



DIABOLOGIC

BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

One way to keep a man from getting anywhere is to give him a toy—a nonsense puzzle—that he can't put down. It's much more effective than trying to forcibly hold him!

Illustrated by Freas

DIABOLOGIC

He made one circumnavigation to put the matter beyond doubt. That was standard space-scout technique; look once on the approach, look again all the way round. It often happened that second and closer impressions contradicted first and more distant ones. Some perverse factor in the probability sequence frequently caused the laugh to display itself on the other side of a planetary face.

Not this time, though. What he'd observed coming in remained visible right around the belly. This world was occupied by intelligent life of a

high order. The unmistakable markings were there in the form of dockyards, railroad marshaling grids, power stations, spaceports, quarries, factories, mines, housing projects, bridges, canals, a hundred and one other signs of life that spawns fast and vigorously.

The spaceports in particular were highly significant. He counted three of them. None held a flightworthy ship at the moment he flamed high above them, but in one was a tubeless vessel undergoing repair. A long, black, snouty thing about the size and shape of an Earth-Mars tramp. Certainly not as big and racy-looking as a Sol-Sirius liner.

As he gazed down through his tiny control-cabin's armorglass he knew that this was to be contact with a vengeance. During long, long centuries of human expansion more than seven hundred inhabitable worlds had been found, charted, explored and in some cases exploited. All contained life. A minority held intelligent life. But up to this moment nobody had found one other life form sufficiently advanced to cavort among the stars.

Of course, such a discovery had been theorized. Human adventuring created an exploratory sphere that swelled into the cosmos. Sooner or later, it was assumed; that sphere must touch another one at some point within the heavenly host. What would happen then was anybody's guess. Perhaps they'd fuse, making a bigger, shinier biform bubble. Or perhaps both bubbles would burst.

Anyway, by the looks of it the touching-time was now.

If he'd been within reach of a frontier listening-post, he'd have beamed a signal detailing this find. Even now it wasn't too late to drive back for seventeen weeks and get within receptive range. But that would mean seeking a refueling dump while he was at it. The ship just hadn't enough for such a double run plus the return trip home. Down there they had fuel. Maybe they'd give him some and maybe it would suit his engines. And just as possibly it would prove useless.

Right now he had adequate power reserves to land here and eventually get back to base. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. So he tilted the vessel and plunged into the alien atmosphere, heading for the largest spaceport of the three.

What might be awaiting him at ground-level did not bother him at all. The Terrans of today were not the nervy, apprehensive Terrans of the Earthbound and lurid past. They had become space-sophisticated. They had learned to lounge around with a carefree smile and let the other life forms do the worrying. It lent an air of authority and always worked. Nothing is more intimidating than an idiotic grin worn by a manifest non-idiot.

Quite a useful weapon in the diabolical armory was the knowing smirk.

His landing created a most satisfactory sensation. The planet's point-

nine Earth-mass permitted a little extra dexterity in handling the ship. He swooped it down, curved it up, dropped tail-first, stood straddle-legged on the tail-fins, cut the braking blast and would not have missed centering on a spread handkerchief by more than ten inches.

They seemed to spring out of the ground the way people do when cars collide on a deserted road. Dozens of them, hundreds. They were on the short side, the tallest not exceeding five feet. Otherwise they differed from his own pink-faced, blue-eyed type no more than would a Chinese covered in fine gray fur.

Massing in a circle beyond range of his jet-rebound, they stared at the ship, gabbled, gesticulated, nudged each other, argued, shrugged shoulders and generally behaved in the manner of a curious mob that has discovered a deep, dark hole with strange noises issuing therefrom. The noteworthy feature about their behavior was that none were scared, none attempted to get out of reach either openly or surreptitiously. The only thing about which they were wary was the chance of a sudden blast from the silent jets.

He did not emerge at once. That would have been an error—and blunders are not chosen to pilot scout-vessels. Pre-exit rule number one is that air must be tested. What suited that crowd outside would not necessarily agree with him. Anyway, he'd have checked air even if his own mother had been smoking a cigar in the front rank of the audience.

The Schrieber analyzer required four minutes in which to suck a sample through the Pitot tube, take it apart, sneer at the bits, make a bacteria-count and say whether its lord and master could condescend to breathe the stuff.

While it made up its mind, he sat in patience. Finally the needle on its half-red, half-white dial crawled reluctantly to mid-white. A fast shift would have pronounced the atmosphere socially acceptable. Slowness was the Schrieber's way of saying that his lungs were about to go slumming. The analyzer was and always had been a robotic snob that graded alien atmospheres on the caste system. The best and cleanest air was Brahmin, pure Brahmin. The worst was Untouchable.

Switching it off, he opened the inner and outer air lock doors, sat in the rim with his feet dangling eighty yards above ground-level. From this vantage point he calmly surveyed the mob, his expression that of one who can spit but not be spat upon. The sixth diabolical law states that the higher, the fewer. Proof: the seagull's tactical advantage over man.

Being intelligent, those placed by unfortunate circumstances eighty yards deeper in the gravitational field soon appreciated their state of vertical disadvantage. Short of toppling the ship or climbing a polished surface they were impotent to get at him. Not that they wanted to in any inimical way. But desires grow strongest when least possible of satisfaction. So they wanted him down there, face

to face, merely because he was out of reach.

To make matters worse, he turned sidewise and lay within the rim, one leg hitched up and hands linked around the knee, then continued looking at them in obvious comfort. They had to stand. And they had to stare upward at the cost of a crick in the neck. Alternatively they could adjust their heads and eyes to a crickless level and endure being looked at while not looking. Altogether, it was a hell of a situation.

The longer it lasted the less pleasing it became. Some of them shouted at him in squeaky voices. Upon those he bestowed a benign smile. Others gesticulated. He gestured back and the sharpest among them weren't happy about it. For some strange reason no scientist had bothered to investigate certain digital motions stimulate especial glands in any part of the cosmos. Basic diabolical training included a course in what was known as signal-deflation whereby the yolk could be removed from an alien ego with one wave of the hand.

For a while the crowd surged restlessly around nibbling the gray fur on the backs of their fingers, muttering to each other and occasionally throwing sour looks upward. They still kept clear of the danger zone, apparently assuming that the specimen reclining in the lock-rim might have a companion at the controls. Next, they became moody, content to do no more than scowl futilely at the tail-fins.

That state of affairs lasted until a convoy of heavy vehicles arrived and unloaded troops. The newcomers bore riot-sticks, hand-guns, and wore uniforms the color of stuff hogs roll in. Forming themselves into three ranks, they turned right at a barked command, marched forward. The crowd opened to make way.

Expertly they stationed themselves in an armed circle separating the ship from the horde of onlookers. A trio of officers paraded around and examined the tail-fins without going nearer than was necessary. Then they backed off, stared up at the air lock rim. The subject of their attention gazed back with academic interest.

The senior of the three officers patted his midriff where his heart was located, bent and patted the ground, forced pacific innocence into his face as again he stared at the arrival high above. The tilt of his head made the officer's hat fall off and in turning to pick it up he trod on it.

This petty incident seemed to gratify the one eighty yards higher because he chuckled, let go the leg he was nursing, leaned out for a better look at the victim. Red-faced under his fur complexion, the officer once more performed the belly and ground massage. The other understood this time. He gave a nod of gracious assent, disappeared into the lock. A few seconds later a nylon ladder snaked down the ship's side and the invader descended with monkeylike agility.

Three things struck the troops and
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the audience immediately he stood before them, namely, the nakedness of his face and hands, his greater size and weight and the fact that he carried no visible weapons. Strangeness of shape and form was to be expected. After all, they had done some space-roaming themselves and knew of life forms more outlandish. But what sort of creature has the brains to build a ship and not the sense to carry means of defense?

They were essentially a logical people.

The poor saps.

The officers made no attempt to converse with this specimen from the great unknown. They were not telepathic and space experience had taught them that mere mouth-noises are useless until one side or the other has learned the meanings thereof. So by signs they conveyed to him their wish to take him to town where he would meet others of their kind more competent to establish contact. They were pretty good at explaining with their hands, as was natural for the only other life form that had found new worlds.

He agreed to this with the same air of a lord consorting with the lower orders that had been apparent from the start. Perhaps he had been unduly influenced by the Schrieber. Again the crowd made way while the guard conducted him to the trucks. He passed through under a thousand eyes, favored them with deflatory gesture number seventeen, this being a nod that acknowledged their existence

and tolerated their vulgar interest in him.

The trucks trundled away leaving the ship with air lock open, ladder dangling and the rest of the troops still standing guard around the fins. Nobody failed to notice that touch, either. He hadn't bothered to prevent access to the vessel. There was nothing to prevent experts looking through it and stealing ideas from another space-going race.

Nobody of that caliber could be so criminally careless. Therefore it could not be carelessness. Pure logic said the ship's designs were not worth protecting from the stranger's viewpoint because they were long out of date. Or else they were unstealable because beyond the comprehension of a lesser people. Who the heck did he think they were? By the Black World of Khas, they'd show him!

A junior officer climbed the ladder, explored the ship's interior, came down, reported no more aliens within, not even a pet *lansim*, not a pretzel. The stranger had come alone. This item of information circulated through the crowd. They did not care for it overmuch. A visit by a fleet of battleships bearing ten thousand they could understand. It would be a show of force worthy of their stature. But the casual arrival of one and only one smacked somewhat of the dumping of a missionary among the heathens of the twin worlds of Morantia.

Meanwhile the trucks rolled clear of the spaceport, speeded up through twenty miles of country, entered a

city. Here the leading vehicle parted company from the rest, made for the western suburbs, arrived at a fortress surrounded by huge walls. The stranger dismounted and promptly got tossed into jail.

The result of that was odd, too. He should have resented incarceration seeing that nobody had yet explained the purpose of it. But he didn't. Treating the well-clothed bed in his cell as if it were a luxury provided as recognition of his rights, he sprawled on it full length, boots and all, gave a sigh of deep satisfaction and went to sleep. His watch hung close by his ear and compensated for the constant ticking of the autopilot without which slumber in space was never complete.

During the next few hours guards came frequently to look at him and make sure that he wasn't breaking the locks or disintegrating the bars by means of some alien technique. They had not searched him and accordingly were cautious. But he snored on, dead to the world, oblivious to the ripples of alarm spreading through a spatial empire.

He was still asleep when Parmith arrived bearing a load of picture-books. Parmith, elderly and myopic, sat by the bedside and waited until his own eyes became heavy in sympathy and he found himself considering the comfort of the carpet. At that point he decided he must either get to work or lie flat. He prodded the other into wakefulness.

They started on the books. Ah is

for ahmud that plays in the grass. Ay is for aysid that's kept under glass. Oom is for oom-tuk that's found in the moon. Uhm is for uhmlak, a clown or buffoon. And so on.

Stopping only for meals they were at it the full day and progress was fast. Parmith was a first-class tutor, the other an excellent pupil able to pick up with remarkable speed and forget nothing. At the end of the first long session they were able to indulge in a brief and simple conversation.

"I am called Parmith. What are you called?"

"Wayne Hilder."

"Two callings?"

"Yes."

"What are many of you called?"

"Terrans."

"We are called Vards."

Talk ceased for lack of enough words and Parmith left. Within nine hours he was back accompanied by Gerka, a younger specimen who specialized in reciting words and phrases again and again until the listener could echo them to perfection. They carried on another four days, working into late evening.

"You are not a prisoner."

"I know," said Wayne Hilder, blandly self-assured.

Parmith looked uncertain. "How do you know?"

"You would not dare to make me one."

"Why not?"

"You do not know enough. Therefore, you seek common speech. You must learn from me—and quickly."

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This being too obvious to contradict, Parmith let it go by and said, "I estimated it would take about ninety days to make you fluent. It looks as if twenty will be sufficient."

"I wouldn't be here if my kind weren't smart," Hilder pointed out.

Gerka registered uneasiness, Parmith was disconcerted.

"No Vard is being taught by us," he added for good measure. "Not having got to us yet."

Parmith said hurriedly, "We must get on with this task. An important commission is waiting to interview you as soon as you can converse with ease and clarity. We'll try again this fth-prefix that you haven't got quite right. Here's a tongue-twister to practice on. Listen to Gerka."

"*Fthon deas fthleman fthangafth,*" recited Gerka, punishing his bottom lip.

"*Futhong deas—*"

"*Fthon,*" corrected Gerka. "*Fthon deas fthleman fthangafth.*"

"It's better in a civilized tongue. Wet evenings are gnatless. *Futhong—*"

"*Fthon!*" insisted Gerka, playing catapults with his mouth.

The commission sat in an ornate hall containing semicircular rows of seats rising in ten tiers. There were four hundred present. The way in which attendants and minor officials fawned around them showed that this was an assembly of great importance.

It was, too. The four hundred represented the political and military power of a world that had created a

space-empire extending through a score of solar systems and controlling twice as many planets. Up to a short time ago they had been to the best of their knowledge and belief the lords of creation. Now there was some doubt about it. They had a serious problem to settle, one that a later Terran historian irreverently described as "a moot point."

They ceased talking among themselves when a pair of guards arrived in charge of Hilder, led him to a seat facing the tiers. Four hundred pairs of eyes examined the stranger, some curiously, some doubtfully, some challengingly, many with unconcealed antagonism.

Sitting down, Hilder looked them over much as one looks into one of the more odorous cages at the zoo. That is to say, with faint distaste. Gently he rubbed the side of his nose with a forefinger and sniffed. Deflatory gesture twenty-two, suitable for use in the presence of massed authority. It brought its carefully calculated reward. Half a dozen of the most bellicose characters glared at him.

A furry-faced oldster stood up frowning, spoke to Hilder as if reciting a well-rehearsed speech. "None but a highly intelligent and completely logical species can conquer space. It being self-evident that you are of such a kind, you will appreciate our positon. Your very presence compels us to consider the ultimate alternatives of coöperation or competition, peace or war."

"There are no two alternatives to

anything," Hilder asserted. "There is black and white and a thousand intermediate shades. There is yes and no and a thousand ifs, buts or maybes. For example: you could move farther out of reach."

Being tidy-minded, they didn't enjoy watching the thread of their logic being tangled. Neither did they like the resultant knot in the shape of the final suggestion. The oldster's frown grew deeper, his voice sharper.

"You should also appreciate your own position. You are one among countless millions. Regardless of whatever may be the strength of your kind you, personally, are helpless. Therefore, it is for us to question and for you to answer. If our respective positions were reversed, the contrary would be true. That is logical. Are you ready to answer our questions?"

"I am ready."

Some showed surprise at that. Others looked resigned, taking it for granted that he would give all the information he saw fit and suppress the rest.

Resuming his seat, the oldster signed to the Vard on his left who stood up and asked, "Where is your base world?"

"At the moment I don't know."

"You don't know?" His expression showed that he had expected awkwardness from the start. "How can you return to it if you don't know where it is?"

"When within its radio-sweep I pick up its beacon. I follow that."

"Aren't your space charts sufficient to enable you to find it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because," said Hilder, "it isn't tied to a primary. It wanders around."

Registering incredulity, the other said, "Do you mean that it is a planet broken loose from a solar system?"

"Not at all. It's a scout base. Surely you know what that is?"

"I do not," snapped the interrogator. "What is it?"

"A tiny, compact world equipped with all the necessary contraptions. An artificial sphere that functions as a frontier outpost."

There was a deal of fidgeting and murmuring among the audience as individuals tried to weigh the implications of this news.

Hiding his thoughts, the questioner continued, "You define it as a frontier outpost. That does not tell us where your home world is located."

"You did not ask about my home world. You asked about my base world. I heard you with my own two ears."

"Then where is your home world?"

"I cannot show you without a chart. Do you have charts of unknown regions?"

"Yes." The other smiled like a satisfied cat. With a dramatic flourish he produced them. "We obtained them from your ship."

"That was thoughtful of you," said Hilder, disappointingly pleased.

Leaving his seat he placed a fingertip on the topmost chart and said, "There! Good old Earth!" Then he returned and sat down.

The Vard stared at the designated point, glanced around at his fellows as if about to make a remark, changed his mind and said nothing. Producing a pen he marked the chart, rolled it up with the others.

"This world you call Earth is the origin and center of your empire?"

"Yes."

"The mother-planet of your species?"

"Yes."

"Now," he went on, firmly, "how many of your kind are there?"

"Nobody knows."

"Don't you check your own numbers?"

"We did once upon a time. These days we're too scattered around." Hillder pondered a moment, added helpfully, "I can tell you that there are four billions of us spread over three planets in our own solar system. Outside of those the number is a guess. We can be divided into the rooted and the rootless and the latter can't be counted. They won't let themselves be counted because somebody might want to tax them. Take the grand total as four billions plus."

"That tells us nothing," the other objected. "We don't know the size of the plus."

"Neither do we," said Hillder, visibly awed at the thought of it. "Sometimes it frightens us." He surveyed the audience. "If nobody's ever

been scared by a plus, now's the time."

Scowling, the questioner tried to get at it another way. "You say you are scattered. Over how many worlds?"

"Seven hundred fourteen at last report. That's already out of date. Every report is eight to ten planets behind the times."

"And you have mastery of that huge number?"

"Whoever mastered a planet? Why, we haven't yet dug into the heart of our own and I doubt that we ever shall." He shrugged, finished, "No, we just amble around and maul them a bit. Same as you do."

"You mean you exploit them?"

"Put it that way if it makes you happy."

"Have you encountered no opposition at any time?"

"Feeble, friend, feeble," said Hillder,

"What did you do about it?"

"That depended upon circumstances. Some folk we ignored, some we smacked, some we led toward the light."

"What light?" asked the other baffled.

"That of seeing things our way."

It was too much for a paunchy specimen in the third row. Coming to his feet he spoke in acidulated tones. "Do you expect *us* to see things your way?"

"Not immediately," Hillder said.

"Perhaps you consider us incapable of—"

The oldster who had first spoken now arose and interjected, "We must proceed with this inquisition logically or not at all. That means one line of questioning at a time and one questioner at a time." He gestured authoritatively toward the Vard with the charts. "Carry on, Thormin."

Thormin carried on for two solid hours. Apparently he was an astronomical expert for all his questions bore more or less on that subject. He wanted details of distances, velocities, solar classifications, planetary conditions and a host of similar items. Willingly Hillder answered all that he could, pleaded ignorance with regard to the rest.

Eventually Thormin sat down and concentrated on his notes in the manner of one absorbed in fundamental truth. He was succeeded by a hard-eyed individual named Grasud who for the last half-hour had been fidgeting with impatience.

"Is your vessel the most recent example of its type?"

"No."

"There are better models?"

"Yes," agreed Hillder.

"Very much better?"

"I wouldn't know, not having been assigned one yet."

"Strange, is it not," said Grasud pointedly, "that an old-type ship should discover us while superior ones have failed to do so?"

"Not at all. It was sheer luck. I happened to head this way. Other scouts, in old or new ships, boosted other ways. How many directions are

there in deep space? How many radii can be extended from a sphere?"

"Not being a mathematician, I—"

"If you were a mathematician," Hillder interrupted, "you would know that the number works out at 2^n ." He glanced over the audience, added in tutorial manner, "The factor of two being determined by the demonstrable fact that a radius is half a diameter and 2^n being defined as the smallest number that makes one boggle."

Grasud boggled as he tried to conceive it, gave it up, said, "Therefore, the total number of your exploring vessels is of equal magnitude?"

"No. We don't have to probe in every direction. It is necessary only to make for visible stars."

"Well, aren't there stars in every direction?"

"If distance is disregarded, yes. But one does not disregard distance. One makes for the nearest yet-unexplored solar systems and thus cuts down repeated jaunts to a reasonable number."

"You are evading the issue," said Grasud. "How many ships of your type are in actual operation?"

"Twenty."

"Twenty?" He made it sound an anticlimax. "Is that all?"

"It's enough, isn't it? How long do you expect us to keep antiquated models in service?"

"I am not asking about out-of-date vessels. How many scout ships of all types are functioning?"

"Really I don't know. I doubt

whether anyone knows. In addition to Earth's fleets some of the most advanced colonies are running expeditions of their own. What's more, a couple of allied life forms have learned things from us, caught the fever and started poking around. We can no more take a complete census of ships than we can of people."

Accepting that without argument, Grasud went on, "Your vessel is not large by our standards. Doubtless you have others of greater mass." He leaned forward, gazed fixedly. "What is the comparative size of your biggest ship?"

"The largest I've seen was the battleship *Lance*. Forty times the mass of my boat."

"How many people does it carry?" Grasud asked.

"It has a crew numbering more

than six hundred but at a pinch it can transport three times that."

"So you know of at least one ship with an emergency capacity of about two thousand?"

"Yes."

More murmurings and fidgetings among the audience. Disregarding them, Grasud carried on with the air of one determined to learn the worst.

"You have other battleships of equal size?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"I don't know. If I did, I'd tell you. Sorry."

"You may have some even bigger?"

"That is quite possible," Hillder conceded. "If so, I haven't seen one



yet. But that means nothing. One can go through a lifetime and not see everything. If you calculate the number of seeable things in existence, deduct the number already viewed, the remainder represents the number yet to be seen. And if you study them at the rate of one per second it would require—”

“I am not interested,” snapped Grasud, refusing to be bollixed by alien argument.

“You should be,” said Hillder. “Because infinity minus umpteen millions leaves infinity. Which means that you can take the part from the whole and leave the whole still intact. You can eat your cake and have it. Can’t you?”

Grasud flopped into his seat, spoke moodily to the oldster. “I seek information, not a blatant denial of logic. His talk confuses me. Let Shahding have him.”

Coming up warily, Shahding started on the subject of weapons, their design, mode of operation, range and effectiveness. He stuck with determination to this single line of inquiry and avoided all temptations to be sidetracked. His questions were astute and penetrating. Hillder answered all he could, freely, without hesitation.

“So,” commented Shahding, toward the finish, “it seems that you put your trust in force-fields, certain rays that paralyze the nervous system, bacteriological techniques, demonstrations of number and strength, and a good deal of persuasiveness.

Your science of ballistics cannot be advanced after so much neglect.”

“It could never advance,” said Hillder. “That’s why we abandoned it. We dropped fiddling around with bows and arrows for the same reason. No initial thrust can outpace a continuous and prolonged one. Thus far and no farther shalt thou go.” Then he added by way of speculative afterthought, “Anyway, it can be shown that no bullet can overtake a running man.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Shahding, having once ducked a couple of slugs himself.

“By the time the bullet has reached the man’s point of departure the man has retreated,” said Hillder. “The bullet then has to cover that extra distance but finds the man has retreated farther. It covers that too, only to find that again the man is not there. And so on and so on.”

“The lead is reduced each successive time until it ceases to exist,” Shahding scoffed.

“Each successive advance occupies a finite length of time no matter how small,” Hillder pointed out. “You cannot divide and subdivide a fraction to produce zero. The series is infinite. An infinite series of finite time-periods totals an infinite time. Work it out for yourself. The bullet does not hit the man because it cannot get to him.”

The reaction showed that the audience had never encountered this argument before or concocted anything like it of their own accord.

None were stupid enough to accept it as serious assertion of fact. All were sufficiently intelligent to recognize it as logical or pseudo-logical denial of something self-evident and demonstrably true.

Forthwith they started hunting for the flaw in this alien reasoning, discussing it between themselves so noisily that perforce Shahding stood in silence waiting for a break. He posed like a dummy for ten minutes while the row rose crescendo. A group in the front semicircle left their seats, kneeled and commenced drawing diagrams on the floor while arguing vociferously and with some heat. At that moment a couple of Vards in the back tier showed signs of coming to blows.

Finally the oldster, Shahding and two others bellowed a united, "Quiet!"

The investigatory commission settled down with reluctance, still muttering, gesturing, showing each other sketches on pieces of paper. Shahding fixed ireful attention on Hillder, opened his mouth in readiness to resume.

Beating him to it, Hillder said casually, "It sounds silly, doesn't it? But anything is possible, anything at all. A man can marry his widow's sister."

"Impossible," declared Shahding, able to dispose of that without abstruse calculations. "He must be dead for her to have the status of a widow."

"A man married a woman who died. He then married her sister. He

died. Wasn't his first wife his widow's sister?"

Shahding shouted, "I am not here to be tricked by the tortuous squirmings of an alien mind." He sat down hard, fumed a bit, said to his neighbor, "All right, Kadina, you can have him and welcome."

Confident and self-assured, Kadina stood up, gazed authoritatively around. He was tall for a Vard, wore well-cut uniform with crimson epaulettes and crimson-banded sleeves. For the first time in a while there was silence. Satisfied with the effect he had produced, he faced Hillder, spoke in tones deeper, less squeaky than any heard so far.

"Apart from the petty problems with which it has amused you to baffle my compatriots," he began in oily manner, "you have given candid, unhesitating answers to our questions. You have provided much information that is useful from the military viewpoint."

"I am glad you appreciate it," said Hillder.

"We do. Very much so." Kadina bestowed a craggy smile that looked sinister. "However, there is one matter that needs clarifying."

"What is that?"

"If the present situation were reversed, if a lone Vard-scout was subject to intensive cross-examination by an assembly of your life form, and if he surrendered information as willingly as you have done—" He let it die out while his eyes hardened, then growled, "We would consider him a

traitor to his kind. The penalty would be death."

"How fortunate I am not to be a Vard," said Hilder.

"Do not congratulate yourself too early," Kadina retorted. "A death sentence is meaningless only to those already under such a sentence."

"What are you getting at?"

"I am wondering whether you are a major criminal seeking sanctuary among us. There may be some other reason. Whatever it is, you do not hesitate to betray your own kind." He put on the same smile again. "It would be nice to know *why* you have been so coöperative."

"That's an easy one," Hilder said, smiling back in a way that Kadina did not like. "You see, I am a consistent liar."

With that, he left his seat and walked boldly to the exit. The guards led him to his cell.

He was there three days, eating regular meals and enjoying them with irritating gusto, amusing himself writing figures in a little pocketbook, as happy as a legendary space scout named Larry. At the end of that time a ruminative Vard paid a visit.

"I am Bulak. Perhaps you remember me. I was seated at the end of the second row when you were before the commission."

"Four hundred were there," Hilder reminded. "I cannot recall all of them. Only the ones who suffered." He pushed forward a chair. "But never mind. Sit down and put your feet up—if you do have feet inside

those funny looking boots. What can I do for you?"

"I don't know."

"You must have come for some reason, surely?"

Bulak looked mournful. "I'm a refugee from the fog."

"What fog?"

"The one you've spread all over the place." He rubbed a fur-coated car, examined his fingers, stared at the wall. "The commission's main purpose was to determine relative standards of intelligence, to settle the prime question of whether your kind's cleverness is less than, greater than or equal to our own. Upon that and that alone depends our reaction to contact with another space-conqueror."

"I did my best to help, didn't I?"

"Help?" echoed Bulak as if it were a new and strange word. "Help? Do you call it that? The true test should be that of whether your logic has been extended farther than has ours, whether your premises have been developed to more advanced conclusions."

"Well?"

"You ended up by trampling all over the laws of logic. A bullet cannot kill anybody. After three days fifty of them are still arguing about it and this morning one of them proved that a person cannot climb a ladder. Friends have fallen out, relatives are starting to hate the sight of each other. The remaining three hundred and fifty are in little better state."

"What's troubling them?" in-

quired Hillder with lively interest.

"They are debating veracity with everything but brickbats," Bulak informed, somewhat as if compelled to mention an obscene subject. "You are a consistent liar. Therefore, the statement itself must be a lie. Therefore, you are not a consistent liar. The conclusion is that you can be a consistent liar only by not being a consistent liar. Yet you cannot be a consistent liar without being consistent."

"That's bad," Hillder sympathized.

"It's worse," Bulak gave back. "Because if you really are a consistent liar—which logically is a self-contradiction—none of your evidence is worth a sack of rotten muna-seeds. If you have told us the truth all the way through then your final claim to be a liar must also be true. But, if you are a consistent liar, then none of it is true."

"Take a deep breath," advised Hillder.

"But," continued Bulak, taking a deep breath, "since that final statement must be untrue all the rest may be true." A wild look came into his eyes and he started waving his arms around. "But the claim to consistency makes it impossible for any statement to be assessed as either true or untrue because, on analysis, there is an unresolvable contradiction that—"

"Now, now," said Hillder, patting his shoulder. "It is only natural that the lower should be confused by the higher. The trouble is that you've not yet advanced far enough. Your thinking remains a little primitive." He hesitated, added with the air of mak-

ing a daring guess, "In fact it wouldn't surprise me if you still think *logically*."

"In the name of the Big Sun," exclaimed Bulak, "how *else* can we think?"

"Like us," said Hillder. "When you're mentally developed." He strolled twice around the cell, said by way of musing afterthought, "Right now you couldn't cope with the problem of why a mouse when it spins."

"Why a mouse when it spins?" parroted Bulak, letting his jaw hang down.

"Or let's try an easier one, a problem any Earth-child could tackle."

"Such as what?"

"By definition an island is a body of land entirely surrounded by water, isn't it?"

"Yes," admitted Bulak.

"And by definition a lake is a body of water entirely surrounded by land?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"Then let us suppose that the whole of this planet's northern hemisphere is land and all the southern hemisphere is water. Is the northern half an island? Or is the southern half a lake?"

Bulak gave it five minutes' thought. Then he drew a circle on a sheet of paper, divided it, shaded the top half and contemplated the result. In the end he pocketed the paper and got to his feet.

"Some of them would gladly cut your throat but for the possibility that your kind may have a shrewd idea where you are and be capable of

retribution. Others would send you home with honors but for the risk of bowing to inferiors."

"They'll have to make up their minds some day," Hillder commented, refusing to show concern about which way it went.

"Meanwhile," Bulak continued morbidly, "we've had a look over your ship which may be old or new according to whether or not you have lied about it. We can see everything but the engines and remote controls, everything but the things that matter. To determine whether they're superior to ours we'd have to pull the vessel apart, ruining it and making you a prisoner."

"Well, what's stopping you?"

"The fact that you may be bait. If your kind has great power and is looking for trouble, they'll need a pretext. Our victimization of you would provide it. The spark that fires the powder barrel." He made a gesture of futility. "What can one do when working utterly in the dark?"

"One could try settling the question of whether a green leaf remains a green leaf in complete absence of light."

"I have had enough," declared Bulak, making for the door. "I have had more than enough. An island or a lake? Who cares? I am going to see Mondafa."

Mondafa turned up next day in the mid-afternoon. He was a thin, elderly and somewhat wizened specimen with incongruously youthful eyes. Accepting a seat, he studied

Hillder, spoke with smooth deliberation.

"From what I have heard, from all that I have been told, I deduce a basic rule applying to life forms deemed intelligent."

"You deduce it?"

"I have to. There is no choice about the matter. All the life forms we have discovered so far have not been truly intelligent. Some have been superficially so, but not genuinely so. It is obvious that you have had experiences that may come to us sooner or later but have not arrived yet. In that respect we may have been fortunate seeing that the results of such contact are highly speculative. There's just no way of telling."

"And what is this rule?"

"That the governing body of any life form such as ours will be composed of power-lovers rather than of specialists."

"Well, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately, it is. Government falls into the hands of those with desire for authority and escapes those with other interests." He paused, went on, "That is not to say that those who govern us are stupid. They are quite clever in their own particular field of mass-organization. But by the same token they are pathetically ignorant of other fields. Knowing this, your tactic is to take advantage of their ignorance. The weakness of authority is that it cannot be diminished and retain strength. To play upon ignorance is to dull the voice of command."

"Hm-m-m!" Hillder surveyed him

with mounting respect. "You're the first one I've encountered who can see beyond the end of his nose."

"Thank you," said Mondafa. "Now the very fact that you have taken the risk of landing here alone, and followed it up by confusing our leaders, proves that your kind has developed a technique for a given set of conditions and, in all probability, a series of techniques for various conditions."

"Go on," urged Hilder.

"Such techniques must be created empirically rather than theoretically," Mondafa continued. "In other words, they result from many experiences, the correcting of many errors, the search for workability, the effort to gain maximum results from minimum output." He glanced at the other. "Am I correct so far?"

"You're doing fine."

"To date we have established footholds on forty-two planets without ever having to combat other than primitive life. We may find foes worthy of our strength on the forty-third world whenever that is discovered. Who knows? Let us assume for the sake of argument that intelligent life exists on one in every forty-three inhabitable planets."

"Where does that get us?" Hilder prompted.

"I would imagine," said Mondafa thoughtfully, "that the experience of making contact with at least six intelligent life forms would be necessary to enable you to evolve techniques for dealing with their like elsewhere. Therefore, your kind must

have discovered and explored not less than two hundred and fifty worlds. That is an estimate in minimum terms. The correct figure may well be that stated by you."

"And I am not a consistent liar?" asked Hilder, grinning.

"That is beside the point if only our leaders would hold onto sanity long enough to see it. You may have distorted or exaggerated for purposes of your own. If so, there is nothing we can do about it. The prime fact holds fast, namely, that your space-venturings must be far more extensive than ours. Hence you must be older, more advanced and numerically stronger."

"That's logical enough," conceded Hilder, broadening his grin.

"Now don't start on me," pleaded Mondafa. "If you fool me with an intriguing fallacy, I won't rest until I get it straight. And that will do either of us no good."

"Ah, so your intention is to do me good?"

"Somebody has to make a decision seeing that the top brass is no longer capable of it. I am going to suggest that they set you free with our best wishes and assurances of friendship."

"Think they'll take any notice?"

"You know quite well they will. You've been counting on it all along." Mondafa eyed him shrewdly. "They'll grab at the advice to restore their self-esteem. If it works, they'll take the credit. If it doesn't, I'll get the blame." He brooded a few seconds, asked with open curiosity, "Do you find it the same elsewhere?"

"Exactly the same," Hilder assured. "And there is always a Mondafa to settle the issue in the same way. Power and scapegoats go together like husband and wife."

"I'd like to meet my alien counterparts some day." Getting up, he moved to the door. "If I had not come along, how long would you have waited for your psychological mixture to congeal?"

"Until another of your type chipped in. If one doesn't arrive of his own accord, the powers-that-be lose patience and drag one in. The catalyst mined from its own kind. Authority lives by eating its vitals."

"That is putting it paradoxically," Mondafa observed.

Quite an impressive deputation took him back to the ship. All the four hundred were there, about a quarter of them resplendent in uniforms, the rest in their Sunday best. An armed guard juggled guns at barked command. Kadina made an unctuous speech full of brotherly love and the glorious shape of things to come. Somebody presented a bouquet of evil-smelling weeds and Hilder made mental note of the difference in olfactory senses.

Climbing eighty yards to the lock, Hilder looked down. Kadina waved an officious farewell. The crowd chanted, "Hurrah!" in conducted rhythm. He blew his nose on a handkerchief, that being deflatory gesture number nine, closed the lock, sat at the control board.

Tubes fired into a low roar. A cloud of vapor climbed around and sprinkled ground-dirt over the mob. That touch was involuntary and not recorded in the book.

The ship snored into the sky, left the Vard-world far behind. He remained at the controls until free of the entire system's gravitational field. Then he headed for the beacon area and locked the auto-pilot on that course.

For a while he sat gazing meditatively into star-spangled darkness. After a while he sighed, made notes in his logbook.

"Cube K49, Sector 10, solar-grade D7, third planet. Name Vard. Life form named Vards, cosmic intelligence rating BB, space-going, forty-two colonies. Comment: Softened up."

He glanced over his tiny library fastened to a steel bulkhead. Two tomes were missing. They had swiped the two that were replete with diagrams and illustrations. They had left the rest, having no Rosetta Stone with which to translate cold print. They hadn't touched the nearest volume titled: "Diabologic, the Science of Driving People Nuts."

Sighing again, he took paper from a drawer, commenced his hundredth, two hundredth or maybe three hundredth try at concocting an Aleph number higher than A_1 but lower than C. He mauled his hair until it stuck out in spikes, and, although he didn't know it, he did not look especially well-balanced himself.

THE END