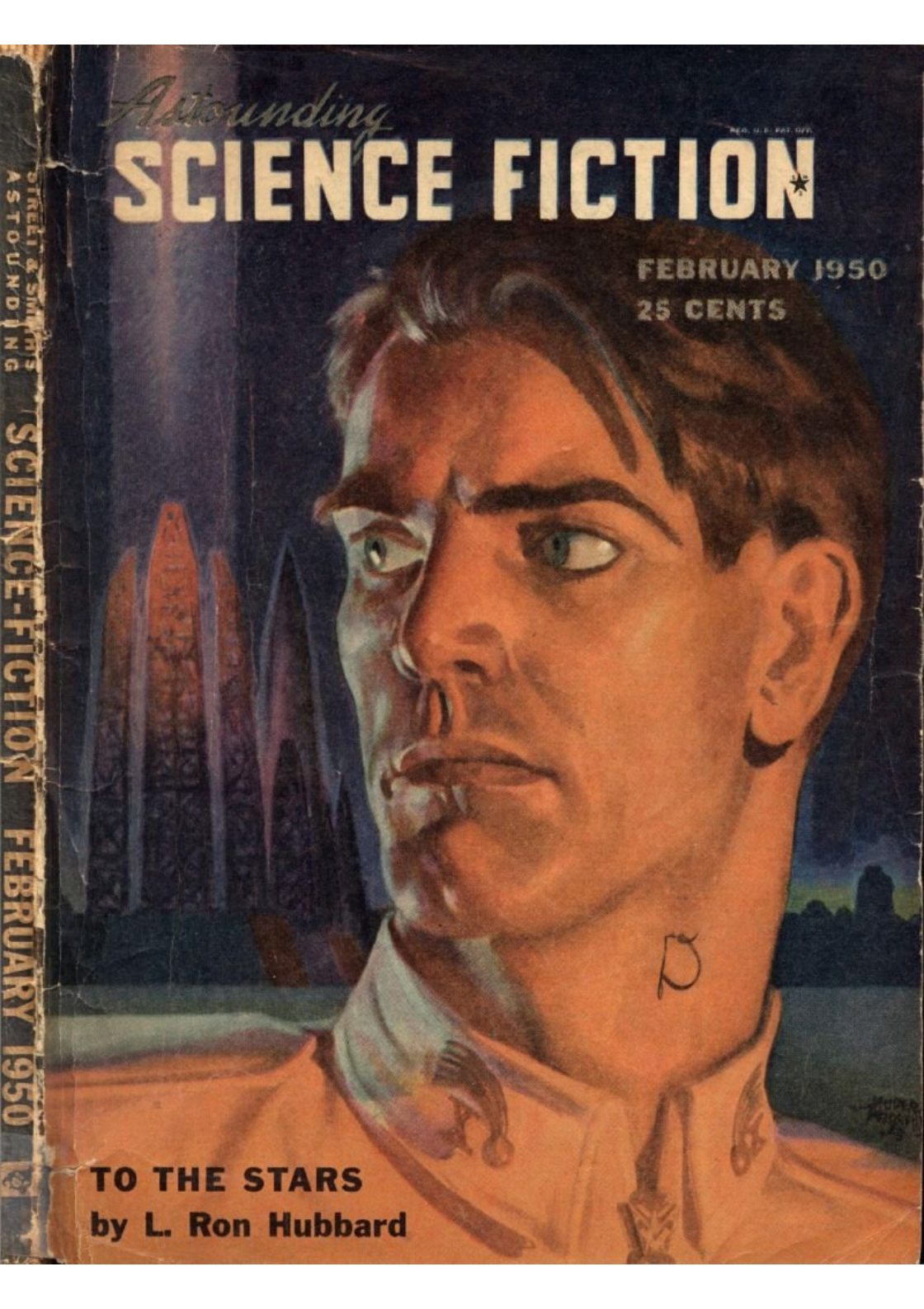
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TO THE STARS
by L. Ron Hubbard

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PROMISED LAND

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Lawrence O'Donnell

First published *Astounding*, February 1950.

Man has learned many tricks to make his environment fit his needs. There is another approach—better, perhaps, but full of blind alleys . . .

People got out of Fenton's way as he walked scowling through the palace, heading for the great steel doors that only half a dozen men in the Unit knew how to open. Fenton was one of the half dozen. The pale scar that made a zigzag like lightning across his dark cheek pulled his face awry a little as he snapped an angry command into the intercom.

A voice murmured apologetically out of it: "Sorry, he's busy right now. If you'll—"

Fenton slapped his palm with ringing fury against the metal beside the intercom. The echoing metallic boom rang like thunder down the hall behind him, where courtiers, diplomats and politicians waited their chance for an audience with the Protector of Ganymede.

"Open these doors!"

There was another pause. Then the voice murmured something again, and the great steel doors slid softly apart a few feet. Fenton stalked through, hearing them thud together behind him, shutting off the sound of whispering, angry and curious, that had begun to fill the hall.

He went through an antechamber and into a tall-columned room shaped like a well, with a dome of starry sky very far overhead. (It was day outside, on Ganymede, and thick, eternal clouds shut out the sky, but if a man is wealthy enough he can arrange to have the stars reflected into his palace if he wants them.)

In the center of the room, under the sky dome, stood the Protector's water bed where his five-hundred-pound bulk wallowed luxuriantly. Like truth, the monstrous man floated at the bottom of his well and watched the stars.

He was not looking at them now. Great billows of lax flesh stirred on his cheeks as he grinned cavernously at the newcomer.

"Patience, Ben, patience," he said in his deep rumble. "You'll inherit Ganymede in due time—when it's habitable. Be patient, even—"

Fenton's angry glance dropped to the man sitting on the raised chair beside the water bed.

"Get out," he said.

The man stood up, smiling. He stooped a little, standing or sitting, as though his big-boned frame found even the scanty weight of flesh it carried burdensome. Or maybe it was the responsibilities he carried. He had a gaunt face and his eyes, like his hair, were pale.

"Wait," the monster in the tank said. "Bryne's not finished with me yet, Ben. Sit down. Patience, son, patience!"

Fenton's right hand jerked doorward. He gave Bryne a cold glance.

"Get out," he said again.

"I'm no fool," Bryne remarked, turning away from the water bed. "Apologies, Protector, and so on. But I'd rather not be in the middle. Ben seems upset about something. Call me

when it's safe." He shambled off, was lost behind the pillars. The sound of his footsteps died.

Fenton drew a deep breath to speak, his dark face flushing. Then he shrugged, sighed and said flatly: "I'm through, Torren. I'm leaving."

The Protector wallowed as he raised an enormous hand. Gasping with the effort, he let it fall back into the dense, oily liquid of his bath.

"Wait," he said, panting. "Wait."

The edge of the bath was studded with colored buttons just under the water level. Torren's gross fingers moved beneath the surface, touching buttons deftly. On a tilted screen above the tank snow fields flickered into view, a road threading them, cars sliding flatly along the road.

"You've just come from the village," Torren said. "You've talked to Kristin, I suppose. You know I lied to you. Surprised, Ben?"

Fenton shook his head impatiently.

"I'm leaving," he said. "Find yourself another heir, Torren." He turned away. "That's all."

"It isn't all." The Protector's deep voice had command in it. "Come back here, Ben. Patience is what you want, my boy. Patience. Spend thirty years in a water bed and you learn patience. So you want to walk out, do you? Nobody walks out on Torren, son. You ought to know that. Not even my inheritor walks out. I'm surprised at you. After I've taken so much trouble to change a whole world to suit your convenience." The vast cheeks wrinkled in a smile. "It isn't thoughtful of you, Ben. After all I've done for you, too."

"You've done nothing for me," Fenton told him, still in the flat voice. "You picked me out of an orphanage when I was too young to protect myself. There's nothing you can give me I want, Torren."

"Getting dainty, aren't you?" the man in the water demanded with what sounded like perfect good humor. "I'm surprised at you, Ben. So you don't want the Torren empire, eh? Ganymede wouldn't be good enough for you, even when I make it habitable, eh? Oh, Ben, come to your senses. I never thought you'd go soft on me. Not after what you've been through."

"You put me through plenty," Fenton said. "I grew up the hard way. It wasn't worth it, Torren. You wasted your time. I tell you I'm finished."

"The tenderizing light of a good woman's eyes has reformed you," Torren mocked. "Pretty little Kristin changed your mind, I suppose. A charming creature, Kristin. Only a foot taller than you, too, my boy. Only a hundred pounds heavier, I expect. But then she's young. She'll grow. Ah, what a pity I never met a really good woman when I was your age. Still, she'd have had to weigh five hundred pounds, to understand me, and such women never really appealed to my aesthetic tastes. You should have seen the charming little things in the Centrifuge, Ben. They're still there, you know—the ones who haven't died. I'm the only Centrifuge baby who got out and stayed out. I made good. I earned enough to stay out."

The monstrous head fell back and Torren opened his vast mouth and roared with laughter. The oily liquid in the bath heaved in rhythmic tides and echoes of his mirth rolled along the pillars and up the well toward the stars, rolled up the walls that had imprisoned Torren since his birth. They were walls he himself had burst apart against odds no man had ever before encountered.

"*You* grew up in a hard school," Torren laughed. "*You!*"

Fenton stood silent, looking at the monstrous being in the bath, and the anger in his eyes softened a little in spite of himself. The old respect for Torren stirred in his mind. Tyrant the man might be, ruthless autocrat—but had ever man such reason to be pitiless before? Perhaps in very ancient times when, for profit, skilled practitioners warped and broke the bodies of children to make them valuable freaks and monsters for the entertainment of royalty. Perhaps then, but not again, until the planets were opened for colonization three hundred years ago.

Fenton had seen the Threshold Planetaria, back on Earth, the fantastic conditioning units where eugenics, working through generation after generation of selected stock, bred humans who could sustain themselves in the ecology of other worlds. He knew little about these remarkable experiments in living flesh. But he did know that some of them had failed, and one such Planetarium had held Torren—thirty years ago.

“Thirteen generations,” Torren said deliberately, drawing the familiar picture for him again, relentlessly as always. “Thirteen generations one after another, living and dying in a Centrifuge that increased its rotation year after year. All those treatments, all those operations, all that time under altered radiations, breathing altered air, moving against altered gravity—until they found out they simply couldn’t breed men who could live on Jupiter, if they took a thousand generations. There was a point beyond which they couldn’t mutate the body and keep intelligence. So they apologized.” He laughed again, briefly, the water surging around him in the tank.

“They said they were sorry. And we could leave the Centrifuge any time we wanted—they’d even give us a pension. Five hundred a month. It takes a thousand a day to keep me alive outside the Centrifuge!”

He lay back, spent, the laughter dying. He moved one vast arm slowly in the fluid.

“All right,” he said. “Hand me a cigarette, Ben. Thanks. Light—”

Holding the igniter for him, Fenton realized too late that Torren could have got his own cigarette. There was every possible convenience, every luxury, available to the water bed. Angrily Fenton swung away, paced to and fro beneath the screen upon which the snow fields were reflected. His fingers beat a tattoo on his thigh. Torren waited, watching him.

At the far end of the screen, without turning, Fenton said quietly: “So it was bad in the Centrifuge, Torren? How bad?”

“Not bad at first. We had something to work toward. As long as we thought our descendants could colonize Jupiter we could stand a lot. It was only after we knew the experiment had failed that the Centrifuge was bad—a prison, just as our bodies were a prison.”

“But you’d shut the Ganymedans up in a place like that.”

“Certainly,” Torren told him. “Of course I would. I’d shut you up, or anyone else who stood in my way. I owe the Ganymedans nothing whatever. If there’s any debt involved, the human race owes *me* a debt that can never be repaid. Look at me, Ben. Look!”

Fenton turned. Torren was raising his gigantic arm out of the water. It should have been an immensely powerful arm. It had the potential muscle. It had the strong, bowed bone and the muscles springing out low down along the forearm, as the Neanderthaler and the gorilla’s did. And Torren had a gorilla’s grip—when he did not have to fight gravity.

He fought it now. The effort of simply lifting the weight of his own arm made his breath come heavily. His face darkened. With tremendous struggle he got the arm out of the water as far as the elbow before strength failed him. The uselessly powerful arm crashed back,

splashing water high. Torren lay back, panting, watching his sodden cigarette wash about, disintegrating in the tank.

Fenton stepped forward and plucked it out of the water, tossed it aside, wiped his fingers on his sleeve. His face was impassive.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know if that debt ever can be discharged. But, you're trying hard."

Torren laughed. "I need the money. I always need money. There aren't enough Ganymedans to develop the planet. That's all there is to it. With the ecology changed, normal humans can live here within ten years."

"They'll be able to live here in another hundred and fifty years anyhow, if plantings and atmospherics follow the program. By then the Ganymedans will adapt—or at least, their great-grandchildren will. That was the original plan."

"Before I got control, yes. But now I give the orders on Ganymede. Since Jensen isolated Jensenite out there," and he nodded toward the snowy screen, "everything's changed. We can speed up the plantings a hundred percent and the air ought to be breathable in—"

"Jensen's a Ganymedan," Fenton broke in. "Without Jensen you'd never have been able to break the original agreement about changing over. You owe the Ganymedans that much for Jensen's sake alone."

"Jensen will get paid. I'll finance him to an ambulatory asylum on any world he chooses. I owe the others nothing."

"But they're all in it together!" Fenton slapped the edge of the tank angrily. "Don't you see? Without the whole Ganymede Threshold experiment you'd never have had Jensenite. You can't scrap every Ganymedan except Jensen now! You—"

"I can do as I please," Torren declared heavily. "I intend to. Ganymede is an unimportant little satellite which happens to belong to me. I hate to mention it, son, but I might say the same thing about you. Benjamin Fenton is an unimportant young man who happens to belong to me. Without my influence you're nothing but a cipher in a very large solar system. I've invested a lot of money and effort in it and I don't intend to throw it away. Just what do you think you'd do if you left me, Ben?"

"I'm a good organizer," Fenton said carefully. "I know how to handle people. I've got fast reflexes and dependable judgment. You toughened me. You gave me some bad years. You arranged for me to kill a few people—in line of duty, naturally—and I've done your dirty jobs until I know all the ropes. I can take care of myself."

"Only as long as I let you," Torren told him with a faintly ominous ring in the deep voice. "Maybe it was a whim that made me pick you out of the asylum. But I've invested too much in you, Ben, to let you walk out on me now. What you need is work-hardening, my boy." He cupped water in his hand and let it drain out. "Who was it," he inquired, "that said no man is an island? You're looking at an island, Ben. *I'm* an island. A floating island. No one alive has any claim on me. Not even you. Don't try me too far, Ben."

"Have you ever thought I might kill you some time, Torren?" Fenton asked gently.

The colossus in the tank laughed heavily.

"I ran a risk, making you my heir," he admitted. "But you won't kill me to inherit. I made sure. I tried you. You were given chances, you know . . . no, I don't think you did know. I hardened you and toughened you and gave you some bad years, and some men might want to kill me for that. But not you. You don't hate me, Ben. And you're not afraid of me. Maybe you ought to be. Ever think of that, Ben?"

Fenton turned and walked toward the door. Between two pillars he paused and glanced back.

“I nearly killed you thirteen years ago,” he said.

Torren slapped his palm downward, sending a splash of liquid high.

“You nearly killed me!” he said with sudden, furious scorn. “Do you think I’m afraid of death? When I wasn’t afraid to *live*? Ben, come back here.”

Fenton gave him a level look and said, “No.”

“Ben, that’s an order.”

Fenton said, “Sorry.”

“Ben, if you walk out of this room now you’ll never come back. Alive or dead, Ben, you’ll never come back.”

Fenton turned his back and went out, through the anteroom and the great steel doors that opened at his coming.

Stooping above the open suitcase on his bed, both hands full, Fenton saw the slightest possible shadow stirring in reflection on the window before him and knew he was not alone in the room. No buzzer had warned him, though the full spy-beam system was on and it should have been impossible for anyone to pass unheralded.

He lifted his head slowly. Beyond the broad window the snowy hills of Ganymede lay undulating to the steep horizon. The clouds that blanketed the world were blue-tinged with Jupiter-light, reflecting from Jupiter’s vast bright-blue seas of liquid ammonia. Between two hilltops he could see one of the planting-valleys veiled in mist, dull turquoise warm by contrast with the snow. The reflection swam dimly between him and the hills.

Without turning he said: “Well, Bryne?”

Behind him Bryne laughed.

“How did you know?”

Fenton straightened and turned. Bryne leaned in the open doorway, arms folded, sandy brows lifted quizzically.

“You and I,” Fenton said in a deliberate voice, “are the only men who know most of the rabbit-warren secrets in this Unit. Torren knows them all. But it had to be you or Torren, obviously. You know how I knew, Bryne. Are you trying to flatter me? Isn’t it a waste of time, now?”

“That depends on you,” Bryne said, adding thoughtfully a moment later, “—and me, of course.”

“Go on,” Fenton said.

Bryne shifted his gaunt body awkwardly against the door.

“Do you know what orders Torren gave me an hour ago? No, of course you don’t. I’ll tell you. You’re not to be admitted to him again even if you ask, which I told him you wouldn’t. You’re not to take anything out of the Unit except the clothes you wear, so you can stop packing. Your accounts have been stopped. All the money you’re to have is what’s in your pocket. This suite is out of bounds as soon as you leave it.” He glanced at his wrist. “In half an hour I’m to come up here and escort you to Level Two. You eat with the repair crew and sleep in the crew dormitory until Thursday, when a freighter is due in at the spaceport. You’ll sign on with the crew and work your way back to Earth.” Bryne grinned. “After that, you’re on your own.”

Fenton touched his scarred cheek meditatively, gave Bryne a cold glance.

“I’ll expect you in half an hour, then,” he said. “Good-by.”

Bryne stood up straighter. The grin faded.

"You don't like me," he said, on a note of sadness. "All the same, you'd better trust me. Half an hour's all we have now. After that I pass over into my official capacity as the Protector's representative, and I'll have to carry Torren's orders out. *He* thinks you need work-hardening. I may find myself finagling you into a slave-contract in the Underlands."

"What do you suggest?" Fenton asked, folding another shirt.

"That's better." Bryne dropped a hand into his pocket, stepped forward, and tossed a thick packet of money onto the bed. Beside it he dropped a key and a folded ticket, bright pink for first-class.

"A ship leaves six hours from now for Earth," Bryne said. "There's a tractor car waiting in the gully at the foot of G-Corridor. That's its key. Torren keeps a close watch on all the Corridors, but the system's complex. Now and then by accident one of the wiring devices gets out of order. G-Corridor's out of order right now—not by accident. How do you like it, Fenton?"

Fenton laid the folded shirt into place, glanced at the money without expression. He was thinking rapidly, but his face showed nothing.

"What do you stand to gain, Bryne?" he asked. "Or is this one of Torren's subtler schemes?"

"It's all mine," the gaunt man assured him. "I'm looking toward the future. I'm a very honest man, Fenton. Not direct—no. You can afford to be direct. I can't. I'm only an administrator. Torren's the boss. Some day you'll be boss. I'd like to go on being an administrator then, too."

"Then this is by way of a bribe, is it?" Fenton inquired. "Waste of time, Bryne. I'm stepping out. Torren's probably rewriting his will already. When I leave Ganymede I leave for good. As if you didn't know."

"I know, all right. Naturally. I've already been notified to get out the old will. But I'll tell you, Fenton—I like administering Ganymede. I like being cupbearer to the gods. It suits me. I'm good at it. I want to go on." He paused, giving Fenton a keen glance under the sandy lashes. "How much longer do you think Torren has to live?" he inquired.

Fenton paused in his methodic packing. He looked at Bryne.

"Maybe a year," Bryne answered his own question. "Maybe less. In *his* condition he ought to be glad of it. I'm thinking about afterward. You and I understand each other, Fenton. I don't want to see the Torren holdings broken up. Suppose I keep the will that names you inheritor and tear up the new one Torren's going to make today? Would that be worth anything to you?"

Fenton looked out over the snow toward the turquoise valley where Kristin would be scattering yellow seeds into the furrows of the ploughed Ganymedan soil. He sighed. Then he stooped and picked up the money, the ticket and the key.

"You'll have to take my word for it," he said, "that it would be. But I wish I understood why you're really doing this. I thought you and Torren got along better than that."

"Oh, we do. We get along fine. But—Fenton, he scares me. I don't know what makes him tick. Funny things are happening to the human race these days, Fenton." Unexpected sincerity showed on the gaunt face in the doorway. "Torren . . . Torren isn't human. A lot of people aren't human any more. The important people aren't."

He swung a long arm toward the turquoise valley. "The Threshold people are getting the upper hand, Fenton. I don't mean here. I don't mean literally. But *they're* the inheritors of the future, not us. I guess I'm jealous." He grinned wryly. "Jealous, and a little scared. I want to

feel important. You and I are human. We may not like each other much, but we understand each other. We can work together.” He drew his shoulders together with a small shiver. “Torren’s a monster, not a man. You know it, now. I know why you quarreled. I’m glad of it.”

“I’ll bet you are,” Fenton said.

When it was safe, he drove the tractor car down the gorge between high banks of snow, rolling as fast as he dared toward the turquoise valley. The Ganymedan landscape framed in the square window openings all around him looked like so many television images on square screens. Probably some of it really was framed upon screens, back there in the Unit whose mile-square walls fell farther and farther behind as the tractor treads ground on.

Probably Torren’s screen, tilted above the water bath, reflected some such landscape as this. But there were often tractor cars trundling along the snowy roads. Unless Torren had reason to suspect, he was not likely to focus too sharply upon this one. Still, Fenton knew he would feel more comfortable after he had passed beyond the range of the ’visor. Not that Torren couldn’t summon up a picture of any Ganymedan area he happened to feel curious about. The thing was to keep his curiosity asleep, until the time came to rouse it.

The cold hills swung by. The heavy air swirled a little as the car spun along, making eddies like paradoxical heat waves between Fenton and the road. No man could live without an insulated suit and breathing-apparatus on the surface of Ganymede—yet. But the specially bred Ganymedans from the Threshold Planetarium could.

When men first reached the planets they found their thresholds fatally different from Earth. They began to alter the planets, and to alter the men. This after one whole wasted generation in which they tried to establish colonies that could be supported from Earth and could operate from artificial shelters. It didn’t work. It never worked, even on Earth, when men tried to create permanent colonies in alien lands without subsisting on the land itself.

There is more to it than the lack of bread alone. Man must establish himself as a self-sustaining unit on the land he works, or he will not work it long. Neither humans nor animals can subsist or function efficiently on alien territory. Their metabolism is geared to a different ecology, their digestive organs demand a different food, melancholia and lassitude overcome them eventually. None of the great bonanza ventures on the mineral-rich planets ever came to successful production because agriculture could not keep up with them and they collapsed of their own weight. It had been proved true time and again on Earth, and now on the planets the old truism repeated itself.

So the Threshold Planetaria were set up and the vast experiment got under way. And they altered the planets as well as the stock that was to possess them.

Ganymede was cold. The atmosphere of heavy gases could not sustain human life. So with atomic power and technological weapons man began to alter the ecology of Ganymede. Through the years the temperature crept gradually up from the deadly level of a hundred degrees below centigrade zero. Wastefully, desperately, the frozen water was released, until a cloud-blanket began to form over Ganymede to hold in the heat.

There were many failures. There were long periods of inactivity, when the insulated domes were deserted. But as new methods, new alloys, new isotopes were developed, the process became more and more practical. When the final generation of Ganymede-slanted stock was bred, Ganymede was ready for them.

Since then, three generations had become self-sustaining on the satellite. They could breathe the air—though men could not. They could endure the cold—though men could not.

They were taller than men, solider and stronger. There were several thousand of them now.

As they had driven along a genetic parabola to meet the rising parabola of an altered planetary balance, so now the Ganymedans and Ganymede together followed a new curve. In a few more generations it would circle back to meet normal humanity. By that time, Ganymede should be habitable for Earthmen, and by then Ganymedans should have altered once more, back toward the norm.

Perhaps the plan was not the best possible plan. Humanity is not perfect. They made many errors, many false guesses, when the Age of Technology began. Balance of power among the nations of Earth influenced the development of the Threshold Planetaria. Social conflicts changed and shifted as civilization found new processes and methods and power-sources.

Fenton thought of Torren. Yes, there had been many errors of judgment. The children of Torren should have walked like giants upon a free planet, Centrifuge-bred colossi. But that experiment had failed. Not even upon tiny Ganymede could Torren use the tremendous strength inherent in his helpless body to stand upright.

It was easier to work eugenically with animals. In the new Ganymedan seas, still growing, and on the frigid Ganymedan continents, were creatures bred to breathe the atmosphere—arctic and subarctic creatures, walrus and fish, snow-rabbit and moose. Trees grew on Ganymede now, mutated tundra spread across the barrens, supplemented by the photosynthesis laboratories. A world was being born.

And across the world marched the heat-giving, life-giving towers built over a hundred-year period by the Earth government, still owned by Earth, not to be touched even by Torren, who owned Ganymede. Fenton swung the tractor over the brow of the hill and paused for an instant to look west. A new tower was rising there, one of hundreds, to supplement the old towers with a new method of speeding up changes. Within ten years these snowy hills might ripple with wheat—

The road forked here. One way led toward the valley. The other lay like a long blue ribbon across the hilltops, dipping suddenly as the horizon dipped toward the spaceport and the ship that was headed for home.

Fenton touched the scar on his cheek and looked at the spaceport road. Earth, he thought. And then? He thought of Bryne's wise, gaunt face, and of Torren wallowing in his water bed that was linked like the center of a spider's web with every quarter of the mile-square Unit and every section of the little globe it stood on. No, not a spider web—an island. A floating island with no link that bound him to humanity.

Fenton spoke one furious word and wrenched violently at the wheel. The car churned up snow in a blinding haze and then leaped forward along the right-hand road, down toward the turquoise mist that hid the valley.

An hour later he came to the village called Providence.

The houses were of local stone, with moss-thatched roofs. Early experiments with buildings of metal, plastics and imported wood had been discarded, as might be expected, in favor of indigenous materials. For life on Ganymede no houses proved quite so satisfying as houses built of Ganymede stone.

The people came mostly of hardy Norse stock, with Inuit and other strains mingled for the desirable traits. The Ganymedans who came out into the snow-powdered street when Fenton stopped his car were an entirely new race. An unexpectedly handsome race, since they had certainly not been bred for beauty. Perhaps much of their good looks sprang from their

excellent health, their adjustment to their lives and their world, the knowledge that the world and the work they did upon it were both good and necessary. Until now.

A big yellow-haired man in furs bent to the window of the car, his breath clouding the heavy air which no normal human could breathe.

“Any luck, Ben?” he asked, his voice vibrating through the diaphragm set in the side of the car. It was only thus that a Ganymedan could speak to an Earth-born human. Their voices had to filter to each other through carbon dioxide air and metal and rubber plates. It meant nothing. There are higher barriers than these between human minds.

“About what you expected,” Fenton told him, watching the diaphragm vibrate when sound struck it. He wondered how his own voice sounded, out there in the cold air heavy-laden with gases.

Yellow heads and brown nodded recognition of what he meant. The tall people around the car seemed to sag a little, though two or three of them laughed shortly, and one big woman in a fur hood said:

“Torren’s fond of you, Ben. He must be, after all. Maybe—”

“No,” Fenton told her positively. “He’s projected himself in my image, that’s all. I can walk around. But I’m simply an extension, like an arm or a leg. Or an eye. And if Torren’s eye offends him—”

He broke off abruptly, slapped the steering wheel a couple of times and looked ahead of him down the wide, clean street lined with clean, wide-windowed houses that seemed to spring from the rock they stood on. They were strong houses, built low to defy the blizzard winds of Ganymede. The clear, wide, snowy hills rolled away beyond the rooftops. It was a good world—for the Ganymedans. He tried to think of these big, long-striding people shut up in asylums while their world slowly changed outside the windows until they could no longer breathe its air.

“But, Ben,” the woman said, “it isn’t as if people *needed* Ganymede. I wish I could talk to him. I wish I understood—”

“Have you any idea,” Fenton asked, “how much Torren spends in a year? People don’t need living room on Ganymede, but Torren needs the money he could get if . . . oh, forget it. Never mind, Marta.”

“We’ll fight,” Marta said. “Does he know we’ll fight?”

Fenton shook his head. He glanced around the little crowd.

“I’d like to talk to Kristin,” he said.

Marta gestured toward the slope that led down into the farmland valley.

“We’ll fight,” she said again, uncertainly, as the car started. Fenton heard her and lifted a hand in salute, grinning without mirth or cheerfulness. He heard the man beside her speak as the car drew away.

“Sure,” the man said. “Sure. What with?”

He knew Kristin as far as he could see her. He picked her figure out of the fur-clad group dark against the snow as they stepped out of the road to let the car go by. She waved as soon as she recognized him behind the glass. He drew the car to a halt, snapped on the heating units of the insulated suit he wore, closed the mask across his face and then swung the car door open. Even inside the mask his voice sounded loud as he called across the white stillness.

“Kristin,” he said. “Come over here. The rest of you, go on ahead.”

They gave him curious glances, but they nodded and trudged on down the hill toward the valley. It seemed odd to watch them carrying hoes and garden baskets in the snow, but the valley was much warmer below the mist.

Kristin came toward him, very tall, moving with a swift, smooth ease that made every motion a pleasure to watch. She had warm yellow hair braided in a crown across her head. Her eyes were very blue, and her skin milk-white below the flush the cold had given it.

“Sit in here with me,” Fenton said. “I’ll turn off the atmosphere unit and leave the door open so you can breathe—for a while.”

She stooped under the low door and got in, folding herself into the too-small seat. Fenton always felt out of proportion beside these big, friendly, quiet people. It was their world, not his. If anyone were abnormal in size here, then it was he, not the Ganymedans.

“Well, Ben?” she said, her voice coming with a faint vibration through the diaphragm in his helmet. He smiled back at her and shook his head. He did not think he was in love with Kristin. It would be preposterous. They could not speak except through metal or touch except through glass and cloth. They could not even breathe the same air. But he faced the possibility of love, and grinned ironically at it.

He told her what had happened, exactly as it took place, and his mind began to clarify a little as he talked.

“I suppose I should have waited,” he said. “I can see that, now. I should have kept my mouth shut until I’d been back on Ganymede at least a month, sounding things out. I guess I lost my temper, Kristin. If I’d only known, while I was still back on Earth . . . if you could only have written—”

“Through the spaceport mail?” she asked him bitterly. “Even the *incoming* letters are censored now.”

He nodded.

“So the planets will go on thinking we *asked* for the change-over,” she said. “Thinking we failed on Ganymede and *asked* to be shut up in asylums. Oh, Ben, that’s what we all hate worst of all. We’re doing so wonderfully well here . . . or we were, until—” She broke off.

Fenton touched the button that started his motor and turned the car around so they could look out across the broad plain below. They faced away from the Unit, and except for blurs of turquoise mist here and there where other warm valleys breathed out moisture and the exhalation of growing things there was no break in the broad sweep of snowy hills—the towers marching in a long row across the planet.

“Does he know we’d die in the asylums?” Kristin asked.

“Would you?”

“I think we would. Many of us would. And I think we’d never have any more children. Not even the idea of having great-great-grandchildren who might be able to walk on Ganymede again would keep the race alive. We wouldn’t kill ourselves, of course. We wouldn’t even commit race-suicide. We won’t want to die—but we won’t want to live, either—in asylums.”

She twisted on the smooth car seat and looked anxiously at Fenton through the glass of his respirator.

“Ben, if the planets knew—if we could get word outside somehow—do you think they’d help? Would anyone care? I think some might. Not the Earth-bred, probably. They wouldn’t really *know*. But the Thresholders would know. For their own safety, Ben, I think they might

have to help us—if they knew. This could happen to any Threshold group on any world. Ben —”

A blue shadow gliding across the snow caught her eye and she turned her head to watch it. Then concussion heeled the car over—

Dimly Fenton heard metal rip around him against rocks hidden under the snow they ploughed through. In the echoing immobility while the vehicle hung poised, before it settled back, he tasted blood in his mouth and felt Kristin’s weight heavy against his shoulder, saw the black outlines of his own hands with fingers spread, pressing the glass against the whiteness of snow.

The car smashed over the edge, jolting downward on its treads, down faster and more roughly with each jolt. The winged blue shadow wheeled back and sailed over them again.

The silhouetted hands moved fast. Fenton was aware of them turning, pulling, gripping numbly at levers they scarcely felt. The idling motor exploded into a roar and the car sprang forward, straight down the unbroken slope.

Then the second blast came.

The rear of the vehicle lifted, hurling Fenton and the girl against the cushioned panel and the thick, shatterproof windshield, which released its safeties under the impact and vanished in a whirl of brightness somewhere outside. The treads screamed as the car ground across bare rock and snow boiled up in a whirlwind around them. The car shot forward again to the very edge of the slope and hung tottering over a hundred-foot drop beyond.

There was a timeless interval of what felt like free fall. Fenton had time to decide that his instinct had been right. The fall was the safer choice. The car’s interior was braced and shock-absorbent, and they would survive a drop better than another bomb-hit.

Then they struck the ground, whirled out, struck again, in an increasing avalanche of ice and rock and snow. The shocks changed to the thunder of bombs, and then absolute darkness and silence without echo.

Neither of them could have survived alone. It took Kristin’s Ganymedan strength and vitality and the resilience that had kept her from serious injury, plus Fenton’s knowledge of mechanics and his fierce, devouring anger.

Buried thirty feet under a solid, freezing mass of debris, Fenton whipped the girl with words when even her hardiness began to fail. With one arm broken, he drove himself harder still, ignoring the shattered bone, working furiously against time. Enough air was trapped in the loose snow to supply Kristin, and Fenton’s respirator and suit were tough enough to survive even such treatment as this.

The mercury-vapor turbine that generated the car’s power had to be repaired and started anew. It took a long time. But it was done. What Fenton wanted was the tremendous thermal energy the exhaust would give them. Very slowly, very carefully, using a part of the turbine sheath as a shield, they burned their way to the open air.

Twice settling rock nearly crushed them. Once Kristin was pinned helpless by the edge of the shield, and only Fenton’s rage got them through that. But they did get through. When only a crust remained, Fenton carefully opened small view-cracks in the shadow, and waited until he was sure no hovering helicopter still waited. Then they broke through and climbed free.

There were signs in the snow where a copter had landed and men had walked to the edge of the abyss, even climbed part of the way down.

“Who was it, Ben?” Kristin asked, looking down at the footprints. When he did not answer, “Ben—your arm. How bad—”

He said abruptly, not listening to her: “Kristin, I’ve got to get back to the Unit. Fast.”

“You think it was Torren?” she asked fearfully. “But, Ben, what could you do? If—”

“Torren? Maybe. Maybe Bryne. I’m not sure. I’ve got to *be* sure. Help me, Kristin. Let’s go.”

“To the village first, then,” she said firmly, setting her marble-hard forearm beneath his elbow to steady him. “You’ll never make it unless we patch you up first. Would Torren really do a thing like that to you, Ben? The nearest thing to a son he’ll ever have? I can’t believe it.”

The dry snow squeaked underfoot as they climbed the hill.

“You don’t know Torren,” Fenton said. He was breathing unevenly, in deep gasps, partly from pain, partly from weariness, mostly because the air in the respirator was not coming fully enough to supply his increased need. But the outer air was pure poison. After awhile he went on, the words laboring a little.

“You don’t know what Torren did to me, thirteen years ago,” he said. “Back on Earth. I was sixteen, and I wandered out one night in one of the old Dead Ends—the ruined cities, you know—and I got myself shanghaied. At least, that’s what I thought for three years. One of the gangs who work the ruins got me. I kept thinking Torren’s men would find me and get me out. I was young and naive in those days. Well, they didn’t find me. I worked with the gang. For three years I worked with them. I learned a lot. Things that came in handy afterward, on some of the jobs Torren had for me—

“When I was tough enough, I finally broke away. Killed three men and escaped. Went back to Torren. You should have heard him laugh.”

Kristin looked down at him doubtfully. “Should you be talking, Ben? You need your breath—”

“I want to talk, Kristin. Let me finish. Torren laughed. He’d engineered the whole thing. He wanted me to learn pro-survival methods right at the source. Things he couldn’t teach me. So he arranged for me to learn from—experts. He felt that if I was capable I’d survive. When I knew enough, I’d escape. Then I’d be a tool he could really use. Work-hardening, he called it.”

Fenton was silent, breathing hard, until he got enough breath to finish. “After that,” he said, “I was Torren’s right hand. His legs. His eyes. I was Torren. He’d put me into an invisible Planetarium, you see—a Centrifuge like the thing he grew up in, the thing that made him into a monster. That’s why I understand him so well.” He paused for a moment, swiped vainly at the face-plate as if to wipe away the sweat that ran down his forehead. “That’s why I’ve got to get back,” he said. “Fast.”

Only Torren knew all the secrets of the Unit. But Fenton knew many. Enough for his purpose now.

When the rising floor inside the column of the round shaft ceased its pressure against his feet, he stood quiet for a moment, facing the curved wall, drawing a deep breath. He grimaced a little as the breath disturbed his arm, splinted and strapped across his chest under his shirt. With his right hand he drew the loaded pistol from its holster and, swinging it from the trigger guard, used his thumb to find the spring hidden in the curved wall.

The spring moved. Instantly he swung the pistol up, the grip smacking into his receiving palm, his finger touching the trigger. The hollow pillar in which he stood slid half apart, and Fenton looked straight at Torren in his water bed.

He stood still then, staring.

The colossus had managed to heave himself up to a sitting position. The huge hands gripped the edge of the tank and, as Fenton watched, the great fingers curved with desperate fury on the padded rim. Torren's eyes were squeezed shut, his teeth bared and set, and the room was full of the sound of his harsh, wheezing breath.

The blind, gargoyle face hung motionless for an instant. Then Torren exhaled with a gasp and let go. There was a tremendous wallowing splash as the Protector of Ganymede plunged back into the water bed.

Fenton's gaze lowered to the long strip of floor beside the bath where a row of tiles had been lifted to expose the intricate complex of wires leading into the banked controls by which Torren ruled his palace and his planet. The wires lay severed on the floor, tangled fringes of them ripped and cut and torn out. It was almost as much a mutilation as if Torren's actual nerve-fibres had been torn. He was as helpless as if they had been.

There was a table set up a little distance from the bath. The key wires in the flooring snaked across the tiles toward the table. Upon it a control box had been set up, and the audio and video devices which were Torren's ganglia.

At the table, his profile to Fenton, Bryne sat, his long, thin body humped forward intently, the pale eyes fixed upon his work. He had a privacy-mute on the microphone he held to his mouth and as he murmured his fingers played lightly with a vernier. He watched the green line ripple and convulse across the face of an oscilloscope. He nodded. His hand struck down quickly at a switch, closed it, opened another.

"Bryne!" The breathless bellow from the tank echoed among the pillars, but Bryne did not even glance up. He must have heard that cry a good many times already, since this phase of his work began.

"Bryne!"

The shouted name mounted in a roar of sound up the well to the star-reflections far above and reverberated to a diminishing whisper that blended with Torren's heavy breathing. Again the huge hands slid futilely over the rim of the tank.

"*Answer me, Bryne!*" he roared. "*Answer me!*"

Bryne did not look up. Fenton took a step forward, onto the open floor. His eyes were hard and narrow. The blood had gone out of his face until the pale scar along his jaw was almost invisible. Torren, seeing him, gasped and was silent in the midst of another shout. The small eyes sunk in fat stared and then shut tight for an instant over a leap of strange, glancing lights.

"Why don't you answer him, Bryne?" Fenton asked in an even voice.

Bryne's hands opened with a sudden, convulsive gesture, letting the microphone fall. After a long moment he turned an expressionless face to Fenton. The pale eyes regarded the gun muzzle and returned to Fenton's face. His voice was expressionless, too.

"Glad to see you, Fenton," he said. "I can use your help."

"Ben!" Torren cried, a thick gasp of sound. "Ben, he's trying . . . that . . . that scum is trying to take over! He—"

"I suppose you realize," Bryne said in a quiet voice, "Torren sent a helicopter to bomb you when he found you were getting away from him. I'm glad he failed, Fenton. We're going to need each other."

"Ben, I didn't!" Torren shouted. "It was Bryne—"

Bryne picked up the microphone again, smiling thinly.

"It's going to be perfectly simple, with your help, Fenton," he said, ignoring the heavy, panting gasps of the Protector in the tank. "I see now I might have taken you into my

confidence even more than I did. This was what I meant when I told you Torren hadn't very much longer to rule. The chance came sooner than I expected, that's all."

"Ben!" Torren was breathing hard, but his voice was under more control now. He swallowed heavily and said: "Ben, don't listen to him. Don't trust him. He . . . he wouldn't even *answer* me! He wouldn't even pay any attention . . . as though I were a . . . a—" He gulped and did not finish. He was not willing to put any name to himself that came to his mind.

But Fenton knew what he meant. "As though I were a . . . monster. A puppet. A dead man." It was the horror of utter helplessness that had disarmed him before Bryne. For thirty years Torren had sought and claimed power by every means at his command, driven himself and others ruthlessly to combat the deepest horror he knew—the horror of helplessness. It was that which frightened him—not the fear of death.

"Don't waste your sympathy, Fenton," Bryne said, watching him. "You know Torren better than I do. You know what he planned for you. You know how he's always treated you. When he saw you escaping, he sent the 'copter to make sure you wouldn't get away. He isn't human, Fenton. He hates human beings. He hates you and me. Even now he'll play on your sympathy until he gets you to do what he wants. After that . . . well, you know what to expect."

Torren shut his eyes again, not quite soon enough to hide the little glitter of confidence, perhaps of triumph, in them. In an almost calm voice he said: "Ben, you'd better shoot him now. He's a plausible devil."

"Just what are your plans, Bryne?" Fenton asked in a level voice.

"What you see." Bryne's gaunt shoulders moved in a shrug. "I'll pretend he's ill, at first. Too ill to see anyone but me. This is a Maskelyne vodor I've got here. I'm working out a duplicate of his voice. It's a *coup d'état*, Fenton, nothing new. I've got everything planned thoroughly. I've done nine-tenths of the management of Ganymede for years now, anyhow. Nobody's going to wonder much. With your help, I can get the rest of the empire for us, too."

"And what about me?" Torren demanded thickly.

"You?" The pale eyes flickered toward him and away. "As long as you behave, I suppose you can go on living." It was a lie. No falser statement of intent was ever spoken. You could tell it by the flat tone of his voice.

"And the Ganymedans?" Fenton asked.

"They're yours," Bryne said, still flatly. "You're the boss."

"Torren?" Fenton turned his head. "What do *you* say about the Ganymedans?"

"No," Torren breathed. "My way stands, Ben." His voice was an organ whisper. "My way or nothing. Make your choice."

The slightest possible flicker of a smile twitched the corner of Fenton's lip. He swung his pistol higher and sent a bullet exploding straight into Bryne's face.

The gaunt man moved like lightning.

He must have had his farther hand on a gun for some seconds now, because the two explosions came almost as one. In the same instant he sent his chair clattering backward as he sprang to his feet.

He moved too fast. His aim was faulty because of his speed. The bullet whined past Fenton's ear and smacked into the pillar behind him. Fenton's shot struck Bryne an invisible blow in the shoulder that spun him half around, knocked him three-quarters off his feet. He scrambled desperately backward to regain his balance. His foot caught in a tangle of ripped-up

wiring beside the water bath, and he went over backward in slow motion, his pale stare fixed with a strange illusion of calmness on Fenton's face as he fell.

For an instant he tottered on the brink of the bath. Then Torren chuckled a vast, deep, terrible chuckle and with tremendous effort lifted a hand far enough to seize Bryne by the wrist.

Still expressionless, still with that pale, intent stare fixed upon Fenton, Bryne went backward into the tank. There was a surge of heaving water. Bryne's suddenly convulsed limbs splashed a blinding spray and his hand groped out of nowhere for Torren's throat.

Fenton found himself running, without intending to or—he knew—needing to run. It was pure impulse to finish a job that needed finishing, though it was in better hands than his, now. He put his good hand on the rim of the huge tank, the revolver still gripped in it, leaning forward—

Bryne vanished under the oily, opaque surface. The incalculable weight of Torren's arm was like a millstone pressing him down, merciless, insensate as stone. After a while the thick, slow bubbles began to rise.

Fenton did not even see the motion Torren made. But when he tried to spring backward, it was too late. A vast, cold, slippery hand closed like iron over his. They wrestled unequally for several slow seconds. Then Torren's grip relaxed and Fenton stumbled back, wringing his half-crushed fingers, seeing his revolver all but swallowed up in Torren's enormous grasp.

Torren grinned at him.

Slowly, reluctantly, Fenton grinned back.

"You knew he was lying," Torren said. "About the bombs."

"Yes, I knew."

"So it's all settled, then," Torren said. "No more quarreling, eh, son? You've come back." But he still held the revolver watchfully, his eyes alert.

Fenton shook his head.

"Oh, no. I came back, yes. I don't know why. I don't owe you a thing. But when the bombs fell I knew you were in trouble. I knew he'd never dare bomb me in sight of the 'visor screens as long as you had any power on Ganymede. I had to find out what was happening. I'll go, now."

Torren hefted the revolver thoughtfully. "Back to your Ganymedans?" he asked. "Ben, my boy, I brought you up a fool. Be reasonable! What can you do for them? How can you fight me?" He rumbled with a sudden deep chuckle. "Bryne thought I was helpless! Step over there, Ben. Switch on the 'visor."

Watching him carefully, Fenton obeyed. The snowy hills outside sprang into view. Far off above them, tiny specks upon the blue-lit clouds, a formation of planes was just visible, humming nearer.

"About ten minutes more at the outside, I'd say," Torren estimated. "There are a lot of things about this set-up nobody even guesses except me. I wonder if Bryne really imagined I hadn't thought of every possibility. I allowed for this years and years ago. When my regular signals stopped going out an alarm went off—out there." The huge head nodded. "My guards would have got here in another ten minutes whether you came or not. Still, son, I'm obliged. You spared me that much time of feeling—helpless. You know how I hate it. Bryne could have killed me, but he could never have held me helpless very long. I owe you something, Ben. I don't like being obligated. Within reason, I'm willing to give you—"

“Nothing I want,” Fenton cut in. “Only freedom for the Ganymedans, and that I’ll have to take. You won’t give it. I can take it, Torren. I think I know the way, now. I’m going back to them, Torren.”

The huge hand floating at the surface of the water turned the pistol toward Fenton.

“Maybe you are, son. Maybe not. I haven’t decided yet. Want to tell me just how you plan to stop me on Ganymede?”

“There’s only one way.” Fenton regarded the pistol with a grim smile. “I can’t fight you. I haven’t any money or any influence. Nobody on Ganymede has except you. But the Ganymedans can fight you, Torren. I’ll teach them. I learned guerrilla warfare in a hard school. I know all there is to know about fighting against odds. Go on and put your new towers up, Torren. But—try and keep them up! We’ll blow them apart as fast as you can put them together. You can bomb us, but you can’t kill us all—not soon enough, you can’t.”

“Not soon enough—for what?” Torren demanded, the small eyes burning upon Fenton’s. “Who’s going to stop me, son? I’ve got all the time there is. Ganymede belongs to *me!*”

Fenton laughed, almost lightly.

“Oh, no it doesn’t. You lease it. But Ganymede belongs to the solar system. It belongs to the worlds and the people of the worlds. It belongs to your own people, Torren—the Thresholders who are going to inherit the planets. You can’t keep the news of what’s happening quiet here on Ganymede. The Earth government owns the towers. When we blow them over the government will step in to find out what goes on. The scandal will get out, Torren. You can’t keep it quiet!”

“Nobody will care,” Torren grunted. But there was a new, strange, almost hopeful flint in his eyes. “Nobody’s going to war over a little satellite like Ganymede. Nobody has any stake here but me. Don’t be childish, Ben. People don’t start wars over an ideal.”

“It’s more than an ideal with the Thresholders,” Fenton said. “It’s their lives. It’s their future. And *they’re* the people with power, Torren—not the Earth-bred men like me. The Thresholders are the future of the human race, and they know it, and Earth knows it. The new race on Mars with the three-yard chest expansions, and the new people on Venus with gills and fins may not look much like the Ganymedans, but they’re the same species, Torren. *They’ll* go to war for the Ganymedans if they have to. It’s their own hides at stake. Ideals don’t come into it. It’s survival, for the Thresholders. Attack one world and you attack all worlds where Thresholders live. No man’s an island, Torren—not even you.”

Torren’s breath came heavily in his tremendous chest.

“Not even me, Ben?”

Fenton laughed and stepped backward toward the open pillar. On the screen the planes were larger now, nearer and louder.

“Do you know why I was so sure you hadn’t ordered those bombs to kill me?” he asked, reaching with his good hand for the open door. “For the same reason you won’t shoot me now. You’re crazy, Torren. You know you’re crazy. You’re two men, not one. And the other man is me. You hate society because of the debt it owes you. Half of you hates all men, and the Ganymedans most of all, because they’re big like you, but they can walk like men. Their experiment worked and yours failed. So you hate them. You’ll destroy them if you can.”

He found the door, pushed it open wide. On the threshold he said:

“You didn’t adopt me on a whim, Torren. Part of your mind knew exactly what it was doing. You brought me up the hard way. My life was spent in a symbolic Centrifuge, just like yours. I *am* you. I’m the half that doesn’t hate the Ganymedans at all. I’m the half that knows

they're *your* people, the children you might have had, walking a free world as yours would have walked if your experiment had come out right, like theirs. I'll fight for them, Torren. In a respirator and mask, but I'll fight. That's why you'll never kill me."

Sighing, Torren tilted the pistol. His thick finger squeezed itself inside the guard, began slowly to tighten upon the trigger. Slowly.

"Sorry, son," he said, "but I can't let you get away with it."

Fenton smiled. "I said you were crazy. You won't kill me, Torren. There's been a fight going on inside you ever since you left the Centrifuge—until now. Now it's going on outside, in the open. That's a better place. As long as I'm alive, I'm your enemy and yourself. Keep it on the outside, Torren, or you *will* go mad. As long as I'm alive I'll fight you. But as long as I'm alive, you're not an island. It's *your* battle I'm fighting. You'll do your best to defeat me, Torren, but you won't kill me. You won't dare."

He stepped back into the pillar, reached for the spring to close the door. His eyes met Torren's confidently.

Torren's teeth showed under grimacing lips.

"You know how I hate you, Ben," he said in a thick, fierce voice. "You've always known!"

"I know," Fenton said, and touched the spring. The door slid shut before him. He was gone.

Torren emptied the revolver with a sort of wild deliberation at the unmarred surface of the pillar, watching the bullets strike and ricochet off it one by one until the hall was full of their whining and the loud explosions of the gun. The pillar stood blank and impervious where Fenton's face had been.

When the last echo struck the ceiling Torren dropped the gun and fell back into his enormous tank, caught his breath and laughed, tentatively at first and then with increasing volume until great billows of sound rolled up the walls and poured between the pillars toward the stars. Enormous hands flailed the water, sending spray high. The vast bulk wallowed monstrously, convulsed and helpless with its laughter.

On the screen the roar of the coming planes grew until their noise swallowed up even Torren's roaring mirth.

THE END

[The end of *Promised Land* by Henry Kuttner (as Lawrence O'Donnell)]