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TERMINAL BEACH

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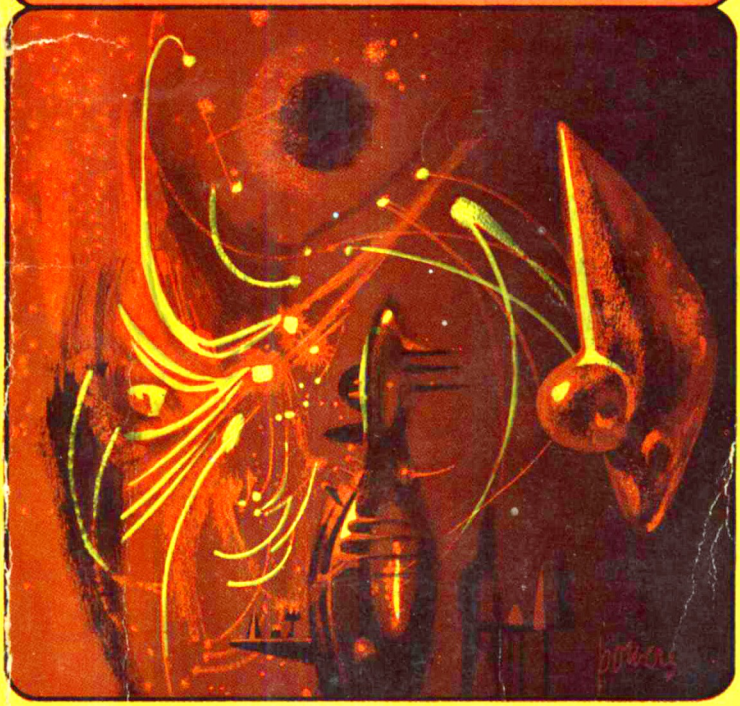
J.G. BALLARD



IN THE TIME-TOMBS

Quickly, following Traxel's instructions, he unbolted the console containing the memory store, lifting out the three heavy drums which held the tape spools. Immediately the persona began to dim, the edge of the desk and the book shelves vanishing as the cone contracted. Narrow bands of dead air appeared across it, one, at the level of the man's neck, decapitating him. Lower down the scanner had begun to misfire. The folded hands trembled nervously, and now and then one of his shoulders gave a slight twitch. *Shepley stepped through him without looking back . . .*

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J.G. BALLARD

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

END GAME

AFTER HIS TRIAL they gave Constantin a villa, an allowance and an executioner. The villa was small and high-walled, and had obviously been used for the purpose before. The allowance was adequate to Constantin's needs—he was never permitted to go out and his meals were prepared for him by a police orderly. The executioner was his own. Most of the time they sat on the enclosed veranda overlooking the narrow stone garden, playing chess with a set of large well-worn pieces.

The executioner's name was Malek. Officially he was Constantin's supervisor, and responsible for maintaining the villa's tenuous contact with the outside world, now hidden from sight beyond the steep walls, and for taking the brief telephone call that came promptly at nine o'clock every morning. However, his real role was no secret between them. A powerful, doughy-faced man with an anonymous expression, Malek at first intensely irritated Constantin, who had been used to dealing with more subtle sets of responses. Malek impassively followed him around the villa, never interfering—unless Constantin tried to bribe the orderly for a prohibited newspaper, at whom Malek merely gestured with a slight turn of one of his large hands, face registering no disapproval, but cutting off the attempt as irrevocably as a bulkhead—nor making any suggestions as to how Constantin should spend his time. Like a large bear, he sat motionlessly in the lounge in one of the faded armchairs, watching Constantin.

After a week Constantin tired of reading the old novels in the bottom shelf of the bookcase—somewhere among the grey well-thumbed pages he had hoped to find a message from one of his predecessors—and invited Malek to play chess. The set of chipped mahogany pieces reposed on one of the empty shelves of the bookcase, the only item of decoration or recreational equipment in the villa. Apart from the books and the chess set the small six-roomed house was completely devoid of ornament. There were no curtains or picture rails, bedside tables or standard lamps, and the only electrical fittings were the

lights recessed behind thick opaque bowls into the ceilings. Obviously the chess set and the row of novels had been provided deliberately, each representing one of the alternative pastimes available to the temporary tenants of the villa. Men of a phlegmatic or philosophical temperament stoically resigned to the inevitability of their fate, would choose to read the novels, sinking backwards into a self-anaesthetised trance as they waded through the turgid prose of those nineteenth century romances.

On the other hand, men of a more volatile and extrovert disposition would obviously prefer to play chess, unable to resist the opportunity to exercise their Machiavellian talents for positional manoeuvre to the last. The games of chess would help to maintain their unconscious optimism and, more subtly, sublimate or divert any attempts at escape.

When Constantin suggested that they play chess Malek promptly agreed, and so they spent the next long month as the late summer turned to autumn. Constantin was glad he had chosen chess; the game brought him into immediate personal involvement with Malek, and like all condemned men he had soon developed a powerful emotional transference onto what effectively was the only person left in his life.

At present it was neither negative nor positive, but a relationship of acute dependence—already Malek's notional personality was becoming overlayed by the associations of all the anonymous but nonetheless potent figures of authority whom Constantin could remember since his earliest childhood: his own father, the priest at the seminary he had seen hanged after the revolution, the first senior commissars, the party secretaries at the ministry of foreign affairs, and ultimately, the members of the central committee themselves. Here, where the anonymous faces had crystallised into those of closely observed colleagues and rivals, the process seemed to come full circle, so that he himself was identified with those shadowy personas who had authorised his death and were now represented by Malek.

Constantin had also, of course, become dominated by another obsession, the need to know: *when?* In the weeks after the trial and sentence he had remained in a curiously euphoric state, too stunned to realise that the dimension of

time still existed for him; he had already died *a posteriori.* But gradually the will to live, and his old determination and ruthlessness, which had served him so well for thirty years, reasserted themselves, and he realised that a small hope still remained to him. How long exactly in terms of time he could only guess, but if he could master Malek his survival became a real possibility.

The question remained: When?

Fortunately he could be completely frank with Malek. The first point he established immediately.

"Malek," he asked on the tenth move one morning, when he had completed his development and was relaxing for a moment. "Tell me, do you know—when?"

Malek looked up from the board, his large almost bovine eyes gazing blandly at Constantin. "Yes, Mr. Constantin, I know when." His voice was deep and functional, as expressionless as a weighing machine's.

Constantin sat back reflectively. Outside the glass panes of the veranda the rain fell steadily on the solitary fir tree which had maintained a precarious purchase among the stones under the wall. A few miles to the south-west of the villa were the outskirts of the small port, one of the dismal so-called 'coastal resorts' where junior ministry men and party hacks were sent for their bi-annual holidays. The weather, however, seemed peculiarly inclement, the sun never shining through the morose clouds, and for a moment, before he checked himself, Constantin felt glad to be within the comparative warmth of the villa.

"Let me get this straight," he said to Malek. "You don't merely know in a general sense—for example, after receiving an instruction from so-and-so—but you know *specifically* when?"

"Exactly." Malek moved his queen out of the game. His chess was sound but without flair or a personal style, suggesting that he had improved merely by practice—most of his opponents, Constantin realised with sardonic amusement, would have been players of a high class.

"You know the *day* and the *hour* and the *minute,*" Constantin pressed. Malek nodded slowly, most of his attention upon the game, and Constantin rested his smooth sharp chin in one hand, watching his opponent. "It could be within the next ten seconds, or again, it might not be for ten years?"

"As you say." Malek gestured at the board. "Your move."

Constantin waved this aside. "I know, but don't let's rush it. These games are played on many levels, Malek. People who talk about three-dimensional chess obviously know nothing about the present form." Occasionally he made these openings in the hope of loosening Malek's tongue, but conversation with him seemed to be impossible.

Abruptly he sat forward across the board, his eyes searching Malek's. "You alone know the date, Malek, and as you have said, it might not be for ten years—or twenty. Do you think you can keep such a secret to yourself for so long?"

Malek made no attempt to answer this, and waited for Constantin to resume play. Now and then his eyes inspected the corners of the veranda, or glanced at the stone garden outside. From the kitchen came the occasional sounds of the orderly's boots scraping the floor as he lounged by the telephone on the deal table.

As he scrutinised the board Constantin wondered how he could provoke any response whatever from Malek; the man had shown no reaction at the mention of ten years, although the period was ludicrously far ahead. In all probability their real game would be a short one. The indeterminate date of the execution, which imbued the procedure with such a bizarre flavour, was not intended to add an element of torture or suspense to the condemned's last days, but simply to obscure and confuse the very fact of his exit. If a definite date were known in advance there might be a last-minute rally of sympathy, an attempt to review the sentence and perhaps apportion the blame elsewhere, and the unconscious if not conscious sense of complicity in the condemned man's crimes might well provoke an agonised reappraisal and, after the execution of the sentence, a submerged sense of guilt upon which opportunists and intriguers could play to advantage.

By means of the present system, however, all these dangers and unpleasant side-effects were obviated; the accused was removed from his place in the hierarchy when the opposition to him was at its zenith and conveniently handed over to the judiciary, and thence to one of the courts of star chamber whose proceedings were always held in camera and whose verdicts were never announced.

As far as his former colleagues were concerned, he had

disappeared into the endless corridor world of the bureaucratic purgatories, his case permanently on file but never irrevocably closed. Above all, the fact of his guilt was never established and confirmed. As Constantin was aware, he himself had been convicted upon a technicality in the margins of the main indictment against him, a mere procedural device, like a bad twist in the plot of a story, designed solely to bring the investigation to a close. Although he knew the real nature of his crime, Constantin had never been formally notified of his guilt; in fact the court had gone out of its way to avoid preferring any serious charges against him whatever.

This ironic inversion of the classical Kafkaesque situation, by which, instead of admitting his guilt to a non-existent crime, he was forced to connive in a farce maintaining his innocence of offences he knew full well he had committed, was preserved in his present situation at the execution villa.

The psychological basis was more obscure but in some way far more threatening, the executioner beckoning his victim towards him with a beguiling smile, reassuring him that all was forgiven. Here he played upon, not those unconscious feelings of anxiety and guilt, but that innate conviction of individual survival, that obsessive preoccupation with personal immortality which is merely a disguised form of the universal fear of the image of one's own death. It was this assurance that all was well, and the absence of any charges of guilt or responsibility, which had made so orderly the queues into the gas chambers.

At present the paradoxical face of this diabolical device was worn by Malek, his lumpy amorphous features and neutral but ambiguous attitude making him seem less a separate personality than the personification of the apparatus of the state. Perhaps the sardonic title of 'supervisor' was nearer the truth than had seemed at first sight, and that Malek's real role was simply to officiate, or at the most serve as moderator, at a trial by ordeal in which Constantin was his own accused, prosecutor and judge.

However, he reflected as he examined the board, aware of Malek's bulky presence across the pieces, this would imply that they had completely misjudged his own personality, with its buoyancy and almost gallic verve and panache. He, of all people, would be the last to take his own life in an orgy of self-confessed guilt. Not for him

the neurotic suicide so loved by the Slav. As long as there were a way out he would cheerfully shoulder any burden of guilt, tolerant of his own weaknesses, ready to shrug them off with a quip. This insouciance had always been his strongest ally.

His eyes searched the board, roving down the open files of the queens and bishops, as if the answer to the pressing enigma were to be found in these polished corridors.

When? His own estimate was two months. Almost certainly (and he had no fear here that he was rationalising), it would not be within the next two or three days, nor even the next fortnight. Haste was always unseemly, quite apart from violating the whole purpose of the exercise. Two months would see him safely into limbo, and be sufficiently long for the suspense to break him down and reveal any secret allies, sufficiently brief to fit his particular crime.

Two months? Not as long as he might have wished. As he translated his queen's bishop into play Constantin began to map out his strategy for defeating Malek. The first task, obviously, was to discover when Malek was to carry out the execution, partly to give him peace of mind, but also to allow him to adjust the context of his escape. A physical leap to freedom over the wall would be pointless. Contacts had to be established, pressure brought to bear at various sensitive points in the hierarchy, paving the way for a reconsideration of his case. All this would take time.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sharp movement of Malek's left hand across the board, followed by a guttural grunt. Surprised by the speed and economy with which Malek had moved his piece, as much as by the fact that he himself was in check, Constantin sat forward and examined his position with more care. He glanced with grudging respect at Malek, who had sat back as impassively as ever, the knight he had deftly taken on the edge of the table in front of him. His eyes watched Constantin with their usual untroubled calm, like those of an immensely patient governess, his great shoulders hidden within the bulky suiting. But for a moment, when he had leaned across the board, Constantin had seen the powerful extension and flexion of his shoulder musculature.

Don't look so smug, my dear Malek, Constantin said to

himself with a wry smile. At least I know now that you are left-handed. Malek had taken the knight with one hand, hooking the piece between the thick knuckles of his ring and centre fingers, and then substituting his queen with a smart tap, a movement not easily performed in the centre of the crowded board. Useful though the confirmation was—Constantin had noticed Malek apparently trying to conceal his left-handedness during their meals and when opening and closing the windows—he found this sinistral aspect of Malek's personality curiously disturbing, an indication that there would be nothing predictable about his opponent, or the ensuing struggle of wits between them. Even Malek's apparent lack of sharp intelligence was belied by the astuteness of his last move.

Constantin was playing white, and had chosen the Queen's Gambit, assuming that the fluid situation invariably resulting from the opening would be to his advantage and allow him to get on with the more serious task of planning his escape. But Malek had avoided any possible errors, steadily consolidating his position, and had even managed to launch a counter-gambit, offering a knight-to-bishop exchange which would soon undermine Constantin's position if he accepted.

"A good move, Malek," he commented. "But perhaps a little risky in the long run." Declining the exchange, he lamely blocked the checking queen with an interposed pawn.

Malek stared stolidly at the board, his heavy policeman's face, with its almost square frame from one jaw angle to the other, betraying no sign of thought. His approach, Constantin reflected as he watched his opponent, would be that of the pragmatist, judging always by immediate capability rather than by any concealed intentions. As if confirming this diagnosis, Malek simply returned his queen to her former square, unwilling or unable to exploit the advantage he had gained and satisfied by the captured piece.

Bored by the lower key to which the game had descended, and the prospect of similar games ahead, Constantin castled his king to safety. For some reason, obviously irrational, he assumed that Malek would not kill him in the middle of a game, particularly if he, Malek, were winning. He recognised that this was an unconscious reason for wanting to play chess in the first place, and had no

doubt motivated the many others who had also sat with Malek on the veranda, listening to the late summer rain. Suppressing a sudden pang of fear, Constantin examined Malek's powerful hands protruding from his cuffs like two joints of meat. If Malek wanted to, he could probably kill Constantin with his bare hands.

That raised a second question, almost as fascinating as the first.

"Malek, another point." Constantin sat back, searching in his pockets for imaginary cigarettes (none were allowed him). "Forgive my curiosity, but I am an interested party, as it were—" He flashed Malek his brightest smile, a characteristically incisive thrust modulated by ironic self-deprecation which had been so successful with his secretaries and at ministry receptions, but the assay at humour failed to move Malek. "Tell me, do you know . . . how—?" Searching for some euphemism, he repeated: "Do you know how you are going to . . . ?" and then gave up the attempt, cursing Malek to himself for lacking the social grace to rescue him from his awkwardness.

Malek's chin rose slightly, a minimal nod. He showed no signs of being bored or irritated by Constantin's laboured catechism, or of having noticed his embarrassment.

"What is it, then?" Constantin pressed, recovering himself. "Pistol, pill or—" with a harsh laugh he pointed through the window "—do you set up a guillotine in the rain? I'd like to know."

Malek looked down at the chess-board, his features more glutinous and dough-like than ever. Flatly, he said: "It has been decided."

Constantin snorted. "What on earth does *that* mean?" he snapped belligerently. "Is it painless?"

For once Malek smiled, a thin sneer of amusement hung fleetingly around his mouth. "Have you ever killed anything, Mr. Constantin?" he asked quietly. "Yourself, personally, I mean."

"Touché," Constantin granted. He laughed deliberately, trying to dispel the tension. "A perfect reply." To himself he said: I mustn't let curiosity get the upper hand, the man was laughing at me.

"Of course," he went on, "death is always painful. I merely wondered whether, in the legal sense of the term, it would be humane. But I can see that you are a professional, Malek, and the question answers itself. A great

relief, believe me. There are so many sadists about, perverts and the like—" again he watched carefully to see if the implied sneer provoked Malek "—that one can't be too grateful for a clean curtain fall. It's good to know. I can devote these last days to putting my affairs in order and coming to terms with the world. If only I knew how long there was left I could make my preparations accordingly. One can't be forever saying one's last prayers. You see my point?"

Colourlessly, Malek said: "The Prosecutor-General advised you to make your final arrangements immediately after the trial."

"But what does that mean?" Constantin asked, pitching his voice a calculated octave higher. "I'm a human being, not a book-keeper's ledger that can be totted up and left to await the auditor's pleasure. I wonder if you realise, Malek, the courage this situation demands from me? It's easy for you to sit there—"

Abruptly Malek stood up, sending a shiver of terror through Constantin. With a glance at the sealed windows, he moved around the chess table towards the lounge. "We will postpone the game," he said. Nodding to Constantin, he went off towards the kitchen where the orderly was preparing lunch.

Constantin listened to his shoes squeaking faintly across the unpolished floor, then irritably cleared the pieces off the board and sat back with the black king in his hand. At least he had provoked Malek into leaving him. Thinking this over, he wondered whether to throw caution to the winds and begin to make life intolerable for Malek—it would be easy to pursue him around the villa, arguing hysterically and badgering him with neurotic questions. Sooner or later Malek would snap back, and might give away something of his intentions. Alternatively, Constantin could try to freeze him out, treating him with contempt as the hired killer he was, refusing to share a room or his meals with him and insisting on his rights as a former member of the central committee. The method might well be successful. Almost certainly Malek was telling the truth when he said he knew the exact day and minute of Constantin's execution. The order would have been given to him and he would have no discretion to advance or delay the date to suit himself. Malek would be reluctant to report Constantin for difficult behaviour—the reflection on him-

self was too obvious and his present post was not one from which he could graciously retire—and in addition not even the Police-President would be able to vary the execution date now that it had been set without convening several meetings. There was then the danger of re-opening Constantin's case. He was not without his allies, or at least those who were prepared to use him for their own advantage.

But despite these considerations, the whole business of play-acting lacked appeal for Constantin. His approach was more serpentine. Besides, if he provoked Malek, uncertainties were introduced, of which there were already far too many.

He noticed the supervisor enter the lounge and sit down quietly in one of the grey armchairs, his face, half-hidden in the shadows, turned towards Constantin. He seemed indifferent to the normal pressures of boredom and fatigue (luckily for himself, Constantin reflected—an impatient man would have pulled the trigger on the morning of the second day), and content to sit about in the armchairs, watching Constantin as the grey rain fell outside and the damp leaves gathered against the walls. The difficulties of establishing a relationship with Malek—and some sort of relationship was essential before Constantin could begin to think of escape—seemed insuperable, only the games of chess offering an opportunity.

Placing the black king on his own king's square, Constantin called out: "Malek, I'm ready for another game, if you are."

Malek pushed himself out of the chair with his long arms, and then took his place across the board from Constantin. For a moment he scrutinised Constantin with a level glance, as if ascertaining that there would be no further outbursts of temper, and then began to set up the white pieces, apparently prepared to ignore the fact that Constantin had cleared the previous game before its completion.

He opened with a stolid Ruy Lopez, an over-analysed and uninteresting attack, but a dozen moves later, when they broke off for lunch, he had already forced Constantin to castle on the Queen's side and had established a powerful position in the centre.

As they took their lunch together at the card table behind the sofa in the lounge, Constantin reflected upon

this curious element which had been introduced into his relationship with Malek. While trying to check any tendency to magnify an insignificant triviality into a major symbol, he realised that Malek's proficiency at chess, and his ability to produce powerful combinations out of pedestrian openings, was symptomatic of his concealed power over Constantin.

The drab villa in the thin autumn rain, the faded furniture and unimaginative food they were now mechanically consuming, the whole grey limbo with its slender telephone connection with the outside world were, like his chess, exact extensions of Malek's personality, yet permeated with secret passages and doors. The unexpected thrived in such an ambience. At any moment, as he shaved, the mirror might retract to reveal the flaming muzzle of a machine pistol, or the slightly bitter flavour of the soup they were drinking might be other than that of lentils.

These thoughts preoccupied him as the afternoon light began to fade in the east, the white rectangle of the garden wall illuminated against this dim backdrop like a huge tabula rasa. Excusing himself from the chess game, Constantin feigned a headache and retired to his room upstairs.

The door between his room and Malek's had been removed, and as he lay on the bed he was conscious of the supervisor sitting in his chair with his back to the window. Perhaps it was Malek's presence which prevented him from gaining any real rest, and when he rose several hours later and returned to the veranda he felt tired and possessed by a deepening sense of foreboding.

With an effort he rallied his spirits, and by concentrating his whole attention on the game was able to extract what appeared to be a drawn position. Although the game was adjourned without comment from either player, Malek seemed to concede by his manner that he had lost his advantage, lingering for a perceptible moment over the board when Constantin rose from the table.

The lesson of all this was not lost on Constantin the following day. He was fully aware that the games of chess were not only taxing his energies but providing Malek with a greater hold upon himself than he upon Malek. Although the pieces stood where they had left them the previous evening, Constantin did not suggest that they resume play. Malek made no move towards the board, apparently indifferent to whether the game was finished or

not. Most of the time he sat next to Constantin by the single radiator in the lounge, occasionally going off to confer with the orderly in the kitchen. As usual the telephone rang briefly each morning, but otherwise there were no callers or visitors to the villa. To all intents it remained suspended in a perfect vacuum.

It was this unvarying nature of their daily routines which Constantin found particularly depressing. Intermittently over the next few days, he played chess with Malek, invariably finding himself in a losing position, but the focus of his attention was elsewhere, upon the enigma cloaked by Malek's square, expressionless face. Around him a thousand invisible clocks raced onwards towards their beckoning zeros, a soundless thunder like the drumming of apocalyptic hoof-irons.

His mood of foreboding had given way to one of mounting fear, all the more terrifying because, despite Malek's real role, it seemed completely sourceless. He found himself unable to concentrate for more than a few minutes upon any task, left his meals unfinished and fidgetted helplessly by the veranda window. The slightest movement by Malek would make his nerves thrill with anguish; if the supervisor left his customary seat in the lounge to speak to the orderly Constantin would find himself almost paralysed by the tension, helplessly counting the seconds until Malek returned. Once, during one of their meals, Malek started to ask him for the salt and Constantin almost choked to death.

The ironic humour of this near-fatality reminded Constantin that almost half of his two-month sentence had elapsed. But his crude attempts to obtain a pencil from the orderly and later, failing this, to mark the letters in a page torn from one of the novels were intercepted by Malek, and he realised that short of defeating the two policemen in single-handed combat he had no means of escaping his ever more imminent fate.

Latterly he had noticed that Malek's movements and general activity around the villa seemed to have quickened. He still sat for long periods in the armchair, observing Constantin, but his formerly impassive presence was graced by gestures and inclinations of the head that seemed to reflect a heightened cerebral activity, as if he were preparing himself for some long-awaited denouement. Even the heavy musculature of his face seemed to have relaxed

and grown sleeker, his sharp mobile eyes, like those of an experienced senior inspector of police, roving constantly about the rooms.

Despite his efforts, however, Constantin was unable to galvanise himself into any defensive action. He could see clearly that Malek and he had entered a new phase in their relationship, and that at any moment their outwardly formal and polite behaviour would degenerate into a grasping ugly violence, but he was nonetheless immobilised by his own state of terror. The days passed in a blur of uneaten meals and abandoned chess games, their very identity blotting out any sense of time or progression, the watching figure of Malek always before him.

Every morning, when he woke after two or three hours of sleep to find his consciousness still intact, a discovery almost painful in its relief and poignancy, he would be immediately aware of Malek standing in the next room, then waiting discreetly in the hallway as Constantin shaved in the bathroom (also without its door), following him downstairs to breakfast, his careful reflective tread like that of a hangman descending from his gallows.

After breakfast Constantin would challenge Malek to a game of chess, but after a few moves would begin to play wildly, throwing pieces forward to be decimated by Malek. At times the supervisor would glance curiously at Constantin, as if wondering whether his charge had lost his reason, and then continued to play his careful exact game, invariably winning or drawing. Dimly Constantin perceived that by losing to Malek he had also surrendered to him psychologically, but the games had now become simply a means of passing the unending days.

Six weeks after they had first begun to play chess, Constantin more by luck than skill succeeded in an extravagant pawn gambit and forced Malek to sacrifice both his centre and any possibility of castling. Roused from his state of numb anxiety by this temporary victory, Constantin sat forward over the board, irritably waving away the orderly who announced from the door of the lounge that he would serve lunch.

"Tell him to wait, Malek. I mustn't lose my concentration at this point, I've very nearly won the game."

"Well . ." Malek glanced at his watch, then over his shoulder at the orderly, who, however, had turned on his

heel and returned to the kitchen. He started to stand up. "It can wait. He's bringing the—"

"No!" Constantin snapped. "Just give me five minutes, Malek. Damn it, one adjourns on a move, not half-way through it."

"Very well." Malek hesitated, after a further glance at his watch. He climbed to his feet. "I will tell him."

Constantin concentrated on the board, ignoring the supervisor's retreating figure, the scent of victory clearing his mind. But thirty seconds later he sat up with a start, his heart almost seizing inside his chest.

Malek had gone upstairs! Constantin distinctly remembered him saying he would tell the orderly to delay lunch, but instead he had walked straight up to his bedroom. Not only was it extremely unusual for Constantin to be left unobserved when the orderly was otherwise occupied, but the latter had still not brought in their first luncheon course.

Steadying the table, Constantin stood up, his eyes searching the open doorways in front of and behind him. Almost certainly the orderly's announcement of lunch was a signal, and Malek had found a convenient pretext for going upstairs to prepare his execution weapon.

Faced at last by the imminent nemesis he had so long dreaded, Constantin listened for the sounds of Malek's feet descending the staircase. A profound silence enclosed the villa, broken only by the fall of one of the chess pieces to the tiled floor. Outside the sun shone intermittently in the garden, illuminating the broken flagstones of the ornamental pathway and the bare fifteen-foot-high face of the walls. A few stunted weeds flowered among the rubble, their pale colours blanched by the sunlight, and Constantin was suddenly filled by an overwhelming need to escape into the open air for the few last moments before he died. The east wall, lit by the sun's rays, was marked by a faint series of horizontal grooves, the remnants perhaps of a fire escape ladder, and the slender possibility of using these as hand-holds made the enclosed garden, a perfect killing ground, preferable to the frantic claustrophobic atmosphere of the villa.

Above him, Malek's measured tread moved across the ceiling to the head of the staircase. He paused there and then began to descend the stairs, his steps chosen with a precise and careful rhythm.

Helplessly, Constantin searched the veranda for some-

thing that would serve as a weapon. The french windows leading to the garden were locked, and a slotted pinion outside secured the left-hand member of the pair to the edge of the sill. If this were raised there was a chance that the windows could be forced outwards.

Scattering the chess pieces onto the floor with a sweep of his hand, Constantin seized the board and folded it together, then stepped over to the window and drove the heavy wooden box through the bottom pane. The report of the bursting glass echoed like a gun shot through the villa. Kneeling down, he pushed his hand through the aperture and tried to lift the pinion, jerking it up and down in its rusty socket. When it failed to clear the sill he forced his head through the broken window and began to heave against it helplessly with his thin shoulders, the fragments of broken glass falling on his neck.

Behind him a chair was kicked back, and he felt two powerful hands seize his shoulders and pull him away from the window. He struck out hysterically with the chess box, and then was flung head-first to the tiled floor.

His convalescence from this episode was to last most of the following week. For the first three days he remained in bed, recovering his physical identity, waiting for the sprained muscles of his hands and shoulders to repair themselves. When he felt sufficiently strong to leave his bed he went down to the lounge and sat at one end of the sofa, his back to the windows and the thin autumn light.

Malek still remained in attendance, and the orderly prepared his meals as before. Neither of them made any comment upon Constantin's outburst of hysteria, or indeed betrayed any signs that it had taken place, but Constantin realised that he had crossed an important rubicon. His whole relationship with Malek had experienced a profound change. The fear of his own imminent death, and the tantalising mystery of its precise date which had so obsessed him, had been replaced by a calm acceptance that the judicial processes inaugurated by his trial would take their course and that Malek and the orderly were merely the local agents of this distant apparatus. In a sense his sentence and present tenuous existence at the villa were a microcosm of life itself, with its inherent but unfeared uncertainties, its inevitable quietus to be made on a date never known in advance. Seeing his role at the villa in this light, Constantin no longer felt afraid at the prospect of

his own extinction, fully aware that a change in the political wind could win him a free pardon.

In addition, he realised that Malek, far from being his executioner, a purely formal role, was in fact an intermediary between himself and the hierarchy, and in an important sense a potential ally of Constantin's. As he reformed his defence against the indictment preferred against him at the trial—he knew he had been far too willing to accept the *fait accompli* of his own guilt—he calculated the various ways in which Malek would be able to assist him. There was no doubt in his mind that he had misjudged Malek. With his sharp intelligence and commanding presence, the supervisor was very far from being a hatchet-faced killer—this original impression had been the result of some cloudiness in Constantin's perceptions, an unfortunate myopia which had cost him two precious months in his task of arranging a re-trial.

Comfortably swathed in his dressing-gown, he sat at the card-table in the lounge (they had abandoned the veranda with the colder weather, and only a patch of brown paper over the window reminded him of that first circle of purgatory) concentrating on the game of chess. Malek sat opposite him, hands clasped on one knee, his thumbs occasionally circling as he pondered a move. Although no less reticent than he had ever been, his manner seemed to indicate that he understood and confirmed Constantin's reappraisal of the situation. He still followed Constantin around the villa, but his attentions were noticeably more perfunctory, as if he realised that Constantin would not try again to escape.

From the start, Constantin was completely frank with Malek.

"I am convinced, Malek, that the Prosecutor-General was mis-directed by the Justice Department, and that the whole basis of the trial was a false one. All but one of the indictments were never formally presented, so I had no opportunity to defend myself. You understand that, Malek? The selection of the capital penalty for one count was purely arbitrary."

Malek nodded, moving a piece. "So you have explained, Mr. Constantin. I am afraid I do not have a legalistic turn of mind."

"There's no need for you to," Constantin assured him.

"The point is obvious. I hope it may be possible to appeal against the court's decision and ask for a re-trial." Constantin gestured with a piece. "I criticise myself for accepting the indictments so readily. In effect I made no attempt to defend myself. If only I had done so I am convinced I should have been found innocent."

Malek murmured non-committally, and gestured towards the board. Constantin resumed play. Most of the games he consistently lost to Malek, but this no longer troubled him, and if anything, only served to reinforce the bonds between them.

Constantin had decided not to ask the supervisor to inform the Justice Department of his request for a re-trial until he had convinced Malek that his case left substantial room for doubt. A premature application would meet with an automatic negative from Malek, whatever his private sympathies. Conversely, once Malek was firmly on his side he would be prepared to risk his reputation with his seniors, and indeed his championing of Constantin's cause would be convincing proof in itself of the latter's innocence.

As Constantin soon found from his one-sided discussions with Malek, arguing over the legal technicalities of the trial, with their infinitely subtle nuances and implications, was an unprofitable method of enlisting Malek's support, and he realised that he would have to do so by sheer impress of personality, by his manner, bearing and general conduct, and above all by his confidence of his innocence in the face of the penalty which might at any moment be imposed upon him. Curiously, this latter pose was not as difficult to maintain as might have been expected; Constantin already felt a surge of conviction in his eventual escape from the villa. Sooner or later Malek would recognise the authenticity of this inner confidence.

To begin with, however, the supervisor remained his usual phlegmatic self. Constantin talked away at him from morning to evening, every third word affirming the probability of his being found 'innocent,' but Malek merely nodded with a faint smile and continued to play his errorless chess.

"Malek, I don't want you to think that I challenge the competence of the court to try the charges against me, or that I hold it in disrespect," he said to the supervisor as they played their usual morning board some two weeks

after the incident on the veranda. "Far from it. But the court must make its decisions within the context of the evidence presented by the prosecutor. And even then, the greatest imponderable remains—the role of the accused. In my case I was, to all intents, not present at the trial, so my innocence is established by *force majeure*. Don't you agree, Malek?"

Malek's eyes searched the pieces on the board, his lips pursing thinly. "I'm afraid this is above my head, Mr. Constantin. Naturally I accept the authority of the court without question."

"But so do I, Malek. I've made that plain. The real question is simply whether the verdict was justified in the light of the new circumstances I am describing."

Malek shrugged, apparently more interested in the end-game before them. "I recommend you to accept the verdict, Mr. Constantin. For your peace of mind, you understand."

Constantin looked away with a gesture of impatience. "I don't agree, Malek. Besides, a great deal is at stake." He glanced up at the windows which were drumming in the cold autumn wind. The casements were slightly loose, and the air lanced around them. The villa was poorly heated, only the single radiator in the lounge warming the three rooms downstairs. Already Constantin dreaded the winter. His hands and feet were perpetually cold and he could find no means of warming them.

"Malek, is there any chance of obtaining another heater?" he asked. "It's none too warm in here. I have a feeling it's going to be a particularly cold winter."

Malek looked up from the board, his bland grey eyes regarding Constantin with a flicker of curiosity, as if this last remark were one of the few he had heard from Constantin's lips which contained any overtones whatever.

"It is cold," he agreed at last. "I will see if I can borrow a heater. This villa is closed for most of the year."

Constantin pestered him for news of the heater during the following week—partly because the success of his request would have symbolised Malek's first concession to him—but it failed to materialise. After one palpably lame excuse Malek merely ignored his further reminders. Outside, in the garden, the leaves whirled about the stones in a vortex of chilling air, and overhead the low clouds raced

seaward. The two men in the lounge hunched over their chess-board by the radiator, hands buried in their pockets between moves.

Perhaps it was this darkening weather which made Constantin impatient of Malek's slowness in seeing the point of his argument, and he made his first suggestions that Malek should transmit a formal request for a re-trial to his superiors at the Department of Justice.

"You speak to someone on the telephone every morning, Malek," he pointed out when Malek demurred. "There's no difficulty involved. If you're afraid of compromising yourself—though I would have thought that a small price to pay in view of what is at stake—the orderly can pass on a message."

"It's not feasible, Mr. Constantin." Malek seemed at last to be tiring of the subject. "I suggest that you—"

"Malek!" Constantin stood up and paced around the lounge. "Don't you realise that you must? You're literally my only means of contact. If you refuse I'm absolutely powerless, there's no hope of getting a reprieve!"

"The trial has already taken place, Mr. Constantin," Malek pointed out patiently.

"It was a mis-trial! Don't you understand, Malek, I accepted that I was guilty when in fact I was completely innocent!"

Malek looked up from the board, his eyebrows lifting. "*Completely* innocent, Mr. Constantin?"

Constantin snapped his fingers. "Well, virtually innocent. At least in terms of the indictment and trial."

"But that is merely a tactical difference, Mr. Constantin. The Department of Justice is concerned with absolutes."

"Quite right, Malek. I agree entirely." Constantin nodded approvingly at the supervisor and privately noted his quizzical expression, the first time Malek had displayed a taste for irony.

He was to notice this fresh leit-motiv recurringly during the next days; whenever he raised the subject of his request for a re-trial Malek would counter with one of his deceptively naive queries, trying to establish some minor tangential point, almost as if he were leading Constantin on to a fuller admission. At first Constantin assumed that the supervisor was fishing for information about other members of the hierarchy which he wished to use for his own purposes, but the few titbits he offered were ignored

by Malek, and it dawned upon him that Malek was genuinely interested in establishing the sincerity of Constantin's conviction of his own innocence.

He showed no signs, however, of being prepared to contact his superiors at the Department of Justice, and Constantin's impatience continued to mount. He now used their morning and afternoon chess sessions as an opportunity to hold forth at length on the subject of the shortcomings of the judicial system, using his own case as an illustration, and hammered away at the theme of his innocence, even hinting that Malek might find himself held responsible if by any mischance he was not granted a reprieve.

"The position I find myself in is really most extraordinary," he told Malek almost exactly two months after his arrival at the villa. "Everyone else is satisfied with the court's verdict, and yet I alone know that I am innocent. I feel very like someone who is about to be buried alive."

Malek managed a thin smile across the chess pieces. "Of course, Mr. Constantin, it is possible to convince oneself of anything, given a sufficient incentive."

"But Malek, I assure you," Constantin insisted, ignoring the board and concentrating his whole attention upon the supervisor, "this is no death-cell repentance. Believe me, I know. I have examined the entire case from a thousand perspectives, questioned every possible motive. There is no doubt in my mind. I may once have been prepared to accept the possibility of my guilt, but I realise now that I was entirely mistaken—experience encourages us to take too great a responsibility for ourselves, when we fall short of our ideals we become critical of ourselves and ready to assume that we are at fault. How dangerous that can be, Malek, I now know. Only the truly innocent man can really understand the meaning of guilt."

Constantin stopped and sat back, a slight weariness overtaking him in the cold room. Malek was nodding slowly, a thin and not altogether unsympathetic smile on his lips as if he understood everything Constantin had said. Then he moved a piece, and with a murmured 'excuse me' left his seat and went out of the room.

Drawing the lapels of the dressing gown around his chest, Constantin studied the board with a desultory eye. He noticed that Malek's move appeared to be the first bad

one he had made in all their games together, but he felt too tired to make the most of his opportunity. His brief speech to Malek, confirming all he believed, now left nothing more to be said. From now on whatever happened was up to Malek.

"Mr. Constantin."

He turned in his chair and, to his surprise, saw the supervisor standing in the doorway, wearing his long grey overcoat.

"Malek—?" For a moment Constantin felt his heart gallop, and then controlled himself. "Malek, you've agreed at last, you're going to take me to the Department?"

Malek shook his head, his eyes staring sombrely at Constantin. "Not exactly. I thought we might look at the garden, Mr. Constantin. A breath of fresh air, it will do you good."

"Of course, Malek, it's kind of you." Constantin rose a little unsteadily to his feet, and tightened the cord of his dressing gown. "Pardon my wild hopes." He tried to smile to Malek, but the supervisor stood impassively by the door, hands in his overcoat pockets, his eyes lowered fractionally from Constantin's face.

They went out on to the veranda towards the french windows. Outside the cold morning air whirled in frantic circles around the small stone yard, the leaves spiralling upwards into the dark sky. To Constantin there seemed little point in going out into the garden, but Malek stood behind him, one hand on the latch.

"Malek." Something made him turn and face the supervisor. "You do understand what I mean, when I say I am absolutely innocent. I *know* that."

"Of course, Mr. Constantin." The supervisor's face was relaxed and almost genial. "I understand. When you know you are innocent, then you are guilty."

His hand opened the veranda door on to the whirling leaves.

THE SUBLIMINAL MAN

"THE SIGNS, Doctor! Have you seen the signs?"

Frowning with annoyance, Dr. Franklin quickened his pace and hurried down the hospital steps towards the line

of parked cars. Over his shoulder he caught a glimpse of a man in ragged sandals and lime-stained jeans waving to him from the far side of the drive, then break into a run when he saw Franklin try to evade him.

"Dr. Franklin! The signs!"

Head down, Franklin swerved around an elderly couple approaching the out-patients department. His car was over a hundred yards away. Too tired to start running himself, he waited for the young man to catch him up.

"All right, Hathaway, what is it this time?" he snapped irritably. "I'm getting sick of you hanging around here all day."

Hathaway lurched to a halt in front of him, uncut black hair like an awning over his eyes. He brushed it back with a claw-like hand and turned on a wild smile, obviously glad to see Franklin and oblivious of the latter's hostility.

"I've been trying to reach you at night, Doctor, but your wife always puts the phone down on me," he explained without a hint of rancour, as if well-used to this kind of snub. "And I didn't want to look for you inside the Clinic." They were standing by a privet hedge that shielded them from the lower windows of the main administrative block, but Franklin's regular rendezvous with Hathaway and his strange messianic cries had already been the subject of amused comment.

Franklin began to say: "I appreciate that—" but Hathaway brushed this aside. "Forget it, Doctor, there are more important things happening now. They've started to build the first big signs! Over a hundred feet high, on the traffic islands just outside town. They'll soon have all the approach roads covered. When they do we might as well stop thinking."

"Your trouble is that you're thinking too much," Franklin told him. "You've been rambling about these signs for weeks now. Tell me, have you actually seen one signalling?"

Hathaway tore a handful of leaves from the hedge, exasperated by this irrelevancy. "Of course I haven't, that's the whole point, Doctor." He dropped his voice as a group of nurses walked past, watching him uneasily out of the corners of their eyes. "The construction gangs were out again last night, laying huge power cables. You'll see them on the way home. Everything's nearly ready now."

"They're traffic signs," Franklin explained patiently.

"The flyover has just been completed. Hathaway, for God's sake relax. Try to think of Dora and the child."

"I *am* thinking of them!" Hathaway's voice rose to a controlled scream. "Those cables were 40,000-volt lines, Doctor, with terrific switch-gear. The trucks were loaded with enormous metal scaffolds. Tomorrow they'll start lifting them up all over the city, they'll block off half the sky! What do you think Dora will be like after six months of that? We've got to stop them, Doctor, they're trying to transistorise our brains!"

Embarrassed by Hathaway's high-pitched shouting, Franklin had momentarily lost his sense of direction and helplessly searched the sea of cars for his own. "Hathaway, I can't waste any more time talking to you. Believe me, you need skilled help, these obsessions are beginning to master you."

Hathaway started to protest, and Franklin raised his right hand firmly. "Listen. For the last time, if you can show me one of these new signs, and prove that it's transmitting subliminal commands, I'll go to the police with you. But you haven't got a shred of evidence, and you know it. Subliminal advertising was banned thirty years ago, and the laws have never been repealed. Anyway, the technique was unsatisfactory, any success it had was marginal. Your idea of a huge conspiracy with all these thousands of giant signs everywhere is preposterous."

"All right, Doctor." Hathaway leaned against the bonnet of one of the cars. His moods seemed to switch abruptly from one level to the next. He watched Franklin amiably. "What's the matter—lost your car?"

"All your damned shouting has confused me." Franklin pulled out his ignition key and read the number off the tag: "NYN 299-566-367-21—can you see it?"

Hathaway leaned around lazily, one sandal up on the bonnet, surveying the square of a thousand or so cars facing them. "Difficult, isn't it, when they're all identical, even the same colour? Thirty years ago there were about ten different makes, each in a dozen colours."

Franklin spotted his car, began to walk towards it. "Sixty years ago there were a hundred makes. What of it? The economies of standardisation are obviously bought at a price."

Hathaway drummed his palm lightly on the roofs. "But these cars aren't all that cheap, Doctor. In fact, comparing

them on an average income basis with those of thirty years ago they're about forty per cent more expensive. With only one make being produced you'd expect a substantial reduction in price, not an increase."

"Maybe," Franklin said, opening his door. "But mechanically the cars of today are far more sophisticated. They're lighter, more durable, safer to drive."

Hathaway shook his head sceptically. "They *bore* me. The same model, same styling, same colour, year after year. It's a sort of communism." He rubbed a greasy finger over the windshield. "This is a new one again, isn't it, Doctor? Where's the old one—you only had it for three months?"

"I traded it in," Franklin told him, starting the engine. "If you ever had any money you'd realise that it's the most economical way of owning a car. You don't keep driving the same one until it falls apart. It's the same with everything else—television sets, washing machines, refrigerators. But you aren't faced with the problem—you haven't got any."

Hathaway ignored the gibe, and leaned his elbow on Franklin's window. "Not a bad idea, either, Doctor. It gives me time to think. I'm not working a twelve-hour day to pay for a lot of things I'm too busy to use before they're obsolete."

He waved as Franklin reversed the car out of its line, then shouted into the wake of exhaust: "Drive with your eyes closed, Doctor!"

On the way home Franklin kept carefully to the slowest of the four-speed lanes. As usual after his discussions with Hathaway he felt vaguely depressed. He realised that unconsciously he envied Hathaway's footloose existence. Despite the grimy cold-water apartment in the shadow and roar of the flyover, despite his nagging wife and their sick child, and the endless altercations with the landlord and the supermarket credit manager, Hathaway still retained his freedom intact. Spared any responsibilities, he could resist the smallest encroachment upon him by the rest of society, if only by generating obsessive fantasies, such as his latest one about subliminal advertising.

The ability to react to stimuli, even irrationally, was a valid criterion of freedom. By contrast, what freedom Franklin possessed was peripheral, sharply demarked by the manifold responsibilities in the centre of his life—the

three mortgages on his home, the mandatory rounds of cocktail and TV parties, the private consultancy occupying most of Saturday which paid the instalments on the multitude of household gadgets, clothes and past holidays. About the only time he had to himself was driving to and from work.

But at least the roads were magnificent. Whatever other criticisms might be levelled at the present society, it certainly knew how to build roads. Eight, ten and twelve-lane expressways interlaced across the continent, plunging from overhead causeways into the giant car parks in the centre of the cities, or dividing into the great suburban arteries with their multiacre parking aprons around the marketing centres. Together the roadways and car parks covered more than a third of the country's entire area, and in the neighbourhood of the cities the proportion was higher. The old cities were surrounded by the vast, dazzling abstract sculptures of the clover-leaves and flyovers, but even so the congestion was unremitting.

The ten-mile journey to his home in fact covered over twenty-five miles and took him twice as long as it had done before the construction of the expressway, the additional miles contained within the three giant clover-leaves. New cities were springing from the motels, cafes and car marts around the highways. At the slightest hint of an intersection a shanty town of shacks and filling stations sprawled away among the forest of electric signs and route indicators, many of them substantial cities.

All around him cars bulletted along, streaming towards the suburbs. Relaxed by the smooth motion of the car, Franklin edged outward into the next speed-lane. As he accelerated from 40 to 50 m.p.h. a strident ear-jarring noise drummed out from his tyres, shaking the chassis of the car. Ostensibly an aid to lane discipline, the surface of the road was covered with a mesh of small rubber studs, spaced progressively further apart in each of the lanes so that the tyre hum resonated exactly on 40, 50, 60, and 70 m.p.h. Driving at an intermediate speed for more than a few seconds became physiologically painful, and soon resulted in damage to the car and tyres.

When the studs wore out they were replaced by slightly different patterns, matching those on the latest tyres, so that regular tyre changes were necessary, increasing the

safety and efficiency of the expressway. It also increased the revenues of the car and tyre manufacturers, for most cars over six months old soon fell to pieces under the steady battering, but this was regarded as a desirable end, the greater turnover reducing the unit price and making necessary more frequent model changes, as well as ridding the roads of dangerous vehicles.

A quarter of a mile ahead, at the approach to the first of the clover-leaves, the traffic stream was slowing, huge police signs signalling 'Lanes Closed Ahead' and 'Drop Speed by 10 m.p.h.' Franklin tried to return to the previous lane, but the cars were jammed bumper to bumper. As the chassis began to shudder and vibrate, jarring his spine, he clamped his teeth and tried to restrain himself from sounding the horn. Other drivers were less self-controlled, and everywhere engines were plunging and snarling, horns blaring. Road taxes were now so high, up to 30% of income (by contrast, income taxes were a bare 2%) that any delay on the expressways called for an immediate government inquiry, and the major departments of state were concerned with the administration of the road systems.

Nearer the clover-leaf the lanes had been closed to allow a gang of construction workers to erect a massive metal sign on one of the traffic islands. The palisaded area swarmed with engineers and surveyors and Franklin assumed that this was the sign Hathaway had seen unloaded the previous night. His apartment was in one of the gimcrack buildings in the settlement that straggled away around a nearby flyover, a low-rent area inhabited by service station personnel, waitresses and other migrant labour.

The sign was enormous, at least 100 feet high, fitted with heavy concave grilles similar to radar bowls. Rooted in a series of concrete caissons, it reared high into the air above the approach roads, visible for miles. Franklin craned up at the grilles, tracing the power cables from the transformers up into the intricate mesh of metal coils that covered their surface. A line of red aircraft-warning beacons was already alight along the top strut, and Franklin assumed that the sign was part of the ground approach system of the city airport ten miles to the east.

Three minutes later, as he accelerated down the two-mile link of straight highway to the next clover-leaf, he saw the second of the giant signs looming up into the sky before him.

Changing down into the 40 m.p.h. lane, Franklin uneasily watched the great bulk of the second sign recede in his rearview mirror. Although there were no graphic symbols among the wire coils covering the grilles, Hathaway's warnings still sounded in his ears. Without knowing why, he felt sure that the signs were not part of the airport approach system. Neither of them was in line with the principal air-lanes. To justify the expense of siting them in the centre of the expressway—the second sign required elaborate angled buttresses to support it on the narrow island—obviously meant that their role related in some way to the traffic streams.

Two hundred yards away was a roadside auto-mart, and Franklin abruptly remembered that he needed some cigarettes. Swinging the car down the entrance ramp, he joined the queue slowly passing the self-service dispenser at the far end of the rank. The auto-mart was packed with cars, each of the five purchasing ranks lined with tired-looking men hunched over their wheels.

Inserting his coins (paper money was no longer in circulation, unmanagable by the automats) he took a carton from the dispenser. This was the only brand of cigarettes available—in fact there was only one brand of everything —though giant economy packs were an alternative. Moving off, he opened the dashboard locker.

Inside, still sealed in their wrappers, were three other cartons.

A strong fish-like smell pervaded the house when he reached home, steaming out from the oven in the kitchen. Sniffing it uneagerly, Franklin took off his coat and hat, and found his wife crouched over the TV set in the lounge. An announcer was dictating a stream of numbers, and Judith scribbled them down on a pad, occasionally cursing under her breath. "What a muddle!" she snapped finally. "He was talking so quickly I took only a few things down."

"Probably deliberate," Franklin commented. "New panel game?"

Judith kissed him on the cheek, discretely hiding the ashtray loaded with cigarette butts and chocolate wrappings. "Hullo, darling, sorry not to have a drink ready for you. They've started this series of Spot Bargains. They give you a selection of things on which you get a ninety per cent trade-in discount at the local stores, if you're in

the right area and have the right serial numbers. It's all terribly complicated."

"Sounds good, though. What have you got?"

Judith peered at her checklist. "Well, as far as I can see the only thing is the infra-red barbecue spit. But we have to be there before eight o'clock tonight. It's seven-thirty already."

"Then that's out. I'm tired, angel, I need something to eat." When Judith started to protest he added firmly: "Look, I don't want a new infra-red barbecue spit, we've only had this one for two months. Damn it, it's not even a different model."

"But, darling, don't you see, it makes it cheaper if you keep buying new ones. We'll have to trade ours in at the end of the year anyway, we signed the contract, and this way we save at least twenty dollars. These Spot Bargains aren't just a gimmick, you know. I've been glued to that set all day." A note of irritation had crept into her voice, but Franklin sat his ground, doggedly ignoring the clock.

"Right, we lose twenty dollars. It's worth it." Before she could remonstrate he said: "Judith, please, you probably took the wrong number down anyway." As she shrugged and went over to the bar he called: "Make it a stiff one. I see we have health foods on the menu."

"They're good for you, darling. You know you can't live on ordinary foods all the time. They don't contain any proteins or vitamins. You're always saying we ought to be like people in the old days and eat nothing but health foods."

"I would, but they smell so awful." Franklin lay back, nose in the glass of whisky, gazing at the darkened skyline outside.

A quarter of a mile away, gleaming out above the roof of the neighbourhood supermarket, were the five red beacon lights. Now and then, as the headlamps of the Spot Bargainers swung up across the face of the building, he could see the square massive bulk of the giant sign clearly silhouetted against the evening sky.

"Judith!" He went into the kitchen and took her over to the window. "That sign, just behind the supermarket. When did they put it up?"

"I don't know." Judith peered at him curiously. "Why are you so worried, Robert? Isn't it something to do with the airport?"

Franklin stared thoughtfully at the dark hull of the sign. "So everyone probably thinks."

Carefully he poured his whisky into the sink.

After parking his car on the supermarket apron at seven o'clock the next morning, Franklin carefully emptied his pockets and stacked the coins in the dashboard locker. The supermarket was already busy with early morning shoppers and the line of thirty turnstiles clicked and slammed. Since the introduction of the '24-hour spending day' the shopping complex was never closed. The bulk of the shoppers were discount buyers, housewives contracted to make huge volume purchases of food, clothing and appliances against substantial overall price cuts, and forced to drive around all day from supermarket to supermarket, frantically trying to keep pace with their purchase schedules and grappling with the added incentives inserted to keep the schemes alive.

Many of the women had teamed up, and as Franklin walked over to the entrance a pack of them charged towards their cars, stuffing their pay slips into their bags and gesticulating at each other. A moment later their cars roared off in a convoy to the next marketing zone.

A large neon sign over the entrance listed the latest discount—a mere 5%—calculated on the volume of turnover. The highest discounts, sometimes up to 25%, were earned in the housing estates where junior white-collar workers lived. There, spending had a strong social incentive, and the desire to be the highest spender in the neighbourhood was given moral reinforcement by the system of listing all the names and their accumulating cash totals on a huge electric sign in the supermarket foyers. The higher the spender, the greater his contribution to the discounts enjoyed by others. The lowest spenders were regarded as social criminals, free-riding on the backs of others.

Luckily this system had yet to be adopted in Franklin's neighbourhood. Not because the professional men and their wives were able to exercise more discretion, but because their higher incomes allowed them to contract into more expensive discount schemes operated by the big department stores in the city.

Ten yards from the entrance Franklin paused, looking up at the huge metal sign mounted in an enclosure at the edge of the car park. Unlike the other signs and hoardings

that proliferated everywhere, no attempt had been made to decorate it, or disguise the gaunt bare rectangle of rivetted steel mesh. Power lines wound down its sides, and the concrete surface of the car park was crossed by a long scar where a cable had been sunk.

Franklin strolled along, then fifty feet from the sign stopped and turned, realising that he would be late for the hospital and needed a new carton of cigarettes. A dim but powerful humming emanated from the transformers below the sign, fading as he retraced his steps to the supermarket.

Going over to the automats in the foyer, he felt for his change, then whistled sharply when he remembered why he had deliberately emptied his pockets.

"The cunning thing!" he said, loud enough for two shoppers to stare at him. Reluctant to look directly at the sign, he watched its reflection in one of the glass doorpanes, so that any subliminal message would be reversed.

Almost certainly he had received two distinct signals—'Keep Away' and 'Buy Cigarettes'. The people who normally parked their cars along the perimeter of the apron were avoiding the area under the enclosure, the cars describing a loose semicircle fifty feet around it.

He turned to the janitor sweeping out the foyer. "What's that sign for?"

The man leaned on his broom, gazing dully at the sign. "Dunno," he said, "must be something to do with the airport." He had an almost fresh cigarette in his mouth, but his right hand reached unconsciously to his hip pocket and pulled out a pack. He drummed the second cigarette absently on his thumb-nail as Franklin walked away.

Everyone entering the supermarket was buying cigarettes.

Cruising quietly along the 40 m.p.h. lane, Franklin began to take a closer interest in the landscape around him. Usually he was either too tired or too preoccupied to do more than think about his driving, but now he examined the expressway methodically, scanning the roadside cafes for any smaller versions of the new signs. A host of neon displays covered the doorways and windows, but most of them seemed innocuous, and he turned his attention to the larger billboards erected along the open stretches of the expressway. Many of these were as high as four-storey houses, elaborate three-dimensional devices in which

giant glossy-skinned housewives with electric eyes and teeth jerked and postured around their ideal kitchens, neon flashes exploding from their smiles.

The areas on either side of the expressway were wasteland, continuous junkyards filled with cars and trucks, washing machines and refrigerators, all perfectly workable but jettisoned by the economic pressure of the succeeding waves of discount models. Their intact chrome hardly tarnished, the mounds of metal shells and cabinets glittered in the sunlight. Nearer the city the billboards were sufficiently close together to hide them, but now and then, as he slowed to approach one of the flyovers Franklin caught a glimpse of the huge pyramids of metal, gleaming silently like the refuse grounds of some forgotten El Dorado.

That evening Hathaway was waiting for him as he came down the hospital steps. Franklin waved him across the court, then led the way quickly to his car.

"What's the matter, Doctor?" Hathaway asked as Franklin wound up the windows and glanced around the lines of parked cars. "Is someone after you?"

Franklin laughed sombrely. "I don't know. I hope not, but if what you say is right, I suppose there is."

Hathaway leaned back with a chuckle, propping one knee up on the dashboard. "So you've seen something, Doctor, after all."

"Well, I'm not sure yet, but there's just a chance you may be right. This morning at the Fairlawne supermarket . . ." He broke off, uneasily remembering the huge blank sign and the abrupt way in which he had turned back to the supermarket as he approached it, then described his encounter.

Hathaway nodded slowly. "I've seen the sign there. It's big, but not as big as some that are going up. They're building them everywhere now. All over the city. What are you going to do, Doctor?"

Franklin gripped the wheel tightly. Hathaway's thinly veiled amusement irritated him. "Nothing, of course. Damn it, it may be just auto-suggestion, you've probably got me imagining—"

Hathaway sat up with a jerk, his face mottled and savage. "Don't be absurd, Doctor! If you can't believe your own senses what chance have you left? They're invading your brain; if you don't defend yourself they'll

take it over completely! We've got to act now, before we're all paralysed."

Wearily Franklin raised one hand to restrain him. "Just a minute. Assuming that these signs *are* going up everywhere, what would be their object? Apart from wasting the enormous amount of capital invested in all the other millions of signs and billboards, the amounts of discretionary spending power still available must be infinitesimal. Some of the present mortgage and discount schemes reach half a century ahead, so there can't be much slack left to take up. A big trade war would be disastrous."

"Quite right, Doctor," Hathaway rejoined evenly, "but you're forgetting one thing. What would supply that extra spending power? A big increase in production. Already they've started to raise the working day from twelve hours to fourteen. In some of the appliances plants around the city Sunday working is being introduced as a norm. Can you visualise it, Doctor—a seven-day week, everyone with at least three jobs."

Franklin shook his head. "People won't stand for it."

"They will. Within the last twenty-five years the gross national product has risen by fifty per cent, but so have the average hours worked. Ultimately we'll all be working and spending twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. No one will dare refuse. Think what a slump would mean —millions of lay-offs, people with time on their hands and nothing to spend it on. Real leisure, not just time spent buying things." He seized Franklin by the shoulder. "Well, Doctor, are you going to join me?"

Franklin freed himself. Half a mile away, partly hidden by the four-storey bulk of the Pathology Department, was the upper half of one of the giant signs, workmen still crawling across its girders. The airlines over the city had deliberately been routed away from the hospital, and the sign obviously had no connection with approaching aircraft.

"Isn't there a prohibition on subliminal living? How can the unions accept it?"

"The fear of a slump. You know the new economic dogmas. Unless output rises by a steady inflationary 5% the economy is stagnating. Ten years ago increased efficiency alone would raise output, but the advantages there are minimal now and only one thing is left. More work.

Increased consumption and subliminal advertising will provide the spur."

"What are you planning to do?"

"I can't tell you, Doctor, unless you accept equal responsibility for it."

"Sounds rather Quixotic," Franklin commented. "Tilting at windmills. You won't be able to chop those things down with an axe."

"I won't try." Hathaway suddenly gave up and opened the door. "Don't wait too long to make up your mind, Doctor. By then it may not be yours to make up." With a wave he was gone.

On the way home Franklin's scepticism returned. The idea of the conspiracy was preposterous, and the economic arguments were too plausible. As usual, though, there had been a hook in the soft bait Hathaway dangled before him—Sunday working. His own consultancy had been extended into Sunday morning with his appointment as visiting factory doctor to one of the automobile plants that had started Sunday shifts. But instead of resenting this incursion into his already meagre hours of leisure he had been glad. For one frightening reason—he needed the extra income.

Looking out over the lines of scurrying cars, he noticed that at least a dozen of the great signs had been erected along the expressway. As Hathaway had said, more were going up everywhere, rearing over the supermarkets in the housing developments like rusty metal sails.

Judith was in the kitchen when he reached home, watching the TV programme on the hand-set over the cooker. Franklin climbed past a big cardboard carton, its seals still unbroken, which blocked the doorway, and kissed her on the cheek as she scribbled numbers down on her pad. The pleasant odour of pot-roast chicken—or, rather, a gelatine dummy of a chicken fully flavoured and free of any toxic or nutritional properties—mollified his irritation at finding her still playing the Spot Bargains.

He tapped the carton with his foot. "What's this?"

"No idea, darling, something's always coming these days, I can't keep up with it all." She peered through the glass door at the chicken—an economy 12-pounder, the size of a turkey, with stylised legs and wings and an enormous breast, most of which would be discarded at the end of

the meal (there were no dogs or cats these days, the crumbs from the rich man's table saw to that) and then glanced at him pointedly.

"You look rather worried, Robert. Bad day?"

Franklin murmured noncommittally. The hours spent trying to detect false clues in the faces of the Spot Bargain announcers had sharpened Judith's perceptions, and he felt a pang of sympathy for the legion of husbands similarly outmatched.

"Have you been talking to that crazy beatnik again?"

"Hathaway? As a matter of fact I have. He's not all that crazy." He stepped backwards into the carton, almost spilling his drink. "Well, what is this thing? As I'll be working for the next fifty Sundays to pay for it I'd like to find out."

He searched the sides, finally located the label. *"A TV set?* Judith, do we need another one? We've already got three. Lounge, dining room, and the hand-set. What's the fourth for?"

"The guest room, dear, don't get so excited. We can't leave a hand-set in the guest room, it's rude. I'm trying to economise, but four TV sets is the bare minimum. All the magazines say so."

"And three radios?" Franklin stared irritably at the carton. "If we do invite a guest here how much time is he going to spend alone in his room watching television? Judith, we've got to call a halt. It's not as if these things were free, or even cheap. Anyway, television is a total waste of time. There's only one programme. It's ridiculous to have four sets."

"Robert, there are *four* channels."

"But only the commercials are different." Before Judith could reply the telephone rang. Franklin lifted the kitchen receiver, listened to the gabble of noise that poured from it. At first he wondered whether this was some off-beat prestige commercial, then realised it was Hathaway in a manic swing.

"Hathaway!" he shouted back. "Relax, man! What's the matter now?"

"—Doctor, you'll have to believe me this time. I tell you I got on to one of the islands with a stroboscope, they've got hundreds of high-speed shutters blasting away like machine-guns straight into people's faces and they can't see a thing, it's fantastic! The next big campaign's going

to be cars and TV sets, they're trying to swing a two-month model change—can you imagine it, Doctor, a new car every two months? God Almighty, it's just—"

Franklin waited impatiently as the five-second commercial break cut in (all telephone calls were free, the length of the commercial extending with range—for long-distance calls the ratio of commercial to conversation was as high as 10:1, the participants desperately trying to get a word in edgeways between the interminable interruptions), but just before it ended he abruptly put the telephone down, then removed the receiver from the cradle.

Judith came over and took his arm. "Robert, what's the matter? You look terribly strained."

Franklin picked up his drink and walked through into the lounge. "It's just Hathaway. As you say, I'm getting a little too involved with him. He's starting to prey on my mind."

He looked at the dark outline of the sign over the supermarket, its red warning lights glowing in the night sky. Blank and nameless, like an area forever closed-off in an insane mind, what frightened him was its total anonymity.

"Yet I'm not sure," he muttered. "So much of what Hathaway says makes sense. These subliminal techniques are the sort of last-ditch attempt you'd expect from an overcapitalised industrial system."

He waited for Judith to reply, then looked up at her. She stood in the center of the carpet, hands folded limply, her sharp, intelligent face curiously dull and blunted. He followed her gaze out over the rooftops, then with an effort turned his head and quickly switched on the TV set.

"Come on," he said grimly. "Let's watch television. God, we're going to need that fourth set."

A week later Franklin began to compile his inventory. He saw nothing more of Hathaway; as he left the hospital in the evening the familiar scruffy figure was absent. When the first of the explosions sounded dimly around the city and he read of the attempts to sabotage the giant signs he automatically assumed that Hathaway was responsible, but later he heard on a newscast that the detonations had been set off by construction workers excavating foundations.

More of the signs appeared over the rooftops, isolated

on the palisaded islands near the suburban shopping centres. Already there were over thirty on the ten-mile route from the hospital, standing shoulder to shoulder over the speeding cars like giant dominoes. Franklin had given up his attempt to avoid looking at them, but the slim possibility that the explosions might be Hathaway's counter-attack kept his suspicions alive.

He began his inventory after hearing the newscast, discovered that in the previous fortnight he and Judith had traded in their

Car (previous model 2 months old)
2 TV sets (4 months)
Power mower (7 months)
Electric cooker (5 months)
Hair dryer (4 months)
Refrigerator (3 months)
2 radios (7 months)
Record player (5 months)
Cocktail bar (8 months)

Half these purchases had been made by himself, but exactly when he could never recall realising at the time. The car, for example, he had left in the garage near the hospital to be greased; that evening he had signed for the new model as he sat at its wheel, accepting the salesman's assurance that the depreciation on the two-month trade-in was virtually less than the cost of the grease-job. Ten minutes later, as he sped along the expressway, he suddenly realised that he had bought a new car. Similarly, the TV sets had been replaced by identical models after developing the same irritating interference pattern (curiously, the new sets also displayed the pattern, but as the salesman assured them, this promptly vanished two days later.)

Not once had he actually decided of his own volition that he wanted something and then gone out to a store and bought it!

He carried the inventory around with him, adding to it as necessary, quietly and without protest analysing these new sales techniques, wondering whether total capitulation might be the only way of defeating them. As long as he kept up even a token resistance, the inflationary growth curve would show a controlled annual 10% climb. With

that resistance removed, however, it would begin to rocket upwards out of control . . .

Then, driving home from the hospital two months later, he saw one of the signs for the first time.

He was in the 40 m.p.h. lane, unable to keep up with the flood of new cars, had just passed the second of the three-clover-leaves when the traffic half a mile away began to slow down. Hundreds of cars had driven up on to the grass verge, and a large crowd was gathering around one of the signs. Two small black figures were climbing up the metal face, and a series of huge grid-like patterns of light flashed on and off, illuminating the evening air. The patterns were random and broken, as if the sign was being tested for the first time.

Relieved that Hathaway's suspicions had been completely groundless, Franklin turned off onto the soft shoulder, then walked forward through the spectators as the lights blinked and stuttered in their faces. Below, behind the steel palisades around the island, was a large group of police and engineers, craning up at the men scaling the sign a hundred feet over their heads.

Suddenly Franklin stopped, the sense of relief fading instantly. With a jolt he saw that several of the police on the ground were armed with shot-guns, and that the two policemen climbing the sign carried submachine-guns slung over their shoulders. They were converging on a third figure, crouched by a switchbox on the penultimate tier, a ragged bearded man in a grimy shirt, a bare knee poking through his jeans.

Hathaway!

Franklin hurried towards the island, the sign hissing and spluttering, fuses blowing by the dozen.

Then the flicker of lights cleared and steadied, blazing out continuously, and together the crowd looked up at the decks of brilliant letters. The phrases, and every combination of them possible, were entirely familiar, and Franklin knew that he had been reading them unconsciously in his mind for weeks as he passed up and down the expressway.

BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW BUY NOW NEW CAR NOW NEW CAR NOW NEW CAR NOW YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES YES

Sirens blaring, two patrol cars swung up onto the verge through the crowd and plunged across the damp grass. Police spilled from its doors, batons in their hands, and quickly began to force back the crowd. Franklin held his ground as they approached, started to say: "Officer, I know the man—" but the policeman punched him in the chest with the flat of his hand. Winded, he stumbled back among the cars, leaned helplessly against a fender as the police began to break the windshields, the hapless drivers protesting angrily, those further back rushing for their vehicles.

The noise fell away abruptly when one of the submachine-guns fired a brief roaring burst, then rose in a massive gasp of horror as Hathaway, arms outstretched, let out a cry of triumph and pain, and jumped.

"But, Robert, what does it really matter?" Judith asked as Franklin sat inertly in the lounge the next morning. "I know it's tragic for his wife and daughter, but Hathaway was in the grip of an obsession. If he hated advertising signs so much why didn't he dynamite those we *can* see, instead of worrying so much about those we can't?"

Franklin stared at the TV screen, hoping the programme would distract him.

"Hathaway was *right,*" he said simply.

"Was he? Advertising is here to stay. We've no real freedom of choice, anyway. We can't spend more than we can afford, the finance companies soon clamp down."

"You accept that?" Franklin went over to the window. A quarter of a mile away, in the centre of the estate, another of the signs was being erected. It was due east from them, and in the early morning light the shadows of its rectangular superstructure fell across the garden, reaching almost to the steps of the French windows at his feet. As a concession to the neighbourhood, and perhaps to allay any suspicions while it was being erected by an appeal to petty snobbery, the lower sections had been encased in mock-Tudor panelling.

Franklin stared at it numbly, counting the half-dozen police lounging by their patrol cars as the construction gang unloaded prefabricated grilles from a couple of trucks. Then he looked at the sign by the supermarket, trying to repress his memories of Hathaway and the pathetic attempts the man had made to convince Franklin and gain his help.

He was still standing there an hour later when Judith came in, putting on her hat and coat, ready to visit the supermarket.

Franklin followed her to the door. "I'll drive you down there, Judith," he said in a flat dead voice. "I have to see about booking a new car. The next models are coming out at the end of the month. With luck we'll get one of the early deliveries."

They walked out into the trim drive, the shadows of the great signs swinging across the quiet neighbourhood as the day progressed, sweeping over the heads of the people on their way to the supermarket like the dark blades of enormous scythes.

THE LAST WORLD OF MR. GODDARD

FOR NO APPARENT REASON, the thunder particularly irritated Mr. Goddard. All day, as he moved about his duties as ground floor supervisor, he listened to it booming and rolling in the distance, almost lost amid the noise and traffic of the department store. Twice, on some pretext, he took the lift up to the roof-top cafeteria and carefully scanned the sky, searching the horizons for any sign of storm-cloud or turbulence. As usual, however, the sky was a bland, impassive blue, mottled by a few clumps of leisurely cumuli.

This was what worried Mr. Goddard. Leaning on the cafeteria railing he could hear the thunder distinctly, cleaving the air only a thousand feet above his head, the huge claps lumbering past like the colliding wing streams of enormous birds. Intermittently the sounds would stop, to re-start a few minutes later.

Mr. Goddard was not the only one to notice them—the people at the tables on the terrace were craning up at the sourceless din, as perplexed as himself. Normally Mr. Goddard would have exchanged some pleasantry with them —his elderly grey-haired figure in its old-world herringbone suit had been a byword for kindly concern for over twenty years—but today he hurried past without even looking at them. Down on the ground floor he felt less uneasy, but throughout the afternoon, while he roved among the busy counters, patting the children on the head, he listened to

the thunder sounding faintly in the distance, inexplicable and strangely threatening.

At six o'clock he took up his position in the time-keeper's booth, waited impatiently until the final time card had been stamped, then handed over to the night watchman, and the last of the staff had left for home. As he made his way out, pulling on his ancient overcoat and deerstalker, the clear evening air was still stirred by occasional rumblings.

Mr. Goddard's house was less than half a mile away, a small two-storey villa surrounded by tall hedges. Superficially dilapidated though still sound, at first glance it was indistinguishable from any other bachelor residence, although anyone entering the short drive would have noticed one unusual feature—all the windows, both upstairs and down, were securely shuttered. Indeed, they had remained shuttered for so long that the ivy growing across the front of the house had matted itself through the wooden slats, here and there pulling apart the rotting wood.

Closer inspection at these points would have revealed, behind the dusty panes, the interlocking diagonals of steel grilles.

Collecting a bottle of milk off the doorstep, Mr. Goddard let himself into the kitchen. This was furnished with an armchair and a small couch, and served him as his living room. He busied himself preparing an evening meal. Half way through a neighbouring cat, a regular visitor, scratched at the door and was allowed in. They sat at the table together, the cat on its customary cushion up on one of the chairs, watching Mr. Goddard with its small, hard eyes.

Shortly before eight o'clock Mr. Goddard began his invariable evening routine. Opening the kitchen door, he glanced up and down the side entrance, then locked it behind him, securing both windows and door with a heavy drop bar. He next entered the hall, ushering the cat before him, and began his inspection of the house.

This was done with great care, using the cat as his sixth sense. Mr. Goddard watched it carefully, noting its reactions as it wandered softly through the deserted rooms, singing remotely to itself.

The house was completely empty. Upstairs the floorboards were bare, the windows without curtains, lamp

bulbs shadeless. Dust gathered in the corners and stained the fraying Victorian wall paper. All the fireplaces had been bricked up, and the bare stonework above the mantels showed that the chimneys had been solidly filled in.

Once or twice Mr. Goddard tested the grilles, which effectively turned the rooms into a succession of steel cages. Satisfied, he made his way downstairs and went into the front room, noting that nothing was amiss. He steered the cat into the kitchen, poured it a bowl of milk as a reward and slipped back into the hallway, latching the door behind him.

One room he had still not entered—the rear lounge. Taking a key from his pocket, Mr. Goddard turned the lock and let himself through.

Like the other rooms, this was bare and unfurnished, except for a wooden chair and a large black safe that stood with its back to one wall. The other distinctive feature was a single light bulb of considerable power suspended on an intricate pulley system from the centre of the ceiling.

Buttoning his jacket, Mr. Goddard went over to the safe. Massive and ancient, it was approximately three feet wide and deep. Once it had been painted a dark bottle green, but by now most of the paint had peeled, revealing a dull black steel. A huge door, the full width and depth of the safe, was recessed into its face.

Beside the safe was the chair, a celluloid visor slung over its back. Mr. Goddard pulled this on, giving himself the look of a refined elderly counterfeiter about to settle down to a hard evening's work. From his key chain he selected a small silver key, and fitted it into the lock. Turning the handle full circle, he drew the caissons back into the door, then pulled steadily with both hands and swung it open.

The safe was without shelves, a single continuous vault. Occupying the entire cavity, separated from the three-inch thick walls by a narrow interval, was a large black tin document box.

Pausing to regain his breath, Mr. Goddard heard a dull rumble of thunder sound through the darkness beyond the shuttered windows. Frowning involuntarily, he suddenly noticed a feathery thudding noise coming from inside the safe. He bent down and was just in time to see a large white moth emerge from the space above the document box, ricocheting erratically off the roof, at each impact sending a dull echo reverberating through the tin walls.

Mr. Goddard smiled broadly to himself, as if divining something that had puzzled him all day. Leaning on the safe, he watched the moth circle the light, frantically shaking to pieces its damaged wings. Finally it plunged into one of the walls and fell stunned to the floor. Mr. Goddard went over and swept it through the door with his foot, then returned to the safe. Reaching inside, with great care he lifted the document box out by the handles fastened to the centre of the lid.

The box was heavy. It required all Mr. Goddard's efforts to steer it out without banging it against the safe, but with long practice he withdrew it in a single motion. He placed it gently on the floor, pulled up the chair and lowered the light until it was a few inches above his head. Releasing a catch below the lid, he tilted it back on its hinges.

Below him, brightly reflected in the light, was what appeared to be an elaborate doll's house. In fact, however, it was a whole complex of miniature buildings, perfectly constructed models with carefully detailed roof-tops and cornices, walls and brickwork so exactly duplicating the original that but for the penumbral figure of Mr. Goddard looming out of the darkness they might have passed for real buildings and houses. The doors and windows were exquisitely worked, fitted with minute lattices and panes, each the size of a soap flake. The paving stones, the street furniture, the camber of the roadways, were perfect scale reductions.

The tallest building in the box was about fourteen inches high, containing six storeys. It stood at one corner of a crossroads that traversed the centre of the box, and was obviously a replica of the department store at which Mr. Goddard worked. Its interior had been furnished and decorated with as much care as its external facade; through the windows could be seen the successive floors laid out with their miniature merchandise, rolls of carpet on the first, lingerie and womens' fashions on the second, furniture on the third. The roof-top cafeteria had been equipped with small metal chairs and tables, set with plates, cutlery, and bowls of tiny flowers.

On the corners to the left and right of the store were the bank and supermarket, with the town hall diagonally opposite. Again, these were perfect replicas of their originals: in the drawers behind the counters in the bank were bundles of minuscule banknotes, a glitter of coins like heaps

of silver dust. The interior of the supermarket was an exercise in a thousand vituosities. The stalls were stacked with pyramids of tins and coloured packets almost too small for the eye to distinguish.

Beyond the buildings dominating the crossroads were the lesser shops and premises lining the side-streets—the drapers, a public house, shoeshops and tobacconists. Looking around, the entire town seemed to stretch away into the distance. The walls of the box had been painted so skillfully, with such clever control of perspective, that it was almost impossible to tell where the models ended and the walls intervened. The microcosmic world was so perfect in its own right, the illusion of reality so absolute that it appeared to be the town itself, its very dimensions those of reality.

Suddenly, through the warm early morning sunlight, a shadow moved. The glass door of one of the shoeshops opened, a figure stepped out for a moment onto the pavement, glanced up and down the still deserted street, then retreated into the dark recesses of the shop's interior. A middle-aged man in a grey suit and white collar, it was presumably the manager opening the shop in the morning. In agreement with this, a second doorway opened further down the street; and this time a woman came out of a hairdressers, and began to wind down the blind. She wore a black skirt and pink plastic smock. As she went back into the salon she waved to someone walking down the street towards the town hall.

More figures emerged from the doorways, strolled along the pavements talking to each other, starting the day's business. Soon the streets were full; the offices over the shops came to life, typists moving in among the desks and filing cabinets. Signs were put up or taken down; calendars moved on. The first customers arrived at the department store and supermarket, ambled past the fresh counter displays. At the town hall clerks sat at their ledgers, in their private offices behind the oak panelling the senior officials had their first cups of tea. Like a well-ordered hive, the town came to life.

High above it all, his gigantic face hidden in the shadows, Mr. Goddard quietly watched his lilliputian scene like a discreet aged Gulliver. He sat forward, the green shade shielding his eyes, hands clasped lightly in his lap. Occa-

sionally he would lean over a few inches to catch a closer glimpse of the figures below him, or tilt his head to see into one of the shops or offices. His face showed no emotion, he seemed content to be simply a spectator. Two feet away the hundreds of tiny figures moved about their lives, and a low murmur of street noises crept out into the room.

The tallest of the figures were no more than an inch and a half in height, yet their perfectly formed faces were completely furnished with character and expression. Most of them Mr. Goddard knew by sight, many by name. He saw Mrs. Hamilton, the lingerie buyer, late for work, hurrying down the alleyway to the staff entrance. Through a window he could see into the managing director's office, where Mr. Sellings was delivering his usual weekly pep-talk to a trio of department heads. In the streets outside were scores of regular customers Mr. Goddard had known intimately for years, buying their groceries, posting their letters, exchanging gossip.

As the scene below him unfolded leisurely Mr. Goddard gradually edged nearer the box, taking a particular interest in two or three of the score of separate tableaux. An interesting feature of his vantage point was that by some freak of architecture or perspective it afforded him a multiplicity of perfect angles by which to observe almost every one of the diminutive figures. The high windows of the bank provided him with a view of each of the clerks at their counters; a transom beyond exposed the strongroom, the rows of deposit boxes on their shelves behind the grille, one of the junior cashiers amusing himself by reading the labels. The department store, with its wide floors, he could cover merely by inclining his head. The smaller shops along the streets were just as exposed. Rarely more than two rooms deep, their rear windows and fanlights provided him all the access he needed. Nothing escaped Mr. Goddard's scrutiny. In the back alleys he could see the stacked bicycles, the charwomens' mops in their buckets by the basement doors, the dustbins half-filled with refuse.

The first scene to attract Mr. Goddard's attention was one involving the stockroom supervisor at the store, Mr. Durrant. Casting his eye at random through the bank, Mr. Goddard noticed him in the manager's office, leaning across the latter's desk and explaining something earnestly. Usually Durrant would have been a member of the group being harrangued by Mr. Sellings, and only urgent business

could have taken him to the bank. The manager, however, appeared to be doing what he could to get rid of Durrant, avoiding his face and fiddling with some papers. Suddenly Durrant lost his temper. Tie askew, he began to shout angrily. The manager accepted this silently, shaking his head slowly with a bleak smile. Finally Durrant strode to the door, hesitated with a look of bitter reproach, and stalked out.

Leaving the bank, and apparently oblivious of his duties at the store, he walked briskly down the high street. Stopping at the hairdressers, he went in and made his way through to a private booth at the back where a large man in a check suit, still wearing a green trilby, was being shaved. Mr. Goddard watched their conversation through a skylight above them. The man in the chair, the local bookmaker, lay back silently behind his lather until Durrant finished talking, then with a casual flip of one hand waved him to a seat.

Putting two and two together, Mr. Goddard waited with interest for their conversation to be resumed. What he had just seen confirmed suspicions recently prompted by Durrant's distracted manner.

However, just as the bookmaker pulled off the towel and stood up, something more important caught Mr. Goddard's eye.

Directly behind the department store was a small cul de sac sealed off from the alleyway leading in from the street by high wooden doors. It was piled with old packing cases and miscellaneous refuse, and its far side was formed by the rear wall of the box, a sheer cliff that rose straight up into the distant glare above. The glazed windows of a service lift shaft overlooked the yard, topped on the fifth floor by a small balcony.

It was this balcony that had attracted Mr. Goddard's attention. Two men were crouched on it, manipulating a long wooden contraption that Mr. Goddard identified as a telescopic ladder. Together they hoisted it into the air, and by pulling on a system of ropes extended it against the wall to a point about fifteen feet above their heads. Satisfied, they lashed the lower end securely to the balcony railings; then one of them mounted the ladder and climbed up to its topmost rung, arms outstretched across the wall, high over the yard below.

They were trying to escape from the box! Mr. Goddard

hunched forward, watching them with astonishment. The top of the ladder was still seven or eight inches from the overhanging rim of the box, thirty or forty feet away from the men on the balcony, but their industry was impressive. He watched them motionlessly while they tightened the guyropes.

Dimly, in the distance, midnight chimed. Mr. Goddard looked at his watch, then without a further glance into the box pushed the lamp towards the ceiling and lowered the lid. He stood up and carried the box carefully to the safe, stowed it away, and sealed the door. Switching off the light, he let himself noiselessly out of the room.

The next day at the store Mr. Goddard made his usual rounds, dispensing his invariable prescription of friendly chatter and bonhommie to sales assistants and customers alike, making full use of the countless trivial insights he had been provided with the previous evening. All the while he kept a constant lookout for Mr. Durrant; reluctant to interfere he was nevertheless afraid that without some drastic re-direction of the man's fortunes his entanglement with the bookmaker would soon end in tragedy.

No one in the stock-rooms had seen Durrant all morning, but shortly after 12 o'clock Mr. Goddard spotted him hurrying down the street past the main entrance. Durrant stopped, glanced around indecisively, then began to wander through the showcases as he pondered something.

Mr. Goddard made his way out, and casually sidled up to Durrant.

"Fine day, isn't it?" he remarked. "Everybody's starting to think about their holidays."

Durrant nodded absently, examining a display of alpine equipment in the sportsgoods window. "Are they? Good."

"You going away, Mr. Durrant? South of France again, I suppose."

"What? No, I don't think we will be this year." Durrant began to move off, but Mr. Goddard caught up with him.

"Sorry to hear that, Mr. Durrant. I thought you deserved a good holiday abroad. Nothing the trouble, I hope." He looked searchingly into Durrant's face. "If I can help at all, do let me know. I'd be glad to make you a small loan. An old man like me hasn't much use for it."

Durrant stopped and peered thoughtfully at Mr. God-

dard. "That's kind of you, Goddard," he sat at last. "Very kind."

Mr. Goddard smiled deprecatingly. "Don't give it a thought. I like to stand by the firm, you know. Forgive me mentioning it, but would fifty be any use to you?"

Durrant's eyes narrowed slightly. "Yes, it would be a lot of use." He paused, then asked quietly: "are you doing this off your own bat, or did Sellings put you up to it?"

"Put me up to it—?"

Durrant closed the interval between them, and in a harder voice rapped out: "You must have been following me around for days. You know just about everything about everybody, don't you, Goddard? I've a damn good mind to report you."

Mr. Goddard backed away, wondering how to retrieve the situation. Just then he noticed that they were alone at the showcases. The groups of people who usually milled around the windows were pressing into the alleyway beside the store; there was a lot of shouting in the distance.

"What the hell's going on?" Durrant snapped. He joined the crowd in the alleyway and peered over the heads.

Mr. Goddard hurried back into the store. All the assistants were craning over their shoulders and whispering to each other; some had left the counters and were gathering around the service doors at the rear.

Mr. Goddard pushed his way through. Someone was calling for the police and a woman from the personnel department came down in the freight lift carrying a pair of blankets.

The commissionaire holding the throng back let Mr. Goddard past. In the yard outside was a group of fifteen or twenty people, all looking up at the fifth floor balcony. Tied to the railings was the lower half of a home-made ladder, jutting up into the air at an angle of 45 degrees. The top section, a limb about twelve feet long, had been lashed to the upper end, but the joint had failed, and the section now hung down vertically, swinging slowly from side to side above the heads of the people in the yard.

With an effort Mr. Goddard controlled his voice. Someone had covered the two bodies with the blankets, and a man kneeling beside them—presumably a doctor—was shaking his head slowly.

"What I can't understand," one of the assistant managers was whispering to the commissionaire, "is where they were

trying to climb to. The ladder must have pointed straight up into the air."

The commissionaire nodded. "Mr. Masterman and Mr. Streatfield, too. What would they be building a ladder for, senior men like that?"

Mr. Goddard followed the line of the ladder up towards the sky. The rear wall of the yard was only seven or eight feet high, beyond it lay the galvanised iron roof of a bicycle shed and an open car park. The ladder had pointed nowhere, but the compulsion driving the two men had been blind and irresistible.

That evening Mr. Goddard made the rounds of his house more perfunctorily than usual, glanced briefly into the empty rooms, closing the doors before the cat had a chance to do more than test the air. He shut it into the kitchen, then hurried off to unlock the safe.

Carrying the box out into the centre of the floor, he unlatched the lid.

As the town came to life below him he scrutinised it carefully, moving up and down the miniature streets, peering through all the windows in turn, fixing the identity and role of as many as possible of the tiny inhabitants. Like a thousand shuttles weaving an infinitely intricate pattern, they threaded through the shops and offices, in and out of countless doorways, every one of them touching a score of others somewhere among the pavements and arcades, adding another stitch to the tapestry of incident and motive ravelling their lives together. Mr. Goddard traced each thread, trying to detect any shift in direction, any untoward interlocking of behaviour.

The pattern, he realised, was changing. As yet it was undefined, but slight variations were apparent, subtle shifts in the relationships between the people in the box: rival store-keepers seemed to be on intimate terms, strangers had begun to talk to each other, there was a great deal of unnecessary and purposeless activity.

Mr. Goddard searched for a focus, an incident that would unmask the sources of the new pattern. He examined the balcony behind the lift shaft, watching for any further attempts to escape. The ladder had been removed but nothing had been done to replace it. Other potential escape routes—the roof of the cinema, the clock tower of the town hall—revealed no further clues.

One incident alone stood out, puzzling him even more.

This was the unique spectacle, in a quiet alcove of the billiards saloon, of Mr. Durrant introducing his bank manager to the bookmaker. The trio were still in earnest conversation when he closed the box reluctantly at two o'clock the next morning.

Over the following days Mr. Goddard watched the crowds passing through the store, waiting to detect, as it were in the macrocosm, some of the tendencies he had observed in the box. His sixty-fifth birthday, soon due to fall, was a handy topic which provided ready conversational access to the senior members of the staff. Curiously, however, the friendly responses he expected were missing; the exchanges were brief, sometimes almost to the point of rudeness. This he put down to the changed atmosphere in the store since the deaths of the two ladder climbers. At the inquest there had been a confused hysterical outburst by one of the saleswomen, and the coroner had cryptically remarked that it appeared that information was being deliberately withheld. A murmur of agreement had spontaneously swept the entire room, but what exactly he meant no one seemed to know.

Another symptom of this uneasiness was the rash of notices that were handed in. Almost a third of the staff were due to leave, most of them for reasons that were patently little more than excuses. When Mr. Goddard probed for the real reasons he discovered that few people were aware of them. The motivation was purely unconscious.

As if to emphasise this intrusion of the irrational, one evening as Mr. Goddard was leaving the store he saw the bank manager standing high above the street on the clock tower of the town hall, gazing up into the sky.

During the next week little occurred within the box to clarify the situation. The shifting and regrouping of relationships continued. He saw the bank manager more and more in the company of the bookmaker, and realised that he had been completely mistaken in assuming that Durrant was under pressure of his gambling debts—in fact, his role seemed to be that of intermediary between the bookmaker and bank manager, who had at last been persuaded to join them in their scheme.

That some sort of conspiracy was afoot he was sure. At first he assumed that a mass break-out from the box was being planned, but nothing confirmed this. Rather he

felt that some obscure compulsion, as yet unidentified to itself, was generating within the minds of those in the box, reflected in the bizarre and unpredictable behaviour of their counterparts in the outside world. Unconscious of their own motives and only half-aware of themselves, his fellow employees at the store had begun to resemble the pieces of some enormous puzzle, like disjointed images fixed in the fragments of a shattered mirror. In conclusion he decided on a policy of laisser faire. A few more weeks would certainly reveal the sources of the conspiracy.

Unfortunately, sooner than Mr. Goddard anticipated, events moved forward rapidly to a spectacular crisis.

The day of his sixty-fifth birthday, he made his way to the store half an hour later than usual, and on arrival was told that Mr. Sellings wished to see him.

Sellings first offered his congratulations, then launched into a recapitulation of Mr. Goddard's years of service to the store, and concluded by wishing him as many years again of contented retirement.

It took Mr. Goddard several moments to grasp the real significance of this. Nothing had ever been said to him about his retirement, and he had always assumed that he would stay on until, like many members of the staff, he was well into his seventies.

Collecting himself, he said as much to Sellings. "I haven't exactly been expecting retirement, Mr. Sellings. I think there must have been some mistake."

Sellings stood up, shaking his head with a quick smile. "No mistake at all, Mr. Goddard, I assure you. As a matter of fact the board carefully considered your case yesterday, and we agreed that you well deserve an uninterrupted rest after all these years."

Mr. Goddard frowned. "But I don't wish to retire, sir. I've made no plans."

"Well, now's the time to start." Sellings was on his way to the door, handshake ready. "Comfortable pension, little house of your own, the world's your oyster."

Mr. Goddard sat tight, thinking quickly. "Mr. Sellings, I'm afraid I can't accept the board's decision. I'm sure, for the sake of the business, I should stay on in my present post." The smile had gone from Sellings' face; he looked impatient and irritable. "If you were to ask the floor managers and assistants, not to speak of the customers,

they would all insist that I stay on. They would be very shocked at the suggestion of retirement."

"Would they?" Sellings asked curtly. "My information is to the contrary. Believe me, your retirement has come at a very lucky time for you, Mr. Goddard. I've had a great number of complaints recently that otherwise I should have been obliged to act upon. Promptly and drastically."

As he left the accounts department for the last time Mr. Goddard numbly repeated these words to himself. He found them almost impossible to believe. And yet Sellings was a responsible man who would never take a single opinion on such an important matter. Somehow, though, he was colossally in error.

Or was he? As he made his farewell rounds, half-hoping that the news of his sudden retirement would rally support to him, Mr. Goddard realised that Sellings was right. Floor by floor, department by department, counter by counter, he recognised the same inner expression, the same attitude of tacit approval. *They were all glad he was going.* Not one of them showed real regret; a good number slipped away before he could shake hands with them, others merely grunted briefly. Several of the older hands, who had known Mr. Goddard for twenty or thirty years, seemed slightly embarrassed, but none of them offered a word of sympathy.

Finally, when one group in the furniture department deliberately turned their backs to avoid speaking to him, Mr. Goddard cut short his tour. Stunned and humiliated, he collected his few possessions from his locker and made his way out.

It seemed to take him all day to reach his house. Head down, he walked slowly along the quiet side-streets, oblivious of the passers-by, pathetically trying to absorb this blow to all he had assumed about himself for so many years. His interest in other people was sincere and unaffected, he knew without doubt. Countless times he had gone out of his way to be of help to others, had put endless thought into arriving at the best solutions to their problems. But with what result? He had aroused only contempt, envy and distrust.

On his doorstep the cat waited patiently. Surprised to see him so early it ran forward, purring and rubbing itself against his legs as he latched the gate. But Mr. Goddard

failed to notice it. Fumbling, he unlocked the kitchen door, closed it automatically behind him. Taking off his coat, he made himself some tea, and without thinking poured a saucer of milk for the cat. He watched it drink, still trying helplessly to understand the antagonism he had aroused in so many people.

Suddenly he pushed his tea away and went to the door. Without bothering to go upstairs he made his way straight into the lounge. Switching on the light, he stared heavily at the safe. Somewhere here, he knew, was the reason for his dismissal that morning. If only his eyes were sharp enough, he would discover it.

Unlocking the safe, he unclasped the door and pulled it back abruptly, wrenching himself slightly against its great inertia. Impatient to open the box he ignored the twinge in his shoulder, reached down and seized the butterfly handles.

As he swung the box out of the safe he realised that its weight was, momentarily, too much for him. Trying to brace himself, he edged one knee under the box and leaned his elbows on the lid, his shoulder against the safe.

The position was awkward, and he could only support it for a few seconds. Heaving again at the box, in an effort to replace it in the safe, he suddenly began to feel dizzy. A small spiral revolved before his eyes, gradually thickening into a deep black whirlpool that filled his head.

Before he could restrain it, the box tore itself from his hands and plunged to the floor with a violent metallic clatter.

Kneeling beside the safe, Mr. Goddard slumped back limply against the wall, head lolling onto his chest.

The box lay on its side, just within the circle of light. The impact had forced the catches on the lid, and this was now open; a single narrow beam reflected off the under surface into the interior of the box.

For a few minutes the room was quiet, except for the laboured uneven sounds of Mr. Goddard's breathing. Then, almost imperceptibly, something moved in the interval between the lid and the floor. A small figure stepped tentatively out of the shadow, peered around itself in the full glare of the light, and disappeared again. Ten seconds later three more figures emerged, followed by others. In small groups they spread out across the floor, their tiny legs and arms rippling in the light. Behind them a score more appeared, pressing out in a solid stream, pushing past each other to escape from the box. Soon the circle of light was

alive with swarms of the tiny figures, flickering like minnows in a floodlit pool.

In the darkness by the corner, the door creaked sharply. Together, the hundreds of figures froze. Eyes glinting suspiciously, the head of Mr. Goddard's cat swung round into the room. For a moment it paused, assessing the scene before it.

A sharp cry hissed through its teeth. With vicious speed, it bounded forwards.

It was several hours later that Mr. Goddard pulled himself slowly to his feet. Leaning weakly against the safe, he looked down at the upended safe beneath the bright cone of light. Carefully collecting himself, he rubbed his cheekbones and painfully massaged his chest and shoulders. Then he limped across to the box and steered it back onto its base. Gingerly, he lefted the lid and peered inside.

Abruptly he dropped the lid, glanced around the floor, swinging the light so that it swept the far corners. Then he turned and hurried out into the hall, switched on the light and examined the floor carefully, along the skirting boards and behind the grilles.

Over his shoulder he noticed that the kitchen door was open. He crossed to it and stepped in on tiptoe, eyes ranging between the table and chair legs, behind the broom and coal bucket.

"Sinbad!" Mr. Goddard shouted.

Startled, the cat dropped the tiny object between its paws and backed away below the couch.

Mr. Goddard bent down. He stared hard at the object for a few seconds, then stood up and leaned against the cupboard, his eyes closing involuntarily.

The cat pounced, its teeth flicking at its paws. It gulped noisily.

"Sinbad," Mr. Goddard said in a quieter voice. He gazed listlessly at the cat, finally stepped over to the door.

"Come outside," he called to it.

The cat followed him, its tail whipping slowly from side to side. They walked down the pathway to the gate. Mr. Goddard looked at his watch. It was 2.45, early afternoon. The houses around him were silent, the sky a distant, pacific blue. Here and there sunlight was reflected off one of the upstairs bay windows, but the street was motionless, its stillness absolute and unbroken.

Mr. Goddard gestured the cat onto the pavement and closed the gate behind it.

Together they walked out into an empty world.

THE TIME-TOMBS

I

USUALLY in the evenings, while Traxel and Bridges drove off into the sand-sea, Shepley and the Old Man would wander among the gutted time-tombs, listening to them splutter faintly in the dying light as they recreated their fading personas, the deep crystal vaults flaring briefly like giant goblets.

Most of the time-tombs on the southern edge of the sand-sea had been stripped centuries earlier. But Shepley liked to saunter through the straggle of half-submerged pavilions, the warm ancient sand playing over his bare feet like wavelets on some endless beach. Alone among the flickering tombs, with the empty husks of the past ten thousand years, he could temporarily forget his nagging sense of failure.

Tonight, however, he would have to forego the walk. Traxel, who was nominally the leader of the group of tomb-robbers, had pointedly warned him at dinner that he must pay his way or leave. For three weeks Shepley had put off going with Traxel and Bridges, making a series of progressively lamer excuses, and they had begun to get impatient with him. The Old Man they would tolerate, for his vast knowledge of the sand-sea—he had combed the decaying tombs for over forty years and knew every reef and therm-pool like the palm of his hand—and because he was an institution that somehow dignified the lowly calling of tomb-robber, but Shepley had been there for only three months and had nothing to offer except his morose silences and self-hate.

"Tonight, Shepley," Traxel told him firmly in his hard clipped voice, "you must find a tape. We cannot support you indefinitely. Remember, we're all as eager to leave Vergil as you are."

Shepley nodded, watching his reflection in the gold finger-bowl. Traxel sat at the head of the tilting table, his high-collared velvet jacket unbuttoned. Surrounded by

the battered gold plate filched from the tombs, red wine spilling across the table from Bridges' tankard, he looked more like a Renaissance princeling than a cashiered Ph.D. Once Traxel had been a Professor of Semantics, and Shepley wondered what scandal had brought him to Vergil. Now, like a grave-rat, he hunted the time-tombs with Bridges, selling the tapes to the Psycho-History Museums at a dollar a foot. Shepley found it impossible to come to terms with the tall, aloof man. By contrast Bridges, who was just a thug, had a streak of blunt good humor that made him tolerable, but with Traxel he could never relax. Perhaps his cold, laconic manner represented authority, the high-faced, stern-eyed interrogators who still pursued Shepley in his dreams.

Bridges kicked back his chair and lurched away around the table, pounding Shepley across the shoulders.

"You come with us, kid. Tonight we'll find a mega-tape."

Outside, the low-hulled, camouflaged halftrack waited in a saddle between two dunes. The old summer palace was sinking slowly below the desert, and the floor of the banqueting hall shelved into the white sand like the deck of a subsiding liner, going down with lights blazing from its staterooms.

"What about you, Doctor?" Traxel asked the Old Man as Bridges swung aboard the half-track and the exhaust kicked out. "It would be a pleasure to have you along." When the Old Man shook his head Traxel turned to Shepley. "Well, are you coming?"

"Not tonight," Shepley demurred hurriedly. "I'll, er, walk down to the tomb-beds later myself."

"Twenty miles?" Traxel reminded him, watching reflectively. "Very well." He zipped up his jacket and strode away towards the half-track. As they moved off he shouted: "Shepley, I meant what I said!"

Shepley watched them disappear among the dunes. Flatly, he repeated: "He means what he says."

The Old Man shrugged, sweeping some sand off the table. "Traxel. . . he's a difficult man. What are you going to do?" The note of reproach in his voice was mild, realizing that Shepley's motives were the same as those which had marooned himself on the lost beaches of the sand-sea four decades earlier.

Shepley snapped irritably. "I can't go with him. After

five minutes he drains me like a skull. What's the matter with Traxel. Why is he here?"

The Old Man stood up, staring out vaguely into the desert. "I can't remember. Everyone has his own reasons. After a while the stories overlap."

They walked out under the proscenium, following the grooves left by the half-track. A mile away, winding between the last of the lavalakes which marked the southern shore of the sand-sea, they could just see the vehicle vanishing into the darkness. The old tomb-beds, where Shepley and the Old Man usually walked, lay between them, the pavilions arranged in three lines along a low basaltic ridge. Occasionally a brief flare of light flickered up into the white, bone-like darkness, but most of the tombs were silent.

Shepley stopped, hands falling limply to his sides. "The new beds are by the Lake of Newton, nearly twenty miles away. I can't follow them."

"I shouldn't try," the Old Man rejoined. "There was a big sand-storm last night. The time-wardens will be out in force marking any new tombs uncovered." He chuckled softly to himself. "Traxel and Bridges won't find a foot of tape—they'll be lucky if they're not arrested." He took off his white cotton hat and squinted shrewdly through the dead light, assessing the altered contours of the dunes, then guided Shepley towards the old mono-rail whose southern terminus ended by the tomb-beds. Once it had been used to transport the pavilions from the station on the northern shore of the sand-sea, and a small gyro-car still leaned against the freight platform. "We'll go over to Pascal. Something may have come up, you never know."

Shepley shook his head. "Traxel took me there when I first arrived. They've all been stripped a hundred times."

"Well, we'll have a look." The Old Man plodded on towards the mono-rail, his dirty white suit flapping in the low breeze. Behind them the summer palace—built three centuries earlier by a business tycoon from Ceres—faded into the darkness, the rippling glass tiles in the upper spires merging into the starlight.

Propping the car against the platform, Shepley wound up the gyroscope, then helped the Old Man onto the front seat. He pried off a piece of rusting platform rail and began to punt the car away. Every fifty yards or so they stopped to clear the sand that submerged the track, but

slowly they wound off among the dunes and lakes, here and there the onion-shaped cupola of a solitary time-tomb rearing up into the sky beside them, fragments of the crystal casements twinkling in the sand like minuscule stars.

Half an hour later, as they rode down the final long incline towards the Lake of Pascal, Shepley went forward to sit beside the Old Man, who emerged from his private reverie to ask quizzically: "And you, Shepley, why are you here?"

Shepley leaned back, letting the cool air drain the sweat off his face. "Once I tried to kill someone," he explained tersely. "After they cured me I found I wanted to kill myself instead." He reached down to the hand-brake as they gathered speed. "For ten thousand dollars I can go back on probation. Here I thought there would be a freemasonry of sorts. But then you've been kind enough, Doctor."

"Don't worry, we'll get you a winning tape." He leaned forward, shielding his eyes from the stellar glare, gazing down at the little cantonment of gutted time-tombs on the shore of the lake. In all there were about a dozen pavilions, their roofs holed, the group Traxel had shown to Shepley after his arrival when he demonstrated how the vaults were robbed.

"Shepley! Look, lad!"

"Where? I've seen them before, Doctor. They're stripped."

The Old Man pushed him away. "No, you fool, about three hundred yards to the west, in the shadow of the long ridge where the big dunes have moved. Can you see them now?" He drummed a white fist on Shepley's knee. "You've made it, lad. You won't need to be frightened of Traxel or anyone else now."

Shepley jerked the car to a halt. As he ran ahead of the Old Man towards the escarpment he could see several of the time-tombs glowing along the sky-lines, emerging briefly from the dark earth like the tents of some spectral caravan.

II

FOR ten millenia the Sea of Vergil had served as a burial ground, and the 1,500 square miles of restless sand were estimated to contain over twenty thousand tombs. All but

a minute fraction had been stripped by the successive generations of tomb robbers, and an intact spool of the 17th Dynasty could now be sold to the Psycho-History Museum at Tycho for over 3,000 dollars. For each preceding dynasty, though none older than the 12th had ever been found, there was a bonus.

There were no corpses in the time-tombs, no dusty skeletons. The cyber-architectonic ghosts which haunted them were embalmed in the metallic codes of memory tapes, three-dimensional molecular transcriptions of their living originals, stored among the dunes as a stupendous act of faith, in the hope that one day the physical re-creation of the coded personalities would be possible. After five thousand years the attempt had been reluctantly abandoned, but out of respect for the tomb-builders their pavilions were left to take their own hazard with time in the Sea of Vergil. Later the tomb-robbers had arrived, as the historians of the new epochs realized the enormous archives that lay waiting for them in this antique limbo. Despite the time-wardens, the pillaging of the tombs and the illicit traffic in dead souls continued.

"Doctor! Come on! Look at them!"

Shepley plunged wildly up to his knees in the silver-white sand, diving from one pavilion to the next like a frantic puppy.

Smiling to himself, the Old Man climbed slowly up the melting slope, submerged to his waist as the fine crystals poured away around him, feeling for spurs of firmer rock. The cupola of the nearest tomb tilted into the sky, only the top six inches of the casements visible below the overhang. He sat for a moment on the roof, watching Shepley dive about in the darkness, then peered through the casement, brushing away the sand with his hands.

The tomb was intact. Inside he could see the votive light burning over the altar, the hexagonal nave with its inlaid gold floor and drapery, the narrow chancel at the rear which held the memory store. Low tables surrounded the chancel, carrying beaten goblets and gold bowls, token offerings intended to distract any pillager who stumbled upon the tomb.

Shepley came leaping over to him. "Let's get into them, Doctor! What are we waiting for?"

The Old Man looked out over the plain below, at the cluster of stripped tombs by the edge of the lake, at the

dark ribbon of the gyro-rail winding away among the hills. The thought of the fortune that lay at his finger tips left him unmoved. For so long now he had lived among the tombs that he had begun to assume something of their ambience of immortality and timelessness, and Shepley's impatience seemed to come out of another dimension. He hated stripping the tombs. Each one robbed represented, not just the final extinction of a surviving personality, but a diminution of his own sense of eternity. Whenever a new tomb-bed emerged from the sand he felt something within himself momentarily rekindled, not hope, for he was beyond that, but a serene acceptance of the brief span of time left to him.

"Right," he nodded. They began to cleave away the sand piled around the door, Shepley driving it down the slope where it spilled in a white foam over the darker basaltic chips. When the narrow portico was free the Old Man squatted by the timeseal. His fingers cleaned away the crystals embedded between the tabs, then played lightly over them.

Like dry sticks breaking, an ancient voice crackled:

Orion, Betelgeuse, Altair,
What twice-born star shall be my heir,
Doomed again to be this scion—

"Come on, Doctor, this is a quicker way." Shepley put one leg up against the door and lunged against it futilely. The Old Man pushed him away. With his mouth close to the seal, he rejoined:

"Of Altair, Betelgeuse, Orion."

As the doors accepted this and swung back he murmured: "Don't despise the old rituals. Now, let's see." They paused in the cool, unbreathed air, the votive light throwing a pale ruby glow over the gold drapes parting across the chancel.

The air became curiously hazy and mottled. Within a few seconds it began to vibrate with increasing rapidity, and a succession of vivid colors rippled across the surface of what appeared to be a cone of light projected from the rear of the chancel. Soon this resolved itself into a three-dimensional image of an elderly man in a blue robe.

Although the image was transparent, the brilliant electric blue of the robe revealing the inadequacies of the projection system, the intensity of the illusion was such that Shepley almost expected the man to speak to them. He was well into his seventies, with a composed, watchful face and thin gray hair, his hands resting quietly in front of him. The edge of the desk was just visible, the proximal arc of the cone enclosing part of a silver ink-stand and a small metal trophy. These details, and the spectral bookshelves and paintings which formed the backdrop of the illusion, were of infinite value to the Psycho-History institutes, providing evidence of the earlier civilizations far more reliable then the funerary urns and goblets in the anteroom.

Shepley began to move forward, the definition of the persona fading slightly. A visual relay of the memory store, it would continue to play after the code had been removed, though the induction coils would soon exhaust themselves. Then the tomb would be finally extinct.

Two feet away, the wise unblinking eyes of the long dead magnate stared at him steadily, his seamed forehead like a piece of pink transparent wax. Tentatively, Shepley reached out and plunged his hand into the cone, the myraid vibration patterns racing across his wrist. For a moment he held the dead man's face in his hand, the edge of the desk and the silver inkstand dappling across his sleeve.

Then he stepped forward and walked straight through him into the darkness at the rear of the chancel.

Quickly, following Traxel's instructions, he unbolted the console containing the memory store, lifting out the three heavy drums which held the tape spools. Immediately the persona began to dim, the edge of the desk and the bookshelves vanishing as the cone contracted. Narrow bands of dead air appeared across it, one, at the level of the man's neck, decapitating him. Lower down the scanner had begun to misfire. The folded hands trembled nervously, and now and then one of his shoulders gave a slight twitch. Shepley stepped through him without looking back.

The Old Man was waiting outside. Shepley dropped the drums onto the sand. "They're heavy," he muttered. Brightening, he added: "There must be over five hundred feet here, Doctor. With the bonus, and all the others as well —" He took the Old Man's arm. "Come on, let's get into the next one."

The Old Man disengaged himself, watching the sputtering persona in the pavilion, the blue light from the dead

man's suit pulsing across the sand like a soundless lightning storm.

"Wait a minute, lad, don't run away with yourself." As Shepley began to slide off through the sand, sending further falls down the slope, he added in a firmer voice: "And stop moving all that sand around! These tombs have been hidden here for ten thousand years. Don't undo all the good work, or the wardens will be finding them the first time they go past."

"Or Traxel," Shepley said, sobering quickly. He glanced around the lake below, searching the shadows among the tombs in case anyone was watching them, waiting to seize the treasure.

III

THE Old Man left him at the door of the next pavilion, reluctant to watch the tomb being stripped of the last vestige of its already meager claim to immortality.

"This will be our last one tonight," he told Shepley. "You'll never hide all these tapes from Bridges and Traxel"

The furnishings of the tomb differed from that of the previous one. Somber black marble panels covered the walls, inscribed with strange gold-leaf hieroglyphs, and the inlays in the floor represented stylized astrological symbols, at once eerie and obscure. Shepley leaned against the altar, watching the cone of light reach out towards him from the chancel as the curtains parted. The predominant colors were gold and carmine, mingled with a vivid powdery copper that gradually resolved itself into the huge, harp-like headdress of a reclining woman. She lay in the center of what seemed to be a sphere of softly luminous gas, inclined against a massive black catafalque, from the sides of which flared two enormous heraldic wings. The woman's copper hair was swept straight back from her forehead, some five or six feet long, and merged with the plumage of the wings, giving her an impression of tremendous contained speed, like a goddess arrested in a moment of flight in a cornice of some great temple-city of the dead.

Her eyes stared forward expressionlessly at Shepley. Her arms and shoulders were bare, and the white skin, like compacted snow, had a brilliant surface sheen, the reflected light glaring against the black base of the catafalque and the long sheath-like gown that swept around her hips to the floor. Her face, like an exquisite porcelain

mask, was tilted upward slightly, the half-closed eyes suggesting that the woman was asleep or dreaming. No background had been provided for the image, but the bowl of luminescence invested the persona with immense power and mystery.

Shepley heard the Old Man shuffle up behind him.

"Who is she, Doctor? A princess?"

The Old Man shook his head slowly. "You can only guess. I don't know. There are strange treasures in these tombs. Get on with it, we'd best be going."

Shepley hesitated. He started to walk towards the woman on the catafalque, and then felt the enormous upward surge of her flight, the pressure of all the past centuries carried before her brought to a sudden focus in front of him, holding him back like a physical barrier.

"Doctor!" He reached the door just behind the Old Man. "We'll leave this one, there's no hurry!"

The Old Man examined his face shrewdly in the moonlight, the brilliant colors of the persona flickering across Shepley's youthful cheeks. "I know how you feel, lad, but remember, the woman doesn't exist, any more than a painting. You'll have to come back for her soon."

Shepley nodded quickly. "I know, but some other night. There's something uncanny about this tomb." He closed the doors behind them, and immediately the huge cone of light shrank back into the chancel, sucking the woman and the catafalque into the darkness. The wind swept across the dunes, throwing a fine spray of sand onto the half-buried cupolas, sighing among the wrecked tombs.

The Old Man made his way down to the mono-rail, and waited for Shepley as he worked for the next hour, slowly covering each of the tombs.

On the Old Man's recommendation he gave Traxel only one of the canisters, containing about 500 feet of tape. As prophesied, the time-wardens had been out in force in the Sea of Newton, and two members of another gang had been caught red-handed. Bridges was in foul temper, but Traxel, as ever self-contained, seemed unworried at the wasted evening.

Straddling the desk in the tilting ballroom, he examined the drum with interest, complimenting Shepley on his initiative. "Excellent, Shepley. I'm glad you joined us now. Do you mind telling me where you found this?"

Shepley shrugged vaguely, began to mumble some-

thing about a secret basement in one of the gutted tombs nearby, but the Old Man cut in: "Don't broadcast it everywhere! Traxel, you shouldn't ask questions like that—he's got his own living to earn."

Traxel smiled, sphinx-like. "Right again, Doctor." He tapped the smooth untarnished case. "In mint condition, and a 15th Dynasty too."

"Tenth!" Shepley claimed indignantly, frightened that Traxel might try to pocket the bonus. The Old Man cursed, and Traxel's eyes gleamed.

"Tenth, is it? I didn't realize there were any 10th Dynasty tombs still intact. You surprise me, Shepley. Obviously you have concealed talents.

Luckily he seemed to assume that the Old Man had been hoarding the tape for years.

Face down in a shallow hollow at the edge of the ridge, Shepley watched the white-hulled sand-car of the time-wardens shunt through the darkness by the old cantonment. Directly below him jutted the spires of the newly discovered tomb-bed, invisible against the dark background of the ridge. The two wardens in the sand-car were more interested in the old tombs; they had spotted the gyro-car lying on its sides by the mono-rail, and guessed that the gangs had been working the ruins over again. One of them stood on the running board, flicking a torch into the gutted pavilions. Crossing the mono-rail, the car moved off slowly across the lake to the northwest, a low pall of dust settling behind it.

For a few moments Shepley lay quietly in the slack darkness, watching the gullies and ravines that led into the lake, then slid down among the pavilions. Brushing away the sand to reveal a square wooden plank, he slipped below it into the portico.

As the golden image of the enchantress loomed out of the black-walled chancel to greet him, the great reptilian wings unfurling around her, he stood behind one of the columns in the nave, fascinated by her strange deathless beauty. At times her luminous face seemed almost repellent, but he had nonetheless seized on the faint possibility of her resurrection. Each night he came, stealing into the tomb where she had lain for ten thousand years, unable to bring himself to interrupt her. The long copper hair streamed behind her like an entrained time-wind, her angled body in flight between two infinitely distant uni-

verses, where archetypal beings of superhuman stature glimmered fitfully in their own self-generated light.

Two days later Bridges discovered the remainder of the drums.

"Traxel! Traxel!" he bellowed, racing across the inner courtyard from the entrance to one of the disused bunkers. He bounded into the ballroom and slammed the metal cans onto the computer which Traxel was programming. "Take a look at these—more Tenths! The whole place is crawling with them!"

Traxel weighed the cans idly in his hands, glancing across at Shepley and the Old Man, on lookout duty by the window. "Interesting. Where did you find them?"

Shepley jumped down from the window trestle. "They're mine. The Doctor will confirm it. They run in sequence after the first I gave you a week ago. I was storing them."

Bridges cut back with an oath. "Whaddya mean, storing them? Is that your personal bunker out there? Since when?" He shoved Shepley away with a broad hand and swung round on Traxel. "Listen, Traxel, those tapes were a fair find. I don't see any tags on them. Every time I bring something in I'm going to have this kid claim it?"

Traxel stood up, adjusting his height so that he overreached Bridges. "Of course, you're right—technically. But we have to work together, don't we? Shepley made a mistake, we'll forgive him this time." He handed the drums to Shepley, Bridges seething with barely controlled indignation. "If I were you, Shepley, I'd get those cashed. Don't worry about flooding the market." As Shepley turned away, sidestepping Bridges, he called him back. "And there are advantages in working together, you know."

He watched Shepley disappear to his room, then turned to survey the huge peeling map of the sand-sea that covered the facing wall.

"You'll have to strip the tombs now," the Old Man told Shepley later. "It's obvious you've stumbled on something, and it won't take Traxel five minutes to discover where."

"Perhaps a little longer," Shepley replied evenly. They stepped out of the shadow of the palace and moved away among the dunes; Bridges and Traxel were watching them from the dining room table, their figures motionless in the light. "The roofs are almost completely covered now. The next sandstorm should bury them for good."

"Have you entered any of the other tombs?"

Shepley shook his head vigorously. "Believe me, Doctor, I know now why the timewardens are here. As long as there's a chance of their being resurrected we're committing murder every time we rob a tomb. Even if it's only one chance in a million it may be all they themselves bargained on. After all, one doesn't commit suicide because the chances of life existing anywhere are virtually nil."

Already he had come to believe that the enchantress might suddenly resurrect herself, step down from the catafalque before his eyes. While a slender possibility existed of her returning to life he felt that he too had a valid foothold in existence, that there was a small element of certainty in what had previously seemed a random and utterly meaningless universe.

IV

As the first dawn light probed through the casements, Shepley turned reluctantly from the nave. He looked back briefly at the glowing persona, suppressing the slight pang of disappointment that the expected metamorphosis had not yet occurred, but relieved to have spent as much time awaiting it as possible.

He made his way down to the old cantonment, steering carefully through the shadows. As he reached the monorail —he now made the journey on foot, to prevent Traxel guessing that the cache lay along the route of the rail—he heard the track hum faintly in the cool air. He jumped back behind a low mound, tracing its winding pathway through the dunes.

Suddenly an engine throbbed out behind him, and Traxel's camouflaged halftrack appeared over the edge of the ridge. Its front four wheels raced and spun, and the huge vehicle tipped forward and plunged down the incline among the buried tombs, its surging tracks dislodging tons of the fine sand Shepley had so laboriously pushed by hand up the slope. Immediately several of the pavilions appeared to view, the white dust cascading off their cupolas.

Half-buried in the avalanche they had set off, Traxel and Bridges leapt from the driving cab, pointing to the pavilions and shouting at each other. Shepley darted forward, and put his foot up on the mono-rail just as it began to vibrate loudly.

In the distance the gyro-car slowly approached, the

Old Man punting it along, hatless and disheveled.

He reached the tomb as Bridges was kicking the door in with a heavy boot, Traxel behind him with a bag full of wrenches.

"Hello, Shepley!" Traxel greeted him gaily. "So this is your treasure trove."

Shepley staggered splay-legged through the sliding sand, and brushed past Traxel as glass spattered from the window. He flung himself on Bridges and pulled the big man backwards.

"Bridges, this one's mine! Try any of the others; you can have them all!"

Bridges jerked himself to his feet, staring down angrily at Shepley. Traxel peered suspiciously at the other tombs, their porticos still flooded with sand. "What's so interesting about this one, Shepley?" he asked sardonically. Bridges roared and slammed a boot into the casement, knocking out one of the panels. Shepley dived onto his shoulders, and Bridges snarled and flung him against the wall. Before Shepley could duck he swung a heavy left cross to Shepley's mouth, knocking him back onto the sand with a bloody face.

Traxel roared with amusement as Shepley lay there stunned, then knelt down, sympathetically examining Shepley's face in the light thrown by the expanding persona within the tomb. Bridges whooped with surprise, gaping like a startled ape at the sumptuous golden mirage of the enchantress.

"How did you find me?" Shepley muttered thickly. "I doubletracked a dozen times."

Traxel smiled. "We didn't follow you, chum. We followed the rail." He pointed down at the silver thread of the metal strip, plainly visible in the dawn light almost ten miles away. "The gyro-car cleaned the rail. It led us straight here. Ah, hello, Doctor," he greeted the Old Man as he climbed the slope and slumped down wearily beside Shepley. "I take it we have you to thank for this discovery. Don't worry, Doctor, I shan't forget you."

"Many thanks," the Old Man said flatly. He helped Shepley to sit up, frowning at his split lips. "Aren't you taking everything too seriously, Traxel? You're becoming crazed with greed. Let the boy have this tomb. There are plenty more."

The patterns of light across the sand dimmed and broke as Bridges plunged through the persona towards the rear

of the chancel. Weakly Shepley tried to stand up, but the Old Man held him back. Traxel shrugged. "Too late, Doctor." He looked over his shoulder at the persona, ruefully shaking his head in acknowledgment of its magnificence. "These 10th Dynasty graves are stupendous. But there's something curious about this one."

He was still staring at it reflectively a minute later when Bridges emerged.

"Boy, that was a crazy one, Traxel! For a second I thought it was a dud." He handed the three canisters to Traxel, who weighed two of them in one hand against the other. Bridges added: "Kinda light, aren't they?"

Traxel began to pry them open with a wrench. "Are you certain there are no more in there?"

"Hundred per cent. Have a look yourself."

Two of the cans were empty, the tape spools missing. The third was only half full, a mere three-inch width of tape in its center. Bridges bellowed in pain: "The kid robbed us. I can't believe it!" Traxel waved him away and went over to the Old Man, who was staring in at the now flickering persona. The two men exchanged glances, then nodded slowly in confirmation. With a short laugh Traxel kicked at the can containing the half reel of tape, jerking the spool out onto the sand, where it began to unravel in the quietly moving air. Bridges protested but Traxel shook his head.

"It *is* a dud. Go and have a close look at the image." When Bridges peered at it blankly he explained: "The woman there was dead when the matrices were recorded. She's beautiful all right—as poor Shepley here discovered—but it's all too literally skin deep. That's why there's only half a can of data. No nervous system, no musculature or internal organs—just a beautiful golden husk. This is a mortuary tomb. If you resurrected her you'd have an ice-cold corpse on your hands."

"But why?" Bridges rasped. "What's the point?"

Traxel gestured expansively. "It's immortality of a kind. Perhaps she died suddenly, and this was the next best thing. When the Doctor first came here there were a lot of mortuary tombs of young children being found. If I remember he had something of a reputation for always leaving them intact. A typical piece of highbrow sentimentality—giving immortality only to the dead. Agree, Doctor?"

Before the Old Man could reply a voice shouted from

below, there was a nearby roaring hiss of an ascending signal rocket and a vivid red star-shell burst over the lake below, spitting incandescent fragments over them. Traxel and Bridges leapt forwards, saw two men in a sandcar pointing up at them, and three more vehicles converging across the lake half a mile away.

"The time-wardens!" Traxel shouted. Bridges picked up the tool bag and the two men raced across the slope toward the half-track, the Old Man hobbling after them. He turned back to wait for Shepley, who was still sitting on the ground where he had fallen, watching the image inside the pavilion.

"Shepley! Come on, lad, pull yourself together! You'll get ten years!"

When Shepley made no reply he reached up to the side of the halftrack as Traxel reversed it expertly out of the morraine of sand, letting Bridges swing him aboard. "Shepley!" he called again. Traxel hesitated, then roared away as a second star-shell exploded.

Shepley tried to reach the tape, but the stampeding feet had severed it at several points, and the loose ends, which he had numbly thought of trying to reinsert into the projector, now fluttered around him in the sand. Below, he could hear the sounds of flight and pursuit, the warning crack of a rifle, engines baying and plunging, as Traxel eluded the time-wardens, but he kept his eyes fixed on the image within the tomb. Already it had begun to fragment, fading against the mounting sunlight. Getting slowly to his feet, he entered the tomb and closed the battered doors.

Still magnificent upon her bier, the enchantress lay back between the great wings. Motionless for so long, she had at last been galvanized into life, and a jerking syncopated rhythm rippled through her body. The wings shook uneasily, and a series of tremors disturbed the base of the catafalque, so that the woman's feet danced an exquisitely flickering minuet, the toes darting from side to side with untiring speed. Higher up, her wide smooth hips jostled each other in a jaunty mock tango.

He watched until only the face remained, a few disconnected traces of the wings and catafalque jerking faintly in the darkness, then made his way out of the tomb.

Outside, in the cool morning light, the time-wardens were waiting for him, hands on the hips of their white uniforms. One was holding the empty canisters, turning the

fluttering strands of tape over with his foot as they drifted away.

The other took Shepley's arm and steered him down to the car.

"Traxel's gang," he said to the driver. "This must be a new recruit." He glanced dourly at the blood around Shepley's mouth. "Looks as if they've been fighting over the spoils."

The driver pointed to the three drums. "Stripped?"

The man carrying them nodded. "All three. And they were 10th Dynasty." He shackled Shepley's wrists to the dashboard. "Too bad, son, you'll be doing ten yourself soon. It'll seem like ten thousand."

"Unless it was a dud," the driver rejoined, eyeing Shepley with some sympathy. "You know, one of those freak mortuary tombs."

Shepley straightened his bruised mouth. "It wasn't," he said firmly.

The driver glanced warningly at the other wardens. "What about the tape blowing away up there?"

Shepley looked up at the tomb spluttering faintly below the ridge, its light almost gone. "That's just the persona," he said. "The empty skin."

As the engine surged forward he listened to the three empty drums hit the floor behind the seat.

NOW WAKES THE SEA

AGAIN AT NIGHT Mason heard the sounds of the approaching sea, the muffled thunder of the long breakers rolling up the nearby streets. Roused from his sleep, he ran out into the moonlight, where the white-framed houses stood like sepulchres among the washed concrete courts. Two hundred yards away the waves plunged and boiled, sluicing in and out across the pavement. A million phosphorescent bubbles seethed through the picket fences, and the broken spray filled the air with the wine-sharp tang of brine.

Off-shore the deeper swells of the open sea surged across the roofs of the submerged houses, the white-caps cleft by the spurs of isolated chimneys. Leaping back as the cold foam stung his bare feet, Mason glanced uneasily at the house where his wife lay sleeping. Each night the

sea moved a few yards nearer, a hissing black guillotine slicing across the empty lawns, rivetting the fences with staccato bolts of spray.

For half an hour Mason watched the waves vault among the roof-tops. The luminous surf cast a pale nimbus on the clouds racing overhead on the dark wind, and covered his hands with a waxy sheen.

At last the waves began to recede, and the deep roaring bowl of illuminated water withdrew down the emptying streets, disgorging the lines of houses glistening in the moonlight. Mason ran forwards across the expiring bubbles, but the sea shrank away from him into the fading light, disappearing around the corners of the houses, sliding below the garage doors. He sprinted to the end of the road as a last fleeting glow was carried away across the sky beyond the spire of the church. Exhausted, Mason returned to his bed, the sound of the dying waves filling his head as he slept.

"I saw the sea again last night," he told his wife at breakfast.

Quietly, Miriam said: "Richard, the nearest sea is a thousand miles away." She watched her husband silently for a moment, her long pale fingers straying to the coil of black hair lying against her neck. "Go out into the drive and look. There's no sea."

"Darling, I *saw* it."

"Richard—!"

Mason stood up, and with slow deliberation raised his palms. "Miriam, I felt the spray on my hands. The waves were breaking around my feet. I wasn't dreaming."

"You must have been." Miriam leaned against the door, as if trying to exclude the strange nightworld of her husband which haunted the shadows in the bedroom. With her long raven hair framing her oval face, and the scarlet dressing gown open to reveal her slender neck and white breast, she reminded Mason of a Pre-Raphaelite heroine in an Arthurian pose. "Richard, you must see Dr. Clifton. It's beginning to frighten me."

Mason smiled, his eyes searching the distant roof-tops above the trees outside the window. "I shouldn't worry. What's happening is really very simple. At night I hear the sounds of a sea breaking down the streets, I go out and watch the waves in the moonlight, and then come back to bed." He paused, a faint flush of fatigue on his lean face. Tall and slimly built, Mason was still convalesc-

ing from the illness which had kept him at home for the previous six months. "It's curious, though," he resumed, "the water is remarkably luminous. I should guess its salinity is well above normal—"

"But Richard. . ." Miriam looked around helplessly, her husband's calmness exhausting her. "The sea isn't *there;* it's only in your mind. No-one else can see it."

Mason nodded, hands lost in his pockets. "Perhaps no-one else has heard it yet."

Leaving the breakfast room, he went into his study. The couch on which he had slept during his illness still stood against the corner, his bookcase beside it. Mason sat down, taking a large fossil mollusc from a shelf. During the winter, when he had been confined to bed, the smooth trumpet-shaped conch, with its endless associations of ancient seas and drowned strands, had provided him with unlimited pleasure, a bottomless cornucopia of image and reverie. Cradling it reassuringly in his hands, as exquisite and ambiguous as a fragment of Greek sculpture found in a dry river-bed, he reflected that it seemed like a capsule of time, the condensation of another universe, and he could almost believe that the midnight-sea which haunted his sleep had been released from the shell when he inadvertently scratched one of its helixes.

Miriam followed him into the room and briskly drew the curtains, as if aware that Mason was returning to the twilight world of his sick-bed and reading lamp. She took his shoulders in her hands.

"Richard, listen. Tonight, when you hear the waves, wake me and we'll go out together."

Gently, Mason disengaged himself. "Whether you see it or not is irrelevant, Miriam. The fact is that I see it."

Later, walking down the street, Mason reached the point where he had stood the previous night, watching the waves break and roll towards him. The sounds of placid domestic activity came from the houses he had seen submerged. The grass on the lawns was bleached by the July heat, and several sprays rotated in the bright sunlight, casting rainbows in the vivid air. Undisturbed since the rain-storms in the early spring, the long summer's dust lay between the palisades of the wooden fences and silted against the water hydrants.

The street, one of a dozen suburban boulevards on the perimeter of the town, ran north-west for some three hun-

dred yards and then joined the open square of the neighbourhood shopping centre. Mason shielded his eyes and looked out at the clock tower of the library and the church spire, identifying the various protuberances which had projected from the steep swells of the open sea. All were in exactly the positions he remembered.

The road shelved slightly as it approached the shopping centre, and by a curious coincidence marked the margins of the beach which would have existed if the area had in fact been flooded. A mile or so from the town, this shallow ridge, which formed part of the rim of a large natural basin enclosing the alluvial plain below, culminated in a small chalk outcropping. Although it was partly hidden by the intervening houses, Mason now recognised it clearly as the promontory which had reared like a citadel above the sea. The deep swells had rolled against its flanks, sending up immense plumes of spray that fell back with almost hypnotic slowness upon the receding water. At night the promontory seemed larger and more gaunt, a huge uneroded bastion against the sea. One evening, Mason promised himself, he would go out to the promontory and let the waves wake him as he slept on the peak.

A car moved past slowly, the driver watching Mason curiously as he stood motionlessly in the middle of the pavement, head raised to the air. Not wishing to appear any more eccentric than he was already considered—the solitary, abstracted husband of the beautiful but childless Mrs. Mason—Mason turned into the avenue which ran along the ridge. As he approached the distant outcropping he glanced over the hedges for any signs of water-logged gardens or stranded cars. The houses had been almost completely inundated by the flood water.

The first visions of the sea had come to Mason only three weeks earlier, but he was already convinced of their absolute validity. He recognised that after its nightly withdrawal the water failed to leave any mark on the hundreds of houses it submerged, and he felt no alarm for the people who should have been drowned and who were presumably, as he watched the luminous waves break across the roof-tops, sleeping undisturbed in the sea's immense liquid locker. Despite this paradox, it was his complete conviction of the sea's reality that had made him admit to Miriam that he had woken one night to the sound of waves outside the window and gone out to find the sea rolling across the neighbourhood streets and houses. At first she had merely

smiled at him, accepting this illustration of his strange private world. Then, three nights later, she had woken to the sounds of him latching the door on his return, bewildered by his pumping chest and tense perspiring face, his eyes lit by an uncanny light.

From then on she spent all day looking over her shoulder through the window for any signs of the sea. What worried her as much as the vision itself was Mason's complete calm in the face of this terrifying, unconscious apocalypse.

Tired by his walk, Mason sat down on a low ornamental wall, screened from the surrounding houses by the rhododendron bushes. For a few minutes he played with the dust at his feet, stirring the hard white grains with a branch. Although formless and passive, the dust shared something of the same evocative qualities of the fossil mollusc, radiating a curious compacted light.

In front of him, the road curved and dipped, the incline carrying it away onto the fields below. The chalk shoulder, covered by a mantle of green turf, rose into the clear sky. A metal shack had been erected on the slope, and a small group of figures moved about the entrance of a mine shaft, adjusting a wooden hoist. Wishing that he had brought his wife's car, Mason watched the diminutive figures disappear one by one into the shaft.

The image of this elusive pantomime remained with him all day in the library, overlaying his memories of the dark waves rolling across the midnight streets.

What sustained Mason in the face of this encroaching nightmare was his conviction that others would soon also become aware of the sea.

When he went to bed that night he found Miriam sitting fully dressed in the armchair by the window, her face composed into an expression of calm determination.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"The sea. Don't worry, simply ignore me and go to sleep. I don't mind sitting here with the light out."

"Miriam. . . ." Wearily, Mason took one of her slender hands and tried to draw her from the chair. "Darling, what on earth will this achieve?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Mason sat down on the foot of the bed. For some reason, not wholly concerned with the wish to protect her, he wanted to keep his wife from the sea. "Miriam, don't you understand? I might not actually *see* it, in the literal sense. It might be . . ." he extemporised, ". . . an hallucination, or a dream."

Miriam shook her head, hands clasped on the arms of the chair. "I don't think it is. Anyway, I want to find out."

Mason lay back slowly on the bed. "I wonder whether you're approaching this the right way—"

Miriam sat forward. "Richard, you're taking it all so calmly; you accept this vision as if it were a strange headache. That's what frightens me. If you were really terrified by this sea I wouldn't worry, but . . ."

Half an hour later, after he had given up his attempt to dissuade Miriam from her vigil, he fell asleep in the darkened room, Miriam's slim face watching him from the shadows.

Waves murmured, outside the windows the distant swish of racing foam drew him from sleep, the deep muffled thunder of rollers and the sounds of deep water drummed at his ears. Mason climbed out of bed, and dressed quickly as the hiss of receding water sounded up the street. In the corner, under the light reflected from the distant foam, Miriam lay asleep in the armchair, a bar of moonlight across her throat.

His bare feet soundless on the pavement, Mason ran towards the waves, and stumbled across the wet glistening tideline as one of the breakers struck with a deep guttural roar. On his knees, Mason felt the cold brilliant water, seething with animalcula, spurt across his chest and shoulders, slacken and then withdraw, sucked like an immense gleaming floor into the mouth of the next breaker. His wet suit clinging to him like a drowned animal, Mason stared out across the dark sea. In the fleeting moonlight the white houses advancing into the water loomed like the palazzos of a spectral Venice, mausoleums on the causeways of some huge island necropolis. Only the church spire was still visible. The water rode in to its high tide, a further twenty yards down the street, the spray carried almost to the Masons' house.

Mason waited for an interval between two waves and then waded through the shallows to the avenue which wound towards the distant headland. By now the water

had crossed the roadway, swilling over the dark lawns and slapping at the doorsteps.

Half a mile from the headland he heard the great surge and sigh of the deeper water. Out of breath, he leaned against a fence as the cold foam cut across his legs, pulling him with its undertow. Suddenly, illuminated by the racing clouds, he saw the tall pale figure of a woman standing above the sea on a stone parapet at the cliff's edge, her black robe lifting behind her in the wind, her long hair white in the moonlight. Far below her feet, the luminous waves leapt and vaulted like acrobats.

Mason ran along the pavement, momentarily losing sight of her as the road curved and the houses intervened. The water slackened, and he caught a last glimpse of the woman's ice-white profile through the opalescent spray. Turning, the tide began to ebb and fade, and with a bubbling spasm the great sea shrank away between the emerging houses, draining the night of its light and motion.

As the last bubbles flickered and dissolved on the damp pavement, Mason searched the headland, but the strange luminous figure had gone. His damp clothes dried themselves as he walked back through the empty streets; a last tang of brine carried away off the hedges on the midnight air.

The next morning he told Miriam: "It *was* a dream, after all. I think the sea has gone now. Anyway, I saw nothing last night."

"Thank heavens, Richard. Are you sure?"

"I'm fairly certain." Mason smiled encouragingly. "Thanks for keeping watch over me."

"I'll sit up tonight as well." She held up her hand to silence his protests. "I insist. I feel all right after last night, and I want to drive this thing away, once and for all." She frowned intently over the coffee cups. "It's strange, but once or twice I think I heard the sea too. It sounded very old and blind, like something waking again after millions of years."

On his way to the library, Mason made a detour towards the chalk outcropping, and parked the car where he had seen the moonlit figure of the white-haired woman watching the sea. The sunlight fell on the pale turf, illuminating the mouth of the mine-shaft, around which the same desultory activity was taking place.

For the next fifteen minutes Mason drove slowly in and out of the tree-lined avenues, peering over the hedges at the kitchen windows. Almost certainly she would live in one of the nearby houses, probably still wearing her black robe beneath a housecoat.

Later, at the library, he recognised a car he had seen on the headland. The driver, an elderly tweed-suited man of academic manner, was examining the display cases of local geological finds.

"Who was that?" he asked Fellowes, the keeper of antiquities, as the car drove off. "I've seen him on the chalk cliffs."

"Professor Goodhart, one of the party of paleontologists. Apparently they've uncovered an interesting bone-bed." Fellowes gestured at the collection of femurs and jaw-bone fragments. "With luck we may get a few pieces from them."

Mason stared at the bones, aware of a sudden closing of the parallax within his mind.

Each night, as the sea emerged from the dark streets and the wave rolled further towards the Mason's home, he would wake beside his sleeping wife and go out into the surging air and wade through the deep water towards the headland. There he would see the white-haired woman on the cliff's edge, her high face raised above the roaring spray, a pale glimmering nimbus which rode like the moon among the fleeing clouds. But always he failed to reach her before the tide turned, and would kneel exhausted on the wet pavements as the last bubbles foamed and the drowned streets rose from the sinking waves.

Once a police patrol car found him in its headlights, slumped against a gate-post in an open drive, and on another night he forgot to close the front door after himself when he returned. All through breakfast Miriam watched him with her old wariness, noticing the tell-tale shadows which encircled his eyes like manacles.

"Richard, I think you should stop going to the library. You look worn out. It isn't that sea dream again?"

Mason shook his head, forcing a tired smile from his face. "No, that's finished with. Perhaps I've been overworking."

Miriam held his hands. "Did you fall over yesterday?" She examined Mason's palms. "Darling, they're still *raw!* You must have grazed them only a few minutes ago. Can't you remember even"?

Abstracted, Mason invented some tale to satisfy her, then carried his coffee into the study and stared at the morning haze which lay across the roof-tops, a soft lake of opacity that followed the same contours as the midnight sea. The mist dissolved in the sunlight, and for a moment the diminishing reality of the normal world reasserted itself, filling him with a poignant nostalgia.

Without thinking, he reached out to the fossil conch on the bookshelf, but involuntarily his hand withdrew before touching it.

Miriam stood beside him. "Hateful thing," she commented. "Tell me, Richard, what do you think caused your dream?"

Mason shrugged. "Perhaps it was a sort of memory . . ." His wife's cool, elegant face was watching him intently. He wondered whether to tell Miriam of the waves which he still heard in his sleep, and of the white-haired woman on the cliff's edge who seemed to beckon to him. But like all women Miriam believed that there was room for only one enigma in her husband's life. By an inversion of logic he felt that his dependence on his wife's private income, and the loss of self-respect, gave him the right to withhold something of himself from her.

"Richard, what's the matter?"

In his mind the spray opened like an immense diaphanous fan and the enchantress of the waves turned towards him with her burning eyes.

Waist-high, the sea pounded across the lawns in a seething whirlpool. Mason pulled off his jacket and flung it away into the water, and then waded out into the street. Higher than ever before, the waves had at last reached his house, breaking over the doorstep, but Mason had forgotten his wife. His whole attention was fixed upon the headland, which was lashed by a continuous storm of spray, almost obscuring the figure standing on its crest.

As Mason pressed on, sometimes sinking to his chin, shoals of luminous algae swarmed in the water around him, their brilliant phosphorescence stinging his legs, and his eyes smarted in the harsh saline air. He reached the lower slopes of the headland almost exhausted, and fell to his knees.

High above, he could hear the spray singing as it cut through the coigns of the cliff's edge, the deep base of the breakers overlayed by the high treble of the keening

air, entwining itself through the long white strands of the woman's hair like the chords of a harp.

Carried by the music, Mason climbed the flank of the headland, a thousand reflections of the moon dancing in the breaking sea. As he reached the crest, the fluttering of the long black robe hid the woman's face, but he could see her tall erect carriage and slender hips. Suddenly, without any apparent motion of her limbs, she moved away along the parapet.

"Wait!"

His shout was lost on the surging air. Mason ran forwards, and the figure turned and stared back at him. Her white hair swirled around her face like a spume of silver steam and then parted to reveal an angular skull-like face with empty eyes and notched mouth. A hand, like a bundle of white sticks, clawed towards him, and the figure loomed through the whirling darkness like a gigantic bird.

Unaware whether the scream came from his own mouth or from this spectre, Mason stumbled back, before he could catch himself tripped over a wooden railing, and in a cackle of chains and pulleys fell backwards into the shaft, the sounds of the sea booming above him in its hurtling darkness.

After listening intently to the policeman's description, Professor Goodhart shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, sergeant. We've been working on the bed all week. No-one's fallen down the shaft." One of the flimsy wooden rails was swinging loosely in the crisp air. "But thank you for warning me. I suppose we must build a heavier railing, if this fellow is wandering around in his sleep."

"I don't think he'll bother to come up here," the sergeant said. "It's quite a climb." As an afterthought he added: "Down at the library where he works they said you'd found a couple of skeletons in the shaft yesterday. I know it's only two days since he disappeared, but one of them couldn't possibly be his?" The sergeant shrugged. "If there was some natural acid, say . . ."

"Ingenious, sergeant, but I'm sorry to disappoint you." Professor Goodhart drove his heel into the chalky turf. "Pure calcium carbonate, about a mile thick, laid down during the Triassic Period 200 million years ago when there was a large inland sea here. The skeletons we found yesterday, a man's and a woman's, belong to two Cro-

Magnon fisher people who lived on the shore just before it dried up. I wish I could oblige you with a *corpus delicti,* though it's quite a problem to understand how these Cro-Magnon relics found their way into the bone-bed. This shaft wasn't sunk until about thirty years ago." He smiled at the policeman. "Still, that's my problem, not yours."

Returning to the police car, the sergeant shook his head. "Nothing." As they drove off he looked out at the endless stretch of placid suburban homes.

"Apparently there was an ancient sea here once. A million years ago. Who would believe it?" He picked a crumpled flannel jacket off the back seat. "That reminds me," he said, sniffing at the fabric. "I know what this coat of Mason's smells of—brine."

THE VENUS HUNTERS

WHEN DR. ANDREW WARD joined the Hubble Memorial Institute at Mount Vernon Observatory he never imagined that the closest of his new acquaintances would be an amateur stargazer and spare-time prophet called Charles Kandinski, tolerantly regarded by the Observatory professionals as a madman. In fact, had either he or Professor Cameron, the Institute's Deputy Director, known just how far he was to be prepared to carry this friendship before his two-year tour at the Institute was over, Ward would certainly have left Mount Vernon the day he arrived and would never have become involved in the bizarre and curiously ironic tragedy which was to leave an ineradicable stigma upon his career.

Professor Cameron first introduced him to Kandinski. About a week after Ward came to the Hubble he and Cameron were lunching together in the Institute cafeteria.

"We'll go down to Vernon Gardens for coffee," Cameron said when they finished dessert. "I want to get a shampoo for Edna's roses and then we'll sit in the sun for an hour and watch the girls go by." They strolled out through the terrace tables towards the parking lot. A mile away, beyond the conifers thinning out on the slopes above them, the three great Vernon domes gleamed like white marble against the sky. "Incidentally, you can meet the opposition."

"Is there another observatory at Vernon?" Ward asked as they set off along the drive in Cameron's Buick. "What is it—an Air Force weather station?"

"Have you ever heard of Charles Kandinski?" Cameron said. "He wrote a book called 'The Landings from Outer Space.' It was published about three years ago."

Ward shook his head doubtfully. They slowed down past the check-point at the gates and Cameron waved to the guard. "Is that the man who claims to have seen extra-terrestrial beings? Martians or—"

"Venusians. That's Kandinski. Not only seen them," Professor Cameron added. "He's talked to them. Charles works at a cafe in Vernon Gardens. We know him fairly well."

"He runs the other observatory?"

"Well, an old 4-inch MacDonald Refractor mounted in a bucket of cement. You probably wouldn't think much of it, but I wish we could see with our two-fifty just a tenth of what he sees."

Ward nodded vaguely. The two observatories at which he had worked previously, Cape Town and the Milan Astrographic, had both attracted any number of cranks and charlatans eager to reveal their own final truths about the cosmos, and the prospect of meeting Kandinski interested him only slightly. "What is he?" he asked. "A practical joker, or just a lunatic?"

Professor Cameron propped his glasses onto his forehead and negotiated a tight hairpin. "Neither," he said.

Ward smiled at Cameron, idly studying his plump cherubic face with its puckish mouth and keen eyes. He knew that Cameron enjoyed a modest reputation as a wit. "Has he ever claimed in front of you that he's seen a . . . Venusian?"

"Often," Professor Cameron said. "Charles lectures two or three times a week about the landings to the women's societies around here, and put himself completely at our disposal. I'm afraid we had to tell him he was a little too advanced for us. But wait until you meet him."

Ward shrugged and looked out at the long curving peach terraces lying below them, gold and heavy in the August heat. They dropped a thousand feet and the road widened and joined the highway which ran from Vernon Gardens across the desert to Santa Vera and the coast.

Vernon Gardens was the nearest town to the Observa-

tory and most of it had been built within the last few years, evidently with an eye on the tourist trade. They passed a string of blue and pink-washed houses, a school constructed of glass bricks and an abstract Baptist chapel. Along the main thoroughfare the shops and stores were painted in bright jazzy colors, the vivid awnings and neon signs like street scenery in an experimental musical.

Professor Cameron turned off into a wide tree-lined square and parked by a cluster of fountains in the center. He and Ward walked toward the cafes—Al's Fresco Diner, Ylla's, the Dome—which stretched down to the sidewalk. Around the square were a dozen gift-shops filled with cheap souvenirs: silverplate telescopes and models of the great Vernon dome masquerading as ink-stands and cigar-boxes, plus a juvenile omnium gatherum of miniature planetaria, space helmets and plastic 3-D star atlases.

The cafe to which they went was decorated in the same futuristic motifs. The chairs and tables were painted a drab aluminium grey, their limbs and panels cut in random geometric shapes. A silver rocket ship, ten feet long, its paint peeling off in rusty strips, reared up from a pedestal among the tables. Across it was painted the cafe's name.

'The Site Tycho.'

A large mobile had been planted in the ground by the side-walk and dangled down over them, its vanes and struts flashing in the sun. Gingerly Professor Cameron pushed it away. "I'll swear that damn thing is growing," he confided to Ward. "I must tell Charles to prune it." He lowered himself into a chair by one of the open-air tables, put on a fresh pair of sunglasses and focussed them at the long brown legs of a girl sauntering past.

Left alone for the moment, Ward looked around him and picked at a cellophane transfer of a ringed planet glued to the table-top. The Site Tycho was also used as a small science fiction exchange library. A couple of metal bookstands stood outside the cafe door, where a soberly dressed middle-aged man, obviously hiding behind his upturned collar, worked his way quickly through the rows of paperbacks. At another table a young man with an intent, serious face was reading a magazine. His high cerebrotonic forehead was marked across the temple by a ridge of pink tissue, which Ward wryly decided was a lobotomy scar.

"Perhaps we ought to show our landing permits," he

said to Cameron when after three or four minutes no one had appeared to serve them. "Or at least get our pH's checked."

Professor Cameron grinned. "Don't worry, no customs, no surgery." He took his eyes off the side-walk for a moment. "This looks like him now."

A tall, bearded man in a short-sleeved tartan shirt and pale green slacks came out of the cafe towards them with two cups of coffee on a tray.

"Hello, Charles," Cameron greeted him. "There you are. We were beginning to think we'd lost ourselves in a time-trap."

The tall man grunted something and put the cups down. Ward guessed that he was about 55 years old. He was well over six feet tall, with a massive sunburnt head and lean but powerfully muscled arms.

"Andrew, this is Charles Kandinski." Cameron introduced the two men. "Andrew's come to work for me, Charles. He photographed all those Cepheids for the Milan Conference last year."

Kandinski nodded. His eyes examined Ward critically but showed no signs of interest.

"I've been telling him all about you, Charles," Cameron went on, "and how we all follow your work. No further news yet, I trust?"

Kandinski's lips parted in a slight smile. He listened politely to Cameron's banter and looked out over the square, his great seamed head raised to the sky.

"Andrew's read your book, Charles," Cameron was saying. "Very interested. He'd like to see the originals of those photographs. Wouldn't you, Andrew?"

"Yes, I certainly would," Ward said.

Kandinski gazed down at him again. His expression was not so much penetrating as detached and impersonal, as if he were assessing Ward with an utter lack of bias, so complete, in fact, that it left no room for even the smallest illusion. Previously Ward had only seen this expression in the eyes of the very old. "Good," Kandinski said. "At present they are in a safe deposit box at my bank, but if you are serious I will get them out."

Just then two young women wearing wide-brimmed Rapallo hats made their way through the tables. They sat down and smiled at Kandinski. He nodded to Ward and

Cameron and went over to the young women, who began to chatter to him animatedly.

"Well, he seems popular with them," Ward commented. "He's certainly not what I anticipated. I hope I didn't offend him over the plates. He was taking you seriously."

"He's a little sensitive about them," Cameron explained. "The famous dustbin-lid flying saucers. You mustn't think I bait him, though. To tell the truth I hold Charles in great respect. When all's said and done, we're in the same racket."

"Are we?" Ward said doubtfully. "I haven't read his book. Does he say in so many words that he saw and spoke to a visitor from Venus?"

"Precisely. Don't you believe him?"

Ward laughed and looked through the coins in his pocket, leaving one on the table. "I haven't tried to yet. You say the whole thing isn't a hoax?"

"Of course not."

"How do you explain it then? Compensation-fantasy or—"

Professor Cameron smiled. "Wait until you know Charles a little better."

"I already know the man's messianic," Ward said dryly. "Let me guess the rest. He lives on yoghurt, weaves his own clothes, and stands on his head all night, reciting the Bhagavadgita backwards."

"He doesn't," Cameron said, still smiling at Ward. "He happens to be a big man who suffers from barber's rash. I thought he'd have you puzzled."

Ward pulled the transfer off the table. Some science fantast had skillfully pencilled in an imaginary topography on the planet's surface. There were canals, craters and lake systems named Verne, Wells and Bradbury. "Where did he see this Venusian?" Ward asked, trying to keep the curiosity out of his voice.

"About twenty miles from here, out in the desert off the Santa Vera highway. He was picnicking with some friends, went off for a stroll in the sandhills and ran straight into the space-ship. His friends swear he was perfectly normal both immediately before and after the landing, and all of them saw the inscribed metallic tablet which the Venusian pilot left behind. Some sort of ultimatum, if I remember, warning mankind to abandon all its space programs. Apparently someone up there does not like us."

"Has he still got the tablet?" Ward asked.

"No. Unluckily it combusted spontaneously in the heat. But Charles managed to take a photograph of it."

Ward laughed. "I bet he did. It sounds like a beautifully organized hoax. I supposed he made a fortune out of his book?"

"About 150 dollars. He had to pay for the printing himself. Why do you think he works here? The reviews were too unfavorable. People who read science fiction apparently dislike flying saucers, and everyone else dismissed him as a lunatic." He stood up. "We might as well get back."

As they left the cafe Cameron waved to Kandinski, who was still talking to the young women. They were leaning forward and listening with rapt attention to whatever he was saying.

"What do the people in Vernon Gardens think of him?" Ward asked as they moved away under the trees.

"Well, it's a curious thing, almost without exception those who actually know Kandinski are convinced he's sincere and that he saw an alien space craft, while at the same time realizing the absolute impossibility of the whole story."

" 'I know God exists, but I cannot *believe* in him'?"

"Exactly. Naturally, most people in Vernon think he's crazy. About three months after he met the Venusian, Charles saw another UFO chasing its tail over the town. He got the Fire Police out, alerted the Radar Command chain and even had the National Guard driving around town ringing a bell. Sure enough, there were two white blobs diving about in the clouds. Unfortunately for Charles, they were caused by the headlights of one of the asparagus farmers in the valley doing some night spraying. Charles was the first to admit it, but at 3 o'clock in the morning no one was very pleased."

"Who is Kandinski, anyway?" Ward asked. "Where does he come from?"

"He doesn't make a profession of seeing Venusians, if that's what you mean. He was born in Alaska, for some years taught psychology at Mexico City University. He's been just about everywhere, had a thousand different jobs. A veteran of the private evacuations. Get his book."

Ward murmured non-committally. They entered a small arcade and stood for a moment by the first shop, an aquar-

ium called 'The Nouvelle Vague', watching the Angel fish and Royal Brahmins swim dreamily up and down their tanks.

"It's worth reading," Professor Cameron went on. "Without exaggerating, it's really one of the most interesting documents I've ever come across."

"I'm afraid I have a closed mind when it comes to interplanetary bogey-men," Ward said.

"A pity," Cameron rejoined. "I find them fascinating. Straight out of the unconscious. The fish too," he added, pointing at the tanks. He grinned whimsically at Ward and ducked away into a horticulture store halfway down the arcade.

While Professor Cameron was looking through the sprays on the hormone counter, Ward went over to a newsstand and glanced at the magazines. The proximity of the observatory had prompted a large selection of popular astronomical guides and digests, most of them with illustrations of the Mount Vernon domes on their wrappers. Among them Ward noticed a dusty, dog-eared paperback, 'The Landings from Outer Space,' by Charles Kandinski. On the front cover a gigantic space vehicle, at least the size of New York, tens of thousands of portholes ablaze with light, was soaring majestically across a brilliant backdrop of stars and spiral nebulae.

Ward picked up the book and turned to the end cover. Here there was a photograph of Kandinski, dressed in a dark lounge suit several sizes too small, peering stiffly into the eye-piece of his MacDonald.

Ward hesitated before finally taking out his wallet. He bought the book and slipped it into his pocket as Professor Cameron emerged from the horticulture store.

"Get your shampoo?" Ward asked.

Cameron brandished a brass insecticide gun, then slung it, buccaneer-like, under his belt. "My disintegrator," he said, patting the butt of the gun. "There's a positive plague of white ants in the garden, like something out of a science fiction nightmare. I've tried to convince Edna that their real source is psychological. Remember the story 'Leiningen vs the Ants'? A classic example of the forces of the Id rebelling against the Super-Ego." He watched a girl in a black bikini and lemon-colored sunglasses move gracefully through the arcade and added meditatively: "You know, Andrew, like everyone else my real vocation was to

be a psychiatrist. I spend so long analyzing my motives I've no time left to act."

"Kandinski's Super-Ego must be in difficulties," Ward remarked. "You haven't told me your explanation yet."

"What explanation?"

"Well, what's really at the bottom of this Venusian he claims to have seen?"

"Nothing is at the bottom of it. Why?"

Ward smiled helplessly. "You will tell me next that you really believe him."

Professor Cameron chuckled. They reached his car and climbed in. "Of course I do," he said.

When, three days later, Ward borrowed Professor Cameron's car and drove down to the rail depot in Vernon Gardens to collect a case of slides which had followed him across the Atlantic, he had no intention of seeing Charles Kandinski again. He had read one or two chapters of Kandinski's book before going to sleep the previous night and dropped it in boredom. Kandinski's description of his encounter with the Venusian was not only puerile and crudely written but, most disappointing of all, completely devoid of imagination. Ward's work at the Institute was now taking up most of his time. The Annual Congress of the International Geophysical Association was being held at Mount Vernon in little under a month, and most of the burden or organizing the three-week program of lectures, semesters and dinners had fallen on Professor Cameron and himself.

But as he drove away from the depot past the cafes in the square he caught sight of Kandinski on the terrace of the Site Tycho. It was 3 o'clock, a time when most people in Vernon Gardens were lying asleep indoors, and Kandinski seemed to be the only person out in the sun. He was scrubbing away energetically at the abstract tables with his long hairy arms, head down so that his beard was almost touching the metal tops, like an aboriginal half-man prowling in dim bewilderment over the ruins of a futuristic city lost in an inversion of time.

On an impulse, Ward parked the car in the square and walked across to the Site Tycho, but as soon as Kandinski came over to his table he wished he had gone to another of the cafes. Kandinski had been reticent enough the previous day, but now that Cameron was absent he might well turn out to be a garrulous bore.

After serving him Kandinski sat down on a bench by the bookshelves and stared moodily at his feet. Ward watched him quietly for five minutes, as the mobiles revolved delicately in the warm air, deciding whether to approach Kandinski. Then he stood up and went over to the rows of magazines. He picked in a desultory way through half a dozen and turned to Kandinski. "Can you recommend any of these?"

Kandinski looked up. "Do you read science fiction?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Not as a rule," Ward admitted. When Kandinski said nothing he went on: "Perhaps I'm too skeptical, but I can't take it seriously."

Kandinski pulled at a blister on his palm. "No one suggests you should. What you mean is that you take it too seriously."

Accepting the rebuke with a smile at himself, Ward pulled out one of the magazines and sat down at a table next to Kandinski. On the cover was a placid suburban setting of snugly eaved houses, yew trees and children's bicycles. Spreading slowly across the roof-tops was an enormous pulpy nightmare, blocking out the sun behind it and throwing a weird phosphorescent glow over the roofs and lawns. "You're probably right," Ward said, showing the cover to Kandinski. "I'd hate to want to take that seriously."

Kandinski waved it aside. "I have seen 11th century illuminations of the pentateuch more sensational than any of these covers." He pointed to the cinema theatre on the far side of the square, where the four-hour Biblical epic 'Cain and Abel' was showing. Above the trees an elaborate technicolored hoarding showed Cain, wearing what appeared to be a suit of Roman armor, wrestling with an immense hydraheaded boa constrictor.

Kandinski shrugged tolerantly. "If Michelangelo were working for MGM today would he produce anything better?"

Ward laughed. "You may well be right. Perhaps the House of the Medicis should be re-christened '16th Century-Fox.' "

Kandinski stood up and straightened the shelves. "I saw you here with Godfrey Cameron," he said over his shoulder. "You're working at the Observatory?"

"At the Hubble."

Kandinski came and sat down beside Ward. "Cameron is a good man. A very pleasant fellow."

"He thinks a great deal of you," Ward volunteered, realizing that Kandinski was probably short of friends.

"You mustn't believe everything that Cameron says about me," Kandinski said suddenly. He hesitated, apparently uncertain whether to confide further in Ward, and then took the magazine from him. "There are better ones here. You have to exercise some discrimination."

"It's not so much the sensationalism that puts me off," Ward explained, "as the psychological implications. Most of the themes in these stories come straight out of the more unpleasant reaches of the unconscious."

Kandinski glanced sharply at Ward, a trace of amusement in his eyes. "That sounds rather dubious and, if I may say so, second-hand. Take the best of these stories for what they are: imaginative exercises on the theme of tomorrow."

"You read a good deal of science fiction?" Ward asked.

Kandinski shook his head. "Never. Not since I was a child."

"I'm surprised," Ward said. "Professor Cameron told me you had written a science fiction novel."

"Not a novel," Kandinski corrected.

"I'd like to read it," Ward went on. "From what Cameron said it sounded fascinating, almost Swiftian in concept. This space-craft which arrives from Venus and the strange conversations the pilot holds with a philosopher he meets. A modern morality. Is that the subject?"

Kandinski watched Ward thoughtfully before replying. "Loosely, yes. But, as I said, the book is not a novel. It is a factual and literal report of a Venus landing which actually took place, a diary of the most significant encounter in history since Paul saw his vision of Christ on the road to Damascus." He lifted his huge bearded head and gazed at Ward without embarrassment. "As a matter of interest, as Professor Cameron probably explained to you, I was the man who witnessed the landing."

Still maintaining his pose, Ward frowned intently. "Well, in fact Cameron did say something of the sort, but I . . ."

"But you found it difficult to believe?" Kandinski suggested ironically.

"Just a little," Ward admitted. "Are you seriously claiming that you did see a Venusian space-craft?"

Kandinski nodded. "Exactly." Then, as if aware that

their conversation had reached a familiar turning, he suddenly seemed to lose interest in Ward. "Excuse me." He nodded politely to Ward, picked up a length of hose-pipe connected to a faucet and began to spray one of the big mobiles.

Puzzled but still skeptical, Ward sat back and watched him critically, then fished in his pockets for some change. "I must say I admire you for taking it all so calmly," he told Kandinski as he paid him.

"What makes you think I do?"

"Well, if I'd seen, let alone spoken to a visitor from Venus I think I'd be running around in a flat spin, notifying every government and observatory in the world."

"I did," Kandinski said. "As far as I could. No one was very interested."

Ward shook his head and laughed. "It is incredible, to put it mildly."

"I agree with you."

"What I mean," Ward said, "is that it's straight out of one of these science fiction stories of yours."

Kandinski rubbed his lips with a scarred knuckle, obviously searching for some means of ending the conversation. "The resemblance is misleading. They are not my stories," he added parenthetically. "This cafe is the only one which would give me work, for a perhaps obvious reason. As for the incredibility, let me say that I was and still am completely amazed. You may think I take it all calmly, but ever since the landing I have lived in a state of acute anxiety and foreboding. But short of committing some spectacular crime to draw attention to myself I don't see now how I can convince anyone."

Ward gestured with his glasses. "Perhaps. But I'm surprised you don't realize the very simple reasons why people refuse to take you seriously. For example, why should you be the only person to witness an event of such staggering implications? Why have *you* alone seen a Venusian?"

"A sheer accident."

"But why should a space craft from Venus land here?"

"What better place than near Mount Vernon Observatory?"

"I can think of any number. The UN Assembly, for one."

Kandinski smiled lightly. "Columbus didn't make his

first contacts with the North-American Indians at the Iroquois-Sioux Tribal Conference."

"That may be," Ward admitted, beginning to feel impatient. "What did this Venusian look like?"

Kandinski smiled wearily at the empty tables and picked up his hose again. "I don't know whether you've read my book," he said, "but if you haven't you'll find it all there."

"Professor Cameron mentioned that you took some photographs of the Venusian space-craft. Could I examine them?"

"Certainly," Kandinski replied promptly. "I'll bring them here tomorrow. You're welcome to test them in any way you wish."

That evening Ward had dinner with the Camerons. Professor Renthall, Director of the Hubble, and his wife completed the party. The table-talk consisted almost entirely of good-humored gossip about their colleagues retailed by Cameron and Renthall, and Ward was able to mention his conversation with Kandinski.

"At first I thought he was mad, but now I'm not so certain. There's something rather too subtle about him. The way he creates an impression of absolute integrity, but at the same time never gives you a chance to tackle him directly on any point of detail. And when you do manage to ask him outright about this Venusian his answers are far too pat. I'm convinced the whole thing is an elaborate hoax."

Professor Renthall shook his head. "No, it's no hoax. Don't you agree, Godfrey?"

Cameron nodded. "Not in Andrew's sense, anyway."

"But what other explanation is there?" Ward asked. "We know he hasn't seen a Venusian, so he must be a fraud. Unless you think he's a lunatic. And he certainly doesn't behave like one."

"What is a lunatic?" Professor Renthall asked rhetorically, peering into the facetted stem of his raised hock glass. "Merely a man with more understanding than he can contain. I think Charles belongs in that category."

"The definition doesn't explain him, sir," Ward insisted. "He's going to lend me his photographs and when I prove those are fakes I think I'll be able to get under his guard."

"Poor Charles," Edna Cameron said. "Why shouldn't he have seen a space ship? I think I see them every day."

"That's just what I feel, dear," Cameron said, patting his wife's matronly, brocaded shoulder. "Let Charles have

his Venusian if he wants to. Damn it, all it's trying to do is ban Project Apollo. An excellent idea, I have always maintained; only the professional astronomer has any business in space. After the Rainbow tests there isn't an astronomer anywhere in the world who wouldn't follow Charles Kandinski to the stake." He turned to Renthall. "By the way, I wonder what Charles is planning for the Congress? A Neptunian? Or perhaps a whole delegation from Proxima Centauri. We ought to fit him out with a space suit and a pavilion—'Charles Kandiniski—New Worlds for Old'."

"Santa Claus in a space-suit," Professor Renthall mused. "That's a new one. Send him a ticket."

The next weekend Ward returned the twelve plates to the Site Tycho.

"Well?" Kandinski asked.

"It's difficult to say," Ward answered. "They're all too heavily absorbed. They could be clever montages of light brackets and turbine blades. One of them looks like a close-up of a clutch plate. There's a significant lack of any really corroborative details, which you'd expect somewhere in so wide a selection." He paused. "On the other hand, they could be genuine."

Kandinski said nothing, took the paper package, and went off into the cafe.

The interior of the Site Tycho had been designed to represent the control room of a space-ship on the surface of the Moon. Hidden fluorescent lighting glimmered through plastic wall fascia and filled the room with an eerie blue glow. Behind the bar a large mural threw the curving outline of the Moon onto an illuminated starscape. The doors leading to the rest-rooms were circular and bulged outwards like air-locks, distinguished from each other by the symbols ♂ and ♀. The total effect was ingenious but somehow reminiscent to Ward of a twenty-fifth century cave.

He sat down at the bar and waited while Kandinski packed the plates away carefully in an old leather briefcase.

"I've read your book," Ward said. "I had looked at it the last time I saw you, but I read it again thoroughly." He waited for some comment upon this admission, but Kandinski went over to an old portable typewriter standing at the far end of the bar and began to type laboriously

with one finger. "Have you seen any more Venusians since the book was published?" Ward asked.

"None," Kandinski said.

"Do you think you will?"

"Perhaps." Kandinski shrugged and went on with his typing.

"What are you working on now?" Ward asked.

"A lecture I am giving on Friday evening," Kandinski said. Two keys locked together and he flicked them back. "Would you care to come? Eight-thirty, at the high school near the Baptist chapel."

"If I can," Ward said. He saw that Kandinski wanted to get rid of him. "Thanks for letting me see the plates." He made his way out into the sun. People were walking about through the fresh morning air, and he caught the clean scent of peach blossom carried down the slopes into the town.

Suddenly Ward felt how enclosed and insane it had been inside the Tycho, and how apposite had been his description of it as a cave, with its residential magician incanting over his photographs like a down-at-heel Merlin manipulating his set of runes. He felt annoyed with himself for becoming involved with Kandinski and allowing the potent charisma of his personality to confuse him. Obviously Kandinski played upon the instinctive sympathy for the outcast, his whole pose of integrity and conviction a device for drawing the gullible towards him.

Letting the light spray from the fountains fall across his face, Ward crossed the square towards his car.

Away in the distance 2,000 feet above, rising beyond a screen of fir trees, the three Mount Vernon domes shone together in the sun like a futuristic Taj Mahal.

Fifteen miles from Vernon Gardens the Santa Vera highway circled down from the foot of Mount Vernon into the first low scrub-covered hills which marked the southern edge of the desert. Ward looked out at the long banks of coarse sand stretching away through the haze, their outlines blurring in the afternoon heat. He glanced at the book lying on the seat beside him, open at the map printed between its end covers, and carefully checked his position, involuntarily slowing the speed of the Chevrolet as he moved nearer to the site of the Venus landings.

In the fortnight since he had returned the photographs to the Site Tycho, he had seen Kandinski only once, at

the lecture delivered the previous night. Ward had deliberately stayed away from the Site Tycho, but he had seen a poster advertising the lecture and driven down to the school despite himself.

The lecture was delivered in the gymnasium before an audience of forty or fifty people, most of them women, who formed one of the innumerable local astronomical societies. Listening to the talk around him, Ward gathered that their activities principally consisted of trying to identify more than half a dozen of the constellations. Kandinski had lectured to them on several occasions and the subject of this latest instalment was his researches into the significance of the Venusian tablet he had been analyzing for the last three years.

When Kandinski stepped onto the dais there was a brief round of applause. He was wearing a lounge suit of a curiously archaic cut and had washed his beard, which bushed out above his string tie so that he resembled a Mormon patriarch or the homespun saint of some fervent evangelical community.

For the benefit of any new members, he prefaced his lecture with a brief account of his meeting with the Venusian, and then turned to his analysis of the tablet. This was the familiar ultimatum warning mankind to abandon its preparations for the exploration of space, for the ostensible reason that, just as the sea was a universal image of the unconscious, so space was nothing less than an image of psychosis and death, and that if he tried to penetrate the interplanetary voids man would only plunge to earth like a demented Icarus, unable to scale the vastness of the cosmic zero. Kandinski's real motives for introducing this were all too apparent—the expected success of Project Apollo and subsequent landings on Mars and Venus would, if nothing else, conclusively expose his fantasies.

However, by the end of the lecture Ward found that his opinion of Kandinski had experienced a complete about face.

As a lecturer Kandinski was poor, losing words, speaking in a slow ponderous style and trapping himself in long subordinate clauses, but his quiet, matter-of-fact tone and absolute conviction in the importance of what he was saying, coupled with the nature of his material, held the talk together. His analysis of the Venusian cryptograms, a succession of intricate philological theorems, was well above the heads of his audience, but what began to impress

Ward, as much as the painstaking preparation which must have preceded the lecture, was Kandinski's acute nervousness in delivering it. Ward noticed that he suffered from an irritating speech impediment that made it difficult for him to pronounce 'Venusian', and he saw that Kandinski, far from basking in the limelight, was delivering the lecture only out of a deep sense of obligation to his audience and was greatly relieved when the ordeal was over.

At the end Kandinski had invited questions. These, with the exception of the chairman's, all concerned the landing of the alien space vehicle and ignored the real subject of the lecture. Kandinski answered them all carefully, taking in good part the inevitable facetious questions. Ward noted with interest the audience's curious ambivalence, simultaneously fascinated by and resentful of Kandinski's exposure of their own private fantasies, an expression of the same ambivalence which had propelled so many of the mana-personalities of history towards their inevitable Calvarys.

Just as the chairman was about to close the meeting, Ward stood up.

"Mr. Kandinski. You say that this Venusian indicated that there was also life on one of the moons of Uranus. Can you tell us how he did this, if there was no verbal communication between you?"

Kandinski showed no surprise at seeing Ward. "Certainly; as I told you, he drew eight concentric circles in the sand, one for each of the planets. Around Uranus he drew five lesser orbits and marked one of these. Then he pointed to himself and to me and to a patch of lichen. From this I deduced, reasonably I maintain, that—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Kandinski," Ward interrupted. "You say he drew five orbits around Uranus? One for each of the moons?"

Kandinski nodded. "Yes. Five."

"That was in 1960," Ward went on. "Three weeks ago Professor Pineau at Brussels discovered a sixth moon of Uranus."

The audience looked around at Ward and began to murmur.

"Why should this Venusian have omitted one of the moons?" Ward asked, his voice ringing across the gymnasium.

Kandinski frowned and peered at Ward suspiciously. "I didn't know there was a sixth moon . . ." he began.

"Exactly!" someone called out. The audience began to titter.

"I can understand the Venusian not wishing to introduce any difficulties," Ward said, "but this seems a curious way of doing it."

Kandinski appeared at a loss. Then he introduced Ward to the audience. "Dr. Ward is a professional while I am only an amateur," he admitted. "I am afraid I cannot explain the anomaly. Perhaps my memory is at fault. But I am sure the Venusian drew only five orbits." He stepped down from the dais and strode out hurriedly, scowling into his beard, pursued by a few derisory hoots from the audience.

It took Ward fifteen minutes to free himself from the knot of admiring, white-gloved spinsters who cornered him between two vaulting horses. When he broke away he ran out to his car and drove into Vernon Gardens, hoping to see Kandinski and apologize to him.

Five miles into the desert Ward approached a nexus of rock-cuttings and causeways which were part of an abandoned irrigation scheme. The colors of the hills were more vivid now, bright siliconic reds and yellows, crossed with sharp stabs of light from the exposed quartz veins. Following the map on the seat, he turned off the highway onto a rough track which ran along the bank of a dried-up canal. He passed a few rusting sections of picket fencing, a derelict grader half-submerged under the sand, and a collection of dilapidated metal shacks. The car bumped over the potholes at little more then ten miles an hour, throwing up clouds of hot ashy dust that swirled high into the air behind him.

Two miles along the canal the track came to an end. Ward stopped the car and waited for the dust to subside. Carrying Kandinski's book in front of him like a divining instrument, he set off on foot across the remaining three hundred yards. The contours around him were marked on the map, but the hills had shifted several hundred yards westwards since the book's publication and he found himself wandering about from one crest to another, peering into shallow depressions only as old as the last sand-storm. The entire landscape seemed haunted by strange currents and moods; the sand-swirls surging down the aisles of

dunes and the proximity of the horizon enclosed the whole place of stones with invisible walls.

Finally he found the ring of hills indicated and climbed a narrow saddle leading to its center. When he scaled the thirty-foot slope he stopped abruptly.

Down on his knees in the middle of the basin with his back to Ward, the studs of his boots flashing in the sunlight, was Kandinski. There was a clutter of tiny objects on the sand around him, and at first Ward thought he was at prayer, making his oblations to the tutelary deities of Venus. Then he saw that Kandinski was slowly scraping the surface of the ground with a small trowel. A circle about 20 yards in diameter had been marked off with pegs and string into a series of wedge-shaped allotments. Every few seconds Kandinski carefully decanted a small heap of grit into one of the test-tubes mounted in a wooden rack in front of him.

Ward put away the book and walked down the slope. Kandinski looked around and then climbed to his feet. The coating of red ash on his beard gave him a fiery, prophetic look. He recognized Ward and raised the trowel in greeting.

Ward stopped at the edge of the string perimeter. "What on earth are you doing?"

"I am collecting soil specimens." Kandinski bent down and corked one of the tubes. He looked tired but worked away steadily.

Ward watched him finish a row. "It's going to take you a long time to cover the whole area. I thought there weren't any gaps left in the Periodic Table."

"The space-craft rotated at speed before it rose into the air. This surface is abrasive enough to have scratched off a few minute filings. With luck I may find one of them." Kandinski smiled thinly. "262. Venusium, I hope."

Ward started to say: "But the transuranic elements decay spontaneously . . ." and then walked over to the center of the circle, where there was a round indentation, three feet deep and five across. The inner surface was glazed and smooth. It was shaped like an inverted cone and looked as if it had been caused by the boss of an enormous spinning top. "This is where the space-craft landed?"

Kandinski nodded. He filled the last tube and then stowed the rack away in a canvas satchel. He came over

to Ward and stared down at the hole. "What does it look like to you? A meteor impact? Or an oil drill, perhaps?" A smile showed behind his dusty beard. "The F-109's at the Air Force Weapons School begin their target runs across here. It might have been caused by a rogue cannon shell."

Ward stooped down and felt the surface of the pit, running his fingers thoughtfully over the warm fused silica. "More like a 500-pound bomb. But the cone is geometrically perfect. It's certainly unusual."

"Unusual?" Kandinski chuckled to himself and picked up the satchel.

"Has anyone else been out here?" Ward asked as they trudged up the slope.

"Two so-called experts." Kandinski slapped the sand off his knees. "A geologist from Gulf-Vacuum and an Air Force ballistics officer. You'll be glad to hear that they both thought I had dug the pit myself and then fused the surface with an acetylene torch." He peered critically at Ward. "Why did you come out here today?"

"Idle curiosity," Ward said. "I had an afternoon off and I felt like a drive."

They reached the crest of the hill and he stopped and looked down into the basin. The lines of string split the circle into a strange horological device, a huge zodiacal mandala, the dark patches in the arcs Kandinski had been working telling its stations.

"You were going to tell me why you came out here," Kandinski said as they walked back to the car.

Ward shrugged. "I suppose I wanted to prove something to myself. There's a problem of reconciliation. He hesitated, and then began: "You see, there are some things which are self-evidently false. The laws of common sense and every day experience refute them. I know a lot of the evidence for many things we believe is pretty thin, but I don't have to embark on a theory of knowledge to decide that the Moon isn't made of green cheese."

"Well?" Kandinski shifted the satchel to his other shoulder.

"This Venusian you've seen," Ward said. "The landing, the runic tablet. I can't believe them. Every piece of evidence I've seen, all the circumstantial details, the facts given in this book . . . they're all patently false." He turned to one of the middle chapters. "Take this at random

—'A phosphorescent green fluid pulsed through the dorsal lung-chamber of the Prime's helmet, inflating two opaque fan-like gills . . .'" Ward closed the book and shrugged helplessly. Kandinski stood a few feet away from him, the sunlight breaking across the deep lines of his face.

"Now I know what you say to my objections," Ward went on. "If you told a 19th century chemist that lead could be transmuted into gold he would have dismissed you as a mediaevalist. But the point is that he'd have been right to do so—."

"I understand," Kandinski interrupted. "But you still haven't explained why you came out here today."

Ward stared out over the desert. High above, a stratojet was doing cuban eights into the sun, the spiral vapor trails drifting across the sky like gigantic fragments of an apocalyptic message. Looking around, he realized that Kandinski must have walked from the bus-stop on the highway. "I'll give you a lift back," he said.

As they drove along the canal he turned to Kandinski. "I enjoyed your lecture last night. I apologize for trying to make you look a fool."

Kandinski was loosening his boot-straps. He laughed unreproachfully. "You put me in an awkward position. I could hardly have challenged you. I can't afford to subscribe to every astronomical journal. Though a sixth moon would have been big news." As they neared Vernon Gardens he asked: "Would you like to come in and look at the tablet analysis?"

Ward made no reply to the invitation. He drove around the square and parked under the trees, then looked up at the fountains, tapping his fingers on the wind-shield. Kandinski sat beside him, cogitating into his beard.

Ward watched him carefully. "Do you think this Venusian will return?"

Kandinski nodded. "Yes. I am sure he will."

Later they sat together at a broad roll-top desk in the room above the Tycho. Around the wall hung white cardboard screens packed with lines of cuneiform glyphics and Kandinski's progressive breakdown of their meaning.

Ward held an enlargement of the original photograph of the Venusian tablet and listened to Kandinski's explanation.

"As you see from this," Kandinski explained, "in all

probability there are not millions of Venusians, as everyone would expect, but only three or four of them altogether. Two are circling Venus, a third Uranus and possibly a fourth is in orbit around Neptune. This solves the difficulty that puzzled you and antagonizes everyone else. Why should the Prime have approached only one person out of several hundred million and selected him on a completely random basis? Now obviously he had seen the Russian and American satellite capsules and assumed that our race, like his own, numbered no more than three or four, then concluded from the atmospheric H-bomb tests that we were in conflict and would soon destroy ourselves. This is one of the reasons why I think he will return shortly and why it is important to organize a world-wide reception for him on a governmental level."

"Wait a minute," Ward said. "He must have known that the population of this planet numbered more than three or four. Even the weakest telescope would demonstrate that."

"Of course, but he would naturally assume that the millions of inhabitants of the Earth belonged to an aboriginal sub-species, perhaps employed as work animals. After all, if he observed that despite this planet's immense resources the bulk of its population lived like animals, an alien visitor could only decide that they were considered as such."

"But space vehicles are supposed to have been observing us since the Babylonian era, long before the development of satellite rockets. There have been thousands of recorded sightings."

Kandinski shook his head. "None of them has been authenticated."

"What about the other landings that have been reported recently?" Ward asked. "Any number of people have seen Venusians and Martians."

"Have they?" Kandinski asked sceptically. "I wish I could believe that. Some of the encounters reveal marvelous powers of invention, but no one can accept them as anything but fantasy."

"The same criticism has been levelled at your spacecraft," Ward reminded him.

Kandinski seemed to lose patience. "I *saw* it," he exclaimed, impotently tossing his notebook onto the desk. "I *spoke* to the Prime!"

Ward nodded non-committally and picked up the

photograph again. Kandinski stepped over to him and took it out of his hands. "Ward," he said carefully. "Believe me. You must. You know I am too big a man to waste myself on a senseless charade." His massive hands squeezed Ward's shoulders and almost lifted him off the seat. *"Believe* me. Together we can be ready for the next landings and alert the world. I am only Charles Kandinski, a waiter at a third-rate cafe, but you are Dr. Andrew Ward of Mount Vernon Observatory. They will listen to you. Try to realize what this may mean for mankind."

Ward pulled himself away from Kandinski and rubbed his shoulders.

"Ward, do you believe me? Ask yourself."

Ward looked up pensively at Kandinski towering over him, his red beard like the burning, unconsumed bush.

"I think so," he said quietly. "Yes, I do."

A week later the 23rd Congress of the International Geophysical Association opened at Mount Vernon Observatory. At 3-30 p.m., in the Hoyle Library amphitheatre, Professor Renthall was to deliver the inaugural address welcoming the 92 delegates and 25 newspaper and agency reporters to the fortnight's program of lectures and discussions.

Shortly after 11 o'clock that morning Ward and Professor Cameron completed their final arrangements and escaped down to Vernon Gardens for an hour's relaxation.

"Well," Cameron said as they walked over to the Site Tycho, "I've got a pretty good idea of what it must be like to run the Waldorf-Astoria." They picked one of the sidewalk tables and sat down. "I haven't been here for weeks," Cameron said. "How are you getting on with the Man in the Moon?"

"Kandinski? I hardly ever see him," Ward said.

"I was talking to the Time Magazine stringer about Charles," Cameron said, cleaning his sunglasses. "He thought he might do a piece about him."

"Hasn't Kandinski suffered enough of that sort of thing?" Ward asked moodily.

"Perhaps he has," Cameron agreed. "Is he still working on his crossword puzzle? The tablet thing, whatever he calls it."

Casually, Ward said: "He has a theory that it should be possible to see the lunar bases. Refuelling points established there by the Venusians over the centuries."

"Interesting," Cameron commented.

"They're sited near Copernicus," Ward went on. "I know Vandone at Milan is mapping Archimedes and the Imbrium. I thought I might mention it to him at his semester tomorrow."

Professor Cameron took off his glasses and gazed quizzically at Ward. "My dear Andrew, what has been going on? Don't tell me you've become one of Charles' converts?"

Ward laughed and shook his head. "Of course not. Obviously there are no lunar bases or alien space craft. I don't for a moment believe a word Kandinski says." He gestured helplessly. "At the same time I admit I have become involved with him. There's something about Kandinski's personality. On the one hand I can't take him seriously—"

"Oh, I take him seriously," Cameron cut in smoothly. "Very seriously indeed, if not quite in the sense you mean." Cameron turned his back on the sidewalk crowds. "Jung's views on flying saucers are very illuminating, Andrew; they'd help you to understand Kandinski. Jung believes that civilization now stands at the conclusion of a Platonic Great Year, at the eclipse of the sign of Pisces which has dominated the Christian epoch, and that we are entering the sign of Aquarius, a period of confusion and psychic chaos. He remarks that throughout history, at all times of uncertainty and discord, cosmic space vehicles have been seen approaching Earth, and that in a few extreme cases actual meetings with their occupants are supposed to have taken place."

As Cameron paused, Ward glanced across the tables for Kandinski, but a relief waiter served them and he assumed it was Kandinski's day off.

Cameron continued: "Most people regard Charles Kandinski as a lunatic, but as a matter of fact he is performing one of the most important roles in the world today, the role of a prophet alerting people to this coming crisis. The real significance of his fantasies, like that of the ban-the-bomb movements, is to be found elsewhere than on the conscious plane, as an expression of the immense psychic forces stirring below the surface of rational life, like the isotactic movements of the continental tables which heralded the major geological transformations."

Ward shook his head dubiously. "I can accept that a

man such as Freud was a prophet, but Charles Kandinski—?"

"Certainly. Far more than Freud. It's unfortunate for Kandinski, and for the writers of science fiction for that matter, that they have to perform their task of describing the symbols of transformation in a so-called rationalist society, where a scientific, or at least a pseudo-scientific explanation is required *a priori*. And because the true prophet never deals in what may be rationally deduced, people such as Charles are ignored or derided today."

"It's interesting that Kandinski compared his meeting with the Venusian with Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus," Ward said.

"He was quite right. In both encounters you see the same mechanism of blinding unconscious revelation. And you can see too that Charles feels the same overwhelming need to spread the Pauline revelation to the world. The Anti-Apollo movement is only now getting under way, but within the next decade it will recruit millions, and men such as Charles Kandinski will be the fathers of its apocalypse."

"You make him sound like a titanic figure," Ward remarked quietly. "I think he's just a lonely, tired man obsessed by something he can't understand. Perhaps he simply needs a few friends to confide in."

Slowly shaking his head, Cameron tapped the table with his glasses. "Be warned, Andrew, you'll burn your fingers if you play with Charles' brand of fire. The mana-personalities of history have no time for personal loyalties —the founder of the Christian church made that pretty plain."

Shortly after seven o'clock that evening Charles Kandinski mounted his bicycle and set off out of Vernon Gardens. The small room in the seedy area where he lived always depressed him on his free days from the Tycho, and as he pedalled along he ignored the shouts from his neighbors sitting out on their balconies with their crates of beer. He knew that his beard and the high, ancient bicycle with its capacious wicker basket made him a grotesque, Quixotic figure, but he felt too pre-occupied to care. That morning he had heard that the French translation of 'The Landings from Outer Space', printed at his own cost, had been completely ignored by the Paris press. In addition a jobbing printer in Santa Vera was pressing him for pay-

ment for 5,000 anti-Apollo leaflets that had been distributed the previous year.

Above all had come the news on the radio that the target date of the first manned Moon-flight had been advanced to 1965, and on the following day would take place the latest and most ambitious of the instrumented lunar flights. The anticipated budget for the Apollo program (in a moment of grim humor he had calculated that it would pay for the printing of some 1000 billion leaflets) seemed to double each year, but so far he had found little success in his attempt to alert people to the folly of venturing into space. All that day he had felt sick with frustration and anger.

At the end of the avenue he turned onto the highway which served the asparagus farms lying in the 20-mile strip between Vernon Gardens and the desert. It was a hot empty evening and few cars or trucks passed him. On either side of the road the great lemon-green terraces of asparagus lay seeping in their moist paddy beds, and occasionally a marsh-hen clacked overhead and dived out of sight.

Five miles along the road he reached the last farmhouse above the edge of the desert. He cycled on to where the road ended 200 yards ahead, dismounted and left the bicycle in a culvert. Slinging his camera over one shoulder, he walked off across the hard ground into the mouth of a small valley.

The boundary between the desert and the farm-strip was irregular. On his left, beyond the rocky slopes, he could hear a motor-reaper purring down one of the mile-long spits of fertile land running into the desert, but the barren terrain and the sense of isolation began to relax him and he forgot the irritations that had plagued him all day.

A keen naturalist, he saw a long-necked sand-crane perched on a spur of shale fifty feet from him and stopped and raised his camera. Peering through the finder he noticed that the light had faded too deeply for a photograph. Curiously, the sand-crane was clearly silhouetted against a circular glow of light which emanated from beyond a low ridge at the end of the valley. This apparently sourceless corona fitfully illuminated the darkening air, as if coming from a lighted mineshaft.

Putting away his camera, Kandinski walked forward, within a few minutes reached the ridge, and began to

climb it. The face sloped steeply, and he pulled himself up by the hefts of brush and scrub, kicking away footholds in the rocky surface.

Just before he reached the crest he felt his heart surge painfully with the exertion, and he lay still for a moment, a sudden feeling of dizziness spinning in his head. He waited until the spasm subsided, shivering faintly in the cool air, an unfamiliar undertone of uneasiness in his mind. The air seemed to vibrate strangely with an intense inaudible music that pressed upon his temples. Rubbing his forehead, he lifted himself over the crest.

The ridge he had climbed was U-shaped and about 200 feet across, its open end away from him. Resting on the sandy floor in its center was an enormous metal disc, over 100 feet in diameter and 30 feet high. It seemed to be balanced on a huge conical boss, half of which had already sunk into the sand. A fluted rim ran around the edge of the disc and separated the upper and lower curvatures, which were revolving rapidly in opposite directions, throwing off magnificent flashes of silver light.

Kandinski lay still, as his first feelings of fear retreated and his courage and presence of mind returned. The inaudible piercing music had faded, and his mind felt brilliantly clear. His eyes ran rapidly over the space-ship, and he estimated that it was over twice the size of the craft he had seen three years earlier. There were no markings or ports on the carapace, but he was certain it had not come from Venus.

Kandinski lay watching the space-craft for ten minutes, trying to decide upon his best course of action. Unfortunately he had smashed the lens of his camera. Finally, pushing himself backwards, he slid slowly down the slope. When he reached the floor he could still hear the whine of the rotors. Hiding in the pools of shadow, he made his way up the valley, and two hundred yards from the ridge he broke into a run.

He returned the way he had come, his great legs carrying him across the ruts and boulders, seized his bicycle from the culvert and pedalled rapidly towards the farmhouse.

A single light shone in an upstairs room and he pressed one hand to the bell and pounded on the screen door with the other, nearly tearing it from its hinges. Eventually a young woman appeared. She came down the stairs

reluctantly, uncertain what to make of Kandinski's beard and ragged, dusty clothes.

"Telephone!" Kandinski bellowed at her, gasping wildly as he caught back his breath.

The girl at last unlatched the door and backed away from him nervously. Kandinski lurched past her and staggered blindly around the darkened hall. "Where is it?" he roared.

The girl switched on the lights and pointed into the sitting room. Kandinski pushed past her and rushed over to it.

Ward played with his brandy glass and discreetly loosened the collar of his dress shirt, listening to Dr. MacIntyre of Greenwich Observatory, four seats away on his right, make the third of the after-dinner speeches. Ward was to speak next, and he ran through the opening phrases of his speech, glancing down occasionally to con his notes. At 34 he was the youngest member to address the Congress banquet, and by no means unimpressed by the honor. He looked at the venerable figures to his left and right at the top table, their black jackets and white shirt fronts reflected in the table silver, and saw Professor Cameron wink at him reassuringly.

He was going through his notes for the last time when a steward bent over his shoulder. "Telephone for you, Dr. Ward."

"I can't take it now," Ward whispered. "Tell them to call later."

"The caller said it was extremely urgent, Doctor. Something about some people from the Neptune arriving."

"The Neptune?"

"I think that's a hotel in Santa Vera. Maybe the Russian delegates have turned up after all."

Ward pushed his chair back, made his apologies and slipped away.

Professor Cameron was waiting in the alcove outside the banquetting hall when Ward stepped out of the booth. "Anything the trouble, Andrew? It's not your father, I hope—"

"It's Kandinski," Ward said hurriedly. "He's out in the desert, near the farm-strip. He says he's seen another space vehicle."

"Oh, is that all." Cameron shook his head. "Come on, we'd better get back. The poor fool!"

"Hold on," Ward said. "He's got it under observation now. It's on the ground. He told me to call General Wayne at the air base and alert the Strategic Air Command." Ward chewed his lip. "I don't know what to do."

Cameron took him by the arm. "Andrew, come on. MacIntyre's winding up."

"What can we do, though?" Ward asked. "He seemed all right, but then he said that he thought they were hostile. That sounds a little sinister."

"Andrew!" Cameron snapped. "What's the matter with you? Leave Kandinski to himself. You can't go now. It would be unpardonable rudeness."

"I've got to help Kandinski," Ward insisted. "I'm sure he needs it this time." He wrenched himself away from Cameron.

"Ward!" Professor Cameron called. "For God's sake, come back!" He followed Ward out onto the balcony and watched him run down the steps and disappear across the lawn into the darkness.

As the wheels of the car thudded over the deep ruts, Ward cut the headlights and searched the dark hills which marked the desert's edge. The warm glitter of Vernon Gardens lay behind him and only a few isolated lights shone in the darkness on either side of the road. He passed the farmhouse from which he assumed Kandinski had telephoned, then drove on slowly until he saw the bicycle Kandinski had left for him.

It took him several minutes to mount the huge machine, his feet well clear of the pedals for most of their stroke. Laboriously he covered a hundred yards, and after careening helplessly into a clump of scrub was forced to dismount and continue on foot.

Kandinski had told him that the ridge was about a mile up the valley. It was almost night and the starlight reflected off the hills lit the valley with fleeting, vivid colors. He ran on heavily, the only sounds he could hear those of a thresher rattling like a giant metal insect half a mile behind him. Filling his lungs, he pushed on across the last hundred yards.

Kandinski was still lying on the edge of the ridge, watching the space-ship and waiting impatiently for Ward. Below him in the hollow the upper and lower rotor sections swung around more slowly, at about one revolution per

second. The space-ship had sunk a further ten feet into the desert floor and he was now on the same level as the observation dome. A single finger of light poked out into the darkness, circling the ridge walls in jerky sweeps.

Then out of the valley behind him he saw someone stumbling along towards the ridge at a broken run. Suddenly a feeling of triumph and exhilaration came over him, and he knew that at last he had his witness.

Ward climbed up the slope to where he could see Kandinski. Twice he lost his grip and slithered downwards helplessly, tearing his hands on the gritty surface. Kandinski was lying flat on his chest, his head just above the ridge. Covered by dust, he was barely distinguishable from the slope itself.

"Are you all right?" Ward whispered. He pulled off his bow tie and ripped open his collar. When he had controlled his breathing he crawled up besides Kandinski.

"Where?" he asked.

Kandinski pointed down into the hollow.

Ward raised his head, levering himself up on his elbows. For a few seconds he peered out into the darkness, and then drew his head back.

"You see it?" Kandinski whispered. His voice was short and labored. When Ward hesitated before replying he suddenly seized Ward's wrist in a vice-like grip. In the faint light reflected by the white dust on the ridge Ward could see plainly his bright inflamed eyes.

"Ward! Can you see it?"

Ward nodded. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I see it."

The powerful fingers remained clamped to his wrist as he lay beside Kandinski and gazed down into the darkness.

Below the compartment window one of Ward's fellow passengers was being seen off by a group of friends, and the young women in bright hats and bandanas and the men in slacks and beach sandals made him feel that he was leaving a sea-side resort at the end of a holiday. From the window he could see the observatory domes of Mount Vernon rising out of the trees, and he identified the white brick-work of the Hoyle Library a thousand feet below the summit. Edna Cameron had brought him to the station, but he had asked her not to come onto the platform, and she had said goodbye and driven off. Cameron him-

self he had seen only once, when he had collected his books from the Institute.

Trying to forget it all, Ward noted thankfully that the train would leave within five minutes. He took his bankbook out of his wallet and counted the last week's withdrawals. He winced at the largest item, 600 dollars which he had transferred to Kandinski's account to pay for the cablegrams.

Deciding to buy something to read, he left the car and walked back to the newsstand. Several of the magazines contained what could only be described as discouraging articles about himself, and he chose two or three newspapers.

Just then someone put a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw Kandinski.

"Are you leaving?" Kandinski asked quietly. He had trimmed his beard so that only a pale vestige of the original bloom remained, revealing his high bony cheekbones. His face seemed almost fifteen years younger, thinner and more drawn, but at the same time composed, like that of a man recovering slowly from the attack of some intermittent fever.

"I'm sorry, Charles," Ward said as they walked back to the car. "I should have said goodbye to you but I thought I'd better not."

Kandinski's expression was subdued but puzzled. "Why?" he asked. "I don't understand."

Ward shrugged. "I'm afraid everything here has more or less come to an end for me, Charles. I'm going back to Princeton until the spring. Freshman physics." He smiled ruefully at himself. "Boyle's Law, Young's Modulus, getting right back to fundamentals. Not a bad idea, perhaps."

"But why are you leaving?" Kandinski pressed.

"Well, Cameron thought it might be tactful of me to leave. After our statement to the Secretary-General was published in *The New York Times* I became very much *persona non grata* at the Hubble. The trustees were on Professor Renthall again this morning."

Kandinski smiled and seemed relieved. "What does the Hubble matter?" he scoffed. "We have more important work to do. You know, Ward, when Mrs. Cameron told me just now that you were leaving I couldn't believe it."

"I'm sorry, Charles, but it's true."

"Ward," Kandinski insisted. "You can't leave. The

Primes will be returning soon. We must prepare for them."

"I know, Charles, and I wish I could stay." They reached the car and Ward put his hand out. "Thanks for coming to see me off."

Kandinski held his hand tightly. "Andrew, tell me the truth. Are you afraid of what people will think of you? Is that why you want to leave? Haven't you enough courage and faith in yourself?"

"Perhaps that's it," Ward conceded, wishing the train would start. He reached for the rail and began to climb into the car but Kandinski held him.

"Ward, you can't drop your responsibilities like this!"

"Please, Charles," Ward said, feeling his temper rising. He pulled his hand away but Kandinski seized him by the shoulder and almost dragged him off the car.

Ward wrenched himself away. "Leave me alone!" he snapped fiercely. "I saw your space-ship, didn't I?"

Kandinski watched him go, a hand picking at his vanished beard, completely perplexed.

Whistles sounded, and the train began to edge forward.

"Goodbye, Charles," Ward called down. "Let me know if you see anything else."

He went into the car and took his seat. Only when the train was twenty miles from Mount Vernon did he look out of the window.

MINUS ONE

"WHERE, MY GOD, *where* is he?"

Uttered in a tone of uncontrollable anger and frustration as he paced up and down in front of the high-gabled window behind his desk, this *cri de coeur* of Dr. Mellinger, Director of Green Hill Asylum, expressed the consternation of his entire staff at the mysterious disappearance of one of their patients. In the twelve hours which had elapsed since the escape, Dr. Mellinger and his subordinates had rapidly progressed from surprise and annoyance to acute exasperation, and eventually to a mood of almost euphoric bewilderment and disbelief. To add insult to injury, not only had the patient, James Hinton, succeeded in becoming the first ever to escape from the asylum, but he had managed to do so without leaving any clues as to his route. Thus

Dr. Mellinger and his staff were tantalised by the infuriating possibility that Hinton had never escaped at all and was still safely within the confines of the asylum. At all events, everyone agreed that if Hinton *had* escaped, he had literally vanished into thin air.

However, one small consolation, Dr. Mellinger reminded himself as he drummed his fingers irritably on his desk, was that Hinton's disappearance had exposed the appalling shortcomings of the asylum's security systems, and administered a salutary jolt to his heads of departments. As this hapless group, led by the Deputy Director, Dr. Normand, filed into his office for the first of the morning's action conferences, Dr. Mellinger cast a baleful glare at each in turn, but their sleepless faces remained mutely lowered to the rich carpeting, as if, despairing of finding Hinton anywhere else, they now sought his hiding place in its deep ruby pile.

At least, Dr. Mellinger reflected, only one patient had disappeared, a negative sentiment which assumed greater meaning in view of the outcry which would be raised from the world outside when it was discovered that a patient—obviously a homicidal lunatic—had remained at large for over twelve hours before the police were notified.

This decision not to inform the civil authorities, an error of judgment whose culpability seemed to mount as the hours passed, alone prevented Dr. Mellinger from finding an immediate scapegoat—a convenient one would have been little Dr. Mendelsohn of the Pathology Department, an unimportant branch of the asylum—and sacrificing him on the altar of his own indiscretion. His natural caution, and reluctance to yield an inch of ground unless compelled had prevented Dr. Mellinger from raising the general alarm during the first hours after Hinton's disappearance, when some doubt still remained whether the latter had actually left the asylum. Although the failure to find Hinton might have been interpreted as a reasonable indication that he had successfully escaped, Dr. Mellinger had characteristically refused to accept such faulty logic.

By now, over twelve hours later, his miscalculation had become increasingly apparent. As the thin smirk on Dr. Normand's bland face revealed, and as his other subordinates would soon realise, his directorship of the asylum was now at stake. Unless they found Hinton within a few

hours he would be placed in an untenable position before both the civil authorities and the trustees.

However, Dr. Mellinger reminded himself, it was not without the exercise of considerable guile and resource that he had become Director of Green Hill in the first place.

"Where *is* he?"

Shifting his emphasis from the first of these interrogatories to the second, as if to illustrate that the fruitless search for Hinton had been superceded by an examination of his total existential role in the unhappy farce of which he was the author and principal star, Dr. Mellinger turned upon his three breakfastless subordinates.

"Well, have you found him? Don't sit there dozing, gentlemen! You may have had a sleepless night, but I have still to wake from the nightmare." With this humourless shaft, Dr. Mellinger flashed a mordant eye into the rhododendron-lined drive, as if hoping to catch a sudden glimpse of the vanished patient. "Dr. Redpath, your report, please."

"The search is still continuing, Director," Dr. Redpath, the registrar of the asylum, who was nominally in charge of security, replied dispiritedly. "We have examined the entire grounds, dormitory blocks, garages and outbuildings—even the patients are taking part—but every trace of Hinton has vanished. Reluctantly I am afraid there is no alternative but to inform the police."

"Nonsense." Dr. Mellinger took his seat behind the desk, arms outspread and eyes roving the bare top for a minuscule replica of the vanished patient. "Don't be disheartened by your inability to discover him, Doctor. Until the search is complete we would be wasting the police's time to ask for their help."

"Of course, Director," Dr. Normand rejoined smoothly, a serpentine smile on his lips, "but on the other hand, as we have now proved that the missing patient is not within the boundaries of Green Hill, we can conclude, ergo, that he is outside them. In such an event is it perhaps rather a case of *we* helping the police?"

"Not at all, my dear Normand," Dr. Mellinger replied pleasantly. As he mentally elaborated his answer, he realised that he had never trusted or liked his deputy; given the first opportunity he would replace him, most conveniently with Redpath, whose blunders in the 'Hinton

affair,' as it could be designated, would place him forever squarely below the Director's thumb. "If there were ample evidence of the means by which Hinton made his escape —knotted sheets, footprints in the flower-beds and the like—we could safely assume that he was no longer within these walls. But no such evidence has been found. For all we know—in fact, everything points inescapably to this conclusion—the patient is still within the confines of Green Hill, indeed by rights still within his cell. The bars on the window were not cut, and the only way out was through the door, the keys to which remained in the possession of Dr. Booth"—he indicated the third member of the trio, a slim young man with a worried expression—"throughout the period between the last contact with Hinton and the discovery of his disappearance. Dr. Booth, as the physician actually responsible for Hinton, you are quite certain you were the last person to visit him?"

Dr. Booth nodded reluctantly. His celebrity at having discovered Hinton's escape had long since turned sour. "At seven o'clock, sir, during my evening round. But the last person to *see* Hinton was the duty nurse half an hour later. However, as no treatment had been prescribed—the patient had been admitted for observation—the door was not unlocked. Shortly after nine o'clock I decided to visit the patient—"

"Why?" Dr. Mellinger placed the tips of his fingers together and constructed a cathedral spire and nave. "This is one of the strangest aspects of the case, Doctor. Why should you have chosen, almost an hour and a half later, to leave your comfortable office on the ground floor and climb three long flights of stairs merely to carry out a cursory inspection which could best be left to the duty staff? Your motives puzzle me, Doctor."

"But, Director—!" Dr. Booth was almost on his feet. "Surely you don't suspect me of colluding in Hinton's escape? I assure you—"

"Doctor, please." Dr. Mellinger raised a smooth white hand. "Nothing could be further from my mind. Perhaps I should have said: your *unconscious* motives."

Again the unfortunate Booth protested: "Director, I insist there were no unconscious motives. I admit I can't remember precisely what prompted me to see Hinton, but

it was some perfectly trivial reason. I hardly knew the patient."

Dr. Mellinger bent forwards across his desk. "That is exactly what I meant, Doctor. To be precise, you did not know Hinton at all." Dr. Mellinger gazed at the distorted reflection of himself in the silver ink-stand. "Tell me, Dr. Booth, how would you describe Hinton's appearance?"

Booth hesitated. "Well, he was of . medium height, if I remember, with . . . yes, brown hair and a pale complexion. His eyes were—I should have to refresh my memory from the file, Director."

Dr. Mellinger nodded. He turned to Redpath. "Could you describe him, Doctor?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. I never saw the patient." He gestured to the Deputy Director. "I believe Dr. Normand interviewed him on admission."

With an effort Dr. Normand cast into his memory. "It was probably my assistant. If I remember, he was a man of average build with no distinguishing features. Neither short, nor tall. Stocky, one might say." He pursed his lips. "Yes. Or rather, no. I'm certain it was my assistant."

"How interesting." Dr. Mellinger had visibly revived, the gleams of ironic humour which flashed from his eyes revealed some potent inner transformation, the burden of irritations and frustrations which had plagued him for the past day seemed to have been lifted. "Does this mean, Dr. Normand, that this entire institution has been mobilised in a search for a man whom no one here could recognise even if they found him? You surprise me, my dear Normand. I was under the impression that you were a man of cool, analytical intelligence, but in your search for Hinton you are obviously employing more arcane powers."

"But, Director, I protest! I cannot be expected to memorise the face of every patient—"

"Enough, enough!" Dr. Mellinger stood up with an imperious flourish, and resumed his circuit of the carpet. "This is all very disturbing. Obviously the whole relationship between Green Hill and its patients must be re-examined. Our patients are not faceless ciphers, gentlemen, but the possessors of unique and vital identities. If we regard them as nonentities and fail to invest them with any personal characteristics, is it surprising that they should seem to disappear? I suggest that we put aside the next few weeks and dedicate them to a careful re-appraisal.

Let us look into our consciences, and scrutinise all those facile assumptions we make so readily." Impelled by this vision, Dr. Mellinger stepped into the light pouring through the window, as if to expose himself to this new revelation. "Yes, this is the task which lies before us now; from its successful conclusion will emerge a new Green Hill, a Green Hill without shadows and conspiracies, where patients and physicians stand before each other in mutual trust and responsibility."

A pregnant silence fell at the conclusion of this homily. At last Dr. Redpath cleared his throat, reluctant to disturb Dr. Mellinger's sublime communion with himself. "And Hinton, sir?"

"Hinton? Ah, yes." Dr. Mellinger turned to face them, like a bishop about to bless his congregation. "Let us see Hinton as an illustration of this process of self-examination, a focus of our re-appraisal."

"So the search should continue, sir?" Redpath pressed.

"Of course." For a moment Dr. Mellinger's attention wandered. "Yes, we must find Hinton. He is here somewhere; his essence pervades Green Hill, a vast metaphysical conundrum. Solve it, gentlemen, and you will have solved the mystery of his disappearance!"

For the next hour Dr. Mellinger paced the carpet alone, now and then warming his hands at the low fire below the mantelpiece. Its few flames entwined fleetingly in the chimney like the ideas gently playing around the periphery of his mind. At last, he felt, a means of breaking through the impasse had offered itself. He had always been certain that Hinton's miraculous disappearance represented more than a simple problem of breached security, and was a symbol of something grievously at fault with the very foundations of Green Hill.

Pursuing these thoughts, Dr. Mellinger left his office and made his way down to the floor below which housed the administrative department. The floor was deserted; the entire staff of the building was taking part in the search. Occasionally the querulous cries of the patients demanding their breakfasts drifted across the warm, insulated air. Fortunately the walls were thick, and the rates charged by the asylum high enough to obviate the need for overcrowding.

Green Hill Asylum (motto, and principal attraction: 'There is a Green Hill Far, Far Away') was one of those

institutions which are patronised by the wealthier members of the community and in effect serve the role of private prisons. In such places are confined all those miscreant or unfortunate relatives whose presence would otherwise be a burden or embarrassment: the importunate widows of black-sheep sons, senile maiden aunts, elderly bachelor cousins paying the price for their romantic indiscretions—in short, all those abandoned casualties of the army of privilege. As far as the patrons of Green Hill were concerned, maximum security came first, treatment, if given at all, a bad second. Dr. Mellinger's patients had disappeared conveniently from the world, and as long as they remained in this distant limbo those who paid the bills were satisfied. All this made Hinton's escape particularly dangerous.

Stepping through the open doorway of Normand's office, Dr. Mellinger ran his eye cursorily around the room. On the desk, hastily opened, was a slim file containing a few documents and a photograph.

For a brief moment Dr. Mellinger gazed abstractedly at the file. Then, after a discreet glance into the corridor, he slipped it under his arm and retraced his steps up the empty staircase.

Outside, muted by the dark groves of rhododendrons, the sounds of search and pursuit echoed across the grounds. Opening the file on his desk, Dr. Mellinger stared at the photograph, which happened to be lying upside down. Without straightening it, he studied the amorphous features. The nose was straight, the forehead and cheeks symmetrical, the ears a little oversize, but in its inverted position the face lacked any cohesive identity and remained a collection of disparate parts.

Suddenly, as he started to read the file, Dr. Mellinger was filled with a deep sense of resentment. The entire subject of Hinton and the man's precarious claims to reality overwhelmed him with a profound nausea. He refused to accept that this mindless cripple with his anonymous features could have been responsible for the confusion and anxiety of the previous day. Was it possible that these few pieces of paper constituted this meagre individual's full claim to reality?

Flinching slightly from the touch of the file to his fingers, Dr. Mellinger carried it across to the fire-place. Averting

his face, he listened with a deepening sense of relief as the flames flared briefly and subsided.

"My dear Booth! Do come in. It's good of you to spare the time." With this warm greeting Dr. Mellinger ushered him to a chair beside the fire and profferred his silver cigarette case. "There's a certain small matter I wanted to discuss, and you are almost the only person who can help me."

"Of course, Director," Booth assured him. "I am greatly honoured."

Dr. Mellinger seated himself behind his desk. "It's a very curious case, one of the most unusual I have ever come across. It concerns a patient under your care, I believe."

"May I ask for his name, sir?"

"Hinton," Dr. Mellinger said, with a sharp glance at Booth.

"Hinton, sir?"

"You show surprise," Dr. Mellinger continued before Booth could reply. "I find that response particularly interesting."

"The search is still being carried on," Booth said uncertainly as Dr. Mellinger paused to digest his remarks. "I'm afraid we've found absolutely no trace of him. Dr. Normand thinks we should inform—"

"Ah, yes, Dr. Normand." The Director revived suddenly. "I have asked him to report to me with Hinton's file as soon as he is free. Dr. Booth, does it occur to you that we may be chasing the wrong hare?"

"Sir—?"

"Is it in fact *Hinton* we are after? I wonder, perhaps, whether the search for Hinton is obscuring something larger and more significant, the enigma, as I mentioned yesterday, which lies at the heart of Green Hill and to whose solution we must all now be dedicated." Dr. Mellinger savoured these reflections before continuing. "Dr. Booth, let us for a moment consider the role of Hinton, or to be more precise, the complex of overlapping and adjacent events that we identify loosely by the term 'Hinton'."

"Complex, sir? You speak diagnostically?"

"No, Booth. I am now concerned with the phenomenology of Hinton, with his absolute metaphysical essence. To speak more plainly: has it occurred to you, Booth,

how little we know of this elusive patient, how scanty the traces he has left of his own identity?"

"True, Director," Booth agreed. "I constantly reproach myself for not taking a closer interest in the patient."

"Not at all, Doctor. I realise how busy you are. I intend to carry out a major reorganisation of Green Hill, and I assure you that your tireless work here will not be forgotten. A senior administrative post would, I am sure, suit you excellently." As Booth sat up, his interest in the conversation increasing several-fold, Dr. Mellinger acknowledged his expression of thanks with a discreet nod. "As I was saying Doctor, you have so many patients, all wearing the same uniforms, housed in the same wards and by and large prescribed the same treatment—is it surprising that they should lose their individual identities? If I may make a small confession," he added with a roguish smile, "I myself find that all the patients look alike. Why, if Dr. Normand or yourself informed me that a new patient by the name of Smith or Brown had arrived, I would automatically furnish him with the standard uniform of identity at Green Hill—those same lustreless eyes and slack mouth, the same amorphous features."

Unclasping his hands, Dr. Mellinger leaned intently across his desk. "What I am suggesting, Doctor, is that this automatic mechanism may have operated in the case of the so-called Hinton, and that you may have invested an entirely non-existent individual with the fictions of a personality."

Dr. Booth nodded slowly. "I see, sir. You suspect that Hinton—or what we have called Hinton up to now—was perhaps a confused memory of another patient." He hesitated doubtfully, and then noticed that Dr. Mellinger's eyes were fixed upon him with hypnotic intensity.

"Dr. Booth. I ask you: what actual proof have we that Hinton ever existed?"

"Well, sir, there are the . . ." Booth searched about helplessly, ". . . the records in the administrative department. And the case notes."

Dr. Mellinger shook his head with a scornful flourish. "My dear Booth, you are speaking of mere pieces of paper. These are not proof of a man's identity. A typewriter will make any marks you choose. The only conclusive proof is his physical existence in time and space

or failing that, a distinct memory of his tangible physical presence. Can you honestly say that either of these conditions is fulfilled?"

"No, sir. I suppose I can't. Though I did speak to a patient whom I assumed to be Hinton."

"But was he?" The Director's voice was resonant and urgent. "Search your mind, Booth; be honest with your self. Was it perhaps another patient to whom you spoke? What doctor ever really looks at his patients? In all probability you merely saw Hinton's name on a list and assumed that he sat before you, an intact physical existence like your own."

There was a knock upon the door. Dr. Normand stepped into the office. "Good afternoon, Director."

"Ah, Normand. Do come in. Dr. Booth and I have been having a most instructive conversation. I really believe we have found a solution to the mystery of Hinton's disappearance."

Dr. Normand nodded cautiously. "I am most relieved, sir. I was beginning to wonder whether we should inform the civil authorities. It is now nearly forty-eight hours since . . ."

"My dear Normand, I am afraid you are rather out of touch. Our whole attitude to the Hinton case has changed radically. Dr. Booth has been so helpful to me, We have been discussing the possibility that an administrative post might be found for him. You have the Hinton file?"

"Er, I regret not, sir," Normand apologised hastily, his eyes moving from Booth to the Director. "I gather it has been temporarily displaced. I have instituted a thorough search and it will be brought to you as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Normand, if you would." Mellinger took Booth by the arm and led him to the door. "Now, Doctor, I am most gratified by your quick perceptiveness. I want you to question your ward staff in the way I have questioned you. Strike through the mists of illusion and false assumption that swirl about their minds. Warn them of those illusions compounded on illusions which can assume the guise of reality. Remind them, too, that clear minds are required at Green Hill. I will be most surprised if any one of them can put her hand on her heart and swear that Hinton *really* existed."

After Booth had made his exit, Dr. Mellinger returned

to his desk, pleasantly rubbing his hands. For a moment he failed to notice his deputy.

"Ah, yes, Normand. I wonder where that file is? You didn't bring it?"

"No, sir. As I explained—"

"Well, never mind. But we mustn't become careless, Normand, too much is at stake. Do you realise that without that file we would know literally nothing whatever about Hinton? It would be most awkward."

"I assure you, sir, the file—"

"Enough, Normand. Don't worry yourself." Dr. Mellinger turned a vulpine smile upon the restless Normand. "I have the greatest respect for the efficiency of the administrative department under your leadership. I think it unlikely that they should have misplaced it. Tell me, Normand, are you sure that this file ever existed?"

"Certainly, sir," Normand replied promptly. "Of course, I have not actually seen it myself, but every patient at Green Hill has a complete personal file."

"But Normand," the Director pointed out gently. "The patient in question is not *at* Green Hill. Whether or not this hypothetical file exists, Hinton does not."

He stopped and waited as Normand looked up at him curiously, his eyes narrowing.

A week later, Dr. Mellinger held a final conference in his office. This was a notably more relaxed gathering; his subordinates lay back in the leather armchairs around the fire, while Dr. Mellinger leaned against the desk, supervising the circulation of his best sherry.

"So, gentlemen," he remarked in conclusion, "we may look back on the past week as a period of unique self-discovery, a lesson for all of us to remember the true nature of our roles at Green Hill, our dedication to the task of separating reality from illusion. If our patients are haunted by chimeras, let us at least retain absolute clarity of mind, accepting the validity of any proposition only if all our senses corroborate it. Consider the example of the 'Hinton affair.' Here, by an accumulation of false assumptions, of illusions buttressing illusions, a vast edifice of fantasy was erected around the wholly mythical identity of one patient. This imaginary figure, who by some means we have not discovered—most probably the error of a typist in the records department—was given the name 'Hinton,' was subsequently furnished with a complete

personal identity, a private ward, attendant nurses and doctors. Such was the grip of this substitute world, this concatenation of errors, that when it crumbled and the lack of any substance behind the shadow was discovered, the remaining vacuum was automatically interpreted as the patient's escape."

Dr. Mellinger gestured eloquently, as Normand, Redpath and Booth nodded their agreement. He walked around his desk and took his seat. "Perhaps, gentlemen, it is fortunate that I remain aloof from the day-to-day affairs of Green Hill. I take no credit upon myself, that I alone was sufficiently detached to consider the full implications of Hinton's disappearance and realise the only possible explanation—*that Hinton had never existed!*"

"A brilliant deduction," Redpath murmured.

"Without doubt," echoed Booth.

"A profound insight," agreed Normand.

There was a sharp knock on the door. With a frown, Dr. Mellinger ignored it and resumed his monologue.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Without your assistance that hypothesis, that Hinton was no more than an accumulation of administrative errors, could never have been confirmed."

The knock on the door repeated itself. A staff sister appeared breathlessly. "Excuse me, sir. I'm sorry to interrupt you, but—"

Dr. Mellinger waved away her apologies. "Never mind. What is it?"

"A visitor, Dr. Mellinger." She paused as the Director waited impatiently. "Mrs. Hinton, to see her husband."

For a moment there was consternation. The three men around the fire sat upright, their drinks forgotten, while Dr. Mellinger remained stock-still at his desk. A total silence filled the room, only broken by the light tapping of a woman's heels in the corridor outside.

But Dr. Mellinger recovered quickly. Standing up, with a grim smile at his colleagues, he said: "To see Mr. Hinton? Impossible, Hinton never existed. The woman must be suffering from terrible delusions; she requires immediate treatment. Show her in." He turned to his colleagues. "Gentlemen, we must do everything we can to help her."

Minus two.

THE SUDDEN AFTERNOON

WHAT SURPRISED ELLIOT was the suddenness of the attack. Judith and the children had gone down to the coast for the weekend to catch the last of the summer, leaving him alone in the house, and the three days had been a pleasant reverie of silent rooms, meals taken at random hours, and a little mild carpentry in the work-shop. He spent Sunday morning reading all the reviews in the newspapers, carefully adding half a dozen titles to the list of books which he knew he would never manage to buy, let alone read. These wistful exercises, like the elaborately prepared martini before lunch, were part of the established ritual of his brief bachelor moments. He decided to take a brisk walk across Hampstead Heath after lunch, returning in time to tidy everything away before Judith arrived that evening.

Instead, a sharp attack of what first appeared to be influenza struck him just before one o'clock. A throbbing headache and a soaring temperature sent him fumbling to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, only to find that Judith had taken the aspirin with her. Sitting on the edge of the bath, forehead in his hands, he nursed the spasm, which seemed to contract the muscles of some inner scalp, compressing his brain like fruit-pulp in a linen bag.

"Judith!" he shouted to the empty house. "Damn!"

The pain mounted, an intense prickling that drove silver needles through his skull. Helpless for a moment, he propelled himself into the bedroom and climbed fully dressed into the bed, shielding his eyes from the weak sunlight which crossed the Heath.

After a few minutes the attack subsided slightly, leaving him with a nagging migraine and a sense of utter inertia. For the next hour he stared at the reflection of himself in the dressing table mirror, lying like a trussed steer across the bed. Through the window he watched a small boy playing under the oaks by the edge of the park, patiently trying to catch the spiralling leaves. Twenty yards away a nondescript little man with a dark complexion sat alone on a bench, staring through the trees.

In some way this scene soothed Elliott, and the head-

ache finally dissipated, as if charmed away by the swaying boughs and the leaping figure of the boy.

"Strange . . ." he murmured to himself, still puzzled by the ferocity of the attack. Judith, however, would be skeptical; she had always accused him of being a hypochondriac. It was a pity she hadn't been there, instead of lying about on the beach at Worthing, but at least the children had been spared the spectacle of their father yelping with agony.

Reluctant to get out of bed and precipitate another attack—perhaps it was due to some virulent but short-lived virus?—Elliott lay back, the scent of his wife's skin on the pillow reminding him of his own childhood and his mother's perfumed hair. He had been brought up in India, and remembered being rowed across a river by his father, the great placid back of the Ganges turning crimson in the late afternoon light. The burnt-earth colors of the Calcutta waterfront were still vivid after an interval of thirty years.

Smiling pleasantly over this memory, and at the image of his father rowing with a rhythmic lulling motion, Elliott gazed upwards at the ceiling, only distracted by the distant hoot of a car horn.

Then he sat up abruptly, staring sharply at the room around him.

"Calcutta? What the hell—?"

The memory had been completely false! He had never been to India in his life, or anywhere near the Far East. He had been born in London, and lived there all his life apart from a two-year post-graduate visit to the United States. As for his father, who had been captured by the Germans while fighting with the Eighth Army in North Africa and spent most of the war as a P.O.W., Elliott had seen almost nothing of him until his adolescence.

Yet the memory of being rowed across the Ganges had been extraordinarily strong. Trying to shake off the last residue of the headache, Elliott swung his feet onto the floor. The throbbing had returned slightly, but in a curious way receded as he let the image of the Calcutta waterfront fill his mind. Whatever its source, the landscape was certainly Indian, and he could see the Ganges steps, a clutter of sailing dhows and even a few meagre funeral pyres smoking on the embankment.

But what most surprised him were the emotional associations of this false memory of being rowed by his

father, the sense of reassurance that came with each rhythmic motion of the dark figure, whose face was hidden by the shadows of the setting sun.

Wondering where he had collected this powerful visual impression which had somehow translated itself into a memory with unique personal undertones, Elliott left the bedroom and made his way down to the kitchen. It was now half past two, almost too late for lunch, and he stared without interest at the rows of eggs and milk bottles in the refrigerator. After lunch, he decided, he would settle down on the sofa in the lounge and read or watch television.

At the thought of the latter Elliott realized that the false memory of the Ganges was almost certainly a forgotten fragment of a film travelogue, probably one he had seen as a child. The whole sequence of the memory, with its posed shot of the boat cutting through the crimson water and the long traverse of the waterfront, was typical of the style of the travelogues made in the nineteen-forties, and he could almost see the credit titles coming up with a roll of drums.

Reassured by this, and assuming that the headache had somehow jolted loose this visual memory—the slightly blurred wartime cinema screens had often strained his eyes—Elliott began to prepare his lunch. He ignored the food Judith had left for him and hunted among the spices and pickle jars in the pantry, where he found some rice and a packet of curry powder. Judith had never mastered the intricacies of making a real curry, and Elliott's own occasional attempts had merely elicited amused smiles. Today, however, with ample time on his hands and no interference, he would succeed.

Unhurriedly Elliott began to prepare the dish, and the kitchen soon filled with steam and the savory odors of curry powder and chutney. Outside, the thin sunlight gave way to darker clouds and the first afternoon rain. The small boy had gone, but the solitary figure under the oaks still sat on the bench, jacket collar turned up around his neck.

Delighted by the simmering brew, Elliott relaxed on his stool, and thought about his medical practice. Normally he would have been obliged to hold an evening surgery, but his locum had arranged to take over for him, much to his relief, as one of the patients had been particularly

difficult—a complete neurotic, a hazard faced by every doctor, she had even threatened to report him to the general medical council for misconduct, though the allegations were so grotesque the disciplinary committee would not consider them seriously for a moment.

The curry had been strong, and a sharp pain under the sternum marked the beginning of a bout of indigestion. Cursing his bad luck, Elliott poured a glass of milk, sorry to lose the flavor of the curry.

"You're in bad shape, old sport," he said to himself with ironic humor. "You ought to see a doctor."

With a sudden snap of his fingers he stood up. He had experienced his second false memory! The whole reverie about his medical practice, the locum and the woman patient were absolute fictions, unrelated to anything in his life. Professionally he was a research chemist, employed in the biochemistry department of one of the London cancer institutes, but his contacts with physicians and surgeons were virtually nil.

And yet the impression of having a medical practice, patients and all the other involvements of a busy doctor was remarkably strong and persistent—indeed, far more than a memory, a coherent area of awareness as valid as the image of the biochemistry laboratory.

With a growing sense of unease, Elliott sipped weakly at the tumbler of milk, wondering why these sourceless images, like fragments from the intelligence of some other individual, were impinging themselves on his mind. He went into the lounge and sat down with his back to the window, examining himself with as much professional detachment as he could muster. Behind him, under the trees in the park, the man on the bench sat silently in the rain, eyed at a safe distance by a wandering mongrel.

After a pause to collect himself, Elliott deliberately began to explore this second false memory. Immediately he noticed that the dyspepsia subsided, as if assuming the persona of the fragmented images relieved their pressure upon his mind. Concentrating, he could see a high window above a broad mahogany desk, a padded leather couch, shelves of books and framed certificates on the walls, unmistakeably a doctor's consulting rooms. Leaving the room, he passed down a broad flight of carpeted stairs into a marble-floored hall. A desk stood in an alcove on the left, and a pretty red-haired receptionist looked up

and smiled to him across her typewriter. Then he was outside in the street, obviously in a well-to-do quarter of the city, where Rolls-Royces and Bentleys almost outnumbered the other cars. Two hundred yards away double-decker buses crossed a familiar intersection.

"Harley Street!" Elliott snapped. As he sat up and looked around at the familiar furniture in the lounge and the drenched oaks in the park, with an effort re-establishing their reality in his mind, he had a last glimpse of the front elevation of the consulting chambers, a blurred name-plate on the cream-painted columns. Over the portico were the gilt italic numerals: *259*.

"Two fifty-nine Harley Street? Now who the devil works there?" Elliott stood up and went over to the window, staring out across the Heath, then paced into the kitchen and savored the residue of the curry aroma. Again a spasm of indigestion gripped his stomach, and he immediately focussed on the image of the unknown doctor's consulting rooms. As the pain faded he had a further impression of a small middle-aged woman in a hospital ward, her left arm in a cast, and then a picture of the staff and consultants' entrance to the Middlesex Hospital, as vivid as a photograph.

Picking up the newspaper, Elliott returned to the lounge, settling himself with difficulty. The absolute clarity of the memories convinced him that they were not confused images taken from cine-films or elaborated by his imagination. The more he explored them the more they fixed their own reality, refusing to fade or vanish. In addition, the emotional content was too strong. The associations of the childhood river scene were reassuring, but the atmosphere in the consulting rooms had been fraught with hesitation and anxiety, as if their original possessor was in the grip of a nightmare.

The headache still tugged at his temples, and Elliott went over to the cocktail cabinet and poured himself a large whisky and soda. Had he in some incredible way simultaneously become the receiver of the disembodied memories of a small Indian boy in Calcutta and a Harley Street consultant?

Glancing at the front news page, his eye caught:

INDIAN DOCTOR SOUGHT
Wife's Mystery Death
Police are continuing their search for the missing

Harley Street psychiatrist, Dr. Krishnamurti Singh. Scotland Yard believes he may be able to assist them in their inquiries into the death of his wife, Mrs. Ramadya Singh . . .

With a surge of relief, Elliott slapped the newspaper and tossed it across the room. So this explained the two imaginary memories! Earlier that morning, before the influenza attack, he had read the news item without realizing it, then during the light fever had dramatized the details. The virulent virus—a rare short-lived strain he had picked up at the laboratory—presumably acted like the hallucinogenic drugs, creating an inner image of almost photographic authenticity. Even the curry had been part of the system of fantasy.

Elliott wandered ruminatively around the lounge, listening to the rain sweep like hail across the windows. Within a few moments he knew that more of these hallucinatory memories lay below the surface of his mind, all revolving around the identity of the missing Indian doctor.

Unable to dispel them, he deliberately let himself drift off into a reverie. Perhaps the association of the funereal rain and the tiresome pain below his sternum was responsible for the gathering sense of foreboding in his mind. Formless ideas rose towards consciousness, and he stirred uneasily in his chair. Without realizing it, he found himself thinking of his wife's death, an event shrouded in pain and a peculiar dream-like violence. For a moment he was almost inside his wife's dying mind, at the bottom of an immense drowned lake, separated from the distant pinpoint of sky by enormous volumes of water that pressed upon his chest. . . .

In a flood of sweat, Elliott awoke from this nightmare, the whole tragic vision of his wife's death before his eyes. Judith was alive, of course, staying with her married sister at the beach-house near Worthing, but the vision of her drowning had come through with the force and urgency of a telepathic signal.

"Judith!"

Rousing himself, Elliott hurried to the telephone in the hall. Something about its psychological dimensions convinced him that he had not imagined the death scene.

The sea!

He snatched up the phone, dialing for the operator. At that very moment Judith might well be swimming alone while her sister prepared tea with the children, in sight of the beach but unaware she was in danger. . . .

"Operator, this is urgent," Elliott began. "I must talk to my wife, I think she's in some sort of danger. Can you get me Calcutta 30331."

The operator hesitated. "Calcutta? I'm sorry, caller, I'll transfer you to Overseas—"

"What? I don't want—" Elliott stopped. "What number did I ask for?"

"Calcutta 30331. I'll have you transfered."

"Wait!" Elliott steadied himself against the window. The rain beat across the glazed panes. "My mistake. I meant Worthing 303—"

"Are you there, caller? Worthing Three Zero Three—" Her voice waited.

Wearily Elliott lowered the telephone. "I'll look it up," he said thickly. "That wasn't the number."

He turned the pages of the memo pad, realizing that both he and Judith had known the number for years and never bothered to record it.

"Are you there, caller?" The operator's voice was sharper.

A few moments later, when he was connected to Directory Inquiries, Elliott realized that he had also forgotten his sister-in-law's name and address.

"Calcutta 30331." Elliott repeated the number as he poured himself a drink from the whisky decanter. Pulling himself together, he recognized that the notion of a telepathic message was fatuous. Judith would be perfectly safe, on her way back to London with the children, and he had misinterpreted the vision of the dying woman. The telephone number, however, remained. The enigmatic sequence flowed off his tongue with the unconscious familiarity of long usage. A score of similar memories waited to be summoned into reality, as if a fugitive mind had taken up residence in his brain.

He picked the newspaper off the floor.

. . . Dr. Krishnamurti Singh. Scotland Yard believes he may be able to assist them in their inquiries .

'Assist them in their inquiries'—a typical Fleet

Street euphemism, part of the elaborate code build up between the newspapers and their readers. A French paper, not handicapped by the English libel laws, would be shouting 'Bluebeard! Assassin!'

> Detectives are at the bedside of Mrs. Ethel Burgess, the charwoman employed by Dr. and Mrs. Singh, who was yesterday found unconscious at the foot of the stairs. . . .

Mrs. Burgess! Instantly an image of the small elderly woman, with a face like a wizened apple, came before his eyes. She was lying in the hospital bed at the Middlesex, watching him with frightened reproachful glances—

The tumbler, half-filled with whisky, smashed itself on the fireplace tiles. Elliott stared at the fragments of wet glass around his feet, then sat down in the center of the sofa with his head in his hands, trying to hold back the flood of memories. Helplessly he found himself thinking of the medical school at Calcutta. The half-familiar faces of fellow students passed in a blur. He remembered his passionate interest in developing a scientific approach to the obscurer branches of yoga and the Hindu parapsychologies, the student society he formed and its experiments in thought and body transference, brought to an end by the death of one of the students and the subsequent scandal. . . .

For a moment Elliott marvelled at the coherence and convincing detail of the memories. Numbly he reminded himself that in fact he had been a chemistry student at—

Where?

With a start he realized that he had forgotten. Quickly he searched his mind, and found he could remember almost nothing of his distant past, where he was born, his parents and childhood. Instead he saw once again, this time with luminous clarity, the rowing-boat on the crimson Ganges and its dark oarsman watching him with his ambiguous smile. Then he saw another picture, of himself as a small boy, writing in a huge ledger in which all the pencilled entries had been laboriously rubbed out, sitting at a desk in a room with a low ceiling of bamboo rods over his father's warehouse by the market—

"Nonsense!" Flinging the memory from him, with all its tender associations, Elliott stood up restlessly, his heart racing with a sudden fever. His forehead burned with

heat, his mind inventing strings of fantasies around the Dr. Singh wanted by the police. He felt his pulse, then leaned into the mirror over the mantelpiece and examined his eyes, checking his pupil reflexes with expert fingers for any symptoms of concussion.

Swallowing with a dry tongue, he stared down at the physician's hands which had examined him, then decided to call his own doctor. A sedative, an hour's sleep, and he would recover.

In the falling evening light he could barely see the numerals. "Hello, hello!" he shouted. "Is anyone there?"

"Yes, Dr. Singh," a woman replied. "Is that you?"

Frightened, Elliott cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. He had dialled the number from memory, but from another memory than his own. But not only had the receptionist recognized his voice—Elliott had recognized hers, and knew her name.

Experimentally he lifted the receiver, and said the name in his mind. "Miss Tremayne—?"

"Dr. Singh? Are you—"

With an effort Elliott made his voice more gutteral. "I'm sorry, I have the wrong number. What is your number?"

The girl hesitated. When she spoke the modulation and rhythm of her voice were again instantly familiar. "This is Harley Street 30331," she said cautiously. "Dr. Singh, the police have—"

Elliott lowered the telephone into its cradle. Wearily he sat down on the carpet in the darkness, looking up at the black rectangle of the front door. Again the headache began to drum at his temples, as he tried to ignore the memories crowding into his mind. Above him the staircase led to another world.

Half an hour later, he pulled himself to his feet. Searching for his bed, and fearing the light, he stumbled into a room and lay down. With a start he clambered upright, and found that he was lying on the table in the dining room.

He had forgotten his way around the house, and the topography of another home, apparently a single-story apartment, had superimposed itself upon his mind. In the strange upstairs floor he found an untidy nursery full of children's toys and clothes, an unremembered freize of childish drawings which showed tranquil skies over

church steeples. When he closed the door the scene vanished like a forgotten tableau.

In the bedroom next door a portrait photograph stood on the dressing table, showing the face of a pleasant blond-haired woman he had never seen. He gazed down at the bed in the darkness, the wardrobes and mirrors around him like the furniture of a dream.

"Ramadya, Ramadya," he murmured, on his lips the name of the dying woman.

The telephone rang. Standing in the darkness at the top of the stairs, he listened to its sounds shrilling through the silent house. He walked down to it with leaden feet.

"Yes?" he said tersely.

"Hello, darling," a woman's bright voice answered. In the background trains shunted and whistled. "Hello? Is that Hampstead—"

"This is Harley Street 30331," he said quickly. "You have the wrong number."

"Oh, dear, I am sorry, I thought—"

Cutting off this voice, which for a fleeting moment had drawn together the fragmented persona clinging to the back of his mind, he stood at the window by the front door. Through the narrow barred pane he could see that the rain had almost ended, and a light mist hung among the trees. The bedraggled figure on the bench still maintained his vigil, his face hidden in the darkness. Now and then his drenched form would glimmer in the passing lights.

For some reason a sense of extreme urgency had overtaken Elliott. He knew that there were a series of tasks to be performed, records to be made before important evidence vanished, reliable witnesses to be contacted. A hundred ignored images passed through his mind as he searched for a pair of shoes and a jacket in the cupboard upstairs, scenes of his medical practice, a woman patient being tested by an electroencephalogram, the radiator of a Bentley car and its automobile club badges. There were glimpses of the streets near Harley Street, the residue of countless journeys to and from the consulting rooms, the entrance to the Overseas Club, a noisy seminar at one of the scientific institutes where someone was shouting at him theatrically. Then, unpleasantly, there were feelings of remorse for his wife's death, counterbalanced by the growing inner conviction that this, paradoxically, was the only way to save her, to force her to a new life. In a

strange yet familiar voice he heard himself saying: 'the soul, like any soft-skinned creature, clings to whatever shell it can find. Only by cracking that shell can one force it to move to a new . . .'

Attacks of vertigo came over him in waves as he descended the staircase. There was someone he must find, one man whose help might save him. He picked up the telephone and dialled, swaying giddily from side to side.

A clipped voice like polished ivory answered. "Professor Ramachandran speaking."

"Professor—"

"Hello? Who is that, please?"

He cleared his throat, coughing noisily into the mouthpiece. "Professor, understand me! It was the tumor, inoperable, it was the only way to save her—metempsychosis of the somatic function as well as the psychic. . . ." He had launched into a semicoherent tirade, the words coming out in clotted shreds. "Ramadya has gone over now, she is the other woman . . neither she nor any others will ever know. . . . Professor, will you tell her one day, and myself . . . a single word—"

"Dr. Singh!" The voice at the other end was a shout. "I can no longer help you! You must take the consequences of your folly! I warned you repeatedly about the danger of your experiments—"

The telephone squeaked on the floor where he dropped it. Outside the headlamps of police cars flashed by, their blue roof lights revolving like spectral beacons. As he unlatched the door and stepped out into the cold night air he had a last obsessive thought, of a fair-haired, middle-aged man with glasses who was a chemist at a cancer institute, a man with a remarkably receptive mind, its open bowl spread before him like a huge dish antenna. This man alone could help him. His name was—Elliott.

As he sat on the bench he saw the lights approaching him through the trees, like glowing aureoles in the darkness. The rain had ended and a light mist dissipated under the branches, but after the warmth indoors it was colder than he expected, and within only a few minutes in the park he began to shiver. Walking between the trees, he saw the line of police cars parked along the perimeter road two hundred yards away. Whichever way he moved, the

lights seemed to draw nearer, although never coming directly towards him.

He turned, deciding to return to the house, and to his surprise saw a slim fair-haired man cross the road from the park and climb the steps to the front door. Startled, he watched this intruder disappear through the open door and close it behind him.

Then two policemen stepped from the mist on his right, their torches dazzling his eyes. He broke into a run, but a third huge figure materialized from behind a trunk and blocked his path.

"That's enough then," a gruff voice told him as he wrestled helplessly. "Let's try to take it quietly."

Lamps circled the darkness. More police ran over through the trees. An inspector with silver shoulder badges stepped up and peered into his face as a constable raised a torch.

"Dr. Singh?"

For a moment he listened to the sounds of the name, which had pursued him all day, hang fleetingly on the damp air. Most of his mind seemed willing to accept the identification, but a small part, now dissolving to a minute speck, like the faint stars veiled by the mist, refused to agree, knowing that whoever he was now, he had once not been Dr. Singh.

"No!" He shook his head, and with a galvanic effort managed to wrench loose one arm. He was seized at the shoulder and raised his free arm to shield himself from the lights and the pressing faces.

His glasses had fallen off and been trampled underfoot, but he could see more clearly without them. He looked at his hand. Even in the pale light the darker pigmentation was plain. His fingers were small and neat, an unfamiliar scar marking one of the knuckles.

Then he felt the small goatee beard on his chin.

Inside his mind the last island of resistance slid away into the dark unremembered past.

"Dr. Krishnamurti Singh," the inspector stated.

Among the suitcases in the doorway Judith Elliott watched the police cars drive away towards Hampstead village. Upstairs the two children romped about in the nursery.

"How horrid! I'm glad the children didn't see him arrested. He was struggling like an animal."

Elliott paid off the taxi-driver and then closed the door. "Who was it, by the way? No one we know, I hope?"

Judith glanced around the hall, and noticed the telephone receiver on the floor. She bent down and replaced it. "The taxi-driver said it was some Harley Street psychiatrist. An Indian doctor. Apparently he strangled his wife in the bath. The strange thing is she was already dying of a brain tumor."

Elliott grimaced. "Gruesome. Perhaps he was trying to save her pain."

"By strangling her fully conscious? A typical masculine notion, darling."

Elliott laughed as they strolled into the lounge. "Well, my dear, did you have a good time? How was Molly?"

"She was fine. We had a great time together. Missed you, of course. I felt a bit off-color yesterday, got knocked over by a big wave and swallowed a lot of water." She hesitated, looking through the window at the park. "You know, it's rather funny, but twenty minutes ago I tried to ring you from the station and got a Harley Street number by mistake. I spoke to an Indian. He sounded rather like a doctor."

Elliott grinned. "Probably the same man."

"That's what I thought. But he couldn't have got from Harley Street to Hampstead so quickly, could he? The driver said the police have been looking for him here all afternoon."

"Maybe they've got the wrong man. Unless there are two Dr. Singhs." Elliott snapped his fingers. "That's odd, where did I get the name? Must have read about him in the papers."

Judith nodded, coming over to him. "It was in this morning's." She took off her hat and placed it on the mantelpiece. "Indians are strange people. I don't know why, but yesterday when I was getting over my wave I was thinking about an Indian girl I knew once. All I can remember is her name. Ramadya. I think she was drowned. She was very sweet and pretty."

"Like you." Elliott put his hands around her waist, but Judith pointed to the broken glass in the fireplace.

"I say, I can see I've been away." With a laugh she put her hands on his shoulders and squeezed him, then drew away in alarm.

"Darling, where did you get this peculiar suit? For heaven's sake, look!" She squeezed his jacket, and the

water poured from her fingers as from a wet sponge. "You're soaked through! Where on earth have you been all day?"

THE TERMINAL BEACH

AT NIGHT, as he lay asleep on the floor of the ruined bunker, Traven heard the waves breaking along the shore of the lagoon, reminding him of the deep Atlantic rollers on the beach at Dakar, where he had been born, and of waiting in the evenings for his parents to drive home along the corniche road from the airport. Overcome by this long-forgotten memory, he woke uncertainly from the bed of old magazines on which he slept and ran towards the dunes that screened the lagoon.

Through the cold night air he could see the abandoned Superfortresses lying among the palms, beyond the perimeter of the emergency landing field three hundred yards away. Traven walked through the dark sand, already forgetting where the shore lay, although the atoll was only half a mile in width. Above him, along the crests of the dunes, the tall palms leaned into the dim air like the symbols of some cryptic alphabet. The landscape of the island was covered by strange ciphers.

Giving up the attempt to find the beach, Traven stumbled into a set of tracks left years earlier by a large caterpillar vehicle. The heat released by one of the weapons tests had fused the sand, and the double line of fossil imprints, uncovered by the evening air, wound its serpentine way among the hollows like the footfalls of an ancient saurian.

Too weak to walk any further, Traven sat down between the tracks. With one hand he began to excavate the wedge-shaped grooves from a drift into which they disappeared, hoping that they might lead him towards the sea. He returned to the bunker shortly before dawn, and slept through the hot silences of the following noon.

The Blocks

As usual on these enervating afternoons, when not even the faintest breath of off-shore breeze disturbed the dust, Traven sat in the shadow of one of the blocks, lost somewhere within the centre of the maze. His back rest-

ing against the rough concrete surface, he gazed with a phlegmatic eye down the surrounding aisles and at the line of doors facing him. Each afternoon he left his cell in the abandoned camera bunker and walked down into the blocks. For the first half an hour he restricted himself to the perimeter aisle, now and then trying one of the doors with the rusty key in his pocket—he had found it among the litter of smashed bottles in the isthmus of sand separating the testing ground from the airstrip—and then, inevitably, with a sort of drugged stride, he set off into the centre of the blocks, breaking into a run and darting in and out of the corridors, as if trying to flush some invisible opponent from his hiding place. Soon he would be completely lost. Whatever his efforts to return to the perimeter, he found himself once more in the centre.

Eventually he would abandon the task, and sit down in the dust, watching the shadows emerge from their crevices at the foot of the blocks. For some reason he always arranged to be trapped when the sun was at zenith—on Eniwetok, a thermonuclear noon.

* * *

One question in particular intrigued him: "What sort of people would inhabit this minimal concrete city?"

The Synthetic Landscape

"This island is a state of mind," Osborne, one of the biologists working in the old submarine pens, was later to remark to Traven. The truth of this became obvious to Traven within two or three weeks of his arrival. Despite the sand and the few anaemic palms, the entire landscape of the island was synthetic, a man-made artefact with all the associations of a vast system of derelict concrete motor-ways. Since the moratorium on atomic tests, the island had been abandoned by the Atomic Energy Commission, and the wilderness of weapons aisles, towers and blockhouses ruled out any attempt to return it to its natural state. (There were also stronger unconscious motives, Traven recognised, for leaving it as it was: if primitive man felt the need to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche, 20th century man had reversed this process—by this Cartesian yardstick, the island at least *existed,* in a sense true of few other places.)

But apart from a few scientific workers, no-one yet felt

any wish to visit the former testing ground, and the naval patrol boat anchored in the lagoon had been withdrawn five years before Traven's arrival. Its ruined appearance, and the associations of the island with the period of the Cold War—what Traven had christened the 'Pre-Third' —were profoundly depressing, an Auschwitz of the soul whose mausoleums contained the mass graves of the still undead. With the Russo-American *détente* this nightmarish chapter of history had been gladly forgotten.

The Pre-Third

'The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of the Unconscious. The most cursory study of the dream-life and fantasies of the insane shows that ideas of world-destruction are latent in the unconscious mind. Nagazaki destroyed by the magic of science is the nearest man has yet approached to the realisation of dreams that even during the safe immobility of sleep are accustomed to develop into nightmares of anxiety.'

Glover: *War, Sadism and Pacifism.*

The Pre-Third: the period had been characterised in Traven's mind above all by its moral and psychological inversions, by its sense of the whole of history, and in particular of the immediate future—the two decades, 1945-65—suspended from the quivering volcano's lip of World War III. Even the death of his wife and six-year-old son in a motor accident seemed only part of this immense synthesis of the historical and psychic zero, the frantic highways where each morning they met their deaths the advance causeways to the global armageddon.

Third Beach

He had come ashore at midnight, after a hazardous search for an opening in the reef. The small motor-boat he had hired from an Australian pearl-diver at Charlotte Island subsided into the shallows, its hull torn by the sharp coral. Exhausted, Traven walked through the darkness among the dunes, where the dim outlines of bunkers and concrete towers loomed between the palms.

He woke the next morning into bright sunlight, lying half-way down the slope of a wide concrete beach. This ringed what appeared to be an empty reservoir or target basin, some two hundred feet in diameter, part of a system of artificial lakes built down the centre of the atoll. Leaves

and dust choked the waste grilles, and a pool of warm water two feet deep lay in the center, reflecting a distant line of palms.

Traven sat up and took stock of himself. This brief inventory, which merely confirmed his physical identity, was limited to little more than his thin body in its frayed cotton garments. In the context of the surrounding terrain, however, even this collection of tatters seemed to possess a unique vitality. The emptiness of the island, and the absence of any local fauna, were emphasised by the huge sculptural forms of the target basins let into its surface. Separated from each other by narrow isthmuses, the lakes stretched away along the curve of the atoll. On either side, sometimes shaded by the few palms that had gained a precarious purchase in the cracked cement, were roadways, camera towers and isolated blockhouses, together forming a continuous concrete cap upon the island, a functional megalithic architecture as grey and minatory (and apparently as ancient, in its projection into, and from, time future) as any of Assyria and Babylon.

The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudo-geological strata condensed the brief epochs, micro-seconds in duration, of the thermonuclear age. 'The key to the past lies in the present'. Typically the island inverted this geologist's maxim. Here the key to the present lay in the future. The island was a fossil of time future, its bunkers and blockhouses illustrating the principle that the fossil record of life is one of armour and the exo-skeleton.

Traven knelt in the warm pool and splashed his shirt and trousers. The reflection revealed the watery image of a thinly bearded face and gaunt shoulders. He had come to the island with no supplies other than a small bar of chocolate, expecting that in some way the island would provide its own sustenance. Perhaps, too, he had identified the need for food with a forward motion in time, and that with his return to the past, or at most into a zone of non-time, this need would be obviated. The privations of the previous six months, during his journey across the Pacific, had reduced his always thin body to that of a migrant beggar, held together by little more than the preoccupied gaze in his eye. Yet this emaciation, by stripping away the superfluities of the flesh, seemed to reveal an inner sinewy toughness, an economy and directness of movement.

For several hours he wandered about, inspecting one bunker after another for a convenient place to sleep. He crossed the remains of a small landing strip, next to a dump where a dozen B-29's lay across one another like dead reptile birds.

The Corpses

Once he entered a small street of metal shacks, containing a cafeteria, recreation rooms, and shower stalls. A wrecked juke-box lay half-buried in the sand behind the cafeteria, its selection of records still in their rack.

Further along, flung into a small target basin fifty yards from the shacks, were the bodies of what at first he thought were the inhabitants of this ghost town—a dozen life-size plastic models. Their half-melted faces, contorted into bleary grimaces, gazed up at him from the jumble of legs and torsos.

On either side of him, muffled by the dunes, came the sounds of waves, the great rollers on the seaward side breaking over the reefs, and onto the beaches within the lagoon. However, he avoided the sea, hesitating before any rise that might take him within its sight. Everywhere the camera towers offered him a convenient aerial view of the confused topography of the island, but he avoided their rusting ladders.

He soon realised that however confused and random the blockhouses and camera towers might seem, their common focus dominated the landscape and gave to it a unique perspective. As Traven noticed when he sat down to rest in the window slit of one of the blockhouses, all these observation posts occupied positions on a series of concentric perimeters, moving in tightening arcs towards the inmost sanctuary. This ultimate circle, below ground zero, remained hidden beyond a line of dunes a quarter of a mile to the west.

The Terminal Bunker

After sleeping for a few nights in the open, Traven returned to the concrete beach where he had woken on his first morning on the island, and made his home—if the term could be applied to that damp crumbling hovel—in a camera bunker fifty yards from the target lakes. The dark chamber between the thick canted walls, tomb-like though it might seem, gave him a sense of physical reassurance. Outside, the sand drifted against the sides, half-

burying the narrow doorway, as if crystallising the immense epoch of time that had elapsed since the bunker's construction. The narrow rectangles of the five camera slits, their shapes and positions determined by the instruments, studded the east wall like cryptic ideograms. Variations of these ciphers decorated the walls of the other bunkers. In the morning, if Traven was awake, he would always find the sun divided into five emblematic beacons.

Most of the time the chamber was filled only by a damp gloomy light. In the control tower at the landing field Traven found a collection of discarded magazines, and used these to make a bed. One day, lying in the bunker shortly after the first attack of beri-beri, he pulled out a magazine pressing into his back and found inside it a full-page photograph of a six-year-old girl. This blonde-haired child, with her composed expression and self-immersed eyes, filled him with a thousand painful memories of his son. He pinned the page to the wall and for days gazed at it through his reveries.

For the first few weeks Traven made little attempt to leave the bunker, and postponed any further exploration of the island. The symbolic journey through its inner circles set its own times of arrival and departure. He evolved no routine for himself. All sense of time soon vanished; his life became completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events. Too weak to forage for food, he lived on the old ration packs he found in the wrecked Superfortresses. Without any implements, it took him all day to open the cans. His physical decline continued, but he watched his spindling arms and legs with indifference.

By now he had forgotten the existence of the sea and vaguely assumed the atoll to be part of some continuous continental table. A hundred yards away to the north and south of the bunker a line of dunes, topped by the palisade of enigmatic palms, screened the lagoon and sea, and the faint muffled drumming of the waves at night had fused with his memories of war and childhood. To the east was the emergency landing field and the abandoned aircraft. In the afternoon light their shifting rectangular shadows would appear to writhe and pivot. In front of the bunker, where he sat, was the system of target lakes, the shallow basins extending across the centre of the atoll. Above him the five apertures looked

out upon this scene like the tutelary deities of some futuristic myth.

The Lakes and the Spectres

The lakes had been designed originally to reveal any radiobiological changes in a selected range of flora and fauna, but the specimens had long since bloomed into grotesque parodies of themselves and been destroyed.

Sometimes in the evenings, when a sepulchral light lay over the concrete bunkers and causeways, and the basins seemed like ornamental lakes in a city of deserted mausoleums, abandoned even by the dead, he would see the spectres of his wife and son standing on the opposite bank. Their solitary figures appeared to have been watching him for hours. Although they never moved, Traven was sure they were beckoning to him. Roused from his reverie, he would stumble across the dark sand to the edge of the lake and wade through the water, shouting at the two figures as they moved away hand in hand among the lakes and disappeared across the distant causeways.

Shivering with cold, Traven would return to the bunker and lie on the bed of old magazines, waiting for their return. The image of their faces, the pale lantern of his wife's cheeks, floated on the river of his memory.

The Blocks (II)

It was not until he discovered the blocks that Traven realised he would never leave the island.

At this stage, some two months after his arrival, Traven had exhausted the small cache of food, and the symptoms of beri-beri had become more acute. The numbness in his hands and feet, and the gradual loss of strength, continued. Only by an immense effort, and the knowledge that the inner sanctum of the island still lay unexplored, did he manage to leave the paliasse of magazines and make his way from the bunker.

As he sat in the drift of sand by the doorway that evening, he noticed a light shining through the palms far into the distance around the atoll. Confusing this with the image of his wife and son, and visualising them waiting for him at some warm hearth among the dunes, Traven set off towards the light. Within fifty yards he lost his sense of direction. He blundered about for several hours on the edges of the landing strip, and

succeeded only in cutting his foot on a broken coca-cola bottle in the sand.

After postponing his search for the night, he set out again in earnest the next morning. As he moved past the towers and blockhouses the heat lay over the island in an unbroken mantle. He had entered a zone devoid of time. Only the narrowing perimeters of the bunkers warned him that he was crossing the inner field of the fire-table.

He climbed the ridge which marked the furthest point in his previous exploration of the island. The plain beyond was covered with target aisles and explosion breaks. On the grey walls of the recording towers, which rose into the air like obelisks, were the faint outlines of human forms in stylised postures, the flash-shadows of the target community burned into the cement. Here and there, where the concrete apron had cracked, a line of palms hung precariously in the motionless air. The target lakes were smaller, filled with the broken bodies of plastic dummies. Most of them still lay in the inoffensive domestic postures into which they had been placed before the tests.

Beyond the furthest line of dunes, where the camera towers began to turn and face him, were the tops of what seemed to be a herd of square-backed elephants. They were drawn up in precise ranks in a hollow that formed a shallow corral.

Traven advanced towards them, limping on his cut foot. On either side of him the loosening sand had excavated the dunes, and several of the blockhouses tilted on their sides. This plain of bunkers stretched for some quarter of a mile. To one side the half-submerged hulks of a group of concrete shelters, bombed out onto the surface in some earlier test, lay like the husks of the abandoned wombs that had given birth to this herd of megaliths.

The Blocks (III)

To grasp something of the vast number and oppressive size of the blocks, and their impact upon Traven, one must try to visualise sitting in the shade of one of these concrete monsters, or walking about in the centre of this enormous labyrinth which extended across the central table of the island. There were some 2,000 of them, each a perfect cube fifteen feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals. They were arranged in a series of tracts, each composed of 200 blocks, inclined to one an-

other and to the direction of the blast. They had weathered only slightly in the years since they were first built, and their gaunt profiles were like the cutting faces of an enormous die-plate, designed to stamp out huge rectilinear volumes of air. Three of the sides were smooth and unbroken, but the fourth, facing away from the direction of the blast, contained a narrow inspection door.

It was this feature of the blocks that Traven found particularly disturbing. Despite the considerable number of doors, by some freak of perspective only those in a single aisle were visible at any point within the maze, the rest obscured by the intervening blocks. As he walked from the perimeter into the centre of the massif, line upon line of the small metal doors appeared and receded, a world of closed exists concealed behind endless corners.

Aproximately twenty of the blocks, those immediately below ground zero, were solid, the walls of the remainder of varying thicknesses. From the outside they appeared to be of uniform solidity.

As he entered the first of the long aisles, Traven felt his step lighten; the sense of fatigue that had dogged him for so many months begin to lift. With their geometric regularity and finish, the blocks seemed to occupy more than their own volume of space, imposing on him a mood of absolute calm and order. He walked on into the centre of the maze, eager to shut out the rest of the island. After a few random turns to left and right, he found himself alone, the vistas to the sea, lagoon and island closed.

Here he sat down with his back against one of the blocks, the quest for his wife and son forgotten. For the first time since his arrival at the island the sense of dissociation prompted by its fragmenting landscape began to recede.

One development he did not expect. With dusk, and the need to leave the blocks and find food, he realised that he had lost himself. However he retraced his steps, struck out left or right at an oblique course, oriented himself around the sun and pressed on resolutely north or south, he found himself back at his starting point. Despite his best efforts, he was unable to make his way out of the maze. That he was aware of his motives gave him little help. Only when hunger overcame the need to remain did he manage to escape.

Abandoning his former home near the aircraft dump, Traven collected together what canned food he could

find in the waist turret and cockpit lockers of the Superfortresses and pulled them across the island on a crude sledge. Fifty yards from the perimeter of the blocks he took over a tilting bunker, and pinned the fading photograph of the blonde-haired child to the wall beside the door. The page was falling to pieces, like his fragmenting image of himself. Each evening when he woke he would eat uneagerly and then go out into the blocks. Sometimes he took a canteen of water with him and remained there for two or three days.

Traven: In Parenthesis

Elements in a quantal world:

The terminal beach.

The terminal bunker.

The blocks.

The landscape is coded.

Entry points into the future=levels in a spinal landscape=zones of significant time.

The Submarine Pens

This precarious existence continued for the following weeks. As he walked out to the blocks one evening, he again saw his wife and son, standing among the dunes below a solitary tower, their faces watching him calmly. He realised that they had followed him across the island from their former haunt among the dried-up lakes. Once again he saw the beckoning light, and he decided to continue his exploration of the island.

Half a mile further along the atoll he found a group of four submarine pens, built over an inlet, now drained, which wound through the dunes from the sea. The pens still contained several feet of water, filled with strange luminescent fish and plants. A warning light winked at intervals from a metal tower. The remains of a substantial camp, only recently vacated, stood on the concrete pier outside. Greedily Traven heaped his sledge with the provisions stacked inside one of the metal shacks. With this change of diet the beri-beri receded, and during the next days he returned to the camp. It appeared to be the site of a biological expedition. In a field office he came across a series of large charts of mutated chromosomes. He rolled them up and took them back to his bunker. The abstract patterns were meaningless, but during his recovery he amused himself by devising suitable titles

for them. (Later, passing the aircraft dump on one of his forays, he found the half-buried juke-box, and tore the list of records from the selection panel, realising that these were the most appropriate captions for the charts. Thus embroidered, they took on many layers of cryptic associations.)

Traven lost among the blocks

August 5. Found the man Traven. A strange derelict figure, hiding in a bunker in the deserted interior of the island. He is suffering from severe exposure and malnutrition, but is unaware of this, or, for that matter, of any other events in the world around him. . . .

He maintains that he came to the island to carry out some scientific project—unstated—but I suspect that he understands his real motives and the unique role of the island. . In some way its landscape seems to be involved with certain unconscious notions of time, and in particular with those that may be a repressed premonition of our own deaths. The attractions and dangers of such an architecture, as the past has shown, need no stressing.

August 6. He has the eyes of the possessed. I would guess that he is neither the first, nor the last, to visit the island.

—from Dr. C. Osborne, 'Eniwetok Diary'.

With the exhaustion of his supplies, Traven remained within the perimeter of the blocks almost continuously, conserving what strength remained to him to walk slowly down their empty corridors. The infection in his right foot made it difficult for him to replenish his supplies from the stores left by the biologists, and as his strength ebbed he found progressively less incentive to make his way out of the blocks. The system of megaliths now provided a complete substitute for those functions of his mind which gave to it its sense of the sustained rational order of time and space, his awareness kindled from levels above those of his present nervous system (if the autonomic system is dominated by the past, the cerebro-spinal reaches towards the future). Without the blocks his sense of reality shrank to little more than the few square inches of sand beneath his feet.

On one of his last ventures into the maze, he spent all night and much of the following morning in a futile at-

tempt to escape. Dragging himself from one rectangle of shadow to another, his leg as heavy as a club and apparently inflamed to the knee, he realised that he must soon find an equivalent for the blocks or he would end his life within them, trapped within this self-constructed mausoleum as surely as the retinue of Pharaoh.

He was sitting exhausted somewhere within the centre of the system, the faceless lines of the tomb-booths receding from him, when the sky was slowly divided by the drone of a light aircraft. This passed overhead, and then, five minutes later, returned. Seizing his opportunity, Traven struggled to his feet and made his exit from the blocks, his head raised to follow the glistening exhaust trail.

As he lay down in the bunker he dimly heard the aircraft return and carry out an inspection of the site.

A Belated Rescue

"Who are you?" A small sandy-haired man was peering down at him with a severe expression, then put away a syringe in his valise. "Do you realise you're on your last legs?"

"Traven . . . I've had some sort of accident. I'm glad you flew over."

"I'm sure you are. Why didn't you use our emergency radio? Anyway, we'll call the Navy and have you picked up."

"No. . . ." Traven sat up on one elbow and felt weakly in his hip pocket. "I have a pass somewhere. I'm carrying out research."

"Into what?" The question assumed a complete understanding of Traven's motives. Traven lay in the shade beside the bunker, and drank weakly from a canteen as Dr. Osborne dressed his foot. "You've also been stealing our stores."

Traven shook his head. Fifty yards away the blue and white Cessna stood on the concrete apron like a large dragonfly. "I didn't realise you were coming back."

"You must be in a trance."

The young woman at the controls of the aircraft climbed from the cockpit and walked over to them, glancing at the grey bunkers and blocks. She seemed unaware of or uninterested in the decrepit figure of Traven. Osborne spoke to her over his shoulder, and after a downward glance at Traven she went back to the aircraft. As she

turned Traven rose involuntarily, recognising the child in the photograph he had pinned to the wall. Then he remembered that the magazine could not have been more than four or five years old.

The engine of the aircraft started. It turned onto one of the roadways and took off into the wind.

The young woman drove over by jeep that afternoon with a small camp bed and a canvas awning. During the intervening hours Traven had slept, and woke refreshed when Osborne returned from his scrutiny of the surrounding dunes.

"What are you doing here?" the young woman asked as she secured one of the guy-ropes to the bunker.

"I'm searching for my wife and son," Traven said.

"They're on this island?" Surprised, but taking the reply at face value, she looked around her. "Here?"

"In a manner of speaking."

After inspecting the bunker, Osborne joined them. "The child in the photograph. Is she your daughter?"

"No." Traven tried to explain. "She's adopted *me.*"

Unable to make sense of his replies, but accepting his assurances that he would leave the island, Osborne and the young woman returned to their camp. Each day Osborne returned to change the dressing, driven by the young woman, who seemed to grasp the role cast for her by Traven in his private mythology. Osborne, when he learned of Traven's previous career as a military pilot, assumed that he was a latter-day martyr left high and dry by the moratorium on thermonuclear tests.

"A guilt complex isn't an indiscriminate supply of moral sanctions. I think you may be overstretching your's."

When he mentioned the name Eatherly, Traven shook his head.

Undeterred, Osborne pressed: "Are you sure you're not making similar use of the image of Eniwetok—waiting for your pentecostal wind?"

"Believe me, Doctor, no," Traven replied firmly. "For me the H-Bomb is a symbol of absolute freedom. Unlike Eatherly I feel it's given me the right—the obligation, even—to do anything I choose."

"That seems strange logic," Osborne commented. "Aren't we at least responsible for our physical selves?"

Traven shrugged. "Not now, I think. After all, aren't we in effect men raised from the dead?"

Often, however he thought of Eatherly: the prototypal Pre-Third Man, dating the Pre-Third from August 6, 1945, carrying a full load of cosmic guilt.

Shortly after Traven was strong enough to walk again he had to be rescued from the blocks for a second time. Osborne became less conciliatory.

"Our work is almost complete," he warned Traven. "You'll die here. Traven, what are you looking for?"

To himself Traven said: the tomb of the unknown civilian, *Homo Hydrogenensis*, Eniwetok Man. To Osborne he said: "Doctor, your laboratory is at the wrong end of this island."

"I'm aware of that, Traven. There are rarer fish swimming in your head than in any submarine pen."

On the day before they left Traven and the young woman drove over to the lakes where he had first arrived. As a final present from Osborne, an ironic gesture unexpected from the elderly biologist, she had brought the correct list of legends for the chromosome charts. They stopped by the derelict juke-box and she pasted them on to the selection panel.

They wandered among the supine wrecks of the Superfortresses. Traven lost sight of her, and for the next ten minutes searched in and out of the dunes. He found her standing in a small amphitheatre formed by the sloping mirrors of a solar energy device, built by one of the visiting expeditions. She smiled to him as he stepped through the scaffolding. A dozen fragmented images of herself were reflected in the broken panes. In some she was sans head, in others multiples of her raised arms circled her like those of a Hindu goddess. Exhausted, Traven turned away and walked back to the jeep.

As they drove away he described his glimpses of his wife and son. "Their faces are always calm. My son's particularly, although he was never really like that. The only time his face was grave was when he was being born —then he seemed millions of years old."

The young woman nodded. "I hope you find them." As an afterthought she added: "Dr. Osborne is going to tell the Navy you're here. Hide somewhere."

Traven thanked her. When she flew away from the island for the last time he waved to her from his seat beside the blocks.

The Naval Party

When the search party came for him Traven hid in the only logical place. Fortunately the search was perfunctory, and was called off after a few hours. The sailors had brought a supply of beer with them, and the search soon turned into a drunken ramble. On the walls of the recording towers Traven later found balloons of obscene dialogue chalked into the mouths of the shadow figures, giving their postures the priapic gaiety of the dancers in cave drawings.

The climax of the party was the ignition of a store of gasolene in an underground tank near the airstrip. As he listened, first to the megaphones shouting his name, the echoes receding among the dunes like the forlorn calls of dying birds, then to the boom of the explosion and the laughter as the landing craft left, Traven felt a premonition that these were the last sounds he would hear.

He had hidden in one of the target basins, lying down among the bodies of the plastic dummies. In the hot sunlight their deformed faces gaped at him sightlessly from the tangle of limbs, their blurred smiles like those of the soundlessly laughing dead. Their faces filled his mind as he climbed over the bodies and returned to the bunker.

As he walked towards the blocks he saw the figures of his wife and son standing in his path. They were less than ten yards from him, their white faces watching him with a look of almost overwhelming expectancy. Never had Traven seen them so close to the blocks. His wife's pale features seemed illuminated from within, her lips parted as if in greeting, one hand raised to take his own. His son's grave face, with its curiously fixed expression, regarded him with the same enigmatic smile of the girl in the photograph.

"Judith! David!" Startled, Traven ran forwards to them. Then, in a sudden movement of light, their clothes turned into shrouds, and he saw the wounds that disfigured their necks and chests. Appalled, he cried out to them. As they vanished he fled into the safety and sanity of the blocks.

The Catechism of Goodbye

This time he found himself, as Osborne had predicted, unable to leave the blocks.

Somewhere in the shifting centre of the maze, he sat with his back against one of the concrete flanks, his eyes

raised to the sun. Around him the lines of cubes formed the horizons of his world. At times they would appear to advance towards him, looming over him like cliffs, the intervals between them narrowing so that they were little more than an arm's length apart, a labyrinth of narrow corridors running between them. Then they would recede from him, separating from each other like points in an expanding universe, until the nearest line formed an intermittent palisade along the horizon.

Time had become quantal. For hours it would be noon, the shadows contained within the motionless bulk of the blocks, the heat reverberating off the concrete floor. Abruptly he would find it was early afternoon or evening, the shadows everywhere like pointing fingers.

"Goodbye, Eniwetok," he murmured.

Somewhere there was a flicker of light, as if one of the blocks, like a counter on an abacus, had been plucked away.

"Goodbye, Los Alamos." Again a block seemed to vanish. The corridors around him remained intact, but somewhere, Traven was convinced, in the matrix superimposed on his mind, a small interval of neutral space had been punched.

Goodbye, Hiroshima.

Goodbye, Alamagordo.

Goodbye, Moscow, London, Paris, New York. . . .

Shuttles flickered, a ripple of integers. Traven stopped, accepting the futility of this megathlon farewell. Such a leave-taking required him to fix his signature on every one of the particles in the universe.

Total Noon: Eniwetok

The blocks now occupied positions on an endlessly revolving circus wheel. They carried him upwards, to heights from which he could see the whole island and the sea, and then down again through the opaque disc of the floor. From here he looked up at the under-surface of the concrete cap, an inverted landscape of rectilinear hollows, the dome-shaped mounds of the lake-system, the thousands of empty cubic pits of the blocks.

"Goodbye, Traven"

To his disappointment he found that this ultimate act of rejection gained him nothing.

In an interval of lucidity, he looked down at his emaci-

ated arms and legs propped loosely in front of him, the brittle wrists and hands covered with a lacework of ulcers. To his right was a trail of disturbed dust, the marks of slack heels.

In front of him lay a long corridor between the blocks, joining an oblique series a hundred yards away. Among these, where a narrow interval revealed the open space beyond, was a crescent-shaped shadow, poised in the air.

During the next half-hour it moved slowly, turning as the sun swung.

The outline of a dune.

Seizing on this cipher, which hung before him like a symbol on a shield, Traven pushed himself through the dust. He climbed precariously to his feet, and covered his eyes from all sight of the blocks.

Ten minutes later he emerged from the western perimeter. The dune whose shadow had guided him lay fifty yards away. Beyond it, bearing the shadow like a screen, was a ridge of limestone, which ran away among the hillocks of a wasteland. The remains of old bulldozers, bales of barbed wire and fifty-gallon drums lay half-buried in the sand.

Traven approached the dune, reluctant to leave this anonymous swell of sand. He shuffled around its edges, and then sat down in the shade by a narrow crevice in the ridge.

Ten minutes later he noticed that someone was watching him.

The Marooned Japanese

This corpse, whose eyes stared up at Traven, lay to his left at the bottom of the crevice. That of a man of middle age and powerful build, it lay on its side with its head on a pillow of stone, as if surveying the window of the sky. The fabric of the clothes had rotted to a grey tattered vestment, but in the absence of any small animal predators on the island the skin and musculature had been preserved. Here and there, at the angle of knee or wrist, a bony point shone through the leathery integument of the yellow skin, but the facial mask was still intact, and revealed a male Japanese of the professional classes. Looking down at the strong nose, high forehead and broad mouth, Traven guessed that the Japanese had been a doctor or lawyer.

Puzzled as to how the corpse had found itself here, Traven slid a few feet down the slope. There were no radiation burns on the skin, which indicated that the Japanese had been there for less than five years. Nor did he appear to be wearing a uniform, so had not been a member of a military or scientific mission.

To the left of the corpse, within reach of his hand, was a frayed leather case, the remains of a map wallet. To the right was the bleached husk of a haversack, open to reveal a canteen of water and a small jerrican.

Greedily, the reflex of starvation making him for the moment ignore this discovery that the Japanese had deliberately chosen to die in the crevice, Traven slid down the slope until his feet touched the splitting soles of the corpse's shoes. He reached forwards and seized the canteen. A cupful of flat water swilled around the rusting bottom. Traven gulped down the water, the dissolved metal salts cloaking his lips and tongue with a bitter film. He pried the lid off the jerrican, which was empty but for a tacky coating of condensed syrup. He scraped at this with the lid and chewed at the tarry flakes. They filled his mouth with an almost intoxicating sweetness. After a few moments he felt light-headed and sat back beside the corpse. Its sightless eyes regarded him with unmoving compassion.

The Fly

(A small fly, which Traven presumes has followed him into the crevice, now buzzes about the corpse's face. Traven leans forward to kill it, then reflects that perhaps this minuscule sentry had been the corpse's faithful companion, in return fed on the rich liqueurs and distillations of its pores. Carefully, to avoid injuring the fly, he encourages it to alight on his wrist.)

DR. YASUDA: Thank you, Traven. (*The voice is rough, as if unused to conversation.*) In my position, you understand.

TRAVEN: Of course, Doctor. I'm sorry I tried to kill it. These ingrained habits, you know, they're not easy to shrug off. Your sister's children in Osaka in '44, the exigencies of war, I hate to plead them, most known motives are so despicable one searches the unknown in the hope that.....

YASUDA: Please, Traven, do not be embarrassed. The fly is lucky to retain its identity for so long. That son you mourn, not to mention my own two nieces and nephew, did they not die each day? Every parent in the world mourns the lost sons and daughters of their past childhoods.

TRAVEN: You're very tolerant, Doctor. I wouldn't dare—

YASUDA: Not at all, Traven. I make no apologies for you. After all, each one of us is little more than the meagre residue of the infinite unrealised possibilities of our lives. But your son and my nieces are fixed in our minds forever, their identities as certain as the stars.

TRAVEN: *(not entirely convinced)* That may be so, Doctor, but it leads to a dangerous conclusion in the case of this island. For instance, the blocks. . . .

YASUDA: They are precisely to what I refer. Here among the blocks, Traven, you at last find the image of yourself free of time and space. This island is an ontological Garden of Eden; why try to expel yourself into a quantal world?

TRAVEN: Excuse me. *(The fly has flown back to the corpse's face and sits in one of the orbits, giving the good doctor an expression of quizzical beadiness. Reaching forward, Traven entices it onto his palm.)* Well, yes, these bunkers may be ontological objects, but whether this is the ontological fly seems doubtful. It's true that on this island it's the only fly, which is the next best thing.

YASUDA: You can't accept the plurality of the universe, Traven. Ask yourself, why? Why should this obsess you. It seems to me that you are hunting for the white leviathan, zero. The beach is a dangerous zone; avoid it. Have a proper humility; pursue a philosophy of acceptance.

TRAVEN: Then may I ask why you came here, Doctor?

YASUDA: To feed this fly. "What greater love—?"

TRAVEN: *(Still puzzling)* It doesn't really solve my problem. The blocks, you see. . . .

YASUDA: Very well, if you must have it that way . . .

TRAVEN: But, Doctor—

YASUDA: *(Peremptorily)* Kill that fly!

TRAVEN: That's not an end, or a beginning. *(Hopelessly he kills the fly. Exhausted, he falls asleep beside the corpse.)*

The Terminal Beach

Searching for a piece of rope in the refuse dump behind the dunes, Traven found a bale of rusty wire. He unwound it, then secured a harness around the corpse's chest and dragged it from the crevice. The lid of a wooden crate served as a sledge. Traven fastened the corpse into a sitting position, and set off along the perimeter of the blocks. Around him the island was silent. The lines of palms hung in the sunlight, only his own motion varying the shifting ciphers of their criss-crossing trunks. The square turrets of the camera towers jutted from the dunes like forgotten obelisks.

An hour later, when Traven reached his bunker, he untied the wire cord he had fastened around his waist. He took the chair left for him by Dr. Osborne and carried it to a point midway between the bunker and the blocks. Then he tied the body of the Japanese to the chair, arranging the hands so that they rested on the wooden arms, giving the moribund figure a posture of calm repose.

This done to his satisfaction, Traven returned to the bunker and squatted under the awning.

As the next days passed into weeks, the dignified figure of the Japanese sat in his chair fifty yards from him, guarding Traven from the blocks. Their magic still filled Traven's reveries, but he now had sufficient strength to rouse himself and forage for food. In the hot sunlight the skin of the Japanese became more and more bleached, and sometimes Traven would wake at night to find the white sepulchral figure sitting there, arms resting at its sides, in the shadows that crossed the concrete floor. At these moments he would often see his wife and son watching him from the dunes. As time passed they came closer,

and he would sometimes turn to find them only a few yards behind him.

Patiently Traven waited for them to speak to him, thinking of the great blocks whose entrance was guarded by the seated figure of the dead archangel, as the waves broke on the distant shore and the burning bombers fell through his dreams.

BRIAN ALDISS ON **J. G. BALLARD:**

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TERMINAL BEACH IS J. G. BALLARD'S SIXTH PUBLISHED BOOK AND HIS FOURTH COLLECTION OF STORIES TO APPEAR IN THE UNITED STATES. SCIENCE FICTION FANS, BOTH HERE AND IN ENGLAND, HAVE AGREED THAT BALLARD IS A SENSATIONALLY FINE NEW TALENT IN THE FIELD.

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THE TIME TOMBS—THE ANCIENT MARTIANS WERE LONG DEAD, BUT THEY HAD LEFT A LEGACY OF MEGA-TAPES WHEREIN THEY FOUND A STRANGE IMMORTALITY...

THE VENUS HUNTERS—KANDINSKI HAD BEEN THE ONLY EARTHLING TO OBSERVE THE LANDING OF THE VENUSIANS, BUT NOBODY BELIEVED HIM...